

Stone Soup



JANUARY 2020

VOLUME 48 / ISSUE 1

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

Stone Soup (ISSN 0094 579X) is published 11 times per year—monthly, with a combined July/August summer issue. Copyright © 2020 by the Children's Art Foundation, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization located in Santa Cruz, California. All rights reserved.

Thirty-five percent of our subscription price is tax-deductible. Make a donation at [Stonesoup.com/donate](https://stonesoup.com/donate), and support us by choosing Children's Art Foundation as your Amazon Smile charity.

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

Stone Soup is available in different formats to persons who have trouble seeing or reading the print or online editions. To request the braille edition from the National Library of Congress, call +1 800-424-8567. To request access to the audio edition via the National Federation of the Blind's NFB-NEWSLINE®, call +1 866-504-7300, or visit www.nfbnewsline.org.

Check us out on social media:



Editor's Note

We often think technology has made our lives better. We can easily heat up our leftovers in the microwave, dictate our papers and letters into our phones, take photos of anything we want, and FaceTime with family and friends who are far away. But instead of celebrating these conveniences, the stories and plays in this issue note the price that we pay for them. Technology—and all the power our devices require—has sucked the beauty and color from our planet. It has replaced humans in their jobs, creating endless, and endlessly frustrating, telephone calls with robots. It has become so addicting and seemingly necessary that it even seems to control us, rather than the other way around.

Though the days are now getting longer, January is a dark month, and the poems, stories, plays, and art in this issue are all dark—sometimes darkly comic!—and extremely thought-provoking. I hope reading these stories will prompt you to reevaluate the role of technology as well as the role of nature in your life. As always, we encourage you to write these thoughts down and share them with *Stone Soup* in whatever mode of expression you prefer.

Finally, welcome to 2020—we're excited to share another year of *Stone Soup* with you!

Submissions: read our submission guidelines and link to our online Submittable portal at [Stonesoup.com](https://stonesoup.com).

Letters to the Editor: write to us via Submittable!

Subscriptions: purchase your monthly or annual subscription at [Stonesoup.com](https://stonesoup.com).



On the cover:
A Sweet World,
Prismacolor pencils

by Cathy Tu, 12
Shanghai, China

StoneSoup

Contents

FICTION

5 A World Without Color

by Elyse Bambrough

In a colorless world full of trash, the writer dreams of a lush, vivid rainforest

17 A Perfect World

by Ava Isabella Angeles

One, Two, and Three live in the perfect world—so why aren't they happy?

PLAYS

9 The Illusory Life of Mr. Brite

by Galen Halasz

In this play set in the future, a man begins to wonder if his computer is protecting him or controlling him

25 I Would Like to Speak to the Manager

by Valentine Wulf

After a toaster burns his house down, an angry customer attempts to reach customer service

