

**IN FOCUS 2018**  
by world in focus  
over 300 submissions from 11 countries

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thank you to:

all participants of In Focus

our compiler, tanya nguyen

our artist, rita chen



## *ABOUT WORLD IN FOCUS*

Founded in 2016, World in Focus is a youth-run organization fundraising in our local community with 100% of our proceeds going to our cause: providing cataract surgeries and glasses for children in developing countries, and raising awareness to the local community through various events and presentations.

Over the past three years, World in Focus has been raising money to donate glasses/cataract surgeries to children in developing countries. In partnership with the Himalayan Cataract Project (HCP), we have helped sponsor 24 cataract surgeries in countries like Ethiopia, Nepal, and Myanmar!

## *ABOUT IN FOCUS*

In Focus was held from August to October 2018. World in Focus received over 300 submissions from 11 countries in 4 continents for our second annual writing and arts contest. Contestants were asked to create a piece of artwork or writing to reflect their interpretation of their choice between 3 given prompts:

1. "The power of imagination created the illusion that my vision went much farther than the naked eye could actually see."  
- Nelson Mandela
2. "The voyage of discovery is not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes." - Marcel Proust
3. What does vision mean to you?

## **Preface**

*Welcome to World in Focus' second "In Focus" anthology, a collection of artworks, short stories, poems and essays from youth across the world. Chosen from over 300 submissions originating from 11 countries, this anthology truly encapsulates the hard work and creativity we have been lucky to witness from executives, outreach directors, volunteers and artists over the past three years of World in Focus.*

*Whether you have stumbled across this anthology on our website or picked this up in the library, we are excited for you to explore the importance of vision - both literally and metaphorically - through creative pieces submitted from an international network of talented youth. Ranging from insightful artworks to reflective poems to short stories, the anthology offers a plethora of perspectives on vision and how we use it in our own lives. Guided by three open-ended prompts, the creativity and originality of the submissions are astounding, and we hope that the vulnerability shown in these pieces allow you to truly connect with the artists.*

*To everybody who entered, we commend you on your initiative and your hard work. We understand how intimidating it may be to share an issue or a story that you may never have before, but we are so glad you decided to do so.*

*To our esteemed judges, we thank you for taking the time to pore over the hundreds of submissions. We understand that it's never an easy process to select only a few works from such a talented group, but we truly appreciate all of your help on this incredible journey.*

*As Helen Keller once said, "Never bend your head. Always hold it high. Look at the world straight in the eye." We hope that this anthology empowers you to achieve anything you want to. We hope that it inspires you and sparks imagination within you. After all, vision only lends itself to broader horizons.*

*Sincerely,*

***Natalie Chen and Grace Wu***

*Co-Founders of World in Focus*

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# Visual Arts

Ages 10-14

Anonymous | 12 | Taiwan  
What does vision mean to you?

*What does vision mean to you?*





Ademi Akylbekova | 13 | Kazakhstan  
Child's happiness

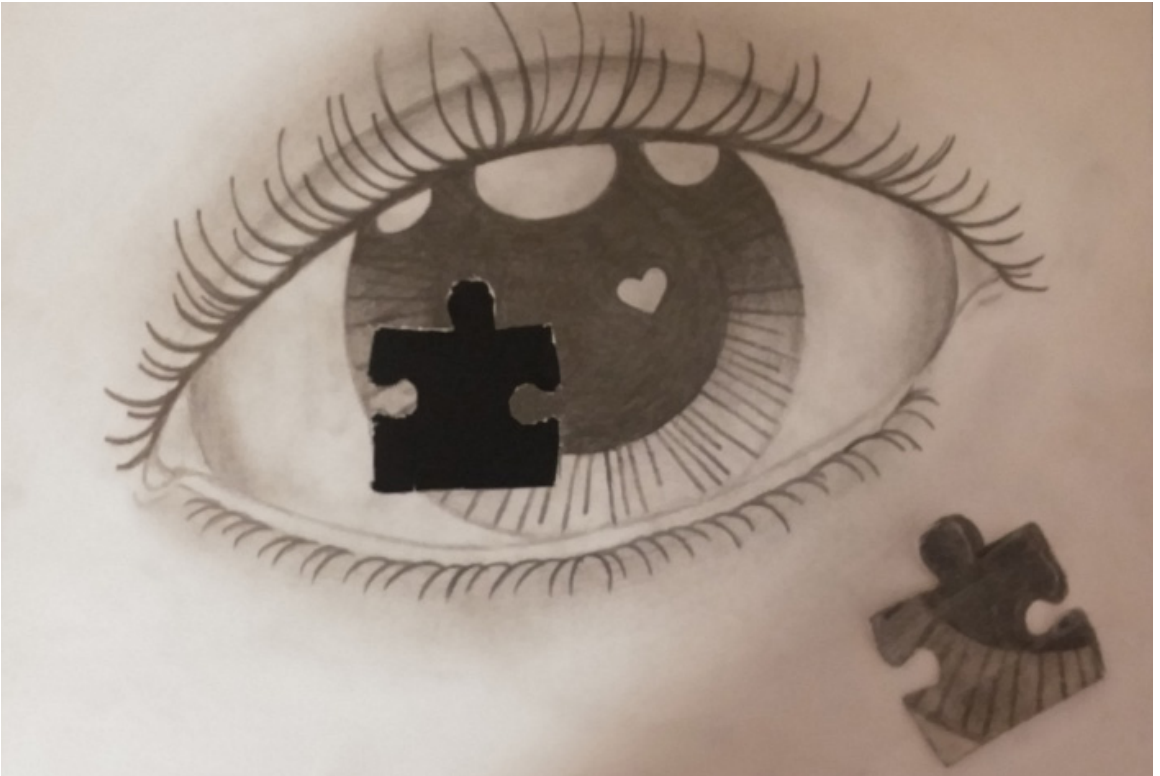
*What does vision mean to you?*



I wanted to show from the point of view of a newborn baby that is happy. The baby has grown with his or her parents and sees the colorful beauty of life with his or her own eyes.

Alisha Zheng | 12 | Canada  
The Missing Piece of the Puzzle

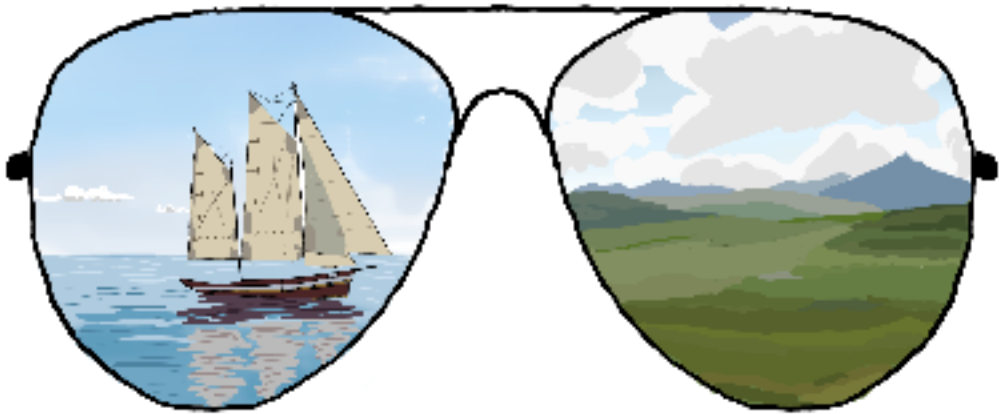
*“The power of imagination created the illusion that my vision went much farther than the naked eye could actually see” - Nelson Mandela*



We can get everyone the eye care they deserve if we just give a helping hand to place the last piece of the puzzle in its spot; completing the beautiful picture. It's not that hard to just pick up the last piece, but it will only be complete if WE do.

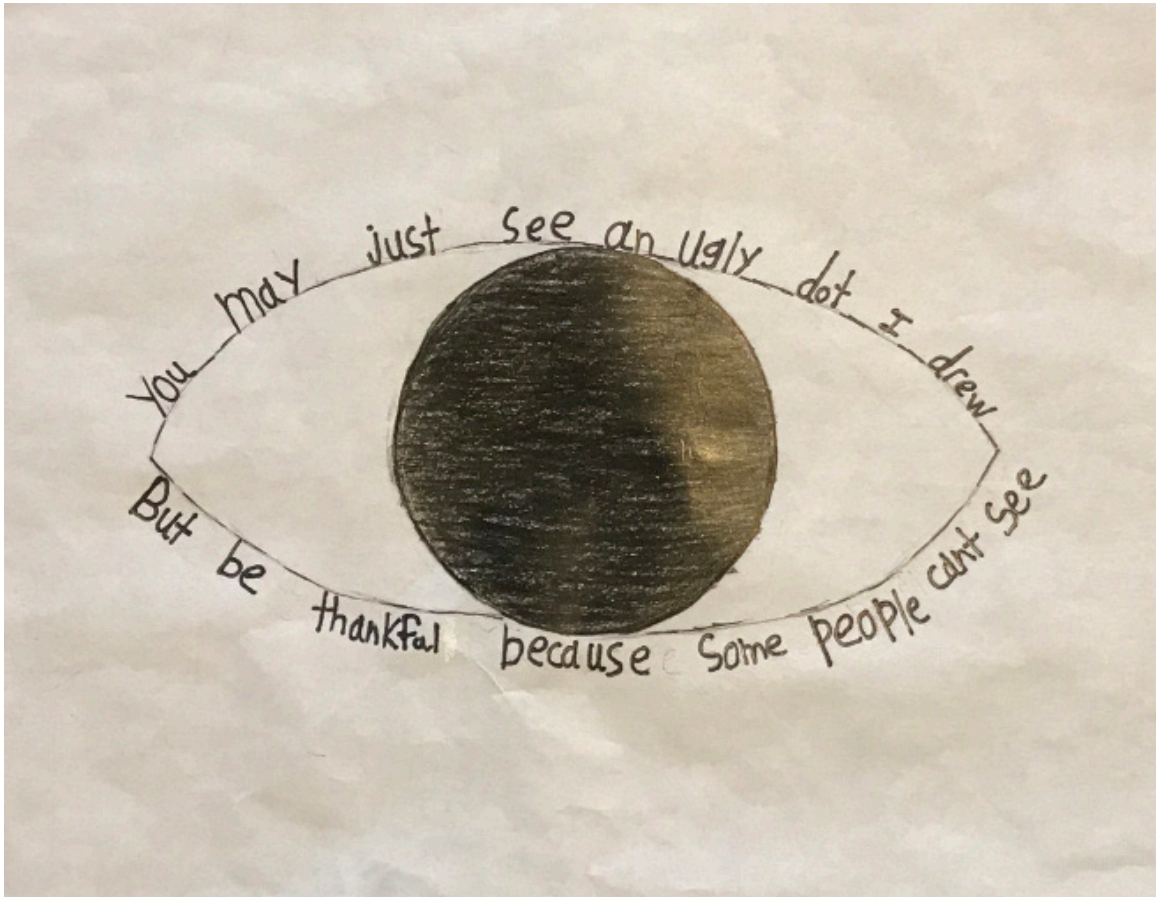
Amelie Hu | 11 | Canada  
Things Differ From Different Point of Views

