



Balloons

BALLOONS Lit. Journal

Issue
Seven

Mar 2018

Annie Pennswater • Arthur Plotnik • Charlotte F. Otten • Eva Hays • Glen Donaldson •
Haemaru Chung • Hyung Jin (Erika) Lee • Jennifer Zhou • Jenny Hu • Jiwoong Yang •
Matthew W. Jones • Nadine Cranenburgh • Niina Tsuyuki Dubik • Stephen Whiteside •
Tomé Thomas Etzensperger



**“Poetry is when an emotion has found its thought and
the thought has found words.”**

– Robert L. Frost (1874-1963)

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Phew! Finally, I have time to sit down, have a cup of tea and conclude my seventh adventure in this wonderful land of BLJ. It was yet another unique experience in many ways. I have had a small group of companions in this voyage – a team of 15 artistic explorers bringing their awe-inspiring works of art in colour and words to paint my memory. Nonetheless, the itinerary was as rich as ever, if not even more so. Importantly, I encountered and discovered some of the most advanced and exquisite things on the way...

The chest of poetry was indeed a treasure of wisdom. Whiteside took me for a mesmerizing space sub-trip while I got lost in Cranenburgh's amazing forest of art. I was attracted by Jones' adjoining rooms where I admired the intricate human relationship. Oh, thanks to Hays, I learnt not just to zoom in on my own face and lose sight of others. And, I could not agree more with Pennswater that we should never wait for inspiration to come, so I took the initiative to dive deeper into the chest only to be moved by Dubik's reflective words (but I am not lying).

Soaring in the sky of fiction, who wouldn't be touched by the delicately crafted family episodes from Chung, Zhou and Plotnik which would surely link to some parts of your past? I heard layers of music on the way – were they from Otten's singing ducks or Donaldson's annoying piano man? In any case, the sound was eccentric. I was dancing through the clouds before crossing Hu's haunting days – I was unable to comfort the emperor and I had to go.

With the help of Yang's mystic train, I was on a kaleidoscopic ride greeted by Lee's charismatic cat and Etzensperger's blissful children. In an evening, I even swam in the whale's dream with the red hand people until the world became peaceful again. I hope I wasn't dreaming.

Writing this end-of-trip reflection, I am proud to feel my overly filled backpack stuffed with music notes, sensations, colour, blue waves, laughter, and of course, raspberries.

My bag is now unloaded and I am ready for the next journey...So, are you ready for this one?

Ho Cheung LEE, Ed.D.
Founding Editor, BLJ





BALLOONS Lit. Journal (BLJ) is an independent biannual online literary journal of poetry, fiction and art primarily for school-aged readers from upper elementary school years onwards. BLJ sees it as an important mission to bring the art of literature, and the creation of it, to our younger generation. The journal is freely accessible to all electronically. BLJ welcomes submissions from people anywhere in the world and in all walks of life. We love something that is fresh, surprising, unforgettable, extraordinary, mind-blowing, humorous, bold, unique, layered, witty, educational, original...etc. In short, we want something exceptionally good. For the most updated information about the journal, please visit the website of BLJ:

www.balloons-lit-journal.com

Submissions are welcome year round. Writers are advised to read and follow the guidelines stated on the above website. Enquiries and submissions should be sent to:

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* Cover & back cover art adapted from this painting





Forward [sic]

This is not a foreword. It is a *forward*. This is because forward is the direction that literature moves, and the direction that children grow, and the direction a magazine like the BALLOONS Lit. Journal faces.

Although I'd been writing for years before hearing of BALLOONS, it was one summer revisiting the fantastic and phantasmagorical authors that I'd read as a child — Lewis Carroll, Edward Lear, Edward Eager, James Whitcomb Riley, C. S. Lewis, and Shel Silverstein — that made me seek out the writing that was being read by today's children. And from everything that I read, one main lesson stuck out, which seems to spell the difference between good storytelling and bad storytelling.

There is a story, just over a hundred years old, called "The Story-Teller." It was written by a man named Saki, and there are actually two stories inside it. The first, told by a stuffy, prim aunt, is flat and predictable, and ends with a hoary didacticism about the importance of proper behavior. The second story has no particular lesson to it, nor any particular order or purpose at all, but it's colorful and unpredictable and full of fascinating, funny details. In the end, the children declare the unanimous victor, and I don't think I have to say which they chose: What kids really want from a story or a poem is for it to be *fun*!

BALLOONS is *fun*.

The cover of this issue displays a beautiful painting of whales whiffing with the help of balloons over a technicolor landscape. It is only fitting that this issue of the BALLOONS Lit. Journal should read also like a virtual medieval bestiary chock-full of fantastical creatures mythological and mundane — an absolute zoo-ful of stuffed bears, champion racehorses, pancake-like sting rays, dew-eyed wildcats, unlikely songbirds, ghostly deep-sea anglers, and (strangest and most exotic of all) the *people* in the stories, into whose lives even a page-long glimpse can offer a lifetime's worth of insight or entertainment.

A good lit. journal can also be like a treasure chest or a *wunderkammer* — mysterious and full of wonderful glittering stories, everywhere you look a different time or place. You can read it all at once, in one great big gulp while sitting in a tree or while watching a horse race, or you can dip into it like a box of chocolates, picking one poem here, admiring a painting there, and sampling the treasures within at your own leisure in between classes or riding an escalator or bungee jumping from a helicopter. Some of the strange little objects in the treasure chest don't seem like much — a movie ticket stub, a torn racetrack chit, the flame-edged glint of an assassin's stiletto,



or just 83 cents in change — but you can find the story behind every one in the pages to follow.

Children's literature accomplishes things that in their own universe would require a magic potion or a wizard's staff — it can make an adult feel like a child again, or give a bright-eyed young reader a taste of what it might be like to be an adult...or a dragon, or a robot, or (in this issue) a lighthouse-keeper, master sculptor, or anything else they can imagine. If I have not, in this small space, already used up my official government allotment of iffy metaphors, this issue of BLJ is also, aptly, a balloon — but not merely a rubber balloon on a ribbon. Balloons in the aeronautical sense are great buoyant engines for taking people into beautiful swirling cloudscape and over miles of blazing blueness to the ends of the earth. This, of course, is exactly the same thing a good story does, and it is with a heart lighter than air that I hand you your ballasts of sandbags, light for you the leaping flames of your hot-air torch, and bid you *bon voyage* as you sail off into the wild azure yonder of the tales, verses, and pictures to be found in this volume.

Now that you're in this balloon, with the control-ropes in your hand and no marked path but the open sky before you, which way should you go?

Forward!

Daniel Galef
McGill University

Daniel Galef is an American and Canadian poet whose children's verse has appeared in BLJ, Caterpillar, Light Quarterly, and Child of Words Fantasy & Science Fiction.



A stylized illustration of a person with dark hair, seen from the side, looking upwards. The background is dark with a large, bright lightning bolt striking down from the top right. The overall color palette is dark with some blue and yellow highlights.

Into the Thunder- storm

Haemaru Chung

Author

I gazed at the dark horizon, watching the storm clouds roll closer to our house. The trees shook and leaves whirled past the window. My parents were running frantically through the house, pulling out electrical plugs. I turned and saw my ten-year-old brother Alex dragging his duffel bag upstairs to his room. His eyes were downcast and his footsteps heavy.

"Joseph! Can you get our stuff from the lawn!" my dad called from the kitchen.

Our picnic gear was heaped in a pile, having been tossed from the back of the car. I opened the front door and was buffeted by a strong wind. With effort, I managed to drag the bags back inside. A few razor-like leaves had sliced my skin, forming thin lines of crimson. I slammed the door shut and the howl of the impending storm was muted.

My family had driven to a lake a couple of miles off to celebrate Alex's birthday. Just supposed to be a nice day out with cake and food. Late into the afternoon, Alex and I were fishing when we heard on the radio that a big thunderstorm was heading our way. Hearing this, our parents decided to head back home. Alex's face contorted into a scowl when our parents told us the bad news. He did not cry, but his grimace remained fixed like a gargoyle for the rest of the car ride home.

When I went upstairs, Alex asked urgently, "Hey Joey, have you seen Oscar?"

"No I haven't. Did you pack him when we left?"

Alex paused to think, lips set in a tight line. "Wait a minute...Didn't I give Oscar to you before we left?"

"No, why would you have given me Oscar ..." I froze. I remembered it clearly. Alex had given Oscar to me to pack in my bag before we left, but as I leaned down to tie my shoe a moment later, I placed Oscar on the bench next to me.

"Wait here," I ordered.

I raced downstairs and grabbed my bag. I dumped everything in it onto the living room table with a clatter. No Oscar. Sweat trickled down my neck. An image of a forlorn teddy bear in the dirt flashed through my mind. I scanned the miscellaneous items strewn across the table once more. I then sprinted up the stairs, almost slipping on the last step.

