



LAKEFIELD  
LITERARY *Festival*

2011

YOUNG WRITERS CONTEST  
WINNERS

2011 Senior Fiction Co-winner

## Speed Limits

*by Nicholas Barsanti-Morris*

*Grade 12 – Kenner Collegiate Vocational Institute*

I hate people who drive the speed limit. Not that I think there's no point to speed limits. But on an open, clear road at night? No \*\*\*\*head in his right mind has to go exactly fifty.

My hand squeaked on the faux leather steering wheel, waiting for the aforementioned "Not-in-his-right-mind-\*\*\*\*head" to make his left and get out of my way; (you don't need to stop and wait when there's no goddamn oncoming traffic!) When the road was clear, I sat back and spun the radio knob like the captain's wheel in an old pirate movie, turned up the metal, and let it soothe me; every loony drum solo and poorly executed guitar riff shook the dust of inane discourses out of my ears.

I pressed the pedal down ever harder until the old Mercedes rumbled the way it was supposed to, the way it wanted to. I always considered Mercs to be the Americans of the German car industry; they built heavy, ugly, simple cars and then put a world-beating engine in them. Mine was an old one: a '93 two door with a snickering straight six. It was ugly, but so was I. We had a kind of kinship like that.

I feel foolish when I look back and think how much I really didn't want it. It was the first car I bought on my own – the only thing I could afford. I had the feeling I'd just paid a lot of money for a brick, but less elegant. I prayed it would break down in some kind of catastrophic failure, and perhaps I would gain a harrowing story out of it. Then I could throw up my arms, admit my mistake, and have my parents buy me something hipper (something hippy girls and pseudo-activist coffee-shop dwellers would dig).

Then strange things started happening; the more I drove it like I wanted to write it off, the more I couldn't resist it. When I hated it, it hated me back, and that's what made it worth loving. I attempted to name it Karl once. It caught fire in protest. I don't call it anything now, as it has more ... Mongol tastes. This explains why I was doing ninety in a fifty speed limit on my way to the edge of town.

When I arrived at the entrance to the parking lot, I didn't slow down and indicate. I braked hard and swerved, accelerated and countersteered, and when I was done I had knifed a perfect S. The parking lot belonged to a long-dead factory complex: a GM plant, ironically. The snow on the ground formed a white, clean shroud over dead asphalt. I floored it down the length of the lot, just abreast of the last light tower. The instant before it exited my periphery, I came off the throttle, spun the wheel, and ratcheted up the E-brake. Tires snarled against the snowy pavement, and I curled until I could once more see the light tower I had just passed. I laid the break lever to rest

again, hit the pedal, and stormed past, lining up the next tower and skidding around in a figure eight.

I stopped and let the ragged seat hold me like a pitcher holds water. I took a deep breath. For one moment, school, friends, enemies, girls I like, girls I don't, stupid money, stupid jobs, and every problem that comes with them, were missing. Like that first step after you shake the rocks out of your shoes. I breathe out, and it's all back.

It is drummed into me that I am supposed to be something. Something important, or productive, or dignified, apparently. I am supposed to want things: an education, job, house, wife, kids, and a responsible car, apparently. Yet I can't, in spite of my mind-crushing effort, trick myself into wanting these things. What I want is a burger and gasoline, but that's wrong, apparently. And that's scary.

I was walking alone some months ago, eyes low. I saw dashes and scribbles of colour on the grey path. Read in order they built a poem. A poem with no signature, no politicality, no *environmentalism*. Nothing to do with injustices in hard-to-pronounce countries, nor woe in the name of cattle or the endangered southern-blue-chested-yellow-eyed-horned-albino-singing-mute-lizard bird. But a poem for me, a poem asking where I was and how to find me. A poem painted just for the person who's always looking down, telling me that someone I will never know has left a mark just out of basic human love.

The day afterwards, I learned that the squealing of tires sounds very suspiciously like "\*\*\*\*\* you," and I liked that.

I looked down at the Post-it I always kept on my dash; half a dozen numbers were crossed out, but at the very bottom one read: Fifty-six, oh-nine. I took off my watch and looped it through the air-con vent. Then I hit start.

I forced my foot down and chambered second gear like the bolt of a rifle. I flew through the opening of a decrepit chain-link gate, up to third. I passed loading docks and shipping doors and railings; when the corner of the building came, I shifted down, raised the brake lever again and the tail-happy Merc threw its ass out. I forced the gas and rounded the corner, smiling the same smile serial killers have. I shifted up, my heart going madder and madder. I rounded the next corner, passed the main bulk of the building, playing the gas and the brake against each other, never moving in the same direction I was facing. My nose pointed dangerously at the concrete and sheet-metal walls, but they came no closer; they flowed past, not as if they were before me but below me. I was looking down from my bridge and the world poured past. The world is sideways, so to go straight, one must fly a bit crooked.

I rounded corners in brush strokes. Some I knew were better than the last, others I knew were worse, but each one shrugged a shackle off. They go straight and I go sideways. They sneer and I smile. They demand silence and an engine laughs at them. Whomever *they* may be.

Coming out into the other side of the lot, I skid again just for flair and hit "stop" on the watch. Fifty-five, one-four. I scratch a number out and write the new one in. Just then a pair of headlights makes me squint. The engine of an old BMW shouts poetry at me. I no longer feel alone, but the

irony, velvety thick, is that the glass and metal between us is as close as we twins will get. Apparently!

