

THE VANGUARD

A STUDENT LITERARY MAGAZINE

SPRING 2020

“THAT IS PART OF THE BEAUTY OF ALL LITERATURE. YOU
DISCOVER THAT YOUR LONGINGS ARE UNIVERSAL LONGINGS, THAT
YOU’RE NOT LONELY AND ISOLATED FROM ANYONE. YOU BELONG.”

F. SCOTT FITZGERALD

Letters from the Editors

Often at hard points in my own life, the words of my favorite writers resonate with me, and help me to focus and move on. I selected the quote on the cover from one of the most influential writers in American Literature, in hopes that it might resonate in some way for all of us during this time of isolation and uncertainty. No one could have predicted what happened this past semester, and we are all dealing with a world that is unfamiliar, and at times, unnerving. And yet, it is in these moments that our stories and poems capture the essence of our shared human experience and help to connect us. It is my hope that this issue of *The Vanguard* can help to remind us all of our connections as an RCSJ community, and bring us together virtually through our shared creative expression.

I would like to thank each and every one of my colleagues in the English Department who helped to promote the magazine, especially Lori Joyce for her continued contributions and support; every member of the college community who submitted their work; and my student editors, Jennifer Lisiewski and Carly Anderson for their time and efforts in publishing this, as we collaborated from home!

It is an honor to work in a community of talented students, faculty and staff. Please continue to send your stories, poems and works of art to vanguard@rcsj.edu – we are already looking forward to our publication next year!

Very Best,

Andrea Vinci

English Instructor, Rowan Choice Program

Faculty Editor, *The Vanguard*

Literature and writing have been a large part of me for years. To me, writing is the bridge to the mind and soul, the pulse point of humanity—especially in times like this. I am honored to work on a project like this, seeing what pieces of writing everyone wants to share with the world. Together, we endure.

Jennifer Lisiewski, Student Editor

I have always had a great passion for writing, so I was very excited to be able to work on *The Vanguard*. I would like to thank Professor Andrea Vinci for giving me this opportunity, as well as the students and staff members for submitting their work. It is heartwarming to be able to see how people are expressing themselves through writing and creativity, even during these trying times. This experience has shown me the vast creative talent within RCSJ, and I am so grateful to have had the opportunity to be a part of this project.

Carly Anderson, Student Editor

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Soft Yellow Flowers – Photography

By: Mary Malinconico, Professor

THE VANGUARD

Fake News

By: Gina Ross, Student

Extra, extra read all about it!

Wuhan is the epicenter of a deadly virus

“Did you hear it was the Chinese eating bat soup?”

I don't think that's true-

“Can you believe they're letting those people over in our country?”

Don't you understand that's not how it works-

“My Uber driver had a mask on today, isn't that hilarious?!”

Did you consider if they were autoimmune?

It's nothing to worry about, a hoax created by the Democrats

Why would we stop to think of those at risk?

When we can laugh from the comfort

Of our bubble and rock?

A Baby Is Born

By: Ron Rogers, Security Guard

A baby is born,
Well what do we know?
Ten fingers, ten toes,
A pair of eyes, a pair of ears, lips, and a nose.
He'll laugh when you laugh, and cries a lot too.
He'll splash in his bath and cuddle and coo.
You might say one baby is just like another.
But, OH NO, NOT this one
This one is my BABY BROTHER!!!!



Photography

By: Kristina Johnston, Student

Cooper

By: Carly Malone, Student

The day I was born was April 21st, 2010. I'm assuming it was a pretty hectic day for my birth mother considering I have four other siblings she was looking after too. I was born up in New York state somewhere, I would ask my mom what town exactly, but I don't really see her anymore. My time living up in New York was the best. I had so many friends in my neighborhood, and I particularly liked my next-door neighbor. She was older than me, but man, her and I would talk for an eternity until our moms told us to come back inside. I loved spending as much time outside as I could, as did my siblings.

Then suddenly, people started showing up to the house talking to my siblings and I, telling us they couldn't wait to give us homes for forever. This was kind of confusing at the time, because I didn't understand why I couldn't stay with my mom and siblings. Now looking back at it, it made sense, what mom could take care of five siblings as crazy as we were? When my adoptive mom finally found me, she seemed so excited to be able to take me home. The whole ride to her house she kept telling me how good of a boy I am and how amazing this is going to be. I believed her too; I knew she was going to be such a caring, cautious, and compassionate person like I needed. Once we got home, I found out that I have two more siblings now! It was a really crazy life change, but I was adjusting quickly. I had a huge spacious backyard to play in

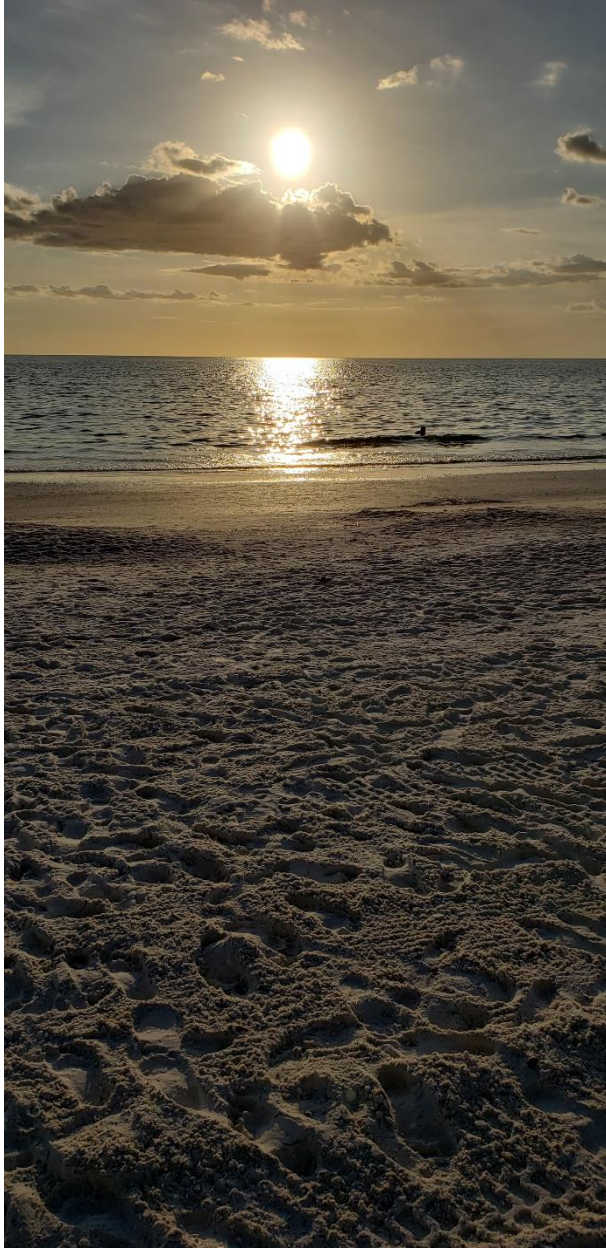
that had the greenest, softest grass to roll around in. As I sat there feeling the cool sensation, hydrated grass gives you, I thought to myself, “life couldn't get better than this.” While admiring my surroundings, I started to get this pain in my stomach.

A little while after one of my birthdays, I overheard my mom talking to my dad telling him it was time to bring me to the doctor because I hadn't been acting right. He agreed. Little did they know that the pain in my stomach had been horrible and consistent for a while now. On the way to the doctor I was really scared. I was shaking, and it felt like I couldn't breathe even with my head out of the window. I have never liked the doctor, but with my stomach hurting, I knew this visit couldn't be good. I went through several tests, and I even got poked with a needle and my blood was taken away by a nurse. They gave me an IV with some kind of medication going into me and it made me feel so much better. On the ride home, I was so happy my stomach wasn't hurting but my mom was crying. I think it might have been because she was happy I felt better.