*“The voyage of discovery is not in seeking new landscapes  
but in having new eyes” - Marcel Proust*



Harry Lai | 11 | Canada  
This is how thankful you should be about  
your eyesight

*What does vision mean to you?*



*My piece is about how thankful I/you should be about your vision and how you can see. This is also about how you should treasure your eye sight and how important it is to keep it well.*



# Jessica Khuu | 11 | Canada World In Focus

*What does vision mean to you?*



*I have drawn a picture that I think represents how the visually impaired see their lives. All of my little sections of pictures contain little quotes and a rainbow outlining around the whole drawing. The outlining represents the outside things that normal and lucky people see while the others can't see as well as the lucky ones. The rainbow ribbon is meant to represent the fading luck and colours that a visually impaired person is losing. However this is what the visually impaired doesn't want so we need to help them become better and happier human beings that could see!!!*

Kingsley Kim | 12 | Canada  
Captured Beauty

*“The voyage of discovery is not in seeking new landscapes  
but in having new eyes” - Marcel Proust*



Nicole Tsao | 13 | Canada  
Deeper than the surface

*“The power of imagination created the illusion that my vision went much farther than the naked eye could actually see” - Nelson Mandela*



What the eye sees does not represent what one perceives. The real power of vision lies within one's imagination from perception, not merely what one sees. The landscape in the eye represents the infinite possibilities of imagination deriving from one's naked eye. We could see what one sees, but never what one imagines.

Sarah Rasouli | 12 | Canada

“The voyage of discovery is not in seeking  
new landscapes but in having new eyes”

- Marcel Proust

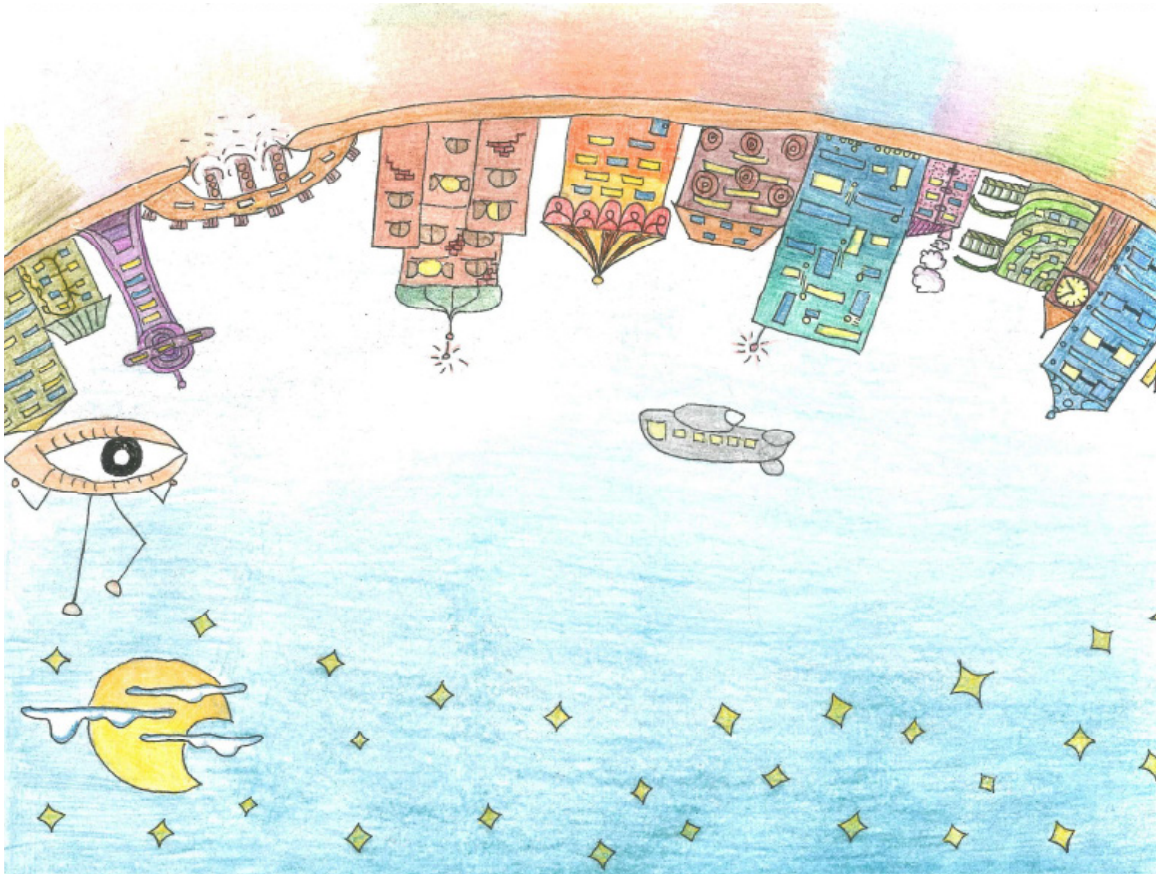
*“The voyage of discovery is not in seeking new landscapes  
but in having new eyes” - Marcel Proust*





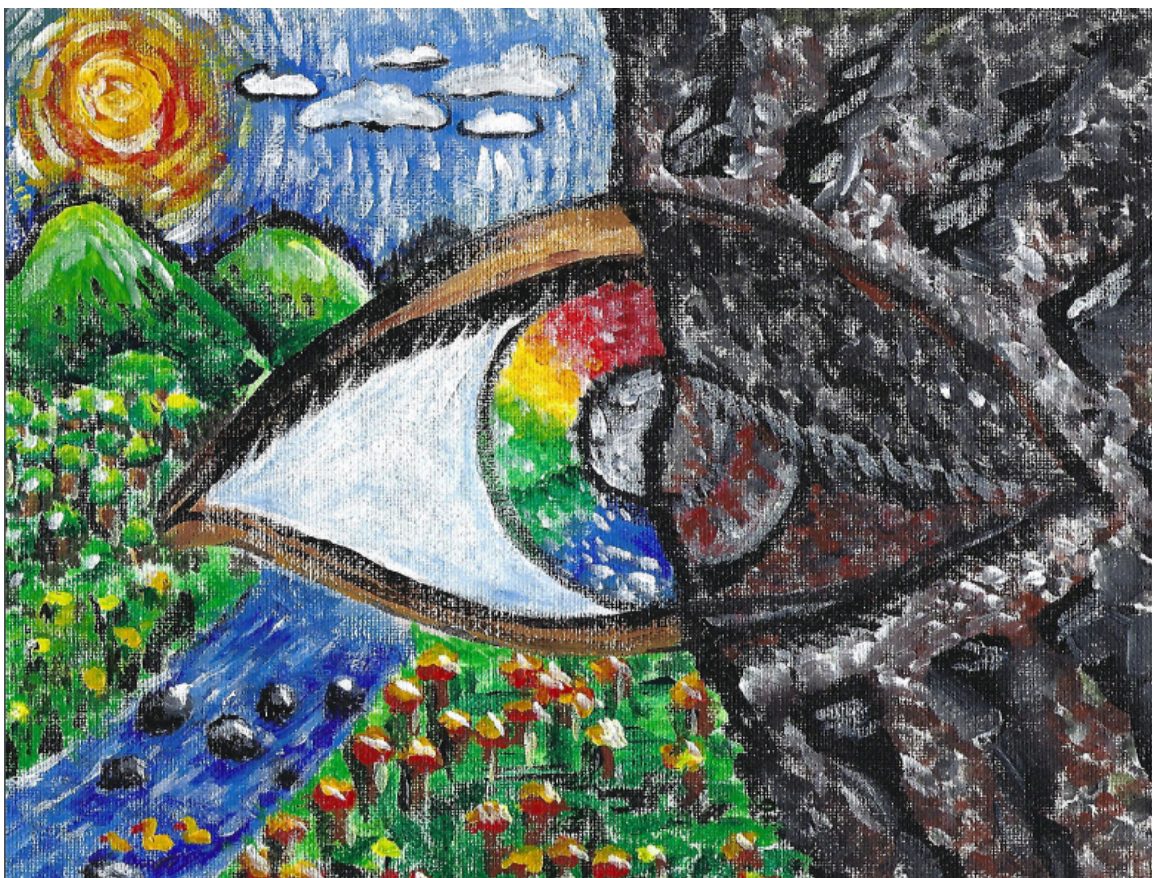
Selina Liu | 11 | Canada  
Looking Differently

*“The voyage of discovery is not in seeking new landscapes  
but in having new eyes” - Marcel Proust*



# Yun Hui Kang | 11 | Canada Spectrum

*What does vision mean to you?*



Though the meaning of a spectrum is a brand of colors across the sky, how could people with eye problems look and understand what it actually is? This is why people should understand the importance of vision. People nowadays walk by beautiful sights, taking the colors for granted that they can see when some people are forced to live without them, sitting in a world of darkness. I wanted to express this with my painting.

