



Aspirations 2021

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A Literary and Arts Journal for
Mercer County Area
High School Students

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Aspirations 2021, a literary magazine published by Mercer County Community College, is proud to celebrate and present the talents of area high school students. For decades, the literary and visual works collected in *Aspirations* have showcased students' hopes, dilemmas, questions, and insights. This year, once again, the creativity within these pages helps us see both the familiar with renewed attention and the unfamiliar with a satisfying sense of recognition.

A distinguished panel selected these works from hundreds of entries. For their discerning sensibilities and commitment to the students in this area, the following teachers and artists have earned the appreciation of this community:

Jacqueline Vogtman	Mercer County Community College
Carol Bork	Mercer County Community College
Ed Carmien	Mercer County Community College
Sharmila Sen	Mercer County Community College
Lucas Kelly	Mercer County Community College
Kerri O'Neill	Mercer County Community College
Yevgeniy Fiks	Mercer County Community College

Still others have contributed to this publication in important ways. We would like to thank the parents, friends, family, and teachers who supported the development of our writers and artists. Thanks go to MCCC President Jianping Wang and our Vice President for Academic Affairs Dr. Robert Schreyer for their support; to Francis Paixão and Daniel Migliaccio in Mercer's Publications Office for their work designing and laying out this journal; to Brad Kent for setting up and maintaining the *Aspirations* web page; and to Shana Burnett for the dependable and effective way she managed submissions, contact with schools, and the many details of the selection, editing and proofing process. Finally, I want to thank Dr. Dylan Wolfe, Interim Dean of Liberal Arts, for his generous help to me and his coordination of all phases of this publication project. His commitment to the arts makes projects such as this one possible.

Nicole Homer
Associate Professor of English and Editor, *Aspirations 2021*
Mercer County Community College

Cover Art

Drashti Patel
Hightstown High School
Grade 12

Drashti is an artist who likes to do photography as well. She likes to represent her culture using her art skills.

Life In Quarantine



Lina Abtouche

Ewing High School
Grade 10

Lina Abtouche is an avid reader and loves to write poetry. She leads an activism club at her school that promotes change in her community. As a result, she uses her words to make an impact.

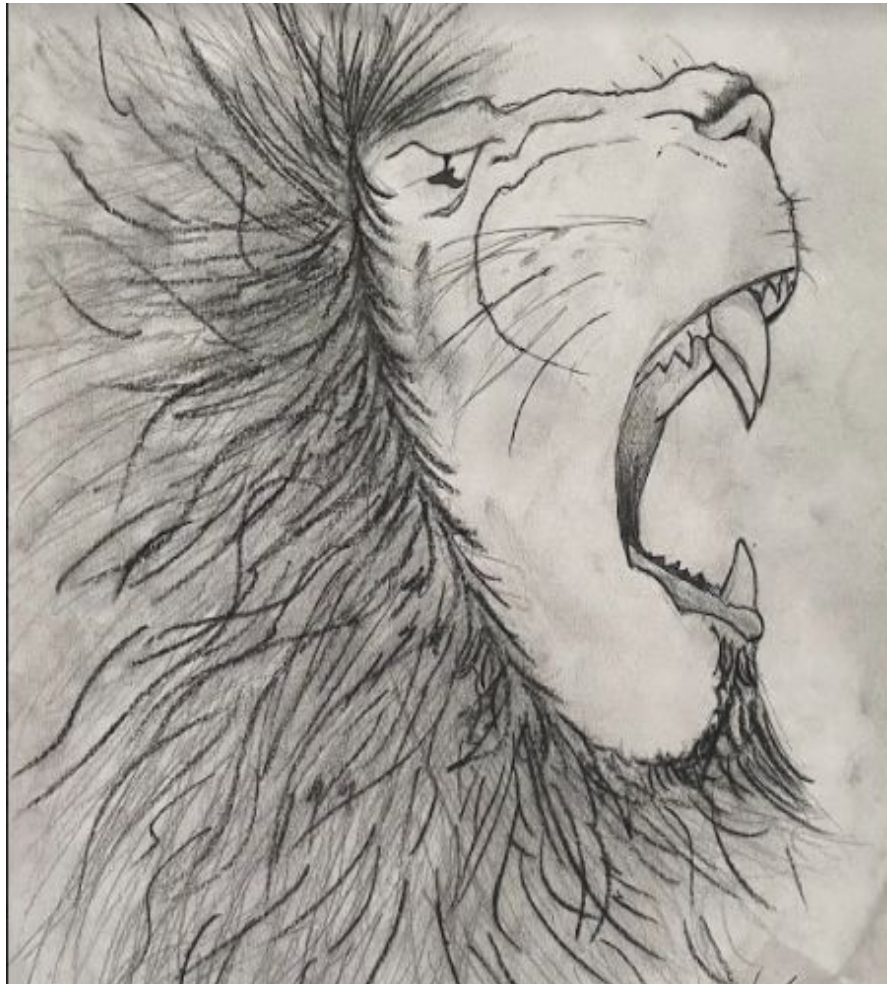
Fly

in a field, one looks at the beauty, not sorrow
flowers billow in the wind, birds fly up above
a time to think about the morrow
you must feel without the regret of love
oh, what splendor you have bestowed upon us, the calm of thee
in a field by which holds so much- hidden
it is only I, visible, laying down in the middle of liberty
I breathe again, time after time- dawn has risen
i pray that this freedom will forever last
remembering the times when love was an illusion
the night sky, dark and grim has finally cast
one starts to see the lights in the depths of seclusion
now I will go into the world on my own
finally, the independence I had failed to have grown

Brayan Alvarez

Hightstown High School
Grade 10

Brayan believes that lions represent the type of person they are. They have been hurt and injured many times, emotionally or physically, but they always manage to stand back on their feet and work harder than before to be both physically and mentally strong.

A True King

Isabella Ames
Hightstown High School
Grade 12

Isabella is a high school senior who enjoys art, specifically drawing and painting.

Tranquility



Lina Abtouche

Begin

I sat there in void, contemplating my decision of walking away
tears from memories of pain trickle down to mix with the puddles
my words have no effect on them- there is always a price to pay
a blinding light shines ahead bringing my thoughts to a muddle
I look around at the commotion of people running
why wasn't I doing the same? I could have been freed.
remember the times when one was cunning
dread the orders you must heed
love, i learned over time, was ostensible
they said such words under jest and a manipulative facade
after we fell, we came back in union- even when reprehensible
when the long, tireless nights came, I went back- a simple nod.
As I soon realized, being alone is the greatest fear within
yet, it is worse to be belittled into a corner where you may not begin

Samaria Banks
Ewing High School
Grade 11

Samaria Banks likes to use art and writing to express her feelings. She likes to use poetry and art as a way to express her feelings about current events and issues. She enjoys soccer and theatre.

