

StoneSoup



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StoneSoup

Writing and art by kids, for kids

Editor's Note

“What’s the point of always wanting to do something more? It’s all going to disappear when we die, anyway. Why can’t I just be happy as I am?” asks Simon, the main character in Phoebe Donovan’s story “Delay.”

Simon is an adult, but he doesn’t (much to his mother’s chagrin) have a career or a family; he is single and makes sandwiches at a deli. But he has friends, he’s part of a community, and he feels fulfilled in his life—and for him, that’s enough. As someone who has always had trouble being “happy as I am,” I needed to read those words—and I’m sure I’m not the only one who does. And as a writer, I admire Simon as a character; he is three dimensional, fully developed—I feel like I could bump into him at the grocery store.

For any of you attempting to write characters, I encourage you to read Phoebe’s story and to pay particular attention to the way she builds the characters of Simon and his mother. I have learned from her, and you will too!

I hope you enjoy all the rich characters and sentences and stories in this issue!



On the cover:
Swimming through Starlight (Sony a5100)
Anna Koontz, 13
New York, NY



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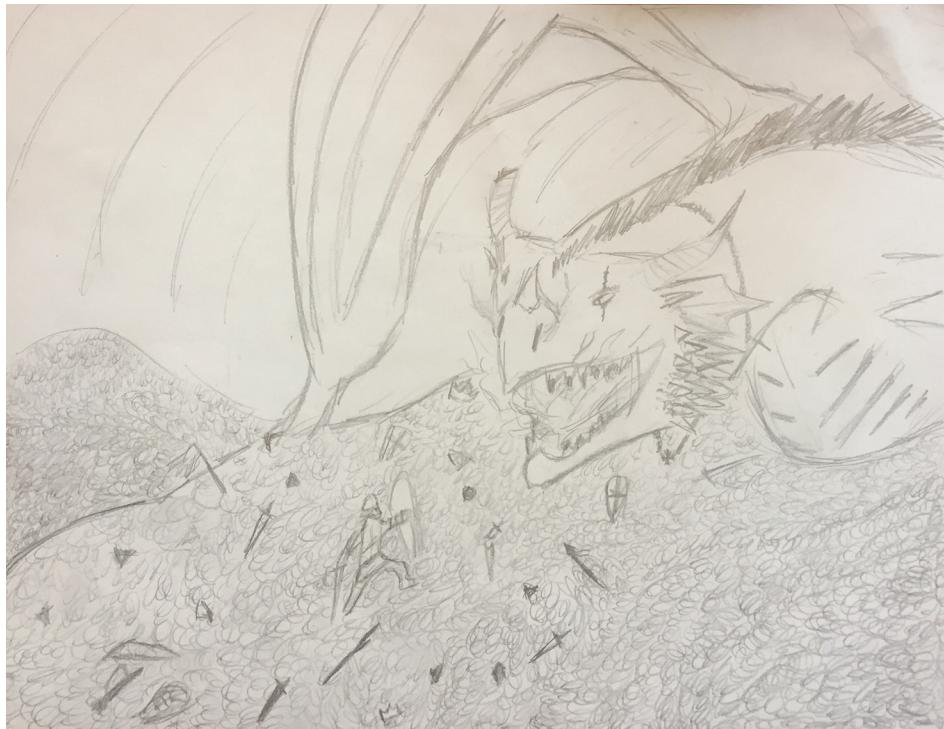
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Enni Harlan

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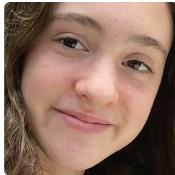
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The Hero and the Dragon

A hero prepares to slay a dragon—but the dragon has other plans



By Avah Dodson, 13
Lafayette, CA

The hero had not signed up for this.

When she had set out on her quest, sword raised, ready for an adventure, and eyes sparkling with ambition, she'd never predicted that she'd arrive here: standing in a dragon's lair, facing the beast's flames.

The hero attempted to draw her sword, but it seemed far too heavy for her to wield, weighted down by the curdling fear in her gut. Still, she lifted her chin and said to the dragon, "Prepare to meet your doom, you vile creature."

The dragon, who was a beast of great culture and respect, took personal offense to this statement and said, irritated, "I don't understand why dragons always have to be vile creatures. Tell me, hero, what makes me so evil that you have no other choice but to smite me down?"

Baffled, the hero groped for a reply. "Because, well... you're a dragon. Dragons breathe fire and serve demons and eat people."

The dragon raised an eyebrow. "I breathe flames to cook; I have never seen a demon in my entire life; and I find humans to be quite crunchy, so I'm a vegan. That may be a perfectly

fine reason to rid this world of me and my all-plants diet, but my point is, you're making inaccurate assumptions about dragons."

The hero's eyes narrowed. She knew of the tricks dragons played and knew not to be fooled by their words. "Just because you use flames to cook, it doesn't make them burn any less dangerously. Just because you haven't seen a demon doesn't mean you don't serve them. And you may be vegan, but how would you know what people taste like unless you've devoured them before?" She found the strength to lift her sword and raised it, baring it at the dragon. "You, dragon, and all the others like you, have an evil, blackened heart. And so I must vanquish you."

The dragon sat down, bracing its large head on its arms. Its interest was aroused; no hero had ever talked back to it as fiercely as this one. "So what if my heart is dark? Everyone was born with the same heart beating in their chests. Mine was pure once, and it still can be. Perhaps it is not so different from yours. Is that not enough for you to spare my life?"

The hero's sword faltered. She

The hero's sword faltered. She hadn't come on this quest to discuss philosophy with a beast.

hadn't come on this quest to discuss philosophy with a beast. She hadn't even come here to slay it. Once again, she hadn't signed up for this.

But she also hadn't anywhere else to be, so the hero told the dragon, "Even if you once were good, you have done things so awful that it has turned your heart black, and that is why we are different." She paused as a thought occurred. "However, people can be open to change. If you apologize for what you have done, if you regret your horrible deeds, maybe I will see that your heart can be pure again and spare your life."

The dragon tilted its head to the side and looked intently at the hero. "Why should I say sorry for doing what a dragon was made to do? The world didn't say sorry when it made me like this—when it made me a creature for brave heroes to come and slay because they have nothing better to do." It smiled an odd, almost sad smile that showed its rows of razored teeth. "If you're looking for a villain to blame, hero, I suggest blaming the world. It is the cruelest of us all."

The hero mirrored the dragon's smile. "I find it easier to fight things I have at least a little control over, dragon."

"I think," answered the dragon, "that a true hero does not fight because it's easy. A true hero fights because she believes in what's right."

"Those heroes often find themselves burnt to a crisp by dragons," the hero—but maybe not

so much a hero anymore—said. She sheathed her sword.

"I'm late for supper, dragon; I must be on my way."

She turned to go and paused. She hadn't signed up for this, had she? And yet... "Maybe I'll come over tomorrow for tea?"

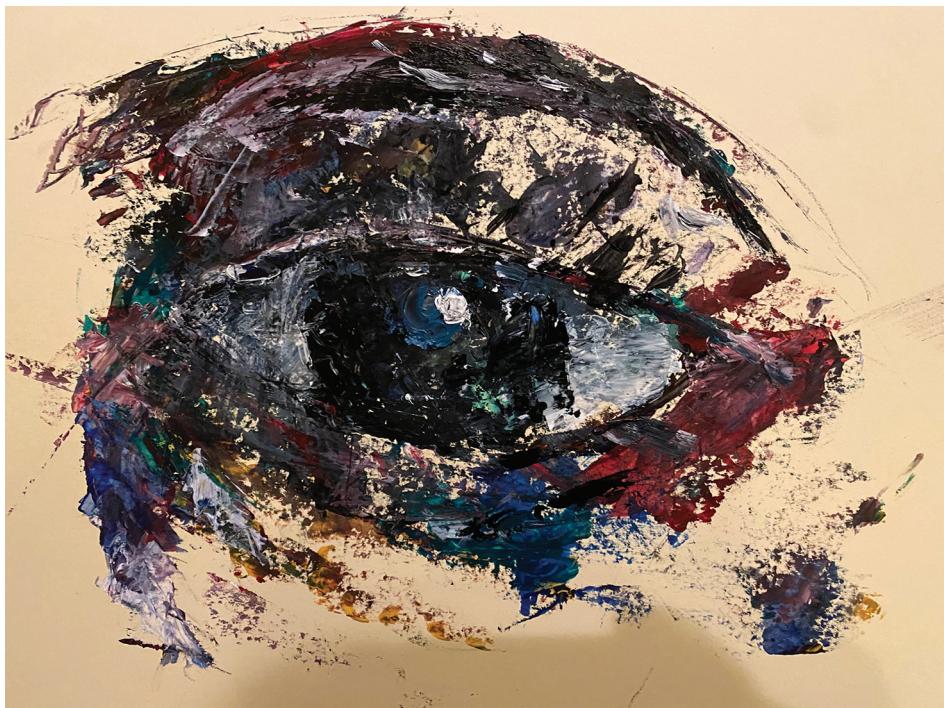
The dragon, for the first time in a long while, blinked in surprise. And then it laughed, a dry sound that sounded like the crackling of flames. "I would most enjoy that."