2011 Senior Fiction Co-winner

## The Model Citizen

*by Allison Ridgway*

*Grade 11 – Crestwood Secondary School*

It's funny how people flit around in a conversation. Their voices rise and fall like the wings of a small bird, soaring through clouds of inconsequential detail, swooping past the absurd or interesting, diving into superficial niceties. Such conversations always hover just above any meaning, like the tip of a wing caressing a velvet pond but never becoming wet. And yet, here I am. We meet here every Friday night, four friends eating dinner at an outdoor café under a black ceiling and chandeliers of starlight. Then we'll go home to our families, and a new day will begin, followed by a week, a month, a year... Yet this is the life I have chosen: this comforting superficiality, this glorious monotony, this blissful pointlessness.

My father once told me that it is not the actions you choose in public that make you a good person, but rather the ones you choose in private, when you are alone and arguing against your innermost desires. Will you hold a moral close to you, to nurture and remain loyal to, as you might a child? But children, being the creation and not the creator, grow into adults and eventually leave to find their own lives and their own creations. Therefore, how can you nurture something that will not always nurture you? Certainly I have morals, but they are not always the same morals. I am a lawyer, a mother, a wife, and a model citizen, always finding the right moral to aid me in whatever situation I am presented with. I'm not a bad person – I prioritize.

We pay our bill, and I pretend I cannot go back to Jasmine's house because I must help my daughter with her homework. She pretends to be disappointed but empathetic. We walk down the street, laughing, enveloped in darkness. It's so easy to lose yourself in this darkness, to not see the hand in front of your face and thus forget that it ever existed. How can you believe something if you cannot see it, if you never saw it, even in the daylight?

I don't see the man in front of me and I trip over him. He is sitting on the curb, his legs stretched out, dangling over the sidewalk and into the street. My eyes lock with his for a second, before I quickly pull them away. His shirt is tattered, and he wears no jacket despite the cold. His baseball cap droops across his forehead and falls into a pout over his ears. He smells of alcohol. I pick up my purse from the ground where I dropped it and leave quickly.

After we part ways, I am walking alone down an alley when I hear it, like the scene from a clichéd horror movie. Footsteps behind me, pounding like a heartbeat, echoing through the darkness. I glance over my shoulder. It's the man I tripped over in the street. He calls out something, but his voice is carried off by the wind.

Why would he follow me? It wasn't my fault that I tripped over him. I seem to remember passing by him before. Yes, I am sure he sits in the same doorway every time we walk past on our

way to the restaurant. Funny, I never really noticed him before. Did he notice us? Perhaps he was planning this all along, to follow me home one night, a wolf to its prey. I come to a dead end.

How terrible that term is, “dead end.” But I cannot die tonight. I have so much to offer this world. I was educated at the finest university, I have the most expensive house, I’m a good, compassionate, altruistic person...well, I recycle at least. I have done so much. Done so much...oh God, what have I done?

When they find me tomorrow, they’ll know. They’ll see that I wasn’t walking back home. Jasmine will know that I lied to her, telling her that I couldn’t go to her house after dinner because I had to help my daughter with her homework. But I lied to my daughter before, telling her that Mommy was busy and that she had to become self-reliant. I lied to my husband, telling him I’d be at Jasmine’s house until midnight. To admit even to myself that I am cheating on him with another man would be impossible.

And is that why this man is following me, because he knows? Has he come to punish me for what I’ve done? But I do not deserve to be punished. People have done far worse things than this, told far worse lies. And I am a good person. A model citizen.

He corners me and I back up, feeling the coolness of brick against my hot back. He’s just another disgusting homeless man, a drunk. And yet he has the audacity to smile. But he should know that you cannot break someone who has already broken herself and everyone around her.

He is in front of me. His arm juts out suddenly. I cringe, but he does not touch me. Instead, he holds out my wallet in his hand.

“You dropped this when you fell. I followed you to give it back.”

He hands me the wallet. I walk around him quickly, giving him a wide berth, but he makes no attempt to stop or follow me. I look into my wallet. Nothing has been removed.

It wasn’t even opened.

I can only imagine his thoughts as he watches me walk away from him. I, who have lived a life of deception, trying desperately to appear superior to others so that they are never able to judge me, have lost the ability to judge myself. I have no morals, no character. I am afraid of what I do not understand, and instead of seeking the remedy for that fear through knowledge, I simply embrace it and let it be my guide. What am I without my preconceptions?

It is I who has the job, and the house, and the children, and the husband – and it is I who can waste it all. It is I who can afford the title of “model citizen.” I bought it, along with my university education and new high-heeled shoes. And it was sold to me so willingly by those that did not even know the customer. And there is no question that it was withheld from this man so easily.

But a person cannot change in a single night. I’ve been given a lot to think about...too much, perhaps. And for now, I’m late for my rendezvous. I step into the comforting night of my lie and pretend that I am at peace.

The man still stands behind me. I feel his eyes pierce the back of my neck. And I'm not sure, but I could swear I hear him mutter –

“There, but for the grace of God...”

## Moonlight Ben

*by Cassandra Sewell*

*Grade 11 – Lakefield District Secondary School*

It was the beep of the heart monitor never changing that always woke me from an uneasy sleep in the uncomfortable plastic chair, which left me with a pain in my shoulder. You'd think they would be able to afford comfier chairs for visitors with the amount of money they charge for a private room and all the hospital equipment. I guess they skimped where they could.

