



LAKEFIELD
LITERARY *Festival*

2021

YOUNG WRITERS CONTEST
WINNERS

History doesn't see us

by Jana Rubel

Grade 11 – Lakefield College School

Part I: Records

First thing in the morning, I swallow my high-tech pill, which controls all my vital parameters, my microbiome, and the millisieverts I have been exposed to over the last 24 hours. The results are sent directly to my phone and my physician, and are stored in a fancy grey digital notebook.

When I arrive at work at the world's largest nuclear power plant, I have to stand in a huge glass cylinder that rays me from top to bottom. Beep. Beep. Beeeeeeeeeeeep. The glass cylinder turns fire red. But I stay calm. This happens – every – single – day. Something is always not ideal. One day it is my golden belt, then it is my silver watch, and after that, I have too many germs on my skin. This means that every day a fire-red column is added to the fancy grey digital notebook they use to keep track of my imperfect results, so I could tell you what was wrong with me 373 days ago or five years ago or last week.

My job is exchanging the used fuel rods with new ones and depositing the old ones in the lake nearby. It is a really boring and repetitive process, and honestly, I don't care about the purpose of it. I just want to exchange exactly 33 fuel rods a day, no more, no less, just the bare minimum. And I must not do something that would catch the supervisor's attention. Of course, they record every single one of my actions in the fancy grey digital notebook, and if one action is not as perfectly acceptable as it is supposed to be, they will make me exchange 66 fuel rods the next day. Beep. Beep. Beeeeeeeeeeeep. Oh no! Did I carry the fuel rod with my left instead of my right hand? Yes, I did. Oh no! That means exchanging 66 rods tomorrow. Plus, it will look bad on my record and add another fire-red column to the fancy grey digital notebook.

That evening, I am watching TV to distract myself from the gazillions of fire-red columns they have recorded in the fancy grey digital notebook. *Oh, what might the next level of punishment be?* Then suddenly, I feel excruciating pain as if I were being poked from the inside of my stomach. I immediately know it is my high-tech pill. It feels like something is dragging it out of me in the direction of my bedroom. Eventually, it just pulls me over to my nightstand with the fancy grey digital notebook. But, wait, it is not grey anymore! It is glowing fire red like the columns they add when my performance is not ideal, and it reads in bold capital letters: **“I DON'T CARE ABOUT YOU NOT FULFILLING THE EXPECTATIONS FOR BEING IDEAL. WHAT I DO CARE ABOUT IS THAT YOU CARE ABOUT ME. WHAT DO YOU WANT TO LEAVE BEHIND FOR YOUR KIDS AND HOW DO YOU WANT TO BE REMEMBERED?”** Then the notebook explodes in a huge red fireball and I black out.

Part II: Selfish

Why are they underestimating me so much? Don't they know who I really am? All they care about is so – extremely – unbelievably – minor. 0.011 millisievert instead of 0.01? A golden belt that might interrupt their hypersensitive wireless cloud storage for a fraction of a second? Uugh, who cares? Their entire species has been around for a minute and 13 seconds if the 4.5 billion years the Earth has existed were 24 hours. They are no more than one tiny nucleus in their stupid nuclear power plants. Yet they treat all their data like their most precious possession and store it in their shimmery grey digital notebooks with at least 10 backup copies. But what about their radioactive leftovers? They have no control at all over that. They don't care about what traces they leave behind, though that's what matters the most. Their notebook shall not shimmer anymore. They shall realize what their presence truly is: Nothing more than a single nucleus among trillions, easily forgotten, easily changed.

Fiery red from anger, I sneak into their existence and manipulate what they care about the most – their data storage. My pure existence is enough to soak the notebook red and cause a fire, making the content indecipherable. Of course, that's the breaking news story of the day. "World's data storage exploded in a huge fireball – all punishment records lost," it reads on the screen integrated into the brick of the nuclear power plant. I can see at least 1,000 humans solicitously buzzing around the nuclear power plant, unsuccessfully trying to find backup copies of their fancy digital notebooks, because obviously, I destroyed them all. I can hear their desperate prayers, "Oh Lord, please make all our data come back, Amen." *Hahaha, as if that would fix their problem...*

What goes by the board in the mess is a natural disaster I did not cause, but of course, humans don't care about that. They don't even notice the enormous jet fire turning the lake near their nuclear power plant into a temporary supernova. They don't notice how every plant and every animal living within 20 kilometers of the lake dies immediately and how a fiery mushroom cloud blasts over their jungle, killing every living thing that's in the way. But how would they notice? They don't have a control system in place for their environment, and they are too distracted by their minor data problem. They don't use fancy grey digital notebooks to record how many plants and animals populate their jungle and lake. They don't measure the millisieverts that plants and animals are exposed to, so they don't know that their careless, selfish behaviour has caused a disaster that will last. Last long enough to stay in my mind, in the spirit of history. Last way longer than them. Longer than their children. Maybe longer than humanity. Because when they continue to behave that way, they will be gone and forgotten before they realize it is too late.

