



# StoneSoup

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# StoneSoup

Writing and art by kids, for kids

## Editor's Note

One of the stories in this issue is called "A Place in the World," and that phrase perfectly captures how I see the pieces in this issue cohering. How do you—do we, does anyone—find their place in the world? What happens if your place has already been determined or selected for you? What if you don't *like* that place? What if your "place" is physical—but then you move? What if you feel like you have no place? These questions have been much on my mind lately as my family and I were displaced for several months because of the fires in our corner of California; they are all questions worth exploring in any medium, and I hope you will do so.

I usually talk about the written works in these notes because most issues are built around the themes I find in the writing, and the artwork follows. But the art we publish, and especially the art in this issue, is simply incredible—imaginative, skillful, beautiful, surprising. For instance, in *Mountain and Trees*, the mountain seems to be floating—or perhaps it is a lake. The ambiguity is unsettling and gives the piece a mysterious, magical quality. Or in *Music to my Ear*, I love how the curves of the violin visually echo the curves of the inner ear. Though I don't have the space to talk about each piece, please spend time looking carefully at all of the art in this issue, noticing what the pieces make you feel or think and why.

Till next time,



On the cover:  
*Winter* (Craft paint)  
Leonardo Cavaliere, 6  
Tarzana, CA

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*Mountain and Trees* (Watercolor)  
Djin Thornton, 10  
Purdys, NY

# When the World Woke Up

A celebration of dawn's quiet joy



By Maggie Shelton, 12  
Bethesda, MD

The ashen sky was dusted with creamy pearls. Street lamps cast their gentle aura across the unlit streets. No sounds could be heard; it was too late for the owls and wolves to be out but too early for a siren to shatter the deathly silence. A cool breeze churned through the crisp night air, changing it into something much softer and warmer. Suddenly, smears of color began to span the horizon, as if the world were catching fire.

The fiery inferno of sunrise began to lighten the world. A gentle, buttery light took a stroll through the dim town. Closed blinds let in the faintest strips of gold and copper, which stretched across walnut floors. Leaves rustled and trees swayed. The morning began to grow louder, and through the scattered pandemonium, the soft and delicate songs of the birds could be heard. Splintering light flooded into dreams. Soft murmurs drifted through open windows and into the open air.

Oh, and the food!

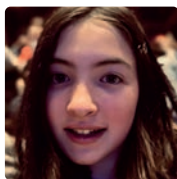
Every breakfast pan was a new sight or smell. Hands of all different colors, from chocolate brown to a sandy hue, reached into the dishes

and frying pans to flip their pancakes or stir their stew. Spicy and sweet scents of food from around the world blended into a perfect mix, and if you stood on the street, you could breathe in the aroma of fresh bread and fiery curry and buttery croissants and rich coffee. Flavors melded together. Brightly colored fruits let sweet juices drip from the corners of mouths. Under every rooftop a family was gathered, making the time to treasure the morning and lock it away. Children turned the pages in their books. They talked with their brothers and sisters. They quickly scarfed down their lovingly prepared breakfasts. No face was without a smile.

At last, the fire on the horizon had spread across the whole landscape, and the world bathed itself in such beautiful tones of amber, emerald, sapphire, crimson, lilac, and tangerine. Even in the midst of all this, nothing could shine brighter than the warm smiles spread across every face.

# Jennie's House

Moving forces Jennie to reconsider what makes a house a home



By Bo-Violet Vig, 13  
Los Angeles, CA

Jennie knew every corner of the house she grew up in. Every rut down the center of her bedroom ceiling, every groove worn into the bamboo floorboards, every chip of peeling yellow paint behind the living room sofa. If you asked, she could show you the twining scrape on the laundry room floor from the time her father dragged the plastic hamper from there to the kitchen with Jennie in it; she could tell anyone why there were still streaks of red crayon across the wall in the foyer (no matter how hard they scrubbed, her mom and dad were never able to wash all of her brother Henry's Crayola masterpiece out of the fading beige wallpaper).

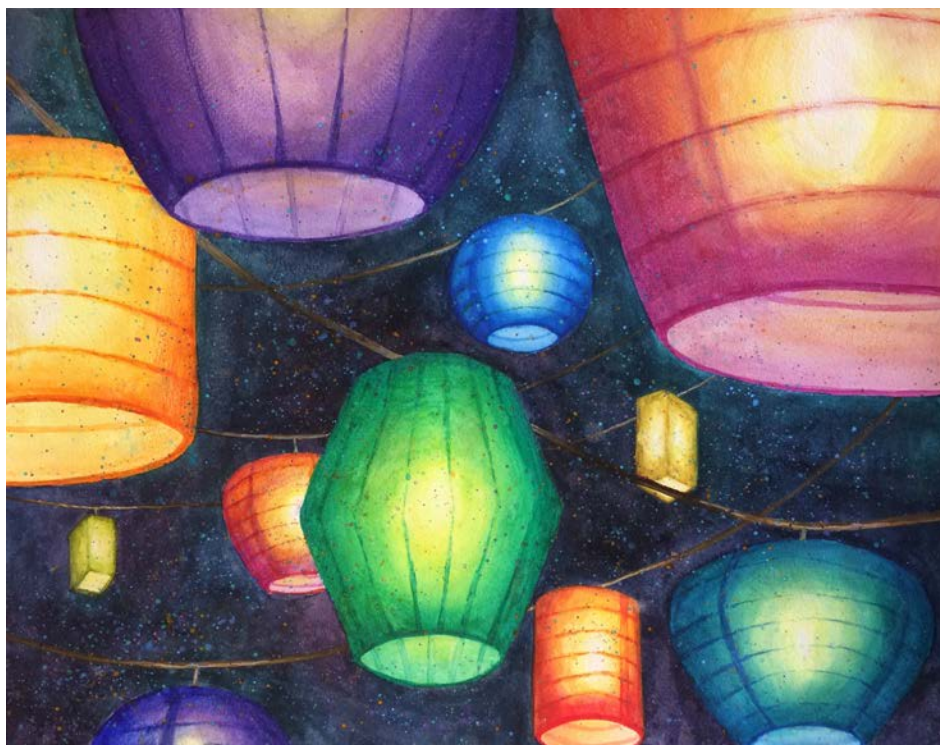
Jennie loved that house, the one on Gardener Street with two oak trees in front and a cluster of pink rosebushes that crawled beneath the wide picture windows, only a block away from the park where Jennie and her best friend, Elizabeth, had spent every day of every summer since they were four years old. The rambling lawn expanding from either side of the little brick footpath leading to the maraschino cherry-red front door, the grapevines dripping

like warm honey from the wooden ledge on the back porch, the lavender stalks, tall and gloriously purple, waving lethargically in the wind by the white fence at the edge of Jennie's backyard—every little detail was a treasure to Jennie.

Everyone loved the house. Sometimes, on steamy Saturday evenings, Jennie's parents would kindle the Chinese lanterns that teetered with trepidation on the porch beams and lay the scuffed dining room table with Jennie's favorite tablecloth—the red-and-white paisley that Aunt Flora had stitched as a little girl all by herself. Then, once Jennie's mother had prepared a pitcher of sweet hibiscus tea, in would stream the guests. Many partygoers attended—Elizabeth's family; Hannah and her husband, Jerry, who lived in the duplex on the next street over; the Caulfields and their baby, Ben; Mrs. Hamilton from the pink house next door; Daddy's colleague Harry Swenson and his three sons; Sophie Russell with her mother Allison . . . Jennie could go on and on.

The food was always heavenly: Jennie's mother would order a peach





*Through Light and Color* (Watercolor)  
Lauren Yu, 13  
Cresskill, NJ



pie from Franny Belle's Bakery on Thompson Road—she'd never learned to bake herself—and her father would make brisket in the slow cooker with lots of onions, the way everybody liked it. All of the kids would play hide-and-go-seek in the dark, and Jennie couldn't remember a time she hadn't won; because she knew every cranny and crevice, she found a discreet hiding place every time.

The grown-ups would laugh and drink hibiscus tea on the porch if it was still scorching hot outside. In the wintertime, they would sit under blankets in the living room and sip coffee, a fire flickering in the hearth. Everyone would stay long past Jennie's bedtime, and usually the other kids would bring sleeping bags to place on Jennie's cream-colored braided rug (stained pink in the middle from the time Jennie, age six, had spilled her juice box and left it to soak in), to doze until their parents crept in through the dark, swathed them in blankets, and carried them out the pristine door of Jennie's house into the luxuriously blustery night.

Every night, Jennie lay beneath her lace-trimmed, mint-green comforter, one cheek against the scuffed white wall, breathing in the heavenly scent of baking cookies combined with the pungent smell of lavender that had seeped into every corner of her house, thinking just how wonderful it felt to be there, how the house's walls almost hummed with memories, how Jennie feared the house would combust: it held that much love and happiness.

Sometimes Jennie imagined herself as a mother with two children of her own, raising a

family in the house she loved so, her own kids romping in the grass-covered backyard, picking lavender, laughing and shouting with delight. She imagined sitting on the porch drinking iced tea next to a grown-up Elizabeth, and sleeping in her own bed forever and ever and ever. She even imagined Henry living there with her, and her mother and father as grandparents, making pancakes for her each Sunday morning, watching movies in their bedroom every Friday night. Jennie couldn't wait for these fantasies to come true. She never doubted that they would.

Everything changed in a matter of seconds, as if a tornado had suddenly blown in and torn Jennie's life apart. There came a call from Grandma Helen in Derry, New Hampshire, letting Jennie's family know that Grandpa Ben was sick with lung cancer. Then Jennie's dad got a transfer to Derry, and he left to be with his father. Then came the announcement that there was a new house waiting for them in Derry on Blancheford Avenue, a street without a park on the end or an Elizabeth to accompany her there. That the blue house on Gardener Street had been sold to a family with a girl Jennie's age. That in a month, Jennie and her family would move across the country into a house they'd never even seen before in person.

Then came Jennie's tears that wouldn't stop, the slam of her bedroom door, the crying and crying into her bedspread for hours on end. The shouting, the screaming. The *I'm not going!*

But New Hampshire happened

anyway, and soon Jennie's whole life, taped shut into dirty cardboard boxes, was bouncing around in the back of a truck headed for Derry. And in a blurry whirlwind of goodbyes and hugs and kisses, Jennie found herself wearing a new, green woolen coat, standing in front of the new house.