Mountain in the Tundra



By Foster Russell, 9
Cincinnati, OH

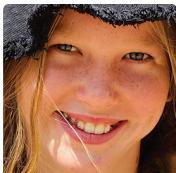
As I climb up the mountain, I choose to be alone.
As I brave the cold, I feel quite bold as I encounter a heaping
Boulder. It is a rock the size of a meteor, and I am colder.



I (Acrylic on cardstock)
Ava Shorten, 12
Mallow, Ireland

Delay

A delayed plane pushes an estranged mother and son together



By Phoebe Donovan, 13
Boulder, CO

My shoes clack satisfyingly, importantly on the airport floor. The wheels of my suitcase spin not-quite silently on the ground as I head toward the gate. I reach the big sign that says GATE 4, and under it in scrolling digital letters: SNA Orange County, California.

I sit tentatively down on a chair that looks relatively clean. But it's not like I have a wide selection of seats to choose from; the terminal is packed with travelers.

A pregnant woman rests one hand on her stomach and with the other holds onto the arm of a man who I assume is her husband. They wander through the rows of chairs, searching for a seat. I stand up and offer mine. The woman gladly accepts.

As I rest against a big white pole, I hear a voice.

“Always painstakingly slow. I don’t understand why they can’t just let us on the plane.”

“They’re cleaning it, Mum,” I say without looking at her.

“Hmph,” she grumbles. She rustles her shawls in annoyance and agitation.

There is gum on the ground beside

my shoe. It was lucky I didn’t step in it. Some people are disgusting. They act like the world is a bin.

In front of me, a father tries to calm his two rowdy children. They are hopping up and down on their seats, talking about how fun it will be in California. I wish I felt that excited. It’s usually great going back home, but not for such a sad occasion.

Gramps was the best. He was never the center of attention, but he was always the one who got everyone to laugh. Dad flew out a few days ago to help with the preparations for the funeral. He insisted I travel with Mum because she is “getting old.” Although she is really not; she is sixty-five and extremely capable. But his father just died, so I’m going to do as I’m told.

“Attention all passengers traveling to Orange County, California: your flight has been delayed until eight a.m. tomorrow morning due to a severe thunderstorm on the flight path.” The message repeats twice more from the speakers on the wall. And then the voice finishes: “Thank you for your patience.”

Everyone groans and gets up. They collect their things and shake

For most parents, I think this would be a nostalgic moment, sleeping in the same bed as their 35-year-old son who has been away from home for a long time now.

small children who have fallen asleep in their chairs.

My mother is remarkably still. As am I. We're both realizing what we've gotten into.

Finally, I speak.

"I guess we should get hotel rooms. Get some sleep before the flight."

She nods.

We go to the airport hotel, and I book myself a room for the night. I wait for Mum to get herself a room, but she just turns and looks at me.

"Well? What are you waiting for?" she walks away from me, leading me toward the hotel room I booked.

"Wait!" I call halfheartedly after her. "Aren't you going to get a room?"

"Do you really expect me to pay for a room when you've just booked one that's perfectly fine for the both of us?" she huffs and continues to walk away.

I unlock the door to our room and Mum walks in ahead of me. She sniffs at the drab furniture and not-so-clean-looking carpet. The room isn't much to my taste either, but it's only one night, and I'm not going to show her that I'm anything less than pleased.

I look at the one large bed in the middle of the room. It occurs to me that I haven't slept in the same room, let alone the same bed, as my mother since I was about three. For most parents, I think this would be a nostalgic moment, sleeping in the same bed as their 35-year-old son who has been away from home for a

long time now. My mother just looks annoyed.

After I take a shower, I step out of the steamy bathroom with a towel wrapped around my waist. I get my pajamas out of my suitcase and start humming along to a song that's playing in my head.

"Knock it off," my mother snaps. "What are you so happy about, anyway?"

"I'm just humming," I say.

"Well, stop."

I do, though I can't help but dance around a bit to the tune in my head.

Mum goes to take a shower. I sit on the edge of the bed, thinking. Her phone is on the side table. It pings as she gets a notification. I look at it. Her lock screen is a picture of her and my younger brother on a beach somewhere.

My brother is the manager of a car dealership. He lives in a large house with his wife, three children, and a cat. Needless to say, my mother is very proud of him.

She steps out of the bathroom, having already changed into her nightclothes, and pulls a book out from her suitcase.

"Is that a book from the list?" I ask. Mum has a list of famous books she wants to read and famous art she wants to see before she dies.

"As a matter of fact, it is."

She shows me the cover. I've never heard of it; I nod and smile like I have. A few minutes pass. The rhythm of her heavy breathing nearly knocks

me out.

“Your grandfather,” Mum says. “It makes you realize that you never know how much time you have left.”

“I mean, it’s not like we didn’t know Gramps’ death was coming. He’s been sick for a while, and he’s not exactly young.”

“You know what I mean, Simon!” Mum snaps. “Stop trying to be contrary.”

I raise my eyebrows in an I’m-sorry-but-I-wasn’t-really-doing-anything kind of way.

She untucks the covers. They have been jammed so tightly down the side of the bed that it takes a couple of seconds to accomplish. She flicks back the top corner on her side of the bed and sits down.

“Your grandfather achieved a lot in life,” she says without looking at me. “He was a very hardworking man.” She glances toward me to show that she is making a comparison.

“I work hard!” I say.

“I’m not talking about you. I’m talking about your very kind and successful grandfather,” Mum says, still obviously comparing us.

I decide not to say anything.

“He had a large family. He even made art every once in a while and sold it for quite a lot of money. He was happy.”

“I’m happy,” I say, annoyed at her assumption.

“Really?” she asks. “Why?”

“I just am. I have an okay apartment that’s near the park; I walk past the neighborhood school on my way to work; I have a good job.”

“You call working in a deli a ‘good job’? What does it do for you? Tell

me. You don’t have health insurance. You work next to a smoke shop. The money isn’t great. What’s so good about it?”

“You wouldn’t understand,” I say and grab the television remote from a table.

It turns on and spits us somewhere near the end of the second hour of *Gone with the Wind*. I fix my eyes to the screen, but don’t really pay attention. I am too annoyed to focus, but I pretend that I am deeply absorbed.

What did she want me to do with my life anyway? Become a lawyer? A doctor? Why does she hate me because I’m not as good as my brother? Why is she angry that I’m happy?

“Why are you angry that I’m happy?”

“I’m not angry!” she shouts.

I raise my eyebrows.

“I just don’t get it.”

“I’m happy. I like my life. I make beautiful sandwiches. There’s nothing wrong with that.”

“Just because there’s nothing wrong with it, doesn’t mean there’s anything *right* with it.”

“What did you want me to do with my life? What great expectations am I not living up to?”

“I didn’t want you to do anything specific with your life. But it would have been nice if you’d done something.”

“I do things every day.”

“But what about the rest of your life?” she asks.

“I intend to continue living exactly as I am.”

“That’s what I thought.”

“What’s wrong with that?”

“It’s just . . . Don’t you want

“What’s the point of always wanting to do something more? It’s all going to disappear when we die, anyway. Why can’t I just be happy as I am?”

anything? Don’t you want anything to come out of your life?”

“What’s the point of always wanting to do something more? It’s all going to disappear when we die, anyway. Why can’t I just be happy as I am?”

“Because . . .” Mum can’t find any words.

“Is that what you did, Mum? Were you always chasing some big achievement?”

“Well, no. But that’s because I started a family, which matters.”