2021 Junior Fiction Winner

Artificial

by Kellan MacKenzie

Grade 9 – St. Peter Catholic Secondary School

“Are you sure you’re awake?”

I don’t answer. Of course I’m not sure. What even defines “awake”? Frankly, I don’t quite care whether this is real or not, as long as I don’t have to think for a while.

The figure who asked the question doesn’t push any further, just offers a tour if I want to be shown around, which I do. They wear an oversized brown coat, colourful patches on the elbows. Their face is indistinguishable, shrouded in what appears to be fog. As for their voice, I’m not sure I ever heard it. It sounds like the voice in my head.

I don’t know where I am, but that’s typical; I get lost a lot these days. We’re on a dirt road that traverses a picturesque field, all yellow corn and trampled wheat. Behind me is a small house. Perhaps it’s mine? A garden and a mushroom roof make it charming, despite the size. In front of me is a city I have seen before, a city I built myself from the ground up, though it seems less familiar now. My thoughts are cloudy and don’t make sense, but I don’t mind.

Patches guides me down the dusty road, then through the narrow city streets. We don’t talk, but they occasionally gesture towards a piece of graffiti or art, all depicting the same familiar green eyes through different media. There are fish as well, swimming through the sky, but I think that must be normal around here.

I have a strange sense of dissociation, and suddenly I am watching myself from the rooftops as I walk the streets, and then I am behind my own eyes again. I’m not walking anymore, but my body keeps moving.

The lack of people is unsettling, and I point out as much to Patches. They nod in agreement. Moments later we pass a large group of teenagers playing a game, and I realize that there have been people on the streets all along, dancing and walking from store to store.

We turn down an alley and head towards a forest. There are light bulbs suspended from nothing that guide our way. I cannot tell if it’s day or night or something else altogether. Large trunks stretch up forever, and occasionally there is a statue or an abandoned gas station between the trees. To my left I see an astronaut bounding through the snow, but then I blink and it’s just a pond with stars splattered at the bottom. I am not wearing shoes, and the moss beneath my feet is warm and comforting.

We come to a clearing and Patches sits down with the guitar they weren't carrying seconds before. They gesture towards an easel placed on the grass.

Paint, they are saying, like you always have.

So I do.

I'm not sure how long we spend like that, Patches' melody guiding my hands as I create the thing I am running from. It is the only way I can ground myself in whatever reality this is; I need a piece of home.

The music has stopped without me noticing, and Patches is behind me, a non-existent hand on my shoulder. My cheeks are wet as I stare at my painting, a galaxy hidden within the pupil of a single green eye. I am dangerously close to awareness. I don't want to be here anymore.

And so I am not. Patches and I stare at the entrance to an archaic castle. Our castle. Stone and moss walls, large windows that face the sun, no matter what time it is. Patches asks me if I remember building it, but I am no longer sure what I remember. We explore the castle's ancient walls and memories left to age behind locked doors. I see my books and empty mugs in the library, exactly where I left them, the fire still crackling, warm and welcoming. I think everything is all right.

Then I look at the walls. Thousands of eyes in charcoal, pastel, and acrylic cover every surface, some framed, some hastily taped, some sitting in piles leaning against the baseboards. I remember every time I have ever drawn that eye. Dozens of different attempts to escape my memories, and there is the proof of my thousand failures.

My thousand and one failures. Patches hangs my latest galaxy eye on the wall. They do that every time. The eyes follow me every time.

"You look just like him," I say.

Patches turns to me, and I can see green eyes through the fog mask.

Please stop, he pleads with me. I wouldn't have wanted this.

But Patches is not him, I realize. Patches is me.

The walls shatter and the world falls apart around me; I am left in total nothingness, staring at Patches. Staring at myself, tears not material enough to fall. It happens every time.

You need to face real life, I whisper to myself. Don't do this.

I do it anyway; it's time to try again.

I open my eyes peacefully. With the sunlight pouring through the window, the memory of my dream is already retreating. Loud knocking at my door gets me up, and I open it to a welcome face. I squint up at him.

