

BONFIRE

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BONFIRE

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7 Months The Ghostwright

7 months.

Such a small amount of time.

It passes by so quickly,
as if it never even took place.

Fleeting memories and even more vague statements.

Things left to be interpreted a thousand times over;
things re-explained to only have one true answer.

I miss those 7 months.

At the same time, I wish they never happened,
The memories are too vast to be remembered in full.

I hear her voice in the back of my mind sometimes.

Singing the songs she used to lull me to sleep with

It's a curse, and yet, I don't know what I would do if they stopped.

If I didn't remember those stories she used to weave as I sat in my
bed,

listening intently to her web of adventures,

Who would I be?

Would it affect me as much?

If she was colder?

If she didn't make me breakfast?

Or hold me when I cried?

Would it hurt less that she's gone if

She didn't know exactly what to say?

7 months.

It sounds like a small amount of time in the grand scheme of things.

It isn't. It was everything.

Sea Glass Ksena Eve Liron

I spoke, and the room cracked
Not in the way that shatters
Not loud
Not violent
Just a thin, invisible line
Running between them and me
Their smiles stayed, but their eyes flickered
Calculating
Measuring
Deciding how far to pull away
Maybe it was the way my voice held too much certainty
Or the way my hands moved when I spoke
Or the wrong words tumbling from my lips
Too quick to stop them
When they asked who I liked
Maybe it was just me
Too much of me
Too loud
Too real
Too unshaped by what they thought I should be
So I learned to hold myself differently
Like glass with edges too sharp
Always handle with care
With caution
But glass doesn't soften on its own

Unless the sea takes it
Tosses it
Drags it
Wears it down
Until jagged edges turn smooth
Until it is something soft enough to hold
Something safe
Something reliable
But I am not sea glass
I cannot let the world erode me
Just to make me easier to keep
I was not made to be worn down
To be shaped by hands that fear sharp things
I was never meant to be palmed smooth
Turned over, and over until I fit just right
In someone else's grasp
I am still sharp
And whole
Whether they dare to hold me or not



The Unraveling Sophie Cuevas

Favorite Horror Movies Sophia Cuevas

“What's your favorite horror movie?”

they ask, laughing, spilling popcorn, and joking

I almost laughed

I almost said something easy

but—

I think of the day I found out my mom had cancer—

but not when it happened, no, two years later

when it truly, finally broke me—

When it hit me like a punch I didn't see
coming.

Two years of pretending it was fine.

Two years of not knowing how close death
sat beside her.

Cancer.

A whisper like a curse

I was too young to hear.

Too young to understand that horror movies don't need a monster.

I didn't scream.

I didn't cry, not even then.

That's my horror movie.

And there's no credits.

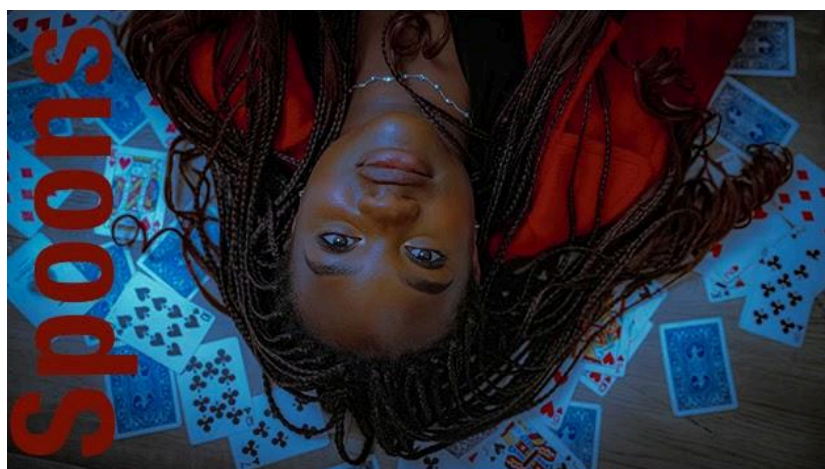
No ending.

Just me, still sitting in the dark,

wondering if I ever said,

"I love you,"

enough.



Spoons Isla Finamore



Coyote Creek Heron Olivia Han

Coyote Creek Heron Olivia Han

There's a large concrete tributary I pass by on my drive to school called Coyote Creek. Unlike its name, Coyote Creek isn't a creek at all. To me, it's reminiscent of the large Los Angeles River without as much water, just an ugly concrete gap that divides the quiet neighborhoods and the corporate village that settles just across the bridge. When it rains, it becomes a large river where the water turns so murky that it starts to look like a slice of the ocean, and it's almost impossible to tell how deep or shallow it is. There's something uncomfortable about Coyote Creek. Maybe it's the sheer size of it, how its sides are angled enough where I wouldn't be able to climb out if I tried, or the sight of trash that always seems to pile up and wash away to who knows where when it rains. I've never seen people around the small cluster of business buildings across Coyote Creek. The only recent memory I can remember was two years ago, when there was a bead shop that had opened, but it had closed just as quickly as it was built. It was as if the grounds were cursed to be uninhabitable for anything new. It was as if the buildings were shells fit for something that wasn't quite alive. Regardless, I pass by it every morning, glancing at the husks of metal and cement that don't breathe anymore.

Recently, however, I've been seeing something else down in Coyote Creek. A pale white body, with legs bowed and wavering like sticks; a heron stands just on the left side of the bridge every time I drive past it. It doesn't wander, just tilts its head side to side and, sometimes, I feel as if it's staring right at me from far away. It stands alone every time I pass by it on my mornings, its pale neck always

shifting for something in the shallow water, and for some reason, it feels too pure for a place so trash-infested. Before then, I had only ever seen herons in the documentaries I would stay up watching, when my assignments were done and I had the living room to myself in the dark, where I sat close to the screen and let my mind grow absent and still, like a dead body on the chair. I used to stare at the flickering blue television and pick at my thumb so much that it would grow calluses, letting my mind wander while I curled up in my seat. I always found them so graceful, their large wings flapping under the sun in wetlands, water splashing and glimmering so wildly I swore I could feel it on my skin some nights. I was an intruder staring at something so beautiful in the dark, curling my fingers gingerly against the folds of my chair like a crow picking for worms in the soil.

Heron are efficient hunters. They're experts at standing completely still, waiting and watching before they can pierce their prey for a quick death, unlike some birds that flail and pick at their food until it withers. I didn't know why it would shake me so much when the camera would sometimes catch the tall birds in slow motion, when its eyes were the only thing that took up the screen, staring right back at me and keeping me still in the dark of my house, watching, waiting for something to swallow me whole. The one at Coyote Creek was nothing like the ones I saw on television. It looked small, with its neck curved in on itself as if it were taking up space. It looked frail. There wasn't prey to catch in the water. And yet it stood still, waiting, watching every day like something will swim by for it to catch.

For some reason, I grieve it. I feel something uncomfortable in my gut every morning when I pass by the bridge and see a blur of its white feathers, standing still in that same place every morning. Breathing. Hungry. Over time, it has seamlessly woven itself into my life. I had a nightmare about it one weekend when I let my feet wander off to the bike trails beside Coyote Creek, where I could see the mountains out south left in pitch black like ash. I didn't realize I was barefoot until I had felt the rough crackle of dry grass and bits of rock under my heels, grinding my walk along a path I wasn't supposed to be on. The sky was a harsh red, the kind where my skin looked like a dull gray, drained of any color that was there before, and my eyes would blink over and over again to see if it would change. What I remember the most, however, was my first instinct to look for a familiar white heron down by the bottom of the creek in the shallow water. Its feathers were glaringly bright against the pure red sky, and, as always, it stood absolutely still. It stared back at me unabashedly, eyes wide, body still, waiting. I remember being unable to breathe, feeling a sharp ache in my chest before I had started to frantically paw at the concrete below me as if I could dig myself out of the situation, my nails scratching at old remains of trash and rock, and, all at once, I had felt like its first successful hunt.

I tried to really take my time the next morning to observe it on our drive to school. It was in the same place as always, included into my routine as easily as brushing my teeth every morning. It was a constant. I hadn't ever thought about how it got there. Perhaps it had flown too far and lost its way, stuck searching for food in a place that was unwelcome but familiar. I'm convinced that it will remain there

forever, poking and prodding at the shallow water until its little body cannot handle the waste and concrete anymore, and I'll only ever see its beauty alone at night, standing still, watching, waiting.

Laugh Annika Patterson

He was a tall boy in his youth, with dark hair and dark eyes.

He was too young, they said, for the sorrow curling his shoulders forward.

He looked just like his father in that sense, old and sad and knowledgeable in the pains of the world that had stolen his mother.

Diana was her name, but in the hospital, she had been nothing but a presence. A presence stolen by the cancer in her lungs.

The boy remembered her before the sickness, when his life had been that of the carefree child he should be.

His days had been filled with colors and laughter and fun and stories, as his mother dazzled him with tales of Jack and his giant and Peter Pan and his lost boys.

But in the hospital, she had lost her color and her sparkle, becoming nothing but another

lost hope and faded dream.

He knew now, even in his ten years of age, that life would never be the same without her. It had, like her, lost all that made it inherently life.

Now his eyes, once mischievous and alight, were dark with the ways of life's pain.

The other boys at school paid him no heed. It was as if he were nothing but a ghost.

He didn't care.

When the peeling of the school bell released them to lunch, the boy watched the other kids play, and have fun, and laugh with his dark, shaded eyes.

And then he'd turn away, silent as death, to his place by the trash cans.

His house was the same, quiet and sad. His father worked at a company that, in its whole, boiled down to the soulless world of finance and numbers. He always came back late.

And then, of course, there were the nights when he didn't return at all, and the boy spent the evening alone.

The house was no longer home. His mother was what made it home.

The boy's life outside of school now revolved around a few simple things. The sound of the microwave heating up his frozen dinner. The rattle of the old buttons on the still older television. The creak of the couch springs as he tried to remember the cold house feeling like home.

As he tried to fill the silence, perpetually flipping through television channels, something snapped outside.

The boy glanced up. He left his microwave dinner and dull television and went to the sliding door. He unlatched it and looked outside. He looked up.

