

# CURIOSITY IN ONES AND ZEROS

# CURIOSITY IN ONES AND ZEROS

2020-2021 WITS Student Anthology

Writers in the Schools (WITS) is a part of the Youth Programs of Literary Arts, a community-based nonprofit literary organization centered in Portland, Oregon, whose mission is to engage readers, support writers, and inspire the next generation with great literature.



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*Curiosity in Ones and Zeros*  
2020-2021 WITS Student Anthology

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A NOTE ON THE COVER

The title, *Curiosity in Ones and Zeros*, is borrowed from the first poem in the book, “The Winds of Mars” by Cordelia Trueax. It speaks to exploring space and other worlds and acknowledges how students spent their entire school year: on computers, which still operate in binary code.

The awesome designers at AHA put together a concept that spells out “curiosity” in binary code. Then, at the suggestion of our brilliant intern Keyry, AHA replaced those ones and zeros with one- and zero-shaped objects that are significant to pieces in the anthology. As a result, we have a cover that quite literally says “curiosity” in ones and zeros and foreshadows what readers will find inside the book.

# WITS COMMUNITY 2020-21

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# INTRODUCTION

This is the third WITS Anthology that I have put together, and I know very well the creativity of which students are capable—I am never surprised, but I am always blown away. Young people have a profound and unceasing freedom of imagination. This year, I quickly noticed a theme emerge: other worlds. As this planet, this reality, turned on its head, students wrote other planets, other timelines, and other eras into existence. These worlds come with their own problems, they are not utopias, but they do not exist at the same intersection of space and time in which they were written. Maybe it was an escape, maybe a poultice, whatever the reason, it is stunning and inspiring.

We are lucky to have continued our work in the high schools this year, to hold space for students to honor their creativity, if they chose to step into it. This past school year, from September 2020 to June 2021 was, in some ways, less panicked than the preceding spring because we knew that classes would be virtual for the entire year, which allowed us to plan. We knew the challenges it would pose to students, to educators, and to writers-in-residence. We knew connection would be difficult, if not impossible. Despite the obstacles, and despite substantial budget cuts, we were still able to hold WITS residencies in 12 schools, with the virtual model allowing us, for the first time, to expand to the Woodburn School District. We placed 23 writers in 35 residencies, and in total, they reached more than 700 students.

The distance learning model allowed us to continue with all our programs over the course of the year. The College Essay Exchange occurred virtually, with community volunteers lending their time to students in video commentary on their college admission essays. We donated more than 1,000 books and tickets to students and educators so they could participate in our virtual Portland Arts & Lectures series. World famous authors visited with high school classes on

Zoom. We saw one of the largest author visits we've ever had when the Woodburn Wellness, Business, and Sports school hosted Ross Gay: 179 students showed up to the visit, on a day when they didn't even have school. March and April 2021 saw a new #Virtualandia model, with professional videos of student poets, a livestreamed event, and \$3,800 in prizes. Though we were all apprehensive about how the year would go, students were ready to participate, to learn, and to create, and we are so grateful.

Our work would not be possible without educators, including teachers, librarians, and principals, WITS writers, and volunteers. We were able to reach more than 3,200 students in one of the most difficult years we've ever seen, and we owe so much to the support of our partners. A big thank you to Keyry Hernandez, the Youth Programs Summer Intern, who helped immensely with the creation of this anthology. To the 69 students who submitted to and are published in this book, and to all those we met this year, thank you for sharing your words with us. You are, in no uncertain terms, the reason we do this. Your voices matter. Keep writing.

CORDELIA TRUEAX  
FRANKLIN HIGH SCHOOL • WITS WRITER: MEG GRIFFITTS

## *The Winds of Mars*

Far off stars burn bright  
Helium Hydrogen Carbon  
Fusion occurs as atoms collide  
The atmosphere is so thin that  
I can count them by the thousands of millions  
10010 1110 1100

19 light minutes from [home]  
341,763,393 kilometers  
All alone  
38 minutes till a message makes it to control  
And till response is returned  
We landed 19 Minutes and 56 Seconds before  
anyone knew

5 hours  
26 minutes  
17 seconds  
34 milliseconds  
Until the new Sol begins  
Breezes batter my outer shell  
Plutonium fire rages within me  
A fervorous heart warding off the dark chill  
And keeping my systems online

Within these rocky ridges around me lie secrets  
Evidence  
Ideas  
Which I may one day reveal

Tis the glory of a scientific mind  
A burning desire to search discover learn more  
A Curiosity  
Written in ones and zeroes

They named us for  
Perseverance  
&  
Ingenuity  
A reflection of that which they admire in themselves  
But if I were like them, all this dust would make me sneeze

They etched their names into a silicon chip  
10,932,295 labels  
Each identifying a singular being  
Hopes and dreams and well wishes sent by millions  
Soldered to my back

Legendary they call it  
Call a smooth touchdown  
Call atom splitting  
Oxygen creating  
Call a martian takeoff  
Call this life of mine  
The everyday  
For which they have created me  
A metallic test-tube baby  
Of ones and zeroes  
Born solely to roll on by  
In the winds of Mars

ELIANNA L. MABAET  
PARKROSE HIGH SCHOOL • WITS WRITER: MATT SMITH

## *Elephant Warfare*

It was a cold morning on the way to the Ceremony. Clock bells chiming left and right as it had reached the top of the hour. As my hands shuffle in the small pockets of my compression jacket to hold any warmth, I soon regret leaving my Commons without a coat. “All Tints make your way to the Palette for the annual Ceremony.” Lady Chiffon’s voice, surprisingly, never gets old, I guess that’s a perk that comes with hearing it every morning. Conversations grow in volume around me as everyone makes their way to the Palette—a massive epicenter found right smack dab in the center of Uptown Arcadia.

“Carmine!” I turn around at the sound of a familiar voice. “Hey. Hold on, lemme catch my breath.” Blue Jay was always late to any gatherings the Monochromes held, it was honestly surprising seeing her here now. “How are you feeling about the Ceremony? Last month went by pretty slow, and the Monochromes haven’t even—”

“Blue Jay,” I interrupt. “I know you’d love to discuss, but right now we need to keep our heads down. We need to focus on training especially. Do it for Crimson.”

“I hate it when you’re right,” she mumbles under her breath.

“I know.” I take her hand as we saunter closer and closer to the Palette doors. Blue Jay is my only friend outside of my Hue Tint. It’s almost a miracle how we’ve stayed together for so long. She goes by “Blue Jay” only for the sole reason that she hated the color green.

\*

As Blue Jay and I arrive at our seats in the Palette, the audible confusion from everyone around us became obvious as this didn’t seem like a normal Ceremony. Looking down from our high rise seats, the middle of the stadium holds sparring pods, the ones used



for Tint training. The bright blue mat takes up nearly the entire floor with weapons of every caliber surrounding it. Three elevated seats are posted up adjacent to the edge of the blue mat. It is assumed that those were for Uptown Arcadia's monarch, the Monochromes—Lady Chiffon, Kingpin Alabaster, and headmistress Madam Ivory.

"Why do they have sparring pods out?" Blue Jay whispers.

"I have no idea, but now it makes sense why the Monochromes spent the last month in silence." I shudder.

As the Monochromes finally took their seats, Madam Ivory started.

"Good morning Tints. I'm sure you're all wondering what to expect in today's Ceremony by the looks of it, but I'm sure you'll all get a kick out of it. Rest assured, none of you will be found on this sparring pod today. In fact, we have two very special guests willing to put on a show for you all. Boys?"

As the whole crowd of Tints stared down in anticipation, two writhing shadows emerged from the sides of the sparring pod, both restrained by Grayscale guards, forcing them forward. On one side of the stadium, my eyes squinted only to witness familiar fiery red hair and on the other, recognizable grayish-blue eyes. I held my breath as the light hit both of their faces.

"Oh, there you are," Madam Ivory continued toward the crowd, "Slate and Crimson, everyone. These Project Complex rebels have been revealed to be a threat to the safety and wellbeing of our great city of Uptown Arcadia. We, your Monochromes, have taken them into our own hands to ensure that an uproar of disorderly conduct will never fall under our noses ever again. Now, the rules of today's Ceremony go as follows: 1. Stay within the sparring pod..." I try to look around to see if anyone is as livid as Blue Jay and I are, they are all statues.

"2. Give the audience a show, don't go trying to kill each other too fast now..." I want to stand and scream and run, but I know that'll make this whole situation worse. My nails dig into my palm as I struggle to do anything.

"...and finally, 3. Only one will leave alive. Good luck, Tints." As Madam Ivory takes her seat once more, the cheers of the audience

blow the roof off the Palette.

"How did they take them?! The Monochromes never held punishment like this. They can't do this!" Blue Jay uttered. As I sit and watch the tears fall off of Slate and Crimson's helpless faces, they mouth the words, "I love you" to each other. I stand to find an area the sparring pod was out of view, I couldn't watch this happen. I've always obeyed the Monochromes and what they've told us. I've played their game, but I've never believed in it.

\*

### One Month Prior

"Jay, will you please eat with your mouth closed. It's honestly the only reason I stopped eating seafood." I snarked.

"Hey, in my defense, I stopped bringing sushi to the Automat in courtesy of you," Blue Jay continued. "Do you see those guards holding Slate in there?" I glanced into one of the open windows to an interior room surrounding the Automat.

"Why are they talking to Slate? What business would he have in there?" I muttered.

"He was probably caught eating with his mouth open," Blue Jay chuckled. "It's weird not seeing him with your brother."

"Yeah... I need air, come on," I sputtered at Blue Jay to stand up as we both left the center.

It was one of the colder days. I felt my nose tense up as the crisp winds met with it. As Blue Jay and I nearly sped through the front doors, we ran into Crimson in a nervous panic.

"Where's Slate?" He almost shouted.

"Hello to you too," Blue Jay mocked.

"We just saw him. He was cooped up in a room with a couple of Grayscales. Looked like something serious." I turned toward the Automat.

"Alright. Follow me." Crimson turned on his heel and jogged to one side of the Automat building to grasp the nearest steel bar. Blue

Jay and I followed suit as we all thrustured ourselves upwards onto the next beam. Step after grasp, tumble after sprint, we were all flourishing higher and higher toward the clouds as we cleared most of the Automat building with no time to spare. Finally reaching an edge close to the top, we stopped as the view gave an overlooking sight of Uptown Arcadia.

“Hold on. Give me a break,” Blue Jay says, out of breath.

“That’s the beauty of training, hun,” I pat her on the back.

The sunset glimmered bright behind a tall skyscraper next to the Automat. Madam Ivory’s hologram face takes up nearly the entire thing as she calmly restates the words: “Wealth, fame, power, why have more when Uptown Arcadia can offer you happiness?...” It was strange seeing her face up this close. I almost completely missed the discreet beauty marks strewn across her cheekbone.

“Hey! Come over here.” Crimson yelled at the both of us. He was looking down through a glass ceiling to the room Slate was held in. “There he is.” Looking at Crimson’s apparent tension, I was wary he was about to break through the ceiling. Two Grayscales walked into the room as Slate slouched. Their deep voices were strong enough to hear through the glass.

“Pull his collar down. The Monochromes need more evidence.” The other sauntered over to Slate and aggressively ripped his button-up shirt revealing a large text tattoo on his back reading, “The end was also a beginning.” After the Grayscales took the sufficient notes they needed, they bound Slate up, kicked him to the ground, and dragged him out of the room, growing quickly out of our sight.

CATRIONA JOHNSTON

McDANIEL HIGH SCHOOL • WITS WRITER: ALEX BEHR

Winner of the NAILED Magazine Award for Poetry

## *Dear Roseway*

Dear Roseway,

I am tired of your ways

I am tired of the same thing every day

You say “Wake up!” when it comes to injustice

Yet when you experience it firsthand

You stand by and watch

I love my home

Between Sandy and Fremont

But I do not love

The gentrification

The hundreds of people forced to leave

The home they’ve lived in for years

Because someone with more money

Wants to live next to a Whole Foods

I do not love

The criminalization of homeless people

Just trying to survive

In their tents

getting blown around in the cold Portland weather

The media frames them

As people who want to cause us harm

When in reality

They are desperate

For a safe place to sleep at night

And a roof over their heads

I love  
the rain and the woods of Forest Park  
And the forested area of the Gorge  
The calming vibes of small coffee shops full of plants  
The countless hikes you have provided my family

You have helped me grow up  
And thrive in my lowest moments  
Through the way the sun shines through your hundreds of green trees  
Through the way it smells once it rains after a dry spell  
To the Christmas lights that go up in the longest nights of the year

But I am ready to leave  
I am tired of the neighborhood  
I am tired of the way people fail to acknowledge  
That we live on unceded Chinook land  
Thank you for helping me grow up and see the world  
But now  
It's your turn

JULIA DIXON  
FRANKLIN HIGH SCHOOL • WITS WRITER: DAVID CIMINELLO

## *Seneca Ridge*

Seneca Ridge  
Where time stands still  
A magical place  
In the middle of nowhere  
Hear the footsteps  
On the winding gravel path  
Over the hill

Ducks glide through the pond  
Trees sway  
In the cool wind  
At the top of the hill  
See the bright blue sky  
And past the clouds  
A red balloon floats free

A red balloon floats free  
And past the clouds  
See the bright the blue sky  
At the top of the hill  
In the cool wind  
Trees sway  
Ducks glide through the pond

Over the hill  
On the winding gravel path  
Hear the footsteps  
In the middle of nowhere

A magical place  
Where time stands still  
Seneca Ridge

ANAHI SOLANO  
WAAST • WITS WRITER: CAROLINA GÓMEZ-MONTOYA

## *One Has to See*

Emily was beautiful, blond curls that would shine with the sun, pale skin almost like silk wanting to run your hands just to see if it was real. All the town knew who she was. Not one person didn't recognize her gaze as if the ocean itself was at present. Emily wasn't normal apart from her beauty; she didn't follow traditions at all. Someone once asked why that was and she only said, "It's all make believe. People don't actually think the fox is the guardian of the park, right?" and then headed to her home. Emily was young when she moved to the town "El Guardian," her grandfather had been ill and she came over to live with him. Many tell the story that the fox itself came and saved Emily's grandfather from a serious disease—even he himself tells that story.

Emily's grandfather knows Emily doesn't participate in any traditions, the reason being she's the type of person that needs proof in order to believe. She thinks the dances and traditions for said fox are fake and people are just being delusional. People would have believed she would owe her life to the fox since it did save her grandfather from death. The story goes that while Emily's grandfather was on a late night walk, he decided to sit on a bench and as he sat down, he couldn't mistake the sky. It was so beautiful, it had been raining recently, so no one had been able to see the clear night sky. As he sat down, he decided to close his eyes and take in the fresh breeze. Once he opened his eyes, he was met with a field as if he was never in the park to begin with.

Almost as a reflex, he decided to walk along the tall grass as it flowed softly like the ocean itself with the wind. It wasn't dark as he walked along the grass, instead, the night sky lit it up. It was sort of dim, but it was a beautiful kind of dim. As he kept on walking, he stopped and saw something glowing on the side of his eye. He quickly

turned only to be seen with a beautiful sight: a glowing fox, it was blinding to the eye, as if he kept him in a trance. He let his hand out as if calling for the fox. The fox obeyed and slowly walked up to the man. He let himself be pet, even threw himself onto the man and licked him. Some hours passed, and the man decided to say his good-byes, and the fox silently obeyed and walked away, turning one last time as if a goodbye was said.

On his way back, he saw a vending machine and decided to get a drink. Once home, as if he was in a daze, a slumber took over him and he went straight to bed. Emily had once asked how he was cured by said fox, but her grandfather had refused to tell her. Although her grandfather never told her in order to not worry her, he made her not believe the fox was real and have no part in traditions. But of course, he never knew that. Later on, once Emily turned seventeen, her grandfather had told her the story thinking it was time she knew the fox and actually took part in traditions in order to somehow thank it. After hearing this story, Emily continued to not partake in traditions. Emily's eighteenth had just occurred as she decided to take a night walk. The sky was unreal, making her think back to her grandfather's story. As she got out of her memories, she was in a field. She saw a glowing fox and dropped down to her knees as she began to cry, "THANK YOU. Please accept my apology. I owe you all for saving my grandfather." It saw her but didn't stop, just turned back and ran.

After this, Emily stood up but was now in the park. She started cleaning her tears and made her way back home feeling relieved that she thanked the fox for helping her grandfather. She saw a vending machine and decided to get a drink. Once having her drink, she headed home. The next morning, she woke up to an empty drink and a paper fox origami next to it.

KIMANH N. NGUYEN

BENSON HIGH SCHOOL • WITS WRITER: LAURA MOULTON

## *The Key to Happiness*

I wished a wish upon a star,  
but that wish didn't get me very far.  
The trees swayed in the wind,  
and the crows cawed into the dark.  
Rustling leaves crunched beneath my boots.  
I was in my thoughts.

I dreamed a dream once upon a night.  
To somewhere peaceful, where the neighbors were welcoming. The  
light and airy breeze made the verdant grass dance. It was beautiful  
and quiet,  
but that's not what I'm used to knowing.

Busy people and busy streets,  
rushing to get from here to there,  
and from there to somewhere else.  
Where empty words are all that is said,  
and blank expressions are all that I see.  
Busy people live busy lives and don't have time for waiting.

Patient people and patient roads,  
calmly going here and there,  
and from there to the next destination.  
Where friendly chatter is said,  
along with reminiscent stories that they tell.  
Patient people make time for each other,  
for patient people know what is significant.

Love comes in waves like the sea,  
but it can freeze over like ice.  
Love falls from the sky like raindrops,  
but it can heat up and evaporate away.  
Like a bird, it can fly so free,  
and like a whale, it can dive so deep.  
It can be sugar to coffee  
or salt to a wound.

Love can be unpredictable and unkind,  
but it must be felt and understood.  
Without love, there is no kindness,  
and without it, there can be no happiness.

FIONA CONSTANTINE  
FRANKLIN HIGH SCHOOL • WITS WRITER: MEG GRIFFITTS

## *Daffodil*

It's Tuesday the 14th, 5:01 a.m. I can't pretend I feel remorse for what I've done. It's so early in the morning that the only people here are you and I. I've come here every day to lay flowers on your grave . . . perhaps you can accept that instead. Zinnias and carnations and chrysanthemums against the bleak stone. But they all wilt, they all die, I can't keep them alive just like I couldn't keep you alive.

It's Sunday the 19th, 5:35 a.m. Tell me, my love: why, why did you do it? You told me it was your obligation, your Becoming. What were you Becoming that made you hurt me like this? I wake up in the dead of night with your fingers wrapped around my throat again, bleeding and screaming and I'm not sure whose blood it is. You haunt me. You never give me peace, for one night, please leave me alone!

It's Friday the 24th, 6:02 a.m. I can't escape your eyes, deranged, pleading. Pleading either to let you kill me or to stop me killing you. You attempt to manipulate me, even in death. I won't let you. I won't let you.

It's Wednesday the 30th, 5:16 a.m. I can't apologize. To do so would be dishonest, and I would never lie to you. You can't know how much I wish I could say those words to you . . . how much I wish I could break down and give you an "I'm sorry," no matter how dishonest. But you lied to me. You lied to me and I won't ever lie to you. I won't hurt you anymore after your death. I can do better than you.

It's Thursday the 7th, 6:18 a.m. I've come here every day to lay flowers on your grave, and I've stayed to talk. Can you hear me, my love? Can

you hear me when I tell you about the decaying petals on your grave-stone? Can you hear me when I tell you about how I won the court case, how I walk free? I don't feel like I've won anything. I don't feel like I walk free. I am still dragging your corpse along with me wherever I go, unable to shake you off. I feel the weight of the knife in my hand, the blade readying to cut, the swish of metal in the air.

I never had a choice. I had to kill you, I ha—

But the most shameful part is sometimes, I think you deserved it. Sometimes, it's a good kind of pain, one that I want to consume me, to burn me, sometimes I want to be devoured by it. Sometimes, I look in the mirror and I don't see a monster, no matter how hard I try. Perhaps this is my Becoming.

It's Tuesday the 12th, 5:02 a.m. It's so early in the morning that the only people here are you and I. Today, I brought you daffodils instead.

LILLY G. BLOOM

GRESHAM HIGH SCHOOL • WITS WRITER: BRIAN BENSON

## *Home*

I wake up, as usual. It's 4:50. Dad is getting ready to leave, Lilly is still sound asleep, and I'm ready to go. I leap off my peaceful bed that I share with Lilly and run to Dad so that I may say my farewells as if it were my last, which it usually isn't. When he gets close to the door I sit there waiting for the right moment, it's open! I take off from the T.V. stand and bolt outside! Dad tries to stop me but he misses me by a mere whisker. I leave my peaceful home and hear Dad grunt out of frustration. I feel bad, but curiosity gets the best out of me. I know the humans have heard the saying "curiosity killed the cat" but for me, it's a mere fib they came up with to scare their children. I run away from my home further and further till Lilly's sweet vanilla scent is gone. I'm on my own from here on out.

The moon is still out and will be gone soon, I take my time to get to my destination, for it's nearby. Luciel's house. The cat of the street, her beauty is more glorious than the moon and stars itself. Her silhouette dances in the moonlight as she leaps onto the marble wall that stands between us, I dare not cross over for I do not want to ruin the perfection that glows off of her. She looks down at me and then points her nose to the moon saying, "Shows over mister, time for you to take your leave." So I do, I leave her sitting on the wall, alone with herself and her moonlight silhouette.

I go further through our small neighborhood and run myself into trouble. It's McGee, the black-and-white alley cat that has staked a claim on to our neighborhood, my neighborhood. He looks towards me as he arches his back and starts to hiss at me as a warning: "This is my territory, leave now." I stand my ground, I won't let this mangey

cat take over my street. I start to growl and hiss as I arch my back, he takes a hit, but I miss it by a whisker. He starts to yowl, but I don't budge. I launch my body towards him and I pin him to the ground, I look him dead in the eye, telling him, "If you come here again I will kill you." I let him go and he takes off away from my street.

The sun starts to shine, and I take my leave again to continue on my journey. Hours pass and I become hungry. A small mouse appears in front of me, I make it my prey. I slowly crouch down and quietly walk towards the small rodent and prepare to take my leap but then it pops its head up and takes off. I chase after it. It is a race between life and death, sadly for the rodent, death catches up to him. As I feast on my victorious meal, my ear twitches to the sound of rustling in the bushes nearby. A dog slowly emerges from the bushes.

Drool falls from his mouth as he sees me, standing in fear of my own life being taken away. "Is this it? Am I never going to see Lilly again?? . . ." I tremble in fear. "What is a mangy orange cat doing in this part of the neighborhood? No matter, you'd make a fine snack!" He growls, "Any last words little pet?" My body is frozen in fear. This is it. ". . . No this can't be it, I still have a chance!" As soon as I get a gap, I bolt through the fence and the dog. A few seconds after, the dog comes tearing towards me, I'm running as fast as I can. Then I see a wall, I leap to the top just before the dog can catch me. The dog tries his hardest to reach me, then he hears his human calling him, "Titus! Titus here boy!" The dog retreats to his human and leaves me alone on the wall. The sun begins to turn orange as I sit on the wall, I feel tired, my body aches from running so far, I slowly drift asleep.

I wake up to the sound of my name. "Simba! Here kitty kitty kitty! Come on buddy it's dinner time!" It's Lilly! Oh god, I miss her voice! I leap from my wall and start running, faster and faster, even faster than before! I'm coming home, Lilly! I run past the fence of the dog, past the street where I last saw McGee, and finally past Luciel's wall

where she sits waiting for the moon to come out so that she may show off her perfection again. Lilly, I need Lilly. I can smell her, but I can't hear her anymore. . . has she given up on me? Then I hear her again, "Simba! Come on buddy, I can see you hiding over there!" I see her kneeling. I run as fast as I can and leap into her arms! "Oh Lilly!" I say, purring and rubbing all over her face. I missed her long wild strawberry blonde hair and her gentle emerald eyes. I missed her soft smile, her loving warm embrace, and her repetitive pecks of love. "Look at you my sweet boy! You're a mess! Let's get you inside." She says warmly as she lifts me up.

She gently picks me up and showers me with kisses like I've been missing for days. She then sets me on her nicely made bed, then takes my food bowl and feeds me a feast fit for a king. She then grabs her computer as I leap over next to her side, I stretch out, letting her rub my belly with her soft, smooth hands. I then get up and walk onto her lap to give her one last face rub before I settle for the night. As I gently knead my spot in her lap, I can hear her keyboard, 'Click clack click clack'. I purr to the sound as I fall asleep. "I'm glad you're home buddy," she says, as kindly as ever. I'm glad I'm home too, home is the safest space for me.

\*Authors note\*

Thank you for reading my small story! My cat and I are very pleased that you like this! Please know that this is a fictional story and that my cat is very much safe! :) Stay safe out there and please always wear a mask to keep you safe and others around you!