“You’re not dead.” I sigh, relieved.

He only smiles; laughter crinkles his green eyes as he grabs my arm, inviting me to sit near the lake and paint with him while we drink our morning tea. I accept and grab my coat with the patches on the elbows. There is a crumpled piece of paper in the pocket, which I toss to the ground.

I know this isn’t real, but I am content to never face reality.

The paper that reads “Are you sure you’re awake?” falls to the ground and disappears.

2021 Senior Nonfiction Winner

From My First Hit

by Michael Jad Cheaito

Grade 12 – Lakefield College School

The first drag I ever took, I was cramped up inside a bathroom stall, pointing my ears towards the sounds of footsteps and creaking doors, and pressing a thin metal rod under my sleeve. My friend, who'd sold it to me, was waiting outside the stall, crafting a smirk as he watched my lungs combust and come back together again. It tasted like Excel gum and the vapour lit the back of my throat up like mouthwash. I was hooked.

As the week progressed, I made stumbling out of school bathrooms a ritual. I'd let my head get light and catch glimpses of my feet shifting, sidestepping, and strolling into classrooms. I'd get good at sliding my vape in and out of my sleeves, under and through t-shirts, and back to my mouth in front of bystanders and snitches; I learned how to zero a hit. I'd begun to practise all those classic, clinical moves that teenagers have made look pretty for years. In my juvenile way, I think I sometimes used the passive feeling of being hunted as an excuse for my behaviour.

It was my eleventh-grade year and my first at boarding school. I'd adapted quickly enough to the change in environment, despite how sudden it was. I was anxious to move on with a lot of the emotional baggage – the depression and anxiety that I'd only later get help with – that I had unwittingly brought with me. I didn't know how down bad I still was, but I also didn't know how easy it was to access escapes that I shouldn't have been able to. There's something to be said about the gut-stopping feeling of wonder that comes about when someone offers you an express route to altered consciousness in the disposable form of a vape pen, and then slides open a dorm room window, just for you, so you can blow the smoke out.

It didn't take long for me to transition from just nicotine to other substances. My first dab pen was a slick, cylinder-shaped dream with a purple bulb at the end that backlit a marijuana leaf. It was filled with cannabis concentrate, which is made by infusing butane with cannabis and evaporating it to create the concentrate, and was probably cut with vegetable glycerin or some unknown additive. Most people around me understood weed as a good time, but from the very second that it didn't send me spinning out and terrified, I understood that I had discovered a new, irresistible way of being.

Some cannabis advocates will tell you that it isn't addictive, but if you've ever struggled with substance abuse and depression, you'll understand the allure of sliding into worlds where no one can hurt you. I started smoking a few times a week, then throughout weekends, and sometimes, even a few days in a row. As 2020 opened up, I sent about 40 sprays of THC oil to the back of my throat, and it would be over a year before I'd find myself sober the next day.

The more integrated cannabis was in my schedule, the easier it became to compartmentalize. Classes I didn't like became waiting rooms for getting high; curfews transformed the ends of the

days into the starts of new ones; spare periods were ripe opportunities to take up a bathroom that nobody else wanted and kick the day forward a few hours. I'd mastered an art of avoidance where, even if only fleetingly, all of my problems could be sucked in and evaporated with the simple press of a button. I'd grow to love a lot of people at boarding school, but the entire time I was using, I really did find it difficult to appreciate any one person more than that golden getaway device I'd kept hidden in my pocket all day long.

The power of drugs, cannabis included, is that they cheat your brain into believing you've achieved something real when you haven't. With the power to reliably manifest all the feel-good you could muster comes the responsibility of self-control. Unfortunately, self-control is a quality that evades a sizable portion of Canadian teens, and I know that it's one I've never quite been able to grasp. The resulting tragedy is that one day, when you have to stop using, you find that the high was, in fact, entirely ephemeral, and all the logic and precedents of your drug habit are left to hang like the old lies of an abusive ex.

You might start to look back and find friendships that have slowly withered. Skates you should've learned to use but chose to substitute with an escape as a way of spending time. Countless, precious moments that you spent asleep or just can't remember. You might find yourself recording your eighth attempt to tell your Arabic grandmother that you miss her because you don't know the words anymore. At the worst of my withdrawals, I was completely disoriented. With the simple absence of less than a gram of material, the purpose I had been chasing for a year had instantly disappeared and left me with nothing but unanswered texts from my dad and the feeling of lost time.