A bird! A pin-tailed whydah. Its long tail brushed the ground. He watched it hop on the pavement near the trash. It looked up. The boy held his breath, feeling a thrill not felt since his mother was alive. The bird seemed to know he wouldn't hurt it. It came closer, watching him with one bright eye.

Bird and boy, together in the dark.

Then the little bird cocked its head to face him in its curious stance and let out one small chirp. And the boy did the impossible.

He laughed.

And when the rattle of the garage signaled his father returning, the boy stood and ran to reclaim what remained of his home.

When Kindness Went Quiet Leah Feigenbaum

Kindness feels like an old language

We forgot to speak.

It trembles on our tongues, hesitant and unsure

We reach for it

But walls rise where bridges once stood

And in the silence

A new language erupts,

Jagged words clash together

And sparks fly between voices that can't find harmony

From the chaos, a fire grows.



Reach Mordecai Mehau

Clipped Wings Camron Marie

Butterflies are weird. They taste using their legs. Can you imagine that? Tasting with your feet sounds like a fate worse than death. Male butterflies group up to eat minerals from mud. The weirdest part of that is that the scientific name for those groups is “Puddle Clubs”. Puddle clubs?? It's absurd. Of course, the weirdest fact about butterflies is the most well-known one. They start as caterpillars, isolate themselves, and then come out with beautiful patterns and a new body; it's crazy. Whenever I do that, I come out even more gross than when I went in, and I lose all my friends. I guess I'm still waiting for my metamorphosis to happen. Why do foot tasters get to be rid of their bodies and get a new life, but I don't? I don't get it. Why do these little bugs get to start fresh, but I have to live with every mistake I make and repent a thousand times over? Please, let me start over, please let me be a butterfly. Can't I get back what I lost? Can I start over as someone worth watching, like someone people admire? Of course not, I'm still here. A caterpillar that people flick off, no matter how hard I try to hold on. Clinging onto a leaf that will eventually rot underneath me. I promise I can be better. Just let me start over, let me have another chance. I know what people want of me now. I know I should stay in my cocoon until someone wants me. Maybe this time, my life won't be ruined by others. Maybe this time, people will like my wings; I won't have to hide them because I know to paint them colors everyone else likes. It might not be me, but it'll be the person others want me to be. Maybe, just maybe, I'll fly out of my cocoon as someone to love.

Butterflies are weird. The type of weird we all want to be.

I'm falling asleep, don't wake me up Ally Halid

I'm falling asleep

I open my phone

And suddenly, all the minutes that had turned into hours

Are displayed on my phone screen

They're glaring at me

The number doesn't matter

It's in the thousands

And it's humbling to confess

The minutes the app had so kindly listed as spent listening to music
were really minutes spent thinking about you

The number is simply another physical manifestation of how you
have effortlessly consumed my life

Every word, every glance and unplanned head turn that follows your
name

I'm afraid to admit all the over-ambitious decisions I've made
because of you

For me too, but really for you

I spend hours pondering the soundness of my brain

I search every picture for you

For a glimpse of your silhouette

I don't think I can put into words how my heart aches when

I can't stop glancing across the room at your empty seat

I think your partner is sick of me staring right through him

I come home and stare at my notebook, filled with hurried
scribblings

I don't want to do this right now

I glare at my pencil and stare at the clock

And I'll think of you

I sit down and open my book

I won't regret the days spent working to catch up to you

Poring over something I don't feel smart enough to even begin to
understand

To be closer to you

To be like you

I'll admire you from up close and far away,

If you'll let me do so

I hope for the privilege to bring you flowers

At every concert and at every milestone

I hope I'm lucky enough to be close enough to count your freckles

I hope I'll still get to cherish the ache in my heart that stays because I
miss you

I hope I can savor the relief that you are still mine

I hope I still get to write bad poetry about you

I anticipate every moment I might catch you in passing
I can't control the way my heart leaps when you look at me
I dread when you have to leave, even though I'd never say it to your
face
I'll tell you to go, but I dream of coming home to you
To you and hair that catches sunlight just right

I won't tire of you
I hope you don't grow tired of me
And if you do,
I'll wake you up

Lilith Ksena Eve Liron

She was made
Not from his rib
But from the same moist earth

She rose with dirt in her lungs
And the stars still wet in her hair
And when she spoke
The sky cracked

They offered her a garden with gates shaped like cages
A man with hands like commands
A God who asked her to kneel
But her spine was a blade
And she knew a con when she saw one

They wrote her into whispers
Into shadows
Into curses on the lips of trembling men
They said she ran
Fled religion
But she was divisive
She chose the door
Do you know the difference?

They called her too much
Too loud
Too sure of herself
Too opinionated
Too exaggerated
“She’s going to hell”

But they never asked
Why the flame spits
When you try to cup it in your hands
When you attempt to lay claim to something you cannot understand

She was the scream they buried
Beneath silk and scripture
She was the first no
Echoing across a universe
that still hasn't learned to listen

She was the thorn
Tucked in the pages of a hymn
The crack in the facade
Of every tired-eyed wife

She was the bite of a backhand
So delicately placed like the lilacs in her hair
The bruise beneath the bridal veil
The thousand-yard stare

They called it hysteria
Called her insane
Said she was the problem
That she was to blame
Called her broken
When she wouldn't behave

Labeled her a whore
A slut
A pagan unworthy
But this body
This bleeding, breathing battleground
Has always been holy

And still
They chain it
With wedding rings
And leashing docile
With breeding wives
And chants to, “smile more,”
As if joy is something she owes them

They tried to carve rules into her bones
Be small
Be soft
Don’t bleed where they can see
Be pretty
Be pure
Compliant
Be sweet

But she spits out the apple
Because it tastes like obedience
Because sweetness was never the point
Because choice
Even bitter
Is sacred

She learned to dance
Like the ghosts of fallen sisters
The ones who didn’t survive
Silenced
In bedrooms and boardrooms
In quiet crowds
And on bathroom floors
Their pain hidden
Under perfume and polite conversation
She learned to carry their names
Like knives in her mouth

Don't forget we were gods once
Let me repeat that
We were gods once

Before they painted us over
With modesty
And kitchen tiles
Before they made love
Something we owe
Instead of something we own

She is not your redemption
Not your ribcage lullaby
She is storm and split stone
Soft only when she decides
And you cannot make her

And no
She will not smile
She will not sit quiet
She will not say thank you
For a crown of thorns
Masquerading as flowers
She will not buy into the lies you have told
That dissent is negotiable
That love is conditional

She does not want your Eden
She does not want your garden of hypocrisy
She wants the sky
And rain
And fire
And every woman
Who was told she was too much
When in truth
She was everything

She is not gone
Not fallen
Not damned
She is rising
And she is not alone
She carries the storm in her throat
You dressed up as sin

She is no longer a shadow
The ground bends beneath her stride,
Stars rechart their courses in her wake
She will not ask to belong
The world will rearrange itself to make room
And she will speak in the voice
You spent centuries
Trying to erase

And the sky will crack again

Woman Ksena Eve Liron

Walk into a room and feel it

The weight of their eyes

Measuring

Assessing

Deciding my worth before I open my mouth

They speak over me

Louder

Sharper

As if my voice is an inconvenience

Just a trivial nuisance

They write laws on my skin

Carve expectations into my bones

They build their thrones from broken spines

Teach me that my body is public property

That my anger is hysterical

That my confidence is arrogant

That my body is a distraction

That my pain's overreacting

That my no is negotiable

That my worth is conditional

They tell me to be soft

To shrink

To nod and smile

To be grateful

Grateful for what?

For the cage they built and called protection?

For the chains they polished and named tradition?

I am not grateful

I am not quiet

I am not asking anymore

I am taking back what they stole

I say burn it down

And I will not apologize for the wreckage I leave behind

Talk Isabel Saenz

Should I or should I not talk?

That is the question I always ask myself

As it is a thought that always passes by

And never seems to leave my mind

I feel I just never have the right words to say

It' s either I talk too much and say the wrong things

Or talk too little, and make some sort of scene

For I never feel there is ever a right time to speak

Because everyone who I talk to takes it differently

Talking too much makes people bored

As I can be seen as self-centered and, even more,

I get anxious of the thought that they don' t like me

And that my words will just push them away quietly

If I talk too much, I "like" them, too

Even when that line isn' t even true

I want to just be friends and nothing more

But the rumors start to spread, and they only ignore me
more

Some people will tell me they like to listen

But—I can' t always tell if they really mean it

Talking too little makes people leave

For what' s the point in talking to me

If there' s nothing to say and no words to speak

Then, of course, they sigh, shift, and walk away

If I talk too little, I' m seen as rude

But sometimes, I just like the quiet too

If there is nothing to say or ideas to be shared

Why then must the silence be so hard to bear?

The truth is, I talk to make up for the silence that's in the
air

Even if I' m the only one who really cares

For if I don' t talk, I' m only left with my destructive
thoughts

The ones that whisper everything I' m doing wrong

For even in this poem—I don' t belong

So, I' m sorry if I talk too much and bore you

For it' s the only thing I “know” how to do

Because—I' m always stuck between the two

For talking too much or too little—never seems to please
you

Supernova Jackson Tran

Stardom, a golden plague of many means. Spread across the scene of the acclaimed Academy Awards was a subtle pandemic of this lifestyle. There was nowhere that I could look without the color gold grabbing my attention away from me. It blinded me, as it stood in confidence, lying glamorous upon everything with a shine akin to a star's violently bright death. I failed to acknowledge anything happening on stage; it seemed as though I had almost been hypnotized by the allure of gold around me. It danced to the audience of my eyes and mocked me, reminding me only of you. Gold was your favorite color. You had always been mesmerized by its appeal and iconic stance within Hollywood. I almost smiled at the fact that I caught myself doing the same.

