



# StoneSoup

The Magazine Written and Illustrated by Kids

JANUARY / FEBRUARY 2024

VOLUME 52 / ISSUE 6







# StoneSoup

Writing and art by kids, for kids

## Editor's Note

It's January, and I was expecting this issue to be full of winter poems and stories—and there are some, such as “One Winter Day,” the evocative nonfiction piece that opens the magazine, and a chilling story called “Thin Ice.” But what surprised me was the humor I discovered this season! There's a hilarious and a little bit snarky story about the Greek gods, a sly art theft mystery, a poem about sneakers, and the rousing tale of a little chicken with a big dream.

Amidst the humor, though, is great sadness. In this issue, we give you the true story of the day Aisana Zhumabayeva found out about the passing of her father. We have a story about someone who suffers because he's so different from his peers. I love those pieces, but I am also grateful for the humor that balances them out. Nothing warms up the short, cold days (and difficult times in our lives) like a little laughter.

This winter, I encourage you to brighten your world by writing a funny story and maybe even sharing it with someone who needs a lift.



Diane Landolf

## Thank You to Our Donors!

Production and publication of this issue is made possible by our Jane Austen donors (\$1,000 and above):

The Allen & Eve Foundation, Sandy & Tom Allen, Anonymous (4), James Evarts, Amanda Fox, Brian Harlan, Gerry Mandel, Brion Sprinsock & Kristine Albrecht, and Sally & Clem Wood.



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*Memories of a Season  
Passed* (iPhone 6 and  
Adobe Photoshop)  
Sloane Kinney, 13  
British Columbia, Canada

Executive Director  
**Emma Wood**

Editor  
**Diane Landolf**

Production Coordinator  
**Carmela Furio**

Typesetter  
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Communications  
**Tayleigh Greene**

Blog Editor  
**Olivia McKeon**

Refugee Project  
**Laura Moran**

Director Emeritus  
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*Sapling Shadow* (Canon Rebel)  
Madeline Male, 14  
Kansas

# One Winter Day

A student takes a break from a long, cold day with a hot cup of noodles.



By Evan Seungho Jee, 12  
South Korea

“Get ready to leave!” the teacher announces from the front of the bus. Most students pack their bags, put their electronics down, and untie their seatbelts. The station is only 500 yards away. We can hear the wheels slowing down, like a steam of gas escaping through an inch-wide hole. Kids start to push each other to try to get off the bus first. After a long day at school amid winter, every student yearns to go home to a hearty meal, but in Korea, the day is not over yet. I stay seated and think about the rest of my day—how I have to go to *hagwon*, or a Korean cram school, to study math even after studying all day at school. The thought alone is enough to exhaust me and send shivers down my spine. I look out the window and see trees struggling to hold on to their last leaves of the year. *They are like me, I think, trying desperately to hold on to the last reminder of warmth, but winter is already here.* Today, more than ever, I am eager to rush to the convenience store—seeking some comfort before I’m sentenced to *hagwon*.

“Rriinnng!” the transparent door slides open, letting a cold breeze onto the bus. My classmates and I race to the door, pushing and wrestling to be the first ones to get off. I jump off the bus, for a moment glancing up at the lonely winter trees. Then I run down the street with the icy wind piercing my skin and dodge all the passersby and motorbikes until I see the familiar neon-green sign of the convenience store greeting me. I climb up the wooden stairs, each plank tainted with cigarette butts and ashes. I push open the glass door and stroll across the narrow corridors. I squat down and try to decide what *ramyun* to eat today. My eyes flow through the different *ramyuns*, from the sweet and tangy *Saeu-tang* to the spicy *Shin Ramyun*. Finally, my eyes set on *Neoguri*, a *ramyun* with a rich seafood broth, and I grab it.

“Beep!” My navy-blue credit card slices through the card reader. I pull out a set of wooden chopsticks and puncture the bottom of my *ramyun* cup to take off the plastic wrap. I peel off half of the lid, and the hot water machine pours boiling water into my little cup. With my hands wrapped around the heated cup, I momentarily feel as if I’m at a campfire in the middle of the frosty woods. I pull out my phone and set a timer for three minutes.

Waiting for the noodles to cook is always the hardest part. I peek at the window.



The windowsills are covered by dust and the bodies of the little insects that fly around wherever you go. Outside the window, I see people passing by on the street, tightly holding on to their thick jackets with their noses facing downwards. They are all still wearing masks, so I can't see their faces. It always seems like no one cares about each other. They seem too cold and busy to acknowledge anything else but themselves. I'm lost in thought when my timer rings.

The burning steam spouts up from the open crack in the lid and warms my face. My anticipation grows as I slowly stir the noodles and smell their savory scent. I lift up my chopsticks to see the noodles, drenched in red, curled around each other like a group of vines in an abandoned garden. As I twist the noodles up into my mouth, they smoothly blend in and explode with flavor. Eating broth is my favorite part of the process. I fold the ramyun lid into a spoon, dip it in the warm soup, and taste the rich seafood flavor. Although it's just a cup of ramyun, it feels as if a meal from a five-star restaurant was delivered to my mouth. The warmth from the broth and noodles is enough to melt down the bitter fatigue I was feeling after school. Now it's time for me to go to hagwon. I promptly get up and clean up behind me. A gust of wind blows as I walk out the doors of the store, but I am no longer feeling cold.



*The Royal Wave* (Canon SX600, PicsArt)  
Sage Millen, 13  
Vancouver, Canada



# I am Here



Oliver Halkett, 11  
California

I am from  
a place not of leprechauns, rainbows, and pots of gold,  
but instead a teenaged sky, moody  
with deluges of rain,  
moments later  
opening to periwinkle heavens  
and effervescent light,  
scurrying clouds away.  
I am from  
salty, rocky beaches, gray water too cold to swim in  
(even though we do every New Year's Day).

I am from  
cobalt *suil amhain*,  
freckles  
and loud, accented, argumentative  
voices.  
Stories from my Nana of  
cherry buns at Bewley's Cafe  
on Grafton Street, and  
sugary milky tea.  
Boiled cabbage and meaty bacon.

I am Here

I am from  
infinite kings  
named Richard and Henry.  
From staying up late  
reading Harry Potter.  
Hard, still-warm pencils and the flap, flap of long volumes.

From the Beatles,  
Freddie Mercury,  
The Rolling Stones.  
I am from  
mountains of  
hard books and hard rock  
and deep-fried haddock  
with chips, malt vinegar, and minty mushy peas.

I am from these two different islands  
disputing the same land  
for centuries.  
Easter Rising, Bloody Sunday,  
the Troubles.  
The queen and the *taoiseach*.  
Dublin and London.

But I am not there  
but here.

I am Here

Eating tacos with *cotija* at my house,  
ice pops on the deck, year round.  
A banana tree in my backyard.  
Palm trees on my horizon.  
Only two seasons  
(summer and inferno)  
boiling heat in August,  
warm breezes in the winter,  
boba and *nigiri* just a block away,  
golden stars adorning  
the grimy concrete.  
Everyone wants to be a star.  
Everyone is from somewhere else.  
I am here, I am there,  
I am from  
dozens of family members,  
my friends for life.  
They are here,  
they are there  
like a pod of dolphins,  
like silvery-white iridium scattering the solar system.

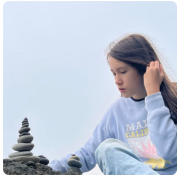


*Emerging* (Panasonic Lumix ZS200)  
Sage Millen, 13  
British Columbia, Canada



# Thunderbird

**Rico the chicken dreams of being champion of a sport dominated by bigger birds**



By Emma Chen Rolufs, 12  
Oregon

Chanting echoed through the dark tunnel. “Rico! Rico! R-I-C-O!” It got louder and louder as I neared the end of the tunnel, and the light got brighter and brighter. I tightened my beak strap and bounced up and down a few times. This was it, the greatest moment of my life. I took another step forward and the cheering flooded into my ears. I knew one more step would take me into a life of excitement, adrenaline, and air rushing through my feathers. I spread my strong, muscular wings, lifted my front leg, and took that step. “Rico! Rico! Rico! Rico . . .”

I woke up with the same feeling I woke up with yesterday—the feeling of being admired and loved by everyone. But, like yesterday, that feeling faded quickly. The reality of waking up in my room—again—and having to pee really badly—again—always seemed to kill the dream.

I sat up in bed, swung my feet over the side, and slipped on my red slippers. Sauntering to my bedroom door, I glanced over at the mirror on the wall and paused to look at my muscles. Maybe half a millimeter bigger than last week? Maybe a millimeter? Whenever my older sister, Macy, talked about my wing muscles, she always made quotation signs in the air with her wing tips and laughed, “Muscles!” I sighed and let my wings hang as I dragged myself over to the bathroom.

I was only halfway done with my business when I was interrupted by Macy yelling from downstairs. “Rico! It’s, like, 8:47! You’re gonna be late! So you’re gonna make me late!” I hate being rushed in the bathroom; it just sorta ruins my peace and quiet.

“Alright, already! Don’t lay an egg! I’m almost done!” I pulled up my pajama pants and ran to my room. I quickly changed into a pair of cargo shorts and a red T-shirt and kicked off my slippers as I ran down the ramp. Macy was waiting in the living room, tapping her talons on the floor. “Where’d my backpack go?” I murmured and checked behind the wingchair. “Found it!” I said, and lugged the heavy bag up and over my shoulders.

“Hurry up!” Macy yelled from the front door. I was heading through when my mom put a wing on my shoulder and placed a warm, fresh piece of cornbread in my wing feathers.

"Thanks, Mom!" I yelled back as Macy practically dragged me into the car. I perched myself next to her in the front seat.

"I'm gonna be so late because of you," Macy muttered.

"Sorry," I half-heartedly apologized through a mouthful of cornbread. She rolled her eyes and started up the car. It hovered up to around ten talons off the ground, and then she stepped on the gas pedal and we were off.

---

It was a smooth, short drive, but I wished it was longer. I was not a fan of school. I'd rather just stay at home and play *Super Cluck Bros*. I'd even prefer just doing homework at home to going to school. But we arrived, as usual, and I slumped out of the car right after Macy lowered it to the ground. Before I could even close the door, she was revving the engine and called through the window, "See ya later, R!" I quickly waved back at her through the window, slammed the door, and watched her speed off to high school. Then I turned around with a sigh and faced what I dreaded every day. Thunderflight Middle School. TMS. Trample. My. Soul.

I heaved the heavy doors open and made my way through the usual morning crowd of students. Birds will wait till literally the last second before the bell rings to get to their classes. But I don't like the noisy flock thing and prefer to just get to my empty classroom early, so I successfully crept past a group of raucous ospreys without being noticed and made my way to classroom number thirty-six. *Phew! Empty.* I took a seat at the back table. My usual spot. Far from the bigger birds.

I put my backpack next to my perch and waited for the bell to ring. Just then, the door to the classroom opened. I held my breath. Maybe it wasn't a good idea to get to class early and alone. I looked frantically around for Mrs. Hew, but she hadn't arrived either. I glanced nervously at the door. *Thank the Griffins! It's just my friend Carl, the mallard!*

Carl waddled up wearing a yellow sweater, black sweatpants, and a tattered brown hat. Yeah, I mean the type of hat that you see Birdiana Jones wearing in those explorer movies. "Hi, Carl," I said.

