



# Stone Soup

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# StoneSoup

Writing and art by kids, for kids

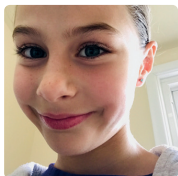
## Editor's Note

One of the main defenses of literature today is that it makes you empathetic—that reading and writing help teach you how to put yourself in someone else's shoes. Sometimes, in the case of a personal narrative, that "someone else" is even a different, earlier version of yourself.

The writing in this issue explores many perspectives that vary greatly from our own—from villagers in the Ecuadorian jungle to the objects in our cabinets, that perhaps live secret lives; from stray village cats to the bear, king of the forest; from the people commemorated by a memorial (which perhaps they hate!) to mythical creatures.

After reading this issue, perhaps you will feel inspired to explore your own environment and write your way into the perspective of something else that you find there—like your dog or a doll, an acorn or an apple, a deck of cards or a picture of a cow.

Until next time,



On the cover:  
*Snowman Army* (iPhone 7)  
Grace Williams, 12  
Katonah, NY

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# StoneSoup

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*Twin Tigers* (Nikon Coolpix P900)  
Sierra Glassman, 13  
Watsonville, CA

# Life in the Jungle

A trip to the Ecuadorian jungle prompts the writer to reevaluate the comforts of her life in the U.S.



By Arielle Kouyoumdjian, 13  
Fairfax, VA

An observant onlooker, upon watching her fellow passengers in the airplane, might have noticed a girl who lacked the lethargic nonchalance of the other voyagers. This girl peered, fascinated, through the stained window. She appeared to be caught in a lustrous reverie that refused to release her. She was, unlike most of the other passengers on the airplane, not fully aware of inhaling the sickly airplane oxygen. Even the most attentive spectator could not have known that this girl was imagining the dense, fragrant air peculiar to the jungle, savoring the delicious rapture of a life about to be changed.

I was the girl caught in a dream. I didn't return to awareness until the airplane landed and we boarded a bus that transported us to the next leg of our Ecuadorian jungle trip. The bus lugged us through the city of Coca, just outside Yasuni National Park. Bodegas displayed toys and foods bursting with color, a stark contrast to the rickety, rotting frames of the buildings. Children milled around a brick courtyard, dressed sharply in school uniforms. I watched

elderly men hobble along the uneven concrete tiles, surveying the youth with melancholy glances and hiding behind stooped shoulders.

The bus bumbled to a stop at the bank of the muddy Coca River. I slipped onto a bench on an idling river boat and stared into the murky water. *What's down there? Water snakes? Secretive freshwater fish?* The boat revved its engine and flew forward until the sound of the wind and water drowned out any conversation. For the entire two-hour journey, I sat wrapped tightly in my poncho as the rain scraped its gnarly fingers across my face and dragged mud into my mouth and eyes. I was grateful for my unrelenting imagination keeping me company during the uncomfortable ride. When the boat reached the shore at last, my mom passed around a bottle of bug spray, and we feverishly shielded ourselves against malaria, dengue, and yellow fever.

"I hate using bug spray. It smells disgusting, and it feels sticky on my skin! No wonder the bugs don't like it," I grumbled.

"You know what's even worse than

bug spray?" my mom asked. "Dengue."

My knowledge of the jungle consisted of rumors about poisonous frogs, blood-sucking parasites, and prowling jungle cats. I was excited beyond words! The idea of such mystery and danger invigorated me: I anticipated countless species of iridescent insects, carnivorous plants, vibrant amphibians, and weird reptiles. Still, the fact that we had been inoculated against yellow fever and swallowed malaria pills before leaving, along with the lack of protection for dengue, made me more than a little apprehensive.

Our naturalist guide, Dany, and local guide, Dario, greeted us. Dany asked if we were physically fit enough to handle hikes through the jungle.

"It's strenuous, but you say you're strong . . ." He sized us up. Evidently, the guides were satisfied, and we trekked deep into the dense foliage. The entire jungle seemed to be one living being, exhaling warm, sticky breaths. There were looming trees, reverberating with the uncanny hum of life. Insects shuttered their pearlescent wings and hastily flitted away. Velvety moss shrouded the wiry, twisted branches, and birds plunked down strange notes from the canopy. The trees solemnly guarded the billowing sky above and the lively forest below, their damp boughs puncturing bulbous clouds and snagging tendrils of breeze.

"In other parts of the jungle," one of our guides said, "people with a lot of money pay for the trees to be chopped down and shipped out. Deforestation is so common in Ecuador . . ."

*If only these dignified soldiers could understand that humans are coming to chop them down, I thought. Do they know that their spectacular armor can be sliced thinner than a sliver of breeze, that their emerald-studded crowns are worthless in the eyes of many twisted humans? I recalled a fact I had read once, that every 1.4 seconds, a football field-sized area of trees is cut down in rainforests.*

As we continued to hike, the guides pointed out strangler fig trees.

"Strangler figs wrap themselves around smaller saplings, then suck the life and nutrients out of them, in turn growing more powerful," Dany said. "They're appearing all over the forest."

I thought of the strangler figs taking the lives of others to supplement their own. *I believe that this behavior isn't particular to trees, though . . .*

Tired and hungry after a muddy hike, and having not eaten lunch, our guides ushered us into a canoe. We glided down a thin vein of black water, the blood of the jungle. *This is exactly how I imagined it!* I craned my neck for a sight of golden monkeys or extravagant toucans. Soon, I was lulled by the constant, contented purr of birds and insects in the trees. The stagnant water smelled of decomposition and rain. Silky air wrapped around me. The syncopated splashes of the canoe paddles melted into the trilling symphony of animals hiding in the slippery shade. Eventually, the canoe slid onto the shore of an indigenous village, home to the native people of the Ecuadorian jungle.

We eagerly stepped off the boat and waited at the base of a slight hill that led up to several huts surrounded by trees. A young woman treaded lopsidedly down the slope to greet us, her dark hair tied in a long braid down her back. *She's pregnant! She doesn't look like she's any older than twenty...* The woman smiled shyly, exposing a dark gap where her front teeth should have been.

"I am Dacy," she said, using the only English phrase she knew. Dacy led us into one of the shady huts, pointing out the roof constructed of woven yucca leaves. Our guides acted as interpreters. The hut was cool inside, and fragrant wisps of smoke wafted from the small fire in the center. We sat on a wooden bench against the plaited yucca wall. Dacy gestured toward several large stones piled next to the fire.

"In our tradition, if one of the stones breaks, it foretells misfortune coming to the residents of the hut," she said, speaking in her native language.

Dacy presented a small lunch she had prepared on the flames and explained each food. There was a bit of pale pink fish from the Coca River, cooked in yucca leaves to give it flavor; mashed, milk-colored yucca; sweet plantain; and, the most unique of all, a large roasted grub that developed inside the bark of a palm tree. The grub had glassy black eyes and ivory, rippled skin slightly browned by the fire on one side. The food was completely flavored by only the smoke from the fire and the yucca leaf.

*I'll sample everything except the*

*grub...* Although grubs are a sustainable food packed with protein, the idea of eating a larva made my stomach churn.

*I can't believe they have to cook on a fire every day, for every meal. Their lives would be so much easier if they had stoves and electricity, I thought.*

Our guides indulged in masato, a traditional drink made of fermented yucca. In some communities, members ferment the yucca by chewing it and spitting it out, so that the enzymes in their saliva break down the root vegetable.

Dario explained, "Masato is extremely filling, and during periods when there is not enough food to support all of the residents, the adults can go for days at a time surviving on only this drink."

*Days at a time without enough food? That's terrible! My heart sank. I watched children play outside, through a small opening in the hut. They have absolutely no idea if they're going to go to sleep hungry tonight, or not. I wish there was something we could do to help them!*

Dacy led us to a sweltering-hot grassy clearing in a circle of crumbling shacks. The shacks were in stunning disrepair, as if time had enveloped the shelters in scarred hands and caressed them with the stony lips of death. The houses looked like dusty bones jutting out of a weathered graveyard. The sun lashed my back and sweat stung my forehead. *How can the indigenous people work in this field every day?! They have such difficult lives!*

Dacy explained how the villagers used to live together in this ring of



now-decrepit houses; however, as time went on, they had spread out down the river. This had given the community members more space.

