



LAKEFIELD
LITERARY *Festival*

2003

YOUNG WRITERS CONTEST
WINNERS

2003 Senior Fiction Winner

With a Full Moon

by Quinn Damery

OAC – Crestwood Secondary School

For two months, Christopher had been forcing himself through sleepless nights and had spent his bleary-eyed days meticulously building his plans and scribbling his notes in a blank ledger, which he had found in his father's desk. In those two months, he had mastered slipping out of his second-storey window and leaping onto the oak tree in his front yard without making a sound. He could do it in the wind, fog, rain, and, as of last week, had even started throwing in some acrobatic twists during his dismount, just to spice things up a bit. Tonight would be his final exit from his second-storey window – his final loop-the-loop from the oak tree and the blossoming of his best-laid plans.

Christopher's mother had told him many times in his short life that he was blessed with focus and determination, and she often told her friends how amazed she was at his ability to direct all of his attention to a task once his interest was piqued. It was this blessed determination that had carried him through these two months with flawless self-assurance.

He checked his watch: 11:26 p.m, with a full moon. He had climbed out of his window a little bit earlier than usual tonight so that he could keep his promise to Madeleine. He had invited her to come with him, but she told him her parents would miss her too much; wouldn't his parents miss him too? He told her he thought they would, but had made up his mind and decided that the world was bigger than the four streets surrounding their neighbourhood where he had spent the entirety of his life. He said that if he didn't start exploring now, he would never get to see enough of it. Madeleine cried a little when he told her that.

Christopher climbed the drainpipe on the side of Madeleine's house and quietly edged along her rooftop towards her window. He carefully peered into her room, where moonlit shadows ran up and down her walls. Christopher tapped on the glass several times, heard a little bit of rustling on the bed, and then saw Madeleine swing open her window.

"I wasn't sure if you'd come," she whispered to him.

"I left early so I could make sure to be here," he whispered back. Even in their quietest voices, Christopher felt as if the whole world might be listening in on their conversation.

"Are you really leaving? You're not really going, are you?" Madeleine had been asking Christopher these same questions for weeks now, as it became more and more apparent to her that he *was* really leaving, he *was* really going.

Christopher and Madeleine spent the next fifteen minutes bantering back and forth about the schoolyard and the hallways, completely setting aside the fact that this was a final visit. Christopher would no longer play Peter Pan to Madeleine's Wendy, stealing her from her bedroom and telling her about his Neverland. There would be no more talking to the stars about flight routes and pickup points, and no more wild tales of adventures yet to come. A pause lingered between them, quiet and graceful like dandelion fluff.

"You shouldn't go."

"You shouldn't stay."

"People will miss you. Everyone will miss you; your family will miss you..."

"I know. I'll miss them too, but if I don't leave now, I might never leave. I might wake up and start telling people I don't want to see the world anymore, but I'd be lying to them. I'd just be tired of trying to run away."

"... I'll miss you."

In all his pages of notes, in both of his months of planning, after all of his visits to her window, it never once dawned on Christopher that Madeleine would miss him when he left. He hung his head a little bit and watched the moonlight tickle the hairs on his arm. Right there, right then, he admitted to himself all of the things he had kept secret from the world. He had a crush on this girl, this cute pony-tailed mystery who sat one row behind him and three desks to the left. He had hoped beyond hope that she would want to come away with him every time he asked her. He thought about giving up his plans every time she said she couldn't. Tonight he knew that he would throw his caution to the wind one final time.

"You can come too, you know."

She paused. She was thinking about it. She could go with him, and she wanted to. He made it sound so fantastic, with mountains and deserts and oceans. He had shown her pictures from *National Geographic*, told her about species of lizards as old as dinosaurs and places where pirates still existed. But she couldn't leave her family; she couldn't bear not to see them again. How could he? She knew he loved his mother and his father, but he seemed so ready to just turn away from them. He never ruled out a return home, but he never spoke about one either. She knew deep down that it wasn't part of his plans. Once he left, he would never want to come home.

Christopher watched her eyes as she contemplated his offer for the final time. It was beyond him to understand why anyone would want to be rooted in one place for longer than they had to be when there was so much more to see. He could feel it out there, but he couldn't touch it yet. He was busting at the seams to leave this boredom behind.

Christopher watched gingerly as Madeleine slowly tilted her head back up again. He watched her eyes to see if he could read her mind before she spoke. It was something he had done every

time he asked her to leave with him, but it was not a trick he had mastered like the silent tree dismount. Tonight, he was just as mystified as always.

Madeleine had rolled the idea around in her head for almost a minute before answering Christopher. She wanted to have all the adventures that Christopher talked about. There would be danger around every corner, but not too much danger, just enough to make them feel brave when they had conquered their terror. But she also wanted to sleep in her own bed at night, wake up on Christmas morning with her mom and dad and baby brother, and see her friends at school every day. She didn't have the itch to escape that Christopher had, and she didn't have the fearless spirit that he bore so proudly.

"I can't leave, Christopher," she finally confessed.

For the last time, Christopher thought about staying and came closer than ever before. His heart spoke to his head, and the two were a stone's throw from agreeing that this was where they belonged. But then one must've turned on the other because, swift as lightning, Christopher was shocked back to his desire to recklessly abandon everything around him and migrate to wherever his mind might wander and his heart would follow.

