



Aspirations 2023

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

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West Windsor, New Jersey



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Aspirations 2023, a literary and arts 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. Once again, the creativity displayed by students helps us see both the familiar with renewed attention and the unfamiliar with a satisfying sense of recognition.

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 Deborah Preston and our Vice President for Academic Affairs Dr. Robert Schreyer for their support; to Nicholas Lucarelli in Mercer's Publications Office for his work designing and laying out this journal; to Brad Kent for setting up and maintaining the Aspirations web page; and to Joshua Grossman for the dependable and effective way he managed submissions, contact with schools, and the many details of the selection, editing and proofing process. Finally, I want to thank Robert Kleinschmidt, Dean of Liberal Arts, for his help with this publication project.

Mercer's commitment to the arts makes projects such as this one possible. Our judges selected these works from among many entries. We thank the following distinguished panel for their discerning sensibilities and commitment to the students:

Edward Carmein
Kerri O'Neil
Jacqueline Vogtman

Lucas Kelly
Kyle Stevenson

Nicole Homer
Professor of English and Editor, Aspirations 2023
Mercer County Community College

Souk Eye



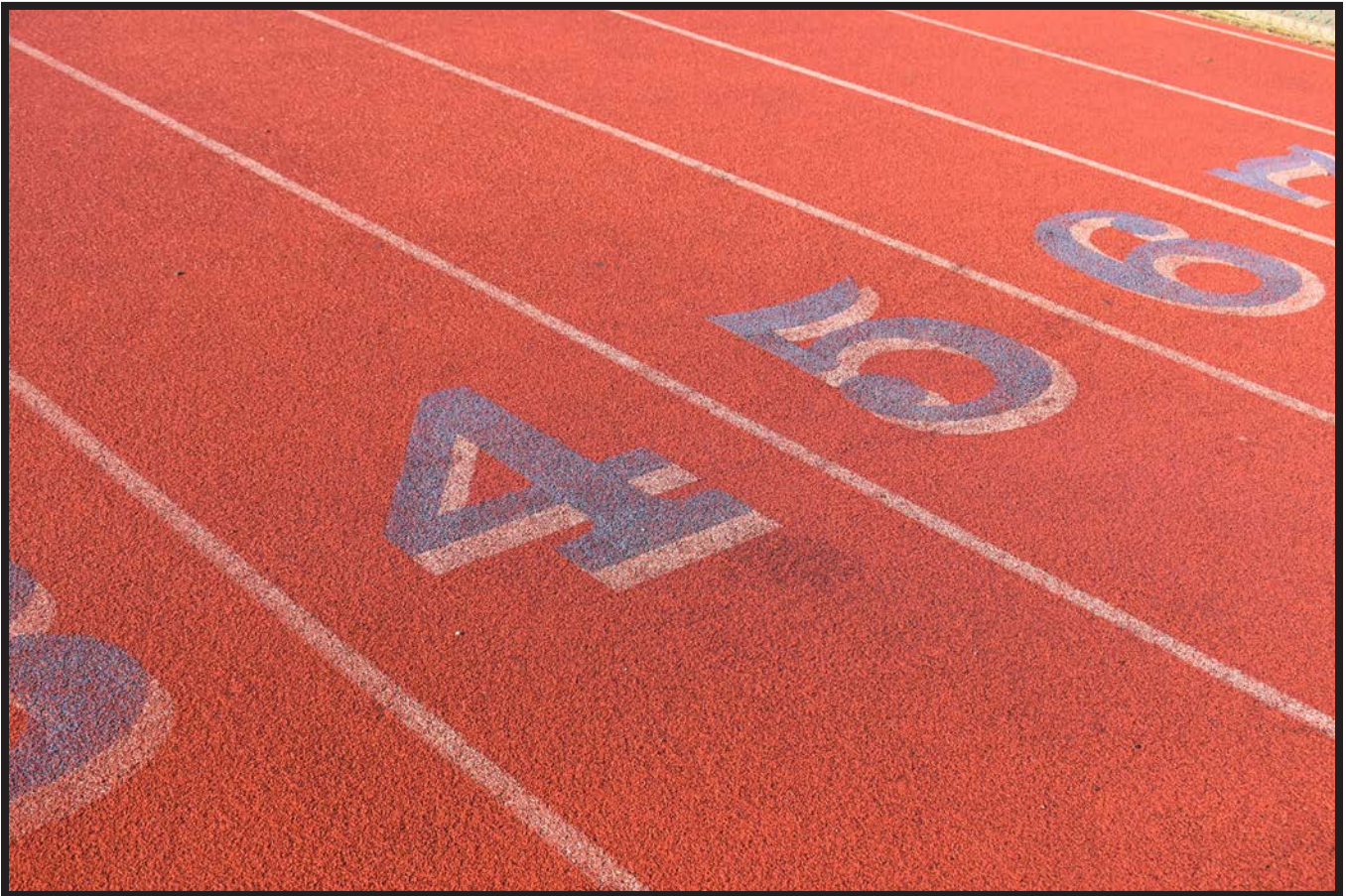
*Kayla Cain
Hightstown High School
Grade 11*

True Color



*Kevin Granda
Hightstown High School
Grade 12*

Trackstar



*Diego Salinas
Hightstown High School
Grade 10*

Fine Rust and Dust



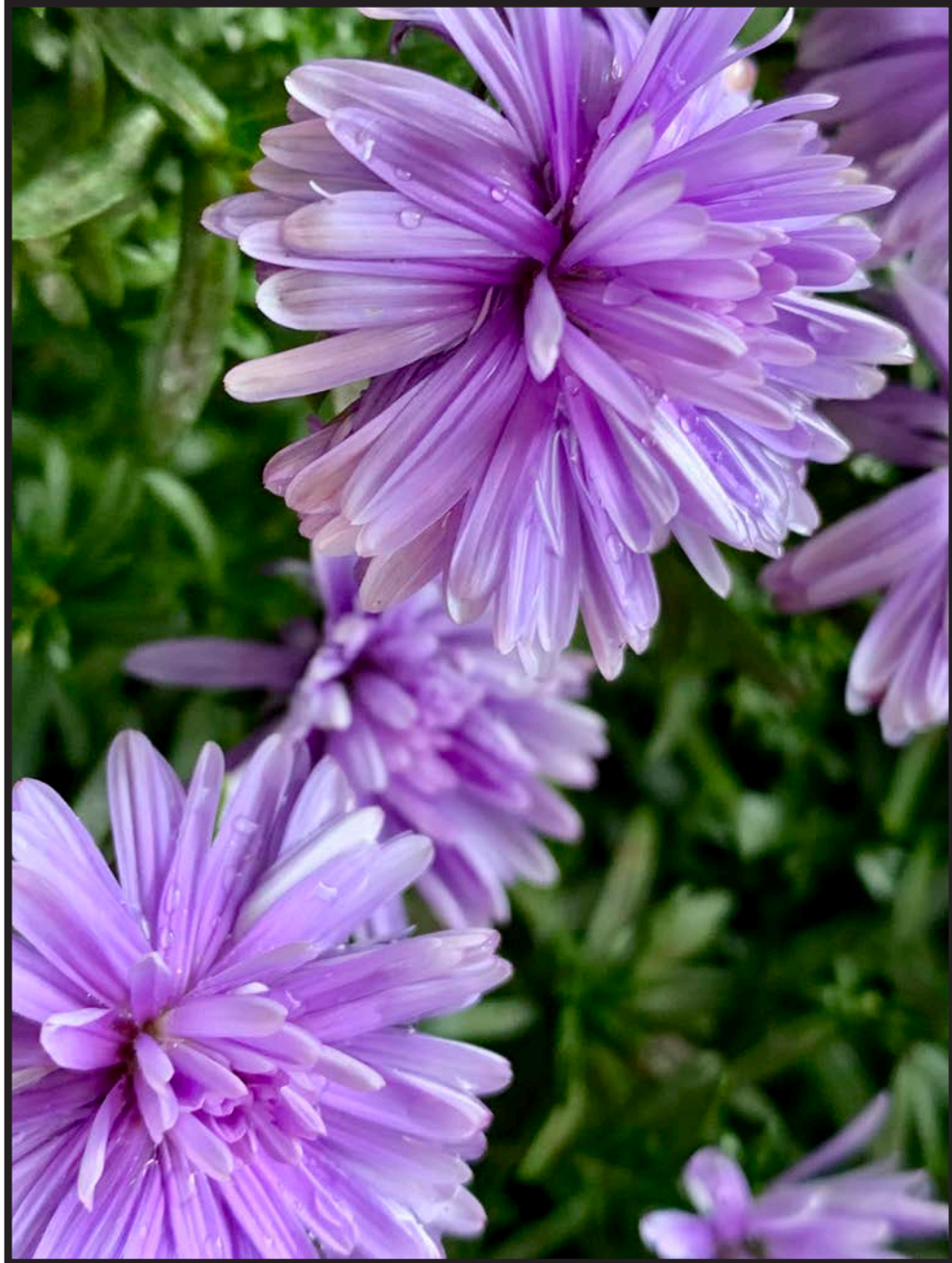
*Amanda Pallazhco
Hightstown High School
Grade 10*