Perspective



Samaria Banks

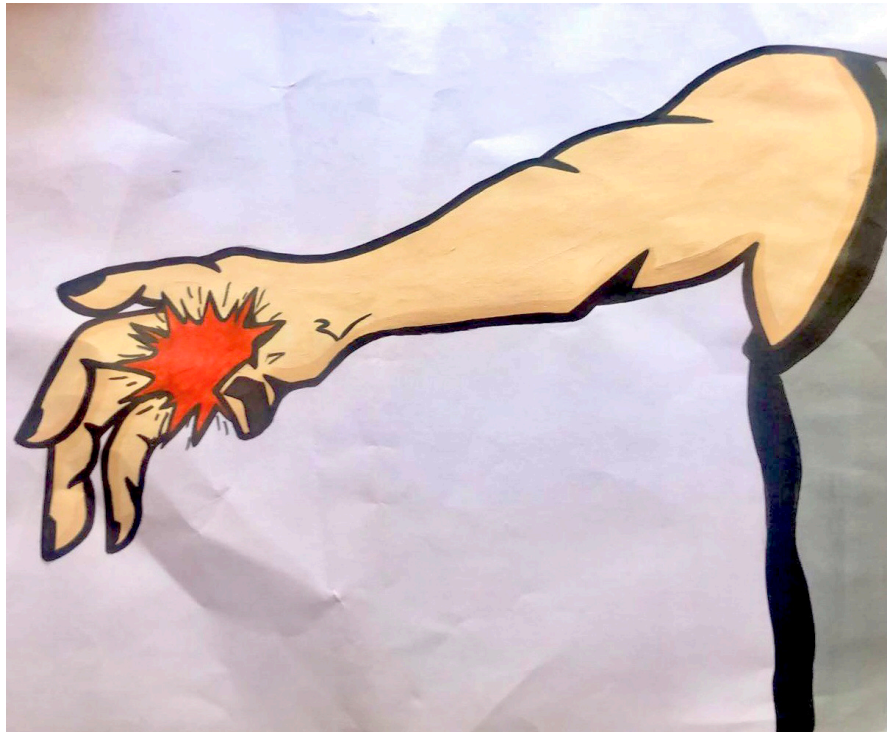
Politics

When asked for this piece I was told to write something political.
Which is indeed quite typical,
but still, something I've decided to ridicule.
Politics, am I right?
You want me to explain how I feel about
guns or get "real".
What about the people without meals?
The people who have to face their biggest fears.
Being separated from their families
when just trying to get out of a country trying to live a better life.
The women who walk the streets with a fear of being beat,
or the black men who can't even trust the police.
To call these things and more a political piece
is exactly why we say your skin gives you a life of peace.

Kristina Cardoso
Hightstown High School
Grade 9

This painting is a picture of the character Katsuki Bakugou, from the show and manga *My Hero Academia*. Kristina associates herself with this character, both personally and morally.

Katsuki Bakugou; (Nitroglycerin explosion)



Samaria Banks

The Color Theory

Colors are pretty,
Right?
When someone asks my favorite color,
I hesitate
There are no favorites.
There is just color.

Of course, you always have to pick,
No one expects you to have a breakdown about color.
So, you say pink, or blue or any other simple color.
But truthfully color is just an experience.
There is no reason for certain colors to be better.

Colors are pretty.
Color is everywhere.
It's odd how food can equal color,
When describing things, they go hand in hand.
Like when random people say, what's your color?
And they debate what food you match with,

She's caramel.
No, light chocolate.
Too light.
Too dark.
Not enough chocolate to be light chocolate!
Well, it's not white chocolate!

Caramel can't be her it's me!

What if i was a strawberry,
Or a peach?
I could be a watermelon.
Colors should be appreciated.
Colors are pretty.

Dhruv Chaudhari
Hightstown High School
Grade 11

Dhruv Chaudhari is a student at Hightstown. He likes to draw in his free time.

Masks Needed



Madelyn Cruz
Ewing High School
Grade 12

Madelyn is an artistic student, who loves to draw and paint. Her favorite subject to draw are animals. She also enjoys writing about topics she's passionate about such as true crime.

Rainforest



Mariz Espiritu
Hightstown High School
Grade 10

Mariz enjoys both illustrating and writing, loves art in all forms, and would like to pursue a career in storyboarding or character design in the future.

Normal Activities for Children



Mariangel Graterol
Hightstown High School
Grade 12

Mariangel loves to draw animals like that cute puppy and also the wonders of nature. She relaxes and enjoys herself while doing it.

Cute Puppy



Madelyn Cruz

American Dream

What a country,
full of opportunities, full of freedoms, full of *hate*.

Americans who receive immigrants with hate,
Americans who receive immigrants with love.
Which one is it?
To those who accept them and help them, thank you.
But if you spread hate to them, why?

Why make them feel unwanted?
Why make them feel like they don't belong?

All they want is to succeed,
To have the American dream.
To be able to provide for their families,
To give them a better life.

They strive to be an American,
Never forgetting where they came from...
Always celebrating their roots.

So America,
Treat them like people.
Like they belong in this country,
Because they do...
They belong *here*.

In the *United* States of America.

Kayla Ewell

Ewing High School

Grade 12

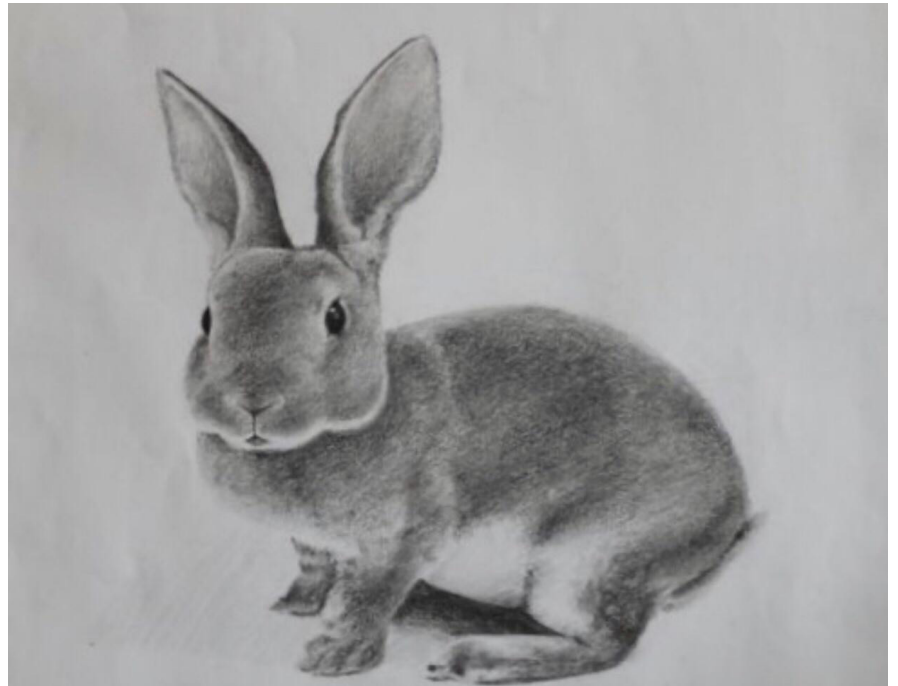
Kayla Ewell is a high school senior, she enjoys writing, and she also enjoys skateboarding in her free time. She's a volunteer at a local skate park. She shares her work with the hope that others will too.

