



LAKEFIELD
LITERARY *Festival*

2016

YOUNG WRITERS CONTEST
WINNERS

2016 Senior Fiction Winner

From the Fireplace

by Christopher Conway

Grade 12 – Lakefield District Secondary School

Cormac remembered. He remembered so hard his head began to burn. His black hair caught on fire and he looked up to a glowing inferno – it was a hole in the roof above his head. The sun stung his eyes and he saw black for a minute, but to him, this was all right. Cormac, a returning student, sat reminiscing.

Having grown into a premature habit of crossing his legs, Cormac settled in. He put a fist to his temple and felt a warm memory of his childhood. Cormac remembered and stared at the spot where he would lie – where his muse Virginia had lain, just moments before – in the leaf pile impression, trying to absorb the heat before it dissipated. They hid behind fruited vines on early fall days, with Virginia’s clicking, crooked bicycle speeding up the hill on Annis, around the tall, curving pines, through the smooth, hilly gutters along Asward, and onto her own road, Rauley.

After some twelve years, Cormac hadn’t shaken off the *click, click, clickclick* of her bicycle.

She was pretty. Cormac saw her white house as an ivory palace, adorned with towering Greek pillars: an impenetrable *Monticello*. Cormac’s education had taught him pretty rhyming couplets with romantic and melodic roses of gold, and angelic choirs singing on feathery canyons. These, though, were just burdens. The house was unstained by the weather, despite dusty winds that tore and discarded the towering maple branches like petty litter, especially in summer. From the leaf pile, Cormac would stare at Virginia’s singing, auburn hair as it arced away from the beaten path, and he would count the seconds until it escaped the top of the hill, and he would write this down in his tattered, school notebook.

Visiting his old haunts reminded him of those times.

Snapping into reality, Cormac studied the three black, senile dogs that lay panting on the porch, licking at some forgotten, stickied brandy or a knotted rough in their paws. The house was the same, despite some crude, rustic renovations, and the heaving wood underneath was enough to satiate him. There was a clearing now by the river behind the house, and Cormac grew ecstatic, remembering as a younger one when the glass-blue water would draw a lazy stick down its length, let it swirl in thought, and he could see it drift out of sight to its end just like Virginia’s clicking bicycle. It was very much the same, even after twelve years.

The door to the right could hardly open, so Warren, squeezing through in limbo, stepped into the light piercing the front porch. He spoke, twirling his cigarettes flamboyantly:

“Nice out, innit?” His lighter flashed and whirred. Satisfied, he sat down slowly, with an exhale. There was no need to answer – the answer was in front of them. There was Annis road, surrounded on the side opposite the house by girthy pines and ferns. It descended gradually as it led deeper into the peninsula, which grew narrower, more obscure, and grotesque as it went on, breaking into a pseudo-lake. The canopy filtered the pale-yellow light into shards of glass, its branches resembling a heaving, green chandelier.

“Is college okay at least?” Warren asked, cautiously.

“School’s fine. It’s nice to be back, though. Nature.” Cormac gestured with lively hands, smiling and agreeing with his own words.

The conversation was kept brief, as was usual in the country. It would seem that the daily follies and pains that are the drudgeries of an urban, adult life were rendered obsolete by some natural force – maybe divine intervention – making the artificial wither and melt in the humid, beating sunlight.

There are no statistics inside the water lilies, wet and laden with fuzzy, hovering honeybees.

It was nearing sunset, so the clarity of the porch’s view was dimming. The greyed, vulgar streetlights came on, so lazily that the two agreed to go to the fireplace. A ring of mismatched bricks, it was a modest setup that had about six chairs surrounding it, facing the road as though it were a ramshackle opera house. It was nearing dark.

Warren set up his fireplace with grace, lighting his paper with matches just like in the old times, the two celebrating while the flame’s lick began to ascend into a crude teepee of dried kindling. The fire sang as the saps and oils of the split birch flamed and sighed, pouring and sizzling onto the sad, grey ash.

“It’s an art,” he explained as he worked.

The flames grew quickly, and because of it, the darkness nearly tripled in its intensity. Bugs rattled and shook, crying and lamenting around the pit. Cormac’s eyes ran up and down the full strip of Annis, now lit by streetlights; it was the main artery leading to the tip of the petty peninsula of the town. Sensing a dried mouth, Cormac coughed, then broke the silence. “How is Virginia? I haven’t seen her in ... a while.”

Warren pursed his mouth to ease a grief. “I saw her at the Wallis house the other morning, sneaking out.” He shuffled his hands and feet to make himself comfortable and spoke again with a deepened vigour: “She was clutching her shirt closed – she looked quite sick, or something. I’m not so sure about her now.” He settled himself and the two met eyes, then just as quickly looked back toward the fireplace, which was now going steadily.

Cormac had a bicycle too, remembering when on nights of reflection and restless anger, he would ride furiously up and down the town’s main road. In his day-to-day musings, he hadn’t given these moments much thought, since he felt they were better off archived, left dusty on a shelf of nightmares. But on one of those nights, he had ridden past the Wallis house, going ever slower to hear the slow, dissonant, and vulgar voices that poured out onto the street. A house of cheap

lights, he would see silhouetted men with thick, crossed arms blowing opaque smoke off the dark, wobbly parapet. You couldn't see their faces, but the darkened corners opened themselves to childhood imagination. In them, Cormac saw contorted, green faces smeared with insidious intent, and above the chin, gnarled and stained teeth that found a dull glow from the light of the bug lamps.