# Visual Arts

## Ages 15-18



Andy Zhu | 16 | Canada  
Eyes of the Arctic

*“The voyage of discovery is not in seeking new landscapes  
but in having new eyes” - Marcel Proust*



Iceland attracts thousands annually with its majestic landscapes. Yet often overlooked is the only native terrestrial mammal, the arctic fox, which has thrived in the Icelandic wilderness for thousands of years. However, it is now beginning to bare the full effects of global climate change. Warming temperatures make prey harder to catch, pups harder to raise, and homes harder to find. In the eyes of this fox rests that of a victim of pollution, environmental destruction, and global warming. Such eyes tell the story of a survivor of these lands that is increasingly unable to survive for much longer.

# Angel Xing | 16 | Canada

## Open Your Eyes

*What does vision mean to you?*



When confronted with the question about vision, I immediately thought of media literacy. In the 21st century, being able to see means the ability to absorb and properly digest information, which is reflected in my art piece. The hands symbolise channels of media, trying to blind and control the individual. However, the person's true vision supersedes barriers, transcending the dominance exerted. Each eye, drawn digitally, represents one of the five senses integral to survival, because in this age, media literacy is crucial to thrive. The contrast of digital and traditional media highlights how true vision is all preceding.

Aruzhan Begimkulova | 16 | Kazakhstan  
The beautiful capital of Kazakhstan

*“The power of imagination created the illusion that my vision went much farther than the naked eye could actually see” - Nelson Mandela*



Astana is a capital of Kazakhstan .This year Astana turns 20 years. Sights of Astana in a view.

*“The voyage of discovery is not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes” - Marcel Proust*



The girl is partly submerged in water and uses the glasses to see, its light and clarity illuminating the dark and blurry waters. The yellow poppies falling onto the girl symbolizes wealth and the apple blossoms in the background represent peace. Both of these things stay afloat and do not fall beneath the waters.

# Cathy Xiao | 16 | Canada Snellen Chart

*What does vision mean to you?*



To me, my vision is a blockade which brings upon anxiety. The fear of my eye sight worsening causes me to take off my glasses from time to time and try to read signs from a distance in an attempt to check if my eye sight has further declined, which causes everyday life to seem like an eye exam. The monsters hidden behind the buildings display my general anxiety, and the balloon placed before the character's face demonstrates the barrier between my glasses and my view. Many elements of this artwork mimic the Snellen Chart and commonly seen optotypes, including the stripes of the sidewalk, the monster's eyes, and the signage.



Celina Shen | 16 | Canada  
Deeper than the surface

*“The voyage of discovery is not in seeking new landscapes  
but in having new eyes” - Marcel Proust*



In the image, a girl is seen to be holding a camera, captivated by this new device. She is not intrigued by the subject at the opposing end of the camera, but rather, the new eyes that have been gifted to her through this lens. She is able to look at the world through a new perspective, thus embarking on her voyage of discovery.

Janet Tsim | 17 | Canada  
A Fantasy in My Mind

*“The power of imagination created the illusion that my vision went much farther than the naked eye could actually see” - Nelson Mandela*



Here, a girl stares blankly off into space, imagining how it would be like to travel to her dream destinations. She sets off into the galaxy on a hot air balloon, sails across the globe in her vintage ship, explores the moon, soars off into the distance rapidly on a plane, flies past planet Mars, and into a fascinating dystopian city. This journey may not be realistic or achievable in the near future for her, but it exists vividly in her dreams as she lets her imagination set her free.

# Mimi Le | 17 | Canada Starry Skies

*“The power of imagination created the illusion that my vision went much farther than the naked eye could actually see” - Nelson Mandela*



This is a photoshop composition of a lake. The lake did not have a star-covered sky before, but with imagination, it is possible to create a piece like this because this displays something that lies beyond the eye: the imagination.



# Sammi Shen | 16 | Canada

## Price Tag

*What does vision mean to you?*



Every cent matters in the business industry and for companies to afford selling their products at a lower price, costs of production has to be lowered. Companies rely on low labour wages in third world countries where people are desperate for any kind of income. Through this piece, I want to emphasize sometimes it takes more than just willingness to notice and acknowledge an issue. I want to showcase how the consequences of underpaid labour, specifically child labour, is not always visible, hence, the presentation of both side of the story.

# Vanessa Ip | 17 | Canada Through the Looking Glass

*“The voyage of discovery is not in seeking new landscapes  
but in having new eyes” - Marcel Proust*



My piece was taken on my trip to Vancouver at Lake Louise. It reflects Proust's quote as the main subject is not the landscape itself, but the tower viewer. It represents how each individual who views the scenery is going to interpret and view it in a different way. The story behind their visit or what the interpretation of the landscape means to them. Therefore, it's not about how many places you have been, but the experiences you have and share with others. They can vary per person and you should look at places in new perspectives, perhaps in the eyes of others.

# Writing

## Ages 10-14

Afraaz Sidhu | 14 | India  
God's own country, well and truly!

*“The power of imagination created the illusion that my vision went much farther than the naked eye could actually see” - Nelson Mandela*

INTRODUCTION:

The Southern Indian state of Kerala, better known as the “God’s own country,” was recently ravaged by floods, the worse in living memory. This hour of crises brought out many heartwarming stories of kindness and compassion, courage and friendship. This poem describes one such real life story where a woman decided to live with her 25 canine friends when the rescuers expressed their inability to rescue all of them. Her courageous decision to stay put with her dogs ultimately led to a special effort to save them from the rising flood waters.

GOD’S OWN COUNTRY, WELL AND TRULY!

It seems to be the right time,  
'Hope you'd never forget our voyage,  
Together in our cherished lifetime.  
Is it that tough to say goodbye?  
Hey! I know our love won't soon die.  
Its our no-tear-policy, right?  
I know you've been my life's eternal light.  
You have to fight the waters, my friend,  
As you did months ago in this very town,  
To get our community's prejudiced trends,  
And never let kindness down.

Afraaz Sidhu | 14  
God's own country, well and truly!

Kindness compliments your grace,  
Its you who conjured friendship as if,  
We never went out of God's own place.  
They had come to save us,  
Out of the dreaded place,  
But they firmly remarked,  
We had to say goodbye to our Mom.  
She never thought twice to say "No"  
To such a preposterous proposal  
That too, with a smile on her face.  
She never thought to save herself,  
In this world of selfishness, she swore to brace  
For life or death whatever the fate.

She never resisted to say no,  
To the pain that we suffered down there.  
She saw love flow,  
From our hearts  
Never refuting love to share.  
Hunger and Despair,  
Did we go through together for days,  
until a team appeared,  
ready to take us all at the first gaze.

Now that we're back here,  
as the floods seem to cease,  
We never fail to notice,  
The smile her lips everyday please !



*“The power of imagination created the illusion that my vision went much farther than the naked eye could actually see” - Nelson Mandela*

My companion is a Box

On the outside it's a standard piece of cardboard

To the naked eye it's not particularly noticeable

But Be careful not to slip on the protruding edges

When I look closely the Bottom is murky

It shimmers like a heat haze

Faint muffled sounds seem to vibrate from the walls

In the lonely corner

We can see the sole shadow of an ominous figure

A solitary smore standing firmly in the shadows

The Box is a thing of mystery

Perhaps it isn't a Box

Instead a cylindrical container

Maybe an empty void

Where you can plummet thorough

and fall

and fall

and fall

Except there is always something hiding there

Sometimes an just a dusty jumble of random objects

Guarded By an army of dust Bunnies and tumbleweeds

Seeming to gaze at you with a morose expression

The inhabitants of the Box sit alone

The Box

They are listless in the face of adversity and the whorls of mist  
They seldom stop By But when they do, it's only for  
a fleeting moment  
You can conjure up glossy prints of your favorite Bands  
drooping chocolate cakes with thick mascarpone filling  
Battered kettles and painted nightstands  
tapestries shimmering with 70 different shades of yellow  
dancing palomino horses, with their tails still waving  
Like something out of a storyBook  
When you reach to touch them, they evaporate like  
smoke  
All that's left is the reminder of their stifling embrace  
They make me feel like I'm living a day-  
dream  
Or a nightmare

## Isabel Ke | 13 | Canada Imagination Has No Limits

*“The power of imagination created the illusion that my vision went much farther than the naked eye could actually see” - Nelson Mandela*

Like many others, I have a very big imagination. I can see things that I've watched or looked at before and they normally come out when I'm trying to sleep. I'm very sensitive when it comes to that and in order to occupy my mind, I 'dream.' Keep in mind that I'm fully awake, and I know what I'm doing. I'm able to control these 'dreams' as it plays in my head, almost like a movie, as if watching out of someone's eyes.

I've seen, visited and done things that I've always wished to do, but never have done. Like the quote states, I see beyond what I can actually see. Perspective change for example. When interacting with others, I can 'feel' their emotions and their intent, not just mine. (Since technically I've created them in this 'world' of mine) You could say it's almost like living the life of another person, whose experienced things that I've never done.

Imagination gives you a sense of understanding in the real world; you can put yourself in another's shoes and see why they are acting a certain way. I've noticed that I have become more observant when it comes to people, much more than I was when I was younger. However, in the real world, you can never completely understand the experiences that they've had, because you've never experienced any of it.