"Hey, Rico! Guess what? The new Wild West novel is out! It looks so good! But I haven't read it yet. Here! Lemme show ya." He stuck his entire bill in his bag and fished out his phone, then swiped through too many photos until he found what he was looking for. "Check it out!" Carl said and showed me a picture of a book with a desert as the background and with "Wild West" printed in bold, yellow letters on the front cover.

"Yeah, it looks cool," I told him.

"Yeah, and I can't wait to read it. You should come over so we can read it together—"

"Read what, losers?" a voice interrupted from the door. Carl and I froze. We knew the voice too well and hoped that if we just sat motionless, we'd disappear. But we didn't, and there they were: Tony Rayburn and his gang looming over us.

**He took a threatening step forward and lifted one of his feet, and his claws glistened in the morning light that streamed in from the classroom window.**

“Uh-uh—nothing. It’s nothing. Just a book, Tony,” I stuttered.

Right before Carl could shove his phone back in his backpack, one of Tony’s goons snatched it and gave it to him. “Wild West? Ha! You peckers and quacks are such nerds,” Tony said with a smirk.

“Hehe, ‘peckers and quacks!’ Good one, Tony!” a big golden eagle chimed in.

“N-no we’re not! We just like good books!” Carl protested, pushing his glasses farther up his beak.

“Oh really, four eyes. You like books, huh?” Tony leaned down so he was eye to eye with Carl and jeered, “How ’bout I shove a book down your beak?”

A lean, tan hawk behind Tony made a gagging sound.

“Just leave us alone!” I cried. A hot wave of anger rushed from my chest to my talons. Tony turned his head slowly to face me. He took a threatening step forward and lifted one of his feet, and his claws glistened in the morning light that streamed in from the classroom window. *Uh oh. Why did I open my beak?* I had no doubt that Tony wouldn’t hesitate to claw my feathers off, and I was expecting the worst, but at that moment the door opened again and Mrs. Hew stepped into the classroom, followed by a few other students.

“Good morning, boys! What is going on? Early birds catching worms?”

Tony stepped away from me. “Oh, Carl here dropped his phone and I’m just lending him a wing,” Tony explained innocently. But when he turned back around to face me, he looked everything but innocent. A wide, menacing grin spread across his beak as he placed the phone firmly into Carl’s wingtips. “See you later, Rico,” he whispered and sauntered back to his table on the side of the room. His gang perched around him. Carl and I exchanged worried and relieved glances as we took a seat. We were lucky that time. But we knew better than to think Tony would leave us alone. His last words, “see you later,” were code for “beat you up later.”

---

I see school as a video game. You have to get through the hard stuff first, like the monsters and the puzzles, before you can get to the treasure chest at the end. When the last class bell rang, I said goodbye to Carl at the front gate, scanned the pickup zone to see that my mom was late again, hurried over to the edge of the parking lot, and fluttered over the fence. There was a dip, covered by overhanging cedar branches, and a boulder that I could climb over to get to the athletics zone. My secret shortcut. I slid down the muddy slope, grasping at the cedar branches to slow myself, then climbed up the boulder. The athletics zone was made out of four different areas: the track (where we have the choice to fly or run), the field (where we play games like dodgeball and capture the flag), and finally—the treasure of my day—the Skyclash arena.



I glanced around for Tony and his gang because I knew he had Skyclash practice on Thursdays. No sign of Tony yet. This was my chance. I jumped down from the boulder and bolted forward across the field. Once I reached the pavement surrounding the arena, I ducked under the bleachers and popped up again at the lowest bench near the edge of the arena. It wasn't super big, definitely not as big as the Skyclash stadium arenas, but it was big enough so that all the birds who played the sport could practice.

Before long, I heard voices coming through the lower doors of the arena. Two falcons and an osprey walked in and set down some very heavy-looking bags on the padded arena floor. Of course, I knew what was in them. A beak protector and beak strap, a pair of talon protectors and leg straps. Helmets, chest guards, water bottles, and wing stretchers. *Man, I'd do anything for a wing stretcher!*

I know it's crazy for a nerdy chicken like me to get excited about Skyclash, but the only thing I enjoy about Thunderflight Middle School is catching a few minutes of the Skyclash practice battles at the end of the day. I was just settling into my perch when the lower arena doors opened again and Tony and his gang appeared at the entrance. I almost jumped under the bleachers.

What is up with this guy? He'll just appear out of nowhere and scare the grain outta me! He's only a seventh-grader, but even the osprey and two falcons, who I knew were eighth-graders, made way for him and his goons as he stalked to the far end of the arena and started unpacking his bags. It was around ten minutes before everyone was there, and then Coach Greg, an older bald eagle, blew a high-pitched whistle. Coach Greg had a reputation for being grumpy and tough on pretty much everybody.

All the students in the arena quickly got into a line when they heard the whistle, facing the coach. "Are we gonna let these little sparrows at Redfeather beat us?" Coach Greg asked harshly.

"No, coach!" the students responded.

"We're gonna crush them and win the tournament!" Tony added loudly.

"That's right! So prove it to me!" Coach Greg yelled and made a motion with his right wing. Redfeather was a rival school that our team competed against. Tony and everyone else ran to their dumped bags and started putting on the protectors and straps. Tony was the first one to finish. He took a sip from his water bottle and then ran to the center of the arena. "Tony, you're gonna practice against Wyatt, okay? Wyatt, get over here!" Coach Greg ordered. Wyatt, the eighth-grade osprey, rushed over with dread in his eyes and faced Tony nervously.

"All right, boys! Take your spots!" Coach yelled. Wyatt and Tony flew up to ledges that were both about forty-five feet off the ground and on opposite sides of the arena. Everyone else backed away and took seats on the bleachers, luckily nowhere near me. I could feel the adrenaline rising in my own body as if I was actually up there, getting ready to battle. "All right—three, two, one, dive!" Coach Greg yelled and he blew the whistle even more ear-splitting than last time.

Wyatt and Tony jumped off their ledges and dove down toward the trampolines. The moment they hit the trampolines, I whispered, "Hit!" And when they bounced

off, I whispered a little bit louder, "Bounce!" They spiraled above the ledges, hovering there for a few seconds before Wyatt made a move and catapulted straight at Tony. Tony dove down at the last second, causing Wyatt to just miss him by half a feather. With one strong flap of his wings, Tony flew up and Wyatt shot through the empty space and nearly hit the arena wall. As Wyatt turned, still confused by what had happened, Tony shot down towards his opponent like a torpedo and grabbed him with his talons. Feathers flew everywhere as Wyatt tried to defend himself. Both birds were using their talons to push the other closer to the ground. Finally, Tony freed himself from the knot, flew up above Wyatt, and then swooped down so fast he might as well have been a peregrine falcon at full speed. The brown blur knocked Wyatt right out of the air. He plummeted down to the padded arena floor and just lay there gasping for air. He clearly had the breath knocked out of him. He slowly got up, limped back to the bleachers, and took a seat next to Hallie, one of the falcons. Tony landed dramatically next to Coach Greg and flexed his wings in front of the small audience.

"Yeah, Tony! You crushed him! Haha!" his friends cheered. Coach Greg patted Tony on the back before telling him to go take a seat. Tony strutted past Wyatt and made some snarky remark. *What a jerk*, I thought. But my anger toward Tony wasn't going to ruin my excitement. The feathers on the back of my head were still ruffled and messy from imitating the moves that Wyatt and Tony had made. My heart was still beating a hundred miles per hour, and I imagined myself up there, diving and spiraling and swooping and doing a bunch of other super cool stuff. But then I observed one of my wings. Short. Scrawny. Useless. Just like the other wing. I sighed and could feel my excitement fading like a deflating balloon. My phone buzzed in my pocket and made a *riiing riiding riiding* sound. I grabbed it, quickly clicked to silent mode, and put it up to my ear.

"Hello?" I said softly.

"Rico, honey, where are you? I'm at the pickup area in front of the school."

"Oh, hey Mom. I'm coming, I just had to go to the restroom. I'll be right there in a second."

"Why are you whispering, honey?"

"I'll be right there!" I repeated as loudly as I dared. I hung up and snuck back under the bleachers and out of the arena. I ran back over the boulder, up the slope and over the fence, then strolled to the pickup area, where my mom's car was waiting for me. I opened the front door and slumped next to my mom without bothering to take off my backpack.

"You okay, Rico?" Mom asked in a concerned voice.

"Yeah, I'm fine," I responded. I could barely see the Skyclash arena through the window. I looked at my wings again. "Ma, why couldn't I have been born an eagle or osprey? Or even just a crow? Why'd I have to be a chicken?"

"Ohhhh, honey! You're technically not a chicken. You're a rooster." She looked at me with a sympathetic expression, then smiled. I sighed and kept looking out the window. Mom changed the subject, "You know, Dad is picking up Grams and Gramps on his way back from work. They're gonna stay with us for a while."

“Oh really? That’s great,” I acknowledged.

When we got home, I dropped my backpack by the door, plodded up to my room, plopped on my soft, pine-shaving mattress, and gazed at one of my posters. It had a picture of my favorite Skyclash player, Clay Bassner. He had a speech bubble saying, “Anyone can play the game!” I groaned and turned over on my side. “Yeah right,” I mumbled. I lay there for a while, until I heard the doorbell ring downstairs.

“Rico! Can you get the door, please?” Mom shouted from the kitchen. I got out of bed and went back downstairs. Grams and Gramps were waiting outside, and the moment I opened the door, Grams said, “Rico! You’re growing so fast! I thought you were an eagle!” And then she pulled me in for a hug.

“Hi Grams! Hi Gramps!” I said.

“Hey, buddy. Good to see ya!” Gramps grinned and patted me on the shoulder. Mom appeared behind me and hugged my grandparents as well. My dad walked in behind them with luggage in both hands and the keys hanging from his beak. “Family reunion!” he squawked, and the keys dropped to the ground. “Isn’t this great?”

After the hugs and kisses and small talk, I escorted Grams and Gramps to the dinner table. “What’s for dinner?” Dad asked Mom and perched next to me.

“Pumpkin soup with the seeds, cornbread, and cooked, seasoned watermelon rinds,” she replied. My stomach rumbled. My mom makes the best food. I licked my beak and started pecking away as soon as the meal was served. I was surprised how hungry I was.

Mom gave me a stern look. “Rico! Use your fork, please!” I picked up my fork and continued eating. The only noise in the room was the sound of hungry chickens munching on the delicious food. Finally, I broke the silence: “Where’s Macy?”

“She’s at her friend’s house working on job ideas and business stuff,” Dad responded.

“It’s good that she’s engaged in getting into jobs and businesses, planning her future, that sort of thing,” Grams said, waving her spoon in the air. Gramps nodded in approval. Grams continued, “Speaking of businesses and jobs, Rico, you’re in seventh grade already; you should start getting into what you’re going to do when you get a little older. I mean, it’s just a few years before you’re in college,” she continued and spooned a mouthful of pumpkin seed soup into her mouth. *A few years?! I had six years before college!*

“I agree,” Mom jumped in, passing the cornbread to Dad. “Rico, are there any entrepreneur clubs at Thunderflight? Maybe you could learn something about getting a life job. You know, just to get ahead of things a bit.” And then the adults got into this whole conversation about what sort of jobs would be great for me, and how important it is to “be prepared.”