What worries me the most when thinking about the choices I made, day in and day out, is that no matter how obviously harmful they were – how clear it was that I was hurting myself – they always seemed mostly rational. I was making wrong decisions, but they were made measurably more feasible because of what started off as a struggle with depression and turned into an addiction. Parents, teachers, and adults who care only have so much of an arsenal when it comes to how to help kids struggling with substance abuse. When we appreciate that drug abuse is a mental health problem, we edge closer to understanding and helping the kids who find themselves on the fringe, rather than reminding them why they hid there in the first place.

2021 Junior Nonfiction Winner

Pinocchio; A Guide to Being a Real Girl

by Clementine MacLeod

Grade 10 – Adam Scott Collegiate Vocational Institute

When I was six, the best thing I could be was good. Good and kind, like Aurora from *Sleeping Beauty*. I liked her pink dress, her singing, and her long thin fingers that were pointed at the tip. I remember looking down at my own chubby, kid hands and thinking I couldn't be pretty without long pointy fingers. I'd grow into them, I reasoned; for now I'd just be good. Aurora smiled and danced and was nice to the forest animals, so I smiled and signed up for a dance class that I hated. I tried my best to be patient and kind to my baby sisters. If I was like Aurora on the inside, I'd grow into my fingers.

I was eight when princesses became dumb. I adapted quickly, falling in love with *Pokemon* and *Avatar: The Last Airbender*. These were shows my brother and his friends liked, with tough, wise-cracking girls who were “cool, not girly.” These girls had spiky hair and hated dresses, and my ringlets, which used to make me look pretty, suddenly made me look weak. I followed my brother closely and desperately tried to keep up with him and his friends. All older, all boys, all unequivocally cooler than me. Instead of joking with them and being “cool, for a girl,” I was nothing but a little princess. I wouldn't give up, brushing out my curls and revelling in the straight, sharp-looking nature of my wet hair. I was gonna be tough and sharp and unafraid. That was the best thing I could be.

From ages eight through ten I fought in vain for this “one-of-the-boys” type of character, only to fall short and end up crying to my mom. *The boys are making fun of me*. I didn't know who I should be if I couldn't be a princess and couldn't keep up as the tough girl. I wasn't athletic, and the second I turned ten I towered over every boy and, to my great chagrin, I had to wear a sports bra! The tough girl was skinny and scrappy and fast. I was big and sensitive and always too slow, though I tried desperately not to be. In the dead middle of this mid-pubescent identity crisis, I opened *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* and met a girl called Hermione Granger.

For once, Hermione was someone like me. She liked books, argued with boys, and had a head of unruly brown hair. More than anything, though, Hermione was *smart*. Being smart was the single greatest discovery of my childhood, because it gave me an excuse not to be tough or, God forbid, “cool.” I threw myself headfirst into my studies and, by the next month, I was at the top of my grade 4 class. And there I remained. Being smart gave me something to hold onto, a way to be interesting and enviable without being a good soccer player. Little ten-year-old Clementine had found her kindred spirit and was not about to let her go. A year later, a classmate came up to me and admitted that when he read *Harry Potter*, he didn't picture Emma Watson in Hermione's shoes, but me. It was the single greatest compliment I'd ever received, and he hadn't even intended it as one.

The darkside of being the Smart Girl didn't rear its head until years later, when my friends started being called pretty and "liked" by the boys in our grade. I didn't care, I told myself, only stupid girls care about boys. I was decidedly better than that. I didn't wear makeup; I didn't like shopping; I didn't like boys. I was Smart and that was the Best Thing. As the months wore on, the intelligence I had so readily clung to began to feel like my downfall. Was that the reason I wasn't pretty? Was that the reason I wasn't popular? I didn't *care* about these things, obviously, but the thought wouldn't leave me alone. If I wasn't the Smart Girl, I was nothing, so I would stay the Smart Girl. I had to.

My second perfect discovery came the summer after Grade Eight. High school loomed on the horizon and I was forced to grapple with my discovery that I did, in fact, care about boys and that I actually liked how I looked with makeup. The admission should have been freeing, but instead I felt unmoored. Pointless. I was at a bookclub, of all things, the first time I heard the term Manic Pixie Dream Girl. The MPDG was awesome! Despite all the critics saying she was a male fantasy, my thirteen-year-old brain felt certain she was everything I wanted to be. Stylish and bubbly while still being smart, she made everyone and everything fall deeply in love with her. This was the girl I was looking for.

