

# THE ALCOTT YOUTH MAGAZINE

ISSUE 3  
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## EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Sophie Kim is a junior in high school from Winchester, Massachusetts. She loves playing tennis, and especially loves playing for her high school tennis team in the spring. She has always had a strong passion for reading and writing, and is excited to share the incredible stories of young women through *The Alcott Youth Magazine*. She hopes these stories will encourage and inspire young people, especially women, all over the world.

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## DIRECTOR

Kaitlyn Donato is pursuing her A.B. at Princeton University. In her sophomore year of high school, Kaitlyn recognized that there were too few magazines focused on writing for and by young women and decided to create *The Alcott Youth Magazine*. With the magazine, she hopes to publish inspirational writing for all to enjoy. Kaitlyn also oversees an affiliated 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, Books and Bridges, Inc., dedicated to reading books about women in leadership to elementary students. She hopes to foster a dialogue about women in leadership throughout schools and communities.



**Meeghan Ford**

# Sports Benefit Girls in Immeasurable Ways

BY RIYA JANARDHAN



**Dr. Gevvie Stone**

My Taekwondo teammates and I practiced our backflips, kicks, and sparring runs for four hours straight. My legs and back were sore. Across the gym, my father waved at me, motioning me to take a break and log into an interactive panel discussion on his phone.

Participating in this meeting has to be vital, I thought to myself. Why would my father pull me out of training barely three weeks before trials for the U.S. national team? The forum was a masterclass on why more girls should embrace sports. I left the discussion energized, uplifted, and ready to take on the world. I am grateful to the panel of exemplary athletes and role models: Dr. Gevvie Stone, Ms. Meeghan Ford, Ms. Lauren Surzyn, Board Chairperson, and Ms. Erin Brown, Executive Director, both at Inspiring Girls USA.

Dr. Gevvie Stone has completed her residency

in emergency medicine and is currently a fellow in sports medicine at the University of Utah. She is also a three-time U.S. Olympic Rower, participating in the 2012, 2016, and 2020 games. Meeghan Ford is the Assistant Director of Athletics for Compliance at Duke University. Ellery Kourepenos, a high school senior and a Young Ambassador for Inspiring Girls USA moderated the panel discussion with remarkable ease and effortlessness.

Dr. Stone embraced rowing after dabbling in soccer, lacrosse, and swimming. She won the National Championship, the first spring training in the sport. Gevvie continued rowing in college and spent the next 13 years studying to be a medical doctor and rowing for the U.S. rowing team.

“Balancing the student-athlete lifestyle for so many years pushes you in many different

directions, brings out the best in you, and ultimately makes you stronger in every imaginable way,” said Dr. Stone.

Meeghan Ford grew up in a small town in New Hampshire, where she played various sports. As there weren't many girls-only sports leagues, she often played in boys-only leagues. In high school, Ms. Ford participated in field hockey, ice hockey, and lacrosse. Later, she realized her passion for sports could evolve into a career. An internship at Disney inspired her to pursue a Master's degree in sports management at UNC Chapel Hill.

Currently, she works at Duke University, where she has the opportunity to attend many games, collaborate with coaches, and pursue her passion for sports.

Juggling sports and other demands in high school is challenging. Both panelists offered sage advice. Meeghan suggests, “Time management is the name of the game. I am a list person, and having a to-do list helps me work through my various tasks. If sports is your priority, you may need to sacrifice some social time with friends.” Dr. Stone added, “Use sports as an outlet for academics and use academics as an outlet for sports. If I were saturated writing a paper, I would take a break to row. If I had a bad practice that day, I would refocus and redirect myself by studying for a

while at the library. Splitting time between both activities helped me stay level-headed.”

Their advice was practical and inspiring for girls passionate about sports. Here are the top 10 takeaways:

**Goal-setting:** Chop big goals into smaller ones to achieve them. Start with mastering the simple tasks, such as getting your dribbling technique down or getting your oar into the water at the right angle.

**Be accountable to yourself:** You can only get to the big goals once you hold yourself accountable for meeting the smaller goals.

**Build the mindset to give it your best every time:** Positive self-talk is essential in athletics and life. Believing in yourself is crucial to succeed. Dr. Stone uses visualization techniques to envision the desired outcome of a race.

**Stay in the present moment, let go of the past, and “be a goldfish”:** Goldfishes have poor short-term memory, allowing them to stay present. Coach K, the former head coach of Duke men's basketball, advised players to focus on “the next play” instead of dwelling on the past, according to Meeghan.



**Be bold; take risks often:** Whether you win or not, the gamble will transform who you are and strengthen you from the inside. Dr. Stone took a significant risk by taking two years off from medical school to try out for the London Olympics.

**Rest and recovery are a huge part of performance:** Training at your best involves more than just working hard. Sleep, recovery, rest days, and stretching are all crucial to reaching peak performance.

**It is as much about the journey as it is the destination:** Winning medals in some races is possible, but not in others. However, what matters long-term is who you become due to your hard work and perseverance. As Dr. Stone suggested, “It may not always result in a happy ending, but the journey is always worth it.” Ms. Ford took a significant risk when she decided to study at Duke University, many hundred miles from her home in New Hampshire. In the end, the risk was well worth taking.

**Thriving in a male-dominated world:** “I love it when they say you play like a girl,” asserted Ms. Ford. “Representation matters. We need to see more girls pursue sports. We need more women

athletic directors in Division 1 schools and more women coaches across the country.”

**If you like a sport, simply lean in:** There is no pressure to aim to become an Olympic-level athlete on day one. Take baby steps. Explore the sport for the joy of it. And see where your interests take you.

**Know there are many opportunities in sports beyond being an athlete:** There are numerous positions in sports that extend beyond being a player on the field. These roles include managers, coaches, athletic directors, sports operations directors, referees, NCAA compliance managers, sports medicine physicians, athletic trainers, and physical therapists. By taking on one of these positions, you can continue being involved in the sport you love long after your playing career.

The panelists also shared many amazing quotes I need to print out to review frequently.

“Don’t let anyone tell you that you cannot pursue a specific path. Follow your dreams,” advised Ms. Meeghan Ford.

“Tailor your life to your goals at the moment.” - Dr. Stone.

“Men have been taking care of each other for a long long time. We women need to support each other and take care of each other,” said Ms. Ford.

“Get comfortable being uncomfortable.” - Dr. Stone.

“What you do when no one else is watching tells you much about your character,” Ms. Ford stated.

Dr. Stone reminded us, “Aim high and have fun. Working hard is easier when you love what you do.”

After the virtual panel session ended, I returned my Dad’s phone and walked back to the padded floor mat of the gymnasium. My mind was filled with thoughts as I had a renewed commitment to the sport I love, Taekwondo. I felt equipped with tips and tricks to balance my academic and sports commitments. I was grateful to Dr. Gevvie Stone and Ms. Meeghan Ford for sharing their time and words of wisdom. Although I may not be able to repay them directly, I am determined to pay it forward.

As teen girls pursuing competitive sports, we can and must serve as beacons of inspiration for other young girls with a dream and a passion for sports.

*Riya Janardhan is a high school junior with a black belt in taekwondo. She recently won a gold medal at the USA National Taekwondo Team Trials, earning her a coveted spot on the 2024 National Team representing the United States at the World Championships to be held in Hong Kong.*

*Riya has many interests, including writing, acting, dancing, and singing. Currently, Riya is a Junior Board Member/ Vice-Chair of the Promotions Committee at Project ADAM and a Young Ambassador with Inspiring Girls USA. She also writes for Gloria Steinem’s Women’s Media Center, Teen Ink, and UNICEF’s Voice of Youth. Her work focuses on topics that empower teens and promote gender equity.*

# WRITING



# The Song of Home

By Minseong Hong

## Movement 1

Home has a song.

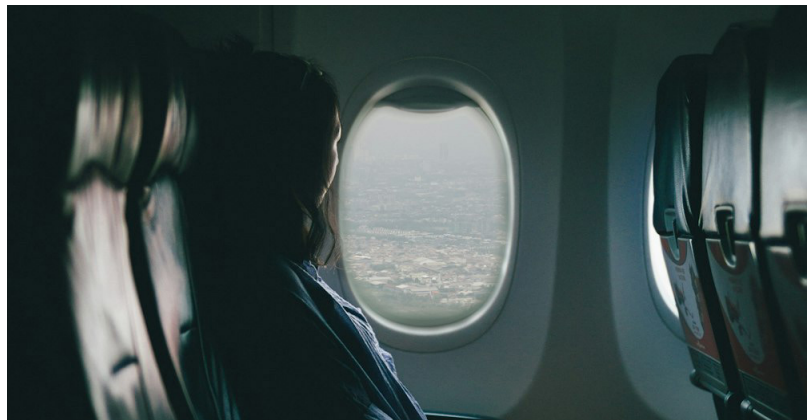
The first time I heard it I was standing outside of Incheon International Airport. I was surrounded by people with faces that looked like mine, and the sound of a language that had only ever belonged to me, and to my right, Mom and Dad smiled, wider than I'd ever seen.