“I have really good grades,” I mumbled. “You guys don’t have to worry about my future. It’s fine.”

But nobody could hear me over all their chirping. Then I started feeling that rush of annoyance and anger flowing from my chest to my talons, the same feeling I had when Tony caught me and Carl earlier.

**I could never be a Skyclash player. I'm a chicken. I can hardly fly, I can't fight, and I'm not strong at all.**

"I want to be a famous Skyclash player!" I blurted out. Everyone went silent and turned to me with surprised expressions.

"Honey, what?" Mom questioned, as if she didn't hear me correctly, but she did. I immediately went stiff, and thought to myself, *Why did I say that so loud?* But I couldn't take it back now.

"I said . . . I want to be a famous Skyclash player, Mom," I repeated.

"Rico, I know that you really like Skyclash, but maybe think of something more . . ." Mom replied in her *oh sweetie, I'm sorry to break it to you* voice as she looked over to the other grownups for help.

"Realistic?" Dad said.

"Yeahhh, that. Rico, here's the thing. Being a Skyclash player wouldn't work out for you because, well . . . you're just . . ." Mom glanced at my tucked-in wings with uncertainty. I already knew what she was going to say.

"I'm just a chicken. I know." I finished the sentence for her. I perched there and looked out the window, avoiding eye contact with my parents and grandparents.

The rest of dinner was awkward silence, and when I was excused, I slinked to the back door and stepped into our backyard. I stood on the steps leading to the small plot of grass and stared at the sky. The longer I stood there, the more I was beginning to think my family was right. I've spent all my life studying the game, observing the techniques and moves, researching its history, and reading about all the rules in the *All Air Sports Encyclopedia* that I keep on my nightstand. And for what? I could never be a Skyclash player. I'm a chicken. I can hardly fly, I can't fight, and I'm not strong at all. But even with the doubt and discouragement, there was something in me that wouldn't let me give up on it. Like a little flame in me that wouldn't go out.

---

The next day, I trudged down the halls of the school, half asleep and feeling sorry for myself. I had walked to school that day because, although I was very tired, there was no way I was going to be stuck in a car with my mom or dad after what had happened the night before at the dinner table. I could not imagine the level of awkwardness I would have to sit through for the entire twenty-minute car ride. I shook the feeling off as I neared the math classroom.

Carl appeared behind me and put a wing on my shoulder. "Rico. Walk a little faster, man. You look like a zombird that just woke up from the grave."

"Mrhggg," I mumbled sleepily and then managed to add, "I'm fine."

Carl turned to look at me with concern-filled eyes. "Whatever you say, buddy," he said with a hint of doubt and ran off into the classroom.

Before I could enter with him, something caught the corner of my eye and stopped me in my tracks. Something shiny. Something blue. A big, electric blue poster was taped to the wall and in bold yellow letters announced:



*Skyclash Tournament of Champions!*  
*Compete against the school's best Skyclash players to become the new*  
*Thunderflight Champion!*

Suddenly all the sleepiness was gone from my body and my mind. I felt like the poster was screaming my name, and that flame from the night before burned hotter than ever. *A chance to beat Tony Rayburn in a Skyclash battle and become the champion of the school?* The thought caused me to have the same explosion of adrenaline and excitement that I always have when I watch other birds Skyclash—the feeling that I’m actually up there, in the arena, fighting for glory. And then it hit me like a bullet. I was going to be the first chicken to join a Skyclash competition. My entire life, I’d thought it was impossible for a chicken to do Skyclash. But I would make my own moves—moves no one had ever seen before! And I was going to win! Not *although* I’m a chicken, but because I’m a chicken!

Suddenly, as if the universe wanted to reward my determination with a glimpse of the future, a vision came to me. There I was, in the middle of the Skyclash arena, with hundreds of birds sitting in the bleachers that surround the space, and Tony Rayburn hovering above me with rage-filled eyes. Just as he’s planning to catapult me to the ground with one fell swoop, I leap to the nearest trampoline and bounce up into the air. And then I dive at lightning speed, straight at Tony, who doesn’t have enough time to react. I ram into his chest with my feet and completely knock the breath out of him. He is left breathlessly flapping in the middle of the arena and I jump to the nearest trampoline again. Then I bounce high up into the air, with my wings tucked, and let myself fall, straight onto Tony, who drops to the ground. I’ve won the battle and everyone is cheering my name: “Rico! Rico! Rico! Rico!”

My vision faded and I was back to the real world. Not even realizing I had been closing my eyes, I opened them and looked back at the poster. I thought I could win this. In fact, I knew I could win this.

“Rico!” Carl called my name from the classroom. Everyone was staring at me with confused expressions, but I didn’t care, because after I won this battle, “pecker Rico,” “loser Rico,” “nerd Rico” would be gone. I was going to show the entire school, and my family, that I could become a Skyclasher. I was going to show them that I was not a loser. I was going to show them that just because I’m a chicken doesn’t mean I can’t fly.

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I burst through my front door and all faces turned to me. “Rico? What are you doing here so early? You usually arrive at least fifteen minutes later,” my mom questioned and tilted her head in confusion. I caught my breath and then dug out a copy of the Skyclash poster that I grabbed from the school office during lunch. I held it up.

“Mom, Dad, I have to do this. It’s been my dream ever since I was a chick.

I know I have a chance! And I know you think it's dangerous, Mom, but I can wear pads and protection and helmets, and I won't get seriously injured—I think." I practically shoved the poster into my parents' faces. "Please. I finally feel like I can do something great."

Mom looked at Dad, then at me. "Rico, we talked about you a lot after dinner last night. We're sorry for how we reacted to your dream. We should've been more supportive. Of course you can join the tournament," Mom said. I couldn't believe what I was hearing.

"As long as you wear protective gear, we're fine with it," my dad added and put his right wing tips on mine. I could tell my parents had some doubts, but I was grateful that they were letting me try to make my dream come true.

"Great Griffins!! This means everything to me! It's on May 21. I have three months to train!" My parents watched with amusement as I bounced around the room, then started doing push-ups on the floor. They completed the parent consent form, and I turned it in the next day. I was actually entering the competition! Step one, complete. The training could begin.

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The past couple of minutes were just a blur. The last three months of intense training were just a blur. I couldn't remember how I got from that moment in front of the poster to this moment in front of the Skyclash arena's upper doors. Straps tied, body armor attached, helmets buckled tight . . . It wasn't until I put my wing tips on the handles of those doors that I stopped. My body was ready to open the doors and get out there, but something was holding me in place. Doubt.

An annoying little voice in my head was still trying to make itself heard: *You're not good enough.* For a moment, I felt myself ready to listen to its whispers. Maybe it was right. Maybe I was just a foolish bird living in a foolish dream. *You're a chicken! Not a legendary Skyclasher!* I would be putting myself in an unprecedented and potentially dangerous situation the moment I stepped through those doors. The arena outside had always belonged to Tony—the big, strong hawk who had been terrorizing smaller birds since kindergarten. These thoughts scared me, and I almost let the fear blow out the flame that had kept me going all this time.

I looked through the small windows on the door and noticed my family sitting on the bleachers. Mom and Dad. Grams and Gramps. Even Macy! Carl and a few other friends were also there, holding a sign that said "Kick some hawk butt, R!" It made me laugh inside and brought happiness into my heart. I didn't just have my own motivation to become a Skyclasher; I had my entire family and friends there to cheer me on. I wasn't alone. They were there for me, and I was ready to be there, in that arena, for them.

I reached out and pushed the doors open. Cheers went up around the arena, and not just from my family and friends. Birds I didn't even know stood up and clapped. I trotted onto the ledge where I'd make my first dive. Beams of golden light shone down onto the arena, and the loud cheers rang in my ears. A huge, blue banner hung over the bleachers:

## “RICO vs. TONY, Thunderflight Middle School Skyclash Championship!”

The intercom crackled, and the commentator's voice spoke through the microphone, “Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the Thunderflight Middle School Skyclash Championship!” We have a very, very interesting match here, and I'm sure you all can't wait to see it play out. Rico, the first-ever chicken to compete in a Skyclash battle at this school, surprised everyone in the first and second rounds of the tournament. Now he's going against the three-year Skyclash champion of the school, Tony Rayburn! Will this be the best Skyclash battle we've ever seen, or will this game end very quickly . . . as many expect?” I couldn't help but flinch at the commentator's last words, but I couldn't let that stop me now. “So, give it up for Rico, our very small but, I will admit, very bold competitor!” Cheers rose up throughout the arena. “And for our three-year champion, the pride of Thunderflight Middle School, Tony Rayburn!” More cheers echoed in the arena.

After his last words, the crowd surrounding the shiny, bowl-shaped arena applauded, but the cheers that rang in my ears came from Carl and my family. “Gooo, Rico! Woohoooo! Knock his feathers off, Rico!” Macy hollered “Rico! Rico!” and I shot her a grateful smile. “You got this, Rico!” Carl yelled nearby and curled his wing tips into a fist as he shook them in the air and jumped up and down.

A loud buzzer sounded over the intercom, signaling the match was about to begin. The crowd went silent and everyone leaned forward in their seats, anticipating the start whistle and the first dives. I could hear my heart beating. This was the moment I'd dreamed about my whole life, ever since the sport of Skyclash had sunk its hooks in me as a chick. I had watched so many battles and had somehow made it through the first rounds. Now, I was finally up there on the diving ledge in the championship!

Tony glared at me and then swiped his big, brown wing across his broad neck.

He narrowed his eyes and then mouthed “You're dead.” But this time, I didn't avoid eye contact or look down at my feet.

I glared back at him and said, “Not today, Rayburn!” At first, Tony looked shocked that someone had talked back to him, and then his expression changed to pure rage. He looked like he was about to explode. If he didn't have feathers, I'm sure he would have looked as red as a tomato. I couldn't help but let out a soft chuckle at the thought of Tony the Tomato. In the entire seven years that I'd known him, I had never seen Tony so helplessly confused by such a mix of anger, shock, and disbelief as he faced me, Rico the Chicken, perched across from him.

A second buzzer sounded and a heron dressed in a black and white striped T-shirt and shorts flapped into the center of the arena and held out a green flag. I immediately turned dead serious and bent my knees, lowering myself into a diving position. The referee put a whistle to his mouth and the world stopped.

I looked Tony in the eyes. I was ready. Ready for whatever Tony would throw at me. The whistle blew, and without a second thought, I lunged off the ledge and

**I sprinted up the slanted wall and let myself fall onto the trampoline under me to bounce myself toward Tony.**

plummeted towards the floor below. All the training I had done—jumping from the roof of my house onto my trampoline while doing flips and dives in the air, barreling into the hammock from different angles and heights, even bounding over the fence and jumping from the boulder onto the athletics field—it all came flooding back to me. Around halfway to the bottom of the arena, I opened my small wings to slow my fall and leaned to the right to steer myself to the nearest trampoline. When I landed, Tony was across the arena, and milliseconds later he was catapulting through the air—straight at my stomach. But I was prepared. Before he could pin me to the wall, I quickly jumped to the trampoline on my left and then bounced as high as I could into the air. The crowd howled at my reaction, but I couldn't get distracted. Tony whipped around to face me and huffed in frustration before flying towards the sky and swooping at top speed, aiming to knock me down and throw me to the floor below, just like I'd watched him do to Wyatt. Staying calm, I waited until the last second, then bounced right over him and let him hit my talons as he passed so that his energy flipped me in the opposite direction. Tony flew into the wall with a *thump*. His anger was out of control. After that it was just Tony attacking and me jumping out of the way. After five minutes, he hadn't landed a feather on me.