If you stand somewhere high up, for example on a mountain, you can probably understand what this quotes meaning is much better. You can see everything on the ground, but not all of the things that are further. If you use 'the power of imagination,' it will create something almost like a delusion or hallucination that you can see much farther and

## Imagination Has No Limits

much more. With your own eyes, there is a limit to what you can see. But to the visually impaired, they have a greater challenge, -as well as a power and a gift. If they stand on that mountain, they will not be able to see anything. But with imagination, the distance can stretch farther than the human eyes can really see. The things that they imagine are there could be 100 times better than what you and I really see in the distance.

Children especially, their imagination is much stronger than ours as we age. I've seen some that have imaginary friends and even have conversations with them! When I was younger, I used to pretend I had a pet pig with my sister. We knew it wasn't real, but it was fun to pretend that they were. We pretended to buckle their seatbelts in the car, as if they sat in the middle and asked them how they were feeling. I recall one of the names being "Squishy," the other one might have been "Piggy," but I don't remember my childhood too well. Not very creative names, now that I look back in my childhood, but still fun times!

I enjoy writing things, because for me, it's easier to express something you've imagined on paper than in words. I love to read and I imagine things better when I read them. If you imagine what is going on in the book inside of your head, it makes it so much easier to see! You feel sucked into the story and it just comes alive. I'm not overly sensitive to things, but reading a sad book really hurts sometimes. It feels like you're with them while something bad is happening, and imagining makes you feel the pain or happiness a lot more. When I was younger, I had much more time to do things that I wanted to do. The older you are, the more responsibility you have, and the less time you have for yourself. I used to be able to read for hours and hours in a row, until I had to be forced to play and exercise. I also used technology a lot less, and had more time to do things that I wanted to do. But things change when you age, for the

## Imagination Has No Limits

better and for the worse.

Imagination can be the drive to what you really want to do; it can motivate you to work harder in life as well. For jobs that require creativity and imagination, for example an artist or an engineer when creating designs, imagination is essential.

I don't believe many people know how powerful imagination is. From an early age, we are taught not to indulge in daydreaming or things that are creative or let us express ourselves. One of my teachers told me that as they got older, they had more difficulty with things that do involve imagination and creativity. The truth is, imagination, can be the start of a revolutionary idea or the first step into making a dream come true.

# Lillian Li | 11 | Canada

## What if you couldn't see?

*What does vision mean to you?*

To look outside and see the world  
Is a precious gift sometimes  
Especially when your vision's bad  
Or when you are blind.

Someone who just cannot see  
Won't want to live like this  
What they really, really want Is to get their vision fixed.

Listening to descriptions  
They will try to visualize the world  
But they will always want to see  
What they have been told.

Now that you know who needs help  
Donate, help them to see  
They have the right to view the world  
Just like you and me.

# Rinal Dahhan | 13 | United States

## They Never Spoke

*“The power of imagination created the illusion that my vision went much farther than the naked eye could actually see” - Nelson Mandela*

Parents and teachers alike often encouraged the power of imagination.

They said all you needed was a little imagination, spoke of the hopes and dreams you could reach with one simple tool.

They never spoke of the depression that ensued in teenage years long after the playful spirit of childhood had since faded away.

They never spoke of all the young adults, suffering through college with nothing but instant ramen and \$40 to their name.

They never spoke of the 30-year-olds, unemployed and at home, because the job market is tough and the real world is pretty rough.

They never spoke of the middle-aged, with three children to raise, and barely scraping up enough money at a job that they hate.

## They Never Spoke

And when did “use your imagination” become a sarcastic phrase?  
Maybe somewhere between 13 and 30,  
where everyone’s losing hope,  
and their faces are bleak.

But somewhere along the line,  
all those kindergarten teachers were right, because  
while they never spoke of the unhappy,  
they reminded children that imagination  
was sometimes all that you needed.

You don’t see many unhappy kids,  
Because they don’t see the world that we do live in,  
they see the world we could live in.  
They see the possibilities of their abilities.  
They see famished and, neglected becoming  
the well fed and respected.  
And all these children  
see much more than we do.  
Tiny eyes, with such huge  
sight.



## *What does vision mean to you?*

This story is all about two girls who are best friends, but one loses her eyesight.

### BEST FRIENDS

“Hey Bella” said Bless, “Hey Bless!” said Bella. Bless and Bella were friends before they could talk and did almost everything together! The two girls were at school waiting for their bus on a cold winter afternoon so they could go home. Very recently Bella had moved houses and goes on a different bus than Bless. Bella’s bus arrived earlier than Blesses. When Bella arrived at her house she went to her room, changed into joggers and a hoodie, washed her face with face soap, put her hair into a messy bun, and turned on Netflix in her room to watch while eating some popcorn. Bella always stays home alone after school, because her parents work and her older sister is in an after school club. When Bless’s bus arrives she gets on and sits on an empty seat. Once she arrives home she goes to her room, changes into sweats and a very warm and comfortable crop top hoodie, puts her hair into a messy ponytail, washes her face and turns on her Laptop to watch YouTube. While her laptop is loading, she facetimes Bella who is currently watching a movie called “Little Rascals, save the day!” Bella picks up the call and the two girls chat for a long time. When Bella’s mom comes home after two hours, Bella goes downstairs to help with cooking. Bella loves to cook, it is her hobby. When Bless’s mom comes home Bless plays with her siblings to keep them busy and out of trouble. The two girls meet up at the park after dinner like every other day. But this day changed how Bless saw the world...

## BLESS

I and Bella were playing tag and she was trying to catch me. I was running while looking back and all of a sudden, when I looked in front of me everything went Black... ! The next thing I knew I was hearing voices that sounded like my mother's and Bella's voices. I opened my eyes but I could not see anything. I heard a different voice that I couldn't figure out whose voice it was. The voice said "We don't think she will be able to see again". Then there was the sound of crying... my mom crying. I then found out where I was and what that voice was. I was in the hospital and the voice belonged to a doctor. I was shook by those words now. I still have a whole life left and I can't see, or in other words I AM BLIND! I started to cry and my mom comforted me. I felt heartbroken, why did this have to happen to me out of everyone in the world! I started to cry a lot but I couldn't see anything. As I thought more about me being blind I realized that I will never be able to see my family or my friends anymore! I wouldn't be able to see anything at school from now on! I felt ruined.

## BELLA

I felt as bad as I sat beside Bless I couldn't stop crying after the doctor said she wouldn't be able to see again. I wish this wouldn't have happened. Why was I chasing her and why didn't I warn her that there was a tree branch! I wish that Bless would get her eyesight back! I told her and her mom I am so sorry many many times, and they told me it's alright it was an accident and it wasn't my fault, but I still felt guilty! Bless's mom drove me home when Bless was asleep. When I came home I ran straight to my loft and started to cry all over again. My mom came up to my loft in the attic and I told her everything. She tried and tried to make me feel better but I felt worse and worse as the time went by. The

next day at school, Bless wasn't there but someone had spread a rumor about her turning blind. Everyone asked me why I pushed her face first into a tree branch, and I told all of them I didn't but instead she ran into a tree branch! I had terrible days for a week. And when I would come home I would start to cry.

### LIFE

Bless went to school a week after but could not see anything. Bella helped her around and helped her with her homework by telling her the questions and writing her answers. Bella apologized a lot to Bless, but everytime Bless would say it wasn't your fault. I wasn't looking where I was running. Life became harder and harder for Bless because Bella couldn't be with Bless at all times, like at different homerooms where Bless had to do everything herself. Bless's mom put Bless into Braille class so she could read and do her work. After a while she became an expert at it. But she still couldn't do her work herself. She couldn't write because she couldn't see where she was writing. At home her mom wrote down what Bless said, and at school a classmate or Bella wrote down Bless's answers for her. But soon Bella's family had to move away. Now Bella couldn't help Bless in anything!

### BELLA

I was crying my eyes out when I found out I had to move. It was the worst! I wish Bless could see again! I wish that I didn't have to move! She lost her eyes because of me and she has to face loads of problems now!

BLESS

I wish I could see the world again. I feel bad about taking my eyesight for granted now. I sighed and told myself that I will find a way to do everything!

Your eyes are a very important body part that you should never take for granted by using lots of tech!

THE END!

# Writing

## Ages 15-18

Anna Yang | 16 | Canada  
The Better Gift

*“The power of imagination created the illusion that my vision went much farther than the naked eye could actually see” - Nelson Mandela*

I fell in love with colours the first day of the second week of kindergarten, when our teacher first told us about the seven colours of the rainbow.

“Roy G Biv, Roy G Biv,” we chanted faithfully, cheerfully ignoring the people who told us that indigo wasn’t really a colour. Our teacher’s word was as holy as scripture, and my mother used to joke that kindergarten teachers and the church were the only ones who could make people believe in things they couldn’t see.

My mother started taking me to the art gallery on weekends when I was six because my teacher told us about Van Gogh’s sunflowers and I wouldn’t shut up until she took me to see them. My mother had to explain that the Van Gogh Museum was in Amsterdam and we weren’t, and we compromised by going to see Monet instead. We stopped for half an hour in front of each painting as she described them to me in her soft voice, ignoring the other visitors when they coughed and glared.

She bought me an iPod when I was eight so I could listen to my audiobooks whenever I wanted. My favourite book was about a girl in love with another girl. One of them had blonde hair, which I imagined to be as warm as the summer sun on your skin, and blue eyes as cool as a dip in pool water in the middle of July. The other was described as having dark eyes and hair, allegedly very similar to mine. Both, I was assured, were very beautiful.

It was because I was so immersed in one of my books that I



bumped into her. She yelped as the cup she was holding hit the ground and some kind of liquid splattered all over the sidewalk.

“Crap! I’m so sorry,” I apologized, feeling embarrassed and utterly useless as I stood there, not quite sure how to move without making things worse.