In this sight, a melody was born.

## Movement 2

That July in South Korea passed as a dream of sweltering heat and familiar faces and memories too happy to believe. When I woke up, I was on a plane, watching Seoul's lights shrink beneath me.

To my right, Mom stared out the window with tears streaming down her face. For a moment she turned and met my eyes. She quickly looked away, but I've never forgotten her face at that moment—like when she saw me she saw everything she would never have.



I wept in darkness to a roaring engine and the crying of a baby three seats before me. Neither Mom nor I spoke the million words sinking between us. By the time we landed, our distance was a ravine, and we dangled on separate cliffs.

## Movement 3

I live in a bubble that surrounds a little white house at the end of a street in suburban Ohio. Walk into this bubble, and you can smell freshly-made Kimchi, see Korean singing competitions playing from the television, and listen to debates about Korean politics around the dinner table.

I have spent my whole life with one foot inside of this bubble and one foot out. One day, I will look back, and find myself on the outside of it.

I have these memories that haven't happened yet. They take place when I am thirty, or forty, or fifty,

graduated from college and with a job and far away from the bubble.

Every year, on my birthday, I drive to the nearest Korean restaurant and order *miyeokguk*. *Miyeokguk* is a seaweed soup, and it's Korean tradition to have on birthdays because mothers often eat it during pregnancy. When a waitress sets it on the table, I remember Mom telling me this.

At the first taste, I cry, because it's just close enough to how Mom made it, and yet just not the same.

My second greatest fear is that one year, I will stop doing this.

#### **Movement 4**

Dad arrived in America on Christmas Eve of 1999. He was twenty-four, a college student. He met Mom on a trip back to Korea and she joined him in 2005. They hadn't been planning on staying, but that was what happened.

I think a lot about their first moment on American soil. It must've felt like stepping onto the Moon for the first time. Now they have been on the Moon for twenty years, watching the Earth from a distance.

Do they regret everything?

Here is the thing I fear the most— the answer to that question. But I know I already know the answer.

#### **Movement 5**

I barely got out of my bed that first week back from Korea, too worn out by jet lag and a strange feeling of loneliness. Then Mom opened the door to my room one Monday afternoon.

“I'm going grocery shopping,” she said. Her tone was warm, and I was surprised—we'd barely spoken since we'd been back. “Will you go?”

I considered it.

“Sure,” I finally replied. And I got up.

The nearest Korean Mart is thirty minutes away. It's a tiny place, nestled right between an empty lot and a video game store. But the moment Mom and I stepped inside, and the cashier greeted us in Korean, and I saw the packages on the shelves I could barely read but knew like the back of my hand— I felt as though I could breathe again.

As Mom picked out the right package of bean sprouts, I wandered up and down the aisles. Every



bag of candy and chips seemed to bring me back to my grandparents' apartment, city lights, family reunions. And the memories didn't hurt as much as they had before.

When Mom had everything, we walked outside with hands full of bags. There was a light breeze and the sky was a clear blue. We got into the car and drove all the way home eating red bean popsicles, laughing when they stained our faces. And as we pulled up to the driveway of our house, I turned and I saw Mom's smile.

In the distance, I thought I could hear a familiar melody.

That was when I realized The Song of Home would never leave us.

*Minseong Hong is a young writer from the United States. In her free time, she enjoys reading, listening to music, and drawing.*

# the futures that never come

By Hayley Mah

This morning's shimmers trickle from the icy sky and pool in the garden, their golden hands gently prying open basil leaves as they thread around the stalks of tomato plants, wrapping Mira's son in warmth against the November chill. Mira watches as her little boy, with his mother's dimples and his father's frown, crouches in the dirt with sticky hands. Grimacing, she plasters another bandage over the cuts and scrapes on his knees, adding to the layers standing out against his dark skin like patchy foundation. She knows he's annoyed by the plastic between his skin and the soil, as though his bones are itching and he can't scratch them, but it has to be done. And in any case, the mess of bandages seems to complete him, a picture of disorderliness with scraped-up knees and Mira's staggered stitching securing the pockets onto his shorts. Crumbs of earth from his dad's side of the garden and his mom's delve into the messy seams, the only place where they will ever embrace.

Mira notes the five crayons her son pulls out of these pockets today: an off-brand orange; the last

sliver of an earthy green (a result of too many depictions of obnoxiously large trees); a deep red one he received in a Valentine, broken in half from the force of his little fingers; and two from a Crayola set Mira brought home for him, a hot pink and a muted beige. Mira knows he can't read the label of any of them—he's only five, the word "periwinkle" means nothing—and besides, the dampness of soil has seeped into the wrapping too often, causing the paper to warp and peel. The boy selects the green and gets to work sketching his mother's wilted flowers, though there isn't much green to colour. She's glad her son seems to embrace it, but Mira hates to admit she's never been good at keeping flowers alive. She always finds herself watching helplessly as brown creeps up each petal until the flowers look like burnt, dehydrated onions. Nonetheless, she keeps them rooted in her garden, averting her eyes from the kitchen window overlooking it while she wipes down her counters, and hoping, every time she unlatches the gate, that she'll step into flourishing petals again.

However, the garden seems more barren every day, and her husband has decided it's his duty

to remind her. A month ago, at the dinner table: “You know, Paul from IT was telling me his wife makes this wonderful cucumber salad from her garden. Imagine that—” he twirled Mira’s store-bought lettuce on his fork “—cucumbers. Right from the garden. They’d probably be perfectly crisp when they’re that fresh—not like the soggy ones from Safeway. Or that banana cake you make when you let the bananas go to rot. Too mushy.”

She makes banana bread, not cake. And everyone else loves it—she’s been asked for the recipe so many times that it’s the only post on her Facebook. The only person who refuses it is him. Why does that bother her so much?

Two weeks ago, lugging this thought with her, tucking it into her suitcase along with all the others, she left for her hometown of Calgary alone, entertaining the idea of roleplaying her life before her husband, tasting the past and the future in one spoon. It was painfully easy to let her life slip out of her fingertips—night after night of lying awake next to him in bed had given her plenty of time to plan an escape route. Though she



doesn’t remember thinking of it in this way when she left, she can see that she did know, even then, that what little trust she had left in him was gone. He checks his watch often but seems chronically late. He changes his mind quickly, forgets every highlighted date in the hallway calendar, and worst of all, he’s a lawyer. The tension peaks in the evenings, so much that she often expects to find scratches in the walls the next morning from

the talons unsheathed by the flurries of aggression in their living room.

Yes, when she left for Calgary, letting go of that was simple, but grabbing hold of another life wasn’t.

For Mira, flying back to her hometown felt a lot like being thirteen and waking up from a sleepover to open

the front door to her mother’s face—strikingly unfamiliar yet almost embarrassing after only one night spent away. Cowtown was for Thanksgiving and Christmas, not a place to go running from the life she’d chosen, and stepping onto the plane felt like giving up, like the aged rings of her trunk were rotting, cracking and peeling off. Every night away, she lay precariously near the edge of her

queen bed, careful to avoid the centre since that felt like she was taking up the space for two, lying on the shadow of her son.

Yet, while Mira slept in her childhood bed inside the familiar walls of her parents' house, her PhD suddenly seemed like it could do more than help with spelling homework. She no longer spent her time wiping applesauce off the walls, combing her son's hair, and googling "how to trick your toddler into taking medicine." She still didn't turn off the alarms for 4:57 and 5:01 on her phone (she hasn't in a decade), but when she woke up, she stretched and watched the sun, instead of listening to the incessant hum of her refrigerator while stuffing a lunch bag with almond butter sandwiches and banana bread. Still, every moment seemed wrapped in the guilt of absence, her ankle unstable and fragile without the weight of her son clinging to her leg, dragging behind her. Gaps between her fingers where those sticky hands no longer intertwined, her wrists felt limp without her son pulling her to soccer practice and art class. When it came down to it, she didn't know if she could let go of another future. Sometime during that week, drunk and delirious on cheap wine, Mira wrote a rambling letter to her husband, chucking it into the mailbox and slamming it closed. In the morning, she took a walk of shame across the tiny front lawn and brought it back into the house (placing

a light yet purposeful kick on a smirking garden gnome holding two knobby thumbs up). The letter remains in between the slats of their bed and the mattress, the saliva seal unbroken. She's thought about what she wrote so often that her memories have begun to warp and decay, the letter's details changing with the sheets, indeterminate, an inky Schrodinger's cat.

