



StoneSoup

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StoneSoup

*The magazine supporting
creative kids around the world*

Editor
Emma Wood

Director
William Rubel

Operations
Jane Levi

Education & Production
Sarah Ainsworth

Design
Joe Ewart

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Editor's Note

Sometimes not a lot happens in the stories we publish. This is not the case in this issue! In these stories, a young boy, still reeling from his father's death, fights to save the world; a journalist travels to a refugee camp in war-ridden Syria; a Parisian street orphan befriends an old woman who has many crazy stories; and a Spanish nobleman finds an ancient fossil. The poems and the art we've included have a similarly lively energy—from the snow falling in Hannah Parker's "A Glimpse of Winter" to Santa Claus making his rounds in Gianna Guerrero's "A Christmas Poem."

We hope this action-packed issue will keep you entertained during the long December nights!



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On the cover:
"Summer is All About Nature," *Acrylic*

by **Nataly Ann Vekker, 12**
Towson, MD

StoneSoup

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South Burlington, VT

There Goes the Sun



by Phoebe Donovan, 11
Boulder, CO

A strange man appears in Robin's house one day and attempts to enlist him in the battle to save the Infinity Realm

Robin stared at the orange plaid subway seat across from him, thinking about his father. How he always liked listening to "Yellow Submarine." How after all that Robin had been through, his dad's favorite song was still played all across the world.

The subway seats went fuzzy as visions and voices swam into focus. It was as if he'd been transported somewhere else entirely without moving an inch, somewhere strange and unpleasant, yet oddly familiar. And as quickly as it came, it left, and he found himself staring at the empty seat cushion, where he saw only fabric and thread and heard only the grinding of the subway wheels.

Robin almost fell out of his seat. His head was spinning. He felt like he was going to be sick.

As the car took a long lurch, his trumpet case nearly slid away from the grasp of his feet. He lifted it to his lap and went over the notes to a C Major scale in his mind until the speaker called out the stop for Ms. Merry's neighborhood.

Robin collected his things (and with them his thoughts) and readied

himself. He had decided not to mention what had just happened to Mrs. Merry. He didn't think she would believe him. He wasn't sure he believed it himself.

He wobbled off the subway and into daylight. The sun against his skin felt like an electrical shock. How was it that he felt so weak and vulnerable?

Robin climbed Ms. Merry's marble steps and passed the colorful flowers lining them. Birds chattered in the trees. He felt more at home here than anywhere else.

The front door was never locked, so Robin stepped into the foyer and listened as the boy before him finished his lesson in the study. He smirked; it was nice to hear someone who was worse at trumpet, even though that wasn't the nicest thing to think.

Ms. Merry welcomed him into the study. Her kind eyes smiled warmly as she offered him a plate of freshly baked cookies.

"What did you think about your homework?" she asked. "Was it hard? Was it easy? Do you think you practiced enough?"

Robin's voice felt higher than usual as he replied that he had done

his homework and was quite satisfied with his efforts. Ms. Merry's eyes peered, and her smile was just a little too tight. *She always knew things*, he thought.

"How's life been lately, Robin?" she asked.

"Dim," Robin answered, suddenly taking a profound interest in the patterned rug.

"Oh," answered Ms. Merry, her tone flat. She tried to catch his eyes but found he couldn't look at her.

"How was the subway today?" she asked.

Robin didn't like lying, but he liked his trumpet lessons with Ms. Merry. So he lied.

"Boring."

The lesson was wonderful, as always: his favorite diversion (and perhaps the only one that worked) from all that had happened in the past year. If he concentrated on the flow of air through his tightened lips, the notes on the page in front of him, and Ms. Merry's sweet, sturdy voice in his ear, the knot in his heart loosened. Only to return, of course, on his train ride home.

Home. It was a funny word, home. The place, the people who made up home were no longer all there. Home was no longer home without the missing piece of the puzzle.

Washed away by the aching in his heart, he nearly missed his stop. He brushed the gathering tears from his eyes and jumped over the gap between the train and the platform and ran to his front door in the bright daylight.

He let the front door swing shut behind him, and he listened to the silence of the house. His mother was

still at work, he knew, but he listened, anyhow, just in case a footstep fell or a faucet ran. And then he did hear something; it was so striking and alien his body jerked backward and his heart pounded.

The upstairs shower was running, splashing down the drain. Horrifyingly, a booming voice rang out, singing slightly off-key to "Yellow Submarine." There was something about the voice that made Robin not reach for the phone.

Robin felt his legs drift toward the stairs as if he weren't really in control of them. As if his curiosity had shoved his fear out of the car door and taken hold of the wheel.

The shower was switched off, and the singing got louder. Holding a chair high above his head, Robin kicked open the door. The outline of a dark figure with a large stomach in a towel shone through the opaque curtain.

"Yellow Submarine" kicked into its chorus once more, and Robin wondered if it would be the last song he'd ever hear.

"Who are you, and what are you doing in my house?" Robin shouted and found his voice was steady.

The song came to an abrupt halt.

"Robin?" the man in the shower questioned.

"Dad?"

Robin was confused. He couldn't be here, could he?

"No. General X is my name. I am the leader of the Infinity Army."

"The what?"

"If you'll step outside for just a minute whilst I change, I'll show you."

Robin waited in the hallway as shivers passed through him.

"I'd like to be, under the sea, in an octopus's garden, in the shade!" echoed from within the bathroom. Somehow, having this strange guy in his house felt familiar.

A couple of verses later, General X emerged from the bathroom. He had a glistening round face and set into it were a pair of baby-blue watery eyes. He wore a navy blue uniform with numerous badges pinned to the front. This attire made him look very official.

"So, what is it?" Robin asked.

"Oh, yes, the Infinity Army."

General X put his hands together and then spread them apart. With the most satisfying sucking noise, a video screen spread to fill the space between his hands. Robin's eyes were fixed . . .

At the front of an enormous army stood a man he recognized from their brief meeting as General X.