There was a brief pause, during which she probably noticed my cane, because when she spoke she didn’t sound nearly as upset as she should have.

“Don’t worry about it, it was my fault. Should have watched where I was going.”

Her words were kind and her voice soft, but they didn’t keep me from feeling embarrassed. I dug my hand into my bag to try and find my wallet.

“Here, let me buy you another-”

Her hand closed around my wrist, gently tugging it away from my bag.

“Really,” she said, and I’d never seen a tomato before but I was pretty sure my face looked like one in that moment. “Don’t worry about it.”

Not worrying wasn’t in my nature. But something about the way she said it made me want to try, and I haven’t stopped since.

The morning sun is warm on my face, and tells me she’s already awake. She always opens the blinds when she’s up before me, because she knows I refuse to get out of bed unless I have undeniable proof it’s actually morning.

Breakfast is quieter than usual. I can hear her tapping her foot against the floor.

“Don’t worry,” I tell her, echoing her words from all those years ago.

She takes a deep breath, slowly, and eventually the tapping stops.  
“You ready to go?”

I nod and pick up my cane from its usual spot against the wall. It’s six steps to the front door, three down the stairs. The last step is just a bit steeper than the first two. She holds the door open and I step through. Nine steps to the car.

She asks if I want the radio on, and I shake my head. Not today.

“Are you excited?” she asks.

“Kind of,” I say, then hesitate. “Yes. Maybe. I don’t know.”

She laughs, in that soft way of hers. I want to know what she looks like, when she smiles. Suddenly, imagining it as the visual embodiment of hot cocoa isn’t quite enough.

“What’s it like? Not being able to see? I don’t think I’ve ever asked.”

She hasn’t, and I love her ever more for it.

“It’s not so bad,” I say, cautiously. “I mean, I’ve dreamed of this day more times than I can count, but I like to think my imagination has done a fairly decent job of filling in the gaps.”

For instance, she’s silent now, but I can almost see her nodding, biting at her lip the way I’ve been told she does whenever she’s in deep thought. My mother has always told me that between vision and imagination, the latter was the better gift.

“Well, I guess we’re here.”

She gets out of the car first and helps me down. I don’t need it, but I can tell that she does, so I let her.

“Read the sign to me?”

There’s a brief pause, and I can imagine her squinting against the sunlight.

“Xavier’s vision correction services.”

“Should have added a ‘for the gifted.’”

I feel the puff of her breath against my cheek even though her laugh is silent.

“Come on. Careful, the steps are kinda steep.”

The operation itself is a bit underwhelming. The result though, is - for once - better than I could have imagined.

All of Roy G Biv is laid out before me, and I feast upon the sight. I am thirty-three but I feel like a child again, hearing my teacher speak of things I cannot see but can imagine, picturing the warmth of yellow on my skin, or the lucidity of blue, or the mystery of purple. I have known colours all my life, but seeing is believing and finally I believe my mother when she said that she couldn't pick a favourite colour.

My girlfriend is staring at me expectantly, and my eyes catch on her lips as she asks me what I think.

“It's beautiful.”

She smiles, and I marvel at the sight.

“Yeah. It is.”

Danielle D'Souza | 16 | Canada  
The Passenger

*“The power of imagination created the illusion that my vision went much farther than the naked eye could actually see” - Nelson Mandela*

His world is a collage of shapes. He was raised by its rectangular cheques and square offices; its cylindrical cups of coffee. He navigates through its terrain with practiced ease, raising himself on a pedestal and teaching its people to love him.

He does not stray from his path. So, when he meets the little girl for the first time, it is only right that he is terrified. She is a blinding reflection of himself, gazing through eyes so familiar, but with a glint he has never known - seemingly too old and too young at the same time.

Her hair tumbles down her back in clumsy spirals. It is almost poetic how he focuses on the oval curls because shapes, he understands. He tries to define this her, to pick apart her patterns, to pin down this niece of his.

This niece who has ignored his gift in favor of the box it was packaged in. Even as he stares, the questions pulsing along his skin, she grins a toothy grin and the words die on his tongue.

In his mind, the scene unfolds in waves. The box is half her size, yet she marches it along the perimeter of the room, whistling the familiar tune of a departing train. Shrill – a sharp exhale of steel. She is the conductor, and her cardboard train chugs dutifully beside her.

She sees trees of green and smooth tracks. He sees a living room of tall walls and cold floors. He can feel his own uncertainty wrapping around him, protecting him. He does not know her fake world, does not want to know it.

But, her four-year-old mind is too innocent to detect his discom-

fort. She just inches closer, smiles wider, expands the little world she has created.

Her train curls in on itself, evolves into something more. Suddenly, it is blinding yellow and she is a taxi driver. She sits in the middle of the rectangular, cardboard enclosure; pressing a makeshift horn.

Look! I'm driving. No. He wants to scream. You're not. He does not know why, but he hates it. This world, so unlike his own, is dangerous. It is wrong. She is a child and is naïve and this box is nothing more than a box and she is nothing more than who she is.

It is a lesson engraved by society years before. I'm a skier.

He knows more than anyone, there is no room for those who wonder. The world is a strict arrangement of sharp edges and repeating patterns and he does not stray from his path.

I'm an astronaut. Society will tear her apart. Look! Look at me float! He feels dizzy. She is a sailor in the middle of the living room, sitting squarely in the box and rowing mystical oars only she can see.

Land ho! Her high-pitched laughter is a piercing lifeline and he clings to it as if his world depends on it. And maybe it does.

There is no pattern to the way she moves. She is the personification of disarray, and the chaos envelops him, eats at him, until it slips beneath the skin and suddenly there is no barrier between its steady growth and the man himself.

His thoughts are spiraling into oblivion and this moment in time continues to stretch until it spans the universe.

He is stuck with a child who sees more than she should, and it is breaking him apart; ruining his beliefs; ripping his world until the shapes are no longer shapes.

He is both relieved and bitter that her world is so hers. Her world is wild and untamed and free; a world in which a box can be a thousand

things at once.

It is enchanting and maybe he's forgetting how to breathe and maybe that's okay because maybe it does not matter if this is fake because it is beautiful.

I'm a pilot. Look at my plane! He does. She is so small and frail, staring at him from inside the box. But there is something about her which startles him. Maybe it's the way her eyes stare at him in childlike wonder, seeing something within him he will never see himself - or maybe it's the way she is both the setting and the main character of her little scene – but she is fiercely beautiful.

So when she calls him to play the passenger, he cramps his six foot frame within the tiny box and lets her tell him a story. He lets her paint his skies with shapeless clouds and feels the wind whistle through his hair and, for a moment, he believes.

He is flying.



Eilene Su | 17 | Canada  
My Diary

*“The voyage of discovery is not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes” - Marcel Proust*

September 16, 2015

Dear Diary,

As far back as I can remember, everything was the same. I lived in the same town, in the same house, went to the school with the same kids, and did the same extracurricular activities every week. I followed the rules, and I was always called a ‘goody-two shoes’, thinking it was a good thing. Until I realized that my life was boring. I used to wonder how my life would be as a story, until I realized that it would be a single page, photocopied. I don’t know what to do with this revelation.

September 23, 2015

Dear Diary,

It’s a lot harder to change than I thought it would be. For many years, I’ve done the same thing that everything was an instantaneous response. I don’t feel, see, or hear anything. I’m watching my life from a narrator’s view. It’s like I can only focus on the most miniscule grain of sand when there is an entire beach that I cannot see. Maybe I should travel.

September 30, 2015

Deary Diary,

I didn’t travel. But I decided to join some other extracurricular clubs. My school has a club for a local charity, but they were accepting all members. It was a lot easier to get into than the other competitive clubs

that I tried for years to get into.

I met this one girl at the club and well... she was kind of weird. She came up to me and kept saying nonsensical things about nature. I don't know if I want to stay in this club.

October 23, 2015

Dear Diary,

So I stayed in the club (mostly because I didn't know how to quit). Still, I hope you're proud of me. It's strange being in this club. There was something oddly comforting about my mundane routines and this club is so unlike everything that I have ever done before... I'm kind of terrified. That girl I mentioned before came to talk to me again. Her words seemed slightly less nonsensical but I still didn't understand much of what she was saying. She did invite me to do some charity work with her on the weekend, but it conflicts with my classes.

November 14, 2015

Dear Diary,

I finally mustered up the courage to tell my parents that I wanted to quit piano. They didn't really understand but after many, many hours of screaming and arguing, they finally agreed... but also took away my laptop. Not sure if it was worth it :( That girl from the club asked me to volunteer with her again, and she's been super persistent I think I will just say yes so she will stop bothering me. Although I still don't know her name...

December 5, 2015

Dear Diary,

I found out that the girl's name is Katrina and we arranged to vol

unteer during the holidays. She says that that's the most important time to volunteer. I mean, I don't really see why since the holidays are always so festive. I'll update you later on how that goes (I'm expecting to be playing board games, and being very... board haha)

February 28, 2016

Dear Diary,

I know I haven't written in a long time (I know I promised to update about volunteering). The thing is, I didn't know how to write this entry, but I'll start with: I am the worst human being. I read through the past few entries and I really am the worst human being. Christmas is not always festive, and I learned that the hard way.

So Katrina and I got to the shelter at 6:00 AM, and of course I was cursing her in my head. I was grumpy from having to go in the first place and having to wake up early. I couldn't believe that I was spending my Christmas day volunteering.

I expected the place to be empty, I mean everyone should have been at home celebrating with their families. And this is when I started to realize how wretched I was. It was packed, completely packed. So packed that it was almost impossible to walk through. Katrina brought me to the organizer who told us that we will be helping to hand out some hot meals and warm clothing. The entire time I was so shocked, I could have been a bobble head.

