

A group of skiers is shown on a snowy slope. In the background, there is a dense line of tall evergreen trees. The sky is overcast. A blue banner with orange text is overlaid across the middle of the image. The skiers are wearing various winter gear, including jackets, pants, and helmets. Some are in motion, kicking up snow, while others are standing still. A string of small red and white flags is visible in the middle ground.

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Contents

Page **Title and Author**

	Prose
3	<u>Dog Troubles</u> <i>By Audrey</i>
8	<u>Fugitive Chickens</u> <i>By Grace</i>
12	<u>The Object</u> <i>By Aaron</i>
	Poem
13	<u>Cherry Blossoms</u> <i>By Thea</i>
14	<u>Anger</u> <i>By Maggie</i>

Dog Troubles

By Audrey

Melissa rubbed her eyes. She rubbed them again. There was a blur of a creature dashing around in her bedroom! She blinked a few times, trying to take it in. A dog! A small, black and white, fluffy, energetic dog! Her face slowly relaxed and her teeth started to show, widening into an open-mouthed grin. Melissa beamed. She wanted to leap up into the air and scream, despite feeling like collapsing after school! That panting, beaming, and drooling creature was a dog! Only her classmates got those furry friends. The dog leapt up onto her and licked her face. *Oh my goodness, she thought. I have a dog! I have a dog! I have a dog! It's so cute! I need a name. It's definitely a female. It's black and white. So I'll name her Oreo!*

"Oreo," Melissa called out. "Who's a good girl! Who's a good girl? You are!" Oreo ran around in circles, her nose pointing upwards toward Melissa.

"Melissa! Time for dinner," a female voice from downstairs shouted. "The food's going to get cold!"

"No, it's not Mom!" Melissa yelled back as she rolled her eyes. "C'mon Oreo, let's go and get some dinner!"

As Melissa scrambled out of her room and down the stairs, the unmistakable fragrance of sweet, tangy orange chicken filled her nostrils. When she hit the bottom step, Oreo close behind, she heard the song of the rice cooker announcing that the rice was ready. Melissa raced to the table, and Oreo sprinted next to her.

"Mom, thank you so, so, so much for getting that dog for me! It's so cute," Melissa gushed even before she sat down.

"Happy birthday, Melissa! Your dad and I thought that you could handle it now that you're 13, but you must know that there are a lot of responsibilities that come with taking care of a dog. Your dad and I won't be able to help you much, so you have to remember to take her out on walks. Remember to feed her, pick up her stool, and everything else a dog requires. You have to promise you'll do that," Melissa's mom warned her. She took out plates and scooped out some rice.

"I promise. I will do all of that. You know I will," responded Melissa.

"Good, now eat. The food is getting cold," Melissa's mom replied curtly.

Melissa eagerly stuffed the chicken into her mouth, and in the din, the thought of taking care of dogs slowly drifted out of her mind.

The next morning, Melissa woke up to the face of her beloved dog, Oreo. She had snuggled up with her. Melissa rubbed Oreo's belly for a few seconds and then got up to brush her teeth. She brushed for 2 minutes, spit the toothpaste out, and looked up at herself in the mirror. Through the reflection, she saw that Oreo had peed on her rug! *Oh no!* Melissa thought, her mouth dripping with toothpaste. *I forgot to take her for a walk last night! Now I have to tell my parents. They'll be furious! We just had this talk last night! What do I do now? Okay, maybe I can wash it with water!*

(cont.)

Dog Troubles

By Audrey

(cont.)

Melissa rinsed her mouth and jumped into action. Getting some paper towels, she tried to dry the rug. She then took some new paper towels and soaked them in water. She rubbed and rinsed the rug, but nothing seemed to get that bright yellow color out of it, and it was starting to smell. Melissa scrunched up her face and shivered. She really didn't like this part of having a dog. *How could I have forgotten to take Oreo out for a walk last night*, thought Melissa. She wanted to hit herself. Melissa guessed this was her punishment. She thought about it for a minute. *How can I fix this? I need to fix this. Maybe I can spray some odor remover on it and then cover it up!* It was ingenious! Melissa raced to her bathroom and took the spray bottle. She practically emptied it all onto her carpet, flipped the rug over, and put some textured rug on top. Melissa crossed her fingers and prayed that her parents wouldn't find out.

