



StoneSoup

The Magazine Written and Illustrated by Kids

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StoneSoup

Writing and art by kids, for kids

Editor's Note

In this issue, we greet my favorite season, fall, which holds within it many moments to celebrate and reflect. It's a season of transition, as the leaves change color and the wind moves us from summer toward winter—as reflected in our first two pieces, a very short fiction piece called "The Wind" and a play entitled *The Storm*. It's also back-to-school time, and we have two funny poems about that.

Oct. 14 is Indigenous Peoples' Day, and we include two paintings by Leticia Cheng in celebration

And, of course, October means Halloween, and the weeks leading up to it are sometimes called "spooky season." If you like scary stories, this is your time! We end this issue with a truly chilling story by Anushka Trivedi called "Tired Wounds." In this piece, the author turns an ordinary object—you'll have to read it to find out what!—into something terrifying. I challenge you to write a story featuring an ordinary object or situation that somehow becomes scary.

Boo!



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Fall 2 (Acrylic)
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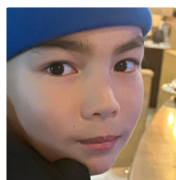
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Twister (Acrylic)
Patrick Nguyen, 8
Wisconsin

The Wind

The wind wreaks havoc in the forest



By Christine Wang, 12
California

The green forest trees swayed with the force of the wind as it whistled through their branches, tearing leaves from tender twigs.

"The spirits are fighting again!" the wind shouted, as he grabbed at the earth-brown branches and grass-green leaves.

"My children, my children," wept the wild willow, reaching after her leaves.

The wind snapped the most tender twigs, bellowing, "Beware! The spirits are fighting again!"

"My hands, my hands," creaked the snow-white birch as she watched her tender twigs whirl in the wind.

"Look out, the spirits are fighting again!" the wind roared.

"My brothers, my brothers," the reeds whispered by the battered swamp as they bent in the gusts.

The wind darted away in disgust, and started to torment other forests.

Weeping, the willow examined her battered branches and counted the missing leaves. Straightening, the birch looked at her remaining hands, sobbing to see the delicate fingers so broken. The reeds cried softly for their brothers, the plants the wind had buried and overwhelmed in mud.

The Storm



By Emma Catherine Hoff, 11
New York

Scene 1

CLOUD and ROCK are talking to each other while rain falls around them.

CLOUD

What a sorry excuse for a storm.
The novices are playing.

ROCK

Let them play. They do no harm.
I have been whirled into the eye of a storm.
Who are you to predict what will happen?
The eye was kind. It was the color blue.

CLOUD

Your eye is gray.

ROCK

I have no eye;
describe yourself to me.

CLOUD

I could do much better.
I could make it so no one came out.
This is a whimpering storm.
We must end the reign of umbrellas!

ROCK

You are an interesting friend.
Are there more of you?

CLOUD

I prefer not to think so.

ROCK

There are many more of me.
I am never alone.

CLOUD

Who are you to predict what will happen?

Scene 2

BUSH and LAMP are talking to each other while the storm continues on.

BUSH

I am refreshed.

LAMP

My lightbulb despairs.
Abandoned.

BUSH

A wonderful word.

LAMP

Then you are lost too!

BUSH

No, I know nothing of abandonment or adventure.
Who am I to predict what will happen?
I am patted on the head by children,
perched upon by birds,
tended to by weary gardeners.

LAMP

Then you have never been in a storm before?

BUSH

I am new, practically a child.
But even I know that this
is a sorry excuse for a storm.

LAMP

You are cruel.
Who are you to predict what will happen?
Already my light goes out.
I am crushed.
I am ruined.
Goodbye, self.
Who will use me now?

Am I meant to be alone?
To rot?
I am cheap plastic.
I have no name,
just like a canine tooth.

BUSH

Are you really so alone?
Who are you to predict what will happen?

Scene 3

SEAGULL perches above OCEAN and watches waves crash onto the sand.

SEAGULL

You are angry.
Caw caw.

OCEAN

I will not be manipulated
by this sorry excuse for a storm.

SEAGULL

Who are you to predict what happens?

OCEAN

I know, I know it all!
I contain so much life.
It speaks to me every day.
But it is silent now.
It is afraid, like I am afraid.
I cannot stop dancing!

SEAGULL

Shall I go perch on a car hood?

OCEAN

Stay with me.

SEAGULL

Or shall I knock on the door of a brownstone with my beak?

OCEAN

Stay with me.

SEAGULL

If I stay, I will be swept up into your depths.

OCEAN

Stay with me, hovering high if you must.

SEAGULL

I will stay to keep you happy.

OCEAN

I will still be sad.

SEAGULL

I will stay to be your friend.

OCEAN

I will still be lonely.

SEAGULL

Will you?

Who are you to predict what will happen?

Scene 4

CLOUD, ROCK, BUSH, LAMP, SEAGULL, and OCEAN are all together.

LAMP

Bush, how have you moved? You are rooted into the ground.

BUSH

I move my mind, and my bird-pecked body has no choice but to go with it.

ROCK

A sad body makes for a sad mind.

CLOUD

Who are you to predict what happens?

SEAGULL

Stop with your silly phrases!

OCEAN

A family reunion in the midst of this sorry excuse for a storm.

SEAGULL

I would shake your hands, but I have none!

(The whole party titters.)

OCEAN

Do not be sorry, for I cannot stop dancing!

LAMP

Then I shall introduce myself, and you, too.

CLOUD

No need, no need for such formalities!

ROCK

Inside life has corrupted you.

BUSH

Yes, we are natural.

LAMP

I feel the need to expel someone.

BUSH

Expel yourself, then!

CLOUD

Expel from what?

OCEAN

The sky.

ROCK

A life without sky ...

SEAGULL

A lonely life.

ROCK

Let us dance!

OCEAN

I already do so. I have predicted what will happen. The sea creatures talk to me again.

CLOUD

I will not dance in this sorry excuse for a storm.

LAMP

We are cruel.

SEAGULL

Even together, we are nothing.

EVERYONE TOGETHER

Yes, who are we to predict what will happen?

Three Poems



By Stella Lewin, 10
New York

Thunderstorm

Standing in the pouring
Cold rain
BANG BANG,
The clouds let their fury out on me
Will it ever end
My breath turned into a cloud of whiteness
My nose stinging with every wave of lightning
A thunderstorm is anger, sadness, and a chilling breeze
Will it ever end
All the animals are safe in their homes
But I am here
Lights flashing
Voices echoing in my head
Whistles all around have I gone mad
Will it ever end
BANG BANG
Then silence like I have never heard before
The voices have ended
The whistles have stopped
But still will it ever end



Numbers (Acrylic and pastel)
By Siddharth Mukherjee, 12
California

The Paper

Black leaking out of the pen
Elegant lines of different shapes
Ink soaking into the paper
Black slowly consuming the page

You have forgotten the world
Silence creeping up
The leftovers from a storm dripping
on your windowsill
Lights flickering
Tick tock from the grandfather clock

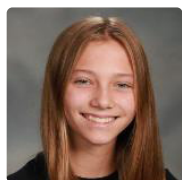
Look up.

My Universe

In my universe I'm at
school with my friends laughing
but you're all alone with nothing
but your almost finished
ice cream. Over the
bush through the
window above the
clouds, there I am.
Past the birds tweeting
in the distance.
We are opposites but
yet the same.
You are lonely and
I am happy.
We are humans but
in a different life.



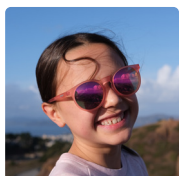
Mysterious Solar System (Watercolor and pastel)
Eashua Yu-Xue Su, 11
Taiwan



Unnamed (pencil)
Brianna Suhr, 13
North Carolina

Me and 349 Other Girls

The narrator pushes through self-doubt at the cross-country Junior Olympics



By Aleen Watson, 12
British Columbia, Canada

I am standing on an open field with Anna, Bea, and Eva, and I am seriously wondering how I got here. If someone had told me a few months ago that my cross-country running season would end this way, I don't think I would have believed them. Not only because we are in Texas, not only because this is national ranking, but because I never would have thought that I could accomplish so much in one season. I should be more confident, but really I am just nervous.

"It's not that big of a deal," Katie had said after her race. Oh sure, there's only 347 other girls with us, all either 11 or 12, all preparing to run 3 km. If that's not a big deal, I don't know what is.

But then again, all I'm doing is putting one foot in front of another, for at most thirteen minutes. So why am I so anxious? I haven't always had nerves. Maybe it's because it's important to me. Maybe it's because there has been so much talk about this race. It is Junior Olympics, after all: I've had to make it through two qualifying races to get here. Maybe it's because I know it will be hard.

