

SOUNDINGS



MAGAZINE

***Soundings* Volume 76**

A Literary-Art Magazine of Staples High School

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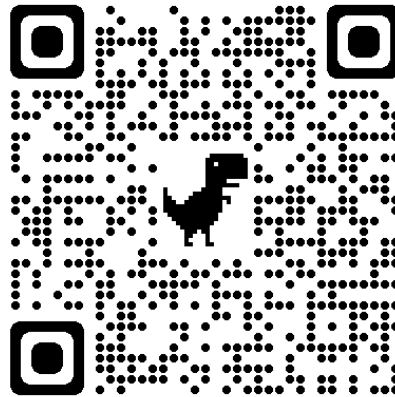
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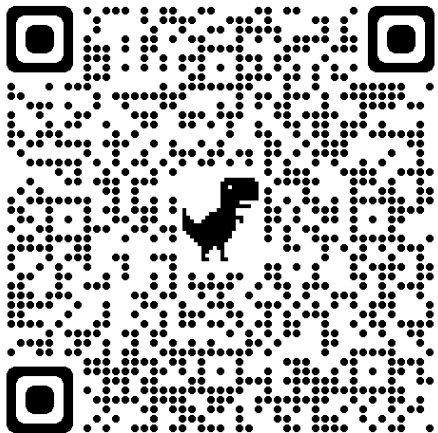
Soundings is a student run creative literary magazine published every year that celebrates student expression at Staples High School. One of the oldest extra-curricular clubs at Staples (est. 1947), *Soundings* seeks to compile student-made work, both written and visual, and in doing so, highlight voices typically overlooked in the high school community.

CONTEST

This school year, *Soundings* has revived its annual contest. The theme for this year was *The Devil is in the Details* and was designed to provoke thought and complexity. The contest was split into two categories--literature and arts--and two winners were chosen, one for written submissions, and one for visual submissions. Out of those two winners, one was selected to be the overall winner. Winners were selected through a democratic and anonymous review process by club members using a rubric that assessed skill and adherence to theme. Winners are highlighted in this magazine.

ANNUAL SELECTION PROCESS

Over the course of the year, with a submission cutoff in late April, the *Soundings* staff democratically and anonymously votes on student submissions based on a rubric that considers skill, effort, and relevancy. The submissions with the most positive votes are then featured in the magazine.



HOW TO JOIN

The QR code on the left links to a Google form that can be used for joining *Soundings*. For more information, go to the page on our website entitled “Become a Member.”

PUBLICATION HISTORY

Staples High School students founded the literary magazine entitled *Soundings*--a name that references “making noise”--in 1947. Some notable past contributors include: Fred Hollister, who was the first editor of the magazine when it was created; Jane Yolen, who published her first book at 22 and has since gone on to author and edit 280 books; Mark Kramer, who had a long career in the writing field and continues to help others with their writing even in retirement. There have been dozens of such contributors throughout the years, and even hundreds more writers and artists, that have found a place to express themselves within *Soundings*.

*To the People of Ukraine, whose strength and courage
during these times is greatly aspirational.*

AND SPECIAL THANKS TO...

Staples and Westport Public Library librarians,

Staples English and Art Departments,

Staples students and community,

our faculty advisor, Kim Herzog,

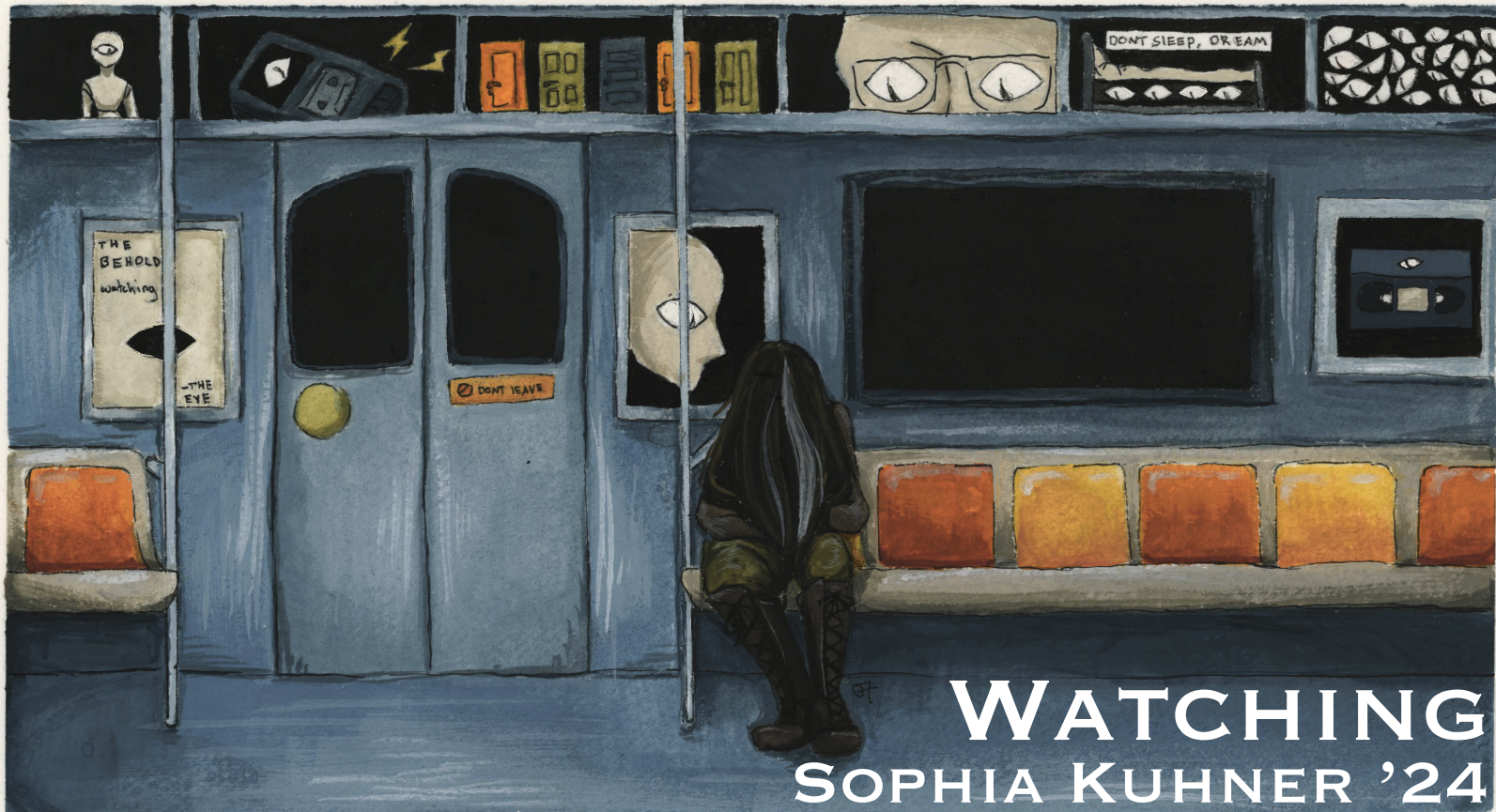
and to writers and artists for their submissions.

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CONTEST WINNERS



WATCHING
SOPHIA KUHNER '24

COTTON JAIYANA KHAN '22

Wisps of wind flutter with grace
As cotton fluffs to take its place.
The sky is gray, the sun erased
As cotton fills the air with haste.

Rubble strips the rooftop bare,
Except for one stray kitten there;
His mewls combat the cotton, scared
As cotton suffocates the air.

A new weight presses the rooftop floor
As a creak emits from the metal door.
Footsteps gather, ankles sore—
The kitten cowers, visibly torn.

As hands now lift the kitten high,
The cotton clears the kitten's mind.
The kitten doesn't question why,
And soon, his cries come from the sky.

Hands are empty, fingertips
Like hydrangeas kissed by ocean lips.
Cotton plunges to fill the rips
In phalanges once worth the risk.

Wisps of cotton flutter with grace.
Nothing new can take their place.
Blood is seeping, white erased
As cotton fills the throat with haste.

Cotton strips blood vessels bare
Until the fingers aren't there.
No panic sparks; no one is scared
As cotton suffocates the air.

A DISTANT TREK Brian Fullenbaum '22

We passed under the sky-high orange arch. The Subaru is accompanied by the road and nothing but the road. There are no birds or grass beyond my dusted rear side window. I can only see wave-like canyons and sand.

When I look even farther I can even see the heat waves curving over each other, fighting to catch my eye. But I look forward as the car drives around the domes of canyon rock and as the road swerves through the sanded desert mountains. Everything is still except for our car on the road. The stagnant desert makes the car feel like liquid.

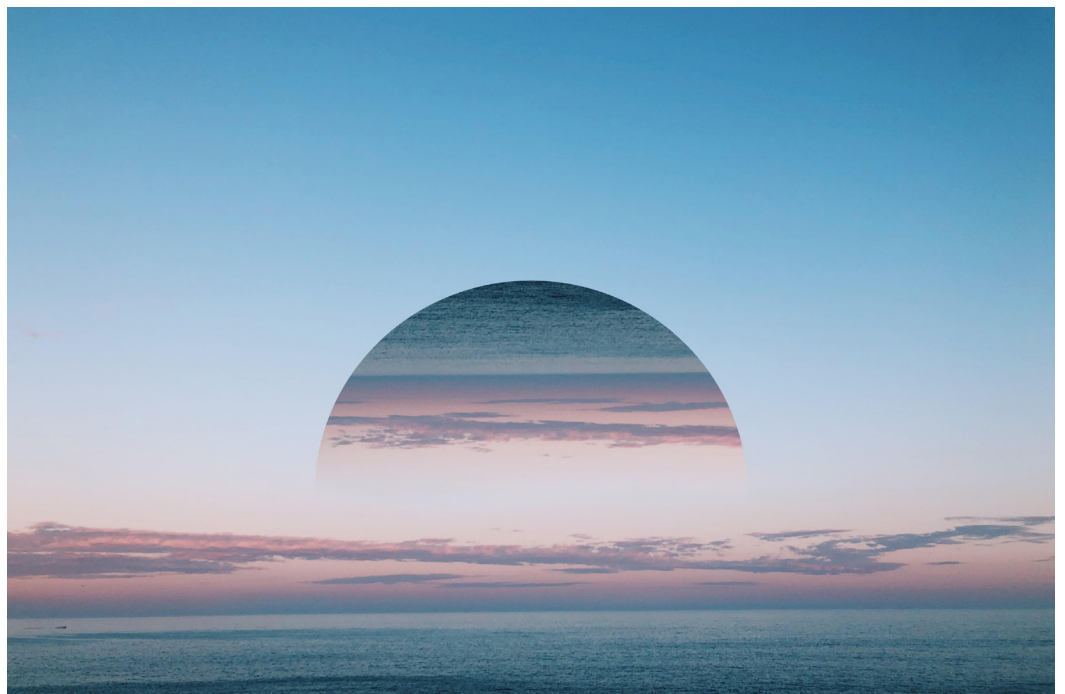
There wasn't a town within a three hour drive through the canyons that faced us. Every ten minutes I can make out some small wooden planks in the distance. Maybe it's the remnants of a shack or even a house.

The car continued to rise and fall in altitude and the car's intended direction from north to south became more intricate. It was probably boiling outside, but I couldn't tell because the air conditioner was blasting through my dry skin.