“How? You put two more people into the world, one of which proceeded to make three more. So far, you are responsible for the creation of five more humans. There are 7.9 billion of us on Earth. Why do five more matter so much? We don’t need any more people in the world.”

“Well . . .” Evidently, she can’t find anything to say to this either, so she goes for a different tactic. “Well. When was the last time you were in a relationship, Simon?”

I’m getting cross now. “I broke up with my last boyfriend five years ago. He thought too much like you.”

She looks upset. I feel bad for insulting her.

“Look, Mum. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean . . .”

“I just can’t right now, Simon. I’m tired. I’m going to bed.”

She turns over and flips off the light.

“But Mum . . .” I say a few minutes later.

She snores, and I can’t tell if it’s real or not. I roll my eyes and flop down on the bed.

I can’t sleep; I just keep thinking about all the accusations my mum keeps making. What I do matters to some people, right?

Old Mrs. Sanchez comes into the deli every day for a foot-long ham and cheese. She says I season it just right. I’ve never seen her eat one, but I can see in her eyes how much she likes them.

I’ve never seen Levi without a suit on. He comes in every weekday to get a sandwich for his lunch. He has always been the serious, unfriendly type, except for once. He came in late Friday night, his suit wrinkled and untidy, his eyes red and puffy. There was a tan line where his wedding ring used to be. He ordered a sandwich and thanked me with the most sincere words. I didn’t think he was capable of appreciation, but he was really, truly grateful. He hasn’t thanked me since, but I know it’s in him somewhere. I haven’t forgotten that night.

There are two little kids who live in the apartment above the deli. They come down through the shop every morning and afternoon on their way to and from school. I always make them an after-school snack to have on their way back through. Their giddy, grateful little smiles always make the extra work worth it.

Surely these people care that I come to work every day and do what I do, right?

My father had a “good job.” He worked in an office at the bank. He made lots of money for us. He worked long days, and often went into work on the weekends too. He would come home so exhausted he would barely speak to us. Mum would attempt a conversation with a “what was the best part of your day, honey?” Almost every time, he would give a shrug, except for about once a year when he would flash a quick smile and tell us that he was promoted. We would all then celebrate with a big dinner Mum had made, and halfway through, Dad would slink away to go watch something on television. I can’t imagine having a job in which the only thing that was good about it was making money, and the only time I ever had a good time doing it was when I got more money. Sure, he was “happy,” but I’m not sure that’s the type of happiness I want to have.

I’m sure he has strong memories of seeing his father go to work too. I wonder what lessons he learned.

I stare over Mum out into the navy, light-polluted sky outside. The airport pillow is surprisingly nice under my head.

By the time I get up in the morning, Mum is up and changed, and has finished repacking the few possessions she took out of her suitcase the night before. She sits by the door, jiggling her leg impatiently until I am ready.

It is almost six o’clock, so we decide to get some breakfast before heading back to the gate. We go to a little diner and get a table for two.

“What can I get for you two?” asks a young waiter with a very thin mustache.

“May I please have a coffee and two scrambled eggs?” my mother says.

“May I please have an orange juice and a stack of chocolate chip pancakes?”

My mother glares at me.

“Are you sure you don’t want anything, um, healthier?” she asks, with a pointed glance toward my stomach.

“No. That’ll do.”

“There could be consequences from eating like that later on . . .”

“Well, I’m not thinking about ‘later on.’ I’m thinking about now. I don’t know how much time I have left to live, so it’s best to live in the moment. Why should I always spend my time thinking about a future that might never come?”

“Is this why you’ve never pulled yourself together enough to get a real job? Because you can’t think enough into the future to arrange a job interview?”

“No. I’ve never arranged a job interview for something else because I like my job.”

Mum rolls her eyes.

The waiter carries our food to the table on one hand, everything balanced on a circular black tray.

He sets down my pancakes in front of me. They smile at me from their yellow dish. My mother’s eggs are plated on red; they look almost fluffy, as if recently emerging from a wind tunnel.

“You’re really going to eat those?” Mum asks.

To prove to her that I am, and that I don't care about the consequences, I take my fork and load it with as much pancake as I can fit. Then I shove it into my mouth.

Mum rolls her eyes.

I load another forkful and push it into my mouth before I have finished chewing the last mouthful.

I struggle to chew; the pancake has become sticky and dry in my mouth. I try to swallow. It sticks in my throat. I can't swallow. I can't breathe. I struggle for air.

I slap my hand on the table, trying to alert my mother that something is wrong. I knock a glass over. She looks at me, confused. She doesn't get it. I slap the table harder. Bangbangbang.

A passing waitress rushes over. She pulls me out of the booth. She grabs me from behind and sticks her clasped fists under my rib cage. She pulls hard. And again. And again. Until finally I fall to the ground, coughing up the mushy, disgusting pancakes into a puddle on the floor.

I wheeze and gag. My hands and knees wobble on the ground. My mother slams me on the back, trying to get the rest of the pancake out. There is nothing but spit left, and I can barely manage to tell her to stop. My throat is sore. I hang my head, trying to catch my breath. Someone hands me a glass of water, and I take a tiny sip.

"Are you okay?" the waitress asks. I nod my head.

"Are you, okay, Simon?" my mother shouts at me with shock and concern.

"Yeah, I'm fine," I wheeze. "Thank you, thank you, thank you. Thank you

so much," I say to the waitress.

I reach up for the table and get to my feet. Once I am recovered enough, I grab my wallet and take out all the cash that's inside. I hand it to the waitress. She tries to refuse it, but after some back-and-forth, she accepts.

My mother peers at me.

"Are you sure you're okay?"

"I'm fine. Don't worry."

She looks relieved, but still worried. I put my hand on her arm. The soft texture of her cashmere jumper is pleasant and safe. My father probably gave it to her. I spent so many Christmases snuggled against Mum's soft sweaters. I wonder if I'll ever get another chance.

"See, I told you! I could have died; I better live life in whatever way makes me happiest!" I say, trying to lighten the mood.

She rolls her eyes in a half-annoyed, half-relieved sort of way.

I check my watch.

"We have a plane to catch. Let's go bury Gramps."



Beyond the Horizon (iPhone 12 Pro)
Aditi Nair, 13
Midlothian, VA



Drift (Sony a5100)
Anna Koontz, 13
New York, NY

Strings of Fate

A wizard regrets his spiteful decision to change a young boy's fate



By Chelsea Guo, 12
Lexington, MA

In a place where unknown darkness lingered beyond wooden shelves, where books flew and pages of paper fluttered like flowers, where clocks ticked and chimed far away and the lanterns were strung with glimmering strings, a wizard sat in the center of the floor. His aged hands hovered over a luminous globe. With a flick, the clouds cleared from it, revealing a boy with messy hair and untied shoelaces trudging down a sidewalk, kicking at a rock. The boy reached his mansion and was welcomed home with hugs and kisses.

The wizard summoned a book with a wave, a mean gleam in his eyes. He deftly pulled a glimmering string from it, then wound the string around his fingers, again and again. He twisted and weaved the boy's fate until he was satisfied, then tied the string to the book and watched it fly off into the darkness.

Years passed. The wizard's hands began to tremble. His eyes, which used to be so brilliant and mischievous, were now wise and knowing, full of somber weight. One day, a book unexpectedly flew into his sight. The string inside was blackened

at the edges. The wizard reached for it. Once the string was pulled out, the globe cleared, revealing the same boy, except now a youthful teenager. He was taking care of a coughing parent while working on homework under a dim candle. The teenager kept on writing, but soon he began crying, tears gleaming like crystals as they landed on his papers in large, wet circles.

The ticking and whirring and rustling and creaking in the room all suddenly stopped. For the first time in centuries, it was utterly, heavily silent. The wizard's horrified expression was fixed on the teenager. His sobs echoed from the globe to fill the whole room with their sad, layered volumes.

The wizard rubbed at his eyes, then his wrinkled face, before he began to wring his robes with shaking fingers.

Abruptly he got up with a speed he thought had been long lost to time. The wizard grabbed a new, sparkling string and began to weave it into the blackened one with careful precision. The noise in the background started up again, softer, but growing louder as the puddles of pooling sunlight

seeping in from windows began to move toward the west.

Finally, when soft, sleepy moonlight brushed against the shelves, the wizard was done. He tucked the string back into the book and sent it off. In the globe, the teenager awoke from restless slumber to find a parcel at his doorstep. Inside was a bottle full of pills and a wad of money. Immediately he jumped with delight and fed the pills to his sick parent.