I looked past the balloons and flowers and saw a little black and white clock on the wall. Four thirty-nine. In the morning. I looked up at the window, saw the moon shining through, and scowled.

I was spending most of my nights at the hospital now because it was better than being at home in the middle of the never-ending war between my parents. They fought from sun-up till sundown, and I was usually right in the middle. After a while, their words started to fade and they became background noise. I knew what they fought about: money. It was always about the money. If not that, it was some wastefulness they brought to each other's lives. Sometimes I felt they were just making excuses to fight with each other because they couldn't control everything. Like me. Like Ben.

I rose from my seat and kissed my brother Benjamin on the head. He looked the same. Sometimes I wanted to trick myself into believing he had more colour. Usually it was a trick of the fluorescent lights. Most days he just looked pale and unresponsive. The days his eyelids flickered were the days that gave me hope, and I would call out his name, but he never opened his eyes to smile at me the way he used to. Over and over again, I cursed the day of his asthma attack that started it all. Ever since Ben had fallen into a coma, the hospital had become my second home. Not that it felt like a home. All white and sterile. So unlike the home that I was used to, with Ben.

I don't come here with my parents anymore. They don't go into the room and see Ben as they used to. They just stand at the door and argue with the doctor about Ben's condition and the cost. Always the money.

My mother had been an airline executive before Ben fell into a coma, and my father sold RRSPs. But when the recession hit, about a month after Ben stopped responding to us, both their jobs came to a skidding halt. Mom got demoted and then quit in a burst of rage. She justified it by saying it was to be with Ben more. Dad worked on commission, and so his sales plummeted because no one had the money. Now they fight about not having money. The hospital bills took it all away.

I picked up my brother's hand, just to feel his skin against mine, to remind me that technically he was still there. I set it back down gently and walked to the window. There was a lock on it. It



was stuffy inside the room and I wanted air, but sometimes you can't get what you want. I looked up at the moon, remembering better days.

Like the days I would spend with my brother when we were kids. We had really great times. He was seven and I was eleven, and we'd have all sorts of adventures. I miss them all the time. All we ever needed to be entertained was a cardboard box. I remember how we thought the moon always followed us, no matter where we were at night. I used to be annoyed that the moon followed us, feeling we couldn't escape. There were times when I didn't like the fact that Ben followed me, too, as if I couldn't escape him. Now when I look at the moon, I just see Ben. I used to think he'd never leave me alone, just like the moon. He'd always be there. Now I'm older, seventeen, and he's thirteen, and I don't think that anymore.

The street lamp outside flickered, once, twice, three times, before ceasing to shine. I frowned; it couldn't be dawn yet, could it? But, sure enough, when I looked to the east, I saw the sky brightening, threatening to visit day on my moonlit night. I felt safe in the night, there with Ben. If the moon wasn't there, then Ben wouldn't be there with me.

I lifted my hand to my cheek, feeling the single tear that had escaped. I shouldn't have any more tears to cry. I have cried too much. Too much when my parents were around. Too much when they wouldn't come and see Ben. Too much when I was on my own. I have cried so many tears; they should have dried up by now. Maybe this would be my last tear, I thought errantly. It would be a relief to be rid of this pain and these emotions.

I retreated into my thoughts for mere moments during the day and always found myself drawn back to Ben. But that chapter seemed to be closing. In the pit of my stomach I knew Ben would never be the same, whether he woke up from this coma or not. Just as the moon would never follow me around again, neither would Ben.

I turned back to the bed, walked over, and planted a kiss on my little brother's cheek. I pulled the blanket up to his chin and smoothed out the linen. Then I went back to my plastic chair and resumed staring out the window where the sun would rise and the world would be set in a different light. Not moonlight. Different, but the same.

## The Sacred Pool

*by Weijia Zhou*

*Grade 12 – Peterborough Collegiate Vocational School*

She trudged warily down the grey stone steps smoothed by a thousand feet that had walked before hers. Head bowed and shoulders drooping, she walked until the grey stone steps of the mountain gave way to the trampled brown path, then to the white paved stone road of the village, picking up her pace when she saw the small hut made out of mud and sticks, with a pig pen on one side and beyond that, the fields newly ploughed. A curl of grey smoke rose from the top of the hut and disappeared into the early evening sky. Seeing the smoke, she straightened, and with a spurt of pent up energy, started to run, flying past the hoe left in the field, past the dirty pig in the pen.

When she was near enough, she called out, almost out of breath, “Elder sister, Elder sister Sparrow.” Without waiting for an answer, she pushed past the deerskin that served as a door and stepped into the gloomy interior.

Sparrow sat in a corner of the small hut, weaving a basket out of grasses that had been carefully preserved since the fall. Sparrow looked up at the sound of her voice and calmly replied, “Come in, Little Jasmine, help yourself to the soup.” Sparrow gestured to a pot in the centre of the hut, with the stones beneath still red from the heat.

Jasmine marvelled at the way Sparrow’s hands flew over the basket, tugging here, threading there, and tying yet somewhere else. It was as if Sparrow’s hands had lives of their own, so that even though Sparrow was looking straight at Jasmine, her hands were still busy weaving the basket.