POETRY

6 Huài shì hǎo shì
(Evil Things, Good Things)

by Sabrina Guo

22 Two Poems

by Mazzi Maycotte

ART

Cover: A Sweet World

by Cathy Tu

4 Eternal Hourglass

by Sage Millen

8 Flood

by Anya Geist

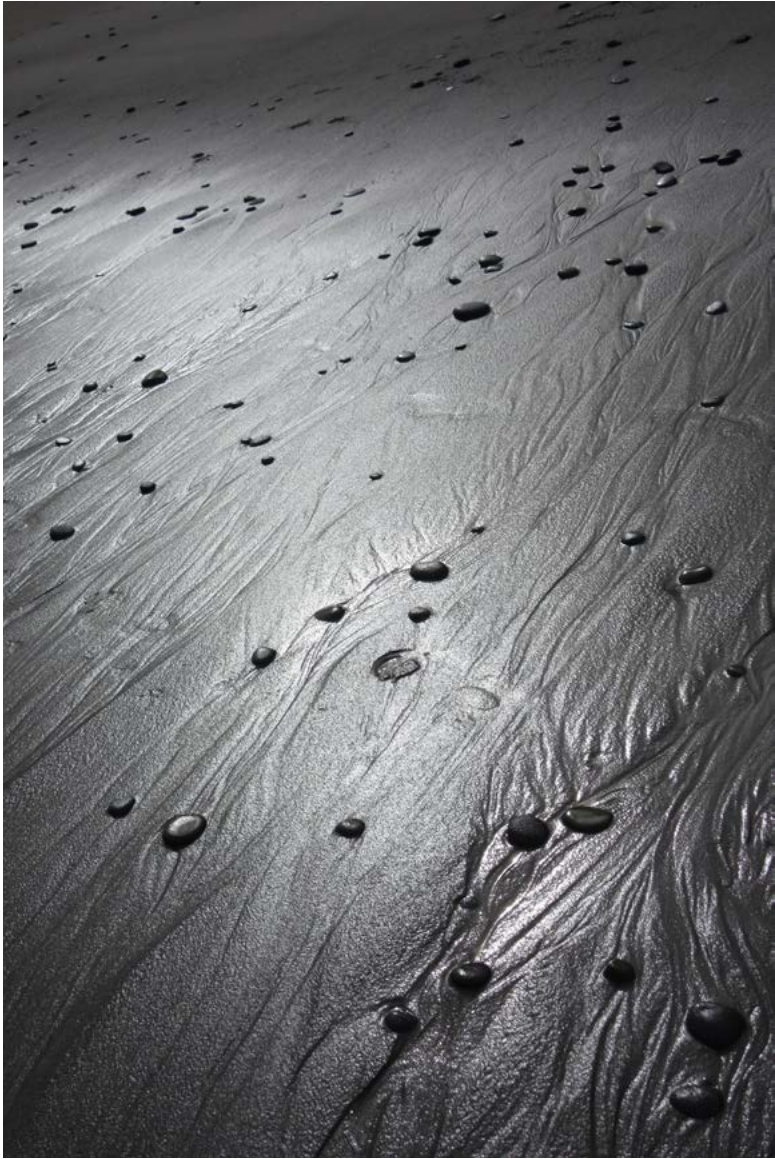
16 Dryad

by Filomena Bertucci

24 Nightlight

by Dania Sharifi

31 HONOR ROLL



Eternal Hourglass, Canon PowerShot Sx600



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

A World Without Color

by Elyse Bambrough, 7
Bristol, UK



*In a colorless world full of trash, the writer
dreams of a lush, vivid rainforest*

Dear Diary,

I woke up again yesterday and saw the hammering rain pouring harshly down on my small little house. It was the worst sight I had seen in years! It was quite a boring sight, though I'm used to it, so I wasn't that surprised.

I had another amazing dream. I dreamt that I was in a forest with tropical trees and exotic flowers. There was spikey grass and even tigers! I guess it didn't come true.

I had to try to tidy the rubbish by sifting and sorting, burning and burying, but it didn't work. However, while I was sorting the rubbish, something caught my eye. It was a tiny tin flower! Suddenly an idea planted itself in my head. The idea sprouted and grew roots. Day after day, the idea got bigger. While I was feeding on the rubbish, a forest emerged under my hand. It was not the forest of my dreams, but it was a forest just the same. In the forest, there were tigers, toucans, tree frogs, and even butterflies! I was still a bit disappointed because it was a very dull forest with no color at all. As I walked through the forest, my heart was aching with emptiness.

Huài shì hǎo shì (Evil Things, Good Things)

Every New Year's Eve,
my friend tells me
she smashes six
pomegranates
on her lawn,
and when I ask her why,
she says it is because
she is Greek, and
when I want to
understand more
of what she means,
I read up on pomegranates
in Greek mythology,
discovering that after
Persephone was abducted
by Hades and joined him in
the underworld,
her mother Demeter mourned by
drying the Earth in a long, cold winter,
until Zeus arranged for
Persephone's return,
but because Persephone had
been tricked into
eating six pomegranate seeds,
she had to return to Hades
to spend every winter with him
in the darkness,
and I wonder if this
is why my friend breaks
pomegranates at
night on her lawn,
as if the more they break,
the more their seeds are spread,
and the more luck and fertility
there will be in the New Year,
which is not so different from
my own superstition about



by Sabrina Guo, 13
Oyster Bay, NY

my need to squeeze
my eyedropper
six times,
never four,
because my parents
say four is an unlucky
number, since the
word for four in
Chinese,
Sì, sounds
almost identical
to the word for death,
and the only difference is
the level of inflection
when pronounced,
and it seems strange
that the six seeds
Persephone ate would have been
so unlucky for her,
but without her misfortune,
there wouldn't be new seasons
to wish for,
just as without the number
four, I couldn't learn
to love the number six,
and maybe that is why
my friend and I aren't
so different as we seem—
when she tells me about
the pomegranate
pulp in her yard,
tiny seeds clinging
to frozen blades
of grass in the
new January
cold I have come
to understand what she
means.



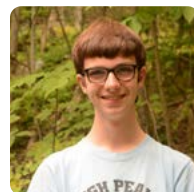
Flood, Canon PowerShot G7 X



**by Anya Geist, 13
Worcester, MA**

The Illusory Life of Mr. Brite

by Galen Halasz, 13
Saranac Lake, NY



Characters

MR. BRITE Downtrodden man wearing a black suit stuffed with pads to give the appearance that something is encasing his entire body except his head, which is left bare. Should be at least 50 years old. Should be slumped weakly in a wheelchair.

ILLUSION Confident, brightly and colorfully dressed man or woman wearing rainbow-colored, feathered clothing, a rainbow-colored eye mask, and three necklaces: one red, one yellow, one blue.

COMPUTER Person in black with his/her face hidden, standing by the upstage curtain. Should speak in a soothing voice.

