

StoneSoup



OCTOBER 2020

VOLUME 48 / ISSUE 9

StoneSoup

Writing and art by kids, for kids

Editor's Note

I have been thinking a lot about time in these past few months. Like all of you, I have been living in quarantine—the days blending into one another more than usual. But I also became a mother in April. And time changed. I would wake up before the baby and look at the clock (6:00 a.m.) then close my eyes for what felt like mere seconds and wake to her crying—suddenly it's 7:30 a.m. I'd say to myself, "I'm going to bounce her for five more minutes." I'd bounce and bounce and bounce and yet when I looked at the clock not even a full minute had passed! Which is to say that time seems so objective and yet our experience of it is entirely subjective.

Or, as Sofia Dardzinski writes in her poem "Decisions,"

A clock tells time
I believe it tells time from its perspective
Every clock is different
Every clock has a different view of things

The poems, stories, and personal narratives in this issue are all thinking, in their own way, around this idea of time, and often of loneliness, too—a condition that makes us even more attuned to the clock than usual. I hope reading this issue will allow you to experience a time distinct from the time of your daily life!



On the cover:
Tell Me a Secret
(Prismacolor pencils
and Copic marker)
Avery Multer, 13
Chicago, IL

Editor
Emma Wood

Director
William Rubel

Operations
Jane Levi

Education & Projects
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–Stone Soup Inc., 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.

Submit your stories, poems, art, and letters to the editor via [Stonesoup.submittable.com](https://stonesoup.submittable.com)/submit. Subscribe to the print and digital editions at [Stonesoup.com](https://stonesoup.com). Email questions about your subscription to Subscriptions@stonesoup.com. All other queries via email to Stonesoup@Stonesoup.com.

Check us out on social media:



StoneSoup

Contents

STORIES

5 **The Last Birthday
Boy**

by Olivia Ladell

41 **My Life as A Tree**

by Aiden Chen

45 **The Book With
No Words**

by Michaela Frey

PERSONAL NARRATIVE

18 **The Time I
Learned of Death**

by Ilina Chaudhury

29 **Past, Present,
Future**

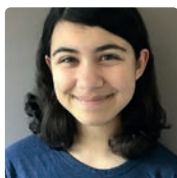
by Claire Jiang

POETRY

- 16 Two Poems
by Julia Marcus
- 23 Decisions
by Sofia Dardzinski
- 26 Where I'm From
by Talia E. Moyo
- 38 Two Poems
by Teddy Lykouretzos
- 47 Afterthought
by Daniel Shorten

ART

- 4 Jupiter and Orion
by Cora Burch
- 15 Five Open Eyes
by Miya Nambiar
- 19 Rocks at Pohoiki Beach
by Lila Raj
- 22 Coral Maze
by Grace Williams
- 24 Two Drawings
by Rithvi Bellamkonda
- 28 Sunflower Fields
by Claire Jiang
- 40 Blue Jay in Spring
by Cecilia Yang
- 44 Reaching
by Jackie Cutrona
- 48 Honor Roll



Jupiter and Orion (acrylics)
Cora Burch, 13
Van Nuys, CA

The Last Birthday Boy

What if you thought you were the last person on Earth?



by Olivia Ladell, 13
Ottawa, ON

It was the big day. After years of preparation, they were finally ready.

The apocalypse had shattered, and would shatter, the lives of too many, and the government feared that Earth would soon become uninhabitable. It was too big of a risk to take chances and stay on the globally destroyed planet. So, after many meetings and studies and conferences, they had decided on a solution that would change the lives and history of the human race forever: to ship the population to Mars. It was an enormous decision, a big leap of faith, a dangerous risk, but there were no other possible conclusions that the government of each country could unanimously agree on. So that was that. Once the public was informed, they began at once constructing tens of thousands of spaceships. It took many years, but it'd be worth it to flee the fatal consequences of the apocalypse.

And now billions of people were crammed into numerous rockets like sardines in a tin, ready to leave their lonely planet behind. It was finally happening. The departure.

Families held onto each other's hands, and there was complete silence in each spaceship. The people were too

flabbergasted, too nervous, too amazed, to speak.

In rocket 310-LBZ, the crowd waited anxiously for the machine to blast off. Some people cried softly. Others were completely stiff. Everyone's heart was pounding, furiously as a loud voice on the speaker silenced the passengers by announcing the countdown to departure was about to begin.

An old woman squeezed her eyes shut. A pair of twins held onto each other firmly. A worried-looking man comforted his sobbing wife. A teenage girl whispered to a frightened child that this was all for the best, but her voice quavered noticeably.

"5... 4... 3... 2... 1..." spoke the slow, rasping voice on the dirty loudspeaker. The passengers held their breath as, in one noisy, smoky lift, the spaceship blasted off into the sky, and up, up, up above.

Somewhere in the bustling, anxious crowd, two panicked parents searched for their lost son. "Where is he?" cried the mother frantically. "He was right behind me the entire time!" cried the father as he looked around. A few long, worrisome minutes passed before the man exclaimed, "Oh! There he is now!"

He pointed toward the very boy who had been a few steps behind him since boarding.

The couple breathed a long sigh of relief and headed toward the young child, whose head was turned. The woman put a hand on his shoulder.

"Son," said the father sternly, "Do not run off like that again." Slightly startled, the youth spun around, and his expression revealed obvious hints of confusion as he cocked his head to the side and stared at the man and woman. The couple gasped.

This boy was not their son.

It's a wonderful dream. I'm in a beautiful garden. Surrounding me are acres of colorful, exotic flowers in full bloom. Bees are buzzing around them, collecting nectar. I gaze to my left to observe a playful, bushy-tailed squirrel scampering down the neatly swept path I stand on, hungry for a snack. His soft tail brushes my bare feet, tickling them, as he dashes past me, headed toward an emerald-green bush to my right full of plump, juicy blackberries: a delicious snack.

"Jayson!" A soft, familiar voice coming from behind me calls out my name. I turn around to see my mother smiling at me. "Jayson, Honey, I baked you some molasses cookies, your favorite!" In her hands, she holds a plate full of the delicious baked goods.

Full of surprise and delight, I exclaim: "Oh, Mom, you shouldn't have!" She smiles wider, her dark brown hair blowing softly in the light breeze. Her apron is stained with flour and in her hair, held back in a messy ponytail, there are bits of dough. She

must have been working really hard. She chuckles as she watches me take first one cookie, then two, then three. I gobble them up greedily and reach for a fourth.

"Be sure to save some for your friends," she reminds me as she watches me begin nibbling the sweet treat. "They should be here any minute now."

"Of course," I reply, then add: "I'm sorry for taking so many. But, really, what can I say? You're an excellent baker." She blushes at the compliment. I scarf down the fourth cookie but don't take any more. "I'm sure my friends will love them." I inhale the heavenly aroma of sugar and molasses. Of course my friends will love the biscuits: they are sweet, chewy, and still hot from the oven. Mmm.

Standing here in a pulchritudinous garden with my mother, awaiting my friends' arrival, eating homemade, freshly baked cookies, that's *paradise* to me.

And then it all ends. In one second, the entire scene is gone, disappeared. Poof. That's just how it is with dreams, after all. You wake up, and the wonder and joy from your nighttime fantasy is over. Welcome to reality.

I groan. The bags under my eyes are heavy, and I am still extremely tired. My eyelids are far from being fully open and are begging to be closed. I should go back to sleep, but I can tell it's almost afternoon by now. I should probably get up. I try to sit up but don't have the strength. And plus, my arms feel limp and weary. A strange, unpleasant feeling of emptiness and disappointment and

Here it is in short: I'm the only person left on Earth. The last one. It's just me. Everyone else left when I was about eight years old.

of hollow, depressing sadness floods my mind. It's all because of that dream I just had . . . I just wish I could grab it and pull it into reality. But of course that'll never happen. With all the energy I can muster, I roll out of bed and land on the cold, dirty floor with a loud thud.

Ouch.

