

Alternative United Voices – Volume 8

A compilation of fiction, poetry and visual art from the students of
Montreal's Outreach high schools

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Organized by Colin Throness



Find out more about Alternative United and read the publication
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Acknowledgements

This year's judge is Curtis John McRae's fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *The New Quarterly*, *Prairie Fire*, and *Chronicling the Days* anthology (Guernica Editions). He is the Editor-in-Chief of *yolk*, winner of the 2022 David McKeen award, and a finalist in the 2019 QWF contest for emerging writers. He recently graduated with a fellowship from Concordia's MA Creative Writing program. Thanks so much, Curtis!

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Above all, big respect goes out to all the students who participated this year. You have all shown us that you will forever belong, not only in this anthology, but in the Outreach's creative community. Your incredible talent as writers and artists shimmers on every single page.

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Foreword

Unconditional belonging is not the default. “Belonging” can be a troubled term, grounded in preconditions and conditional acceptance.

Centered around the theme of belonging, the talented young voices in this anthology not only understand this difficult law, but they have contented with it in their work and deftly explored the fine nuances of what it really means to belong. In the unforgiving trenches of warfare, we are made privy to the intimate brotherhood of belonging amongst soldiers, while also implicitly asked to question what it really means to belong to—and defend—a country. In another piece, we are made witness to the dangers and risks of being in a gang, and of the brutal reality required of that existence.

And yet, in their wisdom and supple understanding, these well-rounded writers simultaneously shed any notions of complete cynicism, crafting a sense of optimism in their burgeoning voices and providing their readers with a balanced and hopeful promise of an imagined and achievable future centered around belonging. We are made witness to the generative interactions within a community, and the simple act of a lemon passing between hands. We see how belonging can be placed in a continuity, how the foundation of a house being built next to another family edifice denotes ancestry, lineage, and home.

Uninhibited by constrained imaginations and exhibiting a maturity of voice and perspective, there is no doubt that these writers belong in this anthology, that their voices and stories have earned their place here, and that the editors and printers have done well to collect, print, and disseminate this collection. Thank you to the team involved in creating this anthology, to the readers who have picked it up, and the students who have submitted their writing and visual art. It has been an honor and a privilege to read your work and be the guest judge for this spectacular anthology of talented young writers.

– Curtis John McRae

FICTION & POETRY

Vezina – 8

Amelia Ballantyne – Just Another Change
Mister T – Unknown Fugitives on the Loose

The Hub – 14

A.T.R. – Belonging

Outreach – 15

Mimi – Shake to Wake
Oleg Delgado – Rest Easy
Sloth – Midsummer Storm
Andy Morais – Break the Pattern
Andy Morais – She Might Forget

Focus – 27

Tafari Promesse-Samuels – Her Ball and Chain

Mile End – 32

Maya Bagarollo – Simple Pleasure
Maya Bagarollo – Flux
Ryan Pulcini – Can You Repeat the Question
Gabriel Leon – A Stranger to this Planet

Perspectives II – 39

Derek Melo – Costa These Bones
S raphine – My Vice
Jacob Magera – A walk through the forest of soon forgotten memories
Jacob Magera – The Man in The Mirror

Mountainview – 49

Tee – If You Can't Break Bread You Fake
Mateo Maw – Where Would I Be Who Am I
Ink Blick – Snakes in the Grass
Christopher EM – A Dealer's Romance
Alexander Graziani – Where's my drugs?
Deez – Grandson for President
Richard Stacey – Devastator

Options – 67

Lucas Brodeur – Monsters Aren't Real
Alysha Cloutier Bearisto – Surviving
Isis Redmond – Following in the Same Footsteps
Kyle Reis – Titans of Industry
Kyle Reis – The Eternal Stain

Kyle Reis – A Black Hole that Devours All
Kyle Reis – Three People
Canela Viereck Lapaix – Two Points of View
Omar Mohammed – Whiskers
Chloe Alagos – The Stars and the Moon
Chloe Alagos – First and Last
Chloe Alagos – Like Her
Aaron Gourarii – The Vicarious
Kenyon Awashish-Hunter – WHAT THE FU—?

Perspectives I – 100

Michael Borges – Seeking Kindness
Ayvah Phoniex – Old Man Tucker
Adriano Iacono – Pavement
Julia Magera & Ayvah Phoniex – Winter Bird
Ayvah Phoniex – Ascending
Collective Poem – The Hungry Having
Julia Magera – Faking a Smile

Options – selected poetry – 111

Lilly Roy
Kasandra Martin Assarica
Anndraya Gero
Andrew Whittick
Kiki
Raine Rushton-Sonnel
Chloe Alagos
Matthew Adler
Darrius Mackenzie-Majothi
N'Meysha
Rhenay James
Leen Osman

VISUAL ART – 121

Kyriakos Giatras
Kaidon Dewitt
Massimo Filippelli
Dream Team
Graydon
Emylio Alejandro
King Aaron-Ian
Amara Cherif

Thomas Beaucage O'Connor
Stuwy
Dinari Gordon
Ethan the Destroyer
Lex
Trenton
KO
Aiden Vaillant
Maya Hertsman
Logan Roter,
Samuel Awashish-Desbiens
Maya Hertsman
Canela Viereck LaPaix
Ryan Sousa
Lilly Roy
Lucas Brodeur
Kenyon Awashish-Hunter
Shobi Lewy
Darius McKenzie-Majothi
Jordan Demaine
Sky Ross
Quentin Edwards-Araujo
Andrew Whittick
Rosie Triantafilia-Maria Nikitara
Shaya Alfred
Samuel Awashish-Desbiens
Aaliyah Belfon-Campbell
Tishawn Brassard Regis
Jordan Davis
Hunter Gault
Samuel Hall
Jordan Narrainen Hylton
Finn Diamond
Victoria Simionidis
Yasmina Krsteski
Kierra Meloche
Hal Cohen
Alex Graziani
Jai'Quan Lawrence-Williams
Tiana-Jade Valliant

Matteo Biucchi
Mason Martineau
Khamye Inniss
Malakai Roach
Matthew Manni
Dylan Lemieux
Sage Cormier
Shai Zrihen
Efecan Kavvouras
Bianca Soucy
Jonathan Murray Genetu
Nathan Kulczycki McIntyre
Damien Anthony Masson-Ioanna
Victoria Silva

Just Another Charge

By Amelia Ballantyne (Vezina)

[Content warning: wartime violence, blood]

A teen boy slouched against the cold dirt of the trench; snow blew into his face and around him as the sharp wind pierced his nose when he inhaled. The gusts burned his nose and stabbed his lungs. He tried not to react to the pain as he read a newspaper from his homeland. The crackle of fire could be heard just a bit further down the trench. Some other soldiers in green uniforms and snow coats talked around the fire and cracked jokes to help lighten the mood.

“Day 542 of the Caovish Campaign” the newspaper headline read. The boy’s breath crystalized instantly in the cold as silence fell over the battlefield. The faint sound of an explosion could be heard, and all the boy could do was wonder if it came from friend or foe. Despite being far from home and from his love he could still remember the warmth of his home nation of Veli, which he had left 234 days ago at the Colonial Legion Army’s orders. The boy continued to fantasize about the vast prairies and warm weather of his homeland. He dusted the snow off his rifle as he got up from where he rested.

The boy got up, he groaned, his limbs almost frozen, stiff from the cold. Yet despite how sore he was, he walked over to his post at one of the sentry positions. In the trench line he tried to adjust his rifle sling comfortably. The low rumble of a truck engine came and went as more supplies were offloaded and put into storage for dinner later that night. The boy hoped for something good like meat, but knew it was most likely more canned food like beans. But that was the least of his worries. In the frigid wasteland of his frontline, he brushed snow off the stool to try and rest his aching legs while sitting down.

More distant explosions sounded as Artillery began to roar awake and shells rained down on the enemies of Colonial Legion. Suddenly there was

the rushed sound of footsteps on the frozen floor as another soldier approached the boy: “Corporal Pudsy! Command has ordered a charge!” the soldier shouted at the boy. “Aye, Sergeant,” was all the boy was able to muster through the loud wailing of the wind. The Corporal followed the Sergeant down the trenches as more and more green uniformed soldiers got out of their warm bunkers, preparing for the hell that was about to unfurl. As ladders were being placed to exit the trench, the Corporal and Sergeant reached their platoon. A Lieutenant waited for them, the Corporal’s helmet painted white with a poor green cross painted on it to signify his position rustled on his head as he prepared mentally.

“Men, we will change the course of history today. We will show them the Colonial power! Fix bayonets and prepare for blood!” the Lieutenant shouted to the 34 soldiers, prepared to fight tooth and nail. Not for their country but for their life. Most of them didn’t even want to fight but more to go home. Then as the soldiers put bayonets on the end of their rifles, the Lieutenant raised a whistle to his lips, breathing one last breath of cold air before letting out the ear-piercing cry of a charge from the whistle. As the whistle blew along with the wind, the soldiers began climbing the ladders running onto the snow-filled no-man’s land between their trench and the enemy trench.

At first all was quiet except for the heavy breathing of everyone and the howl of the wind. And then when the soldiers were about 50 meters from the enemy trench, the terrible sound of bullets whizzing by became audible. A few soldiers tumbled to the ground, hit by enemy gunfire. They lay sprawled on the floor and medics rushed to their side. However, the Corporal continued to run for the trench knowing there’d be cover from gunfire there and there’d be more wounded in the trenches.

As the Corporal and the others got closer and closer to the enemy trench, the gunfire got more intensive with more men falling over. Originally, the force of 32 was now cut to 19, but that didn’t stop them from their charge. The first soldiers jumped into the enemy trench and

close-quarters combat ensued. The Corporal jumped into the trench with the rest, his rifle rustling at his side, looking for the injured. As the Corporal searched, a nearby grenade went off knocking the Corporal off his feet and launching his weapon out of his hands and away from him.

The Corporal tried to get up, with his ears ringing and his vision blurry, he felt a shooting pain in his stomach. While looking down, the Corporal saw a large crimson red stained his uniform and a puddle of crimson liquid at his feet. He stumbled over and fell into a nearby enemy sentry post. As he regained his hearing, he heard that the fighting had died down and the only real thing he could hear was the howl of the wind. Once more, snow piled on his face. While he tried to stop the bleeding with the little supplies he had, a friend of his ran up to him: “Pudsy! We did it, we won the war! We can go home!” he proclaimed, not realizing the situation.

When the other teen boy saw the state of his friend, he quickly grabbed a bandage out of his pocket and started to try and help his friend stop the bleeding. As the Corporal lay there bleeding out, his friend cried out for a medic trying his best to get help while holding back his tears. “Pudsy, hold on there man... We won, we can go home! Don’t die on me here!” he shouted as his friend went lifeless, his skin pale and cold.

The young boy sobbed over him. A medic arrived and started tending to him as other soldiers and medics began cleaning up the wounded and dead, as if it were routine.

Unknown Fugitives on the Loose

By Mister T

[Content warning: violence, guns, murder]

Two criminals named JT and Davis were part of a local gang called Uptown. Wanted for robbery and assault, JT was one of the aggressive criminals around, always one step ahead of the police. His partner, Davis, was a master getaway driver and helicopter pilot who learned quickly and his gun aim was on point.

JT and Davis were currently planning a bank robbery. They'd been doing criminal activities on the low so the police wouldn't catch them. The police had seen JT and Davis running around doing their dirty work but never knew their identity because they were always wearing ski masks. The Feds had been trying to catch these two for three years now. They called them the Duo of Unknown, running around, doing what they do best, never getting caught by no police.

JT and Davis set off with their all black Trackhawk to Maze Bank with a little bit of help from a member of their gang, Tyrone. They parked the car in a garage nearby, owned by one of their crew and they headed towards the bank.

An undercover police officer was driving nearby with his partner on break. They were going for some donuts until they saw three guys walking around the bank. The undercover cop reported to all the officers of an emergency at Maze Bank: three men ski-masked up, wearing all black, two of them with duffle bags. Before JT entered he saw the police and decided that Davis and Tyrone should rob the bank while he dealt with the police. They slowly made their way inside. JT shot four guards inside.

JT called another one of his crew members, Obama, one of his snipers to watch the area. All the guards were out cold but for sure police were on the way so they had to move quickly. JT told Davis to go to the top of the building and take the helicopter.

Davis already knew what kind of helicopter this bank had, a high tech military silent helicopter. They rushed to the top of the building while Davis got the helicopter. Meanwhile, JT and Tyrone stole over four million dollars.

One of the guards who got shot was unconscious for a second but when he regained consciousness, he alerted the president about the bank robbery and that it could be the Uptown Gang with the two wanted fugitives. The president called his high tech SWAT team to track this Uptown area and find where the Duo of Unknown is. The bank manager had put a GPS tracker in the money so the authorities would find where the money had ended up. The SWAT team waited for the right moment to strike.

JT, Davis and Tyrone were on the move because too many feds were storming the building. When they got to the roof, there was no helicopter, the president had ordered it to be taken away, so they had to wingsuit down to their garage. They jumped in the whip and left from the back entrance and drove straight home through a tunnel so the police wouldn't find where they lived, but they didn't know what was coming for them.

Once they got home they thought it was a successful heist and put the money on the table. The bank owner had called the president and told them where the tracker had stopped in Uptown. The president told his high tech SWAT team and they went off. The president went in the helicopter because he wanted to see who these guys were. It'd been three years that the police couldn't catch the Duo of Unknown.

JT, Davis and Tyrone were counting the money and ready to move to a different country they had to lay low in the States. While JT and Davis were getting ready to pack up Tyrone went outside and saw a helicopter in all black making no noise and landing near the house. Tyrone warned JT and Davis they had no time to think. SWAT team busted into the trap house, Tyrone tried to stop them but failed and got shot, JT and Davis gave up immediately because JT had a plan.

The squat team detained the Duo of Unknown with high tech cuffs and strapped to the helicopter. While they were getting arrested thinking about whether Tyrone was still alive and only JT knew he was moving before they got taken out the trap house. Tyrone slowly got up watching JT and Davis be arrested by the president's high tech SWAT team and he slowly walked into the basement, where they had a whole supply of guns. He grabbed a high tech sniper with a silencer. Tyrone aimed at the helicopter before it took off. He shot the handcuffs JT was wearing and his right arm was free, he tried to slowly reach for an officer's gun but failed.

As JT was trying to escape, they heard a voice and it was the president. He wanted to take off their mask to see who these people were but before he even touched JT, Davis kicked the SWAT members off the helicopter. Before they fell, JT grabbed the SWAT member's gun and shot Davis' cuffs while JT had the president hostage.

Davis took out the pilot and took control of the helicopter while JT told the president, "I want 8 million and you stay alive."

The president was nervous. He told him: "I will transfer it on my phone." He didn't need 8 million anyways 'cause he was over 100 billion. The president gave him the money because he wanted to stay alive. Once the money was transferred through the phone, while they were flying over the middle of the ocean, they threw the president out of the helicopter with his phone so that he couldn't contact anyone or cancel the transfer.

JT and Davis were set and flew the helicopter to Jamaica. They bought a nice mansion near the beach with their own privacy and they were never seen again.

Belonging
By A.T.R.

His amazingly beautiful eyes. They are so captivating. When I look at him, I see this intelligent man who has a goal in life. A sensitive but loving man with a beautiful heart. I get lost in his eyes. They are a beautiful unique canvas with so many little details that I could look at forever. His sweet smile is so perfect. Just looking at him makes me smile. Every inch of him was perfectly made from his ears to his nose to his body. Including the little details. His rosy cheeks are so beautiful they compliment his handsome face. The sound of his voice is like the rhythm of a song that is calming and makes you feel safe. His hands are warm and comforting. When we hug, I feel at peace.

arms I belong

—in his

Shake to Wake

By Mimi

It was eerily early in the morning, around 2:30 a.m. when I glanced at the alarm clock by my bedside. Horrid flashbacks had woken me from my dreamless slumber; the thought of hands running along my skin felt like bugs running around my body under the sheets. I had never thought—NEVER THOUGHT—I would have such vile and evil thoughts of something once so meaningful to me.

What makes me feel even more sick to my stomach is sometimes I miss the bruises and cuts that littered the skin I wear. I feel insane. Utterly and completely insane. So bad that when people touch me, I wish they would land a hit; just hurt me so bad it would leave a scar as deep as the one inside me.

So there I was, paralyzed in bed, when Mom came in. She knows that rough days are followed by rough nights.

“You’re safe here,” she said, as she laid her hand on my shoulder gently. I looked at her with a hint of insanity as I replied, “But how can I feel safe, waking from my sleep, sweating and crying at just the thought of someone so much as looking at me?”

Rest Easy
By Oleg Delgado

When you die, you gotta rest easy,
So before you die, you better get busy.
Fly high, and soar through the sky,
Stay true and you'll be alright.

Everything in life seems to be bad right now,
But stay positive, neutral or negative.
There are too many obstacles that won't change,
Light and dark coexist in everything.
So no matter what, there will always be struggles,
So hang on tight—life ain't easy.

When you die, you gotta rest easy,
So before you die, you better get busy!
Fly high, and soar through the sky,
Stay true and you'll be alright.

Everything will be alright,
Disappointment is part of life.
Most of us will know moments of strife,
But we gotta break through,
We gotta strive for everyone,
Including you.
Walk your path and make it true.
Love yourself first—then give it time.
Just know everything takes time,
It might feel hopeless right now,
Just don't doubt you'll never be all alone,

So please stay strong.

Midsummer Storm

By Sloth

Archie scoffed, crossing his arms and drawing a step or two away. He seemed to be trying to shrug this off, like it was some simple disagreement. It was much more than that, they both knew that.

Crimson-red eyes narrowed on the redheaded man across from him, with his toothpick-like stature and scowling gaze. Maxie looked genuinely upset, Archie noted. Not in the same way Archie was, either. It was hard to get Maxie this upset.

“We’ve known for years that we had different ideas, why are ya suddenly makin’ it an issue?” Archie huffed, running a hand through his salty-scented hair mid-speech out of irritation.

“Because now they are coming into motion. I can’t have you getting in Team Magma’s way with your foolish ideas,” Maxie hissed, his tongue curling like a Seviper—words lacing with venom, which he never usually had. At least not with Archie.

“My foolish ideas?!” Archie snapped, voice raising significantly. “You say that as if yers are any fuckin’ better?!”

“Archie, mine are carefully thought out. Yours are...” He paused. “...immature.”

“MINE are immature?” Archie’s voice got louder, an arm raising to point to the window, the one facing the sea. “I’m trying to give those pokemon a better life, more sea—to get rid’a the pollution WE caused! You just wanna end it!”

Maxie narrowed his frozen cerulean gaze. “The ocean is the most abundant resource on this planet. We need more land. Have you ever seen how aggressive some wild pokemon are to humans, how we cross into their territory—how we cross into their homes and use it for our own? Have you ever seen that, Archie?”

Archie remained quiet, which allowed Maxie to continue.

“We trampled their land, their territory, by taking it for our own gain. And never giving back. With Team Magma, with the power of Groudon, we can give back to them what we took. If we expand the land, Archie, we can have more for both humans and pokemon.”

“And to expand that land, Max, what would ya have to do?” Archie said, his tone blank. Unreadable. “You’d be cuttin’ off the ocean, takin’ away their home too.”

“They have plenty of ocean to live in. We can safely relocate them. They will be fine.” Maxie rested a hand on the leg of his glasses, the other behind his back.

Archie took a step back again, keeping himself a full foot away from Maxie. “An’ what if it doesn’t work like that? What if they don’t wanna relocate? They got homes there, they’ve got families. What would ya do then?”

Maxie looked down to ponder the idea. He hadn’t thought that far yet.

Archie uncrossed his arms, taking a step back and resting his hand on the handle on the door, pulling it open. “And you’re callin’ my plan foolish,” he spat, pulling his gaze away from Maxie to look outside.

Storm clouds began to roll in, rain quickly pattering against the ground.

Archie didn’t look back at him. “If yer gonna try and use Groudon to get yer way, I’ll just fire right back at’cha,” he said, refusing to elaborate before walking out the door and into the ongoing storm, a boom of thunder at the same time the door slammed shut.

Break the Pattern

By Andy Morais

The breeze of the early hour blew the thin lace curtain through the half open window, just enough for streams of sunlight to beam across her face, causing her eyes to open like the morning before and the morning before that.

The very same chilled air that blew through the house four weeks ago when Mrs. Gorman entered her home at the same time she did every Sunday afternoon after going into town.

Swiftly but still calmly, she sprung up, hoping not to rock the mattress.

The very same way she did four weeks ago the morning of that particular Sunday when she came home to an unknown woman`s swing coat splayed out on the loveseat.

This morning, four weeks had passed since this woman found her husband unfaithful to her and she woke up with an eerie half genuine smile on her face like every other day this week. Her eyes grazed over the time on the alarm clock to her left as she quietly scurried out to the bathroom.

The very same manner as four weeks prior when she had curiously stepped down the hall getting a view of Mr. Gorman and a brunette from her own half-open bedroom door.

A dozen hair rollers dropping back into the drawer by the sink. Black eyeliner and mascara coating her eyes. Her ring finger tapping rouge onto her cheekbones turning bubblegum pink and the cool-toned red lipstick she applied.

All while remembering how she felt having not been noticed four weeks ago when she headed back through the parlor, picked up her house keys and fled from her own home, holding back tears of shock.

6:57, she saw on the clock walking back into the bedroom just before discreetly climbing back into bed and gently lying down, careful not to squish her shiny auburn ringlets.

7:00. The alarm went off and her eyes opened again. “Good morning, sweetheart! I’ll get started on breakfast right away.”

“Okay, honey,” her husband answered.

The smell of french toast and bacon filled the kitchen as Mr. Gorman sat down at the table being poured a cup of coffee by his wife.

“The toast tastes different, honey,” he stated firmly as Mrs. Gorman stood facing the stove, flipping more bacon.

“New cinnamon. Got it at that little shop across from the market,” she responded, still facing away from him. “It comes from Ethiopia.”

“I don’t like it. Don’t want you using it again,” he hissed with his usual countenance.

“Of course, darling.” The woman cracked an almost gavotting smirk and with that. Mr. Gorman leaped out the door to work. The Mrs. soon followed after tidying up the small meal.

She marched herself down the street to Mrs. Chesed’s house as she did every Thursday for their brunch together.

They sat on the living room chairs with finger sandwiches, biscuits, and a steaming pot of leaded tea, discussing life as always.

Drring. Dring, dring, drrrrrrring. The telephone rang.

“Hello, is Mrs. Marina Gorman there?” a monotonous voice spoke on the phone.

“I’ll hand you over,” said Mrs. Chesed.

“Marina Gorman speaking. Hello.”

“Yes, Mrs. Gorman, this is Leonard’s assistant. Your husband was found collapsed on the pavement outside our building,” the voice spoke.

“You’ll have to come to the hospital quickly, I’m afraid we may be losing him.”

“Oh my goodness! Of course, I’m on my way!”

“Something wrong??” Mrs. Chesed questioned with a concerned cadence.

“Even sooner than I expected.”

She Might Forget

By Andy Morais

She won't forget the hand that grabbed and smacked her thigh in class
because he just couldn't help it

She won't forget being 12, 13, 16 years old with smiles, waves, yells, and
honking cars, a thumbs up to her skirt blowing up in the wind

She won't forget being publicly claimed as his fuck toy because she's
effortlessly almost indisputably a pawn to be placed where he chooses

And she won't forget when he asked

And when she said no he only asked more and more

Again and again, each time more insistently with less gentle demands but
more gentle compliments and praise for her figure which came with more
degradation of her lack of interest in his

She won't forget

And as soon as it was clear to him that the answer was no, he left.

