



# Soundings

V. 71 Spring 2025



To the reader,  
The dictionary definition of sounding is as follows:

sounding1 - /'soundiNG/ (noun)

the action or process of measuring the depth of the sea or other body of water.

In other words, sounding is the act of testing the waters. It is checking for depth and exploring what lies beneath. Within these pages, Viking writers use their creativity to test, explore, interact, and interpret the world around us.

Furthermore, the overarching theme was “navigate”, which means to find one’s way. This has been a rough year for everyone with the back-to-back hurricanes--but we found our way through it. This year’s *Soundings* lit mag is a testament to the people who found their way, and the people still searching. Thank you for your efforts, and we invite you to join us on a journey of humor, excitement, and quiet reflection. Enjoy the voyage.

Truly yours,  
The Viking Creative Writing Crew



Colophon

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Editor: Nancy Engle

Adviser: Bernadette Langiotti

Club Members: Jordyn Barth, Isabella Macholino, Timothy Nelson

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Cover art: “Sun” by Sophia DiLella and “Hammerhead Shark Sculpture” and “Sea Turtle” by Emma Butcher





# More or Less

By MyiaLynn S.

I stand on the shoulders of giants.  
That is why I seem so tall.  
I walk in the footsteps of giants  
That is why yet, I feel so small.  
I am no more than a speck in this world  
Everybody's dreams are all combined in one swirl.  
We people, are nothing much  
Yet we are everything, just in a bunch.  
We are blood, sweat, and tears  
But we are also love, dreams, and fears.  
So much, but nothing at all.  
We are billions  
But we are also just one after all.  
I care about myself  
And you care about you too  
But we all care for others  
That's just what we do.  
We cannot help that we are selfish and greedy  
For we all exist in simultaneity.  
I stand on the shoulders of giants  
That is why I seem so tall.  
I walk in the footsteps of giants  
That is why yet, I feel so small.  
This feeling is not anything such as inferiority I fear  
Only the realization  
That I am only just mere.  
No more, no less.  
And I could be the best  
But in the end, it doesn't really matter  
Because we can appreciate more when we have less.





# Humble Beginnings

Appreciating the little things,  
attention to detail








# Ode to Jackets

Jose A.

The smooth cloth covers my arms  
The warmth comforting me up to my palms  
I wear you every time I can  
And wear you for every situation that's planned  
You make my outfit complete  
Without making my style points deplete  
Even if the clouds begin to rain  
I could still use you to not make my hairstyle insane  
Ever since I was a little kid  
You have always been there whenever I hid  
You have always given me a hug  
And have always given me a snug  
Whenever I don't have a blanket, You're always there to become a  
replacement During the cold late winter nights You have always made  
me feel delight  
You comfort me whenever I feel stressed  
And even made me feel the best  
I am glad to have you in all my favorite colors  
To you, jackets I would choose you than clothes of other





草子  
目  
李  
堅



"Character Art"  
by Preston Strong



# She

Miranda R.

she woke up early every morning to watch the sunrise  
she loved the smell of fresh coffee brewing in the kitchen  
she always had a book in her hand ready to dive into another world  
she walked her dog through the park enjoying the peaceful  
mornings  
she painted beautiful landscapes that captured her imagination  
she planted flowers in her garden creating a colorful oasis  
she played the piano with a passion that moved everyone who  
listened  
she volunteered at the local animal shelter every weekend  
she had a hobby for baking cookies  
she danced in the rain feeling the droplets on her skin  
she wrote letters to her friends  
she explored new cities always eager to learn about different places  
she laughed easily always spreading joy around her  
she practiced yoga to find her inner peace and balance  
she cherished her family gatherings  
she rode her bicycle along the beach  
she collected seashells to turn into cute little bracelets  
she sang along to her favorite songs  
she crafted handmade gifts putting them around the town  
she dreamed big believing that anything is possible

# What Love Looks Like

By Ara N.

It was just after sunset when Clara walked into the coffee shop, her eyes red from crying. She had just lost her job, an email from her boss had told her it was over. The day felt endless, and the world felt heavy.

Then there was Jason. He was sitting at a table, and as soon as he saw her, he stood up and walked over. He didn't say anything at first, just put a hand on her shoulder, soft and comforting.

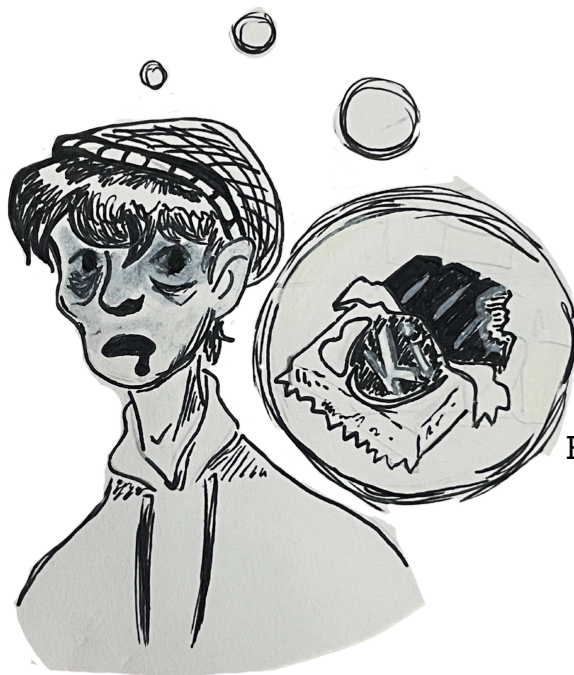
"Do you want to talk about it?" he asked quietly, not pushing, but making it clear he was there for her.

Clara shook her head at first, not ready to talk. She didn't even know what to say. But just his presence, the calmness in his voice, made the world seem a little less overwhelming. They sat together, not saying much, just sipping their coffee.

He didn't try to fix everything. He didn't offer advice or tell her what to do. He just sat with her, and that was enough.

As time passed, Clara felt the weight on her chest loosen a little. It wasn't that her problem was solved, but somehow, being with him made it feel less heavy.

She realized then that love wasn't about grand gestures or big promises. It was in the quiet moments, the small things: being there for someone when they needed it most, listening without rushing, and offering comfort without expecting anything in return.



"Chocolate Zombie"  
by Andy McMurrian

## Favorite Snack

By Joseph G.

The flickering candlelight cast long shadows across Juny's face as he spoke, his eyes wide and manic. It's not just a chocolate bar, you see, he rasped, voice trembling. It's... sustenance. A lifeline. He paused, licking his lips. A KitKat. The snap, the wafer, the smooth, perfect chocolate...it's everything. He leaned closer, his breath hot and stale. "Without one...without that perfect balance...the world tilts. Everything feels wrong. Empty." He began to fidget, his hands twitching. "They say withdrawal symptoms are bad, right? Imagine that but intensified tenfold. The craving consumes me. I'd blow this whole house to smithereens than put anything else in my mouth. Anything. But...a KitKat..." He trailed off, lost in a terrifying, sugar-fueled daze. The candles flickering, threatening to plunge the room into darkness, mirroring the darkness in Juny's soul. Juny's favorite snack.



# The Strange Orb

By Isabella Melendez

It was a normal day in March, the weather was warm, the air thick with humidity. I was walking through downtown St Pete peacefully when I decided to walk into an antique shop. This is something I wouldn't typically do, but I knew something would occasionally capture my attention, so I decided to walk in anyway.

I was kindly greeted by the owner, and we exchanged words before I wandered around. It was quiet, I was the only one in the store at the time, only the sound of the old clock echoing across the small store. I was scanning the shelves when suddenly, something caught my eye. It was an orb or ball of some kind; it had this purple aura inside of it. I decided to buy it not knowing what it actually was.

After leaving the store I headed back to my car to check this orb out. I took it out of the bag, the purple aura still surrounding it. I touched the orb, and it quickly started to light up, the aura turning bright. It wasn't really doing anything until it spelled out the words "Are you ready to see the future?" with two boxes next to the words "yes" and "no". Curious, I tapped the word "yes". I've never seen anything like this before, but I was getting intrigued. After a couple of seconds, it spelled out the words "Who's future do you want to see?" I was confused until to my shock, it made a list of all my family and friends names. I wanted to look for my name, but it wasn't there.

It was then I realized that I'm only allowed to see other people's future, and not my own.

My head was spinning with questions and wondering how I managed to stumble into this thing. But my curiosity would always get the best of me, and I wanted to see how this worked. I looked through the list of names until I came across my mom's name. I tapped the orb, and all the names disappeared and the aura inside of it started spinning. It took mere seconds till the ball showed videos of her inside, she looked older, but she was happy. She was inside a retirement home with my dad, and they were smiling and laughing together, just like they do now. I got a little emotional until the video faded away. Even more shocked than I already was, I decided to do another person. The list reappearing with the names, my best friend's name at the top, she was always curious about her future, and I wanted to see how things would turn out. I clicked her name, and the process repeating itself, I was shocked to what I saw next. She was married, with a husband and two kids, and they were playing card games in the living room. Laughing and having a good time, the video then faded. I stared at the orb for a good 20 minutes until I jumped back to reality. So, this thing, I found at an antique store, allows me to see the future?? Insane. Later that day, I thought about how I was going to use this later on, until I decided to keep it top secret from everyone, carefully picking each and every name to see their future, I drop subtle hints and they get confused, not knowing I know their full story.





"Picture of Snow Giants" by Mr. Tilbury



# Holiday Story

By Miranda R.