Map of the Soul



*Keyla Saula Guzman
Hightstown High School
Grade 12*

The Flower of Love



*Yanela Guaman Ordonez
Hightstown High School
Grade 11*

Warm Sunset



Kevin Granda
Hightstown High School
Grade 12

A Polar Evening



*Amanda Pallazhco
Hightstown High School
Grade 10*

Notes of Music



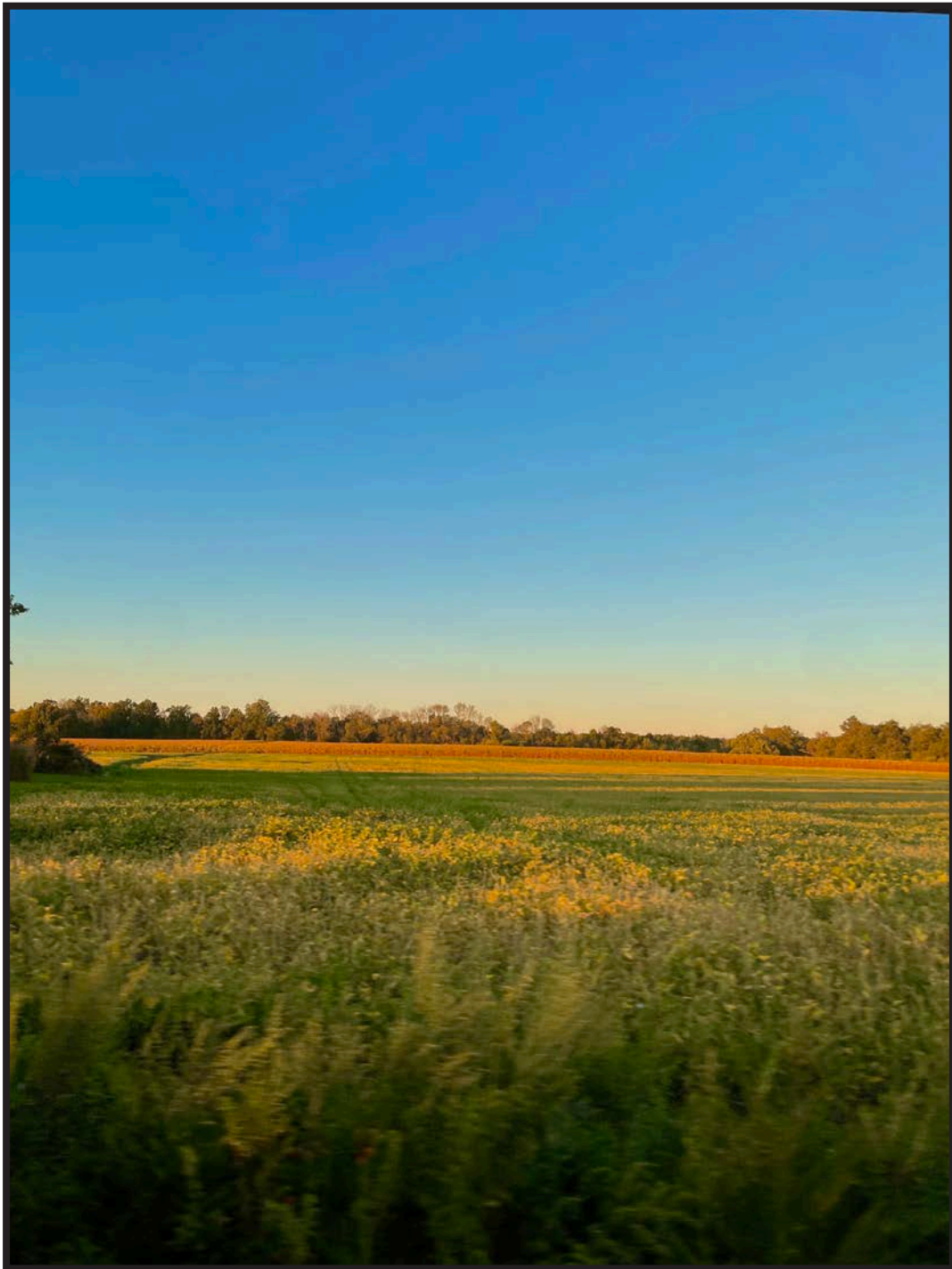
*Maria Sanabria Morales
Hightstown High School
Grade 12*

purple flower



*Alex Carr
Hightstown High School
Grade 10*

Dream Land



*Jordan Blank
Hightstown High School
Grade 12*

The Black Leaf



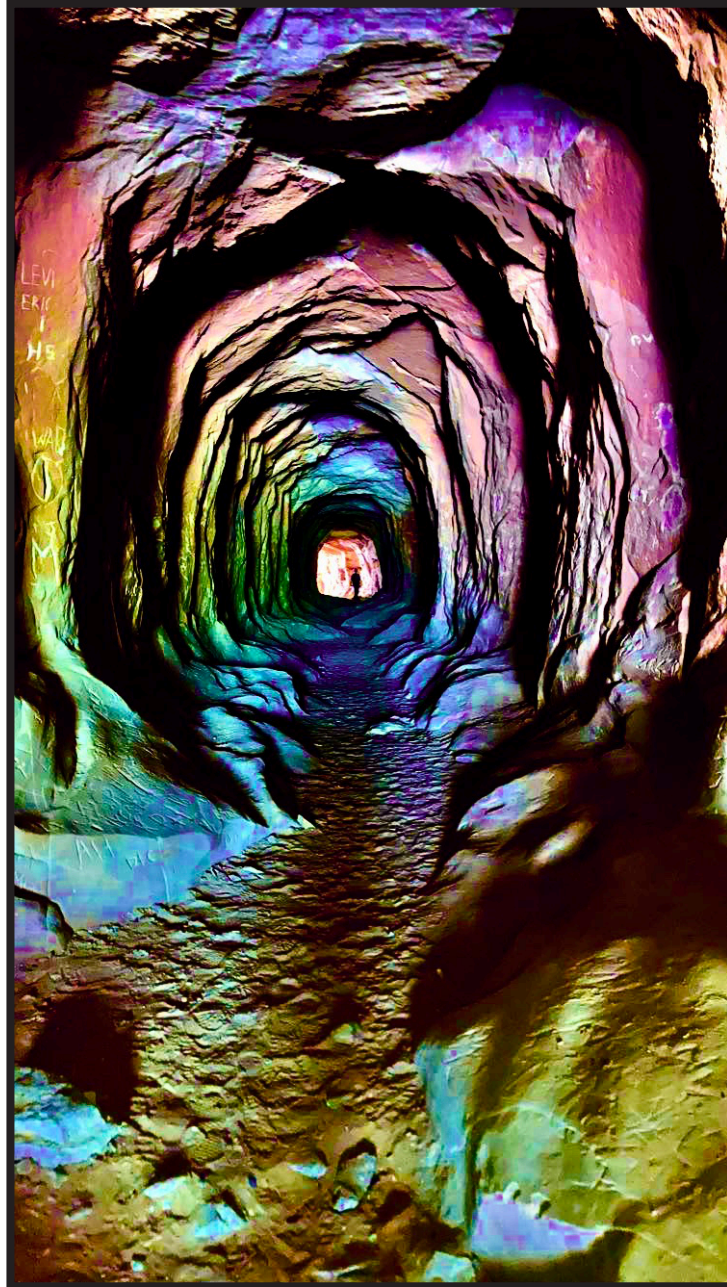
Steve Guzman
Hightstown High School
Grade 12

