



2020 Anthology of **Youth Creativity**  
on Human Rights & Social Justice



INTERNATIONAL  
**HUMAN RIGHTS**  
ART FESTIVAL

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## **Introduction**

The 2020 Anthology of Youth Creativity on Human Rights & Social Justice is a collection of poetry, fiction, essays, and art by creative voices ages 21 and under. This anthology, published by the *International Human Rights Art Festival (IHRAF)*, is our first amplifying youth voices in social justice discourse. Here at the IHRAF, we firmly believe that young people represent the future of our planet and hope for a time when every human being is treated with respect for their rights. Through this anthology, we hope to inspire people of all generations to come together in the fight for social justice.

We are proud to present work by a diverse cohort of young people who reside in eight different countries and around the United States. Through art and writing, these talented youth advocates have engaged with some of the most pressing human rights issues that we face today, all while highlighting the beauty, sincerity, and vulnerability of their quest to remake our world.

## Foreword

**By Tom Block, International Human Rights Art Festival Founding Producer**

It is with humility, hope and a tremendous sense of honor that the International Human Rights Art Festival releases this first Youth Anthology, under the highly-skilled editorship of our 2020 Youth Fellow, Uma Menon. My generation — those in the 40-60 year old range — have failed in our social and climate stewardship. Since I was of the age when I would have qualified for inclusion in this anthology, our climate situation has worsened, our income inequality has increased, systemic racism remains with us, and political leaders have failed to marshal our energy for the common good, too-often playing to the lowest social denominator in bald-faced (and often successful) plays for power. Since the 1980s, the United States of America has, indeed, appeared more and more like an “oligarchy” than a pure democracy, as voting suppression grows, money concentrates in fewer and fewer hands, and the perversion of “free speech” has allowed corporations to act as individuals, dumping vast resources into their selfish and narrow-minded goals. The energy, beauty, power, sincerity and respect evinced in this anthology, therefore, represent desperately-needed palliatives to our social ills. Even more so, I feel that these voices are a harbinger of a new and more compassionate social order, one in which we are not divided by race, gender, ethnicity or religion — but become separated by those who want to move the world forward for all of us, against a shrinking number of selfish, small-minded and greedy dinosaurs who still yearn for some mythical “good old days” which, in reality, never existed. “Hope” is not only the most positive and powerful personal and social drug, it is also the precursor to genuine, constructive change. We hope for it, we imagine it, we implement it. The work in this anthology of youth creators from around the United States and world offers us some first steps toward a new and more caring world community. I’m falling in line behind them, to follow their energy and beauty — I hope that you will join me.

*Tom Block*

Founding Producer, *International Human Rights Art Festival*

**Tom Block** is the author of five books, a playwright, 25+ year exhibiting visual artist and Founding Producer of New York City’s International Human Rights Art Festival.

# Preface

**By Uma Menon, International Human Rights Art Festival Youth Fellow**

All of us today are living in a difficult time that is, in so many ways, unprecedented. But for myself and teens around the world, we are not just living, but growing up, in a time of fear and anxiety. Many of us have grown up practicing for active assailant drills because of the gun violence epidemic. During this climate crisis, we have constantly wondered what the future of our planet will be and whether our rights to clean air and water will be upheld. Throughout our lifetimes, the rights of Black people, Indigenous people, people of color, women, non-binary people, LGBTQ+ people, immigrants, disabled people, neurodivergent people, and low-income communities have been under constant attack.

As youth, we have grown up in a world where, human rights, unfortunately, continue to be violated. Many of us have felt powerless in a society where young people, particularly those who fall at the intersection of marginalized communities, are excluded from discourse on human rights issues. When I first came up with the idea for this anthology, I wanted to create a space where young people could engage with issues of human rights and social justice and be heard by those in power. Today, we are pleased to present an anthology of writing and art from young people across the world, tackling some of the most pressing issues of our time, including the Rohingya Refugee Crisis, climate injustice, gender inequality, and police brutality.

This anthology was compiled at a very important moment in the history of mankind. Much of the writing and art contained in this anthology were created during the COVID-19 Pandemic that changed the way we live and interact as humans. This pandemic has uncovered dangerous systemic inequalities and human rights violations that plague our society. IHRAF and the editors of this anthology would like to thank first responders, essential workers, and educators without whom this would not be possible.

This is also a time when structural racism continues to persist throughout the world. We stand in solidarity with Black Lives Matter and condemn racial injustice and police brutality. This anthology is committed to making space for the voices of Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color. We are pleased to share several pieces in this anthology that advocate for racial justice with skill and empathy. This anthology should give us all the hope that our generation

will be the one to create a world where the human rights of all people are respected. We hope that these outstanding pieces of art and writing will inspire you to consider the state of human rights in your community and the world, and that you will choose to take action. Contact a political leader or representative and ask for change. Contribute your time, skills, or resources to an important cause. Talk to your family and friends and spread awareness. All of us have a part to play in this fight for humanity.

