

Mission Statement

The mission of this magazine is to create an online publication that showcases the talents of the students of Hammonton High School. Students have an outlet for creative expression as they may submit written and visual works for publication. All students are encouraged to electronically submit work such as prose, poetry, essays, photos, paintings, and sketches. Twice a year, a team of dedicated students acts as an editorial board that chooses and edits their peer's submissions. By creating this magazine, students have the opportunity to share their creativity with their community.

Advisor

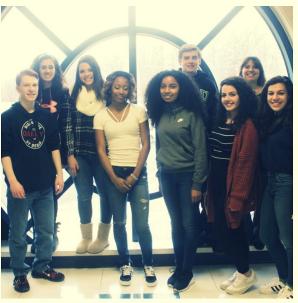
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Pretender

Ama Benjamin

What once was light has turned to darkness
What once had substance seems so heartless
The only healing there is, is through way of pain
The disruption of peace of mind, is the only method of keeping sane
Though residue of joy still exists
The misery and grief still persists
To fight this feeling would only result in surrender
Therefore I put on a smile and pose as a pretender



Photo by Amilee Chiofalo

The Lake

Chiara Donio

He reached down and stuck his hand into the burlap sack slouched against his lawn chair perched on the deck, feeling around for his binoculars. The flashlight, the hand lens, the little bottle of ibuprofen he keeps for his headaches... aha! The binoculars.

He readjusted his chair on the deck, then himself on the chair. He looked into his binoculars out into the lake in which the deck laid atop of. On the other side were children and their mother returning from a long day of kayaking. Come on chickens, he imagined she would say, let's get you dressed and back inside.

He took the binoculars off, feeling slightly guilty that he had just watched them. The mother talked in his own mother's voice, and used his own mother's nicknames. He thought about a time he saw his mother.

In this moment he wasn't thirty but twelve. It was an autumn day like today where the air was crisp and the sky looked happy.

He and his brothers were outside playing one of their made up games. It was tag, essentially, but with rules and stipulations that made the game so complex he would win every time just by simply knowing the rules.

"Ohhh c'mon Jack" his younger brother Keith whined, "How are we supposed to remember all this crap?"

"These are the rules and they make it more fun. Isn't it more fun when you know exactly what to do?" He responded.

"No its not!" Joey, the youngest of the boys interjected, "I hate rules! They're dumb and so are you!"

Joey ran crying back into the house. "See what ya did?" Keith said, "Mom is gonna be pissed" He ran back after his little brother into the house.

Jack was alone now. He walked down his backyard to the deck on the lake, dragging a lawn chair from the shed. He moved the lawn chair to the center of the deck, and plopped himself down.

A few geese were swimming in front of him, loudly quacking and squawking.

"Can you shut up?" Jack said, angrily.
One goose looked at him, and then flew away.
The rest followed.

Jack's eyes welled up, and he started crying. Why am I crying right now, he said to himself, I feel

like a baby. Or like a stupid girl. I shouldn't be crying!

But that only made him cry more. The sun began to set and Jack didn't notice.

After what seemed like an eternity, he felt the touch of a warm hand rest on his shoulder.

"What's the matter chickie?" His mother's sweet, calming voice cut him out of his stupor. She crouched down next to the lawn chair and hugged her son.

But what was actually the matter? Jack's crying stopped and he stared silently into the lake while his mother embraced him. A few moments passed and he still said nothing.

She released him from her embrace and looked at him right in the face.

"Jack, this is hard. This is really hard. I work all day while you boys go to school. Then I come home and make you all dinner. Then I have to clean everything. Then I have to put you chickens to bed. I don't know where your father is during all of this but I can bet you he's at a bar. Oh somewhere at a bar drinking all of his problems away... You know this."

Jack was stiff and cold.

She sighed. Her eyes became glassy, "I know we have this nice house on the lake and I know everything seems okay but I know it's not and I know that the younger two don't realize but you realize, Jack, you're so smart, you're smarter than I was, you're smarter than I am, don't do what I did, don't marry young, don't get a girl pregnant young, don't do anything bad and please follow the rules because I just want you to be okay and not have to live through this!" Tears rolled down her face. And she hugged him again.

He was frozen in his chair. He stuck the binoculars back into the sack. He felt his phone vibrating in his pocket, and remembered he had a conference call to make in exactly a half of an hour. He began to sit up and collect himself and his things, took an ibuprofen, and checked his phone. He received a text from his boss, John, great work on that statistical report you put together. You were right—the company is growing exponentially it seems ©

John dragged the lawn chair back into the shed of his late mother's home, and left.



Photo by Chiara Donio

Beyond Capable

Neil Massaro

All of you inspire me and maybe that's not what this speech is supposed to be but what I see is different from what you see Cause when I look into this crowd I see a dying generation I see the sweet adolescence of today with a lack of reconciliation and It's not only in this room it spreads across the whole nation it's like a war amongst the human creation And I can't bear to walk another day in this world that's headed the wrong way. every single night I pray and I pray
That for once people will listen to what I have to say

Cause You see I'm not asking for fame and I don't want your money I'm just trying to spread a message to people that feel crummy and you can laugh all you want but to me it's not funny Our world is so dark it's no longer sunny. I'm so sick and tired of it every corner I turn and everywhere I look each person is like an unwritten book Because we are so worried about what other people think and when we try to be ourselves our ego just shrinks so we alter ourselves to reflect the norms of society all we do is value propriety and our sweet lives have become nothing more than dubiety. People just struggle with depression and anxiety. And maybe you're sitting there thinking, psh what does he know. But you see I've dealt with depression and I've dealt with self-harm I can't even count the scars on my arm. But please, don't be alarmed.