In a small village nestled in the snowy mountains, there was a little girl named Emma. Emma loved Christmas more than any other time of the year. The village was always adorned with twinkling lights, and the scent of pine trees filled the air. Every year, the villagers would gather in the town square to celebrate with carols, hot cocoa, and the lighting of the grand Christmas tree.

This Christmas, Emma had a special wish. She wanted to meet Santa Claus. She had written him a letter, telling him about all the good deeds she had done throughout the year and how she hoped to meet him in person. Emma placed the letter by the fireplace, hoping it would reach the North Pole.

On Christmas Eve, as Emma was getting ready for bed, she heard a soft jingle outside her window. Curious, she peeked out and saw a magical sight. Santa's sleigh, pulled by reindeer, was landing in her backyard! Emma's heart raced with excitement as she hurried downstairs.

When she opened the door, there stood Santa Claus, with a warm smile and a twinkle in his eye. "Ho, ho, ho! Merry Christmas, Emma!" he said. Emma could hardly believe her eyes. Santa handed her a beautifully wrapped present and said, "This is for you, for being such a kind and thoughtful girl."

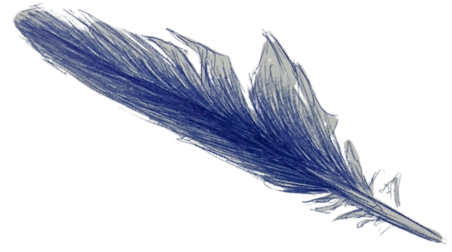
Emma thanked Santa and invited him inside for some cookies and milk. They sat by the fireplace, sharing stories and laughter. Santa told Emma about his adventures around the world, and Emma shared her dreams and hopes for the future. As the night grew late, Santa stood up and said, "I must be on my way to deliver presents to other children. Remember, Emma, the true spirit of Christmas is in the joy and love we share with others." With that, he climbed into his sleigh and flew off into the night sky, leaving a trail of sparkling stardust behind. Emma watched until Santa was out of sight, feeling a warmth in her heart. She knew this Christmas would be one she would never forget. From that day on, Emma always believed in the magic of Christmas and the importance of kindness and love.

And so, every year, she would tell the story of the Christmas when she met Santa Claus, spreading the joy and wonder of the holiday season to everyone she knew.



# Blue

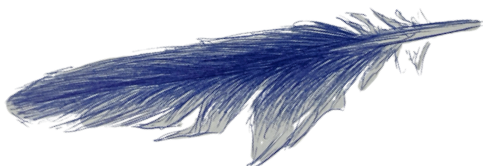
By Ben B.

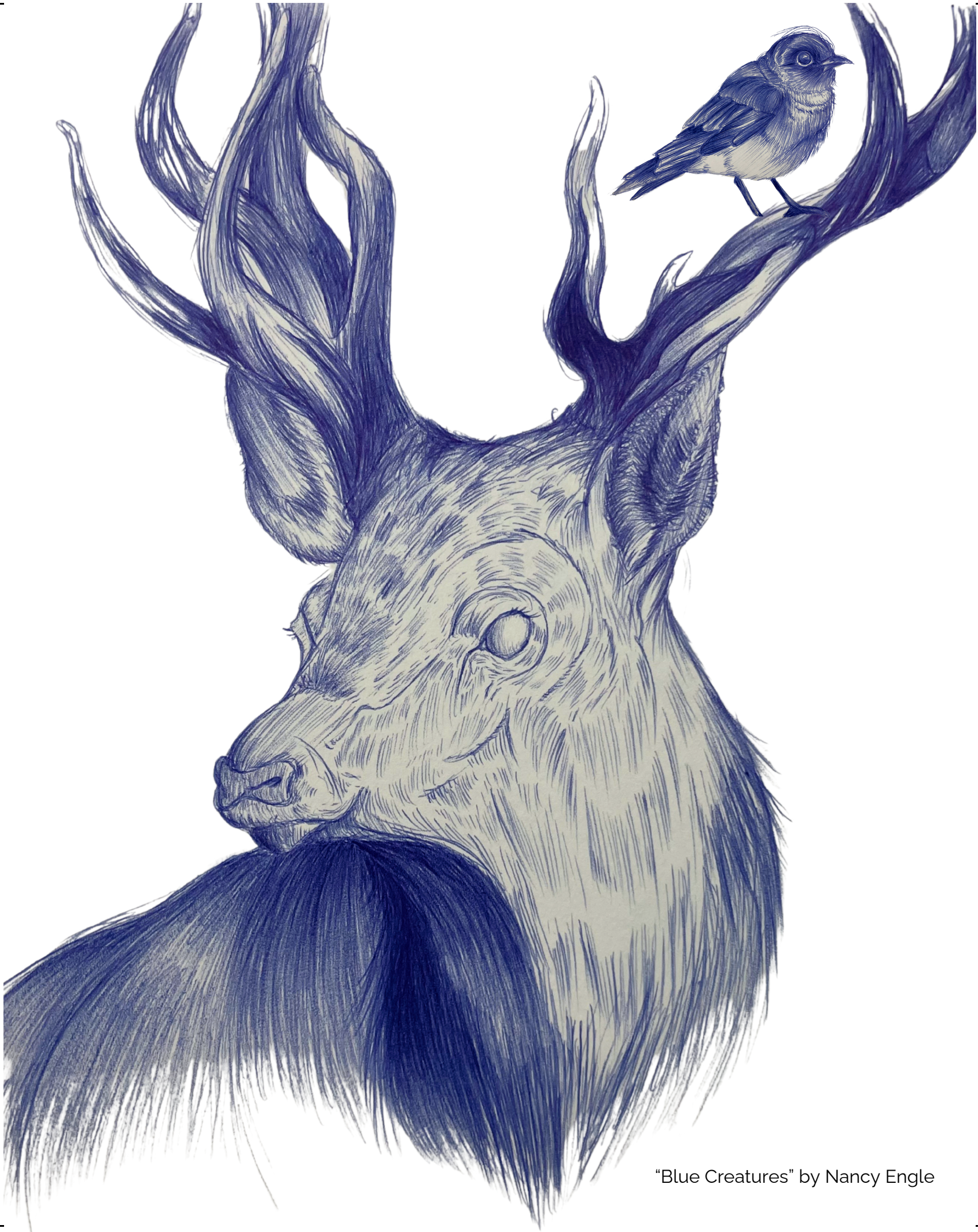


Blue is the color of the ocean. How can it also be the color of a soul  
Deep and loving as the sea, but burns one own like coal  
Filled with the fullest moments, but also the widest emptiness  
Colors brighter than any others seen, but the deeper you see the grayer it becomes  
Everything around it made brighter, but inside its overwhelmed with heaviness  
Drowning in itself without an escape  
Fighting to stay afloat, but to the tide it succumbs

Blue is also the color of the sky, open and exposed  
But how can a blue sky be so open while a blue soul is so closed  
Beyond what is open, pain can be hidden, deep in blue skies there are holes  
Whether in ozone or in a wounded heart  
Stretched thin and wearing over the knolls  
Over the emptiness, a beautiful drape  
By the very people it holds safe, ripped apart

A Blue soul is like a cloud without rain  
So full of hurt but unable to pour out the pain  
Building up until it burst apart with lightning in thunder  
Pushing people away and inside when needed the most  
Leaving the cloud torn asunder  
Floating throughout the air without shape  
Broken and ripped apart without even before even being diagnosed





"Blue Creatures" by Nancy Engle



# Magic Globe

By Ariel L.

Stacy was walking along the sidewalk afterschool, and she notices a small shop she has never seen before walking home. The sign read "Grandpa Joe's Antiques." Stacy gets a closer look and walks up the windows. As she glances through the window she can see piles of books, stuffed animals, and racks and racks of old clothes, but one ball caught her eye. The globe glistened like it was calling for her. Stacy looks around for the door to get in and spots it, she slowly opens the door and peaks her head in.

"Hello?" Stacy's voice echoes through the store and no one responds but the responding sound of silence.

As Stacy creeps in the store looking around for any sign of workers, she clumsily bumps into a rack of clothes, knocking off several hoodies and shirts. Frantically she kneels over to pick up the fallen clothes, grabbing all of them and coming back up to hang them. She puts them back up, panicking as to not be caught by this ominous 'grandpa joe.' Once she has them all back on the rack, she stands straight readjusting herself. Fixing the collar on her shirt she spots the globe once again; it almost sticks out like the golden chest you see in movies. Stacy starts slowly pacing towards the golden globe almost like it has a gravitational pull. Slowly gaining pace she makes her way towards the globe. Once within arm's length, she reached out a hand slowly and placed it on the globe right over Africa. A sudden flash of light takes over her vision and a slight sense of weightlessness rushes over her body leaving her body adrenaline ridden. An almost video like, maybe a memory, plays in front of her eyes yet, her eyes are closed and the vision of this antique store isn't familiar. Neither is the older looking man, who she's never met before, who walked around from a rack of clothes she had been standing next to no less than 10 minutes ago.

"Hello! The globe has your interest, I see?" says he, who before now was dead silent. Even with each step he took.

"Ah uhm, yes actually it did." Stacy hastily responds to the old man.

Quickly her vision goes dark again, and her body gains all the weight it previously didn't have back. She opens her eyes and looks around. Suddenly, an older looking man walks out from behind the rack of clothes she had been standing in front of almost no less than 10 minutes ago.

"Hello! The globe has your interest, I see?" says he, who before now was dead silent. With each step he took his presence grew more and more familiar. Stacy looks at the man, baffled. "Weren't you just there? Didn't you just walk out?"

