



LAKEFIELD  
LITERARY *Festival*

2009

YOUNG WRITERS CONTEST  
WINNERS

2009 Senior Fiction Winner

## Gravelly Bay Road

by Luke Barclay

Grade 12 – Kenner Collegiate Vocational Institute

### One

Why don't you write to me like you promised? Without you is like being alone with the sheer terror we felt after I threw that flat boot-shaped rock through that damn dirty window behind Mr. Lawson's discoloured barn. I miss getting into trouble.

Remember football in the house on rainy days? She hated it! Thank God, Ted "Lightning Rod" Fields caused her to keep us indoors... *The 49ers have the ball with seconds ticking down. Joe Montana digs his socks into the flowery, white tiles of the playing field and hikes the ball. The crowd of cabbage-patch dolls sitting atop the bread board falls into a hush. As Montana fakes a hand off to the left in slow motion, he curls to the right side of the field, avoiding the oncoming angry rush of brooms attached to dining-room chairs. He sees Dwight Clark barely open and tiptoeing the end-zone line. Gotta make a decision, gotta make a decision! He sees a hole through the waving broom handles and tosses a perfect spiral...* We didn't factor in one last defender – her precious teal vase with the ugly, triangular pattern sitting on the side table next to the sofa. You saw how upset he was, so you took the blame as tears ran down his cheeks onto a Bugs Bunny sweatshirt.

Little things separated you from everyone else. The farm isn't the same without you.

### Two

I get it. Talk about hard – driving down old Gravelly Bay Road and watching the family wave goodbye in front of that friendly home. I remember it perfectly: slender, two storeys; a white porch with that broken railing leading up the front steps and circling down to the brown, creaky porch swing he was forced to fix numerous times; and two windows on the top floor that looked like droopy old eyes because of those sagging shutters.

I'll always miss home. That was never an issue. Sometimes you just need a change of scenery; sometimes you tire of routine; sometimes there's no end to the world out there full of wondrous colour, fresh faces. I have experienced things I never could possibly experience back home.

I am a bird that needs to fly. Sometimes the farm was my cage.

### One

They miss you.

Since you left, she's been really stressed out, as if a baby robin had stumbled out of an egg and fallen through the white jagged stones bordering the pit of a twitching predator. I always find her in your room, a victim of old pictures and a made bed, as if a thick mist is fogging her brain.

I'm the invisible boy. There's always been an unspoken favourite – better in school, better looking, better at sports, funnier, taller – traits needing improvement. All my life I've tried to be this person so our parents could love us the same.

Where have you gone?

## **Two**

They'll miss us the same. I promise.

I can't come home – not yet. When I sleep, I walk down a desert road, nothing but a sea of red sand forming heat waves that dance in sync with the sun. I kick a flat boot-shaped rock and hear my shadow whisper. You should see the place I found: grubby and small enough to spit across. Dripping brown walls and tiny tear-shaped windows. Still, more light than I felt back home.

Parents live their lives through their children. I don't care about money or inheriting the family property.

Would you care they're upset when you don't want the life they chose? Would you let the red sports car and loud music blur past the life you could choose?

Since I moved out here to the city, I got a job serving drinks at a snug little pub full of characters teeming with troubles: wars, women, cars, work, marriage, booze, families, world – so many troubles I get troubled just thinking about it. Sure there are times when you'll be homesick and times your wallet's dryer than the Sahara, but you only truly learn from firsthand experiences. Hearsay is hearsay.

## **One is Two**

It doesn't look like I'll be standing face to face with the open road any time soon.

He got sick. Real pale like something chased the colour right out of his body. All he does is lie in bed, too weak to stand. His blank, white bedroom walls so much like a hospital, it's like it was meant to be.

I wanted to show them what I was capable of (stop)

I've been called to step up to fill shoes a few sizes too large (stop)

I need you (stop)

I can't take care of this on my own (stop)

Come home soon (stop)

## **Two is One**

I remember one day we took a fishing trip to Lake Ontario. The whole family went... *Perfect conditions. Water so calm the hot sun gave the lake a kiss as it skipped across the vibrant blue surface, leading a trail of sparkles. Smell of summer air so appealing the fish were just looking for an excuse to get caught. I was about seven years old and you couldn't wipe the frown off my face with a Klondike bar. Everyone in the boat, ankle deep in shiny legless acrobats. Everyone except me was taking advantage of those clueless bastards! I didn't find it out until a few years later but amidst my fishless tantrum, he had hooked one of his captured fish onto my line and threw it in the water. I never felt more excitement in my*

*life. I almost poked his eye out as I screamed and scrambled to set the hook. I still have the photo taken that day of the skinny runt with the buzz cut and toothless smile holding up his scaly, rainbow-coloured trophy.*

Tell him I'll return the favour. Tell her to set the table for one more.

