INTRODUCTION

Dear Reader,

Enclosed you will find a celebration of music, art, and writing. Thank you to creative writing teachers Jon Myers, Michael McGinty, and Greg Irwin for encouraging students to submit their work. Thank you to Patrick Sullivan for suggesting his AP Music Theory students do the same. Thank you to our amazing art department: Abby Gorsage, Carrie Stephenson, Shannon Blakey and Chris Flinchpaugh for helping us collect and sort through the plethora of visual art that you inspire and support. Thank you to Grace Kirk, our senior editor, for designing this year’s edition of the Rock Bridge High School Literary Arts Magazine and for sifting and matching visual pieces to writing and music: the goal for each to enhance the other. A special gratitude to Aslin Printing Services, Gifted Education, Dr. Beth Winton, and Principal Dr. Jen Rukstad for donating more copies of this magazine than we can afford to print. Most of all, thank you to the young artists who have shared their dreams, fears, and hopes in the pages to follow.

Together, this has been a labor of love.

Gwen Struchtemeyer
Gifted Education

Grace Kirk
Senior Editor

02 Writing by Gwen Struchtemeyer
TOMORROW

Today is filled with anger
Jealousy and contempt
All around I feel the danger
Nobody I know is content
Today is filled with hate
It comes from the kids who aren’t loved
An early death is a common fate
How many kids is it going 2 take
Before they realize enough is enough
But tomorrow is another thing
It’s filled with peace and unity
I wonder what tomorrow brings
I hope it brings tranquility
So wake me when it’s tomorrow
Because I just can’t stand 2day
I want a place where there’s no sorrow
So I look at the Heavens and start 2pray
That I can just get through 2day
Rough hands grip
Slide themselves across the bottom of my lips
My hips are held tightly
Hot breath blown on my ear lightly
I shrink inside myself
Creating layers to protect from
What comes next

My back arches in defiance
My body and mind finally working in alliance
To push myself away from those dangerous words
Praying to some god, some lord
That what I know is coming
Is not
What comes next

I am left, shivering
My bleeding bitten bottom lip, quivering
The darkness seems to close in
My worth left in a fringe
What I feared is what came
And yet still I lay here and wonder
Truth is an older aged woman with soft brown curly hair and chocolate eyes to match. When she smiles it’s unashamedly and with slightly crooked teeth that somehow adds to the sincerity of her expression. She smells earthy, like pine needles, and one breath of her seems to reset your senses. Her eyes, although dark, carry immeasurable layers of expression: they are not all welcoming, not all kind, not all forgiving emotions. But they are honest. They will not deceive. If you were to hold her hands, you might be surprised at their calloused feel.

Truth has taken few breaks in her life. You’re afraid if you hold her eyes too long, they will make yours rough too, scrub the dirt off your hands, and expose what’s really underneath. Her voice is loud, not in a way that sounds cruel, but that projects to the whole room. Her voice clear and words precise so each stun you when she addresses you. Truth’s mother is Forgiveness and her father Honor, with whom she gets along very well, and from whom she has learned to better herself. People that she cannot stand are Judgement and Defeat, whom she regularly clashes with every time they meet. Her trying to convince them of the purity she possesses. Judgement and Defeat, of course, never learn.

Truth is not of a staggering height, in fact she frequently finds herself smaller than everyone else in most situations. Yet, it is her aura, awareness, and calculated power makes people look down with shame, abruptly feeling they are cowering under her presence. Most do not mess with Truth. In fact, they mainly try to avoid her and keep her hidden away. Yet, in the end, Truth always remains to be heard.
I moved to the United States when I was nine months old. My first language was not English, and I didn’t grow up watching SpongeBob, or eating cornflakes for breakfast. Coming to America so young meant that I learned my native traditions, alongside American ones. The lines sometimes blur. I see myself as an American. I recite The Pledge of Allegiance. I get engage in US politics. I immerse myself in American history and American literature. I refer to the United States as “my country.” But at the end of the day, I’m see myself as an Indian, too. I go home to aloo gobi and bhaji, Hindi movies and Diwali. I bring homemade fried rice and spicy “weird-smelling” vegetables for lunch, while most of my friends eat school lunch, take-out, and microwave mac-an-cheese.

My parents discuss Indian politics and celebrations. They tolerate me wearing makeup. My friends talk about sleepovers and getting their nails done. They don’t always understand that no, I don’t get an allowance. No, I don’t get to go to parties until 12:00 a.m. There’s a lingering tension when the two somewhat grasp each other: if a friend invites me over, I can go, but I’m supposed to text my parents every hour to let them know that I’m doing well. This is quite strange to my friends.

My parents, who are my heroes, are the bravest, most determined people I know. They fearlessly moved halfway across the world to make sure that my brother and I could receive the best possible education and choices in life. For that, I cannot thank them enough. Both of my parents have struggled with English, and their accents are thick, but they have still managed to earn a good living in a completely foreign country. I know it hasn’t been easy for them either. I should make sure their sacrifice is worth it. I am so fortunate to have all these luxuries and opportunities.

My dad frequently mentions the same analogy: “I had to build my own runway. You have your runway built for you. You are ready to take off, and when the right opportunity comes, you’ll be able to fly higher than I did.” This is true. I am able to speak English without thinking, and without an accent. I am able to come to a school where we are given free laptops, immediate access to the world’s knowledge. I have a much better life than my parents did. I have many choices and chances.

In Columbia, our Indian-Nepali families are close; we share language, religion, traditions, and stories. But we also compete. So if one family’s teen goes to Stanford or Harvard, I should apply also. If their teen wins the Science Olympiad or the Scripps National Spelling Bee, I should do this also. Given the opportunities, I should go to an ivy-league, become a doctor, engineer, or CEO of a multi-million dollar company. Holding that much on your shoulders can cause them to sag occasionally. But I’m okay with it. It has made me an appreciative person, grateful for what I have. It has made me understand that being different is okay, that I should work hard. I’m reminded not be bound by stereotypes, that some might judge my skin color, but I can be both American and Indian.

