



LAKEFIELD
LITERARY *Festival*

2013

YOUNG WRITERS CONTEST
WINNERS

2013 Senior Fiction Co-Winner

Ballad of the Jazz Man

by Kirsten Caldwell

Grade 12 – Kenner Collegiate Vocational Institute

I'm standing in the middle of Rockefeller plaza. I tip my head to the side and picture my family in their Sunday best, walking down the street. My children run to me, all dressed in a vibrant colour of turquoise. I sit at a polished black piano, its keys as white as fresh paper. My hands begin to tap away at each of them, creating a soft jingling symphony. I open my mouth to sing, but instead I awaken. The ceiling is a depressing shade of eggshell, and so are the doctors and nurses. Everything is eggshell, and it pisses me off.

I remember playing in Daddy's church. I'd play on that organ, a tingle in my fingers, and once I started, I couldn't stop. That giant instrument was golden brass with pipes that reached the ceiling; it glowed from the light that shone through the stained glass windows. I remember that Mrs. Hobbs, wider than the organ and wearing that ugly floral print, would come up to me and declare, "My heavens boy, you sure can play. You, my son, will be big someday."

The thrill I'm feeling in this moment is unforgettable. The musicians play on brass, with little or no structure. The thick smoke and dimmed lighting cloud my judgment like a drug. It's a rain forest of sound waves drowning me. I can't keep up. The people move like ebony seaweed on the waves. Like little piranha, the waitresses move in and out of the crowd with trays. The bartender leans over the counter. He smells like homemade cigarettes and malt liquor. "Hey there son, I heard you can play. Sit your ass at that piano and make us all sway." I'm leery at first. If Daddy knew I was here, I'd be a martyr. The bartender, with his stained apron, places a gentle and reassuring hand on my arm. I take a deep inhale of my Kool cigarette and step up to the piano. I feel the crowd's eyes on me; a trickle of sweat slides down the nape of my neck. I clear my throat and play.

They tell me I'm going to appear on television, my own show. My heart stalled when they told me. Me! My first show on the first televisions. But, my fame is short lived. Every night, when I leave the building, a sea of ivory crashes towards me, holding gigantic white signs with bold black letters. *Negroes aren't allowed on T.V.* I miss home more than ever. When they cancelled the show, I felt hatred. But, my daddy raised me to be a compassionate Christian man. I realized not everyone hated my show. I hope acceptance will grow so that my children can be seen for their full potential. I will take this with grace, but this is far from over. *Madison Avenue is afraid of the dark.*

She places her hand on the inner part of my thigh, squeezing it seductively. Her lips meet my ear, and in what almost sounds like a single breath, she mocks me and asks that we meet in her room. I take short puffs of my Kool and stride after her, a mouse after a cobra. Her hips shake from side to side and her mocha skin smells like hibiscus and vodka. As I chase after her, I pass by a

mirror. I halt in absolute terror. Before me stands a man with dark skin and a wedding band. She looks back and calls towards me. I ask her to go on, saying I'll meet with her soon. Who is this man? I don't recognize him. He is a man with no morals and no compassion. *What would my wife say?* Worse. *What would my mother say?* But what pierces my heart the most, *What would my five-year-old daughter say?* Did I really think I could chase women forever? That my life at home won't catch up with me? I am treated like a god here, but at home I am the sole provider for my family. All that resides with them is responsibility, annoyance, and nagging. Suddenly, the man looks more in control, cooler, classier. I turn away from him and stride towards the elevator. As I enter, a small voice in my head asks: *What about your family?* I push the fifth floor button. *Fuck 'em*, I say back.

Have you ever had that feeling of the wind being knocked out of you? In fifteen seconds, you believe your life is hanging by a thread, your gut sends spasms to your brain, and the rest of your body loses control. Your knees become magnets trying to find the steel floor. You grab your chest, gasp for air, and pray to God it's not too late. If and when you do get air, your body cringes as if the temperature dropped twenty degrees. Your lungs are strained, weakened, and ripped like Christmas wrappings. You lie on the ground and beg for mercy, and suddenly... it's all over. Now, imagine that happening, and you were just sitting there, reading a newspaper. A near death experience while reading *Little Orphan Annie*.

I sit on my porch smoking a Kool. My porcelain mistress hands me an iced glass of Scotch as I watch my children run around our property. It's been a good year, but this cough is killing me. I remember my reoccurring dream, where I stand in Rockefeller plaza and my family asks me to play a tune on my grand piano. *Unforgettable, that's what you are. Unforgettable though near or far.* I look to my children, their faces glowing with dumb happiness. God, I love them. My wife still allows me to see them once in a blue moon. My chest begins to tighten and sting; I let out a burning cough. I taste blood in my mouth. I wash it back with a sip of Scotch.

My body is the weakest it has ever been. Every time I move, something develops a new bruise or break. I feel completely insignificant. A man of forty-six should not feel like a man of eighty. Every time I cough, I find it harder and harder to find air as if God is toying with me. I would much rather die at this point than have my children face their dying father. I realize that the choices I have made in life were not the most beneficial for everyone. The doctor tells me it's lung cancer from all those Kools I smoked. Apparently three packs a day is not considered healthy. I wouldn't give up a single pack. Without them, my nerves would never calm. Sometimes, when the nurses leave the room and I have just enough strength to get up, I'll pull one from the side drawer and smoke it by the window. All men have dark and twisted demons within them, clawing at their souls.

My porcelain princess no longer visits me. It's surprising that the women you most dedicated yourself to will casually cut you and leave you to bleed out alone. However, the women you convince yourself you no longer love will somehow find you again, like a dollar bill in the washing machine. I'm not sure why my wife found her way back to me; perhaps it was out of pity. It had been so long since we had been intimate. A soft hand on your shoulder gives you the feeling of summer on your face. Though we haven't really spoken in years, I feel as if we are the best of friends. We laugh the way we used to, but I ask her not to bring the children to visit. I'm going to die – sooner than I thought. The eggshell will surround me for the very last time.

I feel the warmth of the sun on my coal-coloured face, and I smile like I never have before. My children laugh, dressed in their turquoise Sunday clothes. Mama laughs and Daddy preaches. Everyone is there. Oscar's on the trumpet, Wesley on bass. Even Mrs. Hobbs and her ugly floral dress is there. I sit at my piano, and for the first time in years, I sing.

Unforgettable in every way, and forever more, that's how you'll stay...

A Glimpse of Forever

by Claire Motyer

Grade 12 – Adam Scott Collegiate Vocational Institute

It was the kind of night where you forget the time and the place and instead just *are*. The clouds were heavy and threatening, but they didn't notice. They were too caught up in the sharing of this perfect moment, where everything was something and something was nothing. Maybe it was dangerous, but they were invincible. Just friends looking for a good time: Alice with her new boyfriend Sam, and their friends Duke and Craig. They had that sort of giddy, nervous laugh of the unexpected as they passed around the bottle. The wine tasted like warmth and mistakes and growing up.