I was just another high school kid running from my problems just like everyone else. So Please don't think I value myself

cause I'm a nobody

I'm just flesh and bone headed to my grave

and on my way I had encounter with grace

so that this day's faults and failures takes the guilt of yesterday's far away as I stand on stage and preach and pray

and beg people like you to listen to what I have to say

Cause change is possible and it can start today.

And maybe my inspirations don't make much sense

But Sense is what I'm trying to make of why we tell are kids they were born on accident

just a by-product of evolution big bang imagine it

and so that kid goes home and lays on his mattress

wondering what's the point in living if I'm here on accident?

And you wonder why I stand up here so passionate

cause listen to me you are far from an accident

you were created by a creator who cared to carefully craft you into the creation only he can contrive

And that's truth, it's no lie

you are here for a reason

and so am I.

But that's not all because we would rather debate gay marriage like what's right and what's fair are tattoos wrong? Really bro who cares get out of your chairs there's a dying world right outside your stained glass windows depressed people, poor people, addicts, and widows.

Yet we would rather sit on the couch and scroll through twitter
But I'm not going to be a quitter
and trust me I won't jitter
I'd rather die than live see you act like you're just a piece of litter
Because your self-worth is so much more than people make it seem
and that's why I carry such a dream
That each one of us gets a boost of self-esteem
All of you inspire me
because I see opportunity
to be who you want to be
and overcome all of the negativity.
Perhaps everyone can live beyond what they are capable of.

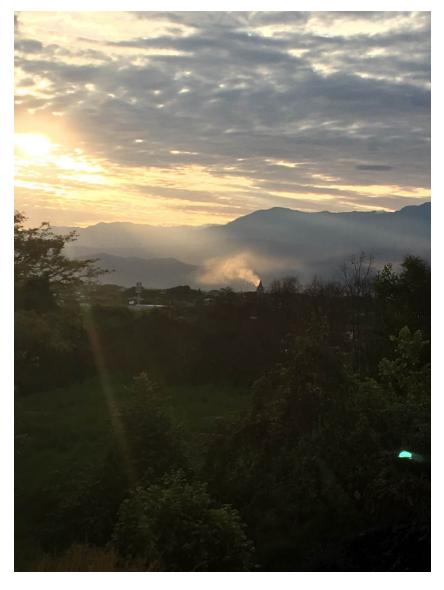


Photo by Alan Miranda

The Room

Robert Brothman

The light coming in from the windows of my bedroom were an exceptional grey. The gloom of it all—the blandness of my room, the pale light coming from an undeniably depressing sky, and the hand I've been so mockingly given. I suppose a person's room being a reflection of themselves is not so far off. My white walls made grey by the receding darkness, my one window that let in little light, my grey rug and black sheets and comforter—my room was awful bland, and so was my life. I am wont to hope and dream, but their fruition is a farce. To think I could amount to anything is an utter farce. But, I still seem to dream those ridiculous dreams, and the more I do the more pain it causes me. I want a life of adventure—I wouldn't mind sailing the seven seas and treasure hunting, I would love to be a knight fighting for honor and glory, or be a king, or a hero, or a leader, or even just liked—but those ring hopeless. Hopelessness is all I feel lately. But, I think I might of always felt this way. How could I not when all hope seems to fall to just the suffocating air of this place I spend the brunt of my time. My very home, a pitiful wasteland.

I've given up trying something as fruitless and pathetic as cheering myself up. My world has only taught me that cheer is the disguised cry of denial and unripe despair. There is no love in this room. There is no hope. I just lie awake every night, screaming and crying out for my liberation. Hoping just one person would hear. My hands shake at just the thought. The light at the end of the tunnel keeps getting smaller and I ask—no I demand—to know when this damned sick game will end. Then I realize my eyes were just shut for a while, and then I open them. But only the visuals change. The room isn't a room. The prison behind my eyes is a state of mind. A state of mind I'm learning to conquer. And I hope with all my heart others will too. Thought is the most dangerous thing to such vulnerable creatures as human beings. And most dangerous is the thought of not being able to win against those thoughts. But, I assure you, you are stronger. This is for those suffering of depression. Those who don't know that there is a way out of the room.

But, first, you must let others in.

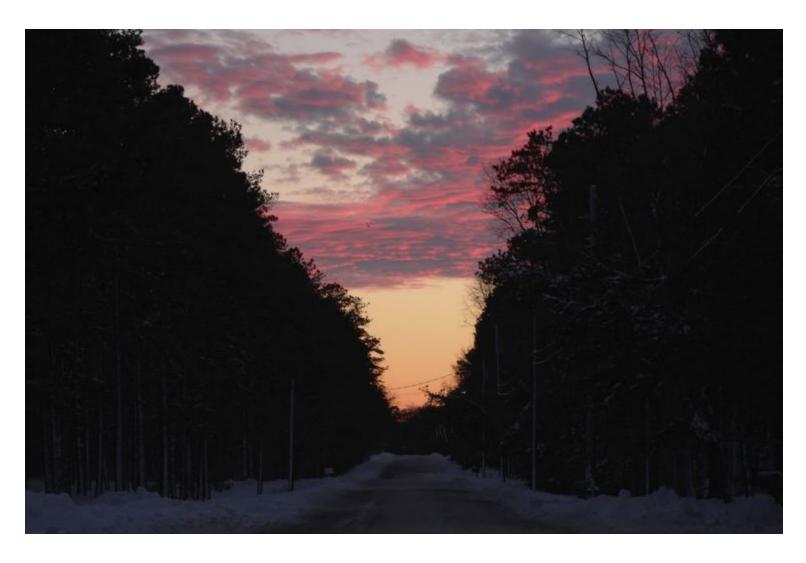


Photo by Mike Ramos

What Society Expects

Jaden Fairbanks

Growing up we are expected to do what society puts out there. We are expected to know what we want to do for the rest of our lives and know who we truly are by the age of sixteen. Society tells us that we can't be pretty without makeup and if you are skinny your life will fall right into place. When will people realize that body positivity is not by encouraging obesity it's about allowing people for once in there life to accept their body without being ashamed or guilty. Society has made you feel like a prisoner in your own body. If you aren't under a size five you are considered "fat." Society comes at young girls the most.