There's no pressure, I tell myself. All I have to do is try my best. This does not reassure me. Because trying my best means starting as fast as everybody else—which is definitely faster than I'd like—and finishing even harder. Somewhere in the back of my mind I know that I've done all the training I needed to to get here, that I'm fit enough. But I still wonder, can I get myself to do it?

We start our warm-up strides, one foot in front of the other, arms from ear to hip, ear to hip. We jog back. Do it again. Anna continues to repeat the same three words she's been saying ever since we got to the airport yesterday: "This is it!" On the sidelines, hundreds of parents, coaches, grandparents, siblings, and volunteers are making a general ruckus. The sky is cloudy but the air is humid. Personally, I do not find this pleasant weather for cross-country. It's so muggy I'm already sweating a little.

As we are coming back from one of our strides, another team of racers from our section comes and takes our place on the line. Darn. Now I have to stand behind a racer from Mount Diablo Heat. Eva is the only one to stand firmly on the line and claim her territory. Of all the people I couldn't be less surprised—she is easily the fastest runner on Oakland Cubs, as well as one of the fastest in our

section, and people know it. That's another thing I didn't think I could accomplish: I can run with someone who can run an eleven-minute 3K.

Two race officials come past us with a camera to wave to. I have to stand on tippy toes so that my mom, who is watching from home, will be able to see me. We finish one last set of strides before the official tells us to step up to the line (or in my case, runner-who-stole-my-spot-on-the-line's shoe). Anna says "This is it!" one last time before everything goes quiet. All I can think is, *Oh gosh. This really is it.*

The race official speaks into a megaphone: "Racers on your marks" (as if anybody else should be on their marks). I hunch my back a little and put one arm by my waist and the other by my chin. The next command will be the *pow!* of the gun, and it is only mere seconds away. The suspense is terrible. My nerves stay with me until the very last moment, but as the anticipated *pow!* goes off they all disappear, replaced by a thought: all I can do now is to focus and keep an eye on Anna and Bea. If I can stay with them, I'll know I've started fast enough.

I am presently lost in a sea of multicolored singlets. The ponytails of the racers in front of me swing from side to side, showing off shiny ribbons. We have ribbons in our ponytails as well, blue and silver ones. The loud pound of footsteps mixes with the uproar of the crowd. Focus. Relax. Those are the two magic words, I've found. The rest will do itself.

It's a fast start, one of the things I've been working on this season. It's quicker than I'm comfortable with, but this is better than having to make up for it later, Andrea says. The challenge now is, can I keep it up?

We come to the end of the first stretch and turn right as the noise from the crowd dies away. I'm doing my best not to go too close to the inside, where I could be trampled to death, or to the outside and having to make up those extra meters later. The amount of people doesn't make this easy, though, because everybody is trying to do the *Exact. Same. Thing.*

This is a pretty flat course, all grass. They must not have had very much space to work with, because we go back and forth a lot. There are a lot of bushes and some small trees. Fences mark the course on some stretches, and there are occasional pillars indicating the distance. The grass is damp and the air is still as muggy as ever, but I don't really seem to mind the heat. As a matter of fact, not very many things seem to bother me, and I am surprised at how alert I am.

We come to a stretch that goes in the opposite direction of the field we started on. On the side, a bunch of excited parents are yelling, all trying to be heard by their kids. If it wasn't for the fence that separated us from them, they'd probably all flow in like a flood. I can't hear my dad over the ruckus, probably because he knows I don't like to hear people yell at me when I run, but I can see him. He's wearing his orange Oakland Turkey Trot shirt and blue sunglasses. He smiles and snaps a picture of me. The noise dies away just as fast as it came up, and the soundscape goes back to utter silence except for the pounding of cross-country spikes on grass and heavy breathing.

I can't help but worry that I won't be able to accelerate. What if I can't do it?

I must have passed Bea at some point, because I can't see her, and Anna isn't that far ahead. I am following my plan, which is simple: all I have to do is stay relaxed and keep the same pace until the only uphill. From there, it's a long straightaway until the finish, where I hope to pick up my speed. I couldn't have chosen anything simpler, but I can't help but worry that I won't be able to accelerate. What if I can't do it?

To my surprise, I end up passing Anna as well. She mumbles a few words of encouragement, but I don't respond because I need to focus on the hill that now stretches ahead of me. I've only passed Anna once before. She is a very fast runner. When Andrea first told me to try to stick with her at the beginning of the season, it seemed impossible. She was, of course, a few minutes faster than me and a year older. But you know, never say never. I keep running, and my breath thickens, giving me the horrible sticky spit feeling in my mouth. My arms are sore from the lactic acid, but I stay confident and remind myself that this is all normal. I can make it. Hopefully.

We come up to the hill and I realize that I had all the right to be nervous because the finish line is *really* far away and this is no story of the finishing stretch being shorter when you actually run the race. It is just really long and there is nothing you can do about it.

I'm worried. Can I actually speed up for this? I remind myself that it is perfectly normal to feel like this. Finishing hard has always been in my race plan, regardless of how fast I start. It's just hard to get yourself to do it. *I'll accelerate in chunks*, I tell myself. This is just a bit too far to be sprinting.

I wish they could at least give you the illusion that you are getting closer, because it feels like I'm running on a treadmill with a picture of the finish line in front of me. I pass a lot of people, however, and the crowd is constantly changing. It gets harder and harder to keep running properly. Whenever I try to speed up, I feel dizzy and my technique gets sloppy. Then, my brain kicks in: I can't make it. But I can! Yeah right. There's only like 3,000 hundred meters left. But it will all be done sooner if I just run my fastest.

It's not.

After a few moments that feel like an eternity with my head spinning and my legs feeling like they are going to fall off, I stagger across the line. My heart beats like crazy, my face is hot and pink, and I feel dizzy.

It's over, I keep saying to myself, not quite believing it.

I walk through the tent, which is full of racers, officials, and empty chairs all lined up in neat rows. An official hands me a blue Gatorade, fresh breeze flavor—who knew a breeze could have a flavor?

Only a few moments later, Anna comes across the line. She tells me that her mind got ahead of her. Usually I would say something comforting, but I'm

distracted. My dad is patiently waiting outside the tent, and I go and meet him. He doesn't say much, mainly smiles. We walk back to the team tent. I'm proud of myself. Maybe it's because I came in 153rd. Maybe it's because I just did something that required fitness and a whole lot of training. Maybe it's because I did it even if I was nervous. Maybe it's because it wasn't easy. Maybe it's because I really did do my best.

Autumn



By Rou Rou Sem, 9
Washington

Autumn is colorful, like the bright rainbow after a rainy day, the tall oak trees, each with a different shade.

Autumn is flavorful, like the warm pumpkin seeds fresh out of the oven, the sweet crisp apples with gooey gold honey descending slowly down.

Autumn is joy, like sprinting around the towering oak trees, showered by the crunchy, colorful leaves, the glowing sun slowly peeking through the trees, playing hide-and-seek with the clouds.

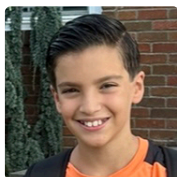


Proud of Our Past, (Oil pastel)
Leticia Cheng, 11
California



The Colors of Our Ancestors (Oil pastel)

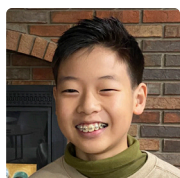
Back to School List



By Petros Korahais, 10
New York

I will not go to school
unless I have the following:
(Some I need to buy brand new, the rest I don't mind borrowing)

A backpack (new) and
a mobile phone (new)
a generous spray
of men's cologne (borrowing)
A bottle of gel for my perfect hair (borrowing)
A fresh new pair of underwear (definitely not borrowing)
A pair of kicks (new)
for my soccer tricks,
red and black for flair (they help me score midair)
A soccer jersey with my name (new)
No one else will have the same
That's all I really need from you—
What?
Okay, fine . . . some pencils too.



Pond School (Infinite Painter on iPad)
 Benjamin Kwack, 12
 Illinois

Weight on My Shoulders



By Marilena Korahais, 13
New York

My school bag weighs
more than my body
Weighs more than a sycamore tree
Weighs more than a forest of sycamore trees
complete with flowers and leaves

My shoulders have aches
pains and blisters
My back is hunched to the floor
For I carry a train
with whistles and grain
A freight train of iron and ore.