After we got home, my mom was talking to my dad. I couldn't hear much but the word “down” was being used a lot and how we didn't have the money for something. I went to bed that night knowing that whatever was upsetting my mom and dad would work out, and that the pain in my stomach wouldn't return. For the next few days I was pampered and primped, my mom and I did everything she knew I loved doing. It was pretty amazing, even though she still looked distraught as we were hanging out, like she was smiling through some kind of pain. I really hope she doesn't have the same stomach pain I was enduring, and yes it did come back but I was being

strong for my mom's sake. I woke up one morning and the pain was the same as it always was, but there was a weird feeling in the air. It was like you could almost feel tension and unpleasantness. Everyone was being especially nice this morning, and it felt as if they were saying goodbye to me, like I was going somewhere. When my mom and I were driving to the doctors she was uncontrollably crying, and I just knew something was wrong.

As I lay on the table, hooked up to an IV, I was getting so incredibly sleepy and my mom was there holding my hand saying, "I love you, you're going to be okay, Cooper." I believed her again; she was my mom and my best friend. I trusted her more than anyone in this world. I was reliving everything in my life, like a movie reel, and I was thinking that I had it pretty good. I slowly started to realize these were my last moments, everything started to make sense to me now. The pain in my stomach was cancer. My mom crying all the time was because she didn't want me to die, and this IV in my arm was pumping my body with pentobarbital to put me into an endless sleep. I quickly made peace with this decision my mom had to make for me, I know it wasn't easy for her to decide. I would do anything to make sure she was happy, like she would do anything for me. One of my last thoughts was that I hope she finds another dog that loves her as much as I did.



Time Changes

By: Olivia Sindoni, Student

Five years old looking out the window,
staring at the cars passing by.
The only real big dream he has,
is to one day be able to drive.

Several short years later he is driving to college,
all his kid dreams have disappeared.
He now has bigger and better dreams,
to graduate and become an engineer.

He comes home from work and sees his son,
looking out the window all alone.
Who is dreaming of growing up,
and becoming a father of his own.

55 years old looking out the window,
watching his grandchildren run by.
The only real big wish he has
is to go back to when he was five.

Photography

By: Paul Rufino, Dean

Distant Love

By: Samara Richardson, Student

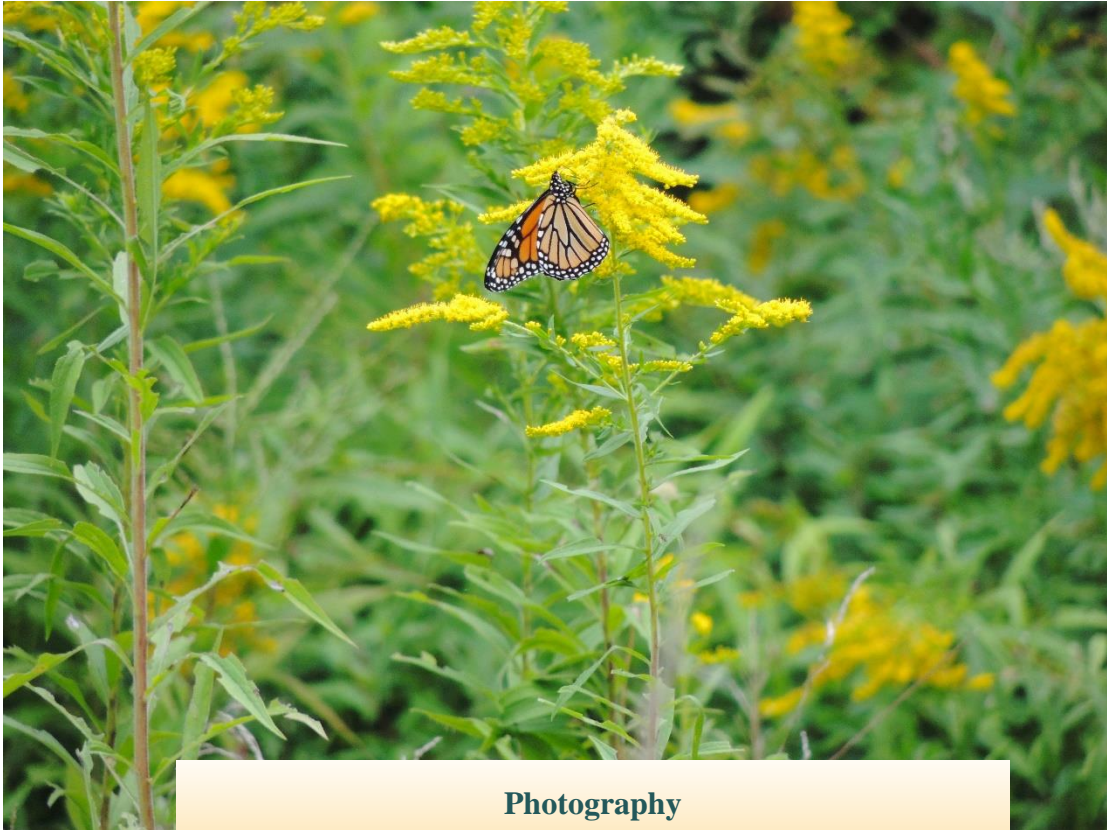
One summer night we connected
Our hearts intertwined
I didn't want the night to end
I just wanted to descend into your arms
Under the pale moon that was lightened up
By all the stars in the sky
From that day on I knew I couldn't let you
Out of my sight
You're one of a kind, that once in a lifetime love
Restless nights fill my head
As thoughts of you
Linger in my mind late at night

You whisper softly in my ear
You swiftly stole my heart
Like a thief in the night
Seeing your face brings me serenity of bliss
You're like a sweet fantasy
That I never want to wake up from

Your smile warms my heart like a moth to the flame
I've lost the chance to tell you how much I love you
Those days are long gone
I'll never forget you
I've waited too long
Now you're with someone else
I can't replace you

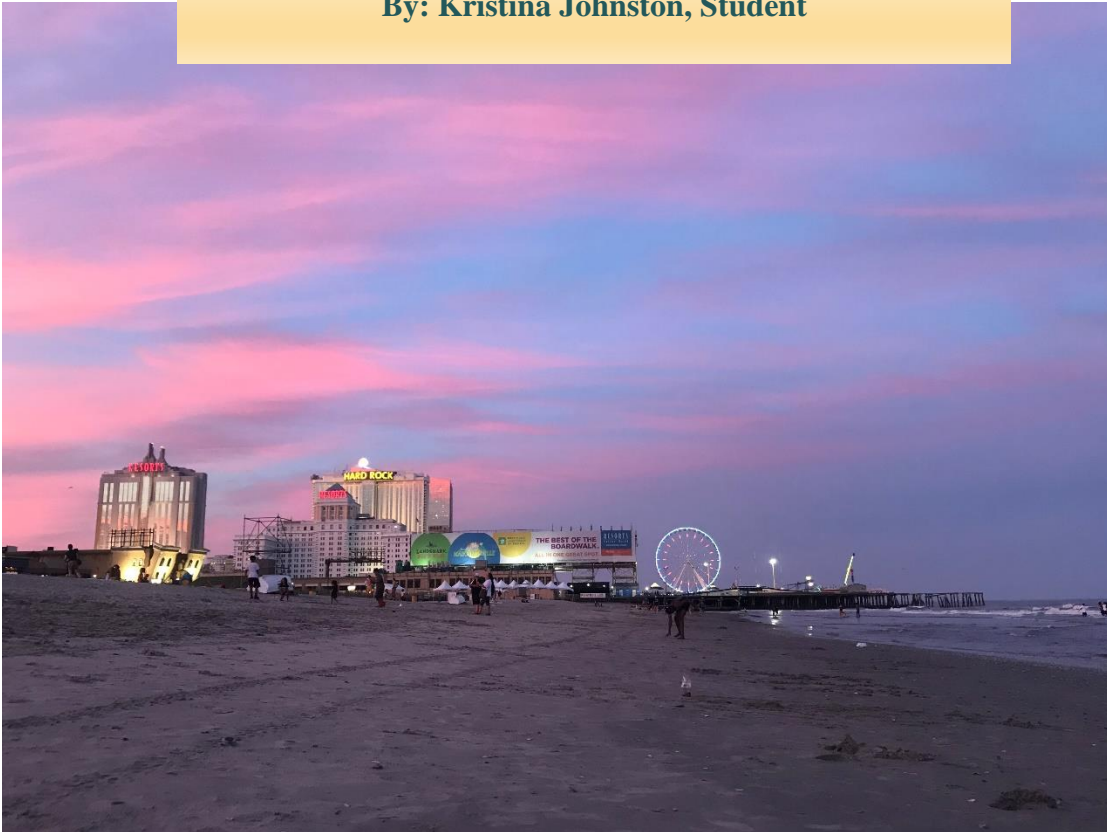
I just have the memories of your face
The memories of your scent
The memories of your touch
All the memories that were once real
Have quickly vanished into the depths of your forgetfulness
I love you
I love you
I love you...