If a young girl makes a mistake with a guy, she is labeled with the word "easy". If a guy gets a girl to himself, he is "the man." In magazines, they don't show you the stretch marks and split ends that the whole world can see. They show you what they want you to look like. You aren't pretty enough if you don't get over hundred likes on a picture. You can't solve your problems from what you see on your phone screen.

Society expects us to get straight A's and get the best job out there. Our opinions don't matter in this world anymore, we are crazy to fall for someone who will never fall for us back because we are brainwashed into thinking only perfect people can be happy and fall in love. We are expected to just man up, move on, and fake a smile when we get heartbroken.

The more time goes by the move we forget what it feels like to have passion, excitement, and desires. You only get one shot at life, yet we spend so much of it picking ourselves apart trying to be perfect and please everyone. We live in an age where there is so much opportunity yet we take advantage of it. We need to take risk because you never know the outcome. The problem is with that is that we are scared to deal with the hate we receive.

Twenty four hours in a day and we spend half of that staring at a phone screen; we get sucked into the negative comments on social media and then we rethink everything we do. We as people are expected to be perfect and to do everything right. Society has made such a bad impact on so many people that we forget who we are.

You are beautiful and that is what's beautiful.

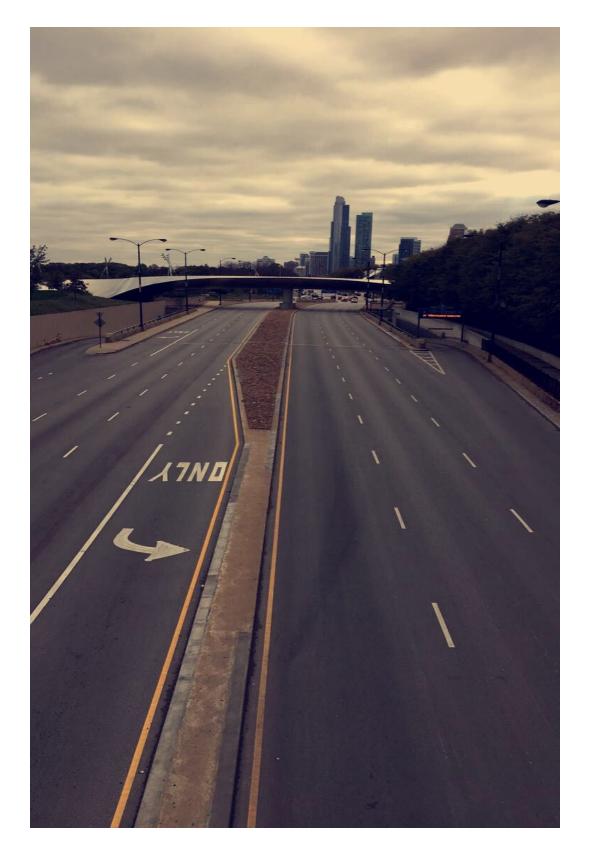


Photo by Lummy Dionicio

A Letter That Can't Be Sent

Anonymous

Everyone hates you. Some people don't care about you. But for some reason I can't stop thinking about you. Every time I look in the mirror, at a guy, or at one of my friends you just always seem to pop in my head. You make me hate myself, you make me hate others, but I mostly hate you. I think about you every day and every night. I ask myself why can't everyone just get along and not hate you? I've always wondered why with you comes such an image everyone is compared to. I see tweets about you that don't stop my mind from thinking about you.

You make me angry. You make me sad. You make me everything but happy. You make me look at myself in depth making me hate my body. I just gotta ask why? Why are you so important to me? Why do people either hate you or don't care about you? Why is it that you're always on my mind? Why is it that every time I think about you I cry? You have ruined my life. I'm not happy. You make me wear this mask in public that makes me out to be someone so happy and positive but I come home to be someone so sad and sappy. But I hope you're happy.

You may be my enemy, but to everyone else you're just known as society.



Photo by Melanie Byrne

My Tears Fall

Katelyn Brothman

My tears fall in harmony with the raindrops. There is a symphony of feelings flowing through my veins. A melody of memories plays in my mind. You told me you loved me and that you would stay. I told you my secrets and you promised you would never say. Now you are gone and I crave for yesterday when you were here, oh so near but now you have sailed away in a sea of all my tears

The storm was going away but now I think it has decided to stay. I'm reaching out into nothingness. Trying to hold on to whatever still exists. In the loneliness of my thoughts I am scared that I could ruin everything, even myself. I try to forget all the pain and I could pretend that it's gone. But in the back of my mind, I know it's apart of me. Still lurking, waiting to devour me. Out of everything I've lost, what I miss the most is my mind.

Maybe it's under the pile of clothes on my bedroom floor.

