

FOREWARD

To us, writing is shaped by our day-to-day experiences. In light of the COVID-19 outbreaks over the summer of 2021, we thought it suitable to pay homage to how the pandemic has percolated in our lives. *Masked*. Like surgical masks, writing helps us filter through our innermost thoughts, forbidden feelings, and wildest dreams. But at the same time, when we peel back the cover of these pages, like lifting a mask, we are able to see the vulnerable truths beneath the facades. Here are the masked voices of MAK. We would like to thank all the writers who were willing to submit their work and expose their inner thoughts. We hope that this issue of the MAK Literary Magazine can showcase the voices of Morrison students from and behind the mask.

Chloe Lai and Hope Yang, *Head Editors*

NOTE FROM SPONSOR:

This year, I'm thankful for masks and I'm thankful for these hard-working writers. We've spent our whole semester masked up and I'm sure we all have a love/hate relationship with our masks. They are stuffy, hot, and they hide our faces. But they also keep us safe, enable us to keep working and learning, and sometimes we don't really mind that they hide our faces. Sometimes writing is like that too — something we drudge over or something we delight in, depending on the moment. We know it's good for us, but it doesn't always feel that way when you're staring at an overwhelmingly blank page.

I'm proud of these writers for their resilience. We're all learning a new resilience by living through a global pandemic. But it also takes resilience to follow the spark of inspiration all the way to a finished and polished piece, to slog through revisions, and to keep tweaking until it sounds right or makes sense. Thanks to their hard work, I am excited to present the eighth volume of MAK's literary magazine. We hope you enjoy!

高雄馬禮遜美國學校
MORRISON
ACADEMY
K A O H S I U N G

*Journeying beyond
knowledge to wisdom*
始於知識，臻於智慧

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PLACE HOLDER: Elementary

What is LOVE?

Jasper Ku, Madison Lee, Sammi Lin, Pharaoh Ling, Hannah Liu, Hannah Yang, Aquila Yen

(Jasper) Love is when my mommy buys me toys.

(Madison) Love is when my grandma buys me clothes.

(Sammi) Love is when my mommy gives me chocolate.

(Pharaoh) Love is when my mommy and daddy hug me.

(Hannah Liu) Love is when my mommy and daddy buy me new clothes.

(Hannah Yang) Love is when my mommy cooks for me.

(Aquila) Love is when my mommy gives me candies.

走過我家...

Aurora Tien 田縉茵

我靜靜的走過我家，
我家的車庫裡，
停了一台新車，
正在加油。

走進麵包店

Aurora Tien 田縉茵

我慢慢的走進麵包店，
麵包店的牆上多了一張海報，
海報的一個角落掉了下來，
工作人員急忙的貼起來。

What is LOVE?

Meika Sai

Love is when we help others and teachers.

Love is when we play with others.

Love is when we are kind to each other and teach them how to speak English.

What is LOVE?

Eunice Chen

Love is when we play with other people and care for them.

Love is when we teach others something.

Love is when we respect each other!

Love is when my parents help me cook and wash my backpack.

What is LOVE?

Ian Lee

Love is when we love our neighbors.

Love is when you help your mom do chores and cook for her.

Love is when you help your grandparents and are kind to them.

Love is when you are kind to your siblings.

Love is when you help teachers erase the whiteboard and teach others English.

What is LOVE?

Tyler Chen

Love is when we play with others.

Love is when my mom cooks for me.

Love is speaking English at school!

上班的毛毛蟲...

Braylen Huang 黃柏霖

毛毛蟲快快的吃早餐,
爸爸家外面的花園,
綠綠的葉子是雨傘,
毛毛蟲趕著上班。

看見松鼠...

Braylen Huang 黃柏霖

我快快的走進森林，
森林裡的松樹上，
多了一隻小松鼠，
正在開心的歡迎我。

走在雪地上

Angel Y Hsin 辛思樂

我靜靜的走在雪裡，
看到很多雪花；
看到很多住在雪裡的動物，
也看到一隻很可怕的白狼，
還看到很多動物好開心。

走進動物園

Rachel Chen 陳慧嫻

我悄悄的走進動物園，
小犀牛灰色的頭上，
站了一隻白鷺鷥，
正在享受美味的中餐。

走進蛋糕教室

Rachel Chen 陳慧嫻

我靜靜地走進蛋糕教室，
老師桌前的材料，
白白的奶油是棉花糖，
姐姐忙著吃蛋糕。

走進房間...

Janice Liu 劉宣妤

我靜靜地走進房間，
房間的沙發上，
多了一隻小螞蟻，
正在享受美味的食物。

走進校園...

Janice Liu 劉宣妤

我慢慢的走進校園，
操場上走道旁的魚池，
圓圓的小米是種子，
蝌蚪忙著變青蛙。

走進校園

Emma Chen 陳佳滢

我輕輕地走進校園，
學校的籃球場上，
多種了一排樹，
正在享受冬天的太陽。

走在大街上

Emma Chen 陳佳滢

我慢慢的走過大街，
店家抬面上的食物，
金黃色的形狀是薯條，
大家忙著吃東西。

走上叔公的山

Elizabeth Tsai 蔡沛岑

我輕輕地走在叔公的山上，
山上的橋下，
站著一排白鷺鷥，
正在享受溫暖的湖水。

走在山頂上

Elizabeth Tsai 蔡沛岑

我慢慢的走在山頂上，
叔公山上的小木屋裡，
潺潺的流水聲是溫泉，
大家享受著泡溫泉。

走進麥當勞

Eason Wang 王義翔

我慢慢的走進麥當勞，
麥當勞的牆壁上，
多了一張髒掉的圖畫，
正在被王叔叔清潔乾淨。

走進校園

Elise Hsu 許沛晴

我輕輕地走進校園，
校園裡的草地上，
多了一排樹木，
正在歡迎校園裡的學生。

走進教室

Elise Hsu 許沛晴

我開開心心的走過教室，
教室裡的牆壁上，
貼滿學生的作品，
學生的作品像是裝飾品。

走過飯店

Brian Yang 楊馥祥

我靜靜的走過飯店，
飯店裡的客人，
又變多了一點，
正在等待結帳。

What is LOVE?

Henry Wang

Love is caring.

Love is when Papa drives me to school!

Love is when Grandma cooks for me.

Love is when Grandma washes my clothes!

Love is when my parents earn money to support me!

Love is when my parents take me on trips!

LEON

Leo Tseng

Legendary brawler

Excess to invisibility

Overpowering attack and damage

Never stops eating lollipops

The Battle Of The Wizarding World

Inspired by the Harry Potter series by J. K. Rowling

Leo Tseng

Once upon a time there was a wizarding school called Morrison Magic School. The school is located in the magical world.

This school is the most well known wizarding school, for it has presented 2,749 outstanding witches and wizards. This is the school that Billy will be going to three months later.

You live in the school during the school year, your dormitories will be the place you sleep, and you will return home every summer.