"Well," said Warren as he exhaled. Hearing Cormac's heaving chest, he sighed and walked first up, and then around, the house – the light switching briefly on and off. On Cormac's cheeks now were fires, erupting in flushes that struggled against his paled skin. Wishing the fire's crackle were infinitely louder to obscure his sobs, he stared at the flames hoping for an escape, but it did not come. The feathered, orange licks of the fire grew more quickly, and so did Cormac's pulsing throat, which he wished more than anything would soothe and settle down. In a desperate attempt at clearing his mind, he looked around, wiping his eyes furiously.

He saw the house, surrounded by white fencing, which, though dulled by the years, was the same as when he had painted it as a small child. Then, he had noticed how the knots and flaws of the wood were hidden as though they never existed, veneered under a perfection of solid white. Cormac thought of his life too as cheap plywood: warped and cracked with splinters, greened with oily, artificial paints, and thrown about in a damp gutter to corrupt. This is my soul, he thought.

It grew humid and quiet, with the night-blue air that framed the fire's whirr settling into routine. Cormac looked again toward the river, wondering if it felt a tragedy as petty as his.

The street was darkened but, from the fireplace, Cormac saw a silhouette at the top of the hill. The descent that followed Annis was smooth and steady, but still painful to ascend. Now distracted by the figure, Cormac's gaze followed it with focus, as he counted the rhythms of the cheap, leather heels clacking against the road's length. It was familiar – an older man, drunk, muttering an old vulgar ballad, his words and melodies slurring and wavering through a laboured, intoxicated wheeze.

"Walking on the fightin' side of me," he sang.

Cormac studied how he was dragging his left leg the whole time down the grass-fringed straightaway. Cormac thought he resembled the laboured clopping of a ruined horse: up up up and down down down. Cormac could hear in the cheap, clacking shoes, a *click, click, clickclick*.

Then the old man tripped and fell. He lay there on the dusty road awhile, staring up toward a heaven-tree of fruitlike stars. Cormac heard a brief chuckle. The old man's chuckle turned into a searing uproar of piercing laughter. Cormac joined in. The two laughed and cried in harmony, stirring the drone of the bug-laden night into a shrieking, joyous noise, the bugs and dogs of the night howling and roaring around them.

In the midst of their laughter, the crude inferno of the teepee collapsed into something less elegant – into just a muddled amalgam of branches and sticks – the flame burning brighter and higher because of it.

Closet

by Rachel York

Grade 12 – Lakefield District Secondary School

It was blisteringly hot. The kind of hot that makes sweat glisten and clothes stick. The window in Olivia's room, which provided the only source of relief from the rising temperatures, was cracked open an inch, just enough to allow the breeze to spill through onto her skin. She could hear off in the distance Mr. Adam's lawn mower, which often sputtered and spat grass onto the street, the chirping of unnamed songbirds, Mrs. Joseph's sprinkler, ticking in a lazy, but upbeat rhythm, and the flip flops of laughing, rowdy teenagers slapping the pavement.

Olivia's closet, which was usually shut tight and only opened in complete privacy, gaped wide. The tall white doors were kept ajar by the wooden chair from her desk. Olivia stared at the overflowing mass on the shelves. Everything she didn't use or didn't want to look at was tossed into the maple wood closet and locked away until she wanted to deal with it. She sighed and straightened her leg forward to knock over a childhood book titled *Walt Disney's Cinderella*. She remembered her mother reading it to her when she was young, all tucked in bed under her pink blankets with her pink pillows, in her pink bedroom. Her mom had always told her, "One day you'll find your prince, too, dear, just like Cinderella." She hadn't liked the sound of this. Olivia tucked her legs back under her body and leaned forward, balancing on the balls of her feet. Her mother wanted her closet cleaned out by the time she got back from work, and Olivia hadn't even started. The closet was full of long-forgotten memories, as well as current complications she'd much rather ignore.

Olivia stretched her thin arm to the second shelf to retrieve an old scrapbook she had made with her best friend, Hazel. Olivia leaned back on folded legs and peered at the book. It was neon green with an ugly silver trim following the lines and indents of the cover. The first page she flipped to was covered in old photographs of her and Hazel. Hazel was the kind of perfect that only existed on movie screens and glossy magazine pages, yet she existed in totally one-hundred-percent-real life. Olivia admired her in every sense of the word. She loved Hazel in every way she could, and even in some of the ways she shouldn't. Olivia crinkled her nose again and turned the slightly yellowed paper to the next page. On this page were notes scrawled in messy pink and purple marker: "You're really cute" read Hazel's thick block letters; "I think you're cute too," replied Olivia's messy scrawl that bled down into the next ten pages. Olivia shut the book and tossed it onto the floor with a loud thud. Most of these things were hidden away for a reason.

Olivia pushed off the floor and balanced gracefully on the edges of her painted toes to reach the top shelf. Her long brown legs were clad in jean shorts accompanied by a loose flannel shirt, borrowed (stolen) from Hazel. She used both her arms to pull down the cardboard box that dominated the closet and placed it on the floor. It was covered with a thin layer of dust and decorated with creases and tape that had ceased to stick a long time ago. Olivia sat on her knees and flipped open the worn flaps. This motion caused dust to dance in the thin stream of light that

poured through her window. Hundreds of photos from years past and present times, all of her and Hazel. Olivia loved this box and the photos it contained, but she also hated everything about it. Olivia reached into the box and pulled out a photograph that lay on top. The girls sit on a stone-grey wall overlooking the water, their legs dangling. The sun sets in the distance bathing them in a kind of golden halo, and their hands are intertwined. Olivia smiled and stroked the picture fondly. Sometimes Olivia wished she didn't have to dwell in her closet, just like the many things she put in there.