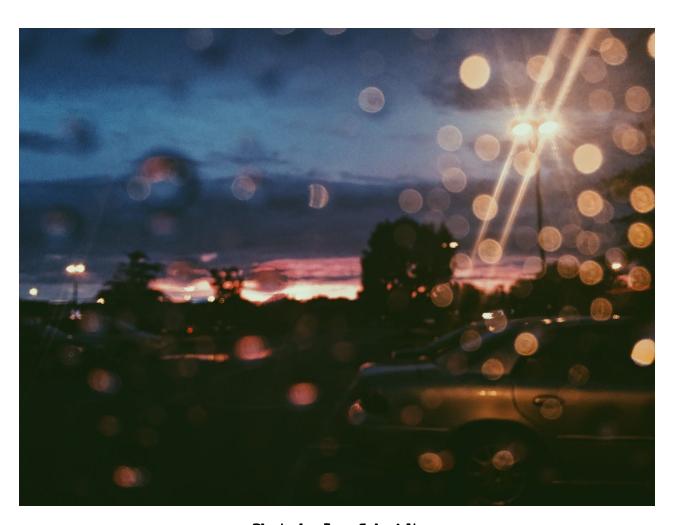
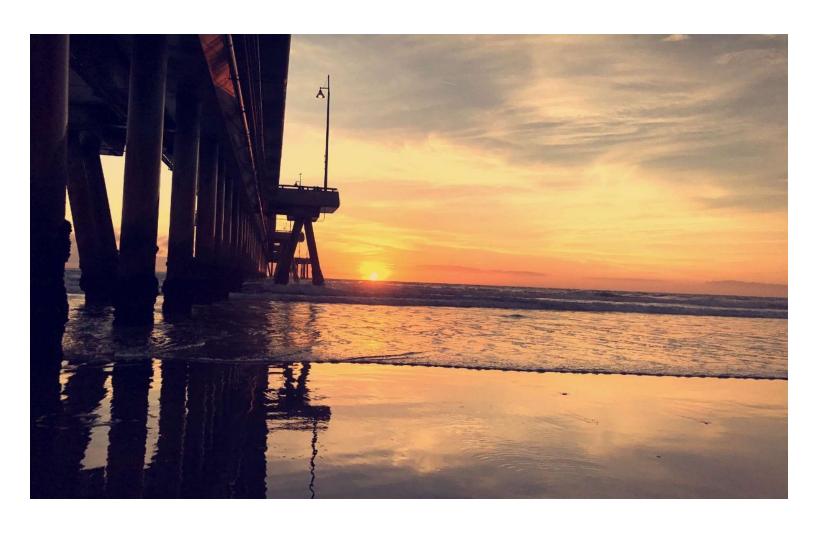


Photo by Jess Schmidt



"No matter how many times the sea comes and kisses the sand the sand always pushes the sea away. It's a sad thing, that thing called love. No matter how many times you kiss someone you can't make them stay."

Photo and Quote Geanna Serechia



Photo by Neuchatel King

The Million Dollar Scheme

Anonymous

"Oh my gosh," I bellowed. My best friend Tiffany just sent me a photo of my boyfriend, Justin, on a McDonald's date with my sister, Laya. Dramatically, I gasped. My legs went weak, and I elegantly fell back onto my bed, and my phone fell beside me. Disgruntled, I grabbed my phone, and I began to type.

"You guys are drowned rats," I angrily typed into the new group chat; it consisted of my cheating boyfriend, and I added his new lover, my crusty sister, into it for good measure. She'd get the text on her way home from the rude McDonald's date she just had with my boyfriend, so I didn't have to deal with her in person. I sent the text, and I sassily sent the incriminating photo as evidence.

"I didn't do it," my cheating boyfriend lazily replied, "I was at football practice."

"Football season is over, just like our relationship," I typed out, "you're a cheater." I waited minutes, and then the only thing that was sent was a bunch of gibberish from Laya talking about a cult.

Frustrated, I opened Twitter only to see that my father was calling me. "What do you want, dad?" I mumbled.

"Your sister's been kidnapped," he said gruffly, "go find her or your phone is being taken away."

I dramatically gasped, and nearly fainted at the lack of humanity my father showed me. I hung up, and went on Twitter to complain about how hard my life is. However, I saw a news story that would change my day forever.

Intrigued, I clicked on the link; the headline stated, "A New Insidious Cult in Baltimore is kidnapping young Korean Women." I skimmed through the article, and determined that they must've kidnapped my adopted Korean sister.

I knew what I had to do if I didn't want my phone to be taken away from me. I called my ex boyfriend, Justin, to figure out what happened, "Justin," I exclaimed, "my sister is in jeopardy!"

"What? I love that show," he said.

"Can you just shut up and tell me what you know? Geez," I mumbled.

"I just saw a girl resembling your beautiful sister get kidnapped a few minutes ago," he responded nonchalantly, "she was forced into a van that said 'cult' on it. What do you think it means?"

I internally screamed at how stupid he was, and calmly told him to come over and drive me to the cult's lair.

After the most annoying twenty minute car ride consisting of Justin incessantly singing to the radio and stopping by Starbucks for a small latte because why not, we arrived at the cult's hideout which was on a cliff I never even knew existed. It was very obvious to find because of the huge sign outside that read "Baltimore cult". I jumped out of the car, eager to keep my phone privileges; however, the huge barbed wire fence surrounding the cult's lair made me question what we were doing.

"Justin, don't you think we need weapons to defeat an insidious cult that kidnapped my sister?" I questioned, smoothing out the wrinkles in my dress; if I was gonna save my kidnapped sister, I was gonna do it in style.

"Oh, right," Justin nervously said, "I think I might have stuff for that in my trunk." He led me to the back of his car, and opened the trunk. Inside was a sports nerd's dream: baseball bats, football helmets, boxing gloves, and golf clubs. I picked up a golf club, swung it towards the sky, and put on a pink football helmet; even though I was gonna get helmet hair, I didn't want to be brain dead because then I wouldn't be able to go on my phone. Justin grabbed a baseball bat and a football helmet.

"Let's do this," I said to Justin, cracking my knuckles for dramatic effect.

We stepped inside unaware of what awaited us. The first thing we noticed was a strange aroma resembling that of iron and something else, but I couldn't put my finger on it. As we continued to walk in the pitch black lair, the smell got stronger and stronger, but still not a single idea of what it was came to mind. Suddenly a loud girlish screech and the nasty gushing of liquid filled my ears from right behind me, but I couldn't see a thing.