Because she was no longer of any use to him

And she won't forget

I know that it was nothing to you (wasn't impressionable)

But she won't forget

Because to her it was understanding that she'll never be worth more than
her body

And she won't forget

Or maybe she will

But only when and if she does

It will have been because it was too much to remember

Too many happenings to recall

By the age of 18, 20 years old there might be too many experiences to think
of

And she might forget

She might forget because the world is so big and society makes her small

She might forget because it isn't worth remembering something so difficult
to fathom at such a young age
Forgive her if she wasn't taught something agonizing to live with and
comprehend as an adult
And forgive her, because she might have been taught
She might have been taught that her jeans are too tight and she's practically
asking for people to look at her
She might have been taught
But what she has learnt is that
She is the subject
The problem
It's apparent what she puts on her body but not where their gaze lies—lies
and she lies when it's fine but it's not because all she learned from her
mother glaring down at her clothes is that her jeans are too tight, and she
does not know why
All she knows is she feels bad for looking the way she does
She feels ashamed of being a young woman and she feels ashamed because
she knows deep down that her mother could be right
Because when she walks out that door she's somehow unwillingly feeding
the commodity that is her person
Her presence every moment is a lovely game of how are we indulging in
the patriarchy today
When she is standing in her bedroom she belongs to herself
When she walks out that door she belongs to you
And so when she walks out that door and is swallowed by your sick world
Your world of standards
Your world of skewed thinking and perception
She can't remember who she belongs to because she knows she must not
be her own
She is overwhelmed with the feeling of your glass sharp piercing eyes on
her physique

Yes, she may forget because the good mothers and brothers told her to,
and taught her better than most
Those same girls who know they can be the pretty one and the funny one
And they are the pretty one
Because they'll teach their daughters the same way
Because they're also the smart one
And they know that about themselves even when others don't
She might forget in the sense that she knows better now
She knows that boys will be boys is only said by those who are those boys
who will never grow up to be men and others with internalized misogyny
most likely taught by a woman in their life
And she hopes that one day those woman will feel comfortable taking that
boot off their neck because many things should be passed down but sexist
propaganda is not one of them
And she hopes that those boys will someday learn to become men
Learn because a mindset can change more than you grow
You'll grow on the outside when your opinions don't show
Show the ink of displaced judgment spilling out from your veins
The blood pumps through those veins
Through to your head
Your head, your brain, where you decided she needed to hear your voice,
your judgments
Your judgements about her face
Her hair
She changed her hair because she was sick of the gold her brunette turned
in the sun
She is sick of the sun but she's sick of you more
When you told her you liked her hair, she didn't anymore
She wanted to change it again
Even though it was only a compliment
In her eyes you found a way to make it about you

No longer about her—in her mind you found a way to make her hair a
product of your consumption
And that made her mad
She didn't like that you liked it because it felt like it wasn't for her anymore
It was like you thought it was for you
Something in the way you said it was soul crushing
Like you thought she would get enjoyment out of your gawking
She wants you to know that your twisted passion for her hair made her sick
to her stomach because it's not fucking for you.
But you won't know
Because even if she summoned up the courage to tell you
It wouldn't change anything
Because you'll forget
And she might forget
But she'll always remember

Her Ball and Chain
By Tafari Promesse-Samuels

“Hey, have you heard about the girl with the ball and chain?”

“Yeah... One thing keeps bothering me, though. Where exactly did she get the ball?”

“Meh, who cares. All I know is I’m stayin’ the heck away from her!”

I overhear three girls discussing this outside my homeroom as I stand outside my locker. The girl with the ball and chain has been discussed by everyone. No single person in this forsaken school hasn’t heard of her. I can’t say that I’m not at all curious about her but I’m honestly rather frightened by her metal ball.

I sit down in class feeling motivated to actually learn something until I look to the side. Wow, how lucky am I, the girl of the hour sits right next to me. I’d figured she was scary looking, but she doesn’t seem so scary. Her long violet dyed hair covering her left eye, her blue and red stripe patterned socks, her muscular ankles. Seriously, I don’t understand these dumb rumors, she seems normal to me despite her burden.

“Um... Hey?!”

She ignores me.

“Hello?! Are you even present right now?!”

“Present,” she responds.

“Uh... not what I meant!”

Her cloudy eyes look at me, as if she doesn’t see me.

“Hello, um, the name’s Jason. What’s your name?”

“Layla Joy Stone.”

“You don’t look too joyful, Layla.” I chuckle.

She gives me a stone cold stare. Fitting, I think. Well, it was worth trying to talk to her. I’ll just sit here and cringe after that pathetic joke.

The class goes by surprisingly quickly. The next class is music. I was never really a musical person but I figured it’d be simple enough. All that

confidence got blown out of the water when we had to learn a song and sing it. I am basic so I picked an Imagine Dragons song hoping to sound at least decent so as to not embarrass myself.

The teacher calls on me and I sing. I sing with all my heart in the beginning, but when my voice cracks and everyone starts to laugh, I feel my entire essence fade. Because of my efforts to not sound stupid, I sound stupid. The pitch of my voice makes me sound like a mouse. The laughter gets louder and louder and louder, almost seeming endless. I turn to see Layla. She looks furious at me for whatever reason. She gets up with a disappointed expression on her face. I brace myself and close my eyes as the loud footsteps and banging approach closer.

“And you’re standing on the edge face up because you’re a natural! A beating heart of stone!” I feel my heart skip a beat—no, it did a whole backflip over a beat because of Layla’s voice. Every single word she sings fills me with bliss. Seriously though, talk about talent!

Layla’s singing, simply put, is exquisite. Her voice echoes through the room with everyone’s attention captured. Motivated, I end up picking up my microphone and we both start belting the rest of the chorus while she harmonizes with my voice. It cracks a little but she gestures to me to keep my eyes on her. What’s this feeling? It’s like we’re the only ones here. Time feels frozen when we sing together. The song ends with us both gazing into the other’s eyes. She studies my harsh looking face. I feel my stare soften while looking at her cloudy soft green eyes.

The class ends in silence but Layla and I have already spoken a thousand words. “Hey, Layla!” She turns to look at me. “We should do that again sometime.” I give her a warm smile.

“OK.” She turns around, but I see her cheeks expand as if she is smiling as she walks away. As I’m walking down to my next class, I see a poster for a talent show taking place today. Tsk, as if, I say to myself. There’s only one person I’d like to see perform something, it would be

Layla. Ah... to listen to her heavenly voice, see her cute face, her gorgeous hair...

“Jason.” She appears in front of me.

“GAH! Jesus Layla. You’re gonna make me crap myself if you do that again! Whew!”

She looks down as the ball tightens to her and she grimaces.

“Layla!” I hold her up so she doesn’t fall.

“Jason, it hurts...” I look into her cloudy eyes. They look like they could cause a thunderstorm. “Jason... I...” She doesn’t make a sound as she collapses into my arms. She shakes and whimpers but she’s quieter than a mouse. She gets up and leaves.

I figure it best to give her some space so I don’t bother her. She runs back towards me and only barely stops before she rams into me. “Jason, I’ll be performing at the talent show today. You’d... you’d better come, OK?!”

“Hmm... I think I’ve gotta do something with my fam—“ She looks at me with that face. I reconsider. “YES, MA’AM!”

After that encounter I’m off to the office because I lost my paper for the next field trip. Wow, really? I run into Layla again? Must be fate at this point. She’s on the phone so I can’t say hi to her, sadly. Afterwards, she sobs quietly and hangs up.

I walk up to her. “Layla? What happened?”

“Jason... I can’t keep doing this anymore...”

“Huh? Doing what?” I ask.

“It’s my father. I can’t keep living up to his expectations of me. It’s always ‘You have to be the best at everything! You don’t wanna be a disappointment do you?!’ I just want to be alone,” she pleads.

I figure it best to just give Layla some space again. Sometimes the best way to cope is to let it all out.

“Jason! Wait!” She grabs onto my legs as if she is the ball and chain.

“Jason, can I vent to you about something?”

“Anything, Layla.”

“The reason why I have this ball and chain is...” She whimpers. “My dad wanted me to feel exactly how he and my mom felt after I was born. He told me that I was too spineless and weak just like my mother who died giving birth to me. I hate how he treats me and my mother!”

I feel my blood boil. How can someone do this to their own child?! “My family has a saying, it comes from a song.”

Layla looks at me perplexed.

“When you decide that you want to reveal who you are, you don’t stop trying no matter HOW many times you fall! If you fall, you have to rise up like a phoenix because, gosh darn it, I believe in you, Layla! It’s your destiny to shine at this show, OK? Show me who you are!” I encourage her.

Layla’s eyes clear, revealing gorgeous green pools.

“You can do this, Layla.” She grabs my hand and we hold hands all the way to backstage of the auditorium. Jeez, this girl has really lit a fire in me.

A boring talent show passes by until we get to the main attraction. She walks up onto the stage and smiles when she sees me sitting in the front and clapping the loudest.

I hear the audience whispering.

“Hey, isn’t this that the weirdo with the ball and chain?”

“Yeah, she’s really freaking me out.”

“Ugh, that dumb hair of hers. She’s such a typical emo.”

“Her mom really gave birth to that?”

These ignorant sons of... Layla is trying to sing, but she starts to sob which causes everyone to laugh. I dash across the auditorium to ask whoever is in charge to put on a song.

“Jason Davis! Return to your seat!” a teacher orders me.

To hell with that! I don’t care if I get in trouble! The song I requested plays and I pull out a microphone and whisper to Layla: “Hey, remember

music class? Well, let's consider this my repayment. Oh, and follow my lead."

I begin to sing, I sound horrible, but Layla gets the courage to sing along with me and we begin to sing just like we did in music class.

"Step on up to the plate! If you fall! Get up! Rise like a phoenix, that's your fate! Step on up, to the plate! It's your last chance now, it's time to make history today!!!" During every single instrumental break we start dancing in sync with each other. I feel light with her in my arms.

At one point I see her looking at the crowd but I gesture to her to keep her eyes on me. We both end the song breathless and gaze into each other's eyes.

Layla's ball and chain snaps open and she hugs me, at this moment I don't give a single damn in the world.

"How do you feel Layla?"

Layla laughs and then whispers, "I feel joyful."

Simple Pleasure
By Maya Bagarollo

When the day has slowed, the birds rested, and everyone has gone to their separate houses, Andrei walks down his front steps. Out of his own house, he carries a mesh fabric bag in his right arm. He stares into the distance, towards the bottom of the mountain from which he lives. The countryside is the most beautiful, he says to himself every passing day.

Suddenly, a gust of wind flows through his cotton lace blouse and pants, making him fly all the way down the unpaved road towards the tiny town below. He's in a hurry anyway because the markets are near to closing for the evening. All he has to do is go to the fruit stands and acquire some lemons for a pie. He had been waiting long enough for the sweet and sour taste of a classic lemon pie. Getting bored of his lonely life up top the mountain, he's finally ready to bake another fine pie. Nothing would be better than making a nice lemon pie, he whispers to himself as he treads through the streets of the town.

The luminescence of the street lights catches him in a trance, making him stumble dozens of times on the bumpy rock trail. There's lights of all kinds but the ones that are making him stop in his tracks are rose coloured. He climbs on a street lamp, smooth and a little slippery from the rain that passed hours ago. He reaches as best as he can, getting closer to the light bulb. The rose coloured bulb shines on the palm of his hand; he stares in awe. Grasping the bulb in his hands, he is fully distracted. The light stings, so that he falls with a loud thud. His vision becomes blurry, he rubs the back of his head from the friction. Quickly, he stands up and almost falls a second time, but positioning himself for balance, holding onto the side of the streetlamp. His sight becomes clearer, the entire world is pinker now, and at the corner of his eye a woman passes by. She too has a mesh bag, held in her left arm. He stands up straight and pats the dirt off his clothes.

Walking towards the woman, he follows silently. Maybe she is also roaming the town for some late acquired goodies, he thinks to himself.

Andrei looks at her, admires her long quiet strides across the cobblestone street. While he walks slowly, not wanting her to get away, he feels that she might be able to help him in some type of way. She illuminates a rose coloured glow, as if she could be from the lantern he'd touched. In the air there are particles, small but glowing and they come from her skin, her hair, and everything feminine about her. Lost in thought, he notices she abruptly turns a right and so he does the same.

The fruit stands are there, he has finally made it, he can finally get the lemons for his lemon pie. The woman was nowhere to be seen, all he could see were fruit stands with the owners waiting patiently for the last couple rounds of customers. Up ahead, a few stands away, a citrus stand awaits Andrei's touch. He is longing for this moment, the moment he should've experienced a lot faster, not getting distracted in the process.

He sprints his way towards them and a man with a bright smile looks up at Andrei. "How do you do?" he asks excitedly but in a tired tone from this long working day.

Andrei says he's fine, he just wants some lemons.

The sales clerk points at the lemons and he inspects them. Taking two or three, he then stops, as a rose fluorescent glow wraps around him, it's the woman from before.

She smiles widely at him. Her face brightens up, she blushes lightly and in her hands is a lemon. She hands it to him. He takes the lemon from her grip, his hand brushing against hers and he, too, smiles.

Flux

By Maya Bagarollo

A flow between hot and cold,
Frozen and melting,
How did it come to this setting?
To be up and out and in the evening
I had changed,
But for nothing?
The face I see as I look through a mirror,
Is nothing no one can see
For it is all that comes running,
Beneath me

Nothing had gone my way,
Simply just went through me
Between right and left,
Front and center,
Is there nothing left to fester?
Will there ever be a place to linger,
And wither away as the day begins to stay
A moment of pure bliss,
Then another without much benefit

How can a person live in such a void?
Though also in anything possible,
Something like a haven,
Something not too far away from heaven
To be a leaf flowing down the midnight sky,
And even a fly circling a state of might

Going through the motions,
I will stay in disarray,
But at the same time I'm an arrangement of flowers
Given to you by the one you cherish most
I could be the moonlight shifting through the night
I could flow left and right,
Up and down,
There is no possible way I can't be found.

Can you repeat the question?

By Ryan Pulcini

Do I know what I'm writing? No. Am I willing to accept the countless fears keeping me up at night? No, probably not. Poetry isn't that hard. It's just triplets, couplets, three words to a line.

No one really has all the answers. Sometimes I think no one has the questions either. The way the world is these days, no one can fix what's beyond repair. I hope you're dead because how could you sleep at a time like this. We exist in a world with goldfish attention spans where three words is a headline "Missouri denies healthcare." Three words can kill and three words can save. What good are these words when it won't change a thing? What good is a paragraph of a child's rambles when people are dying. Cause of death? Bigotry. You're dead cause how could you sleep at a time like this?

Look up. You're forgetting to think, forgetting to breathe, forgetting to live. Life is up here. Yet, you comment below. They become common motivation for each person's next episode. Everyday we move forward because our brains tell us we have to. We should open our eyes because we're told that we must. But everyday you move forward scared and alone but did you know as long as you live you're never alone. We all hide behind the fear society indulges so through your thoughts, maybe you are alone. Can you repeat the question?

I'm afraid of the comments below, afraid of the hate they show and the opinions they carry. Life isn't three words to a line anymore. It's a reckless show of blank cards held close to your chest and shitty decks face down on the carpeted floors. I see right through you. Life isn't just poetry anymore. Life is not roses and chocolate, it's guns and cyanide disguised as apples. Life is rank like trash or horse cakes. Full of racist dogs with sharp teeth and their owners with sharper attitudes. Life is not just cake and

champagne toasts. Life is bad haircuts and bitter wine. But really, Can you repeat the question?

Fear is as bad as the screams in my mind soothed only by the glow of the cursor on my phone screen. Fear is like a jungle of burning trees and burning bridges that I seem to always find myself standing on. It burns in my mind and behind my eyes like the hot iron brand on a horse's hind side. Joy is deafened by screaming faces and cackling voices. Fear. Fear lives in my soul. It lives in swamps and swallows and on the dark side of the moon. It lives in tragedy and in nausea. But most of all in you and me.

So, excuse me if I cannot repeat the question.

A Stranger to this Planet
By Gabriel Leon

Life was never the same after I saw her. I was never one to be honest with my feelings, after my last partner who was a traitor and a liar. However, this one was different.

She was a stranger to this planet. One look at her and I felt such irreplaceable comfort, as if I could finally look past all that grief and sadness. As if I could finally leave this miserable place called “Earth.” I knew she didn’t belong here but nor did I.

Her skin tone mirrored the colour of the sea, her hair as dark as the midnight sky, and eyes the deepest shade of amethyst. However, before I knew it, she fled from the scene as if she was a deer caught in headlights.

Why is she running away, who is she running away from and why am I chasing after her? Sweat dripped down the side of my jaw. She was fast, too fast. I suppose that's what needs to be done when you're an alien on this earth.

Just before I could use the last bit of air in my lungs, time seemed to stop. The clouds laid still and the trees stopped dancing. The upbeat chatter of the city was gone, not a soul left to hear.

“Why are you following me?” she asked. I stood there in utter shock. I was unable to speak to her and, ultimately, understand her being.

These Bones
By Derek Melo Costa

These bones
They are what I am
In my mind
It's all about you
And
What's for you
Are you there
These Thoughts
They are kind
Stuck in my head
These scars
They are from the hate I got
Yet they are long forgotten.
I am Human
Learning to love
Even you
Whenever you're near
Whatever I seek.
I meant well
I meant forgiveness
I meant sorry
I meant an Apology
Although I'm weak
I am more than nothing.

My Vice
By Séraphine

Walking down the boulevard to my bus stop, a gentle breeze fluttered the leaves in the summer trees. Today was a special day, and it seemed the weather had agreed. A birthday party had been waiting only thirty minutes away, and Jessie had finally become eighteen. I wasn't sure how many would be there, all I knew was that me and Jessie had gone all the way back to the age of thirteen. Though I wasn't a social person this party mattered a lot to her, so who was I to object?

I remember the first day of secondary one, I had gone out for lunch. On my walk to the McDonald's, I saw a girl smoking a cigarette by the corner of the street. She wore the same uniform as me, tears had been running down her cheeks. I recognized her from the introduction ceremony and so I steadily approached.

“First day here and I already hate it,” I said jokingly.

She shot me a sad smile and asked, “Do you smoke?”

“No.”

That's one of the things I appreciated the most, she never pressured me to try things that made me uncomfortable.

Stepping onto her property one last breath of fresh air engulfed my lungs, the summer wind always tasted sweet to me. The door opened and I noticed her house was already full with sixteen. An awkward smile made my lips purse, her returned smile turned mine bright. Introductions were made and the party began. Karaoke, charades, never have I ever, and more in which I barely participated. I didn't mind being on the sidelines, I just wanted to be there for her on her big day. Either way, unlike everyone else, she had invited me to spend the night via text earlier today. I knew that's when the fun would begin for me, so waiting it out wasn't too much of a dilemma.

Hours passed as the day died down to let night arrive. We were now only three not including Jessie and me. The group collectively went to her room, though the reason was unbeknownst to me. Everyone began pulling things out of their pockets and putting them on her bed. Peeking onto the bed from behind everybody, what I saw made me mildly uncomfortable. Vapes, of all different shapes and sizes. Some like the ones Jessie would smoke, but a majority were unrecognizable. I glanced at Jessie and she gave me one of those smiles, a smile that told me everything was okay. People began scattering around her room each finding a place to sit, be it floor, chair, or bed. Taking turns passing the flavored toxins for each to taste test, it was then my turn. I looked over at Jessie and waited for her to say something but she sat quietly.

“I don’t smoke,” I muttered.

The room went silent for an instant before their voices filled it. Questions and judgments all alike. Only one comment had actually struck me.

“Yeah, she’s sort of a stick in the mud when it comes to this sort of thing,” Jessie exclaimed.

“Oh come on, they barely have effects on your health,” her friend claimed speciously.

Ruminating as I stared down at the pink and yellow device labeled Vice in my hand. I looked up to see Jessie giving me a grin. I took a little inhale, the saccharine taste making me cough it out on the exhale. My body began to feel light as a sense of euphoria traveled through. As my sense came back to normal I looked down at my phone and then up at Jessie.

“I have to go,” I stood as I spoke.

She followed me to the door with a concerned look.

“Aren’t you sleeping over?”

“My mom wants me home, I’m sorry,” I lied, about both things.

I walked out and quickly away from her house, the air didn’t taste as sweet anymore. To this day, I’m still unsure whether smoking that vape or

abandoning Jessie was my biggest mistake. Because even though vaping has turned into a bad habit for me, at least I wouldn't be vaping alone on my eighteenth birthday.

A walk through the forest of soon forgotten memories

By Jacob Magera

I glance at the screen of my phone, seeing through the glare caused by the bright yet inviting sun that it is 10:47 a.m. I take a deep breath as I slowly exit my car, enjoying the fresh feeling of a cool breeze washing all of my worries away. Seeing my uncle approaching me and my father, I am filled with excitement.

“Hey Walt!” Dad exclaims, wearing a wide smile on his face that screams out pure happiness. His real name is Walter, but sometimes the one who helped give life to me calls him Walt. It only makes sense that he sees Uncle Walter as a close enough friend to call him by a nickname considering the fact that Walter is married to my dad’s sister. They exchange formalities as well as catch up on everything new that has happened. Typical behavior for middle-aged men.

“You’ve gotten so big!” my uncle remarks, the tight squeeze of his bear hug making it hard to suck air into my lungs, something that doesn’t bother me as I enjoyed his warm embrace. Together, we slowly walk towards a bumpy dirt path which has almost been swallowed by the thick forest that surrounds it.

The moist but comforting air fills my lungs as I move one foot in front of the other, admiring the beauty around me.

“Back when I was your age, this whole thing used to be a vast field, but now it has been swallowed by trees,” says my father. “I remember seeing these trees as little ferns barely a foot high.” Hearing this, I can’t help but develop a new appreciation for mother nature and its power.

I close my eyes, opening them to an unfamiliar scene. Taking in everything around me, I see two children frozen in time. I know I have seen them before, but where? For some reason I just can’t put my finger on it. I slowly begin walking towards the children, the small ferns gently tickling my legs like the whiskers of a newborn kitten. Walking past the two

unknown individuals, I admire the sea of baby trees, which I know will someday grow up into big strong beings which will form an amazing forest. Turning around to gaze at the two frozen behind me, I see that they have a look of happiness plastered on their faces. They appear to be running around the vast field, enjoying their youth with no worries in sight. Pure childhood bliss.

Suddenly, something clicks inside of my head. These two mysterious children were in fact my father and uncle. I was standing in the field of ferns where they had enjoyed so much time when they were so full of youth. For some reason whenever I had thought of the past, I perceived it so differently than the present, but now I realize that it is shockingly similar. All of these thoughts pour into my head like a waterfall, causing me to feel lightheaded, everything fades into darkness...

Waking to my uncle and father standing over me, my mind is fuzzy.

“Jacob, you stood there for a few minutes as if you were a hollow shell and then fainted. Are you alright?” my father asks with a worried expression on his face.

“Yeah, I am just a little... tired,” I say, still trying to process what has just happened. Was that real? What does it all mean? Contemplating it all, I come to the realization that there is no use in thinking about it. Nature works in mysterious and inexplicable ways, and the more you try to wrap your mind around it, the more confusing it becomes.

We continued down the beaten path, avoiding the troublesome mud which longed for the sweet comfort of the bottom of my shoe and listening to the birds chirping, a sweet sound that my ears had longed for, for far too long. Hopping over a stream that had dug its way through the path, I am filled with calmness. The sound of the water echoes through my soul, cleansing all of my pent up negative emotions and replacing them with positive ones.

Further down the seemingly magical road, we cross paths with a pile of old, rusty car parts.

“My father drove this car down here many many years ago,” my uncle said, with a nostalgic look on his face. “People used to do that with old cars so that they could come back and use the parts if needed. Believe it or not, this used to be a whole car, but the earth swallowed all of it besides the parts.”

It is truly amazing how mother nature always prevails. Listening to my dad and my uncle tell me tales about when they were kids gives me a sense of belonging. They practically grew up here, and now they share that wonderful experience with me through stories and through the forest, recounting their memories which will soon be forgotten. It is almost as if I am traveling back in time, seeing things such as washing machines and cars that were left here having been forgotten for years, getting a chance to show their worth again in life, serving the sole purpose of preserving precious memories of the past.

As I slowly drift off into the oblivion of my vast mind, I can see my uncle’s father driving down the old gravel road on a chilly summer day in the ’80s. He realizes he needs to face reality, this car has served him for many years, and it was now time for it to rest. Pulling it into the driveway and slowly driving down the old path, he exits the car for the last time. Standing there for a few long minutes, he celebrates the life of the car and also mourns its death. On the walk back to his home, he feels sad that his adventures with his beautiful car had ended, yet calm knowing that it had found its final resting place.

Coming back to reality, I am taken aback by the realization that every single object laying around me had its own story to tell. One day, I will most likely take my kids on this beautiful journey, and they theirs. That is the beauty of time, it never stops.

As I cross another small stream, I stop to take a sip of the elixir of life that we call water, in its purest form. No pollutants, no filters, no chemicals. 100% pure brook water. Feeling the cool liquid hit my tongue before trickling down my dry throat and plummeting into my stomach, I

feel rejuvenated, as if this wonder of nature added years to my life as it fills my complex mind with one simple thing: tranquility.

After battling with thick bushes, hopping over carcasses of the trees that have fallen before me and doing everything in my power to continue on this amazing journey, I finally reach my destination. I gaze at the small, old, creek cabin built by my uncle's father, and the foundation of the new one being built by my uncle like his father had done 50 years before him. Seeing the old clashing yet harmonizing with the new, I realize that this is where I am meant to be.