"Let us be united and stand as one!" General X shouted. He raised his fist in the air and bellowed, "For the Infinity Realm!"

The entire army raised their fists and echoed, "For the Infinity Realm!"

He slapped his hands together just as before, and the video closed.

"Was that you who showed me that thing?"

"Mmm?" General X fidgeted with one of his badges.

"The transmission I had earlier on the train, did you give it to me? I was there—in that place that you just showed me."

"The Infinity Realm?"

"Yes."

"Oh yes. Yes, I did."

"Why?"

"Because, you, Robin, are special!" Robin swelled with hope, though

he couldn't pinpoint why.

"Do you mean that I'll matter? That my life matters?"

General X tugged at Robin's cheek. He hated when grown-ups did this, but he didn't really mind General X doing it.

"Very much so, my Robbie. You already do."

Robin would never admit it, but at that moment, he practically glowed with pride.

"Let's get ice-creams!"

This had been Robin's way of expressing his overflowing joy whenever his father made him happy, and it just felt right to use it now.

General X agreed, saying, "I'll explain more on the walk over."

They put on their shoes, and General X collected his hat. It was navy. It looked very stiff and had a few more badges hanging officially from the front.

"Let us walk," General X said briskly, and off they went.

People stared as they walked past. General X ignored them.

"Tell me more about the Infinity Realm!" Robin pleaded.

"Well, as you know, I am the General of the Infinity Army."

"Yes! The Infinity Army!"

"The Infinity Army is fighting in the Withering War, against the Purple Witherers—"

"Who are the Purple Witherers?" Robin interrupted as they plodded along together in the glaring heat.

"The Purple Witherers are purple baby dragons. They are nicknamed 'Witherers' because once they are killed, three more spawn from their withering skin."

“If we lose, Queen Elementa is going to lock all of the Infinity Realm’s citizens in a dungeon for all of eternity.”

“Wow,” said Robin, “So, you’re fighting them in the Withering War?”

“Yes, and they are incredibly difficult opponents, even with the Infinity Army at the height of its power. But the worst part is the possibility of losing.”

“What happens if you lose?” Robin asked, wrapped in the General’s words.

“If we lose, Queen Elementa, the leader of the Purple Witherers and a very powerful witch, is going to lock all of the Infinity Realm’s citizens in a dungeon for all of eternity.”

How horrible it would be to be locked away in a dungeon until your skin shriveled and your bones decayed, Robin thought. He tried to imagine his new friend General X in that dungeon, but the result was too upsetting.

They arrived at Moolicious and studied the flavors. At the top of the bulleted list was his dad’s all-time favorite flavor, mint chocolate chip.

“What can I help you with?” asked a smiling teenage girl behind the counter.

“May I please have a single scoop of salted caramel in a cup?” Robin asked.

“Sure thing,” she replied.

The girl handed him a see-through cup, packed to the brim with pale, toffee-colored ice cream.

“Anything else for you today?” she asked, still only looking directly at

Robin. Robin turned to General X.

“Robin, can you order me a single scoop of mint chocolate chip in a cup, please,” he whispered.

“Good choice,” Robin said, approvingly.

“It’s my favorite and always has been,” General X said.

They sat outside, eating their ice creams in silence. Robin scraped his spoon across the wall of the cup, collecting every last drop.

General X turned to face him. “The Infinity Army needs you, Robin. We need you as a fighter and as a comrade.”

“I’ll help in any way I can,” replied Robin solemnly, thinking back to the awful dungeon. The pitch-black walls dripped with the stench of decay. Human bones crunched underfoot. It was not a place in which he would like to spend any amount of time.

“That a boy, Robbie!” General X delighted, plopping his hat on Robin’s head. It fell over his eyes.

That night, Robin sat in bed, re-reading one of his dad’s old letters:

Dear Robbie,

I miss you and your mother dearly. I wish I could be there with you. I feel the war is almost at an end and I hope I will be back from deployment shortly. When I do get back, be ready for The Beatles, twen-

ty-four seven. There is no decent radio here at camp and I am going crazy with the lack of good music! Make sure your mischievous mother doesn't (and hasn't) changed the color of our navy walls in the few weeks that I have been away—haha!

Please don't have too much fun without me, save the fun until I get back—tell your mother not to plot anything!

I love you so much.

Forever and always yours,

Dad

P.S. continue practicing with your trumpet, you're getting really good! I expect a high-level concert the minute I get home!

Robin waved goodbye to Ms. Merry as he exited her studio—half-heartedly, Ms. Merry established. She slipped into her silver Subaru, turned the key, and drove homeward.

Ms. Merry switched on the radio, hoping for some music.

"Excuse me, Ted, but who do you think is going to be this month's winner of our hot-dog eating contest?" issued from the speaker in her door.

"Well Joe," came the reply, "the odds are . . ."

Blah, blah, blah, Ms. Merry thought as she switched it off again.

She swung the car around and pulled it into a yellow-marked space in the parking lot and took the elevator

up to her floor.

Ms. Merry let the front door of her apartment swing shut behind her before dropping her keys on the worn grey bench in the mudroom.

"I'm home!" she called, all of a sudden considerably tired.

"Hi, honey!"

Arthur came to greet her, his salt-and-pepper hair ruffled, a wide grin across his face. Rain or shine, he always greeted her with a smile.

They sat down to supper at their little table and ate microwave mac-and-cheese with a freshly cut salad.

"Oh, Arthur, Robin is an amazing student, but lately there's been something wrong with him. It's like something is controlling him from the inside."

"Monica, dear, you have such a big heart. I'm sure he'll be fine."

Arthur squeezed her hand.

Ms. Merry lay in bed as wave after wave of worry hit her. *What if Robin was sick? Or crazy? What if no one knew anything was wrong?* She was drenched.

Robin's dreams were filled with pictures of horrible monsters bearing down on General X and locking him in a musty dungeon as high-pitched cackles filled his ears.