The wizard watched with contentment at the teenager's happiness. He then dismissed the sight from the globe.

He fell asleep on the floor strewn with fates.



Twinkling Lights (Panasonic Lumix ZS)
Sage Millen, 13
Vancouver, BC, Canada

Sunspots

A reflection on the moon and sun



By Kathleen Werth, 12
Bethesda, MD

The sun is odd. We need it to survive. If we get too much of it, however, we die, and the use becomes useless. We won't need it to endure our livelihood if we aren't keeping our body and soul together in the first place. A friend of mine once said that if she had any power, it would be to look into the sun. And I told her that she could anytime; the sun is always there. Just like the moon. Though it is dangerous. It was an odd moment, as we both felt like we needed to retort something to the other. But soon she just walked off, puzzled.

I later thought about it. Why does Mother Nature not let us look at the sun? It's so beautiful. It shows us everything. And it always has.

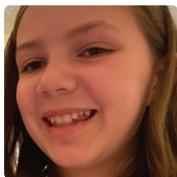
Why make beauty so dangerous? Maybe it's telling us something—that beauty can be limited, or maybe humans' ability or capacity to understand beauty is limited. And that we can take that beauty for granted. So don't wish to know what you are seeing in beauty, because your perception can be twisted and you can be blinded by that beauty.

And maybe that's why the moon takes the sun's place. At night. Because

when the sun goes to rest, the moon and stars show us something just as gorgeous. They're beautiful in a different way—though those who care enough to make sense of that attraction, the attraction of nature, find the same beauty in the moon as in the sun. To some, it might not have the same beauty. It comes out at a time that not many pay attention to. The night.

But even things that are so bright and vibrant have flaws. Sunspots. The sun hides them so well that the only way to discover them is to dare to look so closely into its danger. It's insecure but covers them up with the things we need. Like life. The moon doesn't hide them. Craters. The moon shows them with pride. It's a sign of resilience, one could say. Both make them seem winsome.

But the moon doesn't succor or support us—it merely brags its beauty. It makes the oceans wave to the shores and so on. But do we need it in the way we need the sun? Of course.



Skygazing (iPhone 11)
Emily Collins, 12
Morgantown, WV



Eye of the Toucan (Colored pencil)
Rohan Jayakrishnan, 12
Downington, PA

The Help of the Humans

A dragon struggles to keep warm one freezing night



By Cadence Bertsch, 9
Cleveland, OH

Fire is hot. Ice and snow are cold. There is a difference. One is stronger. If you ask other dragons, they would say that fire is stronger. They would say fire melts ice and snow.

Not me, though. My fire is weak. Weak as a dead leaf. And no. Don't even bother. I know it. Trust me. There is something—just something—wrong with me.

Mother says there is nothing wrong, that I'm just different. But I see that glint of worry in her eyes. The glint that means she is lying to make me feel better. Here is a snippet of my life that I would like to show you:

I huddle in a cave, trying to get away from the snowstorm. It is -50 degrees Fahrenheit, and there are icicles hanging from my chin, neck, wings, belly, and tail. Several of my scales are frozen. Two of my horns have chipped off, but I have eighteen more. I am very aware that I might fall asleep and never wake up.

There are some humans in the cave, but I ignore them. Humans are small, clever, stupid, impatient whiners. They are also yummy. I think about eating them, but even through my hunger, I decide that in this frozen

state I would be too slow to catch them. I snort a small flame.

The humans turn to look at me. They chitter-chatter something in their own language, and there is some yelling from the smallest one. They all nod, and one by one, they bring me their food. Each one smiles at me. I am surprised. Humans are greedy. Why would they give up their food for a creature who eats their kind?

The humans light a fire and sit around it with me. I seem to be their new friend. I warm up. The ice on me melts, and I think, *This is the real kind of fire—not like the one that couldn't save my life.* Suddenly I stop shivering, and I doze off to a dreamless sleep.

These kind people made me reconsider my opinion about humans. Especially eating them—now that's a no-no. After all, their kind saved the life of me, the freezing, useless-fired, human-eating dragon, whether I liked it or not.



The Pear (Acrylic)
Ayaana Showkat, 12
Olive Branch, MS

The Birth of a Star

A mysterious letter gives Sally the courage and confidence to stand up to her bullies



By Terry Yu, 12
Livingston, NJ

Silent wails poured from the door upstairs. Sally's mother slowly trudged up the creaking stairs, knowing that the interaction was inevitable. She slowly opened the door to a room drenched in darkness.

As Sally heard her approaching steps, she tried to keep her sniffles down as much as she could. She didn't want to be found. *Oh no, she's gonna come here. Why? Why, universe? Why are you so against me? What did I do to make you so mad?!* As Sally softly sank into the safety of the closet, the door to her room slowly opened. Her mother inched closer and closer, and Sally's breath shortened. Her mother's soft, sweet voice drifted through the cracks of her closet.

Opening the door, she discovered that Sally was not there. Befuddled, Sally's mother anxiously searched every inch of Sally's room, wondering what had happened to Sally. Finally, she slowly went down to resume cooking, thinking about Sally. *Did I really just hear Sally's sniffles? Or was I dreaming? Should I get more sleep?*

Letting go a breath she forgot she was holding, Sally opened the door. *Thank God she didn't check the closet.*

As she tiptoed back through her cave of clothes, the sweet aroma of cake tickled Sally's nose. Her mom was baking a chocolate carrot cake downstairs, Sally's favorite. Although Sally wanted to stay burrowed in her fortress, her stomach rumbled in disagreement. Groaning, she got up and slowly opened the door.

Creeping down the stairs, she kept her head lowered. Trudging for what seemed like a few hours, she finally reached the kitchen, where a humongous meal met her face to face. Rows and rows of spicy, delicious, gleaming, glorious food welcomed her. All at once she was overwhelmed and almost forgot all of her troubles. Almost. As soon as she saw all this food, she was instantly reminded of the bullying she'd faced at her school today. And then she saw the gigantic cake. All she could think was, *Sugar, fat, bullying, danger. My weight.* And as she ran upstairs in a burst of tears, her mother was stunned.

What did I do? All I tried to do was to make her happy ... Heartbroken, Sally's mother slowly stopped in the middle of taking the cake out of the oven. Battling to hold back her tears,

Sally started to run, unable to keep the tears from falling. She landed on her mother's lap, half in sad tears, half in grief and sorrow.

she set the cake on the table and sat in silence.

Crying gently, Sally knew deep in her heart that her mom was just trying to be nice. She could imagine her downstairs, sitting at the table in silence. Just thinking about her made Sally want to throw up. Feeling a little sick, she slowly got off her bed and inched toward the door. But the hard part was the stairs. It was like a blind fall. Sally didn't know if she was going to be caught and embraced or if she'd just fall into eternity and beyond. So, as she edged closer and closer to the bottom step, sweat started forming around her brow. Brushing away her last remaining tears, she approached the bottom. A sudden gasp came from her mother. Sally started to run, unable to keep the tears from falling. She landed on her mother's lap, half in sad tears, half in grief and sorrow.

"Don't worry, baby. Don't worry. It's all going to be okay, it's going to be okay," her mother recited over and over as she slowly patted her daughter's hair. They moved to the couch. Slowly settling into this routine of patting her head and reciting words, Sally's mother dozed off to sleep, alongside Sally. And so they slept, a mother's hand on her daughter's hair, perfectly aligned with each other.

The next morning, they both woke up a little late.

"Oh, no!" they said in unison.
"We're late!"

"Wait! You knowwww, we could have a girls' day off?" Sally said with

an eyebrow raised.

Her mother laughed and said, "Sorry, dear, but we have to get you to school."

Reminded of her previous day, Sally put her head down. Her mother saw her hesitation and was devastated, thinking of the pain Sally must be feeling.

"Hey! How about we go out and get some breakfast for you, huh? You didn't eat dinner yesterday, right?" Surprised, the corners of Sally's mouth reached her ears.

Ding! As the duo entered the pancake store, they were met head on with a blast of cool air conditioning. Eating, the two sat in awkward silence. After a little while, Sally had some deep thoughts. Now, fully thinking about everything, she realized that she had acted a little immaturely. She had to go to school, no matter how uncomfortable it would be. Then Sally experienced a flashing memory.