"The community has no running water or Western medicine. They mostly travel by canoe and on foot. They fish in the river for seafood. The river water is contaminated by oil tankers, and pollution is sickening the community members."

Dany added, "Since the oil drilling began, there has been an increase in cancer throughout the village."

*It's strange that they suffer from the actions of the greedy oil miners poisoning the Earth, even though the community members themselves have almost no carbon footprint. Yet another thing to make their lives harder. It seems so unfair.*

Dany continued, "The citizens of the community do not have sufficient access to hospitals, and the indigenous people are skeptical of medical residents who are assigned to rotate here during their training. The villagers are used to collecting all of their remedies from the jungle, so they do not readily accept the medical students."

"The people here believe that malaria is caused by what they call 'Bad Air.' They try to cure it with natural medicines, but it doesn't always work. Lots of them end up dying from preventable diseases," Dany told us.

Planting and caring for their crops, cooking, fishing—all has to be done by hand because the community doesn't have access to electricity or gas. The indigenous villagers have a mortality rate of age sixty or

less, due to toiling for hours in the hot equatorial sun. The men have to leave the village to find work in nearby towns and are often gone for months. Starting at age sixteen, and sometimes younger, women plant and harvest yucca, prepare meals, and watch children. They also divide the chores among themselves, take care of each other's children, and socialize while laboring. I looked up at Dacy with a mixture of awe and pity. *They, unlike us, obtain food and make a living without contaminating the river or their land at all. But they pay a high price for their eco-friendly lives.*

The villagers have adjusted to the contemporary economy by supporting the tourism industry. The women make money by selling intricate bracelets and exquisitely painted pots to visitors, and leading tours within the community. Finding jobs outside the community is a tricky task, since education in the community only reaches the eighth grade.

"It is difficult to find qualified and willing teachers. Most of the teachers only have a high school education, which of course means mediocre schooling for the kids," Dany explained.

"A couple of teenagers in the village attempted to go to college in the city, but they couldn't adjust to the city environment and difficult lessons." The children are sucked into the cycle of an insufficient education, which inhibits their ability to break out and gain higher knowledge.

"Still, children in the village are brought up together, and each parent helps the others," Dacy said, smiling.

I began to weigh the benefits and downsides of this community in my head. The selflessness of the residents formed a sense of community that most Americans never get to experience. The indigenous people are secluded almost to a dangerous extent because they cannot access reasonable medical care or an education. They are invisible to the people who pollute and destroy the Earth. Many of us are too self-centered and focused on our own wishes to realize our actions reach far beyond our own lives. And yet this lifestyle isn't altogether bad. Food in the jungle is never taken for granted because the prospect of a meal is not always secure. Unlike us, the indigenous people cannot drive to a nearby grocery store to buy food for the next week. When there is food, however, it is fresh and seasoned with hard work, culture, and compassion. The lack of electricity adds an extra degree of struggle, but it allows for the pleasurable and intimate experience of dining in company by firelight, and encourages resourcefulness. Still, this way of life is far from perfect.

However, rather than pity the indigenous jungle people, I realized, we can understand that their life eliminates many of the issues that plague our sterile and somewhat sugarcoated lives. Today, I see the indigenous life not as uncivilized or lacking but beautiful in its simplicity and in the togetherness and celebration of the Earth it possesses.

I left the village, and for a while it seemed as if I were peering at life through a cloudy window. I was surrounded by prickly,

monotonous skyscrapers, vehicles expelling pungent pollution into the atmosphere, the deep rumble of airplanes, and the nasal bellow of passing trains. Instead of treading lightly over velvety moss to scoop yucca out of the ground for meals, we have to plod through a sluggish sea of glinting, groaning cars to get to the grocery store, filled with processed food. Admittedly, it is extremely difficult for indigenous people to break out of their lifestyle, to receive higher education, to adapt to urban life. But perhaps they are educated in a different way than we are. They understand the Earth, flora, and fauna more realistically and intimately than any professor could. They are not plagued by tech and weapons and pesticides. We are.

Although many Americans are educated and can depend on health care, education, and food, we are also trapped, but in a different way. We are trapped in our own selfish lives, divided by politics and hatred. We are trapped in the cage of our own close-mindedness, even though we have more freedom than most people could possibly imagine. We sometimes take our manufactured, unhealthy lives either for granted or as near perfection. However, when compared with the peaceful, healthful life of the indigenous people, perhaps we need to reconsider our way of living. Jungle flora has been used to create countless medical cures for diseases. Maybe the jungle lifestyle is a remedy for our lives too.

# The Mountain Giant's Mouth



By Ethan Chen, 10  
San Diego, CA

From miles away we saw it, the mountain giant's mouth.  
So we mounted our metal lions on wheels  
and sprinted toward the mountain giant's mouth down its long black tongue.  
We jumped off our metal lions and cautiously tiptoed into the mouth.  
Its teeth drip, drip, dripped saliva down on our heads.  
When we reached the esophagus,  
the mouth closed,  
and we were engulfed in darkness,  
with only our cracker-like lightsabers to guide us.



*Norway's Light* (Watercolor)  
Freya Land, 10  
Brooklyn, New York

# Four Poems



By Amber Zhao, 10  
Brisbane, Australia

## In the Eyes of an Aquarium Visitor

Silent glissandos of bubbles swishing around marine creatures,  
silhouettes beguiling the cool ocean lair of fluorescent colors  
that blinds with sweeping currents. I swallow the chewing gum,  
hard brass pennies scoring an indentation in a cupped finger.  
Now, in these corridors of glass, hidden worlds behind them,  
lunar notes trickle down liquid scales. They are faraway  
galaxies . . . Other music, pulse of movement, plays behind  
that sheet of glass. The aquarium is a living organism,  
fluxing and developing its body, dissolving as fish  
and sharks gaze at the iridescent-bright corals. In mounting  
dances of being, we take photos. A gentle babble, chatter  
amongst us. I say that the shark with its fin  
is leering at me. They leer and laugh at me in turn.

The reflection of the glass mirrors and magnifies their separate  
joys. What, what must they think while the world outside  
drowns in rain, tinkling musically on tin roofs? Our dog  
came up to us, bedraggled after a long night of chasing cats,  
the shimmering frenzy of quarks and atoms on his  
straw-laden hair. And this afternoon, fog  
engulfs our town with its dark childless reign.  
We escaped to this aquarium for less water



but find plenty more in the flow of aquamarine.  
Earth's sap is unknown to them, prehistoric creatures  
alive since the dawn of time, now reduced to specks in  
water, gushed by man. We have lost our dreaming and our  
naïve believing that we could control nature—not harmony,  
a peaceful coexistence and thriving on this vast land—  
but loggers and poachers and thieves that reduce the majesty  
of these paperbark trees and tall blue mountains, spires  
reaching up, up to the clouds, and animals all thriving in seas,  
knowing the barrier between life and survival, now trapped  
with their pleading eyes and hollow, voiceless cry,  
grasping at a sort of eternity. Their hearts will forever  
be lifeless, never undergoing metamorphosis.

