



UNSTUCK IN TIME

An Anthology of Writing by Stratford STEM Magnet Students



UNSTUCK IN TIME

An Anthology of Writing by Stratford STEM Magnet Students

FORWARD

The following is a collection of creative writing pieces and art put together by students, like us, at Stratford STEM Magnet High School. The book is brought together beautifully by amazing designers and mentors who helped us raise our art to its truest potential. We personally know many of the young writers and artists in this anthology, and all of us have put our best effort forward, and nothing less.

The anthology itself contains a glance into the heads of some of Stratford's young minds. Whether you check out its memoirs, poetry, comics, or accompanying art pieces, there is no shortage of passion running through them. Everyone contributed to this anthology by collaborating with others and editing their contributions to make them the best.

Southern Word, Stratford teachers, and the Stratford Writers' Room unified us for the project; forming an environment of acceptance for our thoughts. It is an environment I'm proud to be a part of which includes friends and some people we consider to be like family.

This is a work of true personal experiences and exceptional creativity. It makes us joyful to have been along for the ride for this anthology's creation. We only hope now that it's as enjoyable for others to read through the book as it was helping make it.

We believe the contributors truly are brave, willing to bring to light pieces about their life experiences and creative ideas. The words we can use to describe the anthology itself are

Unique

Exceptional

Notable

Imaginative

Moving

And just plain interesting

Please enjoy the collective hive mind of the amazing students here at Stratford!

Best of Enjoyment!

Henry Cervantes-Cruz & Lydia Riddle
Co-editors



All rights to the work included in this anthology belong to the authors and visual artists, who have given permission for inclusion in this publication.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Band Memoir Written by: Willa Sands	8	Coping With Comics: <i>Online Obsession</i> By: Charlie Saleh	26
Mistakes and Forgiveness Written by: Josiah Cooks	10	Memoir 2018 Written by: Kayleigh Hooper Illustration by: Soriya Chesley, <i>Illustration of Bed</i>	28
Coping with Comics: <i>The Note</i> By: Gracie Sager	12	The Cloud Written by: Ashley Zarazua	31
Popping Out the Box Written by: Yenny Hernandez	14	The Memoir of Mar'Quaile Ferdinand Written by: Mar'Quaile Ferdinand	32
Untitled Written by: Mackenzie Beck Illustration by: John Jackson	16	The Backrooms Written by: Lydia Riddle	34
The Blank Spaces Written by: Leon Phillips Illustration by: Soriya Chesley, <i>You Are Not Deserving</i>	18	Benvolio Written by: J.B.K.	36
The Number One Written by: Andre Eskridge	20	Loves' Funeral Written by: Charlie Saleh	37
I Cope with the Holidays By... Written by: Henry Cervantes-Cruz Illustration by: Charlie Saleh	22	Devotion Written by: Ta'kyra Pogues	38
The Gym Written by: Simon Hubbard	24	Masquerade Written by: Zena Malone	39
Reality Written by: Nataly Rodriguez	25	Quarantine Written by: AJ Gutzmirtl	40
		Envious Written by: Gracie Sager	42

BAND MEMOIR

Written by: Willa Sands

Brass dimly glinting in a poorly lit parking lot. The distant sounds of another band drift over bleachers, over brick walls, a whisper when they reach my ears. My attention snaps back to Mr. Latham.

“Alright, legion. Play it out. 1! 2! 1, 2, ready, AND!”

We whip air through the horn, projecting over the brick walls, funneling all the pent-up energy into one glorious sound, and I can tell from the way Mr. Latham starts moving his head that we sound good.

At this moment, I respect and look up to Mr. Latham so much. I see his passion flowing from him, inspiring us to be greater. I see his deep care for each of us, as clear as the stars in the sky, and it almost brings me to tears. I see how much he gives up for us and I can't help but appreciate him because he loves us. I see how steady he is, how much of a father figure he is to my brothers and sisters around me, and it warms me up and makes tears well in my eyes for the man in front of me. I see his head moving to the music and I in turn am moved by him and his passion and his confidence.

Warm-up over, nerves tingling, breathing shallow, we get a drink of water, then block up in 2 long lines, walking down the hall of the high school and out into the stadium. We walk out onto the edge of the field, black helmets and crests reaching up like a scythe to slice the night, flashes and glints from the bright lights shining on the moving bells of our horns. White capes flutter in the wind, but this is no surrender flag. We wait, on the edge of the field, balanced on the edge of tension and tranquility, as other bands drag by with strange music and stranger routines. Our real competition comes from the show style bands, sharp as a knife's edge with discipline and with only one purpose: to entertain.

Finally, we stand. Block up, this time four across on the track, standing at attention—head up, chest out, shoulders back, feet together. Tight with nerves, we hear the start of the drumline's cadence. Our cue.

“SPAR-TAN LE-GION!” we roar. Left leg comes up to a 90-degree angle, then plunges down. We march. Heads snap in our direction.

“Damn,” comes from the audience. With one voice, we bellow the words as we march, commanding respect and intimidation.

Stop in the middle of the track, by the 50 yard line. Run to our spots. Silence, thick with anticipation for the band that was gone for 5 years and now is making its return.

“Horns ready!” Mr. Latham calls the Spartan legion to battle.

“READY!” Horns to ready position.

“Horns up!” Horns snap up.

“Vice versa, vice versa!” Mr. Latham yells. “Energy! 1. 2. 1, 2, ready, AND!”

A wave of sound. High notes pierce the air, the low, fat notes from the tuba form the foundation, and we build up to the hit. Tuba break, go crazy. We run, screaming audibles at each other, pushing each other into more energy. Shiloh and Gwyn run out in front of the band amping up the crowd and spurring the band into a wild joy that can't be pressed down. They push us beyond boundaries we didn't know we had, challenging us to perform to the utmost, and I love them for it. I can't stop smiling; they have drawn me out of any shell I had into pure sisterhood.

We run back to our spots; now for the crank part. We pour sound over the audience, chaotic waves crashing over sand, and just as receding water pulls sand tumbling with it, they're hooked. Tugged into the riptide of music. The marching legion is back. The last note resounds, and we bellow, “And, DOWN.”

Next song. Back that Thang Up. Snap to ready, then up. “1, 2, ready, AND!”

Low brass and mellophones send quarter notes, an intimidating entrance. Trumpets and mellos take over with the melody. Our bells stand out, casting reflections and throwing light and sound in every direction. All colors are bright, accented as the notes we play, clear-cut contrast against the dark night. Tuba break, and this is the real performance. The first dance gets the audience ready, in the groove. Some stand. Pose, pose, pose. Then the second dance. Low brass leaps down from their chairs. The crowd goes crazy. Half the bleachers are on their feet, yelling, feeding off of our excitement, and us feeding off of theirs. Finish the song, crank all the way. Play your heart and lungs out.

Elated, out of breath, hearts pumping with adrenaline, we file off the track, collapse onto the bleachers. We have poured sweat and blood and tears into each other, relying on each other in full vulnerability. After all this we are something more, something deeper than even friendship can go. We are family, brothers and sisters. I see it in how our faces light up as we look at each other, realizing what we just did. I see it in how we sit closer together now, leaning heads on people's shoulders. This is the bond that cannot be broken.

MISTAKES AND FORGIVENESS

Written by: Josiah Cooks

Have you ever made a mistake and been forgiven for it? Summer 2022, more specifically June of 2022: my junior year was over, and well to be honest, I felt bored. Junior year was the best year of school for me because I met so many awesome people and had new experiences. Anyway, I'm in my room laying down on my bed while listening to the radio. The rest of my family has left the house because they have a funeral to attend. It was only my grandpa and myself. I didn't want to be trapped in my room for a night.

I think God heard what I was thinking because, not even a second later, my friend calls asking me to come over for a pool party. On one hand, I don't want to go. Period. Swimming goes together like a peanut butter and expired jelly sandwich. On the other hand, I want to get out more. Helping my aunt do Uber orders for the majority of my summer hasn't been so eventful. So, I got up, grabbed a t-shirt and shorts, put on my Vans, and went to that party.

The party is a wild one to be exact. I mean I am the odd one out since the people there are more into cars and bikes, while I'm over here more into art and a 90's to 2000's aesthetic. Most of the conversations there are just, "Bro, I been whipping my new Honda on I-24," or, "Oh, me and my girlfriend snuck out to the school and made out." It is weird for me, but it is fun, especially the pool. We did so many cannonballs into the pool and had a chicken fight where my friend and I cheated...I mean won fairly. Let's just say there is a pool noodle behind my head. I pull it from behind my head like a horseman and strike my friend while he isn't looking.