Sam had the idea of going out on the lake (an expansive sculpture of thin ice as dark as the clouds). He was trying to impress Alice, and the rest were not about to show their shaking knees and intoxicated terror. They didn't even wear jackets. They stumbled, laughing as they walked across the slippery abyss. They talked about the future in a way that made them feel infinite; there were no ifs or maybes. Duke and Craig made fun of Sam as he awkwardly held Alice's hand, but Alice didn't mind. Spring was almost here, and she had developed an unending love for the world in which she lived. Her smile lit the darkness of the crisp night. The cracks below her steps were inaudible and the swirling water underneath was hushed.

Once they were in the middle of the lake, they fell down onto the coldness and stared up into the heavy sky. There were no stars, but the snow fell down like fragments of the universe. They were thinking the same thing: *forever is right now*. Their empty wallets did not burn in their pockets, and the dishes were piled high in a sink far away. They didn't worry about their unwritten future because anything was possible. The foursome felt they understood something the rest of the world didn't.

No one wanted to leave; they just stood swaying rhythmically, their movements uncoordinated. Their tongues were swollen and heavy in their mouths, leaving them to enjoy the moment in drunken silence.

Alice could only remember one time when she had felt this way. The training wheels had been taken off, and her knees were already scraped and bruised when her father's final push had sent her into the world. She felt as if she had flown over the pavement, pumping her legs down on the pedals so as not to lose her balance. The trees and houses passed by faster and closer than ever before, and she'd reached out to touch the leaves and lilacs. The shift in her weight caused her bicycle to lean to the side and she fell hard onto the pavement. And yet it didn't feel like failure. For a moment – in fact for many moments, she told herself – she knew what forever felt like.

The oncoming storm had pushed them off the lake, leaving the hum of cracking ice far away, and the four of them walked in the middle of a road, zigzagging with this truth they now shared and leaning on each other's shoulders. The asphalt did not glisten from silent stars, but instead was a slab of dark liquorice, absorbing all light while winding its way through the deserted, midnight countryside. As their heavy hearts yearned to hold on to this moment, the boys decided to have a smoke by the side of the road in a hollowed-out snow bank. The cigarettes dangled from the corners of their mouths or in between their fingers, and Alice shook her head. From the yellow line of the road – at a standstill – she said, “You know those things will kill you.”

And out of nowhere, it came. An eye-piercing light and squealing tires and burning rubber and tangled metal and vicious screams and scattered dreams and then, silence. Alice's stillness echoed in the ones left alone, who held on to each other's shoulders for fear of losing what they had all been once together; they ached from a physical pain that was not theirs, not even Alice's, but from some external force.

By the time of her funeral, they were sober and knew something more about forever. Instead of the infinity of life, they felt the unending numbness and humbleness of guilt. The empty bottle lay at the bottom of Sam's backpack, a silent catalyst containing tragedies which were zipped and sewn into the stitches of atonement.

2013 Senior Fiction Runner-up

A Different Kind of Rabbit Hole

by Caitlyn Clancey

Grade 12 – St. Peter Catholic Secondary School

There once was a young girl, with copper hair like the belly of a robin, and a voice that put even the loveliest melody to shame. Her smile brought light to where the sun's rays just couldn't reach. When she laughed, the trees and the flowers swapped colours and the clouds swallowed back their rain for another day.

"She's going to change the world," her parents gloated to their friends, to their family, to anyone who would listen. "You can bet money on it."

As she grew older, the young girl made friends. Lots and lots of friends, people who crowded around her just to hear what she had to say. She kept up with how they dressed, did her hair the way they did, and even started buying the same shoes, just to ensure she wasn't the odd one out. Because even though she once thrived on being different, the young girl now feared it. Rejection always followed being unique. And that was something she didn't want.

Years passed, and the young girl was sitting on the edge of childhood, peering down at her teenage self as high school approached. Her friends started talking more about things she didn't care much for, like boys and dances and the parties they were anticipating. The young girl feigned excitement as well and pretended that she wasn't feeling more and more like an outsider among her friends.

Their sudden maturity didn't help this. Everyone seemed to come back from Christmas break with shinier hair, fuller figures, and mature postures. The young girl stared at herself in the mirror for a long time, touching at her copper hair, pulling at her loose fitting clothes, and pushing her shoulders back, trying desperately to look like her friends. No matter what she did, it was still her plain face that was reflected back at her, as she wondered why everyone else was getting prettier while she remained the same, utterly forgettable girl.

Something happened that year. The girl shrank into herself when she was around her friends, trying to blend in with the hopes that no one would notice how she wasn't keeping up with their drastic transformations. She spoke less as she just didn't trust herself to say the right thing. They all seemed to be miles ahead of her while she hobbled behind them, desperately hurrying to catch up but to no avail. Sometimes she went days without saying anything, just listening. She didn't think her friends minded.

The summer before high school began, the young girl found herself isolated. No one returned her calls. No one invited her to their house, or to the mall, or to the concert they all attended

together. When her birthday arrived in late August, her mother asked if she wanted to have her friends over for a party. The young girl pretended they were all busy.

“Maybe a sleepover after school starts up, then,” her mom suggested brightly, obliviously.

The young girl entered high school alone. She fought through the thick ocean of students that threatened to drown her each day and tried to ignore the group of girls who didn't seem to notice that they were missing a member. Sometimes they caught her eye in the hallway and looked away again, unflinching, as if she was just another face.

It seemed impossible. She was the girl they confided in when they had no one else to turn to. She knew something personal about each of them, something she pinky-swore never to reveal and still, to that day, kept locked away inside of her chest. It didn't make sense for them to pretend she was never a part of their lives because she was at one point. She had been one of them and now she wasn't. How could they act like it never happened?

A bitter, rotten seed had been planted in the girl's heart, one which fed on the lack of attention she received from the other students and the amount of time she spent by herself. Gradually, as she progressed through high school, the seed sprouted a vine. It wound its way up her body, spilling into each limb and grabbing at whatever it could find, holding tight. The vine whispered in her ear, tugged at her heart, told her she wasn't good enough for them, so what made her think she was good enough for anyone else? The girl listened. She understood. And she cried.

She withdrew from the world and everyone in it. Her lips remained pressed together during the day, refusing to speak or make any noise that would direct attention towards her. She dragged her body from class to class and endured the torture that came with being alone. No one partnered with her for projects, no one sat next to her if they could help it, and no one tried to get to know the girl who refused to show her teeth. Did any of them ever wonder what her smile looked like?

One day, it all became too much. One day, she fell down a rabbit hole but didn't come out in Wonderland. She clawed at the earth and begged for the sun. No one heard her; she wasn't nearly loud enough. One day, a bleak blanket fell over her, one which she couldn't lift no matter how hard she tried. Everything around her turned grey, and suddenly there was no colour any more. It was too sad. She was too sad. So she left to go and find colour elsewhere.