Cameras flash, SNAP! SNAP! Visceral yet ethereal,  
those lights dance around the aquarium, a portal to their dimension,  
a celestial, bewitching world of ocean's priestly rule. Back home,  
that aura of magic, that solid elemental vitality,  
still pulses through me. Gripping my pen, I write:  
*Silent glissandos of bubbles swirling around marine creatures...*

# Antarctic

“The sea’s cold,” is all you write from Antarctica, “and we haven’t seen any penguins yet. Hope we do.” How to analyze that icy wilderness, with its harsh arc of grandiose majesty, luminous glaciers otherworldly in the setting sun? The Earth’s veins will be hidden deep beneath the icicle-crust ed ground, my friend, and the surreal wonders of stepping onto land after many days at sea, a sensation to conquer. I remember those waterfalls of ice, pluming into the distant rays of an underwater moon. Stinging chandeliers, jellyfish, pulsed deadly, deadly under a human touch, yet beguiling, a universal gravity drawing the fingers to the stingers. Translucent lives floated and flowered in a primal ripple-ring of wild nerves,

and plastic floating billowed out like hollow silk. The drift of marine snow impacts our small universe of steel pens, the kettle’s familiar whistle and scissors left unpacked from their case. We journeyed down the wild underwater cavern, that labyrinth of darkness, a metallic lake, the Southern Ocean, reflecting and dissolving ourselves as we really were. As if the pulsing of the boat was gone, and we were no longer tethered to that rope on which hung life . . . and death. It’s been a thousand years, feels like it, since I descended the staircase of ice and snow for the first time.

How, then, back from our trip, has life shrunk to this bare minimum? I gnaw on my pencils; suddenly the tree in someone else’s garden flushes red, blood on branches acidly looking up to the sky, and shifting forms in textures evolve. We walked together in Antarctica, strolling from the point where universe meets universe and back, breezes whipping endlessly, our twin fingerprints glowing transparently on Antarctic, sacred land. Now you are on another expedition, and we move on different axes; you acknowledge the penguins but do not study their very form, shape, soul, like me, tiny wriggling

bulbs of black and white, alighting into the ocean.  
At night the color palettes would spring and turn above.

Your final visitation was a quick one, that ghostly gaze  
of departure to Antarctica already spreading its languorous translation  
all over your pale silken face—imagining zodiacs,  
moving images in a world magnified by its sheer, brutal barrenness,  
and an escape to endless stars wheeling, even  
blizzards pouring down from the polar axis's hemisphere.

# The Memorial Tree

Battered plate, battered life. Plumed reed and paperbark  
surround that memorial, certain heirs of late afternoon and evening  
drifting like phantoms around that blurred steel lake,  
now ancient with new faces, my face lost in that ripple of glass,  
ripple that comes to all living things, the realization  
that life is not what you expect, and that glorious crown,  
charming everyone with heart-struck bedazzle,  
may tomorrow just be a faded visage of an earlier hope,  
withheld by a greater force, propelling everything.

That tree waits, patiently, for its reincarnation as something,  
something, at least, for those cold words on the memorial do not signify  
anything about the kind woman who inhabited this place,  
or that gentleman, friends with birds and driftwood spears.  
It only quotes a name, birth and death date—  
but in that little punctuation mark, that tiny indentation of a dash,  
a whole life of sorrows, happiness, hopes and fears,  
all lost now on the gentle spiraled clouds,  
patrolling every speck-person day after day.

In memorial of (insert person)—would they really want that?  
What if they detested that dear childish park,  
preferred the jazzy pace of mature metropolis life?  
I ask parents this; they shake their heads, clearly thinking,  
“The girl’s too old for her age.” They shake their heads again,  
but I know they have good intentions. They just don’t  
understand how I make magical spells, poems, out of mundane things,  
experiences,  
think such profound thoughts about life, death, eternity, and existence.  
But, well, that is my existence, to be honest.

I do some research into their lives, with no success,  
and find the memorial tree again—the willow still weeping,  
its dainty leaves like fallen tears guarding the memorial,  
still highly polished, but faded with time and age.  
Without thinking, I cup water from the drought-sickened stream,  
pour it onto the memorial tree. It still looks sad.  
However, the next time I visit it, by an invisible change, it is happy:  
the falling leaves are tears of happiness, not sadness,  
and a delighted face uttering joyful words floats upwards like a ghost, is gone.





*Morning Chore* (Samsung Galaxy S9+)  
Joey Vasaturo, 10  
Colebrook, CT

# Finishing a Poem

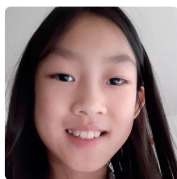
I have carved truth and beauty into yellowed parchment,  
having created something unique, vital, simple, complex, and bottomless  
as a fallen flower. The jagged edge of brokenness  
intrudes upon my soul, and dusty fingerprints outline  
the soul of this poem. The unbroken stretch of time  
has not erased these words eclipsing  
the sun and moon alike.

What troubles they must have faced; what creative, poetic troubles  
would have gnawed on that author—spirit  
like moss and ivy on a house! Impossible feats are possible  
viewed the right way, melding dark and light  
into lines that are like a wishing well and looking glass.  
These rhymes instill visions that I thought  
would never come again,

and the rhythm beats faster than fire. For me,  
I find a new renewal in this poem. After years of waiting  
to write that masterpiece, that *pièce de résistance*,  
word after word grasps into touch, paper, and ink  
to reveal the tide of inspiration.

# The Wild World

**Luxi decides to spend a year among her animal friends, researching the mysterious, wild forest of Oakwood**



By Ever Sun, 10  
Bellevue, WA

Luxi Carbonelli was a city girl. She liked pop culture, the tall 'scrapers that loomed above her, and all the noise to brighten up her day. Luxi loved the flash and lights of the city. She lived in an apartment on the twenty-third floor. Her room was plastered with posters of models, TV stars, fashion designers, and much more. All the walls were covered, and her drawers were filled with makeup, perfumes, and purses. Often she went out late with her friends to new exhibits, popular restaurants, and the mall. She got the newest styles of clothing and the hottest lipsticks, purses, and necklaces.

But Luxi also loved nature.

There was a small, dense forest just outside the city. It was so thick with trees and plants that nobody ever bothered trying to make a settlement there. People just let it be; it was small and full of hills, so it would not be good to try to live there. The soil was hard and cracked, and who-knew-what animals lived there. At night, you could hear the pack of wolverines howling, a pierce of noise through the quiet, unmoving silence that hovered over the city. Then a rustle of feathers,

and the arc of doves that nested in the forest took flight from east to west, and didn't seem to fly back; but in the morning, the doves were in the forest. Many people stayed up all night, watching to see if they flew back to the east. They never did, but somehow they were back east in the dense forest after flying west.

When Luxi was dismissed from school one day at 2:45, her first stop was always the wild forest. In the city it was called Oakwood, because of the numerous varieties of oak there. Luxi would breathe in the woody scent of the forest, and calmness would fill her heart. She loved the calls of nature—the chirps of the sparrows, finches, woodpeckers, and the occasional colorful parrot. Then there was the swish of the tail as the squirrels went flying from branch to branch above her. Burrowing animals making their home underground came up and welcomed her—Luxi was not a stranger in Oakwood. Beautiful hummingbirds, so delicate, shy, and small, landed on her with no fear, and mourning doves nuzzled her gently.

All the wonderful creatures of Oakwood waited for her to come,



*Peaceful* (Colored sand)  
Aerial Chen, 11  
Katy, TX



## The king of Oakwood, his majesty of the forest, the Great Brown Bear, was bowing to her!

and then the woods were alive with chirping, singing, squeaking, everything! Even the plants danced, waving their leaves—thin or thick, small or big, rough or smooth. They came together in harmony and waited for their king.

After the small woodland animals welcomed her, the air filled with joy, they became suddenly anxious—for the king of Oakwood was about to come into their presence, his guards all around him. As silence befell them, a low growl filled the quietness, followed by a choir of howls. Then came the king of the forest.

His wolverine guards, dressed in green uniforms with yellow rims, a brown wood belt from which hung a silver sword, and long trousers reaching down to their thick boots, surrounded him on all sides. He was a mighty, strong animal, big and towering over Luxi like the skyscrapers. He balanced on his hind legs, stood up to his full height, and then he let out a roar so great it shook the dirt ground beneath them. The trees seemed to shake, the birds squawked with fear, and the deft creatures sprang to their burrows for protection. Luxi's legs felt like they would crumble, but she stood up straight and strong. She was ready for him.

When the king of Oakwood finished his show, he came back on four feet and looked deeply into Luxi's amber eyes. His big black eyes softened and he bowed his head. The king of Oakwood, his majesty of the

forest, the Great Brown Bear, was bowing to her! Luxi was appalled, but showed no emotion.