Before I continue, there's one piece of information I forgot to tell y'all. For the sake of this story, I have this friend. Let's call her, Maddie. Maddie and I are, as we dubbed each other, "OBFF'S" or Online Best Friends Forever. We text each other on Discord every day, and overall, we are very close towards one another. But Maddie is a jealous person. Like, she is very jealous of what I have in my life, and I don't notice the signs until after the party.

11:03 pm, June 28th, 2022. I wake up from a nap and see Maddie is online. I text her with my usual, "Heyo!" She responds back with the same. I text her, "So I just got back from this crazy pool party with my friends!" I am expecting her usual, "Sounds fun."

"I'm done, I can't hide this anymore," she responds.

For five minutes, she is typing. Discord shows: "**insert your username** is typing with..." What I get is, "You're a horrible friend! You seem so egocentric, and God, you always keep talking about how awesome your life is. Meanwhile, I can't even leave the house or see my boyfriend because we live half a day from each other! Just stay away from me."

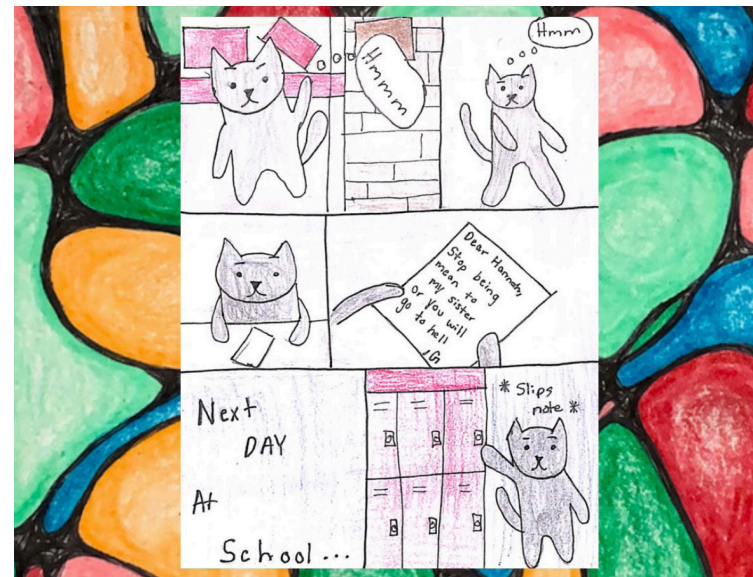
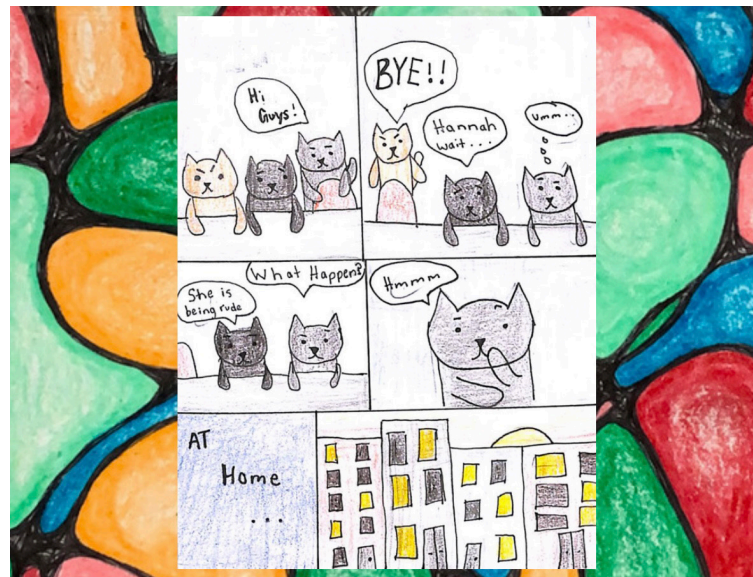
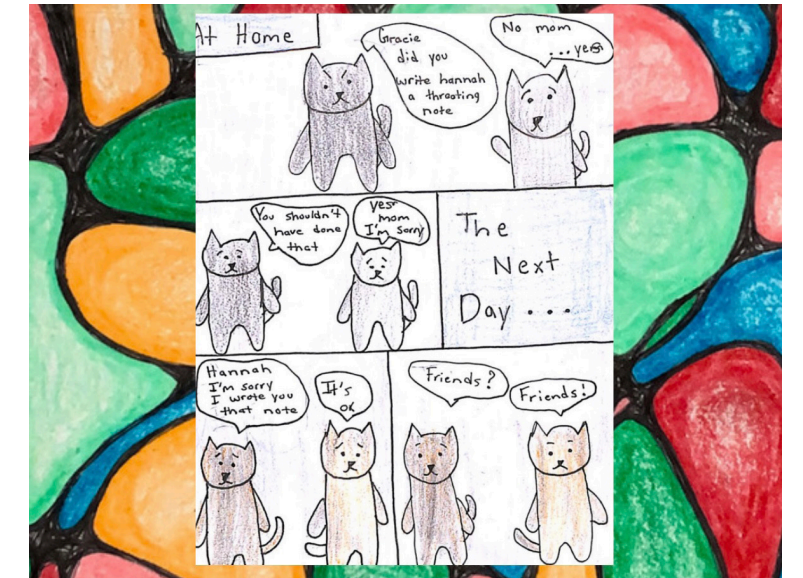
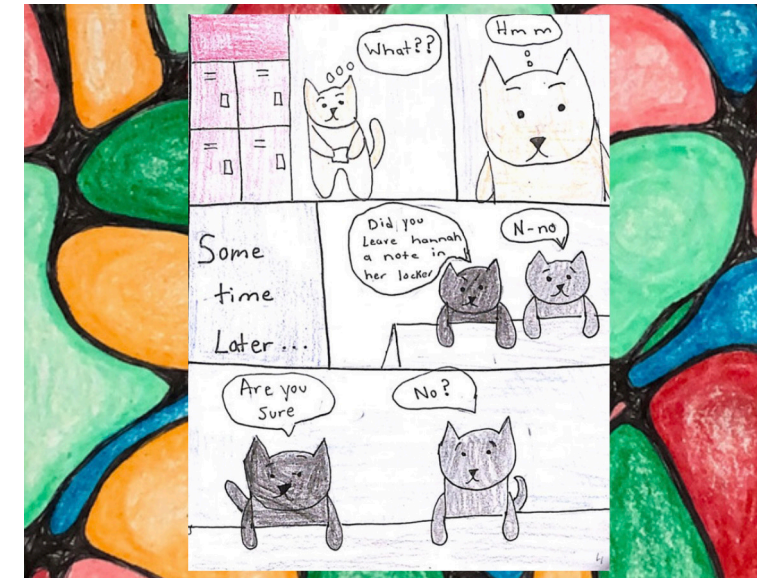
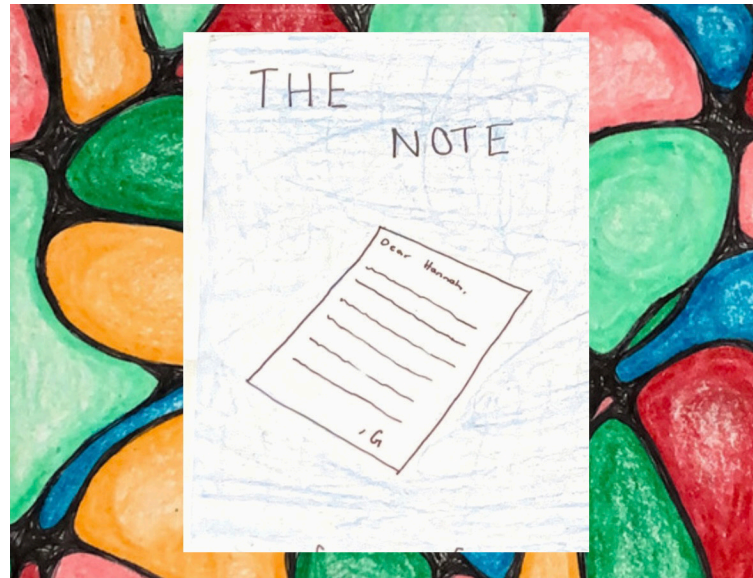
This leads us back to the question. The answer is, no, she never forgives me for it. I try texting her and her friends for days after the freak-out and no response. Thing is, the mistake I committed wasn't really a mistake. It was more of a lesson. Choose your friends wisely.

As I'm typing this, it has been nearly a year, and now I have made some awesome new friends who don't get jealous of my life. They, in fact, support me and my goals and my ambitions. Am I mad at Maddie? No, I wish her the best because I'm hoping she has changed over the course of nine months. As for me, I'll cherish my friends, memories, and live my best life.

THE NOTE

By: Gracie Sager

The **Coping With Comics** contest was created and facilitated by **Write With Pride**, a program that cultivates spaces for LGBTQ+ youth to write and share as well as provide resources that foster well-being.