"LAYA???" I desperately yelled out hoping that would be her. I felt something wet beginning to spread across the floor and the smell finally hit me. "B-blood," I quivered trying not to cry and ruin my make up. My dad did say I needed to bring her back, but he didn't say anything about bringing her back alive. I was blinded by the lights that suddenly flashed before my eyes. The same girlish scream pierced my precious ears and made me turn around to see what the commotion was. As soon as I turned around, I saw the most horrific thing I ever could've imagined. My shoes were RUINED and stained with blood that would take too much effort to clean off. Angrily, my eyes followed the trail of blood and led to the second most horrific thing I've seen today. There right in front of me, was a very pale Justin on the ground wailing and clutching his side where the trail of crimson red blood began. I grimaced at the mess in front of me.

"OMG Justin are you ok?" I asked trying to sound concerned for him as the thought of my poor stained shoes blocked my mind.

"He-help me," he tried to get out. A sound of laughter drew my attention away from him and to a girl with a mask in the corner holding a knife. I backed away with horror while meticulously avoiding the blood so none of it splashed on my dress. She wore an all black dress, had a blonde ponytail, and a hat that looked awfully tacky. Too tacky to say the least, but strangely familiar.

"Tiffany?" I managed to say as I gaped in surprise that she still wore that even after I told her how tacky it was, though I did extol her for her bravery in wearing that in public.

"Yes, it's me." she responded with a grin as she approached me. "We're like best friends Jasey. I'm not gonna let that sports loving rat cheat on you with your crusty older sister and let him get away with it. But thank me later. Right now I need to skin your sister alive and set a price on her organs to sell on the black market. Wondering if I could make a million dollars off of her." She eagerly made her way to the narrow hallway ahead of us. I couldn't let her kill my sister,

or not yet at least, but she was abruptly stopped as Justin crushed her skull with a swing of his baseball bat and fell down himself. I ran to him and knelt beside him trying to listen to what he was saying.

"Tell your sister I'm sorry I couldn't afford that extra McNuggets order she wanted. And tell my parents...that...sports are...life." he slowly breathed out. His hand dropped the same way people did in movies, and it could only mean one thing. He's dead.

"Huh. Why have Laya when you can have all this?" I thought to myself. This truly was something I will never understand about boys. I dropped his head on the ground and looked at him with the most disgusted face I have ever made at someone.

Shaking off what I had just saw, I went down the hallway, and went into a door that had a sign reading "Laya's room". I barged in, seeing my adopted sister restrained and gagged. I untied her, and ran outside, dragging her behind me. She was surprisingly conscious, and once we were outside she hugged me.

We ended up on the edge of the cliff that the lair resided on. "Thank you so much for saving me, even though I totally went on a date with your boyfriend," my sister gushed. "I guess he likes adopted Korean songwriters," she continued. The euphoria of keeping my phone almost made me forget the horrible act my sister did! Quickly I came up with a plan that would end well for everyone.

"Let's take a selfie, Laya," I said. As soon as I snapped the picture I sent it to my dad, and I received a smiley face in reply; this meant I could keep my phone! Then, I decided to do something that would solve all of my problems.

"Laya, stand up," I ushered, "we'll get better selfie lighting." She stood up, and I pushed her off of the cliff, hearing her screams as she fell. Satisfied, I posted our picture together on every social media site I had; I captioned it: don't cheat on me.



Photo by Jess Schmidt

An Eighteen Year Sentence

Julia Clancy

The sun is setting
And we are trapped—
Behind a white picket fence
A middle class bear trap.

Watch the sky change as
The Sun sets behind a sea of
Identical roofs.
The pavement cools,
The fireflies dance,
All is calm.

But my mind is racing I have weighed out all possible options.

If you can't beat them, Go to prom.

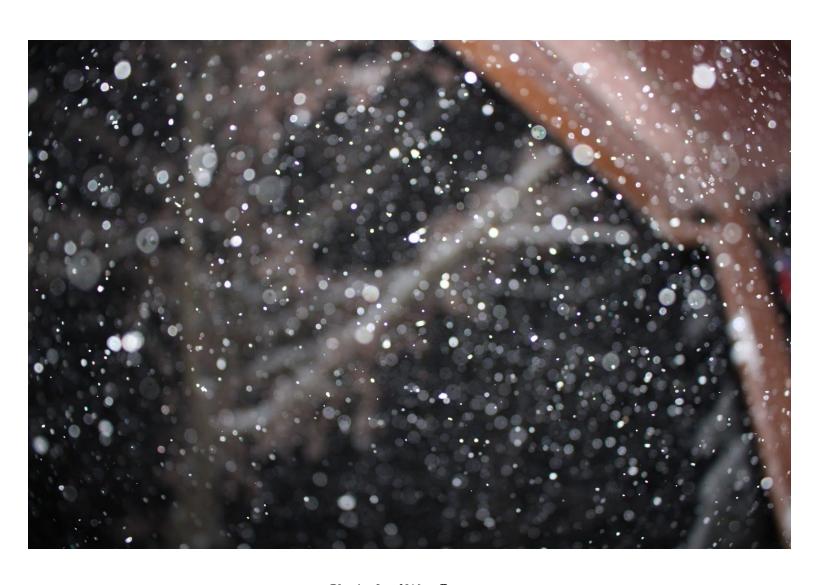


Photo by Mike Ramos

Life is Like a Bow

Gabby Ballin

Life is like a bow

You never know where your arrow might go
When you start to draw back your string
It resembles all your dedication, hard work and sting
Your heart beats faster and faster as you plan to let free
All you wanna do in life is be where you want to be
Once you let go, your arrow flies
Once you let go, your happiness will rise
Everything you ever worked hard for is now here
Pull your arrow on back and let out a cheer