Sally was slowly walking down the stairs to the bus to return home. Suddenly, she flew off the stairs and crashed to the ground. Slowly getting up, she realized that a bully had pushed her. "Stout Sally, Stout Sally, Stout Sally!" As she put her head down and walked away, she felt something hit her back. Turning around, she saw that on her shoulder was a big slab of cake. It was Turner's birthday, and I guess it was more important to throw the cake at her than to eat it. Snickers came from all around her. Suddenly, it was war.

The cake was flying here and there, and almost none of it hit her. But it wasn't that she was physically hurt. She was emotionally hurt. To know that no one likes you and that people think you're fat and you can't do anything but stand there—it's a feeling no one should ever experience. Yet Sally had experienced it that day.

Sally was so mortified by that memory that her eyes started involuntarily blinking at superspeed. Traveling across the lot toward her mom's car, it was all gray. Everything was. Going home, packing up, everything. Even that day of school was a gray blur.

At her house, her world was still gray. Her mother was slowly baking a proud pie, a childhood tradition. She would always bake this special pie to show her support for and pride in Sally. But Sally didn't think she deserved that pride today. She had done nothing but go to school—not even really focusing in class and just doing. She felt like a robot, doing what she was told and nothing else. Today it had seemed that not even bullying could affect her, to the confusion of Baxter John and his bullying minions.

Quickly, Sally hurried to her room. A letter was on her bed. It seemed like her mother had taken it from the mail and placed it there. Who would be sending her a letter? She looked inside. A card had the words "Happy Birthday!" on it. *My birthday was yesterday, though...* Now Sally was intrigued. She opened it.

A bead of sweat formed. *Why am I sweating? What?* She opened it one inch. Then one more... and one more... She could almost hear the music

building up, like in the climax of a movie. Finally, the card was open.

Her pupils dilated. Just the first word made her heart beat quicker than it ever had before. There was a ringing in her ears. The world felt like it was falling, and Sally was falling with it. She somehow knew what was inside this letter just might change her life.

Eyes scanning the paper, she slowly read: Dear Sally...

The world stopped. Tears were starting to form. The world felt like everything, good and bad, white and black, everything. *What was she doing with her life? What is the meaning of my life?*

After what seemed like forever, she slowly lay on her bed. She kept her face still for a moment and then the rushing came. Like a waterfall, tears streamed down her cheeks. This hadn't happened since the time in third grade. And it was embarrassing, not only because she was crying but because it wasn't because of sadness. It was because of joy. Pure bubbles of joy came in the form of happy tears. Sorrowful tears of understanding, love-and-hate tears.

And she felt free—she felt real freedom, not burdened by anything in this world. She was flying, glowing like the first star in the night sky. And there it was: light in the dark. The only light in the universe. Like the center of the universe.

It was pulling at her and she wanted it. And it wanted her. Whatever it was. Suddenly they were one. And her curiosity was all fulfilled. Before, she was wondering what it was. Well, she wasn't anymore. The

light was it. There were no words to explain it. It was a feeling of freedom, a feeling of love, and a feeling of just being full. As if she were floating. There might have been people who doubted her, people who made fun of her, but they weren't important. They were just side characters in her story, and she was the star. There was nothing that could cast a shadow on her spotlight. To anyone else, it would've been blinding, but for her, it was like a cape of light, a star in her wake, something that only made her more there.

This wasn't something that required thinking. It wasn't something that needed to be slowly read. This feeling was like everyone in the world was looking at you. But in their eyes, there was shining pride, glorious satisfaction, and comfort. And she liked this. A lot.

Bustling crowds swam around her as she entered the lunchroom. Shining lights came from the windows, making her flinch. Suddenly all the bustling stopped. Everyone was staring at her. And she was blushing. But why? You see, earlier that day, she had decided she was going to change her life. She was going to wear the clothes that would represent her. And so she went to school wearing a new dress. Shocked gasps and giggles came from the crowd. And then she went to the table where she always sat. Like a broken spell, everyone started to resume eating, except for the bullies. Baxter John, Tommy Finch, and everyone who sat at their table suddenly started approaching her.

"What do you think you're doing?" asked one of the girls.

"Yeah!" remarked another.

"I'm doing multiple things: breathing, eating, and being interrupted by some rude people. Which one are you talking about?" asked Sally in a nonchalant tone.

Suddenly their faces all turned beet red. As some of them slowly retreated, muttering distasteful words, only the brave stayed.

"A bold statement for someone as fat as you!" taunted one of the girls, who spat on the ground like it owed her something.

"Oh, really? Well, guess what? I don't care!" Gasps came from the whole table, bullies and non-bullies alike. As she resumed eating, suddenly, one of the boys charged at her. She glared at him. He stopped mid-run and slowly collapsed on the ground. Getting back up, he was now a human with a big tomato for a face. As he and his friends returned to their tables, only three more remained.

"Sally! Sally! Sally!" Cheers were erupting behind her. As she looked, she could see her fellow tablemates cheering for her. And other people too. A chorus formed. And she didn't see anger in that moment. She just saw people with hard shells but fragile hearts inside. She saw people who were bullied, people who wanted to right the injustice in this world. They were stars. Shining stars. And she saw a smile. A smile brighter than all the others. The person who had changed her life was smiling at her. So she smiled back.

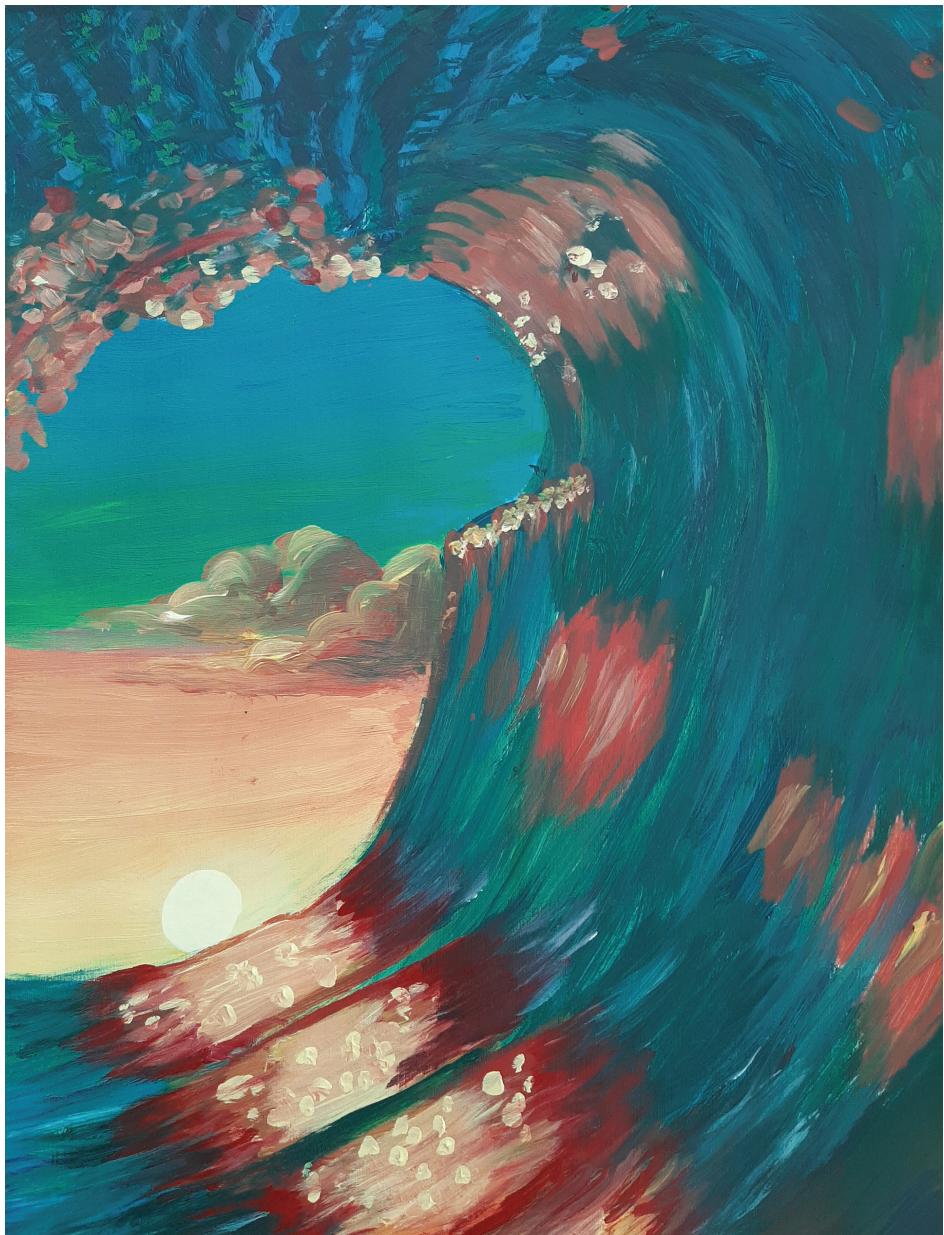
And as the day passed like any other, Sally made a discovery. She noticed that without bullies, school was actually fun. Not only did she learn and make new friends, but she was also more social. And as she left school, the adrenaline that had been passed onto her finally dissipated. She was tired and overwhelmed and wanted to sleep for a thousand years.