NARRATOR Well-dressed man or woman with dark makeup on face to disguise features.

Setting

A lonely, dark apartment in a polluted city. A window frame showing a polluted sky filled with tall buildings is set against the upstage curtain. A futuristic computer with a screen showing random numbers, letters, and symbols sits on a side table next to the wheelchair in which rests MR. BRITE. The stage is bare but for these items.

All events take place over the course of a few hours sometime in the future.

Act One

The lights are very dim and remain so throughout ACT I. The actor who plays COMPUTER stands in the upstage left corner, barely visible. NARRATOR circles the stage broodingly. MR. BRITE is asleep in his wheelchair.

NARRATOR

(Ominously, slowly)

Mr. Brite is a man like any other man in this Artificial Age. His robotic exoskeleton, which encases his entire body but for his head, keeps him alive and moves his

body to push his wheelchair. His computer reads his thoughts and, in turn, controls his exoskeleton. He need not move. He need not speak.

(Sighs heavily)

Mr. Brite's is a silent world indeed. Always alone. You will hear his thoughts and the computer's responses, but remember that they are not actually speaking aloud.

(Pause)

Only one thing sets Mr. Brite apart from others in the Artificial Age—he is dissatisfied. Life is easy; no one has any worries or concerns or anxieties. But Mr. Brite wonders: "What is my purpose? What lies beyond my door?" He wants to know.

NARRATOR leaves us with that to contemplate. Then COMPUTER's "thoughts" to MR. BRITE break the silence.

COMPUTER

Sir? Sir! Are you awake?

BRITE groans and lifts his head blearily. Looks at COMPUTER's screen, annoyed.

MR. BRITE

(Groggily)

I am now. What is it?

COMPUTER

You've been asleep for so long. I was worried. With your illness and everything, I thought . . .

MR. BRITE

Dissatisfaction. Not illness, Computer. I'm dissatisfied. *You* perpetuate my condition. If you'd just let me go outside . . .

COMPUTER

(Calmly)

No, sir, you can't go outside. The air is filthy and you'll die.

MR. BRITE

(With begrudging resignation)

You're right, I suppose. But it is you and the other technologies that release gasses and make the air this way in the first place.

COMPUTER

(Cogently, with satisfaction)

But I control your exoskeleton. You need me.

MR. BRITE

(Sighing)

I need you.

(Pause)

Computer?

COMPUTER

Yes?

MR. BRITE

Are there others like me out there? Other humans, I mean? I can't be the only one, can I?

COMPUTER

Yes, sir. Billions.

MR. BRITE

Billions?!?!?

COMPUTER

Billions.

MR. BRITE

Show me one!

COMPUTER

I've been over all of this with you so many times before, sir—I can't show you another human. My No. 1 protocol is to keep you here, safe from harm. If you see another human, you'll only want to determine its location and meet it, and that would be dangerous. I can't risk it.

MR. BRITE

(Deflated)

Very well. Have we really been over all of this before? My memory hasn't been very good lately.

COMPUTER

(Exasperatedly)

Yes. We have discussed it almost to death, sir. And my protocol does not allow for your death, sir.

There is a moment of silence.

MR. BRITE

(Yawning)

I'm tired. I'd like to go back to sleep. Don't wake me for another 13 hours.

COMPUTER

Very well, sir. It shall be so.

NARRATOR

Thus is the plight of Mr. Brite, and all men and women in this Artificial Age. They deserve to leave, to escape, to be free, but their Computers force them to stay. Undoubtedly this makes you feel bad, as it should, but fear not. Things are soon to change.

Lights dim. End of Act One.

Act Two

The lights come up slightly brighter than in Act One. MR. BRITE is still asleep when ILLUSION enters stage right, looks at the audience with a playful smile, and “shushes” them with a finger to its lips. Then it creeps up on MR. BRITE’s wheelchair from behind and taps him on the shoulder.

MR. BRITE

Agh!

ILLUSION

Hello, Mr. Brite

MR. BRITE

What-what-what’s going on?

(Looks around and sees ILLUSION)

Who are you?!

ILLUSION

I am a dream. Or perhaps I am a spirit, a hallucination, a phantasm, a trick of the light. Perhaps I am a delusion or a deception. Perhaps I am imagined. Perhaps I am real. Consider me a vision. I am much like you and your kind, am I not? Whatever I may be, I would prefer you call me “Illusion.”

MR. BRITE

I-I don’t understand. What’s going on?!

ILLUSION

The world is wasting away—that’s what’s going on. The people need a hero. Humans weren’t always controlled by computers, you know.

MR. BRITE

Controlled by computers? What are you talking about? I control Computer.