Even now in her garden, the past seeps into the present once more as she lies in the soil next to her son, staring up through a lattice of yellowing stems. They fragment the smear of clouds into a stained-glass mosaic as she morphs the letter again, tracing the greying leaves that blanket the soil she used to work so hard to maintain. Perhaps, on those pages, there is the story of a life without husband and son, the undiscovered end of the highway well beyond her exit. On her fifth birthday, her new fish died; an hour later, watching the flaming wax cascade down her five candles, she first gripped onto the idea that she was running out of time. Since then, she's always clung fiercely to the past, leaving claw marks in it as she wrestles with time while trying to grab back the present. She never wants to see today in a box neatly labelled "past." As though in accordance with her thoughts, the sun seems to be setting quicker than ever tonight. The shadow of her son lengthens into the bushes as the sun

dips below him. As he hands Mira his drawing (“Looklooklooklook!”), the shadow extends his own arm. His garish drawing makes Mira grimace. It’s a tasteless work, portraying him and Mira in clown makeup, watering the dying flowers. Her husband is obsessed with the circus—maybe it’s his dull, white-collar job, or his suburban evenings. Their house is decorated with circus memorabilia, and their son already has a wardrobe full of stripes and polka dots. She imagines the boxes she’ll have to pack if she goes through with this—flamboyant clutter, probably making a honking sound and cream-pieing her when she tries to close the cardboard flap. Looking at the hideous drawing, she was suddenly struck by a thought: why did they call them paintings? They should be called painteds. She began to giggle uncontrollably. Perhaps she, too, was a doomed paradox, aging forever yet always-already done. Reaching thirty felt a lot like arriving at an expiration date, her youth souring, but also like she was reaching a deadline—the point beyond which she could no longer change the life she had chosen for herself. She told her friends she didn’t need any gifts, for how could they purchase time back?

“Gorgeous drawing. It’s your best clown yet, son.” Her husband’s grating voice pulls her eyes down from the sky and her thoughts back into the

garden. He waves a hand in her direction. Why are his nails so neat? What kind of 30-year-old man cares about having well-manicured hands? Her own nails are crusted in dirt and dry from immersing her hands in scalding dishwater. She conjures a smile and prays it looks natural. “I cancelled the reservation tonight. I’m exhausted.” He picks a piece of dirt off his pants, “How much could’ve happened in two hours?” Mira turns her cheek away from the sun, raising her son’s drawing to shield herself. “Lots. I thought about Bubbles today.”

“Who?” he asks, not waiting for a response as he points to the drawing. “Did you see how he used the softer colours for the Auguste clown and the hot pink for the Pierrot? Anyways—” he drops his bag onto the soil, reaching a stupidly refined hand into it, “—doesn’t sound like much to me.” Furrowing his brow, he unzips another pocket.

“Fine. Well.” Mira takes a breath. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5. “Why don’t you ask—why don’t you ever ask?” *And Bubbles was my FISH. My short-lived fish.*

“I’m calling them and asking for the reservation back,” he says, locating his phone and slipping it out of the bag. He turns, slamming the kitchen door behind him.



Mira chokes out a laugh. Another scene for her son to draw and embellish with clown makeup: the latch on the back door closing. The cars rushing past on the Henday. His stupid clown music blaring from his phone in the kitchen. Her son's voice, sickly sweet: "Mom, can we get ice cream?" Calgary (failure). The suitcase upstairs, tucked in the back of her closet. A Wikipedia article about the Netherlands, sitting open in an incognito tab. "Will, it's November." The sun hastily weaving a tapestry of light and dark, her son's shadow already spread thin across the yard. A thorn working its way through her sock. The letter, shapeshifting underneath their mattress. Fragile sprouts under the decaying leaves, pushing through the soil and reaching for the sun.

"Get in the car."

*Hayley is currently 15, and a Chinese-Canadian emerging writer living in Vancouver with a remarkable sense of humour. Oddly enough, her least favourite subject is English, though she adores writing.*

# Nature 101: Lessons From a Tree

By Madelynn Miller

I am by no means an expert on nature. I'm a naturalist, but not a nature-ologist. I see the world for its intrinsic value, not for the



molecular happenings of trees and riverbeds. I am a simple girl who finds herself whole in nature; a girl who feels a sense of relief when the tallest things around me are the trees, not a skyscraper reflecting sunbeams on to my pale face. But that doesn't mean I know *nothing* about nature. I know something about trees.

My education in the trees started well before ten, but by that age I knew vacations to the woods were no more routine than brushing my teeth every morning. When we would drive to small town Pinegrove, Grandpa would take me on walks in the woods on the ten-acres of land we own there. The trail is nothing more than trimmed-back branches between the oaks and mangroves, creating a sort of grassy path that

leads to nowhere. On our walk, we see Eastern box turtles with necks painted traffic cone orange and firetruck red. They always look like crayons that have been left out in the sun too long—stripes flowing across their noses to the tip of their shell. We see squirrels, usually grey ones, with tails longer and poofier than a household duster. But none of these compare in quantity to the deer. Whitetail deer, abundant in Eastern Pennsylvania, roam the forests. Parades of doe scurry through the underbrush like they are playing a game of tag. I never noticed how high they jump until I saw them next to half-snapped trees from years of decay and lightning storms. They can jump as high as ten feet with those bony legs. No wonder Grandpa and Dad say that venison is the leanest and cleanest protein for our bodies.

Finding these animals was no small feat. On many of our walking trips, I found myself standing no more than two feet from skittish animals, both of us shocked by our unintentional crossing. Intertwining mountain laurel clouded my peripherals. Tall conifers and oaks disrupted my 20/20 vision. But the trees taught me careful attention; they taught me care. When I took the time to notice the little movements between the trees, I could see what hid between the wild bushes ten feet ahead of me. I learned to look for the sandy-white of a deer's tail in between low hanging branches. I learned to look closely at the ferns beneath my feet so as not to crush an innocent turtle.

I can never forget the sound of the birds when I woke up in the morning. Loud *skree* and small *chip chip* filled the trailer from the open windows, letting cool air pass through the stuffy interior. Looking outside, I saw the birds cuddled next to each other in their nests out on tree limbs. And at night, the sound of peepers and bullfrogs *grup grup* polluted my ability to think. The trees' leaves would flutter in the nighttime breeze, calming the inhales and exhales of my breath. There was no need for a sound machine when Mother Nature was right there, singing me a lullaby. And the stream: a constant rushing sound filled my brain

when I heard it. The sound of dead trees burning into crackling fire crunched my bones. I could feel the warmth of that fire on my shins even when I just heard it.

Nighttime sounds blocked anxious thoughts.

The soft sways of the limbs mimicked mine as I calmed unsteady breaths. The gentle breeze in the leaves taught me calmness. There was no time to cloud the mind with what-ifs, judgments, and questions with no answer. There was only time to look at the stars in passing. It is what some may call bliss—I like to call it *really living*.

The trees were prolific, spanning miles of open space. Some as tall as fifty feet, others no more than one. Leaves of all kinds littered the forest floor. I remember as a young child walking through these woods and collecting leaves with five lobes, leaves with toothed edges, leaves with multiple little leaves, and some with nothing left but a stem. Under the conifers were the best treasures, though: pinecones of all sizes. Some as long as a finger, others just the size of a fingernail. I would take these back to the small trailer situated in the middle of an opening in the forest. I made things. Bird feeders: pinecones rolled in peanut butter and bird seed; necklaces; little people using glue, googly eyes, and little twigs. I never brought toys along to the woods because

I knew I could find enough entertainment there without them. Plastic was inferior to twigs; play-doh inferior to mud.

Leaf hunting became like cloud watching—one looked like a bunny, others a shark. But most importantly, these trees taught me to give back what I took. Pinecones are the way in which conifers propagate and spread seeds. After I would take these life-giving shells to use for human entertainment; I always tossed them back out into the woods, where one day another little girl could come back and have her own pine tree, her own pinecones. The trees also taught me to never take more than I need. The beauty of nature is its ability to regenerate on its own, but only if humans take little from it. Taking pinecones and leaves modestly allows both human creativity and the natural world to thrive.