Panting, Sally got off the treadmill and checked her weight. She knew the number was still high, but seeing it just gave her more motivation.

Look on the bright side. You've been going to the gym for three months and you've already improved so much.

Think positive! You can do it. You will do it! As she resumed running, her thoughts centered on one thought and one thought only. The letter. So she worked and worked until she couldn't move anymore. Then she jogged home and went to bed.

Drinking a protein shake and settling on the bed, she stared at the ceiling. And as her last thoughts of her day slowed, she thought, *The world is a bright place, and I make it brighter.* And as she drifted off to sleep, her thoughts stilled like a galaxy, moving slowly but always moving. And every time someone stood up to a bully, a new star appeared.



Sunset Waves (Acrylic)
Erika Chen, 12
Diamond Bar, CA

Sunset

An idyllic evening on a lake sparks newfound clarity in the narrator



By Landen Cusick, 12
Medina, OH

Grass enclosed my feet with every step I took. The sky was pigmented blue, newer than my eyes had ever seen before. The paddleboard meandered with me to the sweet, blue lake, so unblemished that, for moments at a time, I could catch sight of my future in it. The sun glistened on my back. The humid summer air engulfed my being with its touch. Life was leading me to the dream world, decamping all my stress.

The snow-white and crystal-blue inflatable raft I held felt weightless on my shoulders. I was free, acquitted from all conflict. Nature turned from crows to hummingbirds, gale to sunshine, just because of my presence.

The second I docked my raft, a sense of relief passed me, unaware of the relief's purpose. I can't help but think I just wanted to feel accomplished. Elevating my legs up on the raft, I felt it depart from the land. It was like I was flying. I conceptualized all the possible creatures that could be splashing about, in awe at all the beautiful fish and tadpoles that slipped out from under me.

My milky-white shoes drifted out of my peripheral. Then the jagged rocks, tracing the shoreline.

I swayed the night-black oar through the lake. Everything felt natural. The final pieces of shore swam away from me as I lay down, exonerated from all previous stress. I admired the atmosphere above me, not a silk cloud to be seen throughout the sapphire sky. The sun was covering me in a blanket of warmth. I felt like a cub with its mother.

Skimming my index finger on the face of the water and feeling the humidity, I recalled the beautiful, warm apple cider my mother would make me during wintertime. The shimmering water, no turbidity, the warmth of the lake—it all welcomed me with open arms.

Standing up, I felt like a preacher to the fish. My knees came to my chest as I cannonballed off the edge of the teetering raft into the open water. I could only imagine the fish and what they were thinking—I imagined they felt like dinosaurs when the meteor came down.

Nostalgia flooded my head. The delicate smell of the unblemished

reservoir brought me back to California: the beautiful beaches, the humidity on my back, it all welcomed me to the water, welcomed me to the dream world.

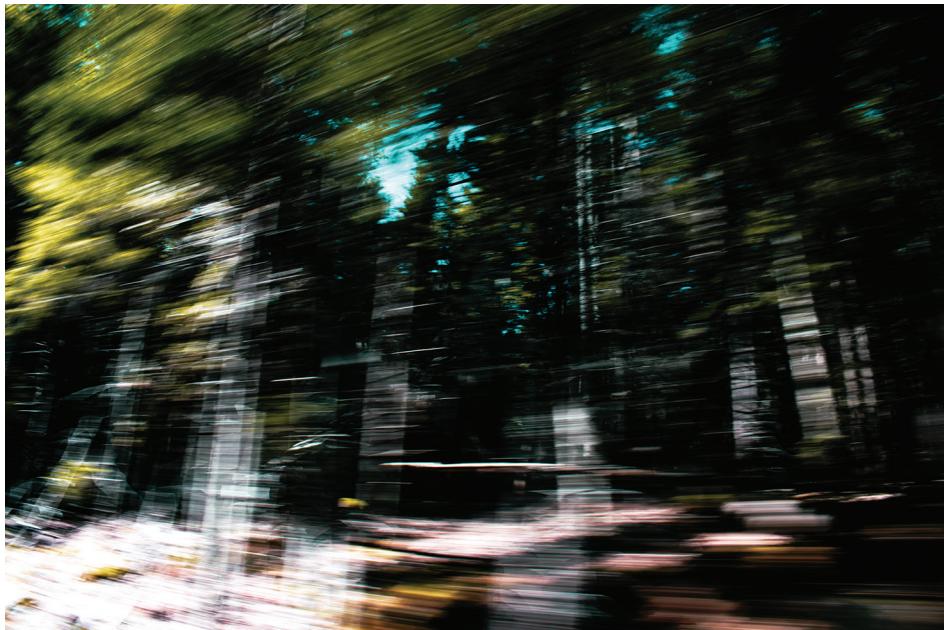
My mouth sealed shut, eyes clenched, my hair soared around me like an aura. The water collapsed with my body, propelling the remaining water into the sky. *I'm flying*, I thought. *I'm free*. The water swam back together above me. I didn't open my eyes, I couldn't open my eyes. Yet I could still discern the creatures around me; the fish were like snowflakes, no two the same.

Still shaking like a dog coming inside from rain, I recognized the auburn red peering over the horizon line. I dropped down on the raft as the sun lay down on the array of trees from across the lake. "My eyes ... they're lying," I felt myself speak before my mind could think. "It's beautiful."

As the lake's essence dripped off of my body, I lay in disbelief. The sunset displayed the truth: I couldn't just focus on the small bad things in life when I could just open my eyes and see all the true beauty of the world.



Fence along the Water (Acrylic)
Kathleen Werth, 12
Bethesda, MD



Fleeting (Canon EOS 80D)
Audrey Li, 13
Scarsdale, NY

from *Remember the Flowers*

Winner (Poetry) of the 2021 Stone Soup Book Contest



By Enni Harlan, 14
Los Angeles, CA

The Forest of Clovers

Come play with me, Oppa.
It rained yesterday, you know.
The rain left fields of three-leaf clovers.
We kneeled in the damp, weed-blanketed grass.
In the forest of clovers there was a clearing.
We built a house of twigs there,
a stone path winding through the forest
up to the empty well of sticks.

The day after that the gardeners came,
their boots trodding on our masterpiece.
They weeded and mowed, picked and pruned,
crushing our town with rubber daggers.
When we returned to the fields,
it rained no more.

The forest of clovers was gone.

School Days with Selective Mutism

Four years old in late September,
kindergarten on a weekday.

Sometimes I spoke.

Those days were rare.

The lunch monitor
resolved to help,
but finding the kids I'd
open my mouth for
was rolling the dice,
again and again.

I played with her, I played with him—
still no words
came forth back then.

One day she rolled, and the sides came up even.
Go sit with her, she said.

I went to the girl
by the orange cubbies
with that kind of lunch box opening into a tray
of purple plastic containers all lined
with name-tag stickers in loopy letters
and butterflies of pink and blue.

I could hear a smile in her voice.
And then
I looked up.

Lunch

The grass is always greener on the other side. I didn't understand when Appa first said it but I did understand when she opened one purple container revealing Trader Joe's lemon yogurt, sweet and sour, so perfectly white, just the right portion, spooned up with plastic ... I begged and begged Umma to buy the same yogurt at the grocery store

then I put it into a bowl, with metal spooned up the white lemon yogurt. But hers looked better in the plastic container. Mine was never the same.

At lunch I brought a thermos of rice with seaweed sprinkled over the top. She envied mine and asked her mom till one day, one container contained some rice with seaweed sprinkles too. She made a face—the rice was cold.