"This is where our family has existed for hundreds of years," my father informs me. Hearing the sound of the leaves that had been heard by many before me, I finally feel at peace with myself and with the world around me.

The Man in The Mirror
By Jacob Magera

His bloodshot eyes are empty,
As hollow as his soul.
You scream and beg for mercy
but to his ears it's a wonderful song.
Each plea brings him closer to madness, and he won't rest until you're
gone.

Another sleepless night,
Mind plagued with what he's said.
What good is the constant fight
When the target is on your head.

Constant mental anguish, a war inside your brain.
Tears are shed as the leaves run red, a beautiful crimson rain.
Tell yourself it'll all be fine,
That those are his words not yours.
All stars eventually lose their shine.
A life filled planet with a frozen core.

One in five.
Each year, one in five teenagers contemplate suicide.
Look around. In front of you, behind you, side to side.
You are not alone. It's okay to cry.
We are all fighting our own battles, every person in this crowd
No matter how hard the struggle, remember that I am proud.
Please do not give up, a new era will dawn.
Suicide doesn't end the pain, it simply passes it on.

Mental health is complicated, an intricate enigma
To save ourselves and future generations, we have to end the stigma.
There is nothing wrong with feeling this way, there is no shame in reaching
out.
I'm begging you to confide in those you trust, a gentle plea or a desperate
shout.
No matter how lonely it feels, there are people who can help if you ask.
The road to salvation is not a straight path, but with time and support you
will make it there at last.

If You Can't Break Bread You Fake

By Tee

[Content warning: drug use, trafficking, violence]

I promised myself this was the last time I would chop. I needed to change my life. My name is Tati Schmidt, I'm 13 years old and I chop rock, food, that hard, whatever you'd like to call it.

I come from a very big family of ten kids, five guys, and five girls, including myself. Growing up poor humbled me quick. Almost everyday, until the day I turned 13, eating 50 cent cakes from the depanneur and sharing with my little sister had been normal to me. My pops left when I was about four or five and never came back. My megz had always done her best with the cards she was dealt. My dream was always to move my mom out the hood, and to buy my little sister, Westside, a pony. One day in 6th grade I had gotten suspended from school for bringing a knife, but when I tried to explain to my teachers that I needed protection, they never believed me. Almost everyday from then till the end of the year I had to walk to school.

One Monday morning, as I was making my way there, I saw a tall dark-skinned man with gold teeth and a gold chain, along with a matching gold watch. He was smoking a boagie with a spliff in the other hand.

I always wondered what it was like to smoke. I know now, curiosity killed the cat. He told me his name was Jay, so I told him mine. As I sparked up my first ever boagie, he asked me if I smoked loud. I told him yes, but deep down I knew I had only really smoked it once or twice in my life.

He asked me where I was going. I told him school. Then he asked me if I would rather make money. Looking back, maybe I should have just kept walking, but instead I said yes.

I mean I was too young to get a job, and I really needed the money to eat. He told me he seen a younger version of himself in me. And that was

the first day on the block. He gave me half an eight ball to hold, while he introduced me to all of the OGs. Jay told them my name was T and to only address me as T.

“Now it’s time to get back to work,” he said. As we walked away he whispered in my ear, “You are now certified.”

He also said that if I ever needed protection he would bless me. I trusted him, and we got to our first chops. He told the client to make it known that I was serving for him, and that I would be around if they needed anything.

The client, Candy, dabbed me up and said, “Cool.”

We continued chopping till the sun went down. As the weeks went by, my stack grew bigger. It got to a point where I had to stuff my mattress, I really thought I was on it.

Bringing money home and giving most of it to my mom and little sister Westside was the best feeling in the world. They deserved it. Putting food in the fridge and bread on the table is all I cared about.

After 11 months of hard work and trapping late nights, Jay wanted to try something new. He was talking about taking a trip to T-dot, but the only thing was that I would have to go solo. It would just be for the weekend and all expenses would be covered. Obviously I said yes and ran back to my cribbaz and started packing.

He got one of his boys Moscow to drive me, and for the whole six hours, we were fried, blunt after blunt, we eventually arrived at the trap.

I called Jay unknown to make sure everything was blessed. He told me he was finishing off his last chops and would be going back home soon. I didn’t think anything of it. I told him to enjoy his night and said I would see him soon.

Saturday rolled by. My job was to stay inside, bag up, weigh, wait for the client to come and pick up the food. I did that for the rest of the day. I was tired, so was Moscow. We had been cooking it up all day and were starting to get headaches from all the chemicals in the air. We decided to

call it a night and headed back to the hotel. We sipped, we smoked, we went to bed.

Sunday rolled around, a repeat of Saturday. Around evening time, we decided to pack up all our stuff for the long six-hour drive. I made a lot of money that weekend. Everything went smoothly. We finally made it back to Montreal.

The next day was January 12th, Monday morning. As I was making my way down to the metro to make my chops, I had been trying to call Jay all morning. He hadn't picked up. I started to get nervous. I hadn't spoken to him all weekend. I had no idea what was going on until I seen Candy in the corner, screaming, crying. I approached her and asked what happened.

She said, "You didn't hear? Jay was shot at the club last night. Someone caught him dancing with his girl."

My heart dropped. I promised myself this was the last chop I would ever make. I changed my life. From that day on I realized that I needed to make real money, legal money. I was tired of living a lie. Fast money is really just fast money. I'm grateful that it happened when I was young and it taught me a lot since that day. I'm just glad it wasn't me that got smoked.

Where Would I Be Who Am I
By Mateo Maw

Where would I be who am I
where is this place I can't define
These people they feel unalive
they're cool I cannot lie
But it isn't a mistake
I can feel it thrive

All this anger makes me wanna cry
all this pot got my head so fried
I tried my best to impress the guys
and now here I wait for my design
In a cell with two black eyes
it wasn't worth it and now here I may rest and die

Snakes in the Grass

By Ink Blick

[Content warning: graphic violence, blood, murder]

Gunshots roared from outside. Jai knew those weren't fireworks. All you could hear was six bangs then pure silence. Pure until you heard the sirens getting louder and louder. That was always your cue to run. Jai was used to this, his area had the highest crime rate in Toronto. He'd lived in Driftwood his whole life. Every night someone lost their life to gunshots or stab wounds. And when you chilled with basketball players you'd end up playing ball too.

He grew up with Tyson who was now Jai's closest friend. He went by Ty. Jai and Ty grew up together and they had been close since they could remember. They both lived on the same block so they both moved the same, walked the same, and talked the same. They were closer than brothers. Since they were young they would bring in illegal money in any way to feed their family. Now they were both 17, out of school still living in a struggle on the block. They surrounded themselves with gang members and got involved with them. That's all both of them knew, they were raised in the streets. Jai had a clean record but Ty had a long list of crimes that he'd done five years total for.

They would always chill outside with two other people, Daniel and Michael. Those weren't their real names, Jai knew, but he didn't know or care what they were. They were two hooligans always starting problems. Jai wasn't close to them, they were just from the same hood as him. Michael was a lot bigger than Jai and Ty but Daniel was really short and small.

One day Jai had nothing to do all day so he decided to go make money. He texted someone he found on his phone. Jai and Ty were planning to rob a plug and make money with the drugs they took from him. The plug was named Marco. He answered Jai almost instantly. Jai was trying to buy an ounce of snow for \$2400. That was a lot of money. Marco

wouldn't be too happy when he found out they were trying to rob him. Marco wasn't from the same area as him, he was from the downtown area. Usually you wouldn't want to rob a plug from downtown. They didn't fuck around, especially about their money. Jai did not know he was from downtown. He also didn't know Marco was 23 years old and knew a lot of dangerous people. But that would be obvious, he was selling cocaine in bulk.

Jai sent the location. He was on his way to meet Marco with Ty and with two pocket rockets. One was a Ruger and the other was a 42. The location was an alleyway walking distance from where Jai lived. They got there early, masked up, hands on their guns. Ready.

Marco pulled up in the car. Jai and Ty walked up, Jai went to the passenger and Ty went to the driver. Marco was sitting in the passenger seat. Jai upped his Glock and Ty pulled his strap out too.

"Pass the OZ," Jai said to Marco.

"Not a good idea," he snapped back.

"Pass it!" Jai raised his voice.

Marco handed it over and gave him a death stare in the process. Jai and Ty ran off back to Ty's house.

Marco wasn't happy at all. He just lost \$2400 and was robbed at gunpoint. He didn't know Jai or Ty, but he had Jai's snapchat. All Marco had to do was ask around the streets and he quickly found out who Jai was, where he was from and the people he chilled with. Marco posted on his Snapchat story saying there was \$10,000 on someone's head. He then tagged Jai's Snapchat. Jai didn't even see this, he was too busy scaling up the ounce into dimes.

The next day, Jai had all the product ready to sell and it was now time to make a lot of money. He went downtown to the trap spot, and he was already bringing in money quick. \$400 in 25 minutes. The day was going well for him. The money coming in distracted him from the fact he was downtown in the same area Marco was from. In less than ten minutes, an

all black Benz with tinted windows pulled up near him. The car stopped with a screech. Four people hopped out dressed in all black with ski masks. Jai instantly reached for his Glock. Each of the four guys had guns in their hands. Jai put up his mask and sent shots while he fled the scene. They chased after Jai down the alleyways and on roads. Jai turned a corner and sent more shots from the wall. He hit one of them while two others chased, also shooting. The other one was helping his boy up, to bring him back in the direction of their car. Jai ended up escaping untouched.

“What the fuck was that about?” he said to himself.

Jai got into his house and picked up his phone, he saw the Snapchat story by Marco. The realization had him standing there for two minutes, shocked. Jai knew he had to leave the city or he would end up dead on the street. He called up Ty and told him to reach his house. Ty came through and Jai told him he had to leave the city. Ty didn't understand why, he was asking a lot of questions. Jai shut him up and told him.

“I have to leave now, there's no time to explain. Help me pack my shit.”

Ty agreed knowing it was probably something serious. Jai told him he was going to go to Montreal and he might not come back. Ty told him that he would come visit sometimes. Jai called up someone for a stolen car. Within minutes, Daniel pulled up in a car for him. Jai dapped up Daniel. Jai got in the driver seat, Ty went to the window and asked to talk before he left. Jai said ye and Ty hopped in the passenger and closed the door.

“I'm sorry,” Ty said.

Before Jai could react Ty pulled out his Glock and shot him three times in the head. Blood was all over the window. His best friend's life was worth ten bands. Money is the root of all evil, watch out for the snakes in the grass.

A Dealer's Romance

By Christopher EM

[Content warning: drug abuse, sexual exploitation, violence]

It was Friday afternoon and I had just finished school. Sec 3 was so Goddamn annoying but I finally got to go home and relax. Maybe I would stop by Atwater and get rid of the 0.4 of crack that was burning a hole in my pocket. When I finally got home, I noticed all my weed was gone. My girlfriend was sitting on the couch smoking my last joint with her friends in my apartment.

I got mad. "Why are you smoking all my weed, Arianna? It was literally all gone!"

Her eyes were fire red, behind them she looked dead inside, like a zombie.

When I asked her about what happened to all my weed she said she smoked it with her friends. When I told her that I was pissed that she smoked all my 30 grams she apologized and she looked guilty, so I allowed it for this one time. When her friends left I told her that she smoked a lot of my weed and that we needed to talk about it because she was showing signs of drug addiction. After she left I decided that I would try to smoke less around my girlfriend because of this incident and it would be better if I could quit.

The next day at school I saw my girlfriend and she was acting weird and she was stumbling around the school so I went up to her and she looked super tired. When I asked her why she was so tired, she didn't want to tell me. That's when I knew she had done something bad.

So I asked her to empty her pockets and when she did I found three Xanax in a little bag. I told her that she couldn't be doing these hard core drugs in school, she told me that Xanax is not a hard core drug and that she was taking them responsibly. She tried to grab the bag of Xanax but I

had them in the palm of my hand with a tight grip. I told her that she was acting like a fiend and that I was not going to be smoking with her anymore. When I told her this she got super mad and just walked away and I didn't see her for the rest of the day, even though I tried to call her multiple times.

The next day I woke up to the police standing right in front of my door at 5 AM in the morning. They told me that my girlfriend was missing from her house and she was nowhere to be found. I was still in my bed and I knew right away where she was because it wasn't her first time doing this. When the police asked if I knew where she was, I told them I didn't know because I also knew that she hated the police from when they arrested her and almost broke her rib cage.

When they left I went outside and was going downtown because that's where she was. Everytime she ran, she always went downtown. After hours of looking and asking people if they had seen her I found her crawled up into a little ball smoking crack. When she saw me she looked scared and super sad. I told her that we needed to leave now but she would not listen to me because she wanted more crack to smoke.

After a lot of talking she finally agreed that she would stay at my friend's house for a while. She sobered up because the police were looking for her and if the police found her and she was high off drugs, she would get another charge.

The next day I went over to my friend's house and she still looked very high off the crack. So when I asked her if she still had some, she said that she got some from my friend and she said that she had to have sex with him for it. After that me and my "friend" got into a fight. When my fist collided with his nose it felt like glass had shattered and then the blood came. I just kept punching him until his face was mashed up.

When the fight was over I just left the house and I went home and did my own thing, not caring about what she did anymore and where she ended up, because that was a huge betrayal for me, especially when I trusted her so much.

Some people have problems and don't know how to address them, but you can't get so involved in other people's lives at the expense of your own happiness. You just end up getting hurt and it's a painful loop of disappointment.

Where's my drugs?
By Alexander Graziani
[Content warning: drug use]

When I wake up, the room is dark. I check the time on my phone, it's 7:03 on a Monday. I need to get ready for school. "It's my birthday," I say as I stare at the open bag of pills on my nightstand. I walk over and pick up the bag and pour out some of the pills onto my hand. I pick one up with the other and throw it to the back of my throat then swallow. I don't even think of getting water and just use the little amount of saliva left in my mouth. I feel the pill slowly creep down my dry throat.

I go to the kitchen, grab a piece of bread and devour it in seconds. I brush my teeth, put on my hoodie then walk out the door. As I'm waiting for the bus I realize I don't have my bus pass as I was robbed yesterday. "Fuck," I think, as I see the bus coming. The driver stares at me as I walk on, waiting for me to put my pass on the card reader.

"I don't have my card, I was just robbed," I tell him. He gives me a look meaning he doesn't really care and just waves his hand, so I walk to the back of the bus and sit in the corner where there are no people. I start to feel the molly kick in.

I am happy but in a way I am disappointed in myself. I know it's bad for my body, but it gives me a sense of relief, like an escape from reality and all my problems. My vision melting and my eyes wide as I get off the bus. I'm standing still as I'm staring at my school from across the street. I still have 12 minutes before school starts, so I sit on the bench next to the bus stop and light a cigarette. I take a long hit without even realizing that my throat's been hurting. Sitting there high out of my mind staring at the still burning cigarette, it feels like it had been a while so I quickly reached into my pocket and pulled out my phone. It had only been three minutes, but those three minutes had felt like 30. I stare at the cigarette in disgust then throw it onto the road and watch as a car drives over it.

I stand up, as I'm watching the traffic light, waiting for it to say I can cross the street. I start to feel my legs turn inside out. My vision's distorted as I cross the street. I start feeling like everyone is staring at me. I get worried and stressed thinking that everyone knows I'm tripping. I start to walk faster, or so it feels, but in reality I'm stumbling with every step.

I stand in front of the stairs of the school in worry. I stand there waving my body back and forth uncontrollably as I see the other students staring at me as they walk inside. My friend Joey sees me and decides to scare me. He walks up behind me and grabs both of my shoulders then yells: "MARCO!"

At this moment I feel my soul leave my body and my legs collapse. I fall to the ground and stare at the sun as it burns my eyes.

Joey stands over me and asks, "You good bro?" I don't say anything back, but instead I stand up as fast as I can. He stares at my eyes and says, "So, what'd you take?"

"Molly," I replied quickly.

"Hah, you idiot. We got class soon, let's go inside."

I keep my head down as I'm walking to my locker, ignoring everyone saying hi to me and wishing me happy birthday. I shove my bag into my locker and head to class. I sit at my seat at the back of the class. I feel like taking another pill. I get a weird feeling rush through my body, I know something is wrong.

The teacher walks around the class collecting everyone's homework. She arrives at my desk and gives me a concerned look as she says, "Happy birthday, Marco. Did you do your homework?" I look up in such a strange way and just stare at her with wide eyes. "Well?" she says, waiting for me to answer her. I stare at her with a scared face and start shaking. "Marco?"

I fall off my chair. Now I'm shaking on the floor as the teacher runs to her desk to grab her phone. Everyone watches as I lay there, probably dying. The teacher runs over to me with her phone to her ear. "I'm calling 911. You're going to be okay!" she screams.

“Pills...” I try to speak but my voice is fading.

“What?” the teacher asks, confused.

“I need them!” I struggle to say.

“You need pills?” she asks with a frightened face.

I use up the rest of the air in my lungs to say: “Where’s my drugs?”

THE END

Grandson for President

By Deez

[Content warning: gun violence, torture, murder]

It was a cold dark day so I decided to put my jacket on in case I needed it. My friends and I were just chilling, waiting at Westmount for Kamala (we call her KK for short). I was already with Obama and Grace. We were high so time went by fast while we waited for her.

Obama was dark skin, with buzzcut hair, and was around 5'10. Grace was darkskin and had dreads, and was around 5'11. I go by Tdaw but most people call me T. I'm white, around 5'10 and have long brown curly hair. All of us had white jumpman pros (Jordans).

Then there was Donald Trump. We all didn't like him. He was an opp. Trump was around 6 foot and 240 pounds. He was a fat white guy who thought he was about that. Wait, I almost forgot about Kamala. She was light-skin with braided black hair and was around 5'7.

We were all walking down the street and we hopped in the Bentley. I was surprised how all four of us fit inside the car. It was a 2021 Bentley Mulliner Bacalar, Kamala's car. We were on the way to go smoke up on the top of Mount Royal but on the way I saw somebody I thought I recognized.

"Yo, pull over!" I shouted. "That's Trump, that orange-haired white whale!"

Kamala pulled over on Sherbrooke, near Place-des-Arts. We jumped out of the car and what I was thinking was to sneak up, but it was too late. Obama screamed out to Trump: "Yo, reach, bruv! I need to talk to you."

Trump looked back at us and started to walk away into the crowd on the street. He knew it was over. We caught him solo. I pulled out the blick and let off two shots so everyone would run down the street. As soon as I shot at the sky everyone was panicking. Knowing Trump's slow ass, he will be in the back of the crowd. I saw his red hat so I followed him running

down Sherbrooke. After 25 minutes of running I caught up with him near Lionel Groulx. At that point he stopped running and accepted it.

I called Kamala to come with the hatchback Rolls Royce because we would need much more space for Trump's fat ass. Everyone hopped in the car. Trump had a mask on his face. He was bleeding because Obama had punched him a couple times. We all were in the car taking the highway going away from Montreal. We stopped in a little hut in the woods near the reserves.

Trump was almost dead because of all the running and the mask on his face had fucked up his oxygen. Obama and I tried to pick him up but ended up dragging him inside. When Obama took off the mask, Trump pretended to be dead but clearly his stomach was still breathing heavily so he didn't fool me. Since he wanted to pretend he was dead, I said, "Guys, let's just burn the hut so no evidence is left."

Surprisingly, Trump managed to keep his mouth shut. So Obama lit the hut on fire and made sure the door was locked. Of course when the fire started Trump came back "alive" so he could scream for help.

After Trump's death, it was all over the news but people seemed to be happy. Nobody really cared. After a month of being on the low, Obama ran for president and won four months later.

Devastator
By Richard Stacey

’Twas the year 364 and Ser Launey was in his store selling his old armor while his squire Colin was in his room still flippin’ sleeping. That’s when Launey came in.

“If you don’t get out of bed right now you will be sleeping on the floor tonight,” said Launey.

“Yes ser,” said Colin.

“Take a shower you smell just like our neighbors,” said Launey.

“Yes Dad, I mean ser,” Colin said.

“That’s better, son. Now get to work. I’ll be waiting in the stable, so hurry up,” said Launey. “Yes ser,” said Colin.

“Today, now!” Launey demanded.

That’s when Tina the evil queen showed up with her vicious wolf Lexi. “Will you finally sell me your land or will I have to take it?”

“Never!” said Launey angrily.

Jordan came running to stop Tina. “Tina, you must stop,” he said, panicking.

“Why should I stop and listen to you, Jordan?”

“You and your brother are peasants, so I will take your land and lock you in the dungeon of my castle.”

“Why don’t you tell me why you want to do this,” asked Jordan.

“Because you hurt my one feeling,” Tina claimed.

“How did I do that?” Tina wondered out loud.

“You didn’t respond to my invitation.”

“Oh, I didn’t get an invitation,” said Jordan.

“But I sent one,” Tina said.

“COLIN!” yelled Launey.

“Yes ser,” said Colin.

“You lose an invitation that was sent by the queen?”

“Yes,” said Colin.

“Why?” asked Launey.

“Because it got wet so I threw it out,” said Colin. “I didn’t know it was important.”

“Well you’re in big trouble now,” said Launey.

“Your majesty, I would like to throw you a birthday party as an apology for my son’s behavior,” said Launey.

“That will make me feel better, so yes, if you throw me a party, I will not take your land,” Tina said happily.

“Jordan!” cried Launey.

“What’s happening to him?” asked Tina.

“He is dying,” said Launey.

“From what, though?”

“Tuberculosis.”

“How long has he had that disease?” asked Tina.

“All his life, but it got worse when we were teens so that’s now been 37 years now he’s had it and now it’s hitting him hard,” said Launey.

“Okay, someone get a medic. He’s dying! Hello, anybody? Someone? Where is there a medic?”

“Uhh,” Jordan moaned.

“No, no, this can’t be happening. Jordan, come on! Wake up, Jordan!” cried Launey.

“Guards, take Jordan to my infirmary,” said Tina. “I will take a look at him.”

“When? Tomorrow?” asked one of the guards.

“No, today, dummies!”

“Oh, okay,” the other guard said.

“Ser Launey, you and your squire can follow me to my castle,” said Tina.

“Okay,” said Launey.

That's when Jordan didn't make it and the land was stormy forever and still is today.

Monsters Aren't Real

By Lucas Brodeur

[Content warning: blood and monsters]

As Alex was heading to bed, he begged his parents to leave the hallway light on.

“Alex, we’ve been over this, the light bothers your mother. You’re ten years old now, you should be over all this monster nonsense.”

The disappointment in his father’s voice only meant one thing.

Darkness.

The safety found under his covers kept the shadows away, but he could still hear them, their growls simmering beneath him.

“But the light keeps them away!”

Alex tried to tell his Father, but, as always, his Father dismissed him.

Now Alex lay under his comforter, a shield from the horrors that roamed his room at night.

As Alex drifted to sleep, he prayed that the “Nightmares“ that haunted him night after night might just stay away.

But then the growling started.

Alex opened his eyes, and in the corner of his room a figure stood there, watching him.

He couldn’t move, and when he tried to scream for his parents, nothing came out.

“What’s happening?” he thought.

Alex began to panic. He still couldn’t yell and his parents weren’t coming for him.

Out of the corner of his eye, Alex saw it move. It was coming towards him, growling, just like the monsters that hid under his bed.

He closed his eyes.

“They can’t scare you if you can’t see them,” his mother would tell him.

So he kept his eyes shut, and as the creature crept closer all he could hear was that awful growling.

“Monsters aren’t real, Alex,” his father’s voice echoed through his head.

“Monsters aren’t real,” he whispered.

Alex began to sob. Why didn’t his parents leave the light on? Why didn’t they believe him?

The growling grew louder as did the creeping footsteps of the creature that was approaching.

“Monsters aren’t real, monsters aren’t real,” he said, over and over.

Then the growling stopped, Alex opened his eyes and the monster had disappeared.

“Was it just a dream?” he thought, but it felt so real.

“Mom! Dad!” he cried, but no response.

He waited for the sound of his parent’s door opening and the flick of the hallway lightswitch like always but to his surprise, no one came.

“DAD!” he yelled at the top of his lungs, the sound bouncing off the walls back at him.

Silence.

Alex got out of bed and tiptoed to the door, still fearful of the creatures that might lurk in the darkness.

He carefully opened the door, scared that if he made any more noise, the monster that might’ve gotten to his parents would get him too.

Slowly, Alex crept through the hallway towards his parents room when he felt something cold and wet on the ground under his feet.