"Okay, try not to freak out. Oscar wasn't in my backpack and I might have left him by the lake."

Alex was still for a moment before he realized the significance of my words. His eyes became misty and his face turned maroon. Cries began to bubble up his throat. *Uh-oh*. A single, fat tear drop ran down his pudgy cheek.

"I'll get Oscar back, don't worry, Alex!" I declared.

Alex looked at me with his bushy eyebrows raised high.

"You're going to run three and a half miles to get Oscar, in *that storm*," he snorted.

I looked at the window with a sinking feeling. The thunder clouds were close to our house now and I could faintly hear the raindrops against the pavement.

"Don't worry, Alex," I said. "Three miles is nothing. The rain will be refreshing." A clap of thunder boxed my eardrums and shook my body.

"Alex, don't tell Mom and Dad, okay? Tell them I'm resting in my room because I'm tired."

"Wait, are you really going out there? I mean, it still looks pretty bad," Alex whispered in awe.

"Yeah," I put on a brave face. "We go to that lake all the time. I know the way there like the back of my hand. Plus, according to the Weather Channel, the storm will be over in less than thirty minutes. It won't be that bad."

I quietly stepped out of my house with an

umbrella and raincoat. The rain slammed into me from above and I fought to keep my footing on the slippery pavement. It felt as if I were pushing back an ocean wave with my umbrella instead of rain droplets. I bit my bottom lip and plodded forward, blinking in a futile attempt to clear my vision. After only walking for ten minutes, I ducked behind one of my neighbors' houses, gasping for breath.

What was I doing? I might kill myself trying to retrieve a toy. I had to walk more than three miles and I barely survived ten minutes. I glanced at the street sign to judge my bearings. Maple Street. What do you know. I was just a few blocks away from the scene of the accident two years ago.

Alex was getting on my nerves as we walked back home from a long day of school. I snapped at him, tired of his incessant chatter. He retorted and before long our voices escalated into shouts. He ran ahead as I stayed behind fuming. It all happened so quickly after that. Alex sprinted across the street, trying to catch the light. A blue streak swerved around the curb and the car barreled into Alex with a crunch.

"ALEX!"

Alex's collarbone, ribs, and leg had been broken, but he survived. His recovery in the hospital was slow and painful. Sleeping pills were the only means to alleviate his discomfort. I sat by him during his spasms, holding his hand tightly until our hands were blotchy white and red. That was the only thing I could do. After the doctor examined Alex's x-rays, he warned us that Alex may have a slight permanent limp and would most likely have trouble running from now on.

Two weeks later when Alex was well enough to talk, I handed him a gift.

"I got this for you. As a token of apology."
Alex pulled the teddy bear closer to his

face, studying it. It wasn't a unique bear. It was just a brown, furry bear with massive circular eyes, but I thought he would like it.

"It's so soft!" Alex proclaimed. "I'm going to name it Oscar!"

As I looked at Alex playing with Oscar, I resolved that as Alex's older brother, it was my responsibility, no, duty to keep him safe. I would not let him down again.

I felt icy waves sliding down my neck and spine as I thought about Oscar. Those old memories rekindled each time I saw that little bear; he was a symbol. The rain didn't seem like it would let up but I didn't care. After adjusting my hood, I clenched my umbrella and stepped out of the cover of the house. I staggered like a drunkard in zigzags, barely moving forward. The raindrops felt like steel pellets as they battered my skin. I kept my head down and careened forward.

The deluge lessened around an hour and a half later. The dark clouds dissipated and sunlight pushed through. Rows of trees drooped on either side as I trod over the sodden path. Shining raindrops trickled off the tree leaves. Branches swayed gently in the breeze. The scent of pine was sharp and reinvigorating. The forest was still and quiet, basking in the final rays of the sun. The only evidence of the violent storm were the various trees that had been knocked down, their great trunks splintered. When I finally reached the campsite, I found a massive tree resting on top of the fragments of the table and the bench where I had left Oscar. My hands clenched into fists and I trembled.

No! No! No! No!

I stumbled forward but slipped immediately. I crawled back up, my face and limbs covered in slick, disgusting mud. Suddenly my hand brushed something cold, wet, and furry. I scrambled back

in fear.

Did I just touch a dead animal?

I was filled with revulsion as I clutched my stomach. I scrambled away from the mangled creature sprawled in the dirt. Its matted fur bristled with pine needles. A single, dull, black eye gazed at me lifelessly. When the green spots faded from my vision, I inched forward, inspecting the mysterious object with fascinated horror. My fingers must have touched one of its arms that stuck out of the twigs. Strange. Its limb was rounded at the end, with no indication of claws or fingers. A thought sprang in my mind and I tore the debris off the animal, pulling it loose. It was Oscar. He was caked with mud, adorned with leaves and one of his large eyes was missing. Oscar's left ear was also gone and some of the stitching in the left side of his face was nearly pulled out. It didn't matter. I had found him. Cradling my little brother's treasure in my arms, I collapsed, laughing with relief, delight and per-haps a touch of insanity.

As I walked out onto the highway, a car pulled up and I found myself face-to-face with my dad. He merely frowned when he saw Oscar and said "That ain't gonna be fun to fix." He then ushered me into our car and drove me home in silence. I walked into the house without looking at anybody and collapsed on my bed. When I gained enough energy, my parents unleashed their wrath onto me for one straight hour, chastising me for being reckless. I endured the onslaught of rebukes, nodding and apologizing profusely. After they left, Alex came in to talk.

"Joey, I'm really grateful for what you did, but you didn't have to do it," Alex remarked. "It's not like I can't live without Oscar."

"Wait what?" I was baffled. "Are you happy that Oscar is back or not?" I asked, groaning as I sat up. My adventure had left me with serious bruises, scrapes, and sore muscles. It was a trial to even sit up now.

"Of course I am!" Alex beamed.

"Then why are you saying that I didn't have to get Oscar?"

"Well, I mean, you could've been killed out there. I need you with me."

"Really?" I chuckled. "Didn't you always say that Oscar was a better friend than me?"

"I was just kidding," Alex admitted. "Oscar's just a toy. Who else's gonna look out for me besides you?" He grinned.

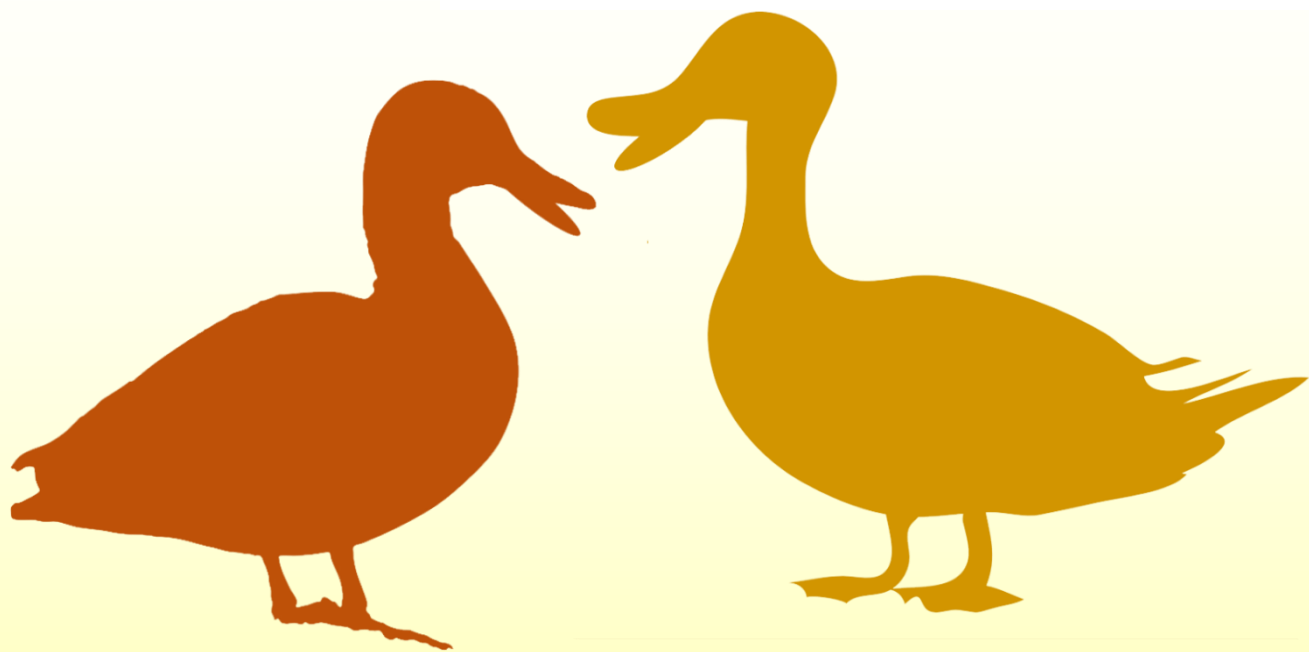
I was dumbstruck for a few seconds as I digested Alex's words. A slow smile spread across my face and I reclined into the bed.