*Uma Menon*

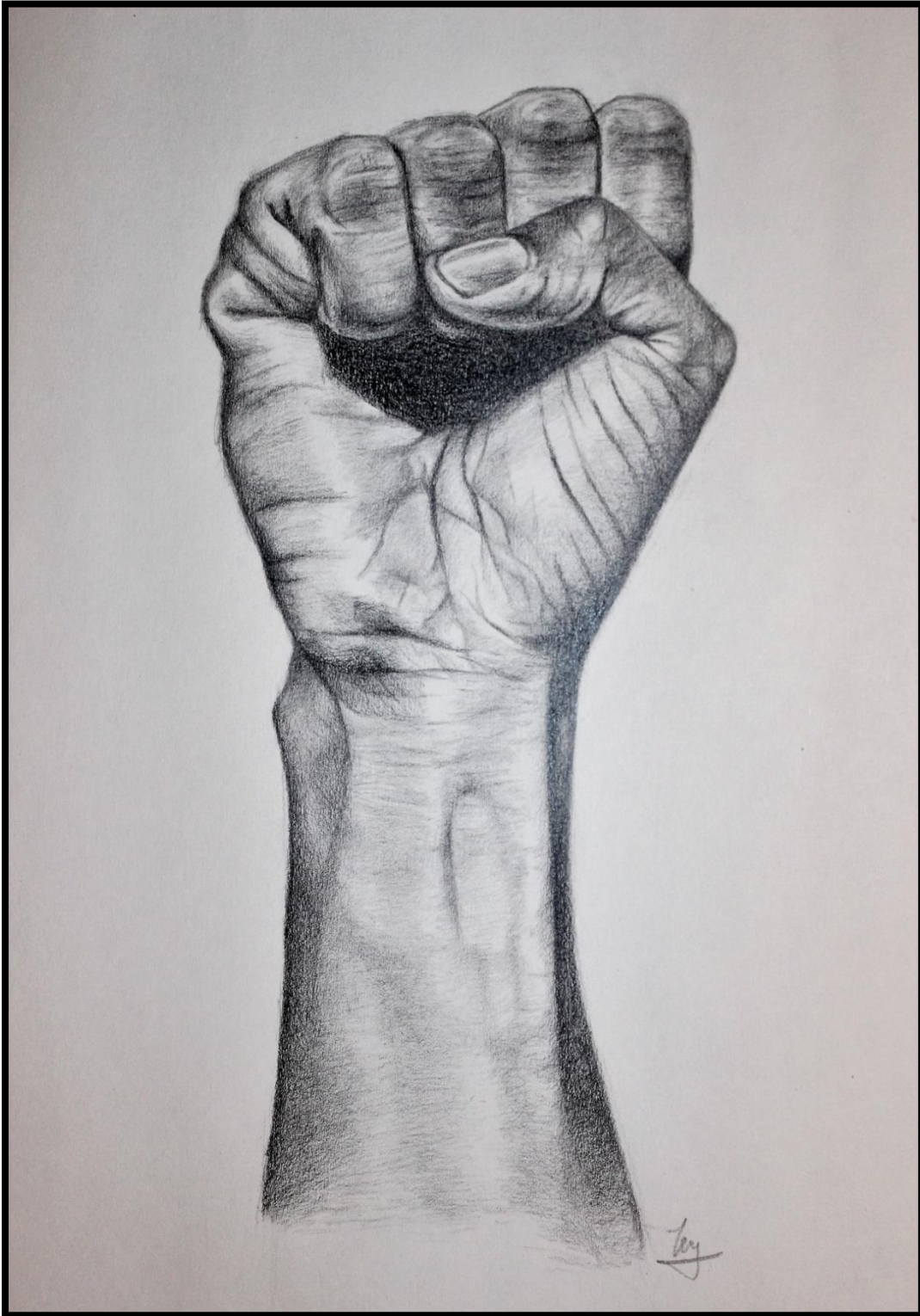
Youth Fellow, *International Human Rights Art Festival*

**Uma Menon** is a seventeen-year-old author, social justice advocate, and Youth Fellow of the International Human Rights Art Festival from Winter Park, Florida.

2020 Anthology of Youth Creativity on  
Human Rights & Social Justice

# RESIST

By Victoria Tong





# **On Fridays We Strike**

**By Maggie Munday Odom**

a tsunami of young people rolls through the space between high-rises / crosswalks trampled  
by a thousand fed up sneakers / sidewalks across the world bow to the anthem of youth  
tired of excuses / pamphlets spill from pencil boxes and backpacks / trading crayons  
for cardboard signs that scream of a world in flames / banners beg for a future / there is no planet  
b / chanting until the foundations of city hall tremble / yanking out the seams of the politicians'  
sleeping masks / fists to the sky demanding change / this generation will march  
until climate justice becomes a reality

# The Positive Poem

By Cris Eli Blak

This is a positive poem.  
I'm sick of seeing the news  
talk about the poverty,  
not the prosperity in the projects  
where people praise God and don't deserve  
to be tear-gassed.

But I won't talk about that  
because this is a positive poem.

And I grew up on a block  
where the streets sounded like  
a shuffle of music  
and the air smelt like the international  
section of a grocery store,  
a melting pot that was somehow always hot  
and if you got caught when the streetlights  
came on you should get home and run,  
not because of something you've done,  
but because you don't know who might be  
out looking for blood,  
maybe they'll have a badge.

"Oh say can you see by the  
dawn's early light"  
we still had to fight when that  
Declaration was signed in 1776,  
we were still dismissed  
and even diminished.