The new house was a drab olive grey, a color Jennie loathed the way she did Brussels sprouts. The fact that her parents planned to have it painted a lighter shade of green as soon as the weather improved didn't console Jennie in any way. It was quaint, only one story tall, with a sloping shingled roof, a wraparound porch, a snow-blanketed front yard, and a squeaking wooden gate that led down the driveway to a brick-paved backyard that had only a small patch of garden at the very edge. There was a magnolia tree next to the pathway leading to the steps, white-barked and stout, with long arms beckoning to be climbed.

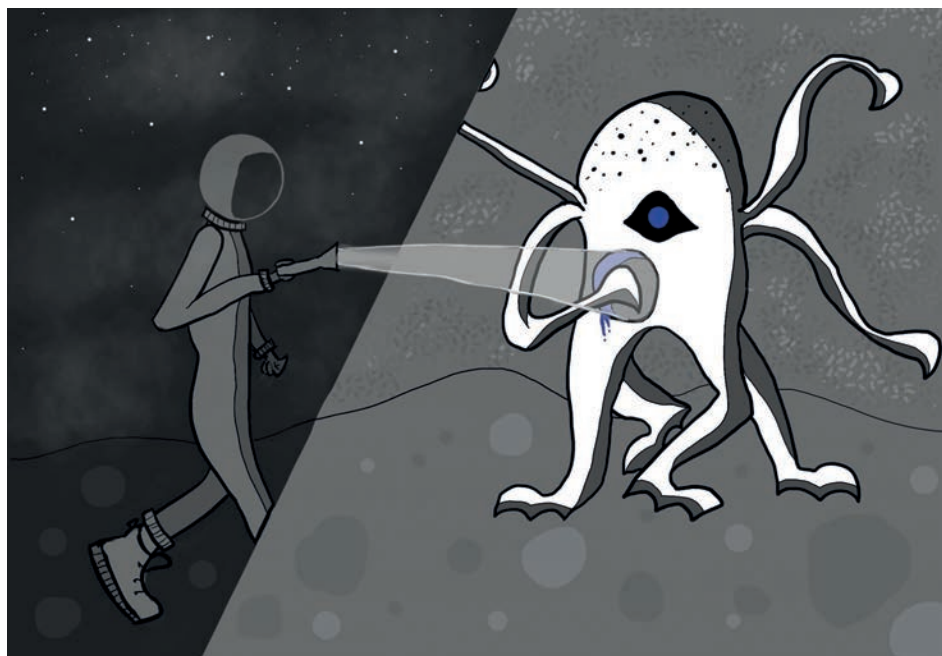
The inside of the house smelled like detergent and flowery perfume, a pungent scent that made Jennie's head ache. And though the living room was beautiful, wide and spacious and painted a spritely yellow, the dining room was a condensed cramp of table, chairs, and a cabinet. Jennie's bedroom here was bigger than her old one, painted sunset pink. She had a new, white rolltop desk, a furry beanbag chair, and a window that looked out onto the magnolia tree, which she would have fervently adored—but it wasn't her house, it wasn't her home. It never would be. So Jennie loathed it. The visit to the house evoked more tears, more sobbing, even hiding in a closet that smelled

of dust and crawled with silverfish. Jennie hated the new house with all of her heart. Her heart was still in the old house on Gardener Street.

A long car ride to the hospital followed, then a walk down a hall that was too clean. And there was Jennie's grandpa in his bed, a huge smile of delicious delight and glee on his wrinkled face. Grandma Helen mirrored his expression, hailing her relations with joy and ecstasy. Jennie's father ran across the room to kiss his parents, relaxed but brimming with tearful happiness. He looked happier than she'd ever seen him at home, Jennie realized, here with his parents. Henry and Jennie's mother were happy along with Jennie's father, jumping up and down and hugging each other and contentedly exclaiming things like, "I missed you so much!" Jennie made her way over to Grandpa Ben, took his hand quietly, and held it. A strange, warm sensation filled up Jennie's body as she glanced around the room at all of the happy faces. *Maybe, Jennie thought, the new house could become my home, even if it smells bad inside and has a tiny dining room. Even if I loathe it, it will still be a home because I'll be with my family, my mother and father and Henry and Grandma Helen and Grandpa Ben. It's not the house—it's the people who live with you that make your house your home.*

Jennie smiled at Grandpa, whose face glowed with joy. "I hope you get to come home soon!" she whispered.

Maybe she didn't loathe her new home too much after all.



*Invisible to Human* (Procreate)  
Emi Le, 13  
Millbrae, CA

# The Alien Who Copied Everyone

**Alien dreams of leaving his regular life on planet Watercolors to become an explorer**



By Dana Yehia, 8  
Sunnyvale, CA

There was once an alien who lived on a planet called Watercolors and wanted to be an explorer. But there was a little problem. The problem was that to be an explorer, you had to explore. But everyone on his planet already knew so much about the planet, it would be almost impossible to find something that hadn't been explored on Watercolors. He knew he had to do something about it, so he started exploring day and night but couldn't find anything that someone on his planet hadn't explored yet. That's about the time the poor little alien decided to give up.

After all of that thinking, he felt a bit of hunger in his tummy. It was that type of hunger that made it feel as if your tummy is saying, "I want FOOD!" He felt like he'd caught the flu—his tummy was killing him—so he went to eat lunch. When he arrived, he saw the menu of his dreams! There was pizza, spaghetti, tomato soup, hamburgers, steak, fries, chicken, asparagus, artichokes, meatloaf, and even his very favorite meal—omelets! So, he got himself a spot in line. He

waited for his turn, because that's what a polite alien does. He waited in line for about ten minutes, but it felt like a hundred million years to him.

When it was finally his turn, the alien who was writing down the orders asked, "What would you like to order?" Alien knew this was an honest man because of the polite way he'd asked Alien. So Alien said, "The omelet, please."

The alien who was placing the orders answered, "That will be thirteen dollars, please."

So Alien handed over thirteen dollars and said, "Thank you for the food." Alien said thank you because, again, he was a polite alien and also because he really needed the food, so to him that omelet was really important.

When he got his omelet, he found himself a table. He ate his omelet as slowly as possible because it tasted so good, and he wanted to enjoy it as much as he could. When he was finished, a waiter handed him the dessert menu. There was ice cream, chocolate fondue, cinnamon rolls,

Italian smoothies, cotton candy, lollipops, and ice cones. He ordered cotton candy. After that he was pretty much full, so he headed home.

When he got home, he didn't really know what to do, so he started reading a book called *Life Full of Baloney*. It was about someone who had so many questions about life, like why don't aliens get pimples and humans do, or why do living things snore, or why do living things get addicted to things so quickly, or why do living things have to eat to live, or why do you have to cut down a tree to make paper. It was Alien's favorite book because, in case you didn't know, Alien loved mysteries.

He read the book for about twenty minutes, and then he decided to have a TV break. He was watching something called *Serious Black's Mission*. It was about someone named Serious Black who had a mission of wizardry he had to accomplish. Alien liked it because it had wizardry, and wizardry is like magic. And Alien was very interested in every little detail of what life would be like if everyone were just walking around with magic wands in their hands, casting spells on each other like "Abracadabra!" or "Expeliarmus!" like in *Harry Potter*. He watched about twenty minutes of the show while eating a bagel and a tangerine, and drinking a cup of juice.

After a while, he heard a noise coming from outside. It sounded like a crash from out his window, but when he looked outside, it was just boring old raccoons. Alien treated it like no big whoop, but soon the raccoons were throwing all sorts of trash at Alien's apartment window—banana

peels, dead apple cores, and even chicken bones, which caused the glass of Alien's apartment window to break with one big glass shatter. It frightened Alien a bit, but he knew they were just some silly raccoons. Still, Alien asked himself the question, "Why are these raccoons so strong?" That's when Alien realized that these weren't raccoons, but specifically and biologically possums!

Alien decided to call the exterminator because he knew he couldn't get rid of all those possums all alone. When Alien got on the phone, an alien on the other side of the telephone answered right away. The alien from the exterminator company answered in a deep and questioning voice: "Hello? Is there an animal emergency at your house?"

Alien answered, "Well, there appears to be a group of possums throwing trash at my window, which is now shattered. And no, it is not at my house but at my apartment."

The exterminator answered in a cheerier voice, "Okay. Be there as soon as possible."

Alien thought that as soon as the exterminator came to his apartment, the possums would go away, but right at the moment Alien was thinking about that, he heard *DING-DONG*. Alien got up and opened the door. It was the exterminator!

The exterminator was wearing navy-blue overalls with a patch at the top that read "The best exterminators in town!" Alien thought this was the logo.

When the exterminator came in, Alien said, "Hello."

"Now, now. Where is this group of

possums you told me about?"

"They're over there," said Alien, pointing proudly to the trash can.

The exterminator went to his truck and came back with a bunch of cages in his hands.

The exterminator said, "We're gonna have to trap them in these cages. Then, when we can get them far enough from the neighborhood, we'll let them free in the wild."

"Sounds like a good plan to me," Alien said like he was taking it more seriously.

As they finished their discussion, the exterminator got outside the lobby, went to the trash place, and got the possums in the cages in no time. Alien was so impressed by the exterminator's skills that he was actually more worried about how much money it would cost, but he didn't fear the possums anymore.

When the exterminator came back, Alien asked, "How much will it cost?"

The exterminator said, "Fifty dollars."

Alien knew that fifty dollars was a lot of money, but he also knew that he had no other choice but to hand over fifty dollars. Alien paid the exterminator.

After that, the exterminator took off, leaving Alien with zero "thank yous," zero handshakes, and not even a simple "bye-bye"! Alien was pretty sad that the exterminator was not very polite, but Alien also knew that not every living thing on Watercolors was noble. Although he was also wondering if the aliens on Watercolors were the only living beings in the galaxy. Was it possible

that there were other ones on other planets?

That's when Alien had the best idea in the universe! There was a legend about people living on a planet called Earth. So, Alien decided that he was going to explore there. Alien was so happy that he would still be able to be an explorer, though he didn't even know how he'd be able to start exploring. He didn't have a spaceship to get to Earth. He didn't have a disguise to look like a human. He didn't even have a plan of what he was going to explore! Was he going to explore human biology? Was he going to explore states, continents, and countries?