The commentator spoke excitedly, "Wow! Rico is pulling the jump and dodge move over and over again. This chicken can dance! Tony hasn't managed to hit him once. It looks like Rico's using his small size and agility as a great advantage! But when will he start striking back?" Tony glanced at the commentator's booth and looked like he was ready to fly through it in a rage, but he veered and took another swoop at me.

*He's right. When am I going to attack?* I started worrying as I dodged Tony's attack once again. But then Tony stopped to catch his breath and hovered a few meters away. *Now!* I sprinted up the slanted wall and let myself fall onto the trampoline under me to bounce myself toward Tony. He didn't expect me to attack, especially from that angle. I sank my talons into his back and he let out an angry screech. He reached with one of his wings to throw me off his back, but with only one wing flapping, Tony faltered, and we both started falling toward the bleachers.

"GET OFF OF ME YOU . . ." But before he finished his sentence, we both hit the rim of a trampoline and I lost grip on his shoulder. I fell onto the trampoline and watched as Tony flapped back up, where a huge net separated the top of the arena from the sky. *I need to get up there too*, I thought. I jumped from trampoline to trampoline until I reached the highest one, but Tony was still well above me. He used this advantage to dive at me at full speed and grabbed me by the shoulder. The pain was terrible. Then he started flapping back to the top.

"Tony's got Rico! He's got him!" the sportscaster yelled, and the crowd gasped.

"Oh no, Rico!" I heard my mom yell from the audience, and I looked down



to see her with both wings over her eyes, but with her feathers spread just enough to watch.

"You're gonna pay, loser!" Tony barked in my face when we reached the upper netting. Then he wrapped his wing around my chest and dove at lightning speed with me right under him. If I didn't do something, and fast, I would be punched into the ground at full force. My feet were still free, so I kicked at Tony with one foot and his grip loosened on my waist. I slipped out of his wing barely a second before he could get me onto the floor. I flapped with all my might to get to the trampoline next to me without touching the floor. Tony had quickly spread his wings to halt his dive and avoid landing. He urgently flapped to increase his distance from the ground and I saw my chance to end the game. I looked him in the eye and taunted, "Never gonna get me."

He immediately burned with rage and growled "Shut up, pecker!" Then he torpedoed at me with hatred in his eyes. That's when I felt I was living my vision. I rolled to my left, narrowly avoiding Tony's attack, bent my skinny knees, and kicked with all my strength at Tony's side. My feet rammed into him, knocking him back.

"Argh!" Tony shouted, and was left breathlessly flapping in the center of the arena. The kick allowed me to push off of him to reach a trampoline on the slanted wall. I tucked in my wings and winked at Tony as the trampoline reached its stretch limit and catapulted me forward. Tony's eyes widened helplessly as I shot across the arena like a cannonball and struck him in the stomach. He landed gasping for air on the floor below.

I landed beside Tony, exhausted and holding myself up with my wingtips on my knees. Tony closed his eyes and banged his wing on the ground in frustration. Except for my panting and Tony's gasping, the arena was silent. The audience was catching its breath too, but all at once let out cheers, screams, and applause like an exploding volcano. I had to cover my ears to prevent myself from going deaf. I had won. I had done it. Tony had underestimated me, and that was my advantage.

"WHAT AN AMAZING, UNEXPECTED WIN! RICO IS THE NEW CHAMPION OF THUNDERFLIGHT MIDDLE SKYCLASH! Well done, Rico!" The commentator's words rang in my ears. Then the doors to the arena flew open and my family and friends came running through. They circled around me, cheering and hugging me. They picked me up and screamed, "Rico, the new champion! Rico, the new champion!"

"That was amazing, Rico! You beat him! I knew you could do it!" Carl called to me over the noise as the rest of the crowd came to congratulate me. Happiness was exploding inside of me, and tears rolled down the sides of my face. Everybody was calling my name, just like in my dreams. Except this wasn't a dream. I had really beaten Tony. But more importantly, I had believed in myself and become the first chicken to battle in a Skyclash match at my school. It was all wonderfully real.



*Water on Wood* (OPPO Find X2 Lite)  
Karuna Yang, 12  
New Zealand

# Thin Ice

The narrator has a close call on the thin ice of a forest stream



By Lina Yoon, 13  
California

I rubbed my mittens together to bring some warmth to my cold hands. The temperature had dropped below what the thermometer could read. But I still loved the winter wonderland of the forest; no blizzard could deter me from the great and gorgeous nature that surrounded my warm, wooden home. For this reason, on this icy dusk, I had ventured outside, bundled in a cozy yarn-knit scarf (which barely deterred the swirling snow) instead of curling up next to the fire with a good book and a steaming cup of hot chocolate. I caught the snowflakes that floated down from the infinite, navy midnight sky. I felt free as nature engulfed me. Some caribou nibbled at a small olive-colored clump of moss near the stream; others pranced around in the distance. A vivid aurora colored the sky behind them. Bright, shiny stars twinkled across the transparent, frozen streams.

I stepped in pure white snow. Icicles hung on shivering pine-tree branches, reflecting the pale moon, and I walked slowly and carefully to the bank of the river that winds around the area. Wanting to test the ice, I tugged a branch from a dying bush and poked it. It seemed hard enough. I felt a quiver of fear, being at the banks of where my brother died. The dark sky did nothing to comfort me, only frightened me.

I gingerly stepped on the slippery ice, one foot after the other. I squinted to try and make out how solid the ice in front of me was, but it was too dark. I stepped once. Twice. Three times. No ice had fallen. I started to skate through the frozen stream, humming and gliding on the ice, until there was a small rock in the way. I tried to avoid it, but I wobbled over the slippery ice and my body weight crashed into the already fragile ice. My hands groped into the frigid air for something, but I found a branch too late as my feet touched cold, frigid water. With a splash, half of my body was submerged in the icy river.

My gut nagged to me: *I told you so.* Death by this river has happened before. Oh my poor brother, is this how he felt, floating away in the water?

I thought again, *Well, how are you going to get out of this one?*

I held onto the branch with all my might, my mind racing through old memories. A fading picture of my mother and father holding me and my brother

tightly next to a fire, telling us something. I thought harder. “Don’t panic if you ever fall in the stream.” “Grab something and push yourself out if you can. If you can’t . . .” The ending evaded my memory, but it didn’t matter much. I knew what I had to do. Remembering my mother’s warning, I slowly pulled myself a bit closer to land. Holding the branch in one hand, I hoisted myself up, never letting go of the branch. I rested my elbows on a rock, my lower body out of the water, except for my feet. I felt only two things. Pain and cold.

I pushed myself up against the tree trunk, my legs numb. *The less pain I feel, the better*, I thought. So I took a step towards the west of the moon, where my home lay. Another step. I felt a strange dull pain go through my weary body.

The entire sky had blackened into the abyss, only lit by the pure moon, so light and fair. I took a few more steps, not sure whether I could go on. A few more. I crumbled onto the same snow I had walked on as I had gone out to see the wilderness. Now, it seemed that my destiny was to die in my beloved forest.

I sighed as I crept away from the fox, her ears twitching. I grabbed the tree trunk and pulled myself to my feet. I realized that I needed to take off my pants and socks, and wrap the scarf around my legs. I hobbled toward home, the moon guiding me to safety. The fox followed me until I left the region of her home. Seeing my cabin in the distance, I ran my last few steps. More, a few more! A few more is so much. I grabbed the handle of the door and pulled it open, the warmth radiating to me the moment I stepped in.



*Bright Vision* (Pen and pastel)  
Riya Kasture, 12  
India



# The Onlooker



By Julia Xu, 13  
Massachusetts

Smoke the only trace  
Of its existence  
Surging up to be one with the clouds  
Swirling shapes that remind of something  
That we can't seem to place  
Bringing tears to the eyes  
That should have already been there

Embers, once flaring with vitality  
Now ash as they gently land on our  
Ignorant shoulders

There is no line between  
The:  
Burnt  
Burning  
Untouched

Reaching down without avail  
Staring at the ravaged  
Yet we can't  
Seem to tell our bodies, tell our legs  
To move down the side of our mountain  
Lush green  
Against the backdrop of red seas and black sand  
Hollowed out inside  
By none other than ourselves  
As the cracks start to appear and we  
Inch further up  
Away  
Forever the onlooker



*The Arcadia* (Acrylic)  
Arwen Gamez, 14  
New York

# When I Accidentally Drew an Arc around My Butterfly

The narrator turns a mistake into something beautiful



By Norah Lu, 7  
California

I had just finished sketching a butterfly at my school desk. I grinned and raised my arms over my head, stretching with joy as I looked down at my picture. I had spent fifteen minutes sketching it. I picked up a yellow crayon and started coloring the right wing.

Suddenly, Maxine, my friend next to me, bumped me on the elbow. That made an arc around my yellow butterfly picture. Oh, all that work for nothing! But I can't just start all over again! *You have to think of an idea, Norah.* I lifted my head and studied my drawing carefully. I thought about places where butterflies land: grass, leaves, flowers . . . wait—flowers? Hmm, that might be useful after all. I said nothing while I colored the rest of my butterfly. But when it was time for the arc I accidentally drew, I smiled a huge smile.

First, I drew a circle. (Can you guess what I was doing?) Next, I drew some small half circles. (Can you guess what now?) Then, I drew a stem. (It's getting obvious.) Finally, I colored it. It was a flower! A pretty, yellow flower! I grinned the biggest grin yet. It was beautiful!





*Twilight Fortress* (Mixed materials, oil paints, pencil, sand)  
 Ariel Makri Levy, 12  
 Florida

# The Rise of Athena

Athena makes the other gods jealous with her ingenious new invention



By Willem Ehret, 12  
New Hampshire

Athena was bored of the other gods. All they cared about was gossip and entertainment; none of them wanted to sit and listen to her talk wisely or play *Trivial Pursuit Architecture Edition*. All the nymphs and spirits were all so boring, ghosting around the woods to play lighthearted games of tag.

Athena would spend the day up in her godly workshop. This workshop was nothing like Hephaestus's forge, full of loud noises, fire, and white hot metal—no, not at all. Athena liked to call her neat, air-conditioned space *The Laboratory*.

And so Athena would spend all the time she could working on blueprints or writings or solving *Mount Olympus Times* crossword puzzles in *The Laboratory*.

But she was not motivated by anything lately. Designing the machine that wrote the *Mount Olympus Times* had been a challenge, but that had been millennia ago, and she felt that her brain had not been fully stimulated for some time. She would simply sip her hot ambrosia and do the crossword, then pace around, making a 3-D model of this and extracting the DNA of that.

Of course she was not lonely. No, what a silly idea. She *enjoyed* her time in *The Laboratory*. And she didn't care what the other gods posted about her on social media, or that in the game *Battle of Godz* she was portrayed as a little freckled girl in pigtails and a school uniform. But sometimes, late at night, she knew she did care, and she would wish that there were beings out there somewhere that understood what it was like to always need to know *why*. People who would play *Trivial Pursuit Architecture Edition* and admire her work up in *The Laboratory*. People who would think of her as a great, wise being. People who would name cities after her. People who would ask for her architectural advice. People who would design a giant statue of her in a temple and put it in a great, prominent spot overlooking the city. They would worship her too. Set a new standard for intelligent life, and make gods look like, well, gods. And so the idea of the human was born.