We spent the whole day serving food and providing warm clothes, but what terrified me was that there were children there. Children my age, children younger than me. I couldn't believe any of it. I even remember how one kid said that today was his best Christmas ever, while that morning I was wondering if my parents had gotten me the new smart

money, whether they lost their job, or had too many kids, or those that had been kicked out of their house. That night, I went home and cried. For the first time, my tears were not for myself.

June 10, 2031

Dear Diary,

I found this while cleaning out my parents' house so they could move to a retirement home. I don't know why I stopped writing, but I thought you would be curious. TL;DR after that day volunteering, my life had completely changed. It brought meaning into my life. I began to see that the kids that I go to school with are not just "kids", but individuals who need a friend. It seemed from that moment on, my life had regained colour. I still volunteer t that shelter. It's ironic how a building that was 20 minutes away was once just a building, but now it's so much more.

Florence Guo | 15 | Canada  
Grey

*“The power of imagination created the illusion that my vision went much farther than the naked eye could actually see” - Nelson Mandela*

You could be anywhere but here.

You run through a wild forest, cold wind streaming in your hair, leaves crunching and twigs snapping beneath your feet. Brown dirt beneath you, crumbling as your footsteps rush past. Blue birds, fluttering to and fro, flashes of colour. Red fruit hang from bushes, and maybe if you reach out to take one the thorns will pierce your flesh, berry red blossoming on your skin.

The beating of your heart keeps time.

The first snatches of a red dawn over the horizon: it sets fire to the grey fog but it's not enough. Maybe it won't ever be enough.

Behind you: a veil of mist; you cannot see. Something follows you.

Grey, a haze: blurred around the edges like an old memory. Grey and it bleeds the colour from the forest as it passes.

Grey: the walls of your bedroom. You are still here.

You have gone nowhere but to your mind.

You will go nowhere.

Grey: the floors. Grey: your clothes.

An alarm clock beeps.

Grey: the sky outside. It rains.

The sand is silty white beneath your feet. The sea is foam green and distant specks of black—birds, you think—circle overhead. There

are umbrellas, all around you, and to your left there are children running, chasing an orange ball. A pink clamshell, ridged, in your hands. The green of coconut trees are stark against the blue sky. The sun casts the world in a warm yellow light and when you lean back, red peeks through the thin film of your eyelids.

You could stay here forever.

To your right there's a flash. It starts in the distance, like dust drifting towards you: a storm.

You are in your car with its seatbelts of grey.

Your mother drives. You pass blurry streets.

Minutes roll by.

The asphalt is grey.

Rain drips down the window.

*Maybe, you think, the sky weeps for you.*

*Does it watch you, you think, absurdly. Does it see the mountains and rivers and forests where you could be?*

A tundra: nothing but white for miles without end. The snow crunches softly beneath your feet and the aurora borealis dances above you: purple and green and blue like a drug and you think, maybe, just maybe, you could stay here forever with the wind in your hair and the colours forever imprinted behind your eyelids.

The sun blazes low on the horizon, never quite out of sight, never quite enough to stop the grey creeping up your edges of your vision, swallowing the world.

A dull fluorescent light casts ashen shadows. Cinder block walls around you.



Pencil lead, scratching against paper. *How do they live like this, you wonder. Do they not see the smog that drowns them?*

Your teacher gestures, wildly, distorted through dirty water.  
His grey suit ripples and fades.  
Life goes on.

There's nothing but blue sea and a blue night sky around you, endlessly deep.

You look and you see— nothing. The oblivion of the pitch black sea calls to you; the waves sing their hypnotic song. They dance, up and down and up and down, scattering the starlight: rainbows encased in seaspray, frozen in their ephemeral lives.

Then—

Chrome chairs. A tablecloth like spiders' webs at dusk.

The clock ticks.

Ashen faces smile with thin lips and feather grey streaks your mother's hair.

There's something dull behind her eyes.

You wish you did not have to look.

You don't have much of a choice.

You climb until you could reach up and pluck the stars from their nest in the velvety blue.

Before you, city lights lie like paint splattered on a canvas. Before you, the buildings are on fire with neon lights, flashing, flashing. A burning sunset to your left, painting the sky in cotton candy pink and neon orange and firetruck red.

Dark blue to your right, fading into black. Stars wheel like beacons

in the dark and as you look at them, you think: maybe, maybe, this is home.

A grey computer screen. The numbers blur in front of your eyes.  
The rain still falls, outside.

The clock ticks, softly, and you stare at its hands: turning, turning.  
Grey creeps up in the sides of your vision but you dig your nails  
into your palms until it blooms red.

*No, you think. No, you will not let it sweep you away.*  
The clock ticks on.

You're here.

Grey steel twists together; the buildings tower above you.  
Rain trickles softly from the sky.  
You run through the asphalt streets, puddles splashing.

A warm spring wind blows in your hair and people throng around  
you. Their rain jackets are red and yellow and there's a cup of brown  
coffee in your hands. Your shirt is blue and your lips are blood red and  
the flowers tucked into your dark hair are purple and pink and white.  
The traffic light flashes green.

You're far from home.

Above you, the sky is grey.

*Grey is but a shade, you think, of its former glory.*  
But it is a colour nonetheless.

And the days pass, one after another, sometimes grey and some-  
times not and you think: *maybe this life isn't so bad.*

# Jack Zhang | 17 | Canada

## A Littoral Epiphany

*“The voyage of discovery is not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes” - Marcel Proust*

The rain was coming down in fat, gusty sheets over the hotel awning. Another inn, I thought, staring out of the grimy tour-bus window. I was sick to death of inns. Through the entrance I could see the chaperone. She was leaning against the hotel counter, yellow and indistinct, bending like a Dalí. I wondered if she hated her job, traipsing about for hours on end and for twenty bucks an hour. I couldn't picture her enjoying it. It was our last night in the Maritimes, and I had hardly enjoyed it myself.

I guess it all started with the trees. We had deplaned at Fredericton Airport on Friday just as the sun was bleeding out. The fusty five o'clock heat swelled up from the tarmac. I felt its presence like a clamshell.

I didn't think much of New Brunswick. Even as our driver loaded up the van, the view from the parking lot was like any other, the horizons a ho-hum collage of green on green.

We got in and they started the car. All the while, she and my mother chatted in opaque streams of Mandarin. I made out snippets like “hotel” and “schedule,” but mostly I looked out at the landscape. The trees looked back at me, silent and dispassionate. There were tall basswoods with shiny leaves, slender, milk-white birches, firs and spruces, and denuded trees that stood dead; there were trees everywhere you looked. I pictured turning up a pocket of them in icy Greenland. Laughable, I thought, that every country you visit will have trees. The things were inescapable, crowding every landscape with their sameness.

I turned toward the window, where the raindrops were sliding down. Normally I liked to watch them race, but today they looked sad, lugubrious, as though a distraught god were crying them.

The other tourists were in a bout of agitation, too. The man behind was barking about the thunderstorm. My mother was lecturing to a pregnant couple about housing and university options. I slumped back in my seat and listened to the old curmudgeon yell at the weather. I sighed.

It wasn't raining that afternoon on the yacht. I call it that, but it was more of a dinghy, really. College students in white shirts with tooth-paste-commercial smiles. My mother selected a booth near the stern. To this day I can still smell the exhaust.

The sights were nothing short of unspectacular. From our spot, we had a perfect view of the gross, blue-green waves lapping flaccidly at the gunnel. My mother was ecstatic. I watched as she transformed into a creature of photo-mania, her fingers click-clicking away. Horrifying, I thought. When she turned the camera on me, I told her to freeze.

"Why? We're out here."

"Yes," I said, looking at the 'here'. "But I don't want to."

"Don't be like that," she said, scowling, her forehead lines bent like a seagull in flight.

"And what's the difference?" I started, "between 'here' and any other body of water? It all looks the same."

"Fine," she said, her voice cold and sheeted.

My mother didn't take my photo that day. She and some other tourists went up to the top deck, all lobster-hats and smiles. They wanted to get some landscape shots.

In the booth next to ours, the young couple gave a wink of commiseration. I smiled, meekly.

I had chalked up our tiff to a difference of priority, but as I wasted away in that repellent bus, I thought: What was my priority? To go through life without being photographed? To have the worst possible time with my mother? To be a perpetual mope?

No, I thought, but I couldn't think of any vindicating excuse. Every experience I had always seemed to go sour. My life felt like one long look through a kaleidoscope, except I had already twisted through every combination. I was hopelessly blasé. And the worst part was I had no idea what to do. What happens when your character flaw is apathy? Nothing. The story doesn't go anywhere—or if it does, you get executed by the French-Algerian justice system.

My own fate seemed bleaker still. I turned to stare out the window for what felt like the thousandth time. I tried looking at the rain differently, but all I saw were the twenty or so other thunderstorms I'd seen from my own backyard. Nothing novel to it.

"I've never seen so much rain before." It was the couple, the man.

"Really? Don't you get rain in Sacramento?" My mother asked.

"We're better off opening the sprinklers and pretending," his wife joined in. "That's why we came to the Maritimes; a counterpoint to dry, suburban Sactown."

Sactown? I thought. I didn't know they spoke fluent English.

She shot me a grin. "Your mom says you're from Toronto, right? What's that like?"

"Fine," I said, looking down.

"In Sacramento, rainstorms are a rarity. And lobster is almost myth. Well, at least for us."

"What about trees?" I ventured. I was being flippant, but her answer surprised me.

The lady looked at me, eyes glittering. “Funny thing, ‘City of Trees’ is our nickname.”

“But at the end of the day, it’s not about the scenery,” her husband interjected. “The trees are all just background. It’s the people,” he smiled, wrapping his arm around her, “that you share the scenery with.”

“Yeah,” I agreed.

I slumped back in my chair a second time, mulling it all over. Everything around me seemed quieter; the man behind was conversing with his sister in soft, intimate tones. I watched the tour guide pad back onto the bus, her face aglow. The rain had let up slightly, timidly, but enough for a beam of sunlight to poke through. My mother was beaming, too.