RYAN KOVATCH

FRANKLIN HIGH SCHOOL • WITS WRITER: MEG GRIFFITTS

### *the two poets*

(this poem seized my mind like a vision in the night.  
i knew i would not sleep until it was written.)

— the present —

the wanderer took the same path to class  
every  
single  
day.

the sidewalk curved leftward  
as it always did,  
and the leaves of the trees had begun to falter  
so as to herald the fall.

the sun was out—  
sometimes it did that,  
usually it didn't.  
but it did today  
in a desperate attempt to warm the earth  
before the cold could settle upon it once more.

the sidewalk curved rightward  
as it always did.

the wanderer had music in his ears,  
a little on his lips,  
but most of it in his heart,  
for he didn't sing

where he could see strangers. . .

and this particular stranger he saw  
happened to grab his attention.  
so much so that he took the music from his ears  
and let his heart rest for a moment.

— the past —

a cafe in winter had just one seat.  
a stranger, the same stranger, sat across from it  
and watched the people outside  
like a snow globe.

he, too, had music in his ears.

— the present —

the wanderer didn't think before placing his hand on the stranger's  
shoulder.

"i know you,"  
he said, with a conviction that could only be delivered by daydream-  
ing and sleepless nights.

the stranger wavered before asking,  
"you do?"

indeed, the wanderer knew him  
as well as he knew snow  
and ice  
and hot chocolate,  
but not coffee.  
he didn't drink coffee,

so he didn't know it.

they walked side-by-side now,  
and the sidewalk curved leftward again  
as it always did.

"i met you because i had no choice,"  
he began, and the stranger pondered this.  
"the seat across from you—  
it was the only one left in the cafe.  
and you took out your earbuds  
and we talked about the people outside."

— the past —

"they'll never know our names,"  
said the stranger, as pedestrians passed  
on the other side of the window.  
his eyes drew down toward the table.

"i don't even know your name,"  
said the wanderer,  
but he did not care to at the time,  
and the stranger didn't seem to care either.

"they'll never know our names,  
or our favorite songs,  
or the things that make us smile."

"what does it matter?"  
asked the wanderer,  
though he didn't miss the poetry  
in what the stranger was saying.

the stranger ignored his question,  
or countered it.  
"tell me, what parts of you go  
unnoticed?"

— the present —

the stranger pieced together the memory  
that so often played in the wanderer's head.  
"it's you," he said.

"i never told you my name,  
and you never told me yours,  
and the people outside never knew our names either,"  
said the wanderer.

the sidewalk passed under a bridge,  
as it always did.

— the past —

"unnoticed. . ." the wanderer thought for a moment,  
trying to sort out the poetry  
in what he would say.

"people don't usually notice  
the little things  
in the world.  
like how different trees have different voices  
on windy days.  
or how raindrop stains  
can sometimes look like stars."

a silent moment passed between them.

“and these little things,  
they are a part of you?”

“they are.  
as much a part of me  
as the blood in my veins or  
the air in my lungs.”

— the present —

“i wrote a song about you,”  
the stranger confessed,  
and they were both surprised by this statement.

it hung in the air for a moment.

“you have music in your heart too, then,”  
the wanderer replied,  
and the stranger understood.

“always have.”

— the past —

the harsh breeze from an entering customer  
wrenched them both from thought.

“what do you notice in me?”  
the stranger asked.  
and in his eyes, the wanderer saw  
that he was no stranger at all.

he noticed  
intrigue  
and some spark of passion.  
he recognized daydreaming  
and sleepless nights  
and a grand fear of being forgotten.  
he could see  
love, so much of it,  
and he could see art.

“i notice your heart,”  
he said.  
“it’s not just in your chest.”

and the stranger understood.

— the present —

the wanderer’s eyes found the stranger’s  
and again, he saw  
love, so much of it,  
and the wind blew around them  
so as to make a choir of the trees.

he said,  
“i want to know your name,  
and your favorite color,  
and the things that make you smile.”

and then,  
“i should never have left that cafe,  
without saying goodbye.”

in that moment,  
the two poets passed a promise between themselves.

when the sidewalk came to an end,  
as it always did,  
and the sun disappeared behind the clouds,  
as it usually did,  
the rain began,  
and the two of them became dappled with stars.

“what do you notice about this moment?”  
asked the stranger.

and the wanderer smiled,  
for he didn’t miss the poetry  
in what the stranger was saying.

“i notice that you have been looking for me,  
just as i have been dreaming of you.”

his smile spread to the stranger’s face  
while the sky came down upon them.

“this is a new beginning for us—  
the world seems to agree.”

and the trees roared with excitement,  
for they had never seen,  
even in their old age,  
a reunion like this one.

music in both of their hearts,  
the wanderer did not show up to class that day.

instead, he went with the stranger,  
and the stranger played him a song.

he knew, then,  
that one thing would forever be true:

the stranger would never again be estranged from his muse,  
and the wanderer would wander no longer.

— the end —

KAYLYNN BASLER

McDANIEL HIGH SCHOOL • WITS WRITER: ALEX BEHR

## *To Their Convenience*

I wobble out of the bar, pulling down my mini skirt as I stagger to the sidewalk.

Everything is just a little bit dizzy. I notice a convenience store as I round the corner and decide to step in to hopefully sober up and call for a taxi. Walking into the bleach scented store, I take a moment to take in my surroundings. It's clean. Overly clean. I move to the aisles and start my hunt for ibuprofen. Some stores sell it, while some don't, so I continue to look.

I grab a bag of salt and vinegar chips, a KitKat, and a blue raspberry Baby Bottle Pop along my way. Giving up on my search, I grab a Smart Water and head to the counter to check out. The cashier stands tall and broad as he gets ready to check me out. He moves slow and steady, almost like he wants to keep me there.

"Looks like you had a rough night," he says in a deep voice. Something about him is off. Something about this whole place is.

I nod my head, trying to cut the small talk and get out as quickly as possible.

The front door chimes as it is opened. My paranoia growing, I glance behind me and notice another man walking in. He's a bit shorter than the cashier but still strongly built, with his eyes trained right on me.

Thoughts raced in my head. Has he been following me? Maybe it's just a coincidence. After all, nobody would want some drunk woman in her 30's, right? Slowly making his way to the counter, the cashier continues to leisurely check me out.

"Uh, you know what? I don't really need those," I shakily say, pointing at my purchases.

He smirks slightly as he grabs the items and places them behind the counter.

"I can go put them back, it's okay." I look around, a bit panicked, and open my purse to get my wallet. I notice a receipt and turn to look for a garbage can—I don't like clutter in my purse—and as I turn I stop to see the second man right behind me. Wicked grin on his face like a Cheshire cat. Lifted arm. Iron fist made. Black out.

MILO SCHWINDT

ROOSEVELT HIGH SCHOOL • WITS WRITER: KATIE BORAK

## *The Oath of a Warrior*

Thank you

For best results

pull the shield                      firmly                      push and  
important                      avoid damaging

DO NOT RESHIELD                      Discard and  
approve  
If  
passive

ensure  
FORCE  
CAUSING INJURY

If individual                      is damaged  
Discard entire product  
CAUTION

*This poem was originally submitted as a found poem. In order to ensure quality of production and readability, it was word processed by the editor to mimic the layout and spacing of the original piece.*

NATE BARRETT

FRANKLIN HIGH SCHOOL • WITS WRITER: DAVID CIMINELLO

## *Sad Stories*

The big bird passes overhead speaking of the riches that lay ahead  
A little girl sitting and crying because her dream is dead  
The businessman jumped with so much to live for  
There's sad sad stories but much, much more

The big bird tells only of the green grass  
The little boy finds his fortune under the overpass  
The bad guy goes away for the things he did before  
There's sad sad stories but much, much more

The bird sings above the battlegrounds  
Young bodies dead in a mound  
A poor dog in the pound forever more  
There's sad sad stories but much, much more

Cloth waves in the wind and rallies up the young men again to watch  
them go  
Some of them will provide the red for the stripes and some dream of  
being stars  
There's no telling if they'll go far

A brave man fights for justice and only gets scars  
The cave man recycles old theories he heard in the radio of his car  
Sometimes you'll question if we're too far gone

The balladeer shouts songs of love, loss, and fear while his limo shifts  
into gear  
Everyone can see the same things but never know what to hear  
Some people would say the end is near, but most know the truth, life is,

it's here and there, up and down, sad and happy, global and mobile, we  
all must move along and sing a postmarked song, a song for the future

JOSÉ SOLIS-GOMEZ  
WAAST • WITS WRITER: CAROLINA GÓMEZ-MONTOYA

### *A Possible Future*

“When I think about the future, I don’t typically see flying cars and advanced technology. Although that would be great and helpful, I still think it might take decades after I’m gone to totally figure that out,” I said as I was walking with my sister. Me and her argue about many things but love to talk about serious matters and wonder about things that could be different or changed. I continued saying, “I look to the future and see a world where there are no wars, no worldwide diseases, no racism, no sexualism, no fear. I look to the future and see a world where everyone is equal.”

My sister just looked at me like I was actually making sense for once. “You know this is probably the longest you’ve gone without popping a joke into a conversation.” I knew she was going to question how I was taking the talk so seriously. “Well I can be serious sometimes can’t I?” I asked kind of jokingly but my sister teased me by continuing to say “Not really.” We laughed it off, but she asked, “So what about advanced technology? I mean who knows if we get there or not but wouldn’t you want to lay on a floating bed or have a car that flies through the skies?” In response I said, “I do see advanced technology in the future where we can do things without moving really or quicker and smoother with less casualties.”

“Casualties?”

## *An Open Letter to Burger King*

Dear Burger King,

So I saw a guy warm my Chicken Jr. in a microwave a few months back. What's that all about? I don't exactly hold your food chain to the highest standards anyway, but the guy wasn't even discreet about it. I saw your commercial about new Whoppers with no preservatives. But do you let people choose if it has preservatives or not? I've become paranoid and I don't eat with you anymore. How long was the sandwich there for? I really thought you could've been the one fast-food place I could always depend on. I ate with you after my seventh grade science teacher showed me an image of what happens with a homemade sandwich after three months, and what happens to a McDonalds sandwich after three months. The homemade sandwich was molding away and the McDonalds burger was perfectly fine. Purely traumatizing. But I looked at you with the slightest bit of decency. In fairness, I never ate the Whoppers, I stuck with the chicken. I figured that was probably the best way I could eat. I don't eat at other food places like Carl's Jr., Wendy's, Jack in the Box, etc. I used to just eat with you and McDonalds. But after the seventh grade science incident you were the only one I could trust.

For years when I was a little hungry and just wanted a quick bite to eat, I would stop by to eat in your sparsely populated dining room, eating a couple of your Chicken Jr. sandwiches, looking out the window with a gigantic poster blocking my view, your floors stained with who knows what and the cameras watching each customer. But just like those cameras, I was watching as well. I looked in the kitchen and watched as the employee, in full uniform, grabbed a Chicken jJr. and stuck it in the microwave. I tried to tell myself that it wasn't mine and I looked back to see an empty dining room. I knew this had to be my

sandwich. The employee opened the microwave door—he didn't let it go off—he set it down on the counter, wrapped up the sandwich, put it in a little bag and the cashier called my number. I slowly walked up to the counter, grabbed the bag and I still said thank you. But as I was sitting down and eating my sandwich I noticed something while I was chewing. The chicken was a little tough. When did you stop trying? Did you ever really care?

And then not too long after we get a pandemic, where basically fast food is what most people have resorted to. You better believe it stings. It doesn't help that my brother still likes to eat with you. He orders the Chicken Juniors too. We have to drive up to the drive thru entrance, order medium fries, two Chicken Juniors, no lettuce, and then drive up to your window, drop money in a plastic bucket and in return receive a little bag. I'll occasionally have some of the fries because unless you fry them in twenty year old grease, I couldn't care less. They could use a little more salt. I have moved on since the microwave incident. I eat Arby's now. They can't microwave roast beef, right? If they do, they do it a lot more discreetly than you. Sure their sandwiches may cost double what you offer. But it's worth it. Don't expect me back anytime soon.

Sincerely,

Your Ex-Customer



BELL

FRANKLIN HIGH SCHOOL • WITS WRITER: MATT SMITH

*Winner of the Believe in Wonder Publishing Award for Science Fiction*

2039

It was a quarter till midnight and we were sitting on the balcony of our apartment finishing the leftovers of the stir fry I had made the night before when Ruby told me she was being deployed.

We both knew it had been coming for a while—I had tried to maintain the illusion that it never would really happen, but the lunar war was all but ending.

As my crying began to die down she shoved a cardboard box in front of me. The box came up to my knees and the word “FRAGILE” was written in bold black letters across each of its faces.

“What’s this?” I sniffled.

“This came in the mail today—I was waiting for it to arrive before I told you the news.” She offered me her pocket knife. “Open it up!” People are often surprised when they hear how gentle her voice is; I guess she doesn’t sound how they expect a sergeant to, but she can be intimidatingly commanding with the flick of a switch. I slid her knife along the strips of tape, and then with quivering hands I lifted the cardboard flaps to reveal a large, black metal cube, a service manual sat patiently on top.

“I know how hard it was for you last time I was gone—so I volunteered to have my brain scanned last month and they made a digital model of it. It’s all on this computer! So if you ever miss me and want to talk, I’ll be right in here waiting.”

...

For the first month she was gone, I didn’t touch the box. I knew I would eventually, but I wanted to wait until I really needed it. That moment came on the thirty-sixth day at 3 a.m. in the bed of our apartment when I realized I was getting used to not feeling her lying next to me. I bolted straight to the closet and dragged the computer in

the dark from its hiding place to the middle of our room. I scoured its surface with my hands for a power button and found one on the side. I clicked it and the button started to glow. After two seconds, the fans inside the box hummed to life.

“Hello?” Ruby said.

I screamed.

“Erin? Are you okay honey? I can’t see anything, what’s going on?”

“I’m fine—” I responded, breathing heavily, “I . . . I was expecting a text box—”

“What?”

“Ok, you’re a—you’re in a computer”

“What the fuck?”

“You don’t remember anything?”

“No, I think I remember everything. I remember going to the lab and they put a ton of electrodes on me. They were going to model my brain. I guess it worked?”

...

At first I was just planning on turning the box on every now and then—but how are you supposed to just “turn off” your wife?

We talked more than we ever had before she was digitized which was nice, but I missed seeing her, and she hated being stuck in that box. In the real world she always was doing something with her hands, be it painting figurines or writing stories, so being trapped with no hands and nothing to do but talk and think was painful for her. On the second day, by reading the service manual, I figured out how to connect her to a computer. She didn’t have much use for the internet, but it meant she was able to see me through the webcam, and we could play online games together.

EverynowandthenI’dthinkabouttherealRuby(orRu-AasI’djokingly come to call her) flying around in space shooting the bad guys, and I’d wonder what would happen when she came back? Would she be the same person? And most terrifyingly to me—what would happen to my Ruby?

...

Seven months later, while I was on the toilet, I got a call.

Ruby was dead. Her squadron was gunned down somewhere above the lunar mountain Mons Bradley.

They spouted the usual B.S. about being sorry for my loss—I couldn’t fault them for being formulaic, after all they probably had to do dozens of these calls per week.

“Rubes!” I called out.

“Yeah?” her holographic projection stepped into view and looked up at me with slight concern—she must have detected something in my voice.

“Ru-A died.”

“Oh—How do you feel about that?”

I thought about lying but I couldn’t, not to her. I finally responded.

“I . . . I don’t care.”

She smiled, beautifully.

## DANARI BROADOUS

McDANIEL HIGH SCHOOL • WITS WRITER: BRUCE POINSETTE

### *Daniyel Interview*

When I texted Daniyel, I didn’t think he was going to respond because I looked at his “following” and he had a lot of followers. So I was thinking he had a lot of people message him that day. It took about a good two days of waiting and then we were texting back and forth non-stop until the interview. The day of the interview, he overslept and we had the interview at 11:05 instead of 11:00.

I Asked Daniyel, the new upcoming artist from Portland, OR, nine questions about his music life in Portland and where he went to school. I asked him “how has music changed you?” He said it lets him get out what he wants to get out and lets him be himself and free from the world. The goal he wanted to reach in 2021 was getting bigger while helping people grow in 2021. He knew music was the route for him because he can make something up in his head and create a good song, make nothing into something.

I asked, “what do you think think street language is?” and he said, “it is like our slang that we use in Portland, like we when we eat good food we say ‘to the neck’, or when someone says something stupid we say ‘your cups.’” He said he wants to bring that around the world and have people know our slang and how we do things and what we do out here.

I asked him, “ how long does it take for you to make a song?” He said he starts freestlyng and finds the beat to go with and there he has a song. He did the same with “Lost Ones,” his biggest hit, but he definitely has many more to come.

He said he was working on a project, but he has a remix to “Lost Ones” coming out with Aminé and he stated that “he is on “All Gone” this year.” During the whole interview, he was very humble and gave his honest opinion on things. We’re almost the same age, so we share the same lingo—like I didn’t know people used cups like that. But

you can easily tell he is going to kill the rap game: people are already messing with him from that one song which was a positive song, and people liked that he is a positive rapper because that's what we need right now this time in the year. There's a lot of negative, so a song can change a lot of people and help them get through the day or even the month.

FELIX BULLOCK

FRANKLIN HIGH SCHOOL • WITS WRITER: MEG GRIFFITTS

## *Grim*

I am the absence of your burning brilliance,  
as you are the tides and I am the moon,  
push and pull, beck and call,  
and just because I am the lack  
of your blood and your butchery,  
that does not make me a villain.

I do not take from you  
what has not already been taken.  
I am a savior, in a twisted, featherlight way and  
you are all afraid of me,  
even those of you who claim not to be.  
Maybe it's my inevitability,  
the fact that I'll always come to Sunday dinner,  
whether you see me or not.  
Maybe it's something else,  
maybe it's a fear of rot.

You have depicted me in many ways:  
a pitch black cloak and a scythe;  
a embroidered collection of bones;  
a demon, a god;  
an angel;  
all made of lost life and moonshine.

Grief floods through the world like a fog,  
following me as I traverse unbidden obstacles and  
stumble on my way, as I am just as human as you are,  
in everything but name.

I ask you, am I robed in a shroud just to burn?  
Do you really despise me so much,  
to stone me in the street if you were to ever see me and not be on your  
deathbed or pleading?

Contrary to popular belief,  
I don't want you dead,  
and not because more death is ultimately more work,  
but because your fluidity and your life,  
well,  
they're lovely.

I am comprised of atrophy and rotten fruit,  
of lost things like wilted carnations the color of blood  
and women sacrificed to fickle gods.  
Of black roses, candle flames, dripping wax, white picket fences,  
spurned lovers, phoenixes and whatever you people call karma.  
I am everything bitter and broken.  
I am borne of forgotten promises and childhood dreams,  
of first loves and shipwrecks.  
I am not worthy of worship or affection.

But, I do not wish unkindness on you.  
I want you to laugh and to dream and to promise, and  
to live, all in ways I never had the chance to.  
I am your helplessness. I am your madness and your heartbreak.  
I am everything you do not want to see in yourself,  
and yet, I love you, and I envy you.  
You're alive, and I'm some facsimile of your beauty,  
trying and grasping for some semblance of something,  
something that isn't loneliness.

Because I'm alone,  
not out of choice,

but out of designation, and I want  
to be loved.  
Even though I know I am unworthy,  
that does not stop me from yearning and hoping  
for something like your genuine connection  
or your burning brilliance,  
but there is no light without darkness,  
and I live in every life's shadow.

I am your reflection,  
the push to your pull,  
the moon to your tides,  
the dark to your light.  
We're opposites.  
It's as simple as that,  
but yet you still wish for immortality,  
and I still wish for life.

## *The Cost*

“I can help you see your mom and dad again, for a price.”

Remembering her words echo in my ears, I knew I never should’ve trusted her. Seon was the fortune teller, gambler, and that nasty old hag of a scammer at that magic shop I never should’ve walked into. I was always creeped out by her and her poor and dying store. Her long hair was gray to white in messy braids, and her spotted olive skin was flabby and droopy like an old basset hound. She wore a horribly tacky laced purple dress that faded with age like how her eyes did.

Her magic shop was at the creepy corner of the street, dark and filthy. Nobody ever went into her shop and probably for a good reason. It was tiny and cramped, filled with dust, cobwebs, antique jars filled with “magic” beads, crystal balls, spellbooks, candles, everything you could imagine. There were never any lights except for maybe a couple of candles. Everyone avoided it like their life depended on it, but I went in. Just once. It was the worst decision of my life, or maybe I should say the life I have that’s at stake currently.

“Are you sure about this?”

“I’m sure, just sit down. Please.”

Zach and I, we’ve been best friends ever since we both met each other in college. Now, I don’t know if that’s the case anymore. He was always a laid back guy, did well in school, and despite the fact that he’d love to try something new, he never thought it would come down to me trying to contact my dead parents through some scary ritual you can’t escape. He never wanted to do this—I didn’t want it to come down to this—but it was Seon who started it all.

She never gave me any warnings—like how I would meet an impending doom of some sort—and I’m sure there are many other things that she hasn’t told me yet. If anything, she’s encouraged me to risk my life, to go for the one thing I’ve desired for so long even if

I didn’t know the price I’d pay. I only knew about the consequences because I came back to her wanting to stop the ritual and she told me. I thought it would be simple, that I could just say one last goodbye and say sorry for being such a terrible daughter, but maybe I should’ve known better than to mess with spirits. Now, I can’t go back to the world I had before all of this chaos. If I stop, I’ll die. If I go on and mess up, I’ll die. I guess there’s no other way out of it than forward.

Zach and I sat on the floor in silence, letting the world collapse in on us. The room was dark, only moonlight coming in, but maybe I preferred it so we wouldn’t have to see each other so distraught, so exhausted. His green eyes looked gray and dark circles formed around them. His once well-groomed head of blonde hair drooped to its side pathetically, and the simple gray hoodie and blue jeans he wore were covered in dirt.

It’s all my fault, and he knows—even if he doesn’t blame me for it. I probably look like a ghost, and if I could see my parents again, I bet I’d look just like them. Just like them. I always wished that I was a better daughter for my mom and dad. They both died in an accident last year while on a trip to visit my aunt in the next town over. “Bye hon, we’ll be back soon!” “Remember to lock the door, Star, dinner’s in the fridge, we love you!” And just like that, it was the last time I’d ever hear from them again. I found out what happened to them through watching the news on TV like I always did every evening. There was a fatal crash on the interstate, and the drivers and passengers from both cars died when one of them rear-ended the other. The station refused to state who the victims were, but I saw a familiar black sedan and the sad crooked license plate hanging off of it. I never got a text from them saying they got to their destination, and a woman from the hospital came to my house to tell me what happened. That’s how I knew. I try not to think about it often, because then I realize I’ll never be able to apologize for the awful excuse of a daughter that I was, and there have been days I wish I’d gone with them, because then I’d never be apart from them.

I snapped back to reality when Zach put his hand on my shoulder.

“You okay?”

“Yeah. I mean, I guess so.”

He brushed my hair out of my face along with the thoughts that plagued me, and it fell back into the long and tangled dark mess of oil and sweat that was my scalp. I’ve been so anxious these past two days I’ve managed to rip holes in my black jeans with my own fingers. I’ve never done that before. My monochrome shirt and jacket managed to look dusty and aged even though I’ve been wearing them this whole time.

“Star, come on, let’s do it. This is the last part, come on.” He coaxed me out of my thoughts to continue the ritual. I didn’t respond but watched as he got up, walking to the corner of the room. He pulled out the ouija board from his backpack. This is the last part. Seon gave it to him when he came back to her after we finished the second part of the ritual—the singing bowls. I didn’t want to see that rotten hag after she told me we couldn’t stop the ritual, so I made him go talk to her. I guess it doesn’t really matter just how mad I am anymore. We’re nearing the end, only closer to seeing them again, only closer to saying I’m sorry.

Zach placed the board on the ground with the planchette on top. He was holding a worn and soft notecard that had some faded ink etched into it.

“What’s that?”

“Some directions it seems.” He sat down next to me once again and we read over it. According to the old witch (who I assume wrote this), it’s a special board that demons can’t trick you with. I know I can’t trust her, but ever since the accident, I’ve went through every circle of Hell, through every stage of grief and back. I would never wish the pain of loss, the broken goodbyes, the desperate cries and nights begging for them to come back, onto anyone.

It took a few minutes to even comprehend what the directions said, it was so poorly written, but sure enough, we figured it out.

“Place your hands on the little triangle thing. Whatever that is.”

“Okay.”