“So, how did it go at the temple?” Sparrow asked as the younger girl sat down and ladled a bowlful of soup for herself.

“The same as always,” Jasmine said, her voice stinging bitterly in her throat. “The Pool showed me nothing.”

“Be patient, Little Jasmine,” Sparrow said as tranquilly as always. “The Spirit of the Mountain will reveal all when the time is right, when you are ready to know.”

“But I pray to the Spirit every night; I pray and pray for the Spirit to show me my future, but nothing comes. You are lucky Elder sister Sparrow; the Spirit showed *you* a future of weaving the first time you went to the temple.” She didn’t mean to sound so accusing, so disrespectful, but that was how it came out. And she couldn’t take it back, because it was the truth, because even though Sparrow and Jasmine used to be the closest of sisters, there now seemed to be a wall between the two of them, because Sparrow was a weaver and Jasmine was ... nothing.

She felt like stamping her feet and screaming out loud, but that was what little children do, and she was almost an adult. If only she knew what she would do when she became one. After a long, tense

silence, she finally said, “Sometimes ....” She paused, then continued on. “Sometimes I think the Sacred Pool is nothing but ordinary water!” she finished hotly. Immediately she regretted her words.

But the scolding she expected from Sparrow about being disrespectful didn't come. Instead, Sparrow only said softly, “Maybe, mind you, only maybe, maybe that's all the Pool is – ordinary water, that is. But maybe you should stop relying on the Spirit to tell you who you are, and instead think about what *you* want to be.”

Jasmine put down her bowl and shook her head. Sparrow didn't understand how she felt; how could she? After all, Sparrow already knew she was a weaver. Sparrow had never had the anxieties or the fears of *not* knowing. But even though she thought this, all she managed to squeeze out was, “It's not that simple!” She stood up hurriedly and ran out.

As she rushed out of the hut, past the pig and the hoe, she heard Sparrow's voice call out faintly behind her, “No matter what you become, Little Jasmine, you will still be my bright little flower.”

\* \* \*

One, two, three ... she counted under her breath as she climbed the smooth, grey steps up the mountain. She watched as her shadow, a darker grey on top of the light grey steps, shortened and shortened, until ... nine-hundred and ninety-eight, nine-hundred and ninety-nine ... it was nearly noon when she reached the temple. Sweat trickled down her brow as the hot sun beat down on her face, her arms, her feet, and anywhere else not covered by clothing.

Despite her tiredness, and despite having already been here several times, she still found the temple awe-inspiring. No one, not even the oldest of the village elders, knew when the temple was built or by whom. The paint was faded, but she could still see the dragons perched at the edge of the roof and the intricate carvings of what seemed to be lotus flowers painstakingly etched into the stone pillars. She stepped inside the temple, which was mercifully cool, and waited. The Sacred Pool stood at the very centre. Although at the moment it was in shadows, she knew that when the sun reached the top of its arc, holes at strategic points in the roof would allow the sunlight to shine directly into the Pool.

So she waited and waited. Then, it was as if for a moment time skipped a beat; one moment the Pool was in darkness, the next moment it was bathed in the bright, golden light of the sun. She walked over to the Pool and once again was mesmerized by its beauty. The water was about a hand-length deep, and the sand at the bottom sparkled up at her. She felt a thin breeze brush the nape of her neck, sending the water rippling in the Pool. Her eyes followed the ripples crested with lines of gold rushing this way, then that way, then this way again.

Somehow she couldn't be angry or frustrated here in this place, and she found herself remembering Sparrow's words from the night before. “What *I* want to be,” she mused. She hadn't really thought about this before, and there had always been a tiny part of her that was afraid she might make the wrong choice. “But if, if I could be anything, what would I be? Well, certainly not a weaver.” She could weave simple things, but she had neither the patience, the skill, nor the interest in it as Sparrow had. Her mind stumbled, then strolled, then raced through all the possibilities. And then she saw it, translucent and tinged with the gold reflected from the Pool. One blink and it was gone. But she did see it; she knew she did.

Dashing down the mountain two steps at a time, she felt only the cool breeze on her face. Looking up, she was astonished by the blue softness of the sky and the green crispness of the grass. How had she missed those on her way up? She laughed when she saw a splash of red that belonged to a robin. As soon as she reached the village, she must tell Sparrow that she saw their favourite bird. And also that she, Jasmine, now knew who she was.

2011 Junior Fiction Winner

## Chasse Galerie

by Vanessa Kraus

Grade 9 – St. Peter Catholic Secondary School

It's *la veille de l'an*: New Year's Eve. The sun went down an hour ago behind the hulking cement compound. We're out in the snowy yard, hauling a green fibreglass canoe out from hibernation. I drop it on my foot.

"*Tabernacle!*" I curse, grabbing at my foot.

Sébastien turns around and glares at me, shrouded in the smoke from the cigarette dangling over his lip. "C'mon, Guy. Don't you want to ditch this dump for a while?"

I look at his face, at the faces of our four companions, the entire French-Canadian population of the Livius Sherwood Observation and Detention Centre. End of the line. *L'enfer de jeunes*: hell for the young. "I don't know if I buy this, 'Baste. How does this work again?"

Sébastien smooths back his long black hair. "Simple, *mon ami*. We get in the canoe, say the magic words, and we're off to club for a few hours, back before sunrise – and the shrinks never know!"

"But does it *work*?" I press.