"Who are you?" the Bear King asked softly.

"I'm Luxi Carbonelli," Luxi answered confidently. They stared into each other's eyes.

"You're brave," the bear said. It's funny to think that bears can smile, but this brown bear did. The tips of his mouth curved upward, and his eyes smiled along.

"I know," Luxi replied. The Bear King nodded admiringly. All the woodland animals watched them, including his wolverine soldiers.

"Why don't you come to my royal den?" the bear invited encouragingly.

Luxi blushed and nodded. "Sure, why not?"

The bear heaved Luxi up on his back, and the animals gasped in wonder. *This lucky girl received such an honor*, they all thought, murmuring to each other as they crawled back to their homes. The bear and his parade of soldiers, and Luxi, who rode on top of him, strode away.

Up on the bear's back, Luxi could almost reach the treetops. She could see the magnificent birds in the fumble of branches and leaves of the trees. She spotted marvelous creatures she'd never imagined before: birds with plumes in all the bright colors she could think of, red, orange, yellow, and pink; squirrels that were transparent and seemed to be made of glass; a nest woven out of pencils (later she realized they were

pencils belonging to every schoolchild in the city—she spotted her name somewhere in the middle); and below the trees, she slowly realized that there were deer freckled with white dots. But the most marvelous feature of those deer was their antlers. The antlers were so long and stretched so high up they mixed with the branches of trees, camouflaged. Rabbits sat near the feet of the deer and watched the parade with dull eyes.

Eventually, they reached the bear's home. It was a huge hole, or den, dug out from the largest tree Luxi had ever seen. It stretched so wide Luxi could not see either end and so tall there was no top—at least to Luxi's eyes. The neighboring trees were dwarfed; they seemed a hundred times smaller than this giant of a tree. Its trunk was old and rough, its branches weak but sturdy, and the leaves were dried and falling because it was November and almost all the trees planted in the sidewalks of Luxi's city were bare. The wind swept the dried fallen leaves from the floor and carried them away.

"We're here." The bear smiled. Luxi was dumbfounded by the enormous tree, the trunk facing her like a wall.

"Why can't we see this?" Luxi asked, thinking of how they couldn't see this giant tree from her city. The treetops were flat when they looked down to the small patch of forest.

"The Fog stops humans from looking at the true image of Oakwood. The trees are small and dense to you humans, aren't they? I'm—well, I'm glad that the Fog's there to blind the humans' eyes. Humans are so unaware of their natural surroundings. That's why the

WOOD—Wizards Of Oakwood D—placed the Fog around the trees."

Luxi looked confused.

"What? There are four Oakwoods of our kind: Oakwood A, Oakwood B, Oakwood C, and Oakwood D."

Luxi nodded.

The bear heaved a sigh. "You know, you're the only human to ever see Oakwood without the fog."

"Really? Why?" Luxi asked, genuinely surprised.

"Well, you're different from the rest. You take notice of nature's beauty. You're kind to animals. And you care for us. Others just make tables, chairs, and rugs out of us." The bear looked away as he said this, and Luxi noticed he was sad.

"Well, I'm honored to be special to the king of Oakwood!" Luxi said with a giggle.

The bear looked fondly at her, but Luxi didn't see.

Afterward, Luxi thought about what the bear had said about her, and she made a decision—she was going to stay in Oakwood for a year and study nature. When she went back to her city, she would spread the information to other nature researchers, and what she found could help maintain wildlife. Her schedule? Monday, observe and take photos. Tuesday, get samples (like pieces of plants, abandoned nests, etc.). Wednesday, analyze photos and samples. Thursday, record findings in her Nature Notebook. Friday, explore some more in the forest, catching anything she might've missed. Saturday, the bear would take her to landmarks and hopefully she could find anything useful there. Sunday, free! At first, Luxi was hesitant to leave

**Luxi's pencil dropped onto the wet soil. She couldn't believe it. Her head spun. She had been in Oakwood, doing nature research, for ten years.**

her city life for a year or more, but then she thought again. How she loved the natural world!

So that's what Luxi did. She got up early to start her day's work, with two wolverine soldiers guarding her. The bear, she realized, was quite fond of her, and her heart bloomed with warmth when she thought about it.

Sometimes, as she looked for samples and clues, conversations started between Luxi and the critters of the wild. One day, as Scientist Luxi (as she liked to call herself) was taking samples of dirt in test tubes, a mouse skittered past her knees, his warm white fur brushing against her.

"Oh! Hello, little mouse! I'm Luxi. What's your name?"

"Oh, hey! I'm K.T. And yes, I'm a male! Wait, are you a human?" K.T. asked.

"Yeah, I'm researching Oakwood's nature. After a year or so, I'm probably going to go back to my city and share my findings with the scientists in my world," Luxi told K.T.

"Huh. Oh, I remember you now! You rode on the king of the forest's back! Back then, I was just a mouseling," he replied giddily. "Wait, a year you say? For your research?"

"Yeah, I think I have two or three weeks left until I go back," Luxi said as she drew a sketch of a bony plant in her Nature Notebook.

"But . . . a year in Oakwood time would be ten in human years! You've been here for ten years of human time."

Luxi's pencil dropped onto the wet soil. She couldn't believe it. Her head spun. She had been in Oakwood, doing nature research, for ten years. Big, fat drops of tears rolled down her pink cheeks. She bowed her head, the tears dripping onto her sketch, and her long brown hair draped down, covering her face. She didn't understand why the bear hadn't told her. K.T. tried to hug her, but he realized he was too tiny, so he patted Luxi on the knee instead. She must've cried for hours, because when she wiped the dry tears away, K.T. was no longer there. Instead, K.T. had left her an acorn larger than an average ping-pong ball. She picked it up and admired it, smiling, and knew that she had a friend in Oakwood.

When the bear heard what Luxi said had happened in the woods, demanding why he hadn't told her that Oakwood's time went by faster than it did in her human world, he bowed his head to her for the second time during her stay with him.

"I didn't want you to leave," the bear said sadly. Luxi stopped yelling, and her face softened.

The next day, the bear heaved her up to his back. And though he had done it before, she was still taken by surprise. Again, as on the first day she had come, the parade attracted attention from all the animals in the forest. Luxi waved goodbye to the animals, recognizing some that she'd spoken with. When she looked down, she saw K.T. squished in the midst of

a family of mice and waved joyfully at him. K.T. smiled and waved his tiny paw goodbye.

After a while, the woods became denser than ever, signaling that the exit was near. After all, that was what people in her city thought Oakwood was like. Then the bear said to Luxi, "This is where I will leave you. Remember, you have to stop them from cutting the trees down for land. Say that the trees are dense and the ground is hilly so they'll know that they can't build houses here on the animals' land. Say that there's a barrier that wouldn't allow anyone in except for you. That way, Oakwood's nature won't be destroyed. Please?" the bear said sincerely, and Luxi nodded.

"Of course. This beautiful wildlife ecosystem can't and won't be destroyed. Girls' honor," Luxi promised.

Luxi turned around to exit Oakwood, and also to shade her tearful face from the bear. How sad it was to leave all the animals in the forest! She would miss them so much. Suddenly, she stopped in her tracks. Luxi turned around and threw her arms around the furry bear, saying, "Oh, I'll miss you so much!"

The bear smiled again a little and patted her lightly on the back, for fear of crushing her. Although you couldn't see it, in Luxi's fist was the large acorn, brown and handsome, that K.T. had given her. Friends couldn't be separated. All the rabbits, deer, mice, birds, moles stopped in silence, and it seemed that time stopped at that moment. And maybe it had. Who knows?

All we can do is hope for the best.  
And then? It's all up to fate.



# Two Poems



By Graecie Gwyn, 9  
Fallbrook, CA

## Morning

Morning is good.

Morning, everyone.

I love you, everyone.

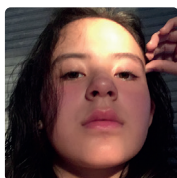
I love each and every one of you.

The United States of America.