It was close to midnight when Olivia crept from her room, leaving the painted door gaping. Her legs skimmed the hall and her thin feet padded down the staircase. Olivia entered the living room where her mom was reading a novel. Olivia sat on the adjacent sofa with her legs folded, chewing her lip in uncertainty. She uncrossed and re-crossed her legs, then looked out the window. The sky was a blanket of navy blue with millions of sparkling pinpricks dotting its endless canvas.

Olivia swallowed the lump that was building in her throat and licked her dry lips. She felt it. This was it, the moment her whole life had led up to. She couldn't handle keeping it a secret any more; her closet was full enough. Her mother, reading glasses atop her head and her book on the arm of the couch, stared at her in anticipation. "I'm in love with someone," Olivia finally said, then held her breath.

"That's wonderful, honey," replied her mother, a smile on her face. "What's his name?"

Olivia took a deep breath and spoke quietly.

"It's Hazel, mom. I'm in love with a girl and she's great."

Keeping her head high, Olivia looked up and over. She was not ashamed. She was proud. She rose and exited amid the companionable silence.

Back upstairs, up the wooden steps, through the long hallway, Olivia's door was ajar. If someone were to walk in, they would see a large bed covered in a green bedspread and a maple desk that bore stacks of binders, notes, and books (including *Macbeth*, a school play as well as a personal favourite). Beside the desk, there lived an antique burgundy dresser which, if studied closely, revealed "O+H" carved into the bottom right drawer. In the centre of the room, across from the wide, thick-trimmed windows, was Olivia's closet. The closet doors were perched open of their own accord, and the shelves were tidy. It was no longer shut tight, its contents locked away from the world. The old scrapbook now sat proudly on her dresser, next to a photo of her and Hazel, lips sealed together. No longer in secret.

2016 Junior Fiction Winner

Crepacuore

by Cydney Cantello

Grade 10 – Crestwood Secondary School

There is a lady sitting across from me who shows no emotion. Her auburn hair is streaked with grey and pulled back into a tight bun atop her head. Thin, black-rimmed glasses rest on the bridge of her narrow, owl-like nose, glasses held in place only by a silver chain wrapped around her Egyptian neck. Her skin is wrinkled with old age; her slender fingers are folded across her lap.

“Tell me, why are you here?” she asks. Her tone is ice-cold.

I stare at her as an image of a rushing river flashes before me.

“Because he’s dead.”

Once more I see colourless skin and lifeless eyes. The lady offers a half nod and glances down at the clipboard on the coffee table beside her.

“And how does that make you feel?”

“It doesn’t,” I reply, shaking my head. “I don’t feel anymore.”

“Thomas, I can’t help you unless you let me,” the woman half-heartedly reasons.

The weather often reflects my mood. Today the skies are clouded over. It is dull and grey. Rain pounds against the windowpane. *Pain*, what a fitting word! If I am feeling anything, that’s what it is. I feel pain. Drops hit the ground the way death strikes a person – fast and hard. Dirty rain pools in the eavestroughs and overflows.

“Pain,” I say at last. “That’s how it makes me feel. It hurts.” The lady scrawls my response down on her clipboard.

“What was he like?” she asks.

He was kind. He would sacrifice his own happiness to make a stranger smile. I remember walking home from work together once. It was a Friday, a payday. We were going to the movies – or at least that is what we had planned. There was a boy not too much younger than we were, who lay on the streets in a blanket of newspapers, his bones pressing against the dirty skin that showed through his tattered clothing. Dean bent down and placed his month’s earnings in the boy’s filthy hand. The warm smile Dean wore, the same one he always wore like a favourite t-shirt, never left his lips.

Sometimes, I can still feel cold harsh waves sputtering up into my chest. We were having fun, like we always did.

“He was nice.”

She smiled a fake, rehearsed smile. “Then what happened?”

I frowned suddenly. “He died.”

It was supposed to be a joke. Nothing more than a testosterone-fuelled dare. Crepacuore is the type of river that parents warn their kids not to go near, no matter how inviting the murky depths may appear. It’s a hotspot for teenagers looking to prove themselves to one another, especially when the heat of summer bleeds into a frigid autumn. It is too wide to cross, with a current too strong to even attempt it, but he did. Twenty yards from shore, a boulder pierced the surface, its armour smoothed from years of abusive waves.

“Dean, fifteen bucks and an orange soda you can’t make it to that rock in eight minutes,” I dared.

In a heartbeat Dean had taken off in a breaststroke. I didn’t even get to see his face, just kicking feet. I thought he waved. I waved back, but he wasn’t waving. He shouted at me. I laughed. He was the best in drama. He was strong but the current was stronger.

I was snapped back to reality as the lady’s shrill voice cleaved the silence. “Yes,” she started, “only the good die young.”

Her sentence brought up a new feeling. Anger. “But he wasn’t good!” I shouted. “He was brilliant! His future held promises I can’t even fathom! Why should I graduate when he can’t?” I clenched my hands into fists, digging my nails into my palms to feel a whole new degree of pain. “It should have been me!” I screamed. “It should have been me! It should have been me!” I yelled over and over until my throat was raw.

The lady sat and watched me with patience until my fit burned out. “Yes, life works in mysterious ways.”

I lifted my head to look her in the eye. “Fuck life.”