"Yeah, I'll always be there."



Haemaru Chung, a writer, violinist, photographer and athlete, is currently a junior at a high school in New York City. His work has been recognized by the National Scholastic Art and Writing Awards, Rider University, Jack London Foundation, among other awards. Other work has appeared in *The Round*, *Louisville Review*, *The Interlochen Review* and *The Apprentice Writer*, among other literary magazines.

Those Musical Ducks



Author

Charlotte F. Otten

When I read in the New York Times that two ducks were seen at a wedding in Riverside Park standing next to the string quartet that was playing sweet wedding music, I believed it. I knew that birds respond to human music. Hadn't I played Schiller's Ode to Joy on the piano early in spring with the windows open to catch the sweet breezes when I heard a cardinal accompanying me in the sycamore tree? When I paused, he paused. When I concluded, he concluded, then flew away. This happened every evening for about a week. The last time I concluded, I expected him to fly away. But he didn't. He kept on singing. I went to the window to watch him. He sang with full-throated ease, a grand Addio. I never saw him again.

So do I believe that birds can enjoy a string quartet and sing along with a piano rendition? Of course. Maybe that's why I could believe it when I heard ducks singing, even talking.

I've never told this story to anybody, except to my children, but early in June I saw two ducks, a male and a female, Mallards, strolling up our driveway. Obviously looking for a place to call home, they seemed to be inspecting real estate. When they stopped at the bush growing next to the white cedar just off the driveway, I wanted to say, "This looks like a good place for a nest, but cars back out of their garages here and you'll be in an environment unfriendly to nesters. Your little ones will be breathing in exhaust fumes."

Did I see them shaking their heads No? Fortunately, they decided against it. Then they went down the hill, checked out the property in the shadow of our deck and just off the creek, and they seemed to agree. The next few days they were busy constructing a nest. But they didn't stop there. They seemed to be constructing another structure, not quite a nest, not quite not a nest. If I could believe my eyes, it looked like a computer. Primitive, but real.

But that wasn't all that I had trouble

believing. This pair had the most unusual voices. I've always heard that female ducks do not sing. Those who believe that have never heard what I call "My Pair." They sang duets. Duets that sounded like love duets, true, not quite Verdi or Puccini, but undoubtedly duets.

This Mrs. Duck sang the soprano line in a duet with the bass line of her husband. She sang three quacks and then a fourth quack that soared over the whole creek. No other duck could match this coloratura.

When Mr. Duck sang his part in the duet, he sang three quacks and then a fourth quack that sank so low it created ripples deep down in the creek.

Then I saw, or thought I saw, unusual things happening on the creek. When these ducks sang their duets, every duck on the creek came to listen, like the ducks at Riverside Park. We had duck audiences on the creek and on the shore right beneath our deck. They seemed to be as impressed as I was.

I noticed that some of the female ducks tried to imitate Mrs. Duck's high tone, but they fell flat. Some of the male ducks tried to imitate Mr. Duck's low tone, but they rasped.

One day I saw Mr. and Mrs. Duck (I do believe they were married, they seemed so comfortably domestic) posting a sign on the edge of the creek near their nest.

WILL SING DUETS
AT WEDDINGS
ANNIVERSARIES
BIRTHS

At least that's how I read miscellaneous twigs they stacked up in a neat pile.

While they waited for replies, they practiced. Mrs. Duck's last note grew higher and higher. Mr. Duck's last note grew deeper and deeper. That day a pair of ducks was pretending to dive for food, but they really came to hear the

musical ducks sing. Could they really be talking to each other? "Shall we ask them to sing at our wedding?" the young female duck seemed to say, coming up for air.

"Our wedding is very special," the young male duck said. "Do you think they're good enough?"

"I've never heard anyone sing like Mrs. Duck," the young bride-to-be said. "She sounds like the famous opera singer, Lily Ponds."

"And Mr. Duck sounds like the famous opera singer, Jose Van Duck," said the young groom-to-be,

"Let's invite them," said the young bride-to-be.

"I wonder how much they charge," said the groom-to-be.

"Here they come now," said the young bride-to-be. "Let's ask them."

The young bride-to-be swam over to Mrs. Duck. "You sing so beautifully; will you sing at our wedding?"

The young groom-to-be swam over to Mr. Duck. "How much do you charge to sing at a wedding?"

Mr. And Mrs. Duck hesitated. This was their first engagement. "All we ask is that you babysit our eggs," said Mr. Duck. "We may be gone on a singing tour."

"Oh, we can do that," said the young bride-to-be. "We don't have any eggs of our own yet. That will be our honeymoon."

"When is the wedding?" said Mr. Duck. "We may have a busy singing schedule."

"Tomorrow," said the young groom-to-be.

"What time?" said Mr. Duck. "Not too early, I hope. Our voices are a little hoarse before sunrise. Besides, we don't like to compete with that rooster who tries to drown out everybody at dawn. If you ask me, he sounds like a cat coming home from a night in the alley."

"Ten o'clock," said the young groom-to-be.

"That's fine," said Mr. Duck.

"Where?" said Mrs. Duck.

"On the creek down at the arbor of trees. Where the path of flowers leads to the creek," said the young bride-to-be.

"We'll be there," said Mr. and Mrs. Duck.

When Mr. and Mrs. Duck got back to their nest, their computer showed that they had a message. (I was right. It was a computer.) Mr. Duck booted up the computer and read the message aloud to Mrs. Duck. It said, "Can you sing for a birth? We're expecting octuplets in a few days."

"Where did the message come from?" asked Mrs. Duck.

"From Over the Hill in Quandary Creek," said Mr. Duck.

"I know that creek," said Mrs. Duck.

"That's where the Philosophical Ducks live. They're always in a quandary about who they are and about the meaning of duck life. I wonder if they even agree on how many ducks they're expecting. Octuplets. How many is that?"

"Eight," said Mr. Duck.

"Let's not answer right now," said Mrs. Duck. "Let's see how our wedding goes tomorrow."

The next morning Mr. and Mrs. Duck preened their feathers and practiced their duets. They arrived at the arbor ten minutes before 10 o'clock.

All the ducks' relatives were sitting on the creek waiting for the music to begin. The bride and bridegroom were waiting on the path along with the bride's father.

Before they sang the wedding march, Mr. and Mrs. Duck sang a song they had learned in the Cathedral of the Pines:

O may they wing
by wing advance
along life's streams

from troubles free.

I suddenly realized that their song came from my hymn book. We sang this song at weddings in our church.

On the last word “free,” Mrs. Duck’s quack soared so high the leaves on the trees began to tremble, and Mr. Duck’s bass sank so deep the reeds in the creek began to shake.

Then it was time for the wedding march. They sang “Entrance of the Bride” by Mahlerd:

Here comes the bride,
Dad at her side,
See how he waddles
With Fatherly pride.
Here stands the groom,
Wearing a plume,
Beckons to his darling,
In bridal bloom.

When they got to *bridal*, their voices soared and glided on bri-i-i- and then plunged on *dal bloom*. It sounded like a waterfall.

Pastor Placid was waiting for them at the altar of the arbor. They quacked “I Do” to his questions about wanting to get married, and then he pronounced them Mr. and Mrs. Drake.

When Mr. and Mrs. Drake were kissing each other, all the ducks took off to the breakfast reception. Some flew. Some swam. Nobody dawdled.

At the reception Mr. and Mrs. Duck were greeted with applause. The ducks began to line up to sign them up for all kinds of occasions. Mr. and Mrs. Duck asked the ducks to come to their nest so that they could put their engagements in the computer. It looked like Mr. and Mrs. Duck were going to have a busy spring and summer.

When Mr. and Mrs. Duck flew back to their nest, Mr. Duck said, “We have a message on our computer. It’s from the Ducks Over the Hill on Quandary Creek.”

“What does it say?” said Mrs. Duck.

“I’ll read it aloud,” said Mr. Duck. “It says, “Please cancel our request. Our ducklings have hatched. We’re too busy for a celebration. We have septuplets.”

“How many is that?” said Mrs. Duck.

“Seven,” said Mr. Duck.

“I told you they couldn’t count,” said Mrs. Duck.

Now the creek has disappeared under snow. Mr. and Mrs. Duck flew away early, anticipating the blizzards. Not a sound springs from the creek. It’s frozen solid.

It’s nice to think that Mr. and Mrs. Duck will be back in the spring. But I’m not counting on it. Or on anybody believing my story.