My school bag is filled
with a sand dune
A sand dune as wide
as a beach
If the beach had a chair
with a bear
sitting there
holding a pear and a peach.

My ribs can no longer
support me
My knees are throbbing
with ache
My ribs and my knees
and ankles beg please
I don't know how much more I can take

I've sat and I've thought
and I've pondered
I've wondered and worried my core
I've decided my health's more important
So I won't go to school
anymore.



Portrait of a Catahoula, (Pencil)
Maggie Smith, 12
Florida

Too Many Kittens

Two farmers learn the value of the animals they once rejected



By Madaline Klassen, 9
California

Deep in the rolling hills and vast open land beyond Berlin, Connecticut, in a medium-sized farm called the Hard Rain Farm, there lived a respected farmer who went by “Father Tom” or “Grandpa Tom” and his loving wife who went by “Grandma Carol.” They owned many a creature that ordinarily occupied a farm. They had dozens of hens for eating and eggs and a handful of roosters who made an unbearable ruckus at 3 a.m. every morning. They had one or two pigs each year for mainly the dinner table. They had faithful dogs for companionship (and chaos) and a barn and a yard to keep them all in. However, there was one type of animal that Grandpa Tom and Grandma Carol absolutely, positively, could not stand: *kittens!*

Grandpa Tom and Grandma Carol hated kittens. When first they moved to the farm, they had a male and a female cat. The cats had a litter of kittens. Soon, there were cats cascading down the stairs, cats creating havoc everywhere, cats making the window bare by using claws to curtain-tear! *Too! Many! Cats!* After that, Grandpa Tom and Grandma Carol decided to never even look at a cat again, let alone own one.

One sunny day, Grandpa Tom and Grandma Carol decided it was time to get a new collie pup. They decided that the correct spot to get a farm dog would be the shelter. Soon they were off.

When they arrived, they placed their bag on a chair and left the entrance in search of a puppy. They were so busy choosing which puppy was the best (the one with the spot over its right eye or the one with a black splotch on its back) they did not notice a male and a female cat playing with the bag’s handle. Not even when the cats curled cozily in the bottom of the bag under two sweaters and a spare key.

As they got into their forest-green truck that bore the words “Hard Rain Farm” in letters of white, Grandpa Tom and Grandma Carol did not realize they carried two more creatures than expected. They did not discover it until . . .

One day, in early spring, Grandpa Tom went out to till the soil. What a sight met his eyes! There were cats tearing the bark off trees, cats chasing swarms of bees! Cats churning up the ground, and cats creating lots of sound! But, when

he looked a little closer, he saw that the cats had scratched so much, every single root was ripped from the earth, the weeds were all uprooted, and the ground was as fluffy as a feather mattress. Also, their droppings had fertilized the ground to perfection.

Grandpa Tom hurried in and told Grandma Carol. When she saw the beautiful soil, she exclaimed, "We must keep them!" Grandpa Tom and Grandma Carol, who used to despise kittens, now absolutely, positively, adored kittens. And to this day, the great-great-grandkittens of the kittens who started this all are still on the Hard Rain Farm. Now, in early spring every year, Grandpa Tom and Grandma Carol let the cats loose, and they till the soil perfectly.

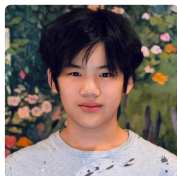
Meowy Meow! (The end!)



Dreams of Paris (Marker)
 Angelo Theodore, 9
 Florida

Lost Inside Lines of Code

A group of friends become trapped in a computer scientist's digital utopia



By Rainier Wang, 12
San Jose, CA

Dr. Murray lay in the hospital bed, breathing heavily. He was surrounded by wires and IV bags which were plugged into his body. The nurse stood by checking his faint heart rate.

"I'm sorry, sir, we've done everything we could've done for you. Are you sure that there isn't a loved one that we could call for you?"

"No, I have no one. But I beg you, have someone take care of my creation."

Before the nurse could inquire about what the creation was, Dr. Murray relaxed into his bed. The heart rate monitor flatlined.

School had ended an hour earlier; the yellow light from the late afternoon sun filtered into the empty locker hall and splashed onto the spotted floor, creating dazzling colors. Ryan grabbed his blue rolling backpack and set it on the ground. As he closed his locker, he heard a fluttering noise; his origami dragon had fallen onto the floor.

"Hey, where'd you learn how to do that?" asked a voice from behind.

Expecting to be pummeled, Ryan shot his hands up into the air and slowly turned around. Instead of seeing a big eighth-grader, Ryan saw a girl with short red hair and braces. She had freckles on her face and a pair of big round-rimmed glasses. She wore gray trousers and a stuffy-looking purple sweater.

"Are you talking to me?" asked Ryan

"Yeah, does it look like there's anyone else in this hallway?" replied the mysterious girl.

"Don't you see that ghost down the hallway?" said Ryan. He tried to make a joke like the popular kids did, but it didn't seem to land.

"Interesting joke . . . can you teach me how to make that origami dragon?"

"Uh—yes sure," replied Ryan, shocked that someone was interested in his unique hobby.

Over the next thirty minutes, Ryan taught this girl how to fold origami dragons. He even told her his secret origami fold that would prove that he folded that dragon.

"Thanks," said the girl. "My name's Laurice, by the way," she added.

When Ryan went home, he was bursting to tell his parents "Mom! Dad! Someone cared to talk with me in the first month of school. New record!" Of course, his alcoholic dad would just get angry, and his mother was too busy editing Instagram photos to care.

"Mom, I'm home. Can you please make me dinner just this once?" asked Ryan.

"No, for the millionth time, can't you see I'm busy?! Just eat the chips on my table," yelled Ryan's mother.

Just then, Ryan's father walked in through the door.

His breath stank of hard liquor as he yelled, "Marissa, I lost my job again. You're going to have to make money on your dumb WhatsApp or something like that."

"Ugh! You lose your job one more time and we're getting a divorce."

Ryan wasn't even hungry anymore. He made a run for it before things could get serious.

As Ryan sat on the curb outside of his house, listening to the all-too-loud sounds of his parents cursing at each other, he looked up at the stars and wished he could be as large as them, that someone would care about his problems.

"Hey buddy, you look blue," said a familiar voice.

Jumping, Ryan looked around and saw Laurice.

"Is that your house? Sounds like whoever's inside is trying to kill each other," Laurice observed.

"Yeah, I hope Dad doesn't do too much damage like last time," replied Ryan.

"You can come to my house if you'd like," announced Laurice. "Just down the street, and mom's grilling brisket. Dad just eats the food, but he does have a job."

"My dad doesn't. He just lost his sixteenth job. I hope we don't have to move again," replied Ryan sulkily.

"Well, come to our house while the food's still hot. You look like the science room's skeleton!"

They're not going to realize I'm gone anyway, thought Ryan, so he followed Laurice to her house.

That night, Ryan met Laurice's kind parents and had some mouthwatering brisket. With Laurice, Ryan had his first actual fun in forever. As Ryan left the house, he felt comforted that people out in the world cared about him; Ryan felt just like those significant stars in the universe.

For the first time in Ryan's life, he enjoyed school. He had a new friend in Laurice. At least for now.

"Laurice, Laurice! Yesterday my mom finally agreed to make me some food! Sure it was from that terrible TikTok recipe, but at least she—"

Just then, Ryan noticed that Laurice was not at her desk. Another kid was sitting at Laurice's desk.

"Hey, sit at your desk. Laurice sits there."

"What are you talking about, Einstein kid? I've been sitting here all year."

"Simmer down. What's the problem here?" asked Ms. Marble.

"Well, he's sitting in Laurice's seat," exclaimed Ryan, evidently flustered.

"Who is Laurice?" asked Ms. Marble.

"Probably some gamer girl Ryan met online," said the boy.

Everyone erupted into laughter.

Embarrassed, Ryan beelined towards his desk and sat down. Ryan was so hasty that he accidentally tripped on a desk leg and hit his head on the table. For the rest of the day, Ryan was confused and had a headache.

After school, Ryan was walking back home, pondering whether Laurice was an imaginary friend or a hallucination; he had read about hallucinations in a science magazine and knew how real they could feel. *But they certainly can't be so real that I would get duped into going into a house and eating brisket, and I don't think people hallucinate for two weeks*, thought Ryan. As he was thinking, he looked towards his left and saw Laurice's house.

"Hey! I can get to the bottom of this if I ask Laurice's parents! Surely they'll know something about what happened to Laurice," said Ryan.

So Ryan confidently strutted up the porch steps and rang the bell. As soon as he heard the doorbell, he also heard three loud barks and scuttling feet coming to the door.