Tonight all I'm thinking about is you
If you would walk back in my life I would tell you
Just how much I loved you
The memories are fading away like
The petals on a rose that are being blown away
Into the blue dreamy sky



Photography

By: Kristina Johnston, Student



Music for a Magic Moment

By: Lori Joyce, Professor

“But it’s a dry heat,” natives of the American Southwest say. Dry heat or not, 105 degrees is still god-awful hot. With our three kids aged seven, ten, and twelve jammed into the back seat of the rental car and the air conditioning roaring, my husband and I blasted out of the furnace called Las Vegas.

The elevation rose as we traveled, and the temperature blessedly dropped. Our planned route covered Zion National Park, Bryce Canyon, finishing up on the north rim of the Grand Canyon. We progressed slowly because each turn in the road offered pull outs from which to view the majestic scenery of rock formations, hidden gorges, hawks drifting on updrafts, or mesmerizing striking vistas of rivers, trees and rocks. Each time we got back on the road, we said we wouldn’t stop at the next turnout, until we saw the view and couldn’t resist the chance to be immersed in the glory of the scenery.

After three days of slow traveling, we headed for Grand Canyon National Park. Once there, we parked in the lot and approached the lodge which was on the way to the canyon. While itself an imposing stone structure, we hurried to see the main event – the striated rocks of the canyon.

The five of us huddled together as if to form our own bulwark against the immensity of the view before us. The jagged rocks nearer to us glowed red, rust, and brown, while the endless vista faded to gray, allowing us to be both intimate and intimidated with the grandeur of the canyon that stretched into a perfectly straight-line horizon.

Eventually, we returned to explore the lodge. I noticed closed doors and as I am want to do, opened them and pulled my family into what seemed to be an assembly hall. Along one wall was a bank of open windows that overlooked a patio where visitors murmured while they viewed the canyon. A piano occupied another corner of the room. My husband told our daughter Susan (10 years old) to play his favorite, Beethoven's "Ode to Joy." I stood at the windows as she began the song. The song hit the perfect grace note for this place, and my soul expanded wider and deeper than the canyon itself. As the music ethereally filled the air, the people below me stopped talking and moving. Several of them wiped their eyes. I, too, awestruck by the beauty of the melody that soared like an eagle over the canyons, was moved to tears.

About twenty minutes later we walked back through the parking lot, following a young couple. We heard the man whistling "Ode to Joy," still touched by the magic of the music that unexpectedly enriched the visit of all who heard the song wafting along the canyon rim.

**Photo of Professor Joyce's
Daughter Playing Piano at the
Grand Canyon Lodge**



I Can Feel It Coming

By: Rasheema Abdullah, Student

I can feel it coming it's almost here
 I don't want it near
 The feeling that I fear
 Well the feeling is fear that I'm afraid of
 This feeling is not one of those that comes from above
 My feeling of fear can be cured with love
 But the feeling of love I got was the wrong type
 It was harsh rough it wasn't right
 I have tears on my face I have to wipe
 To show them that I'm quite alright
 Although I'm scared as hell
 No one can tell
 I can hide it well
 But what happens when I get that way
 The scared stage and it's there to stay
 I can't hide it anymore
 And they open the door
 To see I'm hiding in a corner on the floor
 Now they see me in flashback mode (don't worry I'll go down the list)
 I'm gonna show what happens when that happens, it goes something like this
 In my head the memories come
 From the time when I was so dumb
 He pinned me
 Then went in me
 I was too scared to think
 About what I got myself into that happened in just one blink
 Inside my mind
 That's what you'll find
 That event just stuck on rewind
 From the time I was 9
 But what does it look like on the outside
 It looks like I'm dying
 As I'm screaming muffled and crying
 NO! STOP! PLEASE!
 I'm on the floor begging on my knees
 Needing someone to hug me and get me back to ease
 I don't know why he did what he did
 Wait that's a stupid question to ask
 Why did I listen to him? I was a stupid kid
 Running away and telling someone was my only task

Defining You

By: Lorraine Troupe, Student

The sticky floor smelt of musty water that soaked into my new socks. The halls leading to my room were a blank simple beige color that gave me the impression that this would not be an exciting trip. The nurse pulled out a chain of keys, each one used for a different door, and unlocked mine. There was a girl sleeping in the first bed closest to the door, and then there was mine. It reminded me of the cots I used to sleep on in pre-school during nap time. There was a small table in between the beds that had a few books my roommate was reading to keep herself from going insane here. Next to each bed there were long closets that we could put our clothes in, but nothing could hang. They took the hooks off. “Honey why don’t you get some sleep. Your roommate can explain everything to you tomorrow, and since you arrived here so late, I’ll make a note of that in your chart and they’ll let you sleep a bit longer. Goodnight.” She closed the door and smiled through the small glass window as she locked the door and turned down the lights. Only a small night light remained on so that when the nurses check on us as we’re sleeping, we can be seen. It was 4 a.m., and I couldn’t sleep. I was already in a completely new environment, one in which I didn’t feel comfortable yet, so naturally it’d be hard to sleep. What made it extra difficult was the light coming from the nightlight and doorway shining in my face. I stared at the blank ceiling and wondered if this place would help me get better. It’s supposed to help kids learn to cope and discover who they are, but what does it mean to discover who you are? How can you not know who you are? I always thought I had known; I was an average person who obtained no special skill set(s), had intimacy issues, was unattractive, and pretty

much anything else you can say negatively about a person. I knew who I was, but I'd soon learn how your own perception of things wasn't the truth.

I woke up to my roommate brushing her long brown hair. Her name was Kaitlyn, she was here after trying to overdose. She had some issues with people in her school saying crap about her and it got to her head. I felt bad for her, she made a mistake. She got involved with the wrong guy, and we've all been there. Maybe not all of us with a guy, but with a person in general. She shouldn't be judged forever by a mistake she made. "Hi, I'm Kaitlyn, and you are?" she questioned. "Lorraine, it's nice to meet you Kaitlyn." She smiled and looked down, "So, if you don't mind me asking, why are you here?" *Why was I here? I thought.* "Well, this summer was a rough one," I stared down to halt the tears I felt coming, "This guy liked me, I didn't feel the same, he couldn't handle that. You know, the usual. Then they get all upset and say shit about you like you never meant anything in the first place. He had his friends text me and call me saying all sorts of things about me, calling me a whore, ugly, said I look like a donkey, have ramen noodle hair. It was an everyday thing for a while, for every number I blocked there were two more to take their place. I had already thought most of those things about myself already, but just hearing that from someone else, I don't know, it just hurt." I stared at the wall and felt numb as I was speaking, then I looked over to Kaitlyn who had the face of pity. "My friend had taken his life a few weeks ago. People tore him down like they've done to so many others. Usually I don't let people get to me, but after he died, I was just already hurt. I was vulnerable to their words because I didn't know how to cope. I hate myself for not being able to help him. I just didn't know how." I had my head in my hands as I stared at my feet, until I heard Kaitlyn say, "It's not your fault. I know it's not what you want to believe, but it's not your fault. It was his choice to do that, the same choice you and I almost made. There was nothing anyone could've

done because it was set in his mind as an answer, you should understand that from your own experience. And as for that guy, screw him and all his punk ass friends, you are never wrong for telling a guy “no.” You’re never wrong for telling anyone “no,” it’s your right to have boundaries. I just wish I had known that too. This place might help you, we have a good group of people, there are 3 other kids here. Once they call us out to breakfast you can meet them all. There’s Qadir, Kayla, and Matthew. Qadir is nice, he’s going to jail after he gets out of here for drug possession. He’s trying to get better so he can be with his daughter again and be an actual father to her, which I find sweet. Kayla is a very sweet girl; she’s going to long term hospitalization once she turns 18 since, she’s been here so many times. Matthew has autism and has been here since his father passed away. “It’s a shame,” she looked down at her sheets she was going to make her bed with, “he doesn’t really understand what dying is. He just cries and yells about wanting his father back, watch for when his tantrums get bad though. He’ll get very angry. When you go into the group therapy area, you’ll see the hole he made in the wall with his head.” After hearing that I was nervous to meet everyone and honestly a little fearful of Matthew.