"I know you can't," he admitted. He knew all along, even when he couldn't see it in her eyes. He checked his watch. 11:48 p.m, with a full moon. He would have to leave soon if he was to have a good start on his journey.

"Well... goodbye, Madeleine," Christopher said, as calmly as possible. His heart and head were holding another debate, and it felt as though it might be heated.

"Goodbye Christopher," she said, and then added, "and say 'hello' to the world for me."

The icy light of the moon was shining exclusively on Madeleine's face at this moment, as though a cosmic spotlight was directing the universe's attention to the scene. Inside her moonbeam, this little girl cried for her little boy, her brave little dash who was going to forsake her windowsill for the unknown that lay farther than her eye could see and her mind could imagine. She cried for all the things he would not see – in the world he knew so well and on the four streets he felt he had to flee from.

In the shadows of the rooftop, Christopher slipped quietly down the slightly rusted metal and turned to see Madeleine one last time before forever took its toll. The moon still held her in its magnificent glare, and she hadn't noticed that he was not beside her anymore. Christopher blinked, capturing this photograph and committing it to memory. He then turned and, silently as an oak tree half-twist dismount, became the adventurer he longed to be.

Dial Tone

by Scott Dancey

Grade 12 – Kenner Collegiate Vocational Institute

The clatter outside his office window twenty-six storeys above the streets of New York City didn't peak his curiosity. He dismissed the noise, assuming it to be a flock of pigeons. The main focus of his attention lay on his clock, which he read every minute. He passed his fingers through his thinning, grey hair and clasped the back of his head. He sighed.

The man slouched even further in his chair. It was 5:17. Almost time. He picked up a yellow envelope from the mess of papers spread haphazardly across his bureau. He took his letter opener to the envelope, slicing it open with all the skill and dexterity of a surgeon, and spilled its contents onto his desk, as from a dehiscent wound. On the envelope was written "Donald Grainger." Mr. Grainger was the man he would be prosecuting tomorrow for a triple homicide. No more guilty a man had the lawyer seen in all his years in the practice.

The ringing of the phone was harsh and abrasive and jolted the man from his thoughts. He picked up the receiver.

"Gustav Gilbertson, attorney-at-law," he said.

At first there was no answer, just a low static interference, as though the caller was in a parking garage. On top of that noise, he also heard a kind of high-pitched whistling sound.

"Hello?" he said again.

"Gilbertson," a man said. Gustav could tell he was whispering, even through the static.
"Yes?"

Again, nothing. The reception continued to waver, and Gustav heard a new sound: very rhythmic scraping.

"Who is this?" Gustav asked. He was becoming annoyed.

"You know," the man answered. His voice almost blended into the distortions.

"No, I don't think I do."

"We met yesterday. We're meeting tomorrow."

Gustav felt his entire body shudder.

"Donald? Is that you?" he asked.

The man's laughter cut through the interference like a knife. Gustav hung up the phone abruptly. He ran to the door of his office and turned the bolt, hearing it click shut with terrible security. Gustav sighed again. He was sweating through his white dress shirt. He loosened his tie a little.

When the phone rang again, as Gustav expected, he walked to the phone, placing his hand hesitantly on the receiver. He lifted it slowly.

"Uh, hello?"

"Mr. Gilbertson?" a clear, defined voice said. "It's Chief Ostling, with the NYPD."

Gustav sighed a third and final time.

"It's good to hear from you, Ostling. I think I may... "

"Sorry to interrupt, but Donald Grainger escaped this afternoon. A cruiser should be at your building in a few minutes."

Gustav was speechless.

"Just sit tight. We'll see you soon," Ostling said, then hung up.

The lawyer dropped the phone to his side, trying to ignore the irritating dial tone it emitted. After staring at it for a while, he placed the receiver back in its rightful place. He began pacing.

The phone rang a third time. Gustav pulled it from the desk and threw it across the room with no hesitation. The bell rang once as it struck the ground. Sweat coursed down the lawyer's wrinkled brow.

Suddenly, a phone began to ring from inside him. Gustav jumped before he realized that it was only his cellphone inside his suit jacket. He pulled it out, removing the jacket as he did so. He abruptly sat down on the floor.

Gustav pressed the "Talk" button and held the phone to his ear. He heard the same static interference and cacophonous chafing sound.

"You thought you were safe, didn't you?"

He was sure it was Grainger this time.

"Where are you, Donald?"

"None of your concern."

"The police are on their way. What do you hope to accomplish?"

"Retribution."

Gustav paused.

"What the hell is that supposed to mean? *You're going to jail.*"

“Maybe, but not quite yet.”

And that’s when Gustav Gilbertson heard it. A gust of wind blew by his building. The way it struck the small alcove outside his window produced a howling effect. But Gustav heard it twice: once from the window behind him, and another time from his cellphone. The result was a disorienting polyphonic experience, like faulty surround sound.

The scraping sound finally stopped, just as Gustav realized it had been coming from behind him all along. He turned to see a man standing directly outside his closed window. The man extended his arms and shattered the cheap glass, sending deadly shards everywhere. The man’s arms became lacerated, as did Gustav’s horrified face. The man stepped through the alcove and entered Gustav’s office.

“Donald?” Gustav asked. His voice sounded as if it was coming from far away.