Sébastien laughs. "Our ancestors have been doing it forever, man. A few words, a little bargain with the Big Guy Downstairs, and one good night back home with the girls." The other boys make noises of assent. They believe him; or perhaps, they're all just desperate to get out. Willing to try anything.

Sébastien makes the last few preparations: "*Les gars*, just a few rules. No mention of God, Jesus or any holies, 'kay? Avoid crosses while we fly, and make sure you're at the canoe by four o'clock this morning. That'll give us plenty of time to get back. If not . . . this place would look like Shangri-La compared to where we'll wake up."

We all nod our understanding.

"Oh, and to be safe . . . no booze, or weed, or anything. Clear heads will keep us out of hell – at least for tonight."

We take our places in the canoe, paddles in hands. Sébastien says the words: a strange collection of nonsense and pleas to the Devil to carry us straight and true. We hold our breath; and like magic, the canoe starts to rise, trembling, as though some invisible two-year-old has picked us up in a

chubby pair of hands. There are shouts, laughs, and general disbelief; then we are off like a shot, headed towards Gatineau.

I've been in planes before, but this is different. I can feel the cold air rushing past my ears, I can lean over and see the city lights below us. Not one of us can believe our eyes; just like the stories we have heard since birth, we are running the *chasse-galerie*.

And just as he did with our ancestors, the Devil has agreed to carry us there and back again for one night. The air is full of our whoops and shouts of joy, and fear, and pure disbelief. Only Sébaste keeps a smug smile during the trip. I begin to wonder . . . has he really done this before?

We touch down in front of our predetermined landing spot. It's a shabby little joint, but the bass is pumping, and the girls are dancing hard. We stash the canoe in an alley and make our way in. We fit in right away; I find a pretty redhead called Lucie. It takes me only a few dances to be right back in my element. The smoky club is like a glimpse of heaven after six months of being trapped in the detention centre.

The hours fly by as fast as the canoe trip; we are free for the first time in months. Before we know it, though, it is four a.m., time to kiss Lucie goodbye and go back. We stand in the snow for a while, watching the seconds tick by. 4:05 . . . 4:10 . . . 4:20 . . . We breathe a sigh of relief when we see Sébaste's unmistakable profile in the door. His eyes are blank; he is drooling. His movements are slack, without purpose. He's stoned!

Our fearless leader is incapacitated. That makes us nervous. We ease Sébaste into the back of the canoe, settling him comfortably and willing him with all our might to fall asleep through the voyage. I repeat his words in a shaky voice. I'm worried my nerves will ground us, but sure enough we rise again. No one is laughing this time; the joy of the previous flight is replaced with cold terror. We fly, everyone willing us to go faster, racing that little copper coin daunting us on the horizon. I keep a close eye on Sébaste's lolling head, making sure he doesn't do anything risky in his drugged stupor. He meets my eye and glares. "Whattaya staring at, Guy? I'm fine. It's you sparked up like a cat on a high wire. *Mon Dieu...*"

And before the last syllable of the Father's name leaves his slack mouth, we know we're doomed. Satan's arms are open wide, and we're heading down, down . . . I scream at the top of my lungs the prayer I know from babyhood, like every good Catholic boy, « *Je vous salue, Marie, pleine de grâce...!* »

They found us half a mile from the Centre, passed out in the snow near the wreck of our canoe. Chilled, frostbitten, but very much alive. And, thanks be to God, with our immortal souls still intact. They said that anything we saw that night was a combination of cold and illicitly secreted weed, courtesy of Sébaste. The day after New Years, he was transferred to another facility. We never saw him again.

We cannot decide whether we were dreaming, or whether we truly borrowed the Devil's wings that night. For now . . . it will be a long time before I ever try again to run *la chasse-galerie*.

## Correspondence

*by Vanessa Kraus*

*Grade 9 – St. Peter Catholic Secondary School*

The Magistra sighed and rubbed her forehead in irritation. She looked back up at the guard and the young man standing before her throne. This was going to be a difficult case. “I will need some time to think on this matter.”

The young man looked alarmed. Surely, his case wasn't *that* important!

The Magistra ignored his shock. She motioned for the guard to take the man away and then rose from the great Throne of Justice.

She progressed gracefully down the arching marble hallways of the Magistral Palace, the skirts of her overrobe sweeping the floor with soft *ssh* sounds. Moments later, she arrived in her private wing. A maid was waiting for her, but the Magistra dismissed her with a wave of her hand. She hung up her heavy, fur-trimmed purple overrobe on a gold hook behind the door of her study and rolled her shoulders, luxuriating in the sudden lack of weight. She rested one hand on the polished mahogany door and entered her study.

Taking in the richly carpeted floor, the gilded moulding on the walls and the well-worn velvet armchair behind the ebony desk, she couldn't help but laugh at the irony of her situation. So much luxury, and yet not an ounce of power! She recalled her shock when her predecessor had informed her that the Magistra was only a mouthpiece, not the true ruler of Sedonna. It still made her shiver that, though unseen by anyone, the true ruler was always present, always in control. And *her* job, the Magistra's job, was to make sure the Goddess knew what went on in her land...