As the car drives around the mountain corner, I see something interesting: a man on a bike out in the open. He's wearing a white tank top that sways with the wind, and some cheap cargo pants. The man's bike is a normal Trek, and there is a small plastic water bottle sitting beneath the seat. The man is not wearing a backpack and doesn't have any supplies.

He's in the middle of the desert. Our car zooms past as I peek through the back window. The man continued to bike – for hours or maybe days through the desert.

For all my worrying, I don't think the biker even gave it a thought. He just carried on.



SPACE BEACH Tamar Rotem '23

THE FALL OF THE HOUSE OF MADNESS

Peyton
Lampugnale '23

The big, ugly colored house sat on the street that is not to be named. He welcomed any irreproachable girl he could come across. The hideous window panes and bitter doors stared at you when approaching while the mind received the hideous images

of the desolate. His raucous vehicles sat in the vast driveway that connected to the lamentable rooms. The rooms which brought consternation to my mind that he would try to wield. The rooms that made me feel sympathy for the imperfect, and the vulnerable. A sense of insufferable gloom pervaded my spirit. I looked at the scene before me. The simplest features in front of me turned miserable, the blue turned frantic, the green turned unwieldy. He, who is not named, welcomed me—an irreproachable girl— into his raucous vehicles and bitter doors with opened arms. Until I could no longer. No one knew, no one saw, and no one heard in the house of madness.

It was the cold October month, where the house afflicted my mind of dread and panic.

ASSEMBLAGE
Mia Vindiola '23



THE LAST ONE Emma Londoner '22

When Vivien finally got picked up,
I was the one left without a grownup.
I love my mom, she's really great,
But when it comes to pick up, she's often late.
I know she'll swing by, and soon we'll be home,
But as the time ticks on, my mind starts to roam.
What if some aliens captured her car in their ship?
What if a witch cast a spell with her magic finger tip?
What if some pirates thought she was treasure?
What if a monster just ate her for pleasure?
What if a vampire turned her into a bat?
What if a t-rex stepped on her minivan, leaving it flat?
What if some zombies tried to eat her smart brain?
What if a fire-breathing dragon's to blame?
What if... oh look, she's finally here,
I breathe a sigh of relief and let out a cheer!



SUNSET Alexe Scully '22

BUT, IT'S NOT OUR FAULT! Raia Badurina '23

I woke up feeling heavy. Cloudy. As if someone scribbled loops of black ink in my mind. I remember hearing that The Sickness would eventually make me feel that way. Fortunately for me, the doctors said that if I just continued to expose myself to sunlight, without going outside, the cloudy feeling would go away by the time we set off for planet Nemobran. With this in mind, I reached to open the blinds beside my window.

The sun was bright and high in the sky. It must have been nearly ten in the morning. I looked out across the yellowing lawn to the single tree at the edge of our property. I watched as a bird ignored the neighboring tree stumps lining our yard, and, instead, landed on the largest branch of our big oak. It was the only standing tree for a few hundred miles. A few years ago people would come like tourists to sit beside it and rest a gloved hand on the bark. They would take pictures next to it and murmur that the “air somehow felt fresher beside it.” I would always laugh at the ignorance of them all; it was as if they forgot the domes around their head purified the oxygen for them. Vicinity to a tree held no importance. We didn’t need plants to purify anything for us anymore. Of course all of this is unbeknownst to the little bird, now pecking his way into the largest branch of our oak. After a few minutes, he found what he was searching for, and took flight into the sun. I watched him for as long as I could before the bright yellow absorbed him. Swallowed him whole. Blinking away the remaining sun spots blurring my vision, I shut the blinds again. It’s too bright outside.

Deciding to be productive, despite the overbearing fuzzy feeling in my head, I pried myself out of bed and trudged over to the two suitcases beside my door. I still needed to pack my Bag of Valuables. It was the only luggage allowed on ship that could contain things besides clothes. Everyone was instructed that all furniture, excess clothing, and other items would be left behind unless they were packed in the Bag of Valuables.

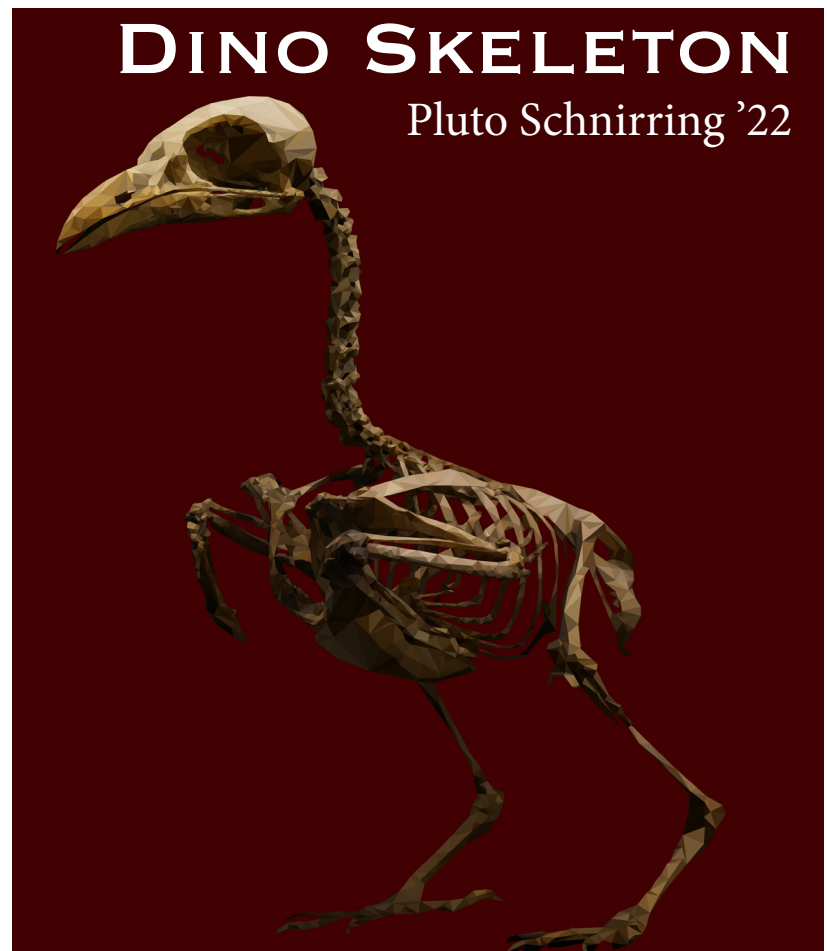
I knew immediately that I needed to include my mother’s journal. She wrote down all of her adventures there. She lived a vibrant life, back in the time of the Green Land and when there were animals around besides the birds. She died when The Sickness was new to all of us. The doctors studied her in hopes of finding a cure. It took them a year before they realized that there was no hope to save anyone who got it as bad as her. The disease wasn’t contagious, but once people started to turn yellow, like the world outside, they were goners. The only cure would be to leave before it got to the rest of us. That’s why Nemobran became so appealing. Humanity was already used to wearing the suits to protect us from the world outside, the world that we ruined, so the transfer to Nemobran wouldn’t be so bad. At least people arriving there weren’t turning yellow. In fact, the color was actually disappearing from their skin altogether. So what’s the big deal about a journey across the galaxy? Chaos is our baseline. We adapt or we abandon. The Earth isn’t being so nice to us anymore? Screw it, we’ll leave. There’s no way that we had anything to do with The Sickness. Nothing is ever our fault, right?

It's funny how the world works. The balance that it creates. We killed our planet, so it killed us right back.

I shoved the journal into the Valuables Bag, and then added a few other things. One being a locket that NASA had printed for me a year after my dad left to explore Nemobran. He was the only astronaut awarded with the oh-so-superior job of investigating humanity's new home. He was our hope for the future. The guinea pig to see if establishing life there would be possible. But his mission was one he'd never return from; the ship was only sent with enough fuel for a one way trip. He didn't know that, of course, otherwise he wouldn't have gone, especially not as a lone explorer. My dad was never the type who thrived during long periods of alone time, and it would be many years before the rest of us decided to join him up there. He couldn't handle it, so one day he just took off his helmet outside. That's when we learned that having the Outdoor Automatic Lock feature was a necessity.

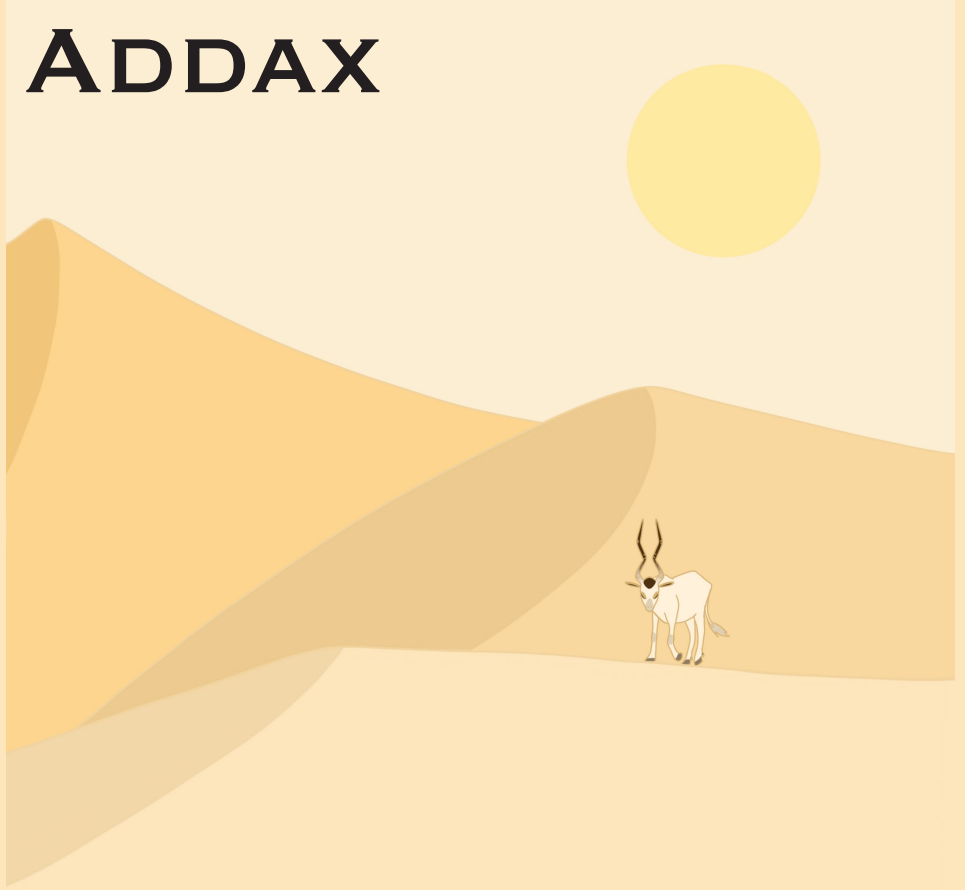
The rest of my Valuables Bag was made full by a few of my favorite books, a childhood teddy bear, and my father's old watch. As I searched through my room to fill it, I realized how impossible it was to put a lifetime full of things into a small backpack. I eventually gave up trying to rationalize between what was important enough to bring, or irrelevant enough to leave behind. Though it was probably easier for me to decide what to keep than it would be for everyone else. I mean, as an only child, I didn't have much. After both of my parents died, I was placed into a house with the other kids who shared my fate. We each only had a room's worth of stuff, but that made everything seem all the more important.