Mountain laurels grow everywhere in wild Pennsylvania. It is common to see twenty to thirty mountain laurels in one spot. They grow

into each other, creating what looks like a home for hobbits. When I was only eight, I wished to build a fort in those trees. I pictured draping cloths

over a few outer branches, hanging a lantern from a low-hanging bough, laying sleeping bags on the dirty, rocky floor to prevent bruises from forming on my skin when I sat down. There were rules, of course. No adults allowed. Boys? I don't think so. Books? Yes. I would imagine deer becoming my friends, the squirrels my bodyguards, snakes my enemies. It didn't help that I watched Snow White, Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, and all the other Disney princesses when I was younger; they could always talk to the animals in ways I could not.

The gentle light flickering above my snug, perfectly small hole brought warmth to more than my extremities. The soft sounds of the rustling branches and flickering ferns reminded me of nightly bedtime stories. I felt less threatened in the natural world, free from human-made dangers: car accidents, robbery, and weapons. It was a home free of human implications.

On the path through the woods was a diversion from the regular route. We would make a left and go down a steep hill covered in ferns. Dad was always scared of the snakes that hid in the shadows. I wondered what else could hide in there, the way I wanted to hide in my mountain laurels. One more left would take us to a sparse forest filled with young saplings. Down one more

small hump and the forest opens to a river. There are two levels of the bank: up top is a platform where my parents and grandparents would set up lawn chairs to watch us swim in the river. They would always pack a cooler filled with food and drinks knowing we'd end up being there the whole day. We'd fish from up there too. The water was filled with native trout and little sunnies. On the bank below was a rocky landing that led into the riverbed floor. We would skip rocks and see who could jump the farthest. We would blow up innertubes and float or play in them, using string tied to the trees lining the riverbank as anchors in the strong current. Sometimes, though, we would drive to the mouth of the river and float into town on the tubes. Back when the river was high, we would never get stuck on rocks or shallow waters. The river became a central memory of my time in Pinegrove.

Every year I would travel to this river, a new tree would sprout, or an old one fall down. Tubing down the stream showed me the gradual changes to the forest—some good, others bad, but change nonetheless. I knew to never expect sameness, to understand change as a natural cycle in everyday life. I know to this day that change is important, whether it be in the specific angle of a tree branch or understanding and exploring a new grove.

At home, though, nature is different.

I live in a two-story house by my family's sawmill. I wake up to the sound of chainsaws gnawing away at logs of ash and maple. I hear the *beep beep beep* of the forklift in reverse. I hear a chipper *chr-chr-chr* wood into beds for horses, cows, and bunnies. At night, I fall asleep to the sound of children screaming at the house down the street, a train *chucka-duh-chucka-duh* by at sixty miles an hour. I hear the *krrr* of car wheels taking off too fast or slowing down too late. I hear sirens taking another person to the hospital.

Forests here are clear-cut. I was fifteen, driving home from a weekend in the mountains. A loud *krrrch* sound flooded my ears. I turn and see the tallest oak tree in the forest fall onto the ground covered in industrial tire tracks. Saplings peek out from under the fallen tree, searching for light they'll never see again. Those same birds that woke me up in the morning in Pinegrove lost their homes here. Babies not yet hatched from their eggs shattered into a million little pieces. This isn't just a pinecone. It's the entire tree; an entire ecosystem destroyed for human gain. And little does the human race know, the resiliency of the trees has been left to dust. The broken eggs, torn up ground, and lost lives all broke down the ability for the forest to continue to grow, to give



to us. Once we've taken so much, we can't take anymore.

There are still trees. Many of them, though, lining property lines, creating the "perfect" landscape in development housing, even many creating a half-assed excuse for a forest; I walk in five feet and can see my neighbor's house on the other side. The birds come around too, but only when the noises stop. Only when the cars stop driving forty miles an hour up my thirty-mile street on the outskirts of 230-people-and-counting small-town.

Fire smells different here. Fumes of burning plastic from last night's dinners—here, they burn garbage and use single-use dinner plates. I smell a chemical company distill their byproducts into the air "safely" and "cautiously" in the middle of the night; the next morning, I taste the putrid, acid sourness of those chemicals in my mouth.

The deer are still around. I see them when I am out, but they usually have soulless eyes, a bloated stomach, and a tongue sticking out of their mouth like they just took the "silly" photo in a series of family photos. And they are never with other deer. They are laying on the side of the road because they could not jump over a tractor trailer driving twenty miles over the speed limit on a backroad.

There's also a river in town; well, actually a creek. Right next to the bar, where men in their eighties who were born and will die in the same town, working for the same manufacturing company that supports our small economy, drink excess amounts of alcohol to cope with lost opportunity. The name could fool you. Toad's creek—should have a lot of toads, right? Nope. The creek doesn't even have enough water to support an ecosystem anymore. It's dried up in most places, leaving the banks littered with those same men's empty Busch Light cans and Fireball shooters.

Trees teach me something here too: the single twiggy sapling growing on the side of the creek taught me that it needs food, shelter, and water, not plastic bottles, evaporated streams, and concrete buildings to grow. After so much human pollution intrudes on the natural space, the trees and everything that comes with the trees will die.

There was a fort in town, too. A wooden park built many years before I was born. Trees surrounded the play area, and children had a place to escape the world. The wooden park looked like a castle, just like I pictured my mountain laurel fort would be. One day a kid was running barefoot and stepped on a needle: heroine. The park was destroyed, and so were the hopes of a better future for the town.

Humans and nature cannot coincide the way the world has been built. People uproot land to build houses. Trees are cut down to build parks. Animals are killed because of automotive advancement. But most of all, children's safety and innocence are destroyed when nature and humans cannot work together. Whitetail deer are not seen running peacefully; they are seen dead. Fawns are seen without mothers. Birds are left hiding, scared of the unnatural sounds of revving and motors. And people are left with polluted minds and bodies without an escape into the world we came from.

I'm reminded of a specific lesson Grandpa taught me about the trees: one day we were planing boards back at the sawmill. I noticed a small purple dot spreading into the tree's inner rings. Grandpa told me that any piercing metals that inject themselves into a tree will bruise it, rotting it from the inside out. In many ways, we are the same as these trees. We feel pain, we rot, and we bruise in every way a tree does. We must learn to appreciate the trees the way we appreciate other humans. A bullet kills more than one thing: humans, animals, trees. Too much human intervention will kill our world.

*Madelynn Miller is a Senior at Cedar Crest College. Majoring in both business and English, Madelynn hopes to work in the nonprofit sector after her college career. Madelynn will be attending Cedar Crest College for her MBA directly after her undergraduate education. Madelynn grew up in a small town. Her family owns a small business, as well as private land in Pinegrove and Clinton County, Pennsylvania. Nature is her passion, and the lessons the natural world have taught her shaped her into the young woman she is today.*

# The Markswoman

By Josslyn Ervin



As a carefree little girl with a fondness for gargantuan hairbows, I didn't used to worry about desperate thieves or madmen. But that was before I visited the Maverick County Fair of 2015. At first, it was wonderful. Children laughed, vendors smiled, and balloons bobbed in the breeze. My Mom and Dad bought me pink cotton candy, and I savored every lick while I watched the other fair goers. I still remember noticing for the first time that strangely enough, some people looked unhappy. They didn't smile. They didn't laugh. They didn't chat. I found it hard to comprehend, this despairing darkness that blinded their eyes to the wonder and light of my favorite place in the world. I scrunched my

eyebrows together, hid behind my curly brown hair, and buried my hands in the pocket of my blue sweatshirt. It was best not to think about it.

I loved the fair. Everything about it – the colorful displays, the bouncy music, the food – appealed to me and had made me look forward to it every year for as long as I could remember. Only one thing dimmed my happiness – the fact that Mom and Dad never allowed me to go off with Bella and Lilac (my old friends who I haven't spoken to since 6th grade) when they visited the bouncy house, petting zoo, or any other attraction that glowed in my innocent, unrealistic sight. Every time I asked why I couldn't go, my parents would say,

“Lauren, there are a lot of people here, and we want to keep you safe.”

Of course, I didn't know what they meant by that, but I said, “Okay” anyway. I had no idea that they were thinking something bad could happen to me. It was pointless, of course, because it still happened. But that's later on in the story.

I stood by my parents as they surveyed the

rainbow of produce and canned goods in mason jars for sale by the denim-clad farmers. My mom carried a wicker basket for her purchases and she was wearing a pretty wide brimmed hat encircled by a yellow ribbon to protect her from the hot afternoon sun. Sure, it was near the end of September, but in the South the weather does whatever it wants to do, no matter what the calendar says. My dad had red Converse sneakers that shone in my peripheral so brightly that it seemed like I was continuously looking at them. I fascinatedly watched a brightly colored beetle climb a blade of grass like a lumberjack scaling a massive cedar.