“Ew, gross,” he blurted out, covering his mouth in hopes that he might catch the words before they left his lips.

The crimson puddle that soaked the bottoms of his pants led straight to his parents room.

“Mom?” he whispered, still no answer.

Alex opened the door to his parents room, the thick smell of blood clogging his nostrils.

In the darkness he could see a figure, hunched over his father's body.

"Dad?"

The figure looked back at him.

"Go back to bed honey," the voice sounded like his mother's, but it was twisted and nightmarish, void of the comfort it used to bring to him.

"Mom?" he said hesitantly.

"Come give your mother a hug, Alex. Everything's going to be alright."

The creature crawled off his father's corpse and towered over him, its face shrouded in the darkness that his eyes had not yet adjusted to.

Alex stood there, unable to move like before. The creature crept towards him, its footsteps just like the ones from his room.

He tried to scream, he tried to run but he was paralyzed. All he could do was close his eyes.

"You can't scare me if I can't see you," he whimpered. "Monsters aren't real."

"Monsters aren't real?" it asked. "Are you sure?"

Surviving
By Alysha Cloutier Bearisto

My heart, once whole, now shattered into pieces,
As I try to make sense of all the pain and grief it releases.
The memories, like a movie reel, play in my mind,
And I can't seem to leave the heartache behind.
The tears, like an endless river, flow down my face,
As I try to find a way to fill the empty space.
The loneliness, like a heavy weight, sits on my chest,
And I can't seem to find any moment of rest.
The love, once pure, now tainted by hurt and lies,
As I try to understand how it all went awry.
The dreams, once hopeful, now shattered and lost,
And I can't seem to see a future without the cost.
The pain, like a constant ache, throbs in my soul,
As I try to find a way to make myself whole.
The healing, like a distant light, seems out of reach,
But I know that one day, my heart will finally teach.
That love is not just pain and heartbreak and tears,
But also joy and laughter and hopes and fears.
That even when the heart is shattered and torn,
It can still mend and love again, reborn.

Following in the Same Footsteps

By Isis Redmond

It was a Friday night, around 7:30 p.m.. I was getting ready for bed.

My mom put on the “Suite Life of Zack and Cody”, tucked me in and left my room. The sound of the rain drops hitting my window brought a comforting feeling.

I closed my eyes and started to drift off.

I woke up around 4 a.m. to a loud scream coming from the living room. Terrified, I ran out of bed to go get my Mommy. That’s when I saw her holding my father in her arms. Her face red, tears streaming. He was pale blue and half conscious. “GET HELP!” my mom yelled to me. I wasn’t even sure what I was looking at. I was frozen, yet no tears fell. At that moment it was as if I came back to life.

“911, what is your emergency?”

“It’s my dad.”

My mom grabbed the phone frantically and layed my father down as she started to do CPR. I sat on the ground and just stared at him.

Seconds felt like minutes and suddenly that comforting rain sound brought panic.

It took five long minutes for the ambulance to arrive. Once they did, my mother calmed down.

They rushed into our house and started to continue CPR. Yet again, I couldn’t do anything but watch. I guess a firefighter caught on that I was just staring at them using the defibrillator on my dad and took me outside.

“Don’t worry about your daddy, he will be just fine.” I looked back to my front door, and then up at the rain. I didn’t have shoes or a jacket on. “So, have you ever made a mud pie?” I shook my head no. The firefighter grabbed a handful of dirt and threw it on the stairs, “See now you get some.”

I grabbed some and threw it on his pile. By the time we had created a pretty big cake, my front door opened. The paramedics came out first with my dad in the stretcher. I looked up to see him. He turned to face me. “Hey, princess. I’m okay. I’ll be home soon, I promise.”

I ran inside to see my mom. When I walked in, the police were in the middle of handcuffing my mom. The firefighter who was trying to cheer me up spoke with the officer. “It was an overdose. We found all kinds of stuff: meth, crack, heroin. He’s going to the hospital and then getting booked and as for the mother, she admitted some was hers so she will be going for possession. We notified the grandparents and they are on their way to come get her.”

My mom cried out: “No! You can’t take her away from me! That’s my baby girl! Please! Scarlet, baby, I will fight for you. I love you. I will be back for you.”

I gave her a hug as they took her away.

“Sweetie, you are going to go with this nice lady and wait for your grandparents,” the firefighter said as he patted me on the shoulder and walked out. “Hi love, my name is Officer Eléa. How about we go wait in the car?” She held my hand as we walked out.

Looking at the raindrops hitting the car window, I wondered: How did the night turn out like this?

I saw my grandparents car pull up and my grandma rushed to see me as my grandfather stayed back to talk to the officers. “Oh, my baby. Come, let’s bring you home.” She opened the door to the police car and gave me a hug.

“She hasn’t cried or talked much,” the police officer told my grandpa.

In the back of my grandparents car, I took my first deep breath of the night. My chest was on fire, finally my emotions came out. I broke down. I wasn’t stupid. I knew what they were doing. But why couldn’t they stay sober?

*****SKIP SEVEN YEARS*****

🍷 : I'll catch you at 6.

Me : Thank u, See ya then.

I put my phone down, and looked at the clock. "Three hours. Should I clean?" I said looking around at the mess I had made around me. I picked up all the clothes and threw them in my closet. "God, you are disgusting," I said looking into the mirror.

There was a knock at the door.

"Scarlet, you in here?" The door opened and Miss Smith walked in.

"Hi." I came around the corner.

"Hello. It's time. I need a sample." She gave me a clear cup.

"Ah, yes, time for you to degrade me more. It's my birthday. Can you at least give me some privacy today?"

"You know I can't," she said, giving me this smile like she was pretending to understand what I was going through.

"You tested me yesterday and I was clean. You will test me tomorrow. I am just asking for this one day. Can you break the rule?"

"Happy 14th." She closed the bathroom door.

"Shit, that worked." I pulled a contact bottle out of my bra. "Thank you, Candy." I filled the clear bottle, and cleaned up the bathroom.

"Here." I gave it to Ms. Smith with a smile. "Still warm for you," I said, pushing her out the door. "You know the group home has rules. You have to keep your room clean or else it looks bad on them."

"Well, that's a mood breaker," I thought, letting out a sigh. I jumped on my bed and let the hours go by, staring at my screen.

Me: Leaving now

🍷 : See you soon, Babygirl

“Hey,” I said, handing him \$100. “I’ll take anything.”

“Damn, someone got dough today.”

“Yeah, I guess.” I let out a small chuckle just wanting to break the awkward silence.

“Are you going to tell me the occasion or nah?” He handed me an OZ.

“My birthday.”

“Damn. Okay, shawty. Do you want a gift?”

“Nah, it’s okay.” I took a step back. “Thanks for this,” I started to walk back.

“Nah, I didn’t mean like that. I... I got some H if you want. Go big for your birthday.”

“Don’t do it, Scarlet!” my subconscious was yelling at me. “You know what happened to your parents.” I guess my little devil was stronger than the angel. “Fuck it.” I turned around. “Sure. Why not.”

“First time? I’ll be gentle, don’t worry.”

He injected a needle into my arm.

“You know I have always liked you,” he said. He put his hand on my cheek.

Everything went black. Suddenly I was the same little girl watching her father struggle to breathe in the living room.

I remembered their promises to come back.

There was one problem.

They never came back.

And I never woke up.

Titans of Industry

By Kyle Reis

Corporate greed, a sickness of our time,
A scourge that leaves the common man behind,
A race for profit, with no regard for the grind,
A game where power and wealth reign sublime.
The CEO, a titan of industry,
With eyes fixed on the bottom line,
Climbing the ladder of success with zeal,
Leaving a trail of broken lives behind.
The worker, just a cog in the machine,
A means to an end, a cost to be minimized,
Squeezed and squeezed until there's nothing left,
Their dreams and aspirations pulverized.
The shareholders, a hungry pack of wolves,
Demanding ever-increasing dividends,
Feasting on the labor of the many,
While the few at the top grow ever richer.
But what of the world outside these walls?
The environment destroyed, the people in poverty,
The price of progress paid by those who can't afford it,
All for the sake of corporate greed.
So let us rise up and say no more,
Let us demand a fairer world,
Where people and planet are put first,
And corporate greed is forever unfurled.

The Eternal Stain

By Kyle Reis

Greed of countries, a tale as old as time,
A thirst for power, a hunger to climb,
The conquest of lands, the spoils of war,
Leaving destruction in its wake, forevermore.
The kings and queens, the emperors of old,
Their armies marching, their banners bold,
Expanding their borders, claiming new terrain,
Never enough, always more to gain.
The colonies founded, the natives subdued,
The resources exploited, the cultures subdued,
The wealth brought home, the people left in pain,
The legacy of greed, an eternal stain.
And still today, the cycle repeats,
The nations vying for control, competing to defeat,
The weaker nations, the resources they hold,
For their own gain, for their own gold.
But at what cost, this endless race,
The lives lost, the damage we can't replace,
The future we steal from those who come after,
All for the greed of countries, this dark master.
Let us break the chains of this vicious cycle,
Let us learn to share, to work for a common goal,
To build a world that values all life,
Where compassion and justice are the true prize.

A Black Hole that Devours All
By Kyle Reis

Greed, a hunger that knows no end,
A bottomless pit that can never mend.
It drives a person to take and take,
To grasp and clutch and never shake.

Like a black hole that devours all,
Greed consumes and will never stall.
It blinds the eyes and numbs the heart,
And tears a person's soul apart.

The more it feeds, the more it grows,
A vicious cycle that no one knows.
It strips away all that is good,
And leaves behind a wasteland of should.

The greedy person, so consumed,
Will never see what they have ruined.
Their endless thirst will never cease,
And in the end, they'll find no peace.

For greed is not a noble trait,
It's a disease that seals one's fate.
So let us strive to be content,
And leave behind this dark descent.

Three People By Kyle Reis

In a prosperous and peaceful kingdom, three individuals led vastly different lives. Marcus was notorious for his insatiable greed, always chasing wealth and power at any cost. King Edward, the ruler of the kingdom, was similarly consumed by greed, but his decisions were made with the kingdom's best interests at heart, though often at the expense of the environment. Sarah, a passionate environmentalist, dedicated her life to raising awareness about the kingdom's environmental degradation.

One day, Marcus proposed a plan to increase his wealth by exploiting the kingdom's natural resources, regardless of the environmental damage it would cause. The King, driven by greed, readily agreed, ignoring the long-term consequences. Meanwhile, Sarah worked tirelessly to raise awareness of the dangers and pleaded with the King to reconsider.

As time passed, the consequences of the kingdom's actions became apparent. The air and water were polluted, wildlife was dying, and people were getting sick. Despite Sarah's best efforts, the King's and Marcus's greed remained unrelenting.

But Sarah refused to give up. Her passion and determination inspired others to join her cause, and they rallied together to protect the environment. They worked to reverse the damage caused by years of exploitation and began to build a more sustainable future.

Eventually, the people of the kingdom began to see the error of their ways. Even King Edward realized the harm he had caused and changed his policies, prioritizing the environment over wealth. In contrast, Marcus remained blinded by his greed, leading to his eventual downfall.

The story of these three individuals shows that while greed may be a powerful force, it can be overcome by those with the courage to stand up for what is right. Sarah's unwavering dedication and passionate spirit inspired others to take action, leading to a more sustainable future for the

kingdom. It serves as a reminder that, ultimately, our actions have consequences, and we must make decisions that benefit both ourselves and our environment. The story also highlights the importance of responsible leadership and the need to balance economic development with environmental protection.

Two Points of View
By Canela Viereck Lapaix

Sun warm on my skin,
These rays remind me of fleeting beauty.
Golden as a sunflower blooming for the first time in spring.
The dust rises silently, creating the most perfect of sun rays.
My slow, confident, and sure steps breaking the smallest of silences.
Just like that, a thought, a tune, presents itself to my mind.
Something gentle, like how this very scene feels.
I can feel love, the most desperate, and fearful kind.
The type to question all morals, the kind that sucks you in in the most
gentle form.
The most innocent one.
I walk in the direction of the end of the hall.
Making it all feel like some metaphor of life.

The most cruel, awakening representation of the end of any journey.

I have loved the piano since I was a child.
My parents would always insist I play after supper.
Allowing us all to review the events of the day.
I could hear a soldier groaning in the distance, competing with even the
coldest of rays from the moon.
I never felt closer to the divine feminine, lacking from my soul in the midst
of chaos.
The calmness of the touch, felt far, entranced by its own neglect.
I could smell ash in the air, suffocating my heart.
I felt so much loss, like the song had forgotten its own meaning.
As i sat there playing on the forgotten instrument,
The song became the only end to be experienced.

Reminding me of a forgotten human nature.
It all felt bittersweet,
The smell of alcohol, piercing my pores, with a subtle violence,
The numbness became eery.

And all metaphors fell far from reality.

Whiskers

By Omar Mohammed

Once there lived a boy named Jake. Jake was a funny little fellow. He was full of life but his heart was mellow. One day Jake was walking when he saw a cat. It was a black cat and Jake feared for bad luck. Although, he followed the little feline. It brought him through streets he had never seen before. It brought Jake all the way across town. He began to get exhausted and questioned if he should leave it alone. Jake insisted the cat had a message and planned to lead him somewhere special. Hours went by and time started to fly. At this point Jake was lost and the cat was the guide. After hours of travel the cat finally stopped. It stopped in front of a homeless shelter. Jake was confused. The cat was hinting that he should enter by scratching the door. He eventually entered. Jake looked around and scanned the area. To his disbelief, he saw his mother. He hadn't seen his mother in years. Jake was in shock . His mother was staring at him as soon as he walked in. Almost like she knew it would be him. They confronted each other and talked and talked. She had explained why she wasn't with him anymore and how things were going to change. Jake not only left the shelter with confusion but also his mother and her black cat.

The Stars and the Moon

By Chloe Alagos

Attacked in silence and in pain moments away from ending it all I turn to you. You're my inspiration and my will to live. The warmth that you give, the never ending love and affection it was worth all to stay. I'll suffer the consequences of this undying love that you give moments before I go. I'll stay by you and live. Suffering the pain of unwanted love at home, the hate they give to me. The punishments and beatings just to take away... after all I am the oldest. My father may not be the brightest nor does he care, but I'll take care of my siblings and keep them away from harm's way. This isn't always the story about a happy ending but I'll make it worth a while, attached but not too attached.

Happy endings never show what's on the other side? But it wouldn't kill you to have a little faith, aching for the itch of freedom. Feeling free from all that weighs down, lies that were told. This aching feeling to live it concerns me. Just as, "The stars and the moon were our dazzling escape."

Just as how we left it, nothing ever died out how fast you left and moved on. It hurt but I stayed, I used others to distract myself from the thought of you. While you removed everyone and left it as it is. Killing me inside slowly, killing both of us. Killing me slowly but surely, I know I'll move on, just not fully. 'Cause somewhere deep down you still have my heart just buried under the cold illusions of being stone hearted. I still have a soft side for you, I just know that I'll end up hurting you with my words. Maybe my actions on how I treat you. Or maybe my actions on how I'll react to seeing you with someone just like me. Someone who treated you the way I did. But I hope you're happy because while I treated you the same, you broke me inside. You, the person I gave the world to, broke mine. But I know, I'm capable of finding someone just like you but better. So as before, "I love you more than all the stars you can count and all the plants you can't name."

First and Last
By Chloe Alagos

“We’ll get married someday, but for now...” are the words that are chosen to be spoken of.

What is marriage?

What does it mean to love someone?

To give your all for someone?

What does it mean to be by your side?

One thing I’ve learned is that I value you with all my heart.

That I would search the world for you.

I’ve learned more and more about you through the days,

but I’ve also learned that I grew dependent on you.

That I need you in every aspect needed,

I’ve learned I couldn’t handle a day without thinking about you.

As each day passes I grow more dependant on you,

I learn that without talking to you for hours makes me worry.

Without you I learned I can’t do a single thing for myself without missing you.

I’ve learned to lean on you, I’ve learned that I can’t fall asleep without you by my side.

I’ve learned I want you to depend and lean on me,

To turn to me whenever you feel it is needed.

I wanna be your teenage love, your teen romance.

You’re everything in between, I wanna be what you call...

Your one and only. Your first and last.

But who would’ve thought we were just best friends.

Everyone says, “you can’t be friends with the opposite sex without any feelings in between.”

I wanted to prove that wrong, guess I’m the one who failed in the end.

So please don’t leave me alone.

The feeling of warmth through your hugs and the love that came with it makes my heart melt.

To me you were like a goddess.

And I was a burden, yet you were so kind.

Was someone like me allowed to fall for someone like you?

So why were you so special to me?

What was the purpose of it all, the memories, the little moments of time.

What was it to me that made me think about you, that made me want you.

What was it that made me fall, was it your flaws, or was it the way you charmed me.

Was it the way you acted girly on some days or was it when you acted like both genders.

Or was it the look in your eyes that made me curious about you.

Was it your smile, or when I’m with you?

I don’t know whether I deserve everything you’ve given to me the moment we met.

Whether it was four years ago or not, your true self always shined when you were with me and I fell in love with that vibe.

And now you are gone again, not a single thought has passed you about me. Not one worry, or

sign that you’ve thought of me. Mindless games, in fact, but what you didn’t know is how you

made my heart sink. Drowning tear after tear, yet I’m still needlessly here waiting and hurting.

Like a “hopeless romantic“ in love with an ideal I know I’ll never have.
“REGARDLESS” of a
thought of being you first, I was never your very last bit of concern. I was
what you once had;
Now I am what you call lost.
What is love ?
What was I even when I never knew how to open up what’s in me?

Like Her
By Chloe Alagos

Holding on to tears, as I hold
back the urge to yell and shout as though I've never been heard. My
mother was never so
pleased with me. I've felt uncomfortable in my OWN Body.
I wasn't her I'll never be like her
I was just another dream girl

Shows after shows, awards after awards, but not once has she said she was
proud. I think of it as
goal, go achieve just simple words, a comfort of a mother. I tend to think
single mothers have it
good. They're strong, independent.
But what was warmth?

The Vicarious

By Aaron Gourarii

[Content warning: graphic scenes of violence, injuries, blood]

In 2025, the USA and Soviet Union were still in conflict, and they were fed up, so they decided to kill their respective enemy with atom bombs. They tried to stop it, but it was too late; the flash of the explosion destroyed everything alive.

At that time, Edgar was a veteran spy in the KGB and had been working for them for years. He was a master at his work, an agent like James Bond. They were calling him Ed. Ed had seen many things that he wished he hadn't seen, but he knew that he couldn't just leave his job. He had a loyal dog named Karat, who was also working in the KGB with Ed and always following him around.

One day, Ed was given a mission to go to Saint Petersburg and investigate some suspicious activity that was happening there. When Ed arrived in Saint Petersburg, he realized that something was wrong. The city was quiet and there were no people around. Ed sensed something terrible had happened, and he needed to get out of there as soon as possible. He heard on the radio that a nuclear bomb had been dropped on the city and that the radiation was spreading fast. He should act quickly to save himself and his dog.

Ed quickly went back with Karat to their hotel room and grabbed some food, water, and a flashlight, and they got in the car and drove. He knew he needed to get as far away from the city as possible to survive. As they traveled through the ruins of the city, it passed an hour, Ivan noticed that Karat started to whine, shed, and get transparent eyes. While driving and looking at his dog, Ed accidentally hit a person and lost control of the steering wheel and crashed into a lamp. The pedestrian was crushed between the car and the lamp. Ed's head was dizzy after the car crash, and he couldn't concentrate. Karat, too, was shaken up.

Ed said, "What the hell did I hit?"

He left the car and saw the person that was hit. The person was laying on the hood, unmoving, stretched out with protruding bones, bleeding profusely. Ivan approached him and suddenly the person woke up as if nothing had happened. He had a deformed face and bald head, was missing teeth, and his eyes were popping out. Straight away, he started attacking Edgar. He jumped at Ivan and they both went down to the ground.

Ed reacted. He pulled out his gun, trying to shoot him. But he missed. They were still fighting on the ground. Ed did not have the strength to continue fighting the man, could not locate the gun, and was starting to accept that he would die. Unexpectedly, Karat, from the side, attacked the man, bit his neck, and dragged him to the side to save his partner. Then, Ed got his gun back and shot the man right in the head, and he died instantly.

But, now, the problem was that other weird-looking people, like the man who he'd fought with, were coming toward him because they had heard the gunshot. Ed and Karat were panicking as the pack of crazed people with flailing arms chased them like there was no chance of surviving.

All at once, he heard a loud noise, he turned around and saw a helicopter flying over him. Edgar's KGB friends came to the rescue, arriving in military helicopters.

Edgar said, "It's a rescue team! Help, help, help!"

He waved his arms and shouted for help. The pilot spotted him, and the helicopter descended to the ground for Ed and Karat to get into it. At the same time, they were shooting at the horrific people to protect them. A man in a hazmat suit came out and yelled, "Ed, my friend! Is that you? Come in, fast! Quick!"

Ed nodded and smiled. His friends helped Ed and Karat got on board the helicopter. They were overjoyed. They had been saved!

His colleagues hugged him, and they said that they couldn't find him, they thought he was dead. Then, the doctor came and asked if he didn't feel bad.

Ed replied, "My dog, Karat, is very sick. Please, doctor, save him!" Ed begged to save his dog, but the doctor was confused. He was confused about why Edgar didn't have radiation sickness.

The doctor took his blood, did the analysis, and he was shocked. He had never seen this before. He thought that this type of cell had died out a million years ago. He was looking at the microscope and at the same time talking to Ed. "You are so lucky to be alive, as most of the people in the area have died from the blast or the radiation, but you..."

He discovered that Ed had unique cells called Langerhans cells that could resist lethal doses of radiation because they express very high levels of an important protein involved in the stress response that orchestrates DNA repair after radiotherapy.

The doctor had an idea of how to help his dog, Karat. He could inject Langerhans cells from Ed into the dog. The doctor told Ed that Karat should rest for about three days, and they flew to the safe zone, where they evacuated all surviving people. This safe zone camp had a big bubble where they hid to protect themselves from radiation.

And then Ed asked, "Who are these demented people who were attacking me?"

They answered, "These people are like zombies, their brains melted after the radiation, but the heart and muscles are still working, so they still can walk and also attack. But soon they will die."

Ed thanked the men for saving him and his dog. He hugged Karat and felt grateful for his loyal companionship.

The helicopters started to fly toward the safe zone, in Moscow, where there was no radioactive fallout. When they landed, they left the helicopter, and the doctor introduced Ed and Karat to Colonel Bismarck. They shook hands, and the doctor explained that they were unique because

they survived the radiation, so he should take them as an agent on his dangerous mission.

Ed was frightened and asked the colonel, “What mission? What are you talking about?”

Bismarck laughed at him. He said, “Follow me, and I will explain everything to you.”

Ed was scared, but he still went, and he waved to Karat to follow him. They went toward the safe zone. They were in the corridor, and they could see through the window a laboratory, everything was white, everyone was in hazmat suits, and they were testing something. They entered the colonial office. It was dark in the room; there was only one light bulb, and it hung on a wire. The wall was completely covered with maps of all the plans. Bismarck and Ed were in front of the desk with a map. Bismarck was pointing at it and started to explain. The colonel said, “This is our safe zone, and it’s surrounded by military vehicles to protect it.”

Ed said, “From whom? From the demented people?”

The colonel replied, “Don’t worry about them, they will die soon. We have another problem. There are monsters who are always hiding in the shadows of the buildings, and they attack our soldiers. They are strong. We can’t penetrate them with bullets. They pose a big danger to us, and therefore we need your help.”

Ed was shocked. He said, “How did these monsters come here? Are they from another planet? Are they like zombies?”

Bismarck said, “No. They look like humans, and they are tall, but I don’t know how or why they came here; we haven’t figured it out yet, and this is why we called them ‘Vicarious.’ We should eliminate them.”

Ed was shocked again, and he replied, “I think I have an idea. If they’re too strong, we should contact them and make peace!”

Bismarck was angry. He started yelling at Ed, and he smacked the table. Karat felt threatened and started barking, and he was ready to attack Bismarck, but Ed didn’t let him.

Bismarck began to speak again, “No! Are you a fool! We can’t accept this because they are strangers. We have to destroy them!”

Ed replied, “I think you’re wrong. They look like humans, and we don’t know who they are or why they have come here, but maybe they want to make peace with us.”

Bismarck said, “Ed! I’m the boss here! You haven’t killed any of them yet! Your mission is to find where the Vicarious are living, send me the coordinates, and I will strike them with an atomic bomb. I will give you four days to prepare yourself and your dog to leave. Here is your map and get out!”