# Rain

Rain splatters on the haze.  
Shadows crawl to the edge of the cliff to  
seek their journey from far to near.  
In the morning the sun shines bright and  
shows its sunrays upon the night.  
Patterns write their curiosity in the eye of  
wonder to make it right.

The fine, heavy wind flows from its habitat  
and interacts with other creatures upon  
the summer breeze.  
The trees lean upon their knees, begging  
for water to nourish their leaves.



*Disco* (iPhone SE)  
Heloise Matumoto, 13  
Québec, Canada

# When You Fall Asleep at Night . . .

When the people go to sleep, the objects come to life



By Yutia Li, 10  
Houston, TX

The pitter-patter of feet heading up the stairs reaches their porcelain ears. The room is holding its breath, waiting silently for that sound, the sound that everyone yearns to hear. Soon, the faint melody of snoring drifts downstairs. The cabinets begin to stir. The drawers rustle. The cupboards ease open with a muffled *creeeek*. They come pouring out, jostling for position, the tiny objects creating a huge traffic jam. Some throw on makeshift washcloth dresses and suits and find a spot on the countertop dance floor to twist and twirl like graceful ballerinas. Others sit down to chat about the ups and downs of their day. Yet more toss ping-pong balls and skitter around like squirrels, uttering subtle squeals. But most sneak into the pantry and nibble a morsel of well-deserved cookie crumbles and leftover Cheerios after a long, weary day of serving their masters—a meal large enough to fill their bellies but small enough to go unnoticed. After hours of jiving, gossiping, exercising, and snacking, the soft thump of feet

swinging out of bed signals that it's time to return to their captivity. Washcloths fling themselves back onto their racks, ping-pong balls plop back into their buckets, and the wrappers hurriedly hurl themselves into the trash. Cabinets pull themselves closed, and drawers snap shut. When the gurgling of the coffee machine starts up, they know their fun has come to an end. Well, until the next evening at least . . .

# Cody's Last Day

The writer recalls the day they had to put down Cody, her pet rat



By Elena Baltz, 10  
Mountain View, CA

The day Cody was put to sleep started off terrible. I thought my day couldn't get any worse. At school I was barely there.

"Elena. Hey! Earth to Elena!" My friend Penelope brought me back to reality. "Are you okay? You don't look so good."

"It's nothing," I said. But it wasn't nothing. I had to say goodbye to Cody today.

When I got home, I went straight to my iPad. Anime really helps when you are stressed.

I remembered that yesterday Cody's condition had become a whole lot worse. He had already had tumors for a while now, but last night he got an infection that wouldn't get better. He was really old. I mean, he had already lived for three years, two months, and one day. That is a really long time for a rat. His brother Spencer had only lived for two years, eight months, and one day. It was the sixth-month anniversary of putting down Spencer.

My dad got home, so we had to get ready. As I was getting my shoes on, my dad was putting Cody into a carrier. Cody did not like it one bit. He knew what the carrier meant, and he

hated the vet. He made his point clear by squeaking like a crazed animal.

My dad let me hold him on the car ride there. Through the carrier I could hear his squeaks of defiance, but even those sounded pitiful. We sat in silence. The cars came and went. I was barely listening when my dad said, "We're here." I barely noticed when we were called into a back room to wait. All I noticed were Cody's squeaks as he desperately tried to break free.

When we got to the back room, we took him out to play for a bit. His black-and-white fur was matted. His breathing was shallow and raspy. I remembered when his fur was soft when he was young. His round black eyes used to shine with curiosity. He was so cute. His condition had gotten so bad now that we had to wash him. Rats normally groom themselves, so this was bad. He really wasn't doing well.

After a while of no talking, my dad finally said something. "Remember how Cody liked to crawl in jacket sleeves?"

"Yeah," I sighed, remembering it for a moment. "He also loved the Christmas tree."

"He sure did," my dad remembered. "Both the boys loved the dishwasher and the couch. Oh, and cables." Talking about these memories made me feel nostalgic. It seemed like they'd happened forever ago.

We heard a knocking at the door, and the vet came in. "We're ready for him. Come this way." I gulped. It was really happening. I had dreaded this day ever since Spencer, and I was terrified. As we walked through some rooms, I absentmindedly started clenching my fists.

When we arrived at the room, Cody was let out onto a towel. I pet him a couple of times. I could feel his heartbeat going *ba-bum ba-bum*. I remembered how it felt to hold him. He was always trying to get free.

"We are going to gas him so he's unconscious," the vet said. As the vet brought out a machine, I chewed my lip nervously. The machine looked like a glass case with tubes coming out. The vet picked up Cody gently and placed him in the box. She slid the lid on and hooked up the machine. When the machine was turned on, Cody hated it. He was frantically moving about while squeaking like a madman. After thirty seconds or so, he calmed down and fell asleep.

When we came in six months ago to put down Spencer, the vet had had us leave by this point. We got to stay this time. As the doctor got the needle ready, I tried to keep the tears in. It wasn't working very well.

"We'll give him the injection straight to his heart," the vet explained. "He won't feel a thing." Now I really couldn't keep the tears in. Cody and Spencer were my first

pets. I didn't want to lose them. I had forgotten what it felt like to have no pets.

They injected the needle. Time seemed to slow down. It was completely silent. It was almost as if you could hear Cody's heartbeat. *Ba-bum. Ba-bum. Ba-bum*. Then it stopped. He was completely still.

I don't remember the rest of the evening very well. I know that we walked out of the building, got into the car, and drove home. I didn't want dinner. I had lost my appetite. I zoned out until bedtime.

I sat there lying in bed thinking, *Cody's gone. He's really gone*. I guess it hadn't really sunk in until then. I really had no pets anymore. Both my rats were now gone. First Spencer and now Cody. That night I cried myself to sleep.

The day had ended. The day where we lost Cody, our dear pet rat.





*Dragon Play* (Pencil)  
Maya Tzonev, 13  
Wooster, OH



# The Vast Imagination of Melanie McGee

**Melanie is determined to save Riverhaven, home to unicorns and dragons, from being torn apart**



By Sienna Rapaport, 10  
Washington, DC

Staring at the harsh sunlight, Melanie McGee smiled. She was glad to say that the miniature dragon nuzzling her shoulder had not dared to take a step away from her. She grimaced at the thought of leaving all the grown unicorns alone, who were in fact not that grown at all. They were quite a foolish species. No matter their age, they always seemed to find trouble. Leaving them unguarded surely meant the ghastly notion of being fired.

Melanie McGee, who seemed to be no older than twelve, had been given the preposterous job of watching over the irritating animals of the Riverhaven Zoo. The job was impossible. That, at least, was what nearly all the townsfolk had said.

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The mysterious town of Riverhaven was like no other. It was filled to the brim (if that's even possible) with all types of unusual species. You never knew if you might bump into some strange creature on the street. Unicorns, dragons, hippacles, griffins,

monerines—the list could go on forever. The people of Riverhaven had disliked the creatures since the beginning of time. All they had ever wanted was to be left in peace with no foolish unicorns, playful griffins, repulsive monerines (it is believed that this species is a cross between a goat and a sheep), or engrossing hippacles to stop them.

Ever since the end of the Battle of the Diddod, the people of Riverhaven were never to live a regular life again. You see, the Battle of the Diddod had been the worst in centuries. The people of Riverhaven announced war against all of the odd creatures, who were given this name: the Diddod. The war went on for 200 years, 200 long, bloody years. In the end, the creatures won. They were allowed to stay in the town. No one could stop them. The people could declare more war, but no one wanted to relive the horrors of having no food, water, shelter, family, and life.

Melanie McGee was not an inhabitant of this town then. But this is her story. And it is my job to tell it.

So, I am going to take you to a place a lot nicer than the town of Riverhaven. I am taking you to New York, where Melanie was born.

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Now, before I explain Melanie's life, I will start from the very beginning, with the life of Melanie's father, Mr. McGee.