I wrote these thoughts to give a window into what it is like to be an immigrant and an a child of immigrants; they are both separate and intertwined topics. Don’t pity me. I’m lucky. I enjoy two different cuisines. I’m truly thankful for Thanksgiving break. I have one foot in India and one in Columbia. This duality encourages a more open mindset to every task. In the end we struggle with similarly different problems, and that even though mine may not quite match up to yours, we are united by more than separates us.
Autumn has a vibrant personality. She is quiet and reserved when she wants to be, yet her colorful persona cannot help but shine through. She blushes radiant hues of red when complemented, and her soul beams a phosphorescent orange when she sees others mimicking her appearance. Her beauty goes unmatched, though Winter tries its best. Autumn sings a pretty song, her voice carrying through the crisp morning air. Her delicate branches sway, and Wind carries her spirit with him. Those are the days when Autumn drowns in her unrest. There is something new and fresh coming, and yet it seems to never arrive. However, Autumn remains ever hopeful that the unfamiliar feeling in her trunk will bring along something better.

A day arrives when Autumn sees her companions giving up all around her. One by one, branches droop and the sky darkens into a pale gray. Autumn’s enthusiasm is suffocated by frigid air, and her good humor is smothered as she watches people walk by, their eyes stinging and their cheeks flushed. What could this be? What happened to the warmth and vitality that came with this glorious time? Where was the young girl with the purple scarf that sat at Autumn’s trunk to read Pride and Prejudice? Where was the old man who took walks and patted Autumn every morning before work? Wind is becoming extremely aggressive, now ripping at Autumn’s leaves when twilight arrives. Autumn becomes self-conscious; her branches become bare and ugly. Autumn no longer greets the few young people who come to her as they enjoy a few moments alone. Their I love you’s and stolen kisses no longer interest her; it is their enjoyment that creates resentment in her heart. Autumn shivers as Wind brushes past her, no longer interested in her tangled, unsightly branches. Winter sneers at her, commenting how “She used to be so pretty...now look at her.” Autumn is no longer Autumn. Her spirit is stolen from her, and that new season that she believed in so much is just a silly dream now. With a final breath, she gives up like the rest of her friends. Autumn allows her soul to go dormant, awaiting the day her leaves will return.
I can feel the clock ticking
As the short hand drags itself to the 12 mark
Like a marathon runner pushing me onto the finish line
I can feel the deadline getting closer

But the visions dancing in my head have all but left
The words that slid off my tongue
Like the saliva that waters them
Have locked themselves away behind my tight lips

My mind is swirling too fast
All my thoughts jumbled up in its whirlpool
My fingers, my hands
Are itching to create something they can be proud of
Something they can admire and pride themselves on
Show off to the eyes their talent

But my mouth is pressed
And my brain is jumbled
And my eyes are staring at a wall of white paint drying

WRITING BY CHLOE GREENE
Visions Aspiring

Jackson Dampier

\[ j = 120 \]

Maestoso

**B♭ Trumpet**

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I will,
for the thousandth time,
lose my grip on reality.
Somehow
the emptiness grows louder
when I try to shut it out.
The words are trapped in my heart,
a tormenting orchestra of pernicious poisons
that
murder me
over
and over
and over again.
I dream, with the fear on my lips, of an
earth that spins quickly.
The hope that I worshipped was merely a
mirage.
I try to hold on,
but the forces that manage the universe
will drive me to an imminent
fall.
I will,
in a never-ending
trance,
join the myriad of voices that sing to the
void.
I will lose my grip on reality.
Pepper says hi with a sneeze in the face
There’s a tickling sensation in your throat
And a burning desire to spit words out
Or swallow more
Salt is a sensitive soul
A little bit is a lot
But nothing is too little
Sugar waves shyly
But sticks to your tongue
Sometimes satisfying
Otherwise nauseating
Basil is pretty basic
He likes to sit and simmer in the heat
A peacemaker
And a spice
Soy sauce seems thin
But acts quick
Splashes a bit of color and there
Everything is covered by his taste
Winter flurries in gently
Suddenly
After weeks of cold
The sanctuary of white
The promise of sleds footsteps
Crunching on something other than
leaves
Munching on warm foods permeates the house
Seasonal treats appear
Christmas is here
THE MIDNIGHT VENTURE
The pavement rolled under the car as the vehicle sped over hills and around twists in the road. I felt sick. The jerky movements of my mom’s minivan along the winding rural route made my stomach revolt; its contents seemed to rush from one side to the other as the vehicle lurched right and back left like it was at the end of the steel arm of an amusement park ride. My head spun. I’ve always felt carsickness, but it is much worse at night. I squeezed my eyes shut and wondered why I had asked for this. It was my sixth birthday.

When I opened my eyes again, the streetlights were placed at longer intervals as we left the populated suburban outskirts farther behind. That helped me to breathe easier. I looked at my mom, whose mahogany bob was pulled back in a cloth head band. Her classical Greek features were highlighted in a soft turquoise from the dashboard light that left deep shadows around her eyes and under her cheek bones. She looked intent on the road, excited about the surprise, and unaware of my nausea.

“Where are we going?” I asked. I was getting light headed and needed to get out of the car soon; some fresh night air would help.

“You’ll see!” She sounded energized—focused on whatever adventure she knew lay ahead.

Finally, she started to slow the car. I glanced around to see where we were going, but there was nothing but miles of road in front of us and unbroken fields lined by trees on either side. Then she pulled the car over onto the narrow shoulder where a gravel road lead into the middle of a field and promptly stopped. She put the car in park and turned off our headlights. The space outside our car was an inky blackness. We were on the top of a wide hill looking out over an empty field.

“Well, are you going to look?” My mom asked.

I opened the door and swung my legs out of the car. The ground was damp with the dew forming from the slowly cooling air. I meandered around the area, trying to work through my dizziness, and listened to the chirping of the crickets in the field before us.
“The top would provide the best view,” my mom suggested.