It was Saturday, so Melissa headed downstairs to pour herself some cereal and milk. Melissa remembered that tomorrow, her parents were hosting a meeting with some of their co-workers, their boss, and the CEO of the company they were working for. She reminded herself to stay in her room with Oreo and not cause trouble. Munching on her cereal, Melissa checked her phone and squealed! Her best friend, Aurora, had just texted her on her brand new phone. Melissa practically jumped up and down. Aurora was texting about the newest student in school who became popular in a matter of seconds! Something that was really rare. Rumor had it that he was cute too! As she picked up her spoon and phone and typed in a mad fury, wanting to know more, the thought of dogs and pee on the rug drifted away again.

The next evening, Melissa's parents rushed around the house, tidying and cleaning up every single spot until it was perfect, and cooking a delicious meal. Nothing should've gone wrong that evening.

While they were working, Melissa lounged on her bed, scrolling through TikTok, and keeping Oreo safe in her room, so she wouldn't mess anything up. Melissa's door was ajar, so if you listened closely, you could hear her parents rehearsing what to say to their boss. But, Melissa didn't notice as she was engrossed in a dance. Oreo was curiously sniffing at the delicious smells drifting upstairs from the kitchen. Melissa sighed. It was going to be a pretty boring party. She got off her bed and stretched. Beginning to drift back into her stupor of boredom, she suddenly stiffened—the doorbell had just rung. Quick footsteps and then the click of the lock told her that the guests had arrived. Melissa took a deep breath and went back to watching TikTok on her phone.

Back downstairs, her parents smiled nervously and led the three guests inside. The guests looked around curiously and vigilantly, looking for anything interesting.

"Welcome! Thank you for coming. Shall we eat?" Melissa's dad asked. His voice wavered a tiny bit.

"Yes. That would be lovely," a woman replied in a firm voice. She stood up tall and had a powerful air to her. Anyone who saw her would know that she was important. She was, in fact, the CEO of the company that Melissa's parents worked for. She looked immaculate. Her hair was brushed back into a perfect ponytail from which no hair dared stray. She had on a full face of makeup, including foundation, mascara, fake lashes, blush, and she was wearing bright red heels. She wore a dress that was fancy but not too much, and she had a straight, but not cold, facial expression. (cont.)

Dog Troubles

By Audrey

(cont.)

“Great! Take a seat at the table wherever you want and I’ll get the food. It is delicious!” Melissa’s mom said. Everyone sat down and started talking as Melissa’s mom served plates of steaming rice, teriyaki chicken, spinach, and a bowl of clam chowder. After a little while of eating and productive conversation, it was time for dessert. Everyone settled down and watched as Melissa’s mom brought out a triple-tiered cake. It was coated with a deep black frosting with swirls of colors as galaxies and dots of white as stars. It was beautiful.

Meanwhile, Melissa was upstairs texting her friend, when Oreo licked her hand and face unexpectedly.

“Aww, who’s a good girl! I’m going to go wash my hands and face and I’ll come back to play. Don’t bark!” As Melissa went to her bathroom, Oreo smelled other curious scents coming from downstairs. She longed to run around, not having spent her energy on walks. Without anyone watching her, she burst out of the room and sprang down the stairs. Melissa’s mom was walking toward everyone holding the plate with the cake on it gingerly when Oreo smashed into her. The cake went toppling over everyone and the CEO got a face full of frosting. Cake crumbs flew everywhere and the beautiful china that the cake was on fell out of Melissa’s mom’s hands and shattered with a loud crash. Oreo got a mouthful of cake and was more energetic than ever! She licked the CEO’s face and Melissa’s dad as well and went shooting back upstairs, taking the frosting covered table cloth with her.

“Oh my! Oh my!” the CEO screamed as she spat out a mouthful of black and red frosting. “That wretched, stupid, crazy dog! I never knew you even had a pet! Why did that dog have so much energy! I’m covered in frosting!” She stood up, her chair scraping the wooden floor making Melissa’s parents cringe, and strided across the room for a napkin. Her cheeks were flushed, and she had lost the air of perfection. “Let’s go. Now.” she commanded the others. She stormed out of the house, taking her bag and coat as she went. She tilted her head high as the other two followed her, looking at their shoes.