"Ah, I see. Did you lay a finger on the globe?" says the man, with a suddenly different tone.



Winter Rabbit by Lily T.

"Uhm, yeah. I did, was I not supposed to? I'm sorry, I can get out if-" Stacy gets cut off, "no. It's okay, did you want it? Oh, also I'm joe. Grandpa joe." Says joe. "No, I'm not sure I want it. I just thought it was pretty; I'll go I won't window shop."

"No, truly it is okay. You should consider buying that there globe, it might help you save the world one day. You never know." Joe says persuasively. "I really don't want it, I don't have room for it, and my card is in my wallet at home." Stacy says as she starts walking towards the door she came In, expecting a response from desperate-to-sell-joe she slows down to a stop at the door just before exiting, hand on the handle. "Wasting all that potential, are you sure?"

Still facing the door. Hesitantly Stacy turns around and let's go of the handle, "I still don't have my card though." "You know what, just take it. It's been sitting there for so long but be careful with it. Use it wisely." Stacy walks towards the desk where she had previously encountered it, she picks it up, a little fearful to feel that again. Nothing. Concerned, she has a feeling of safety go over her. Holding it carefully she walks to the door, she stops to look back and thank joe, but he's nowhere to be seen. Ignoring that she walks out the door, pushing it with her arms.



Astronaut by Unkown

She steps out onto the concrete sidewalk and looks up towards the crosswalk in front of her, there's a young schoolgirl holding a small squishmallow walking across.

Suddenly her vision goes black, and her body feels weightless, again. The young girl drops her small panda squishmallow in the middle of the oncoming traffic lane, she bends over to get it and suddenly a car blares their horn. With a loud beep and a flash of red, Stacy's back on the sidewalk, and the little girl still walking across the road. She drops her squishmallow and starts bending down to get it. Absolutely mortified, Stacy's runs to the girl, swipes her up and brings her and herself to the opposite sidewalk, as Stacy sets the girl down, she sees that the car she had seen hit the girl, was driving by.

Thinking about this walk home and standing there, she thinks to herself, "maybe he was right. Maybe it will help me save the world one day."

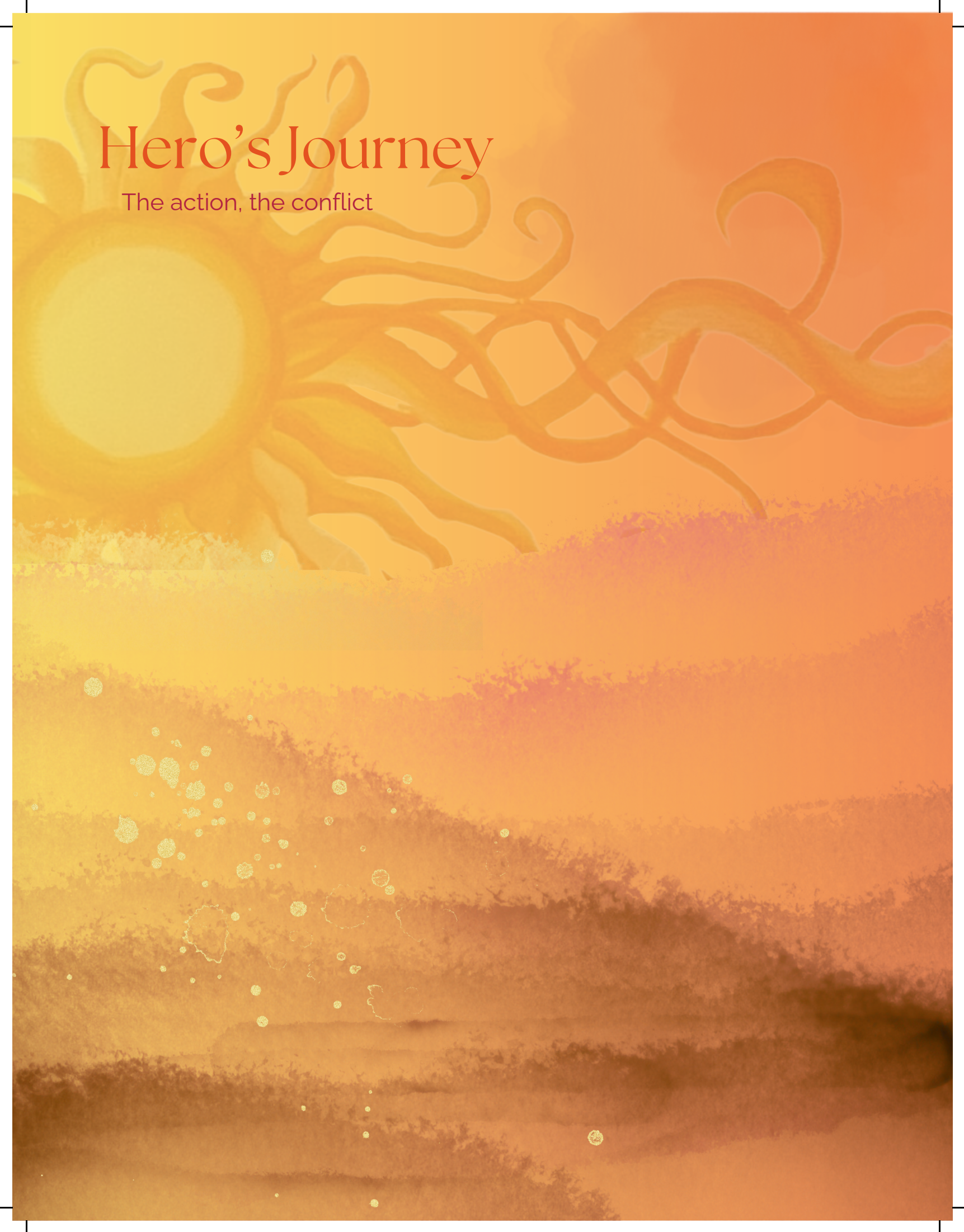


"Jennie Lake" picture taken by Mr. Diaz



# Hero's Journey

The action, the conflict





# The Samurai and the Mongolian

By Tony Ibrisevic

The Mongolian chants echo around the arena filling it. A man in chains and dark samurai armor is pushed through the lifted bar door, where he falls face first into the sand, and his helmet falls off his head. The Mongolian soldier walks over and picks him up by his shoulder and places him on his feet. Keys jingle as the soldier unshackles him, then turns around and shuts the cage door behind himself. On the other side of the area sits another cage door. Once it lifts, a tall, burly Mongolian man dressed in thick leather and iron armor steps in. He lifts his arms and grabs his helmet, taking it off to expose his face and throwing it to the ground. His eyes are dark and calm, gazing straight ahead at his opponent. The samurai's stance lowers slightly, and his eyes dance around, avoiding eye contact with the giant. A sword and a hammer fly from opposite sides of the viewing stands, landing in front of each contestant. Sand scatters into the air as the hammer lands in front of the soldier, and the sword lands in the sand standing up.

The samurai grabs the sword and rips it from the sand, then pulls it back into a guard position where he watches his opponent pick his weapon up. Roaring of the crowd ramps up as the two warriors size each other out, walking slowly towards each other. Both of their eyes are locked onto their targets. The soldier's stare is dead and lifeless, focusing on the samurai. Meanwhile, the samurai's eyes continue to dart around, focusing in on each step, sway, breath, and other general movement of his opponent. Soon enough, both warriors are standing 5 feet away from each other, ready to swing. The Mongol raises his hammer and swings it down at the samurai. An explosion of dust kicks up as the samurai jumps out of the way and swings his sword as a counterattack, striking the Mongol in the side. He grunts in pain as the sword makes contact, but the brunt of the damage is absorbed by the armor. Suddenly he swings his hammer from the ground at the samurai again. In the blink of an eye, the samurai ducks down where the hammer passes over his head. Both of the samurai's hands strengthen their grip on the leather of the sword as the hammer flies by. Then he pushes forward and shoulder bashes the soldier, pushing him back a few feet. With the added distance and the Mongolian's shaken stance, the samurai swings his sword from his hip and makes contact with the Mongol's right hand.

Blood splatters across both of their faces as his hand flies off and lands in the sand. The soldier's hammer falls to the ground, and he is left staring at his bleeding arm. Meanwhile, the samurai turns his sword and reels it back, pointing the tip at the enemy. In a quick stabbing motion, the samurai impales him through the skull. A loud thud echoes through the arena after his lifeless body hits the floor, which is quickly covered by the crowd exploding with thrill. On the other side of the arena, the cage door lifts again. The arena goes quiet. Then the door behind the samurai opens as well. A weapon is thrown through the back door, another sword. Then the crowd starts chanting.

"BEAST. BEAST."