The man laughed, his face silhouetted against the sunlight pouring in from the broken window. He walked on top of Gustav’s desk and grabbed his letter opener before jumping off. When he spoke, it wasn’t to Gustav but to his cellphone that he carried in his bloodied left hand. The lawyer realized that his own cellphone was still pressed tightly to his ear.

“You *did* think you were safe,” the intruder said, as if confirming an earlier hypothesis. Gustav heard it twice. “I even risked life and limb out there on that ledge, thinking that you had a police detail protecting you before the trial tomorrow. Obviously you don’t.” He pointed to the door with Gustav’s razor-sharp letter opener.

Gustav became aware of the sources of the sounds he had heard earlier. Not static, but wind. The scraping must have been the sound of his shoe against the concrete overhang.

“What are you going to do?” Gustav asked the phone.

“Retribution.” His voice seemed to come from all around Gustav.

The man walked toward the huddled lawyer. Vaguely, Gustav heard the sounds of police officers in the outer hallway trying in vain to open his locked door. He found that he couldn’t breathe, much less scream.

“Too bad,” the man said quietly, referring to the officers outside. “Fortunately, I think we’re almost done here...”

He resumed walking toward Gustav at an excruciatingly slow pace.

“... Don’t you think?” he finished.

The man raised the letter opener into the air and removed the phone from his ear. He hit the “End” button.

Somewhere, Gustav Gilbertson thought he heard a phone tolling, but it was just his imagination.

The blade swung in a downward arc.

Click.

Unrest

by Kerry Hollingsworth

OAC – Crestwood Secondary School

The sun dropped from sight, darkness fell, each light went out successively in its turn, and I was left alone. As day escaped with the setting sun my heart sank, my anxiety dilated, and I surrendered to the dread. Night was a formidable foe, one that I'd battled since I could first comprehend the words of a bedtime prayer that effectively ruined my life:

“Now I lay me down to sleep.”

The only way I can keep myself from succumbing to exhaustion is by ingesting excessive amounts of caffeine. Staying awake, although not filled with grace or elegance, is a crafty dance. The moon is deceptive and the stars enchant. The weak of mind and the faint of heart submit in the early hours of night, lacking the will that's required above all earthly things.

Tonight the north wind seemed especially harsh. It found places to penetrate the cracks in my window that I hadn't caught before. I sealed more duct tape over the guilty culprits, ensuring that no draft would breach my walls tonight. I made the rounds of my room: The vent in my floor was covered, all loose articles were tightly secured, my closet was devoid of prowlers, and I had locked each bolt on my bedroom door twice, ensuring the impermeability of my stronghold. Home security is a matter not to be entrusted to someone else:

“I pray the Lord my soul to keep.”

It wasn't that I am an insomniac. Insomniacs can't fall asleep. I chose not to. Everyone's afraid of something; that I'm petrified of one of the human body's most mundane needs is inconsequential. Perhaps if the world weren't populated with convicts and felons, or if children's play-areas weren't a breeding ground for sexual predators, I might be more at ease with closing my eyes to sleep, a time when one is most vulnerable.

I lay down in my bed and pulled the blanket to my chin. The covers immediately started tightening around my neck. I gasped for air and tore the blanket away.

Time passed arduously and night crawled in as I lay still as the dead. My ears throbbed from the otherwise ambient ticking of the clock. Or was that my heart beating? I checked my pulse: still alive.

Every soothing breath or blink of the eye was a momentary lapse – sleep's temptation. I can't close my eyes.

Night squirmed with its pervasive figures swaying, creatures tapping, and beasts scratching at the threshold of my windowsill. Shadows danced upon my ceiling, casting two-dimensional manifestations of the nightmares from weaker times past. Each creak in the house was a gunshot. Every mechanical hum drew blood. The silence between gnawed at my gut:

“If I should die before I wake.”

There’s something to be said about being in complete isolation when lines blur and colours grey.

I heard it. Somebody was in my house. Instinctively, I sat straight up in bed. Every fibre of every muscle was tense. I stopped breathing. Slowly and deliberately, the pounding of feet was amplified. Each step was more intrusive than the last. The gait was long and heavy, with a confidence in its destination. The steps drew near. Terror, it always seems, is not a feeling, but a taste beginning in the back of your throat. It’s a blown-out match, a burst airbag, a smoking gun.

The last footstep fell outside my door. His weight shifted... and shifted again. Horrified, I heard the slow grinding of metal on metal. One by one, each bolt came undone to the last. The door was ominously pushed ajar, and the sound of my racing pulse was joined by another.

A face so generically unimpressive was what I noticed first. Then, like a flare gone off in the middle of a desert, I saw the glint of a blade whose functions were numerous, but whose purpose tonight was singular. Whether it was blind witlessness or the last of my dissipating courage, I lunged past him through my violated door to the outside where I was greeted by the sinister beings that lurk in the night. The intruder was on my tail, on the hunt:

“I pray the Lord my soul to take.”

The only difference between desperation and madness is the absence of hope. I blindly tore through long grass, spiny shrubs, and the silent yards of suburbia. His expired breath was on the rear of my neck. Branches whipped my face as I ran through shallow woods searching for some evidently non-existent solace. My laboured breathing and clumsy dash were as much as my body would grant. I ran madly with no direction, no destination, and only a motivation.