But Alien did not lose hope. He decided to make a plan. He started to think. He decided he was just going to explore everything because it would be his first time there. Alien also decided that he was going to have to get a job if he wanted to get a spaceship, and he needed a spaceship to get to Earth. So Alien searched online all night long for a job. He found jobs like cooking, engineering, and making art, but none of these jobs would get Alien enough money in time. So Alien decided that he'd just have to build his own spaceship.

He started to build and build, and it actually was a really nice spaceship, but it still needed some essential items. So Alien started to think. He started to make a list of what he would need for a billion light-year trip in a spaceship to planet Earth. He needed oxygen, food, water, TV, books, a bed, an emergency phone, and an explorer notebook. So, he got a few oxygen tanks, bought some food, filled



his spaceship with water, got his TV, put some of his favorite books in the spaceship, put his sleeping bag in the spaceship, put an emergency phone in the spaceship, and got a notebook and wrote "Explorer Notebook" on the cover.

He double-checked that he had packed absolutely everything he needed for a billion light-year trip to Earth. He packed one more oxygen tank just in case. It wasn't long after that that Alien realized that he had forgotten to pack one of the most important elements for the trip! He'd forgotten to pack a space suit!

Alien rushed into his apartment in no time. When he came out of his apartment, he was holding a perfectly new space suit in his hands. He also realized that he'd forgotten to pack a human disguise, so he got that too. It took a little bit of time for Alien to get himself upside down into the spaceship, but Alien never gave up. When he got himself into the spaceship, Alien was expecting the sound of a motor, but then Alien remembered that he'd forgotten to put fuel into the spaceship, so he had to get out of the spaceship and fill it up with fuel. Once Alien finished that up, he got himself upside down again, and then he took off for planet Earth.

When Alien was in the galaxy, he saw millions of stars. Some were big, and others were small. But there was one star that was humongous. It was the sun! The sun was so bright that when Alien looked at it, he felt like his eyes were burning! The sun looked so red that Alien thought it was angry.

Alien was getting pretty bored, so he started reading a book. He was

reading and reading; he didn't realize it was nighttime. When people say that time flies by, they actually mean it. Alien went to bed. If you were to stand right next to Alien when he was sleeping, you'd only be hearing the loudest snoring in the universe.

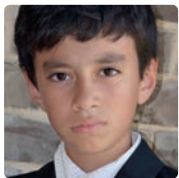
When Alien woke up, he started to knit a scarf. Alien loved to knit. He finally started to see something round and blue and green. Then, he started to eat some kumquats.

Finally, Alien arrived on planet Earth. So, Alien put his space suit on and landed head-first on planet Earth. That's when Alien realized something *terrible*! He didn't know how to speak English! But then a solution rushed into his mind. Alien decided that he was just going to have to copy what everyone said.

So when he got to Earth, he copied *everyone*. Most people found Alien annoying; others found him funny. But Alien still copied everyone. And that's what Alien kept doing, no matter what. He didn't care what people thought of him.

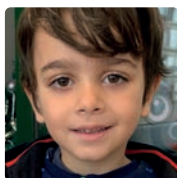
One day he was out for a walk. He was calmly walking when someone bumped into him. This person didn't realize he had bumped into Alien. He had an interesting round object in his hands that had red smoke running around it. It seemed very familiar to Alien. It was something they used on Watercolors to signal a warning. The man said it was a delivery from the planet Watercolors. Alien never knew why he got it. He never found out the answer to this question in his whole life.

# The Moon



By Alex Cole, 10  
Mansfield, TX

The moon, cold as ice  
Glow's beautifully in the darkness  
Abandoned by all



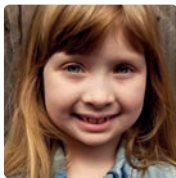
*Bear* (Pencil)  
Paris Andreou Hadjipavlou, 6  
Nicosia, Cyprus



*Tiger* (Pencil)

# The Ambassador

*After de Chirico*



By Emma Catherine Hoff, 8  
Bronx, NY

An ambassador.  
He has no mind, no face.  
He sits back in a daze.

Like a dog,  
loyal  
to anyone who commands him to do anything.  
But with no mind.

No, he stoops lower than a dog.  
He is not human anymore.  
He wears a breastplate—  
for every moment he is ready for a battle to lose.

People treat him like a toy,  
a robot.  
Yet there are no people.

Where he sits is not a city,  
but it has walls.  
It has no hope,  
yet it has strength.  
Perhaps the walls have hope, the ambassador thinks.

The walls could talk.  
Or could they?  
They talked to him.

He knows he is nothing.  
He wants to give himself away.  
Leave the curtain and chair, and enter the darkness beyond,  
where he will have to suffer nothing.  
But then the walls would be alone.

Does he already suffer nothing?  
He is alive and not alive.  
How does he think?  
He is alive and not alive.

Like a tree  
he stands still, not quite able to grasp the knife  
that he could put to his breastplate  
to ruin the mechanisms that hide there.  
To be gone  
from an awful world he is already gone from.





*The Little Mermaid* (Colored pencil)  
 Rebecca Wu, 9  
 Medina, WA

# Sawterra

**Sawterra, who thinks she looks as terrible as her name sounds, wishes to become beautiful**



By Rose Amer, 10  
Belmont, MA

Sawterra had a terrible name. She wished she had been called something beautiful, like Janis or Jasmine. But no. She had to be named Sawterra.

Sawterra, I am sorry to say, looked exactly like her name. She had matted brown hair, muck-green eyes, and a sallow, drooping face. She had a height of nearly six feet, but was far wider than she was tall. She was flabby and sallow and drooping, and she wished more than anything to be beautiful.

One day, as Sawterra was walking along, dragging her feet in the mud, she came across a stone gargoyle stuck deep in the ground. It was a tangle of scaly gray legs and arms and claws and tails, and its huge, gaping mouth looked wide enough to swallow a bowling ball. Sawterra took a great liking to it, as it looked so much like herself.

"I feel sorry for that gargoyle," she said aloud, though no one else was around. "I know what it feels like to be ugly."

And she pulled the gargoyle out of the ground and carried it home in her thick, floppy arms.

---

Sawterra's parents were very rich, and very strange. They, unlike their daughter, were both very thin and hated other people. Her mother had stringy gray hair and pale blue eyes and unnaturally pointy eyebrows; her father had shiny black hair and a dashing black mustache. They were loving parents, and they always encouraged Sawterra to play practical jokes on the neighbors. Oh, and also: they adored frogs so much they filled their house with them.

Frogs in the pantry when Sawterra went to fetch the sugar. Frogs in the frying pan when she tried to make breakfast. Frogs, frogs everywhere.

Sawterra liked frogs too because, like her, they weren't very pretty. Sawterra didn't like pretty things. She felt jealous of pretty things. Because didn't she deserve to be pretty too? Why did some things get to sparkle and glitter and shine while she was stuck being ugly and plain?

Sawterra filled her room with ugly things, many of them even uglier than her. It made her feel good to actually be more beautiful than something. "The man I marry must be

**Sawterra stared longingly through her skylight. One star was especially bright. She would have liked to be that star. That star was beautiful.**

even uglier than me,” Sawterra would often announce. Because, after all, anyone *less* ugly than her would have to find her utterly disgusting. (Besides her parents, of course.)

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Sawterra was sitting in her room, gazing lovingly at her gargoyle. It was nighttime, and she could see the stars through her skylight. Sawterra’s parents didn’t care when she went to sleep, so she stayed up as late as she wanted.

Sawterra felt something cold and damp pressing against her hand. It was a frog, of course. She bent down and smiled at it. This frog’s name was Warty, and he was her favorite because he was especially slimy and warty and gross.

Sawterra stared longingly through her skylight. One star was especially bright. She would have liked to be that star. That star was beautiful.

“Staaar liiighthtt, staaaar briiiiighthtt . . .” she began to sing. “Fiiiiirstt staaaaa I seeeee tooniiighthtt . . .”

Then she paused. What should she wish for? She looked at the gargoyle, its sweet little eyes gazing dreamily into space. And she knew.

“Wiiiiishh I maaayy, wiiiiiiiishhhh I miiighthtt, haaaave the wiiishhh I wwiishh tooniiighthtt . . .”

“I wish,” Sawterra breathed, “I wish my gargoyle were alive.”

At first, nothing happened, and Sawterra thought it wouldn’t work. Oh, how could she have been so silly?

The gargoyle was made of stone. It wasn’t *alive*.

But then the gargoyle seemed to stir, and its lifeless gray scales shifted into bright, shiny, silver diamonds along its body. Its eyes glowed, its mouth opened, and . . .

“WHAT CAN I DO FOR YOU, O GREAT ONE?” it asked in a huge, booming voice.

“Make me beautiful,” she answered.

And so the gargoyle did. Or . . . he tried. He mumbled a spell under his breath, and suddenly Sawterra felt a coldness inside her. She gasped. She hurt all over. Her hair writhed and grew, changing from a drab, unattractive brown to a striking, shiny black. Her face twisted, transforming her features, changing them from ugly to beautiful. It hurt more than anything she had ever experienced before. Her mind went numb. She couldn’t think, she couldn’t breathe.

Sawterra had no idea exactly when the change ended. Gradually the pain and coldness retreated, and everything was dark. *Why was it so dark?*

Then she opened her eyes, and light came pouring in, blinding her.

The gargoyle was bending over her, an expression of sorrow on his face. “OKAY, SO THAT DIDN’T GO QUITE SO NICELY AS I HAD EXPECTED,” he rumbled apologetically.

Sawterra leaped up, her heart racing. “But—am I beautiful now?!”

she cried, and her voice sounded different: high and singsongy, and nothing like her own.

The gargoyle sighed. "YOU'D BETTER GO LOOK IN A MIRROR," was all it said.

She raced to the bathroom, glanced in the mirror—and screamed. Her reflection, staring right back at her, was nothing like her own; it might have been beautiful once, but it was far too damaged to tell. It was twisted and maimed, burned in places, coated all over with sweat and blood. One of her eyes was missing, leaving a dark hole where it should have gone.

