LIFE ITSELF

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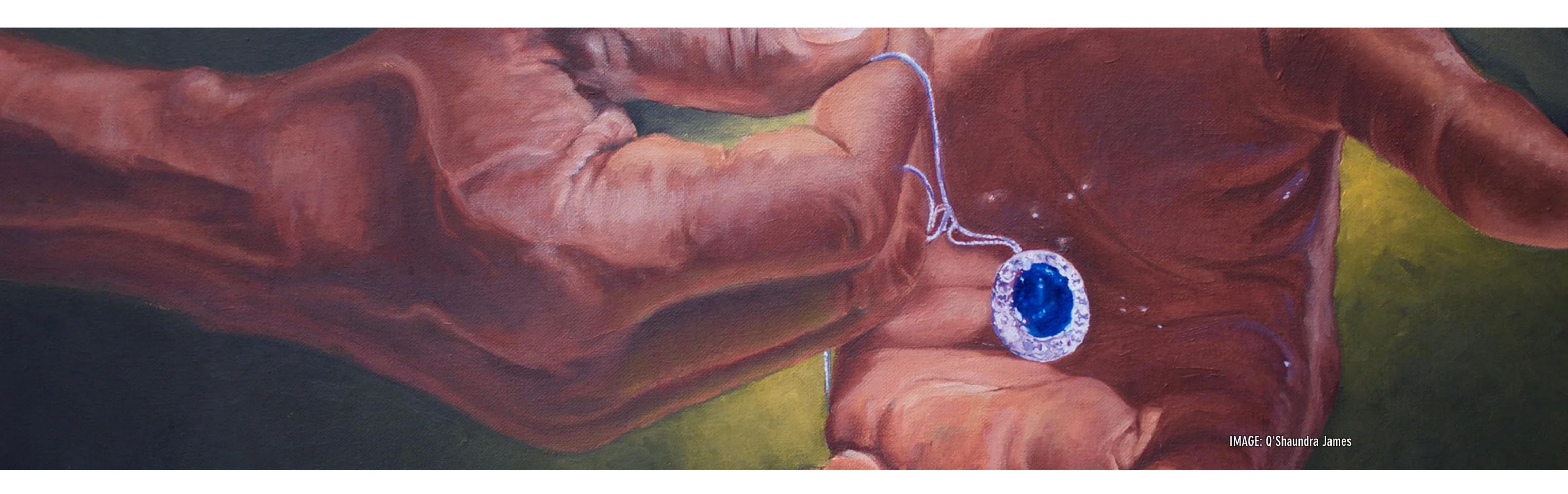
Casey Larin

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CONTEST CONTRIBUTOR

Casey Larin is a sophomore at Evergreen Valley High School. Inspired by the aesthetics of street art, early 2000s animation, and surrealism, he strives to capture the human experience in the modern world. An aspiring comic artist, one day he aims to be an industry professional.

"Listen, An. I'm rotting." Ethan fiddled with his jacket, a mottled olive green coat. "I'm rotting, and I'm gonna die someday soon."

"Ugh. You'll do fine, Ethan." Anthony let his feet nonchalantly bounce against the bricks of the cemetery wall. Behind them were rows of white, eroded headstones. "Plenty of people don't graduate. Don't overreact."

"No, you don't understand." With that, his friend took the sleeve of the coat and pulled it up as much as he could. The bare skin underneath was black and dead; clumps of dark ash and dirt were crumbling Ethan's forearm, revealing the pearl bone. It continued past the cuff, hidden by the sturdy fabric.

Anthony stared, slack-jawed for a long moment, before he winced and pulled back. "Wh—What is this? How long, Ethan?"

"Don't remember when it got bad. Had little spots since sixth grade, though." Ethan chuckled.
"Sixth grade. Everyone telling me I was so special, wasn't I? Never considered that I'd have to worry about this."

"Don't joke. Your doctors, what are they saying?" Anthony hunched over, as far as he could go without falling over.

"You're the only one to know, An. I'm not going to see any doctors."