“Oh, you’re up!?” the male nurse standing at the door said, “I wasn’t expecting you to be awake since your chart says you got here so late. Anyway, breakfast is ready so you can go out to find your seat and eat. After you’re done eating, the psychiatrist will meet with you.” Kaitlyn walked out to the eating area and I followed slowly behind, as my nerves were all out of whack from being here and talking about things. The eating area had 6 small tables, each with two chairs sitting on opposite ends. The chairs were plastic and looked as if it was from a child's toy set. Our food was placed on the same trays used throughout my years of school and it made me lose my appetite. Kaitlyn told me we got points based off whether we ate or not, so I tried to eat

the dense pancakes and cold sausage. “Everything you do that they like earns you points, the more points you have, the better the privileges are for you.” “What privileges?” “The higher the level you get a later bedtime, more phone calls to family, and an extra snack. I’m level two of three, and since you just got here, you’re number one. You can request a higher-level during group sessions later.” “What is this a prison where we have to gain our privileges back?”

A tall grey-haired man with glasses stood at the doorway, “Where is Lorraine?” I raised my hand, “I’m right here.” “Hi, I’m the psychiatrist here and I was coming to introduce myself and get to know you and what brought you here, please come with me.” The room went silent as I walked out and followed him into the “comfort room.” It was designed like a kid’s room and supposed to make you feel more at home. I guess I’d feel more at home if I were a 7-year-old who had a liking for fish, but it’s better than nothing. “So, I spoke with your parents and they gave me insight about some incidents that occurred, but I just wanted to talk them through with you.” He paused, and put his glasses over his eyes as he looked over my chart, “You were harassed by a number of kids over the past few weeks, is that correct?” “Yes,” I stared at my feet again to block off me feeling anything, “they said a bunch of things about me that I already believed myself. They said I was ugly, a whore, looked like a donkey, and many other things.” “You believe you’re ugly?” “Yes, I always have.” “Well what makes you ugly?” I thought about his question for a long time and came up with nothing. I mean, what exactly did it even mean to be ugly? What made someone ugly? “Your father tells me that you’ve had a few boyfriends, and boys hit on you all the time, so why do you call yourself ugly?” “Just because guys find me attractive doesn’t make me feel better about myself. I don’t judge myself based on other people’s opinions.” “But, isn’t that what you did with those kids, you let their words tear you down. You forgot who you were and let their opinions be your remembrance of who you are.” “I can’t forget

who I was if I never even knew in the first place. Everyone has these different versions of who I am in their head, so how am I supposed to decide who I want to be?” “I’m going to ask you this. If no one ever said anything about you, good or bad, who would you be?” I thought for a minute before answering, “I would be the real me I guess, there would be no expectations to live up to, and no harsh words that bring me down from what I want to be.” “Lorraine. There are no expectations for you, there is absolutely nothing you need to live up to, and there is nothing you don’t live up to. You are a person, and sure people can judge you, but it doesn’t define you. Your own opinions of yourself don’t define you. Your actions as a human being is the only thing that will ever define you.”

It’s been 6 months and the doctor’s words still stick with me. Discovering who I was has been a difficult road, filled with many hard nights, but still I progress. I now understand how what others need me to be, will not always be who I am and that’s okay. Expectations only ruin things if you let them. Instead I live life with an unbiased attitude and give everything the “expect the best” attitude the hospital workers taught me. I also now understand how your own expectations of yourself can crush you, and it’s unnecessary to push yourself so much. Instead we should be who we are, without expectations, and without doubts.

“roadkill”**By: Jennifer Lisiewski, Student**

I ask my girlhood if she's still breathing.

I touch her throat with two fingers,

the desperate roadside nurse cradling her fresh

autopsy

scrambling for a bastardized flutter of life.

Let me pause;

I must prepare the corpse, you see.

She's a second grader hitting the fence,

an overflow bubbling of tears,

a shard of early earth, volcanoes and all.

A footnote: I don't have a word for unwoman yet,

or the word for monster in female flesh.

Those words come years later, you see,

at the time of this poem's writing,

but all she knows is ungendered rage:

A girl's rage, after all, must be in perfect tense,

perfectly feminine.



“Fertility Goddess”

**Artwork by: Karen
White, Student**

Growing Up Black

By: Carmen Taylor, Student

Growing up black It's very easy to see the differentiation of our lifestyle

Between my white friends and me

The blackness of my skin was explosively loud

And sometimes exfoliating

Afraid to be to "gangsta" or "ghetto"

Because we don't want the common phenomena thrown on us

They say keep it in the streets

Disregarding us like we're thugs

But not every black person has grown up with a gun

And not every black man is a rapist

Or a threat to society

We shouldn't have to feel the pain we do

When our brothers and sisters experience police brutality

I lost my cousin

17 years old he was put in a box

Now tell me how am I supposed to live

When my whole world was torn apart?

That's the thing about being black

Nobody can really understand your struggle

Instead they're intimidated

So they put you in a bubble



“Curly Stem” – Photography

By: Mary Malinconico, Professor

“Fury’s Fury”

By: Robert Wells, Professor

If you are not a boxing fan, you might as well click the delete key now.

If you are a fan, however, then let's talk about the heavyweight championship fight last night between Tyson Fury, The Gypsy King from Manchester, England, versus Deontay Wilder, the Bronze Bomber from Tuscaloosa, Alabama. It was the most remarkable, entertaining night of boxing I've ever seen. And I go back to the glory days of the 1950's, when my Dad used to score the fights himself on Friday night television. (Remember the Gillette Cavalcade of Sports?)

Las Vegas has become the world capital of boxing, mostly because the gambling and entertainment industry there brings out the high rollers. So the business has become an entertainment phenomenon as much as an athletic contest. People are drawn as much by the hoopla as they are by the action in the ring. (Though, as an old purist, I still measure the event by the action.)

This was a rematch of a rumble the two fighters had in December, 2018, which ended in a draw (and which I skipped). Most observers say that Fury clearly outboxed Wilder. However, Wilder -- a devastating puncher -- knocked down Fury twice in the fight, giving him huge margins in those rounds. At the end, one judge voted for Fury, one voted for Wilder, and the third judge called it even. Thus, the decision was a draw. And, as the old saying goes in sports, a draw / tie is "like kissing your sister." Nobody walks away feeling better.

So this was the rematch that boxing fans around the world were salivating over. Somebody would be the last one standing. Who would it be? Both fighters were undefeated in their professional careers; the only blemish on their records being the draw they'd had against each

other. Wilder had won 41 of his 42 victories by knockout. Not technical knockout, as in "the ref stopped it in the 6th or the 8th," but true 10 count knockouts. At 6'7" and about 220 pounds, with long arms and legs, he has a devastating straight right hand punch that simply knocks out big, strong, tough guys; knocks 'em out cold. He may connect with it in the second round, or the fifth, or the eighth, or whenever. Yet when he does, it's (literally) lights out.

But here's where the story gets interesting. Wilder knocked down Fury twice in their first fight, yet both times Fury got back on his feet and fought back. Impressively. Had Wilder backing up by the end of the round both times. So here we had a guy who could withstand Wilder's best punch and keep on keepin' on. So how would it go the second time? Would Fury be able to stay on his feet and pile up the points as the rounds progressed?