Mr. McGee was the type of person who could become popular within a matter of seconds. He was well known in the city for his mathematical ability and his way with science, and he was one of the many who constantly claimed that Riverhaven was not a real place. Not that many people disagreed. However, Mr. McGee had his quirks: he, even to his own daughter, refused to say his full name. He was always leaving town unexpectedly, and when he came back, he didn't mention any details of what had happened, let alone tell Melanie where he'd gone. He had never, according to Melanie, written with pen and paper; he always used a typewriter. However, his weirdest feature was that he always kept a large metal feather in his pocket. There was no way that the feather had been created by a sculptor. Melanie was sure of it. Not even the best of the best could match the amount of detail woven into the metal. She was also sure that it was definitely not from any animal she had heard of.

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"New York is not a place for an imaginative child. It is not a place for a girl who likes to run, climb, dance, and prance around the city. New York

is for success. For attentive children. For children who follow the rules. For children who aren't foolish and aren't babies. You, my child, are not ready for New York."

This was the exact wording of what Mr. McGee had told her after Melanie had once again broken her arm trying to catch a butterfly—it had been flying so elegantly! It had landed on her nose with a light flutter. A shiver of delight had scurried through her skin. She had trailed behind it as it flew by bustling citizens, as it headed for the streets, headed for the cars, until, at last, it halted with a sudden motion. Melanie was a cheetah at that point: she couldn't stop. Her body flung itself onto the road. Cars screeched to a stop. A man with curly brown hair down to his shoulders left his car and picked up Melanie's prostrate body. She had been driven to the hospital and was now pacing in her room, arm wrapped securely in a cast.

These types of incidents were a ritual for Melanie. Something like this happened at least once a month. And, if she was feeling particularly foolish, maybe even twice. And every time it happened, her father's frown would dig deeper into his face and he would sternly repeat the same words. Then he would give Melanie one last glare and leave her to think in silence.

Melanie always tried to prevent her silliness, but it wasn't much use. She wasn't a city girl. She was meant to be roaming rural landscapes, searching for hidden treasure and mythological creatures that her father said didn't exist. But Melanie knew better. She had read books about the

**She was meant to be roaming rural landscapes, searching for hidden treasure and mythological creatures that her father said didn't exist.**

Battle of Diddod. She couldn't help it: she was fascinated.

But her father, tired from all the pestering, had made a decision. The following day, he stated his plan: "Melanie, I have come to realize that you aren't fit for this lifestyle."

Melanie rolled her eyes in an exaggerated fashion. She had heard those words continually. Her father had attempted to send her away many times, get rid of her so that he did not have to deal with all her silly thoughts. Melanie always returned. No matter where she was sent to, she was sent back. Not many people liked her.

"I am bringing you to the town of Riverhaven," he continued blankly.

Melanie widened her eyes.

"But, Father, you told me that place didn't exist. You told me that I was being foolish. You told me I was being a baby. You're actually bringing me there? You actually believe in Riverhaven?" said Melanie excitedly.

If you knew Mr. McGee, you would never have to second-guess what he was going to say. Of course he did not believe in the foolish land of Riverhaven. However, he *had* found some town that matched that name perfectly. I guess it was a shock at first. But he must have soon concluded that some irrational folk-person had come up with the name as a joke.

"Yes, my daughter. You will go to Riverhaven."

Melanie jumped up and down giddily.

"Really? You mean it? Thank you so much," she said while running off to pack her bags.

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That is about it. After a long and exhausting journey, she made it. When she arrived, people were speechless. She was the first in decades to be happy to see all the nuisance-y creatures. She was the first to show interest in the zoo. That gave old and wrinkled Mr. Bandswith, the owner of the Riverhaven Zoo, an opportunity to offer the job to someone more willing than others. Melanie took it without a hesitation. Now she was beginning to regret it.

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"No one in the town appreciates you guys. Am I right, Uni?" said Melanie solemnly.

Uni, in fact, was a unicorn. And Melanie had named her that. She supposed it was foolish. An act for a silly little girl with an imagination a *little* too vast. But she liked it. She liked animals, and they liked her. But they were annoying. She felt pained to say it; however, she was starting to agree with the townsfolk. When she had arrived in Riverhaven, her hair had still been blonde. Now it was a disheveled mess, caked with so much mud that she could have passed as a griffin herself! Her once-alert posture was now a sagging mess of skin and bone. Her wide and attentive eyes were dim and circled with black exhaustion.

Ever since she had entered the town, she had realized right away that the animals and humans were not getting along. If she were to survive, she was going to have to change that. And who better than Melanie to go fix the town?

Almost anyone. It was true. She was not fit to save even a puny little town. But Melanie pushed those thoughts away.

"You know what, Uni? I got this. Soon, Riverhaven will be a happy, lively town again."

Then she walked off. She was going to save the town, she thought, even if it took years to figure out how.

---

Melanie was sitting in her office, which had been kindly given to her by the zookeeper, Mr. Bandswith. She had already spent hours in there, in search of some clue that would tell her how to stop the menacing war between the Diddod and the townsfolk. All she needed to do was figure what that *thing* was. Her wish seemed to be granted because just then she said, "Uni. Oh, Uni, you must come over here. Look what I've found."

It was a scroll. A long, ancient scroll, frayed at the edges and full of dust. She had heartily opened it with a majestic gesture. She saw it showed a detailed treasure map.

"Look, Uni! This map is about stopping the war! Now, Uni, what we must do is search for the ..."

Melanie squinted at the handwriting. No one writes like that. No one. She was sure of it. The writing was impossible to read. It

was squished together like millions of sardines all trying to fit in one can. She had also noticed that the letter had been written with a quill. Not a pen. Like usual, Melanie discarded the memory.

Before she could depart and follow the strange map, she realized that she was going to have to tell Mr. Bandswith what she was up to. She couldn't just leave her job without telling him. But Melanie didn't understand. She didn't understand what dangers she was about to create by telling this man her plan. She didn't understand that he, out of all people, was not the one to tell. She knocked on his door.

"Mr. Bandswith, may I talk to you?"

"Ah, of course, Malerie. Come in," said Mr. Bandswith.

Melanie groaned. In her head, she repeated, as usual, the same words: My name is Melanie. Me-la-nie. Not Malerie.

But of course she never said it out loud. If she had learned one thing from her father, it was to be polite.

"Mr. Bandswith, I am here to talk to you about saving the world," began Melanie.

Mr. Bandswith chuckled. It was a bizarre thing to say.

---

But before I continue, I guess I must explain Mr. Bandswith to you. You see, similar to Melanie, he was new to the town. He had a short, stubby nose much like her father's. His hair, much like his face, was old-looking. There was barely a strand of hair sticking out of his head, and what was there was the purest white, as if snow had

decided to live on his head. When he smiled, it created a treadmill of some unnatural feeling inside Melanie's body. His smile cocked to the side, showing a line of neat, white teeth. So white that they might have been mistaken for his hair by some folks. His arms, however, looked younger, as if they were aging at a slower pace than his head and hair.

There are only two features that I can explain that are not about his face, arms, or body. And, if I were to be honest with you, I shouldn't be revealing it. It is that Mr. Bandswith's last name is not Bandswith at all. That is, in fact, his middle name. This isn't unusual, though. There are many people who prefer to be called by their middle name and not their last. But it is a characteristic I must point out. He also likes to fidget. A lot. His hand seems to be constantly rubbing some shining object in his sweater pocket.

All of these alarming features were enough to make anyone turn around and never return. But Melanie really needed this.

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"I would like to make peace between us humans and the Diddod. I've been researching, sir. I found this scroll. Inside there is a map. It is a map leading to something that will bring peace. I just don't know—"

Melanie was cut off by Mr. Bandswith. He said, "The scroll said to find the Bird of Steel, the bird that controls the pathway between all the worlds. It says you must follow this certain path, and then you will find him."

"But sir," Melanie said, "how on earth could you read that writing? It's so small and . . . un-modern. Is there a word for that? Because if there isn't, there should be."

Mr. Bandswith waved the question off.

"If you would like to go on this quest, you will need my help. I am grown. You are not. I will help you. Now give me the scroll. I will write down some notes," said Mr. Bandswith.