## Same Sky

by Brad Boyle

Grade 12 – Kenner Collegiate Vocational Institute

*It was the nicest weather our city had seen in weeks, and with winter just around the corner, we embraced the warmth one final time before we started worrying about Christmas gifts. But that was that last thing on our minds; there were hills to roll down and trees to climb.*

*Today there was no need for jackets or gloves, just sunglasses to prevent the blaring, setting sunlight from tanning our souls. In the near distance, the scent of barbecues was growing stronger. We sat beside a patch of tall trees at the base of the hill, our clothes itching from the grass. We pushed handfuls of autumn leaves into comfortable piles. Cool dew stuck to our hands as we lay under the vivid sunset in a makeshift bed of red, orange, yellow, and brown.*

*For an hour of breezy silence, we became part of the earth, a piece of the beauty in a world where we were but temporary travellers. We allowed our heads to roll and face one another. By staring into each other's eyes, we came to the understanding that once we decided to stand up and walk away, no memory of this moment would survive the harsh winter ahead.*

As the man dressed half-heartedly, a single thought repeated itself in his now-awake mind: they could not have been more wrong. In fact, this memory, which he had so desperately clung to for the past hard months, was the only one he had left of her, and he wasn't prepared to let it go. He wrapped a heavy woollen scarf loosely around his thin neck, barely gathered enough strength to lace his boots, and lit a homemade smoke before opening the door.

It was the calmest weather the city had seen all winter, which was fortunate because today was the day his old car had decided to gasp and cough for the last time. He let out a sigh that seemed to say "I can't afford gas anyway" as he kicked the flat rubber with his broken steel-toed boot. The breakdown wasn't unexpected, and his withering body was desperate for some exercise; the snowstorms – mixed with starvation – made it really difficult to be active. He walked to work.

The snow had been cleared from the roads (for the first time in three weeks), making them decent enough for travelling by foot. The air was nippy, but for once it did not sting the hairs in his nose after every breath. He hadn't been able to afford toothpaste for months and was growing tired of the aftertaste of stale, peanut buttered toast.

The blizzards held off for the entire day, an occasion as rare as stores giving away free samples the way they used to. The walk home seemed less tiring, more enjoyable; he could revel in its detail. He rounded the last corner onto the long, weary stretch of cookie-cutter houses. Despite the

blinding glare of sun-settled snow, he saw the figure of a woman wearing a bright orange scarf. They were walking straight toward each other.

She was a beautiful young lady; he was a stubborn young man, and when her eyes fixed on him, her smile sparked the memory he had escaped from since he left the house that morning. At that moment, he didn't notice the crookedness of her stained teeth, or the fact that her orange scarf was actually browner than his sweaty socks. Their paths crossed only a few doors down from his, and he immediately understood why the woman was so alluring.

"Do you have a tissue?" She initiated conversation with a wink. The man shook his head and passed by; guilt rushed to warm his cheeks. "C'mon sir, I have children." As he stepped up to his door, the lonely man wished she was following. But she was a streetwalker, and he couldn't afford her.

His boots slipped off without effort, and his socks stayed with them. He used the last bit of energy he had to grab some small pieces of wood (barely worthy of the title logs) and started a small fire in his fireplace. He sat warming his toes, recalling details of the strange woman. Lukewarm broth was not enough to fill his stomach and not enough to distract his mind from that memory. He lay down in bed and pulled a woollen blanket over his head, capturing his drifting thoughts.

Worst weather the city had seen...

*...Since the flood, years back, still a teen...*

*...Watching the world shatter...*

*...deprived of the love that mattered most...*

*...Locked in a room upstairs...*

*...hoping no one finds him, or at least no one cares...*

The present came to the man like a slap, facing his stinging feelings, his heart racing so fast. Lost images resurfaced from his past, soaring through his mind like quick songbirds, beauty taken for granted for so long... until the sky, it opens up... and his (my) mind began to...

*...fly...*

*It's the most beautiful weather I have ever seen. I am the only one around for miles. The cloud factory is working overtime, and I can't help but stare at the endlessly drifting production. Although they do not form definitive figures, my mind begins to shape the vague wisps into animals running without a care. Faces smiling, frowning, angry, crying. Entire movies playing out right before my eyes. For hours, I stare at the scenes in my imagination floating through the gaping blue storybook, pretending you are there with me – together again.*

*But when the clouds end, I feel no disappointment, just wonder. I begin to think of all the people around the world who are also gazing up at the same sky, hoping that somewhere you are*

*watching as well. For a brief moment I can feel you with me. Sitting on a park bench, you and I. Sailing across the Pacific. Climbing a mountain together, enjoying the view from three-quarters up the rock. Waiting anxiously beside your hospital bed. We are so close that we could hold each other in a warm embrace, never letting go, yet I am the only one around for miles.*

2009 Senior Fiction Runner-up

## Life in 1000 Words or Less

*by Jenna Gordon*

*Grade 12 – Thomas A. Stewart Secondary School*

It's a blustery, wet February day when he meets Joan Dark for the first time. Turns out she was born May 30<sup>th</sup>, 1987, in Domremy, France. He smiles a bit, thinking of flames and a child born among the ashes, and wonders if she believes in reincarnation.