"HOW COULD YOU DO THIS TO ME?!" she screamed at the gargoyle, who shrank away from her in terror. "MAKE ME BEAUTIFUL—AND THIS TIME, MAKE IT WORK!" she demanded.

"Y-YES, MASTER," the gargoyle trembled, bowing so low his head touched the floor. And then he mumbled a few more words under his breath, and the pain started up again. But this time it was worse. Her bones rattled. Her joints ached. Everything hurt. Her throat was sore and her stomach felt queasy. Her hair changed from brown to gold to silver. Her face bent and creased and wrinkled and changed and made her want to cry out from the pain, but she couldn't make a sound. Her eyesight grew fuzzy, her mind grew dim, and she couldn't hear a thing.

Finally, finally it stopped. But it still hurt. She hobbled over to the mirror, and then she burst out laughing despite herself. Because the face she saw in the mirror, looked about a

hundred years old. Sure, it did look as if it had been beautiful once—but that must have been a long, long time ago. Sawterra was hysterical.

*Hee hee hee*, she giggled. "WHAT DID YOU DO TO ME?!" *Hee hee hee*. "ARE YOU CRAZY? THIS IS EVEN WORSE THAN BEFORE!" she screeched.

The gargoyle looked ashamed. "I-I MADE A MISTAKE. I'M SORRY, MASTER."

"WELL, MAKE ME ACTUALLY BEAUTIFUL!"

The gargoyle stared down at his toes, and when he finally spoke, his voice didn't seem so big and booming anymore. "I can't, master. I can only cast three spells in my lifetime—that was two, so I can do one more, and if you regret that one too, you will still be stuck that way forever."

"Can't you at least change me back to normal?" Sawterra pleaded.

The gargoyle smiled proudly. "THAT I CAN DO, MASTER."

And then he mumbled a few more words under his breath, and the transformation began. But this time it felt nice, like when you hold your breath for a minute and finally you can breathe normally again. Sawterra's face softened, her features bounced back to normal, and her senses sharpened. And when it was over, she looked in the mirror and saw . . . herself. She looked exactly like she always had, but she looked beautiful.

"I guess that gargoyle's spell worked after all," she breathed.

The gargoyle cleared his throat. "AHM . . ."

"Oh yeah," said Sawterra. "Thank you, Mister Gargoyle."

The gargoyle smiled and bowed. Then the air began to swirl, and great clouds of dust rose up. Sawterra hacked and coughed, and when it finally cleared, the gargoyle had vanished. It was nowhere to be seen.

Sawterra plopped down onto her bed. *Maybe*, she thought, *maybe this was all a dream*. Maybe she would open her eyes to the bright light of morning, and lose all memory of it in the foggy haze of sleepiness, and she would go downstairs still wishing to change. But for now, she was happy, and that was all that mattered.

# A Place in the World

**Desperately missing his homeland and sick of moving every few weeks, Orson decides to run away**



By Timothy D. Cho, 12  
Knoxville, TN

"Welcome to Brooklyn: Home to Everyone From Everywhere!" read the sign as Orson and his family approached New York City in their beat-up, gray minivan. Most people would have been amazed by the breathtaking sites of the Big Apple, but Orson merely sighed as he glanced over at the Statue of Liberty. Both his parents attempted to muster a smile, but they too were pained as they drove to their temporary apartment.

Orson had first believed that America would be full of opportunity. At least that's what his parents had told him. But ever since his family had moved to the States, everything had gone wrong for them. Orson's parents couldn't maintain jobs for more than a month at a time; they were forced to move across the country every few weeks, and Orson was placed into school after school, never having time to make any sort of friend. Orson had stopped attempting to even talk to any of the kids in school after moving for the eleventh time in a row.

Orson and his family opened the door to their new apartment. They all frowned as they were greeted

by a worn-out "WELCOME" mat with mold growing between the letters. Orson was the first to step into the apartment. He stared at the floor, immediately noticing several black burns on the wool carpet. The apartment was full of the stench of smoke, making him cough until he adjusted to the unfamiliar smell. The walls were faded, and as he got closer, his nostrils were assaulted by a foul odor that made even his parents cringe with disgust. Orson had seen some terrible apartments before, but this one definitely took the No. 1 spot on the list of most awful places he had ever had to call home.

Normally, every time they moved, Orson's mother would have reassured him that everything was going to turn out fine. But this time, she weakly put her hand on his shoulder, walked past him, and dropped onto the couch, passing out from exhaustion. The fifteen-hour drive had definitely taken a toll on the family. Orson's father groggily placed a blanket and pillow by his wife's side and turned to Orson. "Hungry?" he asked.

Orson nodded, just as his stomach loudly rumbled in agreement. Orson



and his father left his mom on the couch and took to the streets of New York in search of food. It turned dark as Orson and his dad walked. Orson barely took notice of the shining skyscrapers, the blaring horns, or the people shouting. Instead, he was daydreaming of a life where he and his family were happy and comfortable. A life where Orson could make friends at school and have a home that didn't have cigarette burns and sickly stench. But Orson was brought back to reality as his dad nudged him, pointing out a convenience store. There, they purchased enough food and snacks for the rest of the week and headed back to their apartment.

Orson and his dad crept back into their room with the groceries. They found Orson's mother still fast asleep on the couch. Orson's dad pulled snacks out of the bags and beckoned Orson to take a bag of chips, but Orson shook his head. He had lost his appetite upon being snapped back from his perfect, imaginary world.

"No, I think I'm just going to go to bed," Orson mumbled. He turned from his father and began to walk toward the bedrooms.

"I know how you feel," his father suddenly said to him.

Orson stopped mid-stride. He turned around and looked his father straight in the eyes.

"How would you know how I feel?" Orson blurted. His words came out cold and harsh. "Do you know how it feels to be the outsider everywhere you go? Do you know how it feels when every time you finally think you've found a friend, you're forced

to let go? Do you? Because that's what I feel every day. Every time you can't keep a job. Every time we move. That's how I feel." Orson turned and pushed the door of his room open. He slammed it shut and threw himself onto the bed.

Even through the door, Orson heard his father sigh a heavy sigh, turn off the lights, and go to bed. Orson sat up in his bed and looked out the window. His sudden outburst of emotion had surprised even him. Orson began to contemplate what he would say to his father in the morning. As he thought, the lights of the city gleamed into his room. He began gazing down at the people roaming the streets. Many walked in groups, several walked alone, but almost all of them moved with purpose, as though they knew just what they were doing and where they were going.

"All those people down there have a place in the world," he whispered to himself. "So why shouldn't I?"

Orson quickly slid out of bed and planted his feet on the floor. He quietly creaked open his door and slipped into the living room. Orson tiptoed toward the kitchen counter and snatched the bag full of food. He then emptied the snacks and a few other necessities into his backpack. Suddenly, he heard movement and froze. He directed his gaze toward his mother. He had completely forgotten about her. Luckily, she was still asleep, but it was clear she was disturbed by the noise Orson was making. She yawned and stretched her arms. As she slowly sat up, Orson hurried back into his room. He glanced frantically around for an escape route.

Unfortunately, the window seemed to be the only option. He pushed it open with some difficulty and slung his bag onto his back. He took a deep breath and stepped onto the bars of the fire escape.

“Ohhh, no . . .” Orson groaned as he looked over the edge of the railing. One wrong move, and he would fall off the edge and get flattened like a pancake on the hard, cold concrete. Firmly gripping the rusted rails of the fire escape, he took a step down, causing a disturbing creaking noise that vibrated through the entire staircase. Suddenly, a wave of blustery wind hit Orson’s skin, causing his hairs to stand on edge. Orson stumbled down the steps. He attempted to recover, but faltered as the wind continued to blow against his bony structure. With each gust, the gravity of the situation became clearer in his mind. He was more than thirty stories up in the air on a precarious set of century-old stairs that felt like they could collapse at any second. Orson choked on a mixture of cold air and nerves and began coughing.

As Orson looked back at his open apartment window, he felt the wind begin to calm. He shook his head. If his family had to move away one more time, he would break. As he looked out at the city skyline, he became even more determined to begin his odyssey. After reassuring himself, Orson began steadily descending, one intentional step at a time.

After a few floors, Orson felt at ease. He began finessing his way down the steps, smoothly coordinating his hands and feet to remain steady. A

few minutes later, he had arrived at the bottom. He hopped off and, for the first time, absorbed the beauty of the city night. The violent wind from up high had turned into a crisp, gentle breeze. The air was slightly damp and tickled the edge of Orson’s hair. He took note of that sensation to mark the beginning of his new life.

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There was no particular destination Orson had in mind. His only thought was to walk. Walk until he was away. Away from his past, away from his anger, away from all his worries. He wanted a fresh start. A clean slate. A new life where he belonged somewhere. Orson’s walk became a jog, then a sprint away from everything he hated. He spotted a subway stop and quickly bolted down the stairs. Orson stepped onto the nearest train and took a seat.

He looked around, realizing he was all alone. As the train started, Orson closed his eyes. He would get some sleep, then get off whenever he decided to wake up. Finally, Orson felt at peace. He was free of anxiety, with no more worries. He quietly sighed, then passed out.

Suddenly, a picture began to emerge in Orson’s mind. It was fuzzy at first, but somehow Orson felt a connection with it. Gradually, the picture became clearer: it was his home. Not the dirty apartment—that would never be home to him—but his old home, the country where he had lived for years. He recognized the abundance of luxuriant flowers and trees bathing in the rays of the sun. The warmth of the scenery was almost

**Yes, he had the same outline as Orson, as well as a similar body—but this couldn't be him. This boy was a lost boy in a big world. A boy that was afraid and full of regret and guilt.**

tangible. Behind the flowers, there was a group of kids playing. They laughed and smiled and ran, without a care in the world. Orson would give anything to go back to the way things used to be. He was happy then.

Just as suddenly, the picture vanished, and Orson was brought back to the dirty subway car. Slowly, he began shaking his head. He grabbed his backpack and pulled out a picture frame. He looked into the picture. The flowers, the trees, the kids—it was all the same. He touched the picture as if it would bring him back to his home. Orson's expression softened as he continued to gaze at it. Tears began streaming down his face as he loosened his grip on the frame. If he was to start a new life, he couldn't have any memories of his past one. He threw it to the ground and began smashing the picture with his shoes. With each pound to the ground, Orson felt a stab in his heart as if his soul were connected to it. The subway slowed and Orson ran out, leaving the picture behind.

