



LAKEFIELD
LITERARY *Festival*

2019

YOUNG WRITERS CONTEST
WINNERS

Cigarettes

by Joshua Dorman

Grade 12 – Crestwood Secondary School

So last weekend my wife died, and I don't really know what to do about it. She got burned alive because of a cigarette she'd left lying around the house somewhere. I don't really know what to do about it, but honestly, I think I might start smoking.

Of course, I know what you're thinking, but honestly, I'm really not a heartless bastard. I just handle these sorts of things this kind of way. Also, smoking isn't that big of a deal once you think about it. There's almost a certain risk of addiction, lung cancer, and bad breath, but honestly, once your wife dies, you stop thinking about those sorts of things. It's only just a personal choice really, because I'm thirty-two and I live my own life, so I can make these sorts of decisions. I tried cigarettes in high school, but I never really saw what all the fuss was about. I could easily stop as soon as I picked up the habit, because honestly, they didn't do anything special for me. Now though, I just think, "why the hell not?" because honestly, why the hell not? I'm thirty-two and I live my own life, so honestly, why the hell not?

What a beautiful woman my wife was, though. Everything was okay for a while when we danced or when we laughed. When we played in the yard together, or when we'd talk over the phone for hours and hours. I miss her, of course, as she's gone now. Told me I was too boring for her. Told me I lacked an "on" switch. Told me to leave after some big awful fight we got into one night. I left the house and stayed at this motel on the edge of town, with big red neon lights like you see in the movies, the same one I'm staying in now, actually.

The next morning my alarm went off at seven, but it was a Saturday and my feelings were so all over the place, so I slept in till eleven. I peeled myself off the sheets after a while and grabbed my coat, not stopping for breakfast or a wash. I needed to see her. I needed her to know where I was coming from, and after that we could start again, with picnic baskets and days in the sunshine picking raspberries and throwing sand at each other on the beach.

I got to our house after a rushed ten-minute drive, and I nearly crashed after I saw the police and firemen everywhere, with their whole yellow tape nonsense. So many terrifying thoughts came to mind that I refused to even put them into English. I sat down, right in the middle of the street and didn't say a word. When an officer finally noticed me and came over, he told me my wife was dead – plain and simple. He was questioning me furiously, as if I had something to do with my own wife dying, the bastard. He said later he heard from the fire chief that the fire had started from a loose cigarette dropped somewhere. She only ever smoked indoors you see, and she only ever smoked when she was desperately on edge. And Christ, those words hit me like an axe through the chest. I'd made her that way, the past night. If it wasn't for my anger, for our argument...

Christ, it was all my fault. And now I couldn't do anything to make it right. Burning alive, I'm told, is one of the most painful ways to die, if not the most.

They gave me a blanket and sat me up in an ambulance, telling me things were okay, the ignorant bastards. Everything was not okay. My entire world was in ashes, my hope lay in ruin, my motivation burned to a crisp, my very reason to live gone up in smoke. I cried for who knows how long before another officer came over. He told me it happened around nine that morning. After that, I threw up.

I got offered a cigarette by another cop, who was interviewing me about my story, making sure all the little dots lined up, so he knew I wasn't telling any lies, no doubt. He asked me what the argument was about. I wouldn't answer him; I refused to. He was very persistent about it though, and it kind of shocked me because I thought police officers were supposed to be kind about this sort of thing. He wasn't, though.

"It's much easier," he said, "if you just tell me all of what happened last night." I didn't answer him. "Listen," he went on, "you'll have to share sometime. Just make it easier for everyone and make that moment be this moment." I tried to turn away from him and smoke my cigarette, but he kept on asking about the same argument whenever I tried. He was wiggling his eyebrows up and down while he was talking to me, with a sort of half smile on his face. What a bastard! I mean, I think I could have handled his persistency on its own, but the eyebrows infuriated me. I would have punched him, I think, if only he hadn't given me a cigarette. That, and the fact that he was a cop and that I'd be arrested. Then I'd probably have to stare at Mr. Eyebrows down at the station, watching me behind the jail bars, asking me questions and wiggling at me the whole time until I got out. What a bastard! But that's what got me thinking about starting to smoke; I hadn't plan on accepting that cigarette, as I don't smoke, but those eyebrows had a funny way of getting me very distracted. And after all that, I thought, "what the hell? I'm thirty-two and I'm living my own life, so what the hell?" So yeah, I think I'll start smoking, probably tomorrow, whenever I feel like it.