Charlotte F. Otten’s book of poems, *JANUARY RIDES THE WIND* (HarperCollins) received five-starred reviews and was selected as a Book of the Year by the Bank Street College of Education and by BOOKLIST. Her book *HOME IN A WILDERNESS FORT 1844* (Arbutus) was nominated for a Michigan Notable Book of the Year. Her most recent book for children, *THE FLYING MOUSE*, the story of a fly fisherman and his mouse lure, was endorsed by Richard Adams. She is the co-editor of *THE VOICE OF THE NARRATOR IN CHILDREN’S LITERATURE*, in which her interviews with Maurice Sendak and Richard Adams appear.

Baby Shoes



Artist

Hyung Jin Lee


Green



Hyung Jin (Erika) Lee is currently studying at the Hun School of Princeton, and along with art, she has a passion for poetry and sabre fencing. Art has been a huge part of her life as far as she remembers. She is still developing a fixed art style, and she works with everything from watercolor paint to wire, and she plans on it remaining her focus until her college years. She looks up to artists that vary in time period and style; André Derain, Maria Pace Wynters, and Milt Kobayashi are just several.

Stephen Whiteside

Raspberry Rain




Canter outside on the balls of your feet.
Hurry on down to the end of the street.
Stop by the wall where the ivy grows high.
Spring up the ladder that runs to the sky.

Slide down the tube that is shiny and pink.
Note the aroma (or is it the stink?)
That comes from the blossoms that grow in the sea,
The Indian bean or the South China pea.

Gather some hailstones into your hat.
Greet the black thunder, and stop for a chat.
Slide up a slide till you're almost in space,
With a lavender handkerchief tied round your face.

Nibble an asteroid, chew on a comet,
(Swallow them carefully, so you don't vomit;)
Remember to carry a very sharp spoon
To savour the tastiest Jupiter moon.



Do not forget as you happily play
To take a long swig of the Milky Way.
Note if it's strawberry, orange or peach,
Chicken or beetroot, or fragments of each.

Then just when you think you are far out in space,
Take a hyper loop link to a quite different place;
Read by a lantern fish, sit on a bench
On the floor of a dark and cold deep ocean trench.

Do not stay long, for the pressure is great,
And you have an appointment – you mustn't be late –
Deep in the heart of the planet's hot core.
Please do not ask me precisely what for.

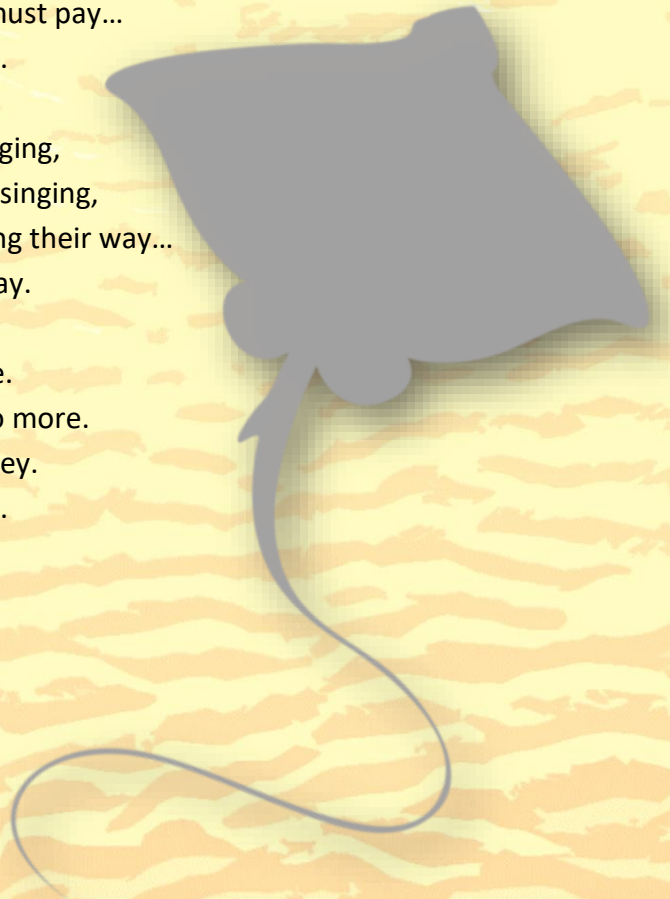
Please do not ask me to try to explain
Your journey through rivers of raspberry rain,
And what will you find when you come to the end...?
Don't be surprised if there's nothing, my friend!

A Stingray is Dying at Waratah Bay

All round the world there is shouting and brawling,
Governments rising and governments falling,
Expenses are building, and someone must pay...
And a stingray is dying at Waratah Bay.

Up by the summits, the eagles are winging,
Deep in the forests, the whipbirds are singing,
Wombats, through burrows, are making their way...
While a stingray is dying at Waratah Bay.

A stingray is lost on the Waratah shore.
It came with the tide. It will wander no more.
Its colours are fading and turning to grey.
Yes, a stingray is dying at Waratah Bay.



Stephen Whiteside

Hammer and Nail



Today I struck a nail with my hammer.
That is why I'm feeling rather glum.
Alas, I must reveal
That the nail wasn't steel,
But a most important feature of my thumb!

Poet

Stephen Whiteside has been writing rhyming verse for many years, inspired by the Australian bush poets, such as 'Banjo' Paterson, Henry Lawson, and C. J. Dennis. His poems have been published in magazines and anthologies, both in Australia and overseas, and won many awards. In 2014, Walker Books Australia published a collection of his poetry for children, "The Billy That Died With Its Boots On and Other Australian Verse." The book won a Gold Gumleaf award for "Book of the Year" at the Australian Bush Laureate Awards during the Tamworth Country Music Festival in 2015.

When Inspiration Hits

I visited a sculptor's studio just to see what I could see.
The lesson that he taught; it spoke a thousand words to me.
As he stood before a passive ball of cold and unformed clay,
I paused to see what he would do, to hear what he would say.

He approached the unformed clay not really knowing what to make.
He didn't waste time waiting for inspiration's hold to take.
He simply started sculpting, though his work had not a name.
But the more he kept up at it, *that's* when inspiration came.

Many people will not make a move 'less inspiration hits.
They just wait and wait and wait and wait and sit and sit and sit.
The writer will not write unless words first come to his head.
The painter will not paint if her ideas are all but dead.

It's in the *doing*, I have learned, when inspiration pays a call.
Not in the waiting and the hoping...
This leads only to a wall.



Poet

Annie Pennswater

Annie Pennswater was born in Philadelphia, PA and graduated from the Bradford School of Business. She spent many years working as a legal secretary before leaving law behind in order to pursue her true calling, which is writing poetry for children. She now resides in New Mexico with her patient husband and two incredibly unique daughters. "The world of children is colourful, joyful, and so wonderfully uncomplicated," says Annie. "It's the only world for me."

Adjoining Rooms

The old grey man
in his shabby brown suit
and torn trilby hat,
circumspectly ascends
the spiralling
communal stairs.

Entering his flat
with practiced stealth,
feeling the bones of home.
Cautiously sitting down
he removes his
street-trammelled shoes
in the comforting dark.

Drinks the glass of milk
waiting on a little table.
Then with an exhalation
nearing a state of grace,
cagily reclines
before delicately stretching
out on the ancient sofa,
resting his head
on the familiar cushion.

Noticing a sliver
of anaemic yellow light,
slipping through
time-worn curtains
he creaks onto his other side
and closes his eyes.

Listening to his wife
of nearly fifty years
gently snoring
in the adjoining room.

Poet

Matthew W. Jones

Matthew W. Jones lives in the Bohemian city of Brighton and Hove on the south coast of England. As well as being a poet he works for Amnesty International. He has previously worked in Community Theatre and Independent Film-Making. He loves reading, photography and going for long hikes up on the Sussex Downs. At present he is also working on an extended surrealistic essay with a view to pos-sibly developing it into a novel.



Cinema



Author

Jennifer Zhou

In the back row of a Beijing cinema, as the music swelled over the speakers and Judy Garland flickered across a dim screen, I saw my father cry for the first time in my life.

It surprised me. My father had always been the authoritative type; one day when I was six, I came home from school to find him standing calmly in the middle of the living room, booking a transcontinental flight while a small platoon of moving men bustled around him. My mother and I were moving to Michigan, he explained after he finished the call. *Yes, sweetie, you have to go, your mother wants you both to move back home. No, sweetie, I'm not coming with you. But I'll visit all the time, I promise.*

And then, noticing my hysterical protests, he attempted a smile.

It'll be an adventure. Like in Wizard of Oz — remember? With Judy Garland?

I did remember. He'd brought home a bootleg DVD of the film earlier that year and we'd stayed up until midnight watching it, engrossed. It was the first Western movie we'd seen together.

Of course, I replied.