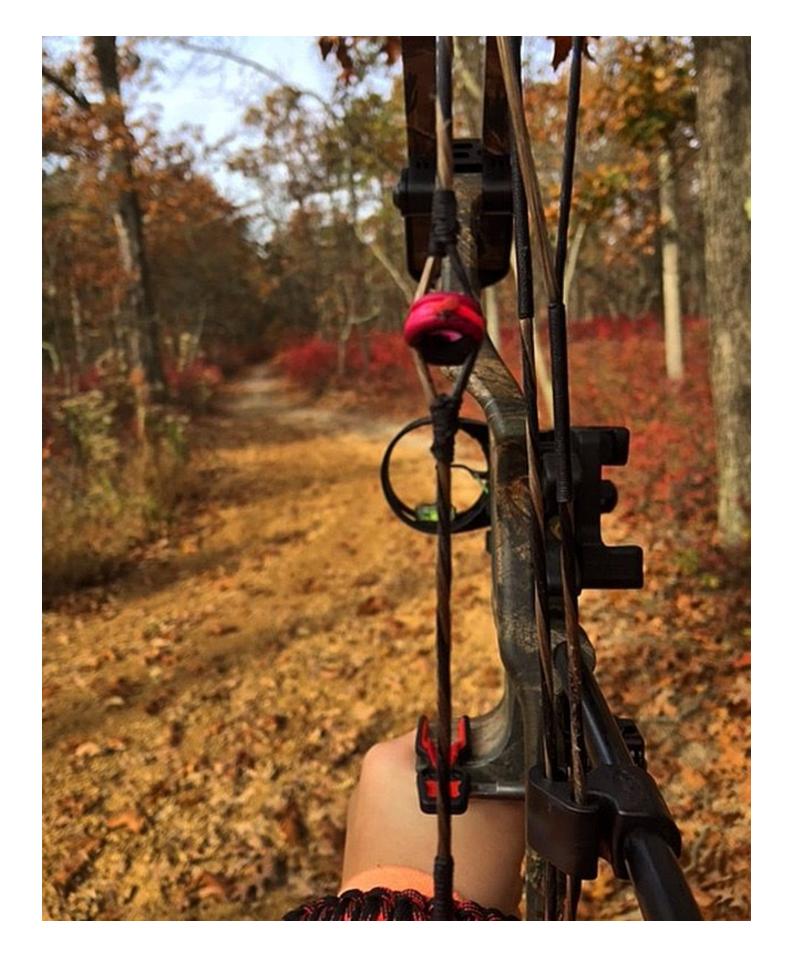


Photo by Gabby Ballin



"Mother Nature's the greatest artist of all. She paints our views and fills our mind, with beautiful colors and design".

Photo and Quote by Gabby Ballin

A Slow Tick

Robert Critelli

If magic was real, if the supernatural world he believed in as a child actually existed, and an all powerful wish granting creature presided there, Damien knew exactly what he would wish for. Death. One word, something that seemed so small yet so big. He thought long and hard, the obsidian stained clock ticking on and on behind him. It was almost three o'clock. A feeling of uneasiness settled upon the room. It was damp, a musty smell filled his nostrils. The clock ticked on.

He was dissatisfied, unpleased with himself. Darkness seemed to consume him the more he thought. He turned to look out the window, maybe soothing images of the sky, or perhaps the trees blowing in the gentle breeze would put him at ease, he thought, but this was not the case. The vast array of color that poured out unto the world became masked by the black sludge of Damien's inner torment.

The clock, it ticked on and on and on. He could hear it in his head, over and over again. It never stopped, the already slow monotonous tick only seemed to get slower and slower as time moved on. Damien felt lightheaded as he stood from his chair. He looked at the clock, stared into it's deep dark chest of death and despair as if waiting for a response. It was even closer to three o'clock now even though it felt as if time stood still.

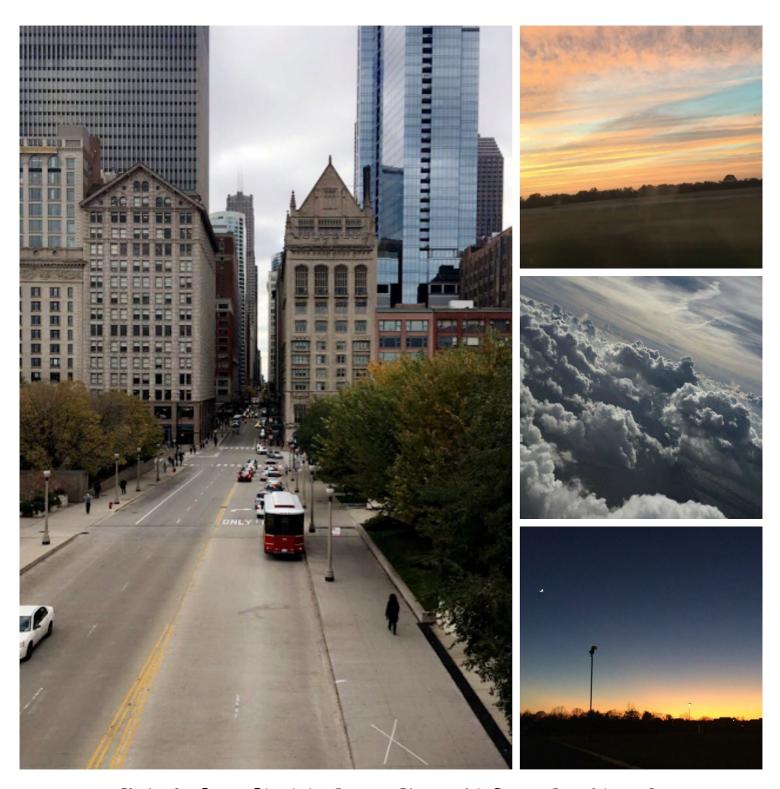
He stumbled backward, crashing down upon the floor, his head spinning, the only only thing he could hear was, the clock. It's slow tick gradually grew slower and slower, as it had before, driving Damien absolutely insane, so insane he was prepared to dig into his eyes with his contorted fingers, digging as much out as he possibly could. Agony, agony is not only what he felt, it was his life. Often times he genuinely believed, deep within the inner confines of his heart, that he was worse than Herod, unfit to live in this transcendent world.