“Daddy, what do you call a boy ladybug?”

He turned around.

“What did you say, Lauren Lark?”

I giggled at the sound of what used to be my favorite nickname and repeated my question,

“What do you call a boy ladybug?”

“I don’t know. Maybe a gentleman bug?”

I looked back down at the insect on the grass.

Bending over, I said quietly,

“Hello, gentleman bug.”

The bug gave no answer, but reached the peak of his blade of grass, turned around, and began struggling back down.

My mom completed her examination of the fruit salsas upon the nearest table.

“I’m going to go check out the honeybees over there, you wanna come?”

She gestured to the tent sheltering a glass box full of yellow and black bustling insects.

“Sure!”

I delightedly darted away. As she followed, she told Dad,

“We’re going to see some bees.”

“Alright,” he answered, “I’ll be in that antiques booth over there. I think they might have the perfect ottoman for the reading nook.”

“Good idea.”

As we made our way towards the beekeeper’s display, a man burst into the aisle. His face

was dirty and his eyes were wide. Three sweaty Maverick County Fair volunteers in orange tee shirts followed, shouting, “Stop, thief!” The desperate man’s stare pierced like a knife. Suddenly, he changed course and bolted straight towards me.

I froze. My parents were too far away to help, and a wanted criminal was barreling down the row. He seized me roughly by the shoulder, shaking and breathing heavily. I regained the ability to move, but it was too late to get away on my own. I shouted and kicked and hit, but it was no use. The fair volunteers fled, saying something about calling the police. Cowards.

I heard a click in the sudden stillness – the thief had cocked a gun. I squeezed my eyes shut and prayed like never before, *Please, God, save me! I’m only six!*

“Don’t come any closer,” The thief snarled, “Get away from me, or she dies!”

I heard muffled footsteps on the grass. I opened my eyes. Three angels slowly approached: a short, stocky man with a mustache, a tall teenager, and a large man in overalls.

“Get back!” My captor screamed in an insane,

throaty voice, “Get back, or I’ll shoot her! Instead of being consumed by fear like I logically should have been in that terrifying moment, somehow, I made a joke. In my head, I nicknamed him Crazy Guy, for surely he was out of his mind.

“Alright,” said Overall Man. He pulled a Glock out of a concealed holster and casually aimed it at Crazy Guy, nodding at the teenager, who did the same.

“Let her go. You don’t want to have the blood of an innocent little girl on your hands.”

“No! Get back!” Crazy Guy cried.

“Look, buddy, we *are* back.” Although his voice was calm, the teenage boy’s knees shook like treetops in a thunderstorm. “We don’t want to hurt you, and I’m sure you don’t want to hurt the girl. Just let her go, please.”

I heard my mom whimper as she cowered with my dad across the way.

“Lauren!”

With firearms involved, there was nothing they could do. Neither of my parents had ever touched a gun, and they feared them like the plague.



Mustache Man stood in a martial art fighting stance as the teenager and Overall Man carefully aimed their weapons at Crazy Guy. They looked like two versions of the same person at different ages. A faint trace of an idea floated past in my mind, but I was too absorbed in whether or not I was about to get shot to grab and examine it.

If the good guys came any closer, then I would quite possibly die. If Crazy Guy moved, he would quite possibly die. We were at a standoff, and unless a major factor entered the situation any time soon, we might stay there forever, becoming upright fossils as the fair grounds were deserted, forgotten, and sold to the highest bidder for profit. Maybe we would become a decoration, an assembly of statues at a vacation resort in the distant future. *Look*, visitors would say as they strolled by, *the esteemed work*, The Peril of Lauren Fields! *What a lifelike masterpiece!*

Oh, how I longed for home. Home was safe, home was comfy, home was cozy. The night before at bedtime, Mom had read *Madeline* to me as I lay in a nest of blankets and pillows, holding my one-eyed teddy bear, Winky. The blankets were as soft as bunny rabbits, the pillows as fluffy as cotton candy, and Winky as comforting as Mom's hug before she turned out the light. I would be

totally, perfectly, completely happy if I were back there, instead of here, in the grasp of a possible murderer-to-be with a gun pointed at my head.

A click echoed in the tense silence. A young woman with flaming red hair rose up from behind a fruit stand and held a gleaming pistol out over a basket of muscadines. Her face was as hard as a stone carving.

"Let her go, jerk," she commanded. "You can't win this."

I felt Crazy Guy's grip loosen. If I made a run for my parents, would he shoot me in the back as I raced for safety? Was it possible to get out of this?

Beads of sweat stood on Overall Man's forehead, the teenager was still quivering, and Mustache Man looked ready to snap like a Kit-Kat candy bar.

That was it for me. How dare this guy pretend he held the power of life and death over all of us! If someone distracted Crazy Guy, I would go for it, and make a dash for my parents. They reminded me of a National Geographic documentary about the Arctic, staring at me like a pair of penguins watching their chick go down an elephant seal's gullet. Well, this chick was going to climb out

again! Down with the elephant seal!

“Please, sir,” The teenager was talking again. “Let her go.”

“How do I know you people won’t kill me if I do?” Crazy Guy demanded.

“Look,” said Overall Man, “I promise that we will not hurt you if you don’t hurt that little girl.

Just let her go, and everyone will be alright.”

“Why should I believe you? I’ve never seen you before! For all I know, you’ll shoot me as soon as she’s out of range.”

I cringed. Where were the police? Overall Man was going to get me shot! Not sensing what dangerous waters he had entered, or rather, pushed me into, he took a deep breath and tried again.

“You should believe me because I want the best for everybody.”

The teenager nodded encouragingly. Smirking, Crazy Guy opened his mouth to interrupt.

“Wait,” said Overall Man, “Let me finish. I want you to live, and her, and us too. But we can’t work

this out in such an uncomfortable position, sir. So how about you just let her go and we can have a seat and talk about it?”

“How dare you tell me what to do!” Crazy Guy raged, “You aren’t the boss of me, I am! I am in charge right now. If I want you dead, you will be, and if I want her dead, she will be. Now quit talking to me like I’m a child before I do something you don’t like!”

He quaked like an erupting volcano, spewing angry red words all around him. But he still didn’t shoot me.

“Hey,” said Mustache Man. It was the first time he had spoken. “She’s just a little girl. Don’t ruin her life because you’ve already ruined yours.”

Crazy Guy fell silent. My heart pounded. No one spoke. No one moved. This was the deciding moment.

“Go on.” He pushed me away.

In a daze, I stumbled over to my parents. They scooped me up and cried over me like two children rejoicing over a found puppy.

With a quick nod, Mustache Man rushed forward

and pinned Crazy Guy's arms as the teenager wrested the gun from his hand with a practiced twist. I couldn't hear their words, I was crying too hard, but when the police showed up a few minutes later, Crazy Guy got into their car willingly.

All my mother wanted to do was get me home, but the police had some questions for her and Dad, so I sat in a camp chair behind the Red-Haired Lady's fruit stand and waited. She told me her name was Wilma Otis and let me pet her golden retriever, Cheyenne. I didn't say much, so soon she just let me be. When my parents came for me, I was asleep on the ground with Cheyenne, holding a half-eaten apple.

I'm sixteen now. I stand between two narrow walls separating me from the other marksmen and hold a pistol straight out in front of me. My grip is sure and relaxed and my arms are strong and steady. My hair lies behind me in a long brown braid. I watch the paper target bounce softly on the wire and cock my weapon. When I squeeze the trigger, a powerful sound rockets around the room. Round round, I empty the barrel, and shells fall all around me. I am surrounded by a storm of sound, unconscious of everything but the red bullseye, riddled with holes, and the power I hold in my hands, the power to protect those I love. When

my ammunition runs out, I stop and observe my target. I'm a good shot.

*Josslyn Ervin is a high school senior from rural South Carolina. She's homeschooled and loves reading, writing, and music.*

# Dear Eli

By Bailey Kim

Sometimes, when things get particularly boring, I like to float way up high, perch myself atop a cloud, and gaze at the world below. It's a more introspective sight than you might think at first, especially at night, when you can see the

cars bustling, the people walking, and the lights on the buildings flickering. You start to wonder about each and every person's life under you, and how there are thousands to millions of people, captured in just one look. It makes you question your own life. Whether it really, truly mattered in the grand scheme of things—whether you were just another one of those thousands to millions of people.