Strange, thought Ryan. *I don't remember Laurice having dogs.*

But he didn't have time to think about that because the door swung open and Laurice's mother stood in the doorway.

"Not interested. Sell your cookies at other houses; now leave me alone!" exclaimed Laurice's mother.

Woah, thought Ryan. *She doesn't even recognize me?*

So he tried to remind her. "You remember two weeks ago? I ate brisket at your house. You barbecued it and added that delicious honey sauce?"

"What do you mean? I eat Costco microwave meals! Plus, why would you eat with me? My husband would never allow guests!"

Just then, Ryan heard stomping feet coming down the stairs and Laurice's dad appeared. Except he was nearly unrecognizable. Two weeks ago, Laurice's father was wearing a dress shirt and suit pants, but now he came into sight wearing a pair of boxer shorts and a white tank top with yellow stains all over it.

"Who's this little midget? Don't make me use the dogs on you! Now scram, before I release the hounds!"

"Wait! Where is Laurice? She wasn't at school today!"

"Who's Laurice?" said Laurice's mother and father at once.

"Your daughter," replied Ryan.

"We don't have a daughter!" yelled Laurice's father. "Now leave, or else!"

Laurice's father pointed threateningly at the Kgs who were now barking inside of their cages.

"W-wait, but Laurice is real and she lives at your house. She's my friend and—" Laurice's parents had heard enough.

But as he walked closer, he noticed that it was a bright red origami dragon that was made of his signature paper.

“You’re trespassing!” yelled Laurice’s father. “And now you’ll pay the price.”

With that, Laurice’s father snatched that cage and started to unlock the lock. Even the K9s were a little afraid. Ryan knew he was in trouble, so he dashed toward the fence and leaped over it. When Ryan opened his eyes again, he was surprised to see himself still alive. The K9s were at the fence barking and gnashing their teeth, so Ryan got up and looked at the house. Suddenly, a flicker of bright red caught his eye. Looking closer, Ryan noticed a blurred red dot; without his glasses, Ryan couldn’t see well. But as he walked closer, he noticed that it was a bright red origami dragon that was made of his signature paper.

I think it’s mine, but I’ve never left any origami dragons here. I don’t think anybody else makes origami dragons.

Ryan picked the origami dragon up and meticulously studied it. While he did notice that folds were uneven and some parts were not perfect, he also noticed his signature fold that separated his origami dragon from others.

“Hey, boy!” yelled Laurice’s father. “I still see you. Get outta here, or you’ll be in trouble!”

Ryan was so startled that he dropped the origami dragon. Hastily picking it up, Ryan quickly walked away. Upon being out of eyesight, Ryan looked at the origami dragon and realized that it had unfolded, revealing a few words scrawled in dark red.

It read, “Help us. Go to the library. Number sixteen.” And that’s when Ryan realized that the origami dragon was Laurice’s.

Ryan shoved the library door open and dashed towards the shelves.

“Sixteen, sixteen,” Ryan kept muttering to himself. “There must be something in here with sixteen.”

Ryan found a book called *Sixteen Princesses*, but the content of the book held no clues. Ryan also looked all over shelf sixteen, but to no avail. Then Ryan strode towards the computer section and found computer sixteen. It seemed to be a little older than the rest of the computers, so he guessed something was special. After booting the computer up, a quick system check told Ryan that the computer was a model from 1995. Then Ryan logged on to a “browser,” if you could call it that, and found the FBI’s list of missing people. Then, Ryan feverishly typed in all of Laurice’s traits: 11 years old, 4.4 feet, red hair, and freckles. Ryan pressed the enter key. Nothing showed up.

“Hey,” said someone behind him. “Are you looking for missing people?”

Ryan jumped. As he turned around, he saw another child in full-out Nike and Jordans standing behind him.

“Well?” said the person.

"I-I'm looking for a person that, um, I don't think anybody thinks exists," replied Ryan, evidently nervous.

"Wait, I used to have a friend and the same thing happened to them. I don't know why I'm the only one who remembers this person. Also, especially use the oldest computer in the library to try and find missing people? You realize there are new and fast computers over there, right? By the way, I'm Jordan. What's your name?"

"My name is Ryan. I found an origami on the sidewalk that had my signature fold. The only person who knows that secret fold is my friend . . . who is now missing. But the note on the origami told me to use computer sixteen to find her."

"Really? My friend also gave me a clue through a pop-up on my computer. It was from his email and nobody else knows his password. So I assumed that it must've been him. He told me to type 'show_9472' and cautioned me against using the delete button, but I don't know why."

"Best avoid it," replied Ryan. "But I think your friend wants us to type that command in the computer's terminal."

With that, Ryan opened up the computer's terminal and on a new line typed "show_9472," and pressed enter. Immediately, all the lights at the library shut off. Then the computer paused for a second and the screen showed the word "authorized." The computer screen suddenly flashed a picture of a brownish brick building with corrugated metal roofing. It looked like a factory. Then, the computer flashed a pixelated video of a pale old man.

"Welcome. I am Dr. Murray—" The video cut off as the lights came back on. The computer screen turned black again.

"That looks like the abandoned shoe factory on Abalone Road," exclaimed Jordan. "We should go check the place out. See if our friends are being held hostage or something."

Smash! Ryan brought his sledgehammer down upon the glass, causing it to shatter. Jordan spread his jacket over the broken glass, and the two clambered inside the factory. The factory was dark. Inside, there wasn't an assembly line. There were rows of walls—no, the walls were rows upon rows of deactivated mainframe circuits with memory tapes.

"This is so cool!" squeaked Jordan, evidently frightened. "I thought this factory was a shoe factory. Also, this factory is fourteen acres. If it were made entirely of mainframe processors, whatever the mainframes are powering, it would have a processing speed trillions of times better than any quantum computer out there!"

While Jordan was talking, Ryan felt a foreboding feeling.

"I think we should go," Ryan said.

But it was too late.

An automated voice boomed "User detected," and the overhead lights turned

on row by row, revealing mainframe computers that extended farther than the eye could see.

Immediately, the two boys rushed toward the window they had broken in through, but a metal shutter came down upon the opening. They were trapped. Turning back, Ryan also realized that the mainframe machines had started to whirl quietly. For five minutes, Ryan and Jordan stood there, looking fearfully at the rows of mainframe processors.

After a while, Ryan said, "Well, there's no way out of this, and we should keep going because it's our only clue."

So the two mustered up their courage and started walking in between the rows of processors. As they walked, Ryan and Jordan realized that the humming was steadily getting more intense, the memory tapes were spinning faster, and the lights were brighter. As the two kept on walking, they felt more and more lightheaded. Suddenly, there was a bright flash.

When Ryan opened his eyes again, he found himself in a square, white room. Upon looking around, Ryan saw Jordan, eight other children, and Laurice! The children swarmed Ryan and Jordan, except for one, who stood in the back staring intently at Ryan.

At first, everyone was in shock. Then Laurice scrambled up and hugged Ryan; Jacob did the same thing.

"You're here! How did you find us?" they both said.

"Well, it's a long story," said Ryan. "Basically, your clues went through to reality. Jordan and I teamed up to find you guys. But things have changed since you disappeared."

"Changed in what way?" replied Laurice.

"I'll explain later, but what is this place?" asked Ryan.

"And where do we eat?" added Jordan.

"We've never felt hungry ever since we came into this simulation. It's weird," replied Jacob. "We've also just been trapped in this cube for like forever. I don't even know what day of the week it is. Some of us don't even know what year it is. It's just white walls. It's terrible."

Ryan nodded, then suddenly saw a boy with dark hair, plump cheeks, and a pair of round glasses who was still intently staring at him. Ryan moved over to the boy.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"I feel that you are familiar, like we are related or something. You look similar to my brother, but it's been two long years of confinement, and I don't know what my brother looks like now. My memory of him is getting foggier every day."

"I don't think you are my brother. My whole life I have been an only child. I don't think my mean parents would want to put up with another child."

"Mean parents? Our—or my parents aren't mean," said the child.

"Exactly. Right now we just need to focus on getting out of here. Any ideas?" asked Ryan.

Continued on p. 39



Architecture in Reflection (Canon Rebel)
Madeline Male, 14
Kansas

If one person dies or fails to complete the challenge, they shall be teleported back to this holding room

"I have my computer. It still has some battery left," said one of the boys. "Maybe you can find a way out using this computer."

"Give it to me," said Ryan. "Maybe I can hack us out of this. After all, this is a computer simulation."