Aching and tired, I get up. My head is slightly dizzy, my shoulders are slouched, and my frizzy black hair is a complete mess, as it is every morning. I stumble clumsily to the door. As I open it, a sudden flash of remembrance sweeps over me, awakening me, as I briefly contemplate the thought. Then I shake it off and walk through the door. But my mind keeps pushing me to think about it, so instead of fighting it, I accept the fact: it's my sixteenth birthday.

Why am I not excited, you ask? Why is it no big deal to me? Why am I not sitting at the breakfast table with my family and friends, eating pancakes and opening presents?

Up until I was seven years old, that's how birthday mornings would've looked: gifts and gourmet food and people I love and big balloons. Uncle Charlie video-recording it on his BluPhone Q+, my best buddy Fred's little sister shouting "Bert-day! Bert-day! Bert-day!" and me with a smile on my face so wide it hurt. Oh, I miss those days. Mom's blueberry pancakes and Dad's unique birthday ties he'd lend me for the day. Smiles and laughter and chatter. But it's not like that anymore.

I reckon this is the part where I explain everything.

Here it is in short: I'm the only person left on Earth. The last one. It's just me. Everyone else left when I was about eight years old.

After the apocalypse a few decades ago, the population decided to flee to Mars. It sounds crazy, I know. But the government believed that, in time, Earth would become completely uninhabitable: food and other essential resources would become scarce and there wouldn't be close to near the amount of drinkable water needed to provide the billions of people on Earth with enough. Everyone decided that it was much too big a risk to stay and live on Planet Earth. So millions of scientists from all over the world assembled, and together they built tens of thousands of spaceships. We all gathered the important things we'd need to survive. Everyone would be headed to our Planet B: Mars.

I was only eight when it was finally time for departure, and to be honest, my memory of it is a little fuzzy. I do remember that they had spent months ensuring that everyone—literally everyone—was inside one of the countless spaceships. People were hurrying to get in, wanting to ensure that they didn't get left behind. Now, note that at eight years old, I was a daydreamer and was distracted easily, so I didn't exactly feel the same urgent and panicked rush to board the ginormous rocket as the others did.

I forget exactly *how* I got left behind, or how I felt, or what I was

doing. All that I *do* remember about that period is right after the departure, sitting on our balcony outside the half-destroyed apartment complex I called home, watching the spaceships blast off into space and realizing that *this was it*. There would be no second chance. No do-overs. No going back in time to undo everything that had just happened. No boarding the 310-LBZ alongside my parents.

At that moment, I suddenly became extremely aware that I was truly alone in the world. That I had been forgotten, left behind, and that I was so *dumb dumb* for not having boarded the rocket ship.

At just eight years old, all alone on the crumbling, paved balcony outside our apartment, eyes full of panic and fear, heart pounding furiously, I wept at my terrifying realization.

I blink, waking from my intense daydream. As I head out of the bedroom, down the stairs, and into the lobby, a pudgy, almost hairless rat scurries past me. My eyes widen for just a second as sudden panic leaks into my head. Quick as a flash, I dart out of the building and onto the cracked sidewalk. Now, judge me, ridicule me, whatever—but no creature scares me more than rats do.

By the way, after the departure, I fled my mostly wrecked childhood home and decided to settle in elsewhere, since the old apartment was practically ruined, and brought back too many hauntingly happy memories. So right now I live in a hotel. Why, after being abandoned, I got the deep urge to move into La Grande

Perle Rose completely beats me, but it is a nice place.

Ever since I began residing in the hotel, I could tell by the peeling, fancy wallpaper and exquisite, detailed portraits hung in gold frames on the walls that the hotel used to be an expensive, luxurious place to stay. The ripped leather chairs in the lobby and plush, velvety (but very dusty) mattresses in each bedroom must have once been the talk of the city, because they are, like, mind-blowingly comfortable. The building itself is made of brick, and the beautiful historical architecture must have been breathtaking to look at before the bricks started crumbling and the structure's entire left half was destroyed by the apocalypse.

It's humid out as usual, and the dirty air is completely still and slightly smoky. All around me I see tall, deserted skyscrapers with big, unwashed windows and modern architecture. The road is full of cars, yellow taxicabs in particular—old, rusty and useless. They're scattered around the broken pavement like pieces of garbage. Before, they might have been useful, but to me, they're just junk. They're in desperate need of repair; no one's even *touched* them in decades.

I trudge down the empty street until I arrive at what once used to be beautiful, busy Central Park. Now it's just a very large strip of land full of yellowish-brown overgrown grass and dead trees. It's in *desperate* need of care. Hmm . . . Maybe I could take on the project of tending it and making it nice again. After all, I'm always looking for new activities to pass time, because

without other people or electricity, my options for entertainment are pretty limited.

My stomach rumbles loudly as I enter the deserted park. As you may have already guessed, food is scarce, so I usually grow my own. The long, dead grass tickles my legs as I head toward a little clearing in the park near a large, bare tree. In this tiny area, there is a small patch of fruits, vegetables, and a few other plants. My garden. The bright sun is hot on my brown skin and the small beads of sweat trickle down my forehead as I kneel down and pick a particularly juicy tomato from its stem. It's rare for a tomato to be this plump and ripe, given the poor air quality and polluted rain, but this one turned out unusually well.

Pleased about this rare little success, I chuckle softly as I whisper to myself, "Happy birthday, Jayson." Then, without hesitation, I bite into the juicy vegetable. By the way, I believe that tomatoes are vegetables, not fruits. Actually, I have an opinion on just about everything! I can be very stubborn sometimes. My strong beliefs and viewpoints are so important to me, even the ones on littler subjects. But honestly, I guess there's no point in really having one because there's no one around to debate with or to agree with me. I sigh sadly. Funny how one's mood can change so quickly.

After I've finished my snack, I begin heading back to the hotel. As I get up off the ground, a big swarm of bugs fly by, buzzing in my ear and getting in my mouth. I run out of the park, hoping I've lost them. Once they are no longer in sight, I slow my pace and begin thinking the same thoughts I

think every day. The ones that make me want to cry. The ones that describe my reality. The words trickle into my brain, flowing into my heart like a stream. A polluted one for sure.

I'm the only living human on Earth. The last one. No matter what I do or where I go, it'll be just me. I'll never know what it's like to have a best friend, to fall in love, or to go to college. Never again will I laugh at my dad's corny jokes or eat my mom's famous chicken curry or even be sent to the principal's office. There are no rules for me, except for the ones I make myself. That might sound like I have so much freedom, like I should be living my best life, having a blast with nobody telling me what to do. But it's not like that. It's really not.

Once I arrive back at my room in La Grande Perle Rose, I grab my faded green skateboard from under the bed. It's my prized possession. My parents gave it to me for Christmas the year before the big departure. I remember receiving it so clearly; I can picture the scene perfectly in my mind. The memory plays in my head like a movie. Gosh, I haven't seen a movie in years.

It was snowing heavily outside, but I was nice and toasty inside our humble, cozy apartment, opening my presents. I plastered a smile on my face as I unwrapped each gift: books and books and books. I was never much into books, but my parents were. They were convinced that I could be too, if I found the right story. So every Christmas, they'd buy me a variety of genres of tales, hoping I would find one I enjoyed. I never did.

Once I thought I had opened all

the gifts, my dad smiled and said, "I think you're forgetting one." He gestured toward the back of the tree. Almost hidden from view was one last present. I unwrapped the plaid wrapping paper and gasped with delight. A skateboard, just for me! I tried it out inside the apartment, but the neighbors complained, and so did my parents. So once it was spring and all the snow had melted, I began practicing in the park. I did it daily, for hours on end! I've had it for almost eight years. You'd think it would be broken or damaged by now, but it's excellent quality. And I've been thankful to my parents for introducing me to this wonderful sport.

My parents. The parents who left me behind. The parents who traveled all the way to Mars without me. My parents . . .

Clutching my skateboard, I race back outside to start practicing some flips. I'm pretty skilled at most of the tricks, even the more advanced ones. But that's probably 'cause I spend several hours a day perfecting each technique. No matter how often I do it, it never gets boring.