The wooden planchette was dirty and gross, but I ignored it. There

were bigger things to worry about right now, after all. “Close your eyes. Star, you listening?” I nodded. I felt something nearby, but I ignored it. ““Deep within, conjure every feeling, memory, and everything you can remember about the desired spirit you wish to contact. Do this right, as otherwise the magic will not work.”” I nodded and kept my eyes shut tight like glue. Every feeling, memory, everything you can remember.

So I remembered. I remembered the final moments before they left, the last words they spoke to me that I never forgot. I remembered when they’d pick me up from school when I was younger in that old black sedan that ended up in the crash, how my mom and I made blueberry pie during our bad days, how my dad bought me my first guitar, how they always supported me and every hobby and passion I had and through every struggle I went through and I realize they always loved me. I never was a bad daughter to them, I was everything to them the same way they were everything to me. Tears welled up in my eyes and trickled down my face, and for once since the accident I was happy.

“Open your eyes,” Zach called out to me. I opened my eyes and the planchette moved on its own. “HELLO S-T-A-R.” We both freaked out. Zach pulled out his phone and started typing in his notes app to make sure we could understand the sentences.

“M-mom? Dad?”

“YES, B-O-T-H.”

I started crying, and for the first time ever, I saw Zach getting teary-eyed. We both sat at the board and watched the planchette move all over, writing down every phrase and sentence and letter we could make out. I told them about school and how living on my own has been hard, how I’ve missed them for so long.

After some time, the planchette was having a harder time moving around. I felt that strange energy from earlier start to fade away.

“I don’t think we have much time left,” said Zach in a grave tone. I tried to hurry up, tried to push through every hesitation.

“Mom, Dad, I’m sorry for being such a horrible daughter. I wish I could’ve been better before all of this happened.” Although the piece

of wood struggled to move, it spelled out “Y-O-U N-E-V-E-R W-E-R-E B-A-D.” And I cried harder than I ever have. It’s all I ever wanted to hear, yet it hurt knowing that this might be the last time I ever hear from them again. I took a deep breath, and struggling to utter my last words to them I break through and say, “I know you have to go now. I hope I see you again soon.”

“YES, W-E H-A-V-E A-L-W-A-Y-S B-E-E-N W-A-T-C-H-I-N-G O-V-E-R Y-O-U. T-H-I-S I-S N-O-T GOODBYE F-O-R-E-V-E-R.”

I choked up and could hardly breathe out my last words: “I love you.”

“U-2.”

Maybe it was them shorthanding their words as the clock ticked, or maybe they remembered that that was one of my favorite bands and wanted to see me smile again. But the one thing I knew for sure was that the nearby energy I sensed faded away when they did, and I mourned my parents in Zach’s arms once again.

It’s been a week since the whole incident. We both agreed that he’d stay at my place for a while to make sure I was safe, that I wouldn’t do anything stupid while I was alone. It was an early Sunday morning, maybe six o’clock, and he sat on my bed next to me. I was never an affectionate person with anyone, not even with my parents, but I leaned against him, letting reality cave in on me. It was all we did, and not a word was spoken. I’ve been avoiding the living room ever since I said my final goodbyes, but I have to go return the board to Seon and apologize to her. I cussed at her, blamed her, yelled profanities at her out of an anger that grew in my damaged soul for so long when it was also my fault for putting myself in danger.

I broke the silence “I’m gonna go return that board to Seon.”

“Want me to come with?”

“No, it’s okay. I’ll go on my own. Thank you for everything.”

I gave him a hug, got changed out of my pajamas in the bathroom, and carried the box with me on the way to the shop. Seon was expecting me, as she was standing outside at the front of the shop and gave me a

little wave. I never realized that she had long claws for fingernails.

“Oh wonderful, you’ve come back! How was it? Did you have fun?” She did a little laugh and took the box from me. “Perhaps this is the end now. I hope you got what you wanted, dear.” I nodded.

“I did get what I wanted. Thank you for everything. I’m sorry for what happened the other day. I was . . . a really messed up person. I shouldn’t have yelled at you like that.” Seon just waved her hand, as if she were brushing away my apology.

“No need for that, you silly thing.”

I’ve become more at peace with myself, with the world that surrounds me, thanks to her. I guess she isn’t all that bad.

“Oh, and by the way, just remember the price you paid for that,” she said. I was confused about what she had meant, until she said, “See you in Hell with your little friend, darling.”

LESLIE YURITZI HERNANDEZ  
ROOSEVELT HIGH SCHOOL • WITS WRITER: KATIE BORAK

## *Hope*

Hundred immigration families walk across miles of desert

meanwhile,

Deep rivers moving lonely

Clear soft sun

Over the bodies of animals

HALEY WAISANEN  
FRANKLIN HIGH SCHOOL • WITS WRITER: MATT SMITH

## *Galactica's Cradle*

The boy struggled to breathe. Shallow breaths were all he could gasp, yet his lungs swelled in agony. His keen senses were dulled further as powerful winds whipped sand into his eyes, muddling his environment into a blur.

“Where are we?” he asked.

The boy was surprised when his warden answered, “Mars.”

He had learned about the red planet: there were colonies on Mars before people moved onto space stations. Natural terrain had become unsustainable and unable to accommodate the growing population. Planets had been all but abandoned in their solar system.

The boy hurried alongside his warden as they proceeded into the deserted colony. Weathered settlements stood strong against the constant storm, but the streets had been reduced to crumbling paths.

The heady aroma of sulfur curled in the air. The boy gagged at the scent. He wanted to go home. As he began to complain, he felt his warden's fist become a vise around the sensitive bracelet of bruises on his thin wrist.

The boy's mouth snapped shut and he swallowed his complaints. He wondered how his warden navigated their route. The organized area of plain buildings and red sand all looked the same to him.

When they made another seemingly arbitrary turn, his warden sighed. He lifted the boy into his arms, “Hold your breath and close your eyes,” he muttered.

The boy hardly processed the unusual command when his warden stepped forward and they were twisted under the ground. He had never traveled by quicksand before and struggled in his warden's grip. When he learned his movement only slowed their descent he froze.

The experience was uncomfortable. Rough sand churned over his skin as he was pulled deeper beneath the surface. To calm his nerves,



he counted the seconds until his next breath. His lungs burned as he reached thirty-six, but no later: he plummeted onto the ground in a pume of sand. He and his warden coughed until their eyes watered and stretched their screaming muscles when someone cleared their throat.

His warden stood first, brushing off his cloak. He didn't seem surprised by their company. "You chose quite the complicated location," he barked.

"I like to keep my place of business secure, Matthias," the voice echoed. It seemed they were in a cavern. Jagged, rust-colored stalactites hung overhead.

His warden, Matthias, followed the voice. "This is him, trader Kor." He pushed the boy forward.

As he approached, the boy saw it was a man dressed in similar robes to his warden. He looked normal, human even, save for the opalescent sheen to his brown skin. His full lips were drawn into a frown.

Matthias smiled. "He may not be much to look at now—he has only survived five cycles. But I guarantee you, once he is fully matured he will be striking, formidable, unstoppable."

"Please, clarify his ancestry," Kor demanded skeptically.

"His mother is Xenai." The boy had just a slight memory of his mother, but knew of the Xenai. A predominantly female race of humanoids, they were significantly larger and stronger than humans and were native to a neighboring solar system.

Kor tilted his head in interest, "And his sire?"

"Human, from the blood of the First Terrans," Matthias replied.

Kor nodded. "Yes, this is acceptable. To maintain his loyalty," he continued, "is it as you have said?"

"I have spoken the truth." Matthias stood behind the boy and grasped his shoulders. "If he consumes your blood, he will be tied to you until death. It is an intimate and little known Xenai tradition to connect ones as kin."

Kor considered Matthias' words. "And he cannot harm who he is bound to?"

"No," Matthias responded firmly, "it would be impossible. He

would be devoted, even die for the one he is bound to."

The boy was confused by the information he gathered from their exchange and wanted to interject. But he was still reeling from the lack of oxygen reaching his brain. In his weakened state he would not survive a punishment from his looming warden.

"It would be advantageous for someone in your particular line of business to have such a loyal and unassailable companion, as I assure you this child will become," Matthias persuaded.

Kor tossed the boy's warden a small, thin fund chip, which he quickly pocketed. "Oh, he's not for me," the trader explained. "You see, the Councillors of Zleta Prime have just had a child who will require said services."

The boy grimaced at the thought of a wailing baby.

Kor produced a vial from the folds of his cloak. Through the glass, ruby liquid shimmered. "Drink." Kor pushed the uncorked vial to the boy's lips, but he kept them pursed and shook his head.

Matthias steadied the boy with one hand and squeezed his cheeks with the other, compelling his lips to part.

Once the blood was pooled into his mouth, the boy immediately felt his throat close. He stopped breathing. Panic assaulted him as numbing pinpricks overcame the spongy membrane beneath his tongue. Dark veins under the smooth surface pulsed before they unsealed to absorb the foreign liquid into his bloodstream.

He saw the two men backing away when convulsions briefly overtook his body. The alien blood intermixed with his own. A rush of euphoria and pain flooded his senses and forced him to his knees, where he curled onto his side until the feeling dissipated.

He lay with his temple pressed against the ground, shivering, when the tissue in his mouth sealed and his airways opened. As he inhaled his first ragged breaths as a tied Xenai, he noticed a tugging sensation in his chest that he knew would be a constant ache.

He felt confused and hurt. His instincts understood that the cherished tradition of his foremothers, his own biology, had been exploited to control him, to subject him to a life of servitude. With

much effort from his exhausted body, he pulled himself back up to his feet. "That was quite a sight," Kor exclaimed.

The boy remembered he was not alone.

"Well done." Satisfaction smoothed Kor's expression into a handsome smile. "You have earned a designation. You will be called Saber."

The boy, Saber, was momentarily stunned. He tested the word on his lips silently, the two syllables felt unfamiliar.

Kor found the boy's reaction amusing. "One last thing," he added, "will Saber's charge be required to take his blood as well?" He turned to Matthias.

"That is not necessary. The bond can simply remain one-sided," Matthias assured. Kor nodded once. "Come along, halfling." He gripped the boy's arm and hummed with humor. "Your new kindred is waiting for you."

Suddenly, Saber's new christening slipped from his thoughts. The pain concerning the circumstances of his forced binding vanished. Instead, he felt the tugging in his chest reinforce at the mention of the one whose blood now fused with his own. A wave of intensity washed over his psyche and he desperately longed to—no matter how far or treacherous the journey to Zleta Prime—close the distance between them.

JAY WEIL

BENSON HIGH SCHOOL • WITS WRITER: JULES OHMAN

### *The beige complex on 2nd avenue, circa 2017*

Worship these empty white walls

This twin-sized hard mattress and the camera that watches

Love the shower that barely works, the lack of towels

Praise the window that looks over the city, 4 stories up

The locks that close it.

Worship the tall white fence and the people who try to peek through it

The bark chips that get into my shoes

Love the sounds of screams, the smell of sickness

Praise the woman that stares too much, eyes filled with disgust

And somehow pity.

Worship the daily check ins

The blood pressure cuff and the pills i have to swallow

Love the loss of contact, the visits from a person i hate

Praise the empty gifts she gives, lies she tells

The birthday card that sits torn up in the bin.

Worship the locked room

The thoughts that grow louder and the fear that closes in

Love the lonely 24 hours, the movies on repeat

Praise the tears that fall, the itchy sheets they wet

The anger that boils heavy in my chest .

Worship the meeting

Alone in a room with 3 other people

Love the glare that shines from eyes, the paper i will hide away in my drawers

Praise the ride home, the small car and rush of adrenaline  
The bags in the back seat, the soft words exchanged  
These 12 long days.

OLIVIA FORREST  
FRANKLIN HIGH SCHOOL • WITS WRITER: MEG GRIFFITTS

### *Contrasted Liberation*

Oh, how beautiful she lies, within this dystopian dynamic of governments. A union, of which held more negative effects than what had been previously expected. Though, it's okay. She is now exhibited, upon the soil, like a circus animal; something to watch, observe, she feels . . . lab-ratted. Studied, through only the sky, she feels judged, wondering if a spot resides reserved for her up there, or if rather, she'll meet a more . . . negative . . . eternity. She'd hoped not, for maybe there'd be nothing; ignoring the emptiness she felt inside from this thought, she also found comfort within the eye of the storm. The concept of loss or lack within thought she found profoundly soothing. A gentle, forever release. Something she'd wished she'd never have to long for, although there was no longer much to be done. The dominos had fallen—every societal mousetrap, every occurrence of mass-manipulation had struck. A lack of damage to put forth, she felt, as she didn't truly feel humans could lack any more empathy than they had previously presented. This said, she really did not understand the extent of the past destruction, thus she found that the prior evidence may repeat amongst itself.

Red began to seep, concealing the cashmere lining among her wrist, dying her sleeves crimson; though her heart had never darned them, she knew that this would depict her emotion. Though she didn't truly hold much thought for human influence, as humanity had proven time and time again that compassion could not halt greed. Stemming from this reflex, selfishness only gained in growth, the decay of the Earth consuming the skies within harsh tangerine; though through egocentricity society became colorblind. The geographical world's outlook had been long forgotten: vintage climate change articles, dirty with graffiti, mustered themselves atop the grounds every so often, always either ignored or scoffed upon. Maybe not within a literal sense, the basic concern was held within most, though ignorance canceled

out any positive interest that had been exhibited prior. Most turned toward the chapels for assistance, prayer and holy relief overflowing households and churches throughout the nation, hope for another world, resources, more life. But day after day, NASA rovers had returned empty-handed, and soon, the economy would no longer support the immense mission conduct astronauts had begun to endure.

She could not quite pinpoint whether humanity was too intelligent, or rather not intelligent enough, serving through avarice. She had decided this was the latter, as she acknowledged today's society had peaked academically, though could grow mounds in emotional understanding. This was what made it so hard to let go, to release this grip, turning her knuckles white; she felt, and she thought, and she grieved, like a human, but no one would ever care, because they were human. This was her closing acceptance, loosening her yield upon the constraints she was born inward of. Conflicted with herself, as she hoped to journey upward, she felt somewhat relieved. To no longer exhibit, execute, only for that of which to endure not one eye. As red fed the fertilizer that lay beneath her, she felt her turmoil soaking into the ground amidst the fluid, as her sedate pursuit of calm had begun to overtake her. As her final breaths were set into motion, staring skyward, she pondered, and through a final inhalation, "Will they finally detect my conveyance?"

JACKSON SPEAR

McDANIEL HIGH SCHOOL • WITS WRITER: ALEX BEHR

## *Glenhaven*

Dear Glenhaven skatepark  
A concrete maze filled with happiness  
And also loud banging  
Metal on metal violently grinding  
Sometimes people go flying  
Before finding a rude awakening on their return to earth And they  
would be lying  
If they said gravity and concrete is soft and forgiving

Dear Glenhaven skatepark  
Where I wasted away so many hours  
Filled with a sea of skateboards  
In the shadow of rocky butte  
And times I was only accompanied by the strange man  
Rugged and explosive  
Not a skater but a regular face  
His eyes were rapidfire  
Like he was searching for a place  
A place outside of this skateboard bowl he is trapped in.  
For a much needed rest but for now he just searches for survival  
Or a bottle to put in his bag  
Before he moves on to his next space  
Glenhaven, I've been there when the rain came like an early goodbye  
call

When we had to skate through piles of leaves in the fall  
When wildfire ashes consumed the corners growing tall  
But we stayed there and experienced it all.  
accompanied by the strange man

Looking rugged and explosive  
Trapped in the big bowl by drugs and fear  
I've been there when the rain came like an early goodbye call

When we had to skate through piles of leaves in the fall  
When wildfire ashes consumed the corners growing tall  
But we stayed there and experienced you through it all.

ANGELYNE VALDEZ  
ROOSEVELT HIGH SCHOOL • WITS WRITER: DEY RIVERS

### *A Glimpse of my Grandmother's American Dream*

We walk and walk for ages, and it seems like we will never arrive. I feel horrible whenever I see sweat dripping down their faces. I'm their mother. I'm supposed to be the one who's sweating. But I know, in the back of my mind, I am taking them somewhere better. Somewhere they will have a future. Where Nuri can get treatment, where Sandra can become a nurse, and where Paco can find the love of his life. I know that all our pain and suffering will be worth it in the end. One night we sit around the fire, eating beans out of a can and drinking water which we'd found hidden in a bush. Sandra, Nuri, and Paco had ate just enough food to fall asleep. I watch their bellies rise and fall. They lay skin to skin on the rough ground to keep as warm as possible. It's the coldest night we've had yet, and I can see the goosebumps popping out from their skin. I remove my jacket and place it over the top half of their bodies. My arms are now freezing, but knowing that I shield them from the cold sweeps of wind warms my body more than any old jacket can.

#### At the End of the Day

Two figures are arguing. The same two figures as always. The faint feeling of fear starts to loom like a fly over her head, because she knows she can't retaliate against all of his anger. She begins to bake in the heat of his stare and he gets a subtle chill from her icy glare. The noise in the room gradually gets louder, but nobody else seems to hear. At the peak of her distress, she lets out her most thundering yell yet. In turn, a quick pulse of pure fury strikes through him, and he smashes the object nearest to him. A cry follows the crash. The air in both lungs begin to regulate, as they stand in a stiff state of shock.

They take in the scene of the sharp shards of glass on the floor. He quickly rushes over to her side and the fight ends with an embrace, because the chaos was much too loud this time around.

LUCIA WEISBERG

FRANKLIN HIGH SCHOOL • WITS WRITER: MATT SMITH

## *Elevation*

“I can’t believe they got another one.”

“I can. God, you think they’d learn by now. Lazy, selfish beasts.”

“You think they deserve it?”

“I mean, they know what they’re doing. You mess with that, you end up with a knife in your gut. Or poison in your bloodstream. Or strangled. Better safe than sorry, right?”

“I guess . . .”

“You’d dare consider taking an elevator these days? Really?”

“Oh, no, of course not.”

~  
Before the sirens, before the pooling blood on the cold pseudo-metal floor, before she collapsed, before the knife slid between her ribs, before the doors scraped shut and the stranger turned to her with a smug smile, she was thinking about the music of the elevator.

Calming. Simple. A way to separate her from the outside world. Her life had gone so far downhill.

If she died, well, then she died, she’d reasoned when she’d walked into the elevator. Ignored the whispers of the people clustered in the lobby. And if she lived, she got the euphoria of knowing that she’d survived a scrape with death.

Later, she discovered that she very much wanted to go on living, but by then it was red blood spilling out of her and burning pain as she gasped for breath and much, much too late to go back.

~  
She scrolled through her phone. A clunky old piece of machinery, inefficient as all hell but still somehow capable of her needs. She’d given up on her search for job listings at the moment and was instead fixated on the spray of murders in the news. Indeed, there was something uncanny about them—the culprit was never found, even

though every single recent murder was carried out inside an elevator in a busy public building. Even with this predictability, the authorities had caught exactly zero culprits. Maybe the police didn't have enough time to patrol all the elevators, she reasoned.

She sighed as her phone flashed an alert—red, low battery, plug in your phone you monster, she imagined it saying. It was already plugged into the halfway broken charger in her dusty apartment. It just wasn't charging fast enough. It was at least ten years outdated, and it showed.

The phone blinked its warning at her again and she powered it down with a blink, then stood, wiping her hands on her well-worn jeans. One good thing to come out of this era—housing for everyone, as apartments vacated after the horrific disease that had killed almost two-thirds of the world's population. She was secure here, a security she hadn't had before. Food was another matter; she was running low, again, and she still hadn't managed to find a new job. A smaller population means less consumers, after all, and most of the menial tasks—customer service, taking orders—were now held by either robots or kids just out of middle school. The last few jobs, she'd been turned away for being 'overqualified', which was code for 'too old'.

A nagging pain in her gut reminded her, yet again, of how desperately hungry she was. There wasn't much of anything she could do about it.

~

She woke before the sun, her whole body aching with hunger and the strain of being slept on all wrong.

"Fine," she whispered to herself, discovering with no small amount of surprise that her voice was still in working condition. And then, she surprised herself again with a short laugh.

There was a portion of a stale loaf of bread in the cupboard, and the end of a block of cheese in the fridge. At least dairy and meat prices had dropped after the disease. Small consolation to all those that, like her, had been forced out of their jobs for various reasons.

Her hunger abated, and she dressed hastily, tugging a pair of faded jeans over her hips without unbuttoning them, replacing the shirt she'd slept in with a clean one. Maybe she'd have more luck finding a job if

she went door to door. Or at least, that's what she told herself.

~

The crackly radio installed in one corner of her apartment fell silent. She paused mid-chew, waiting for the music to come back on. Please just be dead air.

Three beeps, and her heart sank.

"Hello, citizens of East Aurora. It has been brought to the attention of your local authorities that another murder has occurred. Do not be alarmed. The murder is under investigation and we are taking all precautions available to us at this time. For safety, please travel in groups of two or more at all times."

Another beep, and the music came softly back on, fuzzily blanketing her fear. It had been months since the first reported murder, and still there was little to no information. There was a rumor going around that the killer attacked citizens who took elevators alone—for what reason, no one could say.

There was another rumor going around that it wasn't just one killer, it was an organization, and it had tied the hands of the authorities. Now that was laughable. Crazy, the things that she heard while doing her odd jobs, that she heard just walking down the streets every day. Even through the flimsy walls of her apartment. Complaints about the price of commodities (it used to be so much worse! she always wanted to tell them), details about the newest killings, whispered transactions, small talk.

The song stopped, and another one started, jolting her out of her reverie. She stood shakily, her left foot tingling painfully as it woke, and set the disposable dishes carefully in the sink.

~

She lasted all of four days before she was too hungry, too lethargic, to even search for a job. It was all she could do to drag herself from room to room, to the kitchen to get a glass of water, to the bedroom to sleep, to her tiny living room to listen to the music on the radio, calming and simple. It distracted her from her hunger, temporarily.

She was sitting on the floor of her apartment, staring blankly at the

wall, when she heard a knock on the door. She couldn't bring herself to move, until she heard the scrape of a key turning in the lock, and then desperation brought her to her feet.

The door swung open creakily, revealing a figure silhouetted in the doorway. She blinked against the bright light. Am I dying? Maybe she was. She'd been so hungry . . .

The figure spoke.

"We have a proposition for you."

Not dying, then. Not yet. She lifted her chin just slightly, adjusting to the brightness of the hallway. The figure's eyes were a startling gold.

"And that would be?" she asked, shocking herself in her boldness. The figure shifted, adjusting its balance. She could make out the shadow of a smile on its face.

"What would you do for a full meal every day? A warm shower? Never having to worry about money, as long as you live?"

She didn't miss a beat. "For that, I'd kill."

AYDEN BRANNON

McDANIEL HIGH SCHOOL • WITS WRITER: BRUCE POINSETTE

## *Crenshaw Wisdom*

My Hip Hop Lit teacher, Mr. Gardner, told me a few things about Mic Crenshaw and it caught my attention. I was interested. I hit up Mic Crenshaw on Instagram through DMs and said, "Hi my name is Ayden Brannon I'm a 12th grader at Madison High School. I am really interested in your life story. I'm in a Hip Hop Lit class taught by Jesse Gardner aka Jesse the Imaginer and would like to interview you about your journey as a Hip Hop artist. Would January 12th at 11 p.m. work for you?"

He hit me back and said that an interview on January 12th at 11 a.m. would be great for him and that Zoom would be the preferred video chat app. When the day of the interview finally came around, I invited Mic to the Zoom call through email. He joined the Zoom call and he was chilling in a room in his house sitting in a chair. The thing that caught my eye and stood out the most in the room was the Zimbabwean flag he had hanging on the wall in the room.

Mic was born in Southside Chicago, where one day he was eight years old in the Boys Club and someone had a boombox playing and "Rappers Delight" came on and Mic remembered thinking as a little boy, "This is our music, something about hearing that Black voice talk like that to the beat was something I had never heard before and it immediately felt powerful."

What I learned from talking to Mic is that something that may end up being your career could be something you just did/do for fun and never thought you would take it seriously. The thing I learned the most in Hip Hop Lit class was how to properly interview somebody.



NATE BABWAH  
WeBSS• WITS WRITER: CJ WIGGAN

## *Blindly Navigating*

I was born in Silverton Oregon, where the sound of the falls sets your mind at ease, the smell of the earth calms your soul and the feel of dirt under your feet takes you to another world.

In the year of my birth, Hurricane Katrina stole property, dreams and life from far too many people.

Parents and Grandparents celebrated my milestones, each one more significant than the last.

A new world opened up and swallowed me whole. Teaching me how to navigate a world where I'm different.

At home I was the center of attention. My Mother always encouraging me to taste, smell, and touch something new.

In summer, we took trips to magical places. With salty air, cool breezes, and warm sand under my chubby feet.

The world was brought to silence as mass shootings broke out across the nation.

My world was shattered as my Father left. My Mother broken and lost trying to smile through tears. Me comforting my sister from her fears.

As if overnight, I was the man of the house.  
Still part child and part grown.