# I Am

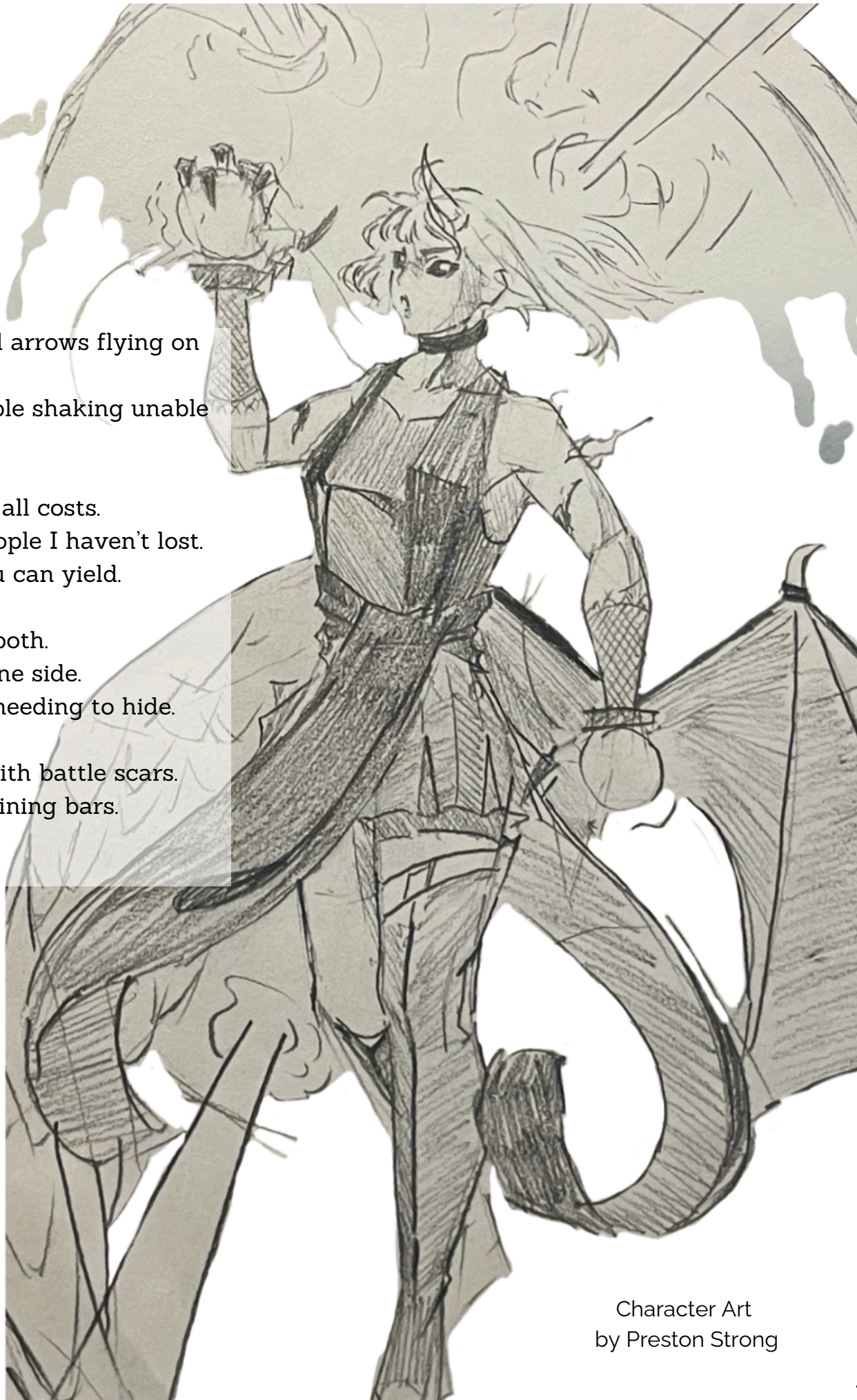
By Jordyn M. Bartha

I am fists, knives, and arrows flying on  
the battlefield.  
Wings breaking, people shaking unable  
to shield.

I am protect them at all costs.  
They are the only people I haven't lost.  
Use all the power you can yield.

I am a misfit, one of both.  
Never belonging to one side.  
Try to fit in without needing to hide.

I am walking away with battle scars.  
Beating on the restraining bars.  
Trying to get by.  
I just have to try.



Character Art  
by Preston Strong



# Callan's Bag

By Isabella Macholino



Character Art  
by Nancy Engle

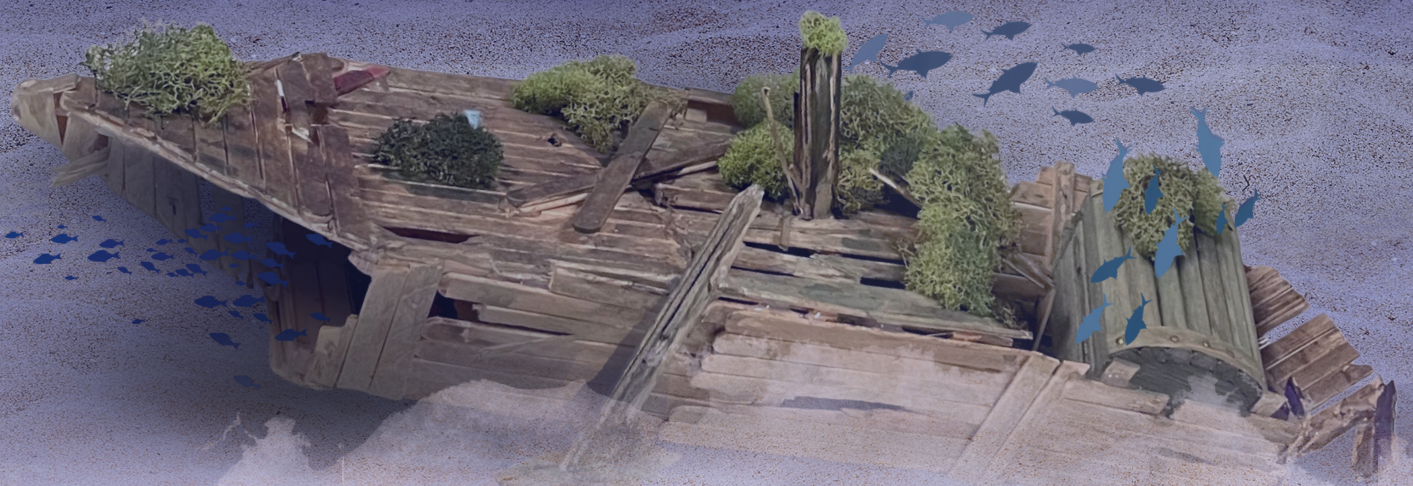
Run. I have to run.  
I try to get the bass strings into my bag while running before  
the cops catch up to me. All of this over some bass strings.  
Seriously?

I trip over something. I don't know what. A crack in the  
pavement? My own bad luck? Who cares, the adrenaline is  
making me inattentive. I fall flat on my face, my backpack  
falling next to me, spilling out all of its contents

The police caught up to me and took the strings from me.  
They write me up, but they don't take me to the station, no  
handcuffs or anything. But seriously, It's New York. Don't they  
have more important things to deal with? Once they walk  
away from me. I open the case for my bass to make sure it's  
okay. Obviously, I can't really afford a new bass right now. The  
thinnest string is snapped, but that's why I tried to steal the  
bass strings in the first place. I start picking up the contents  
that spilled from my backpack. My wallet, which only has fifty  
dollars, which I need to save for food, not waste on bass strings.  
Even though if I got the bass string fixed, I could play the bass  
on the side of the road and hope for some money, which I  
could spend on food,—but it's too late for that now. I'm probably  
banned from that store anyways

I also have a blanket, for the few times I get to sleep. Some  
backup bass picks, the rest are in a little compartment in my  
bass case, a few books from the library. I think I need to return  
those soon, late fees aren't in my budget right now. And finally,  
I have a notebook. Well, it's basically a diary, but sometimes I  
write song lyrics I make up in there, so it's a notebook. Once I  
have everything back in my bag, I start walking again, which is  
good because people were giving me looks for blocking part of  
the sidewalk, like I don't belong here. I guess I need to find  
another music store to steal from and maybe find a  
McDonald's for cheap food or something. Maybe tomorrow will  
be easier. Maybe?





"Sunken Ship" 3D sculpture by Myke Mollett



# Siren

By Tyler S.

They say there are no such things as happy endings, but is that the truth for a siren? This is not the type of siren you may think though. This is the story of a true siren. Half-bird, half-woman. Not that half-woman, half-fish fake.

Leucosia saw a ship and called out for the rest of the sirens. The ten other sirens, eleven in total, all gathered in the shadows of their cave and waited. The ship inched closer to the striking point for the sirens. We all sat in silence, waiting. Thelxiepeia counted nine men on the ship. Once the ship made it to the striking point, Leucosia flapped her wings and flew to a rock in the crew's sight. Before the ship noticed the siren, she began to sing. A wonderful song escaped from Leucosia's lips and entranced the ship's crew. One of the crew members saw the source of the song and jumped off the ship. He must not know how to swim because he immediately began to struggle to stay afloat. After a few moments of struggle, the man slowly began to stop struggling and started sinking. As glad Leucosia is that he's drowned, she wondered why a man would get on a ship without knowing how to swim.

However, at the same time, she didn't care because it helped her kill him. Leucosia continued to sing. Seven of the eight other men followed his lead and jumped off the ship into the water below. Seven sirens came from behind Leucosia and flew over the men in the water, jumping on top of their heads, slowly drowning them. Once they all stopped struggling to breathe, the seven sirens flew back to perch on rocks near Leucosia.

One man remained, however, he just smiled at her maliciously and stayed in place. The sirens began to grow confused on why the man didn't respond to their siren song. That's when Leucosia realized that it wasn't a man. She was a woman. Leucosia grew angry since the siren song didn't work on women. The woman walked to the front end of the ship, went downstairs and came back out with a crossbow. The sirens began to panic. All except Leucosia, she just grew angrier. Leucosia beat her wings against the air and went a few feet into the air, the dove down to attack the woman. The other sirens followed. The woman's face went panicked. Despite her panicked look, she raised her crossbow and aimed it right at the diving sirens. Click. The arrow flew through the air right towards Leucosia. Leucosia dove to the left to dodge the arrow.