POPPING OUT THE BOX

Written by: Yenny Hernandez

“I’ve had enough,” Jessica thought as the toilet water drenched her clothes.

Sarah, Amber, Brittney, and Emma make it their mission to make Jessica’s life a living hell. In the mornings as Jessica gets off her thrift store bike, they watch as she walks in the school ready to torture her. They push poor Jessica into lockers and trip her as she walks in the hallways, making her plaid skirt fly up. When it’s time to go home, the girls always hide Jessica’s bike so she’s always late to work.

But this day was different. They didn’t wait for her at the door, didn’t trip her, or hide her bike. Jessica was puzzled. She wondered what was going to happen, but nothing did. She felt relieved and decided to go to the restroom where they were waiting for her.

“You thought you got away today, didn’t you?” said Amber.

“Don’t you guys have anything better to do?” said Jessica.

“Yeah. This!” Brittney said as all the girls held Jessica down and dragged her into a stall kicking and pleading. Jessica begged the girls to stop. Brittney grabbed Jessica’s head and dunked it into the toilet. Brittney and the others began taunting her and calling her names. When they finally let her go, Jessica was sobbing. The girls still laughing at her began taking pictures. The bell rang, and the girls left.

Jessica makes an oath to herself that those girls would never bully her again. Little did they know, Jessica has a plan to ruin their lives like they did hers. The next day Jessica finds her bullies in the library. She hides behind a bookshelf and listens in on their conversation.

“My dad’s going broke,” said Amber.

“What do you mean?” asks Sarah.

“My dad gambled all of our money away, and my mom said we are losing the house!”

This is perfect, Jessica thinks. This news getting out would ruin Amber’s reputation. Part of Jessica felt sad, but the memories came flooding back of how Amber did nothing to save her from yesterday’s incident. She waits for the girls to leave to put her plan into action. When they finally go, Jessica jumps up to the computer and starts typing in big bold letters:

“Amber Banks gone broke. Help the homeless.”

She prints out 50 copies and plasters them all over the school. Later that week, Amber has to switch schools from all the bullying. Jessica knows her job with Amber was done, and she got what she deserved.

So, she moves on to the next. Jessica has a suspicion that their family pays for them to pass all their tests. The ACTs are coming up, and Jessica is going to unmask the truth. On the day of the ACTs, Jessica, Sarah, and Emma are in the same testing room. When the test starts, Jessica is ready to watch them. When the teacher isn’t looking, Sarah and Emma make their move. Both girls roll up their sleeves revealing the test answers.

After the test Jessica sends an anonymous tip to the ACTs board about two girls cheating. Both Sarah and Emma are expelled and lose their chance to study at Harvard and Yale. Jessica is satisfied but not done.

She saves the best for the last, Brittney. The one who started all of this. Jessica wants to destroy her. The next day, she finds her in the bathroom alone. Jessica wants to leave this in the past, but something in her knows that Brittney needs a taste of her own medicine.

Jessica confronts her, “Do you regret what you did to me?”

“Why would I?” says Brittney.

Jessica thought this situation would go differently, but Brittney will always be a bully. Enraged, Jessica throws Brittney into a stall, holds her down, and dunks her head into the toilet. Jessica walks out feeling proud of herself. The only thing left for her to say:

“Don’t mess with nice girls!”

UNTITLED

Written by: Mackenzie Beck
Illustration by: John Jackson

I, Mackenzie, am unstuck in time.

It's 8:00 A.M. and it's raining. This weather causes my allergies to act up. I'm in class doing my minute math with multiplication when my nose starts running. Running- water- rain.

Screaming. Happy screams. The Expedition Everest ride takes off quickly and I'm not as excited as a 12-year-old should be. It gets better as I realize my dad is having fun. I look in front of me and there's no track; it just ends. Dad gets scared and the ride goes backwards. We get off and Dad talks about how fun that was. As we get ready to go eat, it starts raining.

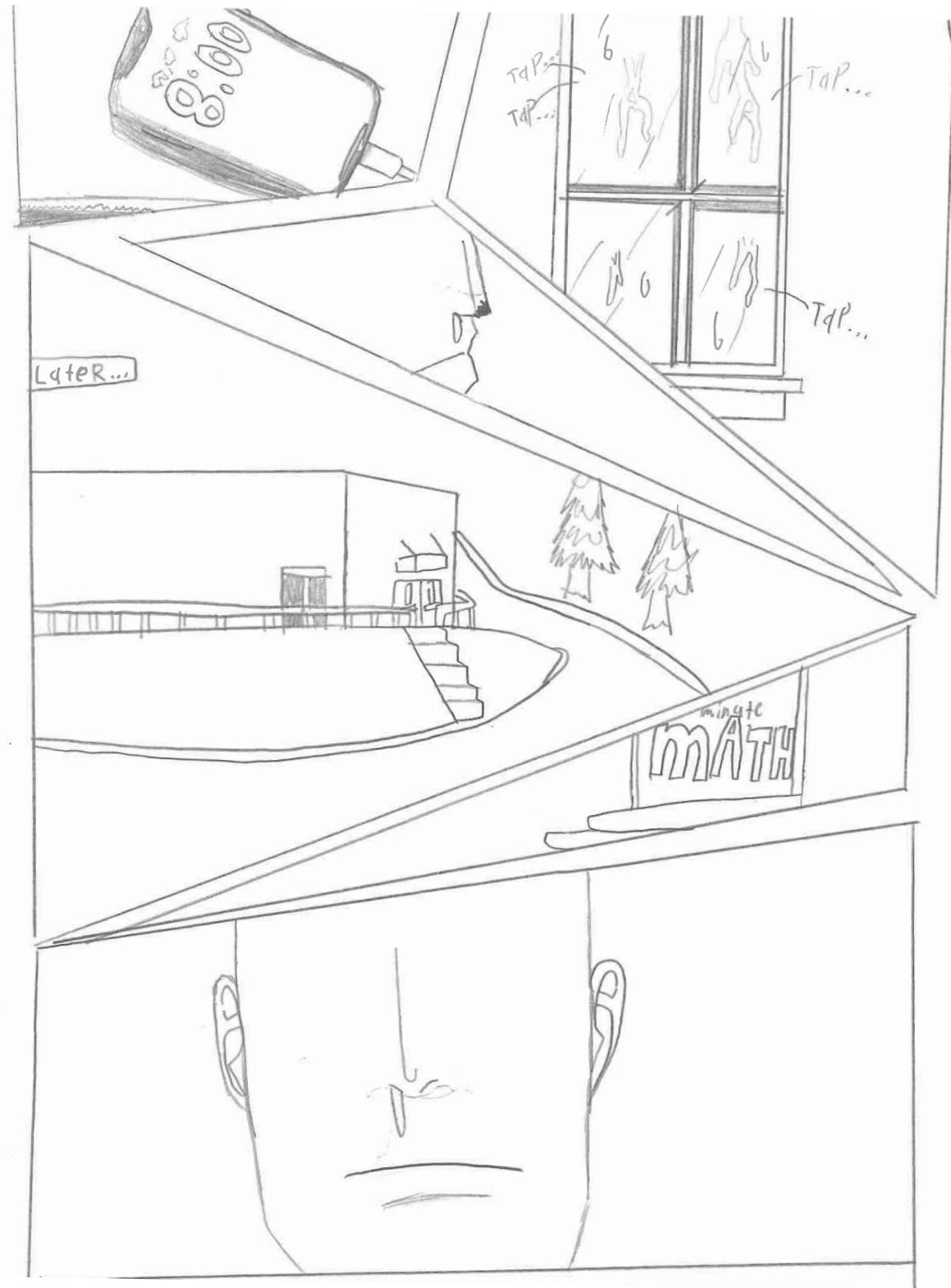
Itzel and I are trying to perfect our dance as we start talking about life. She talks about graduating early (which I don't like because she's a 9th grader graduating before me) and drama she had with some boy. We don't like him. After a whole hour of talking, class is over and it's time to go home. It's dark and I run to the car as it pours down rain.

Sneezing, coughing, not being able to breathe. My allergies trigger my asthma. I go to Nurse Cyd, my best friend. I don't really care that the nurse is my closest friend. I sit in there, color, and talk about dance or how school is going. I dream to be a fashion designer since I draw models with cute abstract clothes, and ballerinas with poofy tutus. Little do I know that as I grow up, these creative thoughts will be rained on and go down the drain.

Solie's my best friend and she's going to be living with me for a while. We stay up till 3 A.M. making Tik Toks and goofing off. As we lay down, she sees someone in the window. It is a man dark as night. A shadow man? I get scared but decide to look to the side and check the hallway to see if there's anyone there, hoping it's Dad. No one's there, but the figure is still in the reflection. Solie looks in the kitchen and the man is in the reflection of the toaster. We try to get rid of these hallucinations and focus on the sounds of the rain.