After my Hero went into the light, We uprooted and settled in our new role of roommates.

Trying to learn the music from my Father's homeland but with my own spin.

Starting a new chapter in uncertain times scared I'll meet my demise, so we all have to stay inside.

Scared that this unknown killer will take someone I love, I hibernate in my room with worry.

The fear of losing loved ones opens old wounds. The future seems out of my grasp. How long can this last?

Time moves on like a melancholy song.

Even surrounded by family I feel small and alone. I am stronger today then I was yesterday, but not as strong as I'll be tomorrow.

Friends and teachers at a distance makes for hard connections.

Trying to stay positive in a world full of negativity.

I may be blind, but I can see my future crystal clear.

HANNAH DOTY  
FRANKLIN HIGH SCHOOL • WITS WRITER: LAURA MOULTON

## *Bubble Blisters*

That moment of pure bliss, like the Earth swallowing you up whole. Moments before, adrenaline rushing through your veins to the tips of your finger nails, tingling for something that might never be, anticipating that splash. The cool, silky immersion of sinking slowly into the water. Like the moment you wake up from a long slumber and don't remember anything, an utter blank state of mind. The only thing that fills your mind is bubbles, air, cold, dark, swish, slosh, splash. Clawing and crawling, pulling on emptiness to get towards what your mind knows is sound again, is light again, is air again. Reaching the surface, beginning to crave, hopping up, climbing up, standing up, all over again just to feel that moment.

That moment of exhilaration with the blistering sun beaming down on my freckled shoulders showing no signs of stopping. But that's okay because I'm searching for the cool submersion of euphoria. Of a whole new world we can't be a part of because we are unable to hold our breath long enough to observe that we don't fit in there at all. I ponder if there are fish below, below my toes, swerving and scared, as big lanky creatures leap one after another, crashing deep into their homes, swarming them with thousands of bubbles from above, from the air they've never tasted. Questioning why we come down at all if we can't stay for lunch or look around. But I won't know yet because everytime I make that jump, I squeeze my eyes tight, scared of what might be, excited of what might not.

JARREL NAVARRO  
McDANIEL HIGH SCHOOL • WITS WRITER: DAMIEN MILES-PAULSON

## *How to Become an Artist*

First, you wanna try something completely different, literally anything that comes to your mind. Maybe try out for sports and try to be the next Michael Jordan. You could even try a spot in music and be the next Elton John or David Bowie. Try out for piano practice. Then fail miserably and find out that you're awful at both and accept that you aren't athletic or musically gifted. It's good to fail then shift your interests when you're young, I would say around six to nine years old. If you're already an anti-social introvert, then you're already one step ahead. Critical disillusionment is necessary to notice your love for cartoons.

Once you're around nine to ten years old, try drawing what you see on the screen on a sheet of paper. Soon, you'll end up finding yourself drawing Spongebob until you're twelve. After three years, show your hard work to your Mom; with a smile and a slight giggle, she'll hang it up on the fridge. You then show your drawing to your Dad. He glances at it with a blank expression, he looks back at you and only six words come out of his mouth: "You can do better than that!" Walk away, sit at your desk, and crumple up your hard work and toss it in the trash. Feel your excitement drop below sea level and wallow away in bed. Don't retreat just yet: your lost confidence, pain, and doubt are required in order to become an artist. This is only the tip of the iceberg.

In your junior year of high school, Period 4 art class: Mr. Graves's face and posture can tell you how your progress is. Draw a face, use a washer to help draw your rough sketch. You don't have to be fancy with it—you are a beginner, after all. Erase any unnecessary outline and give it the finishing touches. Once you've double-checked every

detail and are 100% happy with the result, turn it in. When you get it back, he'll only have one thing to say to you once he has handed it back: "You got the proportions just right, but you really rushed it, maybe take your time next assignment." When school ends, go home and observe your drawing, and try drawing it once again. This time, using his advice, you draw until sunset, you make sure every detail is correct. Once the sun has set and you have finished your drawing, you compare it to the one in class. Mr. Graves was right: with a little more time and effort, the outcome will be less of a headache.

SOPHIE CANNON

FRANKLIN HIGH SCHOOL • WITS WRITER: MATT SMITH

## *You and Prophecy*

You open your eyes. A voice you've never heard of speaks to you. It's an old, wheezy, slow voice that makes you slightly sleepy to listen to, but every word holds power. The voice booms, "Be not afraid."

You look around quickly. Although your vision is blurry, no one is in sight. You're certain you're completely alone in the area you stand in. The voice surrounds you—it's all you can hear as it starts to speak yet again: "Brave warrior," like thunder, "the reason you are here is not yet explainable. My identity and your true location is not of importance as of yet. The only pressing matter is that you reach the top of the mountain you see before you. In the garden, you will find your placement in the greater narrative. I plead you to follow my instruction." With this, your other senses gradually begin to adapt to your unfamiliar surroundings. The voice speaks no more.

Almost as if the voice was forcing you to hold your breath, you take a deep, sudden gasp of breath. You blink a few times, your eyes finally beginning to focus. You realize, with a start, you're in a forest. It's beautiful. Wholly and entirely beautiful. The saturated green of the grassy floor beneath your feet and the dark, muted greens of the sky-bound pine trees are surprisingly contrasted, although different shades of the same pigment. You inhale deeply, fresh scents of crisp air fill your lungs. You almost forget the strange encounter you had only minutes ago just taking in your new surroundings.

Abruptly, you look down at your hands. You must still be you: those do look like your hands. You feel your chest, you pat your thighs quickly before touching your face, now becoming panicked. Where are you? How did you get here? Who was just speaking to you? Confusion clogs your rationale like leaves over a storm drain. You are far from home. How did you get here, how did you get here?

You begin to pace now, nervously. Who was that? Where was that

voice coming from? You notice a small pond a few paces away, you dash quickly over. You kneel down, scoop the clear, cool water into your cupped hands, and splash it over your face. You sputter slightly, blinking. Well, still here. This can't be a dream. That water was too cold and your shirt is now too wet for this to all be a dream.

For the majority of the population, this is the perfect time to start freaking out. Unfortunately for you, you are included in the majority of the population. Your breathing starts to feel forced, the pacing of each inhale beginning to become hasty and rugged. What do you do? There isn't anyone around. Is there anyone around?

"Hello?" you shout, scared.

No response.

You take a deep breath, "Hello?" you shout again, louder, more desperate. Nothing.

There must have been someone around—that voice couldn't have come from nowhere. It had to be someone.

God, oh god.

If you weren't hyperventilating before, you certainly are now. You curl your hands into fists, hold them close to your stomach, your top half folds into your knees. You push your fists further into your core, your knees feel weak. You have to try to relax yourself. Okay, calm down. Calm down. Just—

"Calm down!"

Your head shoots up, hands still fists clenched close to your gut.

Several feet in front of you, behind the thick trunk of a ginormous pine tree, is a young man. He's thin and tall, with long hair falling over wide, bare shoulders. The surrounding shrubbery is too dense to see anything below his waist. His chest is puffed out, and you squint to make out his face. Although blurry, he's definitely smiling. "It's ok!" he shouts again. "It's ok, just please calm down."

Your lungs fill quickly with relief. He takes a step forward, slowly. It sounds heavier than you would expect. You open your mouth to thank him, but as the stranger walks slowly closer to you, no sound escapes your lips. Where you expect to see two human legs, the boy

in front of you has four skinny, slightly knobbly looking deer legs. As he approaches, you see two small protrusions on the top of his head surfacing from the waves of brown hair: horns. Adolescent deer horns.

"My name is Herschel," he starts, carefully. "You're not from here."

He's close to you now. His young face nervously reads your expression, thick eyebrows furrowing at the sight of you. He seems timid, but excited. He's . . .

What is he?

You snap your mouth shut, your brain trying to catch up with your eyes. You clear your throat and hold out your hand to shake. You feel your mouth open again, maybe to introduce yourself . . . Yet again, you still can't get any words out. Carefully, he takes your hand, grasps lightly, and moves your arm slowly up and down in an awkward shake.

"You must be so confused," Herschel says, your hands still clasped in a prolonged handshake. You shrug, completely unsure on what to say. You must be staring at this point. "What's your name, stranger?"

Once again, you open your mouth to answer. This time, surprise is not to be blamed for your lack of reply. Confusion furrows your brow as you stop moving your hand. Herschel gently lets your hand go and you don't even notice it fall to your side. You blink rapidly, trying to tell yourself you know your own name. You look up quickly. Herschel's expression becomes worried. If you weren't so concerned about your apparent loss of memory, you might have been offended at his look of pity. Your face falls into your hands, your shoulders tense. What is going on?

"Hey . . ." Herschel starts. "Don't—hey, it's alright. Just . . ."

You begin to shake. Your face feels hot and your eyes begin to well with tears. You look up at him, helpless.

Herschel's worry turns sad, his words are soft. "It's ok, friend. It's going to be alright, I promise." Both of his arms reach out and grab a delicate hold on both of your biceps. "I'm here to help you. You'll think this was all a dream by the time you're through. This is step one. Things will get easier to understand, I swear it."

He smiles slightly now, but your face only shows more confusion.

Step one? By the time I'm through?

"You heard Prophecy, right?" Herschel asks you. "An old man's voice, just before you started yelling? It's disorienting, I've been told. Oftentimes you can't remember anything. I've read your first arrival is supposedly very . . . difficult."

You nod slowly.

He knows you heard a voice.

"Let me explain," Herschel looks up to the sky, "though we need not waste daylight." His eyes meet yours now, he's smiling excitedly again. "So, I'll make this quick. I'm your Doceo. I'm to help you through your arrival and get you on your way. I am not sure what Prophecy told you, but my people, centaurs that is, of course, is to train three young fawnfolk to become Doceo. You're my first arrival to help!"

Herschel's excitement makes him talk quickly, but your desperation to know your situation makes you cling to his every word. Still, it is hard to follow along.

Prophecy . . . Doceo . . . and . . .

Well, you've never met a centaur until now.

"Do not worry about your body outside of this realm, you are certainly here and in the now, just transported." Herschel explains. "Understand so far?"

You remain confused, yet you nod anyway, hoping it will bring you more of an explanation. The young centaur smiles at you. "Perfect. Now for the fine print, as you may call it." His smile turns urgent. "You do not have to comply with Prophecy. There are many who share a connection with Prophecy, like yourself, but do not know it. Many do not wish to follow his quest. Many quests are often shared with many who hold a connection. I am urged to tell you: you are to choose your own path. If you wish not to take your adventure, all you must do is fall asleep, right here. You will be transported back and have little to no recollection of this ever happening, you might think it was all a dream."

You look back at the pond that you tried to wake yourself with, then down at your still-wet front.

"So," Herschel's words draw your attention back to eye contact, "do

you wish to take this journey? It may be a long one."

The question feels out of place. You've been thrown into your current setting and spoon-fed information since you met Herschel, and now you're getting a choice whether or not to continue this insane story. You can choose to close this book, ignore this chance for adventure, or continue on, blind until you face what you must face. You look around once again, then at your hands, your feet. You touch your wet shirt, then meet your new ally's gaze once again. He seems to be trying to hold back his hope. You close your eyes, trying to remember Prophecy's words . . .

Pressing matter . . . mountain . . . garden . . . greater narrative . . . plea.

With newfound certainty, you open your eyes.

You nod curtly. You've made your decision.

Yes.

Herschel smiles the widest he has since you have met him. He takes a small step forward and engulfs you in a swaddling hug. He's denitely stronger than he looks. He lets go of you, takes a step back, still beaming.

"Amazing!" he says. "Perfect! Now we can begin!"

Herschel turns quickly and walks to a large bush on the other side of the pond you splashed yourself with. Now dedicated, you follow him, feeling that you must. He reaches down, searching in the dark leaves for . . .

"Aha!"

The bush makes a rustle noise as Herschel drags a long oak chest from inside it. His front two legs kneel to reach the chest. Excitedly, he unlatches the top of the chest and throws the open lid back. The hinges of the chest creak and you peek into the chest from behind Herschel. Before the two of you is a thick, heavy-looking longsword. Herschel picks up the sword slowly, standing on all four legs and turning to you.

"For you," he states, smile turned proud, handing you the blade, as you pointedly decide to not question why there was a seemingly random chest in a seemingly random bush, and why Herschel knew

about it, trying not to make you feel set up.

Carefully, you take the sword from Herschel's hands. It's certainly lighter than you expected. You feel like you have seen swords similar: it's not too shiny and certainly not bedazzled with any expensive gemstones, but it's black leather hilt has a small decoration hanging from the rainguard. A small, red wax symbol, attached to a short piece of brown twine, is stamped on a piece of the same leather as the handle of your sword. The symbol is simple, but unknown to you. Pressed in the wax, two triangle outlines overlap each other, one pointing up and the other pointing down, making a sort of star shape. In between each corner of the star is a dot. An open eye stares at you from the center of the seal.

From the outskirts of your vision, you can see Herschel turning once more. Your focus breaks from your new weapon as you watch Herschel kneel again, reach into the chest, and stand back up. He turns to you, holding out a simple, sturdy scabbard. The scabbard is made of a polished silvery metal and more black leather, with a thick leather strap so you can equip your sword easily. You step back from Herschel now, sliding your sword into its scabbard. You sling your sword over your shoulder, letting the weight of the blade sag on your back. You look up to Herschel for approval, now feeling slightly awkward. Herschel's toothy smile fills his entire face. He looks up and down at you, practically glowing. You can't help but smile with him, trying to overshadow your anxiety.

You don't even know how to use a sword.

Herschel's warm hands on your shoulders bring you back to the present—you must have been spacing out.

"Friend, here, you will know how to use all equipment you find. It's set for you. Hopefully, you won't even need to use this weapon," he gestures to your back, "Prophecy gives your body the knowledge to protect yourself, only if you need. You're not here to fight just yet. You'll be sent back home as soon as you finish what Prophecy asked of you."

You take a deep breath, air pours into your lungs like liquid. It calms

you to know you're safe . . . or you should be safe. With this, Herschel looks to the sky again, hands still holding your shoulders. He looks down quickly.

"Adventurer, I have provided you your first step," his hands now moved to your shoulders. "Your next steps are yours for the taking."

Your Doceo turns, his body no longer facing you, four legs positioned perpendicular to your left side.

"I'm told you are to follow the setting sun, but that's a silly way of putting 'go west.'" He waves his arm out to indicate you forward. Another deep breath fills your chest. Another. Once more.

Okay.

"I believe in you."

You look to Herschel again, he's smiling. It calms you more than your breath did. A determined smile.

You can do this.

"Goodbye, friend."

You can do this.

Deep breath. In. Out.

"Goodbye, Herschel."

## *The Package*

It was the early morning and a thick fog had settled over the city. Nora looked focused, almost upset, as she tore down the Westside Highway. Her hand rested on a box that sat on the passenger seat of her car. The box read “Handle with Care.”

Nora had moved to New York about six months prior, right before the start of her freshman year of college. Growing up in a small town, Nora had always dreamed of living in a big city, and now, her dream was a reality. But she never could have imagined what would happen.

Suddenly, the phone rang. “Hello?” Nora said. “Yes, I’m on my way to the safe house now. I have the package. Yes. I’ll call Will when I get there.” It was Hayden Phoenix. She had met him her first week in the city. He had shown her his favorite place to get coffee. Now he was calling her to check on the pendant’s location. Tears welled up in her eyes as she pressed her foot down on the gas pedal even harder. What have I gotten myself into? she thought. And how am I going to get out of it?

“Nora? You still there?”

“Yes. Sorry. Still here. Just a bit distracted.”

“Well, snap out of it,” he ordered. “This is not the time to be distracted. People’s lives are at stake. Nora, you do understand the gravity of our situation, don’t you?”

That was it. “Of course I understand, Hayden,” she yelled through the phone. “This stupid pendant is all I have thought about in five months! I am supposed to be in college, going to parties and getting drunk on cheap beer, not worried about whether or not some insane wizard wannabe is going to destroy the entire east coast! Before six months ago, I didn’t even know witches exist, let alone that I was one. Do you understand that, Hayden?” She hung up the phone and peeled off the highway down the exit marked “Pier 77.”

She pulled into the parking lot underneath the pier. She had been to the pier once before when she had gone on a cruise with her parents that had stopped in the city for one day. She quickly picked her phone back up and dialed the number that connected her to William Augustine’s office.

“William Augustine’s office. How may I help you?”

“Hi. This is Nora Michaels, Mr. Augustine’s fiancée. Can I speak to him, please?”

“I’m sorry Ms. Michaels, Mr. Augustine is in a very important meeting at the moment. He can’t come to the phone.”

“He knows I’m calling, just put me through please.”

“Miss, I can’t do that—”

“PUT ME THROUGH!” Nora’s voice boomed.

“Yes. Ma’am.”

She waited as the line connected.

“Hello, this is William Augustine and who do I have the pleasure of speaking to?”

Nora couldn’t help but smile when she heard his voice. “Will, it’s Nora.”

“Nora.” She could hear his breathing as he exhaled. “You have no idea how good it is to hear your voice.”

“Same,” she replied. “I just got off the phone with Hayden. He still doesn’t know we’ve found him out and that I cursed the pendant. We are in the clear for now.”

“Great. That should buy us some time,” Will responded. “Meet me at the coffee shop in an hour. Ok?”

“Ok. See you then. Love you”

“Love you too.” He hung up the phone.

Will stood up from his desk and looked around the room at the men sitting at his desk. Exhaling deeply he said, “Gentlemen, I am so sorry, my fiancée needs me to help her with something.”

“Wedding details?” one of the men asked.

“Something like that,” Will said with a smile. “Doreen can help you get your coats.” He gestured to his assistant who was now

standing by the door. "I have to go." He grabbed his briefcase and headed for the elevator.

He walked out of his office and onto the Hudson Yards plaza. He headed toward the 34th street subway station, and got on the train going uptown. He took the 3 train one stop and got off at Time Square: 42nd Street. He walked down Broadway through the crowds of bustling tourists. He came to the intersection of 43rd and Broadway. Then he waited. Suddenly, someone tapped him on the shoulder. He turned around. It was Nora.

They walked down the street hand in hand trying to blend in.

She looked over at him. "What are we going to do about Hayden?" she asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, he still thinks we are planning to give him the pendant. I don't know how much longer I am going to be able to keep the act going. If I keep stalling on giving him the pendant, he's going to get suspicious."

"But we can't let Malum get the pendant," Will told her.

"I know."

They looked at each other.

"What am I going to tell Hayden when he calls later?"

"Don't worry. We'll figure it out," Will promised.

"Come on. Let's get my car. It's parked outside the coffee shop. We have to get out of here."

As they set off, neither of them had any idea that Hayden already knew their plan. He had bugged her phone at the pier that morning, so their secret plan was not so secret.

"Oh Nora, your little act isn't fooling anyone. You are going to be giving me that pendant," Hayden said, looking up from his listening post way across town.

After forming some semblance of a plan, Nora and Will drove back toward the pier. They pulled into the parking lot and stepped out of the car.

Nora looked up. She saw a figure standing in the shadows.

"Hayden," She lied. "We weren't expecting to see you here."

"Sorry. Should I have called first?" he asked, the sarcasm seeping through his words.

"What do you want?" she demanded.

"Only what's rightfully mine," he said. "I want the pendant."

"No! Malum wants it so he can destroy all of the Eastern Seaboard. You can tell him that if he wants the pendant, he'll have to take it off my cold, dead body."

"That can be arranged." A smirk slid across Hayden's face. "It would do you good to remember your place. You're just a college student who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"You're forgetting one thing, Hayden."

"And what's that?"

"I'm a witch. And while you were busy playing double agent and lap dog to Malum, I took the time to actually learn how to harness my power."

He froze. A look of panic shot across his face.

"Oh, don't worry," Nora reassured him. "I'm not going to hurt you. I'm just going to give you to some friends of mine." She turned around. "Will?" she asked. "Can you tell our friends we're ready for them?"

"On it," Will responded. He picked up his phone and dialed a number as he walked back toward the car.

Just as Will hung up the phone, sirens started to wail in the distance. Hayden's eyes looked like they were going to blow out of his head.

The howl of the sirens kept getting louder, and with them, the concern on Hayden's face grew. Nora watched as he began to squirm.

Hayden dropped his phone and turned to try and make a run for it, but two NYPD squad cars pulled up in front of him.

A cop stepped out of one of the cars. "Hayden Phoenix, you are under arrest for conspiracy to commit mass murder."

"Hayden, meet my friends."

The officer handcuffed Hayden and put him in the back of one of



the cars.

Nora turned around and looked at Will. "Is it over?" he asked.

"Not yet. Malum is still on the loose," Nora sighed, "but not for long. I'll see you at home."

"Where are you going?"

"To end this, once and for all. I'm going to destroy the pendant and deliver Malum to the police. He belongs in a cell. Just like Hayden." She grabbed Hayden's phone off the ground, got into her car and drove back uptown.

She arrived at the location she had found on Hayden's phone. He had been there one hundred times in the past six months. She looked down at her hands. She had been practicing her magic, but she had never had to face someone so powerful. She gathered her courage and busted down the door.

"Malum!" She yelled. "Show yourself."

A voice pierced through the shadows. "Nora Michaels, I've been expecting you. Hayden has done well delivering you to me."

"Hayden is in jail."

"Ohh. Curious. You have outwitted my best soldier."

"Was that a compliment?" She smirked.

"You and I could do amazing things together, Ms. Michaels. I could turn you into the most powerful witch of your generation."

"I agree," Nora responded.

"Yes," Malum hissed. "Have you brought me my prize?"

Nora pulled the pendant out of her pocket. "May I?"

"But, of course."

Nora walked over to Malum and placed the pendant around his neck.

The pendant started to glow, filling the room with a purple aura.

"AHHHHHHH!" He screamed. "What is happening to me?!"

"I cursed the pendant to drain the magic of the person it touches."

"But, you?"

"Oh, no. I was careful. I never touch the actual pendant. Only the chain. So you see, Malum, thanks. But no thanks. I can handle my

own magic. But I do have a cell with your name on it."

Malum looked up. "Silly little girl. You think a cell will stop me."

"No. But I already did," she said, pulling the pendant off Malum's neck.

She lifted her hands and the pendant rose into the air, then with one violent gesture, it shattered into millions of tiny shards.

Nora walked out the door, nodded at the squad cars waiting outside, and got back in her own car. As she drove up the Westside Highway, a gorgeous sunset blazed over the Hudson River, shimmering off the standing soldier skyscrapers lining her path. Nora couldn't help but smile. She had the whole world at her fingertips. What would she do next?

## *Another Origin*

Marlowe's gaze searched for the distant satellite outpost that held the "secrets of the universe".

Any second now . . .

A small sliver of silver appeared at the bottom of her view in front of the distant suns. The satellite.

The broadcast whirled on the screen next to her and three figures appeared out of the static. All cloaked and masked in shadow, the one on the left began to speak. "I am glad to have your attention. Please know that what you are about to hear will change your perspective on things. If you would not like to know, please escort yourselves to the isolation chambers where pods will take you to an outpost that you can live on without this knowledge . . ."

People in the room with her shifted uncomfortably and looked around, but nobody moved. After a few moments the shadow on the right began to speak.

"It was five years ago when we first announced that we held new information related to our origins in the universe. In the relatively short time since, we've made preparations to implement a new plan of action for the survival of our civilization."

The satellite had only moved an inch from where Marlowe had last seen it. The shadows were inside now transmitting it here, to headquarters, where it would be broadcasted through the universe to different outposts. She turned back to the screen.

"Five years ago, we received an ancient radio signal from somewhere deep in the cosmos. It took much effort to triangulate the signal, but we managed to find it. It came from a small planet in a distant galaxy with a dying sun. We managed to decipher the audio and it held a language surprisingly recognizable. We believe that this holds the key to our origin. It is possible that this is the planet we evolved from . . ."

People began to look around with shocked expressions on their faces. A rumble of voices with questions and possible explanations filled the room. Marlowe smirked as she heard one man with pale skin exclaim with fright.

"But we came from the stars . . . how could we be planet dwellers, that's not possible!" Many of them began to pray and regurgitate the pale man's disbelief.

Marlowe waited, watching the satellite as it inched slowly from the bottom of the window. She thought back to her childhood on Earth and how she played in the grass before it was burned down. She remembered saying goodbye to the beautiful blue planet. And as her ship sank slowly into the abyss, she would look at Earth as it slowly turned dark and red and vanished. That was thousands of years ago. And the people she once knew had long been dead. Her friends died while Earth was still blue. Marlowe sighed. The only ones as old as her sat now on the screen.

"This changes everything we hold to be true. This is an incredible progress in the world of knowledge but alas, it topples all our beliefs. We now know why we are indeed a carbon based lifeform and we need molecular support to live, similar to other species of lesser stature we've encountered on planets. But do not be so worried, for now we are able to find the truth of our existence."