I dodged barricades and hopped fences while the magnitude of pursuit swelled. His feet would trip mine up, forcing acceleration and pushing my body to a boundary that I’d not reached before. I can’t close my eyes; I can’t close my eyes.

The sun rose over the horizon. With all hope gone, I slowed up, dropped to my knees, and waited for him to decide my fate. Nothing came. I turned to find that I was by myself, placed alone on a road at the beginning of a new day. The sun had come to devastate the demons that command the night.

I walked home, my bare feet burning on the caustic pavement, my pyjamas soiled and torn. Maybe today will be better than the last. Perhaps the sun won’t set today.

2003 Junior Fiction Winner

The Piano

by William Lamond

Grade 9 – Peterborough Collegiate Vocational School

The piano had always been there. It loomed in the parlour like some prehistoric beast in its lair, enticing those foolish enough to come and attempt to plunk out a tune, only to be utterly disappointed by the horrible sounds produced by their untrained fingers stumbling across the keys. At length it was abandoned, a mere piece of decor in the largely unused room.

Mike had known the piano since he was very young. When he was a small child, its towering bulk and imposing gothic carvings had terrified him, and he had avoided the parlour at all costs, but as he grew older, it became less frightening. Mike grew bolder until one day, during those teenage years when one thinks oneself invincible, he approached the piano cautiously. He slowly pulled out the ancient, heavy wooden bench and sat down. Resting on the piano in front of him was a yellowed, dusty copy of the “Moonlight Sonata,” by Ludwig van Beethoven. Mike looked hard at the music, looked down at the keys, and looked back at the music. He realized that he had no idea how to play the piano. Still, he decided that there was no backing down now and tentatively put a finger down on one of the keys.

Suddenly, an invisible force caught hold of his hands, giving them a life of their own, and they started playing the first movement of the “Moonlight Sonata” perfectly, without Mike willing them to do so! The chords flowed easily from his nimble digits, smoothly making the transition from phrase to phrase, and accenting and decrescendoing in the proper places, all in perfect rhythm. Mike was amazed and excited! He moved into the second movement, effortlessly bringing the music off the sheet and into reality. Mike began having visions of himself as a world-renowned pianist.

By the third movement, however, Mike was becoming worried, because, no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't prevent his hands from playing. He finished the “Moonlight Sonata,” and to his horror, instead of stopping, his hands sifted through more music and brought out George Gershwin's “Rhapsody in Blue.”

Mike was glued to the bench as his fingers kept playing. While he tried desperately to get control over them, tears of frustration ran down his face. He began screaming for help as his hands methodically polished off Bach, Satie, Debussy, and Chopin. But no one came to his aid.

Mike knew that if he couldn't stop his hands, he'd spend the remainder of his life sitting at this keyboard. His mind raced as he fought down panic while trying to think of a way to stop this terrible phenomenon. He finally came up with an idea. He thought as hard as he could about a very, very fast piece, and, to his amazement, his hands seemed to obey his mental request, picking

up a piece marked *prestississimo*, an incredibly fast tempo marking. Mike's fingers cracked their knuckles and hovered over the keys for a moment. Then, they drove into the piano with such force and speed that all Mike could see was a blur over the keys. But his plan worked! The incredible velocity at which his fingers were striking the keys travelled as kinetic energy through to the strings themselves, and Mike heard loud cracking noises as the strings began to break under the stress. The piano started creaking and shaking, its feet thumping against the floor, the ivories under Mike's hands growing hot and searing his fingers, as if the piano, in its death throes, was trying desperately to shake him off. The cracks sped up into a loud, harsh whirring noise that engulfed the entire house until there was a tremendous bang and a brilliant flash of white light. Mike was thrown halfway across the room, and when he could see again, there was no trace of the piano, not even a splinter!

Extremely shaken, Mike walked out of the room, resolving to take up sculpting, or watercolours, or gardening, anything other than playing the piano.

2003 Junior Fiction Runner-up

Hangin' Out

by Matt Whitfield

Grade 10 – Peterborough Collegiate Vocational School

So I'm down at the store with Jeff, right? We're just hangin' out, doin' nothin', right? Just waitin' for someone maybe to come along who could, like, buy us some smokes or beer or somethin'. There was a party that night, I think. Sooooo many parties, dude! So we were just, like, killin' time.

So we're just, like, sittin' there on the steps, right? And guess who comes along? That goddam little dirt, Zack. Now, man, don't get me wrong. I got nothin' against the kid. I just don't like him. Don't mind him, really, long as he stays the hell away from me. People got their place in the world, and his is nowhere near mine.

So, like I said, I got nothin' personal against the dirt. But Jeff, man. Jeff hates that kid. Damned if I know why, but Jeff can't stand him. At all.

So Zack's, like, walkin' along, right, and he notices us on the stairs. He sees us, and then sorta stops, you know. Hesitates. That's the word. He hesitates, but he keeps walkin'. Jeff notices him, trails off from what he was sayin'. He stands up, stares at Zack. Zack's, like, panickin', he's lookin' away like he can't see us.

“Hey, faggot,” says Jeff. “Where the hell you goin'?”

Zack, he looks up at Jeff. Jeff's got a good six inches on Zack, right, and he's, like, buff, man. He could kick Zack's ass without breakin' a sweat.