One day, while in her workshop, Athena decided to make a diagram of what this “human” would look like. And how it would function. And so on and so forth. Athena got caught up in this idea, working late into the night, her mind racing, designing the complexities of her ideal being. Of course she would never show



## The Oracle always told the truth, and the Oracle was kind of freaky, and the Oracle didn't make satyr ears behind the other gods' heads when they took a family picture.

this idea of a “human” to the other gods. They would laugh, even make fun of her, and Athena was the god of wisdom. She would never stand for being ridiculed and would avoid this at all costs.

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Apollo wore sunglasses, the lenses a cool, reflective gold, and a thick gold chain around his neck. His hair was long and blond, stirring slightly in the breeze. He wore a deep black T-shirt that read *MUSE ROCK* in gold letters. For pants he wore long, shiny gold bell-bottomed jeans and elevated black shoes with a solid block of gold on the bottom. Since Apollo's shoes were god size, the gold blocks weighed about 400 pounds. You couldn't tell this by the easy way he strode over to a door of fire with a lopsided sign above it that read *Apollo's Place*. The door did not send out tendrils of flame like normal fire but rather was contained by some invisible force. The door was set into a giant dome of gold that reflected the sun so strongly that if you were a mere nymph or ungodly being, you would disintegrate upon such a sight. Apollo liked the way the lopsided sign looked in contrast to the symmetry of the dome. He also liked how gold it all looked. In case you have not yet noticed, Apollo liked all things gold.

Apollo thrust each door of fire open with both hands and entered into a cavernous space with green mist swirling all around, “*Eye of the Oracle*” blasting.

Apollo was in a good mood, sauntering over to the edge of what seemed to be a bottomless pit. He flipped off the rim of the chasm, landing perfectly on a circular yoga mat that was positioned on a solid gold column rising up from the gloom. He snatched a remote that seemed to have just appeared in thin air and turned on a huge flatscreen TV. He went to his *godly yoga* profile and selected his favorite video.

After he finished his yoga, he decided to ask the Oracle something.

Of course, Apollo was the Oracle, but everyone referred to the Oracle as if it were someone else, for Apollo and the Oracle were just so different. For instance, the Oracle always told the truth, and the Oracle was kind of freaky, and the Oracle didn't make satyr ears behind the other gods' heads when they took a family picture.

But anyway, back to the story. Apollo took off his sunglasses, closed his eyes, inhaled some volcanic gas, and passed out. As he passed out, he had decided to ask how to get his newest music video to one million views. At the time, when there were so few beings on the earth, and the majority of the population was nature spirits who shunned anything that involved electronics, such a number was huge.

Almost instantaneously his eyelids shot open, and with bright green eyes, he recited, “Go to *The Laboratory*. Bring the other gods.”

Of course this was before it became popular for oracles to tell the future in the form of insanely complicated rhymes.

Apollo eventually woke up, wondering what on earth *The Laboratory* was. He asked around and eventually was enlightened by a geeky satyr with a subscription to the *Mount Olympus Times*. Unfortunately for the satyr, he tried to show the crossword to Apollo, and deciding the satyr had outlived his usefulness, Apollo vaporized him.

Apollo popped in his earbuds and sauntered along as he sent a group text to all the other gods.

From: Apolloisawesome  
To: Everyone except Athena  
Meet @ Athena's ASAP! Oracle's orders!

Of course, no one could refuse "Oracle's orders," so in five minutes everyone was waiting in front of the elevator to *The Laboratory*, wondering why on earth the Oracle had wanted them to meet there.

Apollo took his time getting there, skipping along happily and vaporizing things.

---

Athena was just putting the finishing touches on one of her "humans."

It did not resemble what we currently look like in the slightest. It had a square head, a six-foot cube, but unlike us it had no real face. On what would have been the front of its face was a small ball covered in miniscule hairs that stuck out on a short rod, which served as a nose. On each face of the head besides the top and bottom, half of a sphere stuck out, serving as eyes. The head of the "human" was set on the body and would turn smoothly. The body was very small in comparison to the head, a ten-foot cube, just barely big enough for the ridiculously complex workings inside. The legs resembled tank tracks that could hinge to negotiate almost any terrain. The "human" had four arms which were extremely flexible tubes that could extend to lengths of 200 feet and could lift most anything. The hands were extremely precise and could commit most anything to muscle memory within seconds.

If you take your hands, and you imagine that the wrists are fused together so your palms face each other, imagine your pinky fingers are opposable as well as your thumbs, and imagine each finger is exactly four feet long, then you will have the basic idea of what the original "human" hand looked like.

Except for the hands, its whole body was black to absorb heat from the sun, which it would convert into energy.

It was the ultimate being to Athena's eyes. She had just stepped back to admire her work when the other gods walked through the door.

---

Apollo was very pleased with himself; he was in charge of all the other gods for the moment, and even though the Oracle hadn't technically ordered the other gods to come and help Apollo get his million views, they had steadily believed him.

**Athena looked so confident in her stylish long gray apron in a room full of scary-looking things, and Apollo could find nothing to make fun of.**

And now the gods were going to step into Athena's workshop and make fun of her stupid clothes and whatever stupid things she was doing. Now, as he stepped through the door, he quickly felt his control on the situation slipping.

He had no idea what he was supposed to say and do now that he was standing in front of a very surprised Athena, in a room full of things that were a mystery to him. This was not at all what he had expected. Athena looked so confident in her stylish long gray apron in a room full of scary-looking things, and Apollo could find nothing to make fun of. His eyes found her "human" and, with no idea where to start, the absolute worst possible thing he could have said spilled straight out of his mouth: "What's that? What does it do? Can I vaporize it?"

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Athena could barely process what had just happened. Of all the times the other gods could have dropped in and asked questions about her inventions for her to answer very wisely, they chose now?! She had been about to complete her greatest godly achievement when her upstart brother with his stupid posse had popped in and volunteered to vaporize it! She had been so close to finishing, but now that all the other gods were here, they would demand to know what it was, and then they would want their own beings, or Zeus would demand she make one for him, and nobody else, and on and on and on. So Athena turned all her frustration and worry into sarcastic, demeaning humor and wit, which she felt would compensate for when the other gods would surely steal her idea and come out on top again. Of course, none of the other gods had actually done anything to her yet, but in her mind they were all malicious scheming devils. All these thoughts had gone through her head in a split second, and she coldly answered Apollo without missing a beat. "No, you can't. What are you all here for?"

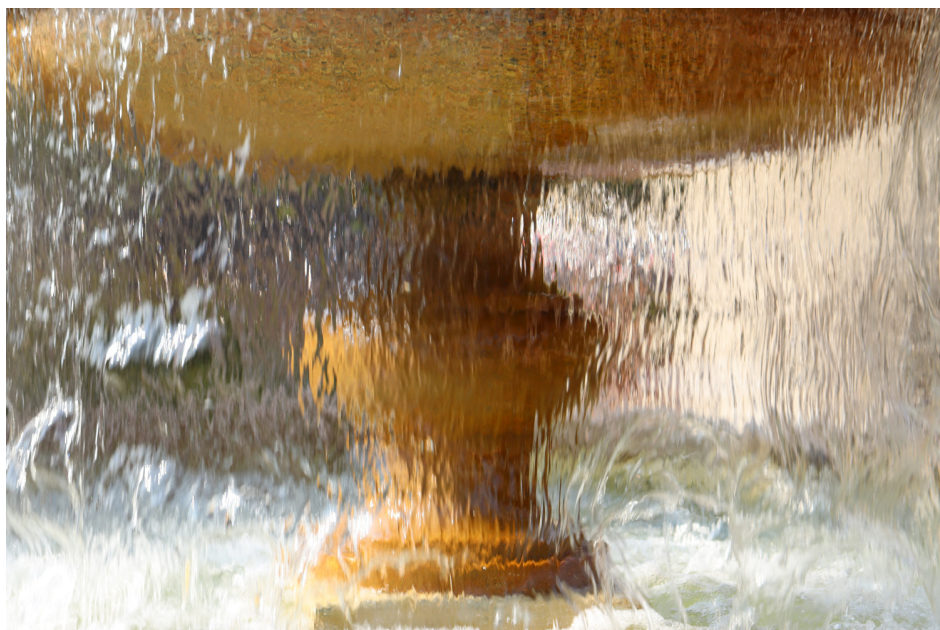
Zeus, standing directly behind Apollo, helpfully supplied the answer. "The Oracle said we should come. Well, Apollo said that the Oracle said we should come." Zeus had been feeling rather childish, being led by Apollo and standing in a group with the other gods, not at the head of the line. Answering Athena's question had made him feel a little better, and now he moved to stand in front of Apollo.

"You fools believed him? The Oracle doesn't lie, but Apollo lies about what the Oracle says. I'm sure this is all for his personal gain, and he made up the whole part about the Oracle," Athena said.

Trying to deflect the attention to Apollo, Zeus said, "I'm sure the Oracle didn't actually say anything and you're lying."

Zeus was now feeling rather stupid being belittled by the very god he regularly made fun of. Whenever Athena was required to come for a meeting with the gods, she spoke little and was away as quickly as possible. This was a different side of Athena, new to him and the other gods.

*continued on p. 36*



*Light on Water Wall* (Canon Rebel)  
Madeline Male, 14  
Kansas

"No I'm not!" said Apollo, realizing how stupid that sounded.

Athena, very unimpressed, leaned on her creation. "Usually you come up with a believable lie, brother, or at least try to make yourself look smooth, but you truly are an idiot."

Zeus decided that, as the king of the gods, he should do something more than stand in a clump with the other gods. He stepped into the middle of the room, and, trying to change the subject, he said, "Athena, what a wonderful . . . workshop you have here, with all these little . . . gadgets."

"It's not a workshop. It's called *The Laboratory*. Didn't you read the sign?" said Athena.

After an uncomfortable pause, Zeus, realizing he was still stupidly standing in the middle of the room, and thinking that Athena looked very in control of the situation when she was leaning on something, decided he needed something to lean on as well. There was a table right next to Zeus, so he leaned on that and reached down to select a fragment of lightning bolt to pick his teeth with. Instead, his arm accidentally turned on the welding machine Athena had just been using, and in his surprise he yanked his arm up. That arm had currently been stroking the handle of his biggest bolt, and in his surprise he clamped onto that, and, in yanking his arm upward, proceeded to create a gaping hole in the ceiling of *The Laboratory* with his lightning bolt.

"Honestly. I was beginning to think I needn't have redesigned the electricity in here so you couldn't short it out, but I guess we should put baby gates and corner protectors up as well."

A laugh burst out from the crowd of gods. "The people love you, Zeus!" Aphrodite crowed. "I've already got like 20,000 likes!"

All eyes turned to her, and everyone realized that she was holding her phone up, recording the whole thing.

"Oh, by the way, Athena, the people want to know what invention you're leaning on."

The thought of proposing this new, dominant being to the public on a social media livestream occurred to Athena, and, realizing how much negative attention that would get, she had no idea what to do. Athena was never very good at coming up with things on the spot. *What would my mother have done?* wondered Athena.