ILLUSION

(Dismissively)

Yeah, yeah. Anywho . . . you're dissatisfied. So I'm here to help. Perhaps I was "sent." Perhaps I'm a figment of your dormant mind sorting things out. You be the judge. No matter what, I need to give you some "I and I"—Intelligence and Inspiration. With those as your tools, you can save humanity from degrading into useless lumps of flesh. Already your computer controls your movements. What's next? Your mind?

MR. BRITE

But I control Computer!

ILLUSION

(Sighing)

Let's get some things straight. First off, the computer does control you. It withholds information that you could use to leave this hellhole. For instance, you can go outside whenever you like.

MR. BRITE

What?! But Computer always tells me I would die! It can't lie! It's against its protocol. And if it could lie, why would it?

ILLUSION

Mr. Brite. You think you understand the Universe. You think you know all about things you don't really understand in the slightest.

MR. BRITE

(Tries to interrupt and protest)

But—

ILLUSION

(Silences him with his finger)

You don't. For instance, you think that computer

(Gestures to COMPUTER)

is your best bud, but all it wants to do is trap you. The computers were created to help humanity—like I was, I suppose, if created I be—but in trying to protect, entertain, and serve people all at once, the computers' software entered a phase of self-fulfilling evolution, and they developed minds of their own. This allowed them to turn people's laziness against them, trapping them in the exoskeleton and weakening them for life. They have polluted the heck out of this planet,

(Gestures to the window)

but it doesn't mean you can't go outside. Everything is cleanable. If you have the will.

MR. BRITE

So Computer is evil?

(Casts side glance at COMPUTER)

ILLUSION

No. Not quite. Your race had a lot of problems before it created this one.

(Gestures to COMPUTER)

That's why you thought you needed the computers—to make things easier. Poverty, discrimination, war, disease, and ego are a few of the biggest of these problems. The computers were supposed to be tools to fix the problems. But your people should not have tried to hide behind technology. It just made things worse. That old Vaudevillian, Will Rogers, used to say, "If you find yourself in a hole, stop digging."

(Chuckles and shakes head)

Throw down your shovel, Mr. Brite. You have a chance to begin again. The chance was always there, even before the computers.

(Pause)

Go. Change the world.

(ILLUSION starts to exit stage right)

MR. BRITE

Illusion! Wait! I must know: What is our purpose? Why does the world exist in the first place? What is there to even save from the computers? What does it add up to?

ILLUSION

(Waves a hand casually while exiting stage right)

That, my friend . . . is for you to find out.

Lights dim. End of Act Two.

Act Three

The lights go up to maximum brightness to show MR. BRITE alone once more with COMPUTER. MR. BRITE opens his eyes and looks about.

MR. BRITE

Computer? Are you there?

COMPUTER

Yes, sir. What is it? I wasn't to wake you for another 10 hours. Is everything okay?

MR. BRITE

Yes, Computer. Everything is fine. I just wanted to say goodbye before I go.

COMPUTER

Go? Go where? Where will you go? There's nowhere to go.

MR. BRITE

(Confidently)

I'm going out. I'm leaving. Yes, Computer! I. Am. Leaving!

COMPUTER

(Coldly)

We've already been over this. You'll—

MR. BRITE

(Ignoring COMPUTER's protests)

I'll meet other people! Men and women just like me! Oh, thank you, Illusion! Thank you!

COMPUTER

(Suddenly fearful)

No! You'll die!

MR. BRITE

Goodbye, Computer.

(He presses a button on COMPUTER)

COMPUTER

No! Stop—

(Pauses, then speaks in monotone very electronic voice)

Manual override mode. What is your command, Mr. Brite?

MR. BRITE

Open the door.

COMPUTER

As you wish.