Then mom and I hoisted ourselves on top of the minivan, the car rocking gently as we pulled ourselves up. She and I could lie side-by-side supine between the two bars. The metal top felt cool under my fingertips and I relaxed and breathed deeply. I took deep, slow breaths and allowed myself to be soothed by the soft sounds of cicadas buzzing in trees on the far side of the field. I could feel the tension leaking from my muscles as a slight breeze seemed to draw a sigh from the world around me. I felt at peace and knew before even opening my eyes that I was glad to be here.

I opened my eyes and saw a backdrop of purest, darkest navy, thousands of pinpricks of light. Stars that were millions of light years away, ancient stars, clearly visible, and my erratic thoughts spun to a stop. Although I couldn’t pick out any particular constellations, I tried to soak it all in, to just stop and enjoy. A single wispy cloud floated right through the middle of the expansive view and I realize that, though it must have been reflecting light onto the puff of vapor, I couldn’t see the moon itself. My mom held my hand and squeezed gently. The night tiptoed along while the fireflies blinked on and off just like the stars above. It felt as though my feet had floated off the ground and the stars were alive around me.

Time passed and I felt both part of the universe, and happy to share this moment with my mom. Two figures reclined on the top of a minivan on a hill above an empty field. Who knew what a delight this would be. Earlier this week I had asked whether she would take me out to show me a beautiful night sky. This was perfect.

“Alright, mom. I’m ready to head back.”

We got down from the roof of the van and got in the car. Mom drove back to the road and home. The street lights began to appear in the distance, pillars of wood and wire, like an old Christmas tree without branches, lighting the way for all late night travelers. The road rolled under us, taking twists and turns over the Missouri hills, but the motion-sickness didn’t affect me now the way that it had before. My head didn’t spin, and my stomach didn’t roil as we crested a hill and saw a glorious full moon hanging low and yellow in the sky.
Weightless

The Chords provided throughout are intended as a rhythm guide, the pianist is encouraged to comp as they see fit.

\( \text{Photo by Kris Cho} \)
To people who don’t know my story:
It’s a long one
very different
semi-entertaining
maybe boring
bittersweet
strange
yet strangely
normal
I hope you will hear it someday
To people who do know my story (or
think they do, anyway):
You’re funny
I like you
To people who want to know my story:
Listen closely
Watch me
Hold me closely
Walk beside me
Ask me questions
Test my flavour
Try to anticipate my actions
Most likely fail
Then try again
I am who I must be
And I must be me
but who is that I can’t see
What it means to be me

way body
GOLDEN AGE

They say this is the Golden Age
“We have fixed so many problems”
“We have caused so much change”

But they see only what they want
Through their rose-tinted glasses

Blind they are for they cannot see
These problems are not past us

You see them wherever you go
Yet in vain you choose to ignore
The hunger in these streets

As you do this you are planting a seed
That will grow into a bush of thorns
Choking the world around you
Until there is nothing left to mourn
Cocktails and Chicks
Some particular old roosters are tough to chew. For too long they’ve been tolerated crowing at the break of dawn as if what they said is new and important, but is actually recycled with more fervor. Strutting their stuff, thinking their waddles and combs are an array of peacock covert feathers. Opportunistically, they feel the ability to get away with pecking at the hens, and sometimes even the chicks who are far too young for comfort. All the hens know how silly they look preening in their middle age. Nonetheless, they can be made pliant, even shockingly tender. Not as succulent as capons, of course, every chef’s favorite.

(Because every hen was once someone’s egg.)

#METOO

THE OLD ROOSTER SMOKED

Writing by Gwen Struchtemeyer
But at least somewhat sufferable, perhaps even tasty. Although it’s tempting to set them directly on fire given their own history of burning hens who questioned, spoke out, or owned more than they did; but when exposed to direct fire, old roosters become leathery, not crispy.

Dispatch, drain blood, then gut and clean the carcass. In a plastic container, pour one gallon of water, dissolve three quarters cup canning salt, one-quarter cup brown sugar, two tablespoons paprika, and one tablespoon grown pepper. Place rooster in container and in the fridge to marinate for 4 -7 days. This is a crucial step for the old bird forcing the muscle fibers to relax their indigestible assumptions.

After brining, pat carcass dry to make ready for The Rub. Here’s The Rub: Combine two tablespoons onion powder, one tablespoon white sugar, one tablespoon paprika, two teaspoons dried parsley, one teaspoon garlic powder, one teaspoon crushed oregano, one teaspoon black pepper, and 1/2 teaspoon powdered cayenne pepper. Rub thoroughly: they always said massaging them was innocent and consensual.

Smoke low and slow at 225 to 240 degrees for two to four hours. Applewood gives the rooster great flavor and that deep tan that make him look younger. You might have known his preference, but now it’s your turn: Check breast or thigh for 165 degrees. He’s now a tasty appetizer to serve with wine at your book club! Just a dollop of softened herbed cream cheese on a ritzy cracker. Plop a chunk of spicy smoked rooster on top. Add a pinch of paprika. Maybe a little green garnish on top. Justice can be tasty, and hens are perfectly capable of serving it.
Writing by Emily Koch
I love the way life moves endlessly outward, its velvet tendrils curling like ivy through our lungs and brains, beneath subway tracks and between book pages, spanning oceans and continents and language. A supercharged vein, forming this dazzling imbrication of sensory experiences we call life. Every living organism shares DNA. We contain substances within our fingernails that make up the endless cosmos. We live and die within a reflective moiety, our atomic counterparts traveling upon a record whose frequency is far too ancient for us to register.

There is a room nestled beneath the folds of the 10th dimension, as incomprehensible as it is expansive. Its inclusivity is beyond human understanding, encompassing every instance of every possibility, future, present, every fiction or reality unbound by laws of physics, gravity or time, every unimaginable version of our imaginable truths, and those which so far exceed description that they exist ineffably; only in unspoken epiphany glimpsed briefly between the horizons of sleep and waking.