He ran until he was out of breath and panting profusely. Orson examined his surroundings and found that he was standing by the Brooklyn Bridge. He walked to the edge of the water and sat down. He looked down into the water, finding his own reflection staring back at him. Yes, he had the same outline as Orson, as well as a similar body—but this couldn't be him. This boy was a lost boy in a big world. A boy that was afraid and full

of regret and guilt. No, this couldn't be him. But it was. He had lost sight of his purpose in life. He was afraid of what the world would do to him. He regretted running from the only people who loved him. And he felt guilty for everything he had done to his parents, to everyone else in his life.

Then he heard two voices. They called him: "Orson!"

He looked back. It was his parents. At that moment, he broke down. Tears began streaming down his face as he looked at the faces of his mother and father. How could he have been so selfish? He had people who loved him, who cared for him, and he had been willing to let that all go for a new life. He had tried to run from his whole life, his whole past. But the fact was, he couldn't run from his past. Orson wanted so badly to change his future, he hadn't thought of his present, the position he was in now, how his actions would change the people he loved the most.

Orson stared as the image of his parents faded away into the night sky. Seeing them had just been his imagination, but at that moment, he made his decision. He slung his bag behind his back and walked back to the subway. He stepped down the stairs and waited. As the train arrived, he stepped in. Shattered glass and a piece of paper sat in the middle of the subway car. He flipped the paper over, finding his picture. Once again he stared at it, but this time not in anger but in happiness. For the first time,

he embraced the picture as a piece of his past rather than an unattainable part of his present. Orson slipped the picture back into his bag and sat down.

Soon after, it was his stop. He quietly got off the subway and walked back to his apartment. He looked up at his floor to find the window of his room closed. Orson went through the main entrance to the apartment building and took the elevator up to his floor. He got off and finally was at his door. Thoughts and emotions ran through Orson's head as he held up his hand to knock. He timidly tapped the door in a rhythmic pattern. No one answered for a few moments. Orson's stomach sank as he thought of the possibility that his parents didn't want him back.

The door creaked open. His parents were there. Orson looked into their eyes and tried to choke out words but failed to do so. Instead, he ran into their arms and began crying. Orson's parents held him tightly, tears also streaming from their eyes. No words were spoken, and they didn't need to be, for Orson's emotions spoke for themselves. Orson's parents took him into his room and laid him onto his bed. His parents sat down with him, and together they looked out the window at the city skyline.



*Spring* (Oil)  
Sloka Ganne, 10  
Overland Park, KS



# Riverside Kingdom

**A magical trip to Yellowstone, perfectly preserved in the writer's memory**



By Lydia Taylor, 13  
Royal Palm Beach, FL

Sunlight pierced the split in the canvas tent, awakening the rustic room. The pellet stove glowed lightly and sounded like afternoon rain on a tin roof. Warmth filled the room. I rolled over lazily and looked at the crowded tent. My brother and I were scared of bears, so we all had to share a single tent. We were scared of a lot of things back then, like the monsters that lived under our beds and in the dark. Everyone was still asleep. I turned to Keane, my little brother, who was peacefully sleeping in my parents' bed.

"Hey, Keane," I whispered as I shook his arm. "Wake up." Keane woke up and turned to face me.

"What time is it?" he asked groggily. He rubbed his eyes and waited for them to adjust to the sunlit room.

"I don't know," I said and looked in the mess of covers on the bed for my phone. I then noticed that we had woken my parents up. My dad was checking his cell phone.

"It's 7:15," he said. "We should start getting ready." My dad took Keane out of the tent into the cold morning air. The bathroom cabin was a short walk

away. My mom picked an outfit for me and put my hair in a braid. We were getting ready to leave our campsite to head again into Yellowstone National Park, where the Grand Prismatic, with its awe-inspiring colors, was waiting for us.

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We followed a trail to the middle of nowhere. Tall grass brushed against my knees and mud stained my boots. Poppies bloomed from the gravel. A river rushed alongside the trails. The sun glowed like dying embers and painted the sapphire sky. I stared out into the mountains that reached for the heavens. The top of the mountains hid in the clouds and made friends with the birds. It seemed like a whole new world up there. The terrain was rocky. I listened to the sound of gravel cracking below my feet. Birds circled overhead and sang their eerie lullaby while the bison grazed the fields that seemed to go on for miles. Dragonflies hovered around my head and crickets hummed from the trees. The world was buzzing with life. We followed the rocky trail to a narrower one that led through the forest. We pushed



onward into the woods.

There was something almost magical about the woods. Cold air ran through my hair and danced through the trees. It whispered to me and called me deeper into the forest. Sunlight danced on the forest floor, which was littered with fallen leaves. It smelled like moss and morning dew. A soft fog hovered around the edge of a clearing.

I ran my hand over the rough bark of a nearby tree. I breathed in deeply. The tree smelled like fresh rain and pine. A small cloud formed around my mouth. It was so cold I could see my breath. I closed my eyes and heard the sounds of the flowing river and birds flying overhead. The beauty of the forest filled my head with daydreams—daydreams of fairies that rode the frozen breeze and unicorns that hid among the pine trees. I wandered aimlessly around the clearing. Small yellow daisies and dandelions covered the forest floor. I picked up a dandelion and blew on it softly. Then I closed my eyes and made a wish. I wished to stay in that clearing forever.

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We pushed onward for what felt like an eternity. We climbed deeper into the mountains until we reached a small ledge overlooking the Grand Prismatic. It looked like some kind of jewel. It poured over the barren, burnt terrain like liquid gold. The ground was cracked and burnt. It was strange to see the barren ground after emerging from the blooming forests. Sunlight sparkled on the spring's colorful surface. It looked so

shallow even though it was hundreds of feet deep. It was a deep blue in the center, but it turned into an emerald green around the edges. Silver steam hung above the spring. Even with the vibrant colors, the water was crystal clear.

"Wow," I breathed.

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We drove back to the campsite in a dark-grey Jeep. The window was freezing cold, but my brother and I had turned on the seat heaters and were blasting the hot air. We slowly pulled into the campsite parking lot. I hopped out and ran to the tent. "I bet you can't catch me!" I called to my brother as I ran to the tent as fast as I could. He ran behind me but never caught up because I was older. I slammed my hand on the sign that read "TENT 13."

"No fair! You cheated! You had a head start!" he complained.

"Did not." I laughed. Then I noticed a grass path near our tent. "Let's go exploring." I walked to the path and began to follow the winding trail.

"Wait up!" he called and ran up next to me. We went down the muddy path and hopped over a muddy ditch. My boots were stained and Keane's pants were covered in streaks of mud. There was a sense of adventure in the air. We followed the grassy path until we could barely see the campsite.

We came upon a sparkling river. Tiny islands sat in the center, and flowers scattered the muddy islands. Green grass lay across these magical islands and stared at the sky. Sparkling silver stones sat at the bottom of the river. The water was

**At that moment, we were in our own world. We let our imaginations run wild. It's strange—when you're little, the world around you can be anything you want it to be. We were pirates and mermaids, explorers of strange lands; we would fly to the moon and back, or save the world.**

clear as glass. My bare feet sank into the mud by the riverbank. I rolled my jeans up to my knees and jumped into the water.

"Come on!" I called my brother.

The river was freezing cold. My brother ran in after me. We splashed around wildly. At that moment, we were in our own world. We let our imaginations run wild. It's strange—when you're little, the world around you can be anything you want it to be. We were pirates and mermaids, explorers of strange lands; we would fly to the moon and back, or save the world.

We were the rulers of our own little kingdom in that river by the mountains. We pretended and played for hours and simply let the time pass by. The sun began to sink behind the mountains, and the sky grew gold.

"It's time to come inside, kids!" yelled my mom from the river's edge.

"Come on! Just five more minutes?" Keane whined as he hopped from one island to another.

"Yeah! Please?" I called and chased after Keane.

"It's almost sunset. You don't want the bears to get you!" She laughed. We both laughed and ran through the river, through the daydreams that floated in the air and the imaginary world we'd made in our minds. I clutched the riverbank and lifted myself out of our riverside kingdom.

# The Director

Alora prepares to begin her career in a world where birth and genetic engineering determine your future



By Anya Geist, 13  
Worcester, MA

Alora sighed and twirled her mocha-colored curls through her fingers. She glanced at the large wall clock in front of her, hanging above the door to the grand office in which she sat. Half past eleven, it read.

Her heart lurched inside her. Had it really been half an hour? Her stomach rolled over inside her and her vision grew spotty. Desperately, she grabbed the edge of the mahogany desk, its edge digging into her palm. She fought to remember the breathing techniques she'd been taught: 1, 2, *inhale*, 1, 2, 3, *exhale*. Slowly, Alora refocused and regained the sunny disposition she was supposed to have.

Wary now, she checked the clock again. Yes, it read 11:30. She sighed. The Chancellor was thirty minutes late to the meeting. And on her first day too. Alora rolled her eyes—though she knew she shouldn't scoff at someone so powerful—and reached across the desk for the intercom. It turned on with a buzz, and a Secretary downstairs picked up.

"Yes, madam?" asked a crackly voice.