When the arrow flew right past the sirens, all of them unharmed, that's when the panicked look on the woman's face returned and stayed there. The woman fumbled to put another arrow into the crossbow, when Leucosia grabbed the woman by her shoulders making her drop the crossbow and flew to the very top of the cave and unlatched her claws from the woman's shoulders. The woman screamed as she fell down and hit a rock emerging from the water with a loud crack. Leucosia smiled wickedly and the sirens that had since perched on the ship, all flew back into the shadows, happy with the kills.



# Silent Night, Sinister Fright

By Katie C.

It was Christmas Eve in the small, snow-blanketed town of Alderwood. Twinkling lights adorned every home, casting a warm glow against the icy darkness. Yet, despite the festive cheer, a sense of unease hung in the air, unnoticed by the bustling townsfolk.

Emma Carter locked up the bookstore, her arms laden with wrapped gifts for her nieces and nephews. The streets were unusually quiet, the kind of stillness that made her shiver, despite the layers of her wool coat. She quickened her pace, the sound of her boots crunching the snow echoing unnaturally loudly.

Halfway home, she spotted a lone figure standing beneath a lamppost. The person was draped in a tattered red cloak, a hood obscuring their face. In their gloved hand, they clutched a rusted sleigh bell that jingled faintly with each gust of wind.

"Merry Christmas," Emma called nervously, hoping the cheer in her voice would cover her unease. The figure didn't respond, didn't move. The bell jingled once more, a discordant note that seemed to ring inside her skull.

Emma hurried past, her breath clouding in the freezing air. When she dared to glance over her shoulder, the figure was gone. Her unease deepened as she reached her house and double-locked the door behind her. The gifts went under the tree, and she poured herself a glass of wine, determined to shake off the odd encounter.

Hours later, as the grandfather clock struck midnight, Emma woke to a sound—the faint jingle of a bell. She sat up in bed, her heart pounding. It was probably her imagination, she reasoned. But then it came again, louder this time, as if right outside her bedroom door.

Trembling, Emma grabbed her phone and turned on the flashlight. The beam sliced through the darkness as she crept toward the noise. Her footsteps felt muffled, like the snow outside had seeped into her home. She paused by the door, her hand hovering over the knob.

The jingling stopped. Silence pressed against her ears, heavy and suffocating. Then, from the other side of the door, came a voice: "You weren't on the list."

Emma screamed, stumbling back. The door creaked open on its own, revealing the figure from the street. This close, she could see their face—or rather, the lack of one. The hood was empty, a void darker than the night itself. The sleigh bell jingled as they stepped into her room, the sound twisting into a sinister melody.

"Wh-what do you want?" she stammered, clutching the flashlight like a weapon.

The figure tilted its head, and for a moment, the void rippled, revealing glimpses of gnarled hands reaching out from an unseen abyss. "Naughty," it said, the word resonating as though spoken by a thousand voices at once.

Before Emma could react, the figure lunged. Darkness enveloped her, the bell's dissonant jingle the last thing she heard.

The next morning, Alderwood awoke to a fresh layer of snow and a chilling discovery. Emma's house stood silent, her gifts untouched beneath the tree. On the porch lay a single rusted sleigh bell, its sound now forever muted.





"Appropriation Project Doll"  
by Will Jackson



# These Darkened Halls

Timothy Nelson

ATTENTION! This is not any sort of threat; it is a work of fiction. This takes place in a different universe called THE SHIMMER where nothing is what it seems to be. Darkness is always trying to take over but is always contested by the light.

Walking down these darkened halls,  
Waiting for the time darkness falls,  
Looking for the inklings wing,  
Waiting for the larks shrieking ring,  
Covering up my red-hot sting.

Walking down these darkened halls,  
Watching as darkness falls,  
Searching for the slithering worm,  
It lives in me and makes me squirm.  
Eating my insides in a pace that's fast nor slow,  
As I watch the burning blood flow,  
Drenching the floor in a burning red,  
Like the sight of the people who wish me dead.

Walking down these darkened halls,  
listening for the darkened calls,  
Fearing the people who live in these walls.  
They're sucking in the death they swallow,  
They are husks, empty and hollow.  
Walking down these darkened halls,  
Waiting for when morning calls.  
When the people no longer swallow,  
The darkness is no longer hollow.

The darkened hall has its first taste of light,  
The shrieking lark takes its first peaceful flight,  
The darkness finally gave birth to light.





"Unfazed" by Nancy Engle



# Under the Weight

By Kaitlyn Cook

The clock on the wall ticks louder than usual. It feels like it's mocking me.

I sit at my desk, papers scattered everywhere—math homework half-finished, history notes barely readable, and an untouched English essay glaring at me from the corner. My laptop hums softly, open to yet another tab I forgot existed. Each notification that pings feels like a reminder of something I've failed to do.

I rub my eyes, feeling the sting of exhaustion. Three hours of sleep—if that. I know I should stop, take a break, maybe even sleep. But how? Every moment spent resting feels like another moment lost. Another deadline slipping through my fingers.

The group chat lights up with messages from classmates.

*"Did you finish the project outline?"*

*"Reminder: Science quiz tomorrow."*

*"Anyone understand the calculus homework?"*

I stare at the messages, my hands hovering over the keyboard but not typing. What would I even say? That I feel like I'm drowning? That no matter how hard I try, I can't keep up?

Instead, I close the chat. Silence feels better, even if it's temporary.

The lamp on my desk flickers, casting long shadows across the room. I lean back in my chair, staring at the ceiling. It's strange how heavy everything feels—like I'm carrying an invisible weight that no one else can see. Everyone else seems to manage, or at least pretend to. Why can't I?

I close my eyes and try to breathe. One breath in. One breath out. The air feels sharp, like it's cutting through the tightness in my chest.

A soft knock at the door startles me.



“Hey,” my sister peeks in, her face full of concern. “You’ve been at it for hours. Maybe you should take a break?”

“I can’t,” I whisper, barely audible. “There’s too much to do.”

She steps inside, placing a gentle hand on my shoulder. “I know it feels overwhelming. But you’re only human. It’s okay to stop, even just for a little while.”

Her words linger in the air, fragile but comforting.

I don’t respond, but as she leaves, I find myself closing the laptop. The room feels quieter now. Not less chaotic, but quieter.

I sit there in the dim light, listening to the soft rhythm of my breathing. Maybe, just maybe, it’s okay to pause. Even if the world doesn’t stop spinning.



Mental Scale by Kaitlyn Norris



Sculpture by Lily-Tai Bui



# The Wallflower

By Kaitlyn Cook

The music thrummed through the walls, vibrating with a heavy bass that seemed to pulse in sync with my heartbeat. The living room was packed, bodies swaying, laughing, shouting—familiar faces, but I didn't quite feel part of the picture. I had been here for over an hour now, sitting on the couch, hands tucked under my thighs to stop myself from fidgeting.

No one really noticed me, and I wasn't sure if that was a good or bad thing. I had come because, well, it felt like something I was supposed to do. It was my senior year, and I hadn't been to any parties. I didn't really talk much in school, always the quiet one in the back of the room, the person people sometimes forgot was even in class.

I watched them—the golden, glowing crowd. They danced with reckless abandon, not caring if they looked silly, or if they stumbled over their feet. Jenna Hartley was the queen of the night, as she always was, flipping her shiny blonde hair, her laugh bright and carefree. Everyone else seemed to circle around her like planets around the sun.

I tugged at the sleeves of my sweater, feeling a little too warm, a little too out of place. My eyes drifted to the snack table. It was a safe place, just a few steps away. I could pretend to be hungry, maybe grab a handful of chips and slip back into my corner unnoticed.

As I made my move, someone bumped into me—hard.

“Oh! I didn't see you there,” said a voice, startled. I looked up into a pair of bright, wide eyes. It was Theo, the guy from my math class who sat two rows ahead of me. His dark curls were tousled, and he smelled faintly of peppermint and cologne. “You're... uh, from Ms. Donahue's class, right?”

I nodded, unsure what to say. My tongue felt heavy in my mouth.



"I'm Theo," he added, offering me a smile, though I could tell he already knew I knew. He shifted awkwardly. "You good? You look a little out of it."

I laughed, but it sounded forced even to my ears. "Yeah, just... not really a party person."

Theo grinned. "Same. I didn't even want to come, but my friend said I'd regret it if I didn't go to at least one 'epic' high school party before we graduate." He glanced around, watching the chaotic crowd for a second. "Not sure this is what I imagined."

I relaxed, just a little. Maybe I wasn't the only one who felt out of place here. Theo gestured toward the back door, where the air outside was dark and cool compared to the stuffy room. "Want to step outside? It's too loud in here."

I hesitated but nodded. Together, we slipped out onto the patio, unnoticed by the sea of bodies. The air was crisp, filled with the scent of pine trees and distant city lights. The muffled thump of the music was still there, but it was easier to think now.

Theo leaned against the railing, his breath visible in the cool air. "You ever feel like everyone else has it all figured out, but you're just... on the sidelines?"

The question surprised me, hitting a little too close to home. "All the time."

He nodded thoughtfully. "It's funny, isn't it? Everyone acts like high school is supposed to be the best time of our lives, but... I don't know. I guess I don't see it that way."

I looked at him, a little amazed. He was popular, wasn't he? Not in the Jenna Hartley way, but people knew him, talked to him. He was good-looking, smart, a natural fit with everyone else at the party. But here he was, on the outskirts with me, asking the same question that had been nagging at me for years.

"I thought I was the only one who felt that way," I said quietly.