After about an hour of warming up with a few tricks, I decide to treat myself and go on a little adventure around the city. I only do this every once in a while. Keeps it special that way.

I zip through the city streets, going faster and further than usual. I feel the strong wind on my face as I gain more and more speed. As my journey progresses, I find myself in a neighborhood I've never

visited. Exploring the new region, I race through the city streets with momentum and control. As the strong breeze blows in my wild hair, I feel like I am one with the wind. I feel free, I feel adventurous, I feel—

"Eeeeeeeeeee!"

I stop cold. What was that? It seemed like it came from somewhere in front of me. It definitely wasn't a raccoon. *Well then what was it? It sounded like . . . like a person. Ohhh no. It is definitely NOT a person. I'm the last one, after all. But wait—I always just assumed that. I never actually knew for sure. But maybe, just maybe, the source of the scream is another—*

I stop myself before I can let that thought turn into hope. It's impossible; it could never be a human. I try not to even think about that as I near the source of the strange noise. Once I get close enough, my eyes widen as a shivering figure comes into view. I stop in my tracks for the second time. I don't move. I don't breathe. I just stand and stare. Rubbing my eyes, I don't believe what I see.

Huddled in a corner is a girl. A real girl. She's quaking out of fear as she eyes a nearby rat with horror. I guess she doesn't like them either. But I'm too stunned to run away from the scrawny rodent, to panic about something as measly as a rat.

A human. THERE IS A HUMAN STANDING BEFORE ME. I don't believe it.

I gasp. The girl jumps and looks up at me, startled at first, then completely stunned. Her eyes begin to widen to the point where they might bulge. She just stares, dumbstruck. Neither of us moves. We just stand, a few metres'

This is really happening, I tell myself. It's not one of my little fantasies, not one of my daydreams.

distance apart, completely shocked. We observe one another in complete disbelief.

I can't describe exactly what I'm feeling. What's happening right now is unbelievable, incredible. But it makes no sense. Knowing, and seeing for myself that I am not alone in the world, that there is another person right before me, it's, well, it's shocking but it's also a bit emotional to be honest. Just think: *I haven't seen another human in eight years.* I truly, wholeheartedly believed that I was the last one, the only one. Yet, here is this . . . this girl, who just shows up. It's too much to take in.

Slowly and cautiously, the girl stands up and inches toward me. I want to tell her, 'Hey, come closer! I'm not dangerous,' but I'm so stunned by all of this I can't speak. I almost can't breathe. *This is really happening, I tell myself. It's not one of my little fantasies, not one of my daydreams.* No. This is real. There's a real girl walking up to me.

As she comes closer, I notice her expression. Her face reveals a mix of happiness, disbelief, and confusion. Her whole body is shaking, as is mine.

She opens her mouth to speak, then closes it. We stand there for a few moments, completely silent, taking it all in. She is the first to talk. "A-are you-y-you . . ." she pauses, searching for the right word, "*real?*" She trembles slightly, and her big hazel eyes are wide and glassy.

I look up at her, close to crying, and even closer to pinching myself to prove that this isn't just my eyes playing tricks on me. But I don't

need to pinch myself, because she's definitely there.

"I-I guess you thought you were the . . . the last one t-too, huh?" I meant to say it with a chuckle, but the words come out shakily and squeakily.

She nods, still stunned. That makes two of us. The girl then inhales deeply, stands up straight, and smiles, putting on a brave face. "I s'pose I should introduce myself. Sorry." She chuckles at herself, seemingly embarrassed by her previous behavior. I can see she is trying hard to remain calm, to act as if this whole situation isn't that big of a deal, but it is.

"I'm Kira," she continues. "And you are . . . ?"

"Jayson," I fill in. "Um, nice to meet you." I attempt to mimic her serenity, but fail noticeably.

"Yeah, you too." She tries to laugh, but instead it comes out as a sob. This time, she doesn't hide it. She just cries. Big, salty tears stream down her pale face, and her wide eyes redden.

My first instinct is to try and console her. I put my hand on her shoulder and open my mouth to speak, but instead of words coming out, I find myself weeping as well. My wobbling knees are weak, so I surrender to the ground. She follows suit, sitting on her knees, head in her hands. Our soft crying merges to heavy crying because it's all just so impossible. All the thoughts and emotions running through my head at this very moment are overwhelming. So we sit, Kira and I, and sob for awhile. After tears are dry and minds are caught up with the

whole situation, questions begin to bubble inside of me: *Who is Kira? How was she forgotten? What's her story?*

We are sitting on the rocky ground. I am looking at Kira, ready to overload the poor girl with my burning questions. She, however, is staring at the ground, breathing slowly and heavily, taking it all in. Finally, my curiosity gets the best of me. All of my questions come pouring out of my mouth, one by one. As I ask them, Kira stares up at me, obviously overwhelmed. But I'm too curious, too intrigued, too stunned, too confused, to care.

"Who are you? Where do you come from? What's your background? Do you live here? How old are you? What should we do now? How were you forgotten—" I pause for a quick breath of air, then continue: "Where are all your belongings? When did—" She cuts me off.

"Alright, alright," she smiles. "I know you have a lot of questions for me. Believe me, I have lots of things I want to learn about you too. We're both curious about each other. But slow down and I'll tell you a bit about myself."

"Okay," I say. "Sorry."

"Don't worry 'bout it," she says nonchalantly, then introduces herself properly. "So, I'm Kira—Kira MacIntosh, that is—and I'm seventeen. I'm from Edmonton, which is in Alberta."

"Alberta?" I ask. I was never interested in geography. "It's a province in Canada," she explains. "Anyway, we were vacationing in New York City when it was time for the big departure. It was me; my mother; my

stepfather; my big brother, Casey; and my baby half-sister, Lucille. Anyway, when I was nine, I hated outer space for some reason. I didn't realize the importance of getting on the ship. In fact, I'd have rather stayed on Earth all by myself than go to Mars.

"Though I disliked space, I had a strong passion for the 'art' of spying. And that included sneaking in and out of places. So, once inside the rocket ship, I led my parents to the heart of the crowd, and as soon as I had the chance, I snuck out. Because of the large number of people, I imagined my mum and stepdad wouldn't notice I was gone 'til later."

"But wait—weren't there guards outside the ships? How did you get past them?"

"There were guards—but there was also a lineup to go through security and all that stuff and board the spaceship. So I put on my most innocent, worried face and said that I had just boarded, but realized that my mommy was still in the lineup, and I wanted to go join her so that I didn't lose her. A lie, of course. But the guards just grumbled and sighed, 'Well, okay, kid. Go ahead.' So then I snuck out of the line, and dashed back to the hotel we were staying in. But, you know, it was kinda destroyed, so I moved to this suburb. It was always so lonely..."

She smiles sadly and signs. "So that's my story. Now tell me about you.

Tell her about me? I really don't know if I'd be able to. I'm still not fully over having been left behind. It's a touchy subject, and whenever I so much as think about it, I get teary-eyed. But *talk about it*? That would be

really hard for me. Especially since I haven't spoken to someone in eight years!

I consider mumbling to her the basic facts about myself, like my name and age, but nothing more. But then I remember: it must have been just as hard for Kira to tell me her story, and it'd be selfish not to follow suit. Plus, she's been through the same thing. She understands me.

I take a deep breath. "Okay, here it is. I'm Jayson Nzeogwu, and I'm 16 years old. I've always lived in New York, but my grandparents come from Ghana and emigrated here during their childhood. Um, I love skateboarding, but my parents always hoped I would take up reading as a pastime—"

"And how did you get left behind?" Kira snaps impatiently, then quiets. "Sorry. I didn't mean for it to come out like that. This must be as hard for you as it is for me. I'm really sorry. I'm just too curious for my own good." She smiles apologetically. "Sorry. Please continue."