A room which is not really a room; a thing so mutilated it evades capture entirely. A notion. Light bouncing off an ethereal cloud, an untamed harbinger of confusion. Imagine yourself opening its door; not so much a door, but a spiritual awakening which transcends all metaphysical things – a two-dimensional letter “O” on a three-dimensional, inanimate computer leaping from the screen. It’s inky curve, its edges and direction defying its native dimension to inflate like a birthday balloon. To inherit its own two-dimensional shadow, to stretch its arms out and yawn: height, length, width. Imagine this. Imagine this increased by so many deviances, multiplied by an infinity integer. Imagine yourself hurdling over dimensional barriers, incurring not only height, length, width, but the ability to see your past and future selves as they exist in the fourth dimension, to travel between them as they exist in the fifth, to manipulate your birth and death, to explore your alterselves, every circumstance, every possible translation of yourself in a kaleidoscope of color, sound, emotion; to not only observe these existences, but to be all of them, at once. A spider-web labyrinthine of complex lives brought to a single cynosure of awareness.

Now stop imagining.
HOW TO GET HIS ATTENTION

Text him all day long. If he doesn’t answer, meet him at his class to ask why. Make sure he waits at least 20 minutes while you’re getting ready to go out.

Hug him while he’s driving. Also make sure he really knows where he is going. He may not know and appreciate your help.

Be a slob. He enjoys picking up after you.

Men love it when women cry. Do so often. Make sure he knows all the drama going on with your friends.

You can never wear too much makeup or perfume.

In fact, go out and get one of those Oompa Loompa orange spray tans.

Ask for his advice, then do the complete opposite of what he suggested.

Make sure he pays for everything. He should be honored to have you on his arm.

Compare him to Zac Efron or The Rock.


Tell him you want to spend every waking moment with him.

I’ve saved the best for last: tell him that you love him and that you see marriage in your future.

That will do the trick.

He may leave skid marks.
DEAR DAUGHTER,

I do not know when you will come, or if you will come at all. I hope not too soon. I’m not ready for you yet. But maybe I will be someday. And if we should meet, there are some promises I should make, to both of us.

I promise that your room will not be pink. It will be white. It will be white with a pile of magic markers in the corner. I cannot wait to see your art all over the walls.

I promise that you will only wear dresses and play with dolls if you tell me you want to. Your toy-box will have crayons and trucks and stuffed animals and dolls inside.

I promise to hold your hand every step of the way until you pick up your feet and let go. I’ll watch you run.

I promise that you’re gonna learn that this life will hit you, hard, in the face, and wait for you to get back up just so it can kick you in the stomach. But you will learn that getting the wind knocked out of you is the only way you can be sure you were breathing in the first place.

I promise that I will teach you that all the pain you will feel can’t be fixed with band aids and chocolate, but I will always have a box nearby anyway.

I promise to teach you to always apologize when you do something wrong, but to never apologize for your shining eyes. I will teach you to trust, no matter how many times you’ve been wronged, because betrayal hurts, but a life full of doubt is so much worse.

When all your books fall to the ground, I’ll be the one to help you pick them up. But when I’m not there, and your shoes fill with water and your eyes fill with tears I will teach you to say thank you to the rain clouds because there’ll be days like this my momma said.

I promise that no matter how bad your grades may get I will support you, because learning begins the moment we take our first breath and does not cease until we take our last, so why bother forcing something that is so beautiful when it happens naturally?

I promise to draw the constellations up your arms every night until you know for certain that you are made of stars. And when you feel self-conscious about your freckles, I will say “Darling, that’s just Cassiopeia across your nose.” I will teach you not to compare yourself to the other kids because a peach is not better than a pear, they just taste different.

I promise to be the sea. I promise to protect you from mistakes I made, and make sure you learn that it’s okay to make your own. I promise to hold you tight when you need it and to step back when you want it. I promise to call you “River” because no matter where you are in the world, you can always flow right back home to me.
THE HERO IS ONLY AS GREAT AS THE VILLAIN

I don’t have the charm of Superman. I don’t have the charisma of Iron Man. And I definitely don’t have the chiseled jawline of Wonder Woman. Since I lack these qualities I am better suited to be a villain.

Almost every hero’s story is the same. Some random person is living an average life and then one day is gifted with amazing powers needed to the save the world. People enjoy a good hero’s tale because it romanticizes what our lives could be like in an alternate universe, but in reality, most of us could just as easily be villains. I’m not saying that everyone is destined to do evil, but a typical storybook villain usually has this complex backstory that explains why they ended up the way they are. Heroic stories are always predictable. My life has been anything but predictable, and, to a degree, this is why I sympathize with storybook villains.

Not long before I was born my birth parents and older sister fled to the United States as refugees from the Bosnian genocide. At two, I was put into the foster care system due to child abuse and wasn’t adopted until the age of eight. For almost half of my life, my odds of being the hero of my story were slight. I could have easily ended up in another abusive home. I could have easily stayed in the foster system until I was 18. I could have easily let my depression from my past consume me. I could have easily been a villain. But I’m not. Unlike a villain, I overcame these traumatic events. I live in a loving home, I have amazing friends, and I am applying to be a student athlete at my dream school.

I have the villain’s back story, there is no denying it, but I wouldn’t change my life or experiences for the world. So if I was cast in the next James Bond movie, I would choose to be the powerful woman trying to destroy the world rather than being a man’s arm candy. Both are destined for the same fate: to die at the end of the movie. Luckily, I’m still alive. My experiences in foster care have made me a strong woman. My adoption has made me grateful. And my depression has made me more determined to be happy. That which could have made me a villain has given me my most defining qualities. Few people can crack a joke in the fifth hour of a ten-mile swim practice or can insert an adoption joke into any conversation. If I hadn’t been adopted or if I lived in a war-torn country, my life would be drastically different. Such a slight edit in my life’s movie could have easily shifted me towards the villain’s side of the story. Villains are villains because they haven’t had enough good in their life to overcome their misfortunes. I have experienced some adversity, but also a lot of kindness. So instead of using my anger to destroy others, I use my dry humor to express my cynical observations. It’s important to love your story. I’m not a villain, I’m a survivor, and I plan to live, and to love, and to give back.
Long days, short nights, and a stagnant imagination fill what should be my sanctuary
I used to fly away on the wings of a dragon, embracing the fierce wind on my cheeks
There was not an end to any tale I wouldn’t dare to seek

But as the long days get longer
And the nights waste away in dreamless sleep,
I find my afternoons vacant of adventures, unable to find anything to seek