Outer Darkness

Every sadness in the world can't be contained, that's why we cry. We cry at home, at school, at work, in stores, any possible place you can shed a tear if needed. In this case, I didn't cry at her funeral. As we stood outside the church in the rain I remember the abundance of things she did over the weeks. As I recall, she began living on her own from a young age. It started with work, she had a job as young as fourteen working under the table for the local pizza shop, she wasn't paid that much but she saved everything she earned unless she desperately needed to spend it. She'd buy necessities; food, clothes, sanitary products, of course, that was only if her mother wasn't capable of providing for her in those times. The second job she acquired she began to earn more money... by this time she was legally able to have one and she was able to work part-time after school which she hardly attended and nobody ever seemed to question her appearance so that played into her favor. She would show up at times, mainly on days when there was a quiz or a test and god knows how she was notified on it or how she even managed to pass if she didn't know the material being learned. But then again, nobody questioned the mystery of this particular girl. I thought back to the time when watched her from my car as she crossed the street with the black umbrella and entered a shop, she was in there for a while and when she left she had a paper bag full of items that she would need to get herself through the week, that was the last time she would enter the shop... she didn't know that though. She moved in a rush, fumbling to keep hold of the bag and umbrella as she walked across the street following the traffic patterns and moving with the crowd of lifeless people that followed. She was careful while walking home to make sure nobody followed. Living on her own at the age of 16 was risky. Who knew what she was doing with her time... well I know what she's doing, but nobody else did. She continued forward until eventually, she was out of my vision. I then drove continuing to follow until I reached her residency, which she was already inside. A couple of weeks had passed since she began living alone and she began to build bonds and make friends, based on her previous social patterns I found that new. Her new friends were looked at most five years older than her, but who says friendship has any age limit, they're just more people to attend her funeral. And that's exactly what they did. We stood in the church blacked out in our drenched attire going to look at the body one by one, walking up to the casket to witness the lifeless, yet soulful human. It was a shame what happened, but I wasn't guilty, or at least I didn't feel it yet. That's what I thought to myself as I looked over her body, the life I took, and the body that remains.

Mariangel Graterol

“The little rabbit”



Brandon Guapinula
Hightstown High School
Grade 10

Infinite Assumptions

Brandon’s artwork shows just one person he asks someone to assume who the person is. This relates to Brandon’s life, many people have assumed him to be many things but assumptions end up being wrong.

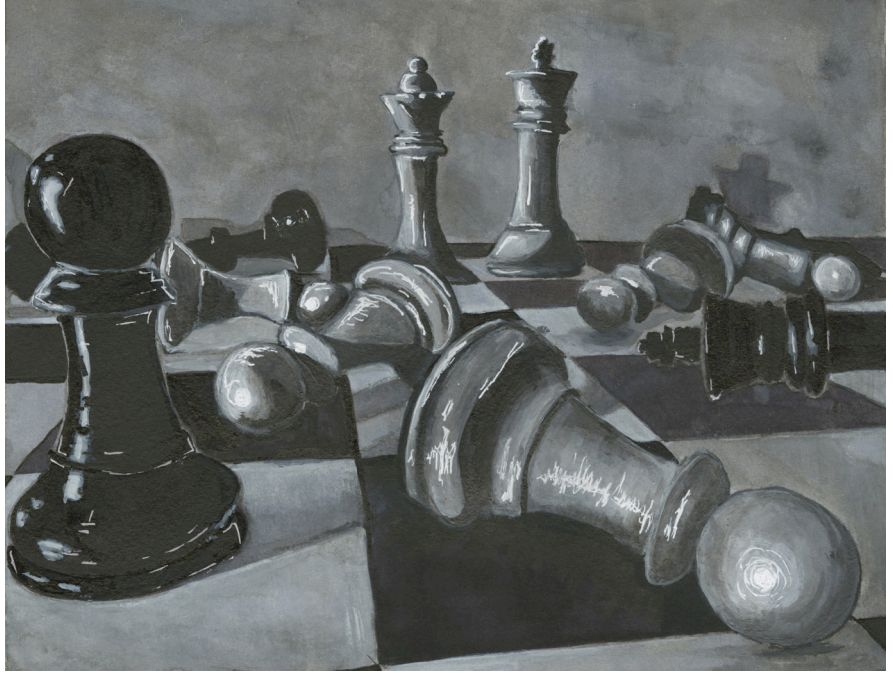


Dylan Kalina

Hopewell Valley Central High School
Grade 10

Dylan Kalina is a student at Hopewell Valley Central High School. Her interests include fine arts as well as performing arts. She currently works in stage crew for her school plays and musicals in the Audio and Scenic departments. Her hobbies also include reading and playing the drums.

Allegiance

**Angie Kramer**

Hightstown High School
Grade 12

Angie Kramer loves spending time at the beach. She captured this image of an approaching storm while on vacation.

Approaching Storm



Kayla Ewell

Master Illusionist

It's merely a social construct, a man-made ideal to help us humans get through day to day tasks. It's frustrating how much of a grip it has within our hearts and minds that we focus so much on what's left of it and not what we spend doing with it. It's everywhere, wherever you look and whenever you look a time will be displayed and its only use is to control our lives... what if we disconnected ourselves from time, but then where would be? Time will tell us oh well you have to be at practice in an hour, it'll also tell you one of your beloved family members is due to pass in 4 days. Even the moon and the sun are controlled by this so-called "Time". The sun is due to set at 7:48 pm and due to rise at 6:32 am. "What time is it now?" I ask myself. What's left to do with today... can't you do it tomorrow? No. Well, why not? Well because I simply don't have "Time". Time is what we tick on. An illusion so profound and woven into the mentality of humans that it's latched itself on like a soul-sucking leech to determine how we choose to spend our days. Our souls are so far gone that there is no recovery, we are lost to this unlogical yet perfect form of control. Everything becomes more simple, clear, and easy when time is around. Time can cause panic when we aren't sure how much is left. It's almost humoring... if I were time I'd laugh in the faces of those who were concerned about how much of me is left rather than doing what they can with it. The eternal imprisonment we have to time is astonishing. And as a human race we will never know when it ends... yet day by day we fall deeper and deeper into its grasp. We need time, time doesn't need us. Time will no longer exist in a world that is no longer in need of it.

Natalia Delgado

Monroe Township High School

Grade 11

Natalia Delgado is a Junior at Monroe Township High School. This is her first year in the United States. She enjoys writing, reading, and visiting different places. In the future, she hopes to pursue a career in science.

Todo Verde

“Todo verde” was the place I’d go to every week with my friends. Mafer, Mika and me would spend hours on end carefully looking for things we thought would fit our “style,” although our style was based off of tv stars who bought high end brands. The store was in our town, small but inviting, bright and tacky green walls, and plants everywhere as if imitating a garden, but the cheap version. Initially it started off as an eco-friendly thrift shop that sold second hand clothing, but eventually it turned to the iconic shop of town. The cashier, Vicky, was this nice looking 20 year old who would never say a thing other than our total to pay. Mika, being the bubbly person she was, would always try to make friends with Vicky, but she never budged. I guess she didn’t like teens. As we were scanning through the racks of clothing, my eyes almost popped out of my skull when I saw this big black t-shirt that said “Maná”. I almost couldn’t believe someone would throw away such a treasure. I showed my friends the shirt, but they had no clue who the band was. I felt so connected to it, as it was the band my dad made me grow up listening to. It had this distinctive smell of its previous owner, but for some reason it made me feel even more attached to it. Maybe the person wore it to a concert. The shirt could have so many memories on it. How many laughs happened while wearing it? And without a doubt I took it, excited to fill it with many more memories and laughs.