"It's okay," I reply, and mean it. "I was pretty insensitive too, when I was asking you all those questions. Anyway, to answer your question . . . I honestly don't remember much about how it happened. I'm really sorry. Those few months were all a blur for me. I just remember being really scared and worried when I finally realized I would be all alone forever. I felt so . . . well, I don't know how to explain it . . ."

"I know what you mean." Kira says gently, and puts her hand on top of mine. "I felt the same way. Once the spaceships departed, I immediately

regretted doing what I had done. I completely get it."

I smile at her, meaning it this time. The feeling . . . when someone truly understands you, knows exactly how you feel, what it's like . . . it's magical. It makes you feel safe, makes you feel you belong, makes you feel you have a purpose. I can tell she feels the same way when she looks at me and smiles back, looking comforted.

I'm glad I found Kira.

One Year Later

"Can you believe it's been a year?" I ask Kira as we water the flowers in the garden outside our home. The day we found each other, she showed me the almost completely undamaged house she was staying in. I was amazed at her find: it's difficult to detect undestroyed buildings because of, you know, the apocalypse. So I took my few belongings and moved in with her. I introduced her to skateboarding, and she introduced me to gardening. It's quite fun, actually.

"No. It's incredible, isn't it?"

"It is, it is," I agree. We then continue concentrating on gardening for awhile until Kira blurts:

"Hey, Jayson, I just thought of something."

"Oh. What did you think of?" I say, continuing to water the plants.

"Well, you know how we found each other, even though we both thought we were the last ones on Earth?"

I turn to look at her, suddenly interested. Her straw-blond hair is as tangled as the vines on the fence. "Yeah . . ."

“Well, what if there are others? Other people, I mean.”

“Well, what if there are others?
Other people, I mean. In the state or
even around the world? There have
got to be some more. Just imagine!
And maybe we could travel all around,
to find them! And we could all live
together, the last people on Earth!”
I can tell she is getting very excited
about the idea. “So what do you think?”
Her smile is wide.

I feel bad for not sharing her
enthusiasm. “I don’t know . . . wouldn’t
that be risky? I can think of multiple
reasons why it could be dangerous.
And it’s all kind of sudden . . .”

“Oh, Jayson, always so serious!”
Kira says. “Okay, we don’t have to do it
today, obviously . . . but wouldn’t it be
cool to find and meet more people like
us?”

“Yes, it would . . .” I admit.

“Okay, there’s a start . . .” She trails
off. “Just consider the idea,” she insists.

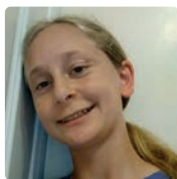
So I do. I do for a while.

It’s only one cold winter’s
night when she brings it up again
nonchalantly, that I finally reply: “Let’s
do it.”



Five Open Eyes (iPhone XR)
Miya Nambiar, 13
Los Angeles, CA

Playing Snatch-It



by Julia Marcus, 13
Culver City, CA

Let's see. Is there any place for an R?
Can it be inserted into FLAP or GUM or
BENCH? But no—I watch as CHART is
made, and I half-heartedly sigh. I watch
HIS turn to FISH and then to SHIFT.
That could be a sentence. But they're
just random words, somehow
conjugated from tiny letter tiles spread
out on the table. It's amazing how many
words can be made—WATERY, CUBICLE,
QUIZ, WISPY.

Right here, when it's just
a game, none of it
seems to mean
anything.

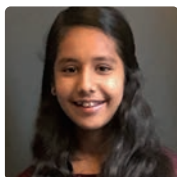
A Window in the Evening

I press my face
against the glass,
blowing circles of air
onto its cool surface.
I step back,
looking at the filmy,
blurred image that faintly appears
on the other side
of the window.
I draw my name in the vapor.
My finger squeaks on the glass
as I drag it through
what used to be my breath.
I wipe it all away.
The window is slippery.

Through the night,
I cast a shadow on my front lawn,
illuminated by the room's light.
I see every sharp detail
of my body,
blurred by my breath.

The Time I Learned of Death

When her grandmother falls sick, the author is forced to confront death



by Ilina Chaudhury, 11
New York, NY

In my memory, my grandmother is the figure of kindness, the perfect role model. That's how I will always remember her. That summer, when my grandmother died, she was different—the woman I met there didn't fit my memory of her, though she was my grandmother nonetheless. My grandmother always had bright eyes and a cheerful smile ready in store to use whenever I was around. That summer, when I met her, it was as though the fire in her had extinguished, like an overused candle.

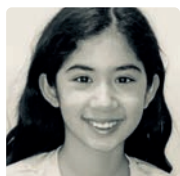
The hot, humid breeze surrounded us, even though it was the middle of winter in India. It always confused me how the weather was all topsy-turvy. As a four-year-old, I didn't know any complicated scientific or geological terms to explain why that was; however, even though I was four, I realized that like the weather, my memories didn't match the grandmother I saw in front of me.

Back then, she and I used to play Jenga together. We played our own way: instead of following the normal rules, we built structures using the

hundred mini blocks. We built houses into towns. Buildings into cities. She also taught me how to draw different animals: trace a small plate to make a circle, then add two triangles as ears and three lines on either side of the face as whiskers. The perfect cat!

That summer, that was all in the past. My family and I were walking the short journey to a nearby hospital. My grandmother was going there for her "check-up." It was strange being in India in the first place; usually, my grandmother came to visit us in the U.S. I stared down at the organized patterns our shoes were making in the sand. I wondered why my grandmother was acting so strangely this summer. She was feeling a little sick; I knew that since my mother had told me earlier. But she couldn't have been feeling "a little sick" to have to go to the hospital. My mother, aunt, and grandmother headed right, toward the hospital, while my dad, brother, and I continued to walk straight on our way to a restaurant for lunch.

Once we got back to the house after lunch my mother, who had



Rocks at Pohoiki Beach (iPhone X)
Lila Raj, 11
San Francisco, CA

arrived slightly earlier, signaled for me to come into the bedroom with her. I followed her to the bedroom. We both sat facing one another on the mesmerizing blue blanket of the bed. I stared down at the blanket. *Was I in trouble? What did I do?* When my mother said, "Your grandmother is sick, she is sick with cancer. Uh, cancer is a disease . . ."

I heard her stutter in the middle; my mother never stuttered. I thought confusedly about what she had said, then asked, "What's cancer?"

My mother thought for a while before answering. "It makes your grandmother tired and sick." She seemed nervous and was pumping her leg up and down as she said, "Your grandmother might die."

I looked up from the blanket staring at her. I processed what she had told me. I saw her red-stained eyes and caught the quiet sniffle that I hadn't noticed when she was talking. I started to cry. I finally was able to process what she had said; my grandmother might die, and that would mean she wouldn't come back to visit anymore.

My grandmother had been admitted to the hospital. It had been a few weeks since she had been admitted, and the doctors were about to perform a surgery on her. My mother anxiously explained how my grandmother would either get better or she would die.

"Why would she die? I thought doctors fixed sick people," I said.

My mother replied by saying, "Sometimes if you're really sick, like your grandmother, you can't fix them."

Why couldn't they fix her? She was

fine earlier. Besides, she was feeling a little better.

I looked the hospital directly in the eyes and saw the reason everyone hates the hospital.

I saw a cold, white, stone prison with bright lights flooding its windows and doors in the pitch-black night. I realized that even though it wasn't the doctors' fault, only some of the patients can ever leave the prison.

It felt like an eternity when a doctor finally came out to signal my mother and aunt in. "Ms. Sinha? Yes, well, we have unfortunately come across a problem regarding your mother. Please, come inside."

Was she dead? She couldn't be dead. My grandmother was alive earlier, so how could she be gone now? I felt as though I was swirling in circles into the dark shadow of the hospital's glare; it wasn't the same kind of mesmerizing as the blue blankets. This was dark voices that were drawing me in, so many bright lights and noises that were deafening but in the background. It was as though I was falling. I couldn't think, I was drowning in noise that wasn't even there.