"I am inquiring about the

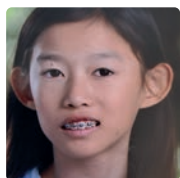
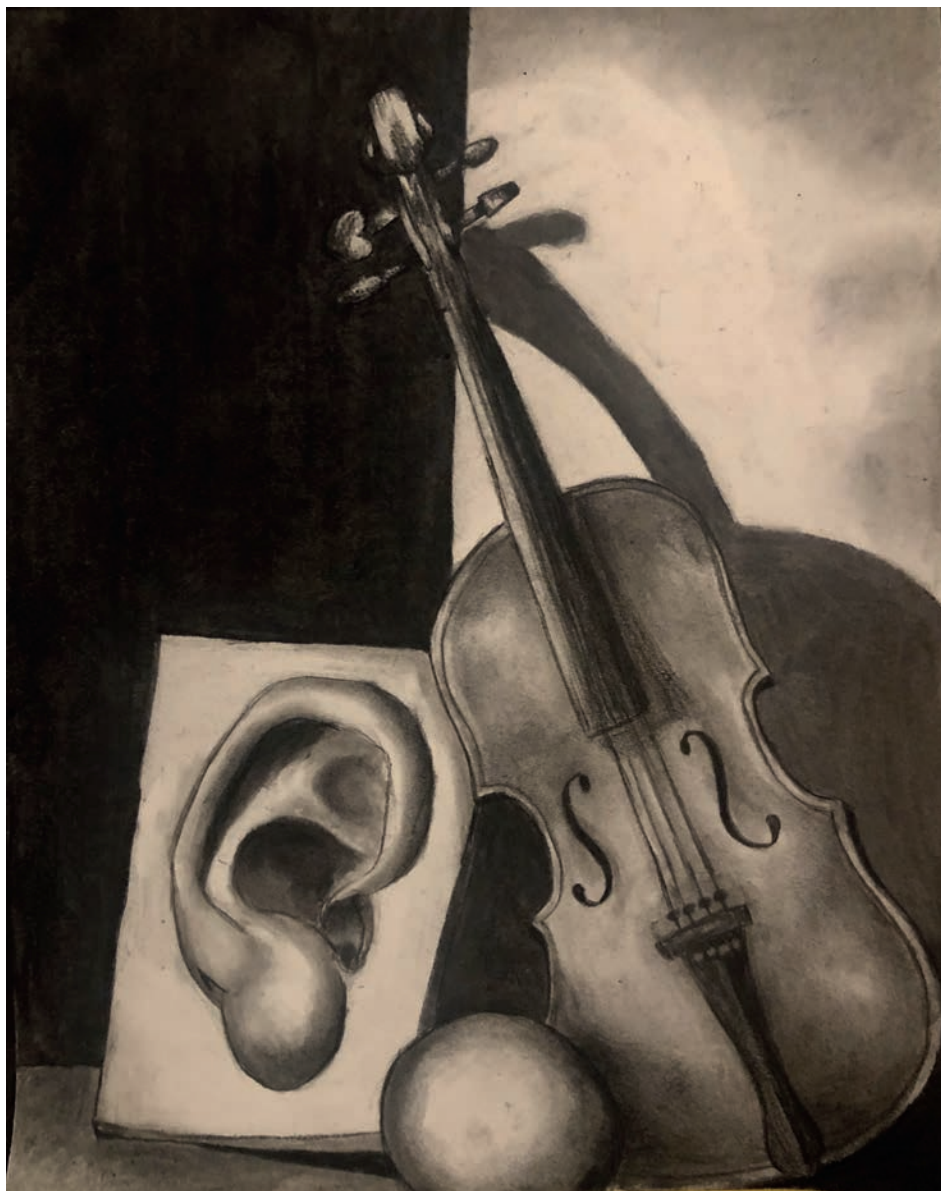
punctuality of the Chancellor of Trade, to see whether he is due to arrive soon or not." She phrased the request as a statement, not a question, as she'd been taught by her father.

"I am sorry, madam. I have no information on the whereabouts of the Chancellor. I shall inform you if I receive further details."

"Thank you. That will be all."

With another buzz, the intercom switched off.

Alora rubbed her eyes out of pure stress, though carefully so as not to smudge her makeup, and then looked around the room. The walls were a simple white, and except for her desk, a chair for a visitor, and a bookshelf, the room was sparse. Behind the desk were floor-to-ceiling windows that framed the city beyond. Alora had to admit that despite its dizzying size, Metropolia was a beautiful city. Previously, it had been called New York City, a rather ugly name; however, after the Famine, it had been rebranded as part of the neo-Greek trend. Metropolia was a hub of international trade and society. It was the perfect place to build a company, like Alora's father had.



*Music to My Ear* (Charcoal)  
Keira Zhang, 11  
Los Altos, CA

Her father. The thought caused her vision to go spotty again, and before she could stop it, Alora was pulled into her memories.

Eliezer Bennet had been a great mogul in his day. He had built his company, PROvide, from the ground up, developing new, safe sporting equipment for the Athletes. Of course, he didn't do the actual designing—he wasn't meant to—but he was the face of the company. Now he was nearing the end of his days, reduced to a weak old man.

Alora remembered when she was little, asking him why he had to die someday. "Plenty of people are altered to live longer, Papi," she'd told him. They were sitting on the sofa in their penthouse, watching the sun go down over the city.

"I know," he'd said. "But I can't."

She'd looked up at him with her big brown eyes. "Why?"

He wouldn't meet her gaze. "That's the way it is. The company needs to move on. You know that you will run the company after I'm gone; you're meant to." Then he had looked down at her. "And you'll do a great, great job!"

Not long after, her schooling had begun. She'd been homeschooled, as most children were, so as to fit her needs. She had learned some science, and how to read and write and do arithmetic, but mostly she was trained to be a Director.

And here she was, fourteen years old, in the final stages of her training. Today, after all, was her first time directing. She was to have a meeting with the Chancellor as practice for running the company. That was not

to say the meeting wasn't real; it was indeed about exporting equipment to Europe.

Her first time directing. Alora thought, and Papi wasn't there to see her. He was sleeping on the sofa at home, his body trying to fight off a genetic disease he wouldn't survive. That was the way it went.

Alora felt tears brimming in her eyes and was brought back to the present by the ringing of the intercom. Reminded that she couldn't break down here, Alora brushed the tears away and pressed the intercom.

"Yes?" Her voice sounded shaky.

"Madam, I have just received word from the Chancellor's Secretary."

"And?"

"He regrets to inform you that due to an unexpected conflict, the Chancellor will not be able to make your meeting."

Alora almost breathed a sigh of relief. She was in no condition to have a meeting. "Thank you for the information."

"Oh," she added, because she knew it was the right thing to do, "please relay to the Secretary that he should make rescheduling a top priority."

"Yes, madam."

"That will be all."

The intercom buzzed off, and this time Alora allowed herself a sigh as she sank back into her chair. She'd expected to feel calm and at peace now that she didn't have the meeting, but part of her was sad. For all its stress, she liked directing, liked being in charge. And she was good at it. Of course she was designed to, just like Athletes were designed to play sports and Secretaries to schedule

**She wasn't exactly sure why she'd brought her briefcase, since it wasn't as if she was going to paint (she wasn't an Artist) or write poetry (she wasn't an Author) but all Directors carried briefcases, and it gave her a feeling of power.**

appointments and answer phone calls, but that didn't bother her. It was the way of life.

Alora pulled up her monitor to see what paperwork she had left and was relieved to find nothing to do. Paperwork, however important, was tedious, and Alora did not feel it was something she was good at.

Alora stood up, stretched, and walked around her father's office—no, her office. She walked over to the windows and stared out at the city. Its gleaming buildings reflected golden light onto her light-brown face; the city was so beautiful in the midday sun. Sometimes Alora could hardly believe it had been born from such tragedy—the Famine, the story of which all children were told:

*More than 100 years ago, when genetic engineering was first introduced, people were ecstatic. But they were reckless. They changed so many traits, and with such frivolous intentions, that they endangered the population. The scientists were not careful and through their engineering unleashed one of the deadliest genetic diseases known to man: the Famine.*

*Over half of the world's 7.6 billion people were affected. The Famine made it so the body could not process food or water. Without treatment, 3.8 billion people perished in a little over three months. Countries were devastated and families upon families were ruined. The only people to survive carried a rare, recessive allele that did not have the*

*Famine. They went about rebuilding the world, and because no one with the Famine survived, its inheritance factor was eliminated.*

*Scientists were more careful this time and slowly reintroduced genetic engineering. People were assigned traits and did what they were best at instead of being allowed to choose at random whatever traits they wanted. There was never again an epidemic as powerful as the Famine. The End.*

It was a horribly sad story, Alora thought, but there was nothing she could do about it. Besides, without it, she wouldn't be alive and Metropolia wouldn't exist. She wouldn't have this life, where everything fit exactly and the world ran smoothly.

Alora was distracted from her thoughts by the ringing of the noon bell across the street at the symphony building. The windows of her office were soundproof, so Alora never heard the symphony practice, or any other noises on the street, but the bell was loud enough that its vibrations went straight through the glass.

Alora decided to go out for lunch since she had nothing to do in the office. She retrieved her blazer from the back of the door and pulled it on over her white blouse. She grabbed her briefcase from beside the desk and left the office. She wasn't exactly sure why she'd brought her briefcase, since it wasn't as if she was going to paint (she wasn't an Artist) or write poetry (she wasn't an Author) but all



Directors carried briefcases, and it gave her a feeling of power.

Alora pressed the button for the elevator and the doors swung open. She entered and began the thirty-floor descent. Somewhere around the fifteenth floor, a man entered the elevator. Seeing his sandy hair and bright-green eyes, she assumed he was a Wilmer, part of the famous Accounting family.

"Miss Bennett," he said to her, "please tell Mr. Bennett I hope he gets well soon."

"I will," Alora replied politely, though her heart felt a pang of sadness. It was no secret Eliezer Bennett wouldn't survive; this illness befell all Directors when they got old, and none lived.

Soon the elevator reached the lobby. Alora told the Secretaries she was leaving for lunch and then walked outside.

It had been a while since Alora'd been outside in Metropolia during the day. She always came to the company with Papi around seven in the morning, had her lessons in an empty conference room with her tutor, then watched Papi work so she could learn how he ran meetings. They would leave around six, when the sun was going down.

During the day, Metropolia was busy with tourists, residents, and employees bustling about, and vendors and street Artists selling their goods to passersby. Alora was astonished by how loud it was as well. Beneath the streets, there was the continuous hum of the trains kept from before the Famine, and on the streets, the typical din that comes

from crowds.

The one noise that was lacking was that of cars. Cars had mostly been forgotten while the world was being rebuilt and really only existed in rural communities. The main methods of transportation in big cities were, if not walking, biking, or taking the train.

Alora hardly knew where to go. She had walked to the nearest intersection but had no sense of direction, no sense of which were the best places to go. Had she been in the arts, she thought, she might have gone to a museum, either to write about the works or to become inspired. But because she was a Director, she had no eye for observing art, and the idea would have been foolish.

She might have gone to the stock exchange, where at least she knew what to expect and what to do, but she had no noteworthy excellency with numbers, something that was expected if she were to visit there.