Robin felt the sun through his closed eyelids as he was shoved back into the normal world. *Though the normal world isn't so normal at the moment*, Robin thought. His thoughts were confirmed by a message scrawled across his mind:

Just letting you know how the war
is going, we're winning!

General X

Robin was so surprised that he banged his head on his outer-space headboard. *General X is very unusual*, Robin thought to himself as he massaged his head through his carrot-colored hair.

His mum appeared in the doorway. She looked tired.

"Sorry I had to work so late last night, honey," she said, sitting down on the end of his bed where his sheets were twisted into knots. His mum had been working extra lately, and when she was away, Robin felt like he was on a different planet, a not altogether pleasant one.

"Do you have to stay late at work again today?" he asked.

"You got your wish. It's Friday."

His mum never worked at all on Fridays. She gave him a big hug to start the morning. An image of a Purple Witherer, horrible and scaly, lingered in the center of his mind, and he hugged his mum tighter, his fingers against her silky hair, her wonderful flowery scent flooding around him.

At recess, Robin sat behind a bush, his back resting against the wall of the school. The bush's leafy branches were less dense up close. Many small twigs, each with six or so leaves, grew out of a curvy central stick in intersections. His observation was interrupted by General X's face, staring at him out of

the bush.

"Hello Robbie!" the General's head said.

Robin stifled a scream.

"You look down," General X's head spoke again. "In need of something sweet, I think."

An arm protruded from the bush, quite a hairy one in fact. The arm handed Robin a chocolate bar.

"Just making sure you're happy," General X said as he faded back into the bush.

The bell rang and Robin walked inside eating his chocolate. Robin noticed people giving him funny looks as he walked down the hall. What did they think he was doing, eating an earwig?

Robin's mum was waiting for him when he got home.

"I was thinking we could spend the rest of the afternoon at the pool. What do you say?"

"I think that's a great idea," Robin said, relieved to spend some time with his mum.

"Okay, then go and collect your swimming things, and I'll get ready as well," she said as the phone rang behind her. Robin walked to his bedroom, taking the short flight of stairs two at a time. From his bedroom, he could still hear his mum downstairs.

"Hello?" there was a short pause and then, "Oh, Ms. Merry, I'm about to go swimming with Robin, can we talk later?"

After that, his mum sounded worried as she said, "Urgent?" There

was a long gap before his mum finally replied.

“Don’t be silly. There’s nothing wrong.”

His mum put the phone down.

The pool was busy, but they spotted a quiet corner where they were not in the chaos of the shouting teenagers and the little kids splashing in. The two of them slipped into the cool water. Robin had a bubble in his mouth as he sank down, down, down. He pushed off from the bottom lightly and surfaced, his face breaking the water slowly.

As he arose from the depth of the water, his mum was there, her comforting face pleased. She held an orange ball in her hands. They spread apart, and she tossed it to him.

The orange squishy ball felt good as it sank into his cupped hands. Robin jumped as he tossed it back. The ball arced in the air before reaching its mark with his smiling mother. She laughed, and her wet hair glistened, as she again threw it to him.

The pool was extremely noisy, but Robin couldn’t hear any little bit of it. It was like he and his mum were in their own shared bubble, where everything was absolutely and completely perfect, and nothing would ever go wrong.

Their space was bombarded with toddlers in floaties, so they hopped out to dry. They both spread towels on the warm concrete and lay on their

backs, absorbing the heat. Robin’s mum rested her hand on top of his and gently squeezed it three times: I - Love - You. It was a moment Robin wished would never end.

On the subway, Robin stared at the people across from him. There was an over-large woman, dressed in all pink, who looked fussy. She stared at her cell phone with her nose wrinkled.

Next to her sat a scruffy male teenager with thick-rimmed glasses; they circled his magnified hazel eyes, which stared at the ceiling, not focused.

In the middle of the row sat a tall, skinny Asian woman, with her hair cut to her chin. She conversed in rapid Mandarin with her small-looking son, who sat in the seat next to her and doodled with crayons in a sketchbook.

The man sitting next to the Asian boy caught his eye. He had a glistening round face with a set of baby-blue watery eyes, fixed steadily on Robin’s. Robin jumped in his seat and forced his eyes elsewhere, though he could feel the man’s steady gaze boring into him. It was as if the man knew Robin, and though Robin recognized him, he couldn’t think where from.

The direction Robin was looking was overcome by Purple Witherers, plodding in a charge down the subway.

It was like he and his mum were in their own shared bubble, where everything was absolutely and completely perfect.

Each Purple Witherer had two spectacular silver horns protruding from its purple scalp.

All of the people he had observed earlier, and others, got up to fight them. Some used backpacks, cameras, pencils, and cutlery. Others brandished swords, clubs, and other weapons to slay the beasts.

The lady in pink fell over on her enormous backside. One of the Purple Witherers snorted fire and singed her frizzy hair.

The Purple Witherers were reducing the numbers of the human army, and very quickly. More and more people were being thrown back, burnt, pushed to the ground, or skewered. One of the Witherers withdrew one of his horns from the Asian lady's leg, his magnificent horn shimmering with blood.

Robin pressed his back against his seat. In the middle of the battle, Robin spotted General X. The General held one of the Purple Witherers at bay with a handsome sabre.

From somewhere over the din, Robin heard the announcement for Ms. Merry's stop. He ran off the subway, away from the battle with his arms over his head. He uncovered his head when he reached the open streets but still ran to Ms. Merry's studio, his trumpet case hitting against his knees.

Ms. Merry greeted him with a smile (a rather forced one, though Robin didn't notice).

"Your homework was to practice the second part of the 'Knitted Cap' duet, did you do it?"

"Yep."

This was a lie, though Robin

thought he knew it pretty well.

"Good then. I go first."

She touched the trumpet to her lips and blew the melody. Robin joined in on the second verse and played the harmony.

A message twisted into life in familiar handwriting: **We lost.**

Robin stopped playing.

Something deep inside him snapped. He fell to the ground.

Robin could almost see it.