“Wh-what just happened?” Melissa’s mom questioned in shock.

“I think Melissa forgot some responsibility of hers.” Melissa’s dad grinded through closed teeth. He was also covered in cake and frosting and looked livid. “Melissa? Where are you?” He yelled furiously upstairs, his eyes closed, wishing this was all just a dream, or more like a nightmare .

Upstairs, Melissa had just reached for the soap when she heard pattering feet and then the door slam open. *Oh my god*, she thought. *Oreo!* As soon as she finished this thought, she heard the crash of a plate and screaming. Loud voices seemed to echo in her ears as she wondered what would happen to her. Visions of her getting grounded and missing so many fun events made her stomach do a flip. As she heard her dad yell those four words, she clenched her fists, took a deep breath, and headed downstairs to face her fate.

When Melissa got downstairs, she walked toward her dad, her face set and gaunt, her eyes looking anywhere other than at his eyes. A quick sideways peek told her that her dad’s face was flushed and his knuckles were white. He looked like he should’ve had steam coming out of his ears.

(cont.)

Dog Troubles

By Audrey

(cont.)

“Melissa? Did you walk it?” her dad said in a forced calm voice. He pointed at Oreo. The beloved dog was tilting her head, her tongue sticking out, a whole chunk of frosting on her head. Melissa pressed her lips together and didn’t speak. She could tell that her dad knew the answer to that question. “Melissa? It’s rude to ignore people when they’re talking to you. Now, I’ll ask it again. Did you walk that dog?” He jabbed his finger vigorously at Oreo.

Melissa lifted her head the tiniest bit higher, swallowed, and squeaked, “No.”

“What was that?” her dad asked, gritting his teeth.

Melissa took a deep breath, summoned up all her courage, and spoke firmly, “No.”

Her dad raised an eyebrow. “No?”

At that moment, Melissa felt she was going to burst. The words were all clamoring up her throat, begging to be spoken. They clawed at her; the apologies, the regrets, everything that had happened. They all wanted out. Melissa couldn’t take it anymore. She opened up her mouth and the words poured out. “I’m so, so sorry! The first night I got her, I forgot to take Oreo on a walk. She peed on the rug and I tried to hide it now it’s probably stained and stuck in there. I just, I don’t know what happened. I’m so sorry.” Melissa cried out. She felt tears welling up in her eyes. Everything was becoming blurry. “I know that I should have just told you and I didn’t! I-I should’ve done so much other stuff. And then, I forgot again!” Melissa sniffed a couple times and rubbed her eyes. “When I was upstairs, Oreo licked my hands and I just went to wash them. I-I d-d-didn’t notice the door was open. I just, I just, I just made a stupid mistake! I’m so sorry! I know the dinner was ruined! I know the rug was too! I’m so sorry! I-I really wanted everything to be perfect! I’m so, so sorry!” Tears were streaming down Melissa’s face. Her eyes were red and she sniffed. It felt like so much weight was off her shoulders. The guilt that had been building up inside her was gone.

Then something struck her, hard. A terrible, terrible thought. *What if I don’t get a dog anymore? What if I’ve ruined my chance? What if I can never have a pet ever again,* Melissa thought. She hiccuped a couple of times, scared. Questions flooded her head. Melissa forced herself not to think of these things.

Melissa’s dad sighed. “I suppose it’s alright. I mean, it’ll take a while to get back on the right side of our boss. But on the bright side, we can fix the pee-stained rug by buying a new one. That’s okay, right?” He looked at his wife, asking for permission. She had been standing there, watching Melissa’s words flood out, a look of concern on her face.

(cont.)

Dog Troubles

By Audrey

(cont.)

“It’s definitely okay. Are you okay, sweetheart?” Melissa’s mom said.

Melissa sniffed a couple of times. She had stopped crying. “Will I get to keep Oreo?” she peeped, her head down again. She crossed her fingers behind her back and prayed to all the gods she’d ever heard of.