\* \* \*

He couldn't help but reflect on his own life and mortality as he watched his friend, Dave slowly lowered into the thawing March mud. Hollow eyes traced the engravings on the tombstone:

*David Maxwell Johnston.*

*October 12<sup>th</sup>, 1988 - March 23<sup>rd</sup> 2009.*

*You will be sorely missed.*

Who'd have thought he'd be spending his 21<sup>st</sup> birthday watching the internment of the best friend he'd ever had? Happy birthday to me, he thought bitterly to himself, and the tune was stuck in his head for the rest of the day.

Death strikes seemingly at random; he knew that – really he did. And that fact, combined with his friend's sudden death, sent him into a series of memories and musings over which he had no control. What would he be remembered for if he were to drop dead where he stood?

Well...in 10<sup>th</sup> grade he was the first in his school to beat *Contessa Imogene*, the latest fantasy epic for the PC system. He'd celebrated by sleeping for 72 straight hours to make up for all the rest lost while he gamed. He'd told his parents through his locked bedroom door that he was studying and doing projects for extra credit, even as the Contessa, in all her pixilated glory, flashed onscreen.

So there's that accomplishment. And he graduated high school – there's another. He was even in the top 10 of his class. It turns out all his computer time was good for something. But... he didn't go to his senior prom. He was going to, but beforehand, as he was about to leave, a call came through to his cell and he had to take it.

His...part-time job, you could say. It was a help hotline for all your computer and technology needs. And, like a responsible human being, he had sacrificed his own pleasure for the needs of others. Besides, he had told himself over six hours later as he hung up the phone, it's not like he



missed anything important. Just hours with his best friend, drinking beer, and watching from the fringes as their classmates got trashed and made fools of themselves, is all.

Getting into a good college was celebrated with a quiet dinner out with his parents, an event he would have liked to skip; then he went home and blared techno music on his insanely expensive stereo until it felt as if his ears might bleed. His LJ account was updated with a new entry full of exclamation points and cyber-bragging before he went to bed.

\* \* \*

As his thoughts occupy his mind's eye, his hands toy with his cellphone, texting, while music blasts in his ears. He's deaf to the world, and it's not like there's anyone left in the cemetery to care that he's tuning out his grief. So when he nearly trips over an oddly dressed girl flying a bright red kite, it's a bit of an understatement to say he's surprised. It would be more accurate to say he gapes up at her from the soggy ground, one earbud dangling in mid air, his broken cellphone in the mud beside him.

She laughs a bit and ties her kite to a nearby cross to help him up. He wonders what strikes him as odd about her, then realizes with a jolt that she isn't listening to music. There are no headphones hooked around her neck, no cord connecting the system to her ears. On closer inspection there's no cellphone, pager, iphone – nothing. She's not even wearing jeans.

"I'm Joan," she says with an open grin you never see nowadays on anyone over the age of seven. "Joan Dark."

He blinks, scrambling for something to say. "Hi." And it comes out too brisk, too rude. Her smile falters a bit, and all at once he's sad to see it go. Then she chuckles. "This is the part where you tell me your name."

"Uh. I'm, uh... Max. Max Waynes."

And there's a moment when he has no idea what to do with the electronics in his grasp – does he drop them and shake her hand? He's having trouble breathing and he can't think straight.

He's saved the trouble when she cheerily continues, a touch curious, too. "Well, Max – Max Waynes, why are you burying your head in those?" She gestures to his lifelines with a mildly dismissive air, and she's not sure of their names. "When it's such a beautiful day?"

He looks at her as if she just grew another head, then at the slate grey sky, heavy with rain clouds, then back at her. She smiles, and he can only answer a question with a question. "Why are you flying a kite in a graveyard...when it looks like it's going to start pouring rain?"

"Why wouldn't I? It's perfect kite-flying weather!"

He just looks at her. He wonders if she's insane.

“...Are you insane? Don't you have better things to do?”

“Nope. I wanted to, so I did. Besides, I think it's good to get outdoors and live. Every day.”

“...Live?”

A nod. “Yes. Live. To be instead of just existing, like everyone else seems to. No one smiles anymore, Max-Max. Did you notice?”

He manages to nod, feeling guilty all the while. He can't remember the last time he smiled and meant it.

“I think it's just about the saddest thing in the world,” she confides.

After nodding again thoughtfully, he looks up at her. In a beat, he tosses the broken pieces of his phone away from himself, before he can change his mind, and the cracked screen catches the weak afternoon sunlight on its way to being lost in the mud.

“Will you teach me?”

“To live?”

He nods. She grins, reaching to untie the kite.

“Of course.”

2009 Senior Fiction Runner-up

## Behind the Barbed Wire

*by Chen Rao*

*Grade 11 – Kenner Collegiate Vocational Institute*

The tangled barbed wire offered little welcome as more people were herded from the railcars like cattle through the gates of Birkenau in early March of 1943. As the Nazis' zeal for killing intensified, even the indigo sky was obscured by clouds of ash that hung low. A crow soared around a towering brick chimney three times before heading north. An eerie atmosphere shrouded the landscape. Occasional gusts swept the descending dust particles back into the air, making it hard to breathe.