In all honesty, Alora thought, as she stood on the corner of the street, chilled in the autumn breezes that swept by, she was most comfortable at the courts. Lawyers and Judges were somewhat similar to Directors; they made arguments and compromises and had a sense of authority. However, Alora wasn't sure if the courts were open to the public, and as she needed to have an unblemished reputation, she didn't want to be caught in a moment of ignorance.

Alora decided to stop by a café on the corner. She weaved her way through the lines of people to a table. Its wooden top shifted and creaked as Alora laid her briefcase on it. She sat

on the wicker chair and waited there, not hungry, but not wanting to leave. She drummed her fingers on the table out of habit and slowly fell into a half-sleeping stupor.

Alora was woken by a voice nearby.

"Allo, there!" it said to her in a cheerful tone.

Alora looked up, trying not to seem as though she'd just been half asleep. She blinked. The person in front of her was rather short, with red hair. "Hello," she responded politely, remembering her manners.

The man (she knew it was a man now) sat down across from her. "You don't mind if I sit here?" His accent was strange, most likely from somewhere in Europe.

"Oh, no. It's fine," Alora replied, trying to figure out why he might want to sit with her. Was he a Businessman who'd made a deal with Papi?

"Are you Miss Alora Bennett?" he asked

"Oh, yes," Alora said, somewhat taken by surprise. "How kind of you to recognize that."

"Yeah, well, you and your father look something alike. Same nose."

With great effort, Alora avoided touching her nose. It was true that while Alora had been modified to have brown hair, eyes, and skin, her nose looked like her father's.

"Ah, thank you," she said.

"Now, might you introduce yourself?" Alora was not afraid to assert her power as a Director to this little man.

"Ah, yes. I forgot myself. I'm Connor Powell." He made a small,

sitting bow. "First violinist in the Metropolitan Symphony." He looked rather proud, then added, "From Central Europe, originally."

So he was a Musician. That made more sense. Often, Alora saw the symphonists leaving their building on lunch break around this time of day.

"Quite impressive," Alora admitted. Alora had been to the symphony once or twice when her father was meeting with a potential client—taking a client to a performance was a show of grandeur—but that had been a while ago. "And to what do I owe this pleasure?" she said to Powell.

"Ah . . ." he faltered. "You see, your father, um, used to make some donations to the symphony and, um, we would like to renew that."

"I see," Alora mused, struggling to maintain a calm façade as she felt her heart beat faster. What was she to do? She couldn't tell him yes without her father's permission since she was still in training, but she didn't want to say no.

Alora swallowed. "As you can tell," she told Powell, forming her words carefully, "Mr. Bennett is not well today, and I am afraid I cannot authorize such a request. I can deliver the message to Mr. Bennett, however, and he can decide."

Alora held her breath as she waited for Powell's response.

"Ah, okay . . ." He seemed just as uncomfortable and began to stand up. Alora followed him. "I've, ah, got to get back to the symphony but, ah, if you could deliver the message?"

Alora nodded. They shook hands and Powell left.

**She longed to have the grace of the conductor as he led the symphony through the mysterious forest of music. She wished to be a violinist, to feel the vibration of the instrument tucked under her chin.**

Alora buried her face in her hands. That'd been so humiliating, she thought. But she thought that was the best way to handle it. She stayed in the café for a bit longer and then left as well.

Now she was back on the street again. The midday sun was strong and warm, but chilly winds still flew through the city.

Unsure of where else to go, Alora began to walk back toward her office. The bells tolled one o'clock at the symphony, and Alora flinched at how loud they were. And then, just before she entered her building, Alora heard it: music.

She turned around to face the symphony. Music poured out of it. It had been so long since Alora had heard real music. It wasn't even a piece of music, just a tuning note, but it sent a warm feeling through her chest. Before she knew what she was doing, Alora had walked over to the grand oak doors of the symphony and walked into the empty, magnificent lobby. The floors were lushly carpeted in such fine materials that Alora bent down to feel how soft they were. The walls were smooth, polished stone, and marble columns lined the way to the grand staircase.

The symphony had stopped tuning now and began its scales. Alora raced up and down the stairs as the notes of the symphony rose and descended. She was sure she'd never felt this good, never had her cheeks flushed

with such great joy and excitement. Then Alora remembered herself. She was a Director; this was no place for her! She did best in offices, striking deals, and compromises. Music had no place in her life.

Alora was about to leave the building when the symphony began its warm-ups. Just simple patterns, and yet they drove Alora back up the stairs and into the Great Hall. Before she knew what was happening, Alora was on the top balcony of the darkened concert hall, her eyes trained on the illuminated stage that lit up the symphony.

She watched with a fiery, longing passion in her eyes and an ache in her heart. She longed to have the grace of the conductor as he led the symphony through the mysterious forest of music. She wished to be a violinist, to feel the vibration of the instrument tucked under her chin. But mostly, she could not keep her eyes off of the piano and the pianist. The way the Musician's fingers danced so delicately over the keys, like a fairy sprite on this magical adventure, was enchanting; Alora placed her fingers on the seatback in front of her, trying to mimic the pianist as she flew through the notes.

And with one culminating note, the warm-ups drew to a close. The sound of the symphony echoed in the Great Hall.

Alora paused, drawn out of the magical moment. What was she

doing here? She couldn't be here. She needed to go back to the office. But it was like warring with the ocean; one could only fight the tide for so long. And so the waves of Alora's ocean pulled her back into the deep sea of music.

Now the symphony was beginning to play actual pieces of music. They stopped often to fix mistakes that had been made, but to Alora, the blemishes were unnoticeable, simply part of the flow of the piece.

Her heart was like a bird; it soared high in the clouds, feeling the exhilaration of flying during the fast movements, and it dove down to earth, skimming the water and the ground, taking in the majesty of the world, during the slow movements.

Alora did not know how long she sat in the Great Hall, but it must have been hours because eventually the rehearsal ended and the symphony left, leaving Alora in the dark without their music.

Alora was sure nothing could ever again make her experience the thrill she had felt while listening to the symphony, and she decided she had to make her own music, had to know the feeling that came from creating such a beautiful, wrenching sound.

Quietly, cautiously, Alora made her way down from the balcony, through the silent, empty hall, to the stage. For a moment, she just stood there on the conductor's podium and imagined what it would be like to conduct, to control the symphony, to hold the audience captive with the force of music.

But that was not what she was there for. Alora tiptoed over to the

side of the stage where the piano stood. Nervously, she sat down on the bench. The hard wood felt foreign to her, but also—right. As she'd seen the pianist do, Alora carefully lifted the polished wooden cover off the keys. And there they were. The keys. Stunningly simple white and black keys, so little and yet capable of so much.

*This is it*, Alora thought. Her heart beat fast in her chest as she pressed a white key down. The sound emitted was high-pitched and clear, but sharp and tangy. It was nothing like the sweet song the pianist had made.

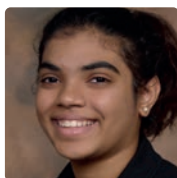
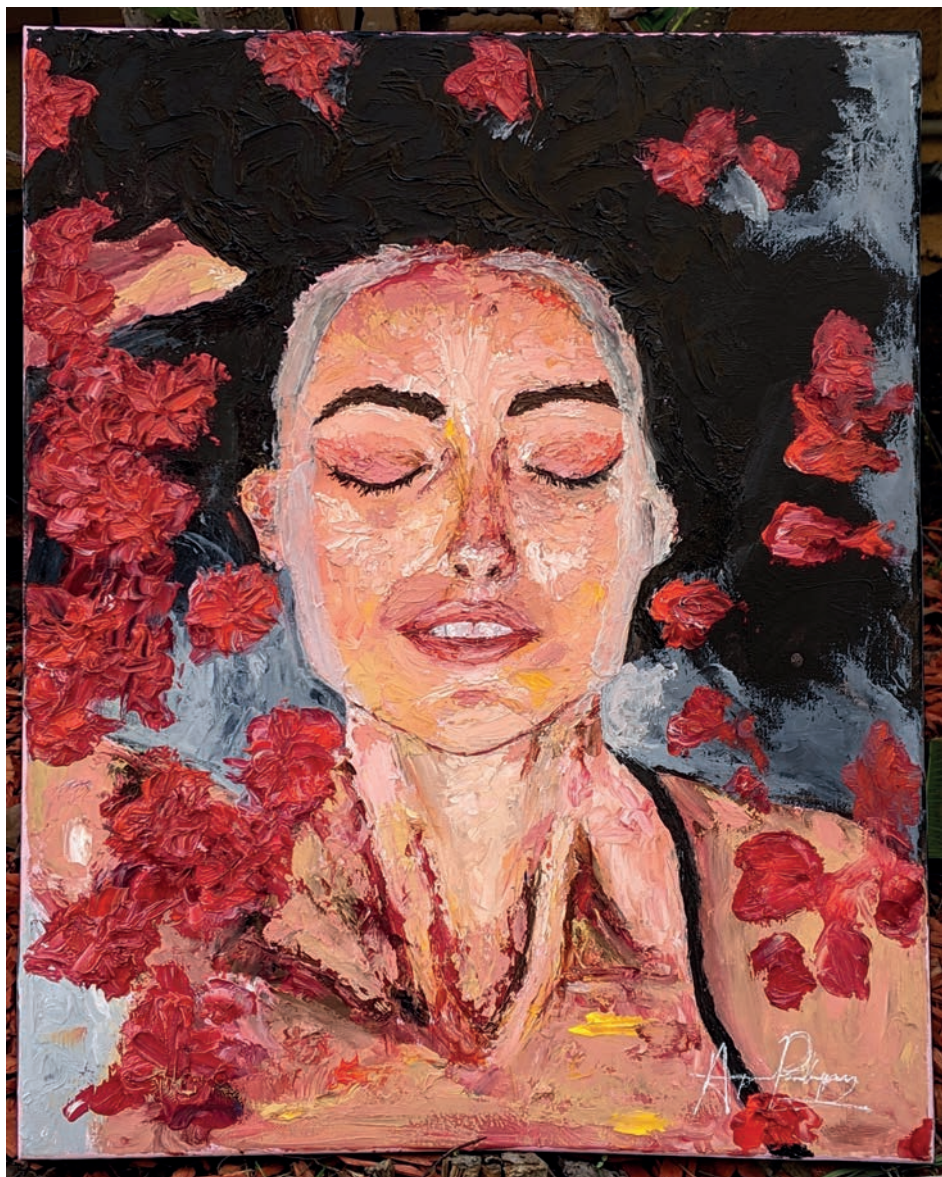
Still, nothing could dampen Alora's joy. She, Alora, had made a sound! She had made music!