It was as though a rainbow had washed over my vision. A revelation, of sorts. The sepia that had clouded my kaleidoscope had all but drained away.

I was going to appreciate my trees.



# Joy Mao | 16 | Canada Colour Me

*“The power of imagination created the illusion that my vision went much farther than the naked eye could actually see” - Nelson Mandela*

*Let me describe it to you.*

People are always telling me about the colours, the ones I can't see, but something different follows each time I hear those words. Of course, it's not so much the colours that change as it is the portrayals of their essences, and even then, they all boil down to something similar in the end.

After all, the spectrum is constant.

Red is ferocious. It screams of violence and anger, of conflict born from love and hate from which none can escape for more than a short moment in time. It is beautiful and deadly, strong and destructive, and won't hesitate to consume you at the first inkling of a step too close. It's the fiery flames licking uncooked meat poised on the grill over a campfire, the pain and anguish endlessly haunting your mind screaming why why why. It's chasing the limits but going too far.

The eyes I see in the mirror are red.

Orange is warm. It spins a tale of pursuit and triumph and the glory that follows, wrapping its loving embrace of all those who near. It's optimistic and encouraging, determined and positive, and holier-than-thou with its hidden deceit beneath a mask of wisdom. It's the hand on your back pushing you forward until you succeed, the voice in your mind asking for more more more. It's taking until there's nothing left to take.

The hands on the grandfather clock are orange.

Yellow is joyful. It sings of happiness and cheer, of achieving all that you ever wished for in the world and holding it in the palm of your hand.

It's energetic and bright, flamboyant and spontaneous, and an unstable force that may burst at any given time. It's the rays of early morning sunlight piercing through the windows, the glow of a person with good news to share, the insistent drumming of now now now. It's warning of the fall after going over the edge.

The cat perched upon the shelf is yellow.

Green is fresh. It promises safety and growth, rejuvenating and healing those who welcome it with open arms and allowing peace to settle in their hearts. It's stable and hopeful, lighthearted and ambitious, and relentless in claiming its own despite whatever stands in its way. It's the graceful branches of willow rustling in the cool spring breeze, the incessantly possessive growls in your head of mine mine mine. It's providing a false sense of security that was never meant to last.

The walls of my house are green.

Blue is deep. It murmurs of unwavering trust and expertise, serving only the wisest and most worthy but rejecting all others who approach. It's confident and forceful, cold and tranquil, and always works in its own favour without a care for the wills of others. It's the vast expanse of the sky that stretches across the world, the ocean of power wailing free free free. It's playing with strategy but with no rules.

The mountain in the distance is blue.

Purple is dignified. It declares authority and independence, standing atop a pile of bodies with a crown of bones resting on its head. It's regal and creative, mysterious and false, and manipulates everything around it until the circumstances are pleasing enough in its eyes. It's the sweet taste of dark berries just before it brings you to Death's door, the tender beckoning of come come come. It's ruling with an absolute hold over the world.

The laptop on my desk is purple.

People tell me about the colours with pity in their voices and their grey, grey eyes, pointing out the things around me that match these colours. They think it would make a difference if I know what's red (the poppies) and what's green (the grass), but it never does.

No one ever bothers to explain black or white to me, but I can tell you all about those.

Black is elegant. It speaks of ever-imminent loss and exploitation, feeding on the countless fears of the people to grow in strength and size while encased in slumber. It's prestigious and sinister, familiar and unwanted, and greedily swallows up all that it can reach into its timeless space of darkness. It's the tapestry of shadows cast upon the ground, the eternal echoes of empty empty empty. It's drowning wretchedly in nothingness.

The heart of a human is black.

White is hollow. It paints pictures of beginnings and innocence, longing to be filled by something other than the immeasurable void it encompasses. It's pure and compassionate, frosty and simple, and remains still like a bystander while being stained with ease by anything it comes across. It's the snowflakes that fall and build and melt away all too quickly, the blank canvas calling choose choose choose. It's wondering the direction of your fate.

The road stretching down the hills is white.

Black and white and grey, grey, grey. That is all I can see with my eyes open wide. But when I close my eyes, I see life and death and all the crossroads that await me.

I pity the people who try to describe the colours to me, the ones who always look at me with sympathy. They see the world the way the world wants to be seen.

But I see the world the way I want to see it.

# Nazanin Soghrati | 16 | Canada Tehran, Tehran

*“The voyage of discovery is not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes” - Marcel Proust*

I. It was a violent summer the year we came back to visit Tehran. None of us wanted to go -- for ten years, my mother and I had lived in glorious ignorance of our home, under the brazen landscape of Boston, and now we were not ready to revisit and ruin the sweet memories we had preserved of the city at the backs of our minds. There was nothing there for us anyway-- nothing other than broken shards on the streets, the fragments of a city we had once mapped in childish scribbles but now felt infinitely far from. But my father argued otherwise. For days, he begged us to return, just for one summer at least, to rediscover the city of our birth. For my mother, that city was also where she had been raised, where she had grown into a young woman and won a scholarship to study in the US. Now, Tehran was no more than a fleeting memory for me and her, a few pictures of green oaks set against a honey sun to admire, souvenirs of nouges and pistachios to relish, some thought burning quietly in the crooks of our teeth. I walked into Tehran reluctantly the night our plane landed. American, the security guards jeered at me. Even from the glance of my eyes, I looked like a foreigner.

II. I walked the streets of my grandparents' neighbourhood in a daze. The smog surrounding the skyline in a red haze made the city look less like a childhood home and more like a monster-- a perverse moloch-minotaur hybrid that hailed and thrashed, howled and bled -- a creature boundlessly unfamiliar to me. After ten long years of living under the New England sky, the city was spread in splinters in front of my eyes: the rowdy bazaars, the copper smiths negotiating prices with customers, the hijabs covering women's heads. I wriggled in my chador

like a fried fish and clasped my mother's hands tightly in fear that I would lose her in the parched, foreign streets. Look at me, I wound the chador firmly underneath my neck, I'm a stranger in my family's home.

III. That summer, my grandmother urged me to volunteer at the hospital she used to work. We took the bus together to the dilapidated hospital and she introduced me to her old colleagues: Aghai Khazai, Khanoom Dardashti, Khanoom Omidi. For 30 years I worked here, she told me. I struggled to introduce myself to all the strangers surrounding me; my own name in Farsi sounded bitter, full of hooks and creases I couldn't iron out. Two weeks into my volunteering work, on a particularly busy night, my supervisor told me about an emergency situation in the floor above with an open-heart surgery. "The doctors need help," she handed me a green scrub and I dressed myself in grim shades, heaving and brewing in worry because I didn't know the first thing about handling such emergencies. The surgery room smelled of wounds, blood seeping from every crevice of the man's body splaid on the middle of the bed. After helping a nurse wash forceps and hemostats on the side, I stepped outside to comfort the patient's family anxiously standing outside. Sorry, I said in Farsi to the mother weeping by the door. It was the only word I knew how to speak in my mother tongue -- but I patted the woman's back and gave her a smile. I felt childish, aimless; other than our humanity and a single word of Farsi, this woman and I shared no commonality. Okay. It'll be okay. A sad smile slowly formed in the mother's wrinkled eyes and whispered a silent thank you. She hadn't understood my words, but she had understood the smile.

IV. When my mother picked me up that night, I tried describing the open heart surgery to her. Everything was so red and raw. I molded my hands into a fist, the shape of a heart beating dead air, and it was heaving like this, I opened and closed my fists to show her the contrac-

tions, how the open heart had gasped like a fresh fish caught from the sea. My mother feigned some interest in the limp, fist-sized organ I had tried to emulate, mumbled a few mindless words of interest and drove into the shameless dark. I slunk back in the yellowed, worn off car seat and thought of the city unfolding itself ahead of me like a crumbling origami. Where are we, mother? Where is home?

V. We left Tehran on the first Tuesday of September, just as the summer heat in Boston was beginning to dwindle down and give way to the autumn rain. Everywhere, the city throbbed with the start of a new beginning, a new season to accomplish, create, believe. Now, I hesitate to call Boston my only home. Where is home when your body is splayed in so many different places? I don't know where home is -- at least, not yet, but I do know I am made of two cities, two skylines poured into a single soul, two worlds laced around one neck.

# Selena Cai | 16 | Canada

## Illusions of Dreams and Reality

*“The power of imagination created the illusion that my vision went much farther than the naked eye could actually see” - Nelson Mandela*

Though I cannot see further than the dreams under my pillow from  
sleepless nights  
I can tell you it is a long way there.

I can tell you that woven into my pillow are infinite  
Nightmares and fantasies and false promises of tomorrow;

I can tell you that in that small distance I can see my future and my past  
And the remnants of all the tears I cried for forgotten purposes and  
All the little lights which showed either the brink of sunlight  
Or the mystery of moonlight.

I can tell you that all those dreams and figures I imagined  
Were more than false senses, yet they never rested as lies as  
Day by day they helped me see the light in otherwise another  
Mundane universe, I can tell you

That colour erupted from those nightmares feeding on the pain in the  
back of my mind  
But that line of sight never disappeared. Never. Not  
Behind hope, behind truth, I could see every possibility which one could  
never see  
Even with the best of spectacles.



Selena Cai | 16  
Illusions of Dreams and Reality

I can tell you that magic really exists, and though I can't see the courage  
in her heart  
I can tell you that I can see the courage in her eyes and I can tell you  
That I can see her future projecting towards the stars and let me tell you  
Let me tell you,

The dreams I see when the rest of the world was still awake,  
The regular naked eye,  
Even with the best of spectacles  
Could never truly read.