The clock ticked on, a sharp and steady pain resided in his chest. It grew worse and worse by the second. Everything around him began to become a blur, a faded memory. He was losing consciousness it seemed. He could still hear it, the slow ticking of the clock. He turned to face it one last time. It looked as if it was only seconds away from turning three o'clock, but he could not really see that well anymore, everything around him was turning red. He was baffled for a second but then realized what had caused this. The blood seeping out from beneath his eye sockets had finally started to pour down over his eyes. At last he felt at peace. The clock had stopped its obnoxious tick. His pain and suffering was over. For the first time in Damien's life he truly felt like his life meant something, as he floated upward towards the unknown, heaven he assumed.

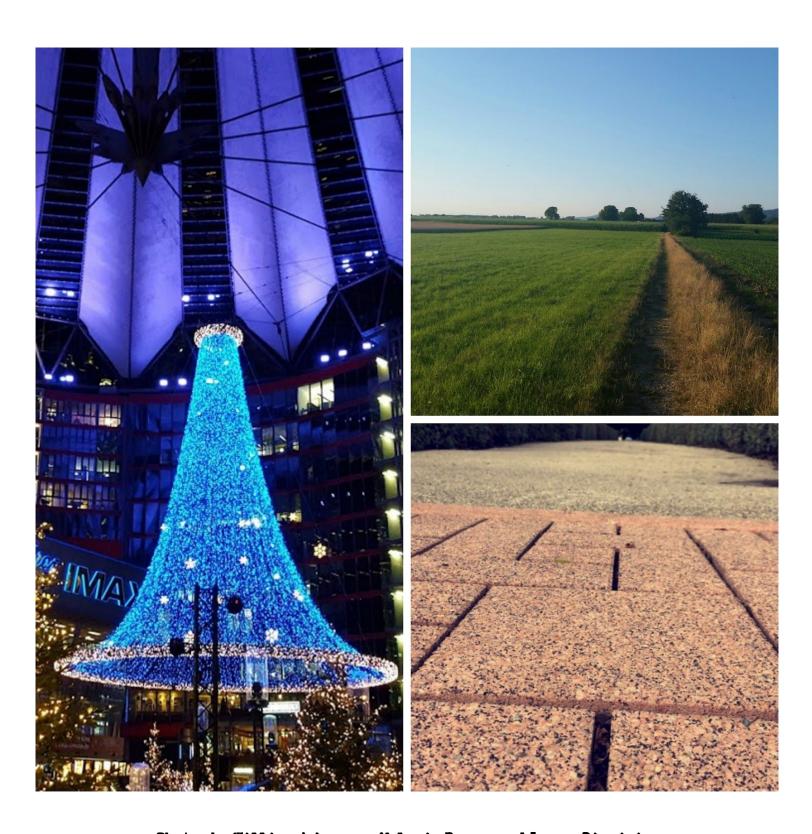
A bright light approached and a smile carved itself upon his face. He was overjoyed with an immense amount of happiness, but then he stopped. He ascended no longer. An evil maniacal laugh erupted below him as the forces of darkness latched onto him. They drug him, down and down and down. Deeper and Deeper into a place of pure tenebrosity, a pit of despair. A domain so evil, so hot, so ripe with the foul stench of revenge, lust, and most of all, death. The small smile that once snuck itself across Damien's face grew wider when he looked upon a creature that was so beautiful and so wonderful. It was so utterly divine and glorious. It was his master, Lucifer, the Devil himself.



Art by Vincent Avellino, Nathaniel Montecillo, and Galadriel Falciani



Photos by Lummy Dionicio, Savanna Ptaszenski, Geanna Serechia, and Alyssa Caporale



Photos by William Ackerman, Melanie Byrne, and Lummy Dionicio

Millions of Miles

Ami Chiofalo

Year after year, night after night

A rock millions of miles away shines so bright.

Above the clouds, looking down on the city

All the lights on the earth yet the moon is so pretty

Traveling from New York to Beijing

Giving the sun a chance to make the birds sing

No matter the weather the moon is there

Clear night skies make the people stop and stare

The moon knows more than anyone

After seeing what's happened and been done

A rock millions of miles away

Holds memories of each day

The Sanctuary

Chiara Donio

Every so often I take a walk down to the bird sanctuary, where I like to walk around amongst the birds. Sometimes I will go there and all is silent; the quiet trees stare at me and wonder why I'm not flying around. Sometimes I will go there and the noise is so terrible I feel as if the birds themselves are pecking at my eardrums, and they are forcing me to leave.

But on some occasions I feel welcomed. I go there and hear some chirping, see a few species and read about them in my book. Those are the days when I get the most accomplished. I will occasionally bring some work with me, sit down on the bench and complete what I must do. They cheer me on, it seems. Or maybe I will bring a book and then feel immersed in a better world than my own.

So one Tuesday in September, it was three o'clock. I hadn't brought anything this time around. When I got there, it was one of those silent days. They all were hiding from me. To my knowledge, they all hated me once again. Upon further investigation, they weren't hiding from me, but from another.

No one ever comes to the bird sanctuary. I mean, I suppose some people must. No one that I have ever seen. But I like it that way. If someone were to appear my hideaway would be disturbed, spoiled even. Then I don't know if I could ever return.