Point in the Right Direction



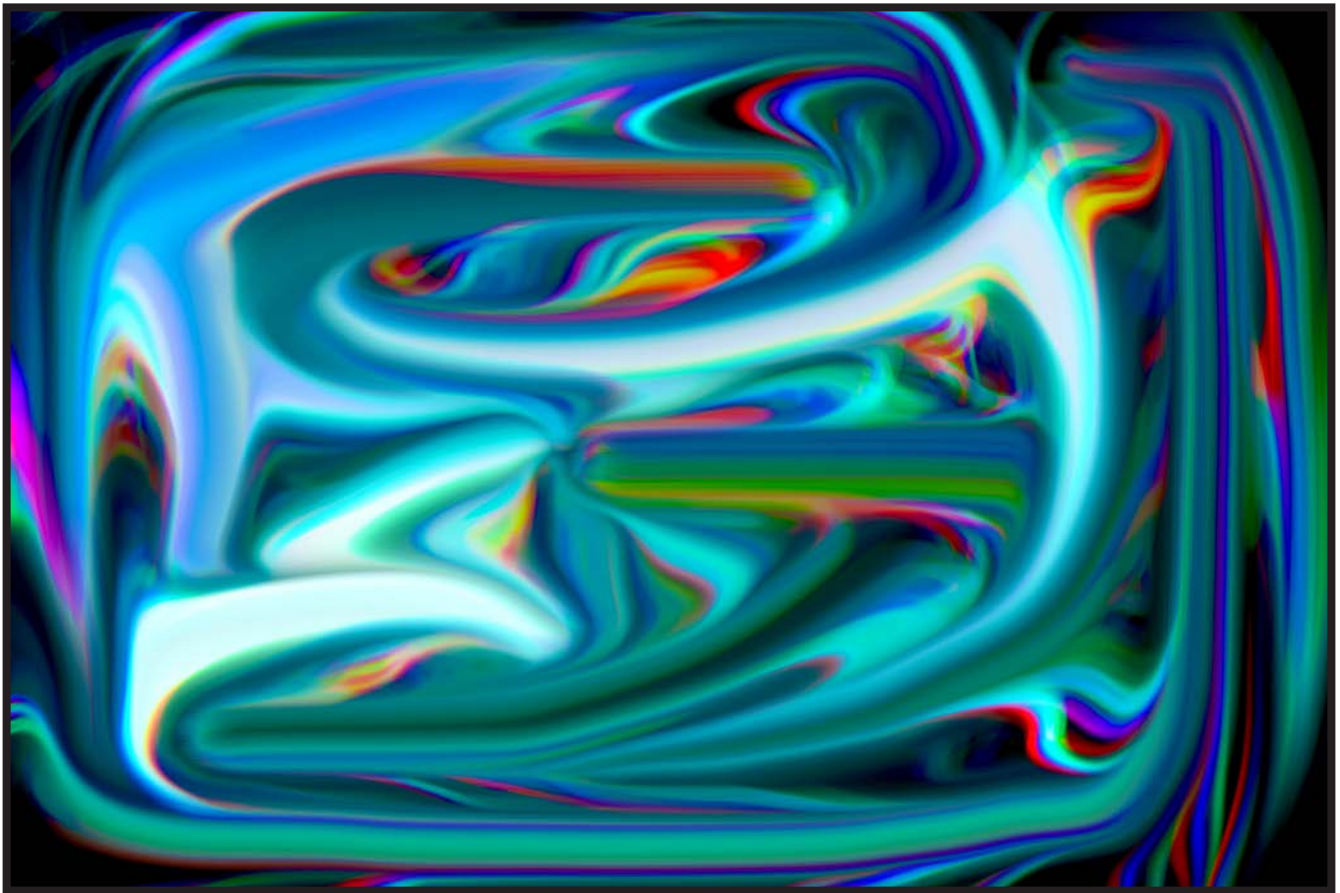
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Cave to Imagination



*Violet Sims
Hightstown High School
Grade 12*

Slick with Color



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Overthinker



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*Camila Solares Gallardo
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*Emily Penagos
Hightstown High School
Grade 10*



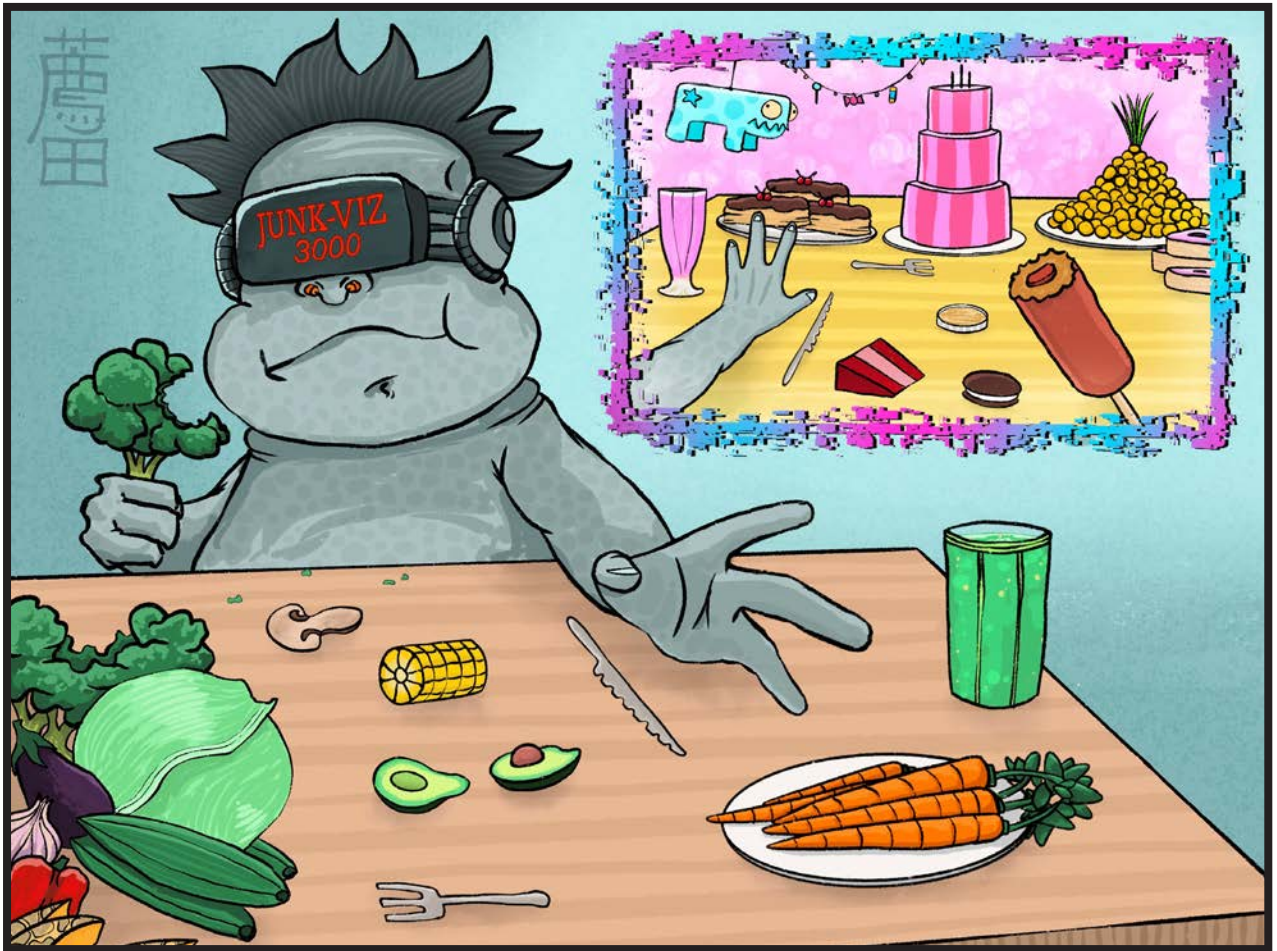
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The pretty sunrise