Fury had a simple plan, which he shared with the world through the media, (He is the most self-promoting, media savvy athlete since Muhammad Ali. Matter of fact, he makes Ali seem almost amateurish by comparison.) "I'm gonna knock him out. Clearly, outboxing him doesn't work because I outboxed him the last time and the judges didn't give me the win. So the only alternative is to knock him out; take the decision out of the judges' hands." Could his fists back up his words?

Fury is a phenomenon unto himself. He is literally of Gypsy heritage, a certified member of the tribe of Irish Travelers, a Gypsy band that has wandered about England and Ireland for centuries. His father and an uncle have both been, officially, kings of the tribe at different times. He's primal, in that he understands and RELISHES the brutality of boxing (and combat sports generally). He admits that "you go to dark places when you're in the ring." Yet he is gifted athletically (especially for a man whose tendency is to be a "fat guy," and he works hard at his craft (both physically and mentally -- watching films of the great fighters of the past,

etc.). He is a huge man, 6'9" and he generally enters the ring at 270 pounds (plus). Last night it was 273. Hell, he even has some flab hanging over his belt, and the love handles in back make you wonder "is he really in shape?" Ah, but he is, and his boxing skills are awesome. He is clearly the best, most skilled boxer in the heavyweight division since Ali. He has excellent footwork (critical in boxing); he moves his head and upper body gracefully, thus avoiding hard punches (another critical skill). He's not a one punch knockout guy, like Wilder, but he has a left jab that's like a hammer in an opponent's face, and he can punch in combinations that pulverize an opponent and wear him down. Most of all, he is fearless and supremely confident in the ring. He's the kind of guy who learned early in life that trading punches can be fun, probably the effect of his Gypsy upbringing. He just happened to be bigger, stronger and more committed to the "fun" than his opponents. So while others may worry about what might happen, he enters the ring with the enthusiasm of a kid waking up on Christmas morning, wondering what presents might be under the tree. Again, something we've not seen since the days of Ali in his prime.

Remember when boxers entered the arena wearing a terrycloth robe with their names emblazoned on the back? Ancient history, my friends. They enter now wearing satin robes, even capes -- like royalty. There is music, too. Might be a folk song from his home country, or a rap song that's popular today, or an old classic that plays into a theme for the night. Like Gerry Lee Lewis' old rock 'n' roll classic, "Whole Lotta Shakin' Goin' On."

Wrong Turn

By: Gabi Ganski, Student

I hate the boy I love the most.

It makes no sense, I know, but it's the most profound thing I could think of while kicking a pebble down the side of the road. Leaving like that felt dignified in the heat of rage, and it would have been if we weren't driving through the middle Nowheresville, New York. My calves were throbbing, ankles aching, and the nearest rest spot was a desolate diner half a mile down the road. What a fine day to wear platforms. What a fine day to get pissed at my transportation.

My eyes fluttered open behind my brown-tinted sunglasses after a nap that I hoped would end at our dreaded destination. Though we finally made it off the highway, the perpetual sight of mountains still punched me in the face. I scoffed. "I hate these mountains." Fritz chuckled, a grape DumDum stick hanging from between his purple stained lips.

"I'm pretty sure we're almost there. Can't be more than an hour."

"That's even worse." I reached in the center console for a strawberry DumDum, speculating about the agony upon arrival. Everyone would be gushing over my cousin's biggest mistake, while I just lurk in the corner with my pseudo date and people watch.

"I still find it funny how you - *I* - drive four hours just to see your pregnant cousin who you can't stand."

"Hey, I told you it was for gloating purposes."

"But is anyone really going to notice you have a full ride to college, flat stomach, and a boy by your side?"

I glanced over at him, pout on my lips. "Would you rather be at work right now?"

“Fair enough. Besides, I’ve heard so much about these people I almost want to see them for myself.”

“Trust me, the stories do them justice enough.”

Through the radio, I heard the beginning riff of the Stones new cover of “Just My Imagination”. I reached for the dial and turned it up. Kicking my bare feet up on the dashboard, I hummed along to the lyrics, my skin soaking up the sunrays I hadn’t seen in a long time. I glanced over at Fritz, aviators on the road, dirty blonde hair waving and falling along the side of his face, and that feeling of elation I promised myself not to feel swept me up in the moment. Three hours into our four-hour journey, and everything aligned for that one moment. The sun was beautiful. The song was beautiful. Those stupid mountains were beautiful. He was beautiful, and I was caught staring. “What?” he asked.

“What?”

“I was asking you.”

“So was I.”

He scoffed. With a playful grin on his face, he asked, “What do you want from me, eh?”

“You.”

There it was. Out in the open to ruin a perfect memory. All the color in his face vanished, and returned to driving in silence. After a moment of waiting for some weak reply, I rolled my eyes.

“What the hell, Fritz?”

He sighed. “Ione, I’ve told you I’m not ready.”

“It’s been five months.”

“I know, and I’m still not ready. I need to focus on myself.”

I snorted. “Can see you’ve been doing a lot of that lately.”

“I’m trying, okay?”

“Sure, as you work two jobs, do art, and hang out with your other friends. Can’t forget stringing me along in the meantime.”

“I told you this was going to take time.”

“But how long? I’ve been patient. I’ve been trying to work with you, but I don’t have time. I’m going to be gone in four months.”

“I can’t put a time on something like this.”

I placed my hand on my head, wondering why I thought this could go anywhere different.

“Would it be so hard to think about anyone other than yourself?”

“Hey, I didn’t have to be here today. You asked.”

“And it was the one time I got a straight answer from you. Anything else I want or need from you is liking going through an act of Congress! But when you need me? I’m there with goddamn bells on my feet!”

“Look, I’m sorry for being such a shitty friend, and that I can’t meet up to any of your expectations. If you want to cut ties --”

Suddenly, the lenses of my glasses weren’t brown: they were red. “Stop the car.”

“Ione --”

“Stop the car!”

Grasp quivering around the wheel, he pulled onto the narrow shoulder lined with unruly grass. I shoved my platforms back on my feet, and pushed open the door, vibrating as I slammed it shut behind me. “Ione, wait,” pleaded Fritz from the driver’s seat.

“To hell with this, this perpetual cycle of disappointment. Whenever shit gets bad you want to cut ties. You want *me* to cut ties. Well congratulations, Fritz! I’m the bad guy now.”

“But the baby shower.”

“I’ll call a cab.”

Beyond the car, I stormed away through the calf-high grass. I didn’t dare to look back because my fit of rage was starting to dissolve into little ponds at the bottoms of my eyes. Fritz and I made sense. He was insecure, I had trust issues. We worked at the same job. Our conversations flowed like a summer stream. When we kissed, we devoured each other, and whenever it stopped we would just stare deep into each other’s eyes. Then god forbid you paste a label on the can, and it all fell apart for him. It didn’t matter about the stories or the feelings or the tears exchanged. Whenever the concept of the big R word came up, none of it mattered anymore, and nothing has ever made me feel so pathetic. I don’t delve into my feelings unless I feel it from someone, and while submerged by my own feelings, I’m an entirely different person. A person I try hard not to show to many people. When it’s shot down like this time after time, it becomes humiliating to feel, no matter how present the signs were that he cared as much as I did.

By the time the bell over the door jingled, my legs were quivering and devoured by mosquitos. Diners up here have much more class than back in Jersey. Sitting on the pink stool at the counter, I felt like I was in a time capsule from twenty years ago, except the window into the jukebox was dark. And the TV was in color, broadcasting a Yankees game. I didn’t think the Yankees were the team this far up. A waitress appeared on the other side of the counter, her hair piled on top of her head and a mole painted just above her lip. “What can I get you?”

“Cup of coffee, please.”

The game was a blow out, just like the idea of being with Fritz, but I still watched. The saucer of coffee was placed down in front of me with two packs of creamer on the side.

“Anything else?” the waitress asked.

“Um, yeah. Where’s your phone?”

“Down the hall to your left on the wall right before the restrooms.”

“Thanks.”