General X stood in his cage, his face pressed against the bars, pleading for release to a woman with a stony face in a long white dress. The woman laughed and General X screamed.

Robin screamed too.

He opened his eyes to see Queen Elementa standing over him.

"Get away from me, you beast!" Robin yelled, sliding backward. She laughed. Robin was trapped. His back hit a wall. Everything went black.

When he awakened, his mum was standing over him.

"Watch out for Queen Elementa!" he warned her, "She's dangerous! She put General X in an Infinity Dungeon!"

His mum nodded at Queen Elementa.

Robin's mum steered him out to her car. She placed him in the backseat. The sun shone through the front windscreen, making it hard to see.

It felt as though this were his own prison, hot and sticky. As though he was sharing the same fate as his beloved friend.

Robin's mother typed "Bluebird Children's Hospital" into the GPS system. Then she drove off.

Sky Blue Hijab

by Seoyon Kim, 12
East Greenwich, RI



A journalist travels to a refugee camp to report on the Syrian Civil War

I twist the fake wedding ring on my finger nervously. It's a cheap copper ring that I superglued a rhinestone to. Back and forth. Back and forth. It's supposed to arouse sympathy if someone tries to kill me. It'll convince them that I have someone back home I love and need to get back to, my colleagues had assured. Though it's likely that I won't be killed by an assassin. If I do get killed, it's more likely to be by a bomb or a missile. I'm pretty sure my ring won't convince anyone to refrain from blowing up everything in a five-mile radius.

Unless it's a magical shield ring. You never know.

The countryside spreads outside the window. I peek outside, but the dizzying height quickly gets me sick, and I close the window blind. I don't have time to get sick. Plus, the airline doesn't seem to have any barf bags.

Syria. Syria. I have to get to Syria. To the war. To the story.

I grip my saddlebag so that my knuckles turn white. I go over the plan in my head. I will land in Lebanon. I will go to the Sweet Tooth Cafe where I will meet my unnamed accomplice. She will sneak me into Syria (I wasn't able to procure a visa to Syria; Leba-

non was the best I could do), where I will get a hotel room and spend the night. Then, I will begin to investigate and write.

It's 2018. I'm a freelance war reporter, on my way to report on the Syrian Civil War. The conflict began a long way back, in 2011, when demonstrations escalated into a full-blown war against the government. I'm still not sure what to think of this entire messy situation.

I sigh as a voice over the speakers announces that we will be landing soon. I check my dull grey hijab one more time. I'm not quite sure if it's necessary, but it's better to be overdressed than the opposite. It's horribly messy and has been tied without technique, but this will have to do. I organize the coarse cloth one more time, then turn my attention to the task ahead.

Two hours later, I finally arrive at the Sweet Tooth Cafe. I see a young woman in all black at the corner table. She has to be the one. I'm slightly shocked that she's so young. The girl couldn't be over the age of 22. I join her and show my identification. She gives me a slight

nod.

We buy cupcakes. My mysterious accomplice gets vanilla, and I get chocolate. Both have strawberry-flavored frosting. Then she leads me to her car. The moments from then on are unmemorable and fleeting; I'm so caught up in my nervousness and adrenaline, I can barely remember anything. I fall asleep within 30 minutes (all that worrying is tiring!), and she wakes me after 30 more.

“انہ نحن” she says. *We're here.*

I look around. I thought it would be harder to cross the border, seeing that it's illegal and all. Either border control is very lax here, or my guide is an expert.

“اليزج اركش” I say. *Thank you.*

She leads me out of the car, and I find myself in an alley behind a hotel. I grab my saddlebag and suitcase, and my guide drives off. I take a good look around. Dusty street. Tin trash cans. I make my way to the front of the hotel, the wheels of my suitcase making loud *clunk!* noises as they roll over pebbles that line the street.

The hotel is admittedly shabby. The war has taken its toll. The fluorescent lights flicker periodically. Dust has settled on the furniture. The rug is worn, and the man behind the counter looks like he has been to hell and back. Scraggly beard, glasses askew, clothes that may as well have been worn for years. The war has made it hard for ends to meet.

“كيب الہأ” he mutters tiredly. *Welcome.* “كفتدع اسم يننكدمي فيك” *How can I help you?*

I ask for a hotel room. He complies. After five minutes of paperwork, I get

my keys and make my way down the hall. I open the creaky door to a dusty room. The beige wallpaper is peeling, and the curtains and bedsheets are threadbare. I sigh. I change, wash up, strip the bed, then pull out a blanket I packed. Exhausted, I slump onto the bed, and five minutes later, I'm out cold.

The next day is overcast, with the scent of rain in the air. It's cold, and I am reluctant to leave my warm cocoon of blankets. I sigh as I get up. Back on goes the hijab . . . and jacket . . .

My first stop is the refugee camp. Hundreds of people are huddled inside thin blue tents, stationed in the dusty, barren valley because they have nowhere to go. The stench of the poor living conditions pervades the still air and bodies that surround me. Wailing babies, infected wounds, dehydration, hunger, and fear fill the scene. The list goes on and on.

I approach a young woman caring for a screaming baby. She hushes and sings to him, but to no avail. The woman's chocolate-brown hair sticks to her face in the perspiration and humidity. In sadness, I look at the baby's ribs poking out. I begin to ask her if she'd be comfortable with being interviewed, but then I see her face. She is already taxed with caring for her family, and she is afraid of me. Her brown eyes widen, and she quickly looks away. She is not the one. I thank her and walk away.

Next, I walk up to a teenager looking at the camp blankly, as if in disbelief that he is actually there. The cold



Fighter Jet, colored pencils



**by Ethan Hu, 8
San Diego, CA**

air slices us, but he barely notices it or my voice. I speak several times before he acknowledges my presence.

“Would you be willing to be interviewed?” I ask him timidly. He looks at me warily, seeing me as a prying foreigner. I ask again, pressing for an answer. “Please. Your voice needs to be heard.”