Billy had packed everything he needed: a wand, jet black robes, a guide to transfiguration, *The Rise and Fall of the Darkest Arts*, a snowy owl, the standard book of charms, his Firebolt (an international racing broom), and his most prized possession— the invisibility cloak he received from his dad.

He waved goodbye to his parents as he boarded the train that would take him to Morrison. He found an empty compartment and sat down. He then bought a large box of honeydukes's best chocolate bars. Billy found a boy sitting on the other side of his compartment. The boy's name was Blaze, and he was also 11. He introduced himself, and they began eating the chocolate bars, playing with exploding bubble gums, making jokes, and sending sparks out of their wands; through that, they became friends.

4 years later Billy and Blaze had received full marks on their examinations, but trouble was starting in the wizarding world. Lord Vex, the most evil hypnotizer in the world, had risen again. His followers returned and Vex was once again at the height of his power. Deaths and disappearances could be seen in the wizarding newspaper every day.

Highly trained wizards and students had been taken away. Under Vex's control, they were commanded to do evil things without knowing it. Undoubtedly, Vex was intending to create an army to take over the Ministry of Magic.

Charybdis, the Morrison headmaster, was setting powerful enchantments around the school and it was very effective. Vex and his followers entered the boundaries of Morrison, and in an instant, many of them were thrown into the lake. Vex was annoyed as he said, "Can't you watch where you're going?"

After 10 minutes, Vex was through the magical barrier and entered the school just as Billy and Blaze descended the staircase.

The legendary duel began. Billy raised his wand as he said, "Expelliarmus!" The hypnotizer flew through the air and Blaze caught it. He pointed it at Vex's three minions, and suddenly, their eyes became unfocused. They were now under Blaze's control; they drew their wands and pointed it at Vex. Billy smiled and said, "Attack!" Spells shot through the air and the smoke cleared. Vex was lying on the ground as he was being hit by 7 different curses.

The magical reinforcement squad carried Vex to prison, and Billy and Blaze were given money, sweets, and thank you cards from everyone.

After that they were famous and everybody was happy.

TO BE CONTINUED!!!!

PLACEHOLDER: MIDDLE SCHOOL

"Nerdiest Battle of Middle School 2022"

Nicolas Chung

It was the last week of school, and the principal wanted to end the school year with something exciting. He called out two of the smartest middle schoolers according to their grades to compete in the "Nerdiest Battle of Middle School 2022." The two contestants were John, a keen but arrogant guy from 7th grade who excelled in math and science, and Rick, a kind and considerate 8th grader who excelled in math and geography. Both of them were to compete from Monday, 5/21, to Wednesday, 5/23, from 8:30am to 3:30pm. They would be competing for seven hours straight except during lunch, which was from 11:40 to 12:15. Once they got to school, both competitors went to the gym, ready to compete. Their fans were already there to support them. There would be many stages within these three days. The points would be decided by the teachers, and their points would determine who wins. Everyone was really nervous. Who would win and who would lose?

Monday, 5/21, 8:00 am: the first day of the "Nerdiest Battle of Middle School 2022." John and his fans were on the right while Rick was on the left, his fans sitting on the bleachers giving support. The first stage was "The World Geography Challenge." The rules were simple: they had to point out as many countries as possible in one minute. The judge was their geography teacher, Mr. Taylor. John went first. He pointed out 12 countries in a minute: Afghanistan, Japan, China, Singapore, Russia, Bulgaria, South Korea, North Korea, Mongolia, Malaysia, Taiwan, and Austria. Then it was Rick's turn. Everyone knew that he excelled in geography, so the result was obvious. He pointed out 46 countries: the United States, United Arab Emirates, Iraq, Iran, Qatar, Australia, New Zealand, etc. Rick won the first stage! Rick beat John by two points: Rick was two and John was zero. The supporters of Rick went wild, and the supporters of John went boo! Soon after, the second event of the "Nerdiest Battle of Middle School" was about to start. The atmosphere was filled with excitement, and everyone couldn't wait for the second stage to start. The second event was a math challenge. Their math teacher, Mrs. Griffin, arranged lots of calculus equations on each of their whiteboards. After five minutes, the person with the most correct answers would win. Three minutes later, BOOM! John finished all the problems and the crowd gasped with surprise. John, who earned two points, only gave the audience a small grin. The clock hit 11:40, which was lunch time. The teachers ordered pizza, making sure they all had enough energy for the final stage of the day. After their meals, they went on to a one-on-one basketball game. Both of them weren't really good at sports, so they were very anxious. Their PE teacher, Mr. Gregg, was the referee of

the game. He decided John would start with the ball because John was younger, and Rick was taller than John by about three centimeters. Mr. Gregg blew the whistle and the match began. The ambience was really intense. John dribbled to the right then to the left; he pretended to shoot. Rick jumped up and John dribbled the ball to the back of the court, then he shot and scored! The audience from both sides cheered hard for that epic shot. After that shot, they kept playing for another ten minutes. Rick scored, then John, then Rick, then John... John scored again. The score was eight to four. John won again, and he got two points. The sun was down, and it was time to go home. The score for Monday was four to two. They were all exhausted after the competition. The teacher also reminded them to get enough rest for tomorrow's activities.

Tuesday, 5/22, 8:00 am: all the students got to school surprisingly early. They were all too excited for the competition. The contestants looked spicy and well prepared, ready to compete. The first event of the day was "The Ultimate Science Knowledge Test." Their judge was the middle school science teacher Mr. Slabbert. Their objective was to name out as many elements as they could in 10 minutes. There were 118 elements in total. John named out 45 elements and Rick only named out 39. John won another two points. The total score was six to two. Rick was really falling behind. They took a break. Rick was feeling hopeless, but his supporters encouraged him to not give up. After those encouraging words, he was filled with enthusiasm again and was ready for the next battle. The break ended, and the contestants got into their positions. Soon, the history teacher, Mr. Upchurch, walked in. He gave them the instructions for this battle. Each contestant had to name eight events of major natural disasters in under a minute. "If you pass, you get two points. If you fail, you get zero," said Mr. Upchurch. Both of them passed with ease. John passed in 32 seconds, and Rick passed in 28. The score was now eight for John and four for Rick. John and Rick were getting really worn out already, but the savory lunch would save them. They had 30 minutes to relax, recover, and enjoy their lunch. After their mouth-watering lunch, they had to face their final event of the day, which was also the toughest challenge of all, given by their PE teacher, Mr. Gregg. The objective was to run three miles around the track, which was equal to 15 laps. Both contestants, who weren't very good in PE, were shocked. They thought to themselves they couldn't make it. Their fans were yelling at them, "C'mon give it a try!" "You can do it." "Believe in yourself!" After their spirited support, they decided to give it a try. So, they went for it. Mr. Gregg, standing at the starting line making sure the contestants were ready, started to shout, "Ready! On your marks, three, two, one, GO!" His gun shot into the air. Both of them struggled to breathe, but they still tried their best. John was in the lead and Rick was half a lap behind him. John was almost at the finish

line, but then a tragedy happened: he tripped. The audience started whispering to one another. One of the audience was whispering to his friend, "Oh shoot, can he still make it?" One of John's fans fell into tears until Rick ran into the same place as John, but then he stopped. He bent down, pulled John up, and passed the finish line together. Mr. Gregg was emotional but speechless at the same time. He didn't know what to do. How was he going to give out the points? The other teachers suggested giving each of them three points but double it for Rick. The score almost tied up, Rick was only one point behind. John had 11 points and Rick had 10 points. Their parents were there and it was time to go home to get some rest.