I bolted by her, tears painting my red cheeks. Slamming the door behind me I let rain sting every inch of my body. My mind pushed to Crepacuore River and my feet followed. I took off in a sprint. I couldn’t feel the road beneath me – buildings and cars passed by in blurs. My breath hitched in my throat as I darted off-road into the forest. I collapsed on the riverbank in a clump of burning muscles. My eyes were drawn to the rock jutting above the ice like a beacon. *Fifteen bucks and an orange soda you can’t make it to that rock in eight minutes.*

My feet guided me across slippery ice; my mind couldn’t form cohesive thoughts.

Then . . . cracking . . . like a bonfire.

It started with spiderweb threads that spread the ice apart beneath me. The transition from winter to spring had begun early. The feeling of falling didn't strike me until my blood ran cold. I gasped for breath as my lungs filled with water. My heart froze, perhaps from hypothermia but I don't think so. This was the last thing *he* saw.

Something grabbed me, skin like cellophane fingertips brushed a sense of warmth over my body.

"Let it go."

I desperately clung to his hand, shaking my head over and over, pulled deeper.

"Let go," I finally whispered.

I gathered all the strength left in my body and squeezed his palm, then released him. My shoulders broke through the surface, and in a fit of bitter coughing I opened my eyes and I breathed in life.

The Teahouse

by Sarah Shi

Grade 10 – Lakefield College School

He bought me almost a week ago. The only job I do is help him with the fields and cook meals for the old man and him. Right now I am working with him in the fields. I try to look down at the ground and the work I am doing, because I am only a slave of this house. So there is nothing else that I should be looking at or caring about. The ground is covered by the soft and hard soils and by rocks. The sun above my head is heating me up like a fireball. But I can't stop. I listen to his words and I am ready to obey them, for I should have no other ideas except work and obeying. Well, at least I am very good at listening and obeying. I've been doing this for almost my whole life. It is the purpose of my life.

I've been in the teahouse since I start remembering things. I see beautiful women everyday with their soft milk and honey skin and shiny silk cloth they wearing. Their sweet smiles are like a butterfly flying among the sea of flowers. "Now, go back to your kitchen and do your work! I spent my silvers to buy you – not for let you standing here like a fool, but work!" I hear the sharp voice screaming above my head. I see a woman with her oily skin and fat flesh in front of me. I hate her, but afraid of her at the same time. She gives me food that can keep me alive so I can work.

I don't know how long before this is going to end. I question myself sometimes. Am I going to stay here and work until I die? How long is that going to be? Am I going to hide in this kitchen forever? I ask myself in my head until that man came and changed my life.

I was told – me go to the Great lady. My heart was pounding so hard in my chest. I was nervous, but I make each step steady and strong going into the great room. Here I am, standing beside the man. Then the great lady start speaking, I cannot hear a single word. My mind is blank. I glance at the man standing beside me. Earth-dark skin and arms fill out with the muscles that must be from the field works. The lady has told me to do well what the man will tells me to do. Work wordlessly and bring my first child to her.

After that, the man and I start walking back together. We do not speak at all on the way back. I should not speak before he ask me any questions. I do not know what to do. I do not know where to place my hands and arms ... it is so awkward. The man leads the way and I walk beside him. I can feel he glance at me several times on the way. And this is the man I am going to be living with from now.

My parents are no longer with me. There are not certain things I care about. I wish that I could just have a tiny amount food for me to support my energy in order to do work. And keep living

like this. At least this man doesn't torture me, or anything bad, like other men do to their slaves. Stay remain is all I ask for, and this is all I CAN ask for now.

We haven't talk at all. Well, I mean I don't know him. I don't know how old exactly he is, what is his backgrounds. I never had a real and short conversation with him. Um...Should I call him "husband?" or "sir?" Am I going to stay with him for the rest of my life? That is a stupid question... He BOUGHT me, with money! Of course, I have to stay with him and do whatever he tell me to do. I am a slave, or, rather than a slave, I could say I am an object of his. Just like a shovel, he could use me whenever he need, but I can never leave when he is not using me. And an object doesn't have any claims. This is how the society is running; well, at least this is how people treat me in the way that it should be....

Home Within the Sky

by Lexie Krocker

Grade 12 – Lakefield College School

I don't know exactly when my obsession with the sky began, but looking back, there were telltale signs. The sky, no matter where I have lived, has always comforted me. Amazed me. I would like to say I have always been in awe, hoping never to take it for granted. For as long as I can remember, I have found comfort in knowing that however far away I was from home, the same sun, the same moon, and the same stars could always be seen by my loved ones.

My parents believe in the value of change, and I've inherited this attitude from them. When I was six, they felt the "travel itch." This itch was not temporary or fickle, and so, my family's familiar life in Red Deer, Alberta was transformed in the unknown land of Bangkok, Thailand. My three-year-old sister and I had no idea what was happening, though I found much joy in selling everything we owned for \$5 at our farewell yard sale. We watched as our outer world changed from colour to colour through a cold, thick, plane window. At 27,000 feet above sea level, we set out for what would be the first of many, long-distance adventures.

It turns out that moving to the other side of the world was not enough to satisfy my parents' cherished love of travel and adventure. We went all over Asia. During every school break, we seemed to fly off to a new destination, allowing ourselves to appreciate the countless pieces of lost paradise that we are so lucky to have on this planet. I loved every trip, and, sure enough, just as I inherited the value of change, I also gained a passion for travelling. Every day, no matter where we were, I could count on watching the sky. I enjoyed the sun rising on a warm, humid morning, and I observed the sun setting and slowly dissipating as the moon and stars took over.

My mom, being the night owl she is, finds the stars most fascinating. My dad often rises before sunrise due to his randomly occurring insomnia. My sister doesn't seem to find the sunsets nearly as compelling as I do, though she is an interested observer, watching how engrossed I become as the sun fades out after a day filled with satisfaction.