...which brought her back to the task at hand. She extracted a delicate glass bowl and three jars of coloured powder from the drawers of the desk. After lighting a small fire in the bottom of the bowl, she tipped some of the first jar into it. This triggered a puff of bright blue smoke and a strong scent of plums. She produced a raven's feather from the pocket of her shift and coated it in red powder from the second jar. After murmuring a few words, she dropped the feather into the bowl, followed by a pinch of green from the third jar. The feather vanished, the fire extinguished itself, and in a few moments all that remained of the ritual was a lingering smell of plums.

The girl threw her hands over her head, trying to avoid the projectiles flying towards her. Gum wrappers, dirt clods, and apple cores rained down around her ears as she hurried through the park, scanning left and right, searching. It should be here, somewhere...

A tin can struck the side of her head. Pain sang in her ears, along with the jeers and curses coming from her classmates.

“Freak!”

“Weirdo!”

“Crawl back to whatever mudhole you popped out of, loser!”

“Yeah, go play in your fantasy world!”

She ignored them. Pressing a sleeve of her jacket to the side of her head to staunch the bleeding, she continued to search the ground, looking for . . . there. She bent and snatched up the precious object, then continued her mad dash across the park, never once looking back at the mob behind her.

Once she got home, she immediately threw her bag onto the floor. Her mother screamed something about quiet over the sound of the TV and her friends’ drunken laughter. Ignoring the noise and the blood clotting in her dark hair, she dashed upstairs and slammed the door to her room. Sitting on the battered wicker stool in front of her scratched white desk, she reached into her jacket pocket and produced the raven’s feather. With the skilled precision of an expert, her fingers moved up the shaft of the feather, stroking each singe mark and nick to decipher the message. After she was done, she sat back to think. The feather told her all she needed to know.

The crime? A young man had stolen a spade from his neighbour. However, his intentions had been good; having broken his own, he had used it only to finish some work on the house he was building. If his testimony was anything to go by, he had simply not had the courage to ask for it. And it was his first offence. In her feather message, the girl also picked up that the Magistra thought the accuser a bit of a bully. She set the feather back down and thought, while looking at the carefully drawn maps of Sedonna decorating her walls.

She remembered the first day she had seen them, when her predecessor had told her she was now the ruler of a land she’d never heard of, somewhere she’d never seen. It had been, most likely, the greatest thing that had ever happened to her. Ruling Sedonna had given her something to distract her from the doldrums of everyday life: difficult homework, a deteriorating planet, and her cruel classmates. It had been her secret . . . until the maps had fallen out of her bag. They were discovered by her classmates and became fuel for their fires.

She thought for a while longer, then grabbed a piece of paper and a pen, and wrote an answer.

*The young man should be made to return the spade and complete three days of labour in his neighbour’s garden. After this, he is excused, but he is to be warned of the consequences of a second offence.*

She rolled up the piece of paper and slid it into the hollow shaft of the feather. She opened her window, enjoying the cool puff of a breeze that blew into her face. The girl set the feather on the roof, and then watched it disappear. Somehow, it always ended up back where it had come from: back in Sedonna.

She rose and went to find a bandage for her head, reflecting on the irony of her situation. Who would ever have thought – she, the ultimate underdog, was the holder of a massive supernatural power? It was easily laughed at.

She wondered if the Magistra, so far away, had similar problems. She wondered what the Magistra was like. She wondered what Sedonna looked like.



Maybe someday, she would find out.

## A Spin in the Dark

*by Mirka Loiselle*

*Grade 10 – Peterborough Collegiate Vocational School*

The city never sleeps. The city is alive, pulsing with the heat of car exhaust and neon lights, even in the dead of night. The city is never empty, never dark. In the city there'd always be someone awake to see me fly by, racing away in the dark hours of the morning.

But that night I rode through my small town unnoticed. I flew past the dingy post office, past the grocery store, and past the ruined church, till the last dilapidated farmhouse disappeared behind me and I was free, riding through an infinite landscape of dark, unbroken stillness. Faster and faster I went, the wind rushing through my hair and into my mouth, the world around me a shadowy blur of trees and fields and dark, dark sky. Nothing broke the silence aside from my laboured breath and the rattle of my bicycle chain. Ca-chunk. Ca-chunk.

Under my wheels the road began to peter out. Soon the gravel turned into dirt, and the dirt into a grassy path that wound its way through an empty field. The ground grew bumpy and uneven under my tires, and the path began to slope upwards, but still I pressed on, not wanting to slow down, not wanting to stop.

I could have gone on forever, biking in that inky darkness. I would've and I could've, but suddenly my tire hit a rock and twisted under me; the wheel jammed, the bike tipped over, and down I went. My head snapped back and hit a rock. Suddenly, all was still.

For a moment I lay without movement, assessing the condition of my bruised body. Gingerly, I sat up and lifted my hand to the back of my head, expecting to feel it moist with blood. I imagined having to crawl back home with my head split open, my skull cracked and broken, leaving a trail of blood dripping behind me. To my relief and disappointment, I felt only hair and dirt. The bike, however, had fared far worse than my head; the front tire was punctured, and the frame twisted and scratched.

I fell back down into the wet grass, clenching my fists tight till my nails bit into my palms. I had thought I could leave this place, thought that the daringness of riding away in the dead of night would somehow provide me with enough momentum to bring me over the hill and away.

This stupid town is so small, and yet I can't escape its borders. Can't...

I hate this place. Hate the cramped feeling you get from living in the same small town since you were born, a town where time means nothing and your life stands still. I'm stuck, stuck in an abandoned field in a tiny town in the middle of goddamn nowhere, with no place to go and nothing to see, stuck in a town you can bike through in less than a minute.