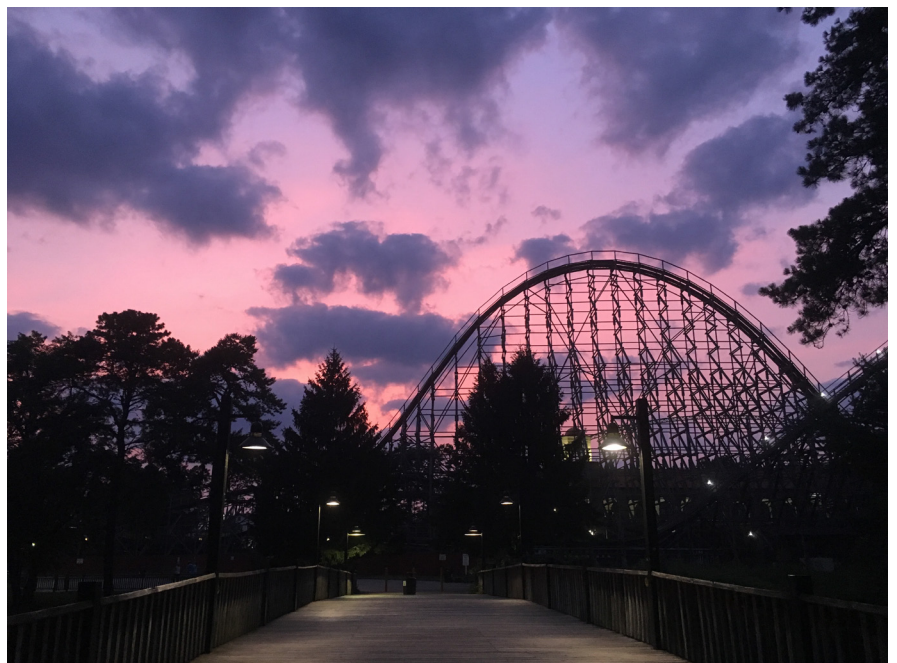
Skyler LaFisca

Allentown High School

Grade 11

Skyler LaFisca loves drawing, taking pictures, and has a strong passion for writing. She has always been very creative ever since she was a little girl. Throughout the years, her love for the arts has shown through her efforts in her work.

The Cotton Candy Sky



Elizabeth Mahler
Hightstown High School
Grade 11

Elizabeth Mahler enjoys beautiful landscapes. She often takes photos of landscapes and nature on family vacations.

Layers of Land



Kaitlyn Kuchinski
Hopewell Valley Central High School
Grade 10

Kaitlyn is a sophomore at Hopewell Valley Central High School. She continually works to improve her writing and can otherwise be found doing homework or watching British baking shows.

In Summertime

Her legs dangled from the wooden dock,
the piercing sunset painted on a canvas of rippling sea.

“Always so soon,” she whispered
her words into the breeze.

Little fish, like streaks of lightning,
darted back and forth in translucent waters,
ran in circles in the dark, beyond,
So desperate for *something*-
left, lost,
as the night consumed the waves.

She watched, a sentinel, while
that plague of starless midnight
seeped into the sky,
and the flashes of orange faded,
beneath the ever-flowing tide.

Her eyes slowly closed.

She listened as the cold, briny water
lapped against the splintered post,
steady and unceasing...

Elizabeth Mahler

Stairway to Heaven



Kayla Makarowitz
Hightstown High School
Grade 10

Kayla Makarowitz loves to paint so she illustrated a drawing of her painting in her gallery room.

The Magic of a Paintbrush



Kaitlyn Kuchinski

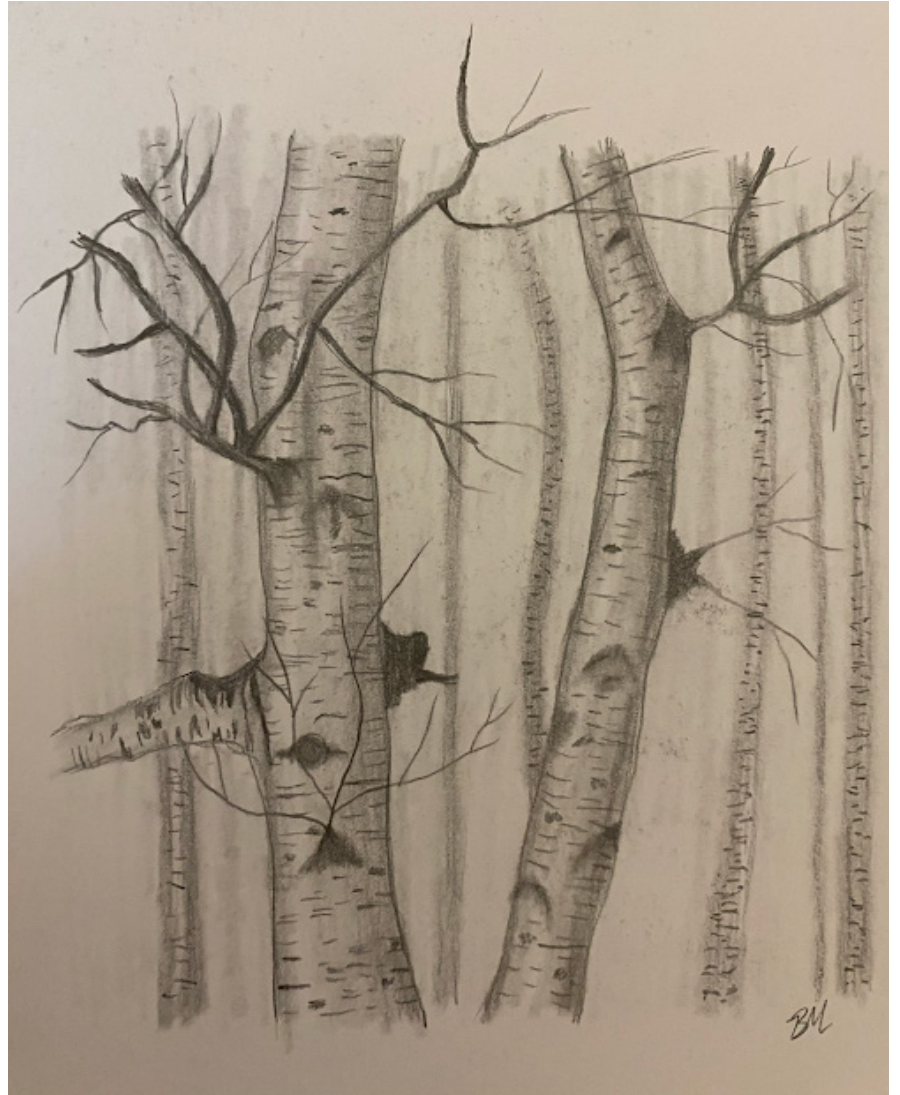
Paint Sample M450-7

My bookmark is falling apart. It has lost that paint-sample-stiffness and the rough smoothness that scrapes against the fingers. It caves in on itself like a wave crashing, ever so slowly. On one side, a small chunk is lost as though bitten off, residing now somewhere on the ground between this room in Pennington and the sunny streets of Seaside Park and wherever the wind could take a little scrap of color, leaving the missing edge to reveal frayed white paper below. In truth, though, I like the way the white paper and creases cut through that deep sea green. By now, the text is barely visible: “Marquee, Beta Fish,” it says, and in the smaller script below, “M450-7.” There is such a cozy familiarity to its imperfections, one that gives the sense of a journey, an adventure, and good memories. It transports me into the feeling of fascination, of soaking in the intricacies of worldbuilding and of language, into an echo of the gripping need to know what happens next, and into hours well spent, sinking into a soft pillow with my legs wrapped in blankets and smelling the Barnes-and-Noble new-ness on each of the thousand crisp pages. And yet, it is something else, too. It seems that reading more and more has opened up a thousand dark wood doors in a vast hallway, beckoning me to glance down both ways to where it blurs in the distance, to savor the golden lights overflowing from the lanterns, and to step through. Holding this bookmark transports me into the scribbling of ideas, so as not to be forgotten, in Expo marker on a whiteboard and into that feeling of being frozen in place, hearing children shouting and the breeze in my ear and the gurgling of water beneath the dock all woven together in an uncanny harmony. My bookmark has been a companion as I’ve changed and begun to seek understanding more and more. It holds such immense value to me, a story told in its creases and dulled edges and the way the little silver bear imprinted on the corner is always trekking onwards through arctic winds. The realness, the memories, and the companionship, the ability to share something so profound to me yet so rarely let through, are a true delight.