He gives in, and I am delighted. Whipping out my pen and trusty notebook, I skim the list of pre-written questions.

“How has the war affected you and your family?”

“Can’t you see?” he says impatiently. “Can you not see the suffering of those around me?” I move on.

“What are your plans for the future?”

“Depends on how long this war lasts.”

“Do you have any hopes for the future?”

“I did.” He gives no further explanation.

“What was your life like before the war?”

“We were the average middle-class family. My father managed a small grocery store.”

“How are your family and friends?”

The teen looks away sharply. It is clear I am prying too deeply. I thank him. He hasn’t given much information, and the answers he gave are very general, but he is clearly uncomfortable saying more. I leave.

Next, I approach an elderly woman chatting with friends. Unlike the faces that surround me, hers is smiling. She wears a sky blue robe and hijab, fading

from years of use, simple yet beautiful. Wisps of salt-and-pepper hair escape, surrounding her tan face. Wrinkles spread from her eyes like rays of the sun. Her eyes are misty, but the pupils are bright and clear, like a young girl’s.

She gives me a warm smile and gestures towards a wooden crate on the left.

“Come! Come!” She laughs. I slowly sit down.

“Would you be willing to answer some questions?”

“Why not? Are you from those newspapers? Ask away.”

“Where are you from?”

“Me? I’m from the beautiful city of Aleppo, right along the Silk Road.” She sighs. “It was supposed to be a safe haven. No fighting.”

“Both parties are accused of war crimes. How do you feel about that?”

“I cannot make assumptions. But I’m greatly disappointed. What happened to dignity?”

I scribble down words. My pen can barely keep up.

“What are your hopes for your future?”

“My future? Well, I would like to see rocking chairs and tea in my future. But I can only hope that the war will end well before my grandchildren grow up.” She smiles.

I ask more questions, each digging up old memories. As the minutes tick by, my elation increases. This is *exactly* what I need.

“What are you doing now?”

The woman looks delighted to show her work to me.

“Ah! I am weaving a rug. It is a most wonderful thing, is it not? It will

be sold, and the income will help us. A wonderful organization suggested it!"

"How beautiful!" I glance over my notes. This should be enough. I yearn to stay and learn more, but I have a deadline. "Thank you so much for the interview!" I say, genuinely meaning it. "Of course."

I leave for the dreary hotel, caught up in my thoughts.

Back in my room, I skim through the notes, lying on my bed. The woman had the most exquisite memories in such vivid detail. She also had a lot to offer, opinion-wise.

"Nothing justifies war," she had said. Those words kept circling my head. "Whatever the rebel groups wanted, this was not the way. However the government wanted to retaliate, this was not the way. Thousands of people are driven out of their homes, out of the places that were supposed to be safe. All for what? At the end of the day, what did anyone gain? Nothing, dear. There is always another way." Her speech went through my head in an endless loop.

Nothing justifies war.

I'll be waiting for the day we can announce the war is over, that the destruction and causing of suffering will end. I'll be waiting, and I'll be ready. But until then, I won't be standing around. People need to know, and people need to step up to stop it.

I take my pen and move to my desk. People need to know, and I will be the one telling them.

A few weeks later, I am safe at my apartment in New York, the reassuring cacophony of cars outside the windows. My article has been written and published. There was the customary praise and critics, and the article had been forgotten.

I didn't forget.

The sky blue hijab the woman had been wearing will not let go of me. My dreams are constantly centered around it. I didn't forget what she said, either.



Halloween Moon, Nikon Coolpix L830



by Hannah Parker, 13
South Burlington, VT

Cafe Terrace at Night



by Aoife O'Connell, 11
Los Angeles, CA

One cold, hopeless night in Paris, a homeless orphan girl meets a mysterious woman

The only noise that night in Paris was the soft tapping of my flats against the cobblestones. It got louder at some parts of the road and softer at others. Sometimes it was fast: a short, discreet sound; other times, slow, like a grandfather clock ticking away the hours.

My hair flew out behind me like a blonde sail, as did my frayed white dress. It wasn't quite white, though. Years of living on the streets of Paris had turned it a light, caramel-colored brown. My hands, smeared with soot and sweat, clutched a handful of stolen coins. I ran my fingers over the words and pictures, reading them without seeing them. Faster and faster I ran, with no real destination in mind. I was feral, desperate, untamable.

I looked up at the sky as I scampered through the dark alleyways. The bright stars stared back at me, their beautiful luminescence stunning my eyes. They were the only light in my life, the only light to guide me. Suddenly, a wave of sorrow passed over me, so strong I cried out. Images of my mother, draped in red robes and mink-fur scarves, filled my mind, as sharp and clear as the cinema. I didn't care how deplorable she was, how deplorable my past might have been. I remem-

bered looking up to her; she was the only thing I'd had. She had been my life. Until she died.

I felt a glut of tears well up in my eyes and didn't stop them from pouring out onto my flushed cheeks. Rubbing them away with dirty hands, I crumbled to the cobblestone street. I felt the cold hardness of it through my dress. As I curled in a tiny ball on the street, a hollow clunk thudded down the road, sounding like a rusty cowbell. Without looking up, I envisioned a man with a large bushy mustache, graying on the edges, his stomach bulging from a black suit. Right now, he would be reaching up and checking the time on a gold pocket watch engraved with his name, Henri. The soft light of the lamp above him shone down, turning him into a ghostly figure.

"Mademoiselle."

I looked up, startled by the high, nasal voice. When I saw the woman standing above me with a smirk plastered on her face, I jumped up. She wore a tattered gown that must have once been beautiful, but now the jagged hem was stained red. Here, my imagination got the better of me; I pictured the woman smearing her dress in a child's blood. I shivered,

though the humid air made my sweat trickle down my back in rivulets. The woman's eyes stared at me, willing my mouth to say something. I could not utter a word. I just took in this lady from head to toe. Her face was wrinkled and old like the pages of a well-loved book, her eyes shone, and her silvery hair coruscated in the moonlight.