Women and children edged toward the open gate in a line. Those newly selected by the SS were – according to routine – required to leave their baggage on the platform. A column of prisoners, men dressed in striped uniforms, passed close to them, moving in the opposite direction. Most were no more than skeletons, an ominous group of walking corpses. One man struggled for his balance, striving to make his grotesquely twisted body keep pace with the rest.

No eye contact was made between the newcomers and the labourers: two parallel lines that never physically met, yet were miraculously communicating on a soundless level, as each individual would inevitably reach the same destiny. Through the mist of unspoken panic, two tiny voices became barely audible.

“Are you still mad at me, Yitzhak?” a small fragile girl whispered after much rehearsal. Yitzhak didn't bother to answer. Hannah couldn't hold back any longer. “It wasn't my fault!”

“You said you'd be careful! Those marbles were the only thing I had left, and you threw them away! From now on, I'm done talking!”

“Move! Is something wrong with your hearing?” boomed a soldier accompanied by a ferocious German shepherd dog. The soldier gripped Hannah by the shoulder and shoved her forward, but Yitzhak was quick to act; he spun around in time to catch his sister just before she hit the ground. Getting up, Hannah watched quietly as Yitzhak checked her over for reassurance. The soldier scowled again while the children joined the line and picked up their pace. Soon, Yitzhak gave up on the idea of the silent treatment.

“Why didn't you pick up the marbles after you dropped them?”

Tears streamed down Hannah's cheeks. “I tried to hold onto them but the train jerked. There wasn't any space. With people and their bags around, I couldn't even see where they rolled across the floor, let alone run after them!”

Yitzhak sighed, “Yeah, I hated that putrid box. I thought the old grimy man in the corner was going to steal my slice of bread...”

“I’m thirsty, Yitzhak,” Hannah said in a dull tone.

“Then don’t talk much and try not to cry. You’ll save water that way...”

They entered an open yard with poplars surrounding the perimeter. Some in the group shuddered at the sensation of this green, immortal species gazing down at them, abandoned in such a deserted place. The poplars stood ramrod in perfect stillness, as if refusing to offer an oasis to the defenceless newcomers.

A Sonderkommando prisoner stomped in and delivered instructions in German and Yiddish: “Achtung! When you go down, empty your pockets! Remove your jewellery! Fold your clothes neatly! Remember your drawer number to find your belongings after the shower!” He beamed enthusiastically. “Won’t it be great to get rid of the dirt and filth? A refreshed body and spirit are crucial for the upcoming labour! Now hurry up! Men to my left! Women to my right!”

The mass of women streamed toward the staircase. Hannah, caught up in the crowd, hesitated at the top as the guard folded his arms across his chest. “Sir, my brother isn’t here yet; I want to wait—”

“Shower first,” the guard snapped.

Hannah suddenly felt courageous. “He promised to take care of me, and I’m supposed to stay in his sight.”

“That’s a heartwarming story, but I’ve heard it all before and I’m sick of it!” His voice was threatening. “You’re wasting my time!”

“Hush, girl!” Before Hannah could talk back, the woman next to her appealed to the guard. “Little thing doesn’t know the rules.”

“All right! Schnell! Get her in there!” the guard snarled.

The stream of people resumed their course reluctantly.

The woman gripped Hannah in her tender, honey-like palm. While being led away, Hannah stuck out her tongue at the silhouette of the hostile guard, thinking that he would be out of luck if Yitzhak had his slingshot and marbles there.

After the last woman had entered the dim shower room, the levers locking the door were slammed vigorously. The thunderous bang echoed in the vacant hall.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the wall at the entrance to the men’s shower room, a small, begging voice made an effort in vain.

“...because I’ve lost everything and I simply can’t afford to lose her.”

The guard searched for an answer. “You won’t,” he responded after a split-second pause. “I guarantee you that she’s as safe as you are. You’ll see her soon.”

He then shut the door with lightning speed to avoid further interaction, though not fast enough to miss Yitzhak pushing tears aside in despair.

Something clicked in the guard’s mind: this child had sensed danger! Without knowing the details of what was to come, the boy had borne the burden and kept even the hint of fear from his sister. Staring at the ground, the guard shrugged. “I didn’t lie to you, boy. I didn’t say where, did I?” He sat down on a nearby bench and plugged his ears with cotton wool.

Gaining control of his trembling fingers, he lit his cigarette on the third attempt. The hall was chilly. The reverberation of death from the chamber crawled through the sturdy door, blending with the smoke he inhaled. His remaining sanity mocked his dumbness – his only solution to escape reality.

There was really never an option, was there? He chuckled bitterly, felt the vicious throbbing in his temples, and buried his face in a sea of sorrow.

A lucky Jew – a fluent speaker of the German tongue – the Nazis had found him having a certain value. By aiding to slaughter his people, his own survival was secured – at least for now. When this mission had been assigned, he had convinced himself that since literally no blood would stain his hands, he could learn to ignore the suffering and guilt. Now, he wondered when that day would arrive.