After we leave the Expedition Everest ride and go out to eat, we get to the Rock 'n' Roller Coaster and I don't want to go on. The rest of my group goes on while I'm left with Nindy. They come back and force me to go on the ride. After doing it once, I love the ride. The weather starts getting bad so there is no line. We go back on the ride at least 7 times all while it is raining outside.

All 6 dances are completed and it's time for the finale. After I heard that I made the competition team for all 4 groups, I didn't hear Itzel's name. I almost forgot that she's not dancing with me next year. The curtain closes and I run to Itzel. She talks to me about how we're still gonna talk to each other over the phone, still have sleepovers, and still talk about drama going on in her school. My makeup is ruined and we're both crying. Teardrops fall on the floor like it's raining inside the auditorium.



THE BLANK SPACES

Written by: Leon Phillips

Illustration by: Soriya Chesley, *You Are Not Deserving*

September 25, 2106

The days are getting more blank spaces in-between. I fear one of these days I will just fade out and not come back. Nobody even knows what happened. One day we just started having blank spaces in our memories. We would blank out and come to many days later with little to no recollection. Sometimes some of our senses go out temporarily. The blank spaces only seem to happen to people with unnaturally dyed hair and piercings. The doctors don't have anything to say about the blank spaces and neither does the government. There haven't even been any news stories on them. A few of us have been trying to find out more by using The Clock App to communicate, but the more we use it the bigger the gaps get. I think we've gotten close though; I can feel it. We're going to find out what happened to us and why it has only happened to certain people. I have to find out why.

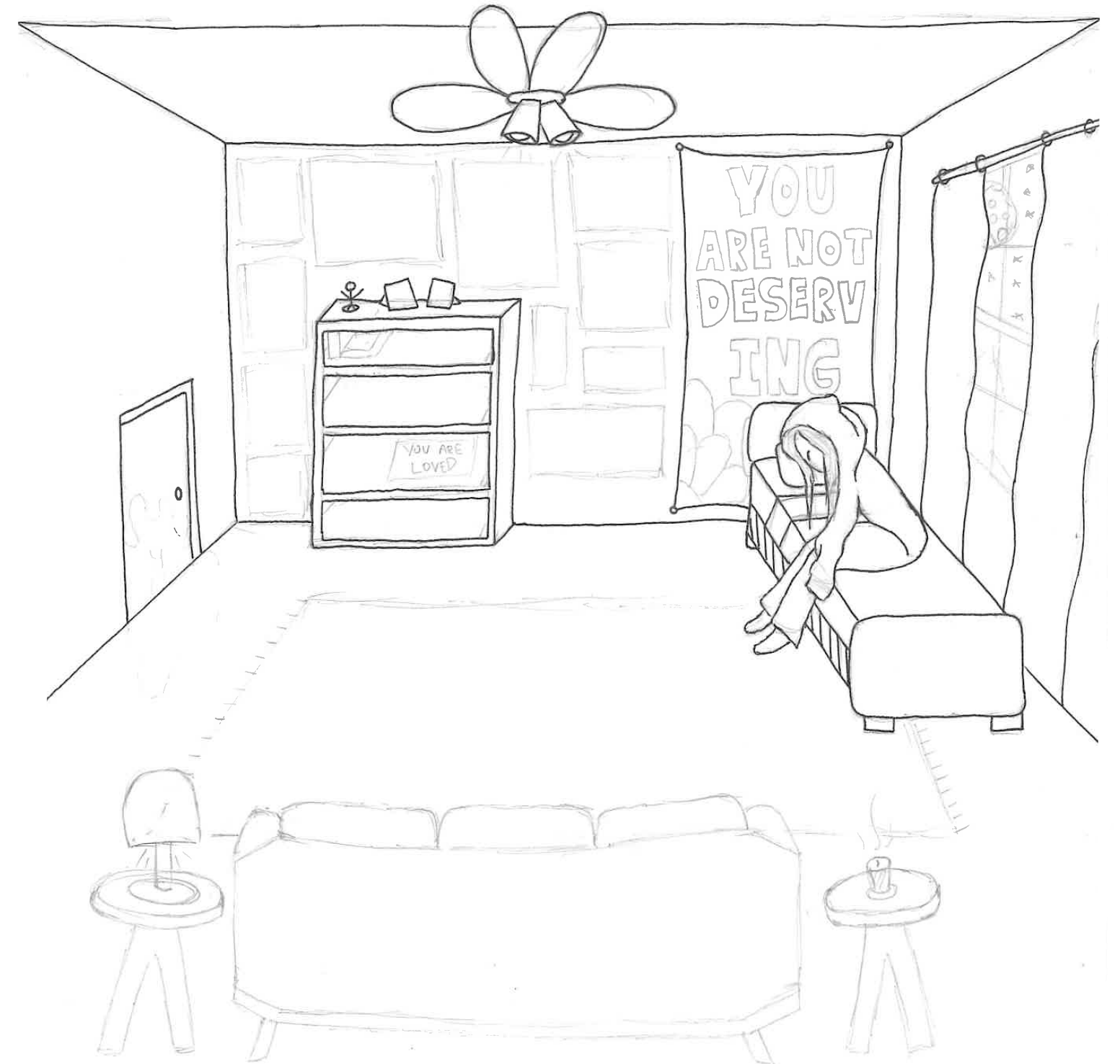
I stand up from my desk and start walking to...to...to get food? I think. It's hard to remember things now. It feels like no matter what...food. I was getting food. I walk to my kitchen and see dishes I don't remember using piled up in the sink, what looks like a bowl with old Raisin Bran dried in the bottom, another bowl with a cheesy ring around it, a cup with dried, red, sticky stuff in the bottom. It's unsettling but oddly familiar; items being used and left in different places than I normally leave them. It sends a chill up my spine, but it's a chill I've gotten used to. We are trying to keep the familiar unfamiliar. The diary only helps me remember things I've not yet forgotten, but I like to imagine it helps.

I open my fridge looking for food just to find it empty. Why is it empty? How is it empty? I start to walk off looking for my shoes. Who knows where they'll be? I can't believe it's empty. I haven't even eaten at home the last few days.

I'm kinda hungry. I should get some food. I walk to my kitchen and head straight for the fridge. I open it, and it's empty.

"Aww man. I have to go to the store."

I go to find my shoes. I find them near the door, put them on, and as I'm about to leave, I hear a ding. It comes from my kitchen and I go to check. It is the oven. When did I turn the oven on? I open the oven and look inside to find a meal cooking. A meal I don't remember making.



THE NUMBER ONE

This is a story of me...well rather who I used to be before that night, the night everything changed. The day started like any other Friday. The whole team wore orange jerseys. I paired my number one with black and orange Jordan 1's and black joggers. I went through the day doing my work, getting everything done to stay eligible. I'm one of the better on the team at doing so. The end of the day hit, and I had done all the work; lowest grade was a seventy-nine.

We put on our uniforms and headed down to the field for warm-ups and a light practice. Before the game started, we did routine stretching. A couple of drills later, it was game time. When they turned on those lights, I knew it was time to dial in. I always got nervous before games even though I had been playing since I was four years old. I just got this feeling, but this game was more than usual. I truly felt like I should not play, but I went through with it anyway.

We won the coin toss, giving us the kickoff. We received it around the ten-yard line and returned it to around the twenty-yard line. I stepped in and my QB and best friend signaled for me to run a streak with my speed and athleticism. I could burn any defensive back in the city. I sprinted parallel to the sideline and just like I thought, I lost my man and my QB sent the ball on time and on target for me to receive it on the twenty-five-yard line and take it in for a quick six.

The game continued on and the fourth rolled along. We were down two and we received the ball at the fifteen yard-line with thirty-four seconds left and no timeouts. We needed to get in field goal range and get it out of bounds.

"Hey Coach, run Blue Eighty. Trust me it'll work," I said.

Coach Jhonson knew I had a rare understanding of the game and he let me call the plays sometimes but never under this much pressure.

He called for it. "HEY QB BLUE EIGHTY BLUE EIGHTY!" He looked at the coach, nodded, and gave me a look of reassurance.

"We got this." I can see him mouthing through his face mask.

I couldn't hear him over the sound of the away crowd chanting and the dinging of cow bells, but I knew what he was saying. He snapped the ball. I faked left then cut right towards the middle. He made the throw. I made the catch, same as any, but then the safety came out of nowhere with the hard hit. Helmet to helmet but it felt like a skull to concrete. As I hit the ground, I felt the wet grass on the back of my hands, gasping for air but I couldn't find any. The last thing I remembered that night was looking up at the endless void of blue, seeing the clouds, and hearing the ref's whistle pierce through the sound of the collected gasp in the arena.