My feet hurt too much to get back up, so I poured each creamer into my coffee, making intense eye contact with the pie case against the wall behind the counter. Something about the triangular gap in the cherry pie and the layers of cherries protruding from the crust made me remember I left the gift in the car. Figures. I can’t even make a healthy decision the right way. The sips of coffee put a delightful bitterness on my tongue. I’m pretty sure my mom would let me sneak my name onto her card, though then I would have to explain the entire fiasco. Then I’d hear the dreaded, “I told you so,” in the middle of an even more dreaded family gathering and continued on the four-hour drive home.

It’s not like I like my cousin.

Halfway through my coffee, my ankles were numb enough for me to meander over to the telephone. Before putting in one of my last two quarters, I pulled the phonebook off the shelf until its chain went taut. Fishing through the yellow pages from the previous year, I found my choice of cab listings that somehow weren’t from all the way in Manhattan. Hope comes in many forms. I tossed in my quarter, and dialed the number with the phone to my ear. A dial tone blasted in my ear, so I went to the next number with my next quarter.

“Joe’s Cab Company. How may I help you?”

“Hi, I need a cab from Waterton Diner.”

“Waterton Diner? Where’s that?”

“Waterton. New York.”

“Sorry honey, we don’t go that far.”

“What do you --”

Another dial tone.

Slamming the phone onto the receiver, I collected my change in the bottom cubicle and reexamined the cab listings for one close enough to this watering hole of a town. I threw in my last two nickels and punched in a number from Utica. *This line is not in service.*

Of course not.

Would it kill these people to get an updated phone book?

Defeated and sweatier than I was from my outdoor march through hell, I scooted back onto the pink stool and gulped my lukewarm leftover coffee. As if it was her sixth sense, the waitress circled back to my part of the counter and asked if I wanted a refill. I didn’t feel like I deserved a second helping of anything, so I declined. If I had been content with what I had in the first place I wouldn’t be in this remote time capsule. I uncrumpled a five from the pocket of my romper and placed it on the table before I left. On the side of the road, I stuck out my thumb with a frown on my face and a slump in my shoulders. Fine time to be hitchhiking, but can things really get much worse than possibly being murdered?

My heart thumped each time one of an entire herd of four cars passed through. One had a pine tree on its trailer. All I’ve ever done in my life was try. Try to be happy. Try to be pretty. Try to be successful and do what I want in my life. Try to trust a man after being deceived by all of them. Fritz was close. Hell, Fritz was almost perfect compared to what I’ve seen. Yet, it never works out. No matter how hard and with how many different approaches I try I end up standing on the side of the road in a last ditch effort to escape from my fuck ups. That’s all that ever comes of my efforts. Rejection and disappointment, even from the few complete strangers

driving by with Christmas trees in the middle of April.

After the fourth car breezed by, I was ready to accept that it was just my luck to be stranded in the middle of Pineytown, New York. As I closed my eyes to search for some sort of breeze in the middle of the humidity, I heard an engine in the distance. Another tree truck most definitely. But the humming slowed down the closer it got, and it lingered in front of my face. When I opened my eyes, I was sure it had to be just my imagination, but his sage eyes peered over his aviators. “Need a ride?”

I pursed my lips, glancing down at the grass brushing against my calves. “I think you made a wrong turn.”

“That’s what I thought, but it looks like I was going the right way after all.”

A smile on my face, we drove off to the dreaded baby shower and continued to make many wrong turns for many moments to come.



“Summer Flowers”

By: Lauren Carbone, Student

Midnight Racer - Brian Weisser

Riding the circuit every Saturday night
Taking all comers and giving them a fright
The quarter mile is over just like that
Outcome in mind, the losers scat

The midnight racer doesn't have much
Revs his Chevy and pops the clutch
He lives for this, but died long ago
Does utter as much as a hello
Because the race is done
Before it even begun

Over the years, the midnight rider becomes folklore
The one who lived with the pedal to the floor
The one who never said "Hi"
Is riding them dusty highways in the sky



"Midnight Racer"

By: Brian Weisser, Student

Wishers

By: Andrea Vinci, Professor

The grass by the lake grew high and unhindered where we climbed over the rail and into an open area that didn't technically belong to anyone. The beaches had been closed weeks ago, but we could still find small areas of the lakes that weren't part of a public beach or someone's backyard, where we could sit and relax. Most days during the quarantine, in the late afternoon, we walked down the street to one of these tiny alcoves by the water. Elliot would fish or look for frogs, and I would read or write. It became a brief daily window of time where we could escape into nature and away from reality.

Because our town had suspended all of the normal maintenance services, the grass had begun to grow quite high with wildflowers throughout. It was beautiful to see what spring looked like unaltered by lawnmowers and weed killers.

That day, we approached hand-in-hand (he was still at that perfect age where he wanted to hold my hand every chance he got), and climbed over the railing and onto the grass. He immediately noticed the presence of the first few fluffy, white weeds.

"Wishers!" He exclaimed, with the excitement that comes so naturally at the simplest things when you are seven years old.

Promptly he began to gather up as many as he could hold, as I spread out our towel.

"Here you go, Mommy," he handed me one. "Make your wish!"

"Ok, are we going to say what we're wishing for?" I asked.

“No,” he gave me a concerned look, “if you say, then it doesn’t come true.”

“You’re right,” I said, playing along with the “rules,” and I bent down and put my cheek close enough to his, so that I could feel the warmth of his skin, as we counted down together.

“1, 2, 3!” I blew softly at first, then harder, as the tiny little white pods flew off one by one into the air. In my head, I placed a silent wish for something that I truly wanted too, caught up in the magic of the simple act. Elliot’s face became determined, as he made sure each and every little piece blew off.

Wishes cast, Elliot went back to trying to catch a frog in his net, and pleading with me to put the worms on his hook, so he wouldn’t have to touch them, and I returned to my book to enjoy an hour of peace.

“Wishers”, or *Taraxacum officinale* as they’re scientifically known, are actually just the seeds of dandelion plants. They’re prevalent for a few weeks in spring, and then they begin to fade as the summer days warm and the flowers emerge from the springtime seeds. Ironically, they are like the perfect metaphor for childhood, magical, but fleeting, and they disappear once the flower has grown.

Almost every day these past few weeks, rain or shine, we’d taken our daily walk to the lake, and blown our wishes together, finding enjoyment in these simple moments. But as often happens as a parent, I was caught off guard. Last week, we climbed over the railing as usual, and I laid out the oversized blue-striped towel that I always brought for us. Smoothing it out, I plucked two wishers out of the ground and called,

“E, I have two wishers for us to do!”

He turned slowly, and looked at me. “I don’t want to do them today,” he said softly.

“Why?” I asked. “We always blow our wishes!”

He looked up at me as his face grew serious, “Because mine hasn’t come true.”

“Do they really work, Mommy? Do I need to just wait more?” Looking in his eyes, I knew that he needed a real answer.

His simple questions crushed me more than most things in this quarantine had. In that moment, I realized one of the harshest realities there is to parenting – we cannot create our children’s reality. I could play with him, and draw with him, and bike with him, and watch movies with him, and try to teach him how to grow up to be a kind, smart, and gentle person, but I could not protect him from all the harsh truths of the world. In fact, I couldn’t even protect him from this. I was unable to make even the simplest of all of childhood’s magical things real for him.

I looked him right in the eye, noticing now that his cheeks were less chubby, and he looked so much older than the toddler he’d so recently been, and I wanted so badly to make it real, to let him believe for just a little longer that the world was a magical place. I wanted to let him think that if you wished hard enough for something, it could come true. I wanted even more to shrink him back to the baby that used to ride on my hip all day, and for the years that had gone by so quickly to turn back.

“No,” I said quietly. I took his hand and looked right into his eyes, knowing that this was one of the moments in his life where he needed to know that he could trust me, “They don’t really make your wishes come true.” I spoke softly, realizing that a small part of his innocence would be lost with this truth.

I pulled him onto my lap and wrapped my arms around him, “but sometimes it can make you happy just to pretend, right?”

He looked up at me and leaned his head back onto my chest.