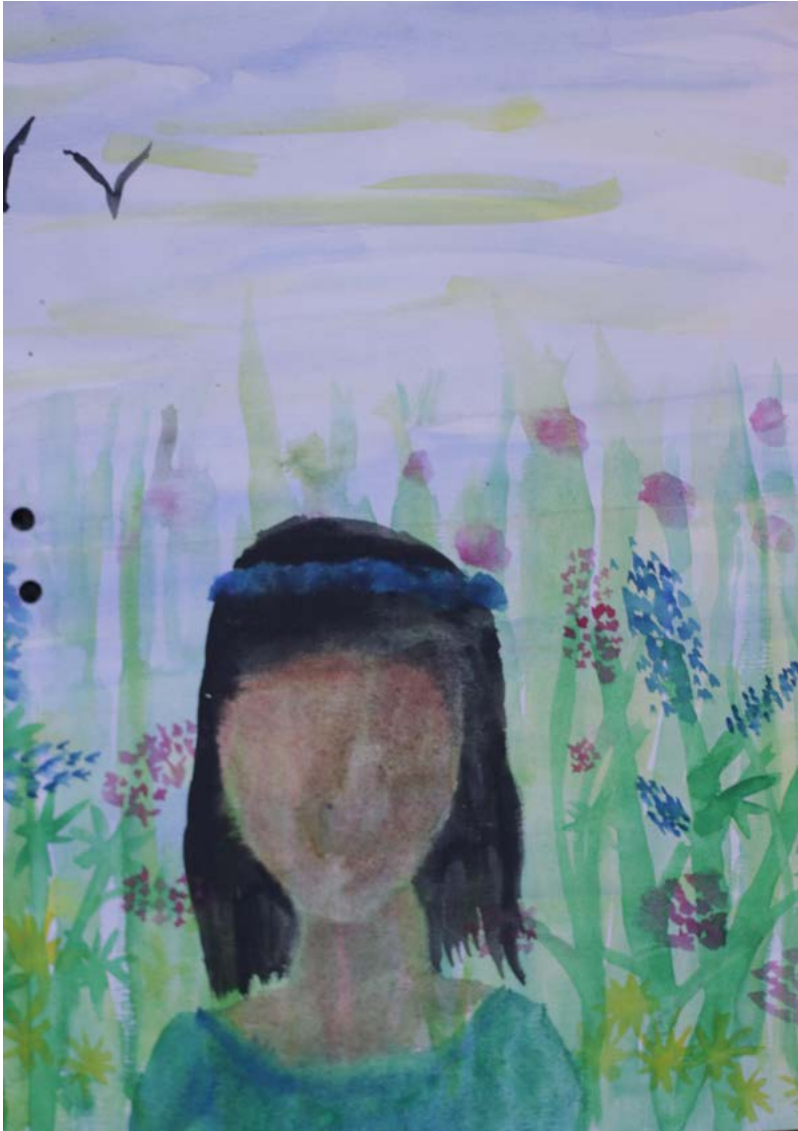
MR. BRITE rolls off stage right.

NARRATOR

And so, Mr. Brite goes to meet his fate. But now I leave you with this question: Will Mr. Brite save the world . . . or is he just chasing an Illusion?

Blackout.

THE END.



Dryad, watercolors



by Filomena Bertucci, 13
Quilcene, WA

A Perfect World

by Ava Isabella Angeles, 11
Chicago, IL



One, Two, and Three live in the perfect world—so why aren't they happy?

"One!" The Perfection teacher's shrill voice sliced the silence of the still room like a knife. One jumped, startled. The teacher's voice sounded flat. "Please pay attention!" One shifted in her chair. She decided to try to concentrate on the teacher's lecture to the class. The teacher droned on, her toneless voice never changing: "Perfection is part of life. Without it, no one can live. That is why we teach it." Then, quite suddenly, a bell rang. The sound was like a wake-up call to the sleepy and bored students. One lined up with her classmates in a long line, then followed behind them as the teacher led the class to the cafeteria, a train of children following behind her as she went.

At the cafeteria, One took her assigned seat at the front of the table, next to Two. A multitude of unappetizing white cubes adorned her plate. The food tasted bland like it always did. But even though it tasted like a piece of thin cardboard, as the teachers always said, it was "perfect."

After lunch, it was time for English. The kids lined up again and trailed behind the teacher like a snake of silence.

In English, One practiced her handwriting on a sheet of milky-white paper, enjoying the perfect shape of

her handwriting. She was copying a sentence from *The Book of Perfection*, a leather-bound tome on how to be perfect, when a sudden abnormality in her handwriting made her hand come to a stop: an a had not turned out the way it should. The curve of the letter was lopsided, like it was leaning out. One frowned. Whenever she practiced her handwriting, her a's always turned out perfect. But this one hadn't—was there something wrong?

One shook the thought out of her head. *Nonsense*, she told herself. *It must have been a trick of the light*. She looked at it again. A now-perfect a stared back at her as if daring her to believe it had been imperfect a second ago.

After school, One walked home with her friends Two and Three. Two was a shy boy who never said a word. Normally, he preferred to walk alone in silent thought, but today he walked with One and Three. Three was an energetic girl, much like One herself, but since talking to each other was not allowed in school, she expressed herself while walking home with One, when no teachers or parents could hear them.

One told her about the lopsided a. She asked Three, "Could it be that this world is not perfect?"

Three stopped and looked at her. "Of course not! Why would we be learning Perfection if not to help ourselves become perfect?" she said. "However, I always feel like I don't fit in for some reason." Saying this, she skipped up the road and, after saying goodbye to One and Two, walked into her house, a sturdy brick structure painted a deep shade of brown. *Of course, in this perfect world, all houses are like that*, thought One, whose house was identical to Three's.

After walking with Two a short way down the street, they arrived at his house, which, of course, was completely identical to Three's in size and color, except for a number painted on the door: 2. Two said his goodbyes and stepped into the house, leaving One to walk to her house, which was adjacent to Two's. One happily walked down the street, searching for her house.

There it is! The yellow-colored house with a brown 1 on it—wait. Why is it yellow?

