

The background of the entire cover is a complex, abstract pattern of red and blue spheres. These spheres are arranged in a grid-like fashion, with some appearing larger and more prominent than others, creating a sense of depth and movement. The spheres are set against a light blue background with a subtle grid of thin white lines. The overall effect is a vibrant, geometric, and somewhat hypnotic visual.

Stone Soup

The Magazine Written and Illustrated by Kids

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VOLUME 52 / ISSUE 3

StoneSoup

Writing and art by kids, for kids

Editor's Note

As spring makes its way into summer, I'm happy to greet sunlight and joy in this issue. We bring you pieces about the love of nature, including Clementine Lewis's memoir about discovering the wonders of the ocean on a snorkeling trip in the Caribbean. And we have flowers—so many flowers! There are flower photos and paintings, flower poems, such as the clever "Flower Punctuations," and even a trickily titled story, "Zinnia Elegans."

I call that title tricky because although it's the name of a flower, this "Zinnia Elegans" is a science fiction piece about a self-driving car. Of course, there really are robotaxis in some cities these days, but this story takes the concept just a bit further. In your writing and art, I challenge you to think about scenarios that are a touch beyond what is happening in today's technology. Sometimes the best science fiction is only a step away from reality.

With a smile and a lot of sunscreen,



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My Favorite Instrument (Colored pencil)
Leticia Cheng, 11
California

Alex and the Magical Harp

In Madagascar, a poor boy seeks music and magic for his village



By Amrita Iyer, 9
Washington

A long time ago, a poor boy named Alex lived in a village in Madagascar. His days were filled with boredom, as there was no music where he lived. His life was limited within the boundaries of the village. Only the local storyteller, Mr. Loan, would occupy Alex and the other children with his continuous legends. Every day, his mother would send him to the market to buy fruits, vegetables, nuts, and seeds. The sellers from other towns arrived with various musical instruments, but none of the villagers could afford to buy them.

One day, as Alex was hiking back from the market, he overheard Mr. Loan telling the children about a harp, gravely: "According to the ancient scripts, a magical harp with the sweetest music of all lies in the beautiful forest of Ambato Atsinanana. If the harp thinks that you have a kind and bold heart, it can develop a kind of bond. You will be able to command it to do anything as long as it only results in something good. Only one who is brave and intelligent can return with it."

At this point Alex dropped all his baskets and raced to Mr. Loan's story circle in excitement. "A musical instrument, you say! How do I get to Ambato Atsinanana?" he asked eagerly.

Mr. Loan glared at him. "It is too risky for a young twelve-year-old boy to recover it! However, I trust you to be very cautious about this as it will be a very dangerous journey."

"Tell me! Pray tell me!" the curious boy pleaded, jumping up and down.

Mr. Loan sighed. "All right! Calm down! I will give you a map." Mr. Loan handed him a little carving drawn on a piece of wood with an X at the end. *The magical harp must lie there*, Alex thought. He quickly piled up his goods in his baskets. Grasping the map with one hand, he hurried home.

"Careful!" Mr. Loan called. "Do not go on this adventure without older company. It will be a treacherous undertaking!" But he was already out of earshot.

Early morning the next day, when the sky was still dark and everyone was sleeping soundly, Alex stepped stealthily out of the house. He glanced at the precious wood carving. It would be quite a trek to even reach the entrance of Ambato Atsinanana! So, he hiked through the farms and trekked through the corn mazes.

Vines curled in every direction. Leaves in all shades of green covered the treetops.

Finally, after two exhausting hours of tromping through boggy marshes, just as he thought he would never reach the legendary Ambato Atsinanana, he smelled a pleasant aroma of lavender, fresh leaves, and sweet orchids. Enchanted by the heavenly fragrance, he stumbled into the dazzling entrance of Ambato Atsinanana.

Vines curled in every direction. Leaves in all shades of green covered the treetops. The branches seemed to form a maze, cutting through the trail. And most beautiful of all, flowers in pink, purple, yellow, orange, red, and more amazing colors dominated every gap of the entrance to the beautiful forest. Alex was amazed with the beauty of Ambato Atsinanana.

Even if Mr. Loan's legend was not real, he would still have thanked him for giving him the thrill of this adventure. Though the forest looked magnificent, Mr. Loan had warned of dangers. Alex, the harp seeker, was bright enough to know that he should listen to the old storyteller. After all, Mr. Loan was the oldest and had more experience than anyone else in the village! As the sun began to rise, Alex began his journey in search of the magical harp.

As Alex tromped through the crunching leaves, he kept stopping at least once every ten minutes to check the map. After hours of continuous hiking, he finally reached a fast-flowing river with at least ten branches of water. There were some rocks, but they looked very slippery. *How do I cross this river?* he contemplated. *It looks powerful, like it can sweep anyone away from this very spot.* He remembered Mr. Loan's words that finding the harp would need intelligence and courage. He checked Mr. Loan's wood carving. This was definitely the first landmark marked on the map. He sat down and thought about accessible materials until an idea struck him like a thunderbolt! It must work, or he could be sent flailing downstream.

Alex had brought a very thin and short rope with him. He started breaking vines with a small pocketknife and twisted and turned them around it, connecting them just like his grandma had taught him. It was just about long enough to reach the other side of the river. He made a loop at one end that was big enough to attach to a rock. It took him a few tries, but soon he managed to hook it to a granite stone at the other end.

Slowly and hesitantly, he began to walk on the slippery rocks, holding on to the rope, praying it wouldn't detach from the rock. He slipped a few times, but each time he slipped, he managed to hold on to it. Fifteen minutes later, he reached the other side successfully. He wearily grabbed it from the rock and untied it. Stuffing it in his backpack, Alex gathered some clean leaves from the tall maple trees and created a bed. He lay down, preparing for a good afternoon nap.

When Alex woke up, the sun was high in the sky, reflecting off the thick canopy.

"I must have slept for hours," he muttered. As he was stretching, he heard a loud rumbling noise and jumped. The noise seemed to be coming from his belly! He hadn't eaten since early morning when he had been able to steal some fruits from his mom's cupboard.

As the twelve-year-old boy was thinking about his next strategy, an orange fruit plopped on his head. "Apricots!" he exclaimed. He glanced up at the apricot tree towering above him. He would have to do some serious climbing. Taking off his slippers, he began to climb. The bark was very rough, and Alex couldn't help but fall a couple of times. On his third try, though, he finally made it to the apricots. He gathered as many as he could and settled on a thick branch where he could enjoy them peacefully.

When his tummy was satisfied, he retrieved his carry bag from under the tree and began to climb again. Trying not to look down, he collected just enough apricots for a five-hour hike. After stowing the pouch in his pocket, he continued his adventure for the magical harp.

As the sun began to set, Alex trudged along the path marked in the map. At last, he reached the cave that was marked in the wood carving. Suddenly a lion emerged from it! "Aaaaaaaaaaaaah!" Alex screamed.

The lion smiled, revealing his razor-sharp teeth. Alex began to tremble uncontrollably. "Who a-are y-you?" he stammered.

The lion replied proudly, "I am the guardian of the sacred, magical harp. If you wish to take it, you must answer three impossible riddles. If you fail one of the riddles, then—"

"Then what?" Alex interrupted.

"Then I will eat you! But don't worry, I will make it a fast death."

"What if I answer the riddle correctly?" Alex questioned.

"Then I will give you a key made out of pure gold."

Alex gasped.

"Are you ready to answer my three riddles, or do you want to turn back?" the lion growled.

He gulped. "I'm . . . I'm ready."

The lion smiled menacingly. "Then I will begin. What walks on four feet in the morning, walks on two feet in the afternoon, and walks on three feet in the evening?"

Alex thought hard and long. *What was the answer?*

"I can't wait all day!" the lion roared.

Finally, he settled on an answer. The answer was correct—it had to be. "A man. That's it, isn't it? Man crawls on four legs in the morning of his life when he is a baby, walks on two legs in the afternoon of his life, and needs a stick to support him with his legs in the evening of his life."

The lion was shocked! Never had anyone answered the Egyptian riddle correctly in over a century. "Correct! Now to the next question. What occurs once in a minute, twice in a moment, and never in a decade?"

The harp seeker thought this might be the hardest riddle in the world.

Five columns of hard stone stood in front of another wall. Each one had a different picture on it.

What is common between a minute and a moment? he thought. After repeating the words, he started to wonder why it was so easy to transition from *minute* to *moment*, even though he'd started to say 'minumomin.' Then he got it! They both contained an *m*! The difference was that there was only one *m* in *minute* and two *ms* in *moment*!

"I got it!" Alex screamed so loud that the lion had to cover his ears. "It's the letter *m*!"

The lion could not believe it! All the adults had failed his riddles, and now a twelve-year-old boy was answering them correctly! "Well done," he said rather grumpily. "Now on to the next riddle. What belongs to you but is used by everyone you meet?"

What could it be? He tried to think logically. He was usually generous and would share his belongings with anyone in need. However, sometimes he got into trouble with his mom for doing so. He remembered how he had shared his expensive blue bicycle helmet with Bob Piddle! Bob broke it on the very first day, and Alex was grounded by his mom. She had shouted his name so loudly that even his friend who lived five houses away had heard it!

Just then he felt he had hit the jackpot. *Name!* It belongs to you but is used by everyone you meet! Silently, he thanked his mom.

"Names! It must be, right?" he asked hopefully.

The lion roared his loudest roar. "You are the first human being in a century to have passed my extremely hard riddles. You will be the first human to hold . . . the golden key!" When the lion shouted "key," Alex thought his ears were going to burst and he was going to be injured because the ground was trembling as hard as an earthquake.

"Goodbye!" the lion bellowed, slapping the precious key into his palm. "Just go straight through the tunnel to resume your journey!"

Alex dashed through the tunnel, grateful that he had survived the lion.

As Alex reached the end of the cave, a beam of sunlight hit him, and he was relieved to be out of darkness! He had been walking nonstop since he had escaped the lion. It had been nearly an hour since that event. Though the sun was still illuminating the sky, he was desperate to find shelter to sleep. Nearby, he found a small clearing of grass. It was nearing sunset, and he decided to have a good night's sleep, sans haunting lions.