"Like hell you're not. I'm calling 911." Anthony fumbled for his phone, frantically zipping open his backpack. Ethan merely blinked at him, slowly and languidly, before harshly slapping his hand. The bag fell out of Anthony's grip, pathetically falling to the steep ground under the wall. His hand went to Ethan's shoulder instead, but the other boy leaned away from it. Anthony pulled back like he was burnt.

"Parents can't afford the bills." Ethan whispered, shaking his head. "Can't afford a one-armed son."

"There are options for that, Ethan! Fuck, I'll get my parents to pay. You're a family friend."

"Don't bother, An. This isn't gangrene. This isn't something you can waltz into a hospital for and pay to get fixed." Ethan answered, smirking, weakly and half-heartedly. "This is the kind of decay they don't teach you about in medical school."

"We have to try! Did you even check what this is?" Anthony brought his palm to rest against his face. "No, what am I saying, of course you didn't. You'd rather tell us when you've lost a goddamn arm."

"No use crying over spilled milk, An." Ethan tapped his fingers against the brick, ignoring the way Anthony tried to avoid looking at it, clenching on empty air. "You know what's funny? When I was eight, I thought that I was gonna be the best artist to ever live. Had so many stories to show the world, and everyone would just eat the shit I offered up on a plate. In the gifted program, I daydreamed of my name on posters and museum plaques. In a way, I'm glad I'm rotting; I won't have to face the reality of it."

"Stop talking like you're going to die!" Anthony clutched at his hair. Tears gathered at the corner of his eyes. "You don't even draw, asshole. And now we have to amputate your arm, and you never will."

"I used to draw." Ethan sighed. "Used to, used to, used to."

Anthony shook his head. "Is—is this why you stopped showing up? All this time I thought you were ditching without me." His eyes were puffy. "When we were at Kate's party, and you were crying and throwing up after threatening to lie down under her car, was, was that 'cause—"

"Because I was dying? Yeah, it was. Couldn't control anything about myself. The fatigue, the emotions." Ethan looked down at the lonely backpack. "I didn't want it to be so slow."

"You're not dying, you're just stupid." Anthony clutched at his hoodie strings so hard his knuckles turned white. "Ethan, you could have told me. We could have caught it instead of you letting me think you hated me for the better part of high school!"

"You never called. Wouldn't have made a difference, though. Know what they don't tell you, An? They don't tell you that when you're a kid, all that potential and possibility gets trapped in you. It stagnates for years, and then starts decomposing from the inside out." Ethan let loose a loud, raucous laugh, chuckles bubbling out of his lips like poison. "Then they don't tell you that this rot is so deep you'll never get it out."

Anthony slammed his fist against the edge of the wall. It scraped his skin, and blood smeared against the rough shale. "You're selfish. You're, you're so unbelievably selfish. Everything with you has to be dramatic, doesn't it? So many chances to do something about this, and you didn't even try!" Anthony wiped futilely at the tears streaming down his red face. He trembled. "Why can't you just care!? Can you, for once, give a damn about something!" Anthony swung his legs back over the other side of the wall. "Just, come on. I'm going to get you help, since you can't look after yourself."

Ethan stayed where he was. Slowly, his fingers drew the zipper down, and he shrugged out of his coat. The dirt had chewed through his shoulder, and under his T-shirt his neck was choked with black. Anthony sobbed.

"It reached my chest last week." Ethan said, now deathly still. "Go home, An. I'm planning to run into the woods and get lost."

"I'll run after you and drag you back into town, and then I'll be angry."

"These woods are big, and neither of us have ever been in there. You'd only get lost too. And you deserve more than what I do." Anthony's rotting friend stared at him over his shoulder. "You couldn't have stopped this. I just wanted to tell you. Bye, An . . . Anthony."

Ethan went limp and crumpled to the ground. His form lay still for a moment, and then he began scrabbling through the dirt, flying into the trees. The branches snagged him, and soon they pulled him into the darkness of the forest.

Anthony felt something along his arm. Then he hopped off the wall and sprinted into town.