Melissa’s mom thought for a moment. It seemed as if the silence lasted for hours. “Hmm, maybe. How about we monitor you with Oreo and let you get used to the responsibilities. If...” Melissa held her breath, not believing it. Melissa’s mom turned to her husband and looked for confirmation.

“Yes, that’s fine.” her dad said blankly, clearly in deep thought.

“Yes, yes, yes! Thank you! Thank you so much!” Melissa rejoiced. She squeezed her mom tightly, fighting back tears of joy.

Melissa rubbed her eyes. She rubbed them again. The sunlight was streaming down onto her bed, blinding her, and she realized it was the weekend! The week felt like it had lasted forever, but it was finally time for it to step down and let the weekend have its chance in the spotlight. Melissa sat up and Oreo pounced on her.

“Whoa, easy girl!” Melissa said and laughed. Oreo licked her face, and Melissa got up to brush her teeth. Today was going to be the day where Melissa and her parents went to see her cousins. It was going to be so fun. Oreo would most definitely stick her tongue out the rolled-down window. She knew that there would be a big birthday celebration for her! She wondered what present she would get this year. Maybe, just maybe, another dog.

(end)

Fugitive Chickens

By Grace

My 10 year old brother, and I have always wanted pets. And we've had an assortment: four fish, many pet insects, and two cats. But we had never had chickens. And we really wanted some! My mom's friend had shown us hers, awakening a new desire in both of us that we never knew we had. So last summer, my mom agreed that we could raise chickens in our backyard. I thought that hatching eggs was going to be a lot easier, but it turns out that the ones you cook with aren't fertile. My mom actually had to go out and buy fertile eggs. And I had to build an incubator using a white styrofoam box with water and a mesh aluminum bridge. In the right hand corner was a small blue thermometer and a mini black evaporator. The thing is, it took a while for us to get the measurements right. We always ended up messing up the size of the bridge and it wouldn't fit in. After multiple tries, we finally got the ratio and proportions correct. Since it was the summer, the heat and humidity caused the incubator to smell bad. It smelled like rotting food with a hint of stinky socks. Obviously I did not know how much work was needed to hatch these eggs. We had about 10 chicken eggs, and you needed to flip these eggs every two hours or so. They all looked a little bit different from each other: there were plain white ones, light beige and yellowish ones, some were big and round, and others were small and oval. I had marked one side of each egg with a "+" and the other side with a "-" to help us organize and keep track of them. Everyday they needed to sleep on a different side. Monday would be "-", Tuesday would be "+", and so on. My brother was in charge of moving their position so sometimes one egg could be right under the lightbulb while other times it was further away from the heat. It was really a lot of work, and we put a lot of our free time into it. Constantly changing the water, adjusting the temperature, and facing the deathly smell that the summer brought was tough.

It turned into a daily routine, taking care of our eggs. We almost turned into zombies, hating and loving it all at the same time. Everyday we had to shine a flashlight under each individual egg to see if everything was forming correctly. In the pitch black of night, I would use the flashlight on my mom's rose-gold iPhone 6 and look for the forming bodies. Anticipation clouded my mind everyday. I was constantly wondering: "*Why aren't they hatching*", and "*Maybe today's the day*". Mixed emotions of disappointment and dread flooded our emotions because none of the eggs seemed any different than they were when they arrived at our house in early June, despite all the constant labor.

About 21 days later, a couple of the eggs started to slightly crack. Tiny little lines started to form on the pearly whitish yellow shell of 4 of the eggs. Every day, little by little, more and more cracks started forming. But the problem was that although days had passed, none of the chickens had hatched yet. The wait was so incredibly hard for me and my brother, impatience always on our minds.

(cont.)

Fugitive Chickens

By Grace

(cont.)

One chick in particular was a fighter. Little rivers started to flow through the outer shell of the egg, and eventually a chicken poked its little head out. He came out super skinny and featherless, with pink raw skin. You could see his wings, yet there were no feathers there. He was kind of scaly looking. Unfortunately, he came out light as a pencil. We had to feed him a lot of food. I was dead set on the name Chicky, but my brother was super insistent on naming him Walter. Being the least favorite child, my name was denied. We welcomed Walter to our family that night, about a month after we got the eggs.