My favourite place to watch all of this unfold would have to be a beach, with my toes in the sand, a cool breeze running through my hair, and the sound of waves endlessly crashing against the shore. As cliché as it sounds, sunsets on a beach have always been, (and, I imagine) always will be, my happy place.

It is not just sunsets on a beach that excite me, though. The sun seems to captivate my interest even while I am skiing. I remember the magnificent peaks in the Alberta Rockies, the site of multiple warm shades of pink and orange reflecting off the snow, and the feeling of the frosty air beating against my cheeks. This was a different magical setting than what I had experienced in the tropics. It was a new and unique vista that would forever be imprinted on my mind. The sky was blue, contrasting starkly with the white, jagged peaks. This sky seemed to stretch out forever.

Looking back on seventeen years of astounding sky-gazing, I fondly recall one day in South Africa that still seems too magical for reality. I had the opportunity, two years ago, to join a select group of students from across the globe, chosen to facilitate an international youth leadership conference. We were to live in rural South Africa for just over two weeks. With no access to Internet, we worked on creating relationships, eventually enabling us to run a successful seminar. The experience was incredible. I was there in early May, their pre- winter month, so the mornings were brisk. But, by afternoon, the sun was beating down. This shift in temperature caused a regular morning debate about what would be most suitable for the upcoming day's attire. Each day was long; we were up at five a.m. and asleep when the laughter in our hut finally abated.

On the third day, we were up earlier than normal. We ate breakfast and proceeded into our assigned jeeps for a very early morning safari. I was bundled up, but still cold, as we zipped along the dark, back roads that led to a large tract of grassland. The sun started to rise over the astoundingly beautiful African savannah. A thin layer of fog caused an ombré effect of vibrant pastels to shoot across the sky. The whole world seemed so huge, and so peaceful.

We all sat in silence, trying to take in the pure beauty of a perfect moment.

That evening, as we quietly shared dinner outside, we watched the sun slowly fade, accompanied by an explosion of breath-taking colour that extended for as far as the eye could see. We were camping out in a field in our sleeping bags that night, so we put our layers back on as we got ready for bed. Each one of us was completely exhausted from the eventful day. One by one, we started to tuck ourselves in, slowly realizing that the illumination we were observing was from the millions of beaming stars above us. I had never seen anything like it: the dark sky was filled with reflections of pink and an incredible number of shooting stars upon which to make wishes. Looking back, I remember thinking that I had experienced all three stages of the sky that day, that the world seemed so big that you could see forever, and that back at home, my family was watching a version of the very same sky.

I don't know exactly where I'm going to end up, or even what path I will choose, but I do know that wherever I may be the sky and my family will be my constants.

A Community Salute: Embracing an Unconventional Childhood

by Samantha Mauro

Grade 12 – Lakefield College School

My mother is one of those free spirits that you encounter on the Pacific Coast of Canada with great frequency. An educated, Toronto-raised girl, she became one of the legions of converts to the alternative lifestyle of the “left” coast. As her only child, born in Victoria, British Columbia, I was subjected to a host of non-traditional education styles in my early years: Waldorf, home schooling, multi-age classrooms, etc., and so it was with enormous excitement and anticipation that I embraced my first taste of conventional schooling – grade six in a public school!

The first Tuesday after Labour Day, in the brisk autumn dawn, I witnessed a strange sight. An unknown vehicle slowly made its way down my rugged, winding driveway. Fortunately, my room was positioned perfectly to peek out at the unusual event. I saw an ancient van rolling down the hill that looked as though it were straight out of Woodstock. Oh, the *horror*, as it dawned on me – it was a beat-up Westfalia, a type of Volkswagen converted to a camper van, abundant on Vancouver Island.

Without the conservative comfort of our recently sold Honda to allow me to fit in with the cool crowd at school, I was forced to ride to classes that first day in the outlandish van. Instead of pulling up in a reliable car or truck, I had an old, derelict vehicle to assist me into this strange new realm of regular school. I refused to get out upon arrival, exhorting my mom to drive me down the road while blurting out, “I would rather walk.”

“By myself,” I added, as I escaped out the rusty, sliding door.

I constantly asked my mom, “Why can’t we just be normal?”

And with precision, my mother would reply, “Because Sam, there is average, but there is no such thing as normal.” All I knew was that the current choice of transportation was indeed a “hippie” wagon. Volkswagen Westfalia camper vans were produced in Germany as early as the 1950s. It was during the 60s that they became an icon in American culture as a symbol of a spontaneous, free-spirited society.

During the scorching, drought-ridden summers, we went on many camping adventures throughout Canada and the United States. The Pacific Northwest is home to some of the wildest, backwoods camping you can ever experience. My family did it all – travelling from the high Rocky Mountains to the surfer’s paradise of Tofino. We drove down to Portland and Seattle for countless outdoor experiences and “alternative” festivals. Being brought up in a nomadic lifestyle, I was dragged across the country more times than I can count on two hands. Occasionally, I would be

lucky enough to acquire a seat on an airplane, but I was usually packed into the backseat of the Volkswagen, along with two huge dogs and all of our belongings.

Travelling in the aging Westfalia, we were frequently greeted by friendly, two-fingered peace signs, a silent greeting between fellow Westphalia owners, as we made our way through mountainous regions of British Columbia. My family's unique transportation really stood out by the time we reached Ontario. There weren't many Volkswagen vans in the centre of Canada. The peace "wave" turned into a single-finger salute as cars impatiently raced by on busy freeways. Over weighted, air-cooled vans aren't the fastest things on four wheels.