There once was a young girl, with copper hair like the belly of a robin, and a voice that put even the loveliest melody to shame. She danced in the rain and held hands with the sun; slept with the trees and whispered into the wind. She believed there was no beauty in the world and went away without ever knowing she was the beauty the world needed.

“She was going to change the world some day,” her parents told each other, their family, their friends, anyone who would listen. “But now we'll never know.”

Going Home

by Emily Frost

Grade 12 – St. Peter Catholic Secondary School

It is late autumn and the wind blows through him. He pulls his weathered brown jacket tightly across his chest; it is futile, but he is trying to preserve what little body heat he has left. A strange hush has fallen over the road he walks, which is desolate but oddly beautiful because of its lack of noisy, flashy cars. He thinks that people are the same way; once they are exposed, once their true colours are uncovered and they are left with nothing but the bare essentials of who they are, they are beautiful. They are all beautiful, even the ones who do not think so. He has seen so much, and he has yet to venture across a human being who is not worth the effort of understanding why they are who they are. He has read other people like books, devoured their secrets and traced their history with a fingertip, but he thinks that if someone tried to read his story, they would cringe as one might from a large spider on the wall. His story is not a pretty one. There would be just one section of the book worthwhile, where he is only a minor character and she is the main event. That would be a chapter worth reading.

He is distracted from his thoughts as a car surges past, the wind cradling the faint sounds of the blaring radio and carrying it back to him like a proud child showing off a painted picture. He does not recognize the tune, and it pains him to think that once he might have known it. He used to enjoy music, the fine and delicate sounds of it, but that appreciation is lost now. There is nothing but the sound of his breathing to fill the void as he walks, always north and always with the steady pace he set for himself when he began this trek. There was a time, decades ago, when he would have reached his destination in a matter of days, perhaps a week. There was a time when his body did not protest with every step, when he could throw a football and run for hours without thinking twice. The time of golden vigour and reckless youth is gone forever, swallowed up by the sea of his life, the daily struggle to avoid drowning replacing it. He is not bitter, and regrets do not litter his heart, so he concludes that he has not lost the battle entirely. No one lives forever, nor would he want to.

The road stretches ahead of him, disappearing into the city that has been burdening his thoughts for weeks. The city itself is the shell; he is only interested in what the city contains. Somewhere within its noisy, crowded depths, his destination awaits. After weeks of travelling on foot, he feels an unexpected surge of strength return to his aching bones. He will reach the city before dusk falls, and he will reach her side before the moon completes its ascent into the night sky. It strikes him suddenly that he has never been farther from his house than he is in this current moment. In his youth, he dreamed of travel and of adventure, but those dreams faded over the years until the day he received the phone call from the city. The house is probably exactly as he left it, with the painted shutters and the porch swing he's been intending to fix for years. He built the place when he was young and in love, and in a burst of unintended poetic parallelism, he left it when he was old and in love. The house had ceased to feel like home when she left, and her

absence had been tangible and painful. Perhaps he is returning home with every step; his home is, and always will be, her. With each step, the weight on his shoulders lifts until he no longer feels as if he is about to drown without her. She is close, so close.

The city becomes a living thing, breathing with a beating heart, opening its arms and welcoming him as he enters. There are a few uncertain stares as he walks through the steadily thinning crowd, but the people mostly ignore him, and he is able to lose himself among them. He watches keenly for the street signs, his mind whirring as he remembers the map he bought three days ago. For the first time in weeks, he feels alive, hope expanding in his chest with delicate wings. He will see her soon, and she will smile at the bedraggled sight of him. He will take her hand, the hand that he held so many years ago when he slipped the ring onto her finger, and he will be home at last.

The building is huge and reminds him of a beehive, its deceptively calm exterior concealing the flurry of activity within. He cranes his neck back, wondering idly which window marks her room. Is the light on or off? Is she awake, or fast asleep? He will find out soon. The doors open automatically, the sort of technology that hasn't quite travelled to his small, rustic village yet. It occurs to him that his journey would have been easier with a car, but honestly the idea of driving had never appealed to him; he harboured the same dislike for automobiles that he usually reserved for in-laws and taxes. The woman at the front desk looks up at him when he enters, but the family of four which has been waiting in line quickly consumes her attention. Anyway, he has the room number, which was given to him by the helpful nurse who phoned him all those weeks ago. He heads to the elevator and catches sight of himself in the shiny, reflective surface: he is grey-haired and pale, every inch the old man. Still, he tries to look presentable for her; he takes a moment to pat down his jacket and pants, running a wrinkled hand through his hair. It is a lost cause, but he is confident that she will see past the wrinkly and weary exterior. She always has before, during those years in which they watched each other grow older.

He has walked for miles, pushed his old bones to the point of exhaustion and beyond, and yet this hallway feels like the longest distance he has ever travelled. He searches for the number on the doors, repeating it over and over until he finds it. His hand is shaking as he turns the doorknob, his breath hitching in his throat as he opens the door and looks into the empty room.

There is a nurse inside, making the bed, and she looks up curiously. "Can I help you?"

"I'm looking for a woman. My wife. I was told she was in this room."

The nurse's expression changes subtly in that moment, her hand reaching for him in the universal signal of comfort, and he knows. He knows he will never be truly home again.

All Summers in a Sea-Glass

by Vanessa Kraus

Grade 11 – St. Peter Catholic Secondary School

My skirt billows around my ankles, the synthetic blue flirting with the icy tone lapping onto the shore, teased by the evening breeze. I'm barefoot now: I left my high heels at the party, far behind me, abandoned for the chance to be alone. I haven't been here in years, but the wedding of a fuzzily remembered friend was all it took to bring me back. During the speeches, the groom made a joke about how he and the bride had both entered “long walks on the beach” in their eHarmony profiles. And yet they are the ones back at the party, bedecked in gift wrapping, befuddled by alcohol, and beset by sycophantic well-wishers.

Something nudges my foot at the waterline. I bend to pick it up: it is a piece of sea-glass, slippery Stella Artois green mottled to olive, rough and husky, by the waves. I've seen pictures of ocean resorts where the water is this colour, but it is nothing like the velvet blue laid out before me here.

I turn back to the shore, squishing my toes into the still-warm sand. Hundreds of thousands of feet have massaged and shaped this beach, I think, and hundreds of gaudy umbrellas have made their stabbing advance in search of the perfect spot. Dynasties of sandcastles have risen and fallen here, populated by legions of chubby-cheeked, soggy-diapered, sun-kissed royalty. This beach must have also seen the births of hundreds of mermaids, lying still as seashells, the scales traced with driftwood sticks ornamenting their stationary tails. This final moment of their creation would usually have been followed by their explosive deaths, with sheets of sand, shouts and laughter filling the air, and a mad dash back into the lake to become human again.