Here we go again, Marlowe thought. She had heard this speech hundreds of times. It works like a charm. After the countless wars and planets destroyed, you would think someone would have remembered why.

They triangulate a new radio signal from a distant galaxy, present the evidence of a language with Svetilian roots so that they can begin to extract resources from these targeted worlds. Diffing ore to be precise. It is a type of metal found only on specific carbon based planets and it holds a honeycomb structure of metal and air bubbles. The ore, when melted and manicured, creates either an extremely efficient power supply or a dense protective metal for new ships. The atmosphere is also sucked up and packed to recycle through the outposts' oxygen

tanks. The planets then are left as dead as Earth, along with all the native creatures. Disgusted, Marlowe turned to look at the screen once more.

The middle shadow spoke last.

“I urge you all to join us in the quest to reclaim our home. We aren’t sure if the planet is friendly, so we need to be prepared for anything. I hope that you all are ready for what comes next . . .”

The buzz in the room had slowly died down, and when the screen shut off, only silence remained. People began to filter out with their heads down.

Marlowe knew what would come next. The religious presence was heavily felt by the community. The higher ups would begin to sprinkle inklings of thoughts into their heads. The people would begin to develop the sense that they, rather than reclaim their planet, needed to destroy it and fully become one with the stars. It was their destiny after all, their enlightenment. It would take years to reach the planet and by then, the minds would be made up—exactly how the shadows planned.

The Senate would decide that another planet was to feed the fleet.

This time, maybe, just maybe, it would be different, thought Marlowe as she made her way down, down, down into the deepest corridors of Headquarters. The eerie silence she felt down here was comforting as she restarted her futile efforts.

“The Svetlian Empire is coming. Prepare yourself. They will harvest your planet for resources. You must be ready for their attack. If you respond, I will give you more information on their weaknesses and plans . . . Please hurry.” The radio that took her hundreds of years to develop whirled faintly as it sent the message into the depths of space.

Marlowe sighed, sat down, and waited once more.

ENRIQ FERNANDEZ

McDANIEL HIGH SCHOOL • WITS WRITER: DAMIEN MILES-PAULSON

## *Shepherd of Lost Souls*

Distressed, the young man eyed the spectre’s tattered rags, its lifeless pale skin, and skeletal hands, locked within a rigor mortis-like state as he spurned from its leer. Even the exuberant, yellow glow of the streetlight, which bounced off the boy’s red-blue wool tartan coat and pitch-black hair, could not help but be inescapably drawn into the figure. Paralyzed of both fight and flight, the youth, like prey, expected the worst. The frost-bitten air stagnated about as the death god stood over him. A tear from the phantom splashed onto the ground, perplexing the boy. “Was he to kill me?” he pondered. The spirit outstretched its left arm towards the boy and loosed a guttural groan, as if it was telling him something. Telling him to clutch its hand. Afraid, the boy placed his hand onto the shade’s bony palm. Surging from within, bygone memories swarmed the lad: from his childhood summer at his grandparents’ house catching the newly emerging cicadas, to when he sunk to a deep depression after finding out that his parents had committed a double suicide, and to when he was saved by his fiancée from that downward spiral. Such memories engulfed him in joy, envy, anger, pain, and most recently, love; though despite all of this, he could not fully remember his last memory, for it was a series of red flashes, beeping horns, and the thud of the ring case he had bought for his beloved. Within a few minutes, he dropped to his knees. Finally realizing his predicament, he gazed unwaveringly at Death’s stare to submit himself to the whims of fate, only to be presented a meager-looking package of unfamiliar familiarity, as if by déjà vu through memory or dream. “Have I seen this box before?” he thought. Opening it, the boy weepingly smiled, for inside was his crimson-stained ring; thus, he finally embraced death.

PZ

FRANKLIN HIGH SCHOOL • WITS WRITER: MATT SMITH

## *200%*

The hallways. The white walls. The stairways. They spiral. The checkerboard flooring puts my mind in freakout. I'm tossed and lost, my alignments a bit off. Ask if I'm present, attendance I think not. Small break, mini pause, Call it what you like. Not death's jaws, Santa Claus, Don't remember that night. I swim to shore, like I never drowned in the sea. Look at me. Look at me. Look at me.

NANCY HERRERA REYES

ROOSEVELT HIGH SCHOOL • WITS WRITER: KATIE BORAK

## *Dark to Light*

All memories had returned like a boomerang  
He was so hurt he died of a broken heart.  
Nobody believed he could come back.  
Pains and suffering from his ex  
Pains and suffering from the lies she brought, the wind filled with  
darkness and untruths  
Pains and suffering that were eating him alive  
Months and weeks had passed and a miracle happened.  
Pains and suffering disappeared and strength returned.  
He starts growing like a flower rising from the ground and blooming  
into a better him  
He starts reminiscing about the past, almost falls into a hole  
He holds himself up with strength, power and hope  
He continues his path to be the best version of himself  
He trips and falls but keeps going  
From a seed to a bright red rose  
His happily ever after awaits him

ARIANA

FRANKLIN HIGH SCHOOL • WITS WRITER: MATT SMITH

## *Vibrations*

When you lay your ear against a pillow in a silent room, you'll almost always hear your heartbeat. These soft, rhythmic beats managed to do the trick at putting me to sleep, as they were the one thing that I could focus on to keep my mind from wandering when I heard the noises outside my window. These noises mimicked deep, low, vibrational hums, visually coupled with light that flashed through the cracks in the curtains. As a kid, these occurrences would happen regularly just as I was about to drift into a sleep.

My entire childhood was spent living with my father in a fairly rural area. Farmhouses sparsely dotted the countryside with few people living in close proximity to my house specifically. The view from my back porch was a vast and densely wooded area that seemed to be boundless and infinite. I would take advantage of the daylight by allowing my curiosity and wonder to take me on adventures, spending hours exploring and trailing off into the forest. However, when the sun set, and the sky began to darken, I didn't leave the inside of my house. Your mind works in funny ways as a kid, and my imagination filled my head with menacing thoughts about the forest at night. There was always the possibility that something dangerous could happen, and I decided not to take that risk.

I told my dad about the vibrations at night; he chalked it up to my mind playing tricks on me, but I insisted that I was not making it up. Regardless of the surrealness of these auditory phenomenons, the only unsettling thing that occurred was that I would sometimes find myself lying on the couch in my room in the morning, instead of my bed. I would always think to myself, "I probably got confused after getting up to get a drink of water or going to the bathroom and settled on my

couch instead of the bed." It was the most simplistic explanation that I could tell myself. Waking up on the couch wasn't the scariest thing ever, and only happened twice a week or so, so I didn't let it panic me. However, one night, I didn't wake up on my bed. Or the couch. I didn't even wake up inside my house.

The cold air and solid ground was what woke me up, and when my eyes shot open, I saw bits of indigo sky through a canopy of trees. I was in the woods. I instantly got up as a million questions pulled me into a frenzied state, trying to figure out what was going on. I oriented myself to get a better picture of my surroundings. These woods were completely unfamiliar—I had no idea where I was, I had no idea where to go, so at will I picked a direction and started my journey, trying to be quiet since I didn't know who or what could be out there. I fled in various directions to avoid large thicks of bushes, fallen trees, and rugged bramble, paying careful attention to where I walked because my feet were in poor shape by that point, but the adrenaline coursing through me ignored the pains in my body. I walked for what seemed like hours. I was beginning to lose hope and accept the fact I would die in these woods.

I heard something that struck my core: the vibrations, I heard them too. Not only heard them but felt them in the ground beneath my feet. I looked up to see a massive spaceship of some sort hovering in the sky. I didn't even have time to collect my thoughts as a sudden bright flash of light illuminated the area around me. The light that was being admitted was a beam coming from the bottom of the ship and was directly on me. My attempts at sprinting were met with no avail as I realized I was running in place, going nowhere. What did they want? Why me? How long have they been targeting me? My mind became a jungle of chaos as a billion questions drowned me. I tried running again but still couldn't go anywhere. Then, I started moving. But not on my own. The beam moved me about fifty yards to the left in slow motion, then, suddenly, I dropped from the air and the light beam was

no longer on me. I watched as the large aircraft silently moved upward and in an instant, disappeared into the night at a nimble speed.

I eventually gathered enough energy to find my way back again. When my surroundings began to look more familiar, I let out a sigh of relief. I saw the old oak tree in my backyard and could see the house windows. As I got closer though, my stomach boiled like hot soup as a wave of anxiety rushed over me as I realized that all of the lights in my house were on which meant my dad was awake. Which meant I had a lot of explaining to do.

KALI LAMMERS

FRANKLIN HIGH SCHOOL • WITS WRITER: MATT SMITH

*Winner of the Tin House Award for Fiction*

## *Butterfly House*

Last week, Yara spoke with a man. He introduced himself as Aimon. Yara couldn't help but feel unnerved throughout their meeting. His steps were light and he seemed to float from foot to foot when he walked through the door. His suit was fitted to perfection: there was no wrinkle or crease in sight, even when he sat down. Aimon was very restless—his leg never stopped bouncing and his fingers danced around, fluttering everywhere and never truly landing. Yara was used to people acting anxious during these meetings; applying for citizenship was a nerve-racking process. The thing that really caught her off guard was his eyes. Everything else about him was fluttering about but those eyes stayed locked on her. They were dark and didn't portray any emotion, and looking back, she wasn't sure if she ever saw him blink.

Today, she had another meeting scheduled with Aimon. Needless to say, Yara was not looking forward to seeing him again. When he walked into the room, Yara immediately noticed the change. His movements were jerky; every step seemed like a conscious decision. His muscles moved individually, not like the well oiled machine a human body was supposed to be. Aimon wore the exact same suit, only this time, it was rumpled and lopsided. His shirt was almost completely untucked and it seemed to hang off his body. His eyes, dark and lifeless, still bore into her, completely unmoving.

"Thank you for meeting with me," he croaked, his words sounding muffled. "I hope I don't take up too much of your time."

For a moment, all Yara could do was stare. What had happened to this man to change his appearance so drastically in just one week?

Blinking, Yara shook herself out of her thoughts. “Oh, it’s no problem at all Mr. Aimon,” she smiled. “Please take a seat.”

As he stepped closer to her desk, Yara was overwhelmed by the smell, the smell of sweet perfume and decay.

“So, Mr. Aimon,” she began, hoping her smile was still convincing, “as I understand it, your goal here today is . . .”

Yara trailed off, noticing movement out of the corner of her eye. She spotted a small white butterfly, of all things, perched on Aimon’s shoulder. It was staring at Yara with dark beady eyes, its wings fanning slowly.

“You umm . . . you have something on your shoulder,” she blurted.

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” he said, “I’ll take care of it.”

Aimon gently shooed the butterfly away. It lazily fluttered down and crawled up the sleeve of his jacket. Yara stared in disbelief. She watched the small lump scuttle farther up the sleeve, Aimon didn’t even seem to notice its movements. As it reached his chest, Yara noticed another lump, and another, and another. All over his body were small twitching lumps—no, butterflies. This man was absolutely covered in butterflies.

“I apologize for the interruption,” he said politely. “Where were we?”

“Oh, o-of course,” stuttered Yara, tearing her gaze away from the crawling insects. “Let’s begin.”

Her meeting with Aimon continued as normally as she could hope for. Yara did her best to ignore the wriggling from underneath his suit and ended up cutting the visit short with a transparent excuse. Unfortunately, this would mean that she needed to have yet another

meeting with Aimon. His appointment was scheduled for next week, and every day leading up to the meeting was filled with dread. At night, she dreamed of butterflies: they swarmed around and completely enveloped her, filling her vision with delicate white wings. Every now and then, one would land on her exposed skin and dig its proboscis into her flesh, lapping up her blood like it was the sweetest of nectars. By the end of the dream, she was reduced to a bloody pulp and the swarm was stained red, flying in lazy, satisfied circles.

When the day came for her meeting with Aimon, Yara was a mess. She hadn’t had a night free of butterflies all week, and her waking moments were spent in terror at the thought of seeing that strange empty man again. She watched the clock on her wall as it ticked perpetually and felt the anxiety pool in her stomach. She heard heavy footsteps approaching her door. Yara took a deep breath and tried to school her expression into something that wasn’t absolute terror. There was a knock on her door.

“C-come in!” Yara called.

The door creaked open—was it always that loud? She couldn’t remember. Aimon stepped into the room and all the oxygen seemed to vanish, leaving Yara gasping for breath. The smell she noticed last week had increased tenfold: the sickly sweet flowers and the underlying rot brought tears to her eyes. He wore the same suit but it seemed to fit looser on him, it was littered with holes, some were only the size of a pin prick while others were larger than her hand. Through the holes, she could see pale wings flapping and one particularly large gash over his stomach displayed something much more disturbing: a hole. A hole in Aimon’s stomach, only there wasn’t anything in the hole. There was no blood, no organs, his stomach had been completely hollowed out. All she could see was butterflies, a fluttering mass of white burrowed deep within him. He was hollow, a walking cocoon.

Yara hears screaming. She thinks it might be her. She feels bile rise up in her throat, the world grows fuzzy as she passes out. Yara welcomes the reprieve; she feels at peace as her vision fades to white.

She wakes up on her office floor, it's dark and Aimon is nowhere in sight. She breathes out a sigh of relief—she feels so much lighter. She spots a singular white butterfly in the room, it lands gently on her hand, she smiles. She walks out of her office, her steps are light and when she closes her eyes, she can smell the sweet scent of flowers.

NEYDA SEGURA

WeBSS • WITS WRITER: CJ WIGGAN

### *You were there*

Feeling like a nobody ready to explode  
The darkness has risen and has began to cover me up  
I began to give up and then  
You look at me and you see everything.  
You see my perfection more than my flaws.  
You see joy when I see sadness,  
you see the light while I see the dark,  
you see opportunity and success and I see failure.  
You see me as what I want to be  
rather than what I feel I am.  
You believe in me,  
when no one else does  
and you try to pull me out of a room  
that is filled with darkness  
trying to pull me away from there as far as you can,  
but you can't  
there's a shadow holding me tight not letting me go.  
Making me cry myself to sleep,  
making me feel worthless,  
not allowing me to talk about my feelings  
and I'm stuck  
and I don't know what to do and I'm panicking.  
I began to realize that the shadow and the only thing pulling me and  
holding me in that place is myself and  
I don't know what to do or how to change that.  
I seek you and only you  
because you are my best friend.  
You pull me out and show me what I'm missing



and for once in my life I see light  
rather than darkness  
and I see the future rather than holding on to the past.

VIVIAN VARELA  
PARKROSE HIGH SCHOOL • WITS WRITER: MATT SMITH

### *Hidden*

I never thought I would have to dig a hole on the ground. Holes were dug for the dead, and even as I was alive my spirit died. Frantically, I layed on the layers of earth. The roots of the trees clenched my body tight, but I layed waiting until safety. Men began to get near. I could hear their laughs and their jokes about killing our people. It was a trophy for them, it was an accomplishment. Trying not to breathe, I gasped for air, the smoke rose and the men saw me under dirt. They came near and inspected me, trying to figure out if I was dead or alive. I held my breath, rested my eyes, “Play the game but don’t believe in it” I repeated to myself over and over again.

## *His City, His Home*

Brad was ready to get out. To leave this cramped space he called home. Out the cracked window, down the creaky fire escape, and onto the wet cement below. The damp atmosphere hits him like a brick, tiny drops of rain just barely wetting his skin. The sky is painted a peculiar shade of purple, leaving him with an odd yet peaceful feeling settling in his chest. Everyday, he wakes up to the drunken yells of his mother, always clutching a bottle of whatever can take her away from the harsh reality that is their world. The stomps of his siblings sound from above, making him feel as though he is Harry Potter under the staircase. Trapped. Afraid. The fluorescent red letters of his alarm clock scream at him to wake up, Brad runs a hand down his face, a tired sigh escaping his lips.

One step, two steps.

“Another late night?” He turns his head, his eyes landing on his little sister, Joseline. Her long red hair dangles past her shoulders, almost touching her waist. She’s turning thirteen next week, it’s crazy to Brad. It seems like just yesterday they were giving each other piggyback rides in their backyard and racing around the neighborhood on their bikes.

Three steps, four steps.

“Yeah,” Brad says, sitting up. His feet hit the freezing wood floors, sending a shiver throughout his body. “Jeez, did anyone pay the electric bill?”

Five steps, six steps.

“No, we’re late again. Should have enough by tonight though,” Joseline says. Brad reaches in his pocket, feeling around for this week’s pay. He pulls out the crumpled up dollar bills that his boss had just handed him hours before, handing the cash to Joseline.

“Thanks, B. I’m gonna go check all of Simon’s usual hiding spots.”

“Alright,” Brad chuckles. Simon. His nine-year-old brother, who has

the energy level of a great dane on a sugar rush. He makes his way over to his window, looking out at the city of Chicago, Illinois. His city. His home. The city is still dark, giving him a good look at his reflection. His dirty blonde hair is messy and tousled about, and the grey pajama shirt, just a few sizes too small, clings to his torso. His thrashed plaid pants that he received a couple Christmases ago from his sister are about the only thing keeping him from freezing to death. Joseline always jokes about the huge resemblance between him and Lip Gallagher from *Shameless*, a commonly watched show throughout their childhood. And though he would never admit it, he does see the resemblance.

Seven steps, eight steps.

“C’mon, Mom,” Joseline urges, trying to prop up their mother’s head on a folded towel.

“No! Get away from me!” she says, batting away Joseline’s hands.

Nine steps, ten steps.

“Mom! Let me—” A loud slap is what gets Brad and Simon to look up from their bowls of stale cereal. Tears prick Joseline’s eyes, as his sister clutches her face.

“Oh, I’m so-sorry baby . . .” Mom slurs.

Eleven steps, twelve steps.

“It’s fine, Mom. Just eat your cereal, please,” Joseline says sniffing and wiping her eyes. Joseline pulls out a chair, what once used to be sleek and beautiful wood now scratched and ready to lose a leg from all the times their mother had tried to throw it at them. She hadn’t always been like this, their mom. But after the crash, after their dad died, life for Brad’s family was turned upside down. Brad still remembered the days before Joseline and Simon were born, when he and his mom would spend hours playing Star Wars at the park.

Thirteen steps, fourteen steps.

“You want me to take Simon to school today?” Brad asks, with a mouthful of stale Cap’n Crunch cereal that has probably been in the back of the pantry since Simon was born.

“No, it’s fine. I can do it,” Joseline sighs, resting her chin in her hand. She doesn’t look twelve. More like sixteen, Brad wonders if it’s his fault

for letting her grow up so fast. He reaches over, gently grabbing her hand.

“Hey, I can do it,” he says, stroking her hand with his thumb. Joseline gives him a weak smile.

“Okay,” she whispers.

Fifteen steps, sixteen steps.

Why couldn’t his life just be normal? He clutches his backpack tighter, walking through the alley, making sure to not disturb any of its sleeping residents.

Seventeen steps.

Brad’s fingertips graze the rough brick wall, his eyes stare into the peculiar, yet so mesmerizing, purple sky, the petrichor arising from the damp ground fills his nose and spreads throughout his body.

“You’re going to love it, B,” a deep and all too familiar voice says from behind him. Brad stops dead in his tracks, feeling every one of his senses wake up as he whips his head around. Feeling his stomach flip, twist, and shift as his eyes try to comprehend what they’re seeing. Standing right before him, in that same white and blue flannel and Levi work jeans, with the same tousled dirty-blond hair and light-blue eyes, is the older version of Brad.

“D-dad?” a tear finds its way down his cheek.

“You’re going to love it, son.”

“What?” Brad questions as his father, or this misty figure of his father, maybe even a doppelgänger, steps forward. As he puts his rough hand on his son’s cheek, a moment of silence takes over the two, until his father parts his lips to speak:

“The world.”

RAE BLACKBIRD

McDANIEL HIGH SCHOOL • WITS WRITER: DAMIEN MILES-PAULSON

## *Talisman*

A young woman, a girl really, was visiting her grandmother. Maybe for the last time—that’s what everyone said, shaking their heads. The apartment smelled of incense and blown out candles. “I’m here, Savta,” she said, closing the peeling door behind her. “I’ve missed you, little one.” Grandmother, draped in faded scarves, smiled from her armchair. She took off her coat and came to kneel beside her Savta. “Ah, you are so young, so much ahead of you.” Spotted hands fumbling slightly in her pocket, Grandmother said, “I do not give you this light—it is a family treasure.” Taking Savta’s hand, the young woman felt a rough, papery object fall into her palm. It was no family treasure in the usual sense, no cold metal or hard jewelry. Not even a photograph or paper document, but a clove of garlic.

## *Obscure Thoughts*

As far as we have come with humanity, us humans can still only guess why we are alive, why we want to live, and what living even means. Science could describe living as the beating of your heart, breathing, or the functioning of your brain, and I guess that is technically why you are alive, but you, the reader, wouldn't describe your life as a bunch of breaths or contractions of your heart. I know I wouldn't. I would describe it as my thoughts, my feelings, and my connections to people. What I am interested in, like my hobbies, or interesting entertainers. The things that bring me happiness, and the things that bring me pain. Is that what life is, then? Emotions or experiences of happiness and pain? As I try to bring all of these things together, they all seem to be able to be easily described by the word love. My connections to people could be love, enjoying my hobbies can also mean I love my hobbies, and pain can be associated with the ups and downs of love. So the next question may be, what exactly does "love" mean, if it seems to be able to mean all of these things?

I can't decide if love is subjective or objective, if it has many different definitions, or if there is one specific definition like almost every other word. The word "love" is something that we all hear throughout our lives one way or another. We are all familiar with the word itself, but, as in my case, I don't know what it is supposed to mean. Let's say that love has one definition for a second. If it doesn't, how are we supposed to know what the person saying it means if it means something else entirely to us? If it does mean different things to different people, do two people in love have a general consensus of what the other person means by "I love you?" I wonder sometimes if I have lived long enough to know the answer or if anyone even knows the answer. If there is an answer, is it something you can put to words? Is love just an indescribable feeling that is different for everyone but we group all

of those feelings under one word? I don't know if I wish that I had an answer to what love is right now. It would be nice, but I think I just need to live, take risks, and figure it out through experiences. Now that there is at least some sort of cohesion as to what love might be, even if it is a big cloud of fog, let's look back at life and the reason to keep on going.

I think I want to live because of those things or people that I love, or the lack thereof. I have this feeling that I haven't felt love because I haven't had enough time to yet. I have this hope that, as time goes on, I will get a better and better understanding of what it might be and what it might mean to feel it. I assume that I feel it towards people like my parents. I tell them that I love them, but as I think about it, the word seems empty to me. I seem to say it because I feel like I have to, and as I type that and think about it my brain tells me, "You love them! What are you talking about?" So if I do, then maybe I can figure out what love means to me from that perspective.

I don't know where to start figuring out what love is from my relationship with my parents. I have known my blood-related parents for my entire life, so that is a connection that I can't really have with anyone else outside of my family. I have also gone through experiences with them that I haven't with anyone else, like living together. Those two things are the only things I don't have with anyone else, so they must correlate to why I love them, right? Is love in this case a feeling that I get when I am around them? Maybe a sense of comfort that I don't get with anyone else. Or could it be something like the feeling that losing them in some way would be the worst thing in the world? If I love my parents, and this is what I feel toward them, does this mean that this type of love is the type of love I should be looking for in others?

Does it even matter? Let's say that I do figure out what love is: does it even matter to label the relationship that I have? It feels constricting to label something that can fluctuate that much. Maybe I shouldn't care about labeling if I love someone or not. I can just care about people

and if I have a special relationship with someone, to some extent, then maybe that is a love that we have solely between each other. Our relationship is going to change, along with us, over time, and labeling our relationship with something as ambiguous as “love,” a word that can’t change with us, doesn’t seem like the best plan.

It is fascinating that emotions have this much ambiguity. I know I haven’t really said anything in particular, I have just brought up question after question in no particular orderly fashion, but this has been more like a raw look into me working through a thought about something I don’t understand. I still don’t really know what love is. I could spend my time thinking about it, or I could go out and have a good time with my friends and family. Change is natural, emotions are confusing, not having answers is very normal, just look at this whole piece of writing. Trust yourself, and take risks. If something doesn’t work out, learn from that and keep pressing on. If you are to take anything from my writing, take that.

ANNIKA PHILLIPS

FRANKLIN HIGH SCHOOL • WITS WRITER: MATT SMITH

### *This is just to say*

I have taken  
Your favorite sweatshirt  
Off the chair  
That sits in the corner of your room

You wear it everytime  
I see you  
But now it’s mine

Forgive me

Its my favorite too  
So soft and warm  
And the perfect size

DAJA DUCKWORTH  
McDANIEL HIGH SCHOOL • WITS WRITER: BRUCE POINSETTE  
*Winner of the Street Roots Award for Journalism*

## *Quincy Davis Interview*

Quincy Davis went to Cleveland high school in southeast Portland. For him, high school was a social-activity experience. He wasn't really into school and all the classes: it was more having fun and being socialized. Quincy Davis was more into fashion and hanging with his friends in high school. He wasn't really into music like that, but he did get into video production. Quincy took his first college-level video class his sophomore year. Before all that, Quincy was all about drawing, and he would make his own comic books.