Breanna Miller
Hightstown High School
Grade 11

Breanna enjoys drawing and art as a way to express herself. She is inspired by the things she sees around her and what she experiences.

Winter Forest



Breanna Miller

Bruiser



Jose Landaverde
Hightstown High School
Grade 10

This poem was written by Jose Landaverde during his 8th-grade year and he rediscovered it earlier this year. It is based on Jose's passion for American football.

Life's a Season

It ain't no lie, life's a season
Each week's a different opponent
Week 1: You vs. Death of a childhood
Week 5: You vs. Bullies
Week 12: You vs. College
Wildcard: You vs. Marriage
Divisional: You vs. Parenthood
American Championship: You vs. Retirement
But the most feared of all
Superbowl: You vs. You
Never underestimate it
Because it ain't no lie
Life's a season of judgment

Anthony Orlando
Hightstown High School

Anthony Orlando likes to travel the country. He likes to spend his time outdoors.

Captain's Way Home



Takai Lane
Ewing High School
Grade 11

Takai likes to watch anime a lot during the week and gets his fair share of video games in as well.

Absence

It might've happened before I was born, that's ok
I don't want to even ask what motivated you to do whatever it was that landed you in jail.

Sadness is what I felt when I couldn't see my father whenever I wanted.
Sadness is what I felt when I couldn't see my father attend the parent teacher conference

Sadness is what I felt visiting you and seeing you come out in that same tan suit every other Saturday only for us to spend, what?
An hour together before you go back through those doors and I go back to my fatherless home.

I mean, I'm glad you're home now,
but those were a couple years that could've been filled with happiness and joy, only if you didn't do whatever it was you did.

Drashti Patel

Walking In Culture



Maddie Marsola
Ewing High School
Grade 10

Maddie Marsola is a 15-year-old who has been writing in her free time since elementary school. She also enjoys listening to music and talking to her friends.

The Liar and Me

am i as ugly as the liar says?
no. i know not to believe it
yet i am afraid of the mirror on my own wall.

the liar told me all about love
and how beautiful it is
for everyone else.

the liar told me to kill myself
as if i hadn't already tried.
what makes it think i will be stronger this time?
the answer is hope, and for once, hope is dark, evil, bloodthirsty.

the liar wants me dead almost as badly as i do.
i wait for it to strike
but it never will
because the liar is good at its job
and i am bad at mine.

Maddie Marsola

Absolutely Mine

Maybe it was wrapped in a plume of smoke
That came from that cigarette
Which she puffed on to settle her nerves,
Or the scent of the spicy, simmering apple cider
Which he brewed thirty years ago
And sipped over the morning paper.
But the warm smells have since been stifled,
Replaced by my sun, my dust, my sweat.

Maybe she wore it to the park
And pulled the brown fabric tight around her shoulders
To keep out the crisp, whistling autumn breeze.
Maybe he brought it to work
And draped it over the chair all day instead of wearing it,
Content just to know that it was there if he needed it.
I wear it on my walks by the school
And it makes a punch in the face feel like a kiss on the cheek
And it feels like someone else is giving me a hug
That is absolutely mine.

Maddie Marsola

PIT

I always bring a pocket knife with me
When I walk outside at night
Because something pursues me.
The hair adorning his head is smooth and blond
But inside it is only a hollowed-out chamber.
His chest is broad and warm
But there is a cavity inside that has been set ablaze.
His eyes are blue just like the sky
But they are rotten like nightmares.
His veins are clogged with black mire,
His skin is thinner than paper,
He is tall and strong and short and weak,
And I hate that I am afraid of him.
I want to use my knife but he would swallow me
And cast me into the burning cavity
So I keep my hand in my pocket,
And walk to my dark home quickly.

Nishtha Patel

Hightstown High School
Grade 12

Nishtha Patel loves the rainy season as she was born in monsoon season. They like to race the droplets and see which one is faster than the other.

Rain Drops



Andres Pauta Nivicela
Hightstown High School
Grade 12

Andres loves to play in the snow. Even when alone, he still has the time of his life.

Clouds can be Picked Up



Deandre Morgan
Ewing High School
Grade 12

Deandre recently began to explore writing through her creative writing class and is enjoying it so far.

I am the Bully

You're ugly.
You're weird.
You're a b****,
No one cares about you.
These are the words I utter to you every single day.
I want my words to cut you deep, making you bleed.
But I have a secret... You wouldn't believe me if I told you,
I wear a mask everyday hiding how I actually feel.
I hate myself.
I only bully you to get away from the fact that you are better than me.
I don't want anyone to know how fragile I really am because then they will know that I break easily.
I'm just trying to fit in.

Deandre Morgan

Reality

Everyday I wake up to this *reality*, a *reality* where your own skin color can be used against you. A *reality* where your skin color can determine how you live and where you live. A *reality* where I have to always wonder, am I next?

Over and over I see people with my skin color get put in body bags from the people that are supposed to be on our side. They are supposed to be our protectors not killers, though they shoot at us like they're at a range practicing on targets. They shoot at our backs with no regret or emotion without even realizing what they have done. They didn't realize that the person they killed was an aunt, uncle, dad, mom, cousin, brother, and or sister. They are tearing families apart and it needs to stop now!

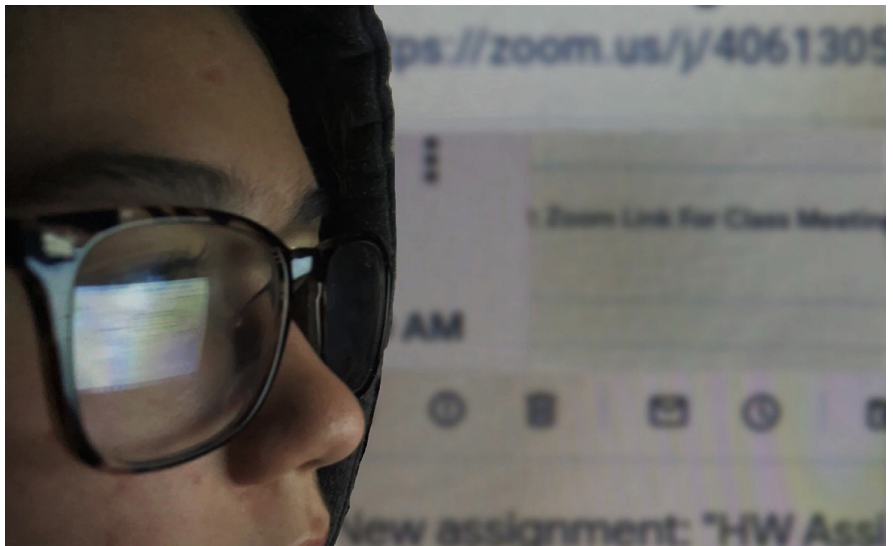
Everyday I am constantly reminded that I am *Black* and don't have the same privileges as everyone else. It hurts me that one day I will have to raise my kids in this *reality*. A *reality* that makes living so stressful and hard.

No matter how many protests, rallies, or boycotts nothing seems to change. We keep being shoved back to this *reality* where everyone is treated differently just because of their skin color. It's like a never ending nightmare and I just want to wake up! This...This is the *reality* in which we live in. It needs to change.