I woke up two days later in the hospital feeling like I got hit by a truck and could still feel some of the sticky eye black under my eyes. My mom was there waiting for me to wake up, and the first thing I remembered asking was, "How bad is it?" She immediately fell into tears, and I realized I couldn't feel my legs. "They said you may never walk again," my mother said, trying her best to keep it together for me. That's when I knew I would never play the game that was the one constant thing in my life for the last thirteen years, again.

That's it. That's the story of how the game I loved got taken from me all in one play. I always think maybe if I had told Coach to call a different play, I would still be playing. That Friday was the last day that I was truly happy, had a good mindset, and felt at home.

I COPE WITH THE HOLIDAYS BY...

Written by: Henry Cervantes-Cruz
Illustration by: Charlie Saleh

I cope with the holidays in my own way.
Any cheer I hear, I participate.
Any traditions called common, I partake.
Any gatherings I see, I love to join.
Though sometimes I need a break from it all.

Family piles up, and with it comes issues.
Where's the perfect report card?
You know your cousin did this? What did you do?
Are you fatter than the last time we saw you?
Are you in any relationship at all?
I want to scream and flee; to distance myself as much as I can.
Don't you know school starts again in just a few days?

What should I do?
I indulge in any comfort.
Sometimes I vent, but everyone's too busy to listen to my thoughts.
And I don't blame them.
Being the lonely weirdo of the family is like a snapped pencil.
Tossed aside.

How to calm my nerves?
Food?
No, it all ran out yesterday.
Sleep?
No, the stress is the reason I can't dream.
Speaking to my parents?

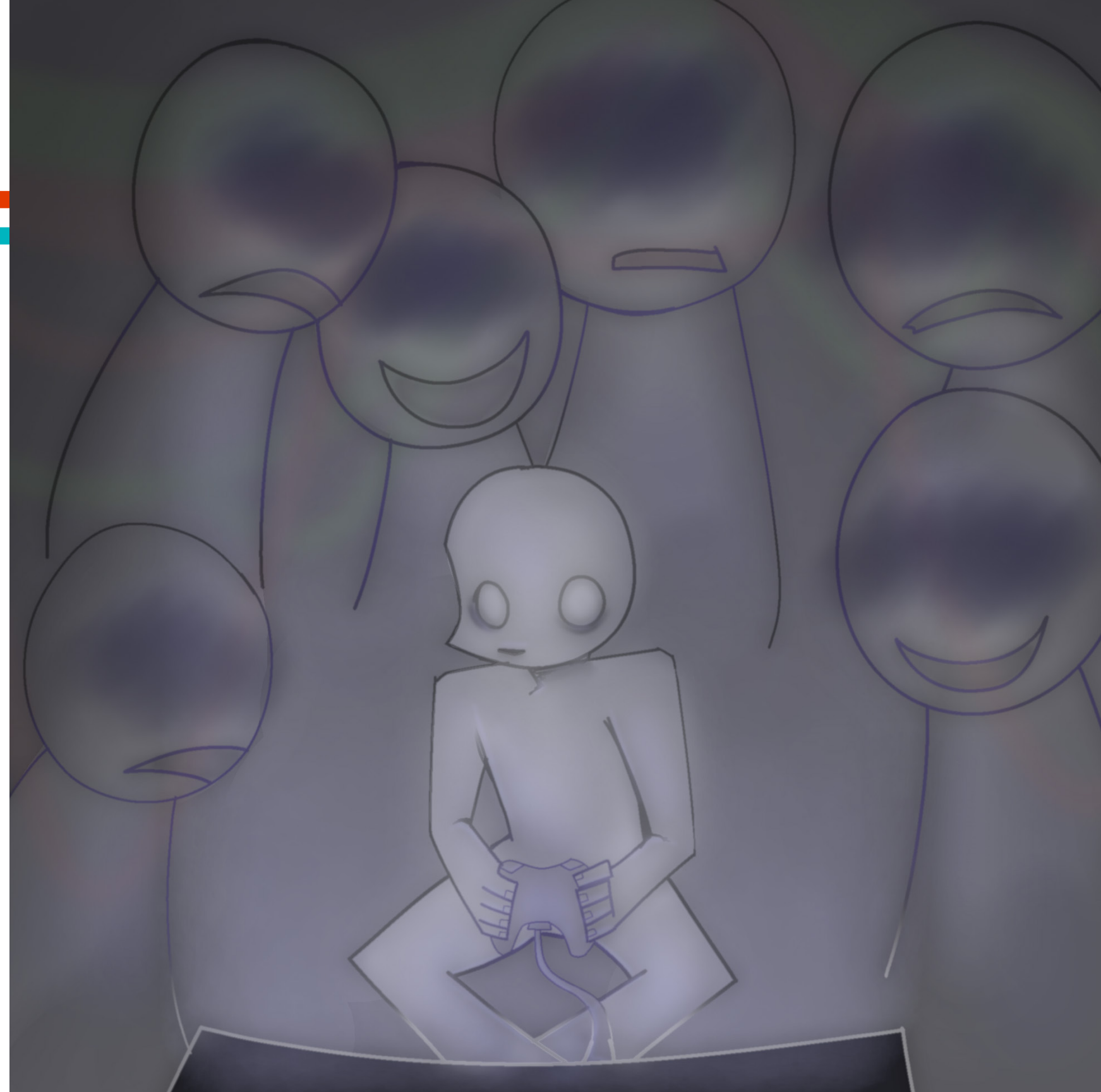
No, they'll just tell me to get over it.
Bottling it all up, shoving it in my abysmal mind?
No, all of its cabinets are full.
I come to rely wholly on...
Video games

Say it's childish, I know you will.
Is it childish when they give me a light distraction from my reality?
After all, video games don't reject me.
They don't take me for granted.
They don't undermine me just because I'm young.

They believe in me.
They give me reassurance.
They showed me a running blue rodent, facing horrors.
He never gave up, so I never did.
A yellow mouse showed me teamwork,
A red plumber showed me to beat the odds,
An orange fox taught me to believe in myself.

They gave me values missing from my life previously...
Video games made me think I did
Something right for once.

I cope with the holidays in my own way.
My comfort attained.
I don't care if it's meaningless to you.
I don't care if it'll somehow worsen my grades.
I don't care if you say it's brain rotting.



THE GYM

Every day I subject myself to growth through pain
Three days before I rest
The weights soothe my brain
A constant reminder that I'm improving my best
Though my doubts and thoughts may misguide me
I have merrymakers and companions on my side
I must make my body the trunk of a tree
The cruel iron will be my guide

REALITY

Written by: Nataly Rodriguez

To tell you the truth, I'm scared of life
It has no proper meaning
Life is not valid
To live is not a good reason

I try my best to speak up for myself
It's often hard to find the right people
People who listen
I'm bound to failing miserably
But my hopes are still high

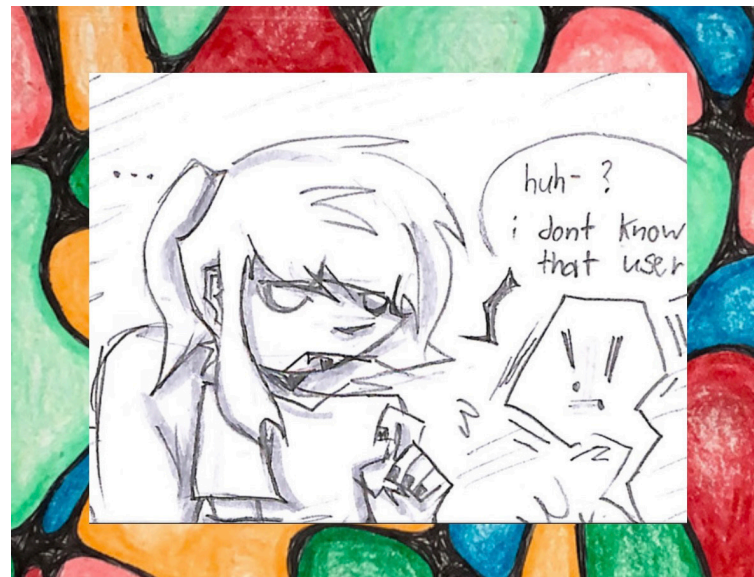
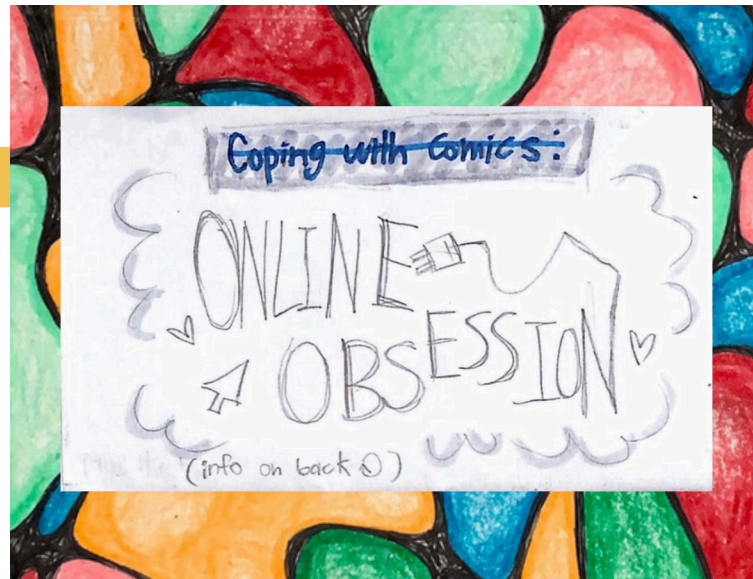
I've been told that I should always be happy
But I can't be sunny unless I have a reason
Smiling is a strange concept
You lift your lips at a certain angle
It makes me wonder what my mirror thinks of my reflection
What my brain thinks of my thoughts