“Did you really make a wish on yours?” He asked.

“I did,” I answered honestly. “For something that would have made me very happy.” I realized then that my wish too, had not, and likely would not, come true.

“What did you wish for?” I asked him back.

“For Corona virus to end, so that I can play with Will.” His simple request to be able to see and play with his cousin made me feel sick to my stomach that I couldn’t even fix this for him.

“It will end soon, I hope!” I smiled at him, trying to find the positive. “Plus, when it ends, it won’t be all good. You’ll go back to school, and I’ll go back to work, and we won’t be together all day.”

He smiled at me, a big, genuine, tooth-missing smile, “I like being home with you,” he said, and reached over to pick up the two wishers that I’d discarded at the start of our conversation.

“We can still blow them,” he held out mine, “it’s fun to pretend.”

The Jedi Tale

By: Joseph Mozier, Student

The sun had not risen, but did we rise,
 For I would meet my girl for the prize.
 Oh lord why did I agree to get up this early,
 People don't normally do this, surely?
 Under the fading stars, we began our fare,
 To head to the metal birds port of air.
 My lady drives the road with rage,
 Oh boy why did I get to this stage?
 We'll get in there at the end of night,
 But we did not expect to meet the Knight.

"The sword at your belt, Sir Knight,
 I know of a better weapon, so say I'm right.
 A saber of pure light in a galaxy far, far, away,
 Won't you join for the light saber this day?"
 The knight paused, a man of great chivalry,
 Who could not get his sword there on delivery!
 He nodded his head, a grin abroad his face,
 Looking toward the Mouse's magical place.
 He said he wanted to go somewhere lame,
 Idaho will have to wait for a place with fame.

So with sword left behind, and TSA a grumble,
 Our first steps off the flight without a stumble.
 Into the heat of which the Knight swore,
 He took his armor off, his sweat began to pour.
 The Knight was in good humor throughout,
 Our lovers stories did not give way to a pout.
 Bonded have we three been in time to wander,
 Seeing the crowds of people, the Knight began to ponder,
 How so many could be squished into lines,
 The knight learned his first valuable lesson in time.

With patience earned, the trio did depart,
 To build a saber of light in Bakku's heart.
 The Knight and my lady were amused by me,
 They saw me run about the park with glee.
 When we walked into the hut with anticipation,
 Our guide made sure we paid without trepidation.
 For this light saber was really expensive, jeez,

Yet building it was such a beautiful breeze.
 With green crystal picked and nature in design,
 I raised my lightsaber to the sky, it's blade ashine.

Yet when he wished to duel blade to saber,
 I had to bestow him the truth of my labor.
 My toy was a creation of glass and metal,
 It would never be used for a duel to settle.
 The knight shook his head in disappointment,
 "Idaho would have been a better appointment."
 Our journeys nearing their financially necessary ends,
 I raised my prize to the sky and its light ascends.
 I turned to the knight who looked a little blue,
 Saber held high I reply, "May the force be with you."

Mercury

By: Rachel Ventrella, Student

i guess i talk with the flickering streetlights,
 they are the only ones who will hear.
 i guess i talk to the sun during the day,
 in hopes of being seen in a better light.
 i guess i talk to the stars on clear celestial nights,
 thinking they'll take me away to another place.
 i guess i talk to the things that can't respond back,
 scared of what they'll think of how i can see.
 i know that i don't talk well for miscommunication,
 but let's just blame mercury retrograde for its confusion.

Catfish: Cooper Creek

By: Daniel Picker, Professor

We stood, then later sat on the cool,
muddy bank above Cooper Creek
below Mountwell Woods which we
walked within. Then stood on the old
rickety bridge in the middle in the summer
dark. Each holding fishing
poles; we fished as boys; although
perhaps both of us only knew
Tom Sawyer somewhat well, this creek,
part of a greater river
it flowed to was our first dusky,
then dark Mississippi.

You or we, just friends, neighbors,
kids, caught a large catfish. This primeval
creature with long black whiskers
or some grotesque monster,
my first catch. I don't know
what possessed me to ask you if I could
take him home, but you let me.
I placed him in an upright, round
goldfish bowl which was too
small. I dumped water from the hose
on him. His tail stuck out
the round mouth and I left
him standing by the driveway
near the back cellar door.
His dark whiskers were long
and thick, his skin gray-black
and slippery, prehistoric, long past
summer twilight, glimmering under night.

In the sunlight of the weekend morning,
I went back to see him. He stunk up
the driveway and backyard,
and I felt an embarrassed fool
for trying to save him.
I put him in a paper bag, then in
a trash can by the end of our
driveway and cellar door and yard.

A Place to Nourish the Soul

By: David Evans, Student

The city is hard. It's not just everyday life – working, struggling to survive – but in its most fundamental form, city life is just that - hard. Concrete, glass, and red brick define existence in this world. Everyday luxuries that we often take for granted--the dew on morning grass, the rustle of leaves blowing in a stiff breeze--are lost. Planners have sacrificed beauty and wonder for the expedience of cramming many people into a space too small for such things. In this world, the world of my youth, the inalienable right of all children to grasp nature, claim sovereignty over bees, and earth, had been denied to us. In a situation such as this, there are two options: succumb to the oppression of grey angular lines – lines that form the symbolic complexity of how we should treasure efficiency over beauty, and practicality over wonder--or reclaim that which is lost. Growing up in West Philadelphia, that is just what my friends and I succeeded in doing.

Harsh as it may be, every city has small, often forgotten, corners where beauty can be found. Planners realize that not all nature can be suppressed. Look at a neglected city sidewalk and you can see nature reclaiming its space with small growths poking up through every crack, green and triumphant. But in their effort to make nature fit into their defined world, the Planner boxed up nature and cordoned it off from the surrounding space. Philadelphia was no different. These little places were the temples of imagination and a place where the soul could be nourished. Overbrook Park, my neighborhood in West Philadelphia, had such a place, although it was tucked away for the privileged few: The Cobbs Creek Golf Course, a piece of the city's Fairmount Park system. Philadelphia has the largest urban park system of any city in the United

States. Snaking its way through all areas of this vast urban landscape, little parks, playgrounds, and a golf course create a place where one can get away from the city's harsh reality.

On the whole, golf courses are a waste of space. This game--played mostly by men, by white men, by middle to upper class white men--uses acres and acres of beautiful space to chase a little white ball, and it only solidifies this ultimate symbolic complex: nature in the urban setting needs to fit into the planner's box. It must be of service and subservient to those who use it. This fiction kept the rest of society from enjoying this natural paradise for what it could be. Fenced off from the rest of the area, Cobbs Creek was, in the minds of some residents, going to waste, and you could see how they bucked the symbolic complex. Many paths led to back entrances into the "park", and numerous holes were cut into the chain-link border, separating the community from the greenery within. Naturally, during the day, golfers were keeping up the status quo. This kept the wide-open fairways busy with men in plaid pants, but left the wooded acres open for local children to explore. Multiple trails kept young minds occupied with fantasy and fascination. The golf course was named for the creek that runs through it, meandering through pockets of wooded growth, crisscrossing its way through the surrounding neighborhoods, as well as the course itself. Never far from the hubbub of the bustling city, it was never far from a street corner should someone get lost on an adventure, but far enough away from the chaos to find that innocent beauty that is so important when growing up.

As captivating as the golf course was in the daylight, it was at night that I found this space most comforting. Growing up in the city, stars were a luxury the night sky couldn't afford. Light pollution from streetlamps, headlights, shopping centers, and office buildings cast a hazy glow that prevented the beauty of the night sky from coming through. The golf course was different. Deep into its heart, the lights of the city had less of a hold on the stars. The moon had

more of sheen and the quiet was remarkable. Friends would gather on the dewy grass and lay back, stargazing. The golf course took on a whole new feeling at night, the sand traps and putting greens hidden under the cover of darkness. The rolling hills and vast spaces, contrasted with the few distant city lights that made their way in, gave the impression of sitting on the finely manicured lawns of some English estate. It was here, blanketed in the quiet of night, where dreams were made. Growing minds discovered that the future was something to be planned for, and together we found the people we wanted to be.