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"Healthy" Reality



Gavin Komoda
Hightstown High School
Grade 11



*Camila Solares Gallardo
Hightstown High School
Grade 12*

Eclipse



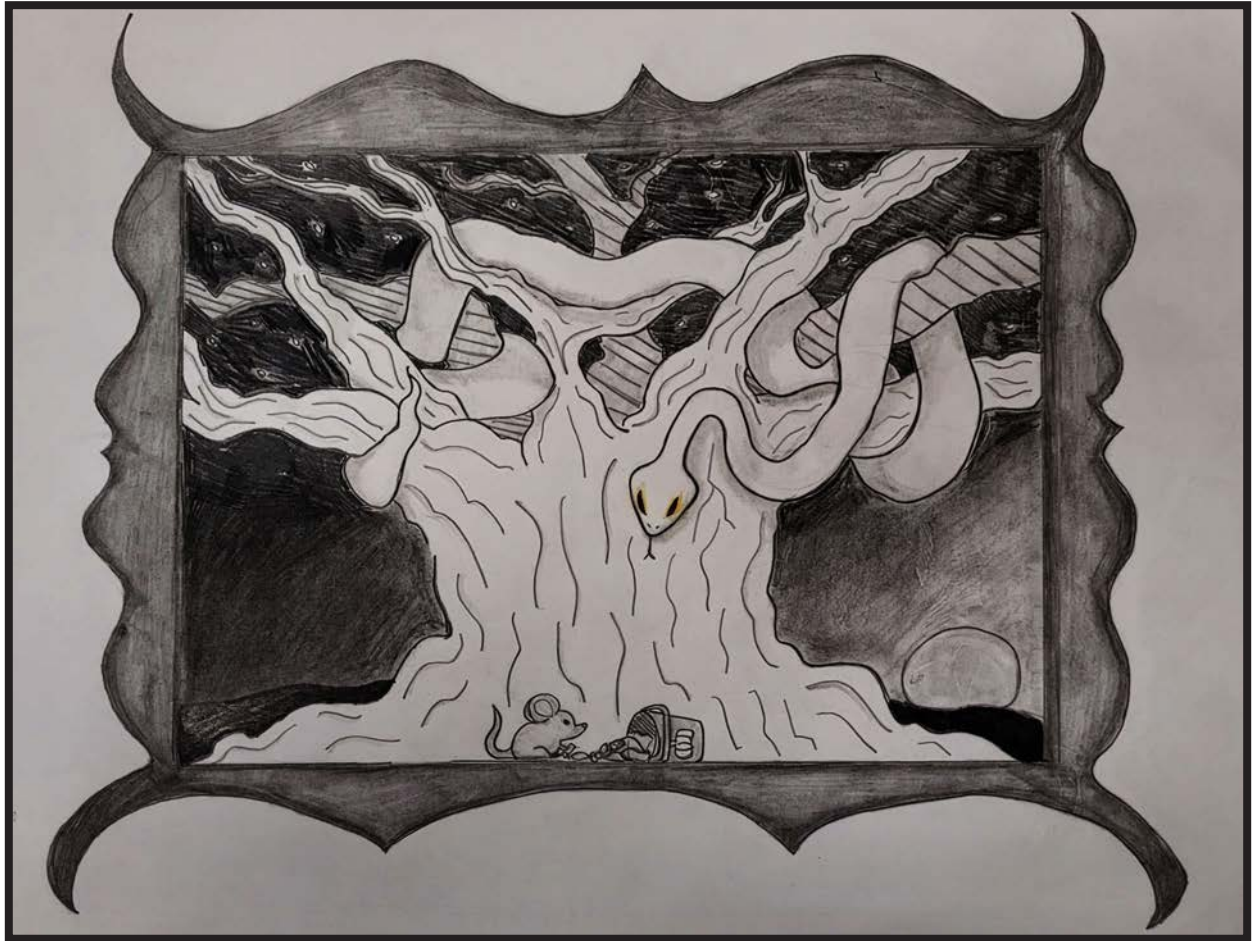
*Megan Sharpe
Hightstown High School
Grade 12*

Eagle on the Hunt



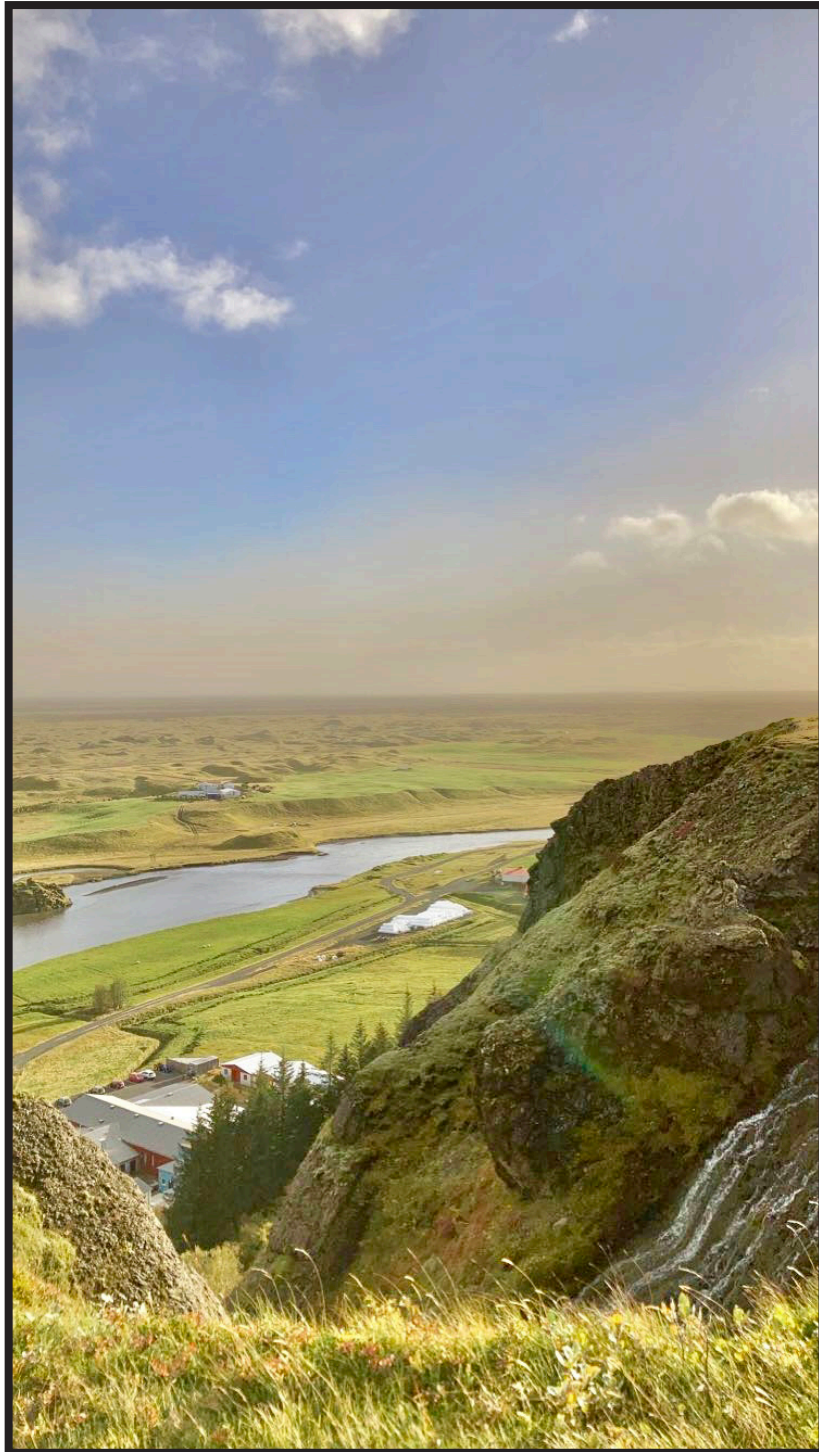
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What A Hike