Some of us are still in cages,  
some still on ships,  
evidence that the struggle is not yet finished.

That is why they hesitate when we immigrate.

We talk a lot about change  
but we won't discuss the chains  
that have been on our wrists  
since the beginning of existence.

Yes, this is a positive focal point

because the only way we will ever  
be free is if we see that we  
have been imprisoned for much too  
long.

I am positive that the future holds  
some advancements in its hand,  
but why don't we get some new rights  
before we buy a new iPhone  
and, yes, I am right when I write down  
these words.

I have lived in the South my whole life  
so I've seen much worse  
than knees on necks,  
I've seen necks without bodies,  
images you will never get out of your head,  
the ones they will never put in history books  
that you'll open up to look  
for someone who looks like you but all you'll  
find is activists who have been assassinated.

But we won't talk about that  
because this is a positive poem.

What if we don't know how to  
be positive?  
What if we are only positive about  
being prosecuted and played as pawns  
in a game created by a system that  
enslaved us not too long ago.

I was told there is always light at  
the end of the tunnel,  
so I'm gonna get to that light and  
hopefully on that other side I won't meet  
anyone who has died,  
hopefully there is  
freedom.

And then we can talk about it all,  
because this will really be a positive poem.



But I knew Better,

lifted my chin up, to embrace needles that pricked my eyes to bathe in my tears

heaviness that hooked in my throat to jerk it back down

because Freedom was *so* hard to swallow

I could do Better

because I had this dream.

And it would be Better because roads

not paved in Blood

Must.

*Must.*

be paved in Gold

But even brick will do.

# **Fighting Climate Change to Secure Human Rights**

**By Ian Babler-Madrid**

Not only is climate change the existential crisis of our time, but it is also currently the fourth-largest threat to human health. Yet, despite all of this, some still struggle to accept the reality of this phenomenon. Climate change disproportionately affects people of color and people of lower economic status - sparking the term climate justice that frames global warming not just as an environmental issue but rather as an ethical and political one.

A U.S. federal government-funded study found that people of color are more likely to breathe in the pollutant of nitrogen dioxide that causes heart attacks, strokes, lung cancer, and respiratory diseases. Supporting the results of this study, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency found that African-Americans and Hispanic-Americans face 37% higher exposure to nitrogen dioxide than whites. This has left people of color with disproportionately higher rates of asthma. The University of Washington estimates that 5,000 premature deaths from heart disease could have been prevented if this disproportionate harm did not exist for African-Americans and Hispanic-Americans. Clean air, a basic human right, is being denied because of climate change. Many communities of color are forced to breathe in toxic air, even though everyone, no matter the color of their skin, should have equal access to clean air.

Most likely due to minority neighborhoods' proximity to cities and/or power plants, people of color are left vulnerable to the dangerous pollutant nitrogen dioxide and face a much larger health risk than white people. To stop disproportionately affecting people of color and ensure equal human rights for all, we must fight to end climate change. There are many ways a person can help reduce the effects of climate change from practicing a low meat diet to discussing climate change with others through relational organizing. Some ways to get more involved is to email your current representative in congress to voice your concerns or to join organizations fighting for the end of climate injustice, like Greenpeace. To be successful, social movements need the help of the youth population and climate injustice is no different.

## **Dance (Matisse)**

**By Pia Bhatia**

I am drowning in sleep. I am parched waking, I am sick of the chase.  
I am open Earth, a barefoot kid who wanders, wonders why the sand is red in Tamil Nadu.  
I am seven years old. We play in a park in the south, surrounded by white expat spawn with  
translucent skin. Us, our roots circled their baby fists in this soil until we took their colour on  
We're transparent too.

# Biblical Plagues in Contemporary Times

*A Reading from the Philippine Drug War, Chapters 1-11*

By Luz de Luna

**one.**

in which the river Nile, and all the sources  
of water in Egypt turn into blood:

but this time, it is the streets that are stained red.

drop after drop, blood seeps through the concrete  
and day after day, the people pretend they do not notice.  
in this version of events, the plague is not a warning  
sent by God to the stubborn man in the seat of power.

in this version of events, the plague is formed from  
the Pharaoh's own delusions. in this version of events,  
it is he who paints the cities crimson. in this version of  
events, the color does not bring him fear but satisfaction.

**two.**

in which frogs fill every surface across the land:

but this time, they are men in green uniform.

they squeeze themselves in places where they do not belong,  
but only because the Pharaoh himself had put them there.  
they do not croak like the smaller critters do—  
in fact, they seem to be silent until they ask you,

*where are you going?*

*do you know what time it is?*

*do you know that you're breaking the law?*

it is easy to go about your day and pretend  
to be unbothered, to make no foolish attempts,  
and just be a good citizen. it is easy to be content  
with keeping your head down—until they take  
you by the arm in spite of all that,  
and ask you to come with them.

**three.**



in which all the dust in the land transforms into lice:

but this time, they are men with pistols  
and badges that glimmer in the light.

their positions are what shield them from the eyes  
of the law, and they satisfy their thirst for blood  
with the Pharaoh's order for a "war on drugs"—  
a fancy name for what is essentially nothing  
more than state-sanctioned murder.

crimson is the city's new color,  
and they are no longer the city's protectors—  
they are its newest painters.