The world is full of mysteries
I, being one of them
Why are there so many
People wondering what's wrong with them
When in reality
Nothing is

ONLINE OBSESSION

The **Coping With Comics** contest was created and facilitated by **Write With Pride**, a program that cultivates spaces for LGBTQ+ youth to write and share as well as provide resources that foster well-being.

By: Charlie Selah



MEMOIR 2018

Written by: Kayleigh Hooper

Illustration by: Soriya Chesley, *Illustration of Bed*

“Your dad is going to need surgery,” Mom had said.

Those were the first words I was met with after spending a day by myself. I was hoping the hours of stress would be dissolved by the news my mom would share with me. That, unfortunately, was not the case.

I sat there uncomfortably for a second before saying, “So no New York trip this year?”

Almost every other summer we went on a trip to upstate New York to visit my mom’s family. I always enjoyed being in Caroga Lake. It was home away from home, a chance to get away from our busy city. My grandparents host a yearly party that I have always loved. During the party, my grandpa would grill, and friends of theirs would play live music. It was something I truly looked forward to. At the time missing the trip was devastating.

Mom had seemed slightly shocked that I didn’t show more emotion.

“No, no New York this year.”

After that, we packed our bags for the next couple of days. We packed until the late-night reruns of day time shows came on.

That week before, we had just celebrated Dad’s 50th birthday, and everything was normal. What started out as a simple doctor’s visit turned into a whole summer of going back and forth from hospitals, sleeping in waiting rooms, and trying to make my eleven-year-old self understand what was happening. Everything changed so drastically, and I had to grow up and stand up when my dad couldn’t. Only a couple hours later when the sun finally rose, my uncle picked my mom and I up and took us to Centennial Hospital.

“May we pray for you?” a preacher had asked my mom. We weren’t the most religious people, but I think my mom was willing to believe in anything if that meant my dad would be okay. All of us stood in a circle, and the preacher prayed that the surgery would go smoothly. Those may have been some of the most uncomfortable minutes of my life. I don’t consider myself to be disrespectful to other religious ways, but considering it’s something I’ve never

practiced, it is very unfamiliar to me. I appreciated the kindness, but I didn’t understand why this man cared or why he thought a prayer would help fix my dad’s heart.

Seeing my dad hooked up to a machine and my family gathered around him in silence was heartbreaking. My dad was never one to show too much emotion so seeing him that vulnerable and broken down was something I couldn’t handle at that age. Despite feeling that way, I couldn’t malfunction because someone had to be strong. Mom tried her hardest for me, but I always knew she was crumbling when she wasn’t around me. She was able to break apart, but I never even cracked because I didn’t know how.

The first time I saw my dad was a day after the surgery. Mom and I stood silently by him while the nurses and the neurologist explained to us what was going on. They were my favorite two people out of all the doctors and nurses. Neither of them treated me like I was invisible. They showed me the scans of Dad’s brain and explained them to me. They made me feel like I was a part of the moment rather than just watching the things happen like it was a movie. I never understood how traumatizing hospitals can be. You don’t even have to be the one stuck in a hospital bed for it to affect you. Seeing someone you love in immense pain is horrible. I remember going to get blood taken and wondering why I felt anxious. I hated that I knew the route to the vending machine with the best snacks in it. I wondered how many people felt the same way. Did they also have to sleep uncomfortably in waiting rooms? Did they have to try to make it to the phone first so they could see if their loved one was okay? Most importantly, does the anxiety ever fade?

One day Mom and I went to the cafeteria within the hospital. She didn’t get much food.

“Do you understand what’s going on?” Mom had asked.

“Yeah, I do,” I said, continuing to look at the various people in the hospital.

I didn’t understand. I didn’t process a single thing from that summer until I was forced into isolation in 2020. I needed to be in isolation. I needed the time alone to think about the way things affected me. I needed to grow because I was simply just getting through it, patiently waiting for the moment to end. Because everything ends right? That’s what I like to tell myself instead of stressing about the infinite possibilities. I’ve never been someone to express how I’m feeling. I care more about others than I do myself. Anytime a friend of mine needs any sort of guidance, I’m there ready to help. But I struggle wondering if I should press send on a text that simply states, “I’m not ok.”

I hate it when people feel bad for me, it never feels like they’re being genuine. I’d rather someone ignore me than lie to my face to magically make me feel better. I’d rather not make a spectacle of my issues knowing that many people I know have much worse things going on. I’m aware that I should be comfortable telling people how I feel. It’s simply that I can’t seem to get myself to open up. I truly do believe that holding back my feelings because I didn’t want to undermine my mother’s feelings is what started it.

Going back to school that next year was the absolute worst. All of my classmates were talking about their various vacations and adventures, and my only activity from that summer was seeing my dad almost die. I was in the sixth grade, and I didn't have the best friends. So it wasn't like I could lean on them. I kept it in. I never told anyone about how the thought of having homemade tacos and seeing my dad drink orange soda absolutely terrifies me. I never mentioned how anxious I am about people leaving me.

I've grown a lot since 2018. I've made much better friends, and I've told people things about myself that I never thought would ever leave my head. One thing remains true. I still can't stand up for myself or my feelings.



THE CLOUD

Written by: Ashley Zarazua

We live on a farm far away from the city. Our closest neighbor is miles away. We take care of our farm animals. Some are free to roam, and others not so free, like the donkey. We moved here a couple of months ago, and I enjoy the noise that nature provides and the peace surrounding us. The mountains all around and the clouds over our heads create the comfort everyone has been seeking. But an issue we've had since coming here is that one cloud.

It's strange. We stare at it every day, and it has never moved. We thought we were finally alone, but that is wrong, as the cloud sees everything we do. We need to find out what it is. My wife believes in aliens and their ships, and she says the cloud is one of them. I don't believe in that nonsense. But there is something wrong. What if it's a spy from the government to monitor the people who live far away from cities and civilization? My wife says I'm crazy. But her idea of aliens in disguise as a cloud isn't crazy? I decided to find an answer by setting up a whole security system. I will see every movement on my farm, whether in the sky or with my animals.

At 3:28 am, the camera notification on my phone goes off. I check, and it's something I've never seen before. My three horses walk synchronously in circles over and over again. I don't want to get up and go out there, but I want to know why this is happening. My wife tells me to go back to sleep, so I do.

At 6:30 am, I wake up and check on my animals. They are all fine. My horses are eating grass; my cows are lying in the sun as always, and my donkeys are drinking water from the tub I made for them. The same cloud hovers above the area. My horses are going in circles.

At 8:04 pm, the weather changed. It starts to rain a bit heavier. I check my cameras to see my animals. They have all gone to the shack I built. I can sleep with the shushing of the rain, but my wife has to put on her earmuffs.

At 2:45 am, the notification on my phone goes off again. It is my camera. I check to see what triggered it. Once again, my horses are pacing in a circle. This time, I decided to go outside and close them up in the shack. I put on my raincoat and boots, as I know it will be muddy, and head out. I plod on the muddy ground toward the horses and feel an uneasy energy enter my body as I get close. I freak out. The circle created by the horses doesn't have a drop of rain. I look up, knowing the cloud is above me. I freeze and start to feel dizzy. Everything starts to turn blurry and becomes darker and darker. My whole body is cold and tingly. The last thing I remember is the thud of my body falling to the ground.

THE MEMOIR OF MAR'QUAILE FERDINAND

Written by: Mar'Quaile Ferdinand

I remember coming back into Tennessee, being so happy to be away from Mississippi. I couldn't care less about anything else. In that moment everything had slipped my mind except my brother, Sayeed Neilson. He was my best friend for four years. We got so close we considered ourselves brothers. It was about three days before his favorite holiday, Halloween. My grandparents and I had gotten back Sunday night and we couldn't wait to surprise him the next day.