We had built a little playground for Walter in a green recycling box so that he could have a place to stay while we were waiting for the other chickens to hatch. It contained some hay and food and water bowls. There was a light bulb in the corner to provide some heat and warmth. Taking care of him was so much work, definitely much more work than taking care of a human baby. And I was the one who got stuck on poop duty. I had to go in with my hands and individually pluck out the little brown pebbles of poop. Most of them were hidden under the worship shaped hay. Everyday I would go scavenger hunting for my chicken's poop. What a great way to wake up every morning. Out of the four eggs that cracked, only three chicks made it out. One of them died while still in the egg. We put the survivors in the pen with Walter that same day, three cute little chickens running and pecking everywhere and everything. Later that day, we found only Walter standing (what a fighter). One chick died of suffocation because it got its head stuck under the lightbulb wire. The other two died by drowning in the water under the silver bridge. Eventually, Walter died of loneliness not long after.

It was a very sad experience, and so my brother and I planned a funeral for him. I had a super close bond with Walter since I had hand fed him everyday because he was too weak to eat by himself. Every breakfast, lunch, and dinner, I would personally take out a bit of chicken food and let him peck away at my fingers. Sometimes I had gone as far as prying his mouth open when he wouldn't eat. We buried him in the mulch-brown dirt, with my brother reciting a whole speech. I zoned out while the speech was happening, but my brother was probably talking about how much he loved Walter. We had our Alexa playing "sad funeral music" in the background, to pay tribute to the dead chicken. Unfortunately, my mother videotaped us, and she laughs at the video daily. I mean, we literally bawled our eyes out for a chicken who we only had for three days at most.

We dug a little grave for Walter, putting a little stick right where Walter was buried. My mom was the one to dig the hole in the ground because my brother and I didn't want to get dirty. The next day, we saw a squirrel digging in that exact spot. A squirrel who, no joke, was eating our chicken (or what looked like it). How low could that squirrel go? Does it not have any sense of respect for the dead?

(cont.)

Fugitive Chickens

By Grace

(cont.)

The next day my mom bought us baby hens from a local farm because we weren't really over the death of Walter. They were so cute and the fluffiest yellow balls of fur. They also looked a whole lot healthier and more well-fed than Walter had. They were also hectic, always pecking away at something. We had a little dead garden in our backyard, so we decided that we could buy a fence from Home Depot and surround the garden with it to make a cage for them. One chicken in particular caught our attention. My brother named her Melinda. She was very stupid, always getting lost and looking clueless. Whenever I put out a bowl of food, all the other chicks came racing towards me, a flock of yellow fuzz pounding the green grass with their feet, sprinting and stampeding towards me. Melinda would always be last, and would usually never even realize there was food until I placed it right in front of her. When the flock of hens would move over from one bush to another, I would see a group of chickens run towards one of the mini shrub bushes. Then, 20 seconds later, Melinda would join them. She was so stupid and lost all the time, but that's why my brother liked her the best. I always thought it was because they were so similar in personality.

A few days later, Melinda passed away. My brother was the one who found her lying motionless near a rock outside in the sun. He thought she was sleeping at first, but it turned out that she actually had died. That day I sobbed for hours, crying up oceans of tears. We never found out exactly how she died, maybe by another animal or a disease. And of course, my mom took a video of me and my brother crying and showed it at all of our dinners with family or friends.

The gated backyard area that we made for them was a perfect idea in retrospect. It was a small enough enclosure that fit perfectly in our yard, and it allowed our chickens some time outside in the fresh air. At night my mom and I would chase the chicks around, trying to grab them and put them in a box to go inside. In the enclosed area, they could see all the flowers and leaves and grass and dirt in the outside world. The thing that we didn't think about was that these chickens were smaller than the size of a tennis ball, and they could easily squeeze through the holes in the gray metal fence.