Bismarck gave Ed a map where he had marked the places where the Vicarious possibly lived. Ed and Karat left the colonel’s office, slamming the door behind them.

The soldiers took Ed and Karat to the room where they would stay for four days to prepare for the upcoming mission. Depressed, Ed sat on the bed, alone with Karat in the room, asking himself with a cry from the heart, “Damn, why! Why should I do this—I don’t have any other choice other than to take this order!”

He looked into Karat’s eyes. Karat put his paw on Ed’s knee and replied, “Don’t worry, I’ll be with you. We’ll do it together.”

Ed was stunned that he began to communicate with him, “Is it telepathy?!”

It was telepathy, Karat, somehow, learned to communicate with Ed with words, telepathically, without barking!

****Four days later****

The soldiers gave Ed and Karat a Ural motorcycle with a passenger seat on the side where Karat would sit. They loaded a machine gun on the back of the motorcycle and put on their helmets. The soldiers gave them the order to go straight to the forest. Ed was still skeptical about what would happen. He was sure that he would be killed by the Vicarious, who possibly lived there.

They drove for two hours and stopped in front of a small house. Karat told Ed that they had to wait there until the time was right. Karat explained to Ed that he had already communicated telepathically with the Vicarious beings, and they agreed to meet at an appointed time. After a few minutes, Ed felt something strange inside himself; he heard a noise in the forest and saw what appeared to be humans walking towards them. They looked like bipeds with long arms and legs, black skin, and dark eyes.

Ed understood, right away, that they must be the Vicarious. Ed and Karat stood tall in a state of shock. The Vicarious looked at only at Ed, approached him, and smiled. The Vicarious felt that Ed and the dog were friendly, not threatening. Ed was very afraid, and he couldn't understand what was happening; but he saw that Karat started turning his head left and right and communicating with them telepathically. Only Karat could explain and translate to Ed.

He could not understand anything, so the Vicarious could communicate with Ed by using psychic abilities that allowed them to communicate telepathically and manipulate images. The Vicarious attempted to communicate with Ed by taking hold of his hand and transmitting information directly to his mind.

Ed's mind blacked out for a second. What was happening? The Vicarious told Ed telepathically. Ed could hear him, but he couldn't understand what the being was saying. He looked at Karat and saw that he was also communicating with them through his mind.

Ed could see the images in his mind and the Vicarious tried translating them into words for Ed. Ed experienced numerous astonishing events, which left his mind spinning. As it turned out, the Vicarious was a group that originated from Earth, just like humans. They had been in a state of hibernation underground for over a million years, surviving solely on radiation. Eventually, when the radiation depleted, they dozed off into a deep slumber. And now that humans had dropped a nuclear bomb, the Vicarious returned to life because of the radiation. But, when the Vicarious

woke up, they understood that they were not alone; there were people who started attacking them. They did not want to kill people, but they were forced to defend themselves.

The Vicarious needed a leader who could help them in this situation, to make peace and negotiate with people. They chose Ed and Karat.

The Vicarious sensed that Ed had Langerhans cells, as they did. They must be from the same genetic family, whose DNA produced Langerhans cells. His ancestors had survived all that time and that's why Ed and the Vicarious could communicate. Ed and Karat gathered meanings. They understood that Colonel Bismarck had lied about the Vicarious, and they had to stop Bismarck before he bombed the Vicarious.

Ed drew on the map where the Vicarious lived. Ed and Karat sat on the motorcycle, and they went back to the safe zone to negotiate with Colonel Bismarck. When they arrived at the safe zone, Ed told Bismarck about this situation and showed him the map.

Bismarck said, "Thank you," and he snatched the map from Ed's hands. He went to the base where they would launch the nuclear bombs. Ed and Karat were still following him, and Ed started explaining to Bismarck, "Colonel Bismarck! You must stop that. You will only make it worse!"

Bismarck became angry and abruptly stopped walking. He swiftly turned around and inquired in a stern tone, "Why is that?"

Ed mentioned that a bombing would lead to an increase in radiation, but the Vicarious sustained their lives with radiation. The bomb would blow them apart, but the body parts would still survive.

Bismarck didn't listen to him, and he ordered his three soldiers who were near him to arrest them. Ed and Karat resisted, and Bismarck continued on his way to launch bombs. Ed and Karat didn't give up; they started fighting with these soldiers. Karat jumped at a soldier and bit him, and Ed hit him with his elbow. The soldier was knocked down and Karat escaped from him.

Ed noticed that the other soldiers were coming toward them, so he jumped in front of them. He quickly punched the first soldier in the face and kicked another one in his stomach. Then, they ran after Bismarck. Bismarck was ready to press the button to launch, but Karat was faster than Ed, and Karat jumped at Bismarck to push him away from the button. Bismarck was surprised and fell to the ground. Ed took the opportunity to punch Bismarck in the face and Karat bit him again. This time, Bismarck was knocked down by Ed's fist and Karat bit him hard.

Ed and Karat had stopped Bismarck from launching the bomb, but they knew that they had to convince the other soldiers and the people in the safe zone that the Vicarious was not their enemy. They decided to use the radio to broadcast their message to everyone.

Ed grabbed the microphone and said, "Hello, this is Ed, the KGB agent sent to find the Vicarious. I have something important to tell you. Please listen carefully."

He explained everything that he had learned from the Vicarious, how they wanted to make peace with the people. He also told them about Bismarck's plan to bomb them, and how he and Karat had stopped him.

He said, "The Vicarious are not monsters, they are not zombies, they are not aliens. They are our distant relatives, and they deserve our respect and compassion. They do not want to fight us; they want to live with us. We can work together to rebuild this world that we have destroyed. Maybe we can find a way to coexist peacefully."

He paused and looked at Karat, who nodded at him. He continued, "Both Karat and I possess an antidote known as Langerhans that can safely protect you from radiation exposure when venturing outside. We will distribute the antidote to each of you, ensuring our survival in this world and the opportunity to rebuild."

Ed hoped that his message would reach the people, that they would listen to him, that they would not dismiss him as a traitor or a lunatic and that they would give the Vicarious a chance to prove themselves. He

dreamt that they would see that there was still hope for humanity in this dark and lonely world.

The Russian people erected a monument recognizing Ed and Karat's heroism. And so, Ed and Karat were remembered as saviours of the people. They had risked their lives to save humanity from the nuclear fallout, and they had succeeded. The antidote they developed was distributed throughout the world. But most importantly, their dreams had come true.

THE END

“WHAT THE FU—?”

By Kenyon Awashish-Hunter

The sun shines over the peaceful clouds. As for below the clouds, war is brewing on a muddy field as far as the eye can see. A British lieutenant named Connor McRough has been tasked by his superiors to intercept a General from Germany.

To get to the general, Connor has to make his squadron cross into enemy lines. Unfortunately, the sun starts to set and they have no light. They sit in a trench that was created by the enemy bombardment and cap there for the allies to push slowly.

Connor is unaware that one of their members is missing. He is yelling out, “Jordan!” Nothing happens.

After a few minutes of waiting, he notices the ground shaking under two of his members.

BOOM! Connor falls backwards as if a bomb has detonated. Apparently, there is no evidence of what he witnessed. He swore that they both didn’t blow up. As he wipes the mud off his hands one of the few members swore they saw a claw reaching for both of them.

The members that witnessed it start panicking and crying. Connor yells out, “Calm down, ladies!” The men start wiping off their tears but are still distressed. “It’s quiet,” Connor says as they prepare to push forward. It’s the brink of dawn. They step out of the trenches and look around.

“Everyone’s gone,” one of his squadron says as the fog starts setting in. The whole field was filled with enemies and allies but nothing remained. In the distance they see an enemy squadron running and screaming from the direction Connor’s squad is supposed to head to.

The youngest in the squad wonders why he hears hooves of a horse. Connor grabs binoculars and looks in the vast fog. Behind the German squad appears a silhouette of something massive like someone riding a horse. The ‘person’ sitting on the horse is carrying a scythe.

Connor quietly says, “Get down.” They all hide as the sound of the hooves get louder and closer.

After hearing the flesh of the Germans being sliced and ripped apart, it gets quiet again. The oldest starts reciting a prayer for protection.

“That isn’t going to help,” says the youngest.

The oldest looks at the youngest and says, “It’s got me this far. Why should I listen to you?”

They lay in the trench for a good amount of time until Connor orders everyone to move out. They look where the creature came from and find no trace of the bodies they had heard being torn apart.

They proceed straight until Connor sees a battalion of Germans and orders all the men to quietly submerge themselves in the mud. The German battalion stops, but the tanks proceed in front for a few more meters. Connor’s squad is immediately nervous because of how close the tanks are.

BOOM! The tanks fire off a round which flies exactly over the squad. A loud, deafening shriek could be heard from behind Connor’s squad. Hooves are being heard again as the ground shakes. The entire battalion is firing everything they have, but it’s no use against the creature as it’s rushing towards them.

SHIIIIING! In one swift motion the creature’s scythe cuts through the tanks. Guns are echoing in the field till all they can hear is the German soldiers' painful screams as they’re being crushed, sliced and ripped apart. Connor’s squad are completely in shock. They feel all their nerves dancing in fear. The sun sets again so they all set camp for the night. Connor wants to check if their perimeter is safe so he regretfully fires the flare into the sky. As the flare is slowly falling down, he witnesses the creature and whispers, “What the fu—!”

The creature turns and sees Connor clearly while he looks in terror. The creature stares at him and all of a sudden, it smiles.



WHAT THE FU—? / Kenyon Awashish-Hunter / Pencil on paper

Seeking Kindness
By Michael Borges



Photo by Matt Collamer on *Unsplash*

One day on the subway, an old man was ranting loudly about kindness. People gave him stares, others walked away in discomfort. Some people gave him money out of pity. No matter what, the old man continued to scream about how the world is unfair and that we need more is human kindness. The man screamed about how we need free healthcare and better mental health services.

People around the man were obviously concerned for the man and some were sure that he had a certain mental illness. The people around him weren't sure if he had schizophrenia or not. The man looked like he was going to collapse at any moment, and people around him were sure that he wouldn't live past a day.

People tried to help him but got yelled at and others just got disgusted by the man, or laughed at him. As a couple hours passed, less and less people were in the subway. Eventually, no one but the homeless man was in the subway.

The man had walked out of the subway and out into the streets to try and find a place to stay. The man collapsed, late at night.

At around 11:28 PM, he died right on spot, as he hit his head.

Old Man Tucker
By Ayvah Phoniex

It started off as a chilly night in Loulou Cabooboo. Far past the bridge, and down the dirtiest terrains and stinkiest stickiest swamps, there laid old man Tucker. Or at least that's what people called him.

Old man Tucker used to live in the village with the town people. They actually liked him. Until one day everything changed.

The Huuda Kavoodas invaded the town, and killed everyone and everything they touched. The Huuda Kavoodas didn't care about the town, or their village. Following orders is all they did; complete the task.

Old man Tucker was the only one to survive the attack. He was just a boy when it happened.

When other towns had found out about the attack, they went to help and see if there were any survivors. When they found old man Tucker, they helped him. That was until they realized he was the only survivor. That was when they turned against him, blaming him for the deaths of all the people.

Old man Tucker tried to tell them what happened, but no one listened. No one except an elderly woman named Mama Okoukou. She believed him. She was the only one who cared to hear his story. She took care of him when there was no one else who could.

It had now been 70 years since Mama Okoukou adopted old man Tucker as her own. Tucker was now 80. Mama Okoukou was dead. Old man Tucker was alone again, with no one by his side. He always held up a sign that asked for people's kindness. No one stopped to look.

So on that chilly night, old man Tucker finally gave into the cold. As his eyes fell shut, he imagined he was with Mama Okoukou. She was singing sweet nothings into his ears, just like when he was a kid. He could feel the tears slip down his face or maybe it was just the rain. Either way, old man Tucker felt at peace for the first time in many years.

Old man Tucker took his last breaths on October 16th, 1340.

Pavement
Adriano Iacono



Photo by Clay LeConey on *Unsplash*

I feel so sorry for the homeless when I see this picture;
It makes me hopeless for everyone.

Who makes people careless?

These people grow up
To be reckless, and fearless.

It's sad to see the homeless;
And right now I'm disappointed.

Winter Bird
By Julia Magera & Ayvah Phoniex



Photo by David Eves

The bird in snow;
Scared of the world.

Stuck in music forever,

Cold, with no warmth;
Can't fly away from the situation.

Cold & stiff;
The winter bird sits on top.

Like some memorable statue
But in reality,
The seats are empty.
No one is there to gaze
At the winter bird,
Reminding it of its insignificance
Time and time again.

Ascending
By Ayvah Phoniex



Photo by David Eves

Ordered and boring;
Meant to look clean
And enlightened.
But it's all just a lifeless picture
With endless sadness.

The Hungry Having
Collective Poem
Perspectives I



Photo by David Eves

We give away
To people without money;

The hungry having
Inexpensive food from selfless people.

Meaningful acts;
To bring peace and love
To changing lives;
Around the world.
That's what caring does

Simply with a helping hand.

The hungry having
Food for a family of six
Just so the homeless
Have heart-warming happiness.

Give me substance;
The hungry having hunger;
It feels like something is eating the stomach;
Kindness;
Like sunshine;
Is everything to them.

The hungry having
Movement together;
Holding off their needs.

Faking a Smile
By Julia Magera



Julia Magera / Scratch art

Pain that no one knows,
Rains but never snows,
Tears fall onto the ground,
My head spins all around,
The battle is all around,
They have no care.

If you see them beware;
They will wear you down to nothing,

Wanting the treasure more than anything,
They don't want to break us,
But we were broken from the start,
They have no heart.

It's time to start thinking of me.
I have been faking a smile for a while.

Options – selected poetry

LOVE is RED

It sounds like THE BLOOD THAT FLOWS THROUGHOUT MY
VEINS

It tastes like THE RED JOLLY RANCHER I POP IN MY MOUTH

It smells like A FRESH BOUQUET OF ROSES

LOVE feels like HOLDING A WARM HAND

(Lilly Roy, Kasandra Martin Assarica)

HAPPINESS is BABY BLUE

It sounds like PIANO MELODIES

It tastes like HOT CHOCOLATE

It smells like BAKED GOODS AND VANILLA FROSTED DESSERTS

HAPPINESS feels like JAMAICA

(Anndraya Gero)

Summer is like a breeze.

Flowers blooming in the air around us.

Trees and grass showing evergreen.

People come out and celebrate nice times.

When the sunsets bring cooling good nights.

(Anndraya Gero)

HOME

Relaxing and comfortable.
Sleeping, cooking, cleaning.
Love my lovely home.
(Anndraya Gero)

A tree that brings life.
Grows with love and cures.
Fruits, vegetables, flowers and love
That everyone can enjoy.
(Anndraya Gero)

I went outside, and what did I find?
A box to open. I hope no one will mind.
It was tied on top with a bow of red.
It was so huge there could have been a car under it.
When I saw what was inside, I was surprised to see
My 10th birthday gift that year.
(Anndraya Gero)

Show me your courage.
Let it beam bright and loving.
Show your emotions sometimes.
Show your feelings other times.
Show me yours, proudly.
(Anndraya Gero)

Lovely flowers.
Smelly, bright.
Blooming, sprouting, flourishing.
Plants are people too!
Caring life.
(Anndraya Gero)

The colour forest green.
Plants grow
Everywhere here.
I love to see
The colour forest green.
(Anndraya Gero)

There once was a boy named Chad
He was a very nice lad
He slipped down the stairs
He swallowed a pear
And, now he's extremely sad.
(Lilly Roy)

There once was a three-headed witch
Who developed a horrible itch
She scratched and she scratched
'Till there was a big rash
And now she's a three-headed fish.
(Andrew Whittick)

My magic wand.
Funny, magic, cool.
Surprising, shocking, weird.
Stunned. Curious.
(Anon.)

BASKETBALL
Fun, touch
Entertaining, Sweating, Running
Throwing laundry into the basket
LONG SHOT.
(Kiki)

SADNESS is BLUE
It sounds like CHILDREN CRYING
It feels like YOU'RE CHEWING ON GLASS
It smells like STAGNANT WATER
SADNESS, You just NEED A HUG.
(Kiki)

Sisters, brothers, nephews, nieces
Annoying, loud, obnoxious, bothersome
Moody, loving, nice
Loyal, trusting, company, greedy
Fat, spicy, clueless, ruthless.
(Kiki)

BASKETBALL

Unexpectedly exciting, Professional
Bouncing, Inbounding, Running

All basketball players are tall men. What is a backcourt violation?

(Kiki)

DEATH

Sad and Dark

Depressing, Raining, Clouding over

Death is sad, but it is nature.

Where do you go where you're gone?

(Anon.)

BOYS

POISON

IMMATURE

DIFFICULTY

BOYS

(Anon.)

UNICORN

Flies majestically

In the wind, through the sky

Brings joy to all life.

(Anndraya Gero)

He walked
Grasped by idiosyncrasies
Flowed through by sweet melodies of bliss
Harrowed by the ethers calling
Into days nevermore
(Raine Rushton-Sonnell)

WINTER
Beautiful Lifeless
Waning, Lasting, Unrelenting
Not my favourite season.
What's yours?
(Raine Rushton-Sonnell)

ANGER is RED
It sounds like ROCKS FALLING DOWN A MOUNTAIN
It tastes like THE SPICIEST PEPPER
It smells like FIRE BURNING
ANGER feels like FIRE
(Anon.)

POUTINE
Fried up, Cheesy
Tasty, Crunchy, Greasy
Fries are immaculate.
(Anon.)

I went outside, and what did I find?
A box to open. I hope no one will mind.
It was tied on top with a bow of darkness.
I was walking (in that box?)
Now, I am lost.
I am not walking anymore ☹️
(Andrew Whittick)

CARS
Speedy, Sleek
Racing, Speeding, Driving
The cars we drive say a lot about US.
(Chloe Alagos, Matthew Adler)

SICK is GREEN
It sounds like GROANING
It tastes like BITTERNESS and SOURNESS
It smells like VOMIT
SICK feels like DISCOMFORT.
(Darrius Mackenzie-Majothi)

Amidst cherry blooms
Soft petals fall to the ground
Whispering secrets
Of love and new beginnings
Nature's sweet serenade
(Raine Rushton-Sonnel)

SNOW
COLD, WET
LAUGH, PLAY, JOY
WHITE, WINTER, SNOWY
SNOW
(N'Meysha)

PEACHES
TASTY, DELICIOUS
EATING, SALIVATING, STIMULATING
THEY MAKE ME HAPPY
FRUITS
(N'Meysha)

SLICE THE PLUMP
PEACHES PEACHY PEACH
SWEETNESS of HONEY
PEACHES PEACHY PEACH
(N'Meysha)

MATH
ALGEBRAIC, GEOMETRIC
CALCULATING, ERASING, FRUSTRATING
ROUNDING NUMBERS
(N'Meysha)

ANGER is RED

It sounds like RAIN and THUNDER
It tastes like HOT FLAMING CHEETOS
It smells like BURNING WOOD
FIRE feels like ANGER
(N'Meysha, Rhenay James)

LOVE

Burns and Hurts
Like a Candle Burning
With a good smell, slowly melting
(Leen Osman)

Friendships

Fun, like a match
A game, everyone is competing
But, no one knows who's real
(Leen Osman)

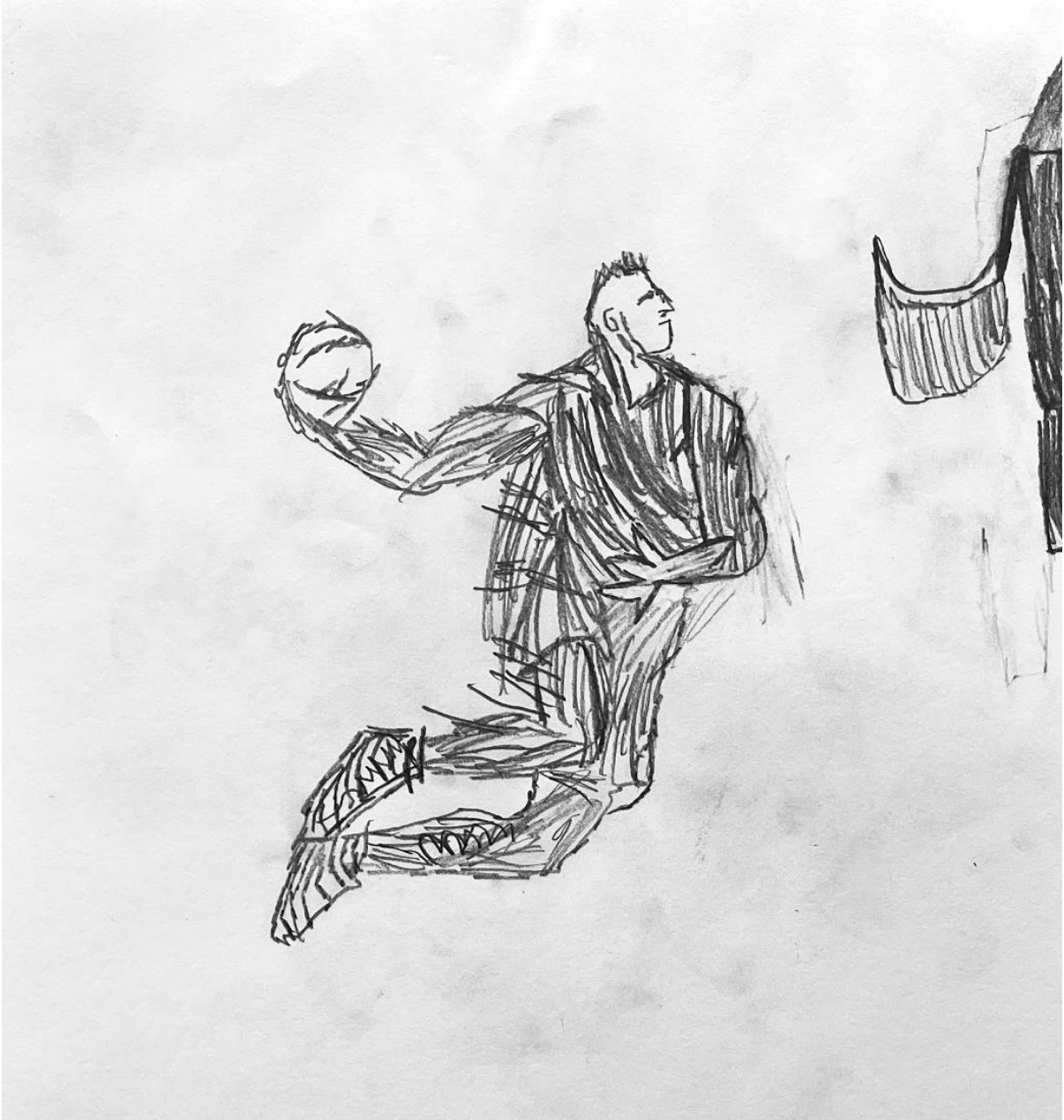
The Moon lights up
Very bright in the night
Shiny, but lonely
Needing someone to be there
While it spins around the world
(Leen Osman)

There was a girl named Juman
That only speaks MYSTERY
Always HAPPY
But, little did they know
She was actually just a good actress
(Leen Osman)

Mom cares, gives, helps
Shouts, learns, grows
Hard, soft, loving
But, she will always be
A 'MOTHER', Mom!
(Leen Osman)



(top) Who Knows / Kyriakos Giatras / Acrylic on canvas
(bottom) Dark Sonic / Kaidon Dewitt / Pen on paper