When Alex began to stir awake, the sun had already risen. He remembered that he hadn't eaten dinner last night and began to pick cherries, plums, and apples from the surrounding trees. After he finished eating the hearty meal, he set back on the trail to continue the quest for the magical harp.

Soon, Alex reached a huge wall. He placed the key in the keylock, exactly

like the lion had advised him. Slowly and surely, the wall began to split open. Five columns of hard stone stood in front of another wall. Each one had a different picture on it. The first one had a river carved on it, while the others had different pictures, such as a meadow, a wall, a lion, a cave, and last but not least, an apricot tree.

He tried to absorb what he was seeing. Each picture had a button right below it. After much deliberation, he realized that the buttons were to be clicked in the same order that he had encountered those objects on his journey. Alex pressed the buttons in the correct order: river, apricot tree, cave, lion, meadow, and finally the wall. At last, the mysterious wall split open to make a doorway, and he stepped through it.

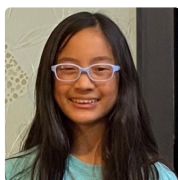
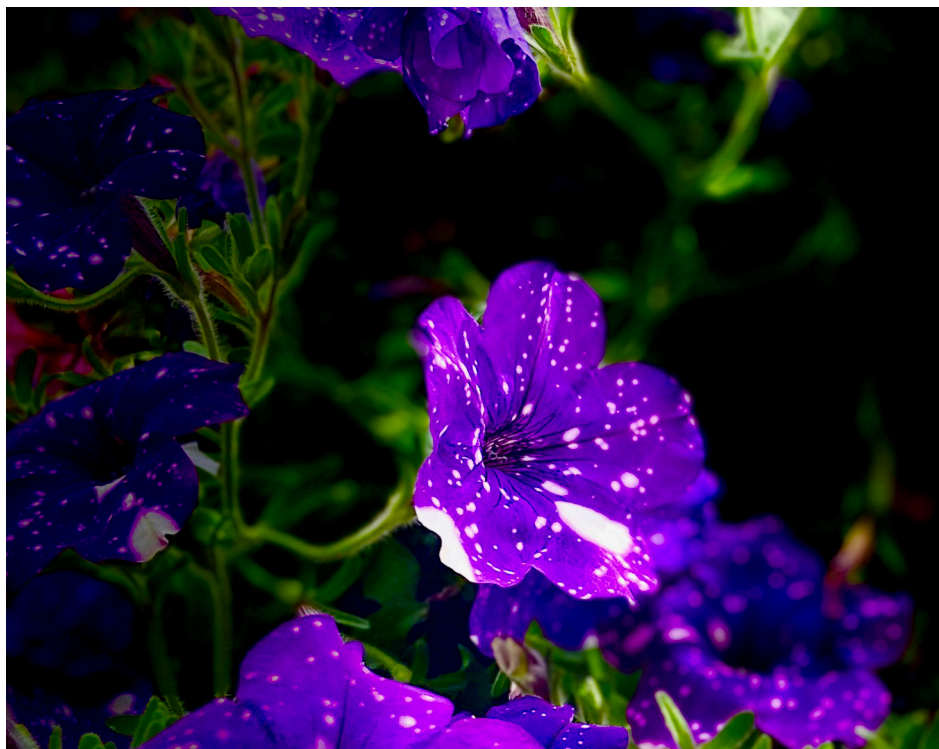
Almost as soon as Alex walked through the entrance, he gasped. The magical harp lay right in front of him. So, *it's true*, he thought. *It's really true*. Alex took the harp with his shaking hand and started to play random notes. He couldn't believe that he had found the harp. It wasn't a legend. Neither was it a myth. The harp was real! And he of all people was holding it. Enchanted by the sweet music, he began his way home, playing a harp. And not any harp—a magical harp that could play the sweetest music in the entire world.

On his way home, Alex passed the lion and all the other obstacles he had met. Surprisingly, as he neared the river, playing music, the river opened a path for him through it. Alex was sure that this had something to do with the music. After another one-and-a-half days of hiking and playing the harp, he finally could see the village: home sweet home.

His mother and Mr. Loan immediately ran out of their huts to greet them. "What's this?" she asked, staring at the harp. "And oh, how happy I am that you are back safe and sound. Tell me everything, Alex, including the part where you decided to be a foolhardy boy and leave the village alone! You could have at least informed me! We were so worried!"

So Alex apologized to his mother and narrated the story of his quest for the harp to her and Mr. Loan. Other village folks stopped by to listen too. "Sounds like you've had quite an adventure." Mr. Loan chuckled. "Why don't you play that harp for all of us?"

And so he played. He was no longer bored. He played the harp, a magical harp. Every day, he would command it to go to every hut in the village and play any song they requested. The village was never spiritless again; the music enlightened them all forever!



Midnight Stars (iPhone 11)
Natalie Yue, 11
California

Flower Punctuations



By Ava Luangkesorn, 9
Pennsylvania

Flowers are punctuations

A dandelion is an ellipsis . . .
for its seeds are blowing away.

A comma is a lily,
for it's buried in the ground.

A colon is two buds or flowerlets:
for they are small and have dots.

A quotation is two hollyhocks
"For their heads reach all to the sky," they say.

An apostrophe is a hydrangea
for it's used and loved endlessly.

An exclamation mark is a catmint
for it is bright, beautiful, and dotted!

A period is a singular baby's breath
for it's small, short, and stout.

A question mark is a jade vine
for it's long, and questions are asked, like "Why are they here?"

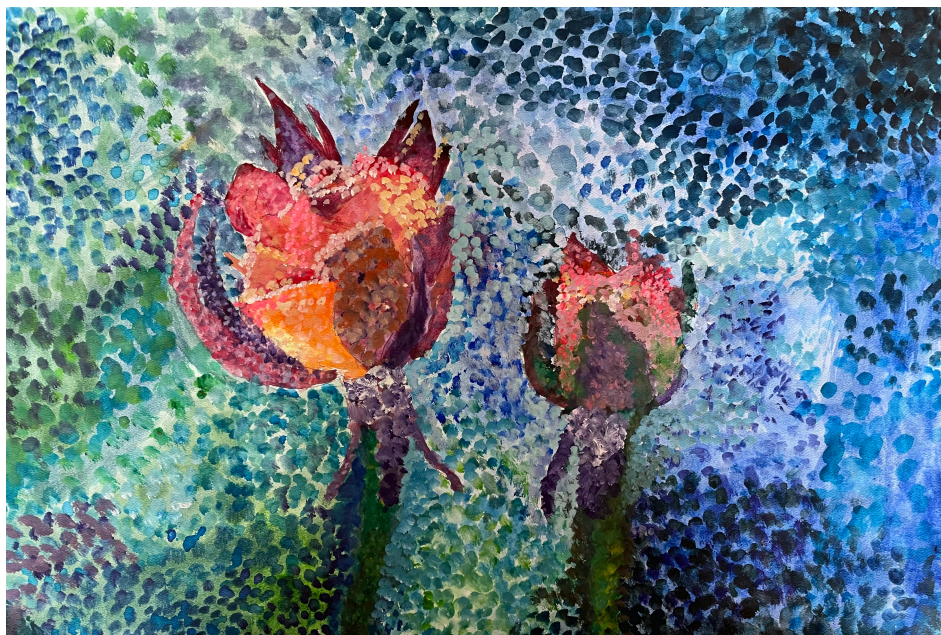
A dash is a Sakura branch
for it's long—and to the side.

A slash is a tulip
for it's slanted/bended to one side.

An asterisk is a begonia*
*for it's small and starry and short.

An ampersand is a *Spiranthes sinensis*
for it's twisted & spun.

Parentheses are Middlemist reds
as they much aren't seen and curved (slightly)



Blooming (Gouache)
Victoria Gong, 11
New York

Allison's Garden

A tribute to a young girl's garden



By Allison Hansford, 9
Maryland

Leaves everywhere, big, small, short, tall. Trees that lead you to unknown places in their towering branches. Bushes that you have never seen before. Flowers so beautiful you can't see them. The sound of birds. Bugs, small bugs with wings, old and young bugs, everywhere. Nowhere is a better place to be than Allison's garden, where nature will always be with you.

Summer



By Grace Zhuang, 6
Maryland

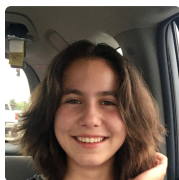
Summer is what I grow in my garden
Summer is what I wear on the beach
Summer is what I sing in my song

Laughing, with the charming daisies
Flying, with my rainbow dress
Crying, with the waves in the ocean

How I wished you could stay

War and Pieces (Part II)

Varya and Misha suffer a terrifying close call as war threatens their town in Ukraine



By Alice Pak, 13
Ohio

This is the second installment of Alice Pak's novella, which we will be publishing over the course of three issues. You can read the beginning of Alice's story in our January/February issue.

Chapter Two

Unlike Misha, I was always a little on the more reckless side.

I was two years younger than him, though sometimes it felt like six. Misha had always been the quiet, observing intellectual and preferred to stand in a corner and watch the world unfold before his eyes. I, on the other hand, wanted to unfold the world myself, so I constantly started getting myself in more and more problems as time passed.

I remember the first time my karma backed up a little and hit me on the head.

I was wobbling behind Misha, trying to jump in as many puddles on the street as I possibly could while he calmly strolled ahead, raising his head up to the sky to breathe in the warm, wet air. My pink rain boots squeaked with every impact, sending water splashing in all directions. Had there been more people outside, I would've probably been more conscious about my childish behavior, but the intermittent rain seemed to have scared most schoolkids back in front of their TV screens. The only pedestrians left outside were groups of laughing men gathered outside of smoke shops and bars and a handful of elderly women gossiping on benches while feeding pigeons.

We were heading to the park. The very park we had been to with our parents ever since our birth, the very park where I held my ninth birthday, the very park where the trees were so old that some of them seemed to be growing crooked. The park downtown, which slowly turned into a hotspot for schoolkids to gather and play soccer or hang out. Me and Misha went there at least once a week and played soccer and held races, which became a sort of ritual for us every Friday after school that I looked forward to every single time. So did he; sometimes, if he was in a good enough mood, he would stop by the local convenience store and buy ice cream for us to enjoy on our walks.