Alora tried to copy the motions of the pianist as she swept across the keys. The noise was discordant and cacophonous and shocked Alora into a revelation. Of course she didn't know how to read the notes the Musicians played; she didn't even know how the notes worked, didn't know what they were. She could never be a good Musician; she wasn't supposed to be one.

And yet the sound of music, even the jerky sounds made by her own hands, filled Alora with wholeness. Music was her place in the world; she had felt it through her whole body in the joy she felt listening to the symphony. Music completed her, Alora felt, in a world where her heart was caged and tamed.

Music freed her and made her truly alive.





*Raindrops on Roses* (Oil, painted with a spoon and fork)  
 Apoorva Panidapu, 14  
 San Jose, CA

# The Famous Painting

Lotus is not a famous painter, but she hopes her latest painting will change that



By Jinhui He, 12  
Beijing, China

The sky was gray, and the sun was blocked by clouds and by fog, layer upon layer.

Young Lotus sat in her studio. She was a painter, but she was not famous.

Lotus was cleaning the house. There was not much good furniture in her home, and her studio was very shabby. The interior decorations were khaki-colored.

Her husband, Joe Fellow, had gone out early to attend a friend's wedding. Why wasn't Lotus there? Oh, my friend, only the upper class can participate in such a solemn and gorgeous wedding! Lotus had sold her wedding dress that year. In addition, she didn't have any gorgeous clothes. Naturally, she could not be regarded as upper class and so was not qualified to go to the event. Joe still had a lot of suits, so he could often appear at major celebrations and superior events.

As Lotus swept up the dust, she opened the curtains. The city, Soci  t  , was outside the window. The people were beautiful in this city, and Fellow, which means friendly and social, was a common name there.

---

"Near Banbridge town, in the County Down, one morning last July," a folk singer sang at the wedding ceremony, though he didn't seem to get much praise. Suddenly, a man stood up and grabbed the singer.

"Stop!" The man said.

"S-Sir, I am performing for free for you all . . ." The singer was terrified.

The man slapped the singer on his face and said, "What on earth are you singing about? And what are you wearing?! It's disgusting!" The man pointed at the singer. It was true that the singer's dress was not too formal, but it was not ugly.

"Sing . . . sing . . . sing this!" the man said and smashed the singer's guitar.

"Wait! That's my instrument, my property!" The singer was angry and desperate. A good guitar would take him about half a year to save for.

"Guards!" At the man's command, several security guards dragged the singer out.

"Brute! I—" the singer's fury was stopped by a punch from the security guard.

Then the symphony orchestra started to play, and people listened with great interest, occasionally



The night was shrouded like a layer of cages, trapping people's hearts.

Lotus was crying and walking. Her steps tottered and her body wobbled. After two steps, she sat down by the roadside and covered her face.

exclaiming, "This is the music of gentlemen!"

The wedding proceeded methodically.

---

Lotus painted at home. A bird landed on her window howling, and the flowers bloomed in the yard. She would soon create a painting. Soft lines and harmonious colors would make up the beautiful painting.

Dusk was coming. The evening wind gently touched everything. Although it was autumn, Lotus seemed filled by the bright warmth of spring. Her pace was light and pleasant, and she took great delight in everything.

"Dear, I'm back." Joe pushed the door open and took off his coat.

"How was the wedding today, Joe?"

"Great, Lotus."

"When can we have such a wedding, Joe? I really wish we could have another wedding celebration. It was too short last time. Maybe for our golden anniversary?"

"No point. We don't have that kind of money."

"Well, if that's what you say."

Lotus's spirits were broken. "Joe, you must go to work." Lotus looked very sad as she spoke.

"You! Don't bother me!" Joe's face changed greatly—the wrinkles on his face became more pronounced, and the shadows on his face also

deepened.

"If you don't want to make money, can you sell your suit? Then at least we can buy paint and I can make money by painting," said Lotus in a lower and lower voice.

"Woman! What do you know?! How am I supposed to get into upper society without this suit?!" cried Joe to Lotus.

"You only know idleness!" Lotus shouted, unable to hold back her anger. But she didn't dare do anything else and started crying.

"If you want money, sell your ruined paintings!" Joe scolded Lotus angrily, and then he dragged Lotus and her painting outside.

"Go! Go!" Lotus was pushed out of the door by Joe.

---

The night was shrouded like a layer of cages, trapping people's hearts.

Lotus was crying and walking. Her steps tottered and her body wobbled. After two steps, she sat down by the roadside and covered her face.

The beauty of love comes from instinct. The tragedy of love comes from instinct too. Instinct, however, can never be explained.

She began to regret it, but it was too late. Time ran too fast, and regret came too late. She was no longer a young, beautiful girl.

A thin man in a white suit came over. "Oh, lovely lady, what's wrong

with you?" This man was Kopil, the most famous painter in the city.

Lotus whispered what had happened to her. Kopil looked at Lotus's painting. "Ah, this is so beautiful! Can I buy it?"

"Sir, this painting costs a hundred dollars."

"No, this painting is bound to be a famous painting." With that said, Kopil took out \$300 from his bag.

"Thank you, sir," Lotus said, clutching at her skirt. Her tears still streamed down her face.

On her way home, her steps were trembling and her body was shaking. She didn't want to go back, but where else could she go?

At home, Lotus put the money on the table and cried again.

"Shut your mouth! You only know how to cry!" Joe roared.

Lotus cried harder than ever.

---

One afternoon a few days later, it was still grey, and there were no more sounds of insects or birds outside. Winter was coming, and the trees were bare.

Joe was leisurely reading a newspaper. He had not seen that the back edition was printed with Lotus's painting. The caption read, "The latest work of the great painter Kopil." The words jumped into Lotus's eyes, and she snatched the newspaper.

"You! What are you doing?" Joe looked at Lotus.

"Joe! This painting is mine! I sold it to Kopil!" Lotus said.

"Are you crazy? That's a masterpiece by Kopil! How could you draw such a picture?! You're an

ordinary painter. Don't bother me!" Joe said.

This time, Lotus rushed out of the house. Her steps were strong and hasty. She couldn't believe that the guy who had benevolently given to her a few days ago could have done such a thing. She felt like she was spinning around and like everything outside had changed even though there was no change.

She ran to the door of the newspaper office, where a group of people were surrounding Kopil. They were chatting and looking up at Kopil with reverent eyes. She tried to squeeze into the crowd but failed.

"Kopil! You stole my painting!" she shouted, and the crowd around him parted.

"Who is this woman? I don't know her! She's making a rumor!" Kopil shouted.

For a moment, it seemed as if the sky were dark, and people said:

"This woman must be crazy!

"How could she paint such a work?

"How dare she speak to our Kopil like this!"

Their words echoed in Lotus's head, and she rushed back to the house, her steps so crooked that she could hardly stand. She began to cry.

"Lotus, I think I was wrong. The painting is indeed yours," Joe said.

Lotus took Joe in her arms and cried, but she didn't see him looking at the money on the table.

"Lotus, is that really what you painted? No, after all, you can't make such a good painting," Joe said.

"Joe—you—" Lotus's eyes were a little red, and she felt terrified and wronged. Even her husband

suspected her.

“Or else? You can wait for the waves to subside and then paint for Kopil, so maybe we can make more—”

“Shut up!” Lotus shouted. She felt as if she were struggling in the mire.

Noise and ridicule kept coming from the crowd, and the sound was like a knife constantly pressing into Lotus’s heart:

“Why don’t you say that van Gogh stole your painting?! I just want to say that Picasso copied my three-year-old son’s graffiti!”

Lotus sat still amidst this hustle and bustle, her numb eyes and stiff body like a dry lotus seedpod.

---

The next day, when a stretcher wrapped in white cloth was lifted out of Lotus’s house, the crowd surged again.

“Oh my God! How pathetic! It’s that unusual painter!” they whispered about the painter who would never be mentioned again.

# The Swan



By Gabe Horowitz, 10  
Chevy Chase, MD

With soft white feathers that look like ruffled velvet,  
The gorgeous swan soars through the lake  
Like other birds soar through the sky.  
Fresh, clean water laps at the creature's breast.  
The swan is utterly serene.  
The serenity escapes the bird's majestic body.  
It fills the lake.  
It becomes the lake.  
All is well.

# 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.

## STORIES

Jodie Chan, 13  
Enni Harlan, 13  
Raya Ilieva, 10  
Kyler Min, 9  
Uma Nambiar, 13  
Anthony Qian, 10  
Julia Stilley, 12  
Elodie Weinzierl, 11  
Lucy Wu, 8

## POEMS

Stephanie Kim, 9  
Yihua Liu, 10  
Iris Sullivan, 9

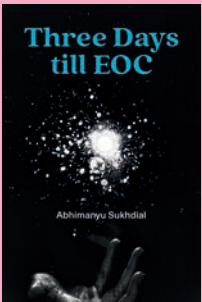
## ART

Stephanie Kim, 9  
Chloe Mancini, 9  
Mackenzie Reese, 13

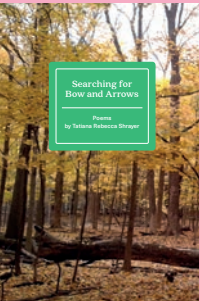
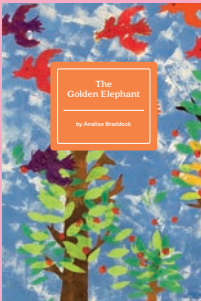
# BOOKS AND MAGAZINES IN THE *STONE SOUP* STORE

*Stone Soup* makes a great gift!

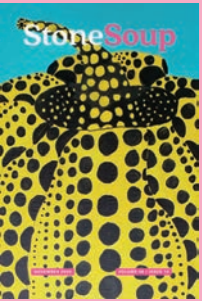
Look for our books and magazines in our online store, [Stonesoupstore.com](http://Stonesoupstore.com), or find them at Amazon and other booksellers.



Published on September 1, 2020, *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.



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