Wednesday, 5/23, 8:00 am. Everyone got to school even earlier because it was the final battle of the "Nerdiest Battle of Middle School 2022." It was a new day, a fresh start. The contestants were in good shape but were also nervous at the same time. The first event of the day was "Language Arts Challenge." The judge for this challenge was their talented teacher, Ms. Ro. She gave the two contestants 30 minutes. In those 30 minutes, they were required to write a five paragraph essay. The results would be voted on by the following teachers: Ms. Ro, Mr. Slabbert, Mr. Upchurch, and Mr. Taylor. "30 minutes is up," Ms. Ro bellowed. Pencils were down and essays were examined. John wrote about animal abuse, and Rick wrote about why they needed a swimming pool for the school. Ms. Ro voted for Rick, because she also agreed that the school should have a swimming pool. Mr. Slabbert voted for John, because he loved animals. Mr. Upchurch voted for Rick, and Mr. Taylor voted for John. They were tied up with two votes each. A few seconds later, Mr. Taylor yelled, "Ms. Ro's the judge. She gets to choose!" Ms. Ro decided to give them three points each. The points were: John: 14, and Rick: 13. After a little break, they moved on to the next competition. The next event was a badminton challenge, which was with their handsome coach, Mr. Gregg. It was a one on one badminton challenge. The rules weren't complicated: the first to 30 points wins. Badminton was their favorite sport, and they were also really good at it. They played for about 40 minutes because they were very skillful. Despite taking a long time, the spectators weren't bored; they were still filled with excitement. Rick won, 30 to 29. The score was 14 to 14. They ended in a tie. Finally, it was lunch break. The 40 minutes they spent on the court almost used up all their energy. After they finished their lunch, they went to the gym. The contestants had stomach aches because they were too nervous from the last fight. The final challenge of the "Nerdiest Battle of Middle School" was "Problem Solving" with Mrs. Griffin. It was a head-to-head math competition. The rules are as follows: a question will be given and if you think you know the answer, you can hit the buzzer and the teacher will come check. If you get it wrong, the other contestant can answer. There were five questions.

The winner gets two points. Whoever wins this math competition will win the "Nerdiest Battle of Middle School." Who would win? The audience members were biting their nails and shivering because they were all very nervous. The first question, John got it; on the second question, Rick got it. They were tied. Three more questions to go, and the mood in the room was extremely intense. Third question, Rick got it again. Then John got the next one. The final question! Both John and Rick's hands were frozen and shaking. They were also sweating as if they had just gotten out of the shower. Mrs. Griffin gave out the last question. One second passed, two seconds passed, then the third second also flew by. After 13 seconds, John hit the buzzer and raised his hand. He got it wrong! A second later Rick hit his buzzer and got it correct. The audience roared, cheers and tears in the air.

Thursday, 5/24, the last day of school: the awards ceremony. The principal of the school handed out the award for the "Nerdiest Battle of Middle School 2022" to Rick: a trophy and a certificate. They had never seen Rick so happy. As for John, he only got a certificate. His certificate said, "Mr. John, thank you for participating in the Nerdiest Battle of Middle School. Thank you for the enthusiasm and effort you gave into finishing this competition. I hope you value this competition on the fun and learning, not on the trophy. Thanks a lot! - Dr. Kim." The crowd applauded for five minutes straight. Their principal, Dr. Kim, made a point to tell all of the students that when they go to competitions, they should focus on having fun and learning, not on winning the trophy. When the awards ceremony was over, summer break was here. Rick couldn't wait to show his parents what he won for the competition. Many pictures taken during the contest were put in the yearbook. Teachers appreciated how encouraging the audience was to the contestants. In many people's opinion, the "Nerdiest Battle of Middle School 2022" was the most unforgettable, inspirational, and legendary competition in history!

What is LOVE?

Chanel Chang

Love is a form of care.

I love my dog so I take care of him.

My dog is loyal and I love him.

Friendship and friends:

They show love to me by helping me with my homework.

They show love to me by spending time with me.

What is LOVE?

Alvin Kim

Love is an emotion

Love is a bond that brings us together

Love can be expressed by humans

Families love each other

Love can't be destroyed

Love is the most powerful emotion

God is love

God loves us

Love is EVERLASTING!

Love Poem

Joongi Kim

Love improves to prove
that it will never be removed
and will never be disapproved

When Love moves
to approve the disapprove of disprove
love improves and starts to behoove

PLACEHOLDER: HIGH SCHOOL

Waking Up

Gideon Yeh

It starts with a sound like an ambulance.

It is my alarm.

Then I realize it is six already.

I have to wake up for school.

My throat is drier than the Sahara desert,

My body has less power than my six-year-old PC that hasn't been turned on in forever.

My eyes feel like someone is pouring lava on them when I open them.

At last, I push through all the challenges,

Use my weak fingers,

Turn off the alarm,

And continue to sleep.

Drowning

Gideon Yeh

Sounds are all muffled,
I think I'm in big trouble,
Swimming's a struggle.

The Wonderful Couch

Derek Lee

Who lifts you up and makes you happy?

Who lets you sit and lets you feel comfy?

Who keeps your bum from touching the floor?

Who lets you lie down when your whole body is sore?

Who lets you customize most of their parts?

Who lets you add colors, even from the start?

Who lets you lay down when you're eating a tart?

Well, to all these questions you have to thank the couch,

Which lets you recline so you will never say "Ouch!"

The Avocado Smoothie

Derek Lee

I picked up my wallet and opened the door,
A bustling boy caught my eye, running into the store.
He bought an avocado and left through the door.
I stopped him and asked: "What's the avocado for?"
He turned around and asked: "What should I use it for?"
I told him: "Be creative, explore!"
The little boy told me not to move and stay put,
He said he'll make something real good
And ran back to his house as fast as he could.

I peeked through his windows,
And saw the little fellow
Standing on his tip-toes.
He was mixing up avocados and pouring in the cream.
I thought he broke something because out came steam.
Suddenly, I heard some high-pitched screams.
Luckily, they were just from my own bad dreams.
The boy stood in front of me with his finished smoothie,
I must have had a nightmare because they smelled so dreamy.

Ode to Pasta

Hayden Brandt

Pasta, pasta, please come home.