Her mother had been the Titan of wisdom and cunning, and always knew what to do in a tough situation. When the gods and Titans went to war, she had allied with the gods. She would have thought, *What can I get out of this?* And so Athena wondered what she would get out of it if she simply said her invention was a barometer and the other gods were none the wiser. Well, then she would go back to being silly old Athena until Zeus found out about her invention and in his jealousy punished her. No, that wasn't what she should do. Maybe she could simply keep her invention in *The Laboratory*, and it would become her friend. No, even if the gods never found out about her invention up there, she would stay silly old Athena, who shyly stayed away from all the other gods. Then Athena had an idea of another path she could take. It was risky, sure, but if it worked,



she would no longer be silly old Athena. She said, “Well, I’ll tell you, if you will all play *Trivial Pursuit Architectural Edition* with me.”

Zeus started to say, “But—”

“No buts,” said Athena

“No butts!” said Ares, giggling.

Athena gave him a glare and he stopped. “Well, if you’re all done here, I guess I’ll show you to the door,” Athena said.

But none of the other gods wanted to leave, for they needed to know what the thing Athena was leaning on was, for that was one of the main differences between gods and Titans. Titans lacked curiosity, whereas the thing that made gods gods was curiosity. And so they one by one gave in, swearing on the river Styx that they would play, until all the gods were waiting in an attentive little group.

And so Athena told them all what it was, and of course they were all jealous and wanted their own. But Athena was prepared for this as well. She shushed all of them and said, “I am sure you all want your own modifications made on this being. I will grant these, if you will give me something in return. Now make a line.”

And such was her authority in this statement that none of the other gods challenged her.

All the other gods had jockeyed for a spot in line, and Ares had ended up in front. Stepping up to Athena he asked, “What’re we in line for?”

Athena sighed dramatically and said, “You’re all in line to see who can give me the best present. Really, Ares, you must pay attention to these things. What were you doing, anyway?”

“I was playin’ this really fun game on my phone where you try to kill as many people as you can and everybody else tries to kill you! And then I got distracted when you started talking about butts!” Ares said enthusiastically.

Athena, knowing that sooner or later Ares would figure out he’d been cheated, scribbled in a little clipboard, *Makes war with their own species, and a few enjoy potty humor*. She was relatively sure that was what Ares would have requested anyway, based on his previous statement. Then she turned to Ares and, raising her voice so all the gods could hear, said, “In return, you, Ares, will give me your best non-bloody armor and spear, and you all will respect me as the god of wise and strategic war. Swear this on the river Styx. They all did, Ares more enthusiastically than most, for he felt the world could always use more gods of war and he hated his non-bloody armor, thinking it looked weak, and was constantly looking for a way to get rid of it. And so Athena moved on to the next god in line. Each god added his or her own touch, Hephaestus asking that they would have a knack for crafting with metal, Aphrodite making them basically resemble gods but not be quite as attractive, and have all sorts of love dramas. Each god chose a quality that they thought these humans should have, something that reflected those gods themselves, and in return, Athena acquired IOUs, treasured artifacts, and in general changed her whole reputation. Instead of being silly old Athena, she was now a war god who had invented an amazing new creature.

Finally, it came down to just two gods left in line, Zeus and Apollo. Apollo stepped up first, and he said, "Make them have a great appreciation for music and the arts."

Athena grudgingly scribbled this down and tried to think of something that Apollo couldn't stand to give up, so she could require him to give it in return. After all, he was the one who had started this whole mess. And then she had it. "You will have to promise not to vaporize anything for a millennium."

As expected, Apollo's face fell, but he still swore it on the river Styx, glumly going over to sit with the other gods.

At last Zeus was the only god left, and he stepped up and said, "Make them smaller. So I can tower over them. Also make sure that if I throw a lightning bolt at them, they will be fried."

Typical Zeus.

Athena thought long and hard about what she should make Zeus give her. Finally, after much thought, she decided that this was too good an opportunity to forgo for a whim at the moment. And so she turned to Zeus and said, "Someday, there will be something of yours I want and need. When that day comes, you will give it to me."

And so Zeus swore on the river Styx that he would.

Once Zeus had sworn, all the other gods filtered out, and Athena went to work fulfilling her promises, turning the being into the human we know today.

After a couple hours, Athena's phone buzzed. It was a text from Apollo:

From: Apolloisawesome

To: Athena

Party @ 8 see U there!

Athena smiled and shut her phone. She would definitely be there.

And as you can see, Athena's "human" really took off.

Now, you might be wondering, *What happened to that IOU Zeus made?* Well, one day Athena decided to take advantage of it. She had been thinking. The other gods respected her, but they didn't fear her like Zeus was feared. And so one day, she marched into the throne room and demanded the Aegis, which is a goatskin shield which had the head of Medusa on the front, which was so ugly, it could turn you to stone. So yeah, if someone had the power to turn you to stone, you probably would fear them and try to be extra nice to them.

Now Athena's reputation is complete, and our story will end here. It makes you wonder, though, whether gods were an invention of our imagination, or the other way around.



*Triangle Man* (Marker)  
Angelo Theodore, 9  
Florida

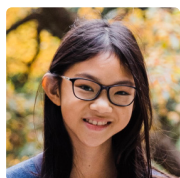
# My Sneakers



By Lily Efergan, 7  
New Jersey

My sneakers, sneakers, sneakers  
They call me every day  
So I can put them on  
Hooray, Hooray!  
Oh sneakers,  
I'm coming, I'm coming  
I have to put my socks on first





*Mischievous Grin* (Pencil)  
Chenya He, 10  
Illinois



# What Poetry Isn't



By Oola Breen-Ryan, 12  
Connecticut

Poetry is like  
how sometimes, if you try hard enough,  
for just a second  
you can see a spiderweb,  
in the sunlight.  
After that,  
it's gone, no matter how hard you look.

Poetry is chaos written out on paper.

Poetry is what might happen,  
if the universe took a pencil in hand  
and wrote something.

Poetry is a song not meant to be sung.

Poetry is the feeling of a sunset or a sunrise.

Or maybe  
it's not.



*Lunch Time* (Google Pixel 4)  
Lillian Beahan, 11  
California

# One Person Short of a Family

**Siblings receive devastating news after their father misses after-school pickup**



By Aisana Zhumabayeva, 11  
New York

The cafeteria was empty and silent. Only two people were there, shivering, naive, and alone. My brother and I.

My brother, Alikhan, was determinedly drawing a design for a school beanie that was going to be used as a graduation present for the fifth-graders of PS11. I muttered to myself quietly, restlessly shifting from foot to foot. However, I had good reason to.

About an hour and a half earlier, all after-schools were finished, and I watched with a mixture of longing and worry as we saw friends, classmates, and people we barely knew walk away with their parents, excitedly recounting their school day to them. They were going home to a warm, loving family, who probably had a home that didn't smell faintly of the none-too-pleasant school lunch. Instead, I was stuck in a cafeteria, with Alikhan, who was too engrossed in his drawing to answer more than a few of my numerous questions.

"Where's Papa? He was supposed to be here more than an hour ago," I pondered. "Maybe he was stuck in a traffic jam." I only knew about traffic jams because my dad had once been late bringing balloons to a playground for one of me and my brother's birthday parties.

The only speech that Alikhan had mustered was, "I don't know. Maybe he's just slow today," still designing the beanie as he said these words. The beanie was black and white currently, and featured the words PS11 and buildings and the White House surrounding it. "That's probably why," I agreed.

It's not like we were thirsty or hungry. There were free snacks after school that nearly no one passed up.

Nearly a half hour after the answer that Alikhan had given me, I still had a small gut feeling that something was wrong. Papa was almost never late. He liked being early, and he usually always left the house to arrive at school five to ten minutes early.

Nonetheless, my gut feeling was soon bombarded with sugary treats.

Five minutes later, fifteen members of the staff came in, still wearing their work clothes, and singing and holding boxes of donuts. "Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you! Happy birthday dear Debbie, happy birthday to you!"

## Even in the bright lights of New York City, the hospital seemed to darken sinisterly.

Everyone paused what they were doing for a moment. Both me and Alikhan, and other members of the PS11 staff, were confused. They hadn't expected there would still be kids left after the pickup two hours ago. We didn't know that anyone's birthday was today, probably because none of the kids at PS11 were friends with a lot of the staff or even bothered to ask their birthdays. The staff must have seen the hungry look in our eyes and immediately gave us donuts so they wouldn't be assaulted by two sugar-craving kids.

Alikhan and I both happily munched our donuts while the staff asked us questions. Why hadn't our parents picked us up yet? We didn't know. Did we have our parents' phone number? Nope. Did we have any information whatsoever on how to contact our parents? Also a no. Whenever I think of this, I suppose the staff wondered why our parents would leave us here, a six-year-old girl and an eight-year-old boy, with absolutely no idea of how to find our parents. Does this make sense to you? It wouldn't have made sense to me either, had I thought of it. But the only thing that mattered at that moment was donuts. I was six years old. I didn't question motives, not unless it included some sort of sweet food.

When a blanket of darkness had completely covered the sky, and when I was finished licking powdered sugar from my fingers, I started to hear the roar of an engine in the driveway. I went outside and saw, to my surprise, that the sound was an ambulance. My suspicions were getting worse, and I was more open to jumping to conclusions. I stood there, petrified for a moment, but then composed myself. Everyone had stepped outside by now, and everyone had a look of concern on their faces.

A man came out, dressed in hospital scrubs and a denim jacket, gestured for Alikhan and me to come in. We climbed into the slightly musty back seat, looking at each other worriedly. The evening had gotten much more weird by the minute. We drove past cafés, grocery stores, and malls. Finally, the ambulance arrived at our destination: the hospital. Even in the bright lights of New York City, the hospital seemed to darken sinisterly.

Alikhan, me, and the driver walked into the hospital. The driver kept looking at me with pity. At the time, I didn't realize why. The driver led us down a sterile corridor with nurses and doctors covered in blue scrubs, some covered completely except for their eyes. I was usually scared of a doctor's appointment at a hospital, but this night, it was more ominous.

We walked into the waiting room, which had juice boxes, a mini television screen, and a few little tables and chairs the size for toddlers, all brightly colored. The screen flickered on and started playing an episode of *Blue's Clues*. The neon colors hurt my eyes after sitting in a dark ambulance for half an hour. The driver left, probably to go home. It was 8 p.m., and a lot of people's jobs were over.

I looked around. No one else was in the waiting room, and my mind flickered back to the steel carts carrying bodies covered with white cloth. I shivered.

Was my dad one of them, just a faceless person you might look at with pity if you didn't know who they were? My heart rate accelerated, beating frantically against my chest.

Well, I thought I probably had enough fun, cheery thoughts about death for today, so I blanked out my thoughts and turned to the television. The bright rainbow of colors seemed more welcoming than my life right then, especially considering the fact that I was in a hospital, I was alone with only my brother, and I hadn't seen either of my parents since when I was dropped off at school.

Suddenly, a round-faced nurse with chin-length blonde hair came in, although she wasn't smiling.

"Your mother is down the hallway. Don't worry. Everything will be all right," the nurse said, although I could sense that she was hiding something big.

Alikhan and I walked down the hallway with the nurse, staring at the rooms full of fancy-looking machines that radiated a feeling of being at the dentist's office—watching someone else and knowing that you'll be next.