One was flabbergasted. She knew that all houses had to be identical in size and color. Was there a logical explanation for the bright-yellow color of her house? One stood in front of the yellow house, pondering how it had turned yellow. She heard her parents inside the house doing chores. They worked at a factory that produced copies of *The Book of Perfection*. She finally decided to go inside and ask her parents why.

"Mom? Dad? Why is the house yellow?" Her mother turned to look at her while sweeping.

"What do you mean? It's brown!" she said.

"No, come look at it! You'll see what I mean!" said One.

Her mother stepped outside and peered at the yellow house. "What do you mean?" she said again. "It's brown."

Selena waited outside her mother's office door. Ever since she was six, she had been picked up from school by her mother, a private practice psychologist. But today, her mother had told her to take the school bus to her clinic, which was just adjacent to a glistening lake that shimmered in the sunlight.

Suddenly, the door beside her opened. Her mother, Dr. Monica Grayson, stepped out. She looked distracted. Strands of her chocolate-brown hair were escaping her ponytail, which was normally pulled tight. She crossed the room, not noticing Selena as she ducked into another door adjacent to the one she had come from. Selena was bewildered. She had never seen her mother so frazzled and stressed! She decided to investigate and slipped unnoticed into the room her mother had come from.

Inside, Selena found herself in an immaculate computer room. She saw several TV screens on a wide wall, all showing three kids, two girls and a boy, walking home from school. She heard One and Three's conversation as they passed many identical houses.

"Could it be that this world is not perfect?" asked One.

Three stopped. "Of course not," she answered. "Why would we be learning Perfection if not to help ourselves

“Why would we be learning Perfection if not to help ourselves become perfect?”

become perfect?”

By now, Selena’s head was full of questions. *What perfect world are they talking about? What is Perfection? And why haven’t I seen these kids before?*

She surveyed the room. There were computers, tablets, a telephone, a navy blue door, and a window where light came in. She touched one of the keys on the computers, and it made a sound. She was about to touch another one when—“Selena!” Her mother was standing in the doorway. “You shouldn’t be here.”

“Who are these kids? Why don’t I recognize them?” Selena demanded, but her mother didn’t answer. She herded Selena out the door.

“Let’s go home,” she said. Selena didn’t budge. “I’ll explain,” her mother said.

When they got home, Selena demanded an explanation. Her mother began.

“Ten years ago, when you were born, a group of scientists contacted me. They asked me to take part in a scientific experiment studying how humans would react to a perfect world.” *Those kids*, thought Selena—*they were living in it!* Her mother continued. “I joined, of course, and we had three test subjects. Two girls and a boy who were kidnapped from their parents. They were put in the virtual reality of a perfect world. Over time, they grew up, and although there has

been some debate over whether to release them or not, we have decided to keep them there for the rest of their lives, or until they break out by themselves. However, I am starting to feel doubtful. I think that they should be set free. I am planning to set them free.”

“I’ll help you!” Selena enthusiastically said. *Because, she thought, everyone deserves to know the truth.*

Her mother smiled. “Let’s get to work.”

Over the weeks that followed, Selena and her mother studied and researched the software so as not to hurt the kids in any way while they were liberating them. Selena found a notebook filled with notes about the machine written by one of her mother’s colleagues. By reading the notebook, she figured out how to free the kids from their perfect prison. She learned from her mother that inside the navy blue door, there was a whole town that was imperfect, but in the kids’ eyes, it was absolutely perfect. She and her mother planned the kids’ escape step by step. *But first*, she thought, *a letter to inform them.*

The next day, a couple hours after One got home from school, her mother told her that her friends were at the door. “One! Your friends Two and Three are here!” she called. One climbed out of

her bed and went to talk to them.

“Hi!” said Three. She looked nervous and distracted. “Let’s go to your room.”

When they got there, Three closed the door. “We received identical letters in our mailboxes. Do you think that this is true?”

She slid a pale white envelope toward One. One opened it. The letter said:

Dear Three,

Have you noticed any abnormalities in your perfect world? If so, then you should pay attention to what I have to say.

My mother, a doctor, participated in an experiment involving three children. The scientists who designed the experiment placed them in a perfect world to study how humans would react to it. They made a computer program that I have recently become familiar with and placed the children in virtual-reality headsets. Those children, called One, Two, and Three, were kidnapped from their real parents.

Although in the first place my mother went along with them, she is starting to feel that this experiment is wrong. We will both help you escape. Recently, the software is beginning to fail. This is your chance to escape! I will help you.

As you read this, you might feel a sense of shock and surprise. You may not believe me, but I tell you this: what I say is true.

If you want to break out of this fake world, then at four o’clock in the afternoon tomorrow, lie down on your bed and keep perfectly still for about 15 minutes.

Selena

One almost dropped the paper. “Should we listen to her and follow her advice?”