I can vividly remember waking up at 5:00 in the morning to the sound of my grandma screaming. I was shocked and worried since I had never in my life heard her scream. So I grabbed something, anything, to cause harm to another person. What if someone got in and attacked my grandma? Where was my grandfather? Was he at home or at work? Was he the reason she was screaming? So I rushed into her room to stop whatever was going on. It all became clear; the cause of her screams. It was Sayeed's pictures on the news. He had been murdered by his own brother and his mother allowed it. It was a shock and all I could do was stumble back as it felt like I was slowly stretching across the floorboards, step after step as if the world was collapsing in on me. I felt incredibly light-headed.

When I entered my brand new dark room and sat on the bed, I did nothing but lay down. I went back to sleep thinking that maybe it wasn't real and all of it was a dream. But that very next day, I woke up to the harsh reality of life; he really was gone.

I got news that there was a memorial for him, so my family and I decided to attend. We lit candles and talked about our memories of him. I was quite literally in shock. I met a cousin of his that looked exactly like him. We talked for three hours. He reminded me so much of Sayeed, so I was really comfortable around him. We exchanged numbers to keep in touch.

When I got home I said nothing and walked into my room in the darkness. I laid on my bed, staring at the faded white wall.

I stopped talking to anyone and everyone and just thought, *What if?* If I had made it back sooner, would he be dead? If I was at his house at the time of the murder, could I have stopped it? If I was stronger, could I have protected him? After thinking for about five months, I grew a natural disgust for people who were weak. I believed that if I was strong, I could protect those I valued and do more. I also believed that if I was there, I could have stopped Sayeed's murder. So after that, I put my body to the test and began to train.

Sayeed's murder affected my mind in the most negative way possible. It changed me because the death of my best friend created a sick obsession with strength and a twisted value of what strength was. It made me into a prick; anything else was irrelevant. I also grew a habit of fighting and it made me happy to simply experience that feeling of my fist being driven into someone else's face. I became someone that was hard-headed and cold minded. I considered everyone and everything useless if they weren't strong enough physically, emotionally, or mentally.

I grew a deep hatred for my birth "mother." We'll call her Emily. Emily wasn't a good figure in my life and while my brother and I were in Mississippi, Sayeed would call. She knew he wanted to speak to us and to spite us, she never answered. She never picked up one of his fifty calls. I began to believe that I could've heard his voice once more. I blame Emily for keeping me from feeling that fleeting rush of our brotherly love.

THE BACKROOMS

Written by: Lydia Riddle

**MC means Main character. Any dialogue spoken by the MC will be in light grey. The gender, appearance, and name of the MC is left for the reader to decide.*

Chapter 1 (excerpt)

Darkness surrounds me. An empty pitch-black void. The only sound I hear is faint buzzing as if a bee is flying through my ears. My head hurts...but I must get up. I must wake up now. I slowly open my eyes to find myself laying on yellow carpet. Everything is yellow, the walls, the carpet, the buzzing ceiling lights. What is this? How did I get here? I call out to the empty space only to be answered by my own echo. Before this, I had been sitting in my studio apartment working on a painting of paranormal spirits and the afterlife. I don't know why that combination. After that I had gotten up to get a fresh cup of water and tripped over a loose floorboard; and then darkness. A dark falling sensation shot through my heart. But that's not important now.

This place feels eerie and empty. Makes me feel as if I'm alone and yet I have the chilling fear that I'm not the only one here. I can't quite describe what it is, but something feels off. This whole place is unsettling. I can't wrap my brain around this. Might as well explore this maze of walls; no point in calling out when nobody will answer me.

As I explore deeper and deeper, I come to the conclusion that I'm lost, and everything looks almost the same as it was a few minutes ago. Have minutes even passed or have I been here longer? My watch...my watch!

MC: "Oh it's broken...Looks like it stopped ticking at 9:32 a.m. Dang it."

I keep walking. My legs hurt and the buzzing continues...How long have I been here...Minutes? Hours? At this point, I'm unsure and I don't know when I'll get out of here or if I can even escape this maze. My stomach feels like it's consuming my insides, gurgling, and mumbling at me and sadly, I don't have any food.

I spot something in the corner of my eye. There's a glass bottle laying on the ground filled with a white liquid. Do I dare pick it up? Can I drink it? Is it poison? I pick up the bottle. It reads, "Almond water."

MC: "Almond Water? I didn't know that existed."

Nonetheless, I open the bottle and take a few sips. I feel hydrated, my legs stop hurting, my head feels like it's part of my body once again. Must be some mystical water to make me feel this good, unless it's some sort of drug but I highly doubt that. If it was drugs surely, I would be hallucinating strange things or struggling to walk.

Now with my determination restored, I carry on, my heart beating stronger than before. At least two hours must have gone by...I decide to stop in an empty room to lay down and rest. Strangely, it has a blue sleeping bag and three empty Almond Water bottles on the floor. This must mean that someone was here before. That I'm not the only one. I'm so tired...I'll have to investigate it tomorrow or whenever I wake up. I don't think time exists here. I get in the sleeping bag and slowly close my eyes, drifting off to sleep.

There's something here...I let out a loud gasp as I'm woken out of my slumber by a deafening roar. I jump to my feet and back myself against the wall. My head spinning and my body slowly awakening itself then, the roar stops. I hear footsteps and talking? It's somewhat muffled but it's someone talking. I quickly peek out to see who it is but no one is there. Maybe they went around a corner. I hear it again.

"Hello? Is someone there?" the male voice calls out.

MC: "Hello? Hey I'm over here!"

I shout as I desperately run towards the source of the sound. This will either be my saving grace or the worst decision of my life.

BENVOLIO

Written by: J.B.K.

O no cousin! My lovely dear cousin
Your precious life was just so very very short.
We hung out together us, a dozen
But so sadly you cousin, just had to depart
Why did you have to love a claimed pet?
Why couldn't you love your only just one true
That Capulet wicked girl was Juliet
And o cousin, now you're done and now through
The lovely times we had were very chill
But in what world am I supposed to do now?
Since you left, I've been feeling so very ill
And now I have to say this dreadful vow
I can't believe cousin you had to die
And I have to say my sad goodbye.

J.B.K.

LOVES' FUNERAL

Written by: Charlie Saleh

Looking from afar, I saw tragedy
Saddened ones peering in the grave of love
Laying together as one helplessly
Their hearts intertwined, once transcending of

Selfish and yet quick, they lost their fore sight
Young minds for dirt, obstructed by distaste
Two families could be one; plaguing blight
Soulmates or to be destined for this fate

Poisoned their minds and ached their many hearts
Sorrow is swift; marriage engulfs souls
Death consumed and drifted, ripped them apart
Some claim to be mature, for they are foals

But their love is noticed by only me
Ignored, though their deaths are simply decreed

DEVOTION

Written by: Ta'kyra Pogues

Loyalty should always come first with any relation
Guessing, would you defend my name in rooms I haven't entered?
That's all I ask for
To have each other's backs
Canonize my loyalty, you might not find it again
You can't love me if you don't have it
Loyalty is someone you should cherish
Instead, people trash the covenant
Fake love roams the air
Rare to find the real
Love would get you killed
But loyalty would make you the last man standing

MASQUERADE

Written by: Zena Malone

I'm having my first driving test. I am fifteen years old. I am still receiving driving lessons to get better so I can be ready to have my license. I have my permit, but I want to have my license when I turn nineteen. I hear police sirens, and I am unstuck in time.

I am at my senior prom. I enjoy the masquerade decorations and the space this year. The hotel ballroom is a big space to have the prom for us. There are spicy chicken wings, finger sandwiches, and chocolate chip cookies with little M&M's inside. The students and the teachers are hype, jumping around doing the wobble. There is a picture of me and my cousin posing and smiling. They are playing old school music like "Celebrate." I go home around midnight because I have to be at work the next day from twelve to six.

I teleport. I am on a road trip to Holiday World with my girl scout's crew. This is my first time getting on a roller coaster, and I am already scared when I first sit down. When we are preparing to take off, I am shaking badly. Then, halfway through riding on the roller coaster, one of my girl scout crew members slob all over me as we are going down. The roller coaster is going fast, and I decide I will never ride on a roller coaster ever again.

QUARANTINE

Written by: AJ Gutzmirtl

At the start of quarantine, I was 13 years old. I had a friend that I had just begun getting closer with before Covid struck. She and I did everything together. We would watch the newest episodes of our favorite shows, we sat next to her record player and listened to her new Queen records, we would have sleepover after sleepover, and we did everything else best friends did. I was even there when she got her first huge haircut and cut off all her hair.