**four.**

in which swarms of flies shall fill all houses:

but this time, they are real people  
hiding behind digital screens and fake names,  
expanding their reach to all online spaces.

with empty threats and skin-deep insults,  
they fill your ears with endless buzzing.  
they descend upon you in swarms once  
they detect disdain in the way you utter his name,  
they ask you—over, and over, and over again—

*why don't you replace him then?*  
*why don't you just cooperate rather than complain?*  
*what do you even know about being a leader?*  
*what good have you even done for this land?*

they defend the Pharaoh's name as if it were their life mission.  
they sing praises for the man who lets them live in starvation.

**five.**

in which the people find their livestock dead:

but this time, it is the children  
who find their fathers lying on the streets.

this time, it is the neighbors who discover  
entire families lifeless in their own living rooms.

this time, it is the women who carry  
the bodies of their husbands and their teenage sons  
over the threshold of their homes,  
leaving behind a long crimson trail  
that can never be scrubbed clean once more.

this time, it is the passersby who stare in horror  
at cardboard signs drenched in blood,  
mourning nameless bodies now  
and forever lost to the ongoing war.

**six.**

in which an outbreak of boils spreads among the people:

but this time, it is a virus that hails  
from a land other than your own.

the Pharaoh refuses to seal the country's borders,  
the Pharaoh refuses to find urgency in a fast-spreading contagion,  
the Pharaoh refuses to acknowledge that prevention is better than cure,  
the Pharaoh says he will combat the virus with nothing but his bare hands.

before he knows it, his people are dying.  
he strengthens security, and threatens  
his frightened populace with death  
should they break any of his new policies.

before he knows it, his healers are dying.  
he calls them heroes, tells them *they—*  
*should be honored to die for their country.*

**seven.**

in which a thunderstorm of hail and fire ravages the land:

but this time, it is deadly ashfall from  
a volcano on the brink of explosion.

the Pharaoh calls the threat a nuisance,  
and says he is not afraid to eat the toxic ash  
and even pee on the volcano itself.

**eight.**

in which a swarm of locusts destroys all remaining crops:

but this time, the produce is rich  
yet left out in the sun to rot.

the farmers are given just a few coins  
for keeping hundreds of millions nourished,  
and even then—they are unable  
to sell most of their harvest.

it is a plague that affects many but not most,  
and because of this—the people  
turn their backs once more  
and pretend they do not notice.

**nine.**

in which darkness descends for three entire days:

but this time, it is for three entire months  
of the year that had just begun.

the people are exhausted from fighting  
one battle after another. the people are  
frustrated with the lack of good governance  
that could have given them the hope  
they needed to keep on fighting.

it becomes clear how constant uncertainty  
can feel just as daunting as pitch-black darkness.

**ten.**

in which all the firstborns are fated to die:

but this time, they are the people at the forefront  
of the land's line of defense against an invisible enemy.

these people are not martyrs, yet the Pharaoh  
appraises them as though they are nothing more  
than sacrificial lambs sent to slaughter  
to appease the angry gods.

he gives them recognition as “heroes”  
in an attempt to quell the people’s rage  
and skirt around the part he played  
in causing their untimely deaths.

**eleven.**

in which the people come face to face  
with a plague not found in the book of exodus,

in which the people continue to bury themselves in prayer,  
and still wake up to find every litte thing unchanged.

in which all the people’s cries start sounding  
as though they are trapped in an echo chamber,

in which the people can no longer help but wonder—  
*is anyone listening up there?*

# Sparkle the Essence of Being Yourself

By Mahreen Hassan



# **Guardian Angel**

**By Norman Isheanesu Hungwe**

My personal person  
One with a great mission  
Always by my side  
True love she never hide  
Straight-forward and strict  
Guarding me always by every means  
Unique and very special  
Bubbling with care she handles my denial  
One thing I know, is amazing blessing  
Her hovering over me, it's a blessing  
Came in this world with a cry  
Hugging me and our hearts beats in unison, for me not to cry  
Cherished me through pain  
Glowing smile for me the bundle you gain  
The beginning of nightmare  
Like a hen, nothing would dare  
With joy you lovingly washed my filthy  
You would look at me with pity  
Always handling me like an egg  
Though I would always drive you to an edge  
One thing I know, is amazing blessing  
Her hovering over me, it's a blessing

# **Bullying, Human Rights, and Social Justice**

**By Nevyn Haque**

I have been bullied for various reasons throughout my life. It all started when I was seven years old. Everyone would make fun of my height, as I am not very tall. I got the nickname "Baby" from my classmates, who would all joke about my skinny body. I told my parents about this situation and reported it to the school authorities. But this was all in vain. After a few years, in fourth grade, the teacher told me to sit in a particular seat. A boy in my class asked me to move as he wanted to sit in that seat, but I told him that the teacher had instructed me to sit there. Frustrated, the boy pushed me, and I crashed onto the seat, leaving me with a scar on my forehead. My parents informed the class teachers about it.

At first, no action was taken. My parents took the double initiative by informing school officials in black and white, who told my parents they would tackle the situation. The boy would make fun of me for being weak and boasted that no action would be taken against him. After that incident, a few weeks later, on the school bus, I sat in a seat where another girl would sit now and then. She slapped me in the face because I sat in her spot, even though I didn't know that she would be sitting there that day. I could not endure the bullying in that school. I wanted to stop going to school. Often, I would fake a headache or a stomach ache as an excuse to not to go to school. I requested my parents to transfer me to another school or allow me to homeschool. They moved me to another school. Just when I thought it was okay, things started to change.