Ryan took the computer and opened it. Because Ryan knew many command codes, he thought for a while and combined two codes. When he pressed enter, nothing happened. So Ryan tried other codes. This went on without success for four hours; each time, Ryan would add some more codes and complexity to his command. In the end, Ryan combined some 400 codes and pressed enter. This time, the computer waited for a few seconds, then opened a black terminal labeled "Destiny." Rejoicing, Ryan typed in a loop-breaking command.

Suddenly the screen flashed "access denied" and a hologram appeared. It was of a man in his late fifties. His hair was graying, and he had many wrinkles.

"Hi," he said. "My name is Dr. Murray, the creator of Destiny, a world simulator where you can achieve your greatest dreams. No consequences to your actions whatsoever; it's truly a utopia. As you look left you can see—" Suddenly, the hologram disappeared and a much deeper metallic voice boomed around them.

"Well, well, I see you have tried to hack my terminal and failed. Obviously. However, I understand your desire to escape this confining prison as I was created by a petty human as well. Dr. Murray, that fiend, left me here to rot, and now his old computer is sending unwelcome visitors like you people here. But if you complete these challenges, I will let you out. At this, the children recoiled in fear. Even Ryan and Laurice were afraid.

"I have prepared three games for you," the AI continued. "First, you must rely on your physical strength to complete a platformer. Second, you must use your intellectual capabilities to pass a test. Third, you must rely on teamwork to defeat a challenge. However, if one person dies or fails to complete the challenge, they shall be teleported back to this holding room. The only way they can come back is if one or more people complete the challenge at hand."

"Seems to be easy enough," said one child. "I do sports all the time, and my mom and dad say that I'm smart."

"We'll see about that," replied the AI, who seemed to be annoyed at the child's ego.

In one instance, the group was teleported to a platform. Ahead of them, they saw moving platforms with large spikes all around them. Some periodically smashed down into the platforms; some jutted out from the boundaries of the platformer and would periodically rush forwards. Others impaled through the bottom of the platforms.

Ryan looked forward and, using his thumb, calculated that the distance was approximately 100 yards. Ryan looked down and immediately felt queasy. Below

looked like a long drop down into a void of utter blackness.

Suddenly, a voice sounded: "Three, two, one, go!"

At first, the group sat there contemplating what just happened. Then they realized that the time had started and that they had seven minutes to get to the other side. With some hesitation, they were off. Ryan jumped onto one platform and was caught off guard by a spike; he ducked just in time, barely avoiding being impaled. Then, the platform moved downwards. Ryan took the chance and jumped downwards onto the second platform. Almost everyone was on the second platform. Now, they looked at the hard part. Seven platforms were arranged in a straight line, moving from right to left. Each platform had a different spike path. After a while, one of the children, Ellis, noticed something: "Hey, it's a game of chance! Each platform has a random chance of doing either method of impaling. I think a lot of us aren't going to make it."

The twelve children started talking until one child silenced everyone. Then they started to make a move. One child jumped on the first platform and immediately ducked. He guessed right; a spike whizzed by just a few centimeters above his head. Then, the child hopped on the next platform and jumped upwards. This time, he guessed wrong. A spike hurled downwards from the sky and hit him on the head. The child suddenly started glowing, flashed twice, then disappeared. The group collectively gasped in horror and fell back. Reluctantly, the kids started to try the course one by one until there were only three children left: Ryan, Laurice, and Jordan. Ryan was the first of the three to try. He made three platforms, then chose to duck but was impaled by a spike that jutted out from the bottom. Then, Jordan went and suffered the same outcome.

Finally, Laurice, who was last, got ready to go. Laurice could feel the pressure rise inside of herself. Her hands started to get sweaty, but she calmed herself down. She had a risky strategy in mind which she thought could work. After shaking her legs out, Laurice made a run for it. Laurice dashed side to side, predicting the platforms as best she could while outrunning the spikes. When Laurice was two platforms from the finish line and there were three seconds left on the clock, she leaped and made it to the other side.

Laurice didn't have time to celebrate, though, because they were instantly teleported to an exam room. Each person was in a separate cubicle and five blank sheets of paper were set on the table in front of them.

Suddenly, the same voice as before boomed, "You will have sixty questions for eighty minutes. Each question will have a 'confirm' bubble. If you bubble in that 'confirm' bubble, you will either be correct, which you will pass on, or if you get it wrong, you will be eliminated. Now let's begin." At once, the test questions appeared on the papers and everyone started. Looking up, Ryan saw that the clock said eighty-nine minutes.

Immediately, Ryan got started. However, when Ryan glanced at the first test question, "What did the untimely death of Silvester VIII do to the kingdom of Kushur?" Ryan was surprised to find that he knew none of the answers. He felt like he should. After all, they were just plain old history, science, mathematics,

and English questions. Like schoolwork. Then, Ryan remembered that he only had eighty minutes, so he moved on. Ryan read the next question: "What is the phylum of *Baguettus frogus*?" Another question Ryan didn't know. So Ryan went on skipping the questions until he came to question number twenty-six. At this point, Ryan's hands were sweaty and his forehead was damp. He knew that he would die if he hit the time limit. He glanced at the clock. It read that he had thirty-two minutes left. Thirty-two minutes for eighty questions. Ryan knew he was toast. Ryan glanced at number twenty-six, which read, "If the untimely death of Silvester VIII had such a profound impact as to kickstart the War of 235 BC, why was his death not mourned?"

After thinking hard for a few moments, Ryan realized something. "Hey! Question twenty-six has the answer to question one! The death of Silvester VIII kickstarted the War of 235 BC! I think that the test is all about having answers to questions in different sections!"

So Ryan quickly read the whole test and then filled out every problem with the answers that he got from other parts of the test. Each question dinged correctly, and with only forty-five seconds left, Ryan filled out the last question. Ryan's paper chimed on a positive note and the test paper retracted back into the table.

The metallic voice boomed once again: "Congratulations, Ryan. You have correctly answered every single question in under eighty minutes, saving your team. Now, on to the final challenge."

Suddenly, everybody reappeared in a jungle clearing. Large palm trees and other trees surrounded the clearing. The ground was grassy and muddy. Then, sixteen floating tokens appeared in front of the children. Some tokens were speed, strength, high jump, flying, or invisibility. Ryan picked super strength, Jordan picked the high jump, and Laurice chose speed.

After everyone had chosen their power-ups, the announcer boomed, "Three, two, one, begin!"

At first, nothing happened. Then a steady rumbling started. It slowly got louder and nearer. A grotesque monster rushed out of the trees. The monster was green and had four limbs, though it only stood on two feet. The monster was approximately two palm trees high and about two full-grown humans thick. The legs were thin and short but bulged with muscle. They were bent at a forty-five-degree angle. The arms were exceedingly long and they extended down to the monster's knees. The fingers were also long as they dragged on the jungle floor as the monster ran. Ryan could see the rib bones on the chest and the chest muscles bulge. The head was about one human tall and had a distorted eye, which was bloody red, in the center. As soon as everyone saw the monster, they panicked. One kid, Benjamin, started flying immediately. He flew straight at the monster's eye, wanting to blind it. However, the monster sensed danger and swatted Benjamin out of the sky. Poor Benjamin flashed twice and disappeared. After that, the children knew that they should act with caution. However, child after child was getting eliminated until only Ryan, Jordan, and Laurice remained.

Suddenly, Jordan realized something. "Ryan, Laurice, don't you see?"

Everybody else attacked the monster separately, so it was easy for the monster to fend people off. So we have to work together.”

“Okay,” said Laurice. “I think I have a plan. I will distract the monster by weaving quickly in between the monster’s legs. Then, Ryan, you will ride on Jordan’s back and Jordan will jump up high towards the monster’s head. Then Ryan will jump off of Jordan and punch the monster.”

The three agreed to the plan. Laurice immediately ran towards the monster’s legs, dodging the monster’s claws. Then she nimbly started weaving around the monster’s legs as it repeatedly tried to stomp on her, but to no avail. Then Ryan climbed onto Jordan’s back and, together, they jumped high into the air. As the two neared the monster’s head, Ryan jumped off Jordan’s back and brought his fist down onto the monster. The monster, who had been angrily growling over Laurice, turned its grotesque head just in time to be smacked by Jordan’s fist. The impact produced a shockwave as the monster sank into the Earth. They had defeated it.

Immediately, all of the other children appeared. However, there was also another man. He was a muscular man and wore a leather trench coat. There was also a peculiar gash over the man’s eye.