So Zack, he's, like, pretendin' that he's all calm and shit. “I'm going in the store,” he says. “Could you please get out of my way?”

He's tryin' to play it cool, but his voice, like, cracks, and he's panickin'. I can see it in his eyes.

Me, I'm just sittin' there on the steps still, watchin'. Like I said before, I don't have nothin' against Zack. He's a pissy little asshole of a kid, but he never did nothin' to me.

Anyway, Jeff, he laughs, and he says, “You hear that? The faggot wants in the store! Should we let him in?”

Me, I don't wanna get involved, really. I mean, that store's right by the cop shop. Any of the pigs went out to get a candy bar, could've been trouble. Besides, I'm kinda feelin' sorry for Zack by this point. Prob'ly he was just buyin' milk for his mommy or somethin' like that, and really, why should I care? He means nothin' to me. I don't care about him enough to hate him.

So I shrug. I say, "Meh." I do nothin'.

I do nothin' when Jeff grabs Zack by the collar, throws him up against the wall. I do nothin' when Zack whimpers for help, nothin' when Jeff smacks him. Do nothin' when the blood, bright, bright red, drips down onto the ground. Do nothin' when Zack runs home cryin', all his money gone, bloody nose, bloody clothes, bawlin' his eyes out, cryin' for his goddam mommy. Do nothin' when Jeff throws stones after him, laughin'.

Do nothin' that night at the party. Jenna, she comes over to me, and she tries to get somethin' goin', right? And don't get me wrong here. I like Jenna. She's hot, man. Hot with a freakin' capital H. Any other night...

But tonight I'm just doin' nothin'. All around me, people are havin' a great time, gettin' drunk, gettin' stoned, gettin' laid. All around me, people are laughin', jokin', enjoyin' theirselves. And there's me, sittin' on a couch in the middle of this party, just sittin' there, doin' nothin'. Doin' nothin', starin' into space. Thinkin'. Thinkin', shit, I did nothin'.

2003 Senior Nonfiction Winner

Unspoken : Depression and the Search for Words

by Zoë Greenwood

Grade 12 – Lakefield College School

Doctors ask questions that require “Yes” and “No” answers, or “How does it feel when...?” “Tell me how you felt when...?” “What were you thinking when...?” They tell you to fill out forms. Blank spaces. Boxes. You are provided with the answers: “Always”... “Often”... “Sometimes”... “Rarely”... “Never.” It’s so simple, how could it fail? At the end there will be a diagnosis, and you will leave with a piece of paper (again) and a feeling in the pit of your stomach that this will never end. This will eat you alive. Prognosis: fatal. Six months to a year.

I assume that they do not understand, cannot understand, maybe don’t even want to. Just another one of *those kids*. Get her in and out as quick as possible, and on to the next one. I assume that they want to tie me to those boxes, those answers. Always, often, sometimes, rarely, never. How can it be that simple? But perhaps the doctors are seeking just as desperately as I am. They seem so badly to want to confine this to a specific set of words. Demanding that you speak their language when talking to them. “Yes, Doctor, I often feel a) hopeless b) sad c) tired d) all of the above.” They want to assign a title to everything I am feeling. Disorder. Dysfunction. Anxiety. Panic. Manic. Bi-polar. Depressed.

But none of their words fit, and none of their prescriptions work, and none of their diagnoses are correct. And now it’s been seven years. Which is not long, really, considering how much longer it is for some people, but it is still painful. Still frustrating. And I am cursed with that deadly combination of art and pain. And something inside of me aches to figure it all out, to explain it in perfect sentences, to cure myself of all of this horror through the beauty of *my* language and *my* words.

But how can I explain it? How can you talk about the disease of sadness in a way that will rid you of it? It fills you up until it is all you know. It becomes every word you speak. Reflected in everyone and everything you see. While you’re driving down the street one day, the beauty of the rain on the windshield makes you cry. Self-contained and insular. My world consists of me feeling. Everything. So intensely. All the time. And the longer it lasts, the more I want to break it down into a series of carefully planned paragraphs, numbered poems, chapters and titles, and entire books. And the more time I spend trying to do that, the longer it lasts. The systemization of desperation. Vicious cycle. Cruel ironies.

I can only assume that things were once easy. I’m sure there was a time when they were. But I can only assume. Now, I cannot function on most days. Not the way I should be able to, not the way something inside of me keeps telling me I can. I wake up and the air is dry; colours are flat or too gorgeously intense. My stomach aches, maybe from the medication, maybe not, and my face is puffy from tears I don’t remember having shed. “I can’t do it,” is the only thing I can think. The only thing I can say. And for another day those words consume me. This is not me. But what else am I? This is all I know. Again, my words fall dead from my lips, my excuses are laughable, my laughs are contrived, my body is numb and sick and not my own.

It happens slowly, this thing... this thing I know so well but cannot put a name to, not without feeling I am lying to someone. Maybe myself. It creeps up on you, seeping into your blood stream, negotiating with your subconscious, making deals with your inner demons. It takes you down one day at a time. A vicious battle that most are destined to lose. I live with this and I can barely explain it. I struggle for words so desperately that my fingernails make my palms bleed, my jaw locks up, and my heart feels as if it might break my ribcage.