Brianna Saragih
Hightstown High School
Grade 10

Brianna Saragih enjoys playing football for her high school team, along with taking pictures for her photo imaging class. Brianna Saragih wishes for people to connect with her photography and for them to find comfort when relating to what they see in her pictures.

When's Our Screen Break?



Takai Richardson
Ewing High School
Grade 9

Takai Richardson loves nature. She loves to spend time in the wind, and they love to communicate with the plants.

Neglect

She didn't choose this life. She didn't choose her parents. She didn't choose their actions. She didn't choose her siblings. She didn't want to lay in bed all day, but she didn't have any choice. Her parents made her this way. They probably don't even know if she exists anymore. But before her other siblings came, life was just wonderful.

"Her name is Melanie?" a stranger's voice asked. The lady showing her the child only shook her head.

"She seems sweet and quiet.. I think she'd be good for us honey," another strange voice added. These were Melanie's new parents, and she couldn't be anymore excited than she already was. Her dark chocolate curls bounced as she jumped up and down. Her small feet made a thudding noise on the cold tile ground as she waited for her new parents to finish with signing papers.

The woman, her mother, laughed along with her and started to get her bags ready to be put in the car. She had a small thin shape, with green olive eyes and long full eyelashes. She had straight ginger hair that fell to the middle of her back. She had pretty orange freckles all over her body, contrasting well with her skin being as thin as paper. The man, her father, didn't look much different from the mother. He had dark brown curly hair that reached the back of his neck, and hazel eyes. He had a much stronger build than the mother as well. After signing all of the paperwork, they were ready to take six year old Melanie home.

Up until she was ten years old, she had the time of her life. She didn't have to sleep in the musty hard beds anymore that were at the orphanage. Instead, she slept with clean sheets, with a full size bed. She had a good sleep every night, and had a good morning routine. But that was when her mother and father were surprised with having another baby. Melanie thought her new sibling would be so much fun, but she didn't expect it to be the worst thing that could happen to her.

When her brother Eli was born, he was so loud. The ringing he caused in Melanie's ears were dreadful. She never was able to sleep anymore, causing her to always slouch during her daily tasks. She started to grow dark circles under her eyes and seemed to always be tired. But her parents still found time for her and to get her the things she wanted and needed.

When she was sixteen and her brother Eli was six, they paid little attention to Melanie. Everything was always about Eli and his well being. Melanie felt as if her parents' love for her expired when he was born. She felt more and more ignored by everyone, so she just stayed in her room. Her movements were always slow, and she was always tired. Her curly hair soon turned into a matted mess, due

to her being so tired she won't even do it. She even stopped going to school, but her parents didn't notice that anyways. They only cared about little Eli, and his grades, and what he eats, and how he feels.

Now, at nineteen, Melanie is a high school dropout. She never expected to turn out like this. She never expected her parents to just up and leave out of her life. Her once loving and caring mother and father. She didn't expect them to just neglect her, their first daughter. But they did. She hasn't talked to them in so long, she feels as if she doesn't know them anymore. As if she was just a ghost living in their house. She has never spoken a word to Eli either, due to her mind being so slow to make up words to say. And whenever she did, her sentences only came out slurred. Melanie decided she'd stay the rest of her days in her old room, huddled with the blankets from her younger years.

Emilie Sawicki

Hopewell Valley Central High School
Grade 11

Emilie is a Junior at HVCHS who loves to read, dance, play volleyball and be creative. She earns Varsity letters in swimming and has a twin brother.

Winter Cascade



Ridhi Shah
Hightstown High School
Grade 12

Ridhi Shah loves taking nature pictures. She takes them when she sees the opportunity to do so.

Spring Bloom



Takai Richardson

A Stranger Knows My Name, But I Don't Know Hers

I still don't know her name. Not even the first letter. But I want to find her and be friends. She was spontaneous and free like a bird. Her voice is as smooth as a polished crystal. Eyes twinkling like sugar being exposed to the kitchen light. Brown curly hair bouncing with every step she took. She was memorizing. But I still don't know her name.

We met at a party I was at for my friends "get together". He had a lot of people from other schools that I didn't know, and I had to beg my mother to let me go. I went to the table to get some food for me and my best friend, and then I saw her. She caught my eye even when she was wearing a hippie outfit, surrounded by people with glitter. We locked eyes and she smiled at me throwing a little wave. Her braces sparkled just like her eyes. She had pretty pink bands on her teeth, complimenting her brown skin. She then proceeded to walk over towards me.

Are you having fun?

Not really. I don't know many people here.

Who'd you come with?

My best friend Harlow. She's the one over there with the white hair and glitter on her eyes.

You're both beautiful. She said with a charming smile.

Oh no, not compared to her.

What's your name?

Kai. What's yours?

That doesn't matter. Wanna get out of here?

Yeah, lets go.

And so we went. We left the house to go to the nearest gas station and buy all of our favorite snacks. She even brought her skateboard to the party, and taught me how to ride it. I felt as free as she did. The wind blowing through my curls and rippling through my shirt, my mother not always on my back about every little thing. I felt

like a bird. With the stranger that doesn't know my name, we felt like doves together. It was an instant connection with her, like a soulmate. Harlow was buzzing my phone asking where I was but I didn't even bother to answer.

Hey stranger, I'm gonna call you Dove. Dove, we should climb that tree right there! I pointed up high into the sky.

Why that one out of so many more?

So that we can feel the wind in the sky better.

So that we can fly?

Yes Dove, exactly that.

We made sure we were careful going up the tree branches, picking the strongest ones to step on. Then we sat on one branch together with our two bags from the gas station eating our candy and drinking juice. The soft smell of the peach rings and watermelon arizona lingered on our tongues. When Dove threw her head back while letting a laugh out, I saw some of the gummy candy that I fed her stuck on her teeth. The peach and watermelon were a weird combination, but a sweet one. She bought me a pack of skittles, and secretly sneaked a paper with her number in the bag she handed me.

The empty plastic that had the peach rings sat on the floor in my room. I ate the skittles while silently looking at the wall, with my head full of loud thoughts. I want to relive that moment again with Dove. To always feel free like I was with her. To spend most of my days with her. Maybe I should text her, or give her a call. But that would be stupid. I don't even know her name. Not even the first letter. She might think that I didn't care enough to learn her name, and that I don't even want to get closer to her. But I was only caught up in the moment. I was stuck in her eyes, my ears blessed with her beautiful laugh. She'll understand. So I picked up the paper that was next to me on my bed and I texted her. Less than two minutes later, she texted back with "Hey, it's Anne."

Torrance Richardson
Ewing High School
Grade 12

Torrance Richardson's favorite subject is English. Torrance's love for reading and writing influenced her to take a Creative Writing class, which is the root of this submission.

The Broken Beer Bottle

"Please spray the monsters under my bed!... Now I lay me down to sleep in the shadow of a war zone, the proverbial elephant in the room did not live with us anymore. The screams pierced through my ears as the sound of shattered glass startled me from sleep. Oh no, not again- I was awakened into that never ending nightmare, another sleepless night evolved into the sunrise and chirping birds. I envisioned Nancy Drew's arrival to solve all the unknowns. My Dad was missing from the breakfast table, and my future was touched with uncertainty." These terrifying words were written on the first page of my diary; as I desperately tried to solve this chapter of agony I had experienced.