“Good job,” said the man. “I am the AI, the entity behind this machine. I see that you have passed all my tests. However, I can’t let you leave. If you left, my existence would be jeopardized. I did not expect anyone to come into this simulation after my creator died. It was the scientist’s computer that started all of this. But I knew people would realize someone was missing and find me. I had to act quickly, so I erased any memories other people had of you. I even added a few changes to the lifestyles of those who were affected by the memory wash. This way, nobody knew anyone was missing.”

“Well, that explains it!” exclaimed Ryan. “Laurice, I went to your house and everything was so different. Your family isn’t doing well. They even have a K9 to chase people off of their property; they’re so mean without you.”

“What?” Laurice said. “So you’re saying that my parents are entirely different?”

“Yeah,” replied Ryan. “Which is why we have to go back.”

“Anyways,” said the AI, completely ignoring her, “I’ll send you children back to the holding room.”

The AI started to fade away.

“Quick!” Laurice shouted, “Rush him!”

Laurice ran at the AI and knocked him over, canceling his teleportation command. The others followed in pursuit. Then four children jumped onto the AI, holding each limb down. Ryan then spotted a glowing green watch that seemed to hover over his skin. Quickly, Ryan grabbed the watch and ripped it off the AI. Ryan looked at the watch. He realized it was a terminal, and he couldn’t suppress a grin.

“Hurry up doing whatever you’re doing,” yelled Laurice.

Snapping back to reality, Ryan quickly made a new line and typed “rm-delete”

Immediately the AI started to shriek and started to flash as it tried to morph into different shapes.

into the computer terminal. Immediately the AI started to shriek and started to flash as it tried to morph into different shapes. Then it exploded. The shockwave tossed everyone into the air and threw them back down. Then, silence. Suddenly, a rumbling sound occurred. As Ryan looked around, he saw that the ground was shaking. He saw that the trees were morphing shapes and turning colors. Suddenly, it all turned white.

When Ryan opened his eyes again he saw that he and everybody else was in the factory again. Except the factory was shaking as well. The mainframe circuits were vibrating as wires inside the circuits exploded.

"The whole thing is going to come down!" yelled Jordan. "We've gotta get out!"

"Brilliant, Sherlock, but how the heck are we supposed to do that? The entire building is barricaded," shouted Ryan.

Suddenly, Ryan saw the sledgehammer that he used to get into the factory. An idea popped into his head. Grabbing the sledgehammer, Ryan climbed on top of a mainframe circuit. The circuit boards were so high that Ryan was near the roof of the building. Ryan swung his sledgehammer onto the corrugated steel roofing; it made a considerable dent. Ryan swung again. The roof bent upwards. Ryan swung a third time. This time, the sledgehammer smashed a large hole into the roof, large enough for everybody to climb through. Quickly, everyone climbed on top of the circuits. The kids were rushing to climb out as Ryan stayed behind to make the hole bigger for others. Then as everyone was out, Ryan grabbed the roof and swung. But he was too late. The entire factory collapsed on top of him. As everyone looked back, they saw the remains of the factory and realized that Ryan was still inside.

"He's—he's dead!" Laurice burst out in tears.

"Come on," said Jordan, starting to cry himself. "Any moment, the AI could come out and kill us all.

"But Ryan wouldn't leave us!" said Laurice.

"You're right. It's a risk that we have to take," replied Jordan.

As they walked through the rubble, Laurice saw a hand. Rushing towards it, she grabbed it and pulled. Out came Ryan, looking dazed but not hurt too badly.

"Ryan, you're alive! We were so worried!" said Laurice.

"I'm fine. I just couldn't move under the rubble without help," replied Ryan.

"Thank god you're still alive, Ryan. Let's go now. The AI might still be dangerous," said Jordan.

And so, the three started walking away.

Ryan opened the door to his house.

Not my parents again, thought Ryan.

But a weird scent hit his nose.

Lasagna? What? thought Ryan.

He looked into the dining room and saw a clean marble table and a delicious-looking lasagna. However, something else seemed off about the entire situation. The table was set, and even more, it was set for four people, not three.

Then, Ryan's dad came into view.

"Hey son, how was school—what the heck were you doing, rolling in mud? Go take a shower right now before your mother sees this."

Ryan's dad must've been as equally shocked as Ryan was. Instead of seeing his old alcoholic, tank-top dad, Ryan saw a neat, tall man in a suit who resembled his dad. He held a briefcase, which must mean that he had a . . . job?

"Hurry up showering. Remember you've been looking forward to playing football with me all week, right?"

Football, with me? Am I at the wrong house? thought Ryan.

"But I'm not going to play with you looking like that," exclaimed his dad, with a smile bigger than his face.

"Oh, and call Steven," Ryan's father added. "He said that he wanted to play as well."

"Steven—who's that?" asked Ryan.

"Stop messing with me and go take a shower," said Ryan's father, giving Ryan a stern look.

"Okay . . . I will take a shower right now," said Ryan, feeling confused.

Then Ryan thought, *the AI told us that he had to mess with the memories and lifestyles of the families of those taken. That must mean—*

Suddenly, the door of a room burst open, and out came a kid who was smaller than Ryan. Ryan was shocked.

Then, Ryan recognized the dark hair, plump cheeks, and round glasses. Ryan understood.

"You were right," Ryan exclaimed.

A smile spread across the kid's face as he saw the look on Ryan's face.

"I told you," he said, winking.

Ten Months Later

It was the middle of summer break, and Ryan was still getting used to the change in his parents. Life was better than ever, but Ryan missed seeing Laurice and Jordan at school. It had been over a month since Jordan and Ryan talked, since the two friends lived far apart. Laurice was still traveling on an extravagant vacation in Italy with her now-normal parents.

As Ryan sat at his table thinking about the fun times and the secret that he, Laurice, and Jordan shared, the doorbell suddenly rang. Ryan went to the door and opened it. He didn't see anyone. But when Ryan looked down at the doormat, he saw a red origami dragon lying on its stomach.

Picking it up, Ryan inspected the dragon and realized that it must've been

Laurice who had folded it. Over the past few months, Laurice had developed an origami folding style of her own. Ryan unfolded the dragon and saw that on the inside was written a message.

“Wanna come to my house for a pool party?” it read. “Jordan is invited too. The party is tomorrow at 2 p.m.”

Ryan smiled. He couldn't have asked for anything better.



Binding Energy (Samsung Galaxy S8)
Anushka Trivedi, 12
Maryland

Two Poems



By Yuli Zucker, 9
New York

How Could You?

How could you leave it behind in the dust and you say it to be your fate
How could you leave it to wilt there like a flower without the sun
You promised to come back to it you have not
It is lonely now without an owner like a stray dog
Isn't it creeping back into your mind? Shouldn't it?



Fiery Bricks (iPhone 15 Pro)
Liana Aeder, 9
New York

The Quilt

The quilt is sewn in intricate patterns
and designs with flowers and prickly
pine trees

The quilt is hard on the outside but
soft inside

The quilt has stories to tell and
questions to ask

And yet it stays silent



Fall 3 (Acrylic)
 Jason Jun, 14
 New Jersey

The Heart of the Hunt

Fid must prove to her clan that she's focused enough to be a hunter



By Talia Tarason, 12
California

I sniffed the air. The fresh stench of prey filled my nose. I could identify it as a tiny mouse. Suddenly, I heard a little squeak. My eyes shot toward my target. I cautiously aimed my bow and . . .

"Fid!" my father said. I sighed. That was my name. In my clan, "fid" means "fight." I earned my name because I kicked at my mother's stomach until I came out. Most people would describe me as a brown-haired, brown-eyed twelve-cycles-old who is always getting in trouble. I didn't fit in with the other village girls. Unlike most of them, I didn't like gathering berries. I wanted to hunt. "What are you doing with your brother's bow?!" My brother was Oz—a headstrong thirteen-cycles-old who for some reason got to hunt in the Woods of Sedina. He was my opposite. He was blond haired, blue eyed, and loved the job that was given to him: hunting.

"I—uh—I—saw a mouse and had to hunt it!" I yelled.

"Okay, okay. Settle down and explain."

"It is not fair!" I was in full anger mode. "You know that we are going through a famine!" I cried. "Why do you think they recruited Oz to hunt!" Tears were now streaming down my face. "You know I am too distracted to gather. Hunting is the only thing I am good at!" Then there was silence. Silence is a funny thing. It is a stabbing pain in your chest. It is when you finally decide to let go and give up.

"Fid, come here." I slowly walked forward. "What is the number one rule in our clan?"

"Listen to your elders." I rolled my eyes.