I close my eyes, and the breeze carries the artificial tang of sunscreen. All at once I'm a child again, squirming on the scratchy grey wool of the blanket from Mexico as a pair of hands covered in rings, familiar and soft as old cushions, rubs the slippery white goop into my shoulders. My eyes are open underwater, and I remember the little dark minnows streaking across the sandy floor, the water around me gleaming and giving me the impression of being inside my mother's favorite blue vase. And of course, who could ever forget the abandon, the sheer excitement, as you plunge below the surface, go under into the menacing cold of the lake, only to find it warm and welcoming as an old sweatshirt, with blue and green secrets hidden in its pockets? I recall lying on the lakebed, breathing out to stay under, and watching my breath drift lazily to break the glassy surface of the lake in a sheet of silver bubbles. I remember the cold grapes and the crunch in my teeth when they got sandy. I remember the straw of the white sun hat, the same white as the seagulls that dove towards me to snatch up the stale chips I dropped, seeming big enough to snatch me in their ridiculous yellow feet and carry me off.

I open my eyes again; it is evening now. The sun is setting over the lake, looking like a giant, brilliant beach ball that the wind snatched when someone looked away. Bach's "Air in G" begins to play in my head, as it usually does at this time of evening. Amid the swell of music I begin to wonder. How many places like these are left, these unspoiled shrines of memory? Bowling alleys and candy shops become laundromats or glass-cracked, dusty derelicts; libraries lose their cosy corners and sagging armchairs to cold crystal screens. Even beaches are not eternal; the lake will rise, or fall, or be doomed, drying up into farmland or obliterating this place entirely. My stories of sand and laughter will belong to a ghost town deep below the surface.

I open my palm, and the sea-glass glints in the last flickers of the dying light, a tiny beacon, a lighthouse that was never there. It's warm in my hand and smells of the water. I grin as I imagine presenting the simple secret of time travel to a roomful of porky balding men in white lab coats: a broken piece of refuse fished out of a lake! Perhaps it is not valuable enough to demand a place at a university, or an institution, or in the homes of the nation, but for me it is worth more than all the balm in Gilead, because it did what the wedding could not: it brought me back.

I slip the sea-glass into my skirt pocket, turn, and begin the slow walk back to the party, and as the last glimmers of sunlight crawl back across the cooling sand, I search for my shoes.

2013 Junior Fiction Winner

Windblown

by Mackenzie Green

Grade 10 – Crestwood Secondary School

I try to capture Gran's vacant gaze with the loose strokes of my charcoal. The gentle curve of her brow, thin lashes, and sagging eyelids over glossy eyes stretch across the centre of my paper. We don't speak as I draw because she struggles to follow conversation, but I think she likes to watch me scatter lines and shapes throughout my sketchbook. The path of my charcoal trails off as a glimpse of Gran's lost vivacity appears on my page. Glancing out the window that faces the front lawn of the nursing home, I begin to sketch a cloud that drifts across the sky. It conjures the memory of a kite, one from long before Gran's mind was a ruined landscape ravaged by illness.

* * *

A gust of wind swept white-capped waves onto the shore and yanked my kite into the sky. Pulled from Gran's attic, its broad canvas wings, striped orange and blue, showed signs of age. I tensed my arms against the force of the bird at the end of my string. With each swoop and zigzag, it threatened to send me sprawling into the mounds of wind-scattered sand that nearly buried my sandals.

"What do you think it would be like to be up there with the kite?" Gran asked, coming up behind me. She spoke close to my ear so I could hear her over the rushes of salty air that came off the water.

"The wind would blow all the thoughts out of your ears and swirl them around, just out of reach," I responded. With the breeze blustering around us, I could imagine staring down at the ocean, my thoughts hazy and fragmented.

"I'm sure that's exactly how it would be," she said.

* * *

I perched on a stool at the kitchen counter while Gran dug her fingers into a bowl of cookie dough, shaped each mound into a ball, and dropped it onto a baking sheet. The radiator hummed contentedly as it drove the stiffness from my fingers and melted the snow that clung to my hair. The air was warm and thick with the scent of baking oats. With one arm I swung my backpack down to the floor. The zipper was broken and a loose sheet of paper poked out of the top.

"What's that, Mia?" Gran asked, pointing to the opening in my bag. Her hand was covered in clumps of dough.

“Nothing,” I mumbled.

“It certainly looks like something.” She eyed me expectantly, streams of sunlight from the kitchen window flecking her grey-green irises.

Slowly, I bent over and pulled the paper from my bag. The top edge was damp and slightly wrinkled.

“Presenting...the world-renowned artwork of the wunderkind Mia Delaney!” Gran declared with the low intonation of an announcer. I laughed, but quickly became silent.

“The kids in my class said it was dumb because the faces are green,” I whispered.

“That’s what makes it wonderful,” Gran said. Her eyes lingered on my paper, roaming over the large ovals of green paint and the ripples of hair that trailed out behind them.

* * *

We sat on the floor, legs out in front, large sheets of white paper spread between us. Gran’s spice rack was empty, and the cylindrical glass containers were strewn around us, some on their sides, others stacked into topsy-turvy castles.

“I never know how to start,” I said, tapping my pencil on the hardwood. Gran leaned over with a glue stick. Before I could protest, she smeared a path of glue across the centre of my page and grabbed the container of cinnamon. She unscrewed the lid and sprinkled the spice over the glue.

“There. Now you just need to transform that line into something brilliant.”

I squinted at the paper. The powdery contour she’d created brought to mind the edge of a face in profile. With a marker, I drew the back of the head and then picked up the glue stick. I created wavy hair and coloured it with curry to make it reddish brown like my own.

“I want to be an artist,” I said. “But Mum says it’s hard and that I should pick a more *stable* career.”

“Stable is overrated,” Gran said. There was a trace of defiance in her voice.

* * *

Gran stares at the serrated line where the trees meet the pale grey sky. Suddenly she turns towards me and her expressionless eyes slide over my sketchbook.

“What are you drawing, Maggie?” My page is filled with charcoal images stitched together in a dreamlike collage.

“No, Gran, it’s Mia. Maggie’s my mum,” I say. She shakes her head, but still she stares at my drawings.

“No, that’s not right...,” she says absently. I push my sketchbook closer to her so she can see the array of memories I have sketched.

“Those are beautiful,” she whispers. Her finger quivers as she traces the velvety black lines.

Gran does not know that the remembered images are hers as well as mine. I want to sit with her and recall the moments depicted in charcoal, but my conversation is limited to the musings compiled in my sketchbook. Gran pushes the book back towards me and I flip to a new page.

“What are you going to draw now?” she asks.

I take a deep breath as I imagine the scene in my mind.

“A young artist and a grey-haired woman stare out the window,” I say. “Against the sky, the artist can see a kite.” Gran looks outside, as though expecting to see vibrant colours darting across the horizon. “But,” I say, “the elderly woman cannot see the kite no matter how hard she tries.” In the corner of my page I make a small sketch of the bird kite from our day at the beach. Gran’s expression becomes confused as she watches the empty sky. “I’ll catch the kite, Gran, and tie it to my wrist so it can’t fly away,” I whisper.