So we moved. I didn't fully understand why my father was staying behind in Beijing, why he and my mother were apart and no longer spoke to each other except with words like *custody* and *settlement*. But I sensed, even back then, that moving to America was an act of escape. I knew they were both fleeing — from their marriage, from each other, from whatever had suddenly and irrevocably shattered between them.

At first, I found everything about Michigan strange. In my mother's tiny hometown of Munising, most people had never stepped foot outside of the Podunk neighbourhood in the Podunk city where they were born. To them, hearing me say I came from China was as shocking as hearing a

green-skinned, six-limbed alien announce that they heralded from the moon. For the first few weeks after they bombarded me with questions — *where's China? What's it like over there? Is it true that you eat dogs and pray to Mao Zedong instead of God?* — but I never managed, in my faltering English, to stutter out a single answer.

But even more disconcerting than the culture shock was the absence of my father. It was strange to live without him, to not wake up to the sound of his radio blasting or pull my white shirts out of the laundry and find that he'd smuggled in a red sock and stained everything pink. He visited, of course — every few months he'd show up on the doorstep proffering a box of chocolates for me and a cheque for my mother, and for the first few visits he even forced himself to be interested in our activities. He'd take me to the library, drive me to birthday parties, politely feign interest when my mother held him hostage with our endless list of complaints (no car, poor heating, intermittent electricity). Eventually, though, the visits grew less frequent. By the end of our third year there, he couldn't stop his eyes from glassing over with boredom as I dutifully briefed him about my life at school. The boxes of chocolates started appearing in the bin, untouched.

Then, in the fourth year of our exile, my mother told me that we were going back to Beijing to visit.

I found China in a worse state than I had left it in. That was the year of major air pollution — when our plane touched down, I looked out of the window at what seemed like an apocalyptic wasteland. It was summer in Beijing, a scorching one, and as the stifling breeze crawled along the runway swells of yellow dust billowed like ghosts. My father greeted us at the gate with pollution masks. When he drove us home, he switched on his headlights so the beam could scythe through the soupy air.

I've been given a promotion, he explained as he drove. *I'm spending more time at work now, a lot more time. But I'll still take you to the park on the weekends*, he added, like an afterthought. *You understand.*

I tried to understand. My father had always been busy, but he now worked such incredibly extensive hours that he often spread out a blanket and slept in his office. On the few occasions that I visited him there, he sat ramrod straight in his chair, refusing to make eye contact and replying to my questions with evasive monosyllables. On the weekends, he drove me to the park or to the museum and waited by the car while I finished amusing myself. Then he dropped me off and told my mother that we *really bonded together*, as if these awkward excursions were supposed to make up for years of paternal neglect.

But one day, about half a year after we'd forged this uncomfortable arrangement, we got lost on our way to a restaurant and found ourselves trapped in a dense maze of ramshackle buildings. My father was in a bad mood — something had happened at work, I guessed, although I knew better than to ask. His mouth was set into a tight line, his hands clenched so tightly around the steering wheel that his knuckles were white. We drove in terse silence, the sky growing dark around us. Eventually, we reached a squat dirt building in the middle of nowhere — *Memory Film Centre*, the flickering neon sign proclaimed in Chinese. The rundown building looked more like a public toilet than a film center. *Now Playing...*

I squinted at the sign, incredulous. *Now Playing Wizard of Oz, starring Judy Garland.*

My father slammed on the brakes.

We're not going to the restaurant, he said. *We're going to see a film.*

Inside, we bought our drinks and squeezed our way into the back row. As the halogen light-bulb flickered off and the opening credits rolled

across the stage, out of the corner of my eye I could see that my father had visibly relaxed. He had removed his stiff work blazer and, for the first time that I could remember, he had loosened his tie.

At the end of the movie, when Dorothy was bidding farewell to her friends in Oz, I leaned over to him and whispered: *do you remember? We've seen this one before.*

He didn't reply. On the screen, Dorothy was tapping her red shoes and reciting the magic incantation that would bring her back to Kansas. *There's no place like home*, she was chanting.

Do you remember, dad? When I was six?

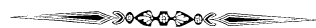
There's no place like home.

It was the first Western film we saw together.

I turned my head and saw tears glistening on my father's cheeks.

There's no place like home.

I never mentioned the tears. But later, sitting in the car, I asked him if we could see a film together next weekend.



Jennifer Zhou is a high school student currently living in Beijing, China. She speaks two languages and is learning a third.



Lost in Art

In the pencil forest
I wander,
dressed like Alice,
splodging five-toed paint prints
on the dusty grey-lead ground

I'm not scared,
it's not a bear hunt,
there's no lurking charcoal wolf
just a vast uncharted canvas
calling out to be explored

And I don't drop stones or breadcrumbs
If my footsteps smudge and fade
every picture hides a story
I'll find words to lead me home

Poet

Nadine Cranenburgh

Nadine Cranenburgh lives in Australia with two poetic boys, four chickens, two cats, four tropical fish and a lot of books. Her poems and stories have been published in Australia, the US and Asia.

Train = Time



Jiwoong Yang

World of My Imagination

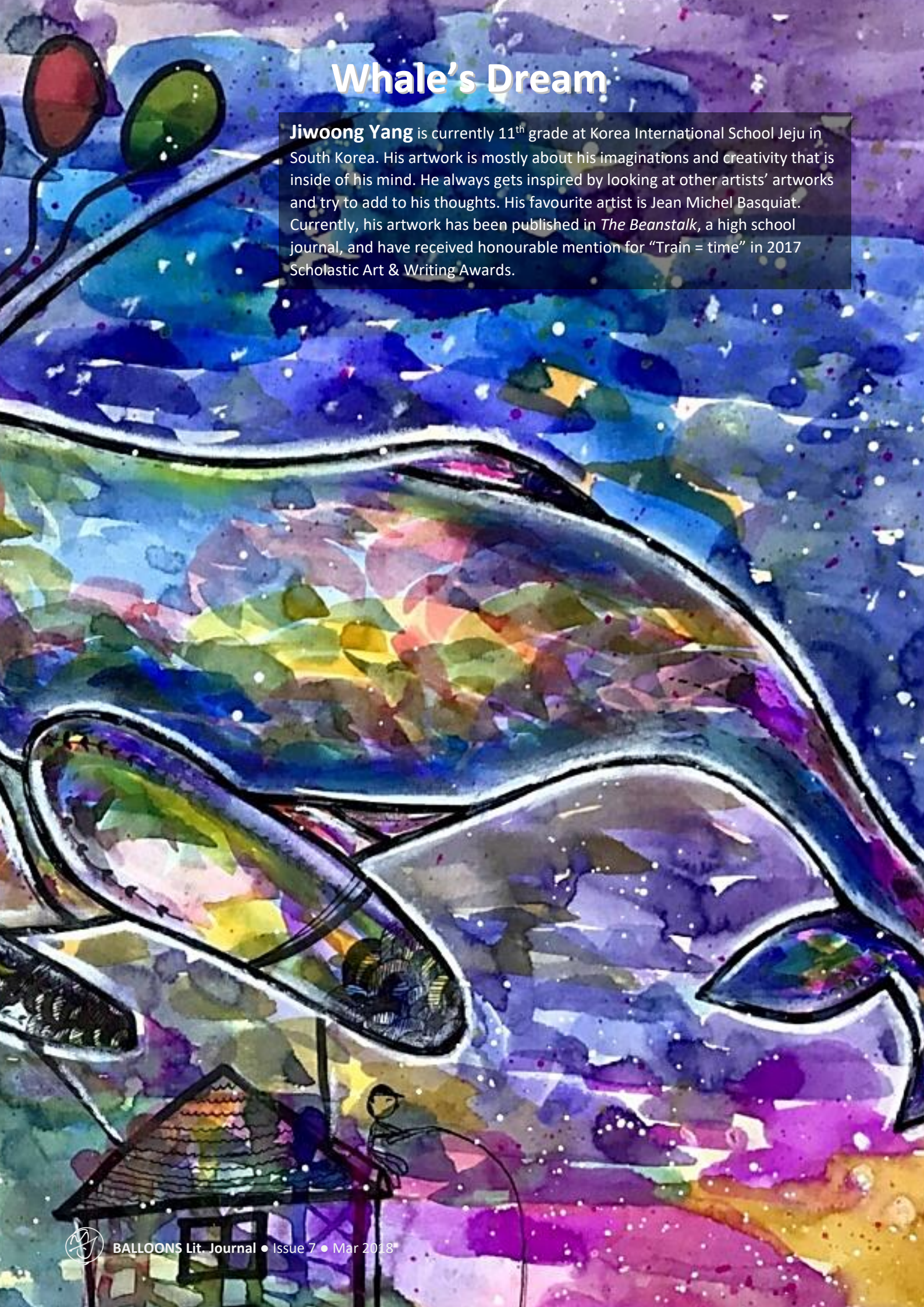


Artist



Whale's Dream

Jiwoong Yang is currently 11th grade at Korea International School Jeju in South Korea. His artwork is mostly about his imaginations and creativity that is inside of his mind. He always gets inspired by looking at other artists' artworks and try to add to his thoughts. His favourite artist is Jean Michel Basquiat. Currently, his artwork has been published in *The Beanstalk*, a high school journal, and have received honourable mention for "Train = time" in 2017 Scholastic Art & Writing Awards.