During our camping trips – if you could call them that – as my parents usually just set up their site on the side of a back road, how I envied the other kids that I met while camping. During one trip in particular, I remember enjoying some of the best days splashing around in a deep, clear river. The giant fir and cedar trees let the sunlight filter deep into the emerald pools. I would constantly pretend that I was one of the "main" campground kids who shared the nearby waterways. We would jump off the rocks and explore down steep trails, but, as sundown came, I would have to say goodbye and hide the fact that I wasn't going back to a huge, conventional style trailer. Instead, I would mope behind my parents as we made our way back to our "cosy" van. No matter how sullen I was at the time, I had the best sleeps under that pop-up canvas. After crawling up to my little room above the double bed below, I would find peace with my huge feather duvet. The dogs were relegated to the carpet at the foot of my parents' lower bunk.

With "vintage" trends resurfacing in our modern day, places and events such as Coachella Music Festival are the ultimate teens' dream. Tie-dye and flower headbands are making a comeback and green, vegan diets are all the rage. So, maybe there is something to the simple, ecofriendly lifestyle my mother embraces to this day.

As I roll into my final year of high school in Ontario, I often contemplate the freedom that a "gap" year, spent with my friends from back home, would offer me. We discuss our dreams of backpacking through Southeast Asia and camping around Australia. I even hear, "Sam, how awesome would it be to travel in your old Westy?"

At a pivotal time in my life, I look back at the fleeting childhood memories of driving around in the VW. One thing stands out: I experienced a very strong sense of community. Flashing peace signs to other Westphalia owners is a cosmic bond between left-coasters, much like the slow hand wave of the Harley Davidson motorcyclists, as they pass each other on the road. Reliving those times with my free-spirited mother and my not-so-hippie father (he is an Ontario boy through and through) brings a smile to my face. I was part of the "Westy Club," a card-carrying, environmentally friendly, peace sign-waving, west coast dweller. A reluctant member of this tribe as a kid, I am warming to the lifestyle as I mature. I'm even starting to believe my parents when they inform me that they did *not* purchase the vehicle solely to embarrass me on my first day of school.

I am ready to embrace adulthood and cannot wait for a fresh sense of independence. I look forward to the challenges and adventures of university, new friends, and new cities. As I course through adversity in my life, I often wish I could confidently pull up to my new surroundings in my vibrant, childhood Westfalia.

A Poet Named “a”

by Cydney Cantello

Grade 10 – Crestwood Secondary School

I once had a friend. In the unlikely event that our paths should ever cross again or by any sort of chance he stumbles upon this, for his own safety, I will call him “a.”

It was a winter’s night, perhaps too late for me to still have been up. From my bedroom, I could see a pond just beyond our property’s end. The edges of the window were frosted.

I popped open the lid of my laptop and watched as “Robert Frost” was typed into the search bar, in size 12-point font. Perhaps I found it on the first Google page, but it could have been the tenth; it’s hard to recall now. Nonetheless, I found a poetry chat room. It was set up so that young adults could discuss and share their own poetry. I scrolled through dozens of poems pinned to the home board, all about love and heartbreak, as well as sappy rhymes by needy teenagers. Finally, I came across one so simple and yet so elegant and happy that I nearly wondered if the author was old enough to know how to use the Internet. I recited it in my head: the poem of the old and wise kookaburra singing in his tree. The poet’s signature was a simple lowercase “a.”

If you hold the arrow over the signature of any poem, the option to chat pops up. I stared at the blinking cursor for a dozen minutes or so before the courage to write “*Hey,*” overcame my fear. Seconds later “a” promptly replied with, “*Hello!*”

“a” turned out to be a boy, nearly my age. He told me he was from the future. Meaning, it was late Wednesday here, but Thursday afternoon where he was. I made him promise not to tell me what the future held sixteen hours in advance.

My parents warned me about people with poor intentions on the Internet, as most parents do, but “a” couldn’t have seemed more average. I liked that about him. The night grew late and the skies darker. I desperately needed sleep, but I feared that I might never be able to talk to him again. I explained my predicament and he suggested we talk by other means: a cell phone app that everyone had called Kik. Kik allows you to send messages and pictures through the use of Wi-Fi.

Most days, “a” and I talked if we were both awake at the same time. Eventually, we learned that talking by this method was difficult and we ended up devising a plan. We would each choose a day or two out of the week in which we would stay up late or get up early.

“a” and I grew to be incredibly close over a period of months. The only way it could have been better was if my best friend didn’t live 10,102 miles away from me. I knew everything about him from his birthday, to the spunky names of his two younger siblings, to the first time he broke his arm surfing.

Unfortunately, I had to keep “a” a secret, aside from a few friends, because you can imagine my parents’ reaction. I was not a feeble-minded teen and I knew enough to make sure he was indeed a fourteen-year-old and not a fifty-year-old man. I’d ask him to send pictures of himself holding up three fingers or a blue crayon in real time, security checks along those lines. As though that were not evidence enough, we began to Skype. Though his accent was difficult sometimes, our conversations were never less than magical.

“a” was wise beyond his years. He was outspoken and passionate. He struggled with his own emotions but never failed to find a solution for mine. For me, “a” was more than a friend; he was a counsellor, a mentor, a teacher, and the best-rounded human being I had ever met. To this day that statement still holds true.

It was an insanely difficult situation to have a best friend and to have someone I could tell all my secrets to, but the biggest secret of all was him. We would often talk about travelling when we were older. We would meet and explore the world together. “a” craved culture and experiences outside his big city life. He often said he longed to fall asleep to the sound of drums or waves, instead of traffic.