I don't remember my death. I don't remember what it was like to die. At first, for a long time, I don't think I believed that I was really dead. I don't remember when during that period of time I started losing my memories. I didn't even notice until after visiting my parent's house one day. I often visited the places I liked when I was living—my university, my friend's houses, stores I used to frequent, restaurants I used to eat at—I



thought maybe something there would give me at least a sliver of clarity or answer any of my millions of questions. Ever since I died, they sat simmering in my stomach, nagging my brain and screeching, We need answers! We need Answers!

That day, I wanted to visit the old playground, but I couldn't remember where it was. A place I must've visited thousands of times, and yet, I drew a blank. The more I thought back to my childhood, the less I realized I could remember. That's when I knew I'd started to forget my life before. I started crying, crying invisible tears that felt wet on my hands but made no marks on the concrete sidewalk as they dripped down. I was starting to fade into nothingness.

I hung around my memorial often. It was a thin,

tall slab of stone, with my name, the date of my birth, and the date of my death etched into it. Flowers and pictures surrounded the front of it, shining vibrant against the dark stone in the daylight, colors of violets, blues, and yellows, happiness captured in short moments with a camera. The pictures, along with the flowers, were swapped out every day by someone different. Most days, it was my parents. Some days, it was one of my friends. Today, it was Matthew.

Matthew hadn't once visited my memorial all the days I'd been dead. I visited him a couple of times, but the air around him always weighed heavily. Something seemed slightly off around him compared to others, and he always seemed paranoid, almost as if he could sense I was there. It scared me a bit. I passed it off as grief. He was my best friend, after all.

I watched as he walked up to my memorial. He was wearing a heavy coat. His hands were shoved into his pockets, but his shoulders were shaking. The wind was heavy, and it whipped his hair around his face. He bent down, pulling a plastic container out of the paper bag he'd been carrying. I recognized it as a muffin from the university cafe—the ones I used to eat every day before class. He replaced the flowers from yesterday with bright pink ones that practically glowed against

the dull green of the grass. He put down the muffin next to them and sat, staring at the stone slab. I placed myself on top of it, watching him. We stayed like that for almost ten minutes, and somewhere along the way he started crying, silent tears falling down his cheeks and soaking into the ground. He had a pained expression on his face, almost as if it hurt to even look at the stone, but despite this, he didn't look away. Soon enough, he pulled an envelope out of the pocket of his jacket, placed it atop the muffin container, got up, and walked away. He hadn't said one word.

I hopped down from the stone. The envelope had my name written messily on the front of it in Matthew's handwriting. To my surprise, when I grabbed it, the paper held in my hand. I dropped it and then picked it up again. I was unsure of why, out of all things in the physical world, I was able to grab the letter. I tried at the muffin container, but my hand passed right through it as usually it did with everything else. Slowly, I tore the envelope open, pulling out a folded piece of paper. I unfolded it and stared at the letters scribbled on the page.

*Dear Eli,*

*I don't even really know what I'm trying to accomplish with this letter. Bring comfort to you?*



*Bring comfort to myself? Who knows at this point?*

*I write this acting like you're going to read it, but really, I guess I'm just talking to myself here. Maybe I've finally gone crazy.*

*I can't really explain this to you, can I? You're dead. You're gone, and it's my fault. Everyone says it was an accident, but I can tell they just do it to make me feel better. The only thing it really succeeds at is making me feel worse, because it wasn't an accident. I know it wasn't one. When we were fighting in that car, some sick part of me really wanted you dead. I wasn't in the right headspace then, I guess. I was angry, tired, and a little bit drunk, even if you didn't know it then. When the car in front of us swerved, I blanked. I don't remember how we crashed, but the next thing I know, I'm looking over at you next to me with blood on your face. I don't think I will ever be able to get your face out of my head. It follows me wherever I go.*

*I guess this is my way of apologizing, because I really am sorry. I miss you more than I care to admit, and it makes me feel guilty because I was the one who killed you. Everyone throws around the word "accident" like I'm the only one who knows that truly I'm a murderer. I murdered my best friend, and yet, I have the nerve to miss you. Can a murderer miss their victim?*

*Everything reminds me of you now. I'd say I hope that one day I'll get past this, but in reality, I don't think I ever will. Your face is going to follow me for the rest of my life, and that's OK because I deserve it. It already took me three weeks to visit this place. I'll try to visit more.*

*I hope you're doing alright. I hope you're somewhere better. I hope you're happy. That's all I really wish for in the end. I'll try to bring more of these muffins since I know you love them. Hopefully, you can eat them every day as you used to, wherever you are.*

He didn't sign the letter. Memories from that day began to slowly flow back to me in small snapshots of moments—getting into the car, the coffee spilling, the argument, the silence after, the car in front of us. I blinked, turning the paper over in my hands a few times, folding it, and unfolding it. This whole time, it was Matthew? He walked away from a crash unscathed while I ended up dead?

I spent hours sitting in the same place, reading and rereading the note, memories swirling in my head while I wracked my brain for answers to anything. Even long after I set the letter back to where it originally was, and the sun had set in colors of

deep red, I sat thinking. Was I even upset, or did I just feel like I should've been upset? Honestly, a weight felt as though it lifted itself off my shoulders. I finally did what I'd been trying to do all these weeks. Yes, I still had so many questions, possibly even more than before, but the main one, How did I die? was finally answered. Did it even matter how I felt? Whether I was angry or not? Whether I forgave him for essentially killing me? I was dead after all. I realized that, whether I forgave him or not, I would still stay dead, and he would still have to live with the guilt of the crash for the rest of his life. He said so himself. Even while grappling with this, I could only bring myself to remember the good moments with him. The times we laughed, hugged, and cried together. When I was alive, his presence was one of the only things that allowed me to keep living. Without him, I think I would've ended up dead anyway. It wasn't worth holding a grudge over. What good would it do?

It wasn't until much later into the night that I looked up into the sky at the clouds. A small speck of light behind one lit up the otherwise dark sky. The moon was nothing but a sliver of grey and the stars were dimmed. I floated up to the light, only to find that the source of it came from a door. It was large and white, and it glowed around the edges, the brightness overflowing from the other

side. Somewhere deep inside me, I think I knew what it was, even if I'd never seen it before. A subconscious recognition.

I grabbed the doorknob, and the gold metal felt warm in my hand. I turned and looked down at the world one last time. I looked at the cars bustling, the people walking, the lights on the buildings flickering, and I smiled. For the first time since I died, I felt content. Nothing felt as though it was simmering in my stomach or screeching in my head. I felt utterly at ease. I turned the knob and, taking a deep breath, opened the door. After that, I didn't look back.

*Bailey Kim found her love for books at a very young age. Her father would fall asleep while reading, she would eagerly picture how the story would unfold. Today, she is a dedicated gymnast who devotes almost as much time training in the gym as she does in school. To unwind, she often stays up too late reading. When she has a free moment, she enjoys writing short stories, daydreaming and sketching. Bailey is currently a junior in high school and resides in New Jersey.*

# POETRY



By Sitara Mitragotri

**cooking lessons**

my mother brings only a plastic bag to California.

*for you*, she says, handing the miniature kitchen  
equipment for *playing house*.

But mainly, *so you can cook with me*.

& to my mother, I am *pressed small* by California,  
tossed from a hospital window into poppy embers  
before the first embrace. first gaze, first word, smeared  
in salt wind & trout.

In her steel container, the flour fossilizes her  
paper knuckles. she holds my palm to melting ghee.  
*it will remember you, child*.

I know that she is preserving these words in jars of  
pickled mango and ginger.  
*it is what ripe lemons can never give you*.

& in the kitchen, my knife cut runs dry of men playing  
cattleherd, grazing bruised cornfields when the mines  
spit rust & combing the silken dirt of these  
fractured ghost towns.

She tells me to protect my fingers.  
*They are your inheritance*.

Fragmented skeletons in river-stained pans & starved,

brass-bellied fish on cutting board.

We fry okra in cumin and coriander, slow, steady.

We eat the bhaji with bandaged fingers.

It's okay if we sit at different tables.

---

\*bhaji - cooked vegetable dishes

*Sitara is a high schooler based in Massachusetts. Her work has been recognized by the Alliance for Young Writers, the National Poetry Quarterly, and The Afterpast Review. She is also the Founder and Editor-in-Chief of The Jhumka Review. In her free time, she enjoys painting and spending time with her pets.*



By Jordan Muscal

**Childhood self portrait with bike, Twinkle Toes and a little Paul Simon**

First swimsuit, a cousin's,  
that clung like an old woman  
who'd been promised retirement and instead  
given baby fat, the faint stench  
of urine.