2009 Junior Fiction Co-Winner

## Footsteps on a Dune

*by Megan Boothby*

*Grade 9 – Peterborough Collegiate Vocational School*

“Hey, can I ask you a question?”

“Hmm? Oh, sure.” I motioned to a spot next to me on the dried limestone and went back to playing in the little pool of rainwater with a twig.

“Why do you write?”

I dropped the twig still hanging damply in my palm and looked in surprise at my little brother. I marvelled at this baffling question.

“What? Where did that come from, Reilly?”

“Tell me!” he insisted.

“OK! I’ll tell you why I write, but it could take me a long time.”

Reilly opened his mouth to respond, but at that moment a call came from the campsite.

“Supper!”

We hopped off our boulder and rushed down the leaf-covered hill to where our parents were waiting. I never did formulate the words to tell him why I write.

\* \* \*

The wind buffeted me from all directions. It whipped my hair across my face so densely that I was rendered virtually blind. The roar of Lake Ontario waves crashing filled my ears, and I squinted in the brilliant sun as I stumbled away on the dune toward my brother. He was perched in the shade of a larch tree, watching me struggle through the sand. The sun glared off the aquamarine water – beautiful despite its deficiencies in cleanliness. I plopped down beside Reilly and sighed. I had an idea, a way to begin an answer to his difficult question.

“Hey buddy, remember that question you asked me last fall? About why I write?” He rolled his eyes into his head, as though searching his brain, and then said, “Yep.”

“Well, look around. See the dunes, smell the water, and hear the waves and the trees? Feel the beach grass and sun-warmed sand under your feet and the wind on your tanning face?”

He nodded.

“This is why I write,” I said and spread my arms wide.

“I don’t get it.” He frowned, confused.

“Just think about it for a while,” I told him, then got up and fought my way back down the dune to the shore. On my way, I muttered, “I hate walking up and down these dunes. You take a footstep forward, but it doesn’t feel like you’re really getting anywhere.”

“Huh” said my brother.

\* \* \*

If snowflakes were conscious, I wondered, would they find their swift ride from the flat grey clouds above exhilarating? Days before Christmas, my thoughts strayed aimlessly while I lay in the snow behind the garage. I faced the sky, feeling the snowflakes fall on my face and melt like cold kisses. There was a crunch and a puff of breath as Reilly retired his snowman-making efforts and flopped down beside me. Together we silently watched the snowflakes swirling in uncountable numbers, creating a miniature hurricane in the sky. Each flake went in its own direction, stitching a pattern of complicated beauty on the backdrop of the clouds.

“This is why I write, Reilly.”

I barely had to whisper.

\* \* \*

My polished paddle sliced the brown glass of the lake as fine tendrils of mist curled around its handle. I shivered in my sweater and lifted my paddle to my lap, not noticing the drops of icy water. For a moment there was pure silence, and I breathed deep and calm.

“Are you going to paddle or not?” Reilly asked, shattering the stillness.

“Yes.” I dug my paddle in deep and took pleasure in the sudden strain. We paddled in the early morning, surrounded by peace.

Unconsciously, we slowed the canoe, the ripples and splashes ceasing in time for us to hear the call of a loon echo hauntingly across the lake.

“This is why I write,” I said, and we dipped our paddles in once again.

\* \* \*

We clambered towards the top of a massive jumble of cave-filled, tree-covered boulders, nearing the uppermost ledge. With a final push we levelled out onto the flat top of the biggest, highest rock and turned around.

“Whoa...” murmured Reilly.

We were looking out over a jagged valley, a scar cut deep into the land by a long-ago stream. It was covered now with a thick blanket of leaves, fallen from the ancient sugar maples. The trees rose from the valley like pillars of natural architecture, their leaves in all shades of red, orange, yellow, and brown, dusting the forest floor and making it look like an exotic carpet. Our breath mingled with the strong fall wind, picking our hair up away from our faces.

“You know Reilly,” I said softly. “This why I write.”

\* \* \*

The sunset was liquid orange against the black horizon of the Great Lake. Waves lashed against the solid spit of rock where I stood beside my brother. In front of us stretched endless water and the evening sky; behind us was the end portion of the hiking trail leading into the woods. For almost three years I had been trying to answer Reilly’s question. I turned to him now in the dusk and began to repeat it.

“Reilly...”

“I know,” he said. “This is why you write.”

I smiled. He finally got it.

“It’s like...”

“No.” I cut him off. “Don’t try. It would be like...” I struggled for words.

“It would be like taking footsteps on a dune.”

I wrote it down in my journal and laughed, the sound echoing into the darkening woods. I had no idea what might lie ahead, but I knew that I would always have everything that mattered.

So I put away my pencil and started with confidence down the unknown path.



2009 Junior Fiction Co-Winner

## Fly For Me

*by Weijia Zhou*

*Grade 10 – Peterborough Collegiate Vocational School*

Thump, thump, thump. She heard someone on the stairs. The floor creaked in the hallway. A moment later, the girl heard a knock at her door.