Just as tears were beginning to brim my eyes, the bell rang, announcing our time slot to head over to the ship. I grabbed my luggage and walked to the front door of the house, where the other kids were already forming a line to suit up. Once my helmet was attached to the rest of the suit, I shuffled out of the door, into the yellow haze, and filed into a car. The other kids sat next to me, their hands in their laps, watching the world pass by as we drove towards the ship. My eyes caught on the same bird from earlier, only this time he wasn't flying. He lay dead on the side of the road. Poor thing didn't get the same luxury as we. He didn't get to flee.



THE LAST ADDAX

Shivali Kanthan '24



MANED WOLF

Shivali Kanthan '24

I CANNOT GO TO THE DENTIST TODAY

Phoebe Barnes '22

"I cannot go to the dentist today!"
Exclaimed little Jenny McClay.
"I've got that thing,
An important fate.
I'm becoming mayor of a United State.
I'm the new player for a renowned team.
I've got to go out and make ice cream.
No dentist today.
They're not seeing me.
I'm not entering the vicinity.
I will not let them check for a cavity.
My teeth are very clean in reality.
Yet you have the audacity
to claim that we are going to the dentist!
I will not go today.
They have lollipops you say?
Actually...
I do not have that thing,
No important fate.
I lied about becoming mayor of a United State.
I'm not the new player for a renowned team.
I am not making ice cream.
Because I have the dentist today."



SANDY
Davis Crandall '25



**SPIDERMAN
(TOBEY
MAGUIRE)**
Cory Lam '22

PICASSO-PAINTED REALITY

Charlie Jandora '24

What's the real difference between a child's self-portrait and one of Picasso's paintings?

Both express a sense of true self

Both challenge authenticity: fortune favors the bold... right?

Is it each child's 'ignorance'?

I should have listened when they said ignorance is bliss

What they really meant to say was knowledge is misery

Genuine emotion, like that of the Weeping Woman's angles, is not seen from a bird's eye view

You must look closer, but remember to be wary of the monsters lurking in the deep

Maybe it's their filter or lack thereof?

They truly bite the bullet and bolt straight towards truth

"Your nose is too long"

"Your forehead is too big"

Observations without the minor details

"Minor"= the mascara smudge under your eyes left in the wake of your tears

= the bruise on your lip from a recent fight

= the texture on your face that allows doubt to cut deep beneath your skin

Possibly their unruly imaginations, their thoughts never grounded?

Their heads are always in the clouds

They are pirates surfing a foamy, white sea in search of the long lost treasure

No one would ever point out to them that you would just sink right through

Some rest on cloud nine, painfully oblivious of the burning world beneath them

Sprawled on the perfectly fluffy clouds that hug them like a blanket

Even if they feel the burn of the rising heat, children will see each cloud's silver lining

Always the optimists

What happened to that?

Are we all just the incomplete pictures our younger selves started to draw?

Even if you draw an outline first, there will be no depth until you cross more bridges

Picasso's paintings are beautiful because of the texture and lines carved into the canvas

A roadmap of a beautiful, confused life

The more of this life you live, the more jumbled the page looks

Just remember to try and experience all of it

What even is 'it'? How do I know I've done it all?

What's the real difference between a child's self-portrait and one of Picasso's paintings?
When looking through the eyes of a child, one may be blind to the world's insecurities
This may be easier...

...but it is not what makes us human

Picasso's paintings are finished, they tell stories

They are perfected to the point of imperfection; what that means to you is for you to interpret

Each face is an extreme landscape that tempts the line between reality and imagination

Clouds will never hold a child, but we should let them figure it out for themselves

The heat from our fire is evaporating their clouds

A person's life may seem perfect on the outside, a kindergartener's landscape

You must look to the details to find their dreams and nightmares

Their scars and reminders

Their roses and thorns

What someone envisioned the world to be as a child is the unthinkable, nothing like their messed up lives today

Their Picasso painted reality



FROG AND A PRINCESS

Sophie Fridland '22

TYPE OF MONSTER

Anya Gubitz '22

His voice had never sounded so cold. But I was sweating and I couldn't stop. My hands kept picking at the loose thread on my sweater, pulling and pulling, unraveling like my life before my eyes. He still had the wrench in his hand, blood dripping and staining the cream fur carpet. It would never wash out. But neither would the nibbles and crumbles of brain spread across the far corner. The blood seeped through the carpet like a wave. Slowly, but eventually, it would reach my feet and I'd have to move. Or I'd have to watch my shoes be stained too. The corpse was beyond recognition. The head had more resemblance to rotted dung and smelled of cheap burger meat. But the red had the most brilliant shine when the fading sunlight hit it. There was no hoping they were still alive, it was undeniably over. I'd never see her face again. I'd never have to see her face again.

Looking up I could see his heart swell. It swelled and slowly burst the anguish running through his veins and pouring out of his eyes. My future dropped with that tear. Turning around would mean accepting the inevitable. The cruel fate of failure. I wasn't ready for that decision. The floorboards groaned behind me, warning of the present. Footsteps neared my standing, pushing me to decide. My safety, my haven, my heaven before me, could do nothing but expect. He wouldn't cry anymore, his last tear was the final goodbye. I step back, away from the blood and toward the future.

My horrors were gone from nightmares awoken. Mornings of bliss, dawns of promise, and nights of healing were not meant to fall to this. To fall to a moment where they would all crumble through the cracks of frail hold. We knew, but we had hoped it would last. We had planned for it to last.

All we needed, all I needed was reprieve from the monster. I needed a bubble in the drowning. I needed a pause in the screeching. I needed a break in the fleeing. I needed a clot in the blood flow. And blood I recieved. From the window frame high on the east wall, to the black ink pen on the center desk to the carpet in front of me. Slowly soaking closer.

Watching the stagnant progression of dark red toward me, the red getting darker and darker, I feel my consciousness fall into it. My memories rise with the fall. Cognizance of a wet face, salt burning my skin. Wood boards shrill as she walks away. He was there to pick me up and hold my pieces while I reassembled. I do the chore myself, because she is my monster and I am my own hero. He fed me when she stole all my life source. He picked up the wrench from my hand when I was shaking and pushed me away from the blood. He kissed my head like a good father would, while telling me to leave.

But then behind me the floorboards groaned, warning of the present. Footsteps nearer to my standing. A once deep warm voice asking what had happened. So I stepped forward, staining my feet with the blood. Deciding only I go down in this fall, because what type of monster murders her mother.



HUSKY

Natasha Taubenheim '22

A COLLECTION OF HAIKUS: CHOOSING TO HOPE

Max Ardrey '23

THE FUTURE

What the future holds
It's not just hand picked for you
You always can choose.

YOU'RE FREE

Look around, wake up.
In your heart, the world is yours.
You are not anybody's.

STAY ON THE BOARD

Life is but a wave
While we all surf across it.
You just need balance.

ONE'S OWN CONTROL

Are you in control?
Please, it will all be alright.
You are in control.

IT IS CALLED THE PRESENT, BECAUSE IT IS A GIFT

The past is the past
And the future can be yours
The *Now* is a gift.

FREE TO CHOOSE

Now take on the day,
Look up at the door that shines,
Just take a few steps.

A CHOICE?

A door that opens,
A light that shines in the dark.
Will you go to it?

ALMOST LIKE CLAY

Brash and maybe harsh,
Life can be sculpted in time.
You are your project.

THE LONG AND WINDING ROAD

What leads where and why?
So many paths and choices--
Blessings in disguise.

FOREVER AND ALWAYS

The choice is all yours.
They are all yours, forever--
You just have to pick.

JUST CHOOSE TO HOPE

The door that opens,
The light that shines in the dark,
You *can* go to it.

HOUSING THE DEVIL Nina Lauterbach '24

Cracks arise from a person's concealment
Like smoke from a chimney.
Layer upon layer, a secret is buried in the basement below the ground. Layer
upon layer, words stumble over each other, crushed in a sentence,
Not wanting to be read.
Layer upon layer, the walls of a house are built over its crumbling foundation.
Layer upon layer, I wear a smile over my bruised heart.

The sun shines through my tear-glossed eyes
Like a heavy curtain blocking spectators from seeing the truth.
"Be nice!" they shout from a distance
As they push me to the side.
I smile, the corners of my lips trembling,
The corner between two walls of life pushing against my shoulders,
Like their rules and my own desires fighting in the sharp edge,
Curling me inward.
"Sit up!"
"Don't act like the weight of the world is on your shoulders."
"Be thankful."

But look closer,
I'm shaking.
With fear, with anger, I don't know,
I just can't let it show.
Close the curtains, shut my eyes,
Keep the roof on before I meet my demise.
Because the words stand in line at the back of my throat,
Scratching and clawing,
Like a caged wolf,
They want to escape.

I want to open the door to let the wolf run.
The urge passes through me,
As a ghost does a body,
Reaching for my soul,
Freeing it from their chains, releasing a breath of defiance.
"That is no way for you to behave,"
They think I feel no pain.

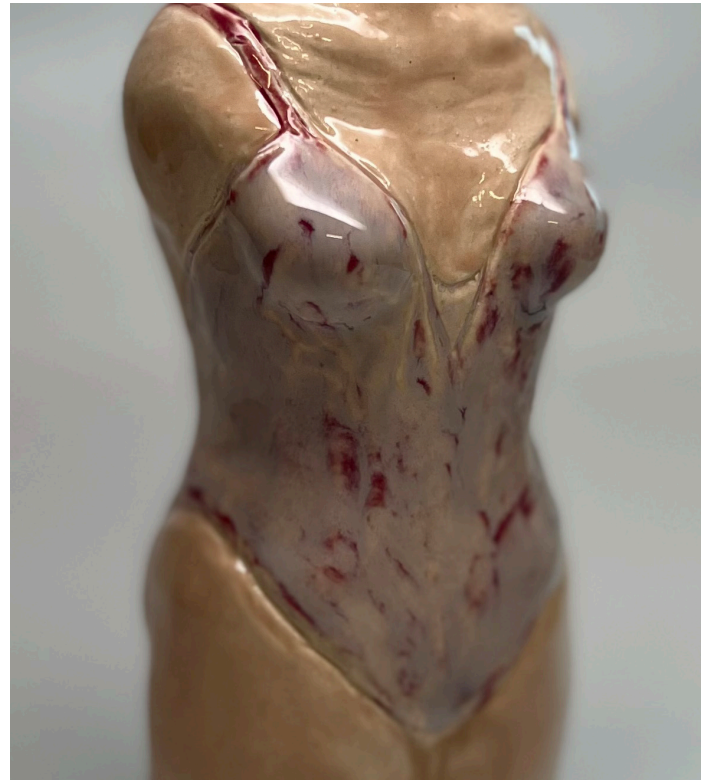
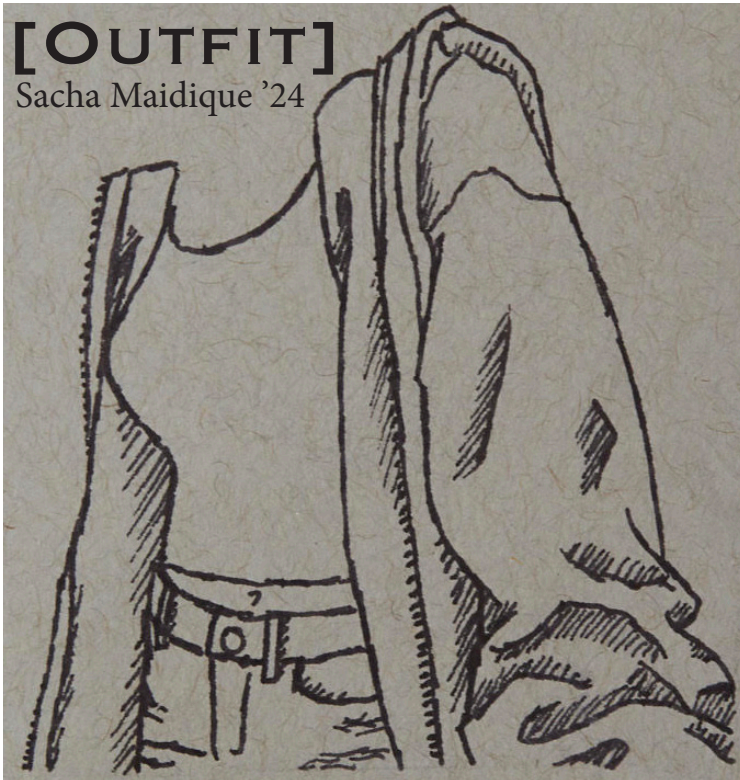
But look closer,
It's all there on my face.