Yes, Doctor, I do write my feelings down. Yes, that's what they tell me... a good way to cope. Yes, that's what they say. No, I don't think I can tell you what I write; you see, my mouth doesn't work the way my hands do.

How do you say it? How do you talk about the way you feel as if you are choking every second of every day? How do you say that now you understand why all those stupid clichéd metaphors really aren't stupid. Tunnels, dark clouds, heavy weight on your shoulders; suddenly those pictures are common visitors. How do you explain that death is so familiar that you have begun capitalizing it? Death sucks at your heart until the noise of its beat becomes an annoyance. Death runs her fingertips over your wrists and shakes her head at you as you lie in a hospital bed, drifting in and out of consciousness to the sound of your vital signs beeping away. She says, "not this time, sweetie, not this time." And you want to scream at her, but once again, you just cannot find your voice.

Yes, Doctor, I often think about dying. No, Doctor, I rarely feel violent. I just want it to stop. Just stop. Just stop. Just stop just stop just stop just stop stop stop.

I am beginning to think that this sickness will eat away at my generation until we are nothing but bones. Sad reflections of what could have been. Just numbers on health cards, just files, eventually forgotten by all those who remembered. I see it in people's eyes every day – this disease shows like nothing else. It ages without lines or wrinkles, makes you walk too slowly, think too quickly, and want too much. I see it in people every day. The pain is on their skin, on their lips, in the way they move their hands. They are so tired. They have tried and tried, although few believe them when they say that. They have dealt with their childhood trauma, their malnutrition, their sleeping problems, and still... still...

Still lonely when I am surrounded by people who love me. Sad because there is too much beauty in the world, and I just can't be a part of it. Angry at only myself. Searching and searching for something I cannot name. Desperately trying to find the thing that can save me from this. Wearing myself out. And down. Crash. And burn. Slow, slow Death.

But I cannot say it like that. I don't think anyone can. They are words that live in your fingertips, not on your lips. They would sound alien delivered by my voice. And so I remain stuck, like so many people. Stuck with this disease I do not understand in a world that does not understand it, desperately seeking words that will never be enough. The doctors who will not let me recover. The writer who cannot save herself with words. A sickness that owns a language that cannot be spoken. People who just won't heal.

Perhaps when I am older, I will stand before the mirror and stare at my breasts, which have started to sag, my skin that has lost its smoothness, the body that I once hated for rising above one hundred pounds, and I will hate myself for ever having got so lost in something so horrendous that I wasted away my youth. Perhaps eventually, the drugs will work, the doctors will assign me a title, be satisfied

with my test results, understand me in their own way, and send me away forever. Perhaps this will pass, and I will finally let go and breathe without choking, sleep without crying, eat without guilt, and love without pain. But I don't think the right words will ever make it off my tongue. I suppose that that is the curse of art and of writing; depression is hard, but it is even harder to admit that the thing you love more than life, more than yourself, the thing you love in a way that is beyond touch and tears and time, will not be able to save you from it in the end.

Twins Tower

by Becky McMaster

OAC – Crestwood Secondary School

So I didn't wear red, white, and blue. It's not because I don't care or don't think it's a tragedy. It's just that sometimes one day of mourning is enough. To spend a whole week with tears streaming down my face was too much. I never want to relive the week of September 11th, 2001, but it's not for the same reason as the rest of the world.

Please don't think I'm cold-hearted. I cried when the plane hit the tower. I knew how people's hearts would break. How families would be ruined. Life is more precious than we think. Newly-widowed women had to tell their children why Daddy wouldn't be coming home anymore. Husbands had to bury their wives. Families prayed that their loved ones would be found, just so they could know the truth. I understood the fear and the pain, and I mourned with the rest of the world. At home, alone with my sister, we watched the television just like the rest of the world. I was in shock. Speechless.

But here is where my experience is different. The phone rang. My parents called from the hospital. Dad was still recovering from his bypass surgery, so my sister and I were home alone. We'd been trying to call them, but in all the confusion, no one could put us through to their room. They seemed so calm. Dad was healthy enough to come home now, but, with all the excitement, the nurses got things mixed up. They probably wouldn't have got out of Toronto anyway; there were so many people from the planes that had made their emergency landings. Dad says this is what it was like when JFK was shot. Everyone would always remember what they were doing and where they were. It was a moment that would define our lives.

Sometimes personal tragedy can cloud one's mind. I can still see the images of two burning towers, but only after I push the sight of two tiny babies out of my mind.

On September 10th, 2001, two beautiful babies came into the world. Both perfect. Both warm. Tiny little fingers and cute little toes. Skin so soft, so thin, so perfect. My brand-new niece and nephew, Rosemary and Galen, were born that day. Too soon and too early. They were born so their mother wouldn't die. Galen never saw the world or felt the warmth of his father's touch. Rosemary was the little miracle. The doctors didn't think she was alive, but with his giant finger on her chest, my brother felt her heart beating. Too small to open her eyes, and with skin so thin you could see the amazing vessels that carried her blood. Have you ever seen an egg a few days after you put it in vinegar? That's how delicate the twins' skin was. They were 18 weeks old. Perfectly formed, but just not right. Something had gone wrong; the placenta was leaking fluid and infection had set in. Bekka's fever was too high, so the doctors thought it would be better to induce her. My mom coached her through it. Bekka said she'll never understand why Mom stayed when

she knew what the outcome would be. Dad couldn't leave his hospital. He could see across the road where the delivery was happening, but my mom went back and forth to tell him what was happening. It was decided that my sister and I wouldn't be told until my parents got home. It was probably the right idea. So I found out on September 12th. Try explaining that to your teachers: my dad had his bypass and my niece and nephew died, and never mind the fact that I don't know whether my relatives who work at the Pentagon are alive or not.