I was slightly taken aback. Only slightly, this is a public park of course. But to get here was certainly a hike. You had to walk down to the end of the island from town, about a good five miles. You could take a car for the first two, or ride

a bike for three, but ultimately the earth was too soft and bumpy for any other travel than one's own two legs.

I approached the figure. It was a boy in his teenaged years—about seventeen maybe? I wasn't sure—partially because I am never around such people and partially because I couldn't remember what I looked like as a seventeen year old boy.

He was sitting on a bench, looking off into the distance. I supposed he hadn't yet noticed me. He had earphones plugged into his ears. The music was blasting so loud I could hear it from the few feet I was standing away from him.

"Excuse Me," I had said, at first politely, then again louder so he could hear me.

He took out one of his earphones, "Yes?" He seemed quite bothered.

Not really sure what I would say to him, because this is a public place and he wasn't really doing anything wrong, I ended up stuttering, "How—are you?"

His eyes shifted back and forth as if this was some kind of joke that he was not a part of, while his thick eyebrows furrowed. "I'm... fine? Why are you talking to me?"

Why was I talking to him? I had seemed to forget. Then I remembered he was in my bird sanctuary where I had planned to sit and watch the birds.

I took a deep breath. "Because I frequent this bird sanctuary you see, and... I find it odd that you are here. No one is ever usually here."

He looked away from me, "It's a public park, man." He put his earphone back in.

This annoyed me. Sure he was not wrong, but I needed to know more. I needed to know if he was a regular here. If he had a schedule of coming so I would know exactly when not to come, or if this was a one time visit in which then I could prepare myself to handle sharing the birds with him for an hour or so.

"Excuse me," I said yet again.

The boy seemed horribly annoyed and responded with a "What, man?"

"I just want to know why you are here. Like I said, I frequent this bird sanctuary. Sometimes I bring a book here, or I'll bring my work. Or sometimes, like today, I bring nothing. Because I like being alone with them."

"Them?"

"The birds," I was getting kind of hot, even though at this time a crisp wind blew through the trees. "Now please, I am just curious as to why you are here." The boy paused the music on his phone and took both his earphones out. He looked at me with direct eye contact, which made me uncomfortable.

"My grandfather used to come here a lot. Like a lot a lot. Like, he proposed to my grandmother here. He grew up on the island. I come down to his house every summer, you know, for the beach and the bay and all. But he died a few months ago. So I drove down here—to his house I mean. But I wasn't in the mood to go to the beach or bay. And then I remembered I have never been to this bird place. I thought I would check it out. And he always walked here, up until he died. So I figured I would walk here...which is pretty annoying. It's a long ass walk. What like, five miles?"

"Yes about five miles," I responded. I didn't like that he cussed.

"Yeah so. What is it about this place..."

At the moment I was not listening, I was thinking about how another person had come here all the time. I had never seen an elderly man around. I wasn't sure about how I felt knowing there was a proposal here. It made me quite uneasy.

"Dude?" The boy uttered. I suppose he was talking to me, so I looked at him.

"Did you hear me? I said what's with you coming here all the time?"

"The birds," I replied, as if it were obvious, which it was.

"Yeah?"

"What else must you know?"

The boy looked over his shoulder, but no one was around. He chuckled a little to himself, and said to me, "So you're just psycho about birds? Love 'em? Can't get enough of 'em?"

At this point I was not sure how to respond. I knew he was condescending me. But I was not willing to explain my circumstances to this stranger. Frankly, he could be lying about his grandfather, which in that case would give him no credibility to be sitting on my bench in my sanctuary. To me this sanctuary was not feeling very much like a sanctuary. I was getting sort of angry in a way.

"I am not at liberty to discuss my whereabouts with a stranger."

The boy scoffed, "Didn't you just ask me what I was doing here? A little hypocritical, no?"

Again I was at a loss for words.

Logically he was right. Logically he had every right to be here as I did, as this is a public property, and the birds are not owned by anyone. I was very, very hot. I was sweating. I remembered I had a suit on, and that I have a large report due tomorrow. I remembered the leftover Chinese food in my fridge that I had to eat for dinner that night. I remembered that I

had to call my mother because it was her birthday. I remembered my wife's face the night before she left me. I remembered I had to call my doctor about a wart on my foot.

A bird flew by.

"Finally," The boy said, "I was thinking, you know, this is a pretty shitty bird park or whatever. Where were all the birds? Ha, finally right? Took ya long enough buddy!" He looked wildly at the bright red bird flying around.

"Yes," I said anxiously, "It is a cardinal."

The cardinal flew down to a shrub right in front of the bench and began to forage for food. The boy took out his phone and snapped a picture.

"You know," the boy said, "I wanna find a blue jay today. Poppop- er, my grandfather- loved them. When I was younger he used to call me Blue Jay. Well, cause my name is James, but my friends call me Jay. And my favorite color is blue. So yeah it's pretty fitting I guess. I was trying to look up where to find them on my phone but I don't get any WiFi out here." The more the boy talked, the more I felt invested in the conversation. And therefore, the boy himself.

"I know exactly where they reside, around the edges of the sanctuary. Perhaps you'd like me to walk you there?" I suggested.

"Yeah man, that'd be cool, thanks!" The boy seemed almost excited.

We had walked along the edges of the sanctuary, looking for blue jays. None were around. But whilst in conversation with James I had forgotten about looking for birds, almost. He talked of his grandfather, his youth, his friends, his baseball team, his girlfriend, his other

girlfriend. It was all quite fascinating, and the chirps of the veiled birds in the trees were muted against his voice.

A half hour passed and James had to get going home. It was a long walk, after all. He left me with his earphones plugged back in.

It was getting dark. Yet I didn't feel alone.

And like a peaceful lark, the breeze blew me back home.



Photo by Hailee Traenkner