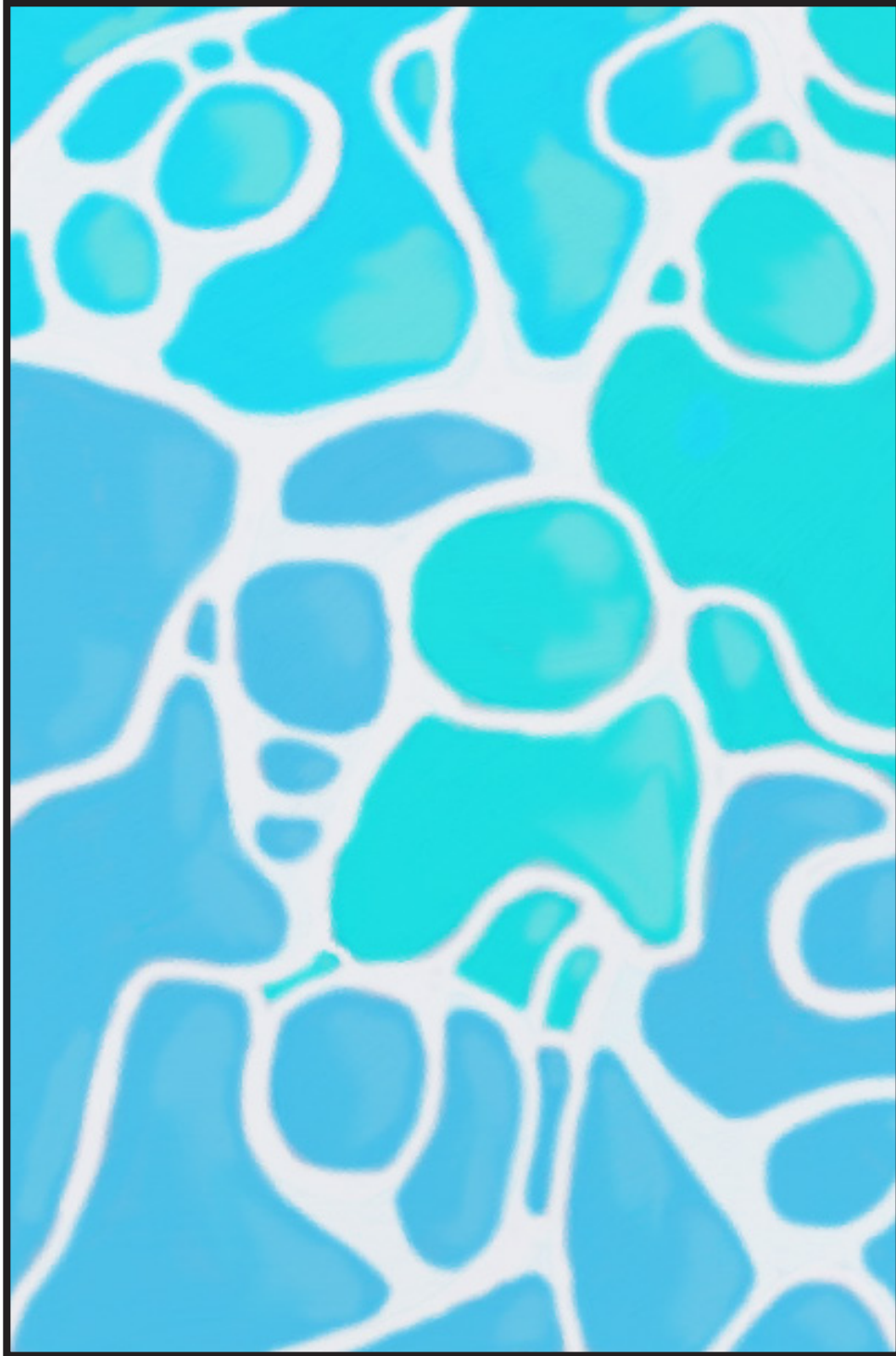
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Swim



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Diamond In The Bay



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Flowers



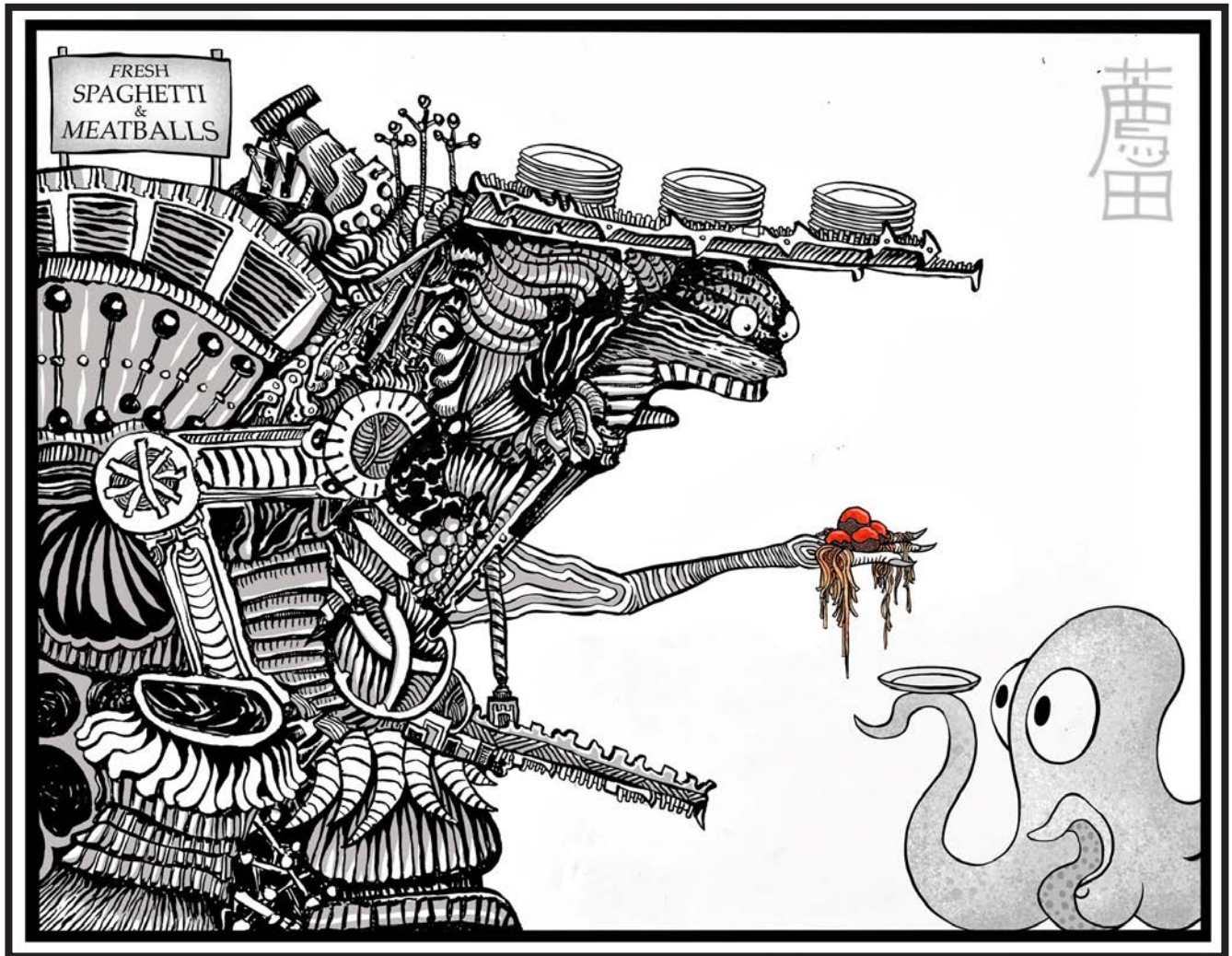
*Dina Genek
Hightstown High School
Grade 10*