“Dinner’s ready; won’t you come out and eat?” a voice begged.

The girl didn’t reply. It was her neighbour from across the street who had been good friends with her brother... her brother who... No, don’t think about it, she told herself firmly. The girl ignored it all as her name was called several times; the doorknob jangled but refused to open.

At last, her neighbour gave up. “All right,” she called loudly, “I’m leaving the food here; when you want to eat, please come out. You haven’t eaten for days.”

There were more footsteps on the stairs. A deeper voice said quietly, “How is she? Any luck?” It was her neighbour’s husband.

“She is still refusing to come out.”

“How many days has it been since the accident?” he said. “She’s still not eating? We really need to do something.”

“You can’t blame her for being like that. Poor girl, her brother...” she trailed off. “It’s such a tragic accident. And he was practically the only family she had left.”

“Stop! Stop it!” The girl wanted to scream, but she only whispered the words, “Stop talking about my brother.” She pulled the covers over her head and blocked her ears with her hands. Yet the words kept coming, each one sending a stab of pain in her chest.

“What she needs is to grieve, cry it out. Sitting cooped up in that room of hers isn’t going to help a thing,” her neighbour said harshly.

Did he think she didn’t want to cry? She had tried, but the tears had refused to come – not when she heard the news, not at the hospital, not even at the funeral. It was as if she had forgotten how to cry. “No! Stop thinking about it!” she screamed at herself.

“Calm down, my dear. I’m sure if we just give her some more time, she will get over it. Come on, let’s go.” Finally there were footsteps again. They were loud at first but quickly faded away.

How could she ever get over it? How could she stand not having her brother there to comfort her when she was sad, to help her out when she messed up, to laugh with her over some lame joke, to fight with her over the television set, or to just be there? She hoped against hope that this was all a mistake, a dream. She didn't want to be all alone.

She suddenly felt tired; she wanted to stop thinking. Maybe sleeping would help her forget all her pain. But her dreams, or rather nightmares, didn't give her any peace. There were scenes of the funeral, scenes of her brother laughing, scenes of the nurses at the hospital, and the face of the teacher who had told her about the accident. Finally they faded away, and she found herself in a very different dream.

To her surprise, in the new dream she found herself standing on the hill where she used to fly kites with her brother when she was small. She looked around, and on the very top of the hill, he was there. She sighed in relief. So there was no accident; he was fine. Everything was all right.

He held out two kites in his hands. "Hurry up," he called. She ran to the top of the hill as fast as she could and threw her arms around him.

"Hey!" Her brother laughed in that familiar way of his. "What was that for?" Still laughing, he handed her a kite. She realized that it was her favourite, the beautiful blue one just a shade darker than the sky.

They ran, her with her blue kite and her brother with his red one, until their kites caught the wind and soared up into the sky. She watched, amazed, as she let out more and more string. She had never seen her kite fly so high before. Her brother was just as successful; his red kite even fought to go higher than hers.

For a while, all they did was laugh and talk about random things, just as if it was an ordinary day. Then suddenly everything changed; her smile froze on her face, and she felt dread in the pit of her stomach. The cool wind suddenly made her shiver. The sun seemed too bright. A violent wind blew, then plucked the red kite from the sky the way a frog would do to a fly. The kite slammed into a tall tree halfway down the hill. She heard the frame crack and the beautiful red cloth tear.

"That doesn't look good." Her brother calmly looked at his kite.

Suddenly she felt a sharp tug from her own kite and was surprised to see it being pulled closer and closer to the old tree where the red kite still lay.

"Oh, no!" said her brother as he realized what had happened. The red kite's string had tangled with the blue kite's before it crashed. Even now, it pulled the blue kite closer to its doom.

Her brother fumbled in his pockets and came up with a pocketknife. "We'll just cut the string, and then you will be fine."

She screamed, "No! Don't!" She felt as if she was losing her brother all over again.

"What's the matter?" he asked. "It will be all right."

“But it was your favourite!” she shouted again.

“Look.” He walked over to where she stood. “My kite’s ruined. Even if I were to somehow get it down, it would never fly again.”

“Yes it will,” she whispered stubbornly, but he only shook his head.

“Besides,” he continued. “The way it is, my kite will drag yours down too, and I will never let that happen.” He patted her head gently as he always did. “Once your kite is free, we’ll fly it together, all right?”

He reached out to cut the string. She tried to stop him, but suddenly found that she couldn’t move. She screamed, but there was no sound. She realized her brother was saying something.

“Fly your kite for me, ok?” said her brother, and then he was fading, along with the kites, the hill, and the sky. “Promise me.” And all she could do was nod as everything disappeared.

She woke up tasting salt in her mouth and warm tears on her cheeks. She climbed out of bed, then unlocked and opened her door. As she stepped into the hallway light, she heard her neighbours arguing downstairs. Quietly she whispered to the air, “I will fly for you.”