One day, in mid-July last year, my chickens got arrested. My family and I had gone out to go on a nice peaceful walk on the Morses Pond path. It was a beautiful day, and I remember it vividly. The sun reflecting off of the clear water, and the air smelling so clean and fresh. I had a slight pink sunburn on my nose and mosquito bites littered across my skin. We had a mini beach day, eating lots of ice cream and just enjoying the water and the view. It was the perfect summer day. What no one expected was to come home to utter silence. No chirping, no pecking, no play fighting, nothing. We thought that they must have been hiding, or sleeping in a bush, or under the big pine tree that's in our backyard.

(cont.)

Fugitive Chickens

By Grace

(cont.)

Later that night, my friend called me and asked, “Hey, do you still have your chickens?”

“Yeah of course why wouldn’t I?”

“My mom just saw a post on Facebook...something about chickens at the police station?”

“What?”

“Yeah an officer found them near your street this afternoon.”

I was in complete shock and started screaming at my brother trying to form coherent words to explain what I just learned. My friend texted me the picture from Facebook of a police officer holding my six chickens. She was smiling in the picture, while the chickens looked like they were going to claw and bite her hand any second, those little demons. They looked like they could fly away at any moment, but thankfully they hadn't learned how yet. She had two in the crook of her elbow, two sandwiched in between her arm and chest, and one in each hand. My mom immediately drove my brother and me to the Wellesley Police Department, where lo and behold we saw them. Scratch that—we heard them. Loud and obnoxious as ever, they were chirping out of a cardboard box. I swear you could hear them from outer space. Walking into the brick building was like walking the walk of shame. Mom had checked us in at the prompter area behind a glass shield and we sat in these brownish gray big cushy chairs and waited.

A female officer came out, brown hair tied up into a low bun, smiling and carrying the big box. Apparently, the kind lady had found the chicks wandering around in our front yard. “They escaped through the holes in your fence. Your neighbors had seen them. One of the police officers patrolling the area had caught them and brought them back to our HQ” she said. My brother walked over to her and thanked her, then picked them up and brought them to our car trunk. We talked to the lady there for a little while explaining the situation, trying to get out of there as quickly as possible. It was embarrassing to say the least, and the fact that we had just found out that we needed a permit for chickens just made things worse. Yeah, we needed a permit. Apparently you needed to get signatures from all your neighbors approving them, since the noise would also affect them. So basically, we had illegal chickens. We were now all criminals. Considering the fact that our neighbors had found our chickens, we didn’t want to bother them so we didn't end up getting the permit. In the end, we gave our chickens away to another farm.

(end)

The Object

By Aaron

Gliding silently above the clouds, a humongous silvery object plummets down into the grasslands.

BBC News was on the scene almost immediately.

“Hello, this is BBC news reporter Darth Vader reporting a U.F.O crash landing in Greenland. Strange sightings are reporting that it is the same U.F.O that came before in legends. In the legend, a U.F.O crash-lands somewhere in the world and aliens start invading Earth. Good thing that's not happening now, right Mr. Palpetine?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Hold your horses, folks! There seems to be a green light steadily shining inside the U.F.O. Good thing aliens aren't coming out! Right, Mr. P?”