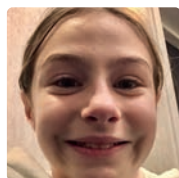
Then my dad grabbed my hand and gently led me to a taxi. I realized that I was crying. Finally the noise died down: peace after so much disruption.

The thoughts were overwhelming, and I slowly drifted off to sleep. I dreamed of grandmothers jumping over a row of hospitals, like motorcycles running over a ramp and flying into the air. The next morning, I woke up and expected to see my grandmother sitting in the chair like she always was. Instead, I saw an empty hole where she was supposed

to be. It was a busy morning; the house was filled with mourning relatives who lived nearby.

We all went to her memorial for her ashes. It was enclosed in a box—black, smooth, and shiny. Prettily carved and painted. We had her memorial in her favorite place, the backyard of her childhood home. I walked toward the box containing her ashes; it smelled sweet yet solemn, like her. When I looked, I could almost see her smiling back down at me. Almost.

After a lot of tears, we headed back to New York. I felt like I was wizened and wise. When the next summer came around and she never came, I cried and realized that she wouldn't come this summer, next summer, or any summer after that. That's just the way it is: the only place I'll ever see her again is in my memories.



Coral Maze (iPhone 7)
Grace Williams, 13
Katonah, NY

Decisions



by Sofia Dardzinski, 9
Potomac, MD

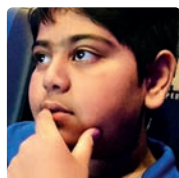
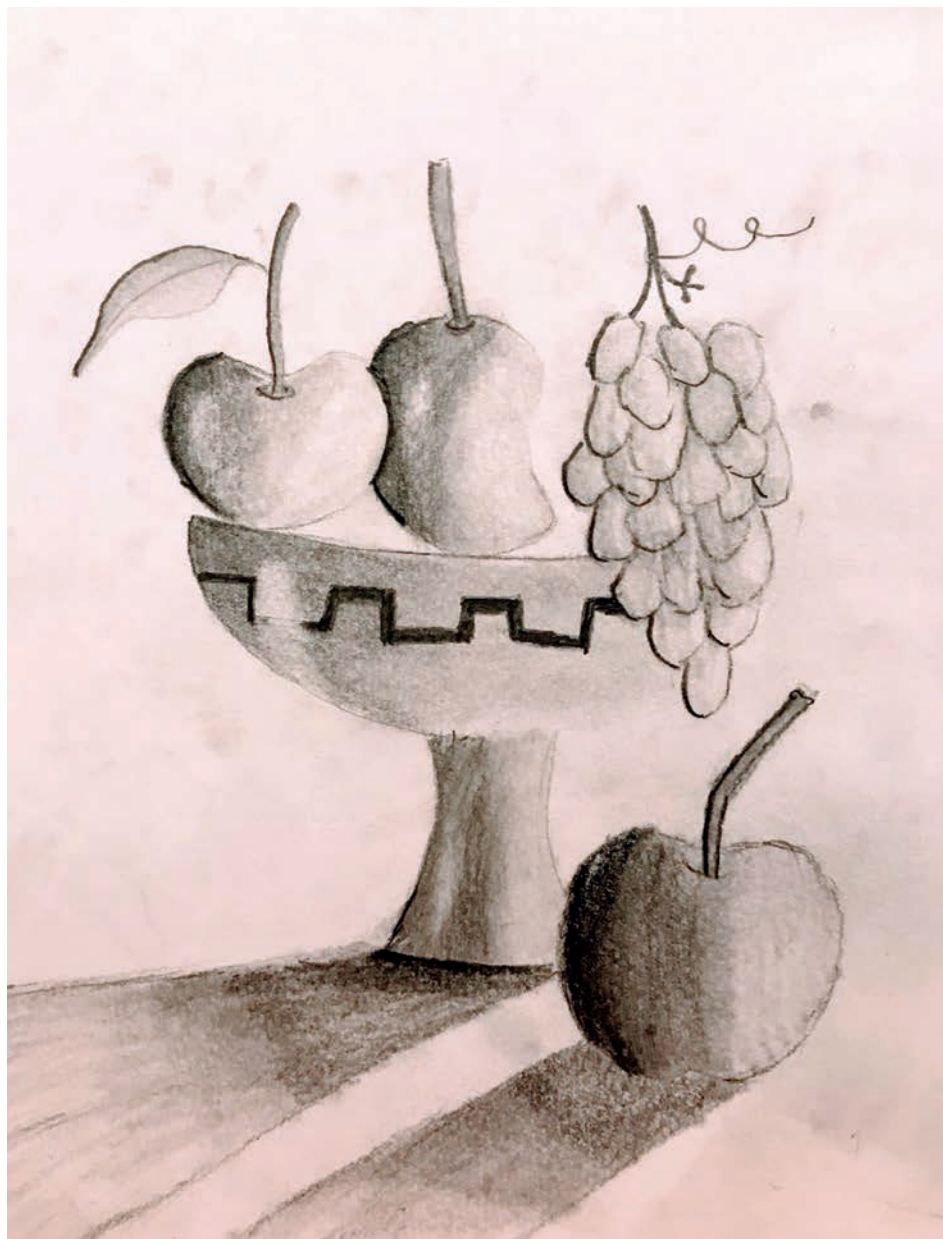
I look at the clock
The red hand ticks, shifting its weight onto the next number
Shifting its promise and memories on and on

A clock tells time
I believe it tells time from its perspective
Every clock is different
Every clock has a different view of things

These numbers are what give us our limits
They tell us when to stop and when to go on
But this is different for clocks
They don't have limits
They are endless
This red hand visits every number, ticking until it finds eternity
Ticking until it visits the right number
But there is no right or wrong

Don't get tired of other numbers
Don't forget about what you said and what you promised
Don't leave behind the things you love just because of another number

BE YOURSELF WHEN THE HAND COMES BY



Fruit Basket (pencil)
Rithvi Bellamkonda, 11
Overland Park, KS



Pottery (pencil)
Rithvi Bellamkonda, 11
Overland Park, KS

Where I'm From



by Talia E. Moyo, 10
Hopewell, NJ

I'm from the hot deserts of Africa, with Sekuru's delectable, rich mushroom stew, and Mama's avocado pudding, and the African adventures with waterfalls and dancing in the night with fireflies as night lights. And the red dusty villages of Cameroon, with rains that come almost once every month. And Sekuru's little straw hut-like chapel, where stories and the Bible are read.

The big continent of Europe is where I'm from, with silly, little, annoying, cute, frustrating cousins who follow me everywhere I go. And aunties, who make delicious cake pops and table grill and German sausages and treats and grow mouth-watering fruits that drip down my shirt, and cook everything possible everywhere they go.

I'm from Hopewell, New Jersey, with its green luscious forests, and with Lotta, our dog, following my every single step. And seeing her perform a routine of sit, lie down, paw and guess which hand your treat is under. And the soft sandy beaches of the New Jersey shore and their warm grains of sand cushioning my feet under cool water with shells of all shapes, sizes and colors.

I'm from Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe, with drops of water splashing my face like rain. I'm from hiking up mountains to reach for the heavens above us. With my Sekuru who tells me stories of his trips from Australia to Los Angeles and all around the world. And I'm from the frightening animals, like charging elephants and yawning hippos with enormous teeth and lions crossing roads.

The piano is where I'm from, with notes from lowest A to highest C, and violins and cellos that follow me. They sing the songs of Mr. Louis with a past as old as dirt itself. And when strummed, fill the air with dust and history of an old jazz band rocking out on the streets all night.

I'm from a village in France, with water crystal blue and caves with plenty of history to go around. And little French schools with children running around and

screaming with joy. I'm from lollipops the size of my head.

I'm from Louisiana, New Orleans, with Louis Amstrong on every street and Mardi Gras beads hanging on electricity poles. And homemade spicy crab mix, my favorite of all time.

I'm from summer night barbecues and side dishes of haricots (rice and beans), and running my home-made "ninja course." With Lotta biting at my clippety-cloppety, sparkling, muddy boots. I'm from staring on a starry night into the clear nighttime sky way past midnight. But on the rainy days, you'll find me in a light raincoat and without an umbrella running around my yard with a little puppy running and slipping at my heels.