I remember thinking about ice cream with a smile that moment. Would I pick strawberry? Or vanilla? Definitely not chocolate, though; Misha always got chocolate, but I thought it was too sugary for my liking. Plus, it always made you extremely thirsty.

Maybe vanilla with a chocolate coat?

That was when I heard it the first time.

It was a loud, shrill sound, shocking the area for miles in intermittent waves of wailing. The siren seemed to almost freeze the street as the people outside immediately stopped their affairs and raised their heads. The noise continued for several more minutes, steadily growing louder as panic started to boil among the pedestrians. I turned to Misha, confusion brewing in me as I noticed a scared expression on his face.

"What's going on?"

The screech seemed to bring a particular fear to the street. Chaos ensued, people running in and out of buildings, shouting orders at each other, and trying to figure out the meaning of the situation. Dust rose up from the feet pounding the pavement, creating a cloud of smoke. I stumbled back, eyes wide, as a stampede ravaged the street.

"Misha?" I yelled. "Misha!"

"Varya!" Misha hollered back somewhere on my left. "Hurry, we have to go!"

I spotted Misha through the dust cloud, waving at me to follow him. "Come on, what are you waiting for? We have to get out of here!"

"What's happening?"

Misha's face seemed to get paler by the second as the sirens blared behind me. "Don't ask questions! Just follow me!"

I sneezed, blinking the settling smoke out of my eyes.

"Come on!" he called desperately. "Don't be stubborn, Varya, please. This could be dangerous!"

"Tell me what's happening, or I'm not going anywhere!"

I heard a piercing whip slice the air above me. I twisted my neck to look at the gray sky, stepping back to see nothing but a gust of wind curl the tip of the clouds.

It all happened in a second.

There was a soft whizzing sound, like an arrow being launched. I turned around sharply to see a single window shatter in the building above me before the rockets hit the wall and my world went pitch black.

My shout died in my throat as time slowed down around me and I watched the building explode, a million pieces raining down on the pavement around me. Chunks of concrete and drywall crashed into the street, a cloud of dust rising up in the storm of rubble. I finally found my voice again and screamed, reaching out a helpless hand towards the spot where Varya had stood seconds before. I couldn't see her now. Someone grabbed me and pulled me under a metal sheet and I knelt down, the blood rushing in my ears, deafening me from the noise of the outer world. I struggled to breathe as through blurry eyes I made out paint-streaked bricks shooting through the air like missiles out of control.

My heart pounded as more bullets slit the air and more muffled blasts shook the ground like an earthquake. Several buildings around me collapsed. It felt like the climax of a horror movie, I thought, as I crouched down, covering

The earth rumbled violently, explosions rocking us back and forth with every smash of concrete against the ground.

my head with trembling hands. Around me, huddled together, were other people, but I looked right past them, out into the crumbling world beyond. The earth rumbled violently, explosions rocking us back and forth with every smash of concrete against the ground. The wind rushing past me felt like a slap in the face, carrying hundreds upon thousands of bits of pebbles, some of which stung my eyes, making tears spring out as I rubbed my face forcefully, trying to lessen the burning.

I don't know how long I sat there. Maybe a few seconds. Maybe minutes. Maybe a lot more, or at least enough for my legs to go completely numb and my arms to follow soon after, only my mind fully awake yet unthinking. It seemed to last for an eternity, an eternity of brainless destruction. Who was behind this?

And just like that it was over. The silence that settled on the area seemed almost ominous as all the banging faded into an unsettling, muted landscape. Terrified faces peeked out from various shelters hidden among the wreckage, slowly creeping out from corners to survey the chaos. I crawled out onto the street, ignoring tiny bits of sharp pebbles digging into my knees. My thoughts swirled around one word.

Varya.

As if something inside me bloomed back to life, I sprang to my feet and sprinted to the debris next to where Varya had been standing before the building exploded behind her. I knelt down, shoving the remains out of the way with my bare hands in a rushed, panicked manner.

"Varya! Varya!" I called, my voice cracking. The shards of broken glass on the ground cut my fingers, sending streams of blood trickling down my palms, but I didn't falter for a single second, desperate to reach my best friend. Tears streamed down my face like small rivers, blurring my eyesight. I heard shouts as strong arms tried pulling me away from the wreck, but I shook my head wildly and kept digging as blood droplets splattered on the dirt of the road. Where was Varya? She had to be buried somewhere here. The strong arms kept pulling at me persistently, until someone finally picked me up and carried me away. I screamed and flailed wildly, fighting. No, I couldn't leave. I needed to find Varya.

"Someone knock him out or something," a bored voice muttered as I was set on the ground away from the debris. "He's gone mad."

"Varya is under there!" I said loudly, pointing to the ruins. "I need to help her!" Someone draped a blanket around my shoulders, gently helping me stand up.

"Come on, dear," a woman's kind voice whispered to me. "Let's get you out of here. Do you live nearby? Where are your parents?"

Without answering, I began slowly dragging my feet in the direction of my apartment, kicking rocks down the road. I didn't want to leave, but turning my head back, I caught a glance of a group of young men already sorting through the remains. Surely they'd find Varya soon . . . they *had* to.

The sky was clear and calm now, inspiring a false sense of security and safety. The bluish-gray tint of the wispy clouds reminded me of the color of hospital walls, light but somehow unsettling.

I walked home slowly that evening. I was still covered in the blanket, shivering, my eyes trained on the ground as I focused on stepping one foot in front of the other. One, two. One, two. I was afraid that if I stopped concentrating, I'd pass out.

I didn't see many people out on the streets. Most who had heard of the terror that occurred downtown had shut themselves in their apartments, peeking outside through their curtains to see if there was any action going on. Those that I actually encountered outside were running in the opposite direction, going to see what destruction had happened and possibly to help.

Help Varya.

I hated how it all felt. It seemed so nice out; the sky was light gray, a small breeze chasing in between the trees. Not the type of weather you see in movies when the villain commits mass destruction and blows up a building. It made me feel like I was dreaming and nothing had happened, because there was no way that *this* would be the scenery to the shooting of an entire block. It made me mad.

"Mishka?"

I looked up to see my mom standing at the end of the street, wrapped in her tan-colored coat. She took an unsure step forward which turned into a sprint as she ran to me. I could see the panic in her eyes as she grasped my cold hands, clutching them as if for dear life.

"Oh, Misha . . ." Her breath hitched. "Are you okay? Are you hurt? Where's Varya?"

I opened my mouth to reply, but no words came out.

My mom continued to watch me intently, trying to read my face. Suddenly, her expression changed.

"Oh my God," she gasped, "Is she there?"

I nodded, a feeling of guilt that had been hovering over me the entire time finally settling in. My mom peered behind me as if hoping to see Varya there.

"I want you to head home," she ordered, fishing her phone out of her pocket and beginning to dial a number, "All right? Until I come back. I need you to stay there."

She tossed me the door key, raising the phone to her ear.

"Hello? Oh, yes, this is Natalia . . . yes, you better come quickly, Varya got buried under rubble from what I understand, I'm so sorry—"

I watched her slowly start walking in the direction of the wreck, still talking on the phone. She was calling Varya's parents, I assumed, as my stomach gave a nervous jolt. What would they say? Would they hate me?

Was it my fault for not acting fast enough?

Instead of taking the elevator as usual, I strolled right past and began climbing the steps. I don't know what I was thinking, but suddenly feeling the pain in my calves made me wake up somehow. By the time I made it to the sixth floor, at least thirty minutes had passed and I was panting heavily. I fumbled with the key,

unlocking the door on my second attempt, and threw my coat aside, collapsing on the couch. I lay there, staring at the corner of the room while my brain kept running.

I didn't realize I fell asleep until I woke up to my mom stroking my hair. I sat up, rubbing the leftover sleep from my eyes. My mom smiled at me.

"Hey hey, did you sleep well at least?" she teased.

I nodded, smiling a little. My smile faded almost instantly once I remembered everything. "Where's Varya?"

"She's in her apartment, don't worry," my mom calmed me down. "She was only in the wreckage for about two hours. They uncovered her quickly, and her parents carried her home to sleep."

"Oh."

I leaned down to pick up my teddy bear, which I had apparently dropped in my sleep, while my mom patted my pillow into shape.

"Is she all right?" I asked nervously, dreading the answer.

My mom pursed her lips.

"She has a minor breakage," she finally said, shaking her head ever so slightly, "in a bone in her arm. But I called her parents and they said she's taking it surprisingly well, and it'll heal fast."

"Wait." I tensed up. "She got hurt?"

My mom nodded sadly.

"Like I said, her arm. She's going to have to wear a cast for a couple of weeks. Which means no playing volleyball or any other dangerous games."

"Volleyball isn't dangerous!"

My mom rolled her eyes teasingly. "All right, all right. Whatever you say."

She stood up, walking to the other side of the room and spreading the pale yellow window curtains apart so that bright sunlight streamed in, showering the room in light. Then, kissing me on the forehead lightly, she made her way back out of the room, promising to make breakfast.

"Can I call Varya?" I yelled after her hopefully.

"Go ahead," my mom called from the kitchen.

I jumped into the hallway, grabbing the home phone off of its stand and punching in the numbers I knew by heart. It vibrated in my hand with a soft *bzzt* as the line connected, the screen flashing with dark orange. I drummed my fingers on the wall impatiently, waiting, until there was a *beep* and someone picked up.

"Hello?" Varya's voice crackled into the speaker.

"Varya!" I said excitedly, not being able to contain the grin that split my face. "How are you?"

"Oh, not bad," she replied, and I could tell she was smiling too. "You? Did you get buried too?"

"No, I didn't," I told her. "Um, how's your arm?"

"It's, uh, well, it doesn't hurt, but the doctor said it was broken."

"Ouch."

"Yeah."

There was a small little pause while I thought of a way to change the subject.
"Hey, at least you can draw something on your cast, right?"

Varya laughed. "I could try. I'd probably mess up."

"Hey, it's better than a boring old cast," I said playfully.

"At least it's purple!"

I snorted. "I thought your favorite color was blue?"