However, this would and will never come to be. Our friendship began the first day of my grade-eight year and lasted till sometime into grade nine. One morning I woke up early as per normal to message him about the wildest dream I had had that night. I stared at the screen eagerly awaiting his response, but the little checkmark acknowledging that my text had been sent was not marked as read. All day it had not been noted, and I dreaded going to bed without him wishing me a good night’s sleep. Of course, I was optimistic and presumed he could have been sick or without Wi-Fi. The thought of “a” ignoring me was unthinkable.

Hours turned to days, days to weeks, and weeks to a dreaded eternity. I waited and waited but I have not spoken to “a” in nearly two years. There is a feeling I get after I have been sick to my stomach, hollow, achy, and empty. That emotion is similar to how I felt when “a” left me, except intensified by thousands of angry tears. The last piece of him to escape my memory was his accent. The hardest part about losing a secret best friend is that you cannot grieve because no one even knows what you have lost. Perhaps, the most heartbreaking thing about a secret best friend who lives a plane flight away is that you don’t know if he died or just got over you.

2016 Junior Nonfiction Runner-up

Algonquin's Children

by Emma Fransky

Grade 10 – Crestwood Secondary School

It began when I was five weeks old, brand new lungs breathing in old forest. This place imprinted itself on me, like a mother bird on her baby. Algonquin was embossed on me for the rest of my life, and it all started with one whisky-sippin', trout-fishin', country-livin' kind of guy.

My grandfather was the spark igniting a family tradition of going to “The Park” (as we refer to it). As a teenager, he used to cut ice blocks from the lake for people’s ice boxes. He was a fishing guide on Baptiste Lake, a carpenter, a railway foreman, and a “rebel without a cause.” He wore the nickname “Relic” well. You never knew what trouble he was going to get into next.

Once, while he was working his trapline, he drove his homemade dune buggy across the lake and ended up sinking through the ice, straight to the bottom. I imagine that in the dead of winter this was a deathly cold situation. When he tried to free himself, he kept hitting his head on the crossbar and the seatbelt got stuck. So there was Papa, at the bottom of Baptiste Lake, minutes before he thought his time on Earth had come to a frozen stop – that’s when he felt someone grab his coat and pull him up. As my grandpa reached the surface, there was no one in sight, but he managed to drag himself out and onto the ice. Luckily, he knew he was close to the family hunting camp. Soaking wet and with limited time until hypothermia set in, he staggered into the bush and reached the cabin. Teeth chattering and blindly searching for a way to start a fire, he found a pack of matches – with ONE remaining! He had one chance to start the fire that ultimately saved his life. Papa wasn’t sure what raised him out of that lake, but this was the day Freeman Fransky started believing in angels.

My grandfather was born in 1928 into a family of nine and grew up in Bancroft, Ontario. From a full-blood Algonquin mother and a Polish father, he was raised off the land, or “with the land,” as Grandpa says. His mother made him moccasins and his father taught him to hunt, track, and trap. He would eventually share one of Ontario’s largest traplines with his brother, Sidney. Later, Grandpa took over his father’s construction company, Fransky Developments, which was settled on the thousand-acre Fransky Homestead in Bird’s Creek, Ontario; later still, the company would be passed on to my father.

Papa took his children to Algonquin often throughout their childhood to teach them the ways of their Algonquin heritage. My father’s eyes widened while in the wilderness. Papa took my father on hunting and fishing trips and taught him how to trap. Papa and Dad mastered the skills needed in Algonquin and became renowned anglers of Lake Opeongo, catching lake trout weighing up to 22 lbs. My grandpa entered The Trout Fishing Derby every year. If I hadn’t gone fishing with him myself, I would have sworn he bought his prize-winning whoppers at the supermarket.

Driving to “The Park” always became an epic adventure. Once, while Papa was hitching the boat and trailer onto his truck, the safety latch broke. In a rush to get there and excited to try his new motor, details had slipped his mind. He was on the highway, when suddenly the boat slid off the trailer and into the ditch. When he finally pulled into the campsite, where my father was waiting, my father asked, “Dad, where’s your boat?” Stunned, Grandpa turned around to see an empty trailer. They drove back fifteen miles to find Papa’s boat smashed in the ditch, but the brand new motor had not a scratch.

Lake of Two Rivers Campground is where many of my memories were forged. I remember the smell of the campfire, the haunting echo of the loon, and the sounds of the bullfrogs as I fell asleep. My Aunt Patsy made camping a kid’s dream. She would bring all sorts of candy and toys from the city when she brought my cousins to the campsite. We would make fire-roasted concoctions and inevitably find them in our hair when it was time to go to bed. When we were little, my cousins and I would always wander around and find new places to make our forts, such as a colossal rock hidden in a little pine grove by the water, down an old trail. We called this place the Queen’s Chair. We took turns pretending who was the king or the queen. I went back to this rock not long ago with my journal: *Wow, I can’t believe I found it... this rock is so much smaller than I remember. Sitting here now, my knees are pressing into my chest... not long ago it seems my little feet were dangling off this very rock.*

As John Muir once said, “Between every two pines is a doorway to a new world.” This is how I felt about Algonquin. This place was a mysterious playground, a new world with an old history for my family. This is the place my family has gathered since my grandfather brought his children here. When my heart was the size of a walnut, Algonquin stole it and still owns it today.