Gran reaches out and places her fingers over the spot where I imagine the kite string is fastened. With the charcoal soft in my grasp, I move our hands together across the page. The black line trails behind, swooping and curling, as if directed by the wind.

The Procedure

by Cailey Ward

Grade 9 – Lakefield District Secondary School

I stared out of my window at the City of Lakefield with its huge skyscrapers and pavement as far as I could see. As I sat there, I thought to myself, wow, a city named Lakefield, and there's not a single lake in sight. There had once been a lake called Katchewanooka, but, like all the others, it was now underground to make room for development.

I looked at the calendar; it was June 3rd 2800. I started to panic – just two days left until my 14th birthday. I was due for the procedure.

“I wish I could stay thirteen forever,” I muttered. I'd been dreading this for years. The procedure was a process which forced teenage girls and boys to choose who they wanted to be before entering high school. Then they went to Lakefield Hospital to be transformed into their choice. There were only two choices. Girls could be a “sporty” or a “beauty.” Boys could be a “jock” or a “braniac.” If you didn't make a choice, you were considered an “out,” and were rejected by students, teachers, and society. Most “outs” ended up in jail because government laws discriminated against them.

Later that day I snuck out to see how bad it was at the high school. I saw a group of girls, possibly my old friends, all with blond hair and blue eyes. Those must be the beauties, I thought. They looked identical. They were beating up another girl who looked nothing like them. That must be an out, I thought sadly.

The day before the procedure my parents asked me whether I had made my choice.

“Why can't I just be myself?” I blurted out, running upstairs to my room and slamming the door. I stared at my red hair, green eyes, and freckled face in the mirror and cried. I didn't want to be a beauty or a sporty, but I didn't want to be an out either. I just wanted to be myself! I packed my backpack, climbed out of my window, hopped on my sky scooter, and flew away.

As I flew, all I could see were buildings. About an hour's ride later, there it was: the most beautiful place I had ever seen, a forest of tall green trees. I landed my sky scooter, jumped off, and felt something hard under my feet. I looked down. There was a worn-out sign that said, “Welcome to Algonquin Park.” The last great wilderness left in the country! I wandered around this unimaginable place until I came to a river, where I sat down and looked up. I saw another sign, “Future Site of Algonquin Condominiums.” I was devastated!

My shock was interrupted when a moose calf and its mother bolted out of the bush. They were the first animals I'd seen that weren't in an iBook. They were so peaceful, drinking water from the

river. They looked up when I snapped a few pictures, then returned to drinking. A deep rumble of thunder startled the moose and they ran off. The storms seemed to be getting more frequent. I'd seen beautiful pictures of snow, but it never fell anymore, just rain.

When I thought about the moose and the condos, I began to cry again. Then I remembered that the procedure was the next day and I cried even harder. I was confused about what to do and I also felt hopeless about the loss of the last wilderness area. Should I become a beauty? Should I become a sporty? Should I be an out and speak up for what was right? Or should I just stay here with the animals and sneak into the city to steal food. I repeated these questions to myself over and over again as the first raindrops started to fall.

I took shelter under the canopy of a stand of towering pines; they were like the skyscrapers of Lakefield but beautiful, green, and living. When the storm passed, the setting sun peeked out from between the clouds. The sky was a canvas of brilliant oranges, yellows, and purples. I pulled out my camera and took more pictures. Never before had I seen such beauty. As I snapped some shots, my spirits rose and my helplessness left me. I resolved to do something about my situation.

The next day I returned to the city on a mission. The first girl I spotted, an out, looked depressed as I approached her.

"Hello," I said calmly.

"Hi," she whispered.

As I sat down beside her, I asked, "What's your name? I'm Leah."

"Elizabeth. What are you going to do to me?" she responded with fear in her eyes.

"I promise I won't hurt you, but I need your help."

"You need *my* help? With what?" she asked, surprised to hear such a statement.

"Well, I have a plan, but I'll get to that later. Everything is wrong with this city, with the procedure, with everything. We should all be able to be ourselves and we shouldn't have to live in fear."

"I know," she answered weakly.

"Have you heard of Algonquin Park?"

"No," she said, unsure.

"Well, it's the only great wilderness left and it's going to be destroyed, just like us. I want to gather the outs and whoever else will join me at the park." I explained my plan.

The next day I stood surrounded by outs and even some sporties, beauties, jocks, and braniacs, sharing the beauty of Algonquin Park. They were just as awestruck as I was. After a tour, I showed them the sign that read "Future Site of Algonquin Condominiums" and explained my idea.

“We can set up a shelter and spend a few days here. Since we all brought our cameras and journals, we’ll take pictures and write stories, poems, and speeches about this stunning diversity so we can inspire others to put a stop to this tragedy. We need people to be themselves again and we need this land to remain as nature intended. Who’s with me?” Everyone cheered, some a little hesitantly.

That night, for the first time ever, we heard a wolf pack howl. We saw a beaver building a lodge, a black bear fishing, and a variety of birds. We had many pictures, poems, and stories about the diverse wildlife.

“How does this haiku sound?” said George (a braniac).

Forest teems with life,
Water courses through its veins,
Earth harmonious.

“That sounds beautiful. I’ve never seen real flowing water before,” said Elizabeth, as she sat writing by the river.

“Neither have I,” George added.

It was time to leave Algonquin Park and return to the city. Although we were unsure of what the following day would bring, we were armed with inspiration and courage.

2013 Senior NonFiction Winner

You Can See Heaven from Deck 12

by Megan Boothby

Grade 12 – Thomas A. Stewart Secondary School

I met a girl on a Caribbean cruise ship in the March Break of 2013. Or a woman, really – twenty-five, shy, awkward smile, Russian looks – my assigned table's assistant waiter.

Her name was Elisabeth.

I cannot explain either the encounter itself or the depth of emotion that makes a person believe in past lives, in reincarnation. It illuminated the lack of random chaos in my universe: an explosion of design that painted the strings weaving my existence together with those of others brightly enough for me to briefly glimpse them, to follow them from the past into the future.

Elisabeth was from Belgium and spoke four languages. In Belgium they have two federal governments: one French, one Dutch. They debate endlessly. But I did not know this until the last days, because for most of the week that I knew her, I did not speak, only observed.

Once she offered my dad coffee and when he refused, she withdrew not only her hand but her whole body in an elegant, dance-like movement. An occasionally obnoxious American next to us tried to take her photo, and she was so self-conscious that she dropped professionalism and ran, hiding her face like a child. Once our eyes met as my family – her friendly and courteous table – walked into the dining room; her whole face brightened to see us, a barely perceptible widening of the features, a subtle glow like the hidden sun.

I liked her, from a distance.

Our moments together collected much as a fall of rainwater might gift into my cupped palms. She gave me words to gather into a poem, ideas I had never fully formed inside my head.