And though it may all be a wash of pretend- this  
Imaginary illusion of today's and tomorrow's and  
Life in between, it is not to say  
That it was ever really bad.

For the power of swirling thoughts and Van Gogh paintings in my head  
Ultimately gave me the sight to see that  
A complete world of potential occurs  
When you imagine with your eyes open and closed.

# Xiaohan Yan | 16 | Canada

## things are scarier in the dark

*What does vision mean to you?*

Things are always scarier in the dark, because in the dark you can't see. Can't see your fingers in front of you, or the stars gleaming like lanterns in the sky or the path that leads to your future.

In the dark, there's only you and your breaths and the beats of your heart. There're only your thoughts, stuck in your head, killing your head, beating down with angry fists that refuse to let you go. In the dark anxiety and stress reign, usurpers who have chased peace and happiness off their golden thrones.

In the dark, there is no such thing as peace. Sleep is stolen away by greedy hands, by the heavy feeling in your chest that's pinned and weighed you down. Sleep is far, far away and you're still here, underneath your measly blankets and clothes. It's too dark to see the stars or even your desk, but you know what lies there- know the books, know the sheets and sheets of paper, know the deadlines scrawled inside of your agenda, know all the possibilities, all the ways tomorrow could play out-

It plays out in your head, and it kills you- this uncertainty, this fear, this fog that clouds your mind and blocks your eyes and takes away your vision for the future. Your dreams in sleep are as far away as your dreams in reality at this point. They have flickered, flickered out and they could be dying for all you know, they could be gone, except you don't know because you can't see-

The feeling in your chest tightens again. You beat at it, hoping to drive it out but it doesn't work. There's another feeling creeping cross your back, a shadowed creature with spider-like legs, and it seems so

## Xiaohan Yan | 16 things are scarier in the dark

much like something's there, except it's not. So you twist and turn, trying to throw it off, to claw at it- the glow from your alarm clock blinds your eyes, and you see nothing, nothing but a long night ahead.

And the worst thing is, you know you have nothing to fear, not really. You tell yourself things can still play out well if you try. If you believe, if you hope, except how can you pray for light if you don't know where it is?

Yet you try, anyway, in the solitude of your bed with only your thoughts for company. The kings and queens of fear laugh at you for trying, and demand that you bow for your insolence, but you try regardless. You pray for time to pass and for the clocks to speed, you pray for someone to listen and help you in this hell of a night. You pray for the sun to come, for light to shine through your window- you pray that your fears are unfounded, that things are not as scary as they seem.

You pray for someone to tell you that things will be okay.

Yet the clocks tick and time passes and no one comes, no one speaks. You are no closer to sleep and you don't know if you ever will be. Sometime in the long night, the dark has slammed itself down your trachea and you feel like you can't breathe. The dark has wound itself around your intestines and you feel like vomiting. The dark has made its way into your head, and now it rules you.

Out of all the children that lie underneath the star-dappled sky, there is not a single one who has never known the dark. It doesn't creep under your bed or hide inside your closet, no, the dark is a conqueror inside of your own mind, a bandit of stealth who steals all you ever wanted and whispers that it is your fault until, eventually, you believe that it is right.

You see, things are always scarier in the dark. But the scariest thing about it is that you lose sight of what's out there. You lose sight of

## Xiaohan Yan | 16 things are scarier in the dark

what you were seeking, what made you hope, what you were so desperate to hold on to.

Yet it's important to remember that the night does not last forever. The night is temporary. And if there's anything you should remember in those long hours of fear and uncertainty, it is this: things are always scarier in the dark. But tomorrow the sun will rise and chase it away, and you will see again.

# Young Zhou | 16 | Canada Cigarettes and Valentines

*“The power of imagination created the illusion that my vision went much farther than the naked eye could actually see” - Nelson Mandela*

## HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

It was like I was grazing the water, but never daring to jump in, tethering at the borderline, but never working up the courage to cross it. I was scared, scared of the consequences, scared of the possibilities, scared of failure.

But I always had a sense of doubt within me. An omnipresent force, telling me to go for what I wanted to do, providing me with a sense of urgency, yelling at me to go for it!

I was just... curious, on what it felt like. All I heard was good things about it. All I saw was the excitement it gave and the happiness it brought. All I knew was how it changed lives. How everybody loved it.

And so, I plunged into the water and never looked back.

## THE CALM BEFORE THE STORM

None of my words could possibly describe how amazing it felt, but it started off so damn sweet. I was no longer aimlessly going about my mundane life but instead thrilled at every single opportunity I got with you. A sense of excitement rushed through my veins. You brought out my real self.

Remember our first meeting? I still laugh at how hilarious it was. I was so mesmerized by the fact that I finally had you, I didn't have a single clue on what to do.

We spent every single moment we could together, nothing could

## Young Zhou | 16 Cigarettes and Valentines

separate us. Sometimes we would go spend time with our friends, they were all happy for me, celebrating that our boat had finally sailed. Other times we would be alone, just the two of us, enjoying that very special atmosphere only we could create. Most importantly, you were always by my side. I always went to you in my times of need and you didn't disappoint.

You made me feel better. You relieved my stress. You were the calm to my storm. As long as I had you, everything would be alright.

And so, I kept on stroking against the gentle and warm water.

### THE BEGINNING OF THE END

But as time went on, I became more and more addicted to you. Every single moment I had needed to be spent with you. Every single second I was without you, I was dying over when would be the next time we'd see each other. I just couldn't resist. You were my whole world. You were my everything.

Our relationship faltered because of this. Our meetings were no longer full of unfiltered laughter, and pure and utter joy. That sense of excitement died down. That feeling that I got when I was with you just disappeared. I was now coming to you because I needed you. Because without you, I would no longer be able to function, no longer be able to live, no longer be able to survive.

Everyone was telling me to stop before it's too late, that you weren't good for me, that I should swim back to shore before it's too late, but I didn't listen.

I had faith in us, that after all of this, we could it make it through the tough times and oh, did I try my hardest. I knew you were tired of me. I knew that you hated how I always went to you and that my life depended on it. I knew that you were upset over all the times I came to you

## Young Zhou | 16 Cigarettes and Valentines

at midnight, begging you to be with me. But I believed. That everything would be alright.

And so, I pressed on, against the waves.

Unforeseen consequences

But alas, I was wrong.

It all came crashing down on me, quicker than I could have ever imagined. The gentle tides of the past were now massive tsunami waves crashing against me. One thing led to another and it came to me that I was already at the point of no return. That I could no longer make it. That there was no hope left.

You stopped caring about me. You found someone else. Right when I needed you the most, you abandoned me. You left me out to drown.

I tried everything I could, but none of it worked. I tried to stop thinking about you, despite how much I truly wanted you. I tried to heal myself, despite how much it hurt me. I tried to get a replacement, despite how much I truly loved you. I tried and tried and tried, but none of it worked.

That was the moment I realized.

The moment when I realized I had failed.

The moment I realized that I was blinded by all the people who loved and cherished you.

The moment I realized that I didn't see all the people who cried and suffered so much pain due to you.

That was the moment I realized that we don't hear from the people who fail, but instead from the people who succeed.

And so, I took out one last cigarette and gave this relationship one last go. I knowingly crashed against the tidal waves, understanding I couldn't make it back to shore.



## Young Zhou | 16 Cigarettes and Valentines

### ADIEU, MY FRIEND

You see “History is written by the victors,” and what lies behind all the successful rehabs and relationships are the countless failures and heartbreaks that come with them.

I held my last cigarette in front of me realizing that I will end up stranded in the middle of the ocean, with nowhere to go. Realizing that I lost.

And so, I dropped my cigarette and looked towards your eyes, realizing that you broke me, and not only me, but also my heart.

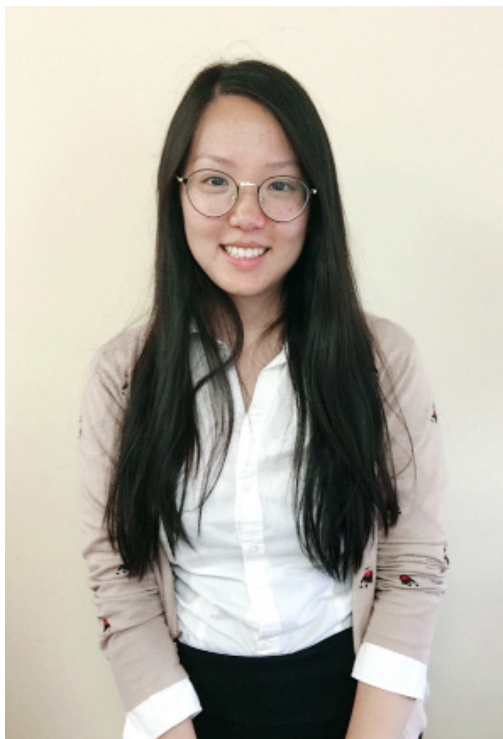
# Judges



**NEIL MARR** came to Bayview Secondary School in 2003 as a teacher of English and then moved to the History Department, where he also teaches Philosophy.

Mr. Marr has been a writer in various capacities throughout his life. While at University of Toronto, he wrote for the newspaper. He had a novel published in 2003 (*Magpies and Sunsets*), and has written several plays. His 2011 play, *P.S. Uncle Angus* debuted at Flato Markham Theatre and won the THEA for best drama at the ACTCO Festival.

He continues to act, direct and write from time to time, but mostly he marks essays.



**YIYING ZHOU** is a Chinese-Canadian artist and educator who has been drawing ever since she could hold a crayon. In fact, she can't recall a time where she wasn't enthusiastic about all forms of art. While pursuing her Bachelors in Fine Art at OCAD University, Yiying worked part-time as a children's art instructor and it was there that she discovered a love of teaching. After graduation, she continued to teach art to students of all ages. Currently, she divides her time between the studio and the classroom.

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