2009 Senior Nonfiction Winner

## What Romeo Knows

*by J. J. Maxwell*

*Grade 12 – Lakefield College School*

I've been playing competitive sports ever since I can remember. Depending on the season, I can usually be found on the rink, pitch or field. Last year I would never have thought I would turn down a season of rugby, and least of all for something I'd never done before. I've learned that I can surprise myself.

The opportunity came from my English teacher. I was thinking about it as I walked my three-year old sister to the playground during March break; I remember a warm breeze kept blowing her hair into her eyes. I was confused in much the same way.

My teacher, Ms. McElwain, was directing our school's production of *Romeo and Juliet* and had offered me the role of Romeo. I was a bit taken aback at first. Acting had never appealed to me, and although I had always enjoyed public speaking, acting seemed too "artsy" for me. I was the "conservative athlete from out west (Calgary)," and acting didn't fit that role. The idea scared me because it was so different from anything I had ever done. I didn't want to miss a season of rugby. I didn't want to let my coach or teammates down. I didn't want such a big change in my life.

I decided not to take the acting role. I was going to stick with what I knew. I decided this the day before I got onto the plane to come back to school.

Ms. McElwain had obviously been thinking about me prior to my first English class. She started talking about the benefits of trying new things as I read what was written on the whiteboard.

*Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things that you didn't do than by the ones you did do. So throw off the bowlines. Sail away from the safe harbor. Catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover. – Mark Twain*

It got to me. I always told myself that change was good, but now that it was staring me in the face, I was backing down. I realised that it was my fears that were holding me back.

I changed my mind two minutes before the first rugby practice. I felt sick as I watched the rugby team run around that first day, but I had made my decision. Rugby would have to wait till next year.

The weeks went rolling by, and I was put outside my comfort zone almost every day. I had to learn hundreds of Shakespearian lines, make a new group of friends, sing a solo, and figure out how to act in less than a month. I had to kiss a girl whom I had never met, who was two years

younger than me, and whose mother was battling cancer. Emotions were high, time was tight, and the pressure was on.

I'm not sure I will ever fully comprehend how much the character of Romeo changed me. Shakespeare allowed me the opportunity to try on someone else's shoes, which provided insight into my life. Romeo's speech taught me authenticity and passion. Authenticity seems to be an innate quality, and it was easy to learn how to be true to myself when I became an authentic person for a few hours every day.

Over the course of the play, Romeo finds the courage to carry out difficult actions and proves to be true to his commitments. Romeo goes through a lifetime of emotions in a few short days – and he took me with him. For those five days in May, my life, much like Romeo's, was turned upside down, resulting in fears and inhibitions being left behind. Far from being "Fortune's fool," I came out of my acting experience with a respect for the unexpected moments that life throws our way; being caught off guard keeps things interesting.

Playing Romeo left me much more composed than I had been only two months earlier. I know that whatever lies around the next corner is anything but "dull earth."

## Dead Simple

by Beatrice Chan

Grade 11 – Lakefield College School

“I’ve seen people get their hands cut off, a 10-year old girl raped and then die, and so many men and women burned alive... So many times I just cried inside my heart because I didn’t dare cry out loud.”<sup>1</sup> These are the words of a soldier – a 14-year-old girl from Sierra Leone – a child soldier.

According to the 1989 *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, children have “the right to protection against exploitation and violence; protection against torture, or any other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment both in times of armed conflict and in peace.” The *Convention* categorically prohibits armed groups from recruiting anyone under 18 years old.<sup>2</sup>

Despite this, in over 50 countries, the number of children under the age of 18 who are soldiers is about 300,000, one-third of which are girls.<sup>3</sup> In conflicts, many non-governmental military organizations fill out their ranks with children under 15, some as young as 7 years old. Even governmental armed forces may recruit children under 18. Although the use of child soldiers is blatant in Africa, the tendency to militarize children is more widespread. For example, in the United States, the government has programs for approximately 400,000 high-school children that teach them how to think and act like soldiers. More than half of all European states accept under-18-year-olds into their armed forces, and the United Kingdom routinely sends 17-year-olds into combat. In Latin America, Asia, and Africa, military high schools are common.<sup>4</sup>

The effect of the use of children as soldiers is appalling. Graça Machal, the Former UN Secretary-General’s Expert on the Impact of Armed Conflict on Children, provides a horrifying description of the effects of war on children: “Youth are killed, tortured, raped, and forced to participate in unimaginable acts of violence against other human beings, and many times against their own families. The bankruptcy of human and moral values evident in this situation needs no further explanation.”<sup>5</sup> In the name of humanity, the use of child soldiers must stop.