Linguine, fettuccine,

Spaghetti from Rome.

It's all so good, I just can't take it.

Put some pesto on the plate;

Bolognese with some bacon

Garlic bread show no fear.

You're sure to be a blast.

I love to eat it for dinner and brunch;

A break from a night-long fast

Delicious, nutritious

The list just grows and grows.

When you're eating pasta,

You beam from head to toe

Breakfast

Hayden Brandt

Breakfast. Made of biscuits, butter, bacon galore

Crepes, croissants, cream cheese and more!

I love my eggs, be it hard or over easy

Muffins, maple syrup, all topped with gravy.

Pancakes and Poptarts, crepes and creams

All so delicious, pan-fried and steamed.

When I wake up, I cannot pretend

I don't want an egg on the weekend.

Horizon

Emily Lin

Over the horizon

Where the sky touches the sea

The cold wind brushing past my face

Damp, bare feet on the thin sand

I glance over my shoulder and see you standing

A slight ray of the dark-orange sunset shines across your face

You wave and I turn back, looking

Over the horizon

Hearing my name

I turn around once again

Standing closer this time, you

Lean down and I can feel your breathe next to my ears

I step away

Your mocha-colored eyes

Charcoal-colored hair

Let's take a picture

You take out your disposable camera, searching for someone to take it for us

I stay back, looking

Over the horizon

I feel your warm hand on my shoulder as I turn back

3, 2, 1

Looking up at you, our eyes lock

I quickly turn away, and you retrieve the camera

One week later, you send me the picture and say

Look, we're looking at each other

I laugh and secretly set it as my wallpaper, it's

You, me

Over the horizon

It's All In Your Head

Emily Lin

I woke up with the sun shining directly in my eyes. I squinted at the illumination and slowly sat up. I scrolled through my phone, clicking into Instagram. I viewed the first few stories as an ad popped up and caught my eye.

THIRD TIME'S THE CHARM? THE THIRD CHOICE IS THE CHARM! PICK OUR NEWEST COLLECTION FROM THE BRAND THIRD CHOICE. STONE NECKLACES, PERFECT FOR A GIFT!

As I was about to swipe up for the website, I saw a message pop up.

"Won't be able to make it to the beach with you today, sorry about that. I'll explain later. Please still go yourself and enjoy the day if you'd like."

I typed in a 'K' and threw my phone on the pillow as I walked to the bathroom. I picked up my toothbrush and squeezed my toothpaste on it. I thought again about Caden saying to reschedule, and I knew he wouldn't. I opened my closet and picked out some white shorts and a tight-cropped tank. I took out my beach bag and threw in sunscreen, sunglasses, blankets, and grabbed my swimsuit. I ran to the kitchen for a bottle of juice and started guzzling it down my throat. The cold, sour juice felt good through my dry throat.

I looked outside the window. The bright sun gleamed through the tall skyscrapers. It seemed like a good day. A bad day to be Irelyn Astor. A bad day to be Irelyn Astor where all the boys around think I'm dumb because I live in a penthouse in the middle of Los Angeles. Because while they say goodbye to me at the end of dinner, I call a Lyft for them before driving home myself.

I slammed close the window and picked up my beach bag. I threw on some flip-flops and unlocked my car door. My phone rang. I recognized the number as Caden's, and I swiped right.

"Hey, how you doin?"

"Driving," I replied.

“Mad?”

“No,” I said.

“You still going to the beach?”

Silence. I rolled my eyes and hung up.

The car clicked as I turned into the parking lot. I threw on my bag and walked onto the gritty sand. The deep blue ocean stood before me, white foam and gold sand as its decoration. Seagulls screeched and the sound of waves crashed against the shore. The wind blew lightly against my face. I could smell the humid air and saltwater.

I set my things on the beige sand and ran to the waters. The clear water was my second home, I jumped in and swam out. I laid on my surfboard once I reached a good distance. This was a good way to clear my mind. It was the only way to clear my mind. Resting on my board, my lids became heavy and I lost track of the scene.

My head felt weighty as my eyelashes fluttered. I felt light and realized I was floating. I quickly opened my eyes and found that I was underwater. The clear liquid surrounding me and me moving slowly.

Am I still in the ocean?

No, I wouldn't be breathing if that was it. I realized I was holding onto something with my mouth, I moved my hands and discovered a mouthpiece for breathing. I waved my arms and moved around, again realizing I had something tied on my back. I tried reaching it and immediately by the shape I knew it was an oxygen tank.

That explains why I'm breathing.

I flapped my arms harshly around the water, moving up at a decent speed. I took off the mouthpiece and tasted the water, it wasn't salty. I wasn't in the ocean. I turned around and saw a stone dropping to my side. I picked it up, it had rough edges and there was writing carved.

It's all in your head.

It had knife-sharp edges and was shaped like a deformed triangle. *There's no way this is actually happening.* Out of stress, I clenched my wrist, hard, and it left a red mark. There was no pain. I clenched again with my nails: blood, but no pain. If there was no pain, I wouldn't need my tank. I took my mouthpiece off and threw the oxygen tank away. I could manage to breathe, but slowly I started panting and lost my air in the water. I quickly dived for my oxygen tank but it sank faster than ever.

So this is it.

I blinked and lost my breath.

My head flipped and I jumped up. I sat on my pink surfing board, still in my white swimsuit. I sighed, realizing it was only a dream. My heart was still pounding, and I laid down once again. I thought to myself: I think too much.

The fact that it was always a dream, shows that...

it was all in my head.

I lay realizing that Caden was just a dream. Everything between us wasn't really 'personal.' I've always been romanticizing everything Caden has said and done when he put half of his mind into what he did. Even though we talked and spent time together, I was really nothing more than an acquaintance to him. I would spend 30 minutes thinking about a five-minute conversation while he sat at home thinking who to text next. The version of Caden I loved was always in my head.

I swept back onshore and grabbed my bag. Taking out my towel, I swing it over my shoulder with my left arm holding onto my board. I turned my cellular data on, and 10 messages from Caden pop up one by one. For a moment, I felt like opening the messages and liking them all.

I ruffled my hair and went into my contacts. I pressed the delete button on Caden's contact, and the screen showed:

This contact will be deleted from iCloud on all your devices.

I took a deep breath and closed my eyes; *delete contact*. I opened my eyes and sighed. And it was at this moment, that I knew, it was better that I came alone. And it was at that moment, that I knew, I would go home and cut ties with Caden. I took a deep breath getting into my car as I put the board in the trunk and threw my bag in the backseat. Then a question came across my mind:

Am I still Irelyn Astor without those boys? Not just Caden, but ALL OF THEM?

Three possibilities ran through my mind. One, I am because after all, I will die alone. Two, I won't because they are what keep me going in life. Three, I am but I'm not. I could always pretend I'm okay without them, but deep inside my heart would linger on them.