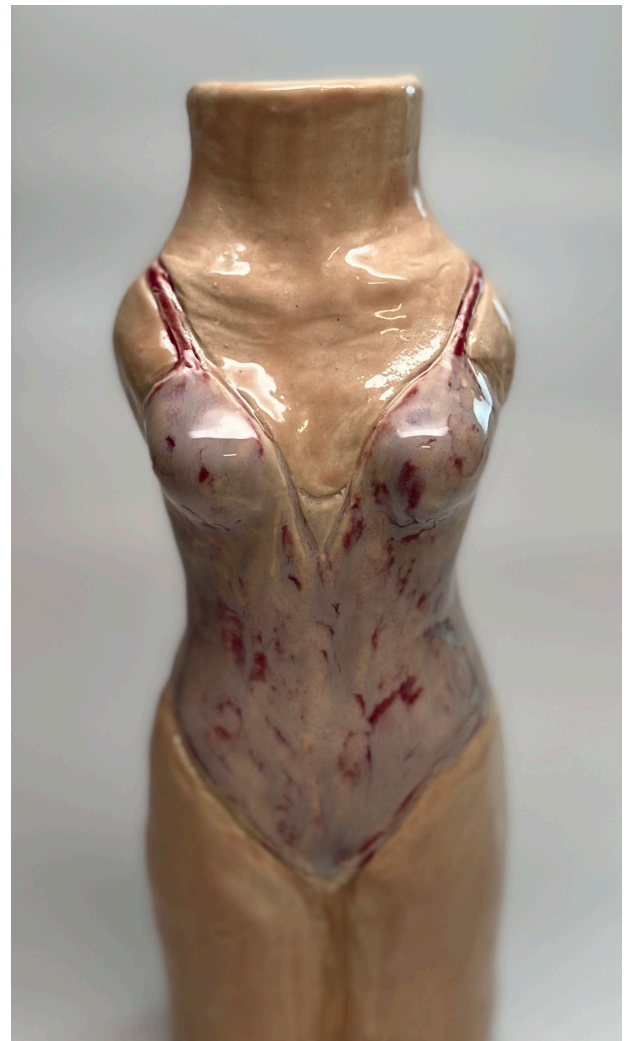
FREE SPIRITS Shivali Kanthan '24

[OUTFIT]

Sacha Maidique '24



OBJECTION Akira Maidique '22



WOMAN'S BODY

Christina Meehan '23

MAINE Sebastian Malino '22

The hum of the heating system reverberated around the restaurant, quiet enough to be left out of conversation, but loud enough to be noticed by all who occupied the diner.

I had never been here before, yet I knew that they kept the heating on year-round, no doubt about it. I felt clammy, as it had been only slightly chilly outside, but the radiators were overcompensating. I looked down at my plate, its food all but untouched.

"How much longer is lobster season going to last?" I groaned.

"You must be joking. This is Maine, Nora," Liam chuckled.

He piled more lobster tails onto his plate. The small establishment smelled like salt and discarded shellfish. It would have been charming in a rustic sort of way, if I liked shellfish, or Maine, or things that were rustic.

"I'm well aware. Can't I just get a hot dog, or chicken fingers?" I pleaded.

"No, I don't think you can get those things at Leland's Lobster Trap," Liam said dryly. He didn't roll his eyes, but he might as well have.

"Ugh," I groaned. I moved closer and leaned in close to Liam's bowed head. "Did you know, I'm actually allergic to lobster?" I asked.

"Really? Is that right?" Liam asked flatly, not looking up from his lobster.

"Mhm. It's severe. If I even look at a lobster, I might burst into hives." I tried to contain my smile.

"You've had three lobsters since we got into the state."

"You're no fun!" I exclaimed, sitting back in my chair.

I began poking at my lobster tails with my fork. They looked about as appetizing as the last thousand lobster dishes I had eaten.

"Here's a question," Liam started. His tone shifted into a more serious voice. "Shoot."

"What on God's earth did you expect when I asked you to go to Maine with me?" he asked, shifting his voice back into a more lighthearted tone. I stifled a laugh.

"Fair enough," I conceded. The smile slowly fell from my face as I answered his question again in my head. "I expected to get away," I added.

Liam's eyes shot up to meet mine. His eyes had always been prettier than mine, two perfect shades of brown that reminded me of strong oaks and good leather. My lackluster blues didn't hold a candle to them.

"Yeah. Yeah, I feel that," Liam said solemnly.

It felt like the energy had gone out of the cramped diner, but I knew that it had simply gone out of my chest. I swallowed.

"With everything that went on, I just -"

"Wanted a break?" Liam interjected. He looked at me with empathy in his eyes.

"A very long break," I agreed, shaking my head.

"I needed one too. You should see the mess at the border right now."

"Do you want to talk about it?" I asked carefully. It was rare that Liam ever talked about his job. The corner of Liam's mouth twitched.

"Not particularly."

"Then we won't."

"What about you? Do you want to talk about Henry?" he asked, equally as carefully as I had presented my question to him.

"Do you want to listen?" I asked.

"I could listen."

"Do you want to?" I urged.

"I'm indifferent," Liam said.

"Well, it's just hard to wrap my brain around it all."

"I can imagine."

"The funniest thing is that I was praying, every night, that they would catch the guy. But when it happened..." I trailed off.

"You didn't feel anything?" Liam finished my sentence.

"I felt sad. It was like the whole damn thing got thrown right back into my face."

It's true. That's exactly how it felt. The news breaking, the trial — god, my testimony. It was like he was dying over and over again each time someone said his name. Every time I try to remember him, the good memories are all replaced by a single image. His body on the asphalt, eyes turned into ceramic.

"I'm sorry," Liam said, snapping me out of my memory.

"It's ok," I shrugged, "I have to come to terms with it someday."

"Is that today?"

"No." I shook my head. "Can we talk about something else?"

"Sure." Liam nodded and looked around. "You wanna ditch this place?"

"Absolutely."

"I'll have your lobster."

"Be my guest."

Liam paid in cash. He left a much more generous tip than I would have, but I'm glad he did. I hope the waiters hadn't heard us talking. I hope we didn't dampen the place with our darkness.

We walked to his car. I spied a sign, raised above the nearby highway, out of the corner of my eye.

Maine: The Pine Tree State, it read. I tapped Liam lightly on the shoulder, and gestured to the sign.

"From the Magnolia State to the Pine Tree State," I said. Liam chuckled quietly.

"I prefer magnolias," he said as he unlocked his car.

I sure didn't. The smell of wilting magnolia leaves filled my nostrils. It brought me to hot, humid summers and swimming in the Mississippi River. It brought me to rolling hills and perfect sunrises. It brought me to Henry's blood splattered on the road, quietly dripping into a storm drain.

I climbed into the passenger seat. I dared to roll down the window as we began moving. The cold wind began accosting my face. The weight of the lighter felt unfamiliar in my hand, I expected it to be heavier. Guess I had been using up the butane too much in the past months. The cigarette didn't help my mood, but it felt nice enough. I blew solid streams of smoke out of the window as we drove.

"Would you like to hear about the border?"

Liam's question caught me off guard. I looked at him; his eyes were focused on the road ahead

of us, but his jaw was tight.

“Do you want to?” I asked, cautious again.

“I do,” he said. “Do you want to listen?”

“Yes,” I answered.

And he told me. He told me about how his stomach turned every time he flew out to Texas. He told me about the bodies they find of people who couldn’t brave the journey to the border. He talked about the people that get caught in the barbed wire at the top of the fence. The people that are unlucky enough to have survived the journey, and who meet the rifles of the border control. Sometimes, it was his rifle. It was the most distraught I had ever seen him. And for a second, I forgot about Henry.

“Thank you,” I said.

“For what?”

“For telling me. It’s good to talk about those things,” I said. He shrugged. We continued driving in silence. If I’m being honest, I didn’t even know where we were going. I was just glad we were away from it all.

“What if we didn’t go back?”

I was surprised that I said that. My voice sounded almost unfamiliar leaving my mouth.

“As in ever?” Liam asked, back to his usual even tone.

“Yeah. We never go back. Wouldn’t that be nice?” I said.

“What about our families?” he asked.

“They’d be alright,” I said. “We’re never actually home anyhow.”

“So we just keep driving?”