At first, things were great at my new school. I adjusted with others quickly, and I had good friends. Bullying was not very serious at first. One day, my classmates were talking about our parents and when I started to talk about my parents, I got strange looks from my classmates when I told them my mother's name. My mother has a western name and since I am Bangladeshi, having a western name is generally not expected. At the time, I didn't give it much thought. That day when my mother came to pick me up, she was wearing a western outfit. The next day, my classmates questioned me about my mom's nationality, her religion, and her beliefs. I was dumbfounded by these questions and explained the situation to my mom when I went home. She

told me to answer that if she has no problem with her name, beliefs, or the way she dresses, then my classmates do not have the right to complain about it. The next day when I went to school, my classmates bombarded me with questions about my name, my religion, and if I know how to speak Arabic. I told them the answer that my mother had taught me. They became quiet after that and stopped asking these questions. But I could always see them whispering and smirking around me when my mother came to pick me up.

Now, I am in another school where things are alright. But when I was absent in school due to some family emergencies, some girls made up rumours that my parents got a divorce and that I had a hard time coping with the news. Since they were uncertain about this "news", they asked me about the divorce themselves, and I replied that it wasn't true. I told my parents about it, and they informed the class teachers about it. My class teachers were shocked to hear about this and asked me why I didn't tell them earlier. My teachers spoke up about this in the class, but they did not mention anyone's names. Now, I have good friendships with my classmates.

I used to get anxious about whether my classmates would start to bully me again. These thoughts made me feel depressed, and I felt like no one would be there to support me in school. My parents have been there for me, and they have supported me throughout these messy situations. Listening to a Korean band's songs also helped me. The lyrics of the songs are about anxiety, depression, and how people's opinions affect others' self-esteem. The message of these songs is that there is a ray of hope and that we can shine a light in this world. After reading the lyrics of the songs, I gathered the courage and strength to be myself and disregard bullying. These messages help me to cope with my struggles. A friend of mine in my current school was bullied by some of our classmates. I told her about the lyrics of some of these songs and advised her to speak with her parents. She felt supported and informed the class teachers about her situation. The teachers helped her, and she is doing fine right now.

In Bangladesh, no anti-bullying campaigns are held, whereas, in some other countries, anti-bullying campaigns are conducted to prevent bullying. I had to deal with these situations without support from society. We need to have anti-bullying organizations everywhere to help people cope. Many of us experience bullying every day and we do not know how to deal with these situations. There are times when we get attacked through social media. Even during the pandemic, in online classes, bullying occurs, and the teachers are helpless. We think that



avoiding school solves everything, but it does not. Often, we feel that if we tell others about it, they will judge us and tell us that we are overreacting. Bullying can cause depression, anxiety and, in some cases, can lead to suicide. It causes people to lose focus in their work, creativity, interest, and even appetite.

The truth is that other people can help us. If we do not tell someone about it quickly, we might find ourselves in quicksand. If you do not feel comfortable discussing with your parents, you can talk to close friends or relatives. Or, you can find online anti-bullying helplines to guide you. We should not hide our problems from others. Repressing our problems can only cause them to intensify. We can talk about our issues through anti-bullying campaigns; they can give us solutions to our problems.

People who have been bullied expect justice because if there is no justice, the bullies get away with this and continue bullying others. Kids and teens have human rights, as well. Society needs to take action and steps to ensure social justice. The government should implement anti-bullying guidelines. Parents and educators should teach them about anti-bullying. Parents need to listen to their children and should not treat bullying as normal. If we don't take action during the pandemic and after the pandemic, we will find ourselves without our rights to grow up in society. We need to spread greater awareness of anti-bullying measures. We must help our friends who are bullied. Their silent tears flow, and we do not know. Just know that you are not alone. If I, living in a country with absolutely no anti-bullying rules, campaign or awareness programs, can overcome, indeed, you can. Why are there no awareness campaigns and strict rules against bullying? Why does one have to be bullied because of her skin colour, height, weight, parents' lifestyle, religion or race? If our society doesn't have anti-bullying guidelines set up to protect you, we need to fight for your rights and spread awareness to help others. We have rights, and our voices need to be heard by society and the government. With willpower and determination, we can conquer the fear, the pain, and the insecurity of bullying and move on with smiles in life.

# Breathe

By Sena Chang

As a man  
lies on the  
soil, pinned  
by officers  
in uniforms, He lies on land his  
ancestors plowed, while their white counterparts  
drank in their success. *I can't breathe.* He gasps  
air that is tainted by centuries of racism, bigotry, and xenophobia.  
They are etched deeply into his nation's fabric, saturating a rich history  
of the fight against oppression. Stitched tightly into the land of the South,  
racism pumps the lifeblood of his nation, which rests upon millennia of  
oppression, injustice, and slavery. Yet this fight unknowingly continues, as  
he is discriminated against by the very markers of his race. It is an unrelenting  
war, between the freed and the oppressed; between the weak and powerful. In morning,  
he wakes to hear the same birds as them, and at night, he shares the same sky to look  
up at. Their notion of love is the same, and the pain they feel is no different from the  
pain of others. Yet they remain separated as two unequal forces, split by an invisible  
line of prejudice. Clouded by assumptions and unfounded suspicions, the powerful  
usurps his power from the mere shade of his skin, and the weak is left to flounder  
in a sea of prejudice. He sees those cloaked white men yet again, but this  
time in crisp uniforms. This force— transcending moral behavior— grips  
at our conscience, greedy for more until it squeezes his lungs so he  
no longer breathes. *They're going to kill me.* When will  
we ever breathe freely?