Be the Light



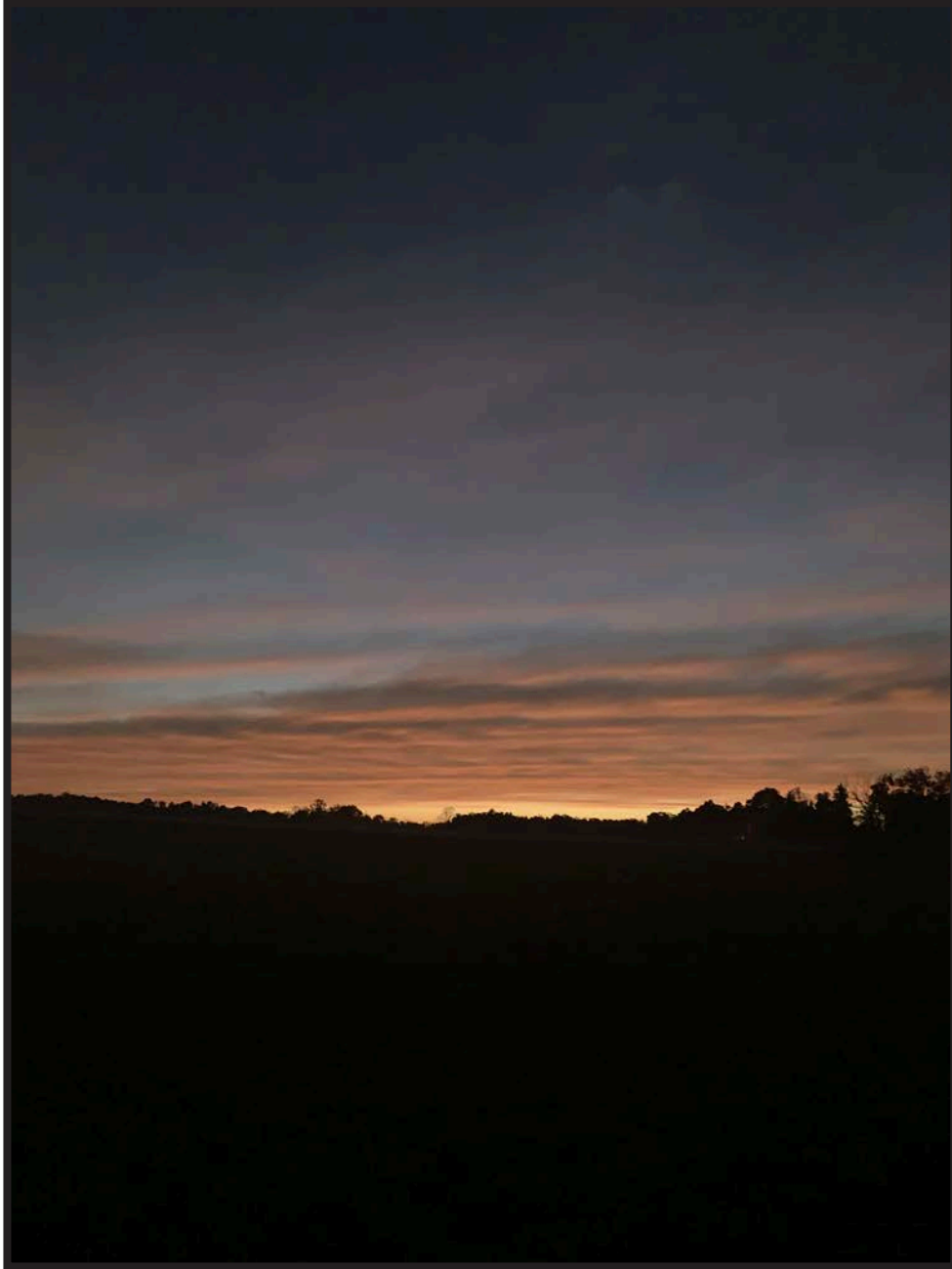
*Karen Padilla Garcia
Hightstown High School
Grade 12*

Spaghetti Machine



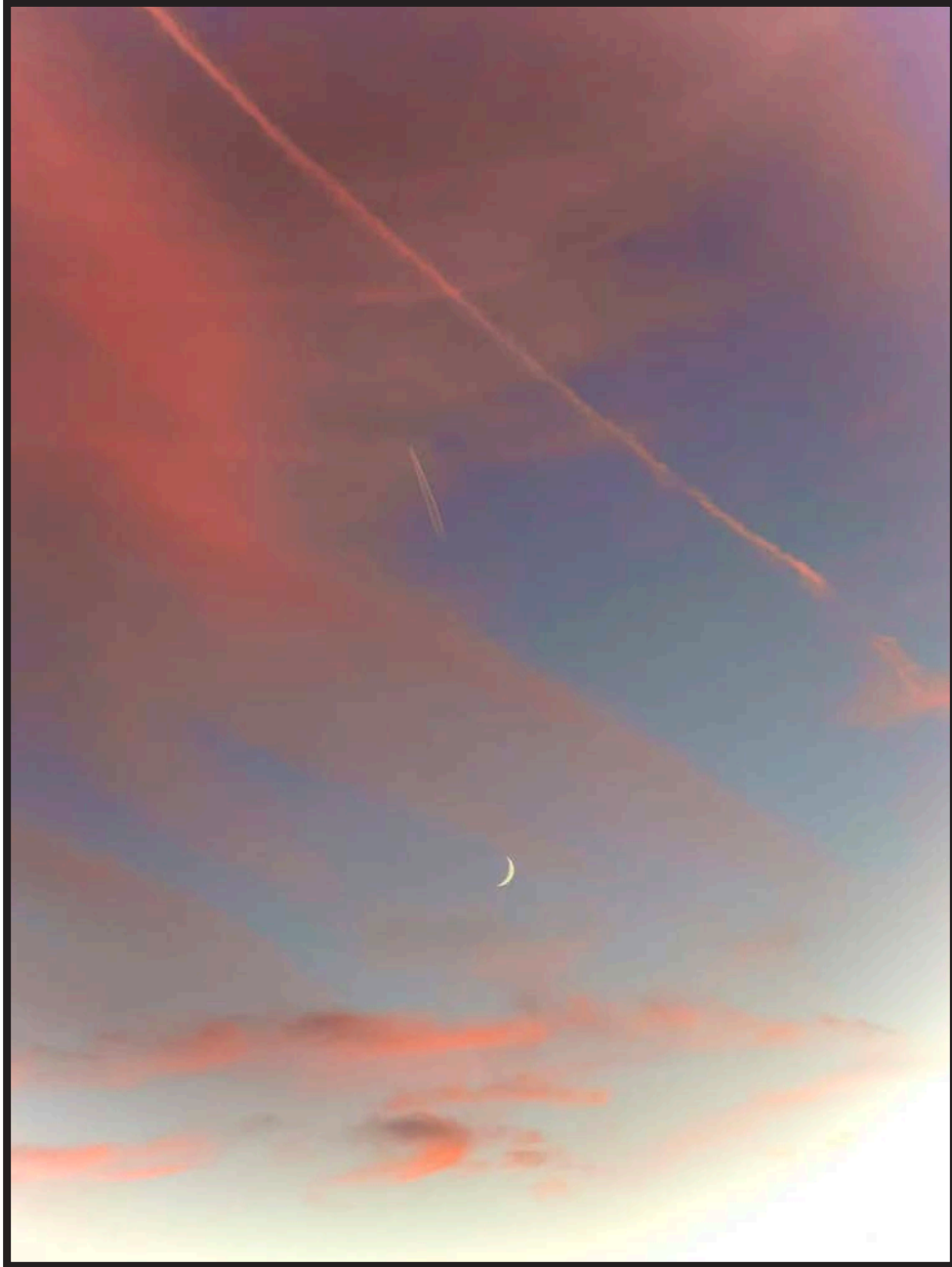
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Hightstown Ram



*Karen Padilla Garcia
Hightstown High School
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Winter