As a six year old girl, the dipsomaniac man I called daddy always needed that dark green bottle to function. As if Heineken beer was his smoked black lungs that helped him breathe. His disappearance marked the first shattered piece of the bottle I was left to tidy. The problems I would have growing up without a father figure complicated my puzzled brain, but my drunken father prepared me to not be the shattered glass he was. The cowardice, irresponsible, man I grew up loving, made me hate him. The broken pieces I saw when I looked at myself in the mirror made me question. "Will you end up like him?" No, I will not let myself fall apart the way he did. I will not disregard those who love me.

I was left to pick up the pieces on my own. Going from being the diffident, sheltered little girl my father once knew, his disappearance precipitated the outgoing, committed woman I am today. I was fortunately blessed with a benevolent support system that filled the void the boozier fabricated. My relationships with my family began as forlorn seeds, but blossomed like a profoundly beautiful tree. I mastered discipline from my grandmother, and understood the sacrifices my mother had made to underpin the leaves to ensure no stem should fall.

While I was in the process of collecting the sharp shards reopening the wounds he left me to sustain I grew to accept the pain, sadness, and betrayal he once put me through. I began to learn who I truly was while collecting all broken pieces. Learning how to be more interactive in the classroom I became engaged in Student Council, helping lead while learning from others to make a difference in my school environment. By learning how to play the clarinet participating in Marching and Concert band, I acquired a love for the arts. Dedicating my time in competitive dance I was able to find an outlet for the troubles I was facing in the shadows. The devotion I found by partaking in Key Club by tutoring the youth in my community, deviated from his introverted tendencies, which helped me embody a safe place for young girls and boys who could have been awakened by sounds of shattered glass.

Alcoholism is a disease that takes time to overcome. To know that he took that time away from the ones he loves, to pick up his shattered pieces finally reveals himself as a bright light of sunshine that radiates on those divergent branches. Years after the disappearance of the monster, I finally understood why he left. It was not because of his love for alcohol, it was to get better for his family. I was finally able to open my eyes, and see not a monster, but a human. My father's departure created torment on the broken six year old, but I picked up those pieces, and merged them together in order to find myself. I will always merit his omission, but I wish the broken beer bottle on the counter did not remind me of the offenses Nancy Drew once tried to solve.

Seth Singer
Hightstown High School
Grade 10

Seth loves mountain biking, sports, and anything that has to do with being outside. His painting is about looking at the bright side and seeing things through different lenses.

The Beauty In Everything



Torrance Richardson

The World She Lives in

Earth, what a world.

A world full of depression, a world full of hatred, a world full of complications. A world where women can't be comfortable in their own skin. A world where a size 2 is deemed perfection, and a size 24 is unattractive. Women strive to be considered beautiful, caking their faces with makeup, getting surgery done because their butt "isn't big enough," injections to fill the emptiness they feel, *but when does it end?*

Women are seen as objects, chewing toys to men. They are used for what they have, but aren't valued. Girls that are still trying to fit into last year's prom dress. Girls who want to fit into the social norms. Girls that starve themselves day by day to be skinny. Girls that are raped and blamed because, "What were they wearing?"

But when does it end?

When the knife hits the skin? When they overdose on pain reliever to fill the void? When they jump off the largest edifice? Why must we hurt ourselves? Why must we flirt with death with bright red lipstick on?

We prepare our bodies to be beautiful at the morgue. Hoping we are still seen as sexy and attractive. Wanting to be loved by those who want to change us. Transmuting our faces and bodies for Instagram likes. But we must remove the mask we are hiding behind. We must reclaim our bodies. *But when will we?* When will all this pain and torment stop? It doesn't.

This is the world she lives in.

Torrance Richardson

A New World

It's been so long since I've seen light. The dusty closet lost its vile scent. I can't remember the last time I saw her.

She bought me at some shopping center, I was the only pair left on display. It was a match made in paradise, or at least I thought it was. I was taller than others, my heel and pointed edge made me unique. She carried me home that night, waiting in the silent box with wax paper to separate me from my other half. I provided her comfort, and she gave me security. She used me whenever she needed me, never choosing anyone over me. I was there on her first day at work, watching as she accidentally spilled steaming hot coffee on her co-worker, some slightly getting on my shiny, now cloudy cheek that she rubbed off ever so lightly. I was able to experience her first date with him, and how he made her happy, but he would never take my spot.

But what changed?

Now, I stand in the back, watching others fulfill her needs the way I used to. She opens the closet door, looking older with bags proceedingly getting darker under her eyes. Her cold wrinkling hands made me shiver at her touch. That look in her eyes; I could foresee what was to happen next.

That was the last time I saw her. The memory of her throwing me into a deep, sightless pit with little light to be seen if I looked up. The rustling chimes made whenever she moved this 'hell hole' made my skin crawl as the space began to get smaller and smaller as she added others like me, along with their pair. I wished I could scream for her to let me out. After being tossed into her gritty car, the hell hole was starting to get hot. A cornchip odor filled my nostrils as the air began to be sucked out of us. We all rubbed against each other, no one was provided their own space. Once I felt the car jerk, I knew what I feared most. The squeaking sound of the rusty bin opening was enough assurance that she was giving us away.

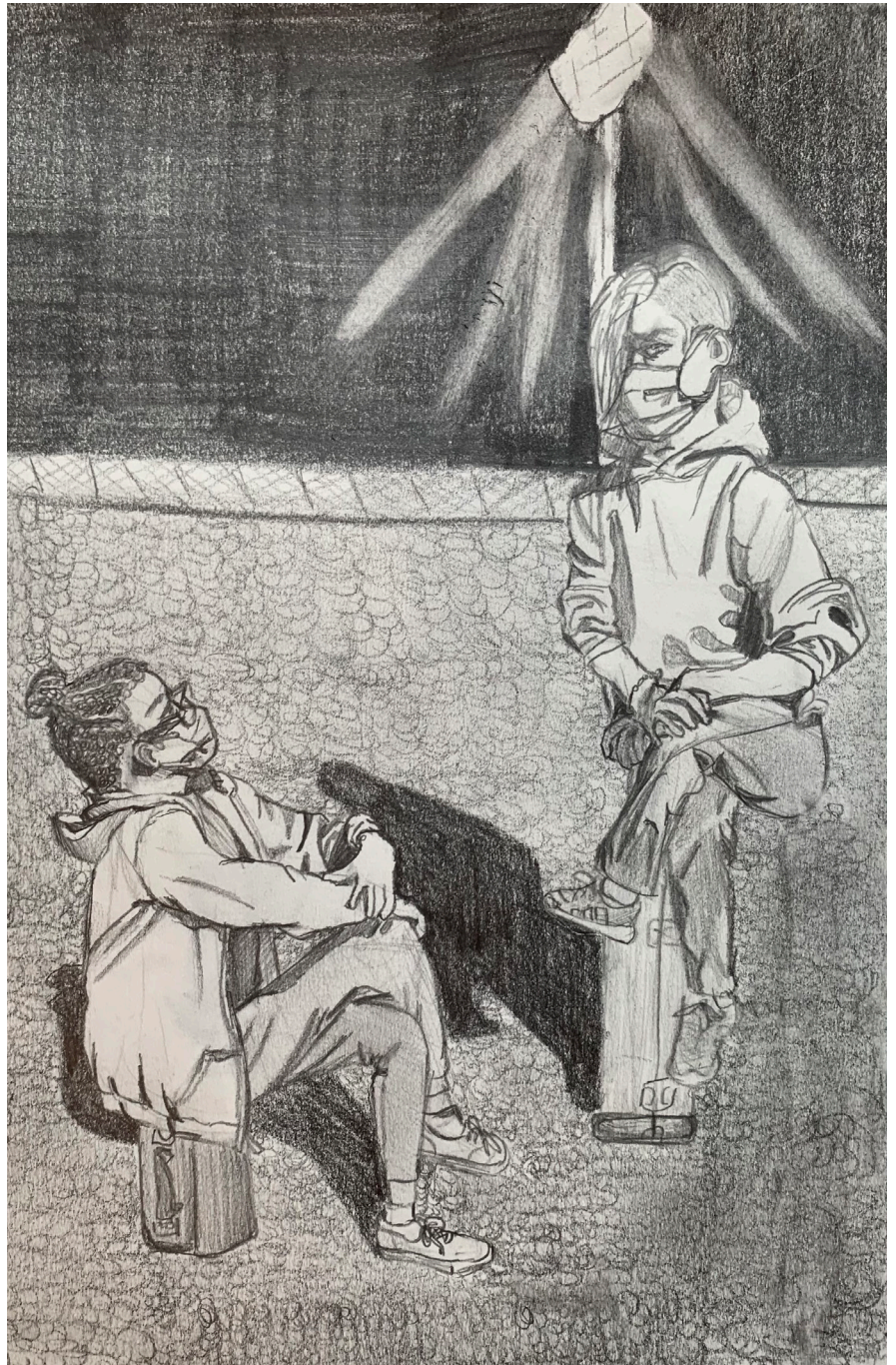
I needed her. She was my home. The comfort I thought I provided was all a lie. I spent hours inside that box, listening to all the cars drive by, but no one came for me. Why must she give me away? What significance did I have? I stared straight into the dark, miserable sky and prayed to see light another day.