2019 Junior Fiction Winner

Teeth

by Fin Taylor

Grade 10 – Adam Scott Collegiate Vocational Institute

The house was quiet, its residents having long since retired to bed. The parents slept together, limbs tangled in linen sheets. The boy slept alone, bundled tightly in a quilt stained with his drool. The child had dozed off hours ago, thinking he would sleep alone. And for a time, he had. But not any more. Now, Fae was there.

Fae was tall and willowy, his skin the colour of the layers of misty sediment that gathers on the surface of milk when it's been left out for too long. When people caught a glimpse of him, and they rarely did, they might describe him as being hulking. This illusion was caused by Fae's coat, which was a baggy, ragged old thing. The shoulderpads, so comically large that he had a hard time walking through some doorways, made him look like a hunchback, though truly Fae stood straight as a fencepost. His face was well-lined, but no shadows gathered on it, not even when his lips pulled back and could have found ample space to hide in the extensive system of crow's feet and smile lines he possessed. Light did not affect Fae as it did others, which is perhaps why he was so hard to perceive: The light he reflected rarely found its way to someone's eye, and even then, it was always just in their periphery. A thin, white shadow flickering for a doubtful moment before vanishing.

Fae waited for a moment in the corner, checking to see if the boy slept soundly. When the boy's deep, constant breathing did not stop or falter, Fae stepped forwards to begin his work.

He flicked his wrists upwards, and his baggy sleeves fell away like snake skin, revealing inhumanly long fingers, covered with divots and calluses. The boy didn't stir at all, even as Fae's index finger snuck underneath his pillow, searching languidly for its prize. After a brief bout of prodding, Fae felt the small bone become lodged between his nail and his finger and slowly drew it back towards him with painful care.

A single perfect molar. His pupils constricted, focusing in on the chunk of bone. Yes...yess. It was a perfect match.

Unable to contain his excitement, Fae forced the tooth far back into his mouth, searching with frantic fingers for the empty slot. He'd filled his mouth over the course of decades; only certain teeth would work, and when he began, he had *so many* holes to fill.

After a moment of scrabbling around within his maw, his sharp nails found the exposed nerve, sending a jolt of white-hot pain through his face. He grimaced, but it did not slow his work.

Fae quickly forced the new tooth into place, and the flesh of his gums grew around it, binding onto the fresh bone with unnerving speed. After just a few seconds, it was indistinguishable from all the other alien lumps of bone that lined Fae's grin.

Fae erupted into a silent dance of joy, so ecstatic he shoved the wrong form of currency under the boy's pillow, leaving a Russian ruble instead of a Canadian loonie. It had been years since he'd found a tooth that fit so well.

His tongue, long and grey, flicked and swerved around his mouth checking for gaps in his mouth. Only two remained.

Just two more successful hunts, Fae thought to himself as he slipped from the boy's room, stopping at the open door that led to the parents' bedroom. As he watched, the man turned restlessly in his sleep, his right arm falling slightly off the side of the mattress. Fae gave a barely gap-toothed smile at the sight of the arm. It was well muscled, and hairy, but beneath the skin and keratin and muscle and fat lay:

Bones.

He forced himself to turn away, lust still in his eyes as he slid down the stairs without a sound. Just two more. Two more teeth would form a full smile. Just two more until his mouth was mended, and he could feed.

As he left, Fae found himself slightly bemused by the irony of his situation; though he filled his mouth with teeth, it had always been the larger bones he'd had a real taste for.

Everything but the Kitchen Sink

by Alexis Thompson

Grade 12 – Adam Scott Collegiate Vocational Institute

Every morning I pack my school bag just like every other high school student does. And just as if I am preparing for a vacation, I go through a mental checklist to make sure I do not forget anything. Binders, check. Textbooks, check. Pencil case, agenda, homework, check. Basically, if my bag looks full enough, I've got all I need. It's a nice school bag, more like a duffel bag really. And it's Harry Potter themed, which is perfect because I think I'm obsessed with the franchise.