I have tried to explain this before, about how moments and strangers are the most profound things I have ever known, but to date I've met no one who was even born in the same universe. Though perhaps unfounded and ridiculous, I hoped Elisabeth was this sort of kindred soul. I gave her a copy of the poem I'd written; I explained to her about the moments, like offering up the chink in my armour, my heart on a plate, exposed.

And Elisabeth said, "I think that's really beautiful."

She said it with such a sincere, quiet voice. She put down what she was holding and stepped close to me, and for the first time ever, I felt as though someone might actually mean what she says. The same way I do.

I rambled awkwardly.

"Well, thank you, then, for... crossing my path."

She stumbled in her semi-broken English.

"Thank you for this warm feeling, in my heart."

It was a moment of such crystalline connection that I felt it lasted centuries.

I told Elisabeth I thought we could have been friends, had we met properly, and she agreed, already in midstride away, called back to work, and we left and went our separate ways.

I never learned her last name.

It is unlikely I will ever see her again. Maybe, though, that's what makes it so indelible. The ephemerality. I don't know.

In any case, I have, in minutes when the rush of life slows down, felt sad since arriving home. Not a sadness I can even justify, but one so deep it makes my heart ache when I'm trying to sleep. I feel hollow, like there's an empty place left by that short March break I can never go back to.

I've concocted the following theory: maybe I put a piece of my soul into every poem, into every expression of art I give away, and everyone has always given it back through their lack of understanding. So when for the first time someone took it for their own, it tore a rift within, but I wouldn't take it back for anything just to know I'm not alone.

Still, I feel cheated. I know social butterflies who can make a million friends, but the one time I was finally certain I was meant to know another person, I only got to keep her for a week.

Something important has happened to me, but I have no name for it.

I am content with my small life. Conversation does not come smoothly to me, and I spent my free time on that cruise perched in a plastic reclining chair on Deck 12, the highest a person could climb, with nothing but a single railing and the rest of it open to the clouds.

I sat with a notebook and wrote my poetry. The ocean told me stories. Two humpback whales playfully slapped their flukes one evening, frigate birds flew, and a pod of orcas graced me with their momentary presence.

It is true I can be lonely. I can feel as far apart from this buzzing Earth as a distant star.

But the view from up there is worth it.

In the Caribbean, chugging each night from Barbados to St. Lucia, from Antigua to St. Maarten or on to St. Thomas, the sky is an open dome of stars that seems exponentially vaster than anything in Canada. It wraps across all visible space above and toward the horizons, remaining immobile even as the ship thunders onward, and it creates the illusion of being an atom within a celestial snow-globe filled with liquid – a black, oceanic silence, peaceful to the brim.

On a cruise ship, few seem to pause long enough to notice such significant grandeur, but I like to think Elisabeth does, wherever she is sailing now.

I like to imagine that every so often she wonders about me, what I'm doing up here in the north, where I'm going, where I've been. Whether I remember her.

I believe she understands. That she knows how – with eyes sharpened through attention to beautiful moments, to ephemeral human perfections and unlikely, powerful connections – you can see clear to Heaven from Deck 12.

One Slice

by Caitlyn Clancey

Grade 12 – St. Peter Catholic Secondary School

I was wiping down the glass of the display case when an elderly woman approached the bakery section, her brown loafers damp from the rain that poured heavily and relentlessly outside. If it weren't for the loud squeaks of protest her shoes made when they met with the linoleum floors, I wouldn't have noticed her arrival; I'd been so focused on getting a frosting stain off the glass that I was barely paying attention to anything else. When I heard her shoes, I left what I was doing and straightened up, giving her my best smile as I asked if I could get anything for her.

She was small, probably a good foot shorter than me, with a single umbrella sitting in her shopping cart and nothing else. Her hair was hidden behind a grey shawl that kept falling too far forward over her forehead so that she continuously had to push it back. She returned my smile with one that seemed to tremble slightly as she took in the cakes and pastries that filled the display case.

"It all looks so good," she mused aloud, looking up at me briefly. "I suppose I can't buy all of it, though."

I chuckled half-heartedly, trying desperately not to glance at the clock on the oven behind me. I was supposed to have punched out three minutes ago, but had held back to finish cleaning the glass. Now I could tell that I was going to be late, something the managers definitely did not like. If only the old lady would hurry up and choose something.

She lifted her hand, her knuckles knobby and protruding harshly as she pressed a finger against the glass. "What's an éclair?"

I suppressed a sigh and gave a brief explanation of the pastry.

Her nose wrinkled in response. "Oh, too much whipped topping for me. Better keep looking."

Five minutes late. Now I bounced from foot to foot anxiously, anticipating the stern talk that awaited me from my manager. Would I get a strike on my record? It was something I only heard about in passing during breaks in the lunch room, where one of the meat department employees was always going on about being a part of a union, and the three-strike rule; get all three and you're out, simple as that.

"I'm sorry I'm taking so long," the woman said suddenly, pulling me from my thoughts with her hesitant apology. "It's my first time shopping alone."

I immediately began to wonder what she meant by that. My face must have given me away because she answered me as if I'd asked aloud.

“My husband and I used to come here together every Sunday,” she explained, smiling sadly at something behind me, something I knew I wouldn’t be able to see even if I were to turn around. “We’d get all of our groceries first before making our way here, to the bakery. We saved it for last because we’d spend so long debating over which cake to get. I’m not sure why, though; we always ended up picking that one.” She gestured to the strawberry cheesecake on the lowest shelf. “It was our favourite.”

I didn’t like the way she kept using the past tense when describing the shopping trips with her husband. I suppose I knew what was coming next before she said it, but that didn’t do anything to prevent the chill that seized my body and pinched at my heart.

“He died of cancer last month,” she whispered, so quiet I barely heard her. “Lung cancer. By then we’d stopped buying the cake because he didn’t have much of an appetite.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, because I didn’t know what else to say. After a brief pause, I murmured, “My...my grandpa’s going through the same thing right now. Stomach cancer, stage four.”

Her eyebrows drew together sympathetically. “I’m sorry to hear that, dear.”

Neither of us said anything. I was looking down at the top of the display case, numbly brushing away some stray crumbs. I realized she was the first person I’d told outside of my family about my grandpa. I’m still not sure why I did. I guess it just felt right.

“I think I’ve decided what I want,” the woman said, and I looked up to see her staring with damp eyes at the slices of cheesecake on the top shelf.

She didn’t have to tell me it was one of these slices that she wanted. I knew and wordlessly pulled the tray from its shelf, turning my back to the woman as I packaged it up for her. My throat was closing in on itself, tears threatening to brim my eyes if I didn’t get away soon. When I turned around again, the pastry box poised in my hand, I was met with the teary face of the woman.

“I’d get the whole cake,” she said quietly, holding her hand across the counter for the box, “but I know I couldn’t finish it all on my own. Have a nice night. I hope your grandpa gets better.”