Glen Donaldson

Glen Donaldson admits to being curious why a group of squids is not called a squad. He cites his all-time favourite movie as CAPRICORNE ONE (1977). Glen blogs at SCENIC WRITER'S SHACK.

Author

Piano Man



Last night, my world turned grey and my face along with it. I know now what happened was no accident. It was, rather, a most deliberate attempt on my life. In its aftermath I have set in motion a scheme to rid myself of this most horrible place and as well the person I have called my roommate these past five months – the treacherous old sea dog known as Captain Drake McNally.

The whole sorry ordeal was sparked some four weeks earlier when the Captain (I have always wondered whether this rank was real or imagined) deigned that we should welcome into our midst no less a fixture than a Steinway grand piano. Given that we were both working as the caretakers of a remote island lighthouse known as Owl's Head, located some sixty nautical miles off the east coast of Wales, this presented some degree of challenge; most especially to the three intrepid furniture removalists tasked with delivering the polished wooden monstrosity.

The challenge, such as it was, involved lugging the thing up sixty-eight winding, crumbling concrete steps, every one of them encrusted in black scale and sea salt. Once in place, so began my endless nights of being forced to listen to the most awful attempts at music making any pitiful soul has ever had to endure. After several weeks of this I wondered to myself if the hightop 'concerts' were not being done in such quantity and at such irregular times as to constitute an effort to irritate me and hasten my leaving.

Late one afternoon when I could stand no more, I politely asked the 'Captain' to take a break from his noise making so I could get some rest in preparation for the

coming nightshift. He did not take kindly to such a request. Later that same night, with a storm brewing in the west, I went outside to bolt the boat shed door. On returning I found the lighthouse door locked. I hammered on it with my fists as waves smashed over the rocks behind me and the waters began to rise. I saved myself from drowning by eventually locating a rope and hoisting it high on to an outside ledge of the tower near the gantry.

I sit here now waiting for the supply ship to come. It is three days overdue. When it arrives I will bid this wretched place farewell, never to return. The painful sound of yet another of the mad Captain's 'performances' of "Chopsticks" echoes down from his upper quarters as I write. Forgive me if I describe it as like some kind of slow drip strain of syphilis for the ears. With his fingers thicker than beef sausages, mention must come also it is by no means unusual to overhear the nerve-jangling sound of several keys being struck at once, adding to my torture. Wax earplugs dull the pain. They and the last bottle of rum is all that sustain me. I pray my deliverance will be soon.



A Revelation at the Races



Author

Arthur Plotnik

Arthur Plotnik is author of several successful books with two of the works having been Book-of-the-Month-Club selections. (Other books include a biography of the Constitution's calligrapher and a guide to urban trees.) He has a special passion for readers, including young ones, having earned a library graduate degree (in addition to one from the Iowa Writers Workshop) and served as editorial director for the American Library Association, and raised two daughters. He now lives in Chicago with his wife, an artist. His many literary works, including poetry, are highlighted on his website, www.arthurplotnik.com.

Do you know what a hunch is? It's a feeling that something is going to happen or be revealed — maybe something good, maybe not: A hunch that bad luck is coming, or that your special someone is about to call. Or that an ugly rumor will turn out to be false. A hunch is just a guess, really, not always logical or reasonable. But somehow it feels that the universe has slipped you a clue under the door — and then comes the question: Should I act on it? Do I trust something so, uh, *feely*?

A lot of hunches have to do with betting, where you put something at risk, something you value, because your feeling says *I'm right*. "I'll bet you my sandwich against yours that Heather goes and sits with Jonah." That may be kind of an innocent bet, but betting can lead to troublesome habits such as gambling, as happened to my father. You start risking more than you should, then more and more to get your losses back. But that's another story. Mine is about a crush I had and how it turned into a hunch, my big bet at a thrilling horse-race, and a revelation.

In the fall approaching my thirteenth birthday, I spent many of my precious after-school hours at the house — mansion, really — of Byron Fairchild, my super smart new friend. We had met in the school's Newspaper Club and found we could easily make each other laugh: my cheesy imitations and his funny way with big words. He liked to say things like *unspeakable* and *insufferable*, his voice going into goofy soprano on the main syllables: "in-SUFF-erable."

His favorite target for such terms was his equally smart sister and unidentical twin, Shelley Keats Fairchild (their mother named them both after English poets). Keatsie, as she preferred to be called, would butt in on us whenever she got bored, just asking for one of Byron's zingers. But to me, Keatsie was the opposite of "insufferable":

I was suffering plenty, deep in the first major crush of my life and convinced that I was unworthy of her and that it could never be. Still, I couldn't wait for those visits, when I could have fun with Byron *and* savor the presence of my secret love.

One Saturday, I wheedled permission from my mother to spend the whole day at the Fairchilds'. "Go, go already," she said, tired of hearing about their maid, gardener, tennis court, servants' rooms, and immense grounds. We lived in a low-rent apartment building across town.

Dad drove a truck from midnight to nine a.m. delivering bread to hospitals and factory cafeterias. When he got home, he slept until four p.m. and then went to play serious poker with other gamblers at the Elks Lodge, a club building just up a long hill from us. He was supposed to come home for dinner, especially on Saturday nights. But sometimes he didn't show up till ten or eleven at night and my mother would go berserk and not talk to him for days. Every afternoon I rooted for him to make it home on time so we wouldn't have the scenes.

So when my afternoon at the Fairchilds' was interrupted by a call from Mom, I was happy to hear her sounding cheerful as a bride. Miracle of miracles, Dad had come home early from his card game and wanted to take us all to Yonkers Raceway this night. We'd gone there together just once, and I'd loved it, watching the horses pull their drivers around the racetrack on two-wheel carts called "sulkies" while the crowd screamed for whatever "nag" they'd bet on. You could also score salty junky food there and pump unlimited ketchup and mustard on it.

I was getting kind of sleepy looking at Byron's science-fiction collection, anyway, so I took a few more longing glances at Keatsie — even exchanged a few words with her — and said "see-ya" to Byron when Dad pulled up in our old

Plymouth. Mom was in her passenger seat, and I joined my older sister Joannie in the back.

We arrived at Yonkers Raceway before the first race and found seats high up in the grandstand. Joannie held our places there, her nose in a movie magazine, while we wandered off. Mom made trips to the betting windows to play her “hunches” — lucky numbers, or horses’ names reminding her of a relative or friend or anything that clicked, like “Mama’s Boy.” The people behind the betting windows gave you tickets showing what you’d bet. After the race, if you had winning tickets, you’d go to the pay windows and trade them in for cash. You’d toss away the losing tickets.

Dad went down by the track to get a closer look at the horses and drivers as they paraded before each race. Usually I’d stand with him along the track rail, smelling horse smells, as he explained his “system” for picking the winners. He’d buy a printed racing program, which showed the horses and riders for each race and their records against other horses and at various racetracks. He’d pencil all kinds of notes on the program, then, at the last minute before the races, he’d run to the betting windows and make wagers so complicated I couldn’t figure out what to cheer for. But when the races started he’d tell me the number of each horse he’d bet on and I’d join in the screaming — or moaning when they lost.

Between races, when I wasn’t with him, I’d roam the betting areas and check out all the characters — men puffing on big cigars and women in fancy dresses. They stood gazing up at “tote” boards showing which horses were the bettors’ “favorites” to win, and which “longshots” would pay a fortune if they miraculously beat the favorites. Other characters shuffled through the litter of discarded tickets on the cement floors. They’d bend way over like ostriches, looking for a winning

ticket that may have been dropped accidentally. Sometimes I joined them in this treasure hunt that never yielded anything, not to this ostrich, anyway.

With money from Dad, I’d also go get food to bring back to our seats: Franks, burgers, French fries, pickles, corned beef sandwiches, popcorn, candy. My sister Joannie, who at the time had nervous digestion and was underweight, wouldn’t eat anything except little bites of hamburger. “It’s all disgusting,” she’d say, as Mom eyed her.

After half the night’s races, Dad had won a little money on his favorites and lost on other horses (“It was fixed!”). Mom hadn’t won anything. Then something crazy happened.

As if I knew what I was looking at, I liked to peer over Dad’s shoulder as he sat and studied the program, scribbling on it with a stubby pencil. While I looked my eye caught the name of a stable that owned a horse in the upcoming race. My heart jumped: *Shelley Farms*

“Dad,” I said, “you have to bet this one, number six!” He looked at the entry. The name of the horse was Stroke of Dawn, which meant nothing to me. But Shelley!