My relatives at the Pentagon weren't working that week, and my dad has recovered well. My brother and sister-in-law will never fully recover; neither will our family. Rosemary and Galen were cremated and their ashes put in a tiny urn with a little dove on the front. The leftover ashes that wouldn't fit in the urn (and some of the flower petals that didn't burn) were put into little charms for necklaces. The names Rosemary and Galen were written in hieroglyphics on the sides, and my brother and sister-in-law each have one. Just this year, my brother had a tattoo put on his forearm with Nefertiti holding twins and Rosemary and Galen written in hieroglyphics down the sides. The twins will never be forgotten.

And this year September 11th came again. Shortly after the anniversary, I got involved in a conversation with a woman who had been in the hospital during the attacks. She hadn't even been conscious on the 11th and said she felt like so "cold-hearted" for not caring. She's just happy to be alive. I understand how she feels. The world looks at us differently. They look down on us for not mourning with the same intensity as every one else in the western world. But not everyone mourns in the same way, and we aren't all grieving for the same reason.

I wish I could escape the world on the 10th of September. I wish I had held my niece and nephew and had been able to kiss them. They are tiny little angels, and I wish they could know how much we loved them. The world stands still on the 11th, but my world died the previous day. Please, let me mourn in peace, in my own way. Please, let me heal my heart. I lost a dream too.

2003 Junior Nonfiction Winner

Finally a Minority

by Hilary Bird

Grade 9 – Lakefield College School

We always think of racism as being like black and white... simple, though painful. No one ever thinks it is as complex as it is. Well, at least, I didn't until now. Racism isn't always meant to be hateful or hurtful; it comes in all forms, yet hurts just the same. I've always been one of the "normal people" at my school. I've never been considered weird or "uncool." I've always been looking out from the inside, never the other way around. Yet, there was one short moment in my life that changed my whole perspective on the world and on my life as I knew it.

The sun shone down through the trees like a burning flame. My back burned from the rays shining down on me. The birds sang, and I could hear the goats' hooves slam against the pavement as they ran in a herd. The sweet melody of friendly chatter among the locals filled the air, and the aroma of the frangipani trees entered my nose. My legs ached as I started on my painful journey down the steep rugged hill which led directly to my new unfamiliar school. My heart pounded; it was another day I would have to live through – and more hell.

My long, pleated, dark-green skirt (not one of my most stylish school uniforms) waved in the wind as I slowly climbed up the concrete steps at my new school to my Form 2 classroom. It had been two weeks since I started here. I was in an unfamiliar place at a time in my life when nothing was exactly familiar to me. Why my family decided to take me out of the school where I was happy and drag me to this new place, which I was supposed to call home for the next year, was very unclear to me. All I knew was that I was in some Caribbean island and that I had to deal with it. I stood on the platform at the top of the stairs and looked around. I stared at the rolling hills and saw a bird fly up. "God, I wish I was that bird," I said to myself. I wish I could just fly up and get off this island. I was beginning to go stir-crazy.

I walked slowly to a big door with a hole in it, opened it slowly, and walked in. I kept my head low trying to avoid any confrontation that I knew I didn't want. I sat down beside my friend Sophie. I broke the silence by pulling out my chair and felt as if I was breaking a law by doing that. The teacher glared at me, along with the other thirty classmates who filled the stuffy room the size of a normal bedroom. Emotions ran through my head and all through my body. I wasn't just scared of that moment; this whole place scared me. The class was silent, not in a peaceful way but in an uneasy way, one that caused me to sweat in utter fear. "You are late," Mr. Johnson said. Mr. Johnson was my math teacher. He was a short, stocky man and looked harmless, yet I knew he wasn't. I was scared of him, and he knew that. I hadn't made many friends, and the few that I did have weren't exactly angels.

The class started. Mr. Johnson let me off because I was new. Sophie and I started talking about life and how she'd been to Canada before. My head swerved around to meet the eyes of a sixteen-year-old girl staring at me as if I was some sort of freak. She intimidated me, and the words that were just released out of her lips shot through me like a poisonous dagger right in the chest. I was surprised and confused at the words that filled my head. "Hey, white girl, lend me a pen."