“You too,” I responded after a moment, having been lost in my own thoughts. She was already gone.

Nearly one year later, after my grandfather’s funeral, I find myself thinking increasingly about this woman and my interaction with her. I’ve had dreams about the full cheesecake and then just the one slice of cheesecake. It seems I can’t escape this memory, and I’m positive it will stay with me for a long time, now that I’m able to draw on my own experience from it.

I see the old lady in my grandma’s eyes, when she talks to me about cooking dinner for one. I wonder if she ever catches herself making too much and has to keep leftovers in the fridge, even though she knows she won’t be able to finish them. I wonder if there are foods she once bought to share with my grandpa that she can’t buy anymore, not now that it would be just her eating it. And I wonder if she feels his absence when she’s shopping alone, buying food for herself, thinking only of what she likes and not what he would like. I wonder all this and it feels like my grandpa has died again, the sadness hitting me just as hard as it did the first time.

I just never figured thinking about a single slice of cheesecake would do that to me.

Brave as a Wolf, Free as an Owl

by Mariah Ward

Grade 12 – Lakefield District Secondary School

The sound of the bass throbbed like a heartbeat, consuming me as I entered the garage. I was excited. My first party of the summer! People laughed, many with drinks in their hands. Being epileptic, I had no option to drink, but the company of my friends was enjoyable. I met new people, including a recent graduate from my school. When we spoke, I was drawn to his unique wolf paw tattoo, the claws appearing to scratch his left shoulder. I found the design striking.

As the evening progressed, I eventually felt like the only sober one remaining; I called my dad to pick me up. While I trudged to his car, another rolled up beside me. An elderly lady leaped out, stared at me with anxious eyes, and asked repetitively, “Was a boy lying on the road?” Confused, I responded that I wasn’t sure what she was talking about. However, sensing her worry, I asked my dad to follow her. Several minutes later, he broke the heavy silence, swearing loudly and yelling, “Call 9-1-1!” I scrambled for my phone. Two shoes were strewn across the road. Something was wrong. Shock and confusion overcame me. My dad took my phone: “A boy’s been hit by a car and he’s lying on the road.”

We got out of the car, and that’s when I saw him. His legs were crossed as if he were stargazing, but when I walked to his left side, I quickly looked away. An open wound gaped gruesomely; his face was awash in blood. A tidal wave of panic hit me. Blinding headlights approached and I ran onto the road, oddly ready to be hit to protect him. The car pulled aside and my dad, still on the phone, drove our car to the centre of the road to block traffic. A lady rushed from her car, offering assistance, but my dad announced that an ambulance was already on its way. Through lifeguard training I knew it was best not to move him in case of a spinal injury so we draped a blanket over the victim and waited. His breathing was heavy, piercing the silence of the people surrounding him. After what seemed an eternity, we heard sirens and glimpsed flashing lights.

The elderly lady we had followed anxiously repeated, “I don’t know what happened.” She and her husband were returning late from a show, she explained. By the time they saw what appeared as a log on the road, it was too late. They had rushed out of their car, expecting a deer but finding something much worse.

More authorities trickled in. I was asked to identify the boy. I gathered my courage, took one last look, and there it was: the wolf paw tattoo just above his gash, the claws now literally ripping open his skin. I gasped his name, fighting tears. I just wanted to run as the nightmare became reality. Firefighters bandaged him up like a mummy, and then another pair of headlights arrived. Two kids ran towards the boy. They were his friends. In tears, they sat by his side, one girl holding his hand, speaking softly as his breathing became laboured. He responded by breathing harder; he

had heard her. Paramedics arrived, lowering him into the waiting ambulance. The moment was surreal. Police said he would be airlifted to Sunnybrook Hospital, giving a glimmer of hope.

I realized then how cold I was, standing on a country road at two in the morning wearing only a t-shirt and shorts and shaking like an autumn leaf ready to fall. Caged by yellow caution tape, I realized we would be required to remain much longer. The pressure of the night weighed on my shoulders while I provided my statement – for the fiftieth time, it seemed. Unable to say or do anything for each other, my dad and I stood in silence, shivering in the blackness. At about four o'clock we returned home to my anxious mother.

By morning the Facebook “walls” were plastered with “rest in peace.” How could they know? Searching the news I found a strange version of the story confirming his death. I sat the rest of the day in denial, numb.

After another sleepless night we headed to the Toronto Zoo, hoping my love of animals would ease my pain. As we drove, I had time to think. Carelessness. Drunkenness. Thoughtlessness. Words describing parties. How is drinking fun with such devastating consequences? Despite being sober, my guilt was overwhelming. I had contributed to the situation by being a bystander, by my helplessness. Everything. Flashbacks haunted me. Finally the comforting presence of the zoo brought relief.

At the zoo I visited the Trumpeter Swan I helped save during my co-op placement at Champlain Animal Hospital. Seeing the animal rehabilitated, in stark contrast to the boy's fate, was uplifting. Our last stop was the Americas Pavilion. Entering the pitch blackness of the nocturnal exhibit gave me an intense chill like spiders crawling down my back. The darkness of the previous night returned. Two glowing eyes pierced the shadows looking into my soul: a Spectacled Owl. People casually passed by, but the animal's eyes were trained on me, its head turning as I walked back and forth, angling when I tried to hide. I left to see other animals. When I returned, the owl was asleep. Its eyes opened slightly, saw me, then shot fully open with a jerk of its head, as if to say, “It's you!”

Once home I looked up “owl symbolism” on the web. “. . . You are being called upon to open your eyes, ears and mind to the truth of a situation; to listen to the wisdom deep in your heart and soul. . . .” The boy's ancestry was First Nations; some First Nations people view owls as spirits of the recently departed, powerful protectors carrying spirits to the afterlife. Normally skeptical, I thought this discovery seemed too powerful for mere coincidence.

With life comes tragedy and mystery. What you learn from it defines you. For me, that mystical owl image was a profound message of hope and possibility that I will never forget. I am now able to move on, each day grateful for what I have and for what that owl taught me.

* * *

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2013 Senior Nonfiction Runner-up

The One-Eyed Wonder

by Julia Whatley

Grade 12 – Lakefield District Secondary School

Strength. It is not something that is always measured in muscle or physical ability. Rather, it is measured in the ability to overcome the struggles in life. The world throws huge curve balls at us, leaving us helpless, unsure of what to do next. When we decide to fight it, to make the best of a bad situation and dodge those curve balls, we discover our true strength. Eleanor Roosevelt once said, “You gain strength, and courage, and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face. . . . You must do the thing you think you cannot do.” Her words speak nothing but truth to me.