The applause scattered throughout the room, catching me off guard and pulling me out of a reminiscent state. An announcer arrived as the applause of the audience abated, and the room slowly flooded with silence. I sat there, on the edge of my seat, tension building up within me, crescendoing. I was anticipating you, your name to be called, yet part of me did not want to hear those words. I could feel my body anticipating the sudden drop, with the pump within my chest gradually increasing, the sense of quivering within my arms, and my breath getting shallower with each exhale. The floodgates of my mind opened, millions of thoughts crashing through my head. I felt crazy. My hands clawed onto the velvet satin of my dress, slowly digging deeper as the next nominee was called. My ears slowly tuned out the wave of applause, so much so that I couldn't discern the ambient noise settling into an uneasy silence. The announcer opened

the envelope, sentencing your worth. My eyes shut, preparing for whatever was to come next.

“Jonathan Nova!” *Jonathan Nova! Jonathan Nova. Jonathan Nova?*

A smile fell onto my face as I let the tears run down my face. What else was I to do? The tears were for you. You did it. You won.

I watched the raindrops race down the windows of the car. What was the point of racing if only one would win? Pitter-patter, pitter-patter, pitter-patter. It was all I could hear.

I promptly left the ceremony after your award was announced. Maybe it was because I was so excited to show this to you. Maybe I was eager to leave the show. The pumping within my chest gradually increased yet again, and the air around me, akin to the vast and cold vacuum of space, made me shiver.

The stars lay absent in the lifeless night sky, ironically, shrouded by the unforgiving crowd of clouds. Instead, they posed as raindrops, thousands of daggers crashing down on my car as I pulled over next to a nearby rusted gate, which stood dead and dormant. The gates guarded the pale white house amidst the grounds. The house sat there, as if no one had come to visit it in years, with the lights long gone and the windows forever shut. I got out of the car, as the rain, these fallen stars, attacked me, and my tears were disguised behind the drops painting my face. I held onto your award, acting as if it were your hand I was holding. I held a firm and tight grip, one that I wouldn't let go, not this time at least. My feet sank into the muddy grass with each step as I made my way to your site. The flowers I had gotten for you lay drooping over, as if they were shedding tears.

The headstone almost glowed, coated with the remnant of dead stars from the sky, yet the words inscribed onto it were almost impossible to read. However, I could still read it. Why would I need to? Why would I ever forget what was on it? It was your name. Jonathan Munoz.

I stood over your gravesite, with a blank stare masking the emotional mess I found myself in. My knees fell onto the ground as the perished soil covered my skin, my arms lying dead and limp. But the award could not decompose alongside me, as my infuriated grip would not allow it to.

“Hi, honey. ” The words pushed themselves through the barricade of my mouth. My head hung down to see the award, grasped within my cold hands. It once looked so golden, a shine gleaming off the award like a warm ray of the sun. I placed it before your headstone, with all the care and tenderness I could. “Look, you won that award you had been talking about. Coated in your favorite color,” I whimpered, barely keeping myself together. All these thoughts about you that scramble in my head, yet I have nothing to say. What else could I say?

Gold was your favorite color. And you made it mine, too. As much as you pictured fame and stardom from that stupid color, I pictured something different. I pictured the look on your face that shone like no other the day you found out you got the part. You practically broke down the apartment door, startling me from my nap on the couch. Your smile was so genuine and infectious. I remember the first time you read the script, over dinner. We laughed as I helped

you through the dialogue between your characters and others, while I did my best impressions of them. I remember when you first took me to the set of the movie, and I watched you perform the lines you had so enjoyed rehearsing with me. The crew told me about the potential they saw in you, a future star. I remember the first time we watched the awards together, promising that you were going to be the one up there one day. You had promised such great things for yourself, to which you were willing to dedicate yourself to any extent to achieve them. And that was when you started to change. What is it that you really remembered? The silent dinners between us, while you buried yourself deep into that stupid script. Coming home to our locked bedroom, hearing only the sounds of your frustration as you recited your lines to yourself over and over and over again. The empty containers of prescription drugs that lie empty on your nightstand. The hard-working and charming man I had married was lost behind this stranger. You know that an actor is only an actor, and this was just a role, right? A role is not a life you live, but you didn't understand that. You were no longer in the role of a husband. Who cast you as this stranger, this person so blinded by the flashing lights and the sickening glamour of gold that he had forgotten his own purpose? To me, you were always destined for greatness because to me, you were always great. I loved that about you. I loved you. To love you was my golden award. To be a star was to be loved by me. But I guess the stars spelled out something different for both of us. And I could not bring myself to see the constellations you saw.

The award still stood out with its enchanting golden scheme; my tears only illuminated the gold, stealing the attention away from the

now sodden sea-gray headstone with your name, barren of any glint I had convinced myself of seeing beforehand. Slowly, my knees gathered out of the damp grass, and my grip loosened as I brought my hands to my sides. I could feel the pump in my chest attempting to go faster, and my arms trying to shake themselves, before they halted themselves briskly. I felt the raindrops become lighter with each tap I felt, something something on my skin. Raindrops, coating my arm upon their arrival from the same sky from which the stars dropped dead.

I never paid attention to the stars or astronomy that much. All I knew about the stars was you. You were always my star, the fiery figure in my night sky that gave me warmth, that promised to burn eternally for me. But you broke your promise to me. You could not burn forever with the pressure you put yourself under. The only thing you could do, the only thing that you can do, is stand as the remnant of something I could not save. The potential of greatness was stripped from you, limiting the brightness you burned at. But you will always shine bright to me. You will always be my supernova. My supernova.

Everything You Make Me Feel Camron Marie

Let me be the reason you laugh. Can I be the reason your eyes widen in joy? Let me be the reason you fidget with your hair. Will I ever be the center of your attention? Will you ever look at me the way I look at you? Will your friends ever tease you after we have a conversation? It's unfair; why do I have to stay pining for years, and you don't even know of my affection. It's unfair how close you get, how you write me every day like it's nothing. It's unfair that I laugh at every joke you make. How I smile whenever I see your face. You make me swoon harder every day. It's unfair how you treat me well. Why can't you be cruel and ruthless? Why are you kind, funny, caring, and intelligent? It's so unfair, and yet, I wouldn't give it up for anything. Even if I wish you felt the same way I do. You matter too much to me to let my unrequited feelings get in the way of our friendship. If you don't feel the same way, that's fine. Even if I didn't feel this way, I'd still want you by my side. I'd want you as my friend. It's unfair when you sing love songs around me, it's unfair that you care what I have to say, it's unfair that I'm so obvious and you're so oblivious. Why do I laugh the hardest at your jokes? Why do I feel like I'm going to throw up whenever you look at me? And why do I never want that sick feeling to go away? I'm so tired of pining. Is there a way to move on from you without moving away?



Heartstrings Sophia Cuevas

Disillusioned Love: The Influence Of Desire & Idealism in Romeo and Juliet Addyson Santos

Escapism is described as the “habitual diversion of the mind to purely imaginative activity or entertainment as an escape from reality or routine” (*Merriam-Webster*); it provides one with a way to run away from their problems, from what one perceives as “unpleasant.” Seeking solace in temporary materials is not unusual, e.g., drugs, alcoholism, gambling—and these are what we most often associate with the word? People immerse themselves in a fantasy that they believe is “good,” and it is why humans are attracted to stories that are unlike their own, as it provides a distraction from their own worldly problems. Humans easily attach to fixation, becoming obsessed and addicted. In the musical adaptation of *The Phantom of the Opera*, the Phantom is depicted as an individual unbefitting of their society, born with a disfigured face, prompting him to seek shelter away from the public eye. He experiences a lack of connection with others, and with society valuing beauty above all, he is ostracized. That is, until he meets Christine, effortlessly becoming besotted with her as a consequence of her being the only person who legitimately cared for him, even with his uncommon appearance. Through the Phantom’s infatuation for her, he found deliverance from his loneliness and strife. The Phantom escaped his conflicts by projecting his desires onto Christine, to be loved and wanted, which ultimately led to obsession. Societal ideals have great influence and are the determining factor in what a person desires. However, the pressures for idealism often become too constraining, giving rise to individuals seeking a way out of it. Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* argues that love is a form of escapism from societal pressures that

shape one's own reality in their pursuit of pleasure, as they struggle to be perceived as "perfect."

Desire is an inherent nature, both a plague and blessing to humanity. There are all kinds of different types of desires, with many notable ones such as physical, emotional, intellectual, and these form how humans view the world. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* presents a theory of desires—action, pleasure, attention, and good-based desires, rather than simply just romantic pursuits. This is supported by the formation of this basis: "For an organism to desire p is for it to believe p is good" (Schroeder). One must first believe that whatever is their desire, is what will be good for them, or in a sense, what will provide them with pleasure. If one believes love is their salvation, their desire for that will formulate. Applying your own ideals to these motivations, however, is what truly creates it. The origins of such a topic stem from one's upbringing, to perceive something to that extent of creating desire, what is fundamentally "good" for someone, it has to be built by the firm beliefs that are instilled into the environment around them. Take Harry Potter, for instance, who desires his parents as he craves to be loved due to a lack of affection in his early childhood. His upbringing, having grown up in an abusive home, seeing his cousin being so loved and spoiled by his parents, caused jealousy within him. This follows the idea of seeing others being loved and happy by their parents, resulting in the belief that it is "good" for them and must be desired. These beliefs are what shape one's ideals, influencing the values of those around them and forming a standard to which members of a

society must uphold. Those leading principles are what a human must abide by in a community.