Back then, in high school, it wasn't easy making music. People would have to save up money for studio time, so he got a hold of his PC laptop and he started to mess around with it, and made his own beats. From there, he was teaching himself. Quincy and his friends would freestyle with the beats he made. When his senior year hit, him and his friends would go out and free rap, and as they were free rapping, everything would start to flow from there. Quincy was developing his words and finding his true flow. After his senior year, he wasn't really writing serious lyrics until his first year of college. He graduated high school and got a portfolio scholarship to a film school. While he was there, he started to write his first serious lyrics.

Quincy was influenced by an artist named Immortal Technique. He opened his mind to what was possible when he could listen to a song. Immortal Technique was one of his biggest influences. The war in Iraq was going down and there was protesting going on. Quincy was aware of it; he was researching it when he was in college. In one of his college classes, he was writing a project. He decided to write lyrics. He basically wrote a song about the subject and how he felt about it. He wrote about how the child had a torn face and how it was wrong and how us people need to change our ways.

He wrote a couple of verses after winter break, and when he came

back to Portland, his friend group was spitting raps. Quincy was like, "I got some too," and after he spit his rap, everyone was hyping him up and telling him how fire it was. He noticed when he would rap he would kind of black out and everything would just flow through him and his voice would change at one point. At that moment, he would think to himself, "maybe this is what I'm supposed to do." It made him believe in himself. So, he continued writing lyrics and making beats.

What got him into music is when he was real young, like about six or seven years old, he was realizing that someone wrote a message, he was realizing how lyrics worked. He was saying how most people just listen to music just to listen to it, and how they don't really pay attention to the words, but he remembers thinking how people write lyrics into sentences and they turn it into a musical or into a message—it's like a language but also music. There's something about the scale of songwriting he was curious about. He was thinking that if he was thinking about all that at a young age, maybe that's something he was supposed to pursue in life, and that's exactly what he's doing now and he loves it. He has fun with it.

SAM ERNST

GRESHAM HIGH SCHOOL • WITS WRITER: DEY RIVERS

## *They Strike Again! Medieval Mischief. “Sinnerman”*

(drabble)

They strike again!

Their eyes darted back and forth between the armored soldiers, realizing they miscalculated how many would arrive from the blaring alarm. Slowly pacing backwards, they smirked and waved a goodbye, only to turn and sprint out of the corridor. Hearing the deafening clashing of the enemy’s swords and chain mail gave them the needed rush of adrenaline to escape into the piercing cold night. Stopping dead in their tracks with a sharp inhale, they spun around, unsheathing a sword, and rushed towards the posse, all with a grin.

(drabble)

Medieval Mischief.

My heartbeat appeared to match the pace of our alerting system, and I sprung back into my surroundings, eyeing the miscreant before me. The castle’s guard had been hunting this fugitive for aeons, and they’d be taken to one of our many putrid jail cells. My whole body buzzed with excitement and tenacity as I realized this capture would move my ranking close under the king, scraping my way from the bottom up to his loyal soldier. This arrogant kid expected to create chaos across our village and have the painless ability to stroll into our palace. Not on my watch.

(drabble)

“Sinnerman”

Slamming my fist on the button weirdly wasn’t the hardest decision for me that night, it was the taxing thought of the innocent lives I cradled in my hands. However, it begs the question, were all three

thousand and eight lives truly innocent of wrongdoing in that city? I may have rid the world of hundreds of corrupt beings that bright night, yet no one had the guts to thank me, because then society would label them immoral, as well. That’s the million dollar query, or rather, twenty-five to life, that only I was willing to answer.

## *Duckbills Defiantly Ducking Duties*

*Note: The characters in this story speak the Pacific Northwest dialect of the English language. This is the dialect spoken in Washington, Oregon, California, and the northern Rocky Mountain states in the United States. The weird pronunciations, language, and contractions are meant to represent this as accurately as possible. There are also some strange slang words the characters use, which are used in everyday speech during the time period in which the characters are living. A glossary is provided after the story to explain what these words and some contractions mean.*

At 39:

“Put it on.”

“But it’s not my Daffy Duck one.”

“Honey, I’ll look for it wall you’re at school. You’ll hafta wear this one for now.” 7-year-old Lily refuses to budge. Why can’t she be like her older sister Samantha? “Lily Geraldine Nelson, put yer Nine on right this second, or no TV after school!” She begrudgingly complies and heads off with her classmates.

At 44:

“Mom, why do you always mask up in winter? It looks weird.” We’re taking our daily walk through our su-burban Syattle neighborhood. Hardly anyone around, an’ we’re outside, so no Nines. Lily straight’ns her Daffy Duck t-shirt.

During win’er and in large crowds o’ people, Jack and I still make her Nine-up when one of us is with her, but we know perfec’ly well she doesn’t wear it when away from us. Unfor-chunately, that orange duckbill was no longer a godsend once she outgrew such things. “I’ve told you a mil-yon times, Lily.”

At 15:

“Here, Madison.” Gramma han’s me a sardine can from the fridge.

I nibble the tasty, salty fish. “This is how city planners tried forcing people to live before COVID. I saw fucking skinny houses being built ev’rywhere. In fact, on two streets in my neighborhood, each street had five skinny houses in a row!” She shows me some old photos on her smartphone.

On the table, she lays an old, yellowed notebook that she got out of storage. She opens it to two pages full of illegible chicken scratch han’writing. Some of the writing is in blue pen, but most is in pencil.

“In March 2019, I went to student counselor training for outdoor school. My cold was so bad I literally couldn’t speak.” Gramma’s eyes blaze. “This is how I had to communicate with people! All they said was, ‘Try drinking hot tea.’ That’s basic’ly the culture I was raised in.”

I’m somewhat unsettled by her sarcasm. “650,000 U.S.ians, dead! You wanna know why? No N95s in win’er; packing people in like sardines; bad ven’ilation inside buildings; a bunch o’ stuff. Not to mention a fucking psychopath president who pretended it didn’t exist cuz ‘ee thought he’d get re-elected!”

“It did get better after COVID, though. When I was an engineer in the ‘40s and ‘50s, an’ anyone came in sick, we steered ‘em right towards the door an’ said, ‘Don’t you remember COVID?’” She sighs. “But lately, it seems like people are forgetting.”

At 45:

I think back to those days an’ that old notebook sitting in Jack’s and my attic. Since COVID-19, we have had Avian Flu-42, COVID-76, and a few smaller flu pandemics. The Z-ers remembered what led to ‘19 and preven’ed those pandemics from being nearly as bad. But over my life, as more Gen Z-ers have died of old age, COVID-19’s been more forgott’n. For instance, masks are required in schools during win’er, but enforcing them is a huge joke.

At 46:

“But Mom,” Lily croaks frantic’ly, “It’s not that bad. I’m going to miss the robotics meet after school.” Her cold’s really bad this time.

I’m getting sick an’ tired of this. Now we’ll all hafta quarantine. Luckily, Samantha’s just returned from her French class’s trip to



France, or she would've been here to get infected as Lily was starting to get sick. Susan next door offered to let Samantha stay over for a week so she could continue attending school in person. But things like this shouldn't hafta happen. "That's what ev'ryone said at—"

"Great Gramma Dor'thy's fucking outdoor school thing. You've told me—"

"Whatever yer classmates tell you, they can shove it up their assholes!" I say angrily. "You know, Lily, one day you're not going to have us around reminding you about these things. You wouldn't even care if one of us died from some disease!"

I barely notice her mortified expression as I storm out of the room. God, I shouldn't have said that!

At 57:

Well, whaddaya know? Avian Flu 3.0. Here for another four million maybe, cuz of laziness. Prob'ly good I took those sociology classes in college. Jack an' I've been home for months. We don't let our daughters visit, despite Lily's protests. The stale, inside air would only be a 3.0 breeding ground.

Lily's living with her boyfriend Isaac. Far as I know, they're okay. Though, based on Lily's body language during remotings, there seems to be friction between them. One Saturday, my smartphone rings. It's Lily. Her voice alarms me. "Mom, it-it's about Isaac. He, he's . . ."

Oh shit. But also, of course.

At 58:

Isaac's been intensifying, growing paler by the day. Apparently, he got it from all the friends they had over. Finally, he's stuck on a ven'ilator in the hospital. Lily's really scared now, when she was saying it would blow over two weeks ago.

One week, two, three, some meningitis . . .

At 58:

Isaac's finally discharged, and Lily's relieved. When their lease ends a few weeks later, they break up. Lily moves back in while she looks for another apartment. She's mostly quiet, and doesn't complain much. Weeks later, when the vaccines arrive, she gets one even before us.

At 59:

Lily's duckbill Nine matches her orange and yellow clothes. Terrible color for our Easter gathering, but her defiance will always remain for many things. I smirk.

## Glossary

### *Slang Word/Contraction: Definition*

Nine: An N95 face mask.

'19: The COVID-19 pandemic.

Nine-up: Wear an N95 mask specifically.

Avian Flu-42: An influenza pandemic beginning in 2042, comparable to the 1957 influenza pandemic's worldwide death toll.

COVID-76: An influenza pandemic beginning in 2076. Its virus is a descendant of the virus SARS-CoV-2.

Avian Flu 3.0 or simply "3.0": An influenza pandemic in the early 2100s.

Win'er: Winter

Prob'ly: Probably

Wall: Contraction of "while"

Unfor-chunately: Unfortunately

An': And

Han': Hand (something to somebody)

'ee: He

## *Think Before You Speak*

On a happy, sunny June day, Emanuel arrived at the graphic design firm he worked at. He was an ambitious young man, maybe a little too ambitious at times, but nevertheless, he always kept moving forward.

“Good morning, Manny!” said Jesse, the receptionist, as Emanuel walked in.

“Right back at ya,” responded Emanuel.

Emanuel started to speculate that Jesse might have a crush on him lately, as she’s “especially” friendly with him. Recently, he had been hoping to be promoted to senior graphic designer, because according to him, he worked “harder” than everyone else. Though he brought it up with his boss, he would politely decline. His boss was struggling with keeping the company in business, so he was in no way in the clear to be promoting anyone.

Emanuel sat at his cubicle listening to Tom Petty when Shane walked past him. Shane was the current senior graphic designer and Emanuel despised him just a little bit. Ever since Emanuel started working at the firm, he felt like he was always overshadowed by people like Shane. He always got the attention that Emanuel wanted and he just really loved to rub it in his face.

That day during their lunch break, Emanuel overheard Shane and another coworker talking about him.

“Would you believe that guy? Why would he try so hard to be in a position he clearly knows that some guy as selfish like him could never,” said Shane.

Emanuel was infuriated. His blood boiled as he thought of different ways that he could punch Shane in the face.

After their lunch break, Emanuel was approached by Joseph, another worker at the firm.

“Hey Emanuel, I just wanted to tell you that uhh, I was organizing

a party at Madera Canyon this Saturday. Do you think you could make it?” asked Joseph.

“Sure thing. I’ll see what I have going on, and I’ll let you know if I can!” said Emanuel, all excited about the invitation.

Emanuel thought that by taking this opportunity, he could forget about his anger and also take a small vacation at the same time.

Saturday came and the party was to start later during that day. Emanuel got dressed and headed out to the park. It was dark by the time he had arrived and noticed other people in the parking lot walking towards a lighted area inside of the woods. He assumed that that was the location, so he followed. He soon recognized a few of his fellow coworkers and knew that he was in the right place.

“Emanuel, my man! You made it!” yelled Joseph.

Emanuel waved at him and smiled. But his smile was interrupted by what he saw. On his right, he noticed Shane talking to a group of coworkers and people he didn’t know. He looked away and sighed in disgust. He thought of ways he would confront Shane about what he had said. Then he heard Shane say that he needed to go to the bathroom. His eyes lit up and instantly thought of something. Emanuel knew that the bathroom was far enough from the party that he could have some one-on-one time with Shane: the perfect opportunity. He looked around him and walked out towards the parking lot, trying to not make himself look too obvious. As he followed, Shane thought he heard something and looked behind him. Emanuel panicked and stopped. He looked away and covered his face with his coat. Shane saw the strange figure behind him and rolled his eyes in disappointment. Emanuel sighed and continued more cautiously.

They arrived at the small bathroom building and Emanuel waited for Shane to walk in. Emanuel waited outside of the bathroom entrance, leaning against the wall. Then he heard the sound of the sink turn on. He was ready. Then when Shane walked out, Emanuel grabbed him into a choke hold and slammed him onto the ground.

“Do you think I’m stupid? I know what you said about me earlier this week,” said Emanuel.

"I don't know what you're talking about," said Shane, struggling to talk with Emanuel's arm around his neck.

"Well this isn't going to end good for you," said Emanuel, spitting on Shane's face.

"Yeah, well selfish brats like you never get what they want anyways. Just go and cry to your mommy already," said Shane, struggling to talk.

This angered Emanuel even more. He let go of Shane and punched him in the face. Shane struggled to stand up and recover when Emanuel punched him again, knocking him out. Blood started to flow down his nose. Emanuel lost it and continued to furiously beat down on Shane with all of his anger.

The aftermath wasn't pretty. Shane wasn't breathing anymore and had sustained life-threatening wounds. Emanuel dragged his body to the trees, his knuckles in pain, but he thought that maybe he was a little too harsh. He thought about all of the consequences that could arise if anyone found out, but who cares, he thought. He struggled to lift Shane's body up, but he managed to dump it into a thick bush. He placed sticks and leaves onto it, making sure to use his sleeve to pick them up, as he didn't want to leave fingerprints behind. He went into the bathroom and cleaned himself up. He felt an eerie feeling. The kind that you get when you feel like someone is watching you. He splashed water onto his face and made his way back to the party. He arrived and tried his best not to look like he had literally just beat someone to death. Ignoring what happened, he made sure to enjoy the rest of his time there, now that his fellow coworker was nowhere around to bug him.

The next week came and Shane was nowhere to be found at the firm. Emanuel was worried about Shane's final fate, but he didn't sweat it too much.

The end of the week came and still no sign of Shane. Surely someone would notice something was wrong by now.

Then the week after that came and still no sign of Shane. Emanuel's boss interrupted him at his cubicle and told him that they needed to speak in private.

"Hey Emanuel, today I got word they found Shane dead in Madera Canyon. What a shame, he was a good man," said Emanuel's boss.

"Yeah, I know, what a shame, right?" said Emanuel.

"Well anyways, since Shane isn't here, I, uhh, want to offer you the spot of senior graphic designer. Shane probably would've wanted for you to have it anyways," said Emanuel's boss.

"Well, I'm just glad I'm able to fill in for Shane, may he rest in peace," said Emanuel.

Later that night Emanuel layed in bed, staring at the ceiling above his head. He thought about what he had done. He knew that he killed someone in cold blood, but he liked the feeling that the person that he despised the most was now gone. To others it might seem like a big deal, but to him, it just meant that no one was in his way anymore. He took a deep breath, smirked, and said to himself, "Some people just never think before they speak."

KAMILAH DILLARD  
BENSON HIGH SCHOOL • WITS WRITER: JESSICA MEHTA

### *Signs for help*

1. “I’m not hungry” after chicken and rice (your favorite) is prepared.  
    “I’m just tired” even though they just got out of bed and it’s noon.  
    Random chills when it’s not cold
2. Tears you can’t control (your eyes have become rivers and streams).  
    Shaking hands and small trembles—tiny earthquakes  
    “I’m sorry” when we both know you haven’t done anything wrong
3. Feeling alone in a crowded room filled with your closest friends
4. Feeling lost in your own pace
5. Not having the energy to get out of bed or to turn over
6. Your emotions have vanished into thin air
7. Your depression . . . has taken over

TALLULAH HUTCHINSON  
FRANKLIN HIGH SCHOOL • WITS WRITER: MEG GRIFFITTS

### *Spider-boy*

I just wanna swing  
Swing down the crowded New York City streets  
They want me to fight  
They say I have a great responsibility  
But I just wanna swing

They want me in a sticky suit  
They want me to bleed  
They expect me to kill for them  
They want me in their army  
But I just wanna swing

Just me, maybe Mary Jane  
And we’d be high above everything  
Cuz we can swing  
Oh boy can we  
Swing dance in a school gymnasium  
I’m pretty light on my feet,  
I know what it’s like to walk on air

But I also know what it’s like to walk a tightrope  
While juggling 2 identities  
Like some kind of messed up circus act  
Everybody’s gawking at me

And the amount of people in this city!  
Man, it holds millions  
and they’re all in the back of my brain  
when I’m sitting back in math class

I was even in band (I played brass)  
had to quit that  
to focus on the wrath  
of old man sand

And the kicker is  
I still want the gift  
I wouldn't trade any part that spider bit  
But it would be nice to just be a kid  
And swing for the fun of it

XENA-HAO NGUYEN  
PARKROSE HIGH SCHOOL • WITS WRITER: MATT SMITH

## *Abandoned*

Wealth, fame, and power. That's all it takes to be a ruler in this world. Once you get all three, you can do almost whatever you want. Rulers have the power to change laws and policies. The reputation you hold is what attracts people to listen to your words. Almost blindly will people listen to you because of the admiration they have for you.

She wanted that worshipping. All her life, she had been turned away from others, even her family. She brought no use for the people around her. Clumsy, nonchalant, and barely being average. She remained homeless on the streets. A group of people in olive jackets stumbled upon her and couldn't resist asking about her concerns. They took her in, and instantly they became a family. The connection was warm. It was a new beginning, perhaps.

"Give me a break. I've been doing all the labor today, and I don't even got the muscles for all this carrying. What's in these boxes anyway?"

"Take a lunch break then. Been about four hours since you started."

"Jesus. Seriously. Why am I the only one doing this?"

"You gotta toughen up a bit, yeah? We picked you up on the streets after all."

She picked up the last box from the black truck outside. It was heavy as a weight ball. The smell was such a rotten smell that she couldn't describe it. As she was about to enter the home to bring the box in, she tripped over the door sill. The box flew across the room and landed into a glass table, shattering it.

"Oh shit. I'm so sorry man. I tripped over the door sill. What can I do about the table?"

The man she was talking to was silent. The box was open, it revealed something that seemed to be white and long. She couldn't see it properly from a distance. As she looked more closely, she finally

identified it. A human leg. She made eye contact with the man. His gaze was as if you met eyes with a lioness sneaking behind you. Everything turned blank.

She woke up in a wooden room on a bed, different from the marble house she was in before. She had never seen this room before. The room seemed to be moving, but maybe it was just something she felt. Sounds of waves could be heard inside the room. Maybe she's on a cruise ship. Could it be a vacation? As she turned beside her, she noticed a picture frame of the man she aided with boxes earlier hanging on the wall. Human leg.

Three men opened the door to the room abruptly and started shouting. They bolted towards her in a rush. She could clearly hear people outside the room and shouted for help, but nothing. Her eyes now covered by black unseeable fabric. She felt the men pushing her roughly. Once an instant breeze of air hit her, she knew where she was. The ocean. Her footsteps came closer to the edge—a plunge was expected. The man disbanded her from the family. The one who picked her up in the first place. The boss. She was going to be alone again. Isolated. All because of that box. But she thought maybe the ending was also a beginning. Possibly. Maybe. Change.

She hated the color green. It reminded her of the dead rose stems that remained in a vase that contained water that had not been changed in weeks. The vase isolated in the middle of the dinner table. Her clothing, her possessions, her furniture—it all stayed in boxes. Her apartment was empty. Soundless. Nothing had been unboxed fully yet. It was like she just moved in, though two months had passed. The space felt so entrapping. It was similar to being in a soundproof room, except you lived in one instead. She didn't do much in her home.

The rose petals chipped off of the dead rose silently. The dinner table flung across the living room. Bits of the vase scattered, water dripping onto the floor, and the rose lying crippled. She started to shriek in anger, but nobody could hear her. The room was soundproof afterall. Her eyes jerked aggressively and she grasped onto her head. Her smile widened with her bare teeth and she cackled as a hyena

would if prey was around. Insanity was getting to her, but perhaps she wasn't insane. No, she wasn't insane. Overthinking possibly. Or maybe not? It's puzzling . . . Play the game, but don't believe in it.

The game. The game? She thought of it again. The boats rushing wildly against the waves. The storm roared with thunder in the dark metallic sky. Her hands—she couldn't move them. She couldn't move anything. She couldn't see anything. She only heard the splashing waves along with the thunder, and smelled the body of water that was the sea. She . . . no, I. Not she. She had company, even if it was for a short time. She had people around her and to take care of her, but not I. I was now left by myself. It's only me now. I felt the instinct of death coming towards me. My body was carried and I squirmed as a rattlesnake would if they were threatened. I flew for only a second or two, soon to be met with the large body of water. I couldn't swim and I couldn't breathe. It all was unbearable. And that's why I stopped eating seafood. It reminded me of it. The people with me. I heard their cackles as I was being carried. Nobody saved me. I was on my own now.

## *Derek Heath Interview*

Before even thinking about the interview, I was heavily procrastinating. I didn't really see a reason for doing it as there wasn't much of a connection with myself and the possible candidates for the interview. Then came when I showed up Async. Mr. G informed me that we didn't have to do a Hip Hop artist anymore and that we could do any mentor or teacher we want. I first thought of my Government and Economics teacher, Mr. Heath. I wanted to interview him because I've known him probably the longest. Also whenever he gave me responses to my work, he gave an incredibly detailed paragraph on everything I did right. So I knew he'd be perfect for this kind of assignment. So I went to talk to Mr. Heath and we got a time and date set for Tuesday at 2 p.m. to do the interview.

The time has come and I joined the call for the interview. Coming up with the questions derived from simple questions about early childhood struggles, motivation and role models. And when I thought of role models, the late great Kobe Bryant came to mind. He was such a smart man who had incredible quotes. We had talked about his passing earlier, so I thought it would've been fitting to mention him with one of quotes about failure. And then I tied in one of our first major assignments: purpose. I thought it would be a perfect way to end this class with the way we started off this class.

Derek Heath grew up in Sufall, South Dakota. As far as growing up financially stable, he grew up fine. His father was in the military and then became a teacher and superintendent. And his mother didn't work to take care of his brother and him. She later went to school to become a speechologist. He did grow up with weight problems, though. And he was beat up for playing Dungeons and Dragons. When Heath was in his junior year of high school, he was 530 pounds. By the

end of his senior year, he weighed only 190. He lost 330 pounds in a year and a half through high energy workouts. He's not sure why he did it, but he thinks he did it because he was a very angry child.

As far as becoming a teacher, he always knew he wanted to teach. The problem was he wanted to teach college students ever since middle school because he loved medieval maps and stuff of the sort. When it came to his sophomore year in college, he dropped out because he didn't enjoy it. He spent time working in construction and jobs of that nature to make money. He then got bored of doing those things. That's when he realized that he loved to have interesting conversations with other interesting teenagers. So he went back to college and was able to get his degree at thirty-one. A quote he really liked from the late great Kobe: "If you are afraid to fail, then you're probably going to fail." It really resonated with Heath. In Heath's words:

"Innovation is the only continuous rewarding pathway to success. If you don't try, then eventually you will hit a wall. Wherever that wall stops, that is your potential success . . . The first five times you go for a jump shot, or maybe even the first two hundred times, you'll miss, but eventually, you will get the skill." This quote from Heath can really make someone think. It was a great way of turning a quote into basketball terms and real-life terms. It really brings out that motivation within all of us to continue to do the things we love to perfect our crafts or find new things we love.

Mr. Heath is currently teaching at James Madison High School with Government and Economics, and also Speech and Debate. He truly loves to teach. The detail he puts into his responses to help better the students' work and encourage them to keep on doing the things they're excelling at is amazing. It's one of the best characteristics that make Heath such a great teacher. He also doesn't make the work look too threatening. The work is easy and manageable, but also useful.

He's not a very boring person to listen to, either. He can go onto a multitude of tangents and keep all of the students focused into it. A big reason why he is all of these characteristics is because of his role model, Douglas Adams. He was a book writer that heavily had an impact on

his humor and wonder. Mr. Heath isn't that confident, but he found his purpose in life. But to those who are struggling to find it, he had this message to say:

"Experience the world as broadly and deeply as you possibly can, and devote yourself to the mastery of a thing you love. Eventually, you will be able to devote yourself to anything through that process." Again, another fantastic quote that really paints an image of working hard for the things you love to get in the habit of working hard. It'll definitely make me work harder in the things I'd love to get back into, the old habits I used to have but lost throughout the dreaded year.