And my heart still yearns for the childish adventure
A villain’s neglected heart that deserves to be tempered

A damsel waiting for her sword so she may slash through her foes
Or perhaps an archer on a quest to earn her bow

Instead, my afternoon adventures are replaced by stress and fear and regret
Unfinished work plagues my listless existence
Possibilities bleed from my soul, I wish I could fix this

Perhaps it is not too late for another adventure
A last chance for an imagination quencher

One last hurrah, is it not too much to ask?
Just one more lazy evening in which I can bask

So I pull on my adventuring socks
Just as warm and welcoming as the late day scenes in which I used to stay
And as I wrap another blanket around my shivering shoulders, I float away

Another mountain to climb
Another land to conquer
Another waterfall to jump over and to wash under

My stress falls away
My fear consumed by bliss
And my regret too far behind me to miss

That one last perfect day is in my reach
Something I will never let go
And I know that I’ve come home
Dreams are glittery things fleeting and faint but real
Dreams are tricking springs that you can jump into get tangled up in and yet somehow it all falls apart
Dreams are durable yearnings stubborn elusive fantasies that don’t go away even when it feels like the end it’s not

Writing by Ruth Wu
A SIMPLE FLAME

Writing by Emma Mayfield
Isolation disturbs the calm atmosphere of the night
A bothersome flicker grabs my quiet attention
I watch the candle’s flame tremble under my gaze
And the shadows of the light quiver

The empty bookshelves are haunted with muffled whispers
Murmurs of memories
Echoing through vacant halls
And sighing within creaking floorboards

I stare as the naked flame dances in front of me
Taunting, daring me to remember
The spots before my eyes hold nightmares
Love found in the incandescence of a simple flame

I am the wick embedded in this inferno
I bend over while she burns,
My self-trimming trick
She cannot see how badly it hurts

I am the fuel, vaporizing
To burn for the candle’s light
I am slowly consumed in her fire
Willing to give my everything to watch her shine on

From the window, I hear the trees breathe
From afar, the howl of an agitated mutt
I sit, a broken clock
Time forgotten

The holocaust of my heart
A flame so young, lighting a wildfire in my soul
The carnage of my thoughts leaving me deranged
My judgement completely extinguished

I am the wax, falling from her warm hands
This fire that had once lit up the darkness
Now leaves me to bleed
I lay lifeless on the table

I am left with nothing
But grotesque blisters and my incinerated heart
The steady burning that strangles my mind
Now lives in a simple flame

I wonder what it would be like
To watch hell engulf her
How satisfying to hear faint screams
As she is reduced to a melted mess

The wind wails a song of forgotten innocence
Branches groan as rain begins to pour
But the water cannot douse
The raging fire in my mind

The candle no longer stands tall
But it whimpers as the flame tries to finish it off
All but the flame bitter and brittle, wasted and woeful
Another life sacrificed to the blaze

ART BY GRACE KIRK 53
5 O’CLOCK

5 o’clock. Bum bum bum bum. Bounce down the carpet stairs and into the basement. Ignore the huge mess on the ping pong table. Walk in front of the fully stocked bookshelves. Step around the cream sofa that took an afternoon and the help of a sister to maneuver into the backyard, down a steep hill, and through the basement door to be set down, and cleaned. Walk along the uneven faux cherry wood floors and run your hand along the rough, blue walls. The door is already open. Go from cool blue to a more familiar pastel purple. The tiny bell on the keychain jingles falling into the basket on top of the bookshelf. Smile at the photo taken for the October edition of the school newspaper that now lays under the keys. Turn right. Walk over the odd teal rug upcycled from your mother’s redesigned office. Turn right again. Kick the three-year-old white Converse sneakers off into the closet that is missing a door. One of the small metal rings falls out of the left shoe. Need to fix it with a length of yellow embroidery floss like the other.

Open the painted dresser drawer with flowers and clouds flaking slightly where it is used the most. Move aside the multitude of sketchbooks and scrap paper set aside for lazy days filled with curiosity and creation. Grab the books sitting on top of the artwork and materials. Turn back, sigh, and drop down into the armchair that had to be taken apart and pulled through the doorway to be set in the room. Finger the spot that looks like a swear word in the upholstery. Smirk. The cat jumps onto the matching ottoman stained with yellow paint. Reminded of an afternoon spent in terror surrounded by shelves upon shelves of crayfish in plastic tupperware helping a father with maintenance of his research subjects, pick up the feline’s crinkly toy crayfish. As it is sent bouncing against the open door and into the hallway, remember the sickening feeling the hundred-some crayfish in attack formation awakened and the tired sighs of the researcher taking over his daughter’s job. Her scurrying paws are the loudest sound in a silent house.

Silence. Pull out phone. Connect to the Bluetooth speaker. Open Spotify. Most recent playlist. Tune out the ad. Bask in 30 minutes of uninterrupted music. In any other ears, the strange combination of indie rock, French jazz, Viva Latino, and now holiday music would be an awkward distraction. Like an itch in your inner ear you can’t scratch. For you, the transitions between moody soft rock to foreign pop are, at times, more soothing than the lavender essential oil dispersed through the room.

Turn. Flip. Roll. One position after the next to find the perfect way to read one of the books. Head and shoulders on the ottoman. Rear on the back of the chair. Legs extended out. Feet reaching toward the popcorn ceiling. Head leaned back, glance at the psychology textbook beneath the bed. Decide between finishing The Handmaid’s Tale and Grids and Page Layouts: An Essential Guide for Understanding & Applying Page Design Principles.

No time. Cat struts back in, prey gripped in her mouth. Dropping the crayfish at the base of the ottoman, she jumps. With an oomph, your doughy belly takes the blow. Push self up into a sitting position. Turn and open the window. Her nose pokes at the screen between her and a world of wonder as a cold breeze wafts into the room and blows the sheer curtains astray.