Then I went with three. Because the *third choice is the charm*, isn't it? Then I hear my voice in my head whispering, "You always think alone and never share your thoughts, and maybe if you shared your thoughts it wouldn't have ended like this."

Although this choice felt like the worst because it makes me fake my feelings, but I've always learned to grow out of my own thoughts. It will go away someday. I will grow out of the idea of Caden I've built inside of my head. The Caden I morphed for myself to fall in love with, not the real Caden. I wasn't even "breaking up with Caden;" I was "breaking up with MY idea of Caden."

I shook my head; in the end, the only person I trusted with my thoughts was me. I believed that my decisions were correct and they reflected who I was. I believed that going to the beach alone, having such a significant dream, and leaving the beach calmly was reflecting who I was. I was never a firm believer in telling others how I felt and my secrets because that made me weak. It would mean that I couldn't do it on my own, but I had already broken that rule when I found Caden. Maybe that was why I wanted to keep him so much: because he was my refuge.

Whatever. It wasn't really much anyway. I knew that it was all just about how I would feel happy in that relationship and not how ME and the OTHER BOY would feel happy. It was focused on me

because they pleased me to get what they needed. Everything I thought about was always in my head and never in theirs. And today's dream made me even more sure about my answer.

Two years have passed, and I have always been reflecting on what happened that day. What has changed is that I know what I want now, but I was lost before. I am like the ocean; two years ago I was still Irelyn, and two years later I am still Irelyn. What's different is that the things inside me have changed; the things I think and the ones I care about. Likewise, the shells and animals inside the ocean change through time. Nothing stays the same forever. I've grown out of who I was two years ago. I am content with my life and realized that it wasn't the boys around me who defined me, but everyone else who truly believed in who I was from the start.

Caden was no longer inside my head.

Queen Bus

Claire Ryan

7:16 arriving at the bus stop,
The green bus already waiting for me.
I guess I'm late again.

7:18 sitting down on my seat ,
Pulling out my phone and earphones
Listening to music, looking out the window.

7:25 thinking about my schedule today.
Looking at the poles passing by counting the spaces in between
1,2,3,4 ...

7:35 the bus makes a turn and I jolt awake.
We're almost at school,
I see staff housing.

7:40 I spot the tannish building that I'm used to seeing,
hearing the sound of the whistle blowing.
I see Dr. Kim waving at people.

7:45 I walk off the bus, eyes barely open.
Dr. Kim says hi to me,
I say hi back.

7:50 I walk into the locker room,
Find my heavy textbook
I walk through the gym making my way to class.

8:01 zoning out in the middle of class,

Already thinking about going home,
And about the Queen bus awaiting me in the parking lot.

4:00 am

Claire Ryan

Lying in the dark.

Seeing the moon outside shining bright,

The sound of a dog's bark.

It's the morning but it still feels like night,

Listening to music while I hum.

Thinking of what I could write for my essay,

Waiting for morning to come.

4:00 am is my favorite time of the day.

Epiphany

Emily Wong

I lost faith in happy endings
when I realized that
I had fallen in love with the best version of him,
simply entranced by his picturesque life.
I knew I had been longing
for a love that can only exist between the pages.

Everything suddenly became so clear
when he left me there that day.
*My naivety erased itself and
I felt myself transform into a realist.*
Hope is nothing but fabrication
and ignorance truly is bliss.

Who knew a love so perfect could hurt so bad?

Hyperfixation

Emily Wong

Hyperfixation,

the act of being completely immersed in something.

I always found it easy

to grow attached to things:

music,

books,

films.

It was comforting having a grasp over those

that could not let me go.

And then you came into my life.

Unlike those books and films,

I know that at any time or place,

you could leave me.

And that's when I knew

what my biggest fear was:

being let go.

"I wish you well"

Emily Wong

"I wish you well"

Lies

I don't wish you well.

I know it's wrong but

if I'm being honest

I want you to cry when you're not with me.

Stay

Bella Hung

And no doubt,
like the polaris,

persisting to the end, the one and only one:

You.

Softly wandering around, The

force

pulls you back up from a downfall.

A slump

That couldn't seem to be helped.

Happy Birthday

Bella Hung

“Hey, Happy Birthday.”

“Thank you!”

was the only repeated text sent
over fifteen years.

They never had one
single
normal conversation in real life,
not even online.

Is this the so-called
“friendship”?

It’s not like they are really strangers,
nor actual friends.

Ocean of Us

Hope Yang

All the swarming fish—
silvered, flat, muddled, and bug-eyed.
They flip from sea to river to marshes to
belly.

They paint spots of color in the ocean,
and might bear their young in anemone
or fall prey to another,
perish.

They are doggedly determined,
or fabulously flashy,
maybe cunningly cooperative,
diverse.

They clump together like grapes,
dull or vivid, sleek or round, they
draw circles in the expanse of
water.

They sweep along the eddies,
trailing each other into gaping mouths
or landing safe in holes of
coral.

Fish do not judge or ponder
at the webs of the world.
They swim, and when that fails them,
they float.

Salmon

Hope Yang

I would stop, think, but
today we throw our silver
scales against the tide.

Maybe our red flesh
succumbs to these frothing streams,
but right now we swim.

Full of Fish

Hope Yang

Swirls of sardine

slash *Starry Night*

over slumbering seas.

Sharks swim, jaws snapping.

Mottled mullet muse over

mazes mapped on mackerel.

A myriad of muddled mouths,

marlin migrate in mobs.

Cook the crumbling cod.

Coiling, curving catfish cut

clean as crust-crummy carp.

Come conjure the culinary calamity.

Control

Hope Yang

Each fine golden grain of sand,
pale as they catch the evening light,
would rest like treasure on your hand,
if only you wouldn't hold so tight.

A trick exists to seeing rain—
fine needles against skies scarred.
You'd see it slash the open plains,
if only you wouldn't look so hard.

You try to escape the rushing currents,
you hide up high in concrete plans,
filled with hollowed out self-assurance,
still loathing the work of hands.

But come down to the shallow waves—
tracing the shore and back again.
Flow with the tides through reef and cave,
and hold that sand, see that rain.

Haiku

Margaret Tsai

What is a haiku?

How do you even write one?

Oh wait, I just did.

Takeoff

Margaret Tsai

You asked me why

I can't stay in the city anymore.

As I watch yet another plane takeoff from the harsh tarmac

I realize that

I can't stay because

Deep down

I know there is somewhere else for me to be

Even the beginning of a new journey is an end.