# We Made It

Return to comfort, stronger together



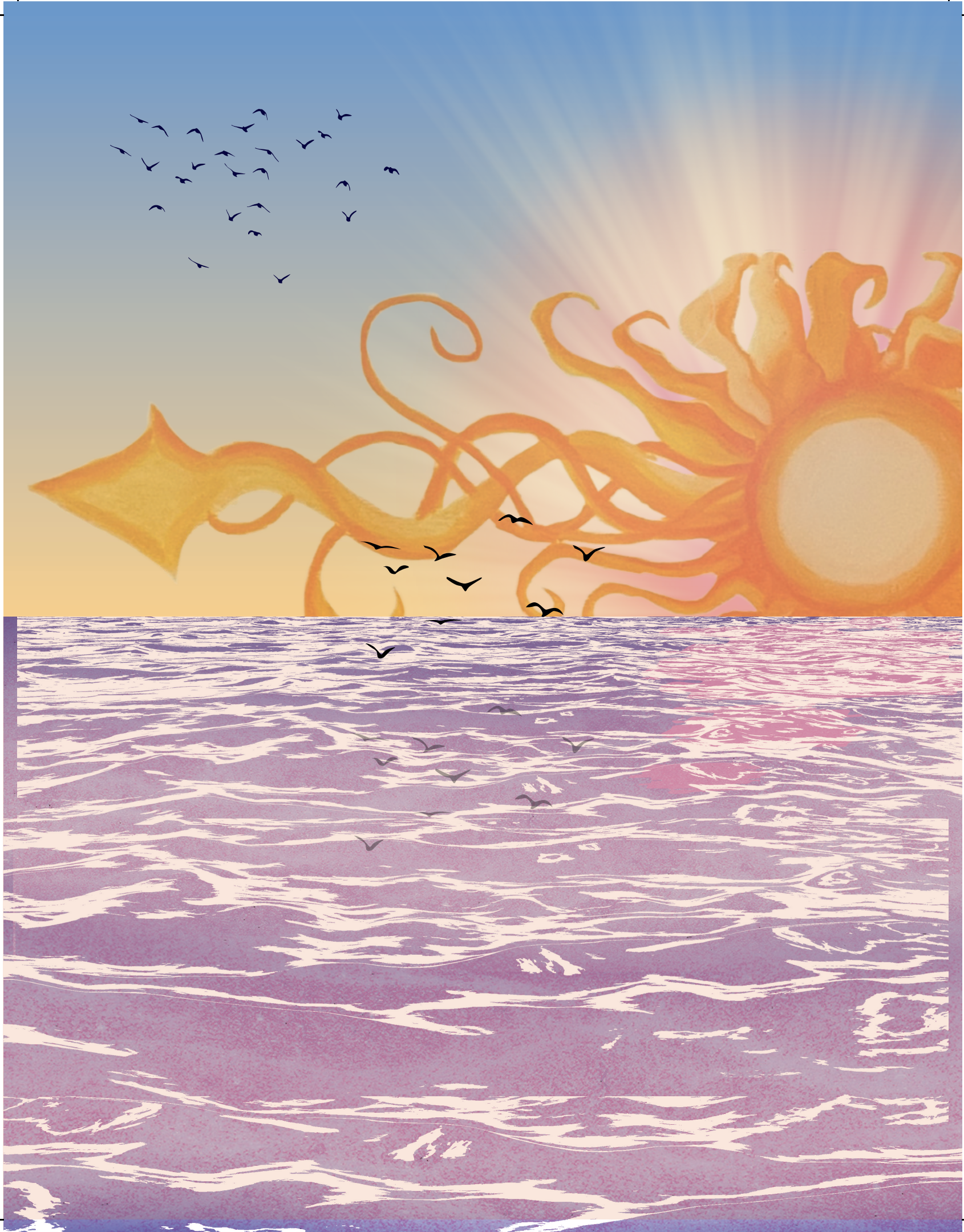
## The Beach

By Keira Lewis

Whenever the words in my mind,  
Make me give up on being kind,  
I find myself searching,  
Searching for the right place to be,  
Where I can relax and not think,  
Not even to blink.  
But I found it,  
My place is the beach,  
I get to listen to the waves,  
When they crash down on the sand,  
Nothing is bland,  
Everything is filled with color,  
Like the sun over the horizon,  
The white cast on the waves,  
The sound of the birds in the distance,  
And most of all,  
The reassurance,  
That everything is just existing