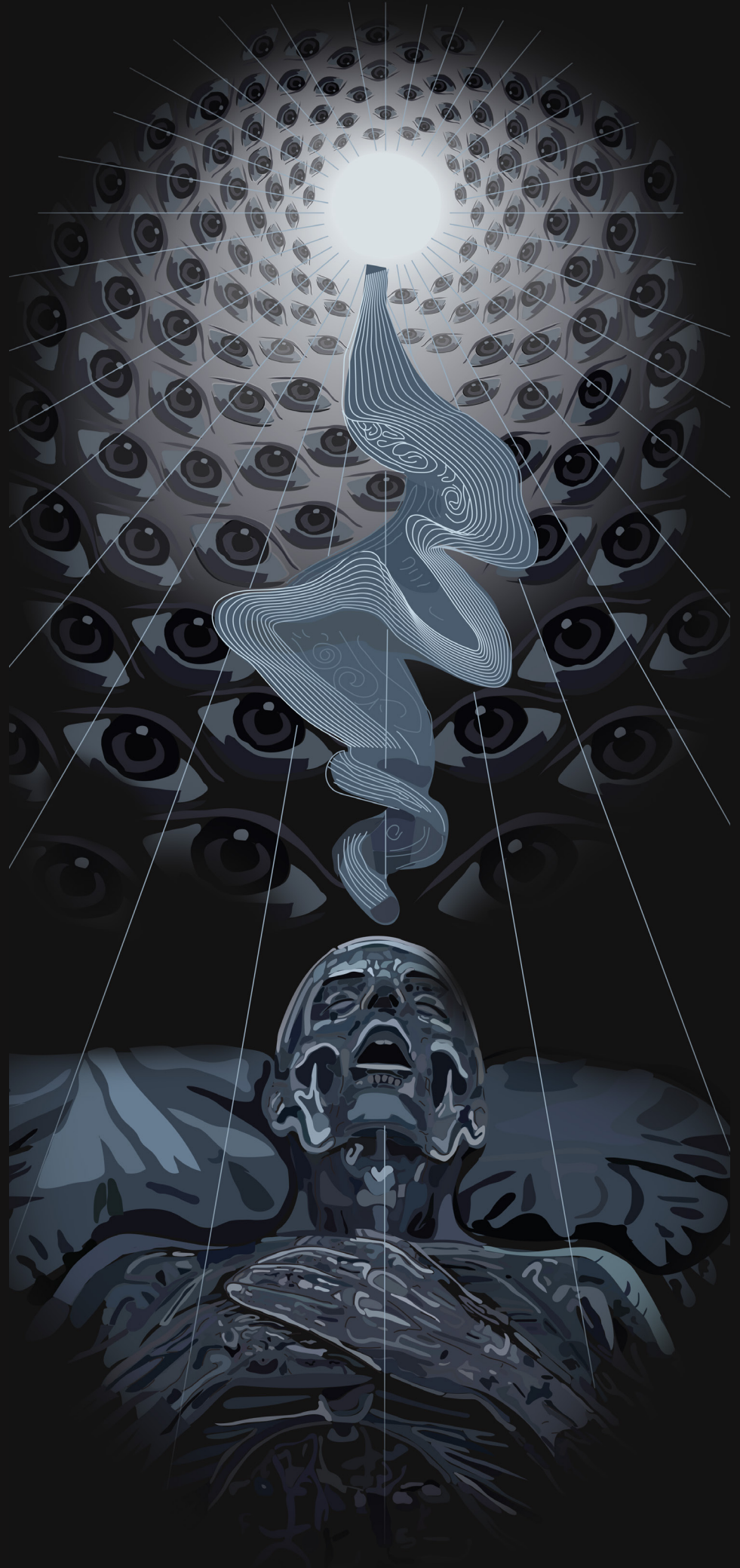
“We just keep driving,” I affirmed.

We fell back into silence. I watched the pine trees go speeding by my window. The sky was a special cobalt blue, far different from the sky back home. The air was crisper here. I could stay here, I knew it. Could Liam? I turned to look at him. His jaw was still tight, meaning he was thinking about something. We kept on traveling down the highway, our tires rumbling and humming down the asphalt, in a symphony that said “Welcome Home”.

JELLY

Sacha Maidique '24





TOOL

Davis
Crandall '25

THE SHADOW OF REALITY Alex Overgard '23

It was just the end of October, and John stared at the grave. The rain was pattering off of it. He gripped his umbrella closer as the wind picked up, and the rain slanted, hitting his feet. He kicked at the leaves around the stone, trying to clean up its look. Jennifer Wick, the stone read. 1934 - 1997, died age 63. His wife had been dead for over 2 years now, but John visited the headstone every weekend to have lunch, using the time to reflect upon his own life. He spent some days just recalling his life before Jennifer's death, remembering a time of warmth and happiness, and the best days of his life...

The rain came down hard. It made small slapping sounds, hitting the smooth, stone slab, slowly etching the acquired dirt out of the lettering. His raincoat was soaked through, and he was freezing, but John slowly drifted away, into a world of light. Jennifer was in front of him. They were young again, on a picnic, feeding each other strawberries in a meadow. John felt happy, for he finally found the difference between a "meadow" and a random grassy field. They were at the base of a large willow tree, and its branches provided shade. It was the perfect temperature, warm, yet a slight breeze blew through her hair. John laughed and took a picture on a Polaroid. The photo slowly peaked out from inside the camera, then after a few seconds dropped into John's hand. He held it up to the light, only to see nothing, then waved it back and forth gently in the air. With each wave the image became a little more visible, and when it was fully developed, he showed it to Jenny, who was hanging over his shoulder. She only blushed and looked away and remarked it was a terrible photo. But it was beautiful and John pocketed and treasured it anyway. They got up from the classic plaid blanket they were sitting on and held hands. A few hundred feet away, there was a forest, cast in shadows. It provided a rather cold, chilling feeling, and they both tried not to keep it in their minds. They spend hours laughing and eating, and playing frisbee, and petting a random dog that appeared out of nowhere. Like seriously, they're in a massive field, there isn't a house for miles around, who's dog is this? As the sun was just only starting to set, they decided to address the forest. Each minute that went by was just another shade that the forest darkened, making it feel even more eerie and unnerving than before.



FLOWER STILL-LIFE

Cameron Retcho '23

Thunder cracked in the distance, echoing around the field. The sky was murky, even though the sun should've just been right overhead. John looked up, only to see his umbrella. He checked his watch. It was only 1:00 PM. He glanced to the edge of the field where the grave sat and stared at the forest. It was barely visible through the rain but he could still feel its ominous beckoning.

"C'mon! We should check it out!" Jenny said excitedly, grabbing John's hand.

She was right there. He was literally holding her hand. "I... don't know about going in there. It doesn't feel right."

"Awwwww it's just a bunch of trees, nothing to fear. I'll protect you!" She grabbed a willow branch.

"You're going to protect us with that?" John poked gently.

"Of course! This is my magic whip! It will keep away any unwanted souls." She pulled John towards the forest.

In John's mind, it did that thing that cinematographers like to do with their shots where the forest sort of stretches and gets bigger the closer you get to it. The trees tripled in size, towering over both of them. A classic fairytale scene. They walked slowly, holding on to each other, not because they were scared, but because there was an indescribable comfort to it. After a few minutes, the trees started to have more space between them, and it became very easy to see far ahead. Just a few hundred feet away, a small stream pooled into a rather large body of water, about 50 feet in diameter. A deer was majestically drinking from the water source, and birds were perched overhead in observance. A large splash in the pond could've been a frog or a fish, but it was too far away to see.

Jenny dragged him towards the pool. "Look! How pretty!" But the faster she ran, the further away it got, vanishing into the distance, becoming a strange mirage of a scene. John wasn't quite sure how this was even possible, but then again, magical things seemed to happen whenever he was with Jennifer.

It was snowing now. The sky turned a bright white, and John closed his umbrella. He was freezing and the snow wasn't making him any warmer, but it felt like the right thing to do. Snow gently fell onto Jenny's grave. He looked at the willow tree, capturing the snow on its long, graceful branches. They didn't do much to protect the grave, but the absolute beauty they provided was unmatched by anything else. He took out a copy of the photo they took that wonderful day, and laid it on the grave. The snow didn't melt because it was covered with the photo, but John knew it would disintegrate as soon as the snow melted. He was a rather accepting man, and knew that this was a good way of letting go. John had a faint smile on his face. He could still live happily, knowing the world had seen a shining ray of light.

Where to?



WHEREVER AND WHENEVER Francis O'Brien '24

I constantly worry— what will happen when I grow old?

Even as a young nine year old!

I worry that I'll never smile.

I worry I may not have style.

I worry I may have no money.

I worry nobody will think I'm funny.

I worry I will lose all my hair.

I worry I may not live anywhere.

I worry I will not find a wife.

I worry about the future of my life.

Although I worry and worry a ton,

I try and try to have some fun.

And when I take life day by day,

All my worries wash away.

WORRIES

Mason Schaefer '22



SHORT LIVED

Alie Shutze '22

The dark, sickening tint flooded the room. It was Christmas day and I couldn't hate the world more. My wife, Cynthia, lay silent and still on her deathbed. The hospital was cold and smelled like bleach. Cynthia had been in stage four cancer for about six months now. I had prepared for this day, but it still hit me like a train. The color was gone from her face, her cheeks caved in, and the only thing on her head was an old beanie.

We never really got around to having kids, although Cynthia would have been a great mother. It was always just rescuing dogs and her mom pestering me about "starting a family." We have a family: me, Cynthia, and then whatever mutt we were fostering at the time. Cynthia and I are only forty-seven; I mean nowadays, everyone seems to be dying from cancer. Why her though? Cynthia is the type of person to throw someone else's trash out. To remember someone's birthday she had only spoken to at work Christmas parties. Me on the other hand, I will be going straight to hell. I hate people. In fact, I only liked Cynthia; she is my person. She was my person. Oh well, to hell with the world and all. Life isn't fair and most certainty likes to fuck with me.

She looked so peaceful, laying there on her last couple of breaths. The doctor walked in and started reading her charts to me because she was too weak to even listen.

"Vitals not looking so good." His voice was stern and sophisticated like I was in trouble.

"Alright Doc, give it to me straight, I'm tired of waking up everyday and listening to this bull shit."

"To put it to you quite simply, I would say your goodbyes now. I'll let you two be for a bit, is there anyone you would like me to call?"

"No, no thanks."

The sad part is that I had no one to call. Cynthia was the only person I ever put as my emergency contact. I choked back tears and the lump in my throat became more prominent. This was it, the last moment with my wife. I looked into her tired blue eyes, remembering when they once were full of life.

...

My friend from college had invited me out to the bar for his twenty-third birthday. We were not extremely close but had mutual friends. Before the bar, we ate dinner at his girlfriend Alyssa's house. I remember going straight after my minimum wage job as a waiter at one of those trashy Italian restaurant chains. There was tomato sauce smeared on my collared shirt, bread crumbs on my black dress pants, and I reeked of artificial parmesan

cheese. I got to Alyssa's apartment, bringing some stale bread sticks from work, and rang the doorbell. Expecting Alyssa, someone else opened the door. The most beautiful woman I had ever seen. Her eyes, a soft almond shape with light freckles resting right below them. She wore a black cocktail dress with intricate embroidered flowers lining the hem. A dainty necklace sat in the middle of her chest, with what looked like initials. I remember her looking at me and smiling. My mind was blank and all I could do was stare at her beauty.

"Hey, I'm Cynthia, sorry, Alyssa will be right back." Her voice was euphonious and comforting.

"Yeah, uh, yeah, Alyssa, right."

I was so dumb, forgetting to even introduce myself. Clenching the bread sticks, I shuffled into the apartment. I brushed past her, getting a whiff of her perfume. She smelt like home, the perfect mix of vanilla and lavender. She held herself with an immense amount of confidence and a smile that lit up the room. The whole night I stared at her, in awe of her enticing beauty. I didn't even have the guts to ask her for her number until I was drunk- stumbling out of the bar.

"So, uh, Cynthia? Right?" I knew that was her name.

"Yep, that's me."

"Anyway I could take you out sometime?"

She giggled and my face turned a deep shade of pink. Cynthia grabbed my phone and typed in her number. Her hands were delicate and soft. To this day, she still makes fun of our awkward encounter that ended up lasting a lifetime... almost a lifetime.

...

As I held my wife's boney, translucent hand, I was quickly reeled back into reality. The dreary hospital room, polyester bed sheets, and the dingy nightgown that's been my wife's wardrobe for the past few months. Day turned into night, and the south wing of the hospital remained alive. I never quite understood hospitals. On one end, life is being brought into this world, and on the other it's being taken away. Stripped from the innocent to be put quite simply. The doctor entered back into our room. The fake condolences were written all over his face. He put his clipboard down and his hands in his coat pockets, then muttered out the words, "We did everything we could." I just felt like another one of his customers he had been trained to soften the blow for.

She was cold and did not smell of her usual lavender scent. I held onto Cynthia, resting my head on her chest. There was nothing in the world I could love more. A partner, a painter, a daughter, all of her amazing qualities consumed by a disease. Her delicate, muffled heartbeat steadily drifted away. All I heard was the continuous beep of her heart monitor, no longer a second apart.