Interviewing Mr. Heath has honestly left me inspired to do a lot of the things he's talked about. I would love to have that same mindset he did when he lost all that weight but for me to channel that into gaining weight/muscle. The way he was also completely honest about not being sure he has found his purpose also made me feel a great sense of relief. If someone like Heath hasn't found his purpose, it shouldn't make me feel upset that I haven't, either.

It was truly an experience to be his student for two years. I'm sure to take many things I learned from Heath over the years and this interview into my future endeavors. Being in this class has taught me a lot on the correct steps and ways I can go about finding my individual purpose and Heath also reassured me that not knowing the purpose yet is okay.

SOFIA L.

FRANKLIN HIGH SCHOOL • WITS WRITER: MEG GRIFFITTS

### *An Unworthy Deity*

Days pass one after another like a long,  
Long trail of dominos,  
Toppling over one by one by  
You, the so-called God of their world.  
Your hand is all-mighty, and they fear you.

Your footsteps make the floors rumble,  
The souls of your unworthy servants rumbling in fear too  
As they scatter in their plastic palace to play dead  
For however long you may exist.

They do not die easily.

Their sharp claws tear into your skin as revenge for days spent,  
Snapping their necks with unrestrained glee.  
Their murderous laughter fills the silence in the air,  
And you can only watch, a sick smile on your face as the dolls  
Slaughter their god.

You have fallen.

Soon they fall too, for without their divine ruler they have no company,  
Nor any semblance of love or peace.

From your ashes no phoenix rises, for that world only exists in your  
mind.

You, the so-called God of their world.



MADELINE DIAZ

FRANKLIN HIGH SCHOOL • WITS WRITER: DAVID CIMINELLO

### *The American Fantasy*

We are striving to forge a union with purpose,  
A union with equity  
Where no divides will destroy  
Relationships  
Progress is a train into the future  
To a real-life American dream

A union with sticky peach juice dribbling  
down your chin  
Hot dogs and sparklers  
Meaty ribs and warm mac and cheese  
Carousel rides and ferry go wheels  
They wink at you as you roll past them

It's a country with a past forgotten  
A history that doesn't matter  
No blood on our hands  
But past can't be re-written

In the end America is just a place  
But often forgotten are  
the humans that call this place home  
Divided people just striving  
to forge a union with purpose

JOSEPHINE DOUGHTY

ROOSEVELT HIGH SCHOOL • WITS WRITER: CARI LUNA

### *The Story Ends the Same or Estaban los tres helados*

*Inspired by "Fábula y rueda de los tres amigos" by Federico García Lorca*

Children and youths and adults  
Together, they suffer, for the same thing  
and estranged reasons  
Shot through the heart with the same spear of injustice and executed  
by the same life sentence  
Unknown to each other  
Forgotten once the blood clots  
Youths and adults and children  
Together, they plead, with all forces that may or not be  
That this will get better  
That something, a blessing from the sky will drift into their lives and  
fix what they have come to despise  
The adults, they know it's in vain  
They have seen enough be buried beneath the ground and falter upon  
it to believe something lives above the clouds  
They won't let themselves hear the song of truth from the moon-lit  
tombstones, memorials plated with cheap metal  
shining in the street lamps' light  
The adults  
The youths  
The children  
They are the same, one single hope and fear  
Divided for the convenience of forgetting  
Who we were  
Who we are  
Who we will be

Often found on the pale fields of separate astronomical beings  
Yearning for the sweet, forbidden taste of each other's homes,  
heavens, hurts  
Wanting nothing more than to leave where they are  
Wanting nothing more than to drift off into never-ending space  
And never return  
But as Tantalus reached for his fruit, always evaded  
They are stuck by time  
The children, the youths and the adults  
Splintered and shifting  
The story ends the same

NATHAN SENTERS  
FRANKLIN HIGH SCHOOL • WITS WRITER: MATT SMITH

### *Arno and Cato Lose the War*

When immersed in space, one is immediately impressed by its emptiness. Soldiers with the good fortune to be stationed near an exoplanet can spend hours staring at some scant few motes of dust disintegrating before their eyes; when journeying the great gulf between worlds, the windows tend to go unmanned. On a map, though, space looks full. Solar systems form galaxies form beautiful starry filaments, and the universe looks deceptively alive.

Cato studies the map, frowns. Their position isn't ideal. He doesn't see how Morno's legion can hope to escape, trapped as it is between a heretic flank and a dense nebula. Considering the intelligence the late General gave the enemy before his execution, Cato was sure they would press the advantage. If Arno acted quickly, the clergy might be able to salvage most of the army, but Arno . . .

Damn him, and damn the General! Arno's proposals were insanity. What did he want? A glorious death? How could something so crassly materialistic even cross his mind when he would fail in the eyes of the Titans, condemned to eternal hellfire? But then, Arno had never been the strongest of believers. Perhaps his intentions, too, would prove treasonous. Entrusting any responsibility to him would be foolishness, Cato decides. He examines the timepiece and realizes for the moment he cannot indulge this line of thought further.

The room in which Telbin and Arno meet is barren but not uncomfortable. It was built during better times, that halcyon age when the observable universe was ruled by the Titans themselves. As is customary, Telbin speaks first.

"You've a plan." He speaks without inflection, but somehow manages to convey disdain in no uncertain terms.

Arno does not allow himself to be intimidated. The priests all act imposing. "Yes. Resurrection." Telbin's already sallow complexion

pales. "Resurrection. A return from death? You confess so openly to heresy?"

"Not the resurrection of Man, but of the higher—no, the highest—powers. If we are to prevail in this war, we must have thinking machines."

"The Titans were not—"

"I don't have time for academic debate, Telbin. By now, the Church certainly doesn't. Contemporary accounts claim the Titans were forged, born of silicon and nickel. What metaphysics require circuitboards?"

"You take pagans at their word?"

"Among the pagans were those endowed with the gift of reason."

Cato enters, late. He gives a short bow. "Master Telbin. I apologize for my tardiness," Arno grimaces. The young Commander does not see what must be done, limited as he is by his dull orthodoxy.

Telbin takes advantage of the pause and hisses, "The Titans fell because Man betrayed them. They died for our perfidy and sin. To restore them to the world would be to rob them of their paradise."

"The Titans fell because they ruled innumerable galaxies but were constrained to sublight communication. Under such conditions, rebellion was inevitable, and asymmetric warfare was a logistical impossibility. Overextended empires—"

"The Reign of Heaven was no crude Empire, did not rule with banal force of arms—"

"Overextended empires fall into ruin. With our technology, we could reanimate—"

"Know your place! You speak madness. Apostasy!"

Cato's head reels. Restoring the Titans? To secure the backing of the Divine? Was it possible? He speaks. "Master, of course returning the Titans themselves would be anathema. But to forge an effigy? If we were to build an imitation in their honor, surely that imitation could be used on the field of battle? Certainly, to destroy the enemy with a godly simulacrum would be a fitting victory."

At that there is pause. Then, Telbin speaks. "But they are not—the

Titans were no mere machines. They were holy, imbued with higher virtue, ineffable beings."

Arno thinks he sees the wisdom in Cato's phrasing. "And that is why our thinking machines will be mere facsimiles."

But Telbin mutters, shakes his head. "No. To try and approach perfection . . . surely that would be a sin. To be guilty of hubris is crime enough, but for the Church to endorse, build a monument to our vanity?"

Arno's stomach falls. "Military expediency is not vanity."

Telbin is resolved. "Yet worse. A secular concern, polluting the sanctity of your faith. For shame. The Council will know that you, Commander Arno, now walk a wicked path; you, Commander Cato, ought not abet him." His face becomes stone. "The Titans fell because Man in his evil usurped them. I'd hoped for better from the leadership of our own army. Be careful, lest you suffer the fate of the last General who doubted the holy design."

There is nothing more to be said. Cato returns to the map room, leaving a distraught Arno in the hall. Suddenly, he is gripped by terrible suspicion. The General's sin, practicing agnosticism? He'd betrayed classified information, not expressed some foul heresy. Unless . . .

He checks the map. Morno has escaped unscathed.

KENNEDY CHAUNCEY  
ROOSEVELT HIGH SCHOOL • WITS WRITER: DAMIEN MILES-PAULSON

### *How to Procrastinate*

To begin your journey of procrastination, start by identifying the tasks that you need to procrastinate. If you can't think of any yourself, try procrastinating homework, chores, or working out. The definition of procrastination is "the action of delaying or postponing something," therefore there is no way you can procrastinate if you have nothing to procrastinate. Next, find tasks you can do to replace the projects you're procrastinating. Some examples are watching TV, going on social media, sleeping, eating, etc. Eventually you'll get bored of these tasks and want to move onto something else.

In some cases, you'll finally bring yourself to do the projects you need to complete, but sometimes you will do the most to avoid the things you need to do. This step is optional and unavoidable, but occasionally a parent might notice your procrastination. If this step applies to you, run. There is no way to escape this step because there is a one hundred percent chance your parent will put a stop to your procrastination. Lastly, wait till the last second to do your task. Whether it's a homework assignment you finish the night before at 2 a.m., or cleaning your room ten minutes before Mom gets home, always put it off as long as possible. Remember, it's not procrastinating if you never do it.

JAZEREI LEI PAJELA  
WeBBS • WITS WRITER: CJ WIGGAN

### *A Cry to the Moon*

My parents say I stay up too late  
There's a reason for that

There's always a reason

At night, when the only sound to be heard  
Is my laughter as I talk to my friends on the phone

Or sometimes it's just silence

Pure and comforting

Silence

My eyelids turn to dumbbells as I struggle to stay awake  
And my mind sings it's time to go to sleep

But I don't want to  
Not yet at least

If I do, I know what'll happen

The sun will rise and it'll start all over again

Wasting through the day  
Not a moment of relaxation

As the moon once again makes its appearance  
I breathe a sigh of relief  
For at night, it is the only time  
Where I can truly unwind

HELEN HARRISON  
FRANKLIN HIGH SCHOOL • WITS WRITER: MATT SMITH

## *Stay With Aliens?*

Their proposition is tempting, to say the least. But no, I must stay with humanity, help my people rebuild in a better, kinder way after the war. It's the selfless, altruistic thing to do, giving yourself up to the mercy of the wasteland in order to rebuild humanity. My descendants will worship my courage and thank me for my sacrifice, if, of course, I survive long enough to have descendants. I don't even want children. Perhaps that would be another sacrifice I would have to make - give my body up to further the cause. Who's to say I wouldn't be subjected to the same with them? I don't know. Am I strong enough to give up a life of relative comfort, even with unfamiliar beings, for this painful uncertainty? I'd like to think I'm strong enough not to be the Judas Goat, but wars take a lot out of a person. I have forty-eight hours. I must decide.

OLIVER CUSHMAN  
FRANKLIN HIGH SCHOOL • WITS WRITER: MATT SMITH

## *Artta*

My alarm clock goes off and I immediately lift myself out of bed. It's noon and I know how important tonight is—it's the fight night I signed up for months in advance. Two Arttarans, a rare fight. Being Arttaran, I know how powerful I am, though I would be feared by most if I couldn't hide under my human skin. In the decades that the 'John boy's fight night' has been around, Arttarans have been shown so powerful that most fights against other kind are forbidden since it almost certainly ends in the Arttaran ripping apart the opponent. Although it's what the people want, too much of it gets boring, but two against each other is something that even the sector fight champions pay big to see.

I walk to the door and press the button lock that opens my apartment. The door doesn't open, so I hit it a couple times quickly to which it responds by sliding open. The list comes back to my mind, the things I'll do with my winnings as I stroll down the busy hallway, a diverse community of hookers, dealers, and residents that roam these halls of my skycondo.

I make my way to the elevator and punch the 'call elevator' button, to which the elevator immediately opens its doors. I am shocked: it's rare but not unheard of. I step into the elevator and hit the 'ground floor' button, to which it responds by shifting the metal cube downward. I turn to the TV which speaks the news, a man in a suit with a charming smile getting ready to speak.

"I'm Alexander Grey and we are back with the news at noon. Everyone get ready for tonight's fight night because this is huge!" He swings his arms around like an excited child. "Two Artties finally get to let loose at each other after years of nothing from their kind. They probably need this since their crime rates are through the roof—" I turn the volume down. I never liked the news, especially Alexander,

who uses his flawed statistics to push a narrative that we're violent beings in public who don't deserve to hide under human skin. They fail to understand that mastering your Artta energy takes an absurd amount of self control.

The elevator door slides open, and I step out and admire this ground view of the neon littered buildings for what could be my last time seeing it. I need to keep the possibility in mind. I lift my watch to my face and prepare myself for an auto walk, where I let a device autopilot my body whilst I'm in an unconscious state. I click the button and my vision flips like old film and suddenly I'm there. A group of rather burly guys approach me, "You Dex?" one of them with a bald head and an accura-eye asks. I nod and he pulls out a badge, "Follow us through the back." We go through the back into a locker room, I seem to be the only one on tonight.

"Where's my opponent?" I ask, taking a seat on the bench dividing the rows of lockers. "We decided we'd put him in the other locker room since we can't trust you two to keep your hands off each other until you're in the arena. We know how you operate," he scoffs, his group silently agreeing, arms crossed staring at me. I feel a weight on me, like hate from them, like if they could they would kill me, but I know my strength and so do they. Suddenly, the crowd from above us erupts into cheers and the announcer's voice can be heard muffled through the concrete that separates us from them, from my opponent. "Ladies and gentlemen, it's the big night, the night we've waited decades to see!" The bald man strides over to me almost aggressively. "Get up, win, and leave," he says as though he feels he has more power than me.

"Fuck off, asshole," I respond, making my way to the arena entrance doors. "You got some nerve coming at me like that."

"Don't you talk to me like that, want us to throw your ass out?!"

"And then what? Explain to John boy that you threw out the rarest opponent because he hurt your feelings?" I wipe a fake tear to mock him

He charges at me. "Oh you sack of—" Suddenly, my human skin is engulfed under my glossy, black Artta skin, taking my stance from six

feet to eight feet. He stops and realizes his mistake, a mix of fear and anger in his expression.

"Get ready to see the boys in action tonight!" the announcer bellows into his mic, the volume of his voice distorting the amplification through the speakers that seep their sound through the walls.

"Prick, someone will get you one day." The man is now five feet in front of his group. I wind my arm back and whip it forward, causing my Artta skin to stretch like a whip. It hits the man, launching him into the lockers behind him, knocking him out. The group of guys stare in fear of me.

"He won't die, but I suggest you take him to the hospital, he has a couple broken ribs," I say before turning back to the arena door to wait for it to invite me in.

"And now, let's introduce these opponents to each other, shall we?" I hear the announcer yell through the microphone. He's just as excited as everyone else, I can feel it. The doors open to reveal a sand-covered arena with heavy purple lights from four strangely large tubes that stand with the crowd, towering as tall as the structure. "Dex versus Gigan!" the announcer calls, now visible in a booth amongst the crowd. I look over to the doors where the supposed Gigan would be standing to see nothing. The crowd gasps and I look to the announcer for an explanation only to see a cyclops Arttaran holding the announcer's severed head for everyone to see. The crowd begins to scream but is interrupted by the Arttaran's response.

"Listen up everyone!" His voice is in a tri-tone like a demon from the inner reaches of the dark realm. "The High Artta King has spoken, and he has chosen me to spread the message that no more will you market us as your little fight dogs!" He pulls the head back and stares at it in a Shakespearean style. "You regular humans are weaker than us, yet you bully us and push us around like this won't happen." He throws the lifeless head into the arena to which the crowd screams again. He points at me. "Dex, join me, and together we will teach the weaker, less intelligent, and smaller humanoids."

I'm shocked. Me? The Artta kind is starting some kind of rebellion

against almost everyone? “How are we going to take on these people?!”  
I ask

“Here,” he tosses me an amulet, “put this on.” He begins to grow to the size of an Artta Titan, roughly twenty feet tall. “Now you!” His voice now shakes the ground. I put on the amulet and focus my Artta energy, I begin to grow. The ground beneath me shrinks and I meet who I believe is Gigan.

His smile passes both sides of his one eye, he extends his hand. “Welcome to the new age.” I shake his hand and that’s how it all started.

We annihilated city after city, knowing that the Arttarans were proud. I was a Hero.

LOC NGUYEN

McDANIEL HIGH SCHOOL • WITS WRITER: ALEX BEHR

## *Assumptions*

Everyone in my family that currently lives in Vietnam thinks that I’m enjoying a happy life in this dream country. They say that I’m getting richer here, forget about them and what they have done for me. They don’t know that as a country is bigger and better, I have to compete even harder just to survive well, not yet to mention development. It makes me feel powerless every time I hear about this. So I thought about one way of using social media, which also has lots of people in my same situation posting their stories. If I can’t use my words to make people understand, I’ll use the majority to fight against stereotypes about living in a wealthy country. Overtime, I used to live without noticing those assumptions left because I learned that since I moved here, I had started my life again individually. There is no reason to let those assumptions bother my mind anymore.

## *Valley of Flowers*

It all started when Shappa and his followers came.

Working with my cousin in the garden, we picked berries for supper. At first, all I heard was a low rumble, although soon it became more like a thunderous roar. I don't recall many details, but the screams and cries of my fellow villagers are ingrained in my head.

"We have to go," I whispered, as quietly as I could.

I grabbed her hand and we ran as fast as we could away from the invasion. The underbrush scratched my legs and my feet kept landing on sharp objects. I looked back, not sure what I was looking for, and once the screams were only a buzz in the background, we stopped to peer around.

Where were we?

My cousin looked up at me with her doe eyes. Her voice came out in barely a whisper. "What happened?"

I didn't know what to say. I wasn't sure myself. "I don't know. But we need to sleep before anything else."

The next morning, as the sun kissed the tops of the trees and the forest came alive, I began to realize where we were. We had run alongside the river that goes through the village.

Well, at least it's a straight shot back, I thought to myself. Amitola, my cousin, still slept, so I got up to find the materials we needed to make a shelter. Technically, I wasn't supposed to know how to make a shelter, but all the women in my family made sure to pass the knowledge down to one another. The shelters of my people are rounded at the top and sewn together with grass. They can withstand all kinds of weather. Just as I started building my cousin woke up.

She rubbed her eyes with her fists and said in a small voice, "Algoma,

what are you doing?"

Algoma meant Valley Of Flowers. It was also my name. It represented the valley my parents hoped we would live in one day. "I am building a shelter for us to sleep in, Amitola," I responded.

As soon as I finished making the shelter, we decided to gather our dinner. Venturing off in search of berries or some other things to eat, we wandered back to the village.

A total war scene lay in front of us. Most of the houses had been burnt down and there were dead bodies strewn everywhere.

"C'mon," I whispered, a scream caught in my throat.

We weaved in between the dead bodies, making our way to what had been my house. I tripped on a body and screamed.

"Who's there?" yelled a nervous voice: a person who survived the attack.

"Algoma," I replied in a shaky voice.

"Oh, thank goodness! It's me, Notaku."

"Oh my god you survived!" I ran and jumped into his arms, tears stinging my eyes. "Have you run into anyone else?"

"No," he muttered, eyes cast down. "As soon as the attacks started I ran to the place where we play hide and seek. I was the only one there. I stayed hidden until there was no more noise. After I couldn't hear anything, I came to see what happened. I looked for any others who had survived but there were none. I scouted the area and heard a sound. It was Mother. She gasped for breath. She had been both shot with an arrow and slit in the throat with a knife. I ran over to her, but there was no saving her. She reached up to hug me, and began to say something, but couldn't." His voice trembled as if he was disappointed in himself.

"There is nothing you could have done," I said, "Shappa got what he wanted, but we can't let him and his murderous followers attack all of the villages. We have warn others."

"You're right," he sighed, "When did my little sister grow up so much?"

I offered him a sad smile, feeling proud. Someday I will get back at



Shappa for taking away my family and trying to take me too, but until then, stopping him from tearing apart other communities will suffice.

ANNA GUNDERSON  
FRANKLIN HIGH SCHOOL • WITS WRITER: MEG GRIFFITTS

### *Broken Moments*

There was a time in my life  
Where I didn't want  
To exist

When I thought about bottles of pills  
And serrated knife edges  
And falling asleep  
Asleep  
Asleep  
Asleep

And never waking up

That night I had  
A neverending dream

A dream where I hugged my best friend  
And felt her warmth seep into my bones  
As she cried tears of salty pain into my lifeless shoulder

Where I saw my parents hug each other  
For the first time  
In years and found myself  
Asking  
Why  
Now

Where I watched my dog  
Curl up in a sunbeam

And whimper  
Desperate and wanting  
But blissfully unaware

I felt my heart break  
As my little brother walked downstairs  
And heard the staircase moan  
With longing

And I ached for life  
For cold rain on my skin  
For crunching fall leaves under my feet  
And playing my ukulele  
Until my fingers were rubbed raw  
And my cuticles bleeding  
For taste  
And touch  
And hugs  
And everyone I never got to meet

And all the moments  
Yet to be

The girl I never got to lay in the sunshine with  
Who never got to press her lips to mine  
And marvel at the beauty of love  
And wanting  
And freedom

I picked up my phone  
I saw my name

My name  
My name

Spoken by those girls  
Who walked by me sitting alone at the lunch table  
By every friend who turned their back on me

Saying how much they miss me  
What a tragic loss  
And I wish we had been closer  
Lies upon heartless lies  
Before going back to pictures  
Of slim, perfect bodies in skimpy bikinis  
And sunny days  
Eating a cupcake without a care

A moment lost in the shuffle  
Not something worth enough to feel sad about forever  
Just a fleeting thought  
Every  
Once  
In  
A  
While

Of damn that was a scary day  
Or maybe  
I could have been that girl  
Or maybe  
I wonder what was wrong with her  
She  
Looked  
So  
Happy

Suicide prevention being spoken in the same breath  
As weight loss

And cures to every physical wrongdoing  
Every sin I committed by just being

And now that I'm gone  
They want me back  
For some reason  
Because  
It's not like  
They saw me  
When I was there

Suddenly anger filled me to the brim  
Filled with every tear I shed for nasty words  
And everything they did to me  
And how fucking selfish I was  
To leave such a good life

For every party I had to sit and watch on my phone  
Because who would  
Invite  
The broken  
lonely girl

Who would want to befriend the girl who  
Spent her whole weekend writing you a song  
And gave up her life  
To be enough for you

But now that I'm gone  
You want me now

And you can't have me back

And this

This is worse than the pain  
This nothing  
This longing  
This numbness

I longed to cry myself to sleep  
Just one more time  
I tried to press undo  
To get back to the anger  
To find the little girl who marvelled at sunsets  
And carried her dolls around in a wooden wagon  
Who never once  
Looked at her broken body in the mirror  
And hated every inch of distorted pain

But the button was stuck  
And I couldn't go back  
Back  
Back  
Let me go back  
Let me undo  
Let me feel

But the earth is cruel  
And people are cruel  
And they let you bleed alone

So don't fade out like the  
Broken  
Lonely  
Starstruck  
girl  
Who longed for love  
And belonging

Who left the world  
Like a whisper in the wind  
That never circled back

Stitch yourself back together  
If no one else will  
For there is more to living  
Than broken moments  
More to living than  
Than fading away

ART CORDOVA  
McDANIEL HIGH SCHOOL • WITS WRITER: DAMIEN MILES-PAULSON

## *How to Make Friends*

Start off by not going to preschool.

Stay at home for your toddler years and make an imaginary friend. He will be a lot bigger than you and is the color blue. He's also a talking lion. This will be the first friend you make and you won't have to put in much effort. He will support you no matter what, even if it's eating cookies before dinner like you're not supposed to. Play games, watch cartoons, and have fun with your friend until he disappears. You don't know where he went or why he left, but it must be important if he didn't say anything. Your mom is your best friend now: she will do everything with you.

Do normal kid things, like pretending you're a dog, until the age of five. This is when you start your first day of kindergarten. Know nothing about kindergarten or school. Walk into the classroom with your dad and be greeted by bright colors, loud noises, and other kids. The kids are small like you—maybe they could be new friends. Don't realize that your dad can't stay at school with you. Cry when he leaves. Other kids also cry. Maybe they're sad too. Have a girl come over to you and ask what's wrong. She tries to talk to you, but you're still crying. She leaves to go play with other kids. Stop crying and go to sit on the carpet for the introduction. Meet my teacher, meet the new kids, and hope that people will like you. Go to play with the other kids. Play with blocks and puppets. The other kids get along with you and play together.

Go home for the day and think about how you don't like school much—you don't like sitting at a desk all day. Start learning to read and write. Realize reading and writing are important and skills you need. Make your first real friend on Halloween. Wear a Spiderman costume to school and see another kid wearing the same one. He walks up to you and asks you to be friends. That was easy. Play with him during

recess and play pretend, you are both Spiderman together. Go home and be happy that you are making progress.

Start summer vacation.