Suddenly, everything seemed so pointless. The bike ride, this empty field, the damp earth, and the wet grass waving, waving in the wind... I bit my lip with frustration and banged my head against the dirt, wishing I were anywhere else but here.

\* \* \*

I don't know how long I lay in the grass. Minutes, maybe hours, crept by, and eventually my tensed body began to relax. The rich scent of wet earth wafted up to my nostrils and I breathed it in, taking in the absolute stillness of the night air. Lying here in this empty field, I could almost feel the earth curving beneath me, running past my outstretched palms. Suddenly I became conscious of the vastness of this planet. Here I was, clutching onto this rock we call Earth that spins continuously round a giant sphere of heat and gas at speeds beyond human comprehension, whizzing through the mind-boggling darkness of space. Just a tiny dot in the Universe.

Looking up, I noticed, for the first time in a long while, the stars sprinkled across the night sky like tiny flecks of shining white paint on an infinite black canvas. Memories of a long-forgotten science class stirred in the back of my mind. Each star, I thought, was a sun: an enormous sphere of heat and gas, shining its light across the vast emptiness of space. That starlight I was seeing had travelled for millions of years, touching nothing, not even reflecting on the slightest bit of dirt or dust, before finally reaching the Earth. And my eye had caught that ray of light. Despite myself, I smiled. At that moment, lying in a darkened field with the light of a trillion suns shining down upon me, I felt as though I were at the centre of it all, and nothing – absolutely nothing – could stop me. My life may be small, I thought, but the world is so much bigger.

Guess you wouldn't be able to see that in the city.

\* \* \*

Somewhere, a bird began to sing. Dawn was approaching. I became aware of the cold, the dampness in my hair, and the soreness in my back after being on the hard ground all night long. Slowly, I stood up and stretched. Looking down, I noticed my bicycle lying pitifully in the long grass. On closer inspection it didn't look so bad; the tire had kept most of its air, and the frame wasn't as wrecked as it had appeared in the dark.

I picked it up and looked down the hill toward the country lane that led back to town. The tiny town where I was raised, with its rundown farms and tacky stores. A town where the paint chipped off the sides of buildings, and the pavement cracked and shrivelled under the heat of the summer sun.

Then I thought of the night sky, of the brilliant stars, and of our Earth floating in the immeasurable abyss of space.

One day I'd escape to the big city, leaving the field and the stars behind me.

But not today.

And so I turned my bike around and headed back home.

2011 Senior Nonfiction Winner

## The Colour Scarlet

*by Rebekah Sibbald*

*Grade 12 – Lakefield College School*

Can you imagine if the colour scarlet were a symphony? It would sing melodically and crash dangerously, it would waltz tenderly and tango passionately, it would be as raucous as a flock of crows and as soulful as the call of a loon. Even the sound of its name, Scarlet, makes it seem so much more exciting than its boring cousin, dear old Red. However, when you think about it, beautiful Scarlet and boring cousin Red really aren't that different. Sure, Scarlet might be paler than an apple, yellower than a strawberry, and bluer and stronger than a peach, but in the end, it is just a close cousin of Red. So why exactly do we feel the need to give this particular shade its own special name? What makes it so different from every other shade of red? The answer is simple: its complexity.

Most colours can be easily connected to a simple emotion: yellow with happiness, blue with calmness, black with depression. Scarlet would seem to be one of the exceptions. Not only can it be associated with many different feelings, but often those emotions are complete opposites. Scarlet is the colour of anger, of the flushed face of a man yelling at a woman. You can see the frustration in their eyes, hear the crash of the vase against a wall, and smell the soup burning on the stove. It is also the colour of love, of feeling the warmth of being held by someone you trust, of forgetting the fear and worry and letting the soft sunlight pierce your closed eyelids. Scarlet is the colour of a romantic with an enflamed soul, reciting poetry in the night to an open window up above, but it is also the colour of a broken heart that feels as though the hurt will never completely go away. Emotions are just the beginning; they are only the first layer of the complex tableau that is the colour scarlet.

Irrepressible Scarlet can also conjure up a multitude of contradictory images and ideas. A young woman walks through the grey world; her eyes and mind are elsewhere. She is worried about her chemistry assignment, and she misses home. Her eyes are ringed with dark circles because she has not slept much recently. Scarlet is the colour that wakes her from her daydream as a tiny hummingbird flashes in and out of the light. In another place and another time, a different young woman walks with a scarlet letter emblazoned upon her chest. Its bright colour does not represent momentary distraction, but instead shame and damnation. It does not interrupt a daydream but is the constant subject of her thoughts. Scarlet is the innocent blush of a budding preteen when the boys in her class make an inappropriate joke. This eloquent shade of red is also the colour of the revealing sheath of a young woman going out to a club. Scarlet is the colour of the funky spiked hair of that guy in your math class who plays electric guitar, and also of the shimmering locks of a medieval lady who plays ballads on her delicate harp. Scarlet is the burning leaves of autumn escorted by a bitter, cold breeze. One could continue endlessly, for its meanings and associations are without limits.