HIDE AND SEEK

Logan Goodman '24



“Don’t throw that! It’ll splatter all over the walls.”

But when she confiscates my bouncy ball,

I can always find one more

Because when it comes to bouncy balls,

I know just what to look for.

The secret is your house is full of bouncy balls—

Apples, light bulbs, a football, a cream puff—

Because anything can be a bouncy ball

If you throw it hard enough.

BOUNCY BALL

Ally Schwartz '22

Bouncy balls are a blast to play with.

They skip and jump and run.

For me and you and everyone in between,

They’re truly loads of fun!

But sometimes my mom gets mad

When I play with my bouncy balls.

“You are making quite a racket!”

A HIDDEN CONVERSATION

Alexe Scully '22

Could you imagine that world?
One where we're free and don't have to hide?
It's a fantasy, a dream,
But what a wonderful dream to have.
If only it were real.
If only we were allowed to love.

My dear Jean, imagine we could love
And exist in that world,
Being happy, being here, being real.
But you and I know that we must hide
And we are not allowed to have
This little dream.

My dear Marcel, allow yourself to dream
And adore all that you love.
We are allowed to have
Our own place in this world,
And we won't need to hide.
We can be real.

But dear Jean, will they let us be real?
Or will they condemn us to hope for a dream?
They force us to hide
And damn our love.
They don't allow us a place in this world.
It'll never be ours, but theirs alone to have.

So why not take what you wish to have?
Demand to be seen, demand to be real.
They can't deny us the world
And force us only to dream.
We shouldn't be ashamed of our love,
We shouldn't be made to hide.

I'm too afraid, my dear, to do anything but hide.
It's a horrible way, but it let's us have
Our precious moments, our precious love.
These little moments feel so real,
And while I dream,
I wouldn't risk losing this to be a part of the world

So let's hide, but be real.
Wish to have, and keep our dream.
But let us love in our own little world



DAY TO DAY

Jaiyana Khan '22

THE PRICE OF PERFECTION

Anya Pulichino '23

It was a dreary and stormy Tuesday night when Alex was walking back home from her retail job. Pouring rain drenched her clothing and her mood. The empty streets and flashing lightning made her feet walk a little faster than normal. Repeatedly cursing herself for missing the bus, she carried on, not seeing the bright light slowly inching forward. When she looked up, she was startled to see a boutique. Although she had just moved here, Alex thought she would've noticed a boutique like this.

Everything was polished, like someone just finished cleaning. The eerily clear window gave a full view to the inside of the store. Extremely life-like mannequins looked at her—no, stared at her. But Alex was entranced by the beautiful clothing that hung on them. Colors she didn't even think existed, patterns she only saw in her dreams. It was not a matter of wanting to enter the store, it was an excruciating need to enter. As if something terrible would happen if she didn't leave with a new wardrobe. [continued on page 35]



67 LANDROVER AT COMPO BEACH
Charlotte D'Anna '22

When she stepped into the store, the first thing she noticed was all the mannequins' eyes seemed to look at her. They seemed so life-like for plastic. Slightly more hesitant, Alex fully stepped into the store. WHOOSH! Alex jumped and looked behind her; the door slammed shut. When she turned around, a lady that reminded Alex of her grandmother greeted her with a smile.

"Hello deary! Sorry about the door, it's very old. I've been meaning to fix it but I'm all alone here with no one to help." The lady seemed so nice, so familiar.

"Oh, it's alright, just gave me a little fright."

"Well deary, would you like to see some clothes? You're in luck, I just restocked. You pretty thing, you look so tired, let me go get my famous homemade cookies. Everyone who's eaten them said they were to die for!" The old lady disappeared behind the counter to reappear with a tray in her hand. Fresh chocolate chip cookies, Alex's favorite, that seemed to be straight out of the oven. Just as Alex was about to decline, her stomach rumbled, matching the volume of the roaring thunder outside.

As Alex walked around the store, the pile on her arm kept growing taller and taller. But with each new piece of clothing she took, the more she thought she was going crazy. First she thought she saw mannequins changing positions. Most concerning, however, she swore that the old lady was sizing her up, like she was looking at a piece of furniture. It didn't help that the old lady kept complimenting her, which wouldn't usually be a bad thing, but she only complimented her skin and how clear it was. Or like how she could be mistaken for a doll.

The thunder got louder with each passing moment, Alex's head got fuzzy, and distant cries were heard. From where, Alex didn't know, but it seemed to surround her. Cries of wanting to be set free, to be released.

Their screams filled Alex's ears, "Help us... please..anyone, please, please, please, HELP ME!" Silence. Everything stopped at once. The screams, the patterning of the rain, the rumbling thunder, everything. It was as if time itself had stopped, and maybe it really had. But that didn't matter, all Alex knew was that she needed to get out of there, now. Alex wasn't a thief, however, so she had to go pay for the clothes that were still hanging on her shoulders. As she passed by the mannequins on her way to the cashier, she was reminded of the screams she heard. Something about wanting to be set free. Alex stopped right in front of one of them. It was positioned so that it was eye level with anyone who walked by. The eyes were the most beautiful part. Clear blue eyes that shined like a clear summer's day, yet there was something off about them. There seemed to be a sadness in them that could've only come from deep emotional experiences. 'How was it that the old lady managed to get so many high quality figures?' Entranced by the beauty of the mannequin, Alex reached out to touch it. Before she could get her hand close enough—

“DEARY, you seem to be finished looking around, are you ready for your payment?”

Torn back to reality, Alex walked up to the front and looked down at her wallet.

“Yes, how much will this be?”

“Oh, dear, you seemed to be mistaken. What I want isn’t money.” Confused, Alex looked up at the old lady, but before she could see her, Alex’s world went dark.

By the time she woke up again, she was still in the store, only this time she was facing the outside. Everything seemed to be the same as before, the storm was still raging, and the moon was the only source of light. However, when Alex went to leave, she found she was stuck. Panicking, she tried to run, jump, scream, anything, with no avail. An overwhelming sickness came over Alex, she realized why all those mannequins seemed so real. WHOOSH! The front door slammed shut, and what Alex heard next was something that made her heart shatter into a million pieces.

“Hello deary! Sorry about the door, it’s very old. I’ve been meaning to fix it but I’m all alone here with no one to help.”

LUCY

Olivia Jones ’22





SELF-PORTRAIT IN PENCIL

Maya Hruskar '23

A HIDDEN VILLAGE Ben Larsson '23

The man, just having reached the peak of the hill, looked over to the nearby town. The quaint village was bustling with troops. All of the houses now falling apart, their smoldering supports glowing and fizzling out. Only a few, now, were still overflowing with great, bright, hot flame, dangerously licking the wooden walls and straw roofs. The grass was trampled and yellow, as if all the scuffling and playing throughout the years had finally caught up to it. There were no more paths. Even the carefully tended crops were now crackling and decrepit, the long corn stalks still glimmering in the night sky.

The man crouched to get a better view, still having a difficult time taking in all of the destruction going on around him. He carefully waltzed down the hill, aware of every branch and root, his dark silhouette slowly approaching the campground. Seeing people, he composed himself and sat down by a bush. With the better view, he saw more than he could have ever imagined. The centuries-old well made from cobbled stone and hardened mud now stood no more miraculously than a pile of rocks. The man wondered how many times the kids must have drank from there, after a long day out in the woods, over the hill that they knew so well. He saw the square, now filled with packages of pillaged items and food, and also a large group of people. They seemed to be tied up and blindfolded, likely the prisoners, shivering through the intense heat. Long devices of metal and wood were pulled out by their guards, suddenly coming into view. The man, still sitting by the bush, watching everything, glared at the soldiers. Suddenly, before he could react, a soldier yelled a series of harsh words and all of a sudden, the world was filled with nothing but that all too familiar noise.

The shot rang out in the neighborhood, just by the hill. Two children ran out of the woods laughing playfully. The town, ablaze with life, just a few minutes away. They ran with their miniature weapons, still smoking from their recent use. As they passed the group of bushes near the camp, they started talking about their plans for the day,

"I can't wait to tell papa what we got," said the first boy. "We're gonna be able to feed the whole village!" He danced around a little bit. The second boy, presumably younger, began to speak about the day as well.

"Yes, but let's scare them first. I know a place in the forest where nobody will see us!" The boys continued running into town, past the bushes. They ran over to the corn stalks, seemingly chatting with an old woman gathering the heads of corn. The sturdy old well was just a few steps behind them, acting as the beacon of the town. Following the paths so delicately wound around the little houses of straw and wood were people enjoying them-

selves greatly in the early April sun. Others were skipping around, or tending to crops. The quaint village by the river looked like a perfect town, happy in its simplicity. Even the dogs seemed to relish the last days of spring, with its cool breezes still starving away the uncomfortable heat of the months soon to come. The heat was actually something welcomed by elders and children alike, as it reminded them of summer nights looking at the stars and telling stories. Even in the winter, they loved heat in the form of warm fireplaces, with its tendrils fiercely licking the bottom of the stew that they had been preparing.

The fire, once controlled and affectionately caressing the cauldron, still roared around the village, the last time there would be any warmth in the tiny settlement. The man blinked a few times, returning to the present, and noticed a man walking towards him. He got up from his bush, wiping his pants to get the nettles out, and stretched a little. The soldier, who was walking towards him, now stopped, waiting for permission,

“You may speak.” Said the man. The soldier looked a bit unnerved with the whole situation,

“Captain, we followed through with your orders. I apologize for the sloppy execution, we will do better next time”

“Thank you. Unless you have any other concerns, you are dismissed,” said the man, now turned to face the razed village. The soldier began again, stating,

“Yes. The General would like to speak with you.”

“Alright, give me a moment, I’ve been sitting in that bush all day. I do wonder why I was assigned to scout this mission,” The Captain said, picking up the communications radio. The cool night seemed a little out of place in the tropics, especially with the fire blazing, but the man sighed, and put the com to his ear.

“Captain, have you secured the resources? Over.” The fuzzy voice seemed to buzz through his ear and skip around in his mind. He quickly replied,

“Yes General, and we have scorched the place, like you ordered, over,” said the man, stating only the bare essentials.

“Perfect, we’re going to need as much help as we can with the massive influx of troops,” he said with a hint of disdain in his voice. “Make sure to record the mission in your report. The next settlement is 14.0583 north, 108.2772 east. Over.” The voice fizzled out, leaving the man alone with his thoughts.

Mission 472: Resources Acquired. Circa April 1967



RED STRINGS

Jaiyana Khan '22

NOT ENOUGH.