The Curtain Rod

One day she came to school
clutching a long black curtain rod,
leaning against it like a cane,
looking like a wounded soldier.

Her foot was injured—
that was all.

Hurt in a fall from a towering
step stool.

We sat on the red-brick wall
by the playground,
wondering what on earth we could play.

Recess faded away from our minds
as the rusty red wall
became a canoe.

Hand in hand we rowed our boat,
dragging the hollow curtain rod
through our sea of wood chips.

The game went on all recess.

We visited Italy, Spain, and Korea.

Two days later I climbed a yellow step stool.

Longing to be like her, I mimed a fall
and begged my mother ardently
for a metal curtain rod.

Bound for Somewhere

When, at ten thirty you took to
Turning the knob of the piano bench,
Raising it to your height,
And sat on the tattered black,
On the wooden floor upstairs, I thought,
A good day to play
Going on vacation.

From the cabinet top, I took down
The round blue hatbox trimmed with white ribbons
And painted ladies on the side
Watering potted flowers
In little brown straw sun hats
Under the summer sky.
Inside I packed ten velvet hats.
I took the green one out and put it on.
Someone's something bought it
Once upon a time
At an antique store.
While you repeated Hanon
Downstairs,
I packed
Then lugged my box of hats
Onto a white Ikea chair
And boarded my
Steam train
Bound
For somewhere.



Window of Color (iPhone 8)
Tatum Lovely, 12
Pipersville, PA

Frozen in the Aisle

All I knew of the cold
was the grocery store—
the frozen food aisle where
we shivered in our T-shirts
while Umma piled gluten-free pizza into our cart,
the cardboard covered in frost,
disguising the image of promised
tomatoes that would thaw and bake in the oven,
their warmth exploding in your mouth
on a lazy Saturday afternoon.

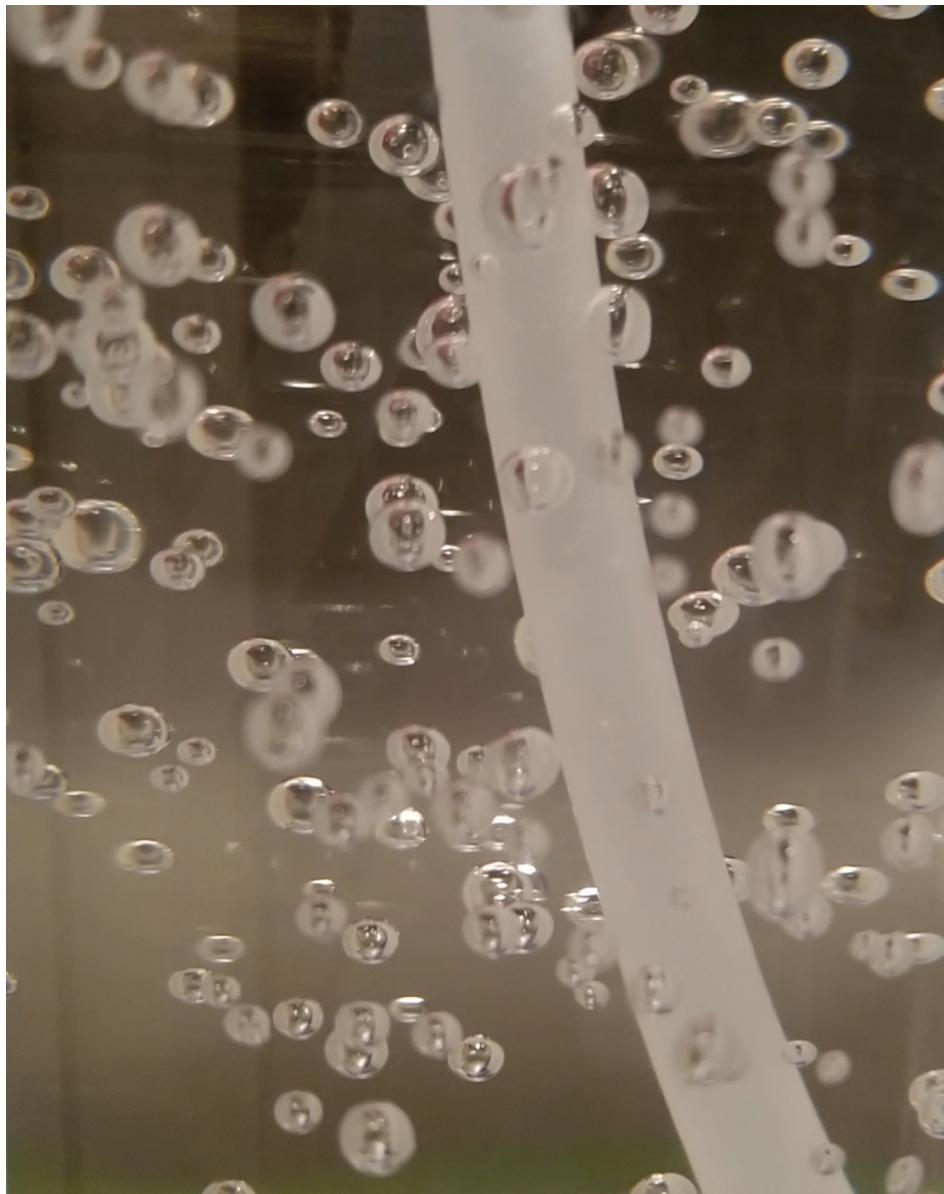
We felt we were frozen, you and I, as we
passed packaged peas
and hardened mango chunks.

We huddled beneath our shopping bags,
wore them like capes,
ignoring the amused smiles
of warm, sweatered customers.

We distracted our shivering minds
with images of chocolate and vanilla ice cream
shining from the tops of lids,
an image denying reality.

We begged Umma to pick one up.
The scoops seemed to smile at me.
She passed right by the ice cream section—
it was cold again.

Remember the Flowers was released on September 1, 2022.
You can order the book at Barnes & Noble or through our Amazon store:
[Amazon.com/stonesoup](https://www.amazon.com/stonesoup).



Frozen in Time (Samsung Galaxy S8)
Anushka Trivedi, 11
Silver Spring, MD

A Stream of Thoughts

The narrator struggles to manage her jealousy and frustration as her friends begin traveling again during the pandemic



By Lindsay Gale, 9
Dublin, OH

I sat on a rough-hewn leather couch in the living room. Beads of sweat grew on my neck and forehead. It was so hot! Our valiant, warrior fan fought bravely against the heat threatening to overtake it. The air conditioning savior wouldn't come, and Mom and Dad refused to turn it on. I wished I could be in Cancun, Mexico, the breeze blowing my hair around my face, the lime-green palm tree leaves rustling, making a whooshing sound that would be much better than the whining of the tired fan. I imagined curling my toes and feeling soft, pale sand sift through them instead of the dry, paint-splattered carpet of our house. I closed my eyes and thought I saw the aqua-blue water of the ocean lapping at the shore. The mist of the tide sprayed over me, but I welcomed it.

Suddenly, a ping sounded from close by. My brain turned it into the clinking of two glasses of ice-cold lemonade. Another ping. My brain turned it into another round of cheers. Then I realized that the clinks weren't clinks at all. They were notification sounds from my phone.

My eyes opened. I took in everything: the whining fan; the dry,

crusty rug; the groaning couch; and the wet, hot sweat I was drenched in. I looked at my harbinger phone. Two texts were emblazoned on the screen. They looked like glowing omens. Each had information scrawled on the top: "Messenger Kids, Annie, 11:03." The first read: "Hi!" The second one said: "We're going to Boston! So excited!"

I groaned. I turned off my phone. The bright screen was replaced with darkness.