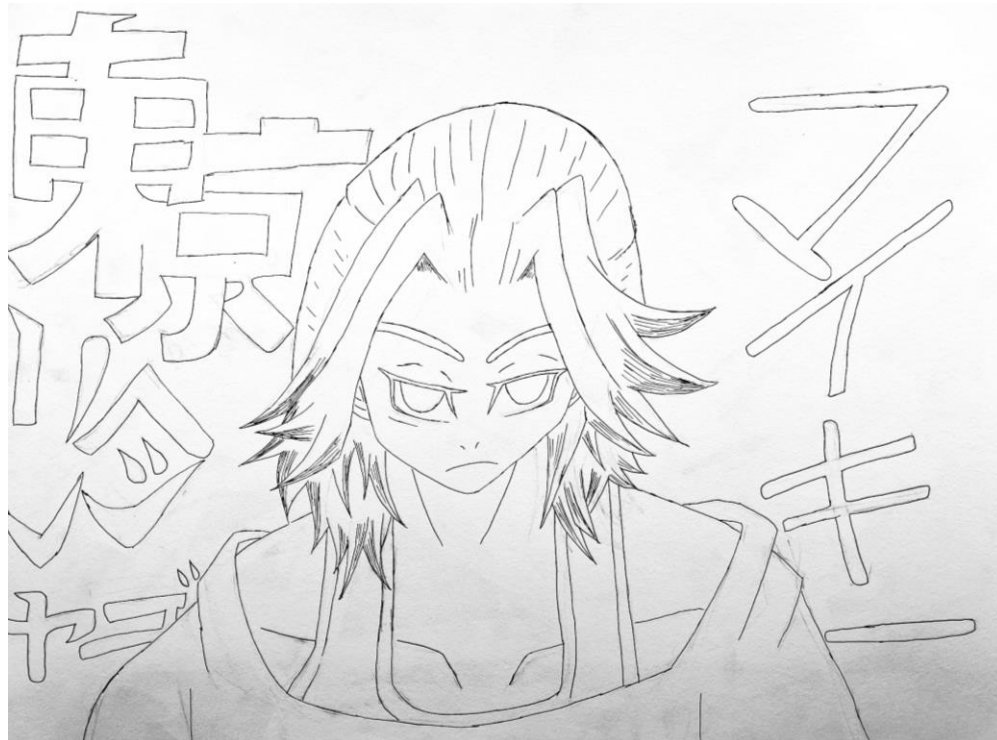
Basketball Dunk / Massimo Filippelli / Graphite on paper



Dream Team / Boruto
Kaidon Dewitt / Pencil on paper



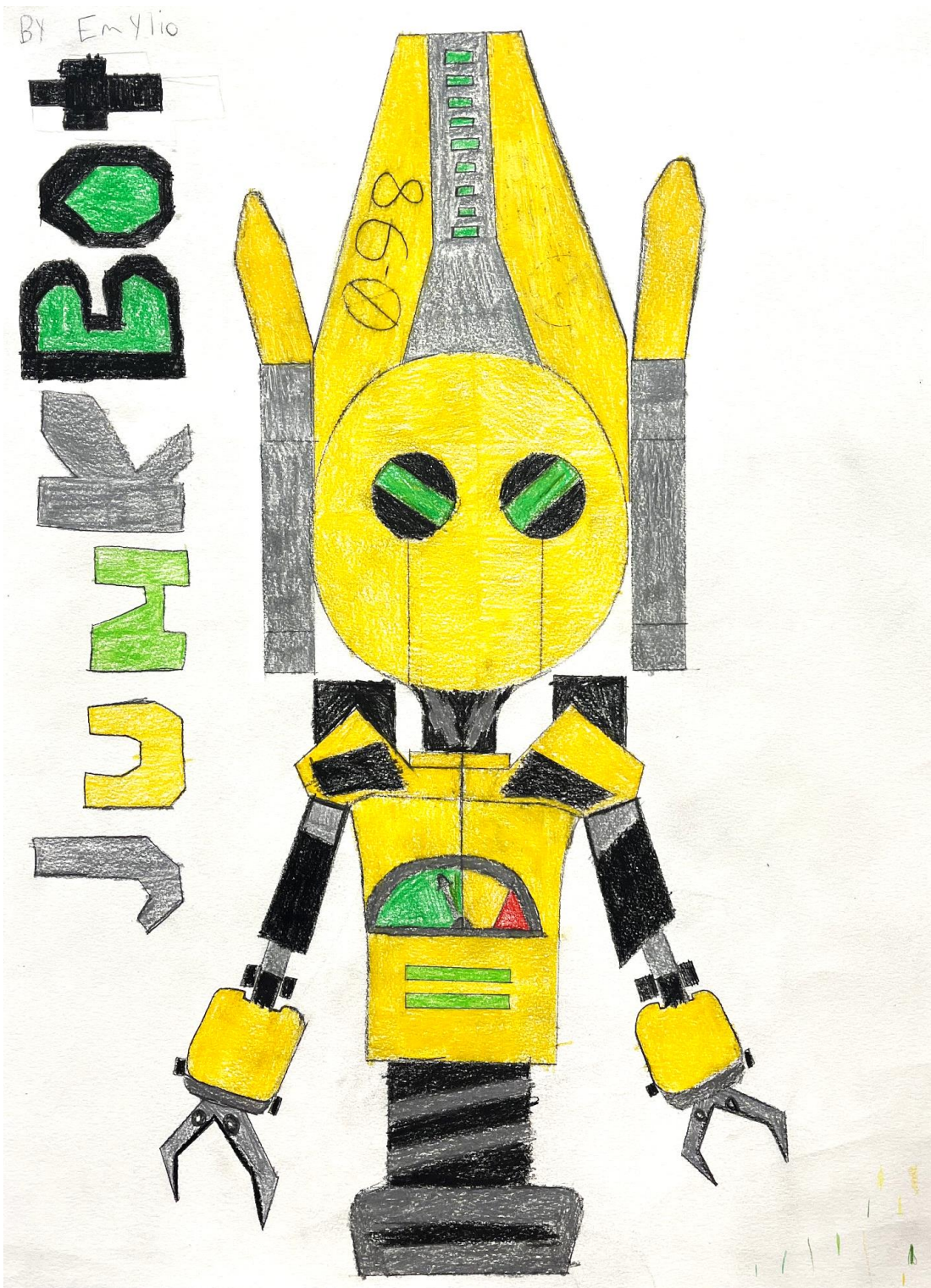
Pokedex / Upper Moon
Kaidon Dewitt / Pen on paper



(top) Fire / (bottom) Mikey
Kaidon Dewitt / Pencil on paper



The Space Ship / Graydon / Acrylic on paper



Junk Bot / Emylio Alejandro / Pencil crayon on paper



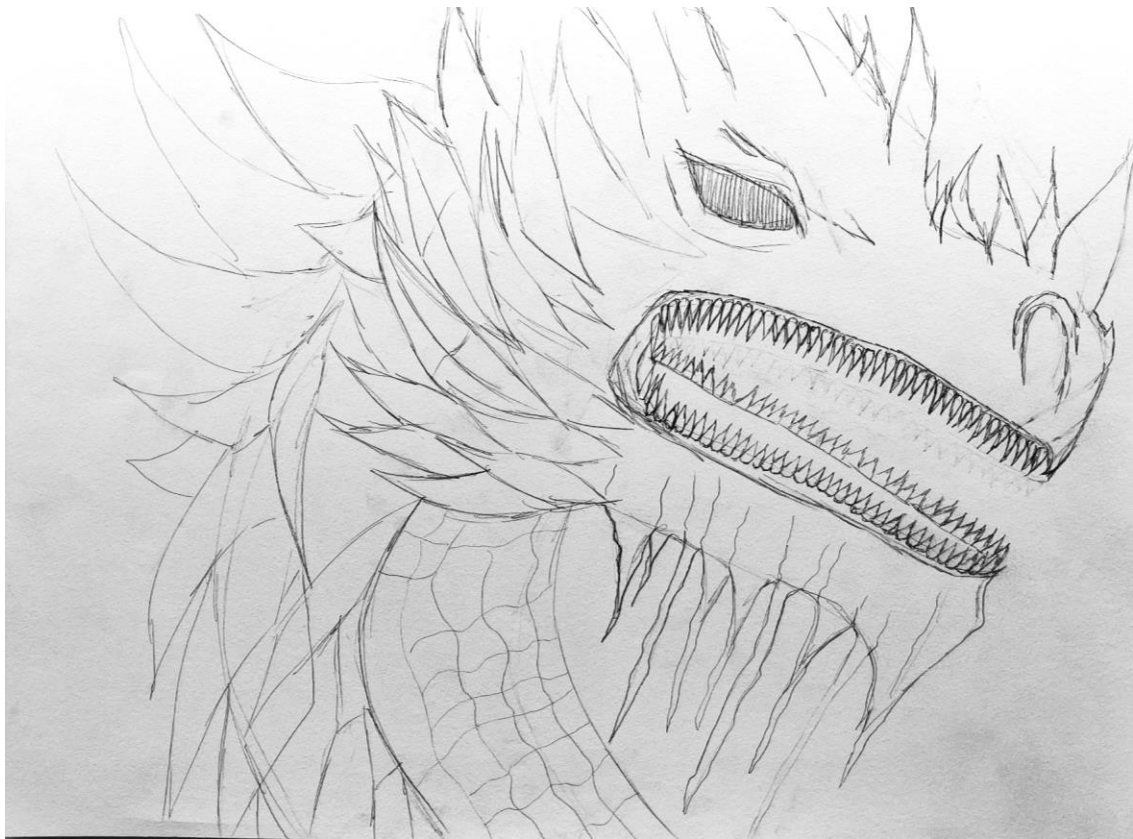
Deku Midoriya / Massimo Filippelli / Pen on paper



Sun Goku / King Aaron-Ian / Pencil on paper



My Own Naruto Character / Amara Cherif / Pen on paper



(top) Drag, in / Kaidon Dewitt / Pencil on paper
(bottom) Dragon / Thomas Beaucage O'Connor / Acrylic on Canvas



(top) Rubik's / Stuy / Pen, ink, pencil crayon, pastel on paper
(bottom) Survive Night Critters / Dinari Gordon / Pen and felt on paper



Salad Fingers / Ethan the Destroyer / Pencil on paper



(top) FOCUS / Lex / Acrylic on canvas
(bottom) Dark Ocean / Trenton / Acrylic on canvas



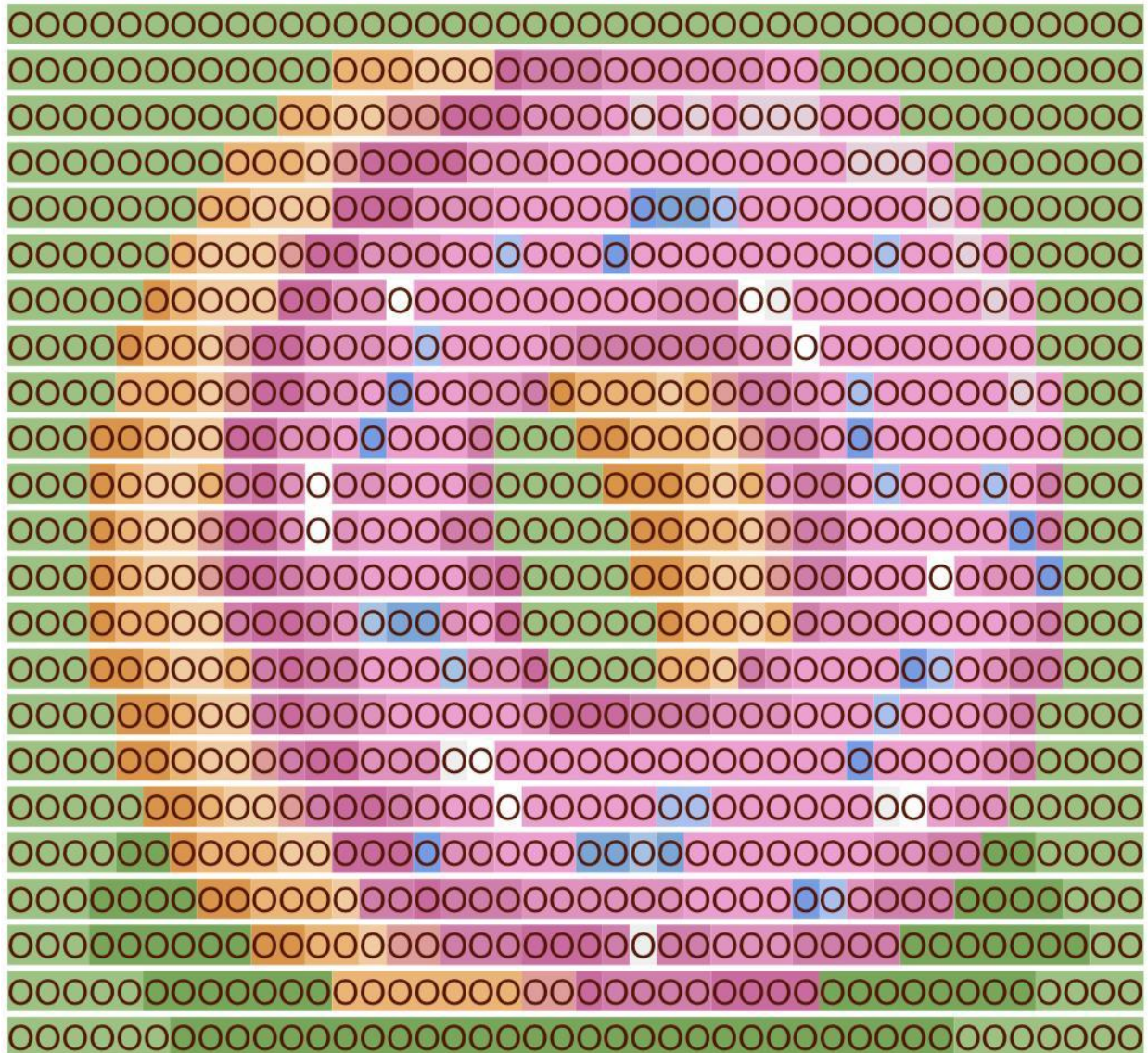
KO / Pencil on paper

BURGER



Burger / Aiden Vaillant / Digital Art

DONUT



Burger / Aiden Vaillant / Digital Art



Please Don't Leave Me / Anonymous / Acrylic paint on canvas



Maya Hertsman / Long exposure photography



LOVE / SHIT

Maya Hertsman, Logan Roter, Samuel Awashish-Desbiens / Long exposure photography



Maya Hertsman / Digital photography



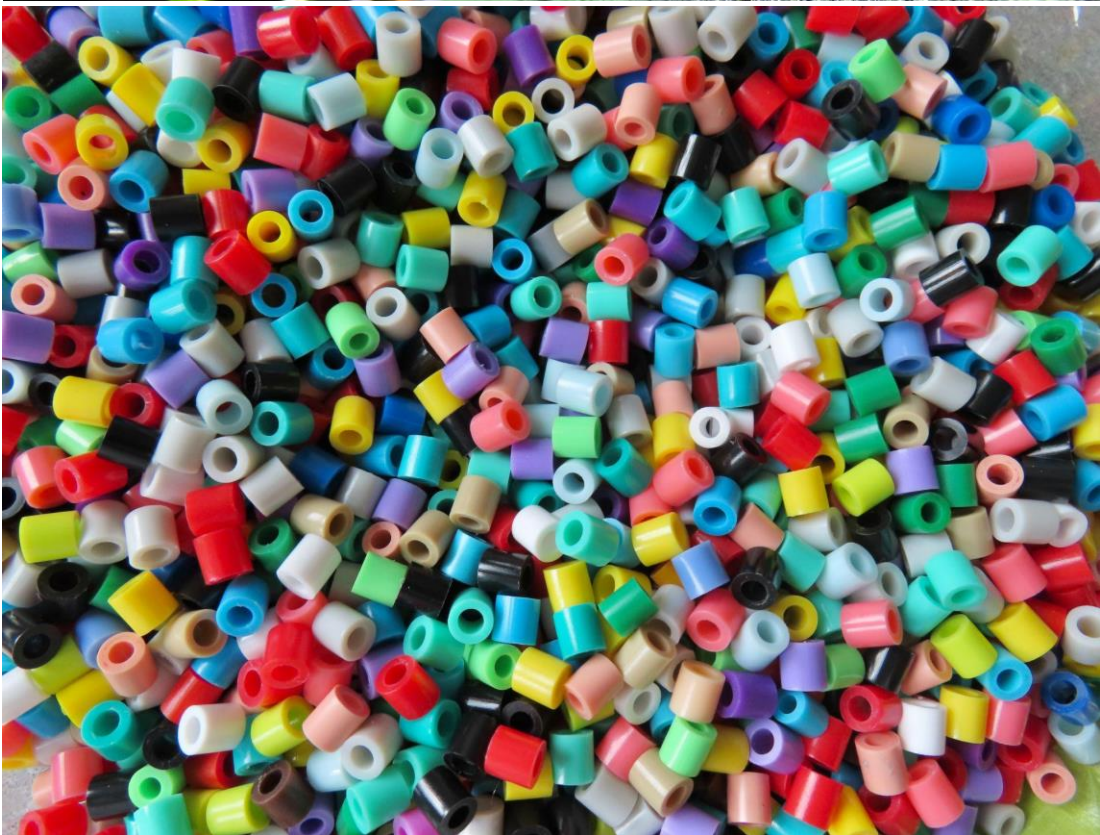
Maya Hertsman / Digital photography



Maya Hertsman / Digital photography



Logan Roter / Digital photography



Logan Roter / Digital photography



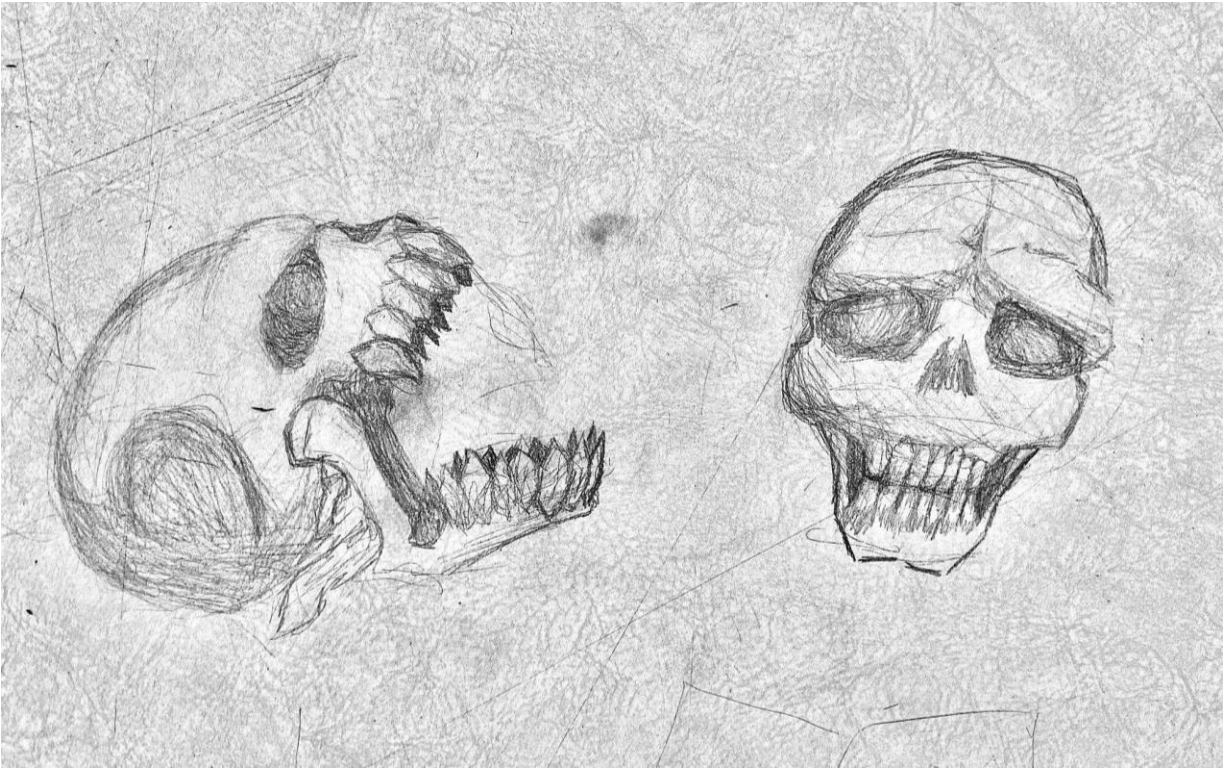
Canela Viereck LaPaix / Acrylic on canvas



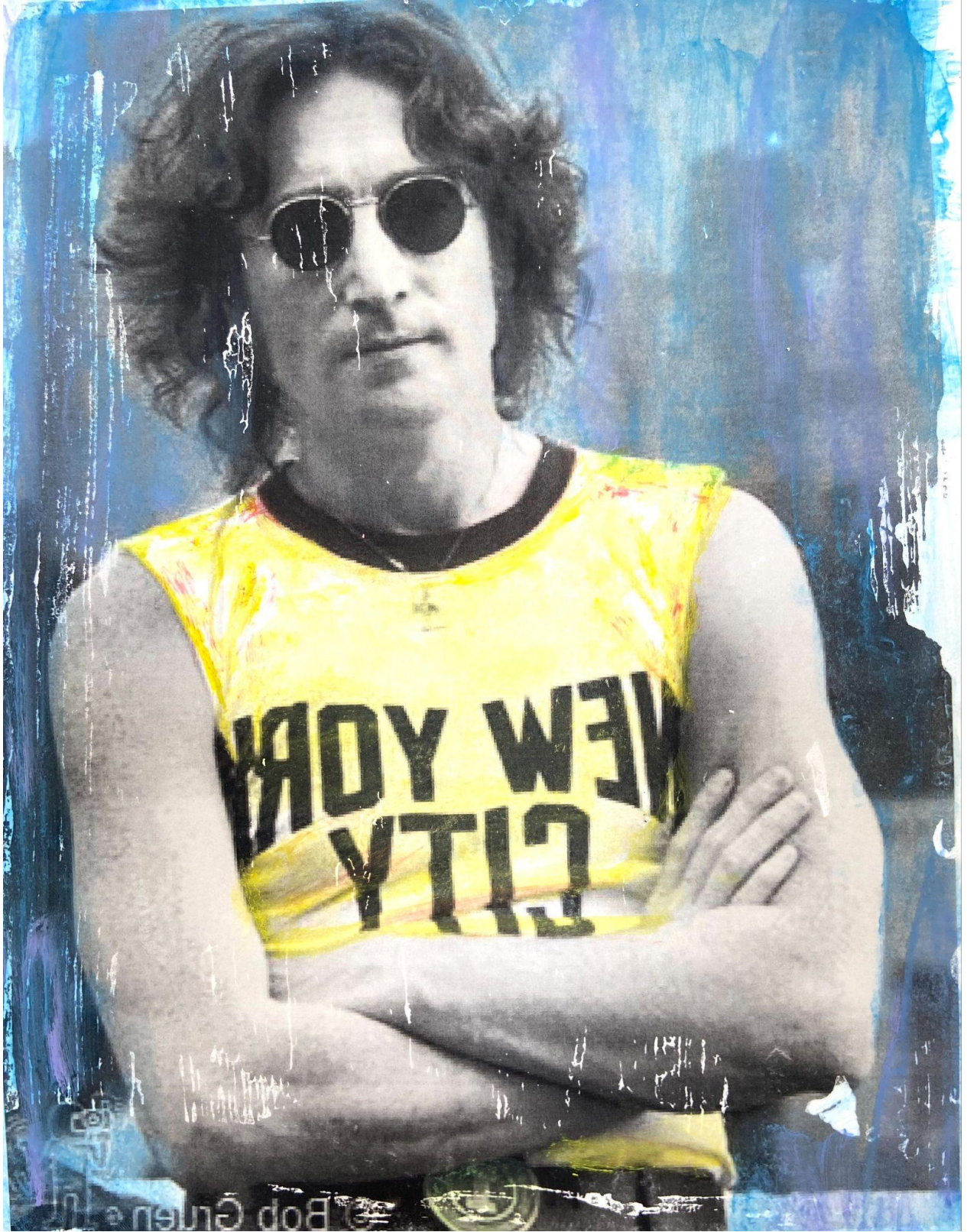
Vezina logo / Ryan Sousa / Latex paint on concrete



Lilly Roy / Chalk drawing



(top) Lucas Brodeur / Image transfer and acrylic paint on paper
(bottom) Kenyon Awashish-Hunter / Graphite on desk