Daisy Seaborne '25

Not enough.

it has been there all my life.
the constant worry and want to prove myself
not to my parents,
peers,
no one in particular

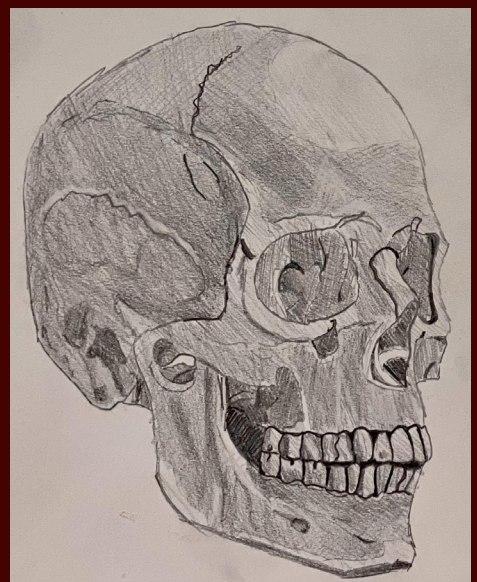
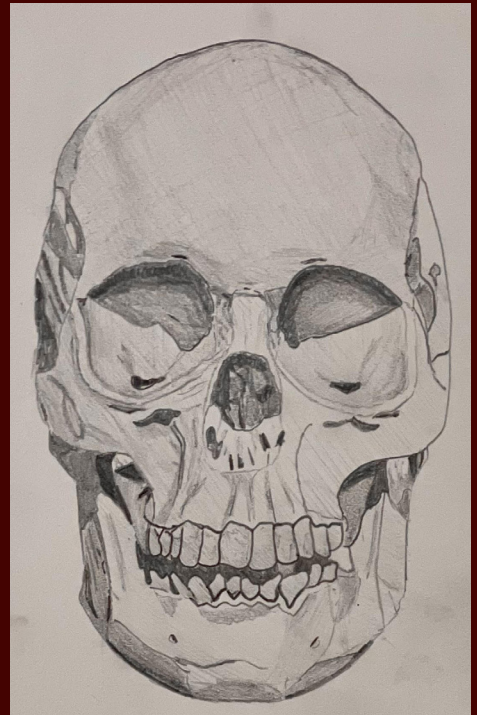
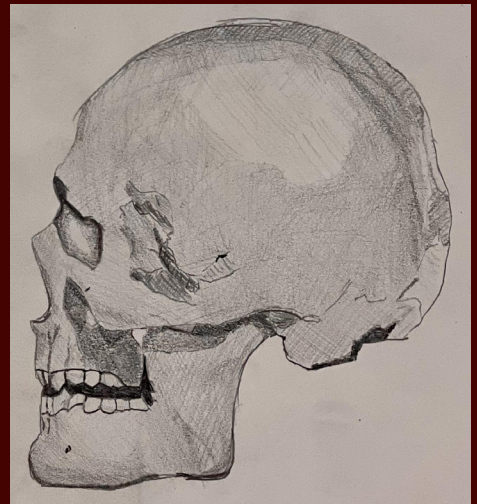
It claws its way to my body, heart, and mind
It is there when my body feels numb with defeat
When my legs give out from under me, straining from
the stress its body takes in
When my lungs suddenly feel tight, as if they're about to
collapse

these thoughts- one may say, affect me 24/7
from the constant counting to the special number nine
to repeating a certain word in my head because if I
don't, I fear my world is going to implode
these small notions in my head consume my mind con-
stantly,
and I ask myself when I will get a break

Sometimes I just want to stop, I want to scream- but
what good will that do?
Every assessment I get back, every critique I am given
The devil that sits on my shoulder whispers,
You could have done better.

[SKULLS]

Jasper Cahn '22



THE EMPEROR AND HIS SOLDIERS

Jacqueline Suarez '23

Many, many years ago lived an emperor who greatly valued the character of his soldiers and thought, *I must find out who of my soldiers possesses a bad character!* However, everyone in the city knew him for his overbearing passion for fashion. If anyone ever had trouble finding the emperor, it was wise to first look in his dressing-room.

The city in which the emperor ruled attracted many strangers from all around the globe. One day, two swindlers entered and tricked everyone into thinking that they were extremely gifted weavers by describing their magical works. All along, they only wished to get closer to the emperor's fortune. The emperor, however, saw right through them, for he valued good character but always sought out the worst in a person. In secret, the emperor met with the swindlers and asked them to continue deceiving people into thinking they were making him a magnificent suit. The swindlers were confused when he requested that they say the suit would only be visible to individuals who believed the emperor was fit for his position in power. He intended for no one to dare cross him. His twisted plan was a success before he even played it out.

The swindler's end of the bargain was that they got magnificent sums of money in order to keep the emperor's secret, just as they wanted. They couldn't care less for the emperor's plan. Quickly the swindlers accepted the offer and entered into the empire. Tucked away, they worked on empty looms day and night so that no suspicion rose that there was actually no suit at all.

After a week of 'hard work' there was still no cloth on the looms, just as the emperor wanted. It was time for the emperor to call on his first victim. He called upon one of his most honest soldiers and asked him to go check on the progress of the suit. Then he waited upon his arrival with a sly grin, pondering the different ways his soldier would describe the cloth he wished he saw.

The soldier marched into the room where the swindlers "worked" and instantly stopped in his tracks. *What in the world!* he thought, and opened his eyes wide, *I cannot see anything at all!* He tried, but could see nothing, for there was nothing to be seen. *Oh dear*, he thought, *do I truly think my emperor is unfit for his position? I cannot say that I was unable to see*

the cloth.

One swindler looked up at the soldier with the eyes of a thief and a grin drawn across his face. “Now, have you got nothing to say?”

Staring at the looms in desperation, he acted as if he saw the most magnificent cloth in the world. “Oh, it is very pretty, exceedingly beautiful. The pattern -- the pattern is delicate, the pattern is delicately classy, delicate and beautiful.” Then he ran out, too exhausted to continue, and told the emperor about what -he wished- he had seen. Now, the emperor grinned, for everything was falling into place. With a devilish look in his eye, he called upon another soldier to visit the weavers. Like the first soldier, he looked and looked but could see nothing, as there was nothing to be seen.

“Is it not a beautiful piece of cloth?” the two swindlers chuckled, now blocking the soldier.

I believe the emperor to be fit for his place in power -- a single drop of sweat hit the floor -- yet I cannot see the cloth at all. I must not dare tell anyone. I will be exiled without a doubt. So he praised the cloth, which he did not see. He then ran out, and unwillingly lied to the emperor about the cloth.

It was time for the emperor to expose the soldiers, and showcase his desire to rid the empire of evil, so he brought them to the swindlers.

“Is it not magnificent?” the soldiers exclaimed with a false gleam in their eyes. “Your Majesty must admire the colors and the pattern.” And then they pointed to the empty looms, for they imagined the others could see the cloth. The emperor stared at the empty looms, and began to chuckle. The swindlers joined in, and in an instant, they were letting their laughs roar.

“Well, you two know what happens now, don’t you?” He shot up, and the two men instantly went down for they understood what they had done. “There is no cloth to be seen!” He explained. “Were you planning on making a fool of myself in front of all my people? In what world could I accept you as my own soldier? What world WOULD, for that matter?”

The first soldier pleaded as tears formed in his eyes. “Your majesty, I only wished to—”

“Silence!” The emperor did not hesitate in cutting him off. “Allow me to rid this

empire of your filthy evil,” the emperor said, without sparing them even a glance. “Take them out of my empire immediately!” he shouted at the guards standing by. “And make sure I never see them again.” The soldiers were thrown out, and knew they were bound to be ostracized forever.

A week had gone by since the soldiers were banned from the empire, and the emperor had some time on his hands. He was filled with an overbearing guilt from banning the soldiers, but couldn’t understand why. He shook it off thinking they deserved it, so he went straight to his dressing room to clear his head. As he was admiring his clothes, the only thing that came to mind was his soldiers. He realized how quick he was to ban the ones who served him for so many years and he couldn’t help but think that it wasn’t fair to deceive good people for the sake of his own reputation. Before the emperor let his mind rest, he was already outside ordering every soldier on sight to go and find the exiled soldiers. They marched out and quickly brought them to the emperor’s feet.

“All I need is your explanation; then, I never want to see you again,” said the emperor.

“Allow me your majesty, please,” pleaded the first soldier. The emperor stood in silence, so he continued, now grabbing his leg and crying. “I did not wish to be exiled! I was terrified!”

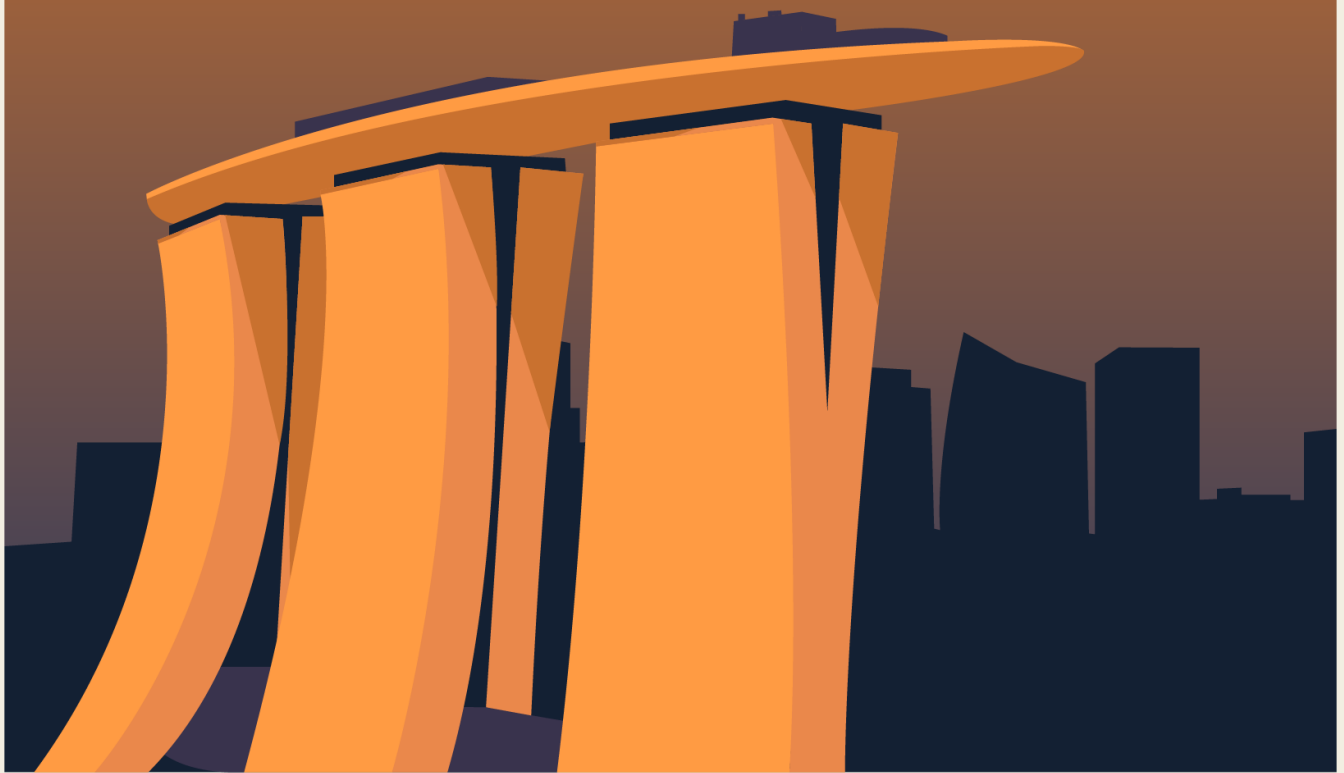
“As was I!” cried the second soldier. “This is the place I am respected! How could I risk leaving it?”

In his eyes, the emperor only saw the truth. He couldn’t even sense an ounce of evil that resided in their souls. Yet deep down he felt the evil that he had worked so hard to reject, this time in his own heart. He clenched his shirt and finally looked up, and saw the tear stained faces of the soldiers; they were already desperately staring back.