On a warm spring night, several friends gather at the end of a dark street. They approach an imposing chain link fence, keeping them close to the sidewalk's end and from the wilderness on the other side. Seeking to escape the cacophony of city life, they look to find a way in – not through the front entrance and the set of expectations that comes with it – but off the beaten path. They are in luck. Like others before them on a similar quest, they find a hole in the fence, and a new way of exploring the same grounds that others have overlooked for decades. Making their way in, stumbling in the darkness, they find their way to the top of a hill overlooking the fairway below. A blanket is spread, and the friends stretch out, laying on one another, gazing up at the stars. The same fence used to keep golf balls from flying through people's windows during the day now keeps the pressures and expectations of their young lives out, if just for a few moments. One friend tells of her fears growing up in a family where she is pushed to marry a solid boy with a good job not long after high school. She is not expected to go to college, at least not in the narrative others have set her in. But she desires nothing more than to set off on her own, become a woman who determines her own path. She stares at the moon above, almost religiously, and offers to it her own version of her story, where she desires education more than

any man. One of the friends excitedly tells the group of his new love and his exuberant hope for the future. He speaks about hoping they both get into the same school at a pace that mimics the speed of his heart when he sees his young love, so they don't ever have to be far apart. Another young man quietly confesses to the group that he will never live up to his family's expectations of a wife and a bounty of children. Never knowing any other boys quite like him, he fears being alone, and he fears losing those closest to him should they know who he truly is. The friends all embrace and uplift each other and figure out their world together.

To some, perhaps even to many, a golf course is an odd place to become sentimental. It is these people that need to look past the function of the land and to the land itself. In Southern Jersey, space is a commodity that can be taken for granted. Drive ten or twenty minutes in any direction and one finds open farmland. Gloucester County actively works to preserve open space. A city, especially one the size of Philadelphia, does not have this luxury. This golf course was the only contact that a whole community – that I – had with nature. This was our only connection to the land. When a concrete sidewalk is the softest thing in a neighborhood, Cobbs Creek Golf Course is something to be treasured. This was West Philadelphia's small corner of beauty – its place to nourish the soul.

Power Fantasy

By: Jesse Jones, Student

My latest venture finally took me to the *Castle of Darkness*. In its grimdark halls of nether-brick, I clashed swords with the underworld's greatest warriors, roasted their wisest wizards with my explosive spells, and outwitted their most devious puzzles— all on my path to the throne room. There, I will defeat the Dark Lord, rescue the princess, and liberate the land. *Win.*

I know the end was near when one last arch broke the hall— grander than any of the last. There's just one more obstacle between me and the Lord of the Dark, and he wasn't hiding. His most elite general is a hulking figure of jet-black whose armor glistens in the torchlight. Ram-like horns jut from his helmet, sharp enough to kill. Behind him is the door to the throne room—a thorny pair of double doors black as the Dark Lord's heart.

"So you've come, Samson of the Light." His growls rumble the room. He draws his sword, a scimitar longer than my entire body, blade ablaze. But I charge first, my lightbrand unsheathed. Our blades clash. It reverberates through my palms. I roll backwards, away from a flaming slash. Before he can wind up another, I lunge. My blade pierces his chest like butter. He bursts into smoke, leaving nothing behind. I've become so unmatched, I have to laugh.

The Dark Lord—the grand finale to my adventure— awaits. I'm about to open the door, but a whisper forces me to pause. After all this... *what next?* I push it aside. There's always more I can do. Places I can go. Fun I can have.

The door swings open, rippling the crimson carpet. On the throne waits a massive figure cloaked in ashen velvet, dwarfing even the general: the Dark Lord. What challenge will he pose?

“So you’ve arrived, young Samson. I am the-” I ignore the spiel— something about conquering the darkness with light. Nothing new to me.

As we draw our weapons, I grin. Time for some *real* action. He thrusts his palm to spray a tremendous hellfire. Hundreds of embers bounce around the walls like pinballs. What a start! But I don’t need to dodge. My holy armor— enchanted with fire resistance— is all I need. I let the flames envelop me. They clear, and there I still stand— having taken only a sliver of damage.

My turn. I hold up my hand, prepping my own spell. Golden light gathers around my palm, forming an orb— three feet— five feet— finally eight feet in scale. *Click.* A beam rockets toward my opponent. It bursts against his chest in a confetti of sparks. He staggers back; it alone took so much health.

Let's end this with a bang. I sprint for him, dodging his shots of dark energy. As I close in, he tries to block my thrust with a claw. It’s not enough.

He smashes into the wall, scattering bricks. But he still has a sliver of energy...

He floats back to his feet and snaps a finger, obscuring all in darkness... No, *consuming* all *with* darkness. I start falling into the void— but I didn't fear. My latest blessing from the goddess— wings of light— sprout from my back. I hover in place, unharmed.

From all sides, *beings* emerge. They squash, stretch, mold themselves like dough. Bone crunches and flesh tears as they grow to monsters of horrendous scale. But it only excites my trigger finger. My sword glows a brilliant white. Like an angel, I fly, purging all that dare cross my path. The spectacle— the heaven-light rending the shadows of hell— dazzles my eyes.

I raise my lightbrand for my final strike. Before he can react, I soar through him—cleaving him. Hundreds of screams— from every soul he consumed— burst out all at once in a firework of rapture. They rise to the heavens, free. Even he was no match for me.

With that, the darkness is gone. The room returns to normal— if a lot brighter. My maiden garbed in pure white— the princess of Light— stands in the lord's place, free of her curse. "Lustrous one..." She brushes aside her golden ringlets, exposing eyes of shining amber. I swear, they truly meet mine. She takes my hands. "Like dawn, your toils have birthed a brighter day." Our hands stay locked.

On horseback we ride out of that dreaded castle together. The crunch of grass underfoot fills me with a satisfaction beyond words. Gentle gusts. Flowers and trees dance, celebrating with us. The sun's holy rays shine brightest— no smog blocking them *here*. Heaven, dare I say.

Oh, if I could breathe it in! How I want to take in all these sights! How I want them to belong to me! But as always, the dreaded opponent rears its ugly truth. All goes black, and I see the final message:

THE END

The soft light of the television illuminates the floor. Games, novels, movies, comics— all lay strewn among my meals. I fall back into bed, spilling my bag of chips onto the dumpster of a floor. My controller falls from my hand, clacking against the hardwood— just missing a stain. I let out a groan. All adventures have to end eventually, but...

I glance at the closed curtains, then back at my setup. I eject the game from my system. As I look at the disk, I think about all my ventures one more time. All 100 hours of them. I almost want to cry, but I'd rather play another game. But as I sift through the pile looking for a new adventure...

“Samson!” *She* yells from downstairs.

Ugh... “What?”

No words. Only stomps, getting closer.

“SAMSON!” My door flies open, knob scratching the drywall. In walks my mother, garbed in her usual robe. “What the hell are you doing!? You missed the school bus!” She stumbles around my stuff— almost tripping over a stack of books. A slipper falls off.

“You should be driving yourself by now...” Her usual nags. “...Clean your sh**...” She snatches a curtain. “And let some light in here! You’re not a vampire!” Then she rips them open, assaulting my eyes with *their* excuse of a sky. No holy rays, not through the smog. No flora dancing in the wind; it all drowned. In *their* world, I see no heaven. Only the hell of reality.

My Tinkerbell

By: Justine Chishko, Student

There is a girl in much distress wearing all black
 She with **All** her family but **One**
 She looks overworked, exhausted, and looks like she been crying forever
 The one she was closest to is missing
 The one who told her *“never give up on her dreams and to keep pushing no matter how hard life gets”*
 Her number one supporter in all she did
 The one she could always count on
 The one who stood by her in all her decisions, no matter if they were wrong or right
 The one who used to pick her up from school when she was ill
 The one who used to be a bus driver
 The one who loved Tinkerbell
 The one who used to be a friend
 The one who used to be a sister
 The one who used to be a wife
 The one who was a mother
 And most importantly a **Grandmother**
I love you endless