Reach. Push closer. Reach again and pull close the soft multi-colored blanket from a sister’s trip to Ecuador. Think of your sister and her adventures and a trip that you may one day take. Granada, Cusco, Lisbon, Athens, Florence, Rome. Get lost in the future and the potentials to be realized. Sigh and close the tired eyes. Leave the room behind for more compelling things rumination may bring.
Bittersweet Days

\[ \text{Carmen Ramirez} \]

\[ \text{Viola} \]

\[ \text{Piano} \]

\[ \text{Vla.} \]

\[ \text{Pno.} \]

\[ \text{\( j = 88 \)} \]

\[ \text{\( \text{music by Carmen Ramirez} \)} \]
am I that lotus blossom	hat fragile delicacy
that hopeless love
that oriental mystery?
dainty feet
  size 6½ wide, callused canvassing
  political steps challenging gods
light feminine laughter
  seizing attention by the neck
  rolling from the stomach
timid flowers floating frozen in stone
a domesticated beast?

I grew mine, from her
yellowed pages turned by her
yellow hands
lettered crevices caressed by gaze
by
slitted serpentine eyes
  over their foreign mythology
  nesting in her foreigner’s narrative
  and her
hissing
  short, midnight hair

she bent over the pool,
like Narcissus, that dokkaebi

I stared at Medusa
;
she stared right back
Fairy tale twists are full of impossible tasks:
Defeat an evil witch, strike down a giant or two,
Outwit the King of Bandits, conquer the common flu,
Dodge bear-shooting cannons, cross a desert armed with a flask,
Tiptoe up to a dragon, make a commotion where it basks
Chip congealed mayonnaise from between fork tines,
Forge diplomatic relations with trolls, only speak in rhymes.
Always it’s impossible what someone asks--

You have to fight magic with magic. You must never fail to believe
That you always have something impossible along the edge of your sleeve,
But when you realize you don’t, simply keep calm and breathe in,
After all, there’s nothing as powerful as a group of best friends,
Then simply do whatever absurd quest must be done:
Marry a girl you just met. Try to finally move on.

On your journey you should expect to learn something new
Lessons that contradict everything you’ve known to be true
Meet: damsels who rescue themselves,
Chipper claustrophobic elves,
Tigers that turn out to be toothless,
Preteens that return to be ruthless,
And men that do not save the day.
The wrong road could reveal the right way
Plus at the end against all odds
You may decide not to stop

So question your quest away
Live out your childhood dream
Because we all know in fairy-tales
Things aren’t quite the way they seem

After all,
It’s always impossible what someone asks--
Are you up to the task?
S ANOMALY

Photo by Kris Cho 63
Night time was upon the land. The sun was hanging low in the sky, painting the horizon with his red and orange light. His heat was starting to fade from the earth, and his rays were losing their power. He was finished with his journey across the sky, and he was prepared to set for the night. However, his friend was not ready just yet.

“I’m late, I’m late!” The spirit of darkness cried. Out from the caves, from behind the trees, from every attic, she emerged and prepared to move, rushing to make up for lost time. She was late every day, but it always bothered her regardless. Muttering under her breath, she began the trip toward the sun, jumping from shadow to shadow. It was the same path she took every day—from behind the barn to the side of the fence to the space beneath a boulder. Everything was familiar. The spirit liked familiarity; it beat a life of unpleasant surprises.

When she reached the horizon where the sun was waiting, he chuckled, glowing good-naturedly. “Right on time, Darkness. Which is to say, you’re exactly as late as usual.” The spirit of darkness squirmed. “Why are you even surprised anymore?” “I’m not. I just like to tease you,” The sun said, a smile in his voice. “Come on. I’m the spirit of the dark! I steal the light away from the Earth every day! You can’t tease me!” “I’m the only one who can tease you.” “You’re not—!” “And you can’t darken the sun itself, in case you’ve forgotten.” “...I hate it when you’re right.” The sun chuckled smugly. “And to think you’re the one that all the humans like.”

“Hey, they like you! Have you heard them wax poetic about how beautiful the night is?” The sun glowed insistently. “Have you heard how afraid of the dark they are?” The spirit countered. “They just don’t understand you,” He said assuredly, casting his light out in gesture. “I know. I’ve been dealing with them for millennia; I barely even notice anymore,” The spirit said decisively.

The sun sighed. “You’re much stronger than I am. You know that, right?” “I don’t, actually. But we have this debate every day—I’d rather not lapse into it again.” The spirit of darkness stretched nonchalantly. “And besides, I have to get to work.” “I suppose so. I’ve been sitting here long enough,” The sun said reluctantly. He pulled his beams of light close to his sides, preparing to set. “I trust I’ll see you in the morning?” “Of course,” the spirit said, watching her friend as he sank below the horizon. When the sun was completely out of sight, the spirit of darkness took a deep breath, turning to face the land. Every day, after the sun was gone, it was her job to expel the light and bring night time to the land. She stretched out her arms, touched the light before her, and cleared it away with a sweeping motion. Darkness sprung up in its place. She moved back the way she came, clearing away the light and watching as the stars ap-
appeared in the sky. Slowly but surely she crossed the great field, leaving no sunbeam to linger
and no space undimmed. She moved quickly, much quicker than any human could ever move.
In less than a minute, she had passed the barn and reached the farm house.
She peered through the windows, looking for a room with no lamps turned on inside. When
she found the empty sewing room, she squeezed through the crack beneath the window and
cleared away the light in an instant. The door to the room was open, revealing a hallway not
lit by artificial light. She moved through it, reaching a room on the other side and clearing it
too.
She was about to leave through another window when she noticed a great noise, erupting
from the corner of the newly darkened room. The spirit turned to see a crib, large enough
to fit a pair of baby twins. Wailing noises were coming from it—the infants must have been
spooked by the sudden darkness. The spirit sighed—she was far too used to that.
She approached the crib, looking down into it solemnly. She could try to comfort the babies,
wrap them in her care, but what was the point in doing so? The babies would only be more
frightened. They wouldn’t understand what she was trying to do—no human ever had, in all
her years of work. So the spirit of darkness turned and left without preamble, the sound of
two crying babies following her through the window.
The spirit darted across the plain, reaching more and more houses as she neared town. Most
houses were quiet as she drifted in and out of the empty rooms, but several of them had
children who suddenly yelped at how dark it had become, or adults who flipped a lightswitch
without another thought.
Before she reached town, there was a patch of woods she had to move through. She twisted
through the trees, banishing the light that hung among them. As she moved along, she drift-
ed past a peculiar figure… A figure that moved and made little noises.
“Who’s there?” The human child called out. The spirit turned to look at the child’s face, and
saw that she was crying. She must have been lost.
“Can you help me?” The girl said, hugging herself, scanning the trees for someone who could
help her. Through her tears, she sounded oddly hopeful. The spirit, however, was sure that
her help would not be appreciated, and was about to move on.
“Anyone? Please!” But the girl’s voice… She was so desperate—she really did mean anyone.
It couldn’t hurt to show her face. The spirit pulled her body together, creating a solid form for
herself as she stepped out of the shadows, looking at the little girl curiously. She expected
the girl to scream, to run, to throw something. But all the girl did was rub her eyes and give
the spirit a smile.
“Can you help me, please?” She asked the spirit, without a trace of fear in her voice.
The spirit was surprised, but not displeased, at the girl’s reaction. “I can. If you’ll allow me to.”
“Thank you, thank you! I’m scared of being alone.” The little girl said, rubbing her eyes once
more.
The spirit knelt down, leveling her face with the little girl’s. “Where’s your home, little one?”
The girl fidgeted nervously. “I don’t know! I’m lost, that’s the problem.”
“Then we’ll find your home together.” The spirit held out her hand, and the little girl took it. The spirit wasn’t sure where to go at first, but soon found herself heading for the nearest neighborhood. She knew exactly how to get there from millennia of traveling through the wood, and she set a brisk pace. The pair walked in silence for a minute.