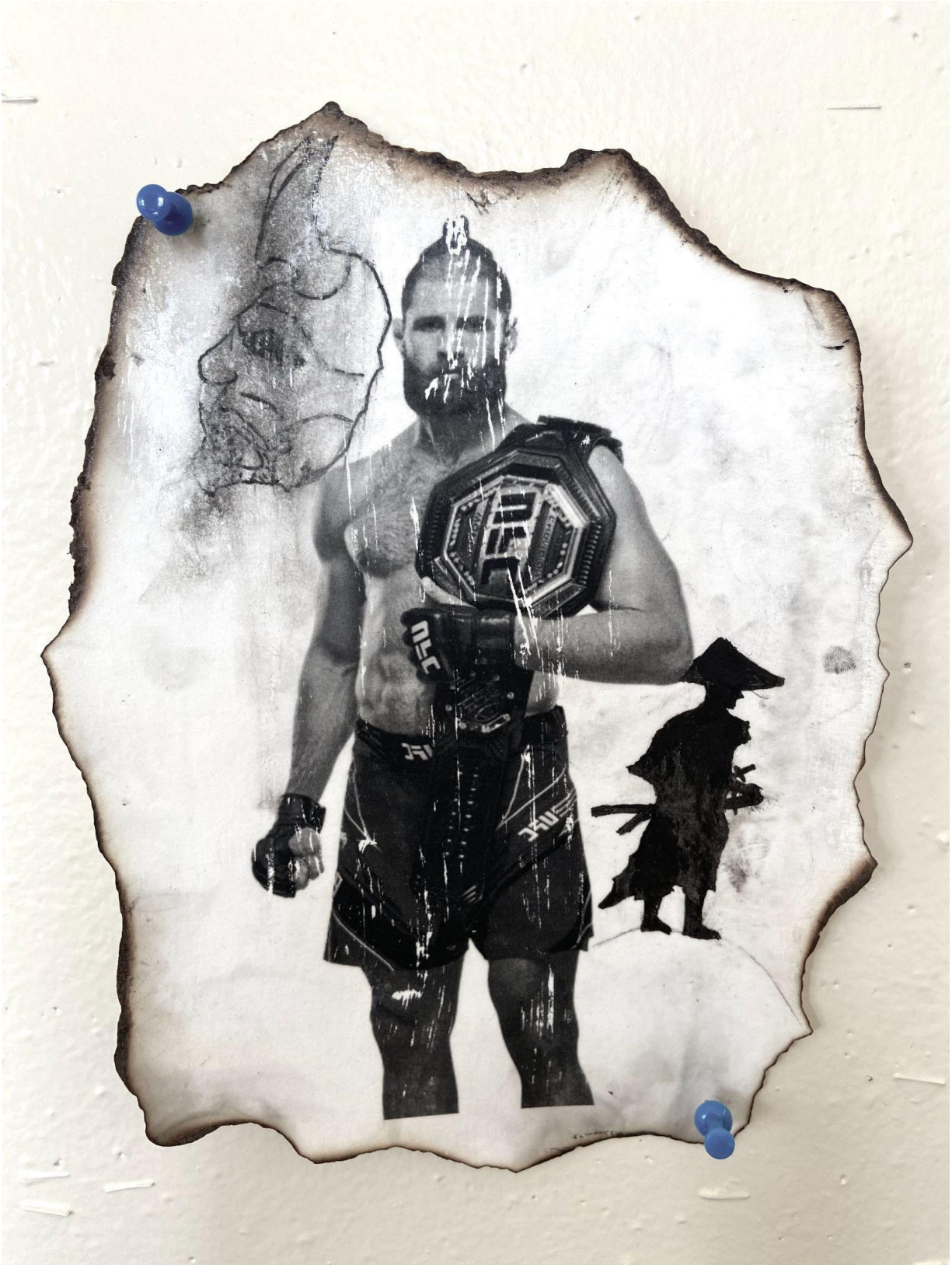
Shobi Lewy / Image transfer and acrylic paint on paper



Darius McKenzie-Majothi / Image transfer and acrylic paint on paper



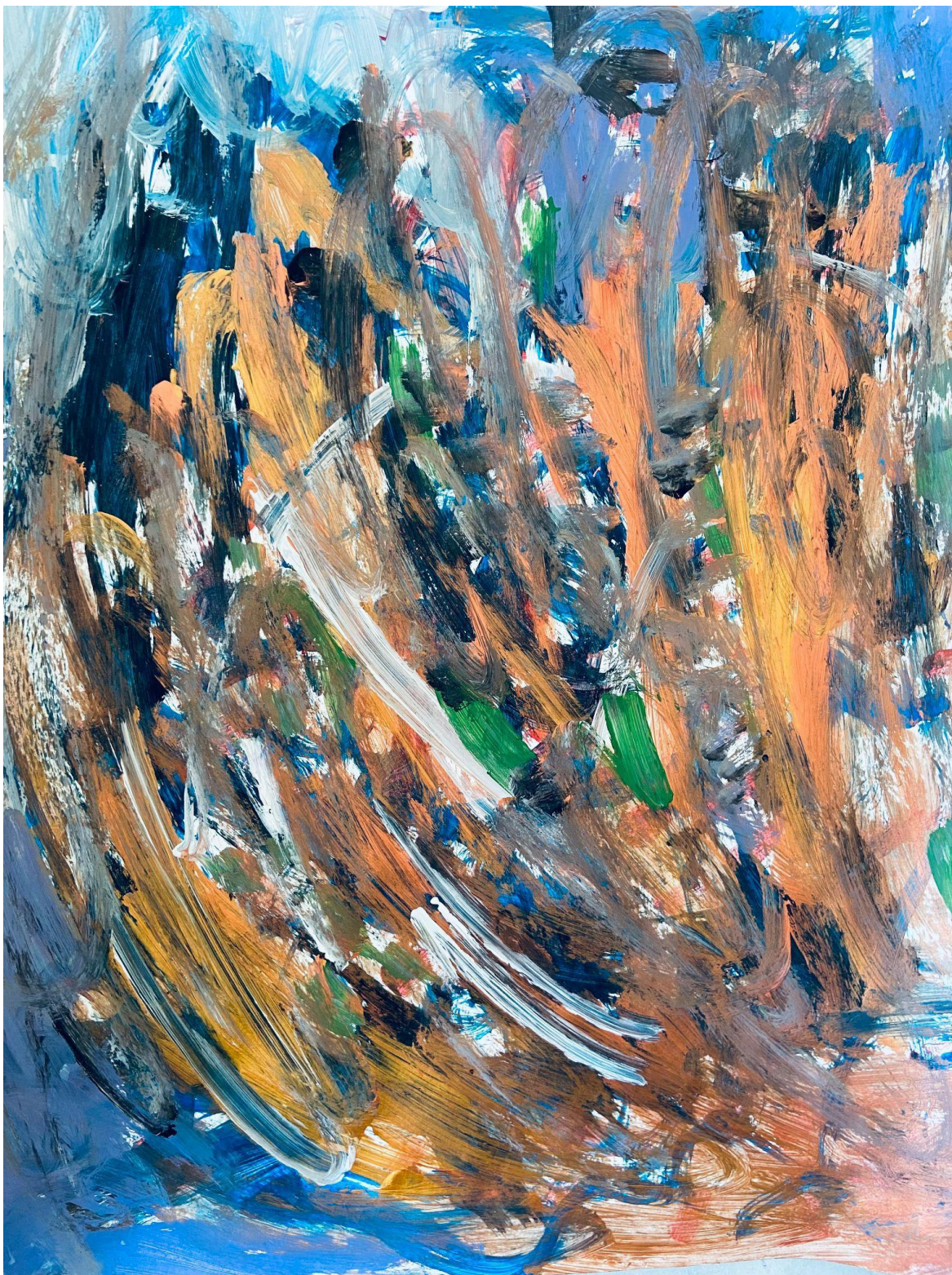
Jordan Demaine / Acrylic on paper



Kenyon Awashish-Hunter / Image transfer, charcoal, India ink on burnt paper



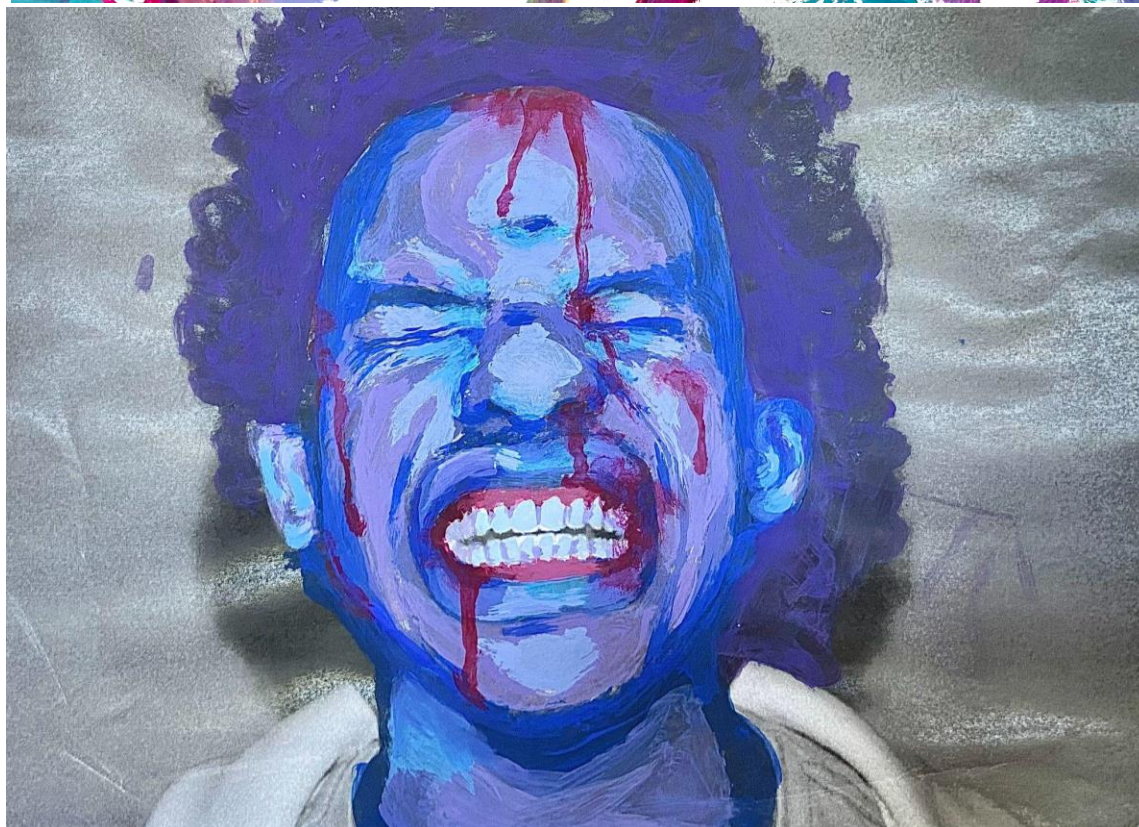
Sky Ross / Linocut print



Anonymous / Acrylic on paper



Quentin Edwards-Araujo / Acrylic on paper



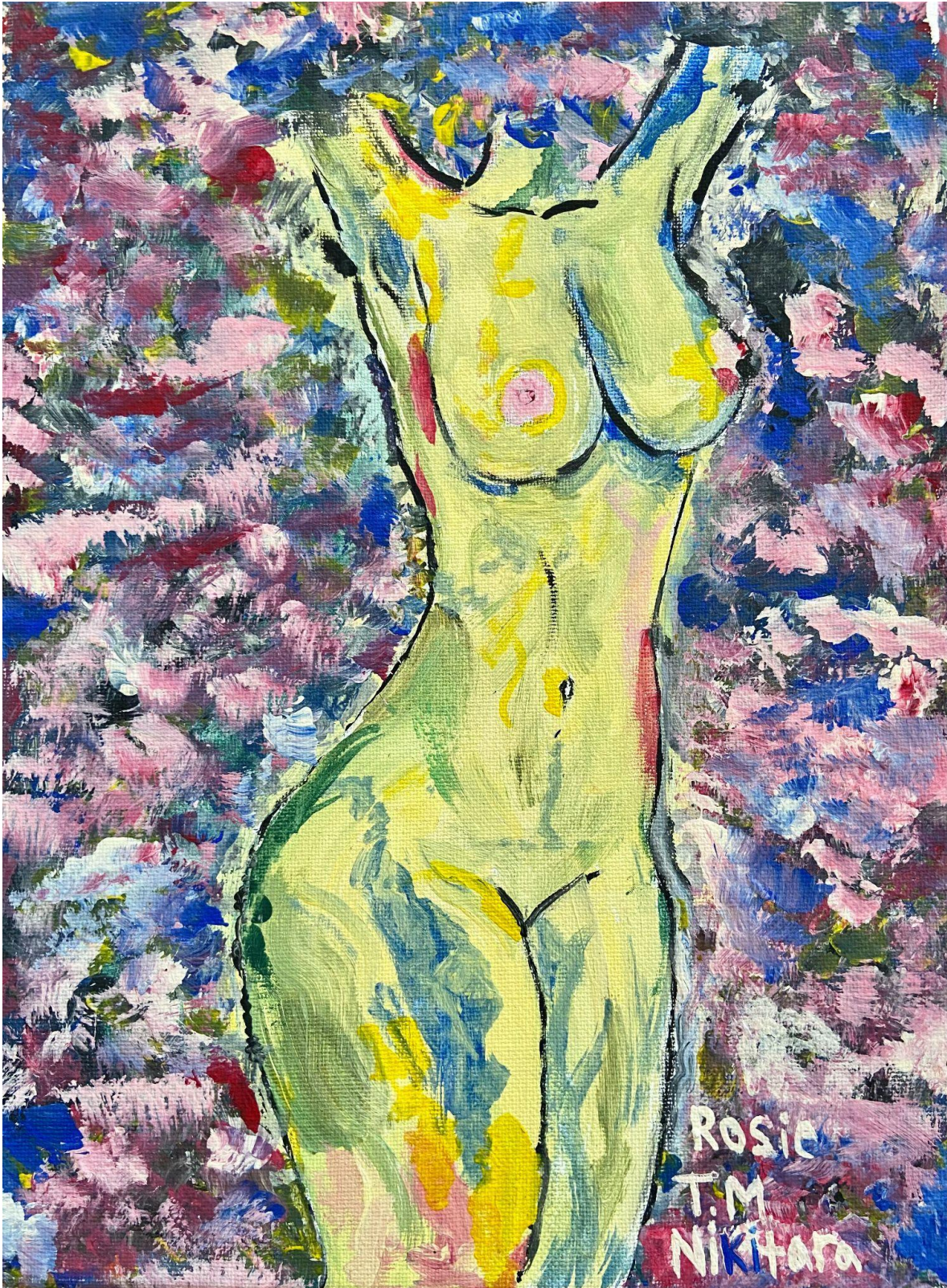
(top) Andrew Whittick / Acrylic on paper
(bottom) Maya Hertsman / Acrylic on paper



Lilly Roy / Graphite on paper



Anonymous / Acrylic on paper



Rosie Triantafilia-Maria Nikitara / Acrylic paint on canvas



Lilly Roy / Graphite on desk

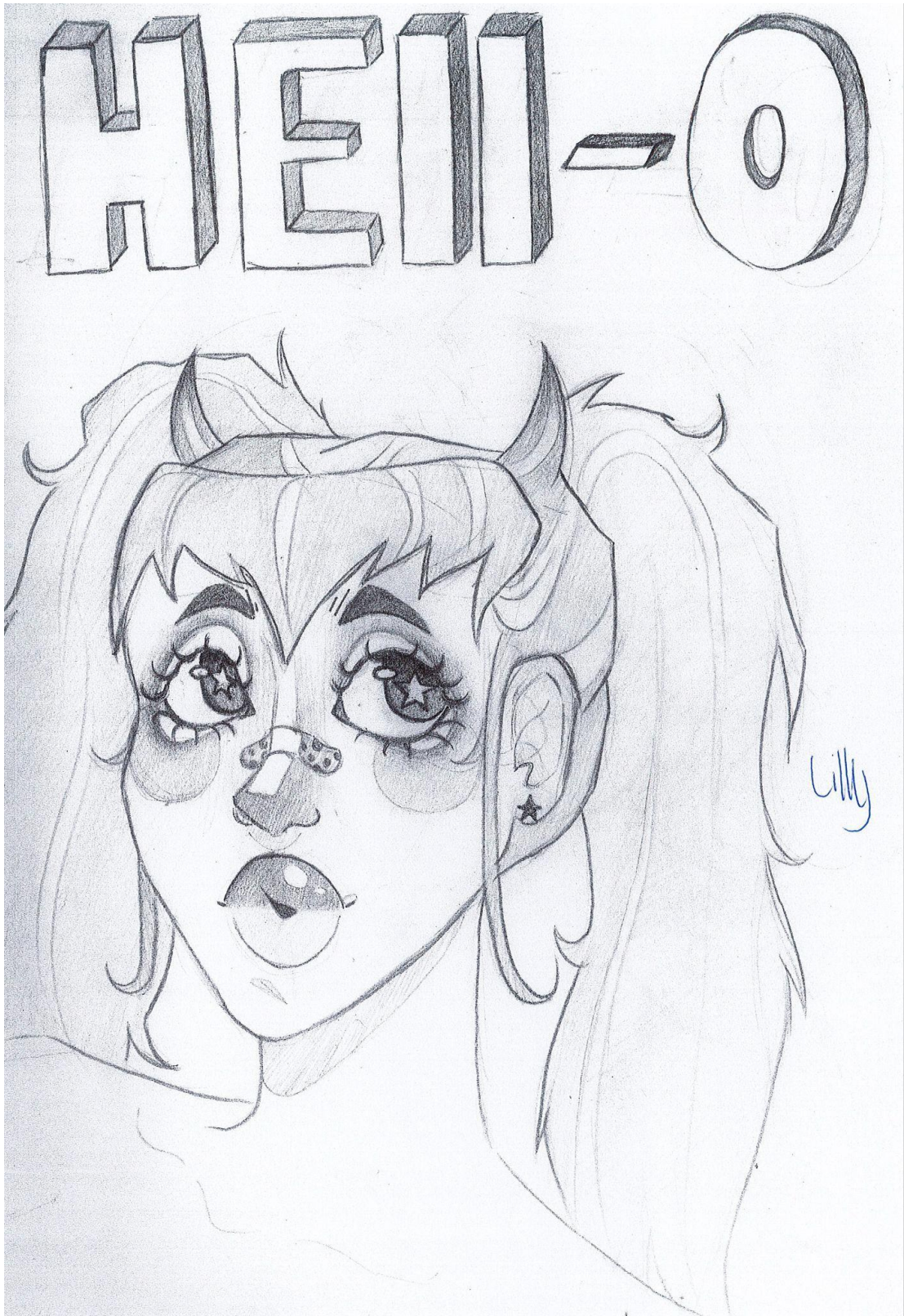


Freedom Quilt

Shaya Alfred, Samuel Awashish-Desbiens, Aaliyah Belfon-Campbell, Tishawn Brassard Regis,
Jordan Davis, Hunter Gault, Samuel Hall, Maya Hertsman, Heather Hardie, Jordan Narrainen
Hylton, Logan Roter



Finn Diamond / Perler Beads



Lilly Roy / Graphite on paper



Patrick / Logan Roter

Mixed media (plaster, cardboard, masking tape, styrofoam, acrylic paint, found objects)



THE HERMIT.

The Hermit (Tarot card) / Maya Hertsman / Pen and ink on paper



MF DOOM / Aiden Vaillant / Wood burning



Kenyon Awashish-Hunter / Graphite on paper



(top) Victoria Simionidis / Perler beads
Maya Hertsman / Clay sculpture



Aidan Vaillant / Mixed media (pencil, ink, marker on paper)



Aiden Vaillant / Mixed media (acrylic paint and marker on paper)



Lilly Roy / Graphite on paper



Yasmina Krsteski / Wood burning



(top) Mitski / Finn Diamond / Acrylic on paper
(bottom) Damien Anthony Masson-Ioanna



Anonymous / Acrylic on canvas



(top) Anonymous / Acrylic on canvas

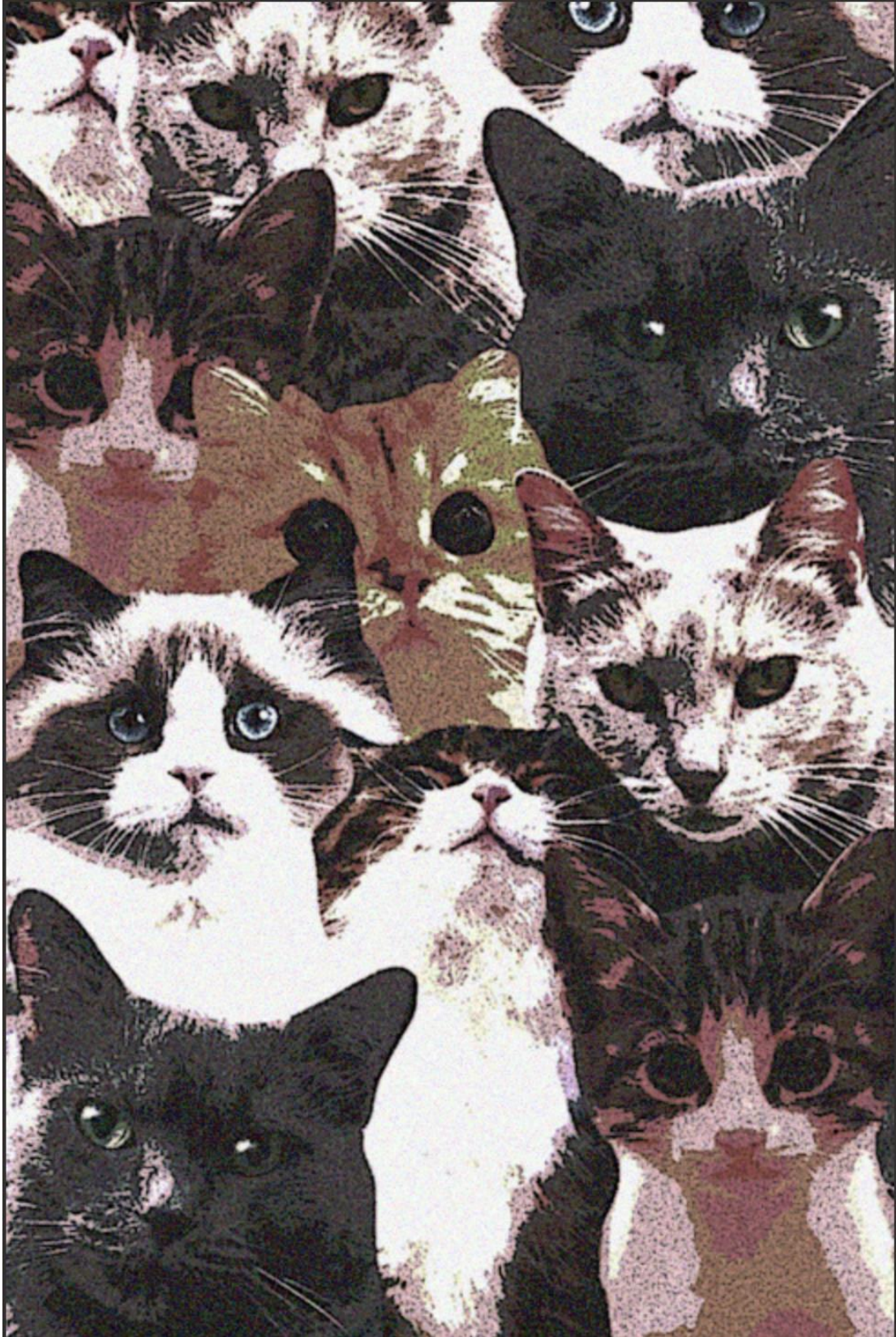
(bottom) Michelle Obama / Kierra Meloche / Marker, graphite, and collage on paper



(top) Malcolm X / Hal Cohen / Mixed media
(bottom) Childish Gambino / Lucas Brodeur / Mixed media



Lilly Roy / Graphite on paper



Aiden Vaillant / Digital collage



(top) Alex Graziani / Wood burning and ink
(bottom) Jai'Quan Lawrence-Williams / Wood burning



Jai'Quan Lawrence-Williams / Wood burning and ink



(top) Tiana-Jade Valliant / Cyanotype photography
(bottom) Matteo Biucchi / Wood burning and ink



Mason Martineau / Wood burning



Jai'Quan Lawrence-Williams
Mixed media structure (beads, paper, craft sticks, string, paint, tin foil, tape)