"Can ya talk?" she asked with a glint of confusion in her eyes. She had an aura of faded beauty around her. I could tell she had once been a figure of stature, of honor. But now she was an unsightly old lady. Her silvery hair was ugly and full of split-ends, her boxy hands stretching out the fabric of her silky white gloves. She had hideous black boots that were muddy and slick with rainwater, boots that must have been three sizes too big. Nevertheless, I was a naïve child, and I loved her almost immediately.

"Yes, Madame, I can talk," I told her. Brushing my blonde hair from my face, I tried to smooth my dress and seem as formal as possible. I doubt I did, though, for my shoeless feet were dirtier than her boots, and my skin had a layer of grime that made it darker.

"Good," the woman announced firmly. "I was beginning to think ya couldn't." She extended a hand to me, and I was surprised to see it only had four fingers. There was a small stump where the ring finger should have been. Alarmed, I shot my hand back, staring into her deep eyes. She laughed heartily. "Lost in a scrimmage with some pirates. Long story. Anyway, I'm Clementine. Call me Clem."

Clem smiled, rotten teeth stuck in her mouth like tombstones. I smiled

too, my flushed cheeks lifting. I nodded my head, my mind slowly processing what I had heard. Before I could ask anything, Clem inquired, "What are you doin' out here on a night like this? And what's yer name?"

I frowned. "I'm Alice," I told her sharply. My life was like that cactus in William & Son's Apothecary. It had seemed so beautiful and sublime that I had stumbled into the store to touch this unique specimen—but when I did, one of the hidden, protruding spikes stabbed my finger, drawing a small drop of blood. When my few and short-lived friends got to know me, they got to know my spikes, my sharp, prickly spikes that I tried so hard to keep hidden.

Clem raised one perfect eyebrow but didn't ask anything else. Inside, I thanked her for not being like the gendarmes who always had a million questions at their disposal.

"Well, Miss Alice," Clem pondered aloud. "I am wonderin' if you'd like to come with me just down the street to Café de Minuit. They have great coffee if yer old enough." My stomach flooded with joy, always enticed by the thought of free food.

"Yes, Madame Clementine, I mean, Madame Clem. Yes. Please. Merci!" I spoke that last word louder, for my stomach growled, and I could not let this kindly old woman hear it. How kind, I thought to myself, admiring the one golden ring on her thumb. It was perfectly smooth and surprisingly dull. It wasn't the solid gold I noticed, though, it was the sparkling diamond on the top. It was clear and shiny and reflected light like a lamp. Absolutely

beautiful.

Clem began to saunter down the street, talking all the while.

"My mother used to work at Café de Minuit. She worked every day from six to midnight, scrubbin' dishes, servin' coffee, takin' orders. But she told me, every day when she left for work, 'Good coffee is worth the work.' I follow 'em same rules every day too." Clem smiled at me again, her bright face lighting up mine. We talked all the way up to Café de Minuit.

When we arrived, Clem pushed open the door, and a soft chiming of golden bells filled my ears. A lonely bartender sat, peering at us with hawk-like eyes. It was silent, other than the crackling of the radio mounted on a table. A muffled song sank into my ears—it was "Ma Pensée Vous Suit Partout," my mother's favorite. Memories of sitting together, listening to the radio, made me choke back sobs.

Clem stopped at a small table in the corner of the room, where there was hardly any light except for a flickering candle. I shivered and closed an open window. Clem sat down on a brittle chair and gestured to another. As I sat, carefully placing my hands on my lap, Clem yelled across the room, "Two coffees!" The bartender nodded solemnly and scratched his slicked black hair.

The two of us chit-chatted for a while, talking about everything. Yet I noticed Clem seemed much more open. She was like a shop window in a fancy, well-known mall where normal passersby can view the little, happy scenes. Clem let the world see her and judge her; she didn't care.

As I drifted into my realms of

thought, my hold on the present slipped, and I tumbled into an abyss of boredom.

"So," Clem addressed me softly after many minutes, "Alice. Ya look bored. Why don't I tell ya a story?"

I perked up, my wispy hair floating around my face like a halo. Mother used to tell me stories. Lots. I remembered sitting on a green satin couch adorned with pillows, hungry for tales. My mother would sit next to me, her verbena perfume filling my nose. She would tell me a story, a new one every day. One day it would be about a girl in a red coat visiting her grandma, the next day it would be a cat in boots.

"Oh, yes, please!" I gasped. My hands grasped the edge of the smooth wooden table. "I would adore that, Madame Clem!"

Clem laughed, the noise filling up the entire room. "Sure, hon. But just call me Clem. I never liked them fancy names. 'Madame! Mademoiselle!'" Clem rolled her eyes. I began to see her as an independent-minded woman: she didn't care what anyone else thought. Clem just did whatever she wanted.

The bartender arrived, placing a steaming cup of coffee in front of us both. The hot liquid sloshed over the cup and onto the table, but the man didn't seem to mind. He walked off, his shiny black boots clicking on the wood floor. I daintily picked up my cup and sipped it. The bitterness surprised me, and I coughed it up.

Clem burst into laughter. "Not many people like it!" She gasped between cackles. "Anyway. I oughta tell ya a story." She cleared her throat. "Before I begin, I need to tell ya this: I'm

a pirate. I ride on the *Dusty Bones* with my seven-man crew. We spend our days robbin' merchant ships and on the run. I love it." As Clem continued to tell her tale, my eyes kept drifting back to the ring. The sheer beauty of it made me almost salivate. *Think of all the money I could get with that*, my greedy mind thought. And so, as Clem got faster and faster, I slyly slid my hand over to hers. My hand flew out and snatched it off her finger, so fast I could barely see it happening. In just a split second, her priceless diamond ring was mine. Now that I had it, I began actually assimilating the pirate's story.

"Now, one day, when I was 'bout yer age—I started bein' a pirate when I was 'round nine—I woke up to a crazy bearded man with a hook staring into my young eyes. We began an epic scrimmage, but not before I lost that finger. After I tied him up nice and tight in some rope, me and my buds threw him overboard. It was a blast!