I'll always be from giving Lotta a bath and seeing her look almost as skinny as a single sheet of paper. And from her shaking herself dry and giving me a shower. I love that I'm from the five year classes of ballet and tap and coming home with usually three to four blisters on each sore, swelling, painful foot, but every lesson was worth it. And the bootcamp-like swimming competitions, always swimming in cold and rainy weather. I'm from summer, summer, and more summer, with buttered corn and sprinting 5Ks all morning. I'm from splashing in an ice-cold quarry and finding mulberries and being silly with friends.

And I'll always be from the really special place—my home.



Sunflower Fields (acrylics)
Claire Jiang, 12
Princeton, NJ

Past, Present, Future

A series of autobiographical vignettes



Claire Jiang, 12
Princeton, NJ

The Globe is Warming

Isn't there a time where you think that you should be doing something, changing it, and wanting to? But not knowing how to, and then think, *Why do I have an obligation to do this?*

I do.

Whenever people talk about pollution and global warming, I agree with them all the way. Climate change is affecting all of us. The trees. The animals. The humans who don't even realize it.

I want to do something about it. I recycle. I reuse. I reduce. I tell people what is going on and the difference that they can make.

One day when I'm all grown up, I'll donate to research and install solar panels on my home. I'll have a job that concerns the environment and the climate.

Sometimes I wonder to myself, *Why? Why do I have to do this? How does the action of recycling one bottle a day*

contribute to helping the earth, with billions of people not doing what I do?

When I get too caught up in the nice new houses and new shops, I tell myself to stop. That this isn't good for me and others.

It's hard to do that.

Because I'll probably be long gone when this Earth will be barren and dry.

I mean, do I have an obligation to the people of the future?

Yes, I think I do.

Flowering Sedges

There are plants all around my house. At the front door, behind the fence in the backyard, in front of the fence. I don't know any of the names.

I've always wanted to be that type of person who can distinguish between which plant is poisonous, which plant is useful and edible, which plant attracts this bug and which plant attracts that one. But that is not me.

I can't even distinguish between an oak tree and a pine tree.

I really can't.

There are these grass-like plants planted in front of the old fence. They bloom and change color every season. Sometimes they're yellow and orange in the center, like a blooming sun. They attract the eye amongst the greenish, long, thin leaves. Sometimes the flowers are purple, the purest royal purple, with a lavender color in the middle.

I wish I knew the name of this plant.

But I don't.

I just call them flowering sedges. You know what sedges are, right?

Now that I've described the plant, experts and plant lovers will tell me that the name is so easy and the plant so recognizable that even the "most ordinary" person would be able to name the plant. The name will probably be as simple as lily. Or tulip.

Or dandelion.

It probably is, but that doesn't matter much to me now.

These plants change color every season. Yellow and orange during the spring and summer, then purple and lavender during autumn.

In some crazy way, they remind me of myself.

Sometimes I can be sunny and cheerful, like the orange-yellow flower that resembles the sun. Other times I can be frustrated and angry, like the dark purple flower.

I wish that I could be in the middle. Calm and secure.

Calm and secure.

Art, Music, and My Piano

My life would not be the same without music. Without art.

Art is a place just for me. Just me. I could draw anything, and it would be beautiful.

No one cares if I mess up or not, or if I did this wrong, or if I did that wrong.

It's just me, perfecting this and that. I like it.

Me, enjoying how colors mix together, then look like a sunset on a blank canvas. How you could create the ugliest color in the world. Then take a brush, scoop it up, and place it on that canvas. And it would still look beautiful.

There are so many different forms of art.

Photography, fashion, architecture, design, paintings, sketches.

All of them are different in each way, yet the same.

When I was younger, I loved singing in the car. For me, it was fun. It wasn't something mandatory. Not something that I was forced to do. It was simply pure fun.

When I was around four or five years old, I started playing the piano. I wasn't some music prodigy or some talented child. Instead, I was a small five-year-old being told to do it, and so I did.

My first piano teacher gave me jelly

beans when I played a piece. She had a whole box of them from Costco, with all types of flavors. I would always look forward to that day when she would award me with two or three of those jelly beans after class. But she didn't motivate me in any way. She didn't care if I practiced or not.

That's why my mom decided that I needed to go to a different teacher.

Her name's Grace. She has a lively temper but a strong, compassionate heart.

She has two dogs and two children and three pianos. I don't think she really liked me when I first came, but now she does.

At least I think she does.

When I first started, we played Haydn. Now we do Bach, Tchaikovsky, Mozart, Liszt, and some more Haydn.

I got my first piano with her.

It's not a grand piano, it's not a Steinway, it doesn't cost a million dollars.

It's a simple upright Kawai, with heavy keys but a beautiful sound to it.

There's a framed picture of me at my first recital at Carnegie Hall when I was six, and a small pot with small pencils. They sit on a satin-like piece of cloth covering the piano, with tassels at the end that have long fallen off.

It's not ancient, not brand new. It's not cheap, it's not expensive. It's not the best, and it's not the worst.

But it's mine. No one else can touch it. No one in my family wants to touch it. They don't know how.

They don't understand how we take for granted how a key makes a beautiful melodious sound. They don't recognize the beauty and splendor of having a piano that's yours. The beauty of being able to play a complex piece on this instrument, and make it sound effortless.

Do.

Re.

Mi.

Fa.

Sol.

La.

Ti.

Do.

And that's how it goes and goes.

Until you can't go any higher or lower.

Just Claire

My name is from the Latin and French languages. In French, it means “clear” in its feminine form. There are many versions of the name Claire. Clarissa. Clare without the i, Clara, Clair without the e. Even Clarence. They all sound the same. Someone could say “Clara!” and I would immediately respond, thinking that they were calling me. Sometimes I wish my parents had chosen a different name for me. Something more unique and special. Like Theodosia, Indie, or Willow or Sparrow.

A name no one has but me.

It’s hard to distinguish when people are actually trying to call your name. When people say the word “clear” or maybe even “clarinet,” I’d perk up, ready to respond. Then find out that they weren’t calling me.

In my school, I am often made fun of for my name. “Clarissa!” or “Clarence!” My brother’s name is Terence, and my name is Claire, so why not smush them together and call both of them Clarence?

In books and movies, there’s always a character with a name similar to Claire, Clarence, Clair, Clare, etc. Sometimes she or he is big, and sometimes she or he is small. Sometimes she or he could be tall and skinny, and other times short and fat. She could be the daughter of Ares, or sometimes he could be a chubby little boy with just two teeth. Ordinary

enough, I don’t feel like them. I don’t feel connected to them in any way. I am me. Just me.

Recently on the news, I heard that the country of Macedonia is debating on whether it should change its name to Northern Macedonia. It doesn’t really seem to make a difference.

Does it?

Then a woman came on the radio and pointed out how adding one word to the country’s name could change, surprisingly enough, its identity.

If I wasn’t given the name Claire, would my identity change?

Would the way that I think of myself and others change?

Would the decisions that I make change as well?

I’m not sure.

The House with The Ugly Fence

My house is wonderful. In its own way. When we moved in five years ago, it was pretty broken down.

I'm 12 now, so we moved in when I was seven. During that time, I was so angry. Why did we have to move? Why did I have to go to this new school? Our old house was wonderful. It was a wonderful community with wonderful neighbors.

Everything was wonderful.

My new home, well, it was pretty cool. It was way bigger than my old house, and I had a bigger room. I could decorate it any way I wanted. Paint the walls the color that I chose and get new furniture.

My thoughts then were conflicting.

Would it be easy for me to fit in at this new school? Would I make friends? What would the curriculum be like?

Eventually I got used to it. I made acquaintances, not friends. But the schoolwork was challenging, and the teachers were nice.

I have great friends now. Some are still acquaintances, but I like where I am right now. I like my school. I like my teachers.