I didn’t know my grandpa when he was the definition of young and crazy. Living in small towns back then, you could get away with almost anything. He and his buddies used to pass cars on the right side of the road, their excuse being that it was safer. Papa filled the windshield fluid container with Crown Royal and rigged up a hose that fed it into the cab. With the press of a button came a perfect shot every time. Not everything will be passed down, but the man I know is from a generation and a tradition I have come to love and respect. Freeman Fransky’s legacy is not written about in a book or documented in a movie; it’s in his family, and I am honoured to be an Algonquin grandchild.

2016 Senior Poetry Winner

A 3 a.m. Escape

So tell me about the nights we'll sit on the fire escape
at 3 a.m. surrounded by sirens and drunken laughs floating through the air.
Remind me of the adventures we'll have getting lost on the subway,
and how you'll blame it on a poorly drawn map when we end up in New Jersey,
not Grand Central Station.
Explain how good it will feel to hold hands on a walk in the park,
our reflections in the pond below surrounded by ducks
swirling around in pursuit of a lost crumb of bread.
Suggest how we'll finally get our first apartment together,
only we might not have enough money for furniture so we'll be left with open hardwood floors.
Show me how we'll dance on them, circling around and around
like the grains of wood beneath our feet.
Confess to me that at night we'll sit in the empty floor space
with a bottle of cheap wine between the two of us,
and admit how it'll make us crazier than the street performer
at the corner of 5th Avenue and 46th.
You know the one I'm talking about.
Confide in me the little pieces of your past that will be revealed over time,
slivers of swingsets and summer camp with friends from a town much too small for you.
Let me know all of your hopes as we talk about mountains we want to see
and languages we'll learn.
But who needs to travel the world when I can see all of it in your eyes?
So tell me the path we'll take through the city blocks,
tripping over each other as yellow cabs drive by and splash us
as we get caught in the rain with just one lousy umbrella to share.
Even that will be useless when it gets flipped inside out from the wind.
But I'd like you to explain the sound of our laughter amused at our own oblivion
because we'd been too caught up in each other to check the weather forecast.

For now, though, I must remind myself of my lonely studio apartment,
and how it lies in a city miles away from the fire escape that awaits us.

* * * * *

By Courtney Cathcart
Grade 12 - Crestwood Secondary School

Symphony

Stopping for no one,
drops of rain
compose our music.

Piercing
the newfound
silence.

Is this what has
become of us?
You stare at me;
your eyes speak words
your heart cannot say.

Rain-dampened
memories
of what was,
and never will be.

“Leave” is muttered
by my own
struggling lips.
Yet, your legs listen
too easily.

The truth,
spoken without fear
this time.

The rain stops;
our morbid symphony
ends its bitter tune.

* * * * *

By Emma Abraham

Grade 11 - Crestwood Secondary School

Mrs. Dean's Dream

He pulls in – black Mustang, 1969.
Headlights off, creeping along the gravel.

Black leather jacket over a plain white T.
My lacey cotton dress waltzes toward him.

Hot breath on skin in cool summer air.
His rough hands. My red lips – silenced by gun-metal eyes.

We descend the dark road, well into the night.
My name inked on his forearm, hand clutching the wheel.

Mrs. Dean, he calls me, reckless, gunning,
Leaving behind nothing but a cloud of dust.

Parked in a meadow, by an old mill,
Lifting me up onto the hood of the 'Stang.

Lying there, imagining our future as if we had a clue,
He lights a smoke, ghostly O's roll off his lips.

"Wild, flower child with a daisy in your hair," he chants.
The whole world grooving to the drum of his heart.

In love with a bad thing.
Entranced, too free to care.

The wallpaper is familiar.
Dress in the closet, red lipstick in the tube.

Startled – a peck on the window,
Metal-grey pebbles skid across the floor.

He stands in the yard, dark hair lit by the moonlight,
Leaning on a black Mustang, 1969...

* * * * *

By Emma Fransky

Grade 10 - Crestwood Secondary School

2016 Junior Poetry Runner-up

The Dangers of Capitalism

How much credit

Do these credit cards give me?

In a world ruled by the labels on our purses

Who are the real rulers? The corporate overlords?

I know not what real excitement is;

My feelings are given to me

In the media, on the racks of department stores.

I will go to school,

Spending thousands of dollars,

Wasting my youth in the pages of textbooks,

To provide a service

To the top one percent,

To those who can afford it.

I will do this

Because it is what we call "success."

I will wait for the launch of the next iPhone,
Spend hundreds of dollars for a camera with more pixels,

Enough to feed an entire village of starving children;

But my reputation

Is more important.

My designer leather handbag

Is more important

Than the animals who died to create it,

More important

Than the price tag which could buy a car.

When I dare to be different
And ignore this atrocity,
I will be mocked.

An outcast
Because silver and gold
Are not on my wrist,
But in my soul.

I will allow a label
To define me,
Allow myself to be consumed,
For the fire to be extinguished
By the mere swipe
Of a piece of plastic
The size of my palm.

This is happiness,
I will tell myself.
This
Is what you worked for,
What your children will work for,
What your parents worked for before you.

Because these credit cards
Give us more credit
Than our high school education
Ever did.

Because it is the one percent
That can afford luxuries.
So who else matters?
Because a booming economy
Is much more valuable
Than a world

In which all are seen as equal.
Because the cure to cancer
Could be locked in the mind
Of an uneducated child.
The next president
Could have died
Of malnourishment,
Because the man who sleeps on the streets
Will never see a roof over his head;
They won't hire him
In his stained shirt and ripped jeans.

Because the sound of the cash register
Is louder
Than the weeping of the world.

* * * * *

By Sneha Wadhvani
Grade 10 - Kenner Collegiate Vocational Institute