“She’s a bum,” Dad said, looking at the horse’s record. “Lousy running times. Disqualified in three races for breaking stride. No wonder she’s —” He looked at the tote board showing the latest odds of winning: thirty-to-one, meaning thirty dollars for every dollar you bet if it won.

“Whaddy’a see in this dog?” Dad said.

I pointed to the name in the program.

“Shelley Stables?” he read. “What’s that mean?”

“It’s his new *girlfriend*,” Joannie piped without looking up from her magazine. “His pal Byron’s twin sister.”

“She’s not my girlfriend,” I said. “I just like her name. Come on, Dad.”

Mom, listening in, lowered her own pro-

gram.

"I'll bet two dollars on it. It's a good hunch."

"You're both nuts," Dad said. "Shining Pride's gonna win by ten lengths. But you wanna throw money away, I'll make the bets for you."

I went with him to the window. He bet on his own pick, plus number six, Shelley, for the rest of us. Then — "Aw, what the heck" — he added another bet on number six for himself.

Well, you kind of know what happened, right? Or I wouldn't be telling the story. But the way it happened.

Halfway through the race, our number six, Stroke of Dawn from the Shelley Stables, was way back in seventh place, pinned in by another sulky. The favorite, Shining Pride, ran well in front. Then suddenly something magical got into our horse, the "bum" we had bet on. Her driver maneuvered the sulky into a clear path and she took off — her legs flying in the graceful pattern called a "trot," front-right leg moving with back-left, then front-left with back-right. She moved up to sixth... fifth... fourth... *third*, coming down the stretch toward the finish line.

We were going wild. But in the last seconds, though she held her position, she seemed to lose the energy to keep gaining on the two lead horses. It looked like she would finish third — except that trotting races can be especially weird: Horses that try to run too hard at the end often lose control of their trotting stride. They "break" into their natural gallop — and according to trotting rules, that means automatic disqualification.

And guess who broke? Both Shining Pride and the second horse, a big grey one named Dutch Treat. It took a while for the judges to announce their official decision. And then...

We were winners!

Not only was I the night's hero, pocketing my unbelievable share from the wad of bills dis-

tributed by Dad, but now I knew that Shelley Keats Fairchild — with her spirit and smarts and big brown eyes, freckled cheeks, long nose with a slightly beaky bump, great smile with beautiful teeth and dimples, hair that spilled over her shoulders curling along the way, and lanky frame moving all crazy-legged in jeans and loose blue jersey with sleeves that came down to her knuckles — I knew that Shelley Keats Fairchild was my destiny.

Did my hunch lead to the truth about Shelley? Sort of, and eventually sort of not. But she and I stayed great friends, I gave some of the money to my sister for college, some to the March of Dimes charity, and saved the rest, so it was a worthy hunch after all. As for one lucky hunch leading to a money-gambling habit, it never happened. I loved my father, and sadly I saw what that habit could steal from a life. Or maybe I just had a hunch that other risks — the gambles you make in your friends, schooling, career, and love — would be challenges enough.



Sense

I've been trying for a while to write a poem about 83 cents
the number stuck in the back of my head
even after I left it through the clouds
but 83 cents is just 83 cents
just coins clinking together in my sweaty palm

My sister and I used to collect state quarters
we taped them to sheets of paper and wrote the names above them in pink marker
we never finished the collection
I ripped the tape off and dumped them in my piggy bank
12 dollars worth of memories

My hands have thoughtlessly held American money and Canadian money and European money
smoothing down folded bills
hands have passed over and over the paper
I caress year old fingerprints

My father always tells me to wash my hands after touching money
"It's dirty" he says
water washes away countless hands

All of my friends have bank accounts
hundreds of dollars stored away
valuable nothing
me, I like to touch it
feel the bills and the coins sloshing in my hands like stew
smell the metallic tang

83 cents are just 83 cents
any bank account can tell you that
but my 83 cents travelled around a food court
my 83 cents bought food before the plane ride
my 83 cents passed through many hands and many lives before reaching me
and somehow I realized that the people who held these five coins
are more important than how much they are worth.



Eva Hays is 15 years old. Poetry is her language, and she has written over 100 poems anywhere she can: on her phone, in her journal, on random scraps of paper. Previously, she has been published in the *Canvas Teen Literary Magazine*, and *Treasured*, a book through the America Library of Poetry.

Zoom in Zoom out

snap
 light
 smile
 look at the final
 product I watch
 everyone zoom
 in on their own
 faces when did
 we become so
 blinded by our
 own lights that
 we fail to see
 everyone else's?
 I'm tired of people
 telling me to love
 myself shouting it
 in my face and I'm
 trying I'm really
 trying I'm getting
 better but I do
 not want to
 become this I
 want to zoom out
 I want to pull the
 camera back away
 from my face and
 take in everything
 else take in the rest
 of the world because
 my face is so small
 I don't want to zoom
 in and lose sight of
 all the other faces
 that make up the world



Eva Hays

Poet



Assassin



Author

Jenny Hu

They tried to kill me once, when I was eleven.

Footsteps pattering in the depths of night, protected by the shadows that crisscrossed their paths and blurred their faces. Knives drawn, flashes of silver in the splashy moonlight. A creak of a door, a hiss of a voice. I'd sat up bolt straight amid pillows of damask and silken blankets. Frozen, as I'd stared at the topaz eyes that glinted from every corner of the room. They'd hidden behind the thick curtains, the wisps of jade and gold. Behind the tall porcelain vases, the statues of my ancestors. But I'd still felt their eyes, only, a moment too late, as a blade whizzed past my ear. I'd screamed for help, my voice still that of a child more than that of a king. As the eunuchs came running in, the guards a step behind them, I'd buried my face in my pillows and sobbed as my gaze locked on the knife that was embedded in the marble frame of my bed.

I ordered the eunuchs to cut down the curtains, after that day. Trembling as I demanded the vases and statues to be smashed, or burned. As a sort of punishment for housing the enemy.

My room was barren, walls covered in gold leaf and pillars with jade dragons warped around them on an empty floor. Without the ornaments, the assassins would have nowhere to hide. Only my bed remained, stacked high with cushions and blankets that would keep me safe in the dark of night, when all I longed for was that feeling of safety that only came with a loved one's embrace.

The second time an attempt was made on my life came years later, when I was eighteen. Yes, people had tried to break into the palace before, but none had made it even close to my rooms before being brutally killed. My palace seemed to swarm with guards nowadays — but no matter how many of the armed soldiers marched silently through the halls, I never felt safe. Never felt safe. Never

felt secure, even in my own home.

And then she came. Dressed in gowns of silver and white, long sashes and ribbons flowing from her waist. Dangling earrings, and a circlet of silver roses resting on her midnight-colored hair. But most of all, wearing a smile that could rival the sun. Oh, I'd missed seeing smiles. Hearing laughter. I'd missed seeing a face in this palace that wore joy, genuine joy.

And so she captivated me, with her voice like running water and her laugh like the songs of a moon lute. She, with the big doe eyes and cherry red lips. She, whose smile could light the entire city of Luoyang on fire.

I loved her, more than anything. More than myself. To the moon, and back. And she loved me too, with joy, like everything else she did. She talked with me, laughed with me. Made me feel secure again, safe again. Loved me so much that she bore me a son, with the same joy written on his face. His smile was her smile, like a mirror. My world was perfect again, shattered pieces swept back into something whole. Until she was the one in my rooms at night, topaz eyes glinting in the darkness, silver blade matching the silver hem of her nightclothes. I didn't believe it — I couldn't believe it — and the scar on my neck where she grazed me is proof enough that I was wrong.

I cried when they killed her at dawn. I hadn't cried in years, ever since the first attempt on my life. But I cried for her.

The next day, I ordered all women out of my court.

The third time came when I was twenty-five.

Ironic; the assassination attempt came the night after I'd led my troops into a winning battle against the Wei Kingdom, claiming yet another province for Qin. My soldiers celebrated long into the night, the smells of drunkenness and burnt food filling the chilly night air. But I didn't drink.



No, I needed to keep my senses with me. Needed to stay alert.

My battle tent was like my room in the palace — elaborate walls, barren floor. Except for a bed, pushed against the side of the canvas material, smothered in silky pillows and thick blankets. But this time, a pair of topaz eyes gleamed amongst the pillows. I leapt out the door flap right as a dagger blew past my shoulder, a wisp of wind against my thick garments.

My reflexes had slowed since the second attempt, but my wariness had only increased. The man, buried in my blankets, was interrogated and tortured until he named all his cohorts, and then killed.

I wasn't present at the interrogation. But I saw his garments when they dragged his body away, saw the glimmer of a silver seal against the crimson blood, saw the looks the eunuchs exchanged, as they handed me the scroll. Written in dark, dark ink were the results of the questioning. The mastermind behind the whole plot was my son — *her* son. Like mother, like son.