What makes Scarlet distinct is that it does not make sense. It is messy and disorganized. Scarlet defies our attempts to classify it as good or evil. It says one thing and then immediately says something completely different. You can find the colour scarlet in your dreams, but also in your nightmares. You think you understand it, and then it flies away like that little humming bird, leaving you feeling confused and alone. If you touch the colour scarlet, it is warm and sticky, but when you take your hands away, you find them stained. If you reach into a bucket of scarlet paint, it seems bottomless. It's a bit risky, because you might fall in! Red is red. It is plain and straightforward; there is nothing to question and there are no surprises. Scarlet can be much more temperamental, dramatic and, yes, maybe even dangerous, but that is the allure. It tantalizes and tricks. It is more than just a colour: it is an adventure.

## Student Basic Law

*by Molly Gaughan*

*Grade 12 – St. Peter Secondary School*

In February of 2010, I found myself standing alone, palms sweaty, in the Hong Kong International Airport. I was halfway around the world, not quite seventeen, and the only phrase I knew in Mandarin was “hello,” “*nia hao*.” Not very helpful, considering people in Hong Kong speak Cantonese.

I was tired, sore, and desperately looking for the exit. I didn’t want to justify my mother’s worries that I’d get lost before I’d even left the airport! Luckily, I found my aunt fairly quickly. She lives and teaches in Hong Kong, and she’d invited me to spend a month with her, attending her school and experiencing life on the other side of the planet. It was an incredible opportunity to travel on my own and to see my aunt, who visits Canada only once a year.

Immediately, my aunt swept me into a new, bustling world. We hiked on Lantau Island and took a treacherous bus ride to Stanley Bay. I learned how to use chopsticks and to not question the food – to just eat it! We saw the Ladies’ Market at night and the beautiful, intricate lanterns displayed for Lunar New Year’s. I saw my first actual lion dance in the New Year’s parade and will remember the clashing cymbals and bright costumes all my life. One particularly vivid memory was seeing the Big Buddha. It’s the largest outdoor seated bronze Buddha in the world, and it’s absolutely massive. It overlooks a small monastery packed with tourists. You climb thousands of steps to get to the top, and then you’re dwarfed by the enormous statue.

Sightseeing was the easy part. I would be attending school for three weeks, taking the same courses as grade 11 in Canada: Art, Biology, English, and Math, plus Business and Physical Education.

I wasn’t sure what to expect from the school; all I had to go on was what I’d seen on the faculty website – written mostly in Chinese characters – and the school agenda my aunt had given me, ominously titled “Student Basic Law.” Inside were the school prayer, hymn, and rules. The uniform code was especially emphasized. Girls wore blue, knee-length dresses in the winter, with white blouses, white knee socks, black shoes with no heel, and a tie. Boys wore white dress shirts, grey trousers, black shoes, and a tie. Students could wear sweaters, but only if the temperature dropped below minus 10 degrees Celsius. No jewellery, though stud earrings were allowed for girls if they were in school colours. Hair was to be kept shorter than the collar or tied back. No gel. No makeup. No “peculiar” hairstyles.

The only other significant point in the agenda was that instead of having snow days, as we have in Canada, Hong Kong students might enjoy the occasional typhoon warning day. I was sure this experience was going to be different from anything I had ever undergone before.

The first day I was filled with trepidation. I was nervous that I wouldn't understand anyone, even though they'd been learning English for years. I was worried I wouldn't make friends and that I'd seem stupid to the other students. Really, it was like any first day of school anywhere in the world. I shook a little as I left the apartment.

Shatin Tsung Tsin Secondary was housed in a building eight floors high, with a single hallway. A bright mural of butterflies and flowers decorated a side wall. I was ushered into the office, introduced to my mentor teacher, and before I knew it, I was enrolled.

I shouldn't have worried. Everyone, from the teachers to the students, was excited to see me. They rarely have exchange students, so I was quite the novelty. They were all curious about Canada. I answered as best I could, even when the girls pulled me aside and asked me, giggling, if I had a boyfriend and if I thought the boys in my class were cute! I chatted with kids sitting next to me, and then we went out to lunch at nearby fast food shops – local *dai pai dongs* alongside international burger chains. I also lined up for the daily morning assembly and had my temperature checked – apparently a relic of the SARS scare.

The atmosphere was stricter than I was used to. Students would stand and bow when their teachers entered or left the room, and lessons were fast-paced and competitive. Still, I was learning so much, and I was amazed at how hardworking the students were, how motivated.

After three weeks at Shatin Tsung Tsin, it was time to leave. My homeroom classmates (Economics 4C) organized a party. They ordered lunch in for the entire class and we pushed desks together to form long tables. We took pictures, said goodbye, and then I was off. I returned to my own Canadian school, where respect for teachers varies according to how popular they are and where the uniform code is considered a suggestion, not a rule. It was reverse culture shock.

I learned a lot in Hong Kong. I discovered that Cantonese and Mandarin are really tough to acquire, and that no one sits in the front seats on the second floor of the double-decker buses except tourists. Throwing coins into the Big Buddha's hand will bring good luck and just because you haven't tried it, food won't necessarily taste bad. I learned that the small restaurants in the mall have the best fried rice and that tying a tie requires a lot of practice. The most memorable lesson I learned was that you have to be open to new experiences. Sure, things could go badly. You could end up looking like a fool. You might get hurt or lose something important. But if you don't try new things, you'll never gain anything, either. This trip allowed me to consider another way of life, and surprisingly, realize that I could live quite easily with the Student Basic Law.