"Yours is blue. Mine is orange."

"Why's your cast purple then, hmm? Where did that come from?"

Varya seemed to think about that.

"You're right. Where *did* that come from?"

"Maybe the doctor thought purple would look good on you," I mused.

"Maybe. Does purple look good on me?"

"Uhhh . . . yeah?"

Varya laughed again. I loved her laugh. It was bright and tinkling, like dandelions in the form of sound waves. It made me feel warm inside, as if I just drank a gallon of hot chocolate.

"Hey, Misha?" her voice appeared in the speaker again.

"Hmm?"

"Promise me one thing, okay?"

I shrugged. "Sure, what?"

"You told me you'd marry me when we grew up, right?"

"I did, didn't I?"

"You promise you will? Even if my arm is still broken?"

I laughed, shaking my head. My mom poked her head from the kitchen, mouthing for me to hurry up.

"Your arm won't stay broken that long, Varya."

"Hmph. What if it does?"

"I'll still marry you, okay?"

"Good. Because you pinkie promised, remember?"

"Of course, of course."

"Well"—I heard some background voices on the line—"I have to go eat. See you later!"

"Bye bye."

The line disconnected, leaving me holding the phone in my hands with its orange screen still flashing. I set it back down and skipped to the kitchen, where my mom had set out a plate of oatmeal decorated with blueberries and cherries. My mom turned to me, wiping her hands on a towel.

"What did she say?" she asked curiously, setting a teapot in the center of the kitchen table as I pulled a chair aside and sat down.

"She sounded happy," I said, shoving a spoonful of oatmeal in my mouth. "And she told me her cast is purple."

My mom raised her eyebrows. "Does she like it?"

It felt like we were stuck in a survival show against our will, where everyone was paranoid and scared.

“I think so,” I decided, chewing thoughtfully. “Though her favorite color is orange.”

“Well, that’s nice,” my mom told me, setting down her own plate and interlocking her fingers. “Oh, you already started eating? I say we pray first.”

I set down my spoon and put my hands together as well, closing my eyes as my mom began.

“Dear Father, I thank you for this meal. I thank you for my son, Misha, and my family and my country. I thank you for the roof above our heads. I pray that peace and love descends on Avdiivka, and may any disagreements stop so that all may live in harmony as before.”

“Amen,” we both finished, before snapping our eyes open and picking up our spoons, the sweet aroma of the warm oatmeal rising up in the air around us temptingly.

Chapter Three

After that day, I could feel that everyone in Avdiivka became a little more tense, a little more alert. Kids at school began traveling in strict packs like wolves, only spending time with their close-knit friends on the playground. People on the streets walked at a faster pace, glancing behind their shoulders.

I didn’t like the feel of it. Neither did Varya. It felt like we were stuck in a survival show against our will, where everyone was paranoid and scared.

“I want everyone to act normal again,” Varya told me one day as we were walking to school. “I want everything that’s going on to stop. So that people can be normal again. Everything was fine before.”

“Before” is what we started calling before the massive shooting downtown. I didn’t have the heart to tell her that shootings have been going on since practically my birth. The Russian-Ukrainian citizens in Avdiivka sometimes traded snippets of stories regarding the terrorists, and I always tried to connect the dots as best as I could to the fast-moving timelines of the present.

Apparently Russia has come to back up the separatists in the conflict.

Although most news sources called it an “invasion,” I didn’t want to believe that this would be the start of a World War Three. At school, we had just finished our unit over World War Two, which had impacted the Soviet Union greatly. Since Ukraine had been part of Russia, it was a mandatory lesson we went through in sixth grade. Reading various books and articles about the six-year-long conflict, I was terrified. Why would people start these collisions? I prayed I’d never have to live through that.

Instead, I directed all of my energy into researching the Russian “military operation” as much as I could. From watching the news, I found out that Russian

troops had invaded Ukraine and taken control over most of Donetsk and Luhansk, to which the government responded by sending its own army there as well, to drive them out. The Russians refused to move, and thus the war started. Each side would push each other back and then get pushed back, which went on for days, which turned into weeks and eventually formed long, endless months of fighting. Donetsk and Luhansk both suffered tremendous breaks and losses. The people were constantly terrified, not being able to leave, but the situation made it more and more dangerous to stay.

The news made everything seem like it was a random, unexpected invasion, I thought angrily. But it really wasn't. Russia was just trying to save its citizens when they pleaded for help. Russia was trying to lend a hand when Ukraine ignored us.

I guess I could say the day that the real drama started for me was the morning that I hopped downstairs to check our mailbox to find a crumpled, slightly dirty piece of paper hastily shoved in our box. I turned it around in my hands, confused, but took it back up to our apartment, dropping it in front of my mom as I walked in.

"This was in our mail," I told her.

She unfolded the paper, a worried look clouding her face. I caught a glimpse of some messy black scrawls before she leaned back out of my sight, her eyes scanning over the message. Then she paled.

"What? What is it?" I stumbled over my words.

My mom stuffed the paper in her pocket, taking a deep breath.

"Oh, it's nothing."

"No," I said stubbornly. "I know it's *something*."

She gave me a warning look to shut my mouth. "Misha, honey, why don't you go read a book? I think you need to unwind a little bit. School must be taking a toll on you."

I rolled my eyes and slouched to my room, closing the door behind me. I could hear my mom typing on the keyboard hurriedly as if it was the end of the world, and I intuitively knew, I knew it wasn't nothing.

My suspicions were confirmed as letters kept arriving, all the same crumpled sheets being forced into our mailbox. Some letters didn't even look like letters; they were written on torn notebook paper, cloth, and all sorts of food wrappers, stained with grease and sauces. I was disgusted, yet I brought my mom every single one to watch the same horrified reaction.

One time, I let my curiosity get the better of me. For once the letter didn't look like it was mailed from a local dumpster; it was a folded piece of notebook paper with only a slight tear at the edges where it looked like it was ripped out of a diary. I looked around, making sure there was no one in the window who would run back to tell my mom, and lucky for me, the only living creatures outside were a couple of doves roosting on top of an empty van. I steadied myself and slowly

My breath caught in my throat as I read the message, feeling goosebumps prick up on my arms and my neck go cold.

pulled apart the two ends of the paper.

I squinted at the black writing, which seemed to be some sort of nearly unreadable mix of cursive and print, trying to make out the words . . .

Get out of here before you meet your end!

My breath caught in my throat as I read the message, feeling goosebumps prick up on my arms and my neck go cold. I flipped the paper over, but there was no continuation.

Who in their right mind was sending these?

I sprinted into the elevator, poking the up button as fast as my finger would allow me until the doors finally closed and the cabin swung up. I tapped my foot frantically, clutching the letter tightly in my fist, until the doors moved open and I sprinted to apartment number sixty-four, swinging the door open and kicking my shoes off.

“Mom!” I yelled.

My mom slid out of the bathroom, halfway through brushing her teeth. She raised an eyebrow, looking a bit tired.

“Mom, why are they sending this to you?” I waved the letter in front of her face. “Who’s doing it?”

My mom’s eyes widened as she snatched the paper out of my hand angrily, crumpling it up. She marched back into the bathroom and set the toothbrush down, wiping her face with a hand towel. Then, she turned to me again.

“Where did you get this?” Her voice was drenched in fury.

“It’s one of those letters you’ve been getting like every month!” I protested.

“Misha, that’s not your business! You shouldn’t be reading them! How many have you already read?”

“Just this one, I swear!” I pleaded. “But why are they threatening us?”

My mom massaged her forehead, sighing. “It isn’t safe for us here.”

“Oh, really? Gee, I didn’t notice, with the *literal threat* in that paper!”

“Hey!” My mom raised her voice once more. “I was figuring out what to do. You wouldn’t like the actions we’d have to take, so I decided that it was better for both of us that I didn’t tell you until the decision was final.”

“Yeah?” I said. “Is it final yet, then?”

My mom glared at me. “Don’t give me the attitude, young man. And yes, it is.”

I stiffened up. Something in her tone made me nervous.

“Misha, we’re going to have to leave Avdiivka for . . . some time.”

“What?” I screamed, stepping back. “No! Not because some idiot is messing with our mail!”

My mom looked up at the ceiling and moved her lips noiselessly as if praying.

“I knew this would be your reaction. I knew it would be hard for you, but this is the best choice we have.”

I shook my head, tears welling up in my eyes.

"There has to be some other choice," I pursued. "Can't we, uh, install security? Or something?"

My mom stayed silent.

"Please," I begged, my voice shaking. "This is my hometown. My school, my friends, all my memories, they're all here. There's no good reason for us to leave!"

My mom pursed her lips, looking like she was having an internal fight herself.

"I'm sorry, Mishka," she said quietly. "This war is out of our control. Russians aren't very welcome here anymore. I'm not going to pretend like you don't know what I'm talking about. Many have left already. We have to leave too, before any more trouble happens."

I sobbed, wiping my tears with my shirt.

"I contacted my brother who lives in St. Petersburg a few nights ago," she continued. "By some complicated method, he found out about a sort of bus, you could say, that travels across the border to Russia. It's dangerous for us to try to cross alone, since the area is under constant surveillance by both armies, but he said if we get on, we'll make it."

"Isn't that kind of dumb? Moving to the enemy country?"

My mom frowned, her eyes darkening again. "Russia isn't the enemy. This entire war is a miscommunication between Russian-Ukrainian citizens that have been under attack for years and wanted someone to protect them. When Russia finally sent its armies to help, it was called an invasion by NATO and turned into this whole mess."

I hung my head.

"I know. Sorry," I said meekly.

My mom stepped closer and wrapped her arms around me in a hug. I hugged her back, wishing I could curl up into a little ball and stay there forever, frozen in time and space. Her hair smelled like cinnamon; she was warm, just like always.

"It'll be okay," she whispered in my ear. "It will all be okay."

But it wasn't. The shelling continued, gunshots echoing for miles around from the battleground near Donetsk. The air always smelled rancid, to the point that some people began wearing masks again, as if another coronavirus epidemic had struck. It was like everyone was entering some sort of survival-hibernation mode; kids rarely roamed the streets like they used to and stuck to little playgrounds that were in front of every apartment complex. School started happening three times a week instead of the usual five, leaving Wednesdays and Fridays off for those who needed them. My mom fiddled with the idea of signing me up for self-defense lessons but backed out in the end, saying that it was too dangerous and costly.