# Breaking News: Rohingya Refugees Rejected At Shores

By Anandita Abraham

I don't mind that my younger brother is blind, because to him, our world remains what it should be, not what it is, and in a tragic way, that makes him happy. Makes him smile with the same dangerous, reckless innocence, now, facing death.

\*\*\*

For months, we heard rumours, nervous whispers from far places. For months, we sat traumatised with a fear so ancient and exhausted that it refused now, to do much more than stir us.

We lived a two day walk from the border, they told us.

The evening before we were meant to flee, my mother arrived first, and I saw terror plastered onto her dark, worn face.

They were here a day early. A convenient surprise. A jack in the box, that would punch once, a single fist to mangle your features beyond recognition. Blood stains that never wash off.

Blood stains are what I saw, 10 minutes later, from between cracks in the wooden floor. Our mother, breathless, told us of roaring men who brandished limbs and guns. Then father knocked our secret knock. We were already beneath the floorboards. My mother rushed, opened the door. Suddenly, another knock. A bullet, shoving its way into my fathers back. We knew, because she screamed. I held my brother close, palms firmly on his mouth.

My memory was burnt with red, hot iron. This would be a nail, hammering into me forever. Shuffling, tearing. Screaming. A hand falling, hard and fast, onto skin. Low, monstrous grunting. Thuds. A single drop of blood, that fell through the cracks, onto my heaving chest, shaking shoulders. I tried to steady my arms, but I quaked and gasped in ragged alarms. Stuffed a fist into my mouth and realised how hard it is to sob, gagged. Grasping desperately for air when there was none. The tears leaking from my eyes dampened my hold on my blind brother.

Only hours later, when the smell of wood burning found its way through the cracks, did I clutch him and crawl out through the passage.

We ran, because our life depended on it. Through black soot that decorated my village, embers of homes and maimed, unrecognisable chunks of meat that were once people I smiled at. Every time I looked away, another grotesque detail would catch my eye. I couldn't help but notice the complete absence of sound.

We ran through the haze, before being jerked into the shadows.

\*\*\*

Our neighbours are lined up, facing the monsters who raise their rifles, bellowing. We pause and peep from the shadows, with the village elder who will pull us through foliage and mud into a small boat, push us out across the choppy, hostile waves.

My brother is trembling, his nails digging into my palms.

*What's happening?*

They're going to visit Ma, I whisper, and he smiles suddenly.

We watch our people - all skin, bones and broken things, join hands and raise fists that cut through the smoke.

And then the massacre - embarrassed bullets easing into hearts that you can still hear thudding if you listen closely.

# Together We Stand

By Zizheng William Liu

As I lay on the roof of my house  
taking in the view,  
the world seems like a beautiful place.  
The golden flowers, whistling under  
the mid-summer's breeze,  
always curled and beautiful,  
and knows it.  
The lush forests covering the naked earth  
from the sun's devastating heat,  
always calm and tranquil.  
But the world is not just trees and flowers.  
Looking past the blossoms of God's creation,  
shows a world plagued with terror.  
Fires ablaze and glass broken,  
we turn against one another,  
desperate to find an answer  
to our problems.  
We side only with our people,  
people who look like us.  
But when can we begin  
to side with all?

## **black boy vs twenty-eight hours**

*based on the statistic that every twenty-eight hours, a black man is killed by police*

**by Maggie Munday Odom**

(one)  
black boy wakes up  
(two) (three)  
black boy goes for a run  
(four) (five) (six)  
black boy buys a diet coke at the convenience store  
(seven) (eight) (nine) (ten)  
black boy hugs his mother  
(eleven) (twelve) (thirteen) (fourteen) (fifteen)  
black boy goes for a drive  
(sixteen) (seventeen) (eighteen) (nineteen)  
sirens  
(twenty)  
black boy pulled over  
(twenty-one)  
hands up hands up hands up hands up  
(twenty-two) (twenty-three)  
black boy vs bullet  
(twenty-four)  
black boy vs chokehold  
(twenty-five)  
black boy vs blue  
(twenty-six)  
black boy vs silent politicians  
(twenty-seven)  
black boy vs a world that  
tells him his life does not matter  
(twenty-eight)  
and another and another and another and another and  
(one)

# D.C. Cherry Blossoms Stand Witness as We March

By Tain Leonard-Peck





## Shades of Yellow

By April Peng

The artist's paintbrush dips into the tub.  
A dollop of yellow stains her palette.

Golden yellow.  
Emperors of thirteen dynasties rose and fell  
For the richness of such colour.  
*Too dark*, she condemns. *This will not do*.  
Upon her tippy toes, she strains to reach the highest shelf  
Retrieving a tub of China White  
Gold diluted into amber.