To: Me

Margaret Tsai

You're only four. It's the first day of preschool and there's still much more to learn
There's a whole world out there, but it'll be different from what you imagine

But I'll tell you this first:

You'll find yourself spinning the display stand for a keyring with your last name
Only to realise that you live in a country that still butchers a one-syllable word

Browsing through the aisles in your local Target, you'll notice that none of the dolls look like you, and the
closest thing is the Snow White figurine because she also has black hair

But before your 6th birthday, you'll find yourself being uprooted from an environment where you stood
out and placed into a crowd where everyone else your age has the same medium-length haircut

Here, you'll remark that the streets smell funny and the bug bites are itchy
You'll have neighbors right across the hall and take the elevator every day
In your free time, you'll still dream of taking a yellow school bus

When you say you've lived in America, they'll ask if you've seen Johnny Depp
Who's that, you'll wonder, maybe he's a friend of my dad

They'll look at you with uncertainty when you can't read the menu and ask to order "that" while
pointing at the only dish with a picture

You'll never fully master the language, moving on after nine years from it
Sure, you'll be able to converse at the post office, but when they ask you to fill out the information form,
you'll still pull up Google Translate (to double check, of course)

So I guess this is to say, 11 years later

Here I am, writing to you

Writing to a version of me that I can't remember, but seek to manifest a story from

A narrative of what could have been but not what is to be

The single chapter of life I reference back on blindly

A sketchy outline I can't seem to conjure composite feelings from

Maybe you'll start to realize you need to scrap some things and redraw the lines

That holding on too tightly is like clutching sand in your fists

What you try so hard to keep will only slowly fall back to where it came from

From: Me

a little space

Mikayla Tam

I decided to go to the ocean
so that I could leave the commotion.
Before I can see your face
I think I need a little space.
Our relationship is kinda messed up.
Don't want to make this sound abrupt.
But I know that after some time,
holding it in would be a crime.
If you really must know,
I think this can't go on anymore.
As much as I wished
it wouldn't end like this,
I think that's the case,
and I just need some space.

fear

Mikayla Tam

Fear.

Something that poisons you,
Binds your soul with all its might.
Hurts you more than any blade could.

Something that consumes you.
Raises your anxiety.
And you seemingly can't escape from it.

There's always those people who say,
"Hey, you can tell me your worries."
But I can't.

Society says,
Crying is for the weak.
Being afraid makes you a coward.
Asking for help makes you an idiot.

People around me say:
Being smart gives you worth
Study for a 4.0
Don't ask for days off or you'll miss a lesson.

And there are those that tell you
Like I already said
That say they want to help.
But I can't show my weaknesses.

No one can know
How far I've fallen,
How much I've cried,
How much hate I have for myself.

So I'll sit here, alone,
In a mirage of stress and hurt,
Trapped by the fear
Within my own heart.

Bright

Yien Lin

The truth that we pursue is bright,
Like a shining star glowing throughout the night.
A spark of flames with bursting light.
So luminous, yet it also blinds our sight.
What exactly is it that we are trying to find?
The thought has never even crossed my mind.
Is the truth the destruction and terrors of the Earth?
Or is it the happiness that derives from birth?
Is the truth a guide that shows us the path of greatness?
If that's the case, why does it have no form—completely baseless?
Is all that we are chasing an illusion?
Something nonexistent and without conclusion?
We don't have all the answers to the questions we're asking,
All we can do is pretend we understand and create a masking.
Even though we might never find it in our youth,
We should not give up, but rather create the truth:
Make the world what we want it to be.
Illuminate the world and create the visions that we want to see.

Still a Long Journey

Yien Lin

Travelling down the trail of life,
An unavoidable path that causes strife.
With many paths of opportunity,
It's difficult to choose, as there's no unity.
Sometimes it's difficult to see the peak.
Will we arrive at the top? Or are we simply weak?
Perhaps we've been at this for a while,
or maybe this is only the beginning of our trial.
Sometimes the sky rains,
Other times it only rains.
There is still a long journey
I have ahead of me.
While I'm walking down this trail,
I'll be thinking about everything in detail.
Reflect on all the things I've done,
With the people that stuck with me when I had just begun.
When the journey's end is near,
What I must do is quite clear.
I have to accept that everything will be fine,
Before I cross the finish line.

Seam Between

Ann Tai

Familiar creases on my heart
Worn smooth by my fingers
I fold it up tight
set it in a glass boat
And cast it into the moonless sea
I hope one day it will
reach you in the seam between
the sky
and the sea

Roller Coaster

Ann Tai

“Alexander,” she smiled. “Come on!”

You frowned slightly, shaking your head. *It’s just Alex*, you thought. She reached out and grabbed your hand.

“May, no.” The sun was too bright; you could barely see her smile. She grabbed your hand. You staggered in the heat like a newborn lamb. Her grip was loose but the coolness of her hand compelled you to follow her into the pulsating, perspiring queue. At sight of the tracks, your legs melted like wax.

It’s too close to the sun, you thought. The line churned slowly and repugnantly like the stomach of a sea serpent. All too soon, you and May have arrived at the front. She let go of your hand and you briefly considered bolting. But then she turned and smiled at you again.

“Keep your arms, hands, and feet...” You barely hear the speaker croak its last warning. A man strapped you in the seat belt. His tired eyes reminded you of your father. He was always warning you against reckless behavior and whatnot. This man said nothing.

You wondered what else was soaked through the seat belt fibers other than sweat.

The wind sent her hair flying in streams of light. The last thing you remembered was her laughter. Her laughter that rolled over you like cruel, incessant waves.

I Dream of Fish

Ann Tai

I fall into a deep daydream
Each drawn breath of brine
Sinks me deeper into sleep

I float along the threads and scraps of kelp
Leftover from the tapestry of the sea
I caress the lawns of the sea
With manatees that toss and turn
like twists of silver silk
I wrap myself around the tendrils of the anemone
And smile at the rage of the clownfish
at an insolent intruder
I untangle myself and cruise along the seafloor
Among flying carpets of flounders
Brushed by the wings of stingrays
I sat in the shadow of sharks
Using the spine of a fishbone
To trace pilgrimage routes for hermit crabs
I laid down on a current
and let it carry me
until my head bumped into glass

And I saw
A blue-tinted phantom in the seagrass
My reflection in the aquarium glass

Hamster

Chloe Lai

Small, white, fluffy ball

Sitting on the cool, cold floor

Munching on black nuts

Life of a Hamster

Chloe Lai

There, inside the cage,
a tiny, white ball of fur sat.
Her small paws held a nut,
munching on treasured food.

The hamster finished
her meal, she stretched out her body,
her mouth opening wide,
showing her two front teeth.

Out of her sheltered
home, she wandered along, finding
some fluffy piles of
bedding lying on the floor.

With as much as she
can carry, she stuffed the bedding
into her mouth, and ran
back to her den, all safe.

With a bit of a
hustle, the white ball fixed
her bed, and soon all is
quiet as she goes to rest.

Disappearance

Chloe Lai

Bright, intense rays of lights barged through the window curtains, making the young man restless as he finally forced his eyes open. Yawning, the messy-haired man rolled over the bed, throwing his hands onto his nightstand and picked up his phone. Saturday, 9:21AM. With a grunt, the man sat up on his soft, sky-blue bed, nearly falling back down as he attempted to open his eyes.