"I can't wait until all of this is over," Varya expressed to me as we sat on the steps of our school after class on a Thursday.

"Yeah, me too," I agreed.

I hadn't yet told her about the news my mom gave me. I wasn't sure if I would

ever find the guts to. I couldn't imagine the sadness that she would feel knowing that I would be in a completely different city in two weeks.

"I'm still confused," she said, glancing up at me. "So why exactly is all of this happening?"

Oh, that's right. Varya's parents had been in a nervous wreck since the very start of the conflict. Unsure of what to think or who to believe, they hadn't told her anything about it and left her to draw her own conclusions based on what the news media broadcasted.

That was dumb. Didn't everyone know that the news could lie as good as a fish could swim? I had figured it out a long time ago. The news never told the whole, unbiased story; they only told the parts that they wanted the public to hear, which was whatever would benefit the government the most.

"It's all politics." I shrugged. "It's very complicated."

"Politics?"

"Yeah." I spread my arms, explaining. "You know, politicians starting and carrying out their own problems onto an international level and blaming each other."

"Who are politicians? I don't think I know any."

"They're men and women who wear fancy suits and decide the fate of our country. Well, not just our country. *All* countries. All the people in the world."

Varya's jaw dropped.

"That's a lot of power. They can basically control our lives, no?"

"You could put it like that," I decided. "Yeah. Politics is all about deciding international relationships and partnerships and then accidentally breaking them."

"Isn't that like a paradox?"

I strained my brain, trying to make the connection. "Now that you mention it, honestly it is."

"Dang," she mumbled. "But why did they start the war, then?"

I furrowed my brow. "Disagreements? Though it would have to be a pretty big disagreement to bring out this mess."

"Wait." Varya squinted at me skeptically. "We have disagreements too, but I don't think I've ever threatened to shoot you. Or any innocent bystanders."

I watched a leaf slowly float down onto the pavement.

"But we're friends, aren't we?" I smiled. "Friends have arguments too, but we shouldn't hurt one another because of something that can be easily solved anyway."

"And Russia and Ukraine were friends for years, no? We speak the same language eighty percent of the time. We have the same traditions. We sing the same songs. Just like you and me. I see no difference."

"Good point. Okay. Very good point. But this war could somehow benefit someone. I don't know who or how, but people dying could potentially be used as some form of . . . *blackmail*."

Varya frowned, looking back at the street before us. "Isn't that illegal?"

"It is," I agreed. "But 'legal' and 'illegal' can change in a day if politicians need them to."

"That is definitely illegal."

"Well," I smiled a little. "It's still their job."

Varya stood up, brushing dust off her skirt and swinging her backpack over her shoulder. "That," she proclaimed, "is simply the stupidest thing I've ever heard of in my life."

I laughed, shaking my head, before getting up and chasing after her.

"You're right."

Mkimbizi



By Jordi, 14
Nakivale Refugee Settlement, Uganda

Right in your hands
That very hard night
Because I am your child
That time we had a chance to turn a page and the only way to get out of the stupid
town.
Bang bang bang
Trrrack trrrack
Krack krack krack
Those are the sounds we heard behind us as we were running away
Oh my goodness
Now I understand the meaning of refugee in Kiswahili.
Mkimbizi
Meaning a runner
We need peace

Friends



By Binja, 10
Nakivale Refugee Settlement, Uganda

What does this really mean?
Guys why life is like this?
I love my friends
Those who accepted me the way I am and couldn't judge

Both of these poems were created with the support of the Humanitarian Service Team.

The Humanitarian Service Team is a refugee founded and led nonprofit, community-based organization located in Nakivale Refugee Settlement, Uganda. Nakivale Refugee Settlement is the eighth largest refugee settlement in the world. The program aims to empower refugees and host communities through charity, awareness, and entrepreneurship courses through a number of educational and skill-building initiatives.

Stone
Soup
Refugee
Project

About the Project

There are millions of children affected by war, social collapse, and climate change now living in refugee camps or dispersed in host countries far from their original homes. The work that appears here is a part of Stone Soup's growing collection of creative expression by young people whose lives have been upended by such conflict throughout the world. To explore the entire collection, please visit the Stone Soup Refugee Project online: <https://stonesoup.com/refugee-project/>.



Spoons (Pen and watercolor)
John Gabriel Sperl, 11
New Jersey

The City

The narrator celebrates the sights, sounds, and smells of New York City



By Aila Monacelli Schrider, 11
New York

I step out of my school, and immediately noise fills my ears. The honking of cars, the steady chatter of kids as they leave, the footsteps, the wind in the trees. This is the very heartbeat of our city.

I greet my mom or dad, depending on the day. We walk toward the train, the hard, gray sidewalk pushing against my feet as I walk. The wind stings my eyes, my nose, my cheeks, but I walk anyway, against the breath of the beautiful soul that is New York.

Shops are crammed next to each other along the sidewalk, like people sitting on a subway during rush hour. The windows are smudged and the doors are grimy. The faded brick seems to sag, like an old man who has seen many things in his life.

Delicious smells fill the air, tickling my nose and making my stomach yearn for food. Food there is, indeed. Food from Europe, Asia, Africa, everywhere you could possibly think of. I don't have enough noses.

Cars shoot past like bullets, and a train honks in the distance. We're getting close to the station.

We round the corner and duck into the deep, dusty staircase. People hurry down the stairs beside us, not looking at anyone, not pausing for a single second. They must all have somewhere to be.

We turn toward the tall metal booth-like structures that you must pass through to board a subway. I pause amidst the chaos, digging through my packed backpack until I bring out my MetroCard.

I stand back up again, with slight difficulty. Countless people are swarming around the entrance machines. I edge toward the machine slowly, and make my way through to the platform.

I wait with my parents. People are all looking at their phones, checking for trains impatiently.

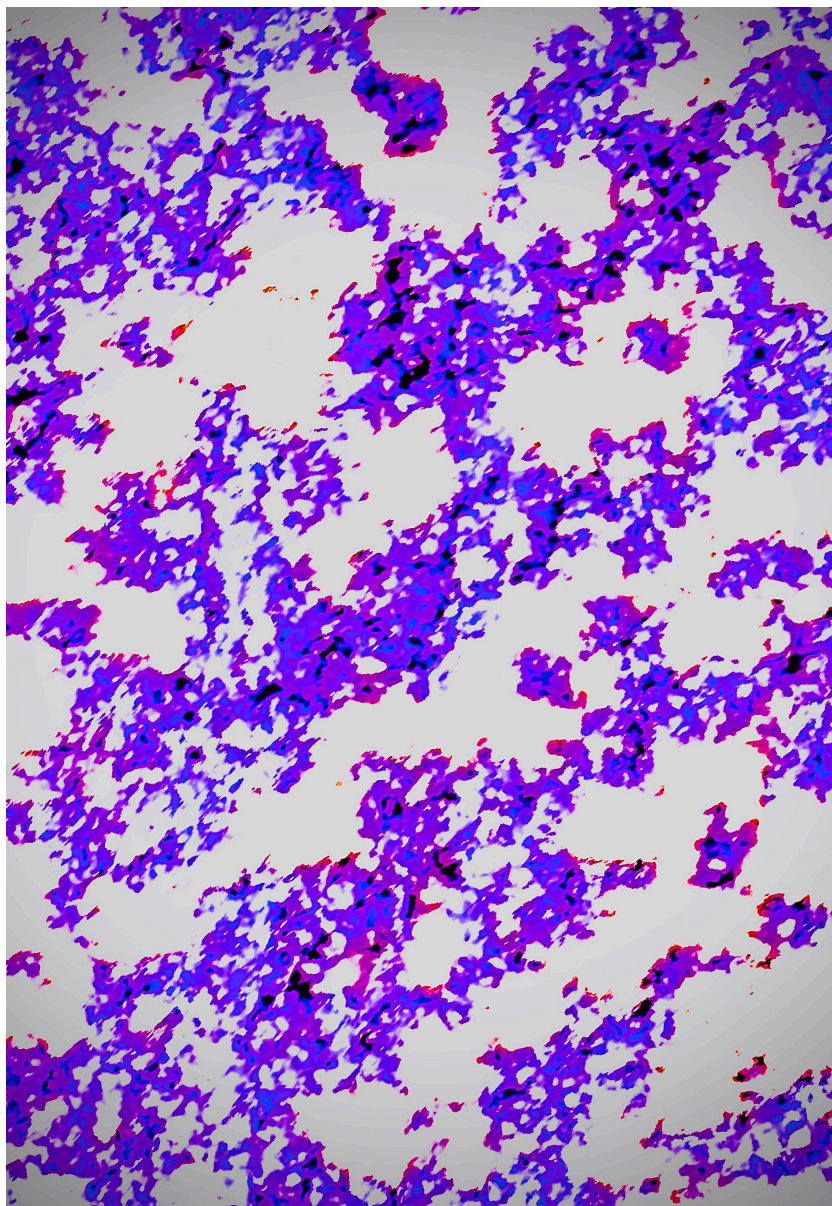
I feel the train before I see it. The ground shakes beneath my feet, and the train shoots into the station. We board, swimming through the crowded car to find a small air pocket.

As the train dances along the tracks, I think about how unique New York is.

So many people (who really do all seem to be in a rush), so many cultures, so much food.

Yep.

There is no place in the entire world quite like New York City.



Tye Dye Dream (iPhone 15)
Liana Aeder, 9
New York

The Red Planet



By Ivy Yang, 13
California

I am from “the Red Planet,” Mars,
millions of miles from a place called Earth,
which, at night, became a bright, shining star,
holding hands with the two enormous moons.

I am from the capital, Crater Thunder,
where we played tennis on the red, red dirt,
except the game didn’t go past the five-minute warmup,
as wasting oxygen tanks was a crime.

I am from the neighborhood right next to the launch site—
we wore enhanced earplugs every night to sleep,
and woke up to the rumbling of engine fire,
signaling the end of a journey for tourists.