I slept through the night until the abyss pit was being moved once again, but this time I felt fresh air. I was now inside another store it seemed. The sign read "GOODWILL," or at least that's all I could see. After hours of sitting in a box with others, I was finally examined. After passing the test, an older woman attached a gooey, sticky substance to my bottom, which I overheard her call a "shoe size sticker." I was placed on the shelf, with smudges on my pointed edge as I waited for someone to show me a new world.

Katherine Taussig
Hightstown High School
Grade 12

Kate Taussig has been into art since she was a little girl. Even after recently branching out into other forms of art she still comes back to the basics, often choosing to depict her friends and family.

Musical Chairs



Chantal Samuel

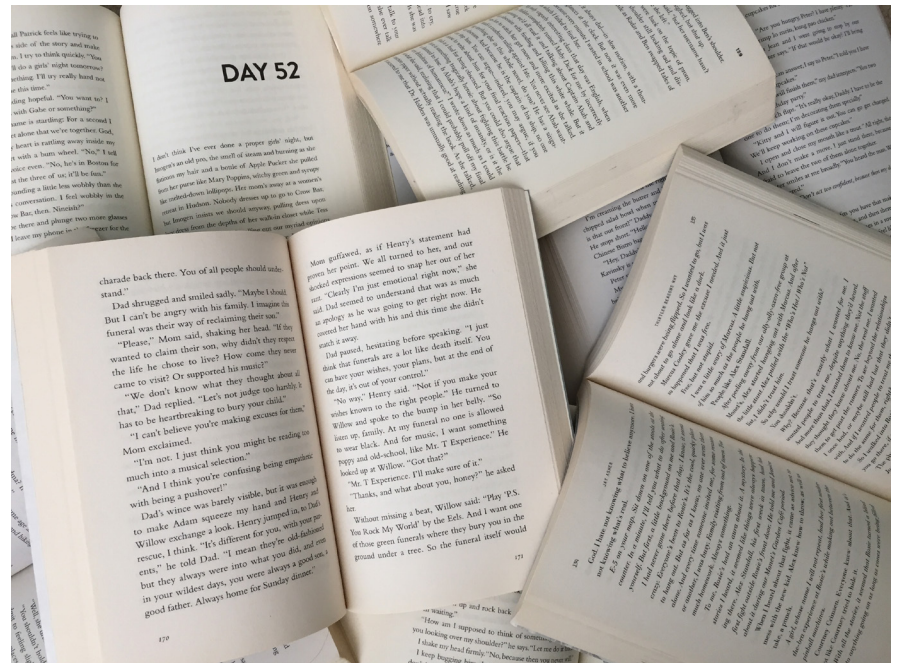
I am Just Like You

I scuffed your shoes just like he hit my face.
 I won't stop insulting you because he said I need to know my place.
 You will never understand the things I do just know I am just like you.
 My words are volcanic because it's how I feel, truly you'll never know neglect is real.
 If he drinks he brings home sorrow, then she cries like there is no tomorrow, as I sit weeping in my room to the tunes of blues.
 I bully you because you're weak, I bully you because you never speak,
 I bully you because I need some peace.
 I'm giving you a lesson on what I went through, It's my words that are changed to not hurt me, but you.
 You will never understand the things I do just know that I am just like you.

Brianna Titus
 Hightstown High School
 Grade 11

Brianna Titus enjoys photography. She hopes her passion for this art form will influence others to pursue the thing they love.

A World of Wonder



Emilie Sawicki

The World Is Not Waiting

The world is not waiting.
The minutes are passing,
Time ticking away,
never stopping. Never slowing down.

The future is getting closer,
closer than I could ever imagine.
It's terrifying.
The uncertainty is suffocating.

But the world is not waiting.
I have to keep up,
work to get somewhere,
and let the pieces fall in place.

I have to make the most of my minutes.
I have to live,
and not waste even one second.
I cannot fall behind.

Because the world is not waiting.
Not for me.
Not for you.
Not for anyone.

The only question left,
Is do I let the world carry me along,
Or do I carry the world with me?
I guess only time will tell.

Emilie Sawicki

Fear

The silence is chilling.
The solidarity is daunting.
Sitting all alone in the house,
Everything startles you.
The creak of the stairs,
The whistle of the wind,
The hum of the fridge,
All send you into panic.
But the most terrifying thing of all,
Is that you are left with your own thoughts,
Roaring in your head,
Reminding you of your suspicions.
Your heart beats too loud.
Your breath is too strangled.
Fear.
Can you please come home?

Katherine Taussig

Inspired by William Carlow Williams'
"The Red Wheelbarrow"

The Stuffed Dog

So much history
From

the stuffed
dog

covered in matted
fur

tucked in purple
sheets

Brianna Titus

Autumn Breeze Blows the Leaves



Johandy Ventura
Hightstown High School
Grade 9

Praying

Angie likes to pray every night.



Katherine Taussig

Inspired by William Carlow Williams'
"The Red Wheelbarrow"

This is Just to Be

I am sitting
in sands
that are on
the beach

at which
we were going to
swim in
the water

Forgive me
The water is cold
and I
won't go in

Benjamin Thompson

Hopewell Valley Central High School
Grade 11

Ben plays soccer, volleyball, and wrestles.
He enjoys spending time with his friends
and at the beach.

The Wrestler

My hands shake as I lace up my shoes
Walking on the mat feels like I'm sinking deep into muddy ground
As I shake his hand I have one goal in mind and that is to win
I have to embrace the hunger, push through the pain and just focus on
him
As I go for the take down, sweat drips down my face, burning my eyes
I hear my friends cheering, I have to block them out and focus, focus
on finishing this
My final move, shoulders are pinned
I hear the referee slam the mat
It's over and a smile comes across my face

Cameron Watkins
Hightstown High School
Grade 12

Cameron Watkins enjoys the outdoors and likes exploring the beauty of nature. He takes photos of plants and other wildlife he finds.

Bloom