Her dad was like a second dad to me. Near the end of 2019, her dad was diagnosed with brain cancer. It was so heartbreaking, and I couldn't even begin to imagine how my best friend felt. Everyone had great faith that he would get through this. The community wore pins to show that we stood with him. It started going downhill faster than any of us thought. Throughout all of this, my family would keep my best friend and her little sister at our house for weeks on end. They lived with us most of the time while their mom was staying with their dad in the hospital. I only grew closer to her.

Her dad passed away in the beginning of 2020. When my mom broke the news to me at dinner, I cried at my spot at the table. I cried because he was amazing. I cried for my best friend. I was only 13 years old, and I had so many feelings. My mom and I were asked to spend the night at their house to keep them company. I ended up staying a few days longer because I felt that I needed to be there for them. I could tell she didn't know what to feel. I did everything in my power to brighten her thoughts.

Throughout all of this, I had a massive crush on her. For a while, I was in denial about having real feelings for her because I had no idea how it worked. I couldn't tell the difference between platonic and romantic feelings. Later on, I felt that she deserved to know. It didn't go as planned, but we continued our friendship. That was when everything really started to go downhill.

My company started to not be enough, and she became really depressed. I stayed by her side because I never, ever, wanted to see her get hurt. It got harder and harder for me to continue supporting her. By this point I was already too attached to let her figure it out on her own. I was her therapist now. I believed we were still very close, and I continued considering her my best friend, completely oblivious that it wasn't mutual. I understood that her dad had passed, and it's very hard to wrap your head around something like that. But she didn't seem to want to get better. I had to protect her from people that I knew would hurt her. Well, I tried at least. I even had to protect her from her own self. She was unsafe in her own mind. I had to stop her from countless bad decisions.

As I continued being her personal therapist, she started running off to people that she thought could love her differently. They would stick around for a couple weeks, then cut her off out of nowhere. She would run back to me. I was clueless that I was being used as a fill-in until her next partner showed up. She would pretend to love me in ways that partners do and that made me happy. But then, again, she would ghost on me and do it all over again.

It was continuous. It took me almost 2 years to put together the pieces. I began getting less and less attached to the point that I didn't mind not being friends with her anymore. I met someone in March of 2022, and they made me very happy. I was no longer friends with my best friend, and it felt so good to not be a therapist or fill-in. The person I met ended up not being the right person for me, and they broke up with me that same summer. I also built up the courage to ask my family for help with my own issues that had begun BECAUSE of my best friend. I got a therapist of my own, a nutritionist and doctor for the eating disorders I gathered in the process. I became happy again. I dropped the negative people in my life and made better ones that were good for me. I feel like I know myself again, and I have grown so much. Things do look up. Everyone's time comes.

ENVIIOUS

Written by: Gracie Sager

I wake with my head pounding; it feels like I got kicked in the head. The blanket is sticking to my skin most likely due to my sweat. Its roughness provides me with a sense of comfort, which personally I think everyone needs some right now. Waking up means I've lived another day in this hellscape. Sometimes I wish I won't wake up, but I have people relying on me. So, that isn't an opinion...I'm envious of people that can take the easy way out. Envious of their freedom.

"Wake up, we need to go." In my zombie-like state I can't make out the voice, but if I had to guess who is calling, it would probably be Aspen. She is always like this. Always looming over me, telling me what to do. I've had enough, but I must keep my feelings under control.

Old memories flash into my mind, memories I would like to forget. The strongest is when I took a life for the first time. It was during the warm season when the sickness takes many lives. I remember my friend Olivia was sick. She started getting violent after spending too long in the sun. I was the one to save her, even though saving her meant losing a part of myself.

"I know ok just give me a break."

"Hurry, we need to have good progress before the sun comes up."

"Ok Ok. Hold on." I have to force myself to get up, wishing that I could lay in my makeshift bed all day. However, Aspen is right. We do need to move. We've been in this spot for 3 weeks now, which is longer than we would normally stay, but we needed to take care of our sick and injured. I hurry up and put my belongings in my pack, being careful not to make too much noise and wake the rest. Me and Aspen are the first to leave our temporary homes, doing our job of protecting the others. We scout out new locations in order to tell if they are safe; without us the others would die. I make sure to pull my bandanna over my mouth and my hat over my head, to protect myself from the condition we're about to face.

"Are you ready?" She says that with hostility. She's mad, of course she is. I mentally roll my eyes.

I nod. We grab our weapons and leave the base, silently praying that we will return later. We head north; it's colder up there, which provides some shelter from the harsh elements. The elements are what keeps us from traveling in

the day. It takes less resources, but it is more dangerous. Which is why we bring weapons with us to protect us. My favorite weapons are two black military grade daggers which pair perfectly with my dual pistols. This combination allows for both close and far combat if needed.

"Are you ok?" I finally answered her. Done letting my mind wander.

She snaps. "I'm fine." And walks off.

"Ok. Well I feel as though you're lying."

"Why would I lie?" She turns and looks me right in the eyes.

I don't cower away like she wants and instead I look right back at her.

"Listen Aspen. I don't care why you're upset. But whatever it is. Fix it."

She rolls her eyes and starts to walk off. I finally snap, which leads me to grab her arm and push her against the nearest tree. My emotions are totally in control.

"Stop."

"What-"

"Stop being a bitch. Because we both know that it's better for us to get along," I say a little too harshly.

"I'm sorry." Fear clear on her face, probably scared that I'm going to kill her. I let her go.

"I'm sorry too. I'm just tired of living like this and your attitude doesn't help anything."

"I'm sorry again...and you're right; we need to get along better if we want to survive out here." Silence falls between us. However, for the first time it's not uncomfortable. There is this understanding now between us. We continue north like planned until the sun starts to rise.

"We need to rest." I break the hours-long silence. We can't travel during the day due to the extreme heat. If we tried, we would run out of water in an hour and die. Or the worst option is another group finding us and taking our things before slitting our throats or using us as slave labor.

"Ok." We walk until we come across a small cave, which will keep us cool when we sleep. We get out our packs and

lay under our scratchy blankets, letting the silence once again consume us.

“Wes...,” waking me from my half sleeping state.

“Yes Aspen?” I open my eyes looking at her. She’s turned away from me, leaving me to only see her pitch-black hair.

“You know I’m truly sorry.” Her voice breaks...I’m fully awake now. I didn’t know our relationship allowed us to cry around each other. It’s dangerous to be vulnerable now. At any moment those you trusted could turn on you. Take everything you own. Kill you. But I won’t say this to her. Instead, I move close and hold her in my arms.

“Yeah. I know.” After I hear her heavy breathing, I let myself rest. Feeling a slight pain in my chest, knowing that at any moment she could be taken away from me, just like Olivia. Out of nowhere, I find myself compelled to tell Aspen about her. To tell her about all of me, the good and the bad. So, I do.

“I’ve killed someone.” I blurt out. She doesn’t answer, but I know she is listening.

“Her name was Olivia. She was everything to me, but then she got sick with the virus. She was so sick that she was gone within the first 24 hours.” I will continue.

“Wes, it’s not like you had a choice. It isn’t your fault.” She tries to give comfort, but inside I know what I did. I know that I chose to kill Olivia because it was the only true way to say goodbye.

“Aspen. I did have a choice, and I chose to kill her.” I say it with a little too much force.

Silence. Again, she doesn’t answer. Because she knows it is true, she knows that I truly did choose. But she won’t judge me because that is how the world is now. Now we have to choose to kill the people we love before the sickness takes over and they kill us.

“I’m sorry.” She says it after what seems like an eternity. It feels like time is repeating itself. Like we’ve already been here before.

“Don’t be. I chose to do it. I just thought you would want to know. That I love someone before you.” The last part slips past my lips before I can stop it. But it’s true—I do love Aspen. Probably even more than I loved Olivia. Olivia may have been my first love, but Aspen will be my last. Because I choose to. Because I chose her. But from time to time, I will still be envious of those who have already left this world. Envious of their freedom to love someone without the fear of losing them.

I don’t wait for Aspen to answer; instead, I hold her close to my heart, both physically and mentally. And for the first time in a long time, I don’t fight sleep. I don’t fight my past because I have hope for a future with Aspen.



www.FlowerpotPress.com
PAB-1010-XXXX
Made in China/Fabriqué en Chine

All rights to the work included in this anthology belong to the authors and visual artists, who have given permission for inclusion in this publication.

Copyright © 2023 Flowerpot Press,
a Division of Flowerpot Children's Press, Inc., Oakville, ON, Canada and Kamalu LLC, Franklin, TN, U.S.A. All rights reserved. No part of
this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical,
photocopying, recording, optical scan, or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the copyright holder.