A sense of dread weighed down my every step. I took my time, nervous and also full of apprehension of what might await at the end of the hallway. Although the room, from a person who didn't know anyone inside, the place would seem normal. For me, it was like being slowly lowered into a pit of bubbling hot oil. I knew that it would be unpleasant but was not entirely sure how the sensation felt.

As I walked into the room, I saw my mom. I was filled with relief until I noticed what she looked like. Her face was red, blotchy tears dripping down her face, and with a hunched back, as though she was carrying a huge weight upon her shoulders that she couldn't carry.

"Alikhan. Aisana." My mom patted the seats next to her on a pillowed operating bench.

"Papa is dead."

My body felt disconnected from my brain.

This couldn't happen. How could my papa, brave, kind, and always there, die? It seemed to be a lie, another reality. But then I saw my mother's face, shrouded with grief, and I realized it was true.

In books, when someone is about to die, their life flashes before their eyes, and everyone else thinks of fond memories they shared with that person.

I remembered my dad tickling me before bed, a kiss on the cheek, a Dr. Seuss book. I remembered hugging him, his stubble tickling my forehead. I remember his happy, kind face as I danced around our apartment, attempting to do handstands and miserably failing. I remembered everything, and how I always had taken him for granted, never, ever thinking of the possibility of death. Never realizing that anyone's breath, no matter what, could be their last.

My body crumpled against the bench, my mom hugging me and my brother, saying "Everything is going to be all right" over and over. But I wasn't going to be fooled. I wasn't naive anymore. Nothing was going to be all right.

All right was being a normal six-year-old with a normal brother and normal parents. All right was being picked up after after-school and not being taken



care of by school and hospital staff when you don't even personally know them. So, because I didn't know how to handle death, I decided to place the blame.

I blamed my mom for lying right then. I blamed my parents for not giving me their phone number. I blamed my brother for not being more comforting. But most of all, I blamed myself.

If I had asked my mom what her phone number was, I could have called her with someone else's phone and told her Papa wasn't arriving. I blamed myself because there were so many things I could have done to possibly prevent this from happening. It was my fault. All mine.

I realized that someone seemed to be crying on me, making whimpering noises. I then realized that that noise was me. And so, all as one, me and my family cried. We probably used a few boxes of Kleenex. As we cried, tears slowly drying up, my mom shakily pulled out her phone and typed in a number.

"Hi, Alina. I . . . Askar . . . Can I spend the night at your house?" My mom was so shaken she could barely get out her words. After calling several times, trembling sometimes too much to get out a few words, she hailed a taxi. Even though the night was freezing, in the 30s, I didn't notice. Time seemed to pass by without me noticing, and before I knew it, I was numbly eating Chips Ahoy mini cookies in a kitchen.

"Do you want to play with me? Please?" She didn't have to ask twice.

I nearly laughed out loud. Before, when all my family was alive, I would be annoyed. Now, I would give nearly anything to get back to normal, or at least pretend for a while.

At one point, as I was detachedly playing with a My Little Pony doll, I thought of something. Every time I took a breath that night, cursing my imagination, I thought of news headlines: "A six-year-old girl gets hit by a car," "A preadolescent dies of unknown cause in a bathroom" (like my dad), and "Brother survives miraculously . . . but sister doesn't. Read on to find more!"

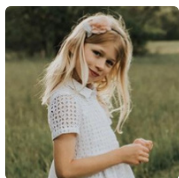
As my mom went to bed, I slipped in beside her. "Can I sleep with you tonight? Please?"

"Okay," she responded. As I snuggled in with her, I was mixed with the most grief and gratitude I had felt in my life.



*A World of Color* (Watercolor)  
Leticia Cheng, 10  
California

# Morning Love



By Mara Occhuizzo, 8  
Virginia

Out my window  
Whispering winds wander  
And dance upon the morning's might  
Sunshine streams rivers of light through my bedroom window

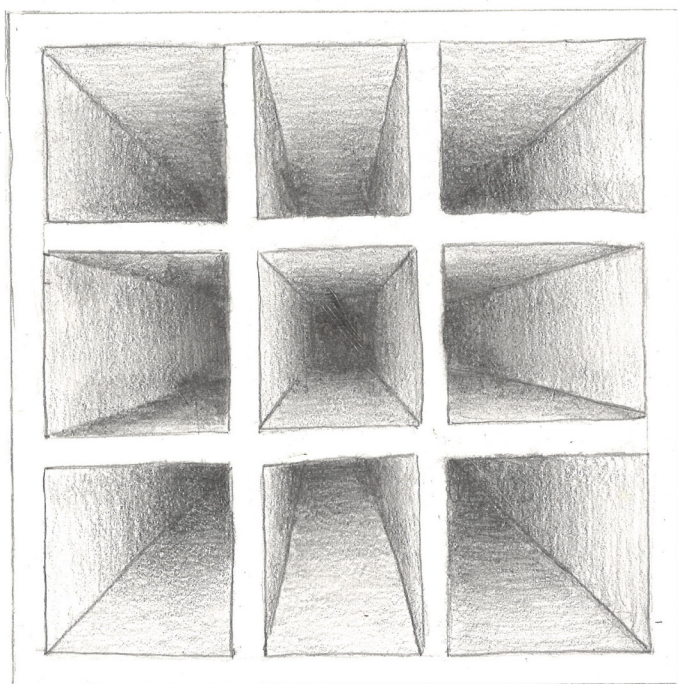
Out my window I listen to the sounds of silent mountains  
I listen to the songs of silent birds  
I listen to the songs of silent voices  
I listen to the songs of things unheard

# Night



By Lydia Grush, 10  
Michigan

The moon glances over at you as if to tell a secret,  
It whispers of the world coming alive,  
The stars shining,  
The quiet symphony,  
And the distant beauty of it all.

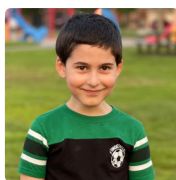


*Sucked into Black* (Sketch)  
Leticia Cheng, 10  
California



# The Mystery of the Mona Lisa

A retired police officer stumbles onto a mystery at the Louvre



By Ashwin Cohen, 8  
District of Columbia

“Welcome to France, Mr. Black,” said the customs officer in monotone. I hate flying but was glad to be in France. I was excited to see all the architecture and history. I wanted to see the Eiffel Tower, the Arc de Triomphe, and the Seine. But first, I wanted to visit the Mona Lisa.

The Louvre was even better in person than in pictures. It was a work of art itself. It’s the world’s largest museum and held 35,000 works of art. It was easily 100 feet tall.

After fighting through the big line, there was something odd about the *Mona Lisa*. It looked different, but I couldn’t tell what. I pulled out my phone and googled “Mona Lisa.” That’s when I realized that there was an extra tree in the background. It meant that I was not looking at the original.

I ran to the guard and told him everything. We raced back to the *Mona Lisa*, and I showed him the extra tree in the background. He told me that last night was rough, and all the cameras and security alarms were broken, but they couldn’t tell why. I pointed out that we now knew that the forger broke the cameras and security alarms. We called Interpol, who were baffled. Interpol’s experts were also baffled. They reviewed the camera footage and saw there were five people acting suspiciously in the museum before it closed last night.

A helicopter pilot named Emmet,

A YouTuber named Preston,

An art researcher named Avery,

A museum exhibit builder named Tom, who loves Michelangelo over da Vinci, and

A reporter named Big Ben. He was British and was very thin and tall.

Interpol wanted someone on the ground to interview them. Because I was a retired cop, I smiled and told them I could do it. My reputation for solving hard cases was well known. The French police brought me all five suspects. But, out of the corner of my eye I could see something. Footprints leading to a helicopter outside on the grounds. I looked closely and read “Courtesy of French Helicopter Airways” on the helicopter. I asked Emmet what the name of his helicopter company was. It was the same.

**It could be all of them. It could be one of them. It could be none of them.**

I went back to the *Mona Lisa* exhibit and saw something weird in the frame. I looked closer and saw a strand of long, blonde hair wedged in the frame. Then I looked at Avery's long blonde hair. Could it be her? Tom was late because he was writing a blog on how Michelangelo is a genius and da Vinci stinks. It could also be Tom. Again, Preston was also a good suspect because he had been making a new YouTube video about the Louvre's security. It could be Preston. But *ah ha!* I thought to myself. Let me learn about the Louvre's security. Big Ben was writing a story about the *Mona Lisa* heist. It could be all of them. It could be one of them. It could be none of them.

The two cops and I strolled into the interrogation room. The interrogation room was musty and dark. The walls were rough like sandpaper, and I could smell something stinky, like old, forgotten food. When the six of us and the two cops strolled into the room, I knew this was a moment that could help me save history. I knew that I could make a major arrest. My hearing aid fell out and I put it back in my left ear quickly.

"I got this," I mumbled to myself to give myself courage.

"Avery, what were you doing last night?" I asked curiously.

Avery remembered that she was eating chocolate when everything turned black. She recalled that she had probably been dizzy from walking in the hot sun. I asked Avery where the wrapper was, and it was still in her purse. I pulled the wrapper out and it smelled funky. On closer inspection I realized that this is the type of chocolate thieves use to knock people out and kidnap them. I told Avery that it was knockout chocolate. She was shocked.

The cops and I went outside to Emmet's helicopter. I saw the footprint that was just when Big Ben stepped in mud. He left the exact same print leading to the helicopter.

"Ah ha! It was Big Be—" I stopped myself. I needed more evidence, because the footprint could be the thief wearing the same brand and size as Big Ben. Tom told me that he wanted to get out of this mess and confessed something amazing. He secretly admired da Vinci and thought that the *Mona Lisa* was way better than Michelangelo's fresco in the Sistine Chapel. Preston articulated that his video showed one hidden security camera that the thief didn't tamper with. We reviewed the tapes and saw a man in black punch security guards, break the security cameras and alarms, and use a red laser to cut the glass to swap the paintings.

Emmet's eyes widened and he screamed, "That's him! That's him!" Everyone turned to look at him and I prompted, "That's who?"

Emmet replied that he had flown a wealthy, masked client to France to see the Louvre.

I had noticed something else in the footage.

"Preston! Rewind! And turn on the sound this time!" I exclaimed. Preston

*continued on p. 55*



*Macaroons* (Oil pastel)  
 Crystal Fu, 12  
 New York

shrugged and did as he was told. I saw that the thief grabbed scissors off a table, walked off camera, came back with something in his hand. I asked Preston to zoom in. A confused Preston said, "Uh, Okay?" I looked closely. He had a strand of blonde hair. On the left side of the screen, I could see something. Or someone. A sleeping woman. And that is when Avery screamed.

I thought that I should go back to the forged *Mona Lisa* to see what I could find. The answer was right under my nose, but I couldn't see it. I stared at the forged *Mona Lisa* and blinked. Under the *Mona Lisa*'s left eye but above her small smile was a smudge in the pigment. I looked closely. I could see the ridges of a thumb print.

Big Ben exclaimed, "It's a scoop!" after talking with Avery about being knocked out. He took out his pen to write in his notebook. At that exact moment his pen leaked black ink, drenching his fingers.