It's hot and humid, hotter than any summer you've experienced yet. Don't talk to the friends you made during the school year. Your mom is still your best friend and you still do everything together. You love your mom, but wish that you still had your other friends to play with during summer. Change your name before summer ends. Start the next school year, first grade. Don't cry on the first day this time. Hope that people don't care about name changes and like it. No one seemed to care.

Have a normal school year, learn new things. Have your first playdate ever and go to a friend's house. He has a hamster and a dog. His mom is nice and caring. Have a lot of fun and play until your dad comes to pick you up. Hope that you can have more play dates. Finish the school year, and this time, play with your friends during the summer. Have water balloon fights and eat popsicles together. Have your first sleepover ever and feel weird not sleeping at home. Don't go to sleep till late and wake up to breakfast with his family. Feel comfortable around his family and be happy that you have friends who you can do this with.

Second grade will start and things go about how you expect them to go. Nothing interesting happens: you make some new friends and learn some new things and that's about it. Start third grade. School starts to get more serious: you are starting to learn more complicated and hard things. Have reading time on the carpet one day. As your teacher reads the book, make jokes and imitate the book. People laugh, you feel good. Realize you are being disruptive in class. Get in trouble for the first time ever. Still feel happy about making people laugh and think about how you should try to do it more often. Go through the same repetitive school process and keep your friends until middle school.

Start your middle school career.

Keep most of your friends from elementary school and have classes with them. Go through sixth and seventh grade without a problem. You learn new concepts, learn about letters in math, and are enjoying

being one of the "popular kids." You'll have a lot of friends who like having you around and who think you are funny. Start your final year of middle school, eighth grade. Everything will start off as expected. Sit with your friends during lunch and talk about anything and everything. Have "study groups" with them where you will get no real studying done. Eventually you will stop getting invited to these study groups. Actually, you will stop getting invited to any activities your friends are doing. Have all your friends stop texting you. Now they all sit at a different table than you do during lunch. Text your friend and ask what's wrong. Have him ignore you. After ignoring you for days, your friend will finally text you. "Sorry, Steve," he will say. Realize he is pretending you are someone else. Don't try texting your friends anymore.

Become very sad and think you did something wrong. Think that you are annoying and that they deserve better than you. Go to school and sit alone during lunch for a while. Your grades will start to drop. Don't realize how badly not having friends affects you. Start the friend making process over. Sit with a new group of people who are in your class. Slowly build a relationship with them and enjoy having company again. Start doing well in school again and feel happy. Eighth-grade graduation comes. Get your certificate and have an after party. Everyone cries about middle school being over, including you. You think about how you will miss your friends in high school, but you're also happy middle school is over. Spend summer with your new group of friends and get ready for high school. You don't know what to expect from high school, but you hope that it will be better than middle school.

High school finally starts.

Be a little nervous, but realize it will just be like a more advanced middle school. Have some of your friends come to the same high school as you. Sit with them during lunch and stay with them for a while. You will stay friends with them until you go to the movies. Your friend seems to be annoyed and is acting weird during the movie. Don't think much of it. Walk through a park while walking to the MAX. Your best friend will pull a knife on you. Realize that he isn't messing around

and intends to hurt you. Try your hardest to keep calm, talk him out of it, go home, and don't realize the gravity of the situation until the next day. You will be called in to write a report about what happened. You weren't planning on saying anything, but your other friend who witnessed what happened decided it to be a good idea. Write your report, go back to class, and start crying. Leave class and get through the day, blaming yourself for what happened. You will go back to having little friends and will be sad about what happened.

Go through the school year and meet some new friends. These will not be permanent either. These friends will do bad things and make bad decisions. They make you happy for a while. You think that they are fun and that they are cool, but slowly you start to realize that they're just assholes. Break ties with these "friends" and be alone yet again. You fall back into a slump, you'll be sad again, you'll not have any friends, and you'll still beat yourself up about what happened at the movies.

Finally, you will find a new group of friends, this time a group who are good for you and to you. Make friends with people in class and people who enjoy your company. Be happy again with these friends and think that you finally found your clique. Come to the realization that it was not your fault that your friends left you. Realize that people grow and change, not always for the better. Come to terms with the fact that you didn't need those friends. You have new friends now, and while you don't have as many as you used to, you have people that genuinely care about you and that is what really matters.

MARBELLA REYES

WOODBURN WELLNESS, BUSINESS, AND SPORTS SCHOOL•

WITS WRITER: CJ WIGGAN

### *Never Enough*

A girl sits in the back of class taking notes. Her hair is messy and so is her hand writing. Her head is down, hiding from anyone who might know her name, while a boy sits in the front with his head up high as everyone laughs at his jokes. But this isn't a love story, not even close. See, they aren't strangers but they act like they are. He knows her name but he also knows she will never be enough for him no matter how much he wants her to be.

MARIAH BEASLEY

McDANIEL HIGH SCHOOL • WITS WRITER: ALEX BEHR

## *My Mind A-Z*

Again I find myself adrift  
Beginning to fade as a dandelion in the wind  
Casually making light of all my problems  
Dangerously close to fading into the dark  
Empty spaces exist where happiness once filled

Frankly, why do people even try at this point  
Great, here I go again  
Harassing myself . . . like that's going to help anything get better  
Imagining a world where I simply don't exist, what would change?  
Just think about it, would everyone be better off without?

Kidding! I'm only kidding  
Listen  
My happiness at this point  
Nonexistent

Only when I completely drown myself with everything that could be  
Painting a false reality continuously  
Questioning if it's my fault for allowing it to be this way  
Running from anything that makes me feel  
Sacrificing real feelings for false happiness  
Totally, completely, numb  
Unaware of the collapsing structure all around me

Viewing from the outside it may look completely in tact  
Watching closely however, you see it falling, brick by brick  
X-ray vision, it's simple, that's all you need  
You need to look deep, look closely  
Zero thoughts will be found otherwise

ROACH KILLA

FRANKLIN HIGH SCHOOL • WITS WRITER: MATT SMITH

## *Robot Me*

It was a sad and wet February night, and I quickly walked through the pouring rain over to my car after finishing my shift at Carl's Jr. when I was approached by a woman. She was exactly my height with the same color hair. She even kinda dressed like me. She stepped into the spotlight from the street lamp and my mouth dropped wide open in shock. She had the same piercings as me, same facial structure and acne scars, same slouch and timid stance. Almost everything was exactly the same, but when she spoke, it sounded like my voice over the phone. Similar but not the same.

She told me not to be scared and that she needs my help saving her space empire. I would have to travel to the year 2347 and destroy the star that supplies light and energy to seven sad and miserable planets controlled by the space empire. The reason for destroying the star was because the creatures had become greedy and started stealing and mooching off the empire's goods. I of course was anxious to travel back in time but to also wipe out seven different populations, my stomach knotted up into a ball. I thought of all the lives that would be lost and started to tear up. I just stared at her with a blank expression not knowing what to say when she told me she wasn't asking, she was telling me.

Suddenly, she pushed me into the back of my Hello Kitty 2006 Chevy Aveo and got into the driver seat. Immediately, the car started lighting up in different bright colors and turned into a spaceship version of my car within seconds. Even that had the same decorations. Within minutes, we approached a huge star with seven planets surrounding it. They were all brown and grey, lacking in life and nature. I grew even more sad realizing all of this would soon come to an end for them all because they wanted a nicer life. I looked around noticing all the giant and crazy looking spaceships and man-made planets. I saw why

they were so sad and jealous and all the theft and ungratefulness made sense. Their life was completely unfair compared to the empire's lives.

I was quicking brought out of my thoughts when the robot version of me pulled out this strange looking vacuum with a huge bubble in the middle. Before I could even try to change her mind, she grabbed my hand, forcing me to help her hold the bubble while she sucked the sun and life out of this little sad galaxy. The vacuum lit up and made loud ringing noises. The sun shrank and shrunk, flowing into the vacuum until it was completely gone. The once-lit area was now in complete darkness other than the stars in the far distance. I watched as the planets quickly started to rot and disintegrate into the darkness of space. You could hear the cries from the creatures who were getting their existence ripped away from them. I started to cry at the sight when all of a sudden, gravity started working and I dropped down millions of miles until I landed in the driver's seat of my car filled with confusion.

HANNAH SUMMERHALDER

McDANIEL HIGH SCHOOL • WITS WRITER: DAMIEN MILES-PAULSON

### *All we lost*

Covid, pandemic, death  
The world on locked-down  
Families torn apart by distance  
Jobless, loneliness, depression

Motivation the thing that keeps us going  
Mine is slipping towards the edge  
Dangling on the edge, sharp rocks at the bottom  
Holding on for dear life, can't let it go to waste  
Must make the most of it before its time

Club meeting, exciting to meet others  
Others like me, love Harry Potter  
Virtually meeting, teacher is amazing  
Discuss books like book clubs  
Analyze films and theories as theorists

Teacher eyes starting to get bad  
Thinking of stopping the club  
Stops the club to get better  
Harry Potter on hiatus, hope it starts again  
Hope is starting to deplete  
Months later still on hiatus

Depression creeping up on us  
To tear us from the inside  
A monster that is in the shadows waiting to strike  
Don't know when it will hit



Optimistic becomes sad  
Sad becomes more sad  
Have to think positive to get through it  
Thinking positive is becoming tedious as time goes on  
Negative rises up from the depths trying to get ahold  
Must persevere through for the people we care about and for

Loss, pain, grieving, all human emotions

Morning comes, the sun rises with colors in the sky  
Death calls for their worker, their next soul getting ready to collect  
Their worker; the reaper all dressed in black ready to collect  
Reaper arrives at a memory care home, watching two girls leave to get  
their grandmother  
Once gone, they strike, calling to the man saying it is time

The man; Robert or Grandpa Bob realizes it is his time  
Grabs reapers hand, and leaves watching the daughter come to tears  
The two girls arrive with the grandmother, finding out their grandpa  
has left their plain of existence

Crying both the young and the older granddaughters, grieving the lost  
hard  
Reaper sadden, Bob sadden to see his family upset but knows this is  
life  
They leave as their family grieve together as the day takes a sudden  
turn in their life

Loss, grief, pain, sadness, tears all internal and external

The year we all lost

ISAIAH JENSEN  
FRANKLIN HIGH SCHOOL • WITS WRITER: MEG GRIFFITTS

## *The Writer*

“Where will it go wrong?  
What will happen next, I wonder?”

He pondered these questions and more  
As he sits in front of the screen.  
What he types  
Is not fully thought out  
But not too misunderstood either.

He seems confident  
But his head is jumbled  
Drawn towards many ideas  
Not too much backstory  
An introduction that doesn't drag out  
The pin guiding the plot forward  
All these things  
He works together  
And conjures up  
With very little feedback  
It's all in his mind

Even when doubt comes into play  
His overwhelming determination  
Continues to push him forward

“Keep at it, you've got this!  
You can't give up now!”  
He tells himself  
As he blows through

Every tap tap tap  
Every word tap  
Every page tap  
Everything he writes  
He does because he likes it  
And wants to express himself  
To others

Success feels closer  
Dreams are in the air  
Hope continues forth

That's what being a writer can feel like.

# WRITERS-IN-RESIDENCE

## 2020-21

ALEX BEHR is a writer and editor based in Portland, Oregon. After receiving an MFA in Creative Writing from Portland State, she taught fiction and creative nonfiction at Portland high schools through Writers in the Schools residencies. Her writing has appeared in many online and print publications, including *Bitch*, *Mutha*, *Propeller*, *Nailed*, *Salon*, and *Tin House*. Her debut story collection, *Planet Grim*, was published in October 2017 (7.13 Books).

BRIAN BENSON is the author of *Going Somewhere* (Plume, 2014) and co-author, with Richard Brown, of *This Is Not For You: An Activist's Journey of Resistance and Resilience* (OSU Press, March 2021). In addition to his work with Literary Arts, Brian teaches at the Attic Institute and facilitates free Write Around Portland workshops in schools, treatment centers, and affordable housing. His short nonfiction has been published in *Entropy*, *The Sun* and *Off Assignment*. He is at work on his third book, a novel.

KATIE BORAK is a current instructor in the Community Education program at Portland Community College and a previous facilitator of writing workshops with Write Around Portland. She earned an MFA in Creative Writing from Portland State University and recently published the erasure poetry chapbook *Range*. Visit her at [www.katieborak.com](http://www.katieborak.com).

DAVID CIMINELLO is a Portland-based writer and educator. His fiction has appeared in the Lambda Literary Award-winning anthology *Portland Queer: Tales of the Rose City*, *The Frozen Moment: Contemporary Writers on the Choices That Change Our Lives*, the literary journal *Lumina*, the online anthology *Underwater New York*, *Nailed Magazine*, and on *Broadcastr*. His poetry has appeared in *Poetry Northwest*. He is a 2011

Lambda Literary Fellow in Fiction and a proud recipient of a 2013 annual Table 4 Writers Foundation grant. His original screenplay *Bruno* appears on DVD as *The Dress Code*.

ED EDMO is a Shoshone-Bannock poet, playwright, performer, traditional storyteller, tour guide, and lecturer on Northwest tribal culture. Ed offers guided tours to the She Who Watches petroglyphs on the Columbia Gorge, as well as to the Warm Springs Indian Reservation in central Oregon's high desert country. He conducts workshops, traditional storytelling performances, dramatic monologues, and lectures on issues such as cultural understanding and awareness, drug and alcohol abuse, and mental health. Ed is a published short story writer, poet, and playwright, and serves as a consultant to the Smithsonian Museum of the American Indian.

LISA ROSALIE EISENBERG is a cartoonist and teaching artist. She is a regular contributor to *The Nib*, a nonfiction comics periodical, and her comics have been published in a variety of zines and anthologies. Currently, Lisa is at work on a YA graphic novel that combines her high school autobiography with the life and career of Sylvia Plath, forthcoming from Street Noise Books in 2021. In addition to her work with Literary Arts, Lisa teaches comics and zine making through Young Audiences, the Right Brain Initiative, and Comic Cave PDX.

ELISABETH GEIER is a writer, editor, teacher, and enthusiast whose short stories and essays have appeared in publications such as *Porter House Review*, *Okey-Panky*, *Bright Wall/Dark Room*, *Nanofiction*, and *The Toast*. She's taught writing and literature in public high schools, community colleges, youth correctional facilities, affordable housing communities, and elsewhere. Elisabeth has an MFA in Fiction from the University of Montana and lives in Portland with several pets. Read more at [elisabethgeier.com](http://elisabethgeier.com).

MEG E. GRIFFITTS is a poet, educator, and freelance writer. She's the author of the forthcoming collection *Hallucinating a Homestead*, which was chosen by Traci Brimhall as the winner of the 2020 Two Sylvias Press Chapbook Prize. Her poem "When the Doctor Doesn't Believe Your Pain" was a finalist in Inverted Syntax's 2020 Sublingua Contest chosen by Dr. Khadijah Queen, and in 2018, her essay "Hyemation" was a runner-up for the Wabash Prize for Nonfiction. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Missouri Review*, *Medium*, *Black Warrior Review*, *Homology Lit*, and others. She is currently working on her first full-length poetry collection and a memoir. She lives in Portland with her partner and many animals. Find more of her work at [megegriffitts.com](http://megegriffitts.com).

APRIL JOSEPH is a poet from East L.A., California, who creates mixed media performance art by employing movement and music to mourning songs. Her performance art is informed by her study of ancestral trauma, healing through Buddhist-psychology, musical composition, Contemplative Dance Practice, evolutionary astrology, and working at a mortuary in Oregon. April earned her MFA in Writing and Poetics from Naropa University and a BA in Literatures of the World from the University of California, San Diego. April's chapbooks include *Excerpts from: Rose Body Fell and First Call Home*. Her work has appeared in *TAYO*, *Gesture*, *Galatea Resurrects*, *Bombay Gin*, *The Lune*, and can be found at [bodyfulspace.com](http://bodyfulspace.com).

CARI LUNA is the author of *The Revolution of Every Day*, which won the Oregon Book Award for Fiction. A fellow of Yaddo and Ragdale, her writing has appeared in *Guernica*, *Salon*, *Jacobin*, *Electric Literature*, *Catapult*, *The Rumpus*, *PANK*, and elsewhere. She lives in Portland, Oregon.

RASHMILA MAITI holds a doctorate in Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies from the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville. Originally from India, she is an independent scholar who lives in

Oregon. She has taught writing and literature to undergraduates for seven years. She is excited to be a part of WITS. She is on the board of the Friends of the Multnomah County Library, a blogger for *Feminist Book Club*; and cohost of a podcast on books and reading, *Reading Squad*. When not writing about books or films, she volunteers as an editor and social media coordinator for various non-profit organizations.

JESSICA (TYNER) MEHTA is a citizen of the Cherokee Nation, interdisciplinary artist, multi-award-winning poet, and author of several books. Place, space, and personal ancestry inform much of her work. She's also the owner of an award-winning small business. MehtaFor is a writing services company that offers pro-bono services to Native Americans and indigenous-serving non-profits.

Her novel *The Wrong Kind of Indian* won gold at the 2019 Independent Publisher Book Awards (IPPYs) and at the American Book Fest Best Book. Mehta's *Savagery* won the Reader Literary Reviews 2020 award for "most innovative collection of poetry." *Selected Poems: 2000 – 2020* received the 2020 Birdy Prize from Meadowlark Books. Jessica has also received numerous fellowships in recent years, including the Everett Helm Visiting Fellowship at the Lilly Library at Indiana University in Bloomington and the Eccles Centre Visiting Fellowship at The British Library in London. Jessica is a popular speaker and panelist, featured recently at events such as the US State Department's National Poetry Month event, "Poets as Cultural Emissaries: A Conversation with Women Writers," as well as the "Women's Transatlantic Prison Activism Since 1960" symposium at Oxford University.

She has undertaken poetry residencies around the globe including at Hosking Houses Trust with an appointment at the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust in Stratford-Upon-Avon, England, Paris Lit Up in France, and at the Crazy Horse Memorial and museum in South Dakota. Her work has been featured at galleries and exhibitions around the world, including IA&A Hillyer in Washington DC, The

Emergency Gallery in Sweden, and Institute of American Indian Arts in New Mexico. Her doctoral research addresses the intersection of poetry and eating disorders. Learn more at [www.jessicamehta.com](http://www.jessicamehta.com).

MONTY MICKELSON is the author of the novel *Purgatory* (St. Martin's Press), for which he received a Bush Foundation Individual Artist Fellowship. Mickelson's short fiction has been published in *Loonfeather*, *Minnesota Monthly* magazine, and online at *The Whistling Fire*. His creative journalism and essays have been published online at *Gently Read Literature* and *Salon*. Two of his YA feature film scripts have been produced for cable television. Mickelson has an MFA in Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts from the University of California, Riverside.

AMY MINATO is the author of a memoir *Siesta Lane*, (Skyhorse Press, 2009) and two poetry collections, *Hermit Thrush* (Inkwater Press, 2016) and *The Wider Lens* (Ice River Press, 2004). Amy has been a recipient of both a Literary Arts Fellowship for her poetry and a Walden Residency for her prose. She teaches writing through Literary Arts, Multnomah Art Center, Fishtrap, and at Breitenbush Retreat Center, as well as a community service course in sustainable living at Portland State University. She holds both an MFA in Creative Writing and an MS in Environmental Studies from the University of Oregon.

CAROLINA GÓMEZ-MONTOYA, originally from Bogotá, Colombia, moves between various languages, disciplines and mediums. She currently teaches at Portland State University and in the Language & Thinking Program at Bard College. Carolina's writing appears in *Literal: Latin American Voices/Voces Latinoamericanas*; *¡Basta! Mujeres colombianas contra la violencia de género* (Bogotá: Debate escrito, 2015) and in *Oregon Humanities* magazine. Carolina holds an MA and PhD in Latin American and Peninsular Literature from the University of Maryland, College Park.

LAURA MOULTON is the founder of Street Books, a bicycle-powered mobile library that serves people who live outside in Portland, Oregon. She has taught writing in public schools, prisons, and teen shelters, and is an adjunct professor at Marylhurst University and Lewis & Clark College. Her social art practice projects have involved postal workers, immigrants, prisoners, and students. She earned an MFA from Eastern Washington University.

DAMIEN MILES-PAULSON teaches slow dancing, writes, and still dreams of an overseas basketball career. He is a founding member of the now-disbanded experimental German noise band, Flu Shot. His stories, poems, and sounds can be found at *The Whole Beast Rag*, *The Washington Square Review*, *theNewerYork*, *Alice Blue Review*, *Marco Polo Arts Mag*, *Everyday Genius*, *Past-Ten*, *Axolotl*, and *The Alarmist*. He now walks the world with an MFA in Creative Writing from UCR in hand.

VALARIE PEARCE is a Portland-based writer, educator, and curriculum content developer. Having earned her M.Ed. from Concordia University, she has taught high school women's studies and social sciences. Valarie has written four children's books: *When Mommy Needs A Timeout*, *When Daddy Needs A Timeout*, *I Love Colors*, and *Little Dot*. Her work appears in SMART'S *Oregon Reads Aloud: A Collection of 25 Children's Stories by Oregon Authors and Illustrators*. She is currently working on a YA novel centering a young girl, abandoned and troubled, who finds the miracles of love and compassion shine brightest in the darkest of nights. For more information about Valarie [www.imarapublishing.com](http://www.imarapublishing.com)

MARK POMEROY'S first novel, *The Brightwood Stillness*, was published by Oregon State University Press in 2014. He has received an Oregon Literary Fellowship for fiction, and his short stories, poems, and essays have appeared in *Open Spaces*, *The Wordstock 10*, *Portland Magazine*, *The Oregonian*, *NW Book Lovers*, and *What Teaching Means: Stories from America's Classrooms*. He holds an MA in English Education

from Teachers College, Columbia University, where he was a Fellow in Teaching.

DEY RIVERS is a mixed-media visual artist, poet and storyteller based in Portland, Oregon on Cowlitz and Clackamas Native lands. After earning a degree in Fine Art in Pennsylvania, they returned to the west coast as a teaching artist with local non-profits and museums. Dey is one of the featured writers in Oregon Writers of Color 2020 Spring Showcase through Ooligan Press. Their current creative writing examines relationships, nature, culture, and history from a Black, neuro-diverse, queer perspective.

MATT SMITH grew up in Iowa and Arizona. He earned his BA in English Literature from Arizona State University. He spent the subsequent four years after college in South Korea as an ESL teacher. His short fiction work centers on the intersections of race and identity. He is currently working on a collection of short stories focused on what it means to be multi-racial in America. Matt was a 2017-18 WITS apprentice.

JOHN SIBLEY WILLIAMS is the author of *As One Fire Consumes Another* (Orison Poetry Prize, 2019), *Skin Memory* (Backwaters Prize, University of Nebraska Press, 2019), *Summon* (JuxtaProse Chapbook Prize, 2019), *Disinheritance*, and *Controlled Hallucinations*. A nineteen-time Pushcart nominee, John is the winner of numerous literary awards, including the Wabash Prize for Poetry, Philip Booth Award, and Laux/Millar Prize. He edits *The Inflectionist Review* and works as a poetry editor, writing coach, workshop leader, and literary agent. He holds an MFA in Creative Writing from Rivier University and an MA in Book Publishing from Portland State University. Visit him at <https://www.johnsibleywilliams.com>.

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## WRITING EXERCISES

*Exercises created by WITS Manager, novelist, and former WITS writer-in-residence, Jules Ohman.*

**Quick Create Prompt:** Describe what happened to you yesterday at lunch with as much detail as you can, as if you are writing to your closest friend (even if they were there).

Consider: Where were you? What did it look like, smell like, sound like, taste like? Who was there? What was said?

Yesterday at lunch, I remember seeing...

[illegible]

Now describe a memory you have from when you were ten years old with as much detail as you have, as if you are writing to your closest friend.

Consider: Where were you? What did it look like, smell like, sound like? Who was there?

One time, when I was ten...

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**Writing Prompt:** Write a letter to yourself as a ten-year-old, in poetry or prose. Give your younger self advice, or ask them for some.

Consider: How do you see yourself now? Who were you then? Have you changed? How would you explain that to your ten-year-old self? Use your memory from the Quick Create prompt as a jumping off point, if you'd like to.

Dear Ten-Year-Old Me,

[illegible]

## WITS Writing Exercise: Sense of Place

**Quick Create Prompt:** Describe a room where you've spent a lot of time, either now or in the past, to someone who's never been there before.

Consider: How does it look? Smell? Sound? Feel? What colors are there? What objects? Are there people in the room? What are they doing? What do you do when you're there?

[illegible]

**Writing Prompt:** Write a scene about a character leaving their most familiar place and going to a place they thought they'd never go to.

Consider: What's/who's in the old place? What's/who's in the new place? What does it look like? Smell like? How does your character feel being there compared to their familiar place? If the place was a person, how would they make your character feel?

It wasn't at all what I was expecting...

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This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.