Other than that, the bag is perfect because it is *huge*. I can easily fit all of my things in it. It's mildly awkward to carry because it fits over only one shoulder, not two, but I avoid mentioning this to anyone. My parents like to ask me if I've also packed the kitchen sink, a comment which I return with a sigh and a dramatic eye roll. Furthermore, my friends enjoy harassing me to get a different bag – a “normal” backpack. I'll also admit, with resistance, that my bag is quite heavy. The strap leaves a bright red mark on my arm, and it requires a bit of a swinging momentum to actually heave it onto my shoulder. Everyone else minds more than I do; it really is my daily exercise.

The reason I carry everything is that I can't leave anything behind. My binders and schoolwork are crucial because I have to do well. I've spent years trying to comprehend that the learning experience is more important than the grade, or the overall mark, or the average. But the desire for good grades isn't me just being a brown-noser, or whatever they're called these days. It's a weird thing to describe. All I know is that I do well because I am terrified of failing. I stay up late and spend countless hours adding the finishing touches on projects so that I can assure myself that I'll do well. Unfortunately, failing for me is not like failing for every other high school student. To put it mildly, I have high expectations.

But here I am, with seven hours of sleep per night, straight As...and anxiety. I'm a perfectionist, and sadly, a walking contradiction. I bear the weight of needing to do well at everything I do. But I also carry the burden of assuming I'm not going to do well. If I don't know every answer on a test, I automatically think I've only done “okay.” But then I end up with a mark that's way more than “okay.” I assume the worst. So...I'm a perfectionist who doesn't trust that she can do anything perfectly. Interesting.

This perfectionism monster that sits on my shoulders affects my mental health, as my stress for tests and assignments is amplified. When I started elementary school, I loved learning, singing, writing, and reading. I still have these passions, but as I get older, school becomes less fun. I am still learning, but with that comes the apprehension of not understanding, and in hindsight, of not succeeding. To this day, I still appreciate learning new things, but weekends can't come fast enough, and the thought of summer break ending makes me want to sob and throw up simultaneously.

Sustaining the pressure of doing well has made me lose enjoyment in a lot of things, not just school. I am constantly overthinking everything; my brain never lets my senses construe things for themselves. I was once quite the little actress. To my dismay, my parents have plenty of videos portraying my *many* puppet shows, dance routines, made-up-on-the-spot songs, and homemade one-woman plays, all of which I'd rather burn than share. As much as I still have an endearment for theatre, I just get too bloody scared to audition. I tell myself I can do it, and I long for the excitement in the pit of my stomach right before opening night. But I can't, despite the number of times my mom cajoles me into taking a chance. I chicken out because I don't trust that I am good enough to audition, and because I dread dealing with the burning cheeks, the chokingly fast heartbeat, and the fear of messing up.

I wear a watch strapped tightly around my wrist all the time, and I have the propensity to check it every three minutes to assure myself I won't be late. If that doesn't scream "I've got issues," then I don't know what does. And most of all, I find myself "worrying about odd things" (O'Brien 10). I constantly dwell on the "what ifs" and the unknowns in situations. As Tim O'Brien describes in his short story titled "The Things They Carried," "in some respects, though not many, the waiting [is] worse than the tunnel itself. Imagination [is] a killer" (10). I always envision things going terribly wrong. I worry on the way to work that I'll make a mistake on cash and embarrass myself (again), and no matter how long I prepare for a test, I'll still have that blasted notion that failure is lurking.

But, all in all, this monster is a part of me, a piece of me that I carry every day. I can't change that, and some days, I actually quite like it. It's a double-edged sword, but it gives me tenacity and the ability to do well. I've improved at mastering its volume dial. I carry my intuition and my extremely compassionate outlook. This is me. I can't count the number of times I have re-written sentences in this essay to get it just right...and who am I kidding? I am still questioning if it is even good enough. This will always be my personal battle. But I know that when I pack up my bag with all of the necessities (and then some), I am prepared for what's ahead. I'm packed and ready to go wherever life may take me.