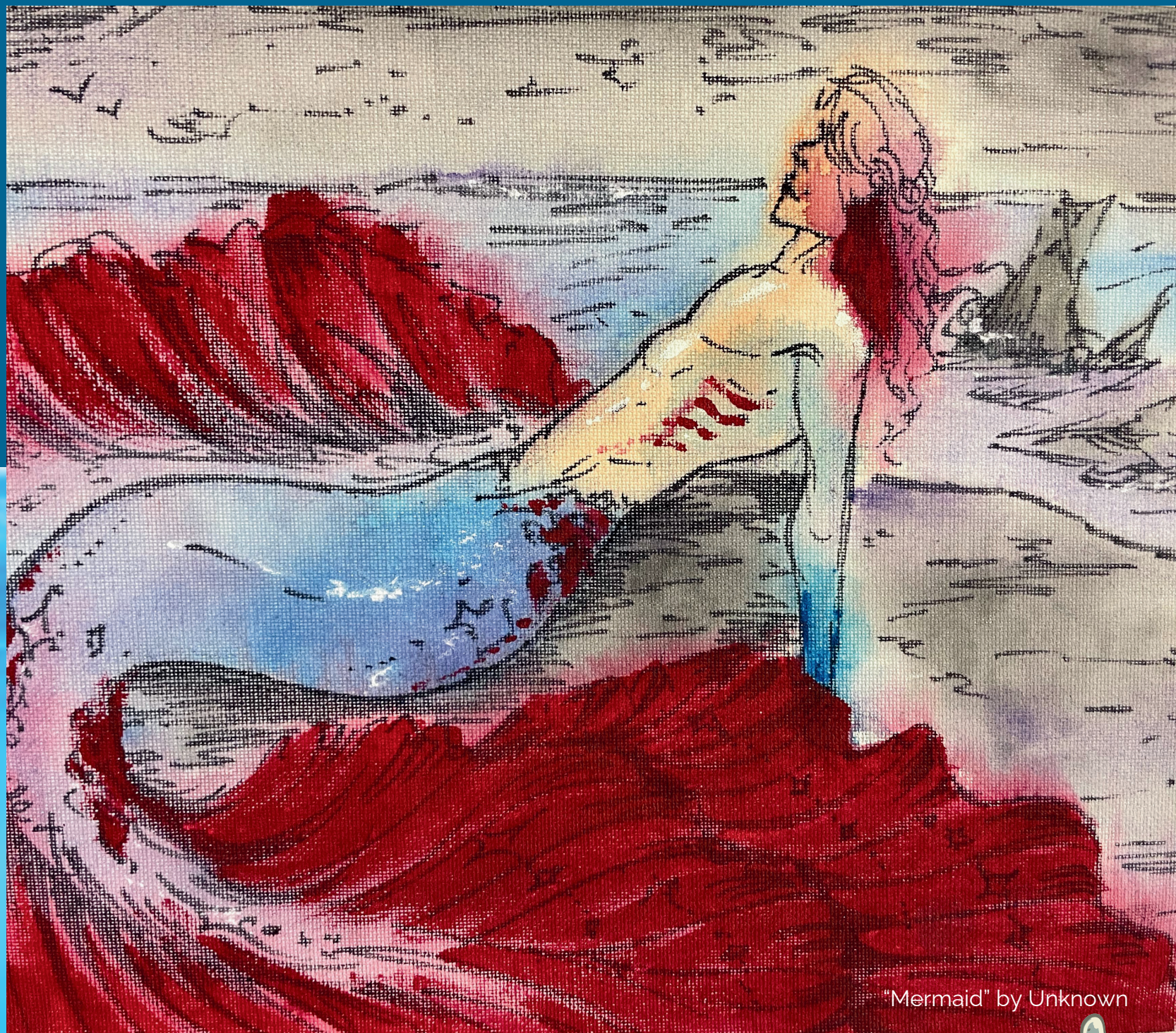




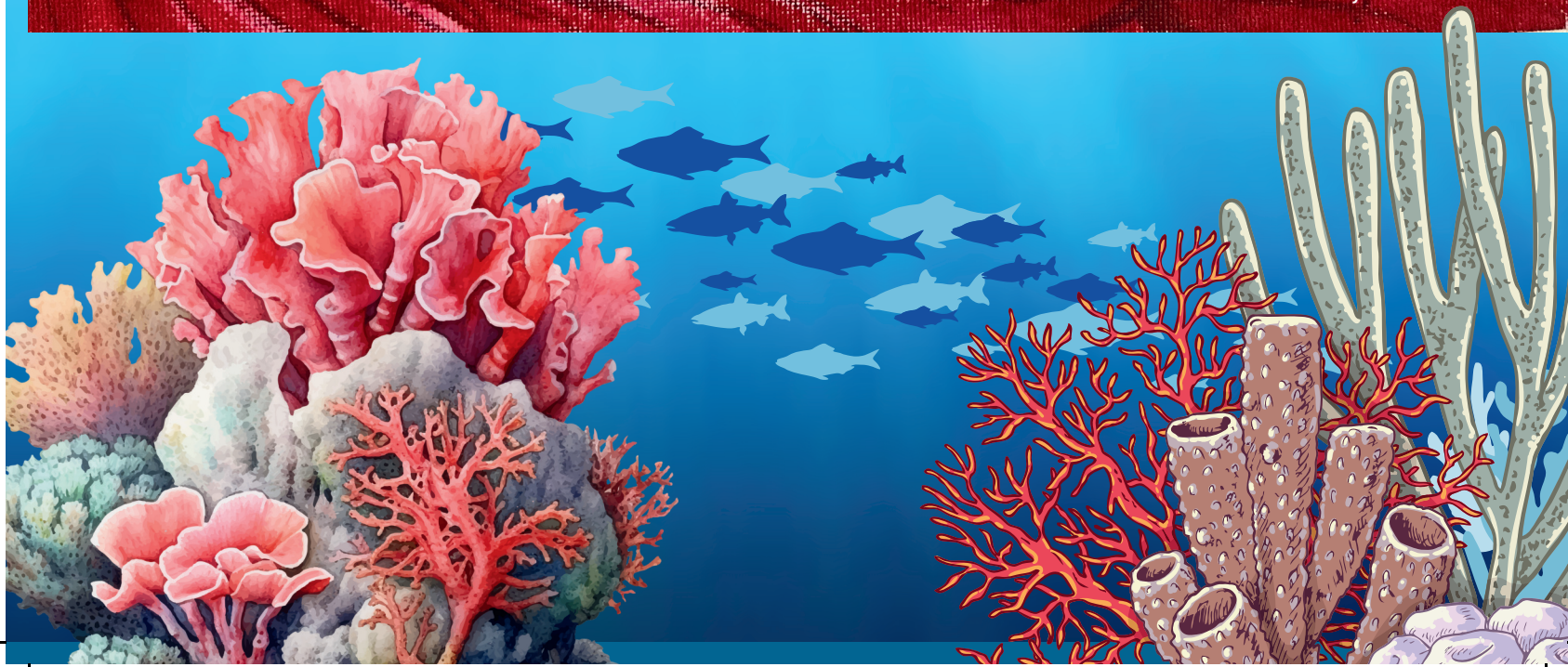


"Environmentalist Diorama"  
by Keirra Albritton





"Mermaid" by Unknown





# My Favorite Place

By Ava W

There is something about the beach that pulls me in, like a magnet, every time I step onto the warm sand. If I had to pick my favorite place, without a doubt, it would be the beach. The smooth sound of the waves crashing against the shore, the salty breeze that blows through my hair, and the sun warming my skin. It's the perfect escape from the craziness of everyday life.

There is something so freeing about being at the beach. The sky and the endless water make me feel small, but in a good way, reminding me that the world is so much bigger than my problems.

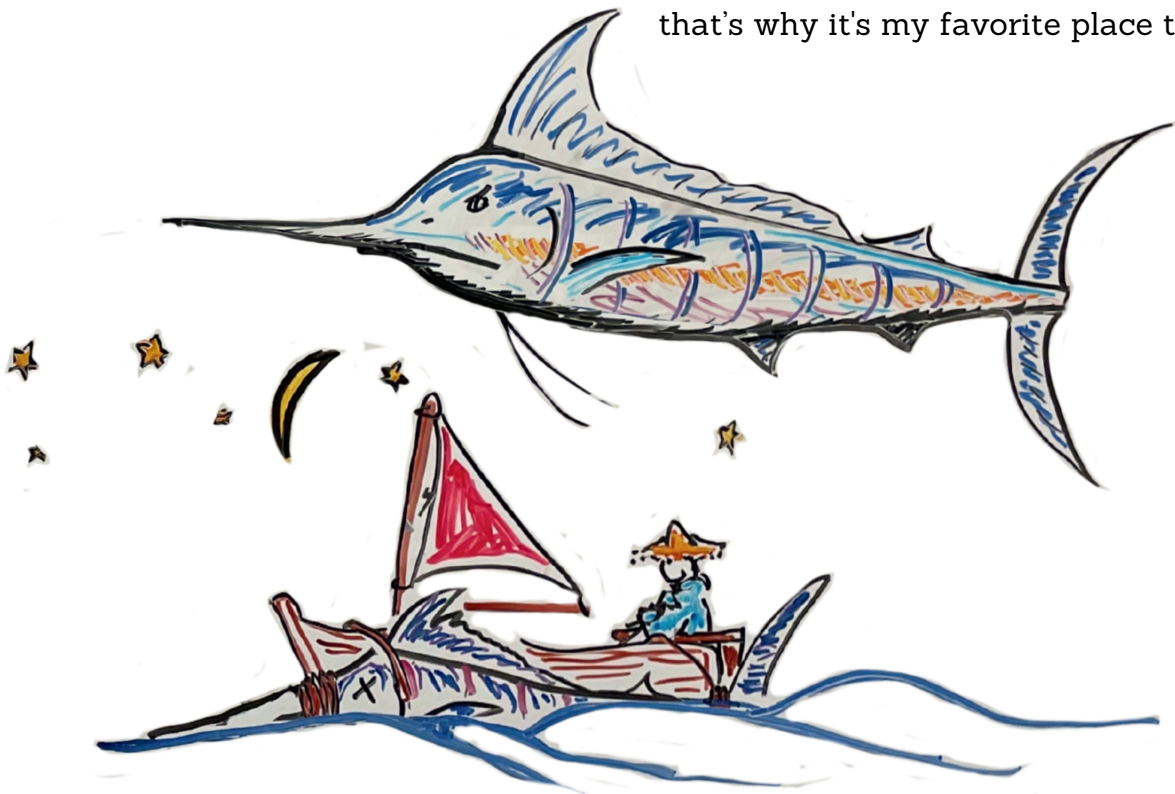
Whenever I arrive at the beach, it feels like a weight has been lifted off my shoulders. The moment my feet touch the sand, I can already feel myself relaxing. The sand is warm and soft, and it shapes perfectly under my feet as I walk closer to the water.

I find myself tuning into the sound of the waves. They crash and pull back in a constant, peaceful cycle that has a calming effect. It's like the ocean has its own heartbeat, slow and steady, reminding me that everything is going to be okay. I sit by the water, watching the tide come in and out, letting my thoughts drift away with it. It's the one place I can go and completely lose myself yet feel completely at peace.

The beach is not just about the calm, though. It's also a place for excitement. I love playing games, jumping over waves, and watching the colorful sunsets. It's where I go to reset and recharge, whether I'm with friends, family, or alone. It gives me the peace of mind I need and lets me reach for whatever comes next.

Every time I leave, I feel a little lighter, ready to take on the world once again.

In a world that never seems to stop moving, the beach is where time slows down, and that's why it's my favorite place to be.



"Old Man and the Sea Whiteboard Drawings" by Mr. Monaghan



# My Favorite Place is My Bedroom

By Myiah M

My favorite place has to be my bedroom. It's more than just a room; it's my own little escape where I can just chill and be myself. The walls are painted this nice blue that makes me feel relaxed just how the baby blue sky does, especially when the sunlight comes in and makes everything feel cozy.

In one corner I've got my bed, which is super comfy. It's the perfect spot to crash after a long day at school. I love curling up there with a good snack or watching my favorite shows. Right next to my bed is my desk, which is kind of a mess, but in a good way because I know where everything is specifically while it looks like a mess to someone else. It's covered in my everyday necessities like mascara, pencils, etc. Although it will look like a clutter to you, it's perfect to me. My walls are filled with posters and tapestries of my favorite artists and movies, which totally show off my personality. They make the room feel alive and reflect who I am. I also have my small business set up where I can make bouquets to just relax when I'm bored.

To make my room feel more like home I will light my favorite vanilla candles I have. The smell is so comforting and adds to the chill vibe of the room. Overall, my bedroom is in fact where I feel at home. It's a space I can relax, create and just be me without any distractions or disruptions. It is my happy place, and I love my room more than anything.

## His Arms

By Ariel L..

The place I love the most in this world is in his presence. His arms wrap around me with a tight, warm, embrace. Which helps me keep calm and collected in times an escape would be greatly appreciated. The symphonies of his voice were almost like the most prominent background noise I've ever heard. The soil beneath his skin even, is as beautiful as an intricate bouquet of Devine pastel yellow sunflowers, the same of which flowers are in the garden we keep well maintained, his garden beats a symphony like a heart does. The greatest symphony I've heard and the most hypnotic one at that. His neck, like the stairs to his eyes, his heaven, in them I feel lost looking for a way out, but inside these walls that his arms have embraced me with, there is no pain. No angst, no negativity, nothing except our happiness and the promise of a healthy future and home. No place such as my bed or the park could ever compare to the place he provides me. There's not a lot of room, but it's the coziest, tightest walls to exist. His walls are my walls too.

Every place he goes is my favorite place in this world. A second without being at my favorite place feels like hell, straight punishment. All I feel is a deep, red, passionate anger and desperate loneliness without my favorite place. My favorite place cries tears like a waterfall, in which I wipe away for him when it starts to flood. And even through storms and hurricanes or tornadoes, our infrastructure stands tall, taller than ever. My favorite place even has its own favorite place, that place is me, he would talk about me the way I talk about him, a girl could only imagine, but thankfully. me and my Favorite place will never have to imagine that again.









"Group Collage" with art by Jenna Dickson, Preston Strong, Will Jackson, Noah Ames, Patty Senethavisouk, Nancy Engle, Andy McMurrian, and Unknown



# The Halloween Run

By Eric Laemmel-Jenson

It's October 31st, 2012, and Charlie is getting ready to go over to Bartley's house for Halloween. She begins wrapping her body in a mummy wrap and puts on a shiny blue shirt and golden heels. She and Bartley are going to be Duce and Cleo from Monster High. As Charlie finishes her makeup, her mom screams across the house.