Benvolio confronts Romeo after his own brawl with Tybalt, as he was instructed by Monague, Romeo's father, to check up on his state as he was constantly seen locked up in his room crying to himself. Benvolio greets his cousin, to which Romeo asks the time, responding with how his sadness makes the days seem long. Benvolio curiously questions, "What sadness lengthens Romeo's hours? / Not having which, having, makes them short" (Shakespeare 1.1.168-169). He possesses desire for Rosaline due to his belief that love is his salvation. Romeo voices that he does "not have which," revealing he knows that Rosaline is completely unattainable for his motivations, and he could only yearn for such a love. In his depressive state, he admits that he is saddened because he is not in an intimate relationship, not loved by a significant other, and time passes slowly because of it, with the line, "Not having which, having, makes them short" (Shakespeare 1.1.168-169). Forming his idea that love is the very thing he deems to be the solution to his predicament, believing if he could merely love another, then his unrequited love for Rosaline would disappear, by reason of him deeming love as "good" for his pleasures. Romeo uses this sentiment as a way to escape his feelings, to project onto another, and he holds this idealism to which love is the definitive of life. However, that is not the only reason why that is his philosophy. In the city of Verona, men are expected to be indifferent, powerful, and self-reliant. Yet, Romeo is none of those things. He is a vulnerable man, desperate with his attempts for love, codependent on others, and becomes

emotionally unstable easily, the contending factor to his despair. Vulnerability is perceived as a weakness, as seen with his lingering sorrow depicted in his conversation with Benvolio, with his father even expressing worry towards him and compelling Benvolio to comfort his cousin. Placing love to this extreme level, he is often sensitive as he is fully detached from reality by immersing himself in the addiction of love. C.S. Lewis presents in his book *The Four Loves*, Eros, the philosophy of a passionate love, and Eros's promise of "total commitment, his [Eros] reckless disregard of happiness, his transcendence of self-regard" (Lewis 151). Love is an obsession and provides a "transcendence" level of affection, with the assurance that one will be happy. Its "commitment" lengthens Romeo's hours? / "Not having which, having, makes them short" (Shakespeare 1.1.168-169). Romeo isolates himself in his room, with thoughts of love plaguing his mind, giving in to his emotions. To be longing for a strong connection, wanting to belong, and with this ideal that one should be unemotional, independent, in order to display a masculine identity, is a contradiction. Romeo, convinced by Mercutio to attend the Capulets' masked ball as a means to distract his heartache, is enraptured at the sight of Juliet, thinking, "Did my heart love till now? Forswear it, sight / For I ne'er saw true beauty till this night" (Shakespeare 1.4.59-60). He perceives Juliet to be the love he so desperately desired, switching up easily to let himself forget about the woes of his affection for Rosaline, believing he "ne'er saw true beauty till this night" (Shakespeare 1.5.60). Romeo deems this love as "true," a real, faithful love to convince his conscience that he no longer wishes for Rosaline. To shape his reality in such a way to pursue his happiness and desires, he accepts the idea that his allure to

Juliet is “better” and a real, sincere love. He maintains this notion of Juliet being an ideal woman in order for his desire to love her to form. Romeo finds attraction in Juliet as he is aware Rosaline will never love him, as it will forever be an unrequited love, and he will never be able to fit the standards that their society expects him to be. He fights his feelings of love for Rosaline and the pressures to be the “perfect” man representing true masculinity, with feelings of love with another woman, to achieve his own happiness by distracting himself with those pleasures.

Juliet’s mother speaks of Juliet’s betrothal to Paris, and asks if she could love him, and provides advice, to which Juliet responds, “I’ll look to like if looking liking move / But no more deep will endart mine eye / Than your consent gives me strength to fly” (Shakespeare 1.3.99-101). Juliet comes to the conclusion that she will love Paris if looks are what will make her be in love with him. She is expected to marry him, whether or not she loves him truthfully. Juliet is grown in an environment where she is set to be betrothed to another, without her voice of consent in the matter. She is skeptical of “if” she will truly love Paris; however, she abides by the ideals placed upon her, and assures her mother that she will love Paris “but no more deep” than what her mother’s “consent” allows her to. Juliet’s parents create this ideal, that she has to be the “perfect” daughter, and she is influenced to follow what her parents want for her, instead of her own desires. This lack of judgment for herself causes her to naturally crave having that choice of judgment. Making her own choices for herself is what she deems as “good” for her pursuit of happiness. Once meeting Romeo, she immediately becomes interested in him,

as a result of her making the choice to “love” him because of her inclination to make her own decisions. In order for her to “love” Romeo, she modifies her reality to create this ideal image of him. She places this “perfect” image of him on a pedestal, viewing him with the ideals she has ingrained into her values, without knowing his true nature and identity. After her confrontation with Romeo, she is head over heels for him, reminiscing on her balcony with the wish that Romeo would “Deny thy father and refuse thy name / Or, if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love / And I’ll no longer be a Capulet ” (Shakespeare 2.2.37-39). She’s young and vulnerable as well, allowing her to be easily manipulated by surrounding factors, such as Romeo’s intense affection for her, and, as mentioned previously, the values her parents created about love. It is an ironic standpoint, as she did in fact “love” Romeo purely for his looks, and what she perceived to be him. Juliet provides no hesitation with her words, promising that she will “no longer be a Capulet” (2.2.37-39) in order to fulfill her desire for a relationship with Romeo. She previously responded to the idea of her engagement to Paris as an “honor I [she] dream not of” (1.3.68). Her true desire lingers through her words, to be set free of family pressures, as she projects that desire onto Romeo, and distracts herself with the pleasures of his love. She wants to be set free from the constraints her family places on her, the ideals forced upon her, and find her true identity. In loving Romeo, it provides her with an escape, a salvation away from any oppression. She craves his love and presence, and like Romeo, views their relationship with high standards and “good” for her pleasure. Her motivation for making her own path for herself,

escaping familial expectations, is what drives her love and creates this image of Romeo, so that she will desire him.

Ultimately, those who experience beliefs embedded by society are often influenced by themselves, which creates pressure to be “perfect” for these individuals. These pressures lead to the desire to escape it using other worldly distractions, love being a primal example, where the desire formulates reality in correlation to one’s values as they view it as inherently “good.” This is seen with Romeo’s overwhelming need to be the representative of true masculinity and Juliet’s pressures to be the model daughter. The perception of reality caused by ideals shapes perfectionism, and those who struggle to be perfect are moved to seek escapism from the confinement of those pressures. This philosophy is present throughout numerous media, like *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Phantom of the Opera*, and even in life.

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Plastic Bottle Dress Kevin Zhang

Dead Flower Jiwoo Lee

Some days the world feels like it's turned its back,
Some nights loneliness and emptiness eats me,
Some nights I realize the coldness of the world.

When the darkness covers me,
I open my windows
And watch how beautiful the houses look,
All glowing together in their light.

Every household holds a different story,
With a different point of view.
We often don't realize,
That we are one of the houses with the lights,
Shining the brightest to those nearby.



Horse Jeanettee Pham

The Wake of Wind Sofia Patel

I want to cup the wind in my palms, press it into glass, and keep it locked.

But it flies, and it's quick, and everywhere

but nowhere.

All at once.

You feel it in the sting of your eyes, the knots in your hair, the wilt of your lips.

Quiet: a soft hum of stories that never meet, but twist and tangle in passing.

Loud: a howl of war and anguish all in a ribbon that whips past your face.

Listening close, I hear my own voice,

Carried backwards, learning what it means to belong to something bigger,

Something endless, something alive.

I want to catch it,

Because in its flight lies truth.

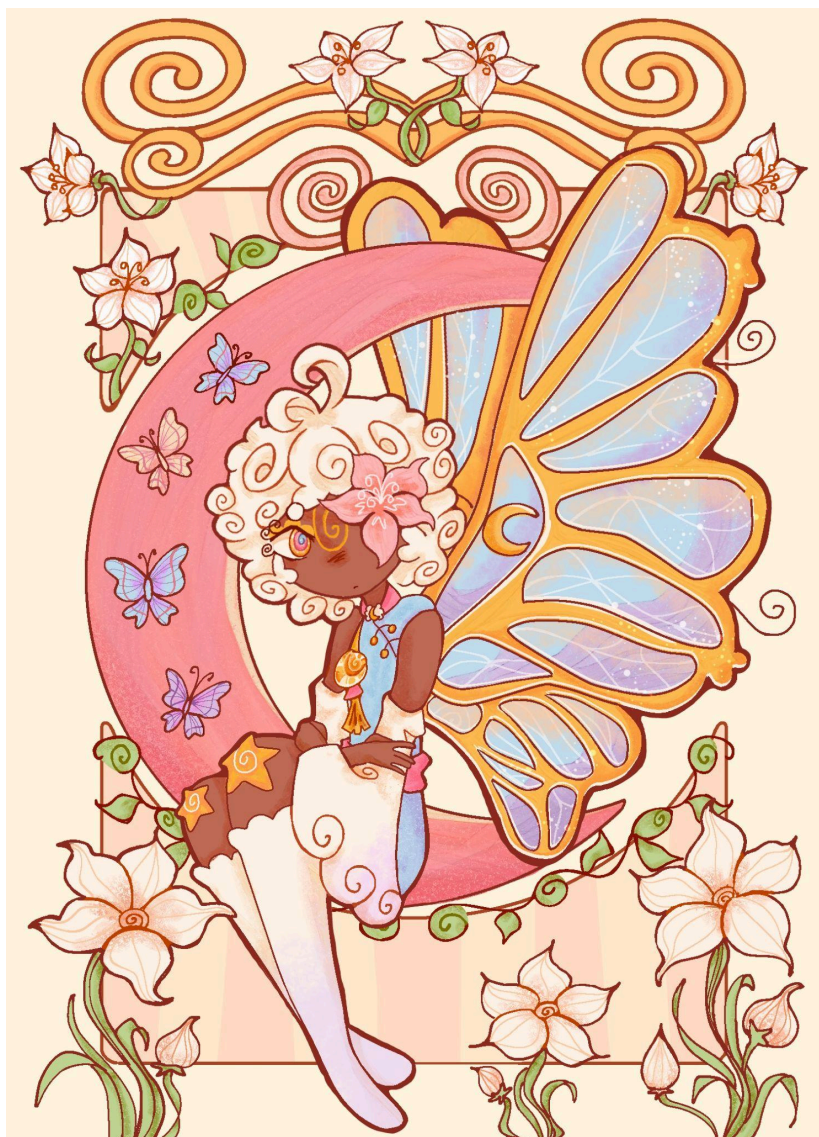
An echo of all that is loved, and all that is lost.

So I chase, not to trap, but to feel the pulse.

Wild and fleeting, everywhere

but nowhere.

All at once.



faerie Dane Le

Summer's Glow Sofia Patel

It's felt in summer's breath, warm, unrelenting.

In the sweat that glues our skin to leather seats,

Driving past a glittering, deep azure sea that isn't ours,

Whispering to the horizon that *one day it might be*.

In the grains of sand we feel beneath our feet and palms,

They stick to our clothes and are washed down drains,

Miles and miles apart, but circle back to the same sea.