"Bein' a pirate ain't just 'bout fighting, though," Clem whispered darkly, suddenly serious. "We steal a lot too. I'm proud to say I'm one of the best thieves in all of France." I bit my lip to keep from laughing. If only she knew that her stolen diamond ring was now clutched in my sweaty palms. Clem resumed spinning her tale, whispering at some parts, yelling at others. I think the bartender got interested too, but I was too hooked to Clem's stories to tell. By the time the grandfather clock struck six, my coffee was cold, Clem looked as raggedy as an old doll, and the bartender was asleep on the bar.

Clem stood up. So did I, eager to leave and sell my ring. Clem peered

around, making sure no one was around—or awake. Then she looked joyfully at me and whispered, "Can I have my ring back?" I stood, stunned. "Look, hon, that was some pretty fine stealing you just did there. And I was wondering," Clem put her face so close to mine I could smell her bitter breath, "if you'd like to join our crew?"

My Hand

by Devon Mann, 11
San Anselmo, CA



My hand moves endlessly
On the piece of paper.
I am writing on and on.
Words spread across the paper rapidly,
Floating like puffy clouds
Pushed by wind
Towards San Francisco.
My thoughts race high and low,
My hand struggles to keep up.
My story is coming to life.



Black and White, Canon PowerShot XS600



**by Sage Millen, 11
Vancouver, Canada**

The Fossil

by Marlena Kilian, 11
Vancouver, WA



A young Spanish nobleman makes an astonishing discovery

Corian Monseur lounged on a couch with lace trimmings, gazing lazily through the window. His father was a nobleman and an architect busy designing the King of Spain's chambers. His family lived in a mansion with servants and rich bedrooms with halls leading to each one. Their backyard was a courtyard made up of rows of flower beds and perfect oaks rising as high as the mansion's roof. The pride of Corian's family was the lake beyond the courtyard, which flowed into many brooks and creeks behind and along the sides of the mansion.

Corian yearned for the tempting freedom he could enjoy not under the mansion's roof, but under the blue sky. Although he was permitted to go outside, he could only go along the endless flower beds, but they were not of any fascination to Corian.

Ceon, his younger brother, darted into the room with pleading eyes and said, "Corian, please come with me outside. Mother tells you not to idle."

Corian's gleaming eyes glanced at his brother, and he spoke solemnly, "I am 12 years old, yet we always seem to have an adventure together." Then he gave an awkward smile as Ceon happily went to get their moccasins

and their light coats.

Molly, a servant who was like an aunt to them, sternly said, "Tsch, tsch, boys. Be sure not to get dirty or walk into one of these chambers with a frog like last time."

Ceon chuckled but Corian remained silent in his deep thoughts. They went out of the wooden door and ran through the flower beds. As much as Corian wanted to carry out his brother's desire, he also got exasperated at having to leave his desirable chamber. Suddenly Ceon halted, greatly surprised. When Corian caught up with Ceon, he could not take in what lay before him: a creek ran between the last two rows of the flower beds, and where the creek flowed, the lilacs lay wilted with the front side of the wooden bed crushing their stems and petals. Ceon burst into tears: lilacs were his mother's favorite flower; she made certain they received extra water from the barrels each day.

As Corian was attempting to console his weeping brother, his eye caught hold of a shiny object lying untouched in the water. Corian tried to avoid looking at the object, which he knew would only be a rock, yet he felt his hopes rise quickly. So, he took

off his moccasins and wool socks as he edged near the creek to take a look at the object. The spring breeze whirled through the air, and the cold water came up to Corian's heels. By now, Ceon was wiping his eyes just in time to see Corian turning the object over and over again in the palms of his hands. Corian was about to throw the object back into the water carelessly when he saw that white had begun to show through where he had rubbed it. The strong feeling that it couldn't possibly be a rock was growing. Corian finally said, "Ceon, we must get Molly, for I think in my hand is an animal's tooth," and they ran hastily to the patio, where servants were brushing the dusty furniture.

Corian yelled for Molly, forgetting his manners, bringing his older brother, sisters, Molly, and even Mother bustling down the stairs with curls flying. Corian could hardly believe that perhaps he held in his hands a great discovery that would be marked down in history.

Servants led the family to a large resting chamber where everyone sat excitedly upon the narrow sofas. "Speak! Speak!" They cried at once as Corian gave the fossil to Molly with shaking hands. A young servant gave her a pair of spectacles. Molly looked intently at the object, and with Corian constantly inquiring if it might be an animal's tooth, she replied, "Well it proves to not be a rock." She paused briefly. "What I am getting to is that I don't know if it's an animal's tooth."

Philip, Corian's eldest brother, suggested cheerfully, "Surely this is a discovery after all; there is no report of

a tooth finding in all of Spain!"

Ronara, his eldest sister, said, "Let us send a telegram to some experts in Russia, for surely they would know!"

All the other sisters gasped with surprise, but Philip clapped as Mrs. Monseur got up and proceeded to prepare the curious discovery for travel. They sent the fossil in a mini-box with an expensive telegram, and afterward, Corian and Ceon explained where the object had been found, and they also explained about the half-crushed lilac beds.

For the next few days, Corian was impatient to receive the telegram from the experts, and the days were hard to endure. Finally, after waiting a long month, a letter arrived. Mr. Monseur was going to return the next day, after spending six months at the King of Spain's palace, and Corian decided to wait before opening the letter so that all the Monseur family could be present.