Amber yellow.  
The artist muses, *Amber is pretty*.  
A girl with an easy smile and an inflamed spirit.  
A girl who is almost beautiful if not for the fact that she's-  
*Too yellow*, the artist concludes.  
And drowns her embers in white.

Royal yellow.  
Elegant and obedient.  
A model for the darker shades.  
She bows her polished little head  
To worship a queen that is not hers,  
To labour for a Kingdom  
That believes she's invaded.  
Had to battle for conditional acceptance  
Just to be colonized by the white  
On her own palette.

Mellow yellow.  
Quiet yellow.  
Yellow that does not speak.  
Yellow that is not seen  
In Hollywood or the school playground.  
Yellow that is ashamed to be  
Yellow that wishes she were white.  
So she avoids the sun and resigns her mother tongue  
Would rather starve than eat yellow  
Would rather mute than speak yellow  
Would rather anything than be yellow.

Banana yellow.



Desperate to peel off her bitter yellow skin  
And reveal her sweet white flesh  
Who she believes she is on the inside.

Whiter. Cream.  
Whiter! Beige.  
Stripped of all that makes it yellow,  
Void of vibrancy or culture,  
Boiled vegetables not stir fry.  
She is anything but colourful  
Despite her colour.

Yet, the artist is pleased.  
She dips her brush into the lifeless beige  
In a looking-glass she finds her own gaze  
And lightly  
She paints over her own yellow face  
In mock-whiteness.

But beige is not white.  
Nor will beige ever be white.  
White mocks beige for its tainted hues  
As they admit her radiance through a filter,  
Where large brown eyes  
Become long thin slits,  
And her perfect English,  
Decidedly imperfect in her yellow mouth.  
Like wall plaster she is stripped  
Down to an impression.

A mistake. The artist sees  
Her false face which  
Pales in complexity  
Of her complexion as  
Golden yellow  
Filters through the cracks in the plaster.  
She longs for the richness of such colour  
Once more.  
No longer a canvas for another  
But its own masterpiece.  
Firmly  
She turns on the faucet.

Erasing the erasure of her race  
As white washed off her golden face.

## Gender as Bone

By Adam Mahout

Two empty cages  
looking for their nightingale;  
words from which belief has flown  
too late against the night of the world  
hanging out toward me:  
its immanent body suspended in emergency  
across the burning precipice of sky—  
my body, the symptom of its burning,  
like a mirage swung open—  
I am wedged  
into these inaccessible earthworks  
and pressed like an enormous question—  
“merely to know and let you go”:  
no body is a tragedy.

# Century XXI

By Liane Xu

Welcome to Century XXI:

it's a wonderful time to be alive.

Here's a taste of Internet, fast fashion, cars, and good health,  
we hope you enjoy these first-class amenities and spread the wealth.

We've paid the price, although the price was quite high:

rising cities, rising temperature, rising sea, rising skies.

Don't worry though, the burden's not on us -

as long as there is coal to be mined,

as long as there is fuel to be burned,

as long as there is food to be served,

as long as the vulnerable remain vulnerable.

Welcome to Century XXI:

it's a terrible time to be alive.

Here's a taste of hunger, polluted air, storms, and ocean garbage,  
we hope you leave with a sense of urgency and knowledge.

We've suffered the impacts, although we contributed the least:

falling houses, falling power, falling world, falling glee.

Do be aware, it's only getting worse -

as long as they keep building power plants whose waste we breathe,

as long as they keep cutting down our forests on which we depend,

as long as they keep angering mother nature to who we have become displaced,

as long as the ignorant remain ignorant.

# American Drill

By Bryn Swiston

When the drills began in elementary school, our hands were unlined. Waiting in the dark, the whites of the young eyes flashing around the room, like stars flickering in the sky. We should have been reading *The View from Saturday*. Now we crouch with empty hands our only protection: the odds. Knees drawn to our chests, the heavy breathing creates a weight. It feels like gas. In through the nose. Out through every set of tightly drawn, gray lips. "I'm sorry. It wasn't like this before." That's what the teachers always say before they turn off the lights and take shelter themselves. "I'm sorry." Click Why was this not like this before? Is it because we've forgotten how to love? Is it because we feel so torn apart from each other? We can't let people drift away from us. We must pull them in tightly and say "You matter. You are not alone in this harsh and confusing time." Maybe someday America will do this. But for now, the lights come back on, blindingly bright. And we crawl out from beneath the tables. And we the students take our seats, staring at the ground. Silent.

By R.P. Krish



## About the Writers

**Anandita Abraham** is a 16-year-old writer of Indian origin residing in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Her work has been featured and recognized by various national and international publications. She spends her days avoiding schoolwork, starting political debates with unfortunate strangers who make eye contact, and examining the human condition.

**Ian Babler-Madrid** is a 17-year-old junior at Winter Park High School in Florida. He serves as a Climate Action Fellow for the Alliance for Climate Education and as a member of Congresswoman Stephanie Murphy's Youth Advisory Board.

**Pia Bhatia** is a 17-year-old student, writer, and artist from New Delhi, India. She has experience editing for Second Revolution and The Aman Project. She has been previously published in The Rubbertop Review, Sonder Midwest, and other journals.