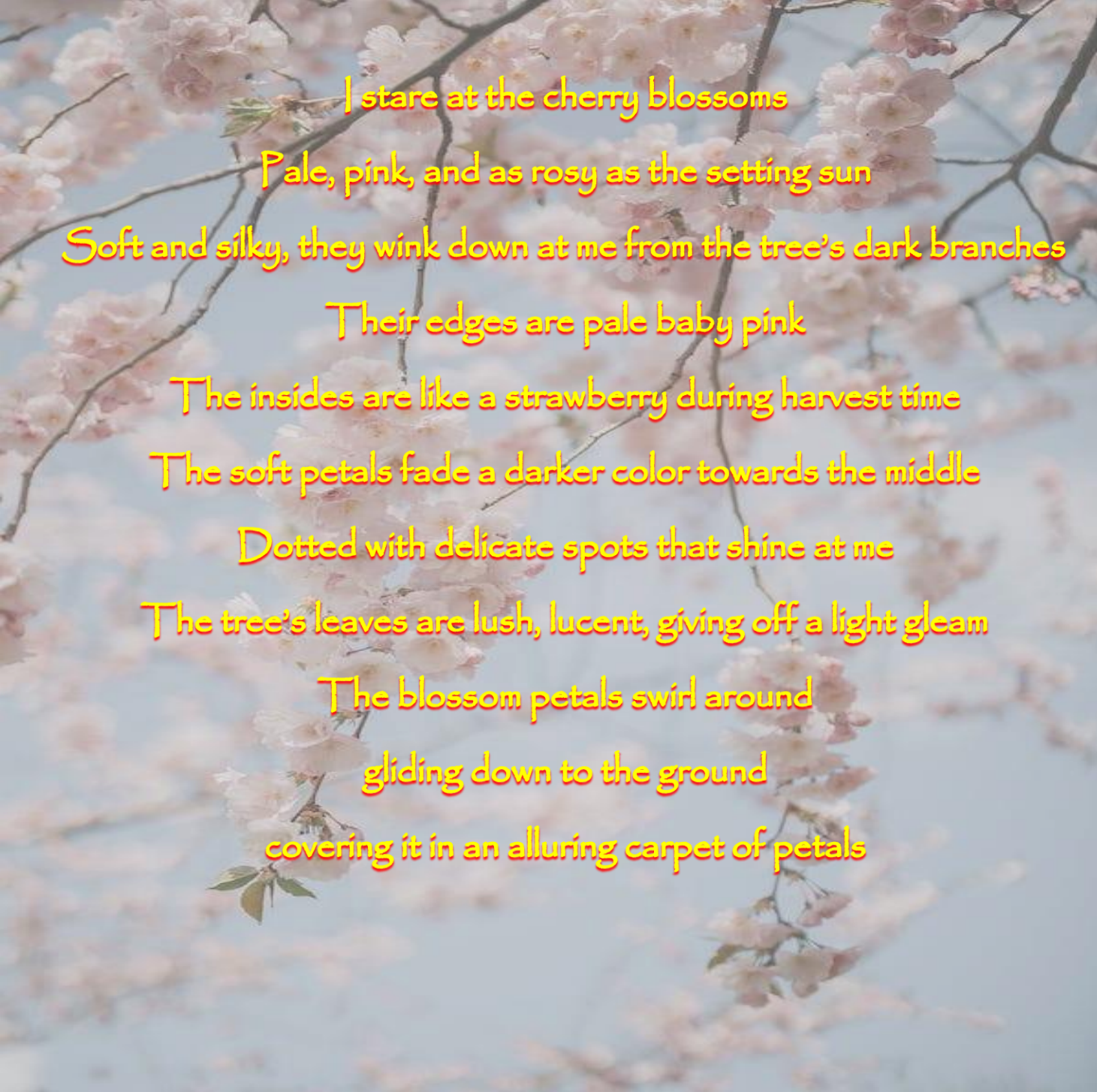
“Mr. P?”

“Where are you, Mr. P? The joke's over.”

“Huh? Mphh! Mphh! Mphh! Clump.”

Cherry Blossoms

By Thea



I stare at the cherry blossoms
Pale, pink, and as rosy as the setting sun
Soft and silky, they wink down at me from the tree's dark branches
Their edges are pale baby pink
The insides are like a strawberry during harvest time
The soft petals fade a darker color towards the middle
Dotted with delicate spots that shine at me
The tree's leaves are lush, lucent, giving off a light gleam
The blossom petals swirl around
gliding down to the ground
covering it in an alluring carpet of petals

Anger

By Maggie

Anger is like a weed

**It makes things look ugly, and you
never seem to be able to get rid of it
If you don't pluck it out, it'll continue
to grow**

**and grow
until it envelopes everything**

**It climbs up healthy plants
slowly choking them until they die**

**Its roots extend into the ground
Stealing water and food**

**from plants around it
The fight against it is tiring**

**and sometimes
you just let it take over**

This weed doesn't grow in the ground though

**it grows in your heart
If you don't get rid of it
Eventually it'll take over
The decisions you make
the thoughts you have
and the words you say
are only partially you now
the weed controls most of them**

**So
while it might be hard
to hack and pluck at it
never
give up the fight.**