Melanie shrugged, a little taken aback, and handed him the scroll. Even *she* could tell that there was something wrong with this man. With a flourish, Mr. Bandswith snatched the scroll, nearly ripping it in two.

"Sir, be careful," said Melanie, saying it more like a shout than anything else.

Mr. Bandswith ignored her. He picked up a long, fragile quill. Melanie giggled. He must have been one of those few people that still used those silly devices. He scribbled down some notes hastily and then stood up.

"Let's go, Margaret, if we want to find the Bird of Steel," said Mr. Bandswith.

"Wait," said Melanie, still gritting her teeth from being called otherwise. "I need to call my father. He must know that I am on a quest."

"That will not be necessary."

(Now, before I continue, I have been kindly calling this man Mr. Bandswith. But he will be staying in the story for much longer than you think. I have taken that as an opportunity to point this out: Mr. Bandswith, as you may have noticed, is quite an unusual man. I think that

## Here Melanie was, hands deep in thick mud, in the middle of some endless forest, searching for . . . well, what?

I will, therefore, call him by his first name: Walter.)

“Like I said, Magnolia, there will be no need to contact your father. I have it all under control. He doesn’t need to know about this meager little adventure. It’ll be our own secret,” said Walter.

Melanie eyed him suspiciously but found no way of solving her suspicions. She gave him one last look and then walked off, grabbing a tiny parcel with just enough food for a week, and shouted behind her, “Let’s go. We want to find this bird and get home before sundown.”

Little did she know that it would take much longer than that.

---

It had been three days since Melanie had set off on her so-called “quest.” She had skipped into the forest, Walter trailing behind her, a flower of hope blossoming in her chest. That hope had died long ago, and she was starting to believe that she was never going to see her beloved Riverhaven again.

Her hair was a tangle of cobwebs, her face was covered in so much grime it took effort to breathe normally, her shoes didn’t seem like shoes anymore. They resembled brown circles, which looked much like some sort of animal foot. It also seemed to reek of some substance that she assumed was some sort of animal waste. And, with barely any doubt, Melanie was pretty sure that it was. She looked away in disgust.

“Have you found anything, sir?” mumbled Melanie grumpily.

Like usual, Walter replied, “No. Nothing.”

Here Melanie was, hands deep in thick mud, in the middle of some endless forest, searching for . . . well, what? She was in search of some steel bird. Some bird who had such boundless knowledge and power that it could grant Melanie’s wish. What would such a bird be doing in the mud in a dry, earthy forest?

In all the excitement, she had barely paid any attention to Uni, who had been nudging her, begging for food. Melanie had none. She had eaten it all, barely sharing with Uni and not even offering any to Walter at all. He was the one who had gotten her into this mess anyway. He had, many times, led them in the completely opposite direction, claiming that the map had told them to go that way. He was wrong every time. He had also said that he saw a metal flash fly through the sky. There had been no metal flash.

At first, Melanie had felt quite bad. It was very unlike her to treat a person in such a manner. Father would not have been proud. But when she saw Walter’s disapproving frown, which was much like her father’s when she thought about it, she had decided that Walter wasn’t worth the kindness. She just shoved more food into her mouth, watching him stare greedily. By the time they had started digging through mud, all the happy thoughts of saving the town had left her, leaving her as

a ball of anger and grumpiness. She looked back at the map. She traced her finger along the winding path that she was supposed to take. Her finger stopped gliding. She had found a landmark!

"Mr. Bandswith," she said, "we may have a chance to save the town after all."

Walter frowned.

Melanie had seen it on the map. The large circular object that she assumed was a stage. This time, ignoring Walter's protests, she used the map and guided the three there. With Uni trotting beside her, Walter unable to use the map and ruin their chances, and in the fresh and welcoming air, Melanie knew that luck was on her side and that she was going to fulfill her wish.

But like I always say: saying that you *know* something is a strong term, like saying you *hate* a certain person or saying that you've *never* done a certain thing. Melanie was taking quite a risk saying that she *knew* it was going to work. And maybe she was right. But I like to say that Melanie jinxed herself. That she had expectations that were a *little* too high, like how her imagination was just a *little* too vast. Because that night, when she arrived at the circular stage where she was supposed to find the legend of the Bird of Steel himself, no one was there . . .

"This—this can't be. We worked so hard, traveled so far . . . and the bird isn't here."

Melanie's whole body went rigid. This had been her chance to prove to her strict, well-educated father, and the whole city of New York, that

she was worthy, that she could be the mature young lady that her father wanted her to be. She was ready to turn around, leaving her only chance of being worth it behind, until she saw Walter. He, like always, was fidgeting with something in his pocket. But this time she could see the object. It was a long, detailed, metallic feather.

Melanie recognized that metal feather. It was the one that her father simply adored. The one that he never let anyone touch. The one that he liked more than his own daughter.

"Father?" said Melanie, her tone clearly stating that she was beyond confused. "You are Walter Bandswith? You've been following me this whole time?"

Walter smiled mischievously. Leisurely and not at all frightened, he pulled off all his hair. But it wasn't hair at all. It was a wig. He took it off, revealing a patch of dark-grey hair. He truly was her father.

"Daughter," he said. "My name is Walter Bandswith McGee. And yes, I am your father. I have much to tell you. So, I guess I'll start from the beginning."

Melanie had so many questions. She was mostly concerned that her father wasn't a dedicated scientist at all but some criminal mastermind who was going to hurt her any second from now. She was mostly correct.

"As a young boy, I had, much like you, a wild imagination and a longing to see the beloved city of Riverhaven. You see, Melanie, at the time, it wasn't unusual to believe in that town. In fact, it was quite the opposite. Many people had lived there and seen it with their own two eyes. Most came back. They



**The questions in her head pounded so loudly that all she could think of doing was burst into tears.**

did not want to get entangled with the war between the Diddod and the townsfolk. I, however, was one of the few children who never got to see it.

“And it was for the same reason that I sent you away. I had an imagination a *little* too vast, much like yours. I was indeed quite popular among the New Yorkers. But that was only when it came to science and math. I would be popular, people would hang out with me, but if I found trouble, everyone would scamper away until my foolishness had stopped. Over the years, I became less and less silly and more and more the lonely child longing to see a famous town. Yes, I had grown, but no one wanted to take any chances. That was, until, one day, I completely disappeared. I ran away from my family, my friends, my only home. I *had* to see the town. It wasn't the town itself that I longed for. It was the power of the Bird of Steel. I had read and heard that if you were to capture the bird, and managed to snatch one of its metal feathers, you would receive all its power. You would control the whole world. I wanted that power for myself,” said Walter.

Melanie scowled deeply.

“Why would you do such a thing? That seems horrible,” seethed Melanie, trying to keep her voice calm.

How was it possible that out of all people, her nerdy, favored father was the one acting like a greedy hog? Melanie felt troubled to think it, but

there was no other way she could describe it. The questions in her head pounded so loudly that all she could think of doing was burst into tears.

“Now, now, Melanie,” said Walter. “Let me continue. When I arrived at Riverhaven, it was pure chaos. I had heard that humans and the Diddod were at war, but I never expected it to be so gruesome, bloody, and cruel. I had nowhere to start. But then one day while I strolled through town searching for a clue, there was a whisper sounding in my ears. The whisper told me to create a map and write down some exact amount of measurements and words which I don't remember. It said that, after doing so, I must follow the map and I would find the bird. I followed its exact instructions.

“And I guess it'll be no surprise for you if I say that, after following the whisper's instructions, I found the bird. It was hard, but at last I snatched the metal feather right off his back. I don't remember much, but I do remember the deafening crack that sounded right when I pulled it off. The thing that I fidget with all the time is the feather itself. That is why I never told you my name. That is why I always use a typewriter. No one can know that I wrote that scroll. That I leave town to make sure no one is looking for me. No one can know I took the bird's power.