But what I don't like is the fence around my house.

Before we moved in, there was already a fence surrounding our backyard.

But we still needed to insert another one, in place of the dying trees.

The fence is a whitish-cream color. I think it's ugly. I don't think that it's that ugly. I'm not sure what I think of that fence. Before, I didn't think much of it. Yes, it was noticeable, but I didn't think much of it.

One day when I was coming home on the school bus, my friend said to me "your fence is kind of hideous."

I was prepared to defend it, saying "so what?" and "what does that have to do with you?"

Then I got off the bus. I looked really closely at that fence. The fence was a cream color. It looked fine. Then I looked at my house. It was painted white with a patterned roof. That looked fine as well. Then I looked at my house and the fence. The white color of the house did not look good with the cream-colored fence at all.

Not at all.

But nothing can be "perfect."

Legacy

Let me tell you a story about my family.

My great-grandfather was a great business man. My great-grandmother was a great person.

He was short. As short as Napoleon, my mom says, even though she never knew him.

She got these stories from my grandmother, who got them from her mother.

He wasn't the most educated person, but he worked hard and took a hold of opportunities.

He was a traditional man. All for the sons.

He and my great-grandmother married when they were young. She was 17, he was probably around the same age.

My great-grandmother's family was moderately wealthy, so her husband got a pretty good dowry.

My mom thinks that he used this money to start his business selling fresh products in Changchun, Northeast China. Changchun is cold. Short summers, long winters.

My great-grandfather observed the fruits harvested in his area. They were not of good quality, and so he went to other places to see if their fruits were fresh.

He bought a bunch of the fresh fruit, Chinese haw berry, in places where

they were cheap, plentiful, and of good quality.

It's a reddish fruit, like a mini pomegranate.

He coated the haw berries with a hardened sugary syrup, which gave the fruit a sweet and sour taste, making it Tang Hulu, or a candied haw berry. Then, he put the candied haw berries into storage to sell for the winter, when haw berry was scarce, at a high price.

He put them on long pieces of hay, turning them into skewers. Since there was not a lot of this fruit of good quality in his region and time, he quickly made a lot of profit off of this business. He did similar things like this with rice, grains, and other fruits. Using the money, he bought large plots of land.

They were very large.

Very large.

My mom says they were the size of a whole county.

Now that's big.

He rented out this land and the houses on it to other people, but since he was too busy running his businesses, he put my great-grandmother in charge.

My mom says that she was kind. Very kind. Too kind.

She was a traditional woman, and put her sons ahead of her daughters.

She was also strong. She lost six of her children, took care of her

remaining three sons and youngest daughter, and also took in two of her nephews.

She treated her own neighbors like family, and was fine with extending the due dates of rents because of family problems.

The family lived happily for quite a while. They had boys to carry on their legacy, and a young, healthy baby girl.

They were happy.

But not for long.

During that time, the Communists and Nationalists were fighting over China. The Nationalists occupied Changchun. That's where my grandma and her family were living. The Communists planned a siege, and cut off the city from food. People starved and died, including my grandma's father.

After the death of her husband, my great-grandmother decided to leave the city. She and her children escaped eventually, and sold her jewelry along the way.

A diamond ring for a bowl of rice.
A golden necklace for some potatoes.

And that's how it went.

I don't think that most people outside of China know of the civil war there. It was gruesome. It was horrible.

After the Communists took over China, there was the Chinese Cultural Revolution. People thought that the poorest people, most of them who

were lazy and unwilling to work, were the most pure and uncorrupted.

They thought that landowners and landlords were bad people. They stole the people's money and used that money for their own benefit.

It might've been true for some people, but not all. Take my great-grandmother, for example. She was so kind and never liked saying no.

But instead, they beat her.

They beat philosophers and scholars.

Musicians and famous actors.

They beat wicked people, they said.

But they beat good people. People who were kind and compassionate, I say.

My great grandmother was so afraid for herself and the livelihood of her own children, she burnt the ownership papers.

She burnt the evidence of all that she had, all that she and her husband worked for to ensure that her children would not be mocked and scorned, even though she was.

I can't believe that even though my family went through all that, I'm still here. Without the struggles they had experienced, I wouldn't be here. I never knew them, but I feel like I do.

I carry on my grandmother's legacy, my great-grandparents', and my ancestors' before them.

They've been through so much, and still have endured.

No matter what happens in the future,
the past will always be with me,
carrying me through the present. I will
carry on their legacy, and I will not be
knocked down by failures.

No matter what, you can always work
yourself back up, if you try. You can be
mocked. Scorned. But in the end, you
can still get back up.

Fleeting



by Teddy Lykouretzos, 13
Bronxville, NY

Why do we take pictures?

The ability to endlessly preserve is one of many modern fixtures.

If we like a dish, we order another.

Impossible to do with the birth of a brother.

Capturing fireflies in a glass,

Eventually they burn out and pass.

Wedding cake in a freezer,

Forever able to eat at one's leisure.

Still tastes of cherry,

But not as good as when you went to marry.

Even hands in cement, statues of stone

Are gone like the wind's moan.

Don't you get it? Nothing is and I'm not being mean.

Life, love, even colors on a screen.

Plastic Permanence

The pyramids were made to remind people of a ruler
But now something lasts longer and can fit in a cooler.
Plastic is like a shapeshifting ooze.
An eternally flexible yet strong fuse
That is slowly burning to our explosive end.
Pennies to make,
Fortunes to break.
Made of the remnants of before
With a host of chemicals.
All for what, a vessel of soda?
We fear poison, but we create it.
Send it into our luscious waterways
And bury it in our merry earth.
We deny our extinction
But we kill ourselves.



Blue Jay in Spring (colored pencil)
Cecilia Yang, 12
San Jose, CA

My Life as A Tree

Being a tree is not easy or peaceful as it seems



by Aiden Chen, 11
Edmonton, Canada

I flew through the brisk, cool air of the morning as a tiny seed, wondering where I would land. With a dull thud that echoed in my ears, I crashed onto the soft, crumbly dirt. The dirt was cool and soothing, and I fell asleep with nothing to do. After a year, I could finally get a clear view of where I had been lodged. Beside me, there was a peaceful lake with muddy brown water. All around me, there was a crowd of towering trees. Even the shrubs were taller than me. I looked around and saw the roots and stems of shrubs. Looking up, I saw their leaves. I looked higher and saw tree trunks. Looking even higher, layers of tree branches and leaves were present, with sunlight occasionally filtering through. Sometimes, small animals from the lake would scamper over the leaf litter on the forest floor. Everything was peaceful, and no bad events happened to me until five years later.

I was growing taller and enjoying myself as my branches grew denser and denser. Suddenly, I noticed a rolling, dark cloud in the distance. Within the hour, it was on top of the forest of conifers. With a deafening roar of thunder, huge drops fell like

stones from the sky. They battered my branches painfully, and huge gusts of wind pushed me from side to side. Then, I was blinded by a flash of brilliant white light. Thankfully, it only lasted for half a second. A mysterious scorching pain started in my lower branches. I looked down and to my horror, I saw flames devouring my branches. Just when I thought the worst was over, the flames spread to another tree and before a minute had passed, the forest was burning down. The heat was so great that the raindrops sizzled and evaporated before they could even get near my branches. The whole forest was filled with an orange haze that distorted the shapes of trees around me. I thought I would topple when a great shower of strong water put out the flames. Looking up, I saw a machine that looked like a giant red bird. It continuously sprayed water from its underside that penetrated through the heat and put out the flickering flames. I silently thanked the red machine for saving my life. It took me three years to heal from that horrible lighting strike.