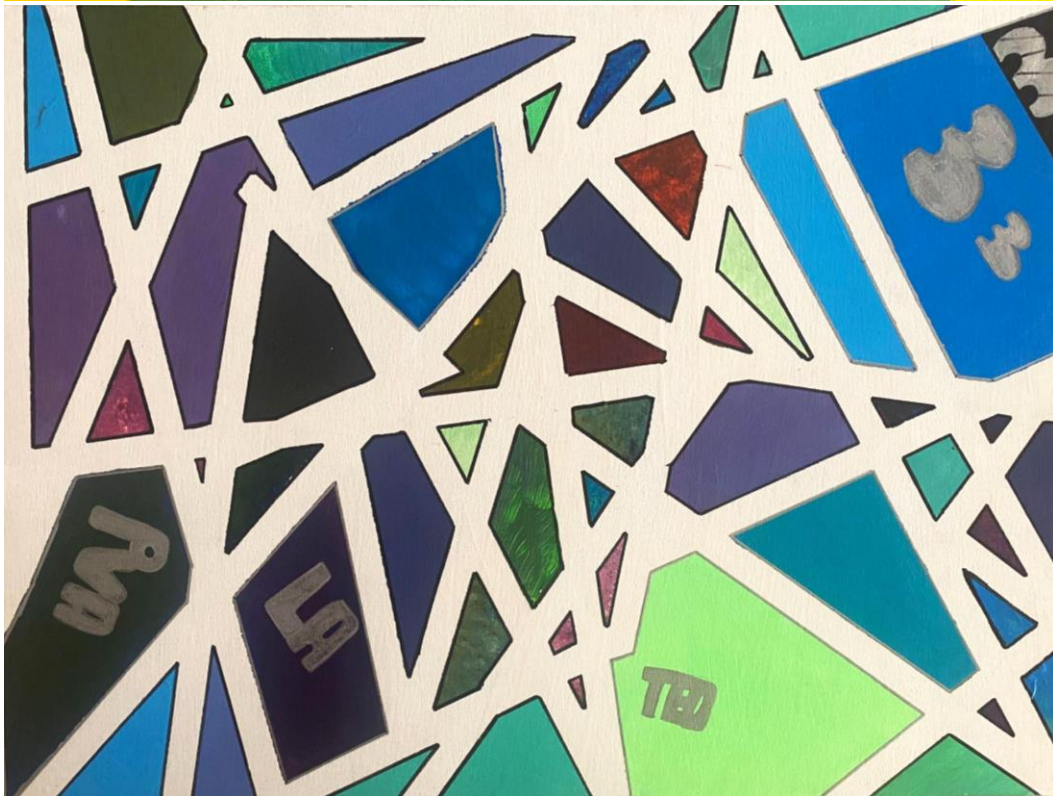


(top) Khamye Inniss / Wood burning and ink
(bottom) Mason Martineau / Paint and ink on canvas

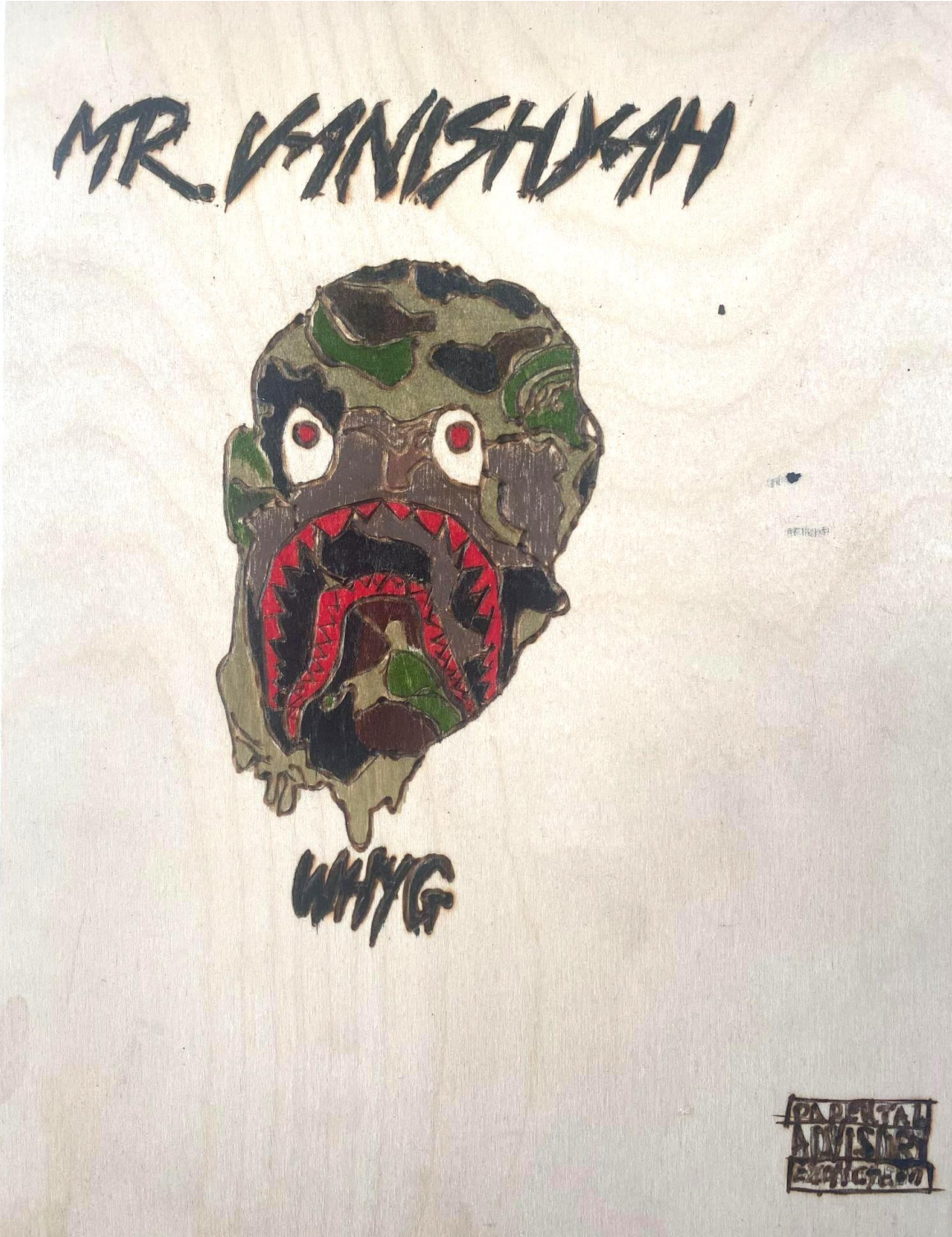


Matteo Biucchi

Mixed media structure (pencils, crayons, craft sticks, pipe cleaners, glue)



(top) Malakai Roach / Paint and ink on canvas
(bottom) Matteo Biucchi / Paint and ink on canvas



Matthew Manni / Wood burning and pencil crayon



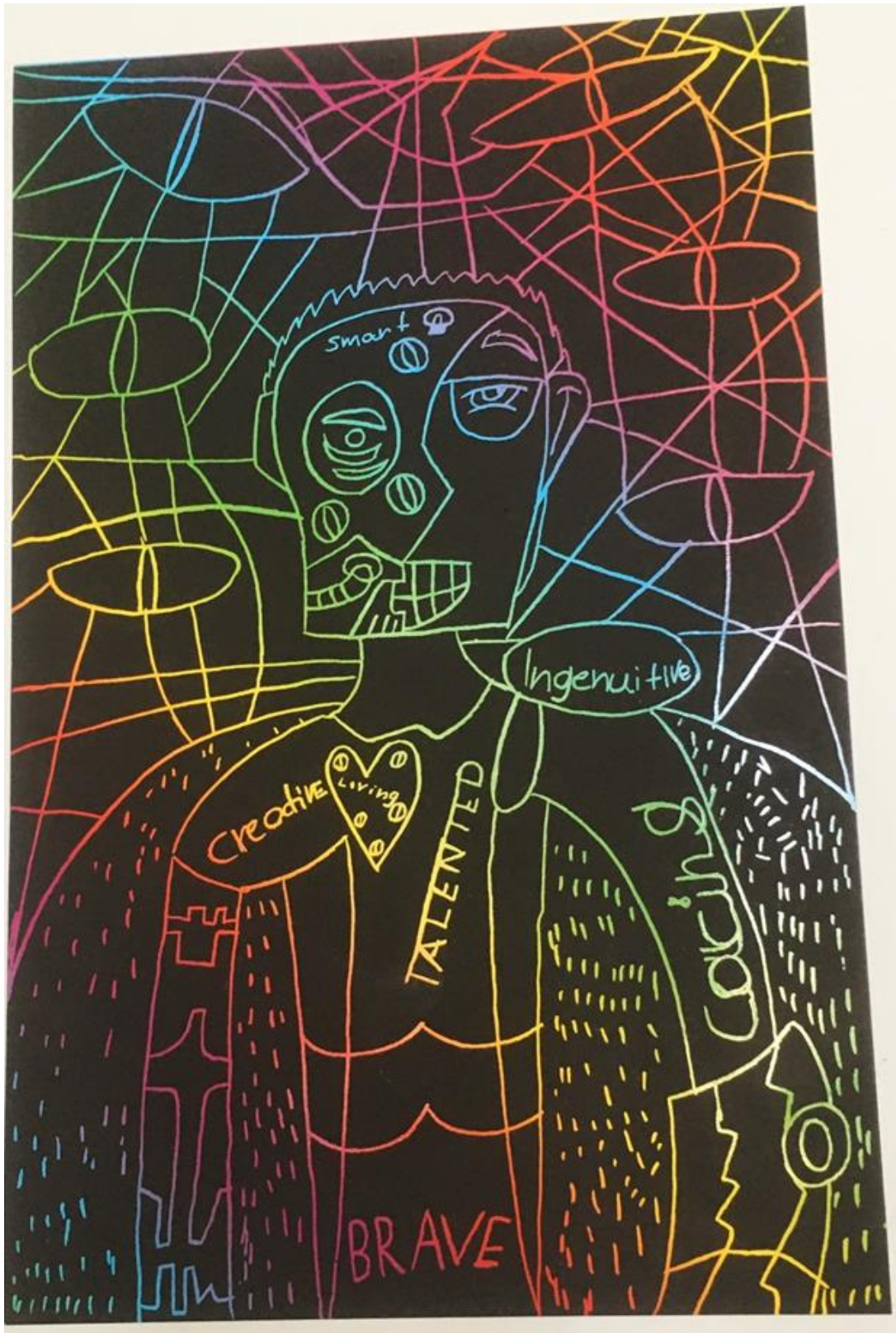
Dylan Lemieux / Wood burning



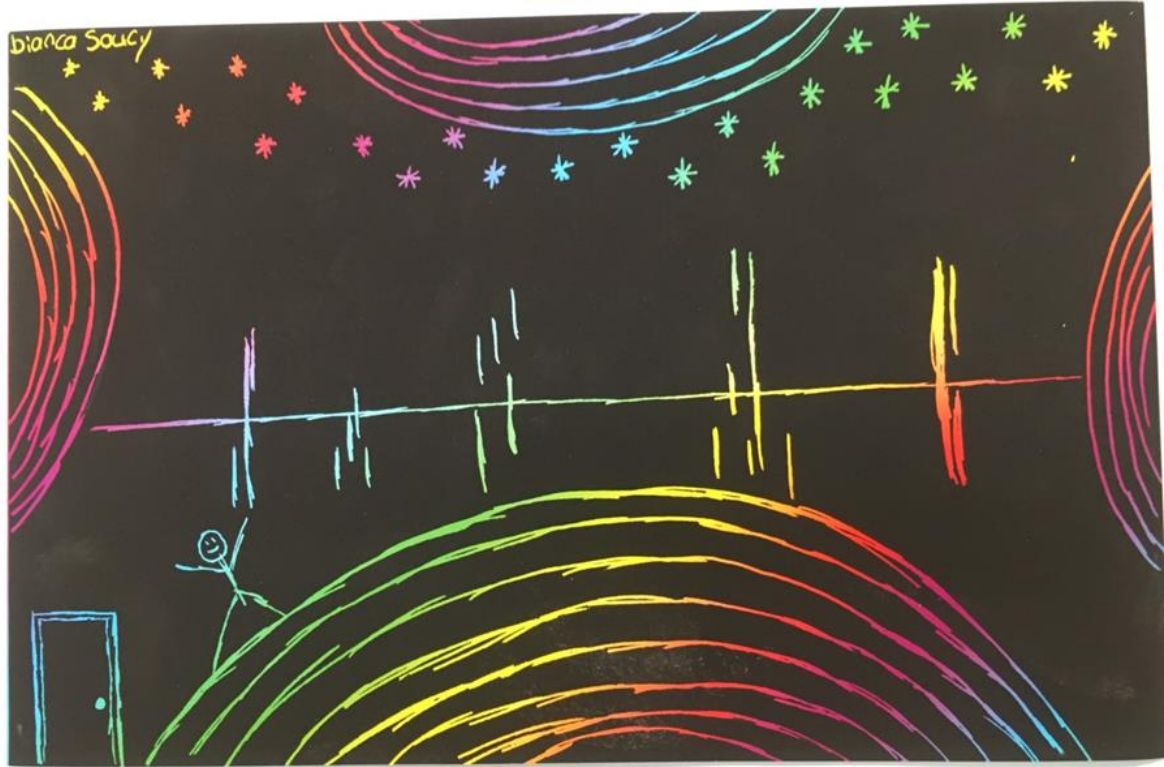
(top) Sage Cormier / Wood burning and ink
(bottom) Shai Zrihen / Wood burning and ink



Sage Cormier / Wood burning and ink



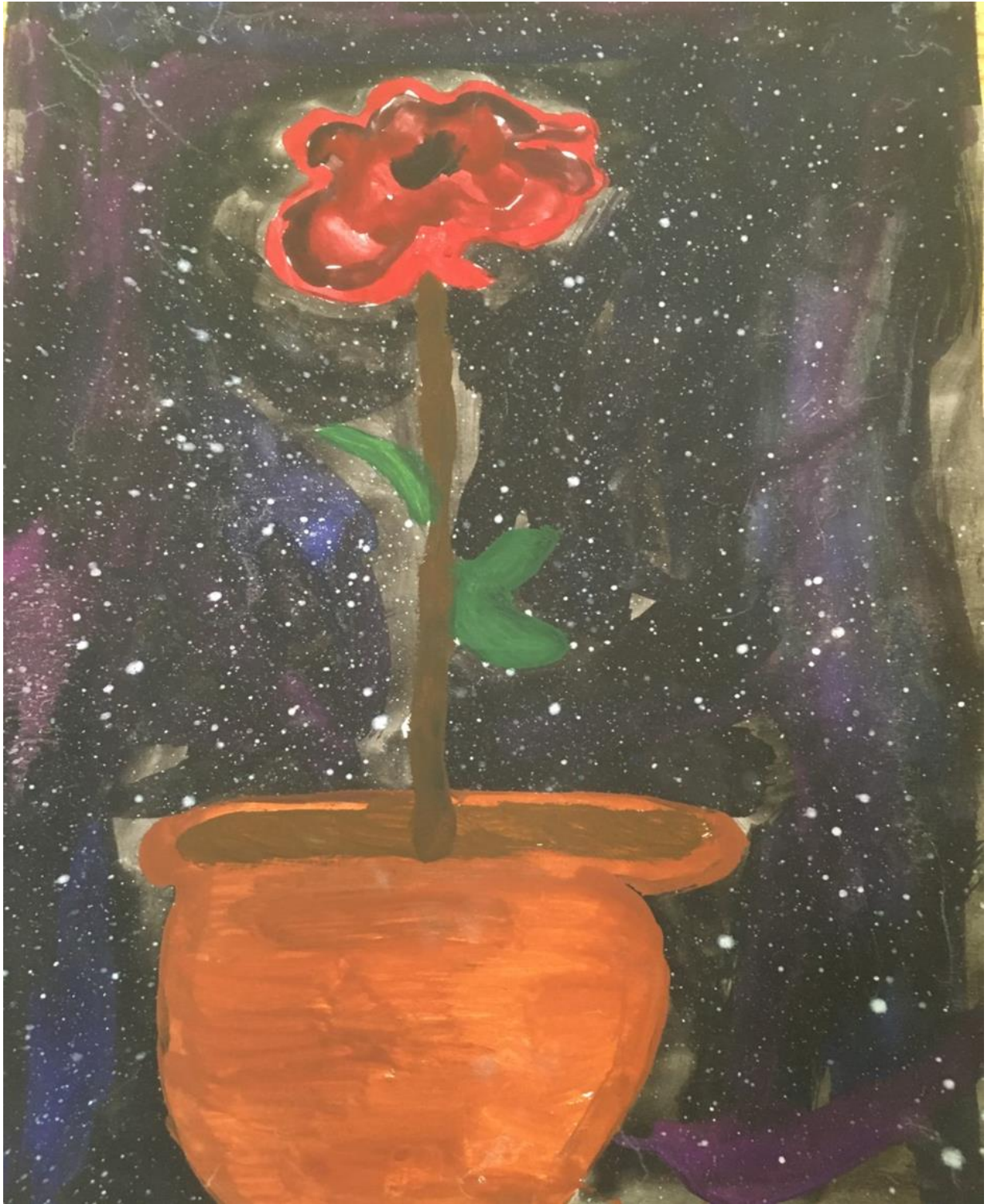
Efecan Kavvouras / Scratch art on acetate



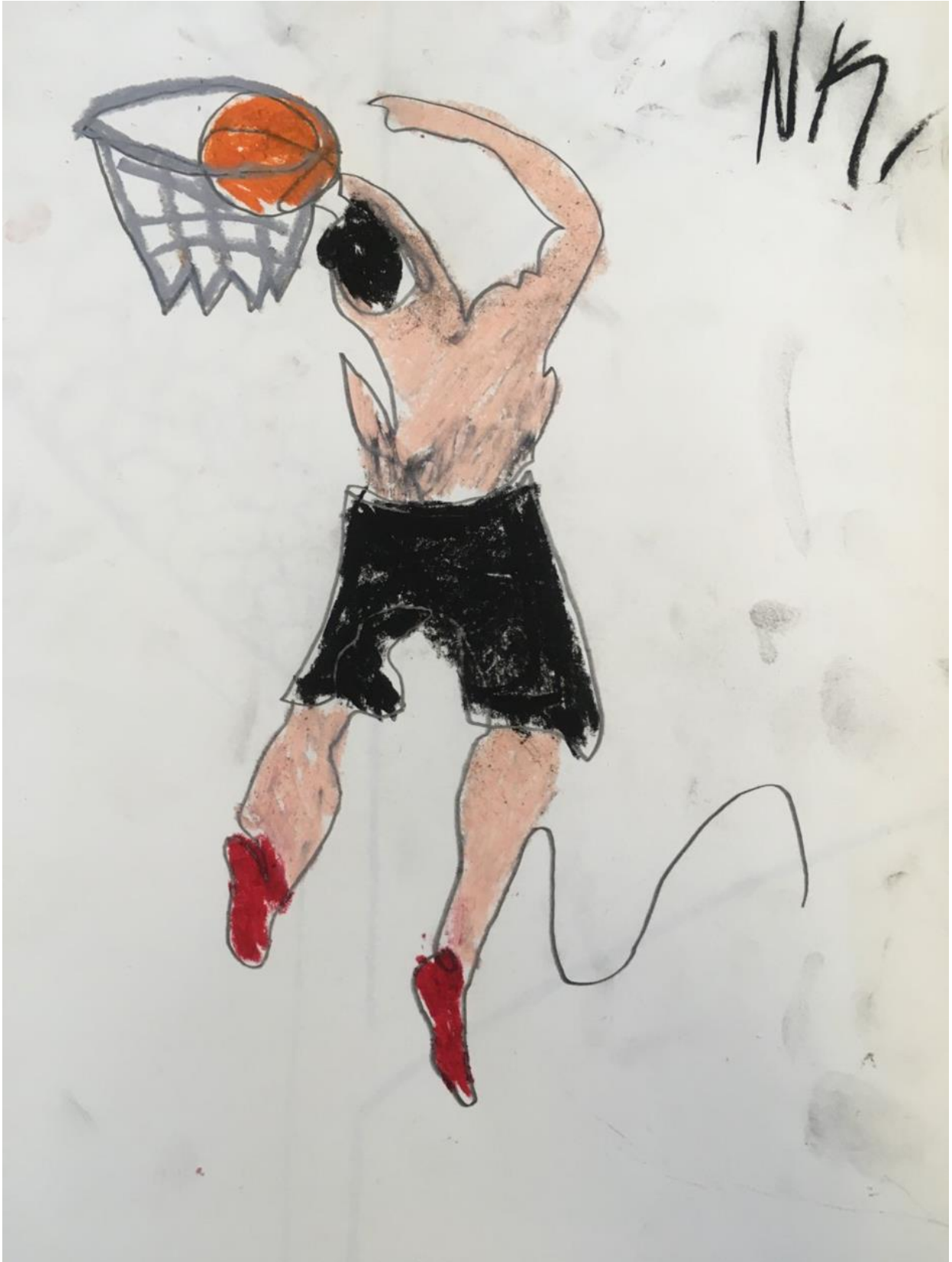
(top) Bianca Soucy / Scratch art on acetate
(bottom) Jonathan Murray Genetu / Scratch art on acetate



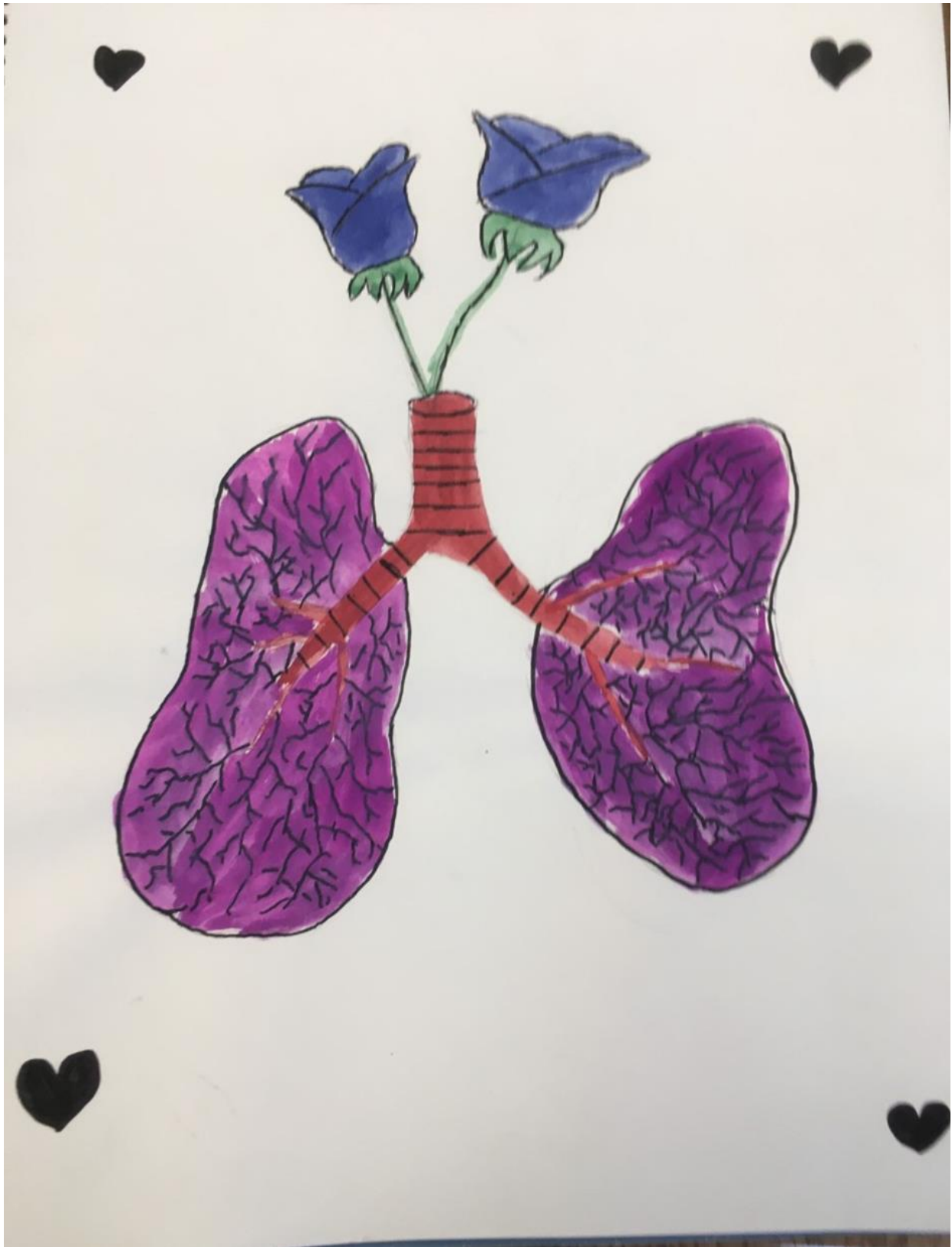
(top) Nathan Kulczycki McIntyre / Scratch art on acetate
(bottom) Damien Anthony Masson-Ioanna / Paint on paper



Bianca Soucy / Paint on paper



Nathan Kulczycki McIntyre / Pastel on paper



Victoria Silva / Paint on paper