In the sun that colors the clouds above us:

Mine, a vermillion, and yours, an amber.

We feel the heat of the *same* setting sun, miles and miles apart.

And though we've never crossed paths,

The tide carries an unseen thread between us,

Two currents moving side by side,

Forever echoing the same shore, yet never colliding.



moon and sun Dane Le

Boots Isla Heller

Yesterday,
I left my house wearing
Little
Red
Boots
The heels lifted me a whole two inches
But my proudness
Made me feel taller
My boots would click
With each step and stride
They sparkled in the sun
With the same sense of pride
Plastered upon my smile
And to everyone I showed my
Little
Red
Boots
And I pointed out the divots in the shoe
Each shade and hue
And the buckle on the side, too
But,
They all stood and laughed at my
Little
Red
Boots
Saying, shouting
“Why would you need
Rain boots
On a bright sunny day?
Why would you need rain boots
When the sun has yet to go away?”
I looked down at my boots
And I felt a great shame

And suddenly my shoes
Had no sheen nor gleam
And their appeal was lost
Most certainly to me
And as I trudged about in my
Little
Red
Boots
I thought of those who were mean,
It's true
How they chastised my footwear
And it's ill-timed debut
How the sun was still out
And the sky was still blue
And I sighed a deep sigh
Pushing all my worries out
And as I continued my forced march,
Out and about
I walked for miles
Until I saw some clouds
Heavy and grey
With a sky that loomed
And a soft patter noise
A place where my shoes
Began to shine
Where droplets fell
As if there was a faucet in the sky
And all those walked and passed me by
Laid a compliment at my feet on my
Little
Red
Boots
So when you feel down
Or when you feel blue
About how those around you

Don't fit quite right next to you
Maybe just
Switch the puzzle
And find a new spot
Where your boots, they shine,
And your smile, it grows,
And all those around
Will tell you they love your
Little
Red
Boots

My gone gaunt wishes Zivie Ye

The day I found out that I'd finally grown up
I stood at the exit
faced with a woman

With red ripe apples hung to one sweaty palm
and the crumpled record
of lost earnings in my other fist

She stood for a second, then licked her dry lips
and moved her eyes from me over to
my rusted metal bed

I wondered what she thought about my dear cardboard scraps

Then there was the shining star,
the bright yellow glow from her stubby wand,
that drew a long crooked wish
down my crumbled list

Cutting through my last hours spent
in blissful unawareness
her shooting star granted upon me my final gift:

I was free
from curfew times
...to fill my home with kittens
...I could paint my house a hot, bright pink
and wear my mother's heels

Then I'd get myself
long,
sharp,
pointy nails,
the color of bright fiery

At last I could do all these things, and own the world
all mine

My kingdom would be filled with fairies and TVs,
walls built of cocoa
and red vines

My star flew across that orange horizon
followed by wide wrung eyes

Because suddenly,
I was left stuck existing in the
in between
and
left on a line closer to my grievings

- Z.Y 10/17/25

cyclicity Ellie Park

we met like the start of a song
soft, slow,
just a lazy hum in my chest
then bubbling laughter,
orbiting
like moons,
pulling tides in me
i didn't know existed
hands brushing together,
breath syncing,
everything spinning softly
until your name was gravity
and i
was
weightless,
free
falling
off a cliff,
a balloon
let go,
fast
forgetting
that even stars
burn out
and spirals
close

in

to

a

dot

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Life on Mars? Aiden Finamore

Fang's First Hunt Amelie Zazik

I woke up to my siblings pouncing on my stomach. I remembered it was the day when my father would finally take me hunting, and I jolted to my feet. My tail wagged back and forth, and I knocked over my youngest brother. Mom was pacing back and forth in the den. She never liked the idea of me going hunting. She thinks I am too young to hunt.

I heard a baritone howl behind me. "Fang, it's time," father said. I was off on my first hunt! As we embarked on our journey, I remembered my mother's advice – *If I see danger, run away*. Leading, my father seemed a mile ahead. The snow cracked like glass crystals beneath my paws. Suddenly, my father stopped. I lifted my snout and sniffed the air. I could smell fire burning from a small cabin in the distance.

A piercing, high-pitched yip greeted us. I could see a tiny tan creature with a scrunched-up face. I gathered he was a pet because he wore one of those suffocating collars around his neck. His shiny prisoner's tag identified him as "Pugsley." Father and I slid behind a bush and waited.

"Father, I don't think this is a smart move. I mean, you don't know who he belongs to. It could be Lumberjack Paul's," I warned.

"Just watch and learn, Daughter," he replied calmly.

My father jumped from the bush, blocking the dog's escape. I couldn't understand why he was interested in such a small morsel. I watched as the dance began. Each backward step the dog took was

matched by a forward step from Dad. Suddenly, I heard a boisterous noise.

“Dad, I think that it is Lumberjack Paul!” I cried. Threads of saliva dripped from Dad’s mouth as he inched closer to the hyperventilating pet.

“Stay away from my dog!” a loud voice boomed.

When I saw the towering man’s stringy red beard, I knew who it was. It was Lumberjack Paul. He had angry red eyes to match his beard. He stroked the fur on his coat, fur that looked like mine. I observed what Lumberjack Paul was wielding in his giant hands: a shiny double-barreled shotgun. I looked nervously at my father. He motioned for me to run. I stood frozen.

“Naughty, naughty wolf, did you think you were going to make a snack of my dog? Do you know what I do with worthless wolves like yourself? I teach them a lesson.”

Lumberjack Paul loaded his long, shiny shotgun and aimed it at my dad’s forehead. I knew that this was the last time I would see my father alive again. I watched as my father’s silky fur turned red and saw an emptiness engulf his once loving gaze. Father’s body collapsed onto a pillow of crimson snow. Lumberjack Paul picked up his trembling pet and walked away. Snow fell fast from the sky, blanketing my father’s body on the ground.

As I looked at my father, I could hear my mother’s words - *if I see danger, run away*. I rose to my feet. The tiny dog sounded his high-pitched alarm.

“Hey!” a familiar voice screamed. “Little stupid wolf, come out. I want to play with you.” I heard an explosion, and then another, as tiny silver pellets tore through the bushes.

I closed my eyes, wishing to be back home in my den with my family. Suddenly, the explosions stopped. I knew this was my chance. I darted from the bush and ran towards home. When I arrived at the entrance to my den, I was greeted with a red carpet of snow, the same color that surrounded my father. The silence outside of my den was deafening, and then I heard a low, grumbling roar.

Slowly, a bear with a round belly shuffled outside of my home. He looked at me then lumbered away.

Exhausted, I entered my den. In the darkness, I could see that my mom was there. I curled up next to her frail body and fell asleep.

The next morning, I awoke to a soft voice.

“Hello, Fang,” the voice called. “Is it true Lumberjack Paul killed my brother?” I pushed away my last moments of sleep from my eyes and nodded. My aunt’s eyes grew determined. I could see my little siblings, each with crusted red fur, huddled tightly by her side. Overnight, the warmth of my mom’s body faded, and she remained motionless at my side.

“Why didn’t *you* run away?” I asked her, knowing there wouldn’t be an answer.

“Listen to me, Fang. I need everyone to come with me. I’m going to teach you to hunt.” My aunt was a large and muscular wolf, almost

the size of my father. Not looking back, we left the den and sprinted outside, the whole pack moving as one. Moments later, my aunt stopped. We were at Lumberjack Paul's door. My aunt announced our arrival with a thunderous howl. She howled again, and us younger wolves joined her in chorus. The wood door swung open.

"What is all this ruckus?" Lumberjack Paul screamed.

My family and I circled Lumberjack Paul like we were playing a game of "Ring Around the Rosie." Then, we pounced. Paul screamed and fell to the ground. I bit down on his lower leg and felt the satisfying crunch of his bones between my teeth. Paul's screams were soon quieted by my aunt's jaws as they enveloped his face. One by one, my siblings hungrily joined the feast, the sounds of slapping tongues and tearing flesh only interrupted by an occasional whimper from Pugsley.

That evening, my siblings and I snuggled close to our aunt in our new den. Shimmering stars held watch in the pitch-black sky. I was full and satisfied after my first hunt. Remembering my father, I licked my paws clean and fell asleep.



Together Mordecai Mehau

Forever? Jiwoo Lee

What is forever?

I wonder.

Maybe people are just hoping for

Something that ever stays.

Forever is such a beautiful lie,

The word that gives you hope and reasons to live.

But everything in the world

Is like a piece of ice,

Slowly melting in its own time.

Maybe forever is only our pride,

But still, everyone reaches for it,

Even when we know it melts in our hand.



The Search Jeanette Pham

Falling in Like Ksenia Eve Liron

I didn't think this was in the cards for me,
Kept my eyes on the ground and my mind in the clouds,
Now my poker face is slipping,
His name lights up my screen so my heart pounds

I find excuses just to be near him
Every glance feels like free-fall
But maybe that's just my mind
Building castles out of nothing at all

He speaks and my thoughts lose balance
Words scatter like ashes on the breeze
He drums his fingers on the desk
And somehow, I feel it in my chest
Drowning never tasted so sweet

He smells like rain
Like something that could rinse me clean
And I wonder
If I sit close enough
Would he notice my heart on my sleeve

The way his hair falls
Soft and careless like a memory
I want to tuck it behind his ear
Just to see if he'd let me

I question everything now
Certified over-thinker
For the post-modern boy
I don't dare to blink or
God as my witness
Ponder if he'll see me
Am I of interest?
Is this all just a dream?