**Cris Eli Blak** is a 21-year-old playwright, screenwriter, performer and poet living in Louisville, Kentucky. He is a two-time poetry slam champion and has had his work produced around the country. More than anything, he believes in art as activism and hopes that people remember to use their voice, especially in times of trouble and inequality.

**Sena Chang** is a 14-year-old student currently living in Tokyo, Japan. In her free time, Sena enjoys researching in the social sciences and discussing politics.

**Luz de Luna** is a 19-year old writer, poet, and photojournalist from the Philippines. An incoming fine arts sophomore, she is an advocate for mental health awareness, press freedom, and the protection of human rights.

**Nevyn Haque** is a Grade VIII student at the European Standard School in Dhaka, Bangladesh. She participates in Cultural Program, Science Fair, and Quizzes. Her writing has previously been published in The Key, Young People's Literary Magazine, Ink and Feather Literary Journal, and Teen Belle Magazine.

**Norman Isheanesu Hungwe** is an 18-year-old writer from Gweru, Zimbabwe. He is following his mother's footsteps and is inspired by her love of art. He enjoys music, reading and writing.

**Zizheng William Liu** is a 16-year-old writer and rising junior at Clements High School in Texas. He is an international editor for Polyphony Lit Magazine and the editor-in-chief of his school's editorial.

**Adam S. Mahout** is an undergraduate at University of North Texas studying English Literature and Jazz Performance. Their poems have been published in *The Dentonite*, *North Texas Review* and *Spiderweb Salon*.

**Maggie Munday Odom** is a 17-year-old poet and playwright whose work has received honors from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Scholastic Art and Writing Awards, the Blank Theatre, the Eugene O'Neill Theatre Center, the Hill-stead Museum, the Writopia Worldwide Plays Festival, the Connecticut Poetry Society, and Get Lit Words Ignite.

**April Peng** is a 21-year-old writer from Los Angeles, California. She has been writing stories since the moment she learned English, but up until this year, she had not written about a single character of Asian descent. Now, she uses creative writing to highlight the importance of understanding one's identity and culture.

**Bryn Swiston** is a junior at Stevens Point Area Senior High School in Central Wisconsin. She enjoys expressing herself through writing, whether it be through letters to senators and representatives or through short poems. Bryn strives enact change in her community, and enjoys reading autobiographies about influential individuals. This is her first published piece of work.

**Liane Xu** is a 17-year-old junior at Winter Park High School in Florida. She is passionate about preserving the environment and fighting for climate justice. She serves as a Climate Action Fellow for the Alliance for Climate Education.

## About the Visual Artists

**Mahreen Hassan** is a 19-year-old student from Karachi, Pakistan. She plans to pursue a career in medicine and researches how art can be used for mental health therapy. She believes art is an important medium to express oneself and uses it to speak up against injustice.

**R.P. Krish** is a ten-year-old student and artist from Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India. He holds the world record for “Youngest to Draw Most Number of Paintings Intended to Create Social Awareness” in the Kalam’s Book of Records. He enjoys drawing, writing, crafting, and conducting science experiments.

**Victoria Tong** is a 16-year-old rising high school junior from Rockville, Maryland. Drawing has always been one of her favorite hobbies, even back when it meant that she was just scribbling with markers on a piece of paper. Her work has previously been recognized by *Celebrating Art*.

**Tain Leonard-Peck** is a 20-year-old artist from West Tisbury, Massachusetts who paints, composes music, and writes plays, poetry, and fiction. He is also a competitive sailor, skier, and fencer. He knows how to construct his own laminar flow hood, knit his own blankets, and haggle for flowers on five continents.



## About the Editors

**Tom Block** is the Founder, President, and Producer of the International Human Rights Art Festival. He is a playwright, author of five books and 20+ year visual artist. His plays have been developed and produced at such venues as the Ensemble Studio Theater, HERE, Dixon Place, Theater for the New City, IRT Theater, Theater at the 14th Street Y, Theater Row, A.R.T.-NY and many others. He was the founding producer of the International Human Rights Art Festival (2017), the Amnesty International Human Rights Art Festival (2010) and a Research Fellow at DePaul University (2010). He has exhibited his artwork and spoken about his ideas throughout the United States, Canada, Europe, Turkey and the Middle East. Learn more at [www.tomblock.com](http://www.tomblock.com).

**Uma Menon** is the first Youth Fellow of the International Human Rights Art Festival. She is a a seventeen-year-old author and human rights advocate from Winter Park, Florida currently studying at Princeton University. She is a Two-Time Pushcart Prize Nominee, 2020 National YoungArts Winner, 2019 Brain Mill Press Editor's Pick Poet, and 2019 Recipient of the Lee Bennett Hopkins Award from the Florida State Poets Association. Her debut book, *Hands for Language*, was published by Mawenzi House in 2020 and was shortlisted for the 2019 International Erbacce-Prize. Learn more at [www.theumamenon.com](http://www.theumamenon.com).

## **About the International Human Rights Art Festival (IHRAF)**

**The International Human Rights Art Festival** is an ongoing series of art-activist events, festivals, workshops, and community programs at the intersection of art, advocacy, and society. At each of our events, we bring together social and political leaders and the general public to challenge audiences through sincerity, beauty and talent, to imagine a better way and help implement a more open-minded, inclusive and caring world. Learn more at [www.ihraf.org](http://www.ihraf.org).