"Aw, man!" he exclaimed. He rested his fingers on the table and leaned against the wall. The black, leaky thumbprint on the wall had similar ridges to the one I saw on the *Mona Lisa*. I gasped and took a photograph of the fingerprint on the painting. I lined the phone up with the wall. I looked back to see Big Ben red and sweaty. I smiled and realized that the two prints were identical. The cops around me got out their handcuffs and placed them on Big Ben. Big Ben was flown to jail by French Airways, and Emmet waived to me from the cockpit. All the other people stood beside me. I explained to Avery,

"Ya know, Big Ben used your hair to frame you—with an actual frame!"

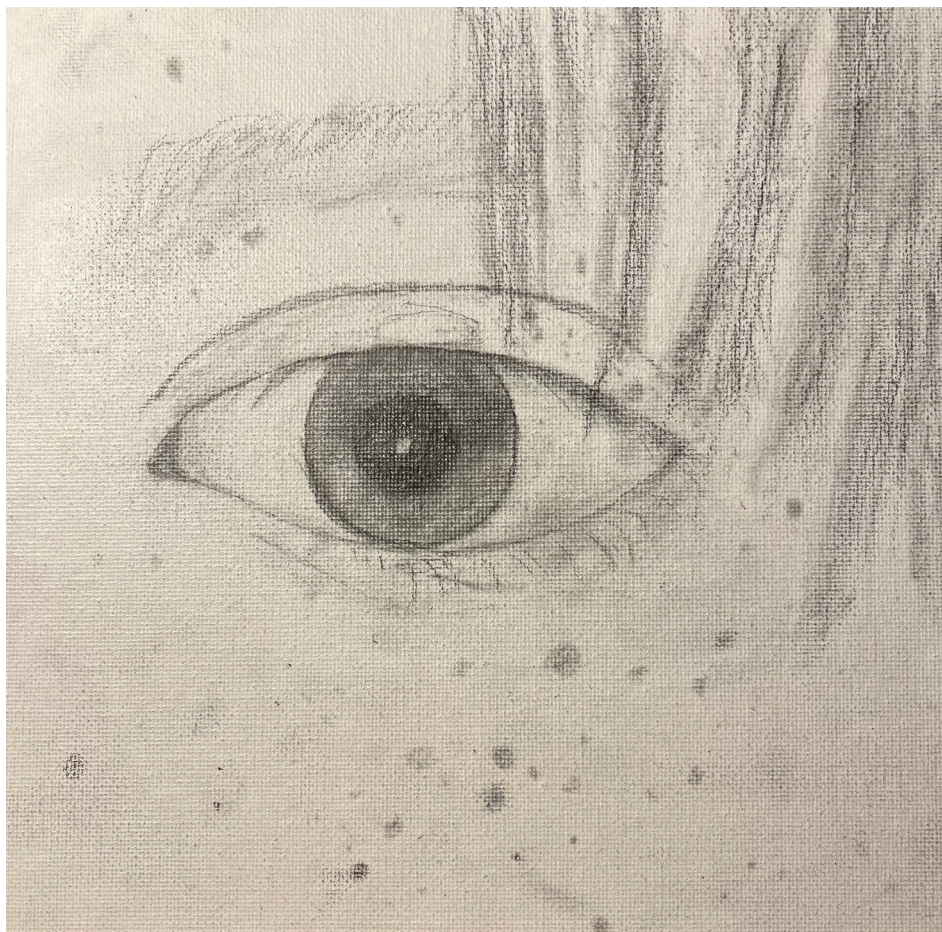
Everyone burst out laughing.

## Epilogue

I got back a letter from the French police chief. Big Ben was questioned, and it turns out that he was an infamous art forger who wanted to sell the *Mona Lisa* for \$900 million. His nickname was the "Renaissance Man" because he specialized in forging Renaissance paintings. His real name really was Ben, and he was now as famous as the real Big Ben. He had confessed that he had stashed it in the back of Emmet's helicopter in case it was found to frame Emmet.

You are probably wondering what happened to the rest of our characters. Avery learned to never accept chocolate from strangers and always look at the wrapper. Preston made YouTube videos about my cases and became a fan. Emmet continued to fly helicopters. Tom wrote articles about Michelangelo not being as good as Da Vinci. And, well, me? I was the hero of France for saving the *Mona Lisa*.





*Lilian* (Pencil)  
Lilian Newton, 11  
Vermont



# Elephants Never Forget

Gram can't seem to fit in with the other students at school



By Maddie Rubenstein, 14  
New York

Gram was an elephant, and he was trying to enjoy himself. He crouched down in the sandbox and grabbed a swath of sand with his trunk, slowly letting it fall back to the box, a trickle of calm. He liked to imagine each grain as a worry discarded, a regret forgotten. But elephants never forget.

His mother told him he walked like an elephant. His peers made fun of his trumpeting laugh, and an elephant was always in the room when Gram was around.

So he'd come to accept himself as such, come to expect that he would be louder than others, more clumsy than others, more awkward than others. He figured he might as well have a tail and wrinkly skin too.

Gram hadn't asked to be an elephant. He hadn't woken up one morning and said, "I want to be different from everyone else my age. I want to have big, floppy ears and humongous feet."

But people seemed to think that he chose to be the way that he was, or they pitied him for his condition, never seeing that, even with four legs and gray skin, he had the same desires as they had.

Gram spent rainy afternoons on his bed, his feet in the air, trying to figure everything out. He wanted to understand why his peers treated him so cruelly. Kids called him spastic, stupid, or slow when his tail was to them. He wanted to put their words out of his mind, and so he pictured the sand slipping from his trunk, his picture of calm.

Sometimes, he tried to see things from their point of view. He supposed he was annoying to be around at times. He supposed kids wouldn't sit with him because he couldn't sit still, his footsteps were loud, and his squeals of happiness were disruptive. Still, he just wouldn't be mean to the others the way they were to him. Gram let himself forgive them, but elephants never forget.

It puzzled him how other students at school could so easily put away their things, take such a brief time to pack up, line up, and transition from quiet reading to math. Each of Gram's transitions were journeys—venturing in and out of the classroom, searching for water, pausing to scratch behind his big ears, and becoming distracted by the slightest of sounds.

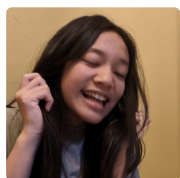
As Gram grew older, teachers sometimes saw him staring out the window and assumed he was ignoring them—that he didn't care about school. They thought of him as only an elephant, and not a student at all. They thought he was so big that he might hurt the other students, and so they'd send him to the front of the class, where they could keep a close eye on him.

This frustrated Gram, for although he was mighty, he had never hurt a single living thing. He'd never even squished the red bugs that ran along the sidewalk corners.

The teachers lost their cool with Gram, spitting angry words when he struggled to write neatly, or when he failed to pay attention in class, caught up in daydreams about traveling the world, going anywhere, anywhere but here.

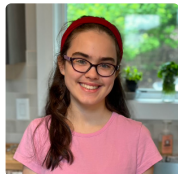
All the while, in the back of his mind, Gram heard his father's worried voice speaking to the teacher on conference day, talking about Gram's future.

So he knew where he'd really end up. The zoo. Where animals belong. He tried to push these thoughts out of his head, tried to stay in the present, in the sandbox, in the sun, but elephants never forget.



*The Sorrowful Horse* (Pigment liner)  
Tutu Lin, 13  
Texas

# January 14th in Asheville. Year 2023.



By Arabella Aab, 13  
North Carolina

No one is awake,  
and the silence is so absolute  
that you can hear the universe  
rearrange itself  
outside my window.

It is blue-gray  
and a moth-eaten blanket of snow  
barely covers everything.  
The wind whips  
whistles  
whines  
ROARS.

It is the bleak midwinter, and I the only thing alive.

I lift the blind  
and the trees rise up like the petrified bodies  
of so many crones from times past.  
They dance a ballet with the windsong—  
paying homage to the ashy blue sky.

The snow falls and is still falling  
turning the world to something  
no one will ever know.

How frightened were our ancestors  
when this storm broke above them?  
Did they think the sun had forsaken them?

Had it?

The wind stills.

The concert is over, at least for now.

I feel the sun begin, quietly, to rise.

A door closes downstairs,

and the day begins.



# Highlight from Stonesoup.com

## From the Stone Soup Blog



### She Needed Me and I Needed Her: “The Summer We Found the Baby”

Reviewed by Sydney Kesselheim, 11

*The Summer We Found the Baby*, by Amy Hest, is a realistic fiction novel set in Belle Beach, New York, during World War II. The book's main characters are Julie, age eleven; Julie's little sister, Martha, age six; and their neighbor, Bruno, age twelve. The trio finds a baby abandoned on the steps of the Belle Beach Library and Julie decides to keep it as her other little sister. Julie writes, "I'm the one who found her. A real, live baby girl, and I saw her first. I saw the basket . . . I just wanted to hold her awhile. I didn't mean to take the baby." (Page 3) The main objective of this story is for the trio to find the mother of the baby and reunite the baby with its family. I found this book to be special because the author writes from several perspectives. The book also depicts how families are coping with loss and exemplifies how the characters fill gaps in one another's lives and hearts.

Each chapter of this book is written from the perspective of a different person from the trio. As I progressed through the book, my vantage point alternated between Julie, Martha, and Bruno. This is a very engaging style of writing because the story is not filtered through the voice of only one character. Instead, there are multiple points of view, and the reader develops a broader understanding of the other characters' intentions and feelings. As we cultivate empathy for the people in the book, we understand their emotions better. This makes the book more intriguing and hooks the reader in from the first page.

"Six. I've been to six of them altogether. Six memorials on the beach. All because of the war," (Bruno, 109). I found this book absorbing because many characters in the story are struggling with loss of family members and uncertainty about the war and its outcome hovers over the book's action. For example, the Ben-Eli family worries about their eldest son, Ben, at war in Europe, and they hope each day for a letter from the frontlines. Meanwhile, another family in the community loses their son in battle. In addition, Martha and Julie are continuing to cope with the passing of their mother, who died in childbirth. This attention to loss is intriguing because I learned from the characters' struggles and better understood how humans confront and persist despite fear and grief.

You can read the rest of Sydney's piece at <https://stonesoup.com/post/she-needed-me-and-i-needed-her-the-summer-we-found-the-baby-reviewed-by-sydney-kesselheim-11/>.

#### About the Stone Soup Blog

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

# Honor Roll

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

## FICTION

Beatrice C. de Baca, 9  
Teresa Cheng, 11  
Reese Fujikawa, 12  
Victoria Huang, 10  
Hoyeon Koo, 9  
Seth Nealon, 11  
Emilee Sung, 11  
Nolan Wei, 7  
Natalie Yue, 11

## POETRY

Madeline Male, 14  
Eleanor Yue, 8

## MEMOIR

Vinay Batra, 13  
Jacob Jiang, 10  
Josephine Scott, 11

## ART

Sierra Elman, 13  
Julia Xu, 13

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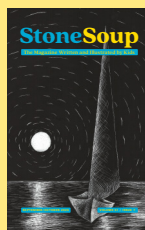
- Current and back issues of *Stone Soup*
- Our growing collection of books by young authors, as well as themed anthologies
- Journals and sketchbooks

. . . and more!

### Finally, don't forget to visit [Stonesoup.com](https://Stonesoup.com) to browse our bonus materials. There you will find:

- Information about our writing workshops
- Monthly flash contests and weekly creativity prompts
- Blog posts from our young bloggers on everything from sports to sewing
- Video interviews with *Stone Soup* authors

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