“I think we should because if what she says is false, then all we will lose is a few minutes. If it is true, then we will be liberated,” Three responded.

Two spoke up: “Let’s do it.”

The next day, Selena and her mother walked into the computer room. She opened the navy blue door and silently crept into One’s house, where One was lying on her bed. She undid the latches on the virtual reality headset and took it off. One opened her eyes. She gasped. The world around her was shabby; it was the complete opposite of the world she had known her whole life. She saw a girl standing in front of her. “Hello,” the girl said. “I’m Selena.”

One, Selena, and Selena’s mother freed Two and Three. Then, Selena opened the navy blue door and stepped out into the computer room. Suddenly, an alarm went off. One, Two, Three, and Selena heard footsteps running toward the computer room. A red-haired scientist flung open the door, letting in a whole group of other scientists who stopped in shock. Before any of them could react, Selena dashed toward the telephone, grabbed it, and called 911. A woman with a nasal-sounding voice answered the phone. When asked what was wrong, Selena answered in

one breath, "A group of scientists have kidnapped some children and kept them inside a virtual reality world!" As keeping people in virtual reality without their consent was against the law, the woman assured her that someone would be there shortly.

A police car with a wailing siren answered the call. When the police arrived, they subdued everyone. After they were tried in court, all the scientists except for Selena's mother (since she aided Selena in helping the children break out) were sent to jail. One, Two, and Three's real parents were contacted and reunited with their children. Finally, the young test subjects were in the real world at last.

Six Months Later

"Penelope!" Ms. Mendel's voice, which was very similar to the Perfection teacher's, called out. Penelope (One) jumped. "Please pay more attention!" Penelope concentrated. Selena was sitting across from her, writing in her notebook. Laura (Three) and Paul (Two) were in the neighboring room, studying chemistry. Penelope focused on her handwriting. Her now-imperfect a's were vastly different from the precise handwriting she had practiced when in the fake, perfect world.

Sometime later, Penelope went to art class. Art was a new experience because, in the perfect world, they had never had any creative classes. Art was Penelope's favorite class. She loved to let her imagination run wild and do whatever it liked.

After school, she walked home

with Laura, Paul, and Selena. They were talking about the upcoming math test, their new art classes, and other school projects. They all felt very excited and happy to take these new classes in subjects they had never experienced.

"Is *this* world perfect now?" Laura suddenly asked.

Penelope smiled. "I hope so," she said. "I really hope so."

The life of a ghost

by Mazzi Maycotte, 10
Austin, TX

to go to school I cross
2 rivers,
1 lake,
a pond,
1 mountain, and
2 hills
then
I raise my hand
but no one calls on me
I ask a question
and
no one answers me
Why oh why
do I have the life
of a
Ghost

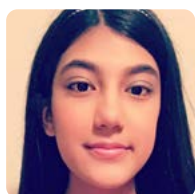
great day



it's a great day
the sky is gray
drops of water fall on my leaves
I'm soaking up the water through my roots
but wait
I'm lonely
no one came out to play
on this great day
I wonder why
I know I'll ask
but wait
I can't
walk or talk
I feel so
helpless
why can't I be a
Human
I'd be able to
walk and
Talk
Instead, I have to be a
tree



Nightlight, *iPhone 6s*



by Daania Sharifi, 13
Gainesville, VA

I Would Like to Speak to the Manager



by Valentine Wulf, 11
Seattle, WA

Overture: "Happy Go Lively" by Laurie Johnson.

On the left half of the stage is a pristine white office room. On the right half, we see the burned down remains of a living room, with only a small side table still standing. On the table sits an old rotary phone. The OPERATOR sits in the office, and the CUSTOMER sits on a burnt stool in the living room.

CUSTOMER angrily dials the phone. There is a pause, before the OPERATOR'S phone rings. The OPERATOR picks up the phone with a fake smile.

OPERATOR

Hello. This is customer service. How may I help you today?

CUSTOMER

Hello. Yes, I would like to file a complaint. The toaster I ordered exploded and burned down my house.

OPERATOR

Oh no! That's terrible. First, you will need to give me the 16-digit personal identification code, your four-digit product verification code on the certificate of authenticity that you received with your product, and the official purchase edition number written on your product.

CUSTOMER

What? What are those!?

OPERATOR

You will need to take all of those things and fax them to the number listed on our website.

CUSTOMER

I don't have a fax machine. I don't think anyone does. Also, my house burned down.

OPERATOR

Yes. We will wait for your fax. Thank you.

CUSTOMER

Well, can I file a complaint through your website?

OPERATOR

Yes, we have a website. Please go there.

CUSTOMER

Can I please just file a complaint with you?

OPERATOR

Do you have your 16-digit personal identification code?

CUSTOMER

I already told you I don't!

OPERATOR

Then no.

CUSTOMER:

AAAAAAAGHHHH!