Like everyone else, I’ve been beaten down and had to fight my way back to the surface, but it was when a being, who is closer to my heart than most, was faced with his own struggle that I was forced to find my inner strength to help him get through it. For many, the being who is nearest to the heart would be a human, but for me, it’s my horse Romeo. Romeo developed severe glaucoma, elevated pressure in the interior chamber of his right eye. When medications didn’t help, we took him to Guelph to be treated by the best. Unfortunately, by the time we got there, the pressure in his eye had almost quadrupled and his retina was being torn to shreds. Not only as Romeo’s owner but also as his best friend, I was faced with the heartbreaking decision to have the eye removed.

Many people do not understand the connection between a horse and its rider, nor should they. To the untrained eye, riding looks like someone sitting on a horse while it runs in circles with the occasional jump thrown in. Inexperienced onlookers simply cannot understand or appreciate the subtlety required for riding. I, on the other hand, belong to a group of people referred to as “horse-obsessed.” Riding Romeo can leave me feeling on top of the world, happier than ever, or extremely frustrated. Trust is an enormous factor, even when riding a horse with two eyes. Navigating a course of jumps at a competition is absolutely thrilling and can move me to tears on occasion. Just the very thought that a fifteen-hundred-pound animal is willing to soar over a four foot jump – for no reason other than the fact that I asked him to – is incredible to me. Flying through the air over those jumps, with the horse beneath me, is my absolute favourite thing to do. As exhilarating as the riding and competing are, it is Romeo’s personality and the connection we have that make my heart swell. Romeo has found his own way of giving me a “hug,” pressing his face into my chest and closing his eyes. When an animal so massive and powerful completely surrenders and shows such sweet affection, I experience an extraordinary feeling that can only be fully understood by those lucky enough to have felt it.

When the vets at Guelph told me that Romeo might never be able to jump with only one eye, I was completely devastated. I was sad not only for myself but also for Romeo because he made it so clear that he truly enjoyed it. Some horses will go around a course of jumps and do well, but

something about the way Romeo approaches his job is different from the others. His eyes truly light up at the first sight of a brightly decorated jump in the show ring. His ears are perked throughout the entire course, and everyone who watches him has a smile on their face the whole way through because they can see how much fun he is having. I was also told that beyond jumping, even just doing dressage could prove to be very difficult for us, as Romeo could become easily spooked.

We arrived at Guelph four days after Romeo's operation. I heard nothing but praise for how brave and friendly Romeo had been before and after his surgery. The poor guy awoke from anaesthetic, surrounded by strangers and missing an eye. Despite the circumstances, Romeo managed to maintain the charisma for which he is so well-known, never complaining and never ceasing to put on his most adorable expression whenever a human approached him. He endured a two-week recovery, having to stay in his stall at home.

I was nervous to ride him, expecting to be thrown into the wall countless times. I was pleasantly surprised when Romeo remained calmer than he had ever been before. A week later, I attempted to urge him over the tiniest of jumps, again expecting frustration, again amazed at how calm and willing he was. I had to adapt my riding to accommodate his disability, having to set him up for each jump so that he had enough time to fully see it. There is no falling asleep at the wheel anymore; I now have to be there for him one hundred percent of the time because Romeo depends on me. We already had an incredible relationship, but working together to overcome his setback, having to trust each other, has enhanced that inexplicable connection between horse and rider.

After having jumped Romeo up to three and a half feet, I decided it was time to attempt an Ontario-wide competition. Once again I refused to get my hopes up and made my goal simply to complete the three phases of the competition successfully. Yet again, Romeo stepped up to the plate, put all of his trust in me, and soared over every last jump, ran his heart out on the galloping portion of the courses, hit the ball out of the park, and took us to the first place position by the end of the day!

An experience that was heart-wrenching even to imagine for many horse owners was thrown my way, and I was forced to deal with it. I am blessed to have such a willing and exceptional animal, and together we have learned more in the past six months than we have in over five years of partnership. I have fallen in love with my horse all over again.

Carry

No pearl.
My womb
a shell;
empty.
Instead,
a ruby peels.
Could have,
should have.
Who could you have been?
Through the looking glass,
I long for the feeling
of your little hand
turning inside me
one last time.
Precious things,
which in time long taken,
form.
My chrysalis,
you could have danced.
Tiny wings,
fragile things.
Icicles
hanging
from the ceiling.
Damocles,
your sword is in the way,
in the way of winter.
You could have been
a January girl.
A merchant of snow.
Delicate,
like butterflies,
you'd trace snowflakes
dashed on the window.
Each year,
bring a glow
brighter than candles
on a birthday cake,
warmer than the hearth
and the crackled whispers
of the flames

that would swim
through the woodstove
like mermaids.
The looking glass shattered,
no pieces left.
No Alice.
Could your fingers,
tiny, frail,
have wrapped around mine?
What would I have sung
to hush your cries?
A faerie in the bell-jar.
A glass casket
for a slumbering princess.
Our fairytales have failed us.
I could not carry you.
I tried.
There is a crevice,
a break in my earth
where there once was
a small,
morning form,
early in its dawn.
A tiny sunrise.
The great light
weakened by the sky,
its bearer.
Its carrier.
Its mother.
Her breast left to dry.
Empty.
A Rachel,
barren.
A sun retreating,
refusing to rise,
refusing to complete its cycle.
I could not hold you, but I will carry you
in other ways.

* * * * *

By Jasher Guiel

Grade 12 - Crestwood Secondary School

Duck Song

(For D. L.)

"The silver swan/while living had no note."
So it's only fitting that this elegant bird
should die with gorgeous song,
with mournful sigh,
beautiful and composed in death,
every feather pure as driven snow
and in its proper place.
But the voice in my head does not speak in old English.
So if I must die,
give me a duck's death.
Let me die in an indignant explosion
of brown feathers.
Let my last note
be a shriek, a honk,
a squawk that brings all eyes to me,
that makes people jump and laugh
and mask the passing of a little brown duck.
Let me die in a graceless explosion of feathers,
with a shriek and a waddle,
halfway to the sky.

* * * * *

Vanessa Kraus

Grade 11 - St. Peter Catholic Secondary School

Sister

(For H. M.)

You say the most beautiful things sometimes,
They roll off your tongue and hang in the air
Catching the light like golden drops.

You once compared the loss of pen and ink
To the first time that music was imprisoned in the staff,
My mind wanders to a time when it was free.

No clef, no time signature
Unbound and unbridled
Held only by the ear and the heart.

You once said, in a dim twilight haze,
That fireflies are like will-o'-the-wisps
Leading weary travellers off their paths.
A tiny pinprick of mystery
Unmasked by harsh words like
Bioluminescence.

I marvel at you, and wonder,
Do all painters, poets, artists,
Carry the same deep sadness,
You a musician without a voice.

I see it always,
A yearning for melody
For high arcing notes
For more than this.

Left only with the bass,
Sounds so melancholy and low
That they are all but lost in the rumble of motors
The hum of everyday life.

You once said, in the darkness of our grandmother's house,
I'm so afraid
And each syllable was like liquid in the night
For without rhythm
Poetry, like music,
is
lost.

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By Lydia Mills

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