“What’s your name?” The little girl asked the spirit.

The spirit chuckled. This child truly was an unusual one. “You may call me Dark.”

“That’s a weird name,” the girl said with a giggle.

“Well, I’m a weird being. So it’s fitting,” The spirit said, giving the girl a shrug and warm glance. A comfortable silence settled over them once more.

“Why aren’t you afraid of me?” The spirit eventually asked, giving in to her curiosity.

The girl looked up at the spirit and thought for a moment. “Well, you’re helping me. So you can’t be that scary.”

The spirit pondered the girl’s response. She had never even imagined a child who wasn’t scared of the dark—the idea of not being seen as a terrifying figure was new to her. She wondered if there were more children like this one out there. “I suppose that makes sense,” she said at last.

Neither one said another word until they emerged from the woods. When they did, the girl gasped.

“This is my street! I know that house!” She cried, letting go of the spirit’s hand and running ahead joyously. The spirit smiled.

“I’m glad you do. It makes finding your house so much easier. Do you know the way from here?”

“I think so. Hey, you should come to my house!” The girl suggested excitedly.

The spirit of darkness frowned. Adults couldn’t see her, so she wouldn’t have to worry about the girl’s parents, but she knew it was best to leave—however much she wished she could stay with the child. “I have a lot of work to get done tonight. So if you’ll be alright from here, I should get going.”

“Oh, okay. Thank you, dark person!” The girl said, running back to the wood’s edge and wrapping her arms around the spirit tightly. The spirit was startled—was this a hug? She’d never been given one before!—but she wrapped her great arms around the child in return. When they let go, the girl turned and followed the street, nonchalantly looking for her house. The spirit of darkness watched her leave.

Feeling quite warm and fuzzy, the spirit let her body unravel, her solid form fading away. She returned to the wood, clearing the parts she hadn’t reached yet. A warmth settled in her heart as she worked.

She was very behind schedule now that she’d taken the time to help the girl, so she worked frenetically, trying to catch up. She cleared every building in the town in record time, and reached the suburbs on the other side with only a few minutes lost.

As she darted through the streets, she became confused once more. If it was possible for one child to give a dark, strange figure a chance, there had to be more children who would do
the same. So why hadn’t the spirit encountered children like that before? The humans had been around for millennia. So why now? Why now and not a thousand years before? Maybe it was because of how detached the spirit had become. For years she’d tried to help wayward children in the night, and for years she’d been turned away. After a few centuries of her help being rejected, she’d just... Stopped. And she’d been mostly ignoring the children ever since. Maybe she’d just missed all the good ones.

A shout interrupted her thoughts. She looked up to see a boy, perhaps a year or two older than the girl. He was lying at the bottom of a tree, his leg bent at an odd angle. He’d likely fallen and hurt his leg.

The spirit cleared the last of the light in the area, and gave the boy a once-over. He looked a little scrappy, but that was nothing new—all young children did. She wondered if he would treat her like the girl had.

“Mom? Mom!” He cried out, gripping his leg with both hands. He clearly needed help, and if no one was coming to save the day... The spirit took a deep breath, and made a split-second decision, pulling her body together once more and stepping out of the shadows in solid form. “Do you need help?” She asked, feeling particularly heroic. She held out her hand in offering, and the boy merely stared at it.

She gave him a confident smile. “I can carry you to your mother, if you’d—”

“GET AWAY FROM ME!”

Thud. In her solid form, the spirit could feel the pain of the rock hitting her stomach. The boy scrambled backward, his leg dragging uselessly in front of him. He winced in pain.

“GET AWAY!” The boy screamed again, reaching for something else to throw as the spirit took a startled step back. Once she came back to her senses, she let her solid form melt away, drifting several meters back before he could land another hit.

She listened as the boy continued to shout for help. He was terrified. Of course he was—why had she expected anything different? She was an idiot! She paced agitatedly, moving in supersonic circles as the boy continued to scream and throw things at the space where she had been standing.

She lingered there, flying in circles, for an embarrassingly long time. Eventually, after the boy managed to summon an adult with his screaming, she turned and left, pointedly ignoring the humans. The boy might have yelled and thrown things at her, but the one that was most displeased with the spirit was the spirit herself. What had she been thinking? One friendly child like the girl after a millennia of terrified ones didn’t mean that the trend had changed. The girl had been an outlier, nothing more, and building up false hope every time she met someone like that was only going to make her job—bringing night to the land—more unbearable.