Mr. Monseur was greeted warmly by his family the next day, and he was given the information about the discovery, which he enjoyed hearing, as they gathered in the second fanciest chamber in the mansion. Corian's eyes opened wide when he was to do the honors. Usually, his father did the honors of opening the letters the Monseur family received, but his father said Corian deserved to do the honors this time. Corian opened the flap of the letter, pulled it out, and eagerly started to read:

To the Monseur Family,

This discovery was a new study for us, and in answer to your ques-

tion, "Is it a fossil?" Yes, indeed: it is an animal's tooth. The tooth is believed to be an ancient baby dragon's tooth. Dearest friends, you have made a fantastic discovery. The fossil is being sent to other scientific experts who will study the fossil more, and soon perhaps the fossil will be in a prehistoric animal museum. Please keep on sending letters not to us but to the building in London, England.

Signed: Workers of the Scientific Animal Culture in Russia

The Monseur family applauded Corian for such a discovery.

By the time Corian was 17, five years later, he had almost forgotten about the fossil he had discovered when he was 12. He had not received a letter since—nothing but the reassurance that it would come. On the day that Corian was getting ready to go to his great-uncle's mansion, a letter arrived at last. Corian was thrilled to open it, but this time his family was not present to hear its words. Corian read aloud as if he were in front of an audience:

Dear Corian,

These past five years have gone by so quickly that we were caught up in examining the fossil very closely, delaying our writing to you, and we beg your pardon. We are proud to say that this discovery is a real one, and we do believe that it is the tooth of a baby dragon. We hope to have another good year of examining the fossil. I gladly write that you,

son of the designer of the King of Spain's chambers, are granted with our permission to display this fossil in the Baton Museum in Spain with your name as the sole discoverer! We congratulate and thank you for this discovery that we hope may go down in animal history!

Signed: The Society of the Museum of Spain's Discoveries

Sam Peters and Carson Coom

Corian was amazed.

Another year went slowly by as the scientists continued to study the fossil. That it was a dragon's tooth was confirmed, and the fossil was put in the Baton Museum, where it was placed in a large glass container and was viewed by many. After 10 years, the fossil was transported to England and Italy, where skilled scientists studied it more. After another decade passed, it was known all over Europe, Russia, China, India, and North America.

Corian's discovery was put down in history, and when he died at the age of 92, his story, along with his background, was recorded in more detail. Corian Monseur's actual life was of little account aside from this famous discovery; however, he did follow his father as the architect for the chambers of the Kings of Spain.



Bowl of Joy, colored pencils



by Ethan Hu, 8
San Diego, CA

A Christmas Poem

by Gianna Guerrero, 7
Ontario, NY



Santa Claus is always on schedule
If he misses, a piece of snow
The wind will blow, blow, blow!
That sled of his will set a trail
Of a wish and a blow through the wind
Those rooftops are
The ones that clickety tock
Some have branches tall and wide
Others have so many thunks and clunks of presents
Down, down, down the clattering

News from Stonesoup.com

Book Contest Winners Announced!

First Place

Three Days Till EOC by Abhimanyu Sukhdial, 11 (Novel)

Second Place

The Golden Elephant by Analise Braddock, 8 (Poetry)

Searching for Bow and Arrows by Tatiana Rebecca Shrayr, 11 (Poetry)

Third Place

Elana by Hannah Nami Gajcowski, 9 (Novel)

Honorable Mentions

Leather Journal, Abhainn Bajus, 14 (Poetry)

The Hidden Key, Peri Gordon, 9 (Novel)

Frozen Nocturne, Sabrina Guo, 13 (Poetry)

The Demisers, Zoe Keith, 11 (Novel)

Last Birthday Boy, Olivia Ladell, 13 (Novel)

Family of Spies, Micah Lim, 10 (Novel)

Escape the War, Priyanka Nambiar, 13 (Novel)

A Brief Encounter with Chaos, Anyi Sharma, 11 (Stories)

New Contest: Personal Essays

Stone Soup is partnering with **The Society of Young Inklings** in our very first nonfiction contest. Their team of professional writers has designed a mentorship experience for both the youth and the educators who take part in this contest. The first 150 submitters will receive a personalized note from SYI. These notes will highlight a strength in your piece and offer guidance about how to build on that strength in future writing. We are so excited to be partnering with such a wonderful organization and thrilled to be able to offer personalized feedback to many of our writers! Find more details on our website under “Current Contests” or the SYI website: www.younginklings.org

Fundraisers: The Refugee Issue and Reaching Marginalized Communities

We have two fundraisers currently underway, and we’re so grateful for the support we’ve already received! In 2020, we plan to publish an issue of *Stone Soup* consisting of art and writing by refugee children, or children of refugees. We also hope to create an initiative to help reach marginalized communities, as we believe all children should be able to enjoy reading and writing. You can find more information about both projects on our website under “Donate” on the main menu.

For the latest news and current material, visit Stonesoup.com

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 that comes our way. We want to commend some of these talented writers and artists and encourage them to keep creating.

Fiction

Hyunjin An, 8
Ava Chen, 13
Ava Evak, 8
Michael Hoffen, 12
Hadley Horton, 11
Lucy Shin, 9

Poetry

Panagiotis Apatsidis Gunaratnam, 9
Mackenzie Duan, 13
Teddy Klein, 8
Ignacio Moyano, 10
Daniel Shorten, 8
Michael Zhou, 12

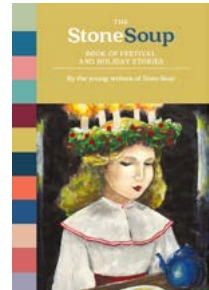
Art

Benicio Moyano, 8
Adele Stamenov, 10

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- Magazines—individual issues of *Stone Soup*, past and present
- Books—our collection of themed anthologies (fantasy, sport, poetry, and more), and the *Stone Soup Annual* (all the year's issues, plus a taste of the year online, in one volume)
- Art prints—high quality prints from our collection of children's art
- Journals and sketchbooks for writing and drawing

... and more!



Don't forget to visit Stonesoup.com to browse our bonus materials. There you will find:

- 20 years of back issues—around 5,000 stories, poems, and reviews
- Blog posts from our young bloggers on subjects from sports to sewing—plus ecology, reading, and book reviews
- Video interviews with *Stone Soup* authors
- Music, spoken word, and performances