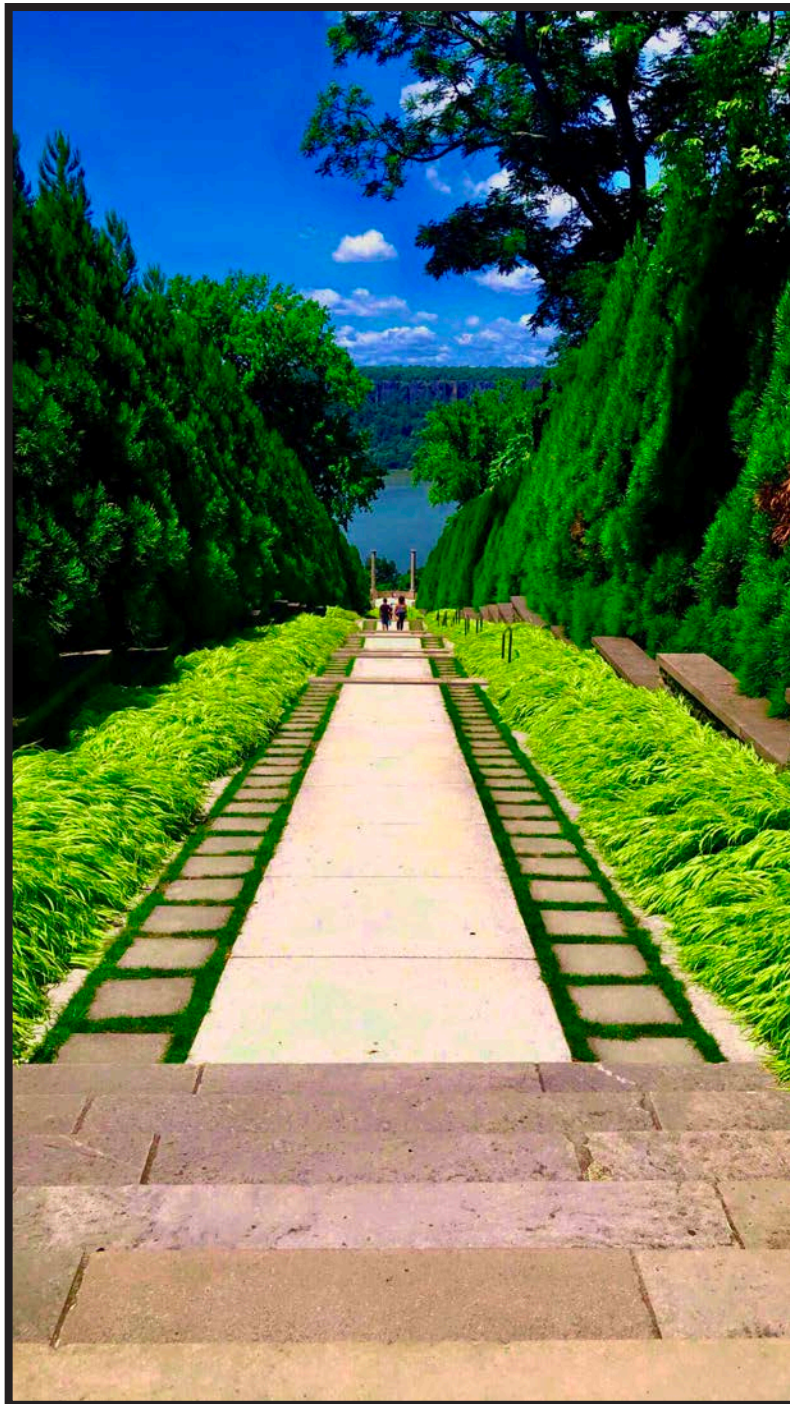
*Azarah Brown
Hightstown High School
Grade 10*

Fence



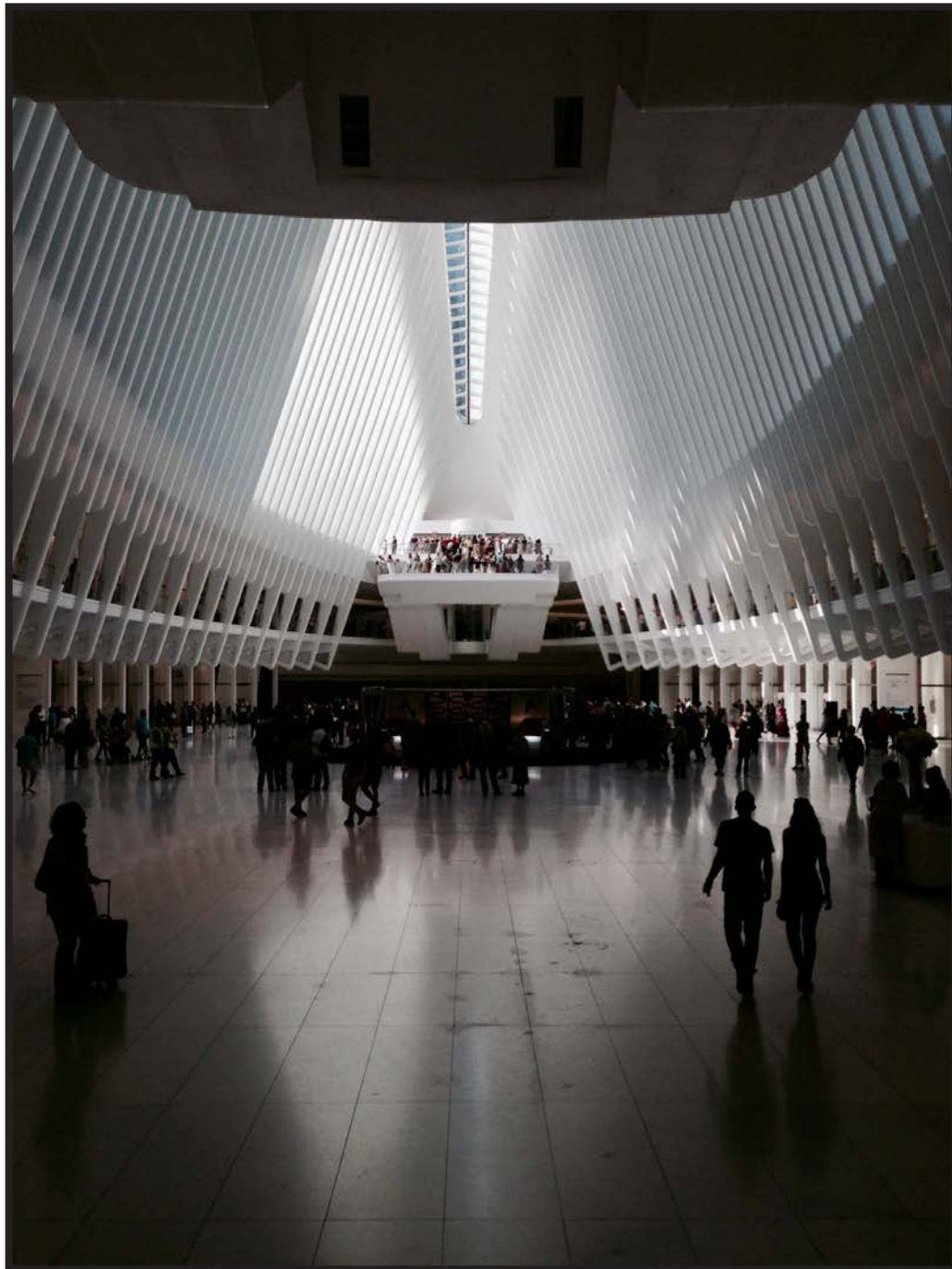
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Yonkers Garden