“Shadow? Are you awake yet?” Lucian rasped. Silence answered him back. Without much thought, the young adult dragged himself off his comfort zone. Like a kid who was forced to do chores, he shuffled towards the bathroom next door, slamming the door shut. Finishing his morning routine, he entered the quiet, lonesome kitchen.

Lucian bent down and opened the wooden cabinets, heaving up a full, large bag of dog food. He picked up the white food bowl, with the name Shadow engraved on it in black, and dumped a generous amount into it. Being more awake now, he walked towards the living room and placed the bowl next to the black, leather couch.

“Shadow! Breakfast is here!” the man yelled again, hands combing through his black, fluffy hair. Again, there was no response, and the ticking of the clock echoed across the near-empty room. Though slightly worried, Lucian mentally shrugged and went to the kitchen, picking up an empty plate along the way that he left last night on the coffee table. He poured himself a glass of milk and took a granola bar from one of the wooden cabinets before heading back into the living room. Plopping on the couch, Lucian took his phone out of his pocket and began to scroll through his feed, munching on his granola bars as he looked at some random videos. Minutes later, he washed the cup and plate before heading back to the living room and stared at the untouched food bowl.

Lucian scratched the back of his head, his foot tapping as his eyes darted back to the circular clock hanging on the wall. “Where could he possibly go?” he muttered, circling around the couch. With a sigh, he slumped back onto the couch, sitting there and watching the minute hand tick by. Every passing minute seemed like an hour, and by the time the minute hand ticked to 10, the boy was up and pacing again, hands behind his back.

Deciding that it was way too abnormal for Shadow to not be awake at this time, he paced around each room in the house, peeking at every single corner to spot the sight of his black dog. After having no luck finding Shadow anywhere in the house, he went closer towards the door. The doggy door wasn’t locked. With his hands pulling tightly on his hair, Lucian immediately rushed to get changed and

went out the front door. Closing the heavy door, Lucian shook his head as he began to walk through his front yard. The cool, fall wind hit his face as he went to the sidewalk, his head turning left and right. With a sigh, he began to pace down the sidewalk and around the neighborhood. Next door, an older-aged man waved at him, calling out a “good morning” before walking up to him.

“How are you doing in this nice weather, Lucian?” the white-haired man asked cheerfully as he finally trudged down his lawn.

With a sigh, the worried man replied, “The weather is all right, but I ain’t doing too good.”

“What’s wrong?”

“I forgot to lock up the doggy door last night. Shadow has disappeared from my house, so I’m guessing he escaped from the tiny door.”

Mr. Buck nodded, his eyes wandering towards the fog-covered mountains behind their houses. “Well, I’m not sure if this will help you, but early this morning, I heard a loud commotion near here. The bark sounded more like a dog than anything else. There were some howls though...” His leathery hands rubbed his chin stubble. “Don’t know if that’s your dog or anything, but I suppose that’s a good place to start. A young, powerful dog like Shadow would probably be quite adventurous in this rural place. I wouldn’t be surprised if he ran away to play with the wolves, assuming that they’re nice animals.”

“With *wolves*?” Lucian eyes widened, chills running down his spine.

“I certainly did hear some wolf howls hours ago, but I got no idea if they were involved with your pet anyhow.”

With a shake of his head, Lucian slightly bowed, thanking the older man before heading in the other direction towards the mountains: the only place where wolves could be. Life here in this small, rural town was peaceful and quiet. Though it took about forty minutes by car to get to the nearest city, for Lucian, it was the perfect choice. The empty road was filled with squirrels and birds as they scrambled across.

Cracking his knuckles, Lucian began to follow the steeper path up as he finally got to the mountain. Though tiring, the cool, fall weather was perfect for one to begin hiking. The once green-colored ceilings were now painted red and orange, its leaves floating towards the ground. The light brown and orange leaves covered the path, crunching beneath Lucian’s sneakers. Bright, crisp chirps echoed through the seemingly empty mountain. The fresh scent of tree bark laced itself around the human, easing the worries of the man.

Half an hour passed, and there were still no signs of animal life carved in any part of the mountain. *Where is he? Did he just run away from me like that?* The branches of the trees higher up on

the mountain lifelessly held themselves despite already shedding off the weight of the leaves. Exhausted, Lucian placed his weight against a tall, birch tree, carelessly waving away a random bug that wanted to nest on his fluffy, black hair. A few dead leaves landed around the male, lying still as it rested onto the floor. Lucian tipped up his head, his eyes trying to look past the orange-colored canopy, with tiny specks of blue entering the fall-colored canvas. Silence echoed through the lifeless mountain, chills running down the young man's spine. Minutes later, the man got up to his feet as he dusted his pants. Just as he was about to turn around and wander off, a faint, familiar bark echoed from the other side. *Shadow?* Lucian thought, his feet automatically starting off towards the direction of the sound.

His jog became a sprint as he subconsciously navigated around the tall, thin trees. The barking and howls gradually grew louder. Lucian's shoulders stiffened, eyes darting around to spot any sign of his black-colored dog. It wasn't too long before he saw a long, black-colored tail perking up from behind a bush.

"Shadow? Are you there?" Lucian worriedly called as he slowed down to a walk. Behind the green, mini tree, the creature jumped away from hiding. The black dog perked up its ears, his mouth opened to a smile, and immediately pounced onto his crouching owner's lap. The large dog furiously licked Lucian all over the face, making the man fall as he bursted into joy and laughter.

"There you are, Shadow! What are you doing here alone so far away from home? I was worried sick when you didn't show up for breakfast! You shouldn't leave through the doggy door!" Lucian scolded as he rubbed the dog's head. Shadow happily barked in reply, his eyes shining in excitement as he trotted over and hid himself behind the bush.

"What are you doing? It's about time we headed back home. I hadn't even eaten lunch yet either." The dog continued to ignore him, stubbornly standing behind the bush. With a sigh, Lucian continued to stand around near a tree, his feet tapping against the ground.

Howls broke off their conversation. The sounds of crunching leaves echoed around them, and Lucian's eyes widened in horror. Without any time to comprehend, he watched in fear as a gray blur swooped past his eyes and into the bush in front of him. A high-pitched yelp immediately followed as two creatures tumbled across the forest floor.

As Lucian was about to rush over to tear away the wolf and save his dog, he stood there frozen in shock as he watched his own pet playfully pouncing on top of the gray wolf. Around him, a few other wolves trotted over as they began to circle around the black dog. Some of the younger wolves continued to horse play around with Shadow, tumbling across the ground. Lucian gaped as he watched the scene in front of him unfold. He stupidly gawked at Shadow as his dog trotted up to him, barking as he introduced

his human companion. With a confused look on his face, Lucian took a small step back as he made eye contact with the wolves' deep eyes. His heart skipped a beat as one of the wolves took a step forward, jumping onto the man, wagging its tail. As the wolf began to lick his face, Lucian burst into laughter as he patted its head.

Hours had already passed when Lucian and Shadow finally made it down the mountain. Lucian could only sigh and smile as both of them finally entered their cozy, warm home.