The fabric was goosebumped  
and thinning, so light it'd slip off the drying rack;  
a diver, tan and lithe.

Front teeth missing, and proud,  
wearing tulle so starched I almost forgave it.

Beat up Twinkle Toes that I paired  
with my Dorothy costume, tapped my toes  
instead of heels—

*diamonds on the soles of her shoes*

Paul Simon says, somewhere.

I rode a bike for the first time  
and tasted metal, cheeks hot  
with strange achievement  
as the neighbor's dog panted at my training wheels.

*But I've reason to believe*

*we all will be received in Graceland*

on the radio of a passing car.

Childhood is a globe to spin in the dark,

Day-Glo ceiling stars crooning  
Nina Simone, Cat Stevens, Hey, Jude;  
a train of thought so long  
you lose sight of the caboose.

In 5th grade, I stood in the back row  
of the class portrait, dead center, looking  
wringed out, stretched  
taller than all the boys.

Sang *Bridge Over Troubled Water*  
at my elementary graduation with  
all the conviction I could pull  
from between my shoulders,  
all the conviction I could shake  
from these asphalt and stardust wings.

*Like a bridge over troubled water*

*I will lay me down,*

*Like a bridge over troubled water*

*I will lay me down*

I sang  
off key and sincere.

## at the foothills of mt lemmon

bobcats pace the low, stucco fences,  
faces bony, stretched thin  
like gossamer

time doesn't exist here  
the rooftop tiles curve their spines,  
arching towards the sky...  
the stars prick the dark with cactus thorns

my grandparents' pills  
are assorted candies, remind me  
of my grandma's mahjong tiles  
with their painted-on characters &  
glossy coatings

we water down the sweet tea this year,  
pale orange & frothing over the glass,  
the sun spooling itself a few more hours

a javelina we find in the driveway,  
a pigeon we can't keep from nesting  
in the casita rafters

my grandmother, sun-screen slathered,  
nails a soft pink, speaks of her father,  
the boat from poland, the house in pittsburgh  
& it sounds like lore

a landline that sounds at early hours,  
an antenna-ed TV that buzzes, constantly,  
my grandma's flip phone ringing  
from deep within her handbag

my sister dives into  
a green swimming pool,  
back straight, taut,  
that half-second  
where she is half  
submerged, half dry legs & pointed toes

here, every grocery run is an "outing",  
my grandfather's dark humor  
startling us like a pothole or roadkill  
my grandmother swats him lightly  
but laughs too, hand over lipsticked mouth

at every restaurant, we tell the waiter  
it's my sister's birthday, they bring  
a slice of tres leche & we sing off-key,  
three generations in the desert once again

*Jordan Muscal is a sophomore in the creative writing department at Kinder High School for the Performing and Visual Arts in Houston, Texas. Her work has been published in Octopus Ink, Buzz Magazines and Youth Be Heard. Besides writing, Jordan enjoys hyper analyzing her favorite books and film, thrift shopping with her sister and trying new foods.*

By Vanessa Niu

## Plague

i.

Always there has been this hunger  
& this need to disguise it. In the  
invisible background of Van Gogh's  
Cypresses is a son reaching into the  
Earth for the lack of fruit hanging  
from the trees & the same hunger  
stayed with Billie Holiday in the  
next century, when the branches  
drooped with bodies. Hidden in  
the mountains of Fan Kuan more  
than a millennium later is a mother,  
spearing the last fish that would  
make the journey upstream & the  
yellowing water, gleaming iridescent  
with oil. Around Marie Laurencin's  
nymphic hill is a girl wrapped into  
the tongue of another, struggling to  
remember when she felt whole  
without the fullness of another  
devout & unholy consummation.  
& the world denies us our meal &  
we are still shamefully hungry.

ii.

Before the tsunami the tide must



ebb. There are always the hungry  
before the locusts swarm.

*Vanessa Y. Niu is a Chinese-American poet and classical singer who lives in New York City. She has written text for the modern composition scene at Juilliard and Interlochen, and can be found at the opera house, a slam-poetry session, or attending open physics lectures when not writing*

By MG

## **Too Much to Ask**

I can fix him, they say.

I can fix her, they say.

Why is it that people always try to fix other people?

Do they look like a broken item to you instead of a living human being?

I love them, they say.

I can change them, they say.

Why is it that people make changing someone sounds so noble?

Do you not see that you sound like you merely couldn't accept them as they are?

I do this for their own good, they say.

I'm only trying to help, they say.

Why is it that people are always so sure that what they do is good just because they have good intentions?

Do you not see that you were merely forcing someone to change against their own will?

Some days I think about whether people can just accept other people as they are.

Letting each other change and grow as they will instead of forcing things to change.

Just because something is imperfect doesn't mean they can't be loved.

Just because something is broken doesn't mean they're not worth loving.

But then again,

that's probably too much to ask.

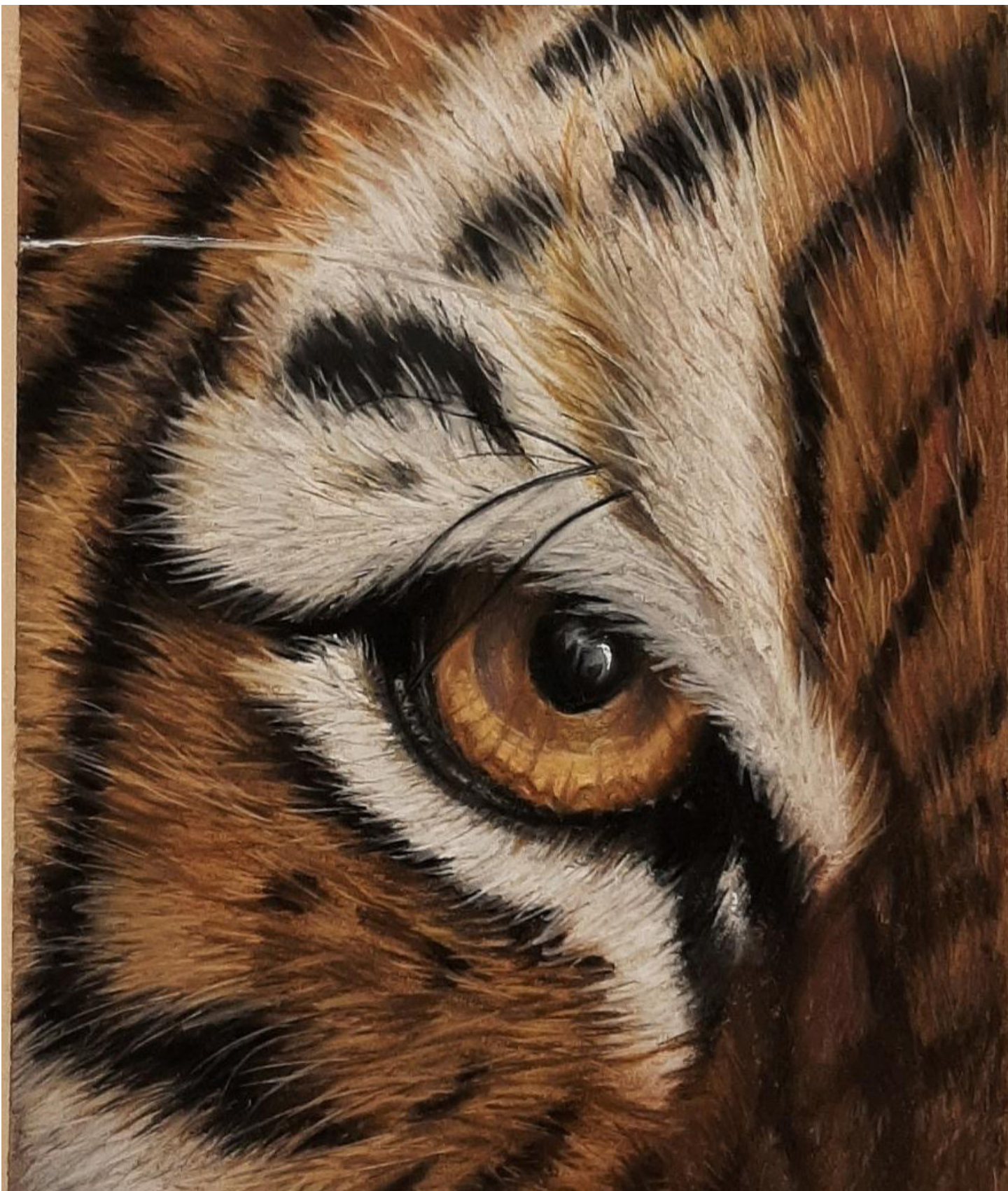
*MG is an author, freelance book cover designer, content creator, and student who loves cats and magical stories. Her poems have been published in more than 30 literary magazines and she is currently working to get her novels out there too!40*