Hair down or up
Which lipstick shade
One misstep
The way I replay
Every touch
Every smile
Every thumb brush over knuckles
You'd think my ribs were stained glass
The way I shatter when he chuckles

I notice how the air feels when he's gone
Suddenly so much colder and thin
The world exhales and I'm left hollow
The echo of him still stitched to my skin
I keep tracing it
A phantom melody
A warmth that doesn't quite belong to me

Maybe this is what almost feels like
The ache before the sunrise
The hand hovering but not quite touching
Maybe I was fine before him
But now everything hums
Alive and in color
Like the sky holding its breath
Waiting for thunder

This wasn't in the cards for me
But here I am
Shuffling hope like it's currency
In the mid-morning sun
Waiting for him to look up
And see what he's done

Nothing Is Not an Option Ksena Eve Liron

Content Warning: gun violence

We are told to sit still
To raise our hands
To keep our thoughts inside our throats
While bullets rattle through classrooms
And we struggle to stay afloat

We are told to be quiet
To wait
To put faith in drills and locked doors
But hope is not armor, and silence leads to martyrs
It seems kids only matter when they haven't been born yet,
They love to argue about abortion and the right to forfeit,
But when any one of us falls to a storm full of bullets
They sit back, watch us drown in more debt

They count votes while we count bodies
They trade headlines like currency,
While we trade whispered I-love-yous
In case it's the last thing we ever get to say

Do you know what it's like
To look around every room you enter for the best place to hide?
To memorize which desks might shield your body?
Or if the sound in the hall is footsteps or finality?

And still they tell us that the books are the danger
That words on a page are somehow more perilous
Than an AR-15 and a teen full of rage
I don't know of a single kid killed by a
Drag Show
Banned book
Or Pride Parade
But I know of hundreds who have lost their lives
To rogue bullets through desk barricades

"Thinking of you" mean nothing
When the floor is already covered in our classmates' blood,
And our silence will not mop it clean
Coping out with "thoughts and prayers"
Does nothing for grieving mothers
Empty words and burning stares
Won't stop the gunners
It's performative sympathy
It's apathy
It's deplorable in tragedy
Because tomorrow, it could be us
So we proceed with caution
We speak out, we must
Because
Doing nothing
Is not an option



Rat In a Cage Fox Finamore

Soy Colombiana Sarah Glauch-Lozano

Soy Colombiana, I tell him, not Mexicana. My heritage is not illustrated in the colorful Paper Picado you see strung up in the streets but is mapped out in the yellow streets of Gabriel Garcia Marquez's Macondo

Soy Colombiana, I tell him, not Brasileña. It is not the pounding of feet to the melody of the Samba at Brazilian Carnival that echos the pounding of my heart, but that of the Cumbia at Carnival de Barranquilla

Soy Colombiana, I tell him, not Chilena. My laugh lines are not sketched in the mudcracks of the Atacama Desert but cut across my cheeks as the Caño Cistales bisects the Amazon Rainforest

Soy Colombiana, I tell him, not Argentine. The blood running through my veins is not given its color by the claret red of wine, but the crimson of cacao beans

Soy Colombiana, I tell him, not Peruana. When my body is buried, my soul will not be tied to the earthly mountains that merge with the ruins of Maccu Piccu, but will soar to glint the sun's light off the gold of El Dorado

Of the thirty-three voices compelled to blend into one symphony of Latin culture

Each is still a unique note, and mine is Colombian



Spoons Isla Finamore

The Backpack Anonymous

More than a bag,
Strong and true.
It carries many things,
Through and through.

If it rains,
It rains.
The outside gets wet.
But it's dry on the inside,
Where great things are kept.

I zip it up,
Making sure not to yank or pull,
For this certain bag is
Out of its world.

The cup holders are used,
With stains and spills.
The fabric is ripped;
It looks like a hill.

And the inside is nice.
Cozy as well.
With a smell slightly musty,
And pockets that are dusty.

Two different pockets—
One small, one large.
A computer in its socket
Perfectly fitting

In the big pocket, there are folders,
Notes and a pen.
Half-finished books
And money to spend.

During my day,
I look forward to gum.
And toys and fidgets
A whole section of fun.

And we can't forget
About the small pocket, too,
Which inside, there are snacks
Which taste like great food.

The fabric is woven
Just to fit my things
And AirPods to listen
To people who sing

I have trading cards,
Toy cars,
Mints too.

A change of clothes,
My homework,
It's just so cool.

And that is my backpack,
Strong and true.
It carries my things,
Through and through.

It is undoubtedly amazing
To have around.
It holds everything I like,
And makes me feel safe and sound.



I SPY Jeanettee Pham



the room with no corners Ellie Park

there's this feeling:

like the moment a wave breaks,

when the water rushes back

and you know

something beautiful or terrible is about to happen,

but it hasn't yet

and all you can really do is

stand there,

barefoot,

sand under your toes,

wind whistling,

breathing salt,

and silence.

it's in my chest,

this ache that i can't quite call pain,

not sadness

nor joy,

but a kind of tightening,

like my ribs are holding a secret

too big to break.

when i see something that reminds me

of a time

i didn't know i would really miss,

or when laughter rings
just so perfectly in the air,
i almost start making
a river of emotion—
when someone says
“remember when”
and i do,
all too well,
much too well.

when i'm so happy
i don't know where to put it all
and my body becomes a jar too full,
the lid screwed on too tight,
i feel it then.

that tightness
right in the center,
like my heart is stretching its arms,
but the room is too small.

sometimes it's a song,
and i don't even know the lyrics,
but the melody
knows me.
it walks down the hallway of my past

and opens doors i forgot were there,
letting light pour in
like it's been waiting
for the longest time.

sometimes it's an aged photograph,
creased at the corners,
a face i loved
wearing a smile that only existed
for a second
but was somehow caught forever,
and that second
is all it takes
for the tightness to return,

a reminder that
joy
and longing
are neighbors.

that happiness can make your chest pound
when it overflows too quickly,
when it's tinted with memory,
when it knows
this is a moment
you'll wish you could hold again.

and maybe that's what nostalgia really is.
not sadness,
not quite,
but the body remembering how to love
something that can't come back
and still loving anyway
even harder

or at least wanting to.

so let your chest tighten,
let it press against your ribs,
seep out from underneath
and hum quietly beneath the skin
because maybe that's how the heart says
thank you
to something it never wants to forget.

Five Minutes Jackson Tran

It only takes 5 minutes for me to get to my grandparents' house. My dad calls it a "privilege," and he definitely treats it like one, often visiting them once a week. I never seem to understand why he does so, as it's often for arbitrary reasons. However, I do seem to understand that it's that kind of thinking that gets me stuck with accompanying him on one of these visits. My grandmother opens the front door and, as always, gives me a warm and welcoming hug, to which I toss her back a half-present grin. As I walk in, the smell of a vague Vietnamese dish nestles itself comfortably within my nose, an aroma I feel acquainted with yet stands unrecognizable. Although the lights were almost unnoticeably lit in the front room, I could still squint hard enough to see my grandfather's computer office and TV, which I helped set up. A lifeless vessel stands before me, in place of the old furniture set I used to play on to re-enact stories and game shows with my cousins. Entering the next room, the cacophony of a familiar Vietnamese game show, of which I am never able to discern, crowds the surrounding ambience. My grandfather, while slow to rise from the couch, makes his way over to me and gives me a firm handshake and hug, which I respond to with a pathetic excuse for an embrace. My dad goes to talk to my grandparents while I sit on the couch, hunching forward with my hands fidgeting, tapping a drum pattern. I remember the Christmas we got this couch, it was like being introduced to a family member's significant other over dinner: awkward, uncomfortable, and I still have not grown to accept it,

mainly in memory of the old one. We still keep its pillows, despite their cream fabric contrasting against the charcoal linen patterns, and their deteriorated state exposing the feathers I always used to pluck out. With their conversation droning on for a bit longer, and the couch remaining ever so consistent in its discomfort, I instead lay upon the firm yet inviting rug, akin to my own bedroom carpeting. The color palette complements that of the old pillows, with bold syrup-brown lines oozing about a rigid helical pathway, a DNA structure carrying the code of life for this home. I melt away into this rug.

A memento of life. A familial platform where my cousins and I watched Disney Channel and eagerly opened Christmas presents together.

I'm suddenly awoken from my reminiscent dream to both my grandfather's iconic calling and my dad's demand for me to report over to him. I drag myself over to the quaint little table they sit at, a surviving relic of dirty dish piles following every family dinner. My grandfather points to a small plate of sticky rice and sweet Chinese sausage resting at the table's center, accompanied by a worn-out Tupperware kit. My dad elaborates, instructing me to get a utensil so I could put away the food and take it home. I turn around to the kitchen, opening the first drawer I see without looking, and to my embarrassment, it is the wrong drawer. It's just a silly mistake, I think to myself, as I close it and quickly open the neighbouring one, reaching my hand in to find the utensil. Once again, I make a fool of

myself, turning my attention towards the fully opened drawer to find yet again, no tray of utensils. My grandmother laughs it off, and I hesitantly copy her, whilst my eyes dart around the surrounding drawers and cabinets, trying to get a grasp on which drawer had the utensils. I can sense the growing looks of concern on my father and grandfather's faces as my search for utensils slowly fades into a violent scavenging for something seemingly more than that. At some point, my grandmother hastily intervened and revealed the correct drawer for me, exposing the tray I had been so desperately scavenging for. I stare, for a good second, ironically marvelling at the sheen of the utensils which pierce my gaze, shattering my worldview. How many times have I opened this drawer, in the middle of a family dinner, while cutting the cake for my cousin's 18th birthday, when I wanted to make a late-night chocolate milkshake with my grandmother, to grab a utensil, without hesitation or a second thought? How could I not know where this drawer was if I am here all the time? Am I really here, all of the time?

I march over towards the front door defeatedly, walking by like a stranger. I could hardly look at the living room rug, or even the front room, without the burden of shame weighing my head down. Even the packaged dish in my hand alienated me, solely in the fact that I never learned its name or even how to pronounce it. I walked outside to my dad's Tesla in the driveway, and I got into the passenger seat. He backed out slowly, the car humming an extraterrestrial-like melody, which sat beside me comfortably and with no issue. As a kid, I always rolled down my window and waved to my grandparents

while my dad backed out of the driveway. I saw my grandparents smiling and waving at me, but this time, my window stayed rolled up, and I did not wave back.