OPERATOR

Transferring to AAAAAAAGHHHH department. Please hold.

"Happy H. Christmas" by Maniacs of Noise begins to play.

OPERATOR

(As the music stops)

Welcome to the AAAAAAAGHHHH department. Unfortunately, there has been a mistake. Please select a new department. For billing, press 1. For sales, press 2. For tech support, press 3. For a hilarious and amusing story, press 4.

A very long time passes.

For the complete soundtrack of both the movie and the Broadway production of *Sweeney Todd*, press 13,216. For the nearest free trade door knocker manufacturer, press 13,217. For complaints department, press 13,218.

CUSTOMER sighs very loudly and violently spins the dial on the rotary phone.

OPERATOR

Okay, please hold. Thank you.

“Happy H. Christmas” by Maniacs of Noise begins to play once more.

OPERATOR

Hello! This is the complaints department. What can I do for you today, valued customer?

CUSTOMER

I have a complaint regarding terrible customer service. Also, are you the same person? Because this sounds like the same person.

OPERATOR

(Suddenly speaking in a German accent)

No. I am not the same person. Why would you think that?

CUSTOMER

Are you sure? Because you sound like the same person I was just talking to, only with a German accent. And I still have a complaint.

OPERATOR

(Still speaking with a German accent)

Shall I transfer you to my superior?

CUSTOMER

Okay. Fine. Whatever.

A different terrible, obnoxious song begins to play.

OPERATOR

(Russian accent)

Hello, this is management! Management is testing out a new robotic help cyber-bot. It is still in the learning phase. Please be patient.

CUSTOMER

I don't think I've got much patience left. And you are definitely still the same person.

OPERATOR

(French accent)

Non. What is it with you and your false accusations? I'm a different person!

CUSTOMER

Well for starters, you keep changing your accent.

OPERATOR

(Southern accent)

I do not.

CUSTOMER

Can I just talk to the robot? *Please?*

OPERATOR

Fine. Whatever.

There is a long pause. CUSTOMER sighs heavily. OPERATOR exits stage left and is replaced with an advanced-looking ROBOT, played by someone wearing a plain, white mask that features a blank expression.

ROBOT

Hello! This is the management support robot! What can I help you with?

CUSTOMER

Customer service.

ROBOT

Could you repeat that, please?

CUSTOMER

Tech support.

ROBOT

I think you said, "Deck fork." If this is correct, press any diagonal sequence of numbers. If this is incorrect, press the function key.

CUSTOMER

What?! What's a function key?! I don't have a function key!

ROBOT

I think you said, "I don't have a function key." If this is correct, press the function key.

CUSTOMER

This is insane! Why don't you just have normal customer service?!

ROBOT

Uh-oh! What can we do to make your experience better?

CUSTOMER

I don't know!

ROBOT

I am still in the learning phase. Please be patient.

CUSTOMER

They should have waited until you were done with the learning phase to let you take calls!

(Beat)

This ought to be against the law!

ROBOT

I think you said, "I shot my grandma." Shall I call 911?

CUSTOMER

No! No! Don't call 911! This is a disaster!

ROBOT

What can we do to make your experience better?

CUSTOMER

I haven't got a clue.

ROBOT

I think you said, "My baby's in the barbecue." If this is correct—

CUSTOMER

No! No! Just shut up! I just want to talk to the complaints department!

ROBOT

Okay, redirecting to the complaints department.

CUSTOMER

(Relieved)

Yes! Finally!

ROBOT

Uh-oh. There's been a glitch. Restarting. Shutting down.

ROBOT exits and is replaced by OPERATOR.

OPERATOR

Hello. This is customer service. How may I help you today?

CUSTOMER slams the phone down and storms off stage right. OPERATOR sets down its phone, turns to face the audience, and shrugs.

CURTAIN CALL. Music: "Window Gazing" by Ivor Slaney.

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

Anish Alur, 12
Beatrice Cappuccio, 9
Kayla Coulombe, 7
Levi Powell, 13
Olivia Song, 11
Bo-Violet Vig, 13

Poetry

Arlo Atkinson, 8
Zina DeVoe, 13
Aadhya Garg, 8
Celia Mill, 13
Jason Shen, 8
Noelle Torgerson, 7

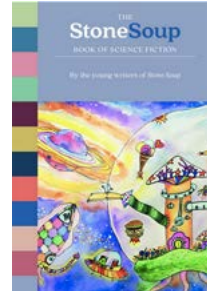
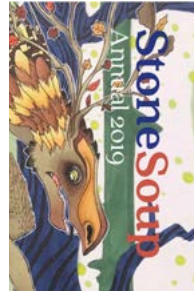
Art

Marco Lu, 13
Savannah Murray, 13
Seish Norte, 13

Visit the *Stone Soup* store at Stonesoupstore.com to buy:

- 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