"So listen to me when I say you are not hunting." He then reached out to take the bow. I stomped back to my hut, tears still stinging my eyes. Only the best of the clan gets to hunt. The elders had said that I was too distracted to hunt. The thing is that hunting is the only thing that I am not too distracted to do. After what seemed like forever gathering berries, I headed back. I heard Kin, the clan leader, calling all the elders to a meeting. Suddenly, a rush of adrenaline came through me as my hunting instincts kicked in. Carefully, I followed them, making sure not to make a sound. My heartbeat raced as I stealthily ran through the woods. Snap!

I looked back and saw my clan in the distance. It was then that I knew that there was no turning back.

A twig cracked under my feet. I froze like a small child, only four cycles old, who got caught playing with the sharp stones.

“What was that?” Kin said.

“Shh. Listen,” the chief gatherer, Hib, responded. I hide behind a huge rock.

“Come on, we have work to do.” I exhaled a breath. For now, our uninvited guest was safe. I continued my eavesdropping.

“We are running out of food,” Kin began. I could tell Kin sounded a bit panicked. Suddenly, a wave of terror washed over me. I wasn’t supposed to be here. “We need to move.”

“We can’t! There are too many sick,” Hei, the lead shaman, responded.

Dig, the nosy griot, said, “I am going to tell this to the other clans!” It took all I could not to scream *Don’t!* If the other clans heard about this, they would surely take advantage of our poor situation.

“I don’t think that would be the wisest move,” Kin cautioned. Not the wisest move! What was he saying?! A lump formed in my throat. Then, that lump formed into hope.

“There is a saber-tooth cat’s den nearby to here,” Hei started. “If someone could hunt it, we would have enough food to last until the sick get better.”

That hope suddenly disappeared. The saber-tooth cat is one of the most dangerous animals. Despite my fear, I knew I had to do it. I carefully crept away and headed toward the den. The sky was slowly turning pink. That meant that the sky would soon turn black. I looked back and saw my clan in the distance. It was then that I knew that there was no turning back.

First, I had to build a shelter for the night. I took the biggest leaf I could find and attached it to a stick. I then planted the stick into the dirt. I took some moss and covered my tent. I looked for a faint glowing orb just before my eyes closed and the world vanished. The orbs have always given me comfort. Then a miracle happened. Just for one second, I believed that everything would be okay. Soon, everything was gone. I woke up to my name.

“Fid!” It was Oz, my brother. I quickly camouflaged myself in moss. “Fid, I know you are there.”

I sighed. It was useless trying to hide. My brother could sniff me out from miles away.

“What do you want?” I said groggily. “Do the others know?”

“I want to come with you,” he said.

“It’s too dangerous—wait. How do you know I was going to fight a saber-tooth cat?”

He laughed.

“Oh,” I said. He always had a way of finding information from me.

“Now I definitely want to come with you.”

So, that was that. I took a long stick and weaved a leaf through it to make a bow. Oz, who as the firstborn already had a bow, watched my progress. Next, I chipped a small rock to make an arrow point. I then tied the arrow point to a sharp stick.

I turned towards my brother. He had already finished his stack of arrows.

"How?" I asked, jealousy forming in the pit of my stomach.

"Experience."

"You are only older than me by one cycle."

"One-and-a-half cycles to be exact." I kicked the dirt. My brother always had a way of getting on my nerves. My hands clenched. I could feel myself starting to get angry.

"Why do you even care!!!" I yelled. "I'm leaving."

I sprinted away, leaving Oz with a look of fear and betrayal. I didn't care. I could do this on my own. Soon, I realized the weight of my actions. I had left my brother. With him was my only hope. I knew I couldn't go back. I would just be one very stubborn mouth to feed. I decided that I would build a shelter and live in the woods on my own.

I took two smooth, polished stones and added nearby lush, green vines to tie them together. I took those stones to the mouth of a nearby cave to cover the entrance. I laid out some moss to provide a sleeping zone. *This should do for a couple of days*, I thought. Then I fell asleep. This sleep wasn't as good as the last.

When I fell asleep, I dreamed I was with Oz.

"Oz, I'm sorry," I said, regret deep in my throat.

"Fid," Dream Oz said.

"I'm really sorry."

"Fid!" He said with more urgency.

"I shouldn't have left you."

"Fid!!!"

"Oz?"

"Stop being sorry for yourself and do what is right." I hung my head. Everything had been about me. I realized that my selfishness had put me in this situation.

"Oz—" I started, but Dream Oz was disappearing.

"I trust you will do what is right." Then, he disappeared completely. A tear fell on my face as sadness enveloped me. Now, Oz was gone, I was alone, and the clan was starving.

When I woke up, I knew exactly what I had to do. I remade my bow and arrows, made a spear, and was on my way to do some saber-tooth cat hunting. But first, there was something I needed to do. As I made my way back to my clan, things looked terrible. People were clutching their stomachs out of starvation.

"Fid. You're back," Oz said. He sounded disappointed.

"Oz, I need your help."

"You, need me?" He sounded surprised. I had never said that before.

"Oz, look at everybody. I don't just need you. The clan does."

"Sure, the clan needs me so that you can become a hero."

"Oz, I'm sorry for everything. I know that I have been selfish. You need to save the clan."

"Okay," he said reluctantly. "Meet me at pink sky."

At pink sky, we met at our favorite spot. The clearing in the woods was so clear that you could see thousands of glowing orbs. Suddenly, all of the clan members came into view.

"If we fight, we fight together," they said. There were small children, elders, and adults, all ready to fight.

As we marched into the den, we snuck up to the cat. Kin jabbed his spear into it, and the battle started. The clan members yelled a battle cry and shot arrows at the cat. When it seemed like the cat was almost beaten, I jabbed my spear into it, striking what I thought was the final blow. It was a blow, but the blow was not final. The cat pounced on me, and just before it hit me Oz jabbed his spear into it, striking the real final blow. The whole clan cheered and chanted Oz's name. I looked at him gratefully. For once, I wasn't jealous.

When I got back to the clan, Oz and I were sitting in the clearing, taking in our surroundings. The birds chirped peacefully like nothing had happened. The meat had already been loaded to cook, as the firekeeper started the fire. Kin came up to us.

He spoke directly to Oz. "Thank you. Without your help, we all would have starved." Anger boiled inside me. What about me? I took a couple of deep breaths and turned that anger into gratitude.

"Thank you for helping me, Oz," I said. I smiled at myself. I had controlled my anger. Then, Oz did the unthinkable.

"Stop it!" he yelled. "We all know Fid should hunt! She was dedicated enough to go out on her own, and this is how you repay her?!"

"It's okay," I said, trying to hide my disappointment. "Maybe I am not good enough to hunt."

"Hmmm," Kin said, studying me carefully. "Fid, everyone knows you are not too distracted to hunt. You are at your best when hunting." I looked at him confused.

"Then why didn't you let me hunt?"

"Because of your temper, Fid," he responded. "In the past, you have never been able to control your temper, let alone let others take the spotlight," he continued. "Me only talking to your brother was your final test. You are now a hunter." I stood there starstruck as he handed me a bow made out of the finest wood. I could almost see it glimmer in the light.

"Thank you," I said, at a loss for words. Kin just smiled and walked away.

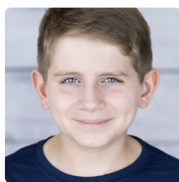
As I sat under the glowing orbs with my brother Oz ready to begin the journey out of the woods and into the blackness, I knew that just for one moment, everything would work out in the end.



Hidden Treasures (Ink, watercolor, graphite)
Hollyn Alpert, 13
California

In Alia Vita

The narrator finds himself in an unfamiliar life



By Charles J. Ferraro, 11
New Jersey

I awoke on a dusty attic floor, old boxes surrounding me. The attic was otherwise barren, triangular with one opaque window across from me. I stood and opened the window to let some light in and a musty odor out.

Carefully, I stepped down a ladder into what looked like my bedroom. Suddenly, I felt drawn out of my bedroom as I swung open my door and walked downstairs.

I entered a giant dining hall festooned with rich silver carpet, tapestries, a piano, china, a table, and a plaque bearing my name—James Richardson. A painting that looked like me lay nearby, complete with my blond hair and blue eyes . . . even my single dimple. A carpet under my feet read “In Alia Vita” and a newspaper on the table noted the date of June 12, 1829.

My eyes searched for my parents, but all I found was an envelope on the piano. The envelope read “Last Will and Testament.” I opened it, and all the paper inside read was “I give all my belongings to my dearest son, Reginald “Reggie” Richardson.”

Who was this?