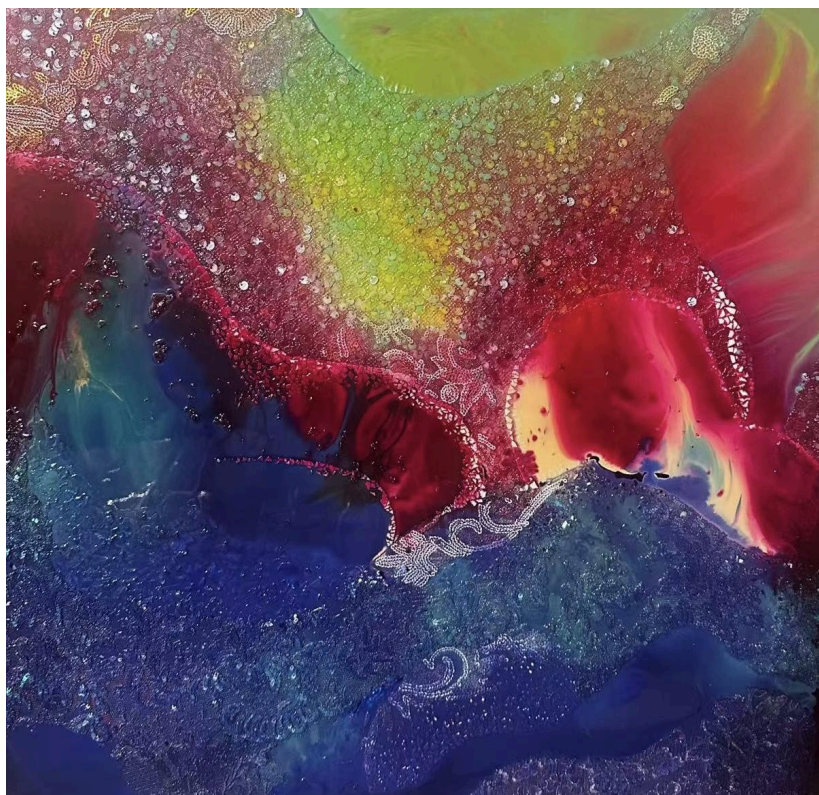


Woman As Flower Esa Wang





Woman As Flower Esa Wang



Perfectly Imperfect Isabel Saenz

Ever since I was little, I've loved my home. The memories that get built each time I go never feel the same; in fact, they are always better. It never matters who I go with or when; all I know is that it never changes. My friends wonder why I go at all, as they see it as the unknown, a place of uncertainty, as they are never sure if I will come back to see them again. To me, that's the best part about my home: there lie no rules, no walls, nothing holding me back as I discover the "unknown."

As I begin to walk across the street, the smell of fresh corn dogs hits me. The old woman on the corner is still there. I've always loved her corn dogs and had gotten one by the time I left. Each time I bite into it, steam would rise from my last bite, reminding me of those key memories connected to my home. Each bite, I'd feel the cheese burn my lip, but its goodness never stopped me. The light at the crosswalk flicks on as myself, and many others, hurry home. I always loved the path to home, it was filled with many markets having bright colored signs advertising all kinds of different foods, some better than others. While walking back to my place, the sand rubbed against the sole of my foot while the sun wrapped my body in warmth, just like I

remember. As I continued to walk, the fresh, salty air cupped my face as I smiled with joy. In front of me, the waves repeatedly crashed against themselves. The sea foam from the clashing waves creates bubbles on the sand, which has always been my favorite part of coming back, as it itched me to only want to go sooner. All my excitement started to bubble up as I finally made it back. It had been a long way to get here, and if I could, I would never leave.

Nowadays, the world has only given me challenges that drain the joy I used to have. They cling on to me like leeches that suck my blood out till I'm left lifeless. I closed my eyes briefly, then looked up to see who else was here. Above, seagulls flying high till I no longer see them, talking to each other, guiding each other, they look so happy and free. I enjoyed seeing the seagulls fly above me, as it reminded me of my family and how we always stuck together and never left each other's side. As my vision panned down, I saw waves crashing, filling my ears with happiness, relief, freedom, and everything I couldn't get elsewhere. The movement of waves reminds me of the fight I always have against myself, never stopping, in fact, only hitting harder and harder each and every time. Sitting down, I removed the chains wrapped against my neck, the loss of weight making it easy to just—run. Running, I felt the sand

crabs running with me, all of us wanting to go home. Nothing was gonna stop us at this rate, as I continued to run till my body hit the waves. *Splash*. The waves were rough and violent as the cool water wrapped around me tight, holding me close. I knew I wasn't going to leave anytime soon. The ripples of the wave carried my body away from the sand till I could no longer feel the sand on the soles of my feet. The smell of the fresh crisp air reminded me of the purity and innocence that can be found nowhere else. I then knew I was finally in the unknown. It was the first time I'd been free, free from lies, hate, pain, sadness, everything that made me want to hate myself. I wanted to swim as far as I could, away from everything. Yet, the waves only kept pushing me back to shore, I didn't know why, they just—did. I tried to push back as I swam harder and harder, as they pushed just as hard. Frustrated, I left the water and sat on the sand, gripping the sand as it stuck to my hand. I sat and just let the warmth of the sun dry the small and scattered water beads that remained on me, cool me off.

As I sat, I watched and realized the lack of pattern there was in each and every wave. There was no wave that was the same as the last, yet they were all beautiful. Looking around, I grabbed any shells that encompassed me, looking at each one, seeing the lack of similarity

between them. Some had hard, rough, uneven edges, while others had smooth, discolored, round-shaped edges. Every shell had its own story, but still ended in the same place as the rest of us; the question was—how?

Despite us all being different, we still ended up—here. In the same place as me, him, her, and even you. I realized that, though sometimes it might feel like others don't understand the journey that you went through, it doesn't mean that they got there with any more luck than you. As I sat, I realized that there is so much beauty in not only this world, but my *perfectly imperfect* self.



Spray Paint Fox Finamore

Contributors

Anonymous contributor for "The Backpack". The author of this poem enjoys all forms of art, including music, acting, and writing. The writer often draws inspiration from their passions and hobbies, including playing games and playing piano. The author's writing is often associated with the things they experience every day in a comedic format.

Camron Marie. Camron is a 10th grader in IA and has been at OCSA since 7th grade. They have been so inspired by the *Bonfires* in the past and have bought all of them since 7th grade. They hope their words can connect with others because writing has always been so impactful for Camron's life. They hope they can inspire others with their writing the way others have inspired them.

Sophia Cuveas. Sophia is an 8th-grade student who lives at home with her mom, dad, and two cats. Sophia danced for 7 years, and after COVID began, playing with makeup. In her free time, she enjoys listening to music and uses herself as a canvas for makeup. Sophia enjoys poetry and is inspired by music she listens to and past experiences. Amongst many of her talents, she also enjoys cooking and makes a delicious roasted rosemary and garlic chicken. Sophia's a girl of many talents who intends on exploring all the world has to offer through her self-expression of art.

Leah Feigenbaum. Leah is a passionate writer who enjoys writing concepts about emotion and meaning through poetry. Her work often reflects on the principles of life and the small experiences that shape who we are. She writes to understand the world around her and to

express her thoughts on society. Outside of writing, Leah enjoys reading, spending time with her family, and, of course, eating delicious food.

Fox Finamore. Currently, Fox is an amateur photographer who only started to get into photos because he saw a video of someone framing up a shot on a Pentax 67. Inspired by this video, Fox Finamore began the search for a 120 format camera that included the very cool “waist level” viewfinder, and eventually settled on a Yashica D, a Twin lens reflex medium format film camera. He later started shooting 35mm film on a Nikkormat FT3. He has shot many kinds of film but mainly enjoys cross processed multi exposures, high contrast black and white, and anything experimental.

Isla Finamore. Isla is a passionate filmmaker and photographer dedicated to developing her creative vision. She has produced numerous independent projects, including directing and filming the music video for Sonia Haste’s newly released song “For Fun.” Through her business, FinamoreFilms, Isla continues to refine her skills in both film and photography. She plans to study film and marketing in college, with aspirations of building a career as a professional filmmaker.

The Ghostwright. The Ghostwright is a pen name they use the majority of the time when they do not feel the need for artworks to belong to them only. G.W. wants this poem to represent the story of dealing with loss as a teen, how it can be horrible, exhausting, and full of anger, but at the same time, it can be serene in the months passing.

Ally Halid. Ally is a senior in the Integrated Arts Conservatory who has spent several too many hours on *Tetris*. She considers herself an avid reader, writer, and singer. She enjoys reading comics, taking walks, drinking tea, and meowing at disgruntled cats in her free time.

Olivia Han. Olivia is an experimental artist based in Orange County who enjoys urban sketching and mixed media. Currently a senior in IA, she applied for OCSA in 8th grade and picked all the placement activities that did not require her to sing or dance and submitted drawings instead. Her current favorite band is Just Mustard, and she is trying to learn how to DJ and weave tapestry before graduation. She hopes to go study art in New York and spend her future weekends back at her favorite Magazine stand in Greenwich Village with a coffee and a sketchbook.

Isla Heller. Isla is a sophomore in IA who loves and appreciates all forms of art, both visual and physical.

Dane Le. Dane is a sophomore who is passionate about drawing and writing. This is his first year at OCSA. He expresses himself through his whimsical and celestial art style, with butterflies, stars, spirals, and so on. He also likes to crochet, scrapbook, and paint. Digital art is one of his main and favorite mediums because of its versatility and accessibility. Elements of space are often shown in his art, such as the moon, planets, aliens, and the sun.

Jiwoo Lee. Jiwoo is a 7th grade student in the Integrated Arts Conservatory. She highly enjoys writing a short story, spending time with her family and friends, and computer programming. Jiwoo

moved to America 3 years ago, and she always puts her best effort into everything she does!

Ksena Eve Liron. Ksena Eve is in her senior year at Orange County School of the Arts. She has been writing for nine years and is an author, poet, reader, and an avid sitcom enthusiast. She had been published in *Bonfire* and *Las estrellas de Nuestra Comunidad*. In her spare time, you can find her at a variety of coffee shops or curled up in her bed with her dog and a fantasy book (and maybe some coffee too).