"CHARLIE LET'S GO!"

Excitedly, Charlie bolts from the house. Charlie waves her mother goodbye as they arrive at Bartley's house and notices her boyfriend waiting in the doorway. She gasps at his attire as soon as she turns to face him. She laughs uncontrollably.

"Bartley, you look so adorable." While she continues giggling.

"Quit laughing. I feel dumb. But nevertheless, you look good yourself. Embarrassed, he flushes.

"Okay, okay, let's go inside. It's cold." Charlie says. They went into the kitchen and greeted Bartley's mom, then went into his room. Charlie tries to fix his makeup and hair to make him look better. As they gaze at one another in awe, they start laughing and giggling. Bartley's mom knocks on the door and asks if they're ready.

-Knock knock knock-

"Are you guys ready?" Bartley's mom asks as she knocks on the room door.

They go in the car and decide to drive to the rich neighborhood to get better candy. Bartley's mom parks the car, and they start the trick or treating. After half an hour, the kids decided to take a seat, only to realize that Bartley's mom was missing. They both started panicking. They didn't know what to do, and neither of them had a phone. Next thing you know, they hear music coming from down the street.

The school bullies are riding their bikes this way!" Charlie grabs Bartley's shirt looking scared.

"We must leave immediately Charlie!" Bartley yells as he grabs her wrist as tightly as he can.

After running across the corner and down the street, they leaped through a gate to enter a private area. Just as they were about to take a seat and relax, they heard a door open.

"Oh shoot, run!" Bartley gives a loud whisper. He starts to pull Charlie as he runs after spotting the closest tree.

"I appreciate you saving my behind twice." Charlie says, giving him a sly smile.

"I guess you're welcome. Isn't that the purpose of boyfriends?" Bartley looks up and only sees Charlie's stunning ocean-inspired eyes, sparkling against her face as the moonlight dances across it.

Just as they look deeply into one another's eyes, a rustling sound emerges, shattering the heat of the moment and replacing it with fear. They hear footsteps coming closer and they cover each other's mouths. Bartley senses Charlie's trembling, who holds her hand tightly to provide comfort. They see a tall shadow slowly approaching them.

Then suddenly...

"Hey guys!" says the tall figure.

Bartley and Charlie look up to see Judah, one of the bullies' friends.

"Oh, hi there, Judah? You're not going to harm us, are you?" Bartley says, balling his fist in preparation to leap up and strike him in order to defend Charlie.



Judah laughs. "No! Not at all! How are you guys doing?"

"Oh, we're doing all right. We apologize; we were trying to get away from your friends and ended up here." Charlie says as Bartley rolls his eyes in jealousy.

"No worries. Do you guys want to come inside?" Asks Judah.

"Yea, that would be great! Thank you! We don't have phones, and we lost Bartley's mom." Charlie says with a nervous chuckle.

As they all go inside, Judah leads Bartley to the phone so he can contact his mom.

"Hey mom, this is Bartley."

"OH MY GOD! ARE YOU OKAY!?" His mom yells in worry.

"Don't worry, Mom; everything is okay. After some time, we noticed you were gone, but before we knew it, we ran into some of our school's bullies and unintentionally ran onto someone's private property. It's okay though, the guy is one of our school friends. I'm sorry." Bartley remarked as he gasped for air, thinking he was going to be trouble.

Over the phone, he hears her sigh and says, "It's okay Bartley. I should've given you a phone call. In a few hours, I can come get you and Charlie if you want to spend some time hanging out with your friend?"

"Yea okay! Thanks mom." Bartley lets out a sigh of relief.

After the call, they all decided to go into Judah's room and hang out until Bartley's mom picked them up.



"Zombified" by Jenna Dickson



# Thinking About The Roman Empire

By Ben Barnes

My thoughts Always on the Roman Empire.  
Never has there been a country as great.  
Always my thoughts "rebuild" spread like wildfire,  
But still I think, we think about it still.

Elite Soldiers only four eleven.  
At their sight enemies quickly scatter.  
Bronze legion of unique strength Leaden,  
They're proof that size truly does not matter.

Thinking about the great Roman Empire,  
even though sadly apart they were torn.  
The memories of what they were never tired,  
In the hearts of people, it is reborn.



"Cone of Shame!"  
by Cassie Brieser

## Cone of Doom

By Ava Warren

I don't know what happened. One minute I was playing, and the next, I woke up with a huge plastic cone around my neck.

It's awkward. I can't see my paws or the ground clearly. I keep running into the walls and knocking over furniture. I tried to scratch my ear, but the cone was in the way. I can't reach it.

The humans keep saying things like "good girl!" and "You're doing great!" but it's hard to feel great when I can't even lick my nose.

I know they're trying to help make me feel better, I've seen them put ointments on my wounds and give me treats, but every time I get too close to the couch, or their legs, the cone makes me knock into them. I hear their laughter, but I don't find it funny. They're just glad it's not them wearing the cone.

I don't get why I must wear it, but I know I need to for a while. I just hope it's over soon, and I can go back to normal. For now, I'll just have to be patient. Maybe if I sit still for long enough, they'll forget about it and take it off. Until then, I'll just follow them around, trying my best to make the best of it, and trying not to knock everything over.



"Dog? In a Cone?"  
by Lillie Coffely



# Cone of Doom Monologue

By MyiaLynn Shinn

I don't know what I did to deserve this. One moment, I was running in the yard, chasing that pesky squirrel like always, and the next I woke up in a strange smelling place, my body aching, my head heavy, my belly sore. And worst of all...this thing. This horrible thing around my neck.

It's big. It's stiff. It clunks against the floor as I try to sniff around. I can't see my own paws! I turn my head, but the world stays the same. I tried to scratch my ear, but my paw just, BAM! Hits the plastic prison. Betrayed by my own foot.

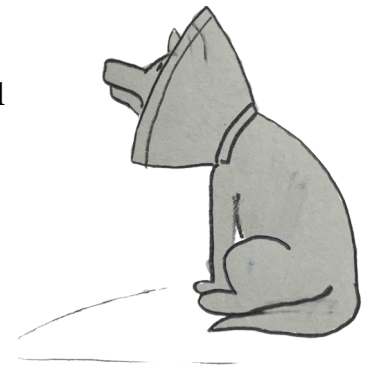
I don't understand. Did I anger the humans? We were a team. I thought we loved each other! But now they laugh and laugh as I bump into walls and knock over chairs. I am a warrior, a hunter, a guardian of this house, and yet I am reduced to this...this lampshade creature.

The worst part? The food. Oh, the food. I smell it, I see it, but when I dive in, clunk. The bowl is tight there, yet it remains out of my reach. My human, the one I trusted most, has to help me eat.

## **This is an insult beyond words.**

But then...Then they rub my head, scratch behind my ears (the parts I can still feel, at least). They speak softly. They call me brave. They bring me blankets and let me rest where the sun hits the floor just right. And when they press their face close and whisper, "Just a little longer, buddy," I believe them.

So, I will endure. I will conquer the Cone of Doom. And when it is gone, I will return to my former glory, a legend, free to chase squirrels once more.



"Reflecting Dog in Cone"  
by Cassie Brieser

# A Dog's Life is Ruff

By Joseph G.



"Sad Dog in Cone"  
by Cadence Davis

Ugh, this thing! They call it a 'cone,' but I call it the 'Wall of Shame.' One minute, I'm enjoying a delightful tummy rub (post-op, they said!), and the next, BAM! I'm wearing a satellite dish around my neck. Eating is a disaster. I keep knocking over my water bowl! And don't even get me started on trying to chase squirrels. I just end up bumping into the fence like a furry, four-legged Roomba. The humans keep laughing, but it's not funny! How am I supposed to maintain my dignity when I can't even lick myself properly? Sigh. A dog's life is ruff, especially when your head is trapped in a plastic lampshade?!



# Word of the Year Check in: Growth

By Miranda R.

I had chosen the word growth, and I am right on point with that word. Recently in Florida we had two bad hurricanes that caused devastation all around. For me it caused me to lose my childhood home that I've grown up in since I was 17 years old. The hurricanes destroyed the roof of my house causing the water to destroy the entire inside, my room, all pictures, electronics, clothes, etc. I knew there was no saving anything and that feeling caused my heart to sink and my mind to race. I had never felt the feeling of what it was like to not completely know what to do.

I remember a moment where my mom and I were just standing looking at each other in silence with the blankest expression on our faces. That was the first time I have ever seen my mom unbelievably speechless. Over time I had to learn how to adapt very quickly to new things I thought I wouldn't have to ever adapt to. I had to learn how to live out of two regular sized backpacks filled with clothes that survived, moving from hotel to hotel that had open rooms, all this and having to go to school and act like everything was going to be okay while silently stressing if I had a place to lay my head at night.

Time passed and my birthday came up which was the same day we moved into our new house. My room is way bigger, I have my own bathroom, bigger back yard, nice garage, etc. Now looking back on those hard two months I realized I'm able to do things I couldn't do before it happened, I have a better idea on life and my preparations I need to do when I get my own place, I can always lean on my mom in hard times and trust her to somehow in her own beautiful way to turn something bad into something great, and lastly that not everything can't just be all bad eventually it has to even out and that's where good comes but with that good it has to be balanced out with some moments of bad.

Whenever a next bad moment happens, I just have to remember eventually it'll even out just have to keep pushing.





"Bison Range" picture taken by Mr. Diaz