I was tough. Well, at least I thought I was, yet nothing in my whole life could have prepared me for what had just faced me. I reached into my bag, grabbed a pen, and threw it back to her. I put my head down on my desk and started to look back on what had just happened. I started to cry, and Sophie looked at me in shock. I didn't even think that they knew my name. I wasn't anything to them. I was a colour and just a colour. I had been called "white girl" for the last two weeks. I was the only white girl in the whole school, and apart from my brother, I was the only white person. I didn't see that. I saw people, not colours. That was the first time I have ever been affected by racism, and now I knew why it had such a bad reputation. To them I was different. I guess my colour was how I was different from that girl. I knew that this intimidating stranger didn't mean for that comment to bring pain; it was a part of her culture and didn't mean anything to her. But it meant something to me. I was finally a minority, a major minority. We never really think of racism that much, but it was an eye-opening experience. I was no longer in my own little world. I was now a sitting duck in a world of hunters. I was open game. I didn't have a respectable status here and I knew that would take a long time to earn. I had to deal with that. I slowly brought up my head, told Sophie that I had something in my eye, and finished my math. My whole perspective on life had changed in only a few minutes. I knew then that the world isn't exactly a little ray of sunshine to live in; it can sometimes be a storm cloud. I needed to deal with what life threw at me and I was going to do that.

Family Strength

by Melina Found

Grade 9 – Peterborough Collegiate Vocational School

It had been a regular day for me so far. I had my usual mediocre lunch, had my usual classes, and was now struggling to lug home my “average” amount of homework. I let myself into the house; I was the first one home, so everything was nice and quiet, just the way I liked it. Cranking up some tunes, I made myself a piece of toast and some hot chocolate, and then flopping down on the couch, I decided to tackle my hideous amount of homework. I wasn’t expecting anything to really happen that night, and why would I? It had been a very average day; however, today was going to be the day when I would be forced to face the most intense event of my life.

My mom and brother came home next, in a big rush; I quickly shut off my music and made myself appear to be really concentrating over my long division problems. There was then the usual “How was your day?” questions to which I replied, “It was a normal day... I have a lot of homework though!” I was advised to “Get at it,” so I did.

Last my dad came home. He looked a little stiff and tired, but that was to be expected of a high-school teacher who taught shop class. I didn’t really think anything of it.

Supper was cooking, and from upstairs my mom called down for me to set the table and pour the milk. She and my dad were upstairs talking. By the time they came down, dinner was ready and I was ladling it into bowls. I didn’t notice my mom’s red eyes.

Dinner was casual – homemade chicken-noodle soup. It was kind of quiet. Usually my dad has a story to tell from his exciting day teaching high school, but he didn’t say a thing. I still didn’t notice anything. I was a growing kid and I was hungry, so my concentration was focused on consuming my tasty soup.

My dad suddenly started to speak.

“Melina, Riley... today I went to the doctor’s office... to get a mole looked at on my back...” He was talking calmly and slowly. I stopped eating and listened.

“They had taken a sample of the mole about a month ago, and today I found out I have melanoma.” I was listening. I knew what it was; it was a disease that everyone fears, but somehow, dumbly, I asked “What is that?”

“It is a form of cancer,” he answered me calmly.

Now I had to believe it. My dad had said it himself; it had come from his own lips... my dad had cancer. I didn’t know what to think. My head was spinning and I thought I was going to be sick.

“I had another piece of the mole taken off my back again today.”

“So that is why he was so stiff,” I thought to myself, sickened.

“The results of this test will be back in about two weeks.”

I wasn't hungry. Somehow I got myself to say, “I think I'm going to go upstairs.” I felt as if I was on fire; every inch of me burned. I just wanted to get away from this dreadful feeling.

I went into the bathroom and sat down. A few minutes later my mom came up. Tears were gushing from her face, and that got me going. She grabbed onto me and hugged me, hard. I had never seen my mom so scared before. She was terrified, as was I, but at that moment I decided I would be strong and help my dad through this. I couldn't just fall apart and cry all the time.

We cried together for a few more minutes, and then my mom pulled away, drying her eyes with her sleeves.

“I need you to know that everything is going to work out, okay?” She looked at me, her red eyes still rimmed with tears.

I nodded; I really didn't want to speak.

I went back downstairs and gave my dad a hug, a smile, and a kiss. I decided I wouldn't do my homework that night. I felt as if I had been kicked by a horse, and all I wanted was to wrap my sheets around me.

The next week went by in a kind of slow motion. My mom had called my school, just to let them know what was happening. My close friends were sombre when I told them and all said something positive to me.

I had started my struggle; I was holding the weight of all this and keeping a level head. I was going to stay calm and not show all of my fear to my dad. I figured he was already stressed out to his maximum; he didn't need to see me freaking out.

I was sort of calming down by the time his next test results came in. I figured, they would say they had cut out all of the cancer and that he was fine, but would just have to go in for checkups or something. I was wrong.

My dad came home, and this time I was anxious for him to come home. I wanted him to walk through the door and tell us he was rid of cancer, that we wouldn't have to utter that vile word again. He didn't do that. Instead he told us, still very calmly, that they had found more cancer and that he would be going to a plastic surgeon in the next week to have an even larger hunk taken out of his back.

I felt as though I was a bird, just about to fly through the cage door of victory when I was brutally shot down. But still I decided I would be strong, I would stay level headed, and that we as a family would beat this.

The next three times my dad came back from the doctor (these three appointments spanned out over three months) he brought with him that bad, hateful news – he still had cancer. I was frantic. They

were going to try again to cut out the cancer, and I was wishing with every fibre of my being that he would come home with the news I so desperately wanted to hear.

The next time he came home, he did have that news! It was joyous! It was victory! I wanted to give him the biggest hug, but that had to wait until his back was better. I called every one of my friends, thanking them profusely for all their support.

I was soaring!