Sarah Glauch-Lozano. Sarah Glauch-Lozano is an Integrated Arts and Creative Writing senior as well as a writer and avid reader. She loves crafting, baking, and autumn, and lives in OC but finds herself more at home in Narnia, Wonderland, and Camelot. Even before she could read, she was creating stories about her princess stickers and scrawling out fantasy maps with crayons. She has had her works published in *Bonfire* in the past, and is passionate about world affairs which is mirrored through her poems, short stories, and spoken word poetry.

Mordecai Mehau. Mordecai, 17, surrounds himself in the arts, from Russian ballet, theater, the circus, a strong passion in fashion, a love for the culture of music, but most of all, he has been drawing since he could hold a crayon. Mordecai comes from a family of artists who supported him leaving his home in Hawaii in 2019 to pursue a career in the arts. 6 years later, he is proud to present his drawings and paintings and hopes to be able to share his work with the world.

Mordecai often describes his art as his life source and window to his soul. Each creation is a way to look into who he truly is.

Ellie Park. Ellie is a poet who likes to experiment with different writing styles and try new things. Last year, she received a Silver Key and an Honorable Mention from Scholastic Art and Writing, and hopes to do even better this year. When she's not writing, she can be found swimming, reading, or watching *Grey's Anatomy*.

Sofia Patel. Sofia is a 9th grader in the IA conservatory at OCSA, who has a deep love for performing arts and creative writing. Her work explores themes of identity, memories, emotions, and myths. She loves writing free verse poetry and sonnets, songs, and short stories. When not writing, you can most likely find her practicing speeches for NSDA competitions, singing songs from *Heathers* or *Chicago*, or listening to Frank Ocean.

Annika Patterson. Annika is a 7th grader in her first year at OCSA. She loves creating art, writing, dance, and playing with her dog, Barley, and her bunny, Super Bun Bun.

Jeanettee Pham. Jeanettee is a senior in IA and involved with IA leadership. She is an artist and writer who enjoys reading novels in her free time. She loves birds and horses.

Isabel Saenz. Isabel is a senior in Integrated Arts who hopes to major in fine arts and minor in criminology in college. She hopes to earn her degree in art and pursue a career in the FBI, CIA, Secret Service, or police force. Though she might not pursue art as a full time career, she hopes to still create and perform as much as possible.

Addyson Santos. Addyson is a sophomore, and this is her first year at OCSA. Her hobbies include writing, going to concerts, playing instruments, and reading.

Esa Wang. Esa is a multidisciplinary student, artist, model, and Miss Asia International titleholder whose work explores womanhood, identity, and empowerment. Her Woman as Flower series reflects her early journey of expressing both the inner and outer strength of women through layered textures and symbolism. Beyond visual art, she founded the *Global Asian Women Artists Magazine* to uplift underrepresented creatives and continues to advocate for women's voices in the arts. Also a filmmaker, dancer, and a model, Esa integrates beauty, resilience, and self-expression across mediums, shaping her vision of what it means to be a woman today.

Zihui Ye. An exploring freshman who is still taking in the possibilities of high school.

Amelie Zazik. Amelie is a 7th grader in IA. She enjoys creative writing, acting, reading horror and dystopian fiction and creating short films.

Kevin Zhang. Kevin is a senior in the Integrated Arts Conservatory at OCSA. He loves to draw, listen to music, and is passionate about becoming a fashion designer.

Editors

Ethan Baker. Ethan is a junior in IA, and he enjoys fishing. Besides fishing, he loves skating and riding bikes.

Alanis Barrera. Alanis is a high school student at Orange County School of the Arts, currently a junior, who enjoys volunteering at her local dentist. By gaining volunteer hours, she is also able to gather experience and better understand what she wants to pursue in the future. This has been a big switch, from tutoring kids to shadowing at a dental office with clients that have very specific problems, and has helped her connect with assistants that have similar interests, which are guiding her and giving her suggestions on what high school classes to take and what major is the best choice for college. Besides wanting to pursue a dental career after high school, she hopes to continue her hobbies, drawing, crocheting, and photography. She can't wait for other things that will come into her life to better shape her through the course of the years.

Sapphire Bordewick. Sapphire is a junior at OCSA. She is a dedicated student with a passion for competitive dance. She is known for her optimism, empathy, and always being down to hang out. If she isn't at dance, you can find her taking a nap or shopping.

Sydney Mae Estrella. Sydney Mae is a Senior in IA who has a strong passion for dance and has been committed to this art for over 13 years. You can find her at a dance studio, studying at cafes, shopping with friends, trying new foods, attending concerts, or traveling the world. In her free time, she likes baking, blasting music in her room, or doomscrolling on TikTok.

Lincoln Ferchaw. Lincoln is a junior in the Integrated Arts conservatory. He joined IA in the 7th grade and had enjoyed writing a lot while in elementary school. In his free, time he tends to eat, sleep, and watch a lot of movies. Lincoln also plays for two hockey teams, one is a club team called the California Wave, and the other is the Villa Park High School hockey team.

Devin Thomas Fuller. Devin is a junior, accomplished hip-hop dancer, and plane enthusiast in the Integrated Arts conservatory. He's danced for 11 years in competitions and has performed at the world's biggest boom box. He's designed many planes and spends time 3D modeling famous jets from memory.

Lauren Geel. Lauren is a junior in the Integrated Arts conservatory. She has three cats, loves art and music, and is usually found sketching or practicing the guitar.

Sarah Glauch-Lozano. Sarah Glauch-Lozano is an Integrated Arts and Creative Writing senior and a writer and avid reader. She loves crafting, baking, and autumn, and lives in OC but finds herself more at home in Narnia, Wonderland, and Camelot. Even before she could read, she was creating stories about her princess stickers and scrawling out fantasy maps with crayons. She has had her works published in *Bonfire* in the past and is passionate about world affairs, which is mirrored through her poems, short stories, and spoken word poetry.

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Sam Lanthier. Sam is a junior in Integrated Arts at OCSA. His biggest interest is upcycled fashion, and he goes to cleanups thrift stores often as he enjoys putting an effort into saving the environment. He also is on the sender one training team and goes to competitions often.

Mordecai Mehau. Mordecai, 17, surrounds himself in the arts, from Russian ballet, theater, the circus, a strong passion in fashion, a love for the culture of music, but most of all he has been drawing since he could hold a crayon. Mordecai comes from a family of artists who supported him leaving his home in Hawaii in 2019 to pursue a career in the arts. 6 years later, he is proud to present his drawings and paintings and hopes to be able to share his work with the world. Mordecai often describes his art as his life source and window to his soul. Each creation is a way to look into who he truly is.

Chloe Reyes. Chloe Reyes is a Junior at OCSA who loves musical theater and dancing. She has been committed to her musical theater studio for almost 10 years and has taken opportunities to teach kids that share the same passions as her. Aside from those passions, she likes road trips, going to concerts with friends, deep conversations, listening to music and napping.

Rachel Sung. Rachel is currently a senior at the Orange County School of the Arts and has been in the Integrated Arts conservatory for the past six years. Rachel's writing has been published in two *Bonfire* editions, and she is the lead student coordinator for the Visual Arts portion of IA Showcase. She loves visual arts, creative writing, and singing, and in her free time, she loves trying new foods, reading, traveling, and watching shows and movies.

Jackson Tran. Jackson is a junior attending the Orange County School of the Arts. He loves to pursue numerous artistic disciplines within the Integrated Arts conservatory, gaining respective

experience within dance, performance, film, music, writing, visual and digital arts.

Tessa Tran. Tessa is a junior in the Integrated Arts conservatory at the Orange County School of the Arts. She wanted to be a part of the collaborative process of *Bonfire* magazine this year to gain artistic experience and contribute passions for the art of creative writing. Outside of school, Tessa finds joy in exploring the world of music and discovering new artistic inspirations. She is always eager to learn and connect with new ideas.

Jacob Turrietta. Jacob is a student at the Orange County School of the Arts. He is a dancer who has been dancing for 16 years, and he has recently found a passion for writing. He is in the middle of writing an autobiography about himself. He is currently in the process of opening his own business as a dog groomer.

Mackenzie Vallejo. Mackenzie is a Senior in the Integrated Arts conservatory. She spends her free time dancing and is a member of the IA hip-hop team, ManIA. She also loves baking, visual art, and binge-watching sitcoms with her sister. Aside from this, you will almost always find her in a new cafe.

Andre Vasquez Flores. Andre is a student whose career choice is to be a future engineer with him currently being in a FRC robotics team in Code Orange. He is experienced in martial arts such as Taekwondo and beginner experience in Jiu Jitsu. He is trained in manufacturing and an intermediate in python coding language skills and enjoys constructing and designing with some experience OnShape 3D modeling software.

Trisha Vidhun. Trisha is a junior at Orange County School of the Arts. She is passionate about women's empowerment and advocacy through the UN foundation Girl Up. She leads a Girl Up Club at her school and the Girl Up Pacific Coast Coalition as the club coordinator. She is also passionate about climate change and has a business whose mission is to fight against fast fashion by selling upcycled and sustainable products. In her free time, Trisha can be found painting, baking, and writing.

Devin Vo. Devin is a senior at IA and loves to dance, which he started in his early years. Besides dancing, he just walks his dogs and golfs.

Ella Marie Weiler. Ella is a junior in IA. She loves singing, reading, musical theater, and cooking. She has a gigantic dog named Bear and loves animals. In her free time, she goes to the mall, sings in church, and hangs out with friends.

Audrie Wu. Audrie is currently a junior attending Orange County School of the Arts as a student in the Integrated Arts Conservatory. In middle school, Audrie loved to write poetry and short stories which she would submit to various competitions and win prize money. When she began high school, Audrie branched out and explored various art forms including oil paint and pastels, mixed media, and photography. Audrie's current fixation is on conveying emotional connections and interconnectedness through mixed media/2D art which she enjoys doing in her AP Art and Design class. In the future, Audrie hopes to pursue a career related to art, communications, or counseling. As of right now, however, Audrie is

more focused on making nails for her friends and trying to get six hours of sleep every night.

Noa Zylberman. Noa is a senior in the Integrated Arts conservatory. She loves dancing and is the president of the hip hop dance team, ManIA. In her free time, you'll find her exploring new cafes, working out, and spending time at the beach.