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Silhouettes Of Remembrance



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BUNNUFO



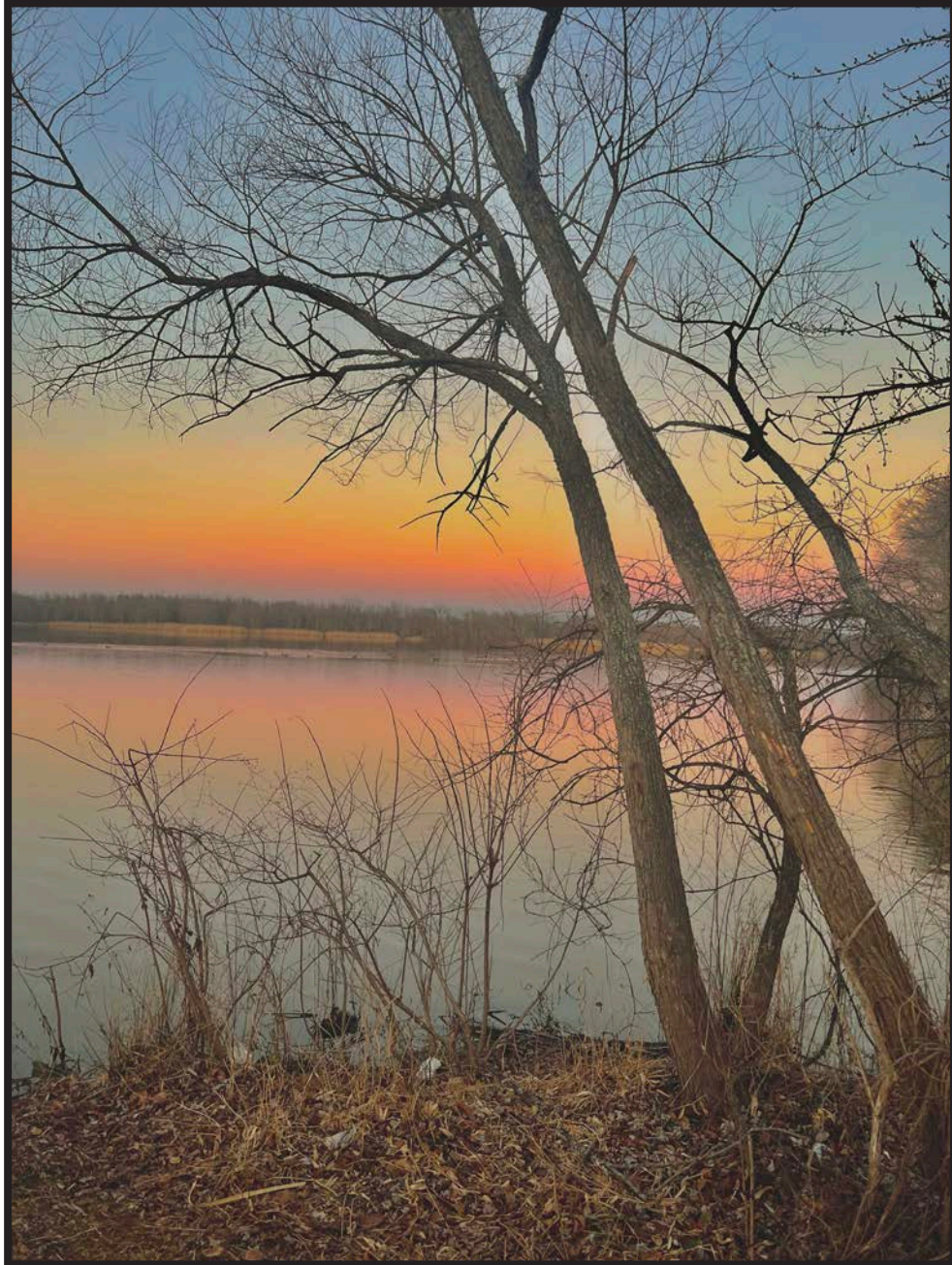
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Grade 12

Nature Walk



*Prabhdyal Mann
Hightstown High School
Grade 12*

SUNLIGHT



*Jhan Vasquez
Hightstown High School
Grade 11*

Brown and White and Nothing

Sand.

Damp, pale, smudged. I sit all day, untouched. I am only damp from the wet feet of people walking by, leaving the remnants of the sea smeared on me, but never embraced with its full attention. You see, the ocean never reaches me, although it makes an effort to get close. The ocean and me: our tiny but overbearing separation determines my existence. I sit - I wait - without anything to cling to, with only the wind affirming my sense of belonging.

Brown Sand.

Watch as the ocean seeps over her, delicately bubbling, transforming her into her natural shade of brown. Her wet surface glistens as gold in the sunlight. Her fragments sparkle like diamonds. Look how her shine lands in the eye of that child. The child makes way to her, mesmerized. She is scooped up, and fated for greatness; can't you tell? A Castle. She, goldenly brown and perfectly wet, is the foundation of a castle. And almost as the sun strips her of water, the ocean coats her, replenishing her color.

White Sand.

Now, watch as the sun makes way to give her the spotlight, revealing her crystallized nature. Her tone reflects that of porcelain. Can't you see our resemblance? I always thought that I was born to be like Brown Sand, but you have made it quite clear how much I blend in with White. I look over: her dry, pure surface simply beams. But don't lie to me, I could never be White Sand, for the mud smeared on me is too prominent. I admit, I often catch myself admiring her brilliant tone, but I wouldn't wish for her life.

Me.

The ocean never chooses me. I never become wet enough; never brown enough. I don't care for porcelain when all I've ever wanted was gold. Don't ask why my heart only desires one. Her life is only mine in my dreams. When my eyes open, I lay frozen in fear of change, for I hardly know what her life truly entails. As you've proven to me, I am not like Brown Sand, or White Sand, so...

I guess I am nothing for now, but
I yearn for the touch of the sea, and
I long to be Brown.

Isabella Martinez
West Windsor-Plainsboro High School
Grade 11

Solving for One's Self

x

In kindergarten, they teach you that x is a letter. It follows w and spells little more than xylophone. In your classroom hangs a chart of the alphabet and above the card for x is a poorly drawn image of an x-ray, a blue scribble that barely delineates anything. You think that's cheating (x-ray is barely a word) and spend the rest of class brainstorming better words that start with x. You can't come up with any and now have more respect for the oddball of the alphabet.

Growing more anxious by the millisecond, Lee stood in front of her class for show-and-tell, knees teetering with every breath she took in. The words she taught herself to say were imprinted into her mind, a discernible reminder of her failure to speak properly when it mattered most. She released her hands to show a carrot. Shriveled and scrunched in such a way that its true rusty orange nature was hidden, she held it up to the class. Eyes gazed back at her in confusion, an orchestra of bewilderment of which Lee was the conductor. Lee was proud of her carrot. The world (a class of 23 seven-year olds) was not.

$$3(2x + 2) = 3$$

Once you reach Algebra, x has more meaning than just a letter. Worlds collide, and numerical and alphabetical characters intertwine. It confused you at first, but you have grown an appreciation for the abstract absurdity of randomly assigning a value to a letter. The letter x has meaning, more than it ever did before.

At the end of every marking period in middle school, Lee brought home her report card, plastered in yellow duct tape at the seams, and left it on the kitchen table, just above the endless pile of bills that awaited her parents. She would wait, pretending to dutifully do her homework that she had finished a week ago, until her parents came home from their 9 to 5. While they made half-hearted conversation around their busy days and mundane meetings, Lee kept one eye (or at least half of it) on that yellow manilla folder perched five feet away from her parents. Despite its closeness, the folder managed to retain its invisibility to their constantly wandering eyes, which resonated with her. Report card days, dreaded by most, were Lee's favorite days of the year; a chance to quantify her newly discovered meaning in the world. The silky-smooth line of A-pluses made her feel something in the very pit of her soul, an excitement only paralleled by the bells of the ice cream truck. Lee found herself in the whirlwind of academic validation. Numbers never lied. People did.

$$\int ((x+2)/3\sqrt{x-3})dx$$

Just like life, math begins to get a lot more complicated as it progresses. Numbers give way to foreign symbols and calculus; sometimes it feels like you are solving hieroglyphics. You are lucky if there is just one variable in a problem – often you are working with integrals, derivatives, and other abstract concepts that your mind can barely grasp the full scope of. Nevertheless, you continue solving, still receiving the same little spark of a thrill within your mind from getting a problem right.

Dropped into the middle of the whirlwind of high school, Lee plunged headfirst into scenarios she never would have envisioned a year prior. She now had seemingly unlimited opportunities and felt the need to pursue them all to the fullest. She danced with boys, she danced with deadlines, she danced with depression; sometimes all at once. Standing in the absurd middle of a school hallway, though, seeing a haze of floating bodies through the fluorescent lights, Lee often felt lost, as if she was drowning in intensity yet simultaneously hovering above it all. She had both everything and nothing to say, yet neither one seemed like a good option. On a particularly bad day, when all hope was seemingly lost and the high school agony appeared to be never ending, Lee hid in her math room. Like a complete and utter nerd, she picked up a marker, found a practice problem, and began to solve it. Though the world was still spinning at an impossible speed, though all her battles still remained unresolved, she found comfort in the concreteness of it all; although she could not solve herself, she could solve her (math) problems.

x=

It always comes back to x.
Math has always been Lee's favorite subject.

Natalie Veale
Hopewell Valley Central High School
Grade 9