Finally, the emperor said, “I will forgive you BUT...” the soldiers now broke into a sweat. Suddenly their eyes then began to widen as the emperor’s focus diverted to the swindlers who were smugly counting their loot. “... I’m going to need you two to hand that over.” The two swindlers slowly looked up and let out a sigh of disappointment that they had only gotten this far. The sound of clinking coins then stopped, the swindlers had let themselves out. The emperor then spent the rest of his day honoring the soldiers in front of him, who possessed a good character all along.

SINGAPORE BAY

Peter Loranger '24



SINGAPORE

A GIFT FOR THEIR SON

Jane Cheema '22

Fire crackled inside a small house that, despite its glaring irregularities, seemed convincingly real for the time being. It was only a small boy's dream, so there was no time or space or outside world—just this one room in a phantasmagoric void. His memories of it were fragmented: there were cornices and picture frames on no walls, darkness and snowflakes behind no windows. Even some of his mother's features were blurred as she took her place beside him in front of the fire. She spoke without making a sound; her voice was forgotten.

"The snow is lovely tonight."

He looked up. "Huh? You're not mad at me?"

"No. Of course not. I was your age once," she reminded him, "and I loved playing in the snow, too."

She smiled, content with the warm fire that glowed on her son's healthy blond hair. A log fell away with a pop, sending a swarm of embers up into the chimney.

"But, next time, tell me if you're going to stay on the roof of the shed. Okay?"

He nodded.

"I was looking for you everywhere. I wanted to tell you about what I saw at the bookstore today... something you might like."

"Huh?"

"Let's see... It was an old book, from the eighteen-hundreds, I think. Supposedly it was very popular back in its day. Anyway, it's about a little boy who lives on an island with his two friends... And they have all these curious adventures, like with sharks and caves and pirates..."

The boy said nothing. He wanted that book but wouldn't admit it.

"And, this little boy... He reminds me of you. He has your name, Ralph, and he's always running and laughing and exploring..." She paused thoughtfully. "I could pick it up for your birthday. Would you like that?"

He agreed demurely. She was trying to wrap a blanket around him now, to dry him faster, but he resisted. He was apparently too old for this humiliation—nearly twelve.

"Stop. I can do it."

Ensconced in the blanket, he focused on the fire. A more bothersome thought nudged him: he couldn't pin down the nebulous reason why parts of his mother were all muddled in his head. That vague dread bothered him, so he got up and said good-night.

“Sleep tight, love. Go say good-night to your father, okay?”

He agreed and went left to the office, but it was empty. Only a green lamp winked on the desk, above a stack of books and a newspaper clipping. Upon inspecting the desk, his eyes glazed right over the books (they were all for grown-ups, about wars at sea and famous commanders and the Royal Navy) and instead settled on the stark, bolded headline. It told him there was fighting some far-away place he didn't know, someplace they'd captured from the Reds. The picture especially unnerved him because he could see the ship in flames through the grainy ink. It was unquestionably real.

“Oh... Daddy's got to go fight. I remember now,” he said, wondering how he'd ever forgotten it.

Beside his bed there was a shelf of familiar books—some stacked vertically, some horizontally, since he often didn't bother to arrange them properly. One of them did not belong, though, because it was resting on the top in a ribbon. Its cover was ocean blue with reddish-gold filigree that glittered like rocks under tropical sunlight. This strange slab, *The Coral Island*, was certainly a gift, but he was even more certain that he'd read it before.

It was impossible. The reality of his dream world was fraying rapidly, like if there was a loose stitch in his shirt that he could pull and pull until there was nothing to hold his clothes together anymore. Like there was nothing fresh to wear but sweat and clay paint. Suddenly the air was too warm for sweaters and ties: all around him was a tangled jungle. It was something out of his book.

He looked up. Through the frame of the canopy, the sky was lavender-coloured with stars like a dusting of sugar. He knew he was on an island in the middle of some sea—no Mummy or Daddy for miles and miles—but it was all right: this was only a children's book. Everyone was his friend on this island, and while there could be scary, savage people beyond it, their hearts could always be purified.

The ocean beckoned him, and he followed it through heavy fronds. His hand cleaved a wall of flowering plants to reveal the dusky beach. In the nearby bower, there were two boys in tattered sailor uniforms waiting for him—that is, they would be if they weren't already asleep. He found a soft spot in the ground between them and let the tall grass swallow him. Beyond, the ocean broke on the reef with a steady rhythm like breathing, rocking him gently to sleep.

When he rose, it was into another completely disjointed scene. It was neither completely his old home, nor the jungle: vines were whorling on his wallpaper and hanging from the ceiling, with tall grasses nudging through the floorboards in clumps. As he made his way down the narrow hall, he called for his mother through the long, exotic tendrils and curving branches.

“Mummy?”

When she didn’t answer, he called louder while searching the rest of the house. He pushed on into the silence, finally coming to the room where he’d seen her last.

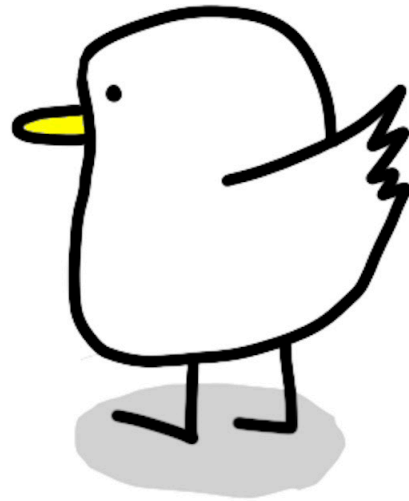
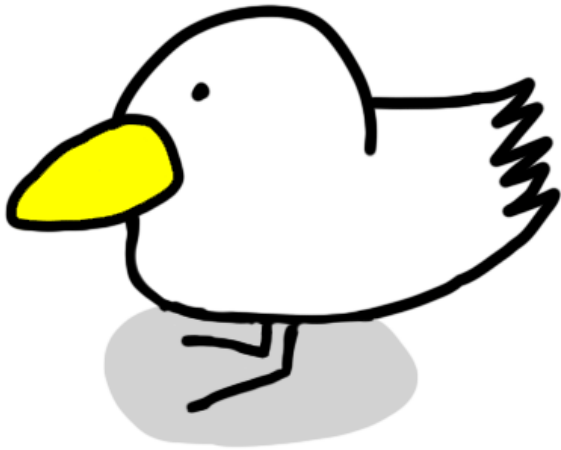
The fire still crackled amidst the intruding plants, which somehow reassured him. Fire in its proper place was pleasant and deceptively calm, he thought—almost like another warm, breathing person next to him.

“Why is it still going?” He looked around. “Mummy, where are you?”

It became brighter and hotter as he approached. Only he realized with a start that it was not just getting closer: it was spreading. Like electricity on a wire, hot red wisps traveled across the vines and leapt onto the curtains, enveloping them instantly. Smoke blinded him for a moment, and his eyes watered. He forced them open to look for some way to stop the fire or escape. Everywhere he looked, though, there was fire, and then it might be as if his home and his books had never existed at all. When he yelled the only answer was the fighter planes buzzing like flies in his ears—quiet, then so loud everything vibrated. Someone ordered him to evacuate through the static of a megaphone. This could not be home anymore, and yet something refused to let him wake.

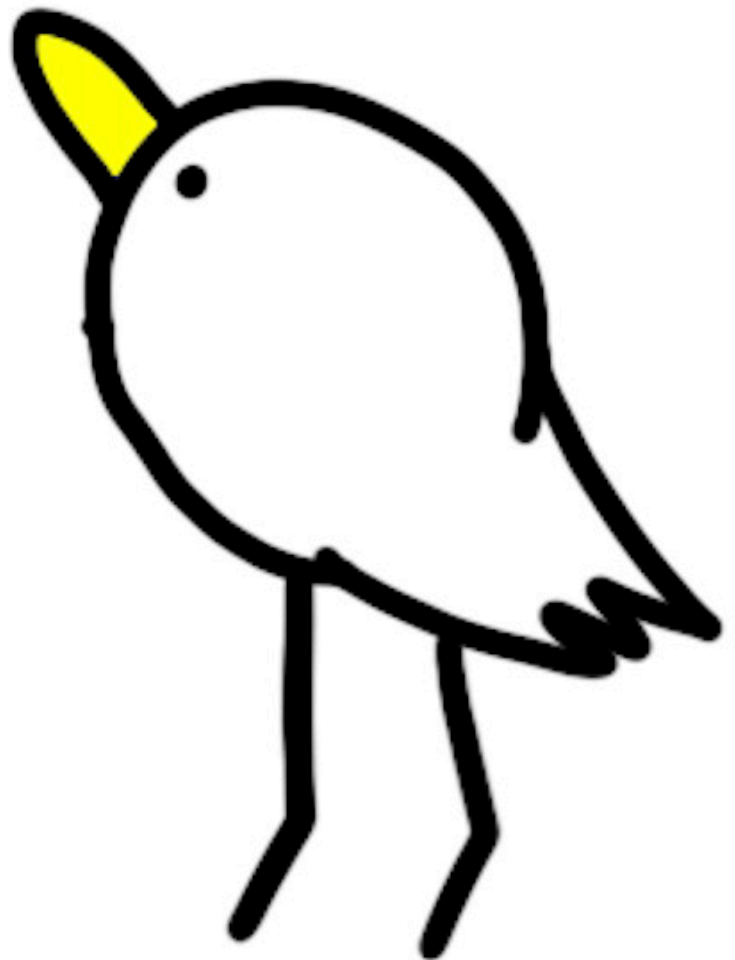
Down the hallway from him, a man in golden epaulets searched the hospital wing. The corridor was sterile and unblinking, full of beds and partitions, but also the laughter and whining of children mixed together. The voices were muffled as if underwater.

The naval commander navigated the sea of boys with calm determination, which belied his inner turmoil. His son surely wanted to see him, but couldn’t that happiness just as quickly give way to regret and fear—even resentment—after what’d happened? He’d wanted to believe he was saving the world when he left, but maybe he had given his son a different, darker gift entirely. His mother was gone, leaving him to face the worst ways of mankind alone. It was a miracle he even lived. Now that the father began to understand this, both the unlivable terror and the miracle, he felt turning away was a sacrifice he could no longer make.



DUCK GIF

Ryan Sunwoo '22





WINGS OF HOPE

Chloe Hackett '23



[EYE] Sacha Maidique '24

A LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

Dear Reader,

Welcome to the 76th edition of *Soundings*! Inside you should have heard a variety of student voices and seen student perspectives through prose, poetry, artwork, photography, pottery, and other media. Our staff has worked hard to put together this year's issue and to showcase varied work from all different students at Staples.

This year was especially trying due to the gradual ease back into normalcy in what hopefully proves to be the final stages of the Covid-19 pandemic. This rough transition from a world of isolation underlines many of the featured pieces in this magazine.

This year we reinvented our inaugural contest from years prior with the theme "The Devil is in the Details." We congratulate all of our winners and thank everyone who submitted. Be sure to keep your eyes out for next year's contest.

Thank you to Ms. Kim Herzog, our advisor, who has and continues to dedicate herself to this magazine.

We hope you enjoyed reading this magazine as much as we enjoyed making it!

Julian Fiore '22 and Lucy Dockter '23
Editors-in-Chief

COLOPHON

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Typography

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