# VISUAL ARTS

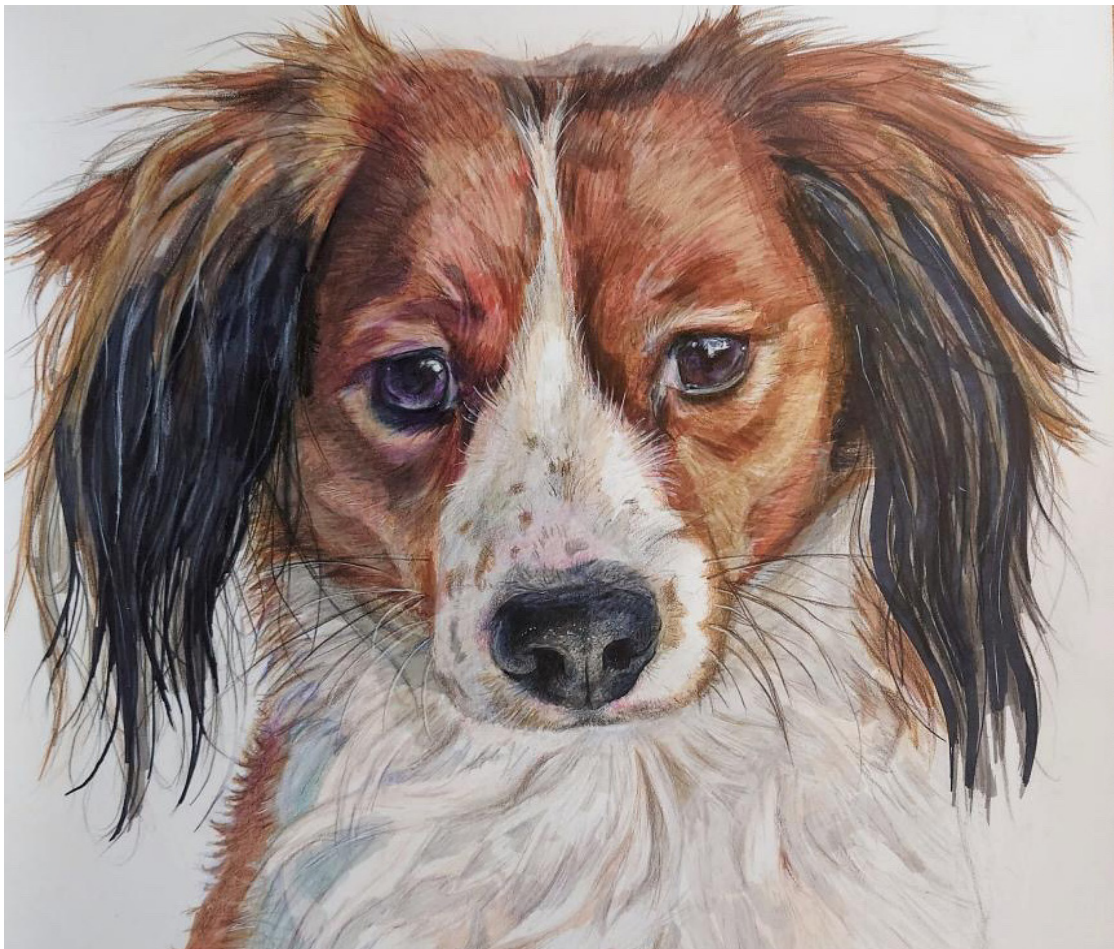


# Maja

Artwork Collection











*Maja is a 17 year old aspiring artist based in Sweden. She draws, paints, and journals using different mediums such as colored pencils, pastels, watercolors, and acrylics. Her art style is mainly realism, but she likes to try new things now and then! She wants her art journey and work to be inspiring to others and share positivity through it!*



# Gabriela Otaiza

Artwork Collection



Asphyxiate

Homage







Zoo





*Gabriela Molina Otaiza is a 17-year old Venezuelan-American artist from Northern Virginia . She has received both state and nation wide opportunities for her work and continues to use her culture as inspiration for her art. Having a passion for hyper-realism using colored pencils, and oil painted subjects, she continues to expand her artistic practice through experimentation, innovation, and above all, having fun creating!*





*Marcelo C. Molon Stamp*  
1/1/22



# Grace Laura

Artwork Collection







*Grace Laura, raised in the mountains, finds her creative spark in the serene landscapes of her home and the guiding presence of her faith in God. Wrestling with mental health hurdles, she turns to art as her sanctuary and transforms her trials into expressions of resilience and hope. Through her impressionistic and realistic paintings, Grace's work aims to extend rays of positivity and healing to kindred spirits navigating their own difficult journeys.*





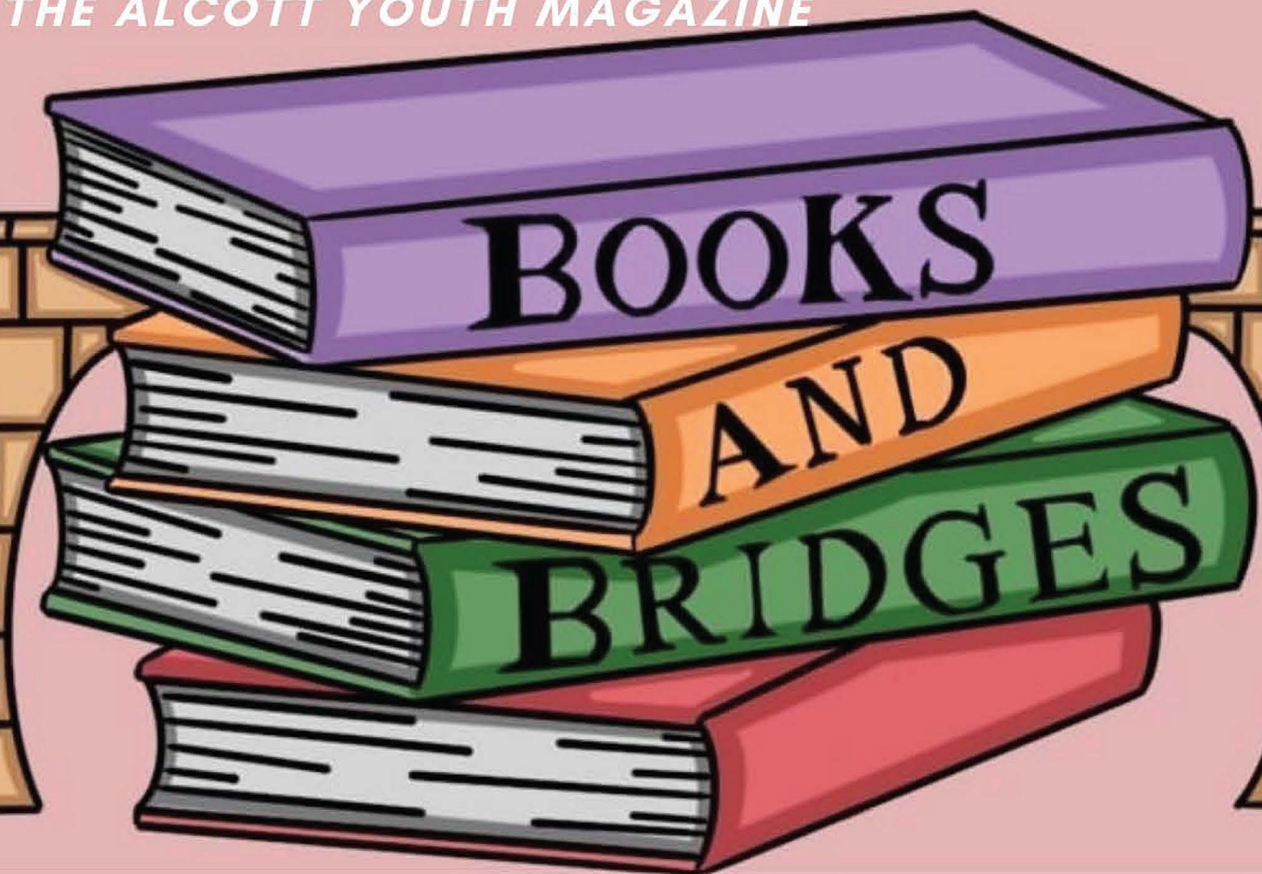








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