Works Cited

O'Brien, Tim. "*The Things They Carried*" Houghton Mifflin, 1990, pp. 1-25.

2019 Junior Nonfiction Winner

Pain

by Nicole Liu

Grade 10 – Lakefield College School

There are two types of pain.

The first is a physical pain that wanes with the fading of bruises and the healing of scars. It's predictable and reliable: excruciating in the moment but wears off steadily and surely with time. This is a pain that I have experienced to various degrees throughout my childhood.

When I was two, I had a seizure that caused respiratory arrest.

When I was three, I gave myself second-degree burns by upending a pot of boiling soup all over my neck and chest.

When I was five, I clipped my eye on the sharp edge of a table.

When I was seven, I suffered a (minor) fracture in my spine by jumping off a playground structure that I was not supposed to climb on.

When I was nine, I fell face first into a pile of bricks. *No, I do not have a nosebleed; my face is just scarred.*

The list goes on. The leftover marks splattered on my legs and arms are proof enough.

The second type of pain is wild, untamed, and has no promise of ever leaving. It comes in the form of monsters and demons that cannot be chased away and that you must learn to live with. You cannot get rid of the hurt and grief and sorrow any more than you can shake off claws dug deep into your skin. I watched this pain break my father down. I witnessed him waste his life away and disintegrate into a shell of the man he used to be. He was battling forces that could not be harnessed or controlled, and it seemed to the common outsider that he was always losing. It was heartbreaking to watch him wage war against life every day, hoping to find the will to keep on living. That would be success; that would be victory: to, for a mere second, overpower the monster and seize control of your own head. It was not glory and it was not fame; it was the motivation to continue and keep trying.

I always tossed around blame in those days. He didn't do this. He didn't do that. He didn't do anything. He didn't do enough. It's funny how we give our empathy to everyone around us: that beggar down the street, the stranger we let cut in front of us in line, our friend who is just using us; yet we don't give it to the people closest to us. They are the ones who love us the most, but they are also the ones that get the brunt of our blame, our anger, and our despair.

I have screamed "I don't care" many times. I have despaired and denied his suffering countless more. I remember sitting in a hospital room and feeling the burden of reality and pain weighing me

down. This pain is accompanied by the smell of antiseptic, the beep of machines, and little white capsules. It is real, it is bare, it doesn't stop. The most painful thing is watching someone waste away while being completely, utterly powerless.

Wolseley Pattern

An ocean sprawls from this appalling shore
of grey and cold, and thinly stretches mile
after mile away. Pallid northern waves file
across and call to lands beyond. Sailor!
Admire this love, but drop anchor before
it's ruined! I knew a shaded lonely isle,
where canopied in green I stood awhile
alone. Recovered from the opal corps
of tides, I trampled her with black gawking
boot prints, in worthless mock of stars above.
My touch, my intimation was untrue,
and pithy like this hat was my talking.
The best I could give to this saving love
was nothing. Let me not conquer anew.

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By Mary Davies

Grade 12 - Thomas A. Stewart Secondary School

2019 Junior Poetry Winner

Burning In My Veins

They scream at me and say that I dramatize living.

That my blood isn't stardust, that my dreams won't happen, that soulmates don't exist, that I can't cry out an ocean. That just because I'm awake at night doesn't mean someone's thinking of me, that painting won't stop the darkness, that crying won't heal my soul.

But I talk to quiet my thoughts, and I paint to drain my mind, and when I cry, I wash my heart. And my blood is stardust, *I feel it burning in my veins*, and my dreams will happen, *I just have to act*, and my soulmate exists, *I can hear him at night*.

And I know I sound crazy, you can't see the stars in my eyes.

You don't love purple skies or italics or words as much as I do, and you don't cry because of a beautiful line. You don't see trees dance behind your eyes and you don't bleed because of myths, you don't feel the sky under your skin. I know you don't have the same fire inside.

And I know you don't bleed worlds. And that's okay,

Some itches lie under the skin.

And some aren't destined to live a life on fire. But please keep screaming

Because I assure you,

That if you hurt loud enough, the stars you once were will hear you and fill your veins with fire too.

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By Aisling Wieler

Grade 10 - Adam Scott Collegiate Vocational Institute