And it worked – for a while. I got more attention and people would say to me, "Clem, you've got everything together." And I did. Until I didn't. Until I couldn't keep up, once again, with the character I was in my head. The Manic Pixie Dream Girl was perfect, but she was unattainable. This realization hurt, more than it realistically should have. Realism, though, has never been my strong suit.

I'm sixteen now and I still don't know what the Best Thing for me could be. I've been the Girly Girl, the Tough Girl, the Smart Girl, the Manic Pixie Dream Girl, but never a real girl. Never a person, always a character. In the movie *Pinocchio*, a wooden puppet's greatest wish is to be a real boy. In my life, I've never wanted anything *less* than to be a real girl. I know Pinocchio gets his wish in the end and becomes a real boy and, although it's never been a dream of mine, the same thing happened to me. I'm a real girl, and I guess I'll have to live with that.

2021 Senior Poetry Winner

Command & Conquer

My dad and my big brother used to play *Command and Conquer* on the kitchen counter.
And I could watch, stooped below, catching big, violent men making moves and invading.
And as my dad would talk strategy, Ali would nod his head.
Mommy wore a durag
And blew out the candles on birthdays.
She'd make it to 40, and 41, and the tumour would go away.
She always chose kisses
And told me to love my brother.
And she'd ask if I wanted to eat bacon or not, because she believed I had a right to *choose* faith.
And as big, violent men applauded and sometimes yelled,
I got good at watching.
I'd watch *Lord of the Rings*, and video games, swords and goblins and grand dragons.
Ali never flinched, but sometimes, I got a little scared.
Ali passed down some strategy,
Like when to pivot or make a noise – when to strike or when to hide.
And Mommy learned a little, too, because when the tumour came back, she'd say things like
“I love you and I'm doing well.” And she always had a smile.
Dad must have forgotten what he taught, because sometimes he slipped out,
“Jad, I don't know what to tell you.”
So I got floats and learned to swim, I learned how to talk fast, how to make friends,
And how to sit politely in a waiting room.
I got better at all the little things
Like how to decode a smile, or walk on the tips of my toes. I'd ask questions like,
“Is Santa real?”
And
“Did the chicken come first?”
And Ali would say, without a flinch, that it was the egg, that fat men in red didn't come down
chimneys,
And that God couldn't be real.

I got good at catching fists with my face and clawing out people's ears.
I practised the dirty tactics
And I'd watch, because you learned things
Like how Dad always had a beer in his hand, and how one night
He drank whisky.
And Ali never cried.
Even at the funeral, he would just nod his head
And practise the artful tricks
Of deflection and espionage.
And when I passed by the casket, I thought to give a kiss,
But I kept my eyes dry
And firm
And talked smart
And little,
Because it's not keen to give things away.
My dad and my big brother used to play *Command and Conquer*. If you knew how to watch,
then there was a lot to learn.

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By Michael Jad Cheaito
Grade: 12 - Lakefield College School

2021 Junior Poetry Winner

The Window Seat

I am tempted to dive out of my oval window into the endless white beneath.

I can't decide if I'll float effortlessly in the haze

Or land on the fluff with a bounce.

Maybe I'll bounce along with ease

Travelling whole cities in a leap, the Vancouver sky to Seoul's in an instant

Or it might take an age just to take a step,

Feet sticking to the chewy whiteness.

Passing a rough terrain

Frosty mountains that dare me to trek and conquer,

But what if I fall straight through

Or slowly sink, heavy boots weighing me down?

I do my laces up loosely.

I'll free my feet and swim under the surface

Each stroke gliding me far

Far further than it might in cold, heavy blue waves way below.

I spot a smooth, massive hill and I make up my mind.

I squeeze out of my little opening into this vast and lavish haven,

Heavy skis weighing down my tingling legs.

My head peeks out, armed with reflective goggles,

Then my arms, clumsy with poles hanging from loops around my wrists.
I sit just like that,
The oval window my ski lift.

There must be others down there
Perfectly hidden
From the monochrome chaos of the world below them,
Waving at each plane that intrudes on their private wonderland,
Occasionally racing them
Until the aircraft realizes it is beaten and gives up
Dipping down

Down

Down

Back to where it came from

Where it no longer looks down on magic

But up at clouds.

The green seatbelt sign flashes
And I quickly clamber back inside.
My ears pop; we are landing shortly.
I wonder if
on the flight home
I'll have another window seat.

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By Eunsae Lee

Grade 9 - St. Peter Catholic Secondary School