Why must it stop? That is dead simple – fighting a war is dangerous. According to UN statistics, 2 million children were killed, and 4.5 million were disabled in action in wars around the world in the 1990s.<sup>6</sup> Military life affects children disproportionately harshly: They suffer higher casualties, are injured more often, and have more health problems than adult soldiers

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.un.org/cyberschoolbus/briefing/soldiers/soldiers.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.un.org/cyberschoolbus/briefing/soldiers/soldiers.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.un.org/cyberschoolbus/briefing/soldiers/soldiers.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.un.org/cyberschoolbus/briefing/soldiers/soldiers.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Graça Machel, *The Impact of Armed Conflict on Children*, (UNICEF: September 2000), p. 4

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.un.org/cyberschoolbus/briefing/soldiers/soldiers.pdf>

because they are less able to take care of themselves.<sup>7</sup> HIV is especially prevalent among child soldiers.<sup>8</sup> Child soldiers are deeply affected individually, and, by extension, their societies suffer. In the next generation, this toll taken on children will result in a reduced population, in which more individuals will need health care, and fewer people will be able to work and fuel an economy recovering from war.

Those children who escape death and serious injury often suffer in other ways. Child soldiers are often drugged with a plethora of narcotics, including marijuana, cocaine, and alcohol in order to induce them to commit violent and unthinkable acts, which they would not do under normal conditions. Ishmael Beah, in his book *Long Time Gone*, tells of his experience as a child soldier: “First, you know, you get your own weapon and everything and the magazines and the bullets, and then they give you drugs. They would take cocaine, marijuana, and sometimes cocaine mixed with gun powder, known as brown-brown. The kids would watch *Rambo*, then head to the killing fields.” When child soldiers are rehabilitated, the first step taken is to detoxify them from all the drugs they have been using; however, this is not always successful.

Child soldiers who are girls are more likely to experience another level of horror. They are routinely subjected to sexual abuse with no recourse, often over a prolonged period of time.<sup>9</sup> A 19-year-old girl, describing her experience in the National Youth Service Training Program in Zimbabwe gave the following description: “There was no one in charge of the dormitories and on a nightly basis we were raped. The men and youths would come into our dormitory in the dark, and they would just rape us – you would just have a man on top of you, and you could not even see who it was. If we cried afterwards, we were beaten with hosepipes. We were so scared that we did not report the rapes. The youngest girl in our group was aged 11, and she was raped repeatedly in the base.”<sup>10</sup> In these conditions, rape often results in HIV infection, physical injury, or pregnancy, and always results in emotional trauma, for which there is no healing salve.

Not just girls, but all child soldiers are in need of emotional healing: Over 10 million have been psychologically traumatized.<sup>11</sup> On a regular basis, they have witnessed killing, raping, and pillaging on a grand scale. Some have been forced to witness the killing of family members. A former child soldier from Uganda, aged 13, told this story: “Early on when my brothers and I were captured, the LRA [Lord’s Resistance Army] explained to us that all five brothers couldn’t serve in the LRA because we would not perform well. So they tied up my two younger brothers and invited us to watch. Then they beat them with sticks until they both died. We were told that it would give us strength to fight. My youngest brother was 9 years old.”<sup>12</sup>

Worse still, many child soldiers, manipulated by adults, have participated in atrocities. To survive, they have been forced to kill their friends, often in cold blood. A 17-year-old street boy, who joined a paramilitary group in Colombia at age 7, testified, “They give you a gun and you

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<sup>7</sup> See UNESCO’s *Report on the Project in Sierra Leone* and UNCHR’s “Critical Issues: Child Soldiers” in *Action for the Rights of Children*, September 2002, p. 37.

<sup>8</sup> [http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf\\_docs/PNADI662.pdf](http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PNADI662.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> UNCHR’s “Critical Issues: Child Soldiers” in *Action for the Rights of Children*, September 2002, p.29.

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.child-soldiers.org/childsoldiers/voices-of-young-soldiers>

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.un.org/cyberschoolbus/briefing/soldiers/soldiers.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.child-soldiers.org/childsoldiers/voices-of-young-soldiers>

have to kill the best friend you have. They do it to see if they can trust you. If you don't kill him, your friend will be ordered to kill you. I had to do it because otherwise I would have been killed."<sup>13</sup>

The memory of these acts haunts child soldiers, as Ishmael Beah points out: "Once the drugs wore out, then the memories started kicking in so quickly, you know, what you had been pressed to do was actually so bad, but now you had the consciousness to know that." Guilt trails child soldiers like a ball and chain: A 16-year-old girl after demobilization from an armed group recalls, "I feel so bad about the things that I did. It disturbs me so much that I inflicted death on other people...I still dream about the boy from my village that I killed. I see him in my dreams, and he is talking to me, saying I killed him for nothing, and I am crying."<sup>14</sup> On the other side of guilt, some child soldiers sadly lose all respect for everyone: "I can do anything to anyone, all the big, big people were scared of me; I was the commander in my village."<sup>15</sup>

The militarization of children everywhere in the world must be stopped. To this end, the issue must be publicized and denounced. But more importantly, child soldiers themselves must be given an opportunity to reclaim their childhood, to re-establish their self esteem, and to re-enter the normal world where humans reach out to one another, not with an M-16, but with helping hands.

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<sup>13</sup> <http://www.child-soldiers.org/childsoldiers/voices-of-young-soldiers>

<sup>14</sup> U.S. State Dept. *TIP Report*, 2005.

<sup>15</sup> [http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf\\_docs/PNADI662.pdf](http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PNADI662.pdf)