They executed my son at sunset, hazy red light catching on the thin silver threads in his han-fu. I expected him to struggle in the guards' arms as they led him to the podium, expected him to fight back. But instead he was placid, and as the noose slipped around his neck he was smiling. Bright enough to light the whole city of Luoyang on fire as his topaz eyes slid shut.

That day, I ordered the eunuchs to remove the stacks of cushions and blankets on my bed. From then on, I'd only sleep with one. But in the dark of night, I had nothing to hide my shivers with as I lay, tears frozen in my eyes. Nothing to protect me from the cold, cold chill that came with knowing that somewhere out there, those topaz eyes were close to me. Watching, and waiting.

The people hate me, or else they wouldn't try to

kill me. This I know. But if they sat where I sat, on that golden throne with dragons weaving up its sides, high above all else, they would see what I see. They would hear what I hear. And they would choose what I choose. I don't take chances anymore. They will come again, this I am sure of. They will, with better blades and stronger men. But I trust nothing, no one. So this time, they'll have nowhere to hide.



Jenny Hu is an eighth grader at the Seven Hills School. She enjoys reading, writing, playing piano, golf, Chinese zither, and drawing. She is bilingual, fluent in English and Chinese, but also studying Latin and Spanish. She has been published in the *Creative Kids Magazine* and the *Creative Communication anthology*, and she also took part in the Power of the Pen Competition, placing fifth in the state of Ohio. In addition to being published in English, she was published in a magazine in China, and was a gold medalist in the International Chinese Essay competition. When she is not writing or pursuing her other hobbies, she loves traveling and learning about different cultures.

Niina Tsuyuki Dubik is a university student. Her poetry has appeared in *Boston Accent Lit* and *The Bitchin' Kitsch*. She lives in Manitoba where she attends the University of Manitoba and writes poetry.



I'm a good person, I always have been.
 Ask anyone, they can't deny what they've seen.
 I'm a great student with all straight A's.
 I never went through a sullen teenager phase.
 I make sure all my decisions are 100% fair.
 I treat all people I meet with compassion and care.
 I've never let a bad day affect my mood.
 I've never ever been disrespectful or rude.
 I've never once wished someone ill will.
 I'm definitely not your ordinary run-of-the-mill.
 I'm a wonderful person through and through
 And you must be wondering, "Could this be true?"
 Maybe you'd like some actual proof.
 Well, here's the truth,
 I'm a liar.

Niina T. Dubik *Poet*



Artist



Etzensperger's artistic project "Red Hand" is a supportive response to the Red Hand Day (12 Feb) to fight against the use of child soldiers. These pieces, along with hundreds of the artist's other Red Hand paintings were exhibited for charity purposes.

Tomé T. Etzensperger

Tomé Thomas Etzensperger, born in Zurich / Switzerland in 1958 as Thomas Etzensperger, initially studied medicine. However, drawing was something of a cradle, and so he quickly turned his hobby into a profession. During his studies as a communication designer, he developed many funny cartoon characters. His comic strip "PiPO" has been featured in many daily newspapers in Germany, the US and Switzerland. Today he is an art, sports and ethics teacher at two schools and is involved with his children's portrait museum, which he founded in 2011 to give children a platform here, with exhibitions and activities for children's rights.

Etzensperger is also known for his "**Red Hand**" painting project against child soldiers. He has drawn more than 4,300 children in recent years. [www.tome-art.com]

Pictures on this page:

Top: **Deep in Thoughts / Daydreaming Boy**, 41 X 50 cm, colour pencil, drawn on the artist's island in the Staffelsee, 6 Aug 2017

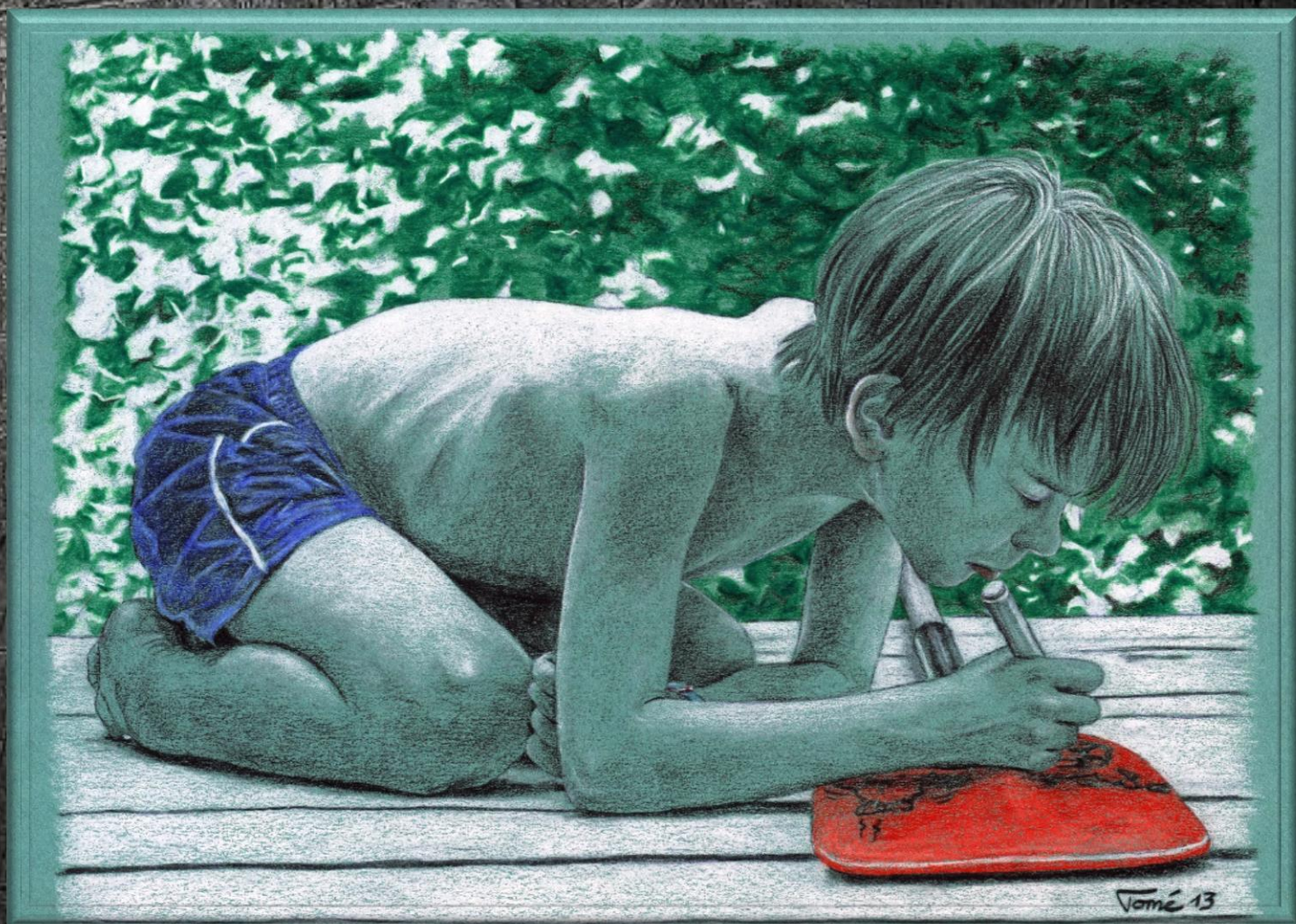
Bottom: **Charcoal Boy from Manila**, Ulingan Tondo, 30 X 21 cm, carbon and color pencil, drawn in Gersthofen and Augsburg, 13 Sept 2017

Pictures on the right page:

Top: **Four Peeking Children**, 65 X 50 cm, color pencil, drawn on the artist's island in the Staffelsee, 10 Aug 2017

Bottom: **My Son Raphael** is painting his kayak paddle, drawn at artist's holiday resort at the shore (waterfront) of the island Buchau in the Staffellake (Staffelsee in Bavaria), 30 X 21 cm, colour pencil, 21 Jun 2013







Balloons

BALLOONS Lit. Journal



NOT FOR SALE



"Take in the vibrant imagery on the cover of BLJ Issue 7 and prepare yourself for another tour of the senses. The hues of Jiwoong Yang's "Whale's Dream" perfectly mirror the richness that can be found on every single page of this latest chapter of BLJ. I was struck by the maturity of the pieces as well as their incredible diversity – not just in terms of where they have originated from, but also in the way they address so many aspects and stages of life. As we are reminded in one poem, let's never forget to zoom out so that we can see all the beauty that is in the world. But before zooming out, zoom in and gorge on another literary feast served up by BLJ."

– Dr Gary J. HARFITT

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