But I liked Mars, my true home.
Earth is too *green*, too *blue*, too *brown*;
too *overpopulated*, too *loud*, too *free*;
too *clean*, too *oxygenated*, too *peaceful* . . .
. . . and too *beautiful*.



Calling (Oil pastel)
Serena Li, 12
New York

Zinnia Elegans

Aster embarks on an unexpected road trip in a self-driving car



By Marlene Dukes, 10
California

San Francisco, CA
Thursday, 11 a.m.

Aster had been up since 6 a.m. It was summer vacation, and her mom had forgotten to book her in any summer camps this year. Due to this, the better parts of her days were now spent sitting alone at home and watching videos about cats on her tablet.

This morning, she was pleasantly drinking her decaf coffee. She swirled the foam with her tea stick. She had always wanted to be like her mom, and though it took a lot of convincing, her parents finally got her some coffee of her own, sans the caffeine. As far as she knew, she was the only fifth- (soon to be sixth-) grader who enjoyed it.

She looked at her phone nervously. She picked it up and dialed her mom. The phone went into voicemail immediately. She hung up and called again.

"This is Jessica—oh. Hey, Aster. Please, I'm in a meeting. Call back later."

"Wait! Mom, please, I miss you so much, can you do something? Please, Mom, please!" Aster cried.

The phone was silent.

"Fine, you can come here. Bring a book and you can play in an empty room. I'm sending a robotaxi to come get you. Bye." *Beep.*

The phone hung up. Aster breathed a sigh of relief.

She packed her book, her phone, an energy bar, and an apple into her backpack. She also grabbed her water bottle and darted into the street. The car smoothly parked and she climbed into the back seat.

"Hello, Aster. Thank you for using Top Hat Cars. I am car number 342w7hy. Please, make yourself comfortable."

Aster settled in and looked out the window as the car drove off. She pondered the strangeness of being in a car with no driver at the wheel. For some reason, her mom liked these cars and expected she would feel the same. Aster didn't

“New destination confirmed. Arrival time: 3:21 p.m. Please buckle your seatbelt.”

know what she felt about them. She curled up and started to cry.

“I wish that I could be with Grandma. She pays attention to me. I wish I could be with her in Alabama!”

Suddenly the car pulled into a driveway and stopped, sending Aster into a heaving jolt. She collected herself. The car made a brief humming sound and then:

“New destination cannot be carried out. It is out of my controlled area. Please—” It paused again.

“New destination confirmed. Arrival time: 3:21 p.m. Please buckle your seatbelt.”

Aster stared.

“Wait, no! Redo the location thing! No!”

She was frozen with fear. She took out her phone and dialed her dad.

“Hi, sweetheart! I’m sorry, I’m in a meeting. How have you been?”

“Okay. But Dad, you wouldn’t guess—”

“Please tell me later, sweetheart. I am a bit busy. I love you!”

The phone hung up. She sighed. “Alabama, here I come.”

Grosford, CA

Thursday, 5:31 p.m.

The car rolled through the streets. Aster’s stomach growled. She had been saving the apple, though she had already eaten the energy bar. She had to go to the bathroom. She spotted a Wendy’s restaurant.

“Um, car? Can you please park at the Wendy’s across the block?” she asked. It obeyed her, dropping her off in front of the fast food place.

She walked inside. She did not like Wendy’s, but because everything around here was fast food, she decided she would order something. She quickly went to the bathroom, after which she returned to the counter and ordered a large burger. She ate one half and saved the other. Then, she bought some more water and returned to the car.

“Continuing journey.”

“Actually, it’s getting dark. Can I sleep?”

“Searching for nearby hotels.”

“I can sleep in here,” Aster said reproachingly. The car purred. Its engines whirled in silence, almost apologetically, as if it had made a mistake. “Canceling search. Please get some rest.”

Kingman, AZ

Friday, 8 a.m.

The car rumbled through the streets, waking Aster. She grumbled.

"Mom, stop shaking me, I'm—oh." She remembered that she was in a self-driving car.

"Good morning, Aster. I am equipped with snacks and refreshments under the armrest that you can have for breakfast."

She flipped open the hatch, only to find energy bars and old candy wrappers. She wrinkled her face in disgust, slamming the armrest abruptly.

"Can you direct me to a breakfast place? I'm not sure energy bars are my thing in the morning."

"As you wish. Going to: Emmy's Pancakes," the car replied, and turned a corner.

Aster thought. She could not remember all those digits that the car called its name. Something else would just have to do.

"Um, car, can I name you something I can remember? I can't just keep calling you 'car,' y'know."

"Very well," the car agreed.

"Uh... I think I'll name you Zinnia. It's my grandma's favorite flower. She would like that. You know, my mom didn't know what to name me, so my grandma did. Mom disapproved but accepted it because it was last minute."

The car whirred and responded: "What an interesting piece of family history. I appreciate your willingness to devise a new character out of me along with a new name."

Aster snorted at the sentence. Just like an electric car would say.

"We have arrived at Emmy's Pancakes."

After a filling meal of a triple stack of pancakes, a blueberry muffin, and orange juice, Aster and Zinnia took off. Aster thought. Her mom was probably worried sick. They might have called the police. She might have a squad after her! Considering she had been gone for two days made her shudder. Maybe she could call it off, tell Zinnia to go back, end this madness... But really? They had gone so far together, just to go back? No. This was a story she had to finish. The mechanical rant of Zinnia broke her thoughts.

"I will need to recharge soon."

Aster nodded. She liked her new buddy. After all, it also needed to eat. They pulled over at a nearby charging station.

"Oh no! I don't have enough money," she exclaimed, looking at her phone wallet balance.

"You should find a charge card in the glove compartment," Zinnia told her. She looked inside. A small rectangular card beamed in the sunlight as she contemplated it. The glory of the card shined in her eyes, and it appeared golden in the light of day, causing her to go into a dreamy reverie.

The distant honk of a car in the streets broke Aster out of her trance. Enough shenanigans. Back into reality, she calmly inserted the card and whistled as

It was a new sensation, self-driving cars, with their hat-like sensors and cameras, like Zinnia's, stacked atop the car, whirring as they scanned the streets.

she plugged in the electric wire. The car beeped, and she took out the plug. She stepped back in. "Let's go, Zinnia."

Dallas, TX
Friday, 10:43 p.m.

The car drove through the streets, lit by the countless city lights. Aster slept in the back seat, ignoring the rumbling. It was a new sensation, self-driving cars, with their hat-like sensors and cameras, like Zinnia's, stacked atop the car, whirring as they scanned the streets. The neon red stripes shined as lights reflected across its side. It turned the corner in an inhumanly perfect glide. The wheel turned and settled. The reality of robotaxis was still very new to the girl, as they had slowly begun their revolution quietly, in the dark, until this new technology populated the streets of her city at almost every turn. Aster fluttered her eyelids. She had been reading her book before she fell asleep, and it was next to her.

"The ghost in the machine, yes, Zinnia..." she murmured.

The soft, immaculate padding on which her head lay had gotten drool stains from the short nights of her sleeping. She had become accustomed to the infrequent meals, which had cost her three pounds. The car decided to take a stop at a safe corner, where it parked for a few minutes before continuing on. The whole city, Aster, and even Zinnia were tired.

Hamilton, AL
Saturday, 1:35 p.m.

The car rumbled on.

"Estimated one hour and thirty-eight minutes left till destination," Zinnia proclaimed in an almost cheery tone. Clearly it was ready to get somewhere where it could rest and recharge, maybe even go through a car wash.

Aster yawned. She smacked her lips with the realization that she had not brushed her teeth in three days.

"Can you make a stop at a grocery store?" she asked Zinnia.

"Of course," it replied, and parked in front of a store called Grocertymart. Aster stepped outside. The heat smacked her in the face, almost taking on a physical force she had not been accustomed to. The humidity choked her as her body tried to understand the swift change of temperature.

She rushed into the market. The unnaturalness of the cold, air-conditioned store was equally jarring. She stumbled around, woozy, and grabbed onto a grocery cart. Her brain was trying to process the change as she contemplated

the store. Looking among the rows and rows of food made her drool with hunger. She crashed through the aisles, grabbing a tube of cheap toothpaste and clumsily getting a toothbrush too, before bursting into the bathroom.

She collected her disheveled self and brushed her teeth. She sighed. Fresh breath, finally. Feeling more stable, she bought some mints, water, and lemonade. Being cooped up in a car for days felt like being in a prison where water was a rarity and the prisoners stashed their bottles and never shared.

She returned to the car, took a seat in the front passenger seat, and leaned it back as far as it could go. She sipped her lemonade. “Ahhhh . . .”

Zinnia sped on.

“We are quickly approaching destination,” it said. Aster could barely contain her excitement. Finally, a place where there were people! The car rolled into the city. More and more houses lined the road. They had arrived.

Alabaster, AL
Saturday, 3:23 p.m.

Aster watched as they rolled past all the houses, waiting for Grandma’s to appear. They stopped at an old, light-blue house. The front yard was bustling with flowers and plants. Aster’s grandma had a knack for gardening.

“It’s here! It’s here!” Aster yelled excitedly. She ran outside, knocked on the door, and—

There was much surprise, love, hugs, and kisses that day. Aster’s eyes filled with tears as she explained her adventure, Zinnia, and the miscommunication. “So, now cars can talk and drive without a driver, eh? This is what this old world’s come to . . .” her grandmother said drily in her sweet Southern accent.

“Zinnia is very nice, Grandma, so you’ll like her.”

The car rolled into the driveway.

“Can we keep her?” Aster pleaded.

Grandma looked at it up and down, inside, and patted it.

“I don’t think it’s that simple, dear . . .”

Aster looked down.

“Though it would be good if we were allowed to, considering that we need a new car.”

“You threw the old one away?”

“Her engine died. She was a good car,” Grandma murmured. She sighed. “Come in. Dinner will be ready soon.”

San Francisco, CA
Thursday, 1:01 p.m.

Aster looked out from her bedroom window. It had been five days since her trip to Alabaster, Alabama, with the malfunctioning self-driving car, Zinnia. Aster had stayed with Grandma until Tuesday. She had explained to her mom about the situation, and they had agreed on letting the trip not be a total letdown. Her dad had even taken time off from his work in India out of worry. Her parents spent two whole days with her.