“After I received the power, I went back to New York. I, with success, created my own news station. I convinced the majority of the town

that Riverhaven wasn't real. I wanted no one to hear of my unlimited power. I didn't want anyone to steal it. There were a couple people who knew the truth. They would protest, but they were soon to become known as insane. Melanie, I am the Bird of Steel."

Melanie gasped. This couldn't be possible. Her whole life she'd been trying to prove herself to a thief. A liar. A greedy man who wanted the world to himself. Melanie's breath rattled in her throat. *How was this possible?* She swallowed down the pain of being so harshly betrayed. She realized once again that she was experiencing one of those awkward moments where she had no way of knowing what to do next.

A silly idea, like all her other ones, popped into her head. It was most likely the worst idea she'd had yet, but it was worth a try. She pretended to look unhappy (which she was) and eyed her father carefully. She saw him rub his palms against the side of the metallic feather. She watched as he fidgeted uncertainly with the tip. She studied him as he lifted up the feather, pinched it with his fingers, and began twirling it endlessly among his fingertips. This was her chance.

As fast as a human could possibly move, Melanie jumped up, rapidly yanked the metal feather right out of her father's fingers, and ran. Less than two seconds later, she heard her father's angry footsteps right behind her heels. His hand swiped through the air, trying to wrench the feather out of Melanie's firm but sweaty grip. Melanie realized that this was her last chance to save Riverhaven. She

had no choice but to do what she was hoping not to.

"UNI! OVER HERE!" screamed Melanie.

Uni arrived in an instant. Melanie jumped onto her soft, furry back and kicked her with her muddy shoe.

"Go! Go, go, go!" screeched Melanie.

Uni soared into the air, howling. Below her, Melanie could hear her father's desperate cries and growls. He had lost all his power.

---

Two days later, Melanie landed in New York. It had been a long ride. Uni wasn't used to carrying such a heavy weight. Melanie's heart was still thumping loudly. The encounter with her father had left her in a shock she had not yet managed to shake off. When Melanie landed in New York, she was immediately surrounded by citizens. Gasps and a couple whoops of excitement circled her. A news reporter jumped to her side, sticking a microphone in her face.

"What is that? Is that a unicorn? Why are you on a unicorn? Where did you come from? Are you Mr. McGee's daughter? What is your name? What happened? Give me a story?" said the news reporter rather rapidly.

Melanie nearly fell back with exhaustion. But she knew that if she wanted to save Riverhaven, she had to tell the truth, even about her father. She took a long breath and then spit out the whole story. Once she finished, the whole crowd was standing there ogling her, speechless.

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It had been a year since Melanie had saved Riverhaven. It felt more like decades. Her father, once popular and favored, was currently sitting in an empty cell in an empty jail on the outskirts of town.

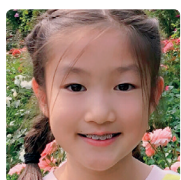
Melanie, who was now thirteen, didn't have much of a home. She was currently on a world tour, surfing through the world, educating every family about Riverhaven. Starting from the day she'd arrived back home, Melanie had been on countless TV shows explaining the story of the beloved town and how it was now safe and full of heartwarming animals and people.

Since Melanie had snatched the feather from her father, the Bird of Steel, it meant that she had full control over the town and the rest of the world. She had immediately stopped the war among the Diddod and the townsfolk. She knew how dangerous this weapon was and how, if it landed in the wrong hands, the world could once more be in danger. She clearly remembered the day when she made her decision: Melanie had burned the feather, destroyed it. No one was going to make the same mistake as her father.

Now the town of Riverhaven was a welcoming town full of tourists. The days of the war were long gone. The creatures and the humans lived in harmony. Melanie didn't have much time to actually visit Riverhaven itself. She was usually on the news or in an interview. Or speaking to her father who wasn't as greedy as he'd been before. But when she did visit, she'd stand up tall and envision what her next adventure as the new Bird

of Steel would be. Because she was the type of girl with an imagination a *little* too vast. And I can assure you, that is how she will stay.





*Lion King* (Oil)  
Laura Hu, 11  
Northbrook, IL

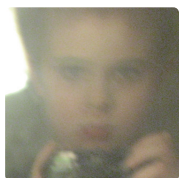
# Scared

A strange noise spooks the narrator



By Kaydence Sweitzer, 9  
Virginia Beach, VA

My eyes were wandering around the page of my book as I was sitting in the fort I made. The moon was strangling the sun and winning for the next eight hours until he was finally defeated at dawn. A frightening sound whispered through the window. Horrified as a person could be, I abruptly hid under the covers. The time went by and I didn't notice a thing, so I quietly read so I could hear if anything came close. As I heard something come close, tears rolled down my face and dripped on the page, slowly washing away the words. "Man, that was my library book!" I exclaimed, quickly covering my mouth just in case. Slow as a sloth, I unfolded my covers, accidentally leaving my bravery behind. I got closer and closer to finding out what was making that noise. The covers were finally letting me see what was around my room. My eyes scanned the room: nothing was there. "I guess it was just the wind," I mumbled to myself as the wind whistled, and I went to sleep.



*Winding Staircase* (Canon PowerShot G10)  
Jeremy Nohrnberg, 10  
Cambridge, MA



# Highlights from StoneSoup.com

## FROM *STONE SOUP* WRITING WORKSHOP #28, ON WORD CHOICE

**30-Minute Writing Challenge:** Write a short story in five minutes; then spend the rest of the time cutting it down to its essentials to make a six-word story.

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### The Near-Doom Incident

Peri Gordon, 11  
Sherman Oaks, CA

#### Original

We were hiking. I didn't want to stroll. I stretched my legs and launched ahead of my parents, feet flying freely over the sandy trail. The foliage glittered around me like green and brown angels, but I paid no notice. I arrived at a place where a family was, positioned as if struggling to see something, but all I saw was rough, brown ground. They called for me to stop.

My parents caught up. "Peri, they were taking a picture!" But no, they were not.

The family pointed at a small, slithering thing snaking its way up the path.

A rattlesnake.

We showed our gratitude to the family that had saved me from doom, and we were on our way.

No more running.

#### Six word version

Dashing ahead. Snake. Could've been doomed.

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### About the *Stone Soup* Writing Workshop

The *Stone Soup* weekly Writing Workshop began in March 2020 during the COVID-19-related school closures. In every session, a *Stone Soup* team member gives a short presentation and then we all spend half an hour writing something inspired by the week's topic or theme. We leave our sound on, so we feel as though we are in a virtual café, writing together in companionable semi-silence! Then, participants are invited to read their work to the group and afterward, submit what they wrote to a special Writing Workshop submissions category. Those submissions are published as part of the workshop report on our blog every week. You can read more workshop pieces, and find information on how to register and join the workshop, at <https://stonesoup.com/stone-soup-writing-workshop/>.



# 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

Cora Burch, 13  
Maya Daku, 13  
Scarlett Flamm, 13  
Thomas Gilmore, 9  
Naomi Pond, 12  
Sanara Roeser, 9  
Mackenzie Whitney, 10

## PERSONAL NARRATIVES

Emily Chang, 12

## POETRY

Lena Aloise, 11  
Ethan Chen, 10  
Jonathan Li, 11  
Grace Mancini, 11  
Oliver Nelson-Meinert, 11  
Lucy Rados, 13  
Amarie Silverthorn, 12

## ART

Maggie Kershen, 10

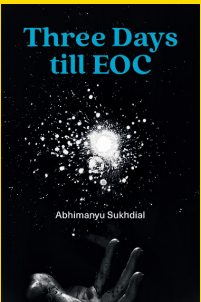
## PLAYS

Anya Geist, 13

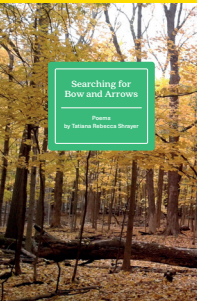
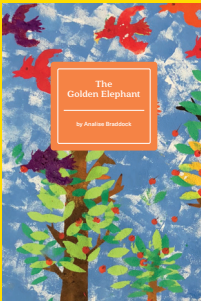
## Books and magazines in the *Stone Soup* Store

*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.

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



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