All of my friends were going on vacation. They told me about it afterward and brought me souvenirs. I already had three boxes of jelly beans in varying tastes of horrible from Universal Studios; a long Canada T-shirt that, when worn, was like stepping into the Mojave Desert; a glass dog statue from Disney World, although I didn't like dogs, always begging for attention. I was bound to get more. Sometimes I wished that my friends could just leave me alone, but now it was different. It was Annie, one of my friends who never traveled. I was always the one who told her about my trips. She was always so envious, but despite that, she never went on vacation—at least until now. I felt like

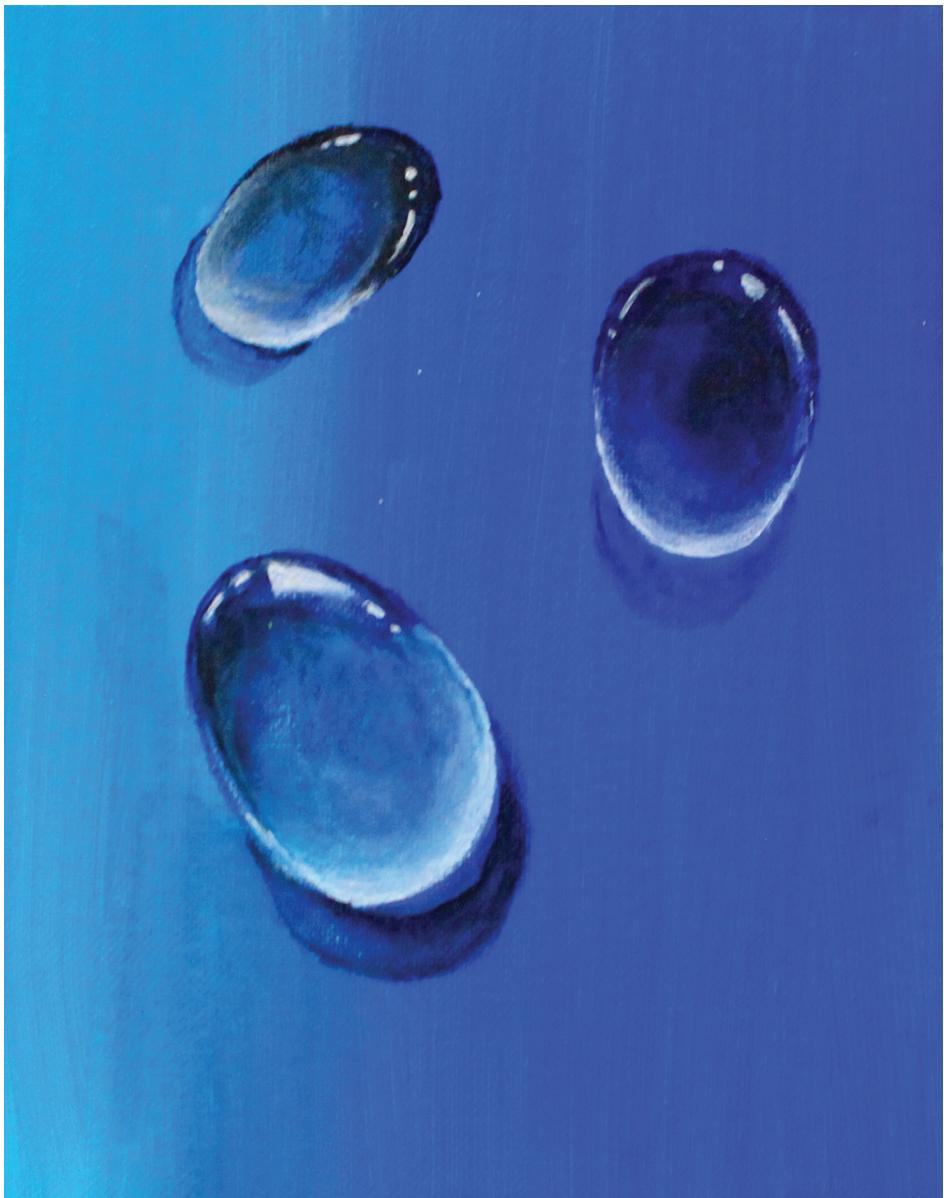
the glass dog: one wrong step and I would crack with jealousy. Wherever I turned, it was my phone vibrating as my friends texted me about their vacations, or my parents talking about people posting vacation photos on Twitter and Facebook.

I was bound at home by the ropes of reasons. Hotels were more demanding, some being eight times their original price. The blue and patterned masks that protected us were barely used anymore. People acted as if Covid had never happened, ignoring all disease-prevention guidelines and making traveling dangerous. Despite the reasons, I still fought to find a way for us to go on vacation, to go to the places my friends were talking so animatedly and excitedly about: Florida; Colorado; Washington, D.C.; Las Vegas; and many others. I had long since known I wouldn't be going, at least not while Covid was a threat. But still I wished I was like them, my friends and the people on the internet, sailing through the smooth water of San Francisco Bay or peering out over Las Vegas, marveling at the bright lights, or looking in awe at the Grand Canyon. But I was stuck at home with a whining fan, a dry rug under my feet, a couch groaning under my weight, and the sweltering heat.

I looked around. I had been so lost imagining all of the places I could have gone that I didn't realize the sky had visibly darkened. A hint of cold air tinged the atmosphere. The pitter-patter of rain echoed against the pavement of our house. I looked out the window. I watched as the world became wet, bleary, and

stained with dew.

I ran outside. The air was much cooler, and the pale yellow sun peeked out from a curtain of gray clouds. The rain fell on me, drenching my clothes even more effectively than my sweat. The world seemed to be taking a deep breath, pausing, cleaning itself of COVID-19, washing away everything bad that had ever happened. I felt the rain washing me free of my anger, disappointment, jealousy, or grumpiness. I was joyous, feeling the mist of rain and the breath of air. I was free.



Water Droplets (Acrylic)
Shaivi Moparthi, 11
Sugar Land, TX

Highlight from Stonesoup.com

From the Stone Soup Blog



Smartphone Addiction: One Middle Schooler's Perspective

By Anushka Trivedi, 11
Silver Spring, MD

When I look at my classmates' faces, absorbed in their smartphones, they look eerily expressionless, even hollow. Their eyes look tired and droopy; their faces look drained and sulking. They look like they have no choice. It is almost as if they are compelled by some unseen force to use every second of the time limit their parents have set on their devices. I cannot help but think of them as stuck in quicksand. They are not even trying to get out of it! I think my fellow classmates, and most middle school students and teens, are addicted to smartphones.

Smartphones have taken over our society. According to 2019 data, 53% of American children own a smartphone by the time they are eleven. Eighty-four percent of teenagers own a smartphone. I have read many news reports in which researchers claim that smartphones can be fun and educational for children and teens and help them socialize with others. As a middle school student who sees the negative impacts of excessive smartphone usage in school, I strongly disagree with these claims.

Parents must take the responsibility because they are the ones who choose to give their children smartphones. Some parents think that by setting time limits and parental controls they can control their child(ren)'s phone use. I think this just makes things worse. Students in my school use all the time they have on their smartphones until their time limit goes off. They seem to be waiting for that time in the day when they can use their smartphones; they are the first thing they reach for at lunchtime. This machine seems to immerse them. Sometimes I imagine them

turning into machines.

Why do parents give their children smartphones? This question has been haunting me, and I think I finally know the answer now. Parents want to have a good relationship with their children, so they give them everything they want to make them happy. Parents may also think that their child is growing up and they deserve to have a smartphone. It is possible that their child is nagging them to have a smartphone because their friends have one. Some parents want their children to be able to communicate with them or contact them. Some others may think that there are many advantages to using smartphones, including playing games, socializing, having fun, and learning. Yet others may think their children are not susceptible to these kinds of behaviors. Others might think the disadvantages are minor. I do not think any of these are good enough reasons to give your child a smartphone because of all the severely negative impacts it can have on a child.

It breaks my heart to see children not being children, and students not being students. Children are missing social and academic experiences in school. They are getting into patterns of behavior that are hurting them now and will hurt them in the future. I urge parents not to give their children smartphones at such a young age. Give children their childhood back.

This is an abridged version of the original article. To read the full piece, go to [Stonesoup.com/young-bloggers/](https://stonesoup.com/young-bloggers/).

About the Stone Soup Blog

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

Honor Roll

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

FICTION

Mia Atkinson, 10
Ariadne Civin, 13
Sophia Du, 10
Karma Jackson, 12
Sarah Sach, 11
Teagan Smyth, 11

POETRY

Orna Brodie, 9
Kaylynn Cho, 11
Madeline Cleveland, 12
Brais Macknik-Conde, 12
Ruby Glenn, 10
Kimberly Hu, 9

ART

Aspen Clayton, 12
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Luka Simpson-Khan, 12
Savarna Yang, 13
Emily Yu, 14

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- High-quality prints from our collection of children's art
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Finally, don't forget to visit [Stonesoup.com](https://www.stonesoup.com) to browse our bonus materials. There you will find:

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

... and more content by young creators!



CHILDREN'S ART FOUNDATION