She was happy that she was home. Though now she missed Zinnia. Even though, according to her mom, it was just a car, it was the car that had brought her from here to her grandma. It was the car that had taken her on the adventure of a lifetime. The car that cared.

There was a knock at the door. Aster hurried down, in the small hope of finding Grandma or someone bringing Zinnia. Instead, there was a tall, lean man with a small scruffy beard in a pair of Converse sneakers and a top hat.

Aster learned that the tall, lean man was, in fact, the CEO of Top Hat Cars. He had come to discuss the matter of Zinnia with her parents. Aster was told to go back up the stairs to her room, but she heard small clips of conversation from below like, “My apologies for the inconvenience” and “will never happen again.”

Finally, after what seemed like hours, Aster was called back. The lean, top-hatted man spoke up first.

“Ah, the viral sensation Aster Ford. I feel like I’ve already met you, I’ve seen your face on social media so many times. It seems your little adventure has made us both a little more famous.”

The man smiled a friendly smile. Aster thought he was very young to be a CEO.

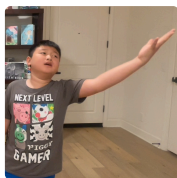
“But seriously now: my apologies for the mistake with car number 342w7hy. I still don’t understand it. But as I’ve already told your parents, this will never ever happen again, I assure you, and our *experienced* technicians are already making changes to the code in our cars. 342w7hy is being modified and will soon be back to normal in no time.”

Aster stared at the man as he wiped the sweat off his forehead with a small, dainty handkerchief. She understood what he meant by “normal.” Zinnia had been reset, and Aster could do nothing about it. The car that had changed her life was now a lifeless piece of engine once again.

“As a courtesy gift, the team and I decided to give you a well-deserved year of free rides from Top Hat Cars.” The lean, top-hatted man handed Aster a small card with a promo code.

“Many apologies, once again, and we hope to see you riding with us again soon!” He tipped his hat, stepped into the back seat of the self-driving car parked in the driveway, and like that, he was gone.

Three Poems



By Jordan Sung, 9
California

When the Light Dances

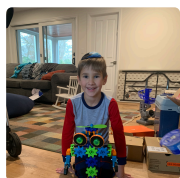
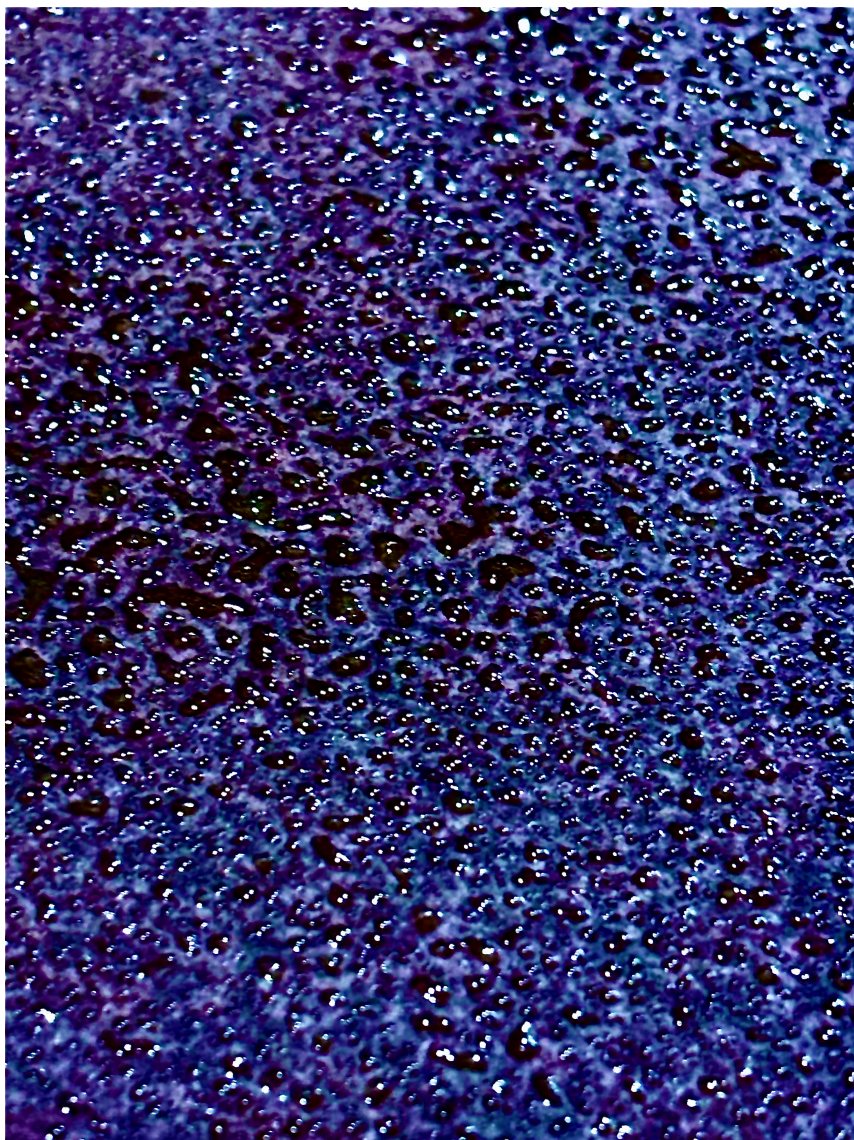
A window of light flows through the shadowy trees
I dive into a bathtub of emerald green water
Hidden in a canyon carpeted with soft moss
Through a giant keyhole in the rock, the light dances
A creamy waterfall spilled from the giant pitcher of rock

Love & Soda

When Mom gets mad she explodes like Sprite
When we get into a fight
Still, her heart's a shimmering waterfall of light

Blue Fear

The whispering light hangs in the shadowy trees
As I fly down a golden path of fireflies
Toward a pirate ship door handle that
Slithers like an octopus tentacle in my palm,
And I am filled with blue fear



Blue Water Droplets (iPhone 15)
Roi Aeder, 7
New York

The Elements of Friendship

A trusting lion and a cautious tigress have an adventure with a sneaky snake



By Samira Trivedi, 8
Maryland

In a deep, dark, and dense forest there lived two friends—a lion and a tigress. They had been friends since they were cubs. They went on many adventures together. This story is about one such adventure.

Lion was very trusting, but kind. Tigress, on the other hand, didn't trust people so easily. Now, in this forest lived another animal—a sneaky snake. Sneaky Snake had not had a meal for a week. He was anxious to find a big meal. He had his eyes set on the biggest animal in the forest. Who else but Lion? He was looking for an opportunity to trap the lion. He knew he couldn't beat the lion in combat, so he needed a clever plan to trick the lion. He knew the lion was gullible and trusted everyone easily. Sneaky Snake hatched a despicable plan to trap the lion.

One beautiful Friday morning, Lion remarked, "Tigress, do you want to go with me for a sprint?"

"Sorry, Lion, but I can't come right now. I have to finish the cooking and clean the house."

"Okay." Lion sprinted away.

It was a very humid day, so when Lion was halfway across the forest, he got tired and thirsty. Sneaky Snake was keeping a close watch on the lion. Just as Lion was taking a break, Sneaky Snake approached him.

"Why hello, great Lion! You look exhausted! I am happy to offer you a drink in my air-conditioned home. It's right around the corner. You are welcome to come."

"Thank you!" Lion thought Sneaky Snake was so incredibly kind and helpful. Lion sprinted after the slithering Sneaky Snake to the snake's house.

When Lion and Sneaky Snake reached the snake's house, Lion could smell delicious spices simmering in a big cauldron. Sneaky Snake liked flavorful meals, after all. When Lion entered, Sneaky Snake locked the door. *Click!*

Lion finally became suspicious. "What are you doing to me?"

"I'm going to eat you! Don't you smell the spices in the cauldron? You're going in there!"

"Oh no!" Lion was trapped. He roared his most ferocious roar.

In the meantime, Tigress was wondering what was taking Lion so long. "He should have been back home by now."

She set out to look for him. Just as she was strolling past Sneaky Snake's house, she heard Lion's roar.

"That's my friend!"

She ran and broke open the door with her claws. She grabbed Lion out of Sneaky Snake's house and they both ran and as fast as they could through the forest back home.

At home, they heaved a sigh of relief.

"Lion, now you know that not everyone can be trusted. You should trust people you know well. Take some time to get to know people."

Lion handed Tigress a glass of lemonade he had made. "Thank you, my friend. I have learned an important lesson."

Lion and Tigress sipped lemonade on their porch watching the sun set.

Two Poems



By Nirali Yedendra, 10
New York

My Liberating Brain

The brain is an organism that lives.
We are creatures; we deepen our arc of knowledge.
We can tumble into an image of fantasy, best yet, commotions, emotions,
I communicate verbally.
Welcome to reality.
It's a place where dreams stop or continue,
It's a blank page of a story with no proper ending.
This feeling of tension burns up into my body.
It's something I cannot quite name.
Could it be an emotion's name?
Nope, it's untitled, unleashed, a vulture flying through the winds of our hidden
passion.
We are just souls scattered throughout the universe,
As compared to Mother Earth.
We are less than a dot,
We are smart,
We evolve,
There are too many things to keep count on.
It's a beautiful world.
With a wish
I carry my cats.
I carry a backpack full of my sparkling joy,
My wings enable me to fly and shine throughout my time.
I am satisfied with how I control my feelings and thoughts, my actions, my
communications,
A brain gives us the freedom of speech; it gives us liberty.

You Own It

Sometimes, courage can be broken.
Stories I've read felt like it happened.
Words could not be spoken at that time.
Where would this life lead me? Is it to the sea of worries or a world of spells?
I shouldn't doubt myself.
Anger erupts in my mind, but what I let out is the great lion's roar.
But somehow, it was never heard.
Even a pin drop sends ripples into my mind,
A collection of questions, some not always answered.
The magic of a child and a pet is so deep that it could never be lost in life.
There is hope!
People don't share their secrets because they're the greatest luxuries one can keep.
It's not like we have nine lives like a cat.
It's unbelievable how, in one lifetime, you can feel it all.