Just as I had barely finished healing, I noticed a small yellow patch

I looked around me and everywhere my eyes passed, plants were brown and dying. I could no longer hear the birds and insects that so often inhabited the area.

on my upper branch. The patch quickly grew into a beehive. Day and night, I was forced to listen to their unceasing buzzes. Then, a large brown bear came to the base of my trunk and stared hungrily at the hive on the upper branches. It prowled around me, trying to find a way to reach the honey. I could almost see the gears in his head turning. Finally, it bunched its muscles and leapt into my branches. I swayed and my needles scattered in the air. I tried to right myself but the bear was too heavy. I could feel my roots coming out of the soft soil. Just when I thought I would fall, there was a tremendous crack and I swayed in the opposite direction. I felt like a frail piece of grass waving in the wind. As I stopped waving, I became aware of a horrible pain in my lower branches. I looked down to investigate and I was horrified by the sight. One of my largest branches had snapped off, leaving a large splintery wound. Then, the hive, which had been loosened, crashed down through my branches and broke out on the ground. Honey splashed everywhere, and it looked like a yellow splatter of abstract art on the ground. The bear began joyfully slurping up the delicious honey. The sight of the animal that had caused so much pain eating the sweet liquid made rage boil up inside me. I willed myself to topple and crush the bear, but my roots rooted me to the ground. It took me about four years to heal.

When I had finished healing, I noticed how thirsty I was. I had been

so caught up in healing my wounds that I did not have time to think about water and rain. So, to quench my thirst, I tried to bring up water through the deep ground. I could not. To find a solution, I looked toward the lake. I was shocked to see that no water existed anymore and all that was left was the dry and cracked depression in the ground. I looked around me and everywhere my eyes passed, plants were brown and dying. I could no longer hear the birds and insects that so often inhabited the area.

In the next month, my situation became more dire. My brownish-red needles were dropping off. I was terrified because I could not make food for myself without water. I could not absorb sunlight either. The trees around me were all brown, and I could not see a single bit of green anywhere. A few trees were dead and it was devastating to see these old friends leaning at unnatural angles. I could not think of anything except how to get water.

Finally, after three years of drought, a moist breeze brushed my bark. A dark cloud passed overhead. Fat drops of rain fell into the forest. As soon as the liquid made contact with the parched soil, it disappeared immediately into the thirsty ground. The sound of raindrops hitting the trunks and bouncing off from dead leaves was the most soothing music I had ever heard. After about 15 minutes, the soil had drunk its fill and puddles formed on the now muddy

ground. I gulped the water with delight as the life saving liquid flowed through my roots and to all parts of my trunk and branches. The rainstorm lasted only about half an hour, which was painfully short, but I knew that I would live long enough to absorb more water from the next storm. I survived the three-year drought. However, I only grew two centimeters in these years.

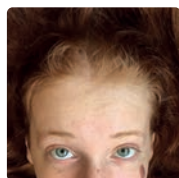
Four years later, a strange man carrying a shiny piece of metal on the end of a branch walked into my view. I wondered what he was doing when he suddenly swung the tool and hacked it into a tree beside me. It toppled down with a ground shaking crash. At each time another tree was cut down, I was trembling that it could have been me. By the time the sun was setting I was the only tree left within a radius of 200 meters. I was lonely, sleepless, and shivering the following nights and was confused whether I should long for the warm greeting from the morning sun or pray for a painless rest that I'd never wake from again.

In the coming winter, after a thick snow covered me, I was decorated by brightly colored ribbons, bells, and lanterns. A few families were standing around me. They sang and laughingly exclaimed: "What a perfect Christmas tree it is!" I felt alive again.

When spring came, a small wood cabin had been built near me. People walked inside and outside the cabin. Their tools made jaw-clenching sounds that made me cringe. Then, a small shed was built right beside me. Once it was fully built, I noticed that the shed was pushing at my trunk. I was leaning at a concerning angle. It took all my strength to not fall and

collapse. I could almost feel my roots ripping out of the ground. I hoped the people living here would take the shed away. I grew like this for the next three years. There were no more Christmas decorations on me. The people sat indoors around a plastic tree with electric bulbs during the winter holidays instead.

One day, a professional-looking worker with a yellow helmet came. I was delighted! He was going to remove the shed. I happily watched him do his work as he prepared an assortment of tools. When he seemed ready, I prepared myself to sway in the opposite direction as the shed was removed. However, I felt myself tilting even more. I watched in horror as the ground rushed up to meet me. With a crash that rattled my heartwood, I fell onto the soft, crumbly dirt in the same way that a tiny seed begins its life.



Reaching (iPhone SE)
Jackie Cutrona, 13
Bedford, MA

The Book With No Words

Meri struggles to find her voice again



by Michaela Frey, 12
Herndon, VA

One word today, thought Meri.

Yesterday was three words.

For Meri, speaking was like a honeybee sting.

The bee has one chance to sting, then it dies. A word = a sting.

Meri talked plenty in her head, but talking out loud was dangerous.

Silence was better.

Meri sat on the dock on the lake at her adopted parents' farm. They were kind people. She liked them a lot. The lake was grey. She saw her reflection.

She was black and white.

She was never good enough, always not right.

Meri thought about the day before yesterday.

The teacher had forced her to say eight words. The. Civil. War. Was. A. Long. Time. Ago.

Each word choked out like a revolting piece of moldy cheese.

Meri would rather drag a cow across the lake.

She hadn't said more than twenty words a day for more than five years.

She remembered why.

It all started with five-year-old Meri. She was in a tiny apartment with a lady in a blue dress.

Back then, Meri was talking. Not just talking—she was being positively loud. “Meri, your room is here,” snapped the lady in the blue dress. Meri was face to face with a wall. She walked in and the lady slammed the door on her.

The room had faded, peeling baby-blue wallpaper. The floor was made of rotten wood with a wood cot in the corner. A small plate lay face down on the floor, and a bowl of oatmeal. Meri called for the lady in the blue dress.

She asked if she could have some more oatmeal. She told the lady it had fallen over.

The lady opened the door and her response? She glared at Meri.

“You’re just a stupid little foster kid. You don’t even deserve a bowl of oatmeal. You try and talk EVER again, much worse will happen to you.” Then she slammed the door on Meri’s finger. So Meri lost her words.

All the hours locked in the tiny

room, Meri practiced making the words but never dared to speak them.

But soon enough she forgot even how to formulate the words.

Then the lady was caught after four years. Meri was put into her new adopted parents' home.

Meri hoped that someday she would have the courage to say her words again.

Afterthought



by Daniel Shorten, 9
Mallow, Ireland

Just in front of the back wall
Was my seat
Full of salty popcorn
No curtain went up
There was no curtain
A poor man buried his children
Who will bury me he wept
A dog barked suddenly
Then Michael stoned the rabbit
And Peggy said the leg stinks
Straight away, Michael said you stink
All I could smell was cola
As we got back on the bus
A man and a woman kissed
Who will bury me?

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

Raya Ilieva, 10
Veryan Johnson, 13
Shaarda Krishna, 9
Madeline Sornson, 12

POETRY

Kiyomi Dallaskidd, 11
Avery Parsons-Carswell, 8
Lucy Rados, 12
Scarlet Song He, 9
Brook Taintor, 9

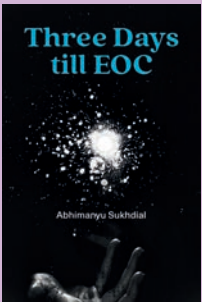
ART

Leila R Keller, 10
Lila Laton, 10
Oakley McCarthy, 10
Madhavan Rao, 5
Sophia Torres, 12

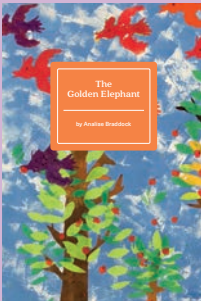
BOOKS AND MAGAZINES IN THE *STONE SOUP* STORE

Stone Soup makes a great gift!

Look for our books and magazines in our online store, Stonesoupstore.com, or find them at Amazon and other booksellers.



Published on September 1, *Three Days till EOC* by Abhimanyu Sukhdial, the winning novella in our 2019 Book Contest. Hardback, 72 pages, \$9.99.



Don't miss the two poetry collections we published in July, available as ebooks at \$4.99 each.

Current and back issues available, older issues at reduced prices!