The spirit of darkness zoomed down the street, breezing in and out of homes and skimming through neighborhoods furiously. Always on the edge of her mind were thoughts of why, thoughts of how, and endless self-deprecations. She was so caught up in her own mind, she barely even noticed what she was doing. And when she finally broke through the suburbs to
the fields on the other side, she heard a rumbling voice.  
“I see you’ve worked yourself into a tizzy again,” the voice said. The spirit of darkness looked up to see the moon, making his slow and steady trek across the sky.  
The spirit scoffed. “Gee, what gave it away?”  
“Come now. We’ve been friends for what, four eons? There’s no need for sass.” The moon gave the spirit a kind look.  
She sighed. “I know, I’m sorry. It’s just... I’m so stupid.”  
“No, you aren’t, Darkness.”  
“Yes, I am! You’re two eons younger than me and you’re so much wiser!”  
“I hope you’ll forgive me if I disagree,” the moon said gently. The spirit writhed, feeling far too childlike under the moon’s fatherly scrutiny.  
He hummed pensively. “Would you mind telling me what’s got you all bent out of shape?” He asked, raising his eyebrows in question.  
The spirit sank to the ground in shame. “...Met a strange girl.”  
“Ah, those humans. They’re all strange, if you ask me,” the moon remarked, his eyes dancing with humor.  
“No, this one was different. She was lost in the woods, and I wanted to help her... So I went up to her in my solid form. But she wasn’t afraid of me, Moon! She just smiled and followed me. And when we got to her street, she actually hugged me!”  
“Hugged?”  
“You know, when a human wraps their arms around another human?”  
“Ah, yes. I always thought that sounded uncomfortable.”  
“It isn’t at all; it’s very warm. But anyway, here’s the catch—when I saw an injured boy a few minutes later, I decided to help him too. I thought for a moment that meeting one good hu-
man must mean they’ve all suddenly changed. And wouldn’t you know it, the boy threw a rock at me and screamed. I don’t know what I was thinking.” The spirit made herself small, suddenly very aware of the moon’s eyes on her.  
He was silent for a moment. Then he spoke softly. “That doesn’t sound stupid to me.”  
The spirit was taken aback. “What? How is it not?”  
“You had faith in the boy, Darkness. You’ve always had faith in humanity. That’s not weakness, that’s strength.”  
“But it’s blind faith! Only one human has ever taken my help.”  
“That’s never stopped you before.”  
“But—”  
“Hush.” The spirit was indignant, but obeyed, drifting slowly in the sky. “When the hu-
mans first arrived, I remember your complaints about how they all hated you, how they all screamed and fled when they saw you. And yet here you are, still trying help them, expecting nothing in return. You’re kind, not an idiot.”  
The spirit pondered the words. “Do you really think so?”  
“How?”
“I thought you were being a little senseless when you first told me that every last human hated you. To think that a group of individuals as stubborn as the humans could ever agree on something like that? Absurd.”
The spirit cackled at the quip, prompting a chuckle from the moon. “You’re not wrong,” the spirit admitted. “They do like to argue.”
“I think you should keep trying to be kind. It’s better than doing the same old things every day.”
“But I like routine!”
“You’ve had the same habits for thousands of years! Mixing it up would be good for you.” “Says the guy who takes the same path through the sky every day.”
“There’s that spunk I know so well,” the moon said fondly. The spirit danced on the wind, laughing joyfully.
As she twirled, she noticed some light still dusting the fields. “Shoot, I missed some,” she said, gesturing toward it.
The moon gave her a fond smile. “Better go clear it. And just in case this is the last I see of you tonight, would you bid dear old Sun hello for me?”
“By all means,” the spirit called as she flew away, darting merrily through the sky.
As the spirit of darkness returned to work, she reflected on the night so far. The moon could be idealistic at times, but his intentions were always trustworthy. And besides, he was right. Even on the days when she passed right by one child stuck in the mud, or another with a skinned knee, she felt compelled, called to offer kindness whenever she could. Altruism was in her nature.
Perhaps she had done the right thing by trying to help the boy. After all, it wasn’t her fault that he’d turned her away.

On the other side of the plain, near the forest’s edge, she stumbled across a small owlet sitting in the grass. It chirped feebly, flapping its useless wings in fear. When she approached, kneeling beside it in solid form, it stopped chirping and gave her a curious look. The spirit was surprised it hadn’t already been eaten.
Without thinking, she scooped up the owlet and carried it into the forest. It chirped loudly in protest, but she ignored it, scanning the nearby trees for a nest. Even in the newly fallen darkness, she spotted the nest easily, in a particularly tall oak tree. She jumped up—higher than any human could manage, she was sure—and grabbed onto a branch near the nest. With her remaining hand, she gently placed the owlet into the nest.
The mother was absent, but the owlet peeped happily, settling down against the nest wall. The spirit dropped to the ground, letting her solid form unravel once more.
Darting back out to the field, she expelled the last of the light, watching it fade away into nothing. Night time had officially begun. She took a deep breath, and sank to the ground. In the distance, she heard an owl hooting.
Perhaps her kindness was her strength after all.
Do you ever wonder what it’s like having autism?
I know how, according to some, I’m broken.
Because I am different and that needs to be fixed.
But that isn’t the case at all.
I am no less human than you.
Just, some aspects of me are more intense.

I was diagnosed when I was three.
They said to my parents
I would never connect with them.
I would live at home my whole life.
They should lower their expectations.

On this day I said nothing.
I didn’t speak until I was six.
But deep inside my mind I thought,
Umm...Excuse me? Do you know that I’m sitting right here?
And you may have spent a decade working on that doctorate
But don’t think you know me.

One day my voice will awaken
I’ll learn how to use my photographic memory
To better convey the chorus of thoughts in my mind.
To feel less intensity in the sights, sounds, and smells around me
Unless I want to immerse in them completely.

Who knows?
I might be the next step in evolution.
Music by Hannah Evans
Beautiful Days Ahead

Hannah Evans

\( j = 120 \)

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Flute
\( \text{mf} \)

Flute

\( p \)

Flute

\( p \)
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Photo by Hunter Acton