Fates are created in the galaxy.
Clouds of thoughts start to rain.
A giggle machine paints smiles on faces.
What's it like to be called a smiley face?
What is it like to feel a feeling with no name?
Thoughts, feelings, and experiences can never be taken away because they are yours once you feel them.
You own it!

Solo *The Banter*



By William Clark, 8
New York

Oh banter and Talk
Canned Laugher and Fun in movies but
Let's keep BANTER and BANTER until your
Eyes get heavy and heads CLASH down.
Powering seconds of bams + HAHA's
Over HILLS of LAUGHTER
And CHATS-BAMS with joy until I
Say: Quiet yo, Time
To Banter



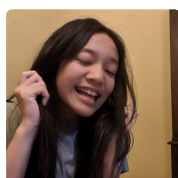
Shoes (Chinese ink)
Victoria Gong, 11
New York

Nature



By Benjamin Feinberg, 7
Ohio

the rivers flow gently
with leaves floating by
in the crystal clear
sky clouds circle
by as a bird tweets
in a tree. I watch how
nature is beautiful as can be as wind
sways the trees. And I think
I love nature and I hope
it loves me.



Keeping Watch (Watercolor)
Tutu Lin, 13
Texas

Three Poems



By Amity Doyle, 13
New York

Tree alone

Has anyone ever wondered why
trees reach out?
Oh, the branches
So lonely that tree
must be, alone in the
middle of a honeysuckle field
dappled with nothing but its own leaves
Leaves, oh tree's loves, they leave
as happened to me, as happened to him,
reaching out to pull her back, alone.



Tree Eye (Canon Rebel)
Madeline Male, 14
Kansas

The water skeeters

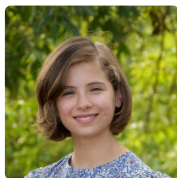
On the water
the bugs float,
lazily, legs stretched out,
looking to grip a stick or stone,
camouflaged in serenity,
as if, do I have to hide from frogs today?

A muted invitation

Oh,
write me a chapter,
one where I am none,
the trees lash merrily,
the sun is dim,
a muted invitation,
for me, for you.

A Hidden World

The narrator discovers the underwater wonders of a coral reef in Bermuda



By Clementine Lewis, 12
Massachusetts

Shhhhh...

Water slaps the shore and whispers back. I snap on my snorkel and clumsily splash into the sun-spangled shallows.

"Come on!" Dad gently calls to me.

"Okay, hang on!" I laugh, pulling on my flippers.

As I bend over, I feel the hot sun on my back. As I look down, the aquamarine water catches my eye. I spot the rowdy tendrils of sand, the color of boiled shrimp, weaving in between my feet and then being sucked out by the power of the ocean. A tiny wave crashing around my feet catches my attention, and I trace it out to Dad, who is beckoning.

"Here I am!" I exclaim, bounding into the water.

The water soon reaches my waist and then neck as I waddle out to my dad. I flop down, face first. The salty water closes over my head as I elegantly slice through the ocean. The top of my head bobs up, and I lie there, still as a statue. *Huhhh... shhhhh*, my snorkel whispers as I breathe. Dad grasps my arm and pulls me along like a tiny tugboat. I space out as I think about making epic sandcastles and splashing in the shallows.

I think about coming from the hotel on a bus and spotting the beige sign *Welcome to Bermuda* in the airport when we arrived.

I think of Dad saying, "What should we do first, head to the beach?" and grinning as I planned what I would do there.

I think of reading my books in the sun-soaked chair next to Mum.

I think of Dad saying, "Do you want to swim to a coral reef?"

"Yes, okay!"

I stare down at the silty sand, now tinged a vivid rose. The warm blue water lulls me into a half-sleep.

My father's thumb nudges me back to my senses. I look up and gasp. *Whooshhh!* goes my snorkel, matching my surprise. I can't look anywhere else. A beautiful reef looms under me. It has brain corals the color of a snail's underbelly, emerald

tendrils of soft, rubbery tissue, tarnished gold anemones, and pink finger corals. It's utterly stunning.

I suck in a deep breath and dive down, circling the reef, immersing myself in the silent wonder of this place. I spot hidden caverns in the rock where little fish dart like shimmering silver fairies. It's like everyone and everything has a place they want to go, but they are not in a hurry to get there. There's constant bustle, like a miniature city. The soft sand gleams from below while the sun's rays shimmer, tinged blue-silver by the water. The gray rock of the reef contrasts sharply with the bright colors of the coral and seaweed. It looks like a rainbow mixed with a smile and a wink.

I suddenly realize that I can't stay down in this world forever and hurriedly swim back up to the surface. My head breaks the surface, and Dad says, "How do you like it?"

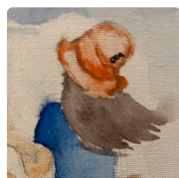
"Good," I splutter.

I stick my head under this time, just below the surface.

There is a flicker, a swish, and a massive parrotfish appears before me. He's mainly emerald green, but little explosions of melon-y gold shine through like tiny little sunsets. His beak is open in a constant smile. He turns sideways, glancing up at me through wide eyes, like he, too, is thinking, *Who are you, strange creature?* Suddenly, the world around me vanishes, leaving only me, the parrotfish, and the water. In my mind, we are worlds apart but still orbiting the same sun. It seems as though time itself has stopped. Then, I twitch, and in a silvery flash, he disappears.

As I swim back to the beach, my only thought is this other world I had no idea I could enter. I think of that rippling sense of magic the world revealed once it unlocked its gates and unfolded like a never-ending city. The bath-like water ripples past my cheeks and slips through my fingers as I glide through that planet of rose-gold sand and aqua water.

Suddenly, I know that this is my place: the ocean.



Moody Moon (Acrylic)
Chrysanthi Constantinou, 13
Ohio

Summer Evening



By Rose Torrey, 9
North Carolina

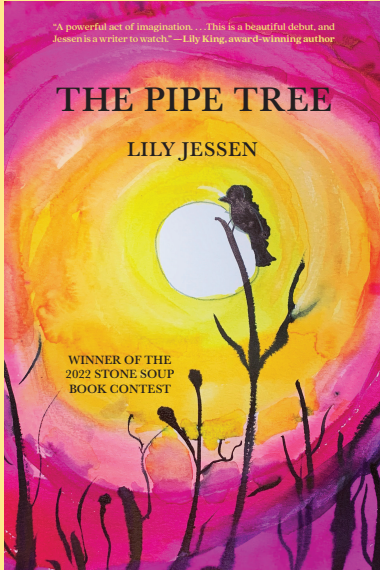
The light is soft,
the air is moist,
the water rushes fast,
the stars shine,
each one a glowing crumb
in the sky.
The land is quiet and solemn.
The owl calls,
without haste,
“Whoo? Who?”
as if talking to the column of moonlight
that stretches across the land,
as if to soften the quickly
growing darkness.
The moon, full of solemnity,
stares down upon it all.
A beautiful painting, a lovely design.

The Pipe Tree

By Lily Jessen

Winner of the 2022 Stone Soup Book Contest

Available now at Barnes & Noble online and at the Stone Soup Store: Amazon.com/StoneSoup.



Cover:

Song at Dusk by Aspen Clayton, 11, Illinois
Originally appeared in the May 2022
issue of *Stone Soup*



Lily Jessen is a poet, writer, and actress from Cape Elizabeth, Maine, where she lives with her family, her dog, cat, and a menagerie of chickens and ducks. She has written and published many short stories and poems in various publications through *The Telling Room*, *Stone Soup*, *Skipping Stones*, and *Root and Star*. When she isn't fanatically planning the complicated plot of her next story, you can find her participating in musical theater and Shakespeare performances, or singing in her chorus. She wrote *The Pipe Tree* in eighth grade and is currently in tenth grade.

Not all cages have bars . . .

Éclair is a vibrant and free-spirited sparrow who spends most of his days singing and begging for scraps of his favorite pastries from patrons of a local bakery. Then, one day, everything changes: lured in by a blueberry muffin, he is captured and brought to live in a cage in a Human Nest. As the days turn into weeks, Éclair and his human captor, the Handkerchief Woman, forge an unlikely bond—and he slowly, reluctantly, adapts to life away from the open skies. But just as Éclair has begun to accept, and even embrace his new life, everything changes yet again. Éclair finds himself faced with a choice: to cling to the comfort of captivity or dare to dream of freedom once more. Will Éclair find the courage to spread his wings and soar beyond the confines of his cage?

This tender and thought-provoking novel serves as a powerful reminder that even in the face of despair, there is hope, redemption, and the promise of liberation.

"The Pipe Tree is a powerful act of imagination.

Through the eyes of a bird, Lily Jessen explores the truths and contradictions of human nature in a tale full of humor, delight, and deep understanding. This is a beautiful debut, and Jessen is a writer to watch."

—Lily King, award-winning author of *The English Teacher* and *Euphoria*

*"How do we remember who we are when everything we once loved is lost? And how do we find the strength to break free of the things that bind us and start over? Lily Jessen's *The Pipe Tree* . . . is a story of resilience, connection, empathy, and finding your voice. . . . I read this story in one sitting, with feathers in my heart. I know readers will love it as much as I did."*

—Kelly Barnhill, Newbery Medal-winning author of *The Girl Who Drank the Moon*

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.

STORY

Audrey Ballon, 12
Mattea Bambrough, 10
Nishka Budalakoti, 12
Liza Claar, 12
Marley Davidson, 12
Aubree Dong, 10
Aditi Koppal, 12
Iwan Lee, 12
Stephanie Lin, 13
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Heath Nelson, 14
Vivian Palme, 11
Catherine Park, 11
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John Gabriel Sperl, 11
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Marin Zarum, 11

POETRY

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Ruby Glenn, 12
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Serena Li, 12
Sienna Quinn, 11
Christian Sierra, 12
Rishi Upadhyay, 11
Mustafa Usmani, 11

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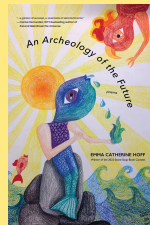
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