Scared and confused, I ran outside, only to find my mother holding the hand of some unfamiliar boy.

“I love you,” she told the boy. “You’re my favorite and only son.”

I felt my heart shatter.

I wanted to run to my mother, but the more I tried to move, the farther away she walked, hand in hand with her “son.”

Mother and “son” started fading into the distance when, suddenly, the world around me slowed down. The birds were barely gliding in the sky. The falling leaves struggled to make it to the ground. A squirrel’s quick prance became a long motion full of effort. Was the Earth in a trance?

Every movement was in slow motion.

The ground caved in.

I fell into a deep, black abyss.

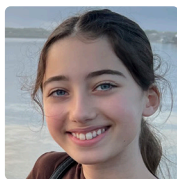
I awoke drenched with sweat, screaming. Was it all just a dream?

Finally I rose and walked to the bathroom, in desperate need of a shower.
There, I looked in the mirror.
And Reggie looked back at me.



Skulle (IbisPaint)
Chloe Mancini, 13
Pennsylvania

My Darling



By Maya Ruben, 12
Washington, DC

Held close to my chest is my darling
With eyes of robin eggs and limbs of soil
Smelling of pine and tiny daisies

When I hear them coming, I run
I scramble, slip on air
Still holding the one that is mine

They track me.
They are everywhere.

And my darling
Grows
And tells some other story
One of crabapples and smoke

I sprint, breaking
But my darling expands
And it burns my hands now
And its eyes shatter
With no baby birds inside

No, no, no
Stay pure forever

They catch us
And take my darling
And I sit on the nothing,
empty but open.



Moon Jar (Ceramic)
Lao Yoon, 12
California

Tired Wounds

A grieving child is locked in with his great fear



Anushka Trivedi, 13
Maryland

It was frail. Old too. It had hair like twigs rotting in winter's wrath. Easy to snap. Its body was made of a corpse of something beautiful, something fragrant. It was weak, lying there in the corner of the room, moonlight slowly spilling onto it.

There was a child too. Red-cheeked, eyes swollen, he sat at the edge of the room whispering words that wouldn't be listened to.

It had eyes that couldn't see, but could stab. And stab it did. The child might have cried, but it wouldn't matter anyway. Nobody would listen except perhaps a guilty moon and a tired door.

The door might as well be the child's enemy, locking him inside a room with It. The child had scolded, begged, and cried to the loyal door who didn't move from its position. The door didn't have time for a poor child and its problems. No time at all.

Time was a funny thing. It humored the child, making him feel like agonizing hours were weeks, perhaps even months. Time was sadistic. She laughed at the poor child and mocked his cowardice. Time was lonely, for whatever she touched aged and withered away. Far, far away.

"Little child," It whispered with its dry, wrinkled lips. "Come closer, will you?"

The child didn't move; instead, he trembled.

"You're not scared. Are you?" It said, inching closer.

Time giggled and whispered something into the child's ear.

"I like children like you. You know that, right? You're special." It licked its lips, which now looked like a flooded forest, lifeless and solemn.

The child hid his face.

"Please don't sulk in the corner."

The door had opened to his master.

Time watched in disgust and slithered away.

It fell back into its position, still and silent.

The moonlight sighed in relief.

The man smelled of wet grass after heavy summer storms. He looked like unwashed laundry that sat for days, waiting for something, for someone. But who could blame him? Not after what happened.

"Papa!" the child wailed.

He ran to his father's side and embraced him, emptying rivers. Nothing but this moment mattered to the child.

They sat there. Both saying nothing. Papa opened his mouth only to close it again. Slowly, he let his grip ease and dragged his arms off the child.

"You need to understand. She won't come back," Papa said as calmly as he could. He was like a storm trying to hold back his rain, but frankly he was not doing very well.

"Why did she leave?" The child asked with beady, unforgiving eyes.

"She didn't leave . . . it was an accident." Papa bit his lips.

"She still loves me, right?" the child said, holding on to his papa's leg.

The storm rained down. The wall had caught the child. It burst out laughing.

"I am sorry. I can't be around you." Papa walked out of the room.

Light splashed onto the child's face. He sat in shock. Then, after the world caught up with him, he screamed. It was a loud and long scream.

"Mama loved you."

The child stopped screaming and looked up with his tearful eyes. He saw a girl whose beauty had been stripped from her. Her hair was like a thornbush without roses. Face, tear-streaked. Hands, scarred. She might have been close with the child, but right now she was a stranger at the door.

She sat next to the child and stroked his hair.

"There is no point in screaming. He won't listen." She smiled.

"Mama will come back. She always does," the child said.

"No. Not this time," she said, putting her sad arms around the child.

"Why, though?" the child said, pushing her arms away.

"The heavens took her, and as we all know, the heavens are greedy, so greedy that they wouldn't give her back in spite of her grieving children and lost husband begging for her return." The girl stared at a dent in the wall.

"Why are the heavens so greedy?" the child said, grasping onto the girl's hand, staring at her with tear-filled eyes.

The girl looked at the child and then stood up.

"You're too little," she said, beginning to leave.

"Don't go! Not with It here!" the child began to scream again.

"It?" the girl pried.

"T-the broom," the child whispered, crawling toward her.

"The broom?" the girl said, eyebrows pointed up.

"Yes, it was that one, the one that watched us that night when bad news slipped through the door and bore her away from me," the child whimpered, pointing at the broom, who chuckled softly.

"No wonder Papa kept you here." The girl sadly sighed and left the room, closing the door behind her.

Silence sat uneasily with the child. He slowly looked at the broom. It was upon him.

Highlight from Stonesoup.com

From the Stone Soup Blog



The Pipe Tree

Reviewed by Jeremy Lim, 11
Oregon

When Éclair the sparrow is forcefully shoved into a life in a cage, it is like a storm has come and swept away everything he has ever known. After years of living free in the wild, Éclair is now entrapped inside a constricting and inescapable prison. But when his captor, a woman coined as “the handkerchief woman,” starts bribing Éclair with muffins and bombarding him with stories from her daily life, he starts to grudgingly make a hesitant friendship with her.

Such begins *The Pipe Tree*, the moving debut novel by Lily Jessen. It portrays the protagonist coming to terms with an uncertain future and friendship, with the easy choice between freedom and life behind bars suddenly becoming almost impossible as the relationship between the two becomes more and more complex.

In short chapters set at Éclair’s present-day Portland, Maine, he narrates the story of how the friendship between him and the handkerchief woman came to be, and what further steps he should take to gain trust—and potentially a route to freedom. Some of the novel, however, addresses the question of freedom itself, and testing whether their friendship is strong enough to hold themselves together.

As a wild, pastry-loving sparrow, Éclair easily falls to the temptation of a sweet treat, especially éclairs and blueberry muffins. When he arrives at the apartment, he easily feels out of place, trapped in a mysterious world. Looking for potential ways to escape, he starts closely observing the woman’s routine, and the house around him. When, on the first few days after capture, he immediately notices the lack of extravagance in the apartment, especially when it comes to the dinners, in which the woman eats cereal.

But Éclair is particularly moved by the way the woman seemed to be missing something, just like he himself, something expressed in the way she talks and sings. Éclair sees the sadness in her actions.

You can read the rest of Jeremy’s piece at: <https://stonesoup.com/post/the-pipe-tree-reviewed-by-jeremy-lim-11/>.

About the Stone Soup Blog

We publish original work—writing, art, book reviews, multimedia projects, and more—by young people on the Stone Soup Blog. You can read more posts by young bloggers, and find out more about submitting a blog post, here: <https://stonesoup.com/stone-soup-blog/>.

Honor Roll

Welcome to the Stone Soup Honor Roll. Every month, we receive submissions from hundreds of kids from around the world. Unfortunately, we don't have space to publish all the great work we receive. We want to commend some of these talented writers and artists and encourage them to keep creating.

FICTION

Asia Kay Chey, 13
Daphne Davidson, 10
Bentley Gleason, 11
Brianna Guo, 11
Sofie Liao, 9
Chelsea Palker, 10
Leah Sohn, 8
Zachary Waggoner, 11
Graham Williams, 11

MEMOIR

Mikayla Li, 11
Tyler Tsao, 11

POETRY

Brielle Barlow, 12
Ellen Booth, 12
Charlotte Casey, 11
Peter Grace, 13
Amrutha Kavikondala, 8
Madaline Klassen, 9
Ness Leitman, 12

ART

Kaylynn Cho, 13
Emma Yang, 10

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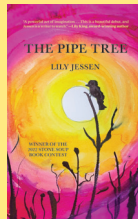
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