"Sleepy," Lucian yawned as he collapsed onto the couch, Shadow following close behind as he curled up into a large ball next to him. "Next time, don't play with your companions for that long. Look, the sun is already about to set." The dog only gave him a dumb, happy smile as its tongue rolled out of its mouth.

"You want to go play with your friends tomorrow?" Shadow immediately sat straight up as its tail wagged back and forth, eyes shining brighter than the morning sun.

"I'll take that as a yes. Now, remember to wake me up and we both can go together to play, okay?" Lucian smiled as he watched his dog turn around in happy circles before it began licking his face in joy. Outside, howls echoed into the peaceful, quiet night.

PLACEHOLDER: STAFF

The Kitten

Candace Brown

I sat down at my antique desk to finish my Pre-Calculus/Trigonometry homework. The April winds blew hollow gusts through my half-open window. A piece of my long frizzy hair blew out of place, and I tucked it back behind my ear. Math was not my strong subject, and Pre-Cal-Trig was proving to be my hardest math yet. But, since I was a senior, I had to follow the honors graduate requirements. I wanted to graduate with honors, but some days, I felt like no matter what words came after my diploma, I wouldn't be ready for August.

I had completed only a handful of problems before I heard the back door slam shut followed by a pleading, "Candace?" echoing back through the house. Mom had been out for her usual post-work walk and she sounded urgent. Something didn't feel right.

I answered back, "Mom? I'm in my room."

My mom pushed open the old wooden door of my bedroom. The first thing I noticed was not her usual walking outfit of thick tennis shoes, t-shirt, and a wave of poofy hair barely restrained in a sweaty ponytail. My eyes went straight to the bundle in her arms. I shot out of my seat to see what she was carrying. It meowed.

"Aww! A kitten!" I squealed. My mom didn't look excited. "Can we keep it?"

She sighed and shook her head. "I don't think it will make it," she offered quietly.

"What do you mean?"

"I'll explain after we find a box and get these twigs out," she instructed.

"Twigs?"

I looked more closely at the kitten with its squealing meows and saw that it had tiny leaves and twigs sticking out of its mouth.

"She's choking!"

"Not as much now," Mom said. "I got most of them out before I took her. You go find a box and some tweezers while I get the rest out."

I searched the house and found a shoebox where we could put the bundled kitten. Then, I ran to the bathroom and grabbed a pair of tweezers from my makeup bag. Next, I lined the box with a baby blanket from the hall closet and raced back to the room. I found mom huddled under my desk lamp holding the kitten's mouth open and quickly pulling bits of grass out before the kitten's mouth clamped

down or squirmed out of her reach. There was one longer twig that looked lodged in the back of her throat.

“You hold her mouth open while I get that last piece,” she said calmly amidst the piercing kitten squeals. My hands were shaking as I forced the kitten’s jaws open with two fingers. I tried to hold her head as still as possible while mom went in with the tweezers. She pulled out the twig deftly and laid it on the glass cover on top of the desk. We both sighed with relief. Mom nested the kitten into the box and adjusted the fuzzy blanket.

“While I was walking back, I looked up on my phone how to help runt kittens, and—”

“Wait, what?” I interrupted in a higher pitch than I intended, “What do you mean she’s a runt?” My mom put out her hands as if to stop me from going higher.

“We don’t know if it’s a girl or not because you can’t tell until they’re about a month old. This kitten is maybe a few days old.”

My eyes widened. “Then it needs to go back to its momma! Don’t they have to have their mother’s milk to survive?”

She scratched the back of her head and pursed her lips. “That’s the thing. I saw this litter by a fence near one of the houses a few blocks over. The litter was all together with the momma cat then. When I walked that way today, the whole litter and mom were gone except for this one.”

“Do you think someone stole the litter?”

“No, I think the mom took the rest of the litter and left the runt behind.”

“That’s horrible!”

Mom shrugged. “It’s just what they do sometimes. You get a stronger lamp to point on her. They say you have to keep a kitten this young warm. I’ll go find some milk.”

We split up to get the supplies. I found a stronger lamp in my closet, and Mom came back in with a bowl of watered-down milk and an eyedropper.

For the next few hours, we took shifts watching the kitten. When my dad and brother came home, we told them the story. Mom tried to feed her with the eyedropper and milky water once an hour. The first time, she (I was adamant it was a she) frantically drank in the liquid as most of it poured down the sides of her cheeks. The second, third, and fourth time was the same. For the fifth time, I wanted to try holding the eyedropper. I held her in my arms in her blanket bundle. She gripped the eyedropper with her tiny paws as if she knew it was the one thing she needed. My eyes filled with tears as she tried to drink the liquid.

“C’mon, c’mon! You can do it!” I whispered.

I gently massaged her neck, willing her throat muscles to work. It was no use. It was as if her throat was fused shut.

We put the kitten back in the box and my mom laid a hand on my back as the tears fell.

“Mom, why won’t she drink the milk?” I sniffled.

“Maybe she’s just too tired.”

“Why can’t she just try harder?”

“Maybe she doesn’t know how.”

I wiped my nose with my sleeve. “I wish we could just make her do it.”

My mom rubbed my shoulder gently. “Listen, honey, we should go to bed. I’ll keep the kitten in our room tonight so that you don’t have to worry about it,” she soothed.

The next morning, my mom came into my room and sat on the edge of my bed, gently waking me before my alarm went off.

“Candace, the kitten died in the night,” she said with a little hitch at the end, like she was trying to get it out and barely could keep it together.

I rubbed open my eyes and felt a tear slide down my temple to my pillow. “Was she too cold?”

“No, I think she was just too weak.”

I sat up quickly. “But she could have had the milk!”

“The twigs she had tried to eat must have damaged her throat.”

Suddenly, my throat clenched up.

“Honey, I’m sorry she didn’t live, but it’s okay.”

“It’s not okay!”

“Why? She’s not in any pain now.”

“Yeah, but—” I could barely speak through my throat, closed tight.

My mom leaned over and patted my leg imploringly. “What’s wrong?”

I tried to press away my tears with my palms, hoping the pressure would stop the flow.

“I couldn’t keep her alive.”

“She was a newborn abandoned by her mother. It was natural.”

“But I couldn’t fix it!” I blurted out.

“Candace, I don’t blame you. We did our best.”

“But mom, I—” my tears just forced their way out through the gaps in my palms.

I stuttered out, “How am I supposed to go away to college in a few months when I can’t even keep a kitten alive?”

“Oh, honey—” she leaned over the bed and hugged me close. I felt my sobs break open with quick, short breaths. How could I expect to leave my family in a few months, leave my small town, start a new life in a bigger city 5 hours away, and be fine? It felt like more than I could bear. Mom held me while the breaths threatened to tear me in two until they came in a normal rhythm.

Then, she pulled back and held my face in her hands, looking me in the eye.

“You are no kitten.”