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Young Writers
at the
Lakefield Literary Festival

Contest Winners 1998 – 2026

Young Writers Contest

Frontispiece

Contents

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Plates

The following paintings are used with the permission of the artist, Jonathan Janson

Cover

young man and computer

oil on canvas, 15 ½ in. x 15 ¾ in.

1996 - 1997

Frontispiece

girl writing with a bic

oil on canvas, 11 in. x 12 ¼ in.

1996 - 1997

Foreword

by Charlotte Gray

Writing is tough. You need talent, but you also need self-discipline, literary skills, and – these days – computer literacy (forget those romantic images of stacks of dog-eared pages filled with inky typescript or illegible longhand). And you also have to believe in yourself and the importance of what you are trying to say.

That's why I love prizes. Let me say that again, louder…I LOVE prizes, and awards ceremonies, and prize-givings. Of course, I love them for me (who doesn't?), but I love them in a wider sense too. I love the expression on the face of a literary prizewinner. Whether it is Alice Munro winning her second Giller Award (her smile out-sparkled her glittery silver gown) or one of the Lakefield Literary Festival student winners at the Saturday night banquet, the impact is the same. There is a bubble hovering over the winner's head, in which are written the words, "I *am* a writer. This prize endorses my membership of that vast, timeless, and wonderful company of people whose words matter."

I polled four authors whom I admire about their reactions to awards. They are all well-known writers who have won so many accolades and glowing reviews that an outsider might expect a whiff of nonchalance about prizes. Nothing could be further from the truth. All told variations of the same story – a cycle of pre-award self-doubt and award exhilaration.

Take Jane Urquhart's vividly recalled response to her first major award. In 1991, Jane won the prestigious French prize, le Prix du Meilleur Livre Etranger, for her first novel, *The Whirlpool.* "My reaction was one of utter disbelief followed by the fear that the whole thing, once the mistake was discovered, would turn into a humiliating fiasco made more humiliating by the fact that I was far from fluent in the language in question." But the impact of the award was tremendous. "After that, I wrote with more confidence on the one hand and with more care on the other. This was the first time that I realized that people beyond my known world might actually pay some attention to what I had to say." Since then, Jane has gone from strength to strength, becoming one of Canada's best-known novelists here and abroad.

Writing can be both lonely and anti-social. What makes you think anybody wants to read your words? Roy McGregor is a marvellous writer in an extraordinary range of genres: as well as being a *Globe and Mail* columnist, he has written both fiction and Nonfiction, plus the hugely popular *Screech Owl* mystery series for young readers. But he has never forgotten the literary coup he achieved (the first of many) more than thirty years ago: two gold medals in the National Magazine Awards in 1977. "I was 29, and for the first time I felt that maybe my senior editors wouldn't now take me aside and say, 'Nice try, Roy, but we now realize what a fake you are and if you promise to go away quietly we won't say anything about it.' At least, maybe they wouldn't for a week or two…"

Even the best writers, in my experience, never expect to win, however much every writer craves the recognition. We protect ourselves by getting defensive ("I don't stand a chance because one of the judges hates me/my kind of writing/my part of the country"). When Ken McGoogan, one of the finest authors of popular history in Canada, found his book *Fatal Passage,* on the shortlist for the Drainie-Taylor Biography Prize in 2001, he just *knew* he couldn't win. "The organizers told all of us to prepare a five-minute acceptance speech… and I did not do it. Why would I waste my time?" Ken was so surprised when he heard his name announced that he could barely speak. "But the joy of winning that prize stayed with me. I felt I'd been accepted into the club."

So an award can feel like your key to the club door. But as the novelist Elizabeth Hay observes: “Doubts roll in even during a moment of glory.” In 1995, a friend telephoned her to give her the news that a short story she had written had won a National Magazine Award. Liz’s knees went weak as she thought to herself, “Well, somebody thinks I wrote something good.” But a spurt of anxiety immediately flared. “I wondered if I’d be able to figure out what I’d done right, and repeat it.” She didn’t just repeat it: she topped it. Her third novel, *Late Nights on Air,* won the 2007 Giller Award for fiction.

In this ebook, there are many great pieces of fiction and Nonfiction, pieces by students who, I am sure, felt the self-doubt, exhilaration and anxiety that are part of every writer’s life. But they have also experienced the giddy pleasure of knowing that strangers recognized their talent. Have any gone on to become full-time writers, like Jane, Roy, Ken, Liz, and me? I don’t know, but I can bet that thanks to their Lakefield Literary Festival Award, many considered it. A handful might even now be nipping at our heels. Prizes matter. That’s why I love them.

* * * * *

CHARLOTTE GRAY is a well-known and highly respected Nonfiction writer. *The Winnipeg Free Press* reviewer, Dana Medoro, describes her as “one of Canada’s best-loved writers of popular history and literary biography.” She is the author of ten (at present) critically acclaimed books, as well as a contributor to many award-winning anthologies, journals, magazines, and documentaries. She holds Honorary Doctorates from five Canadian universities. Moreover, she is both a Fellow of The Royal Society of Canada and a Member of the Order of Canada. She has been a judge and a recipient of many prestigious literary prizes and awards. Her words of advice and encouragement offered here to young writers come from her vast knowledge of and experience in the writers’ craft. To learn more about the career of this remarkable Canadian writer visit her web site at www.charlottegray.ca

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Alasdair Wallace Photography (1998 – 1999)
Peterborough Examiner (2000 – 2008)

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The family of Alasdair Wallace (2009 – 2013)
Dr. Patricia and David Morton (2012 – 2015)
The friends and family of Alasdair Wallace (2014 - 2015)

The Judging Committee

Megan E. Boothby (2023 – 2024, 2026)
Erin Holtz-Braeckman (2025 – present)
Ann Hume (2008 – present)
Andrew Milner (2019 – present)
Sarah Perkins (2023 – present)
Brent Rankin (2025 – present)
Cynthia Rankin (2019 – present)

Past Judges

Rosalind Barker (2000 – 2010)
John Boyco (2019)
Ada Calvert (2000 – 2009)
Madeleine Fortin (2024)
Rosemary Ganley (1998)
Gordon Johnson (2012 – 2013)
Anne Mansell (2008 – 2022)
Orm Mitchell (2010 – 2016)
Barbara Mitchell (2010 – 2016)
Patricia Morton (2014 – 2016)
Tom Passarello (2000 – 2015)
Robin Robb (2019)
Martha Scott (2014 – 2018)
Lucille Strath (1999 – 2023)
Alasdair Wallace (1998)
Helen Watt (1999 – 2014)
Joe Webster (2019 – 2023)
Nan Williamson (2004 – 2015)

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Anchor Press
Annick Press
Broadview Press
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Dundurn Publishing
ECW Press
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Goose Lane Editions
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Thomas Allen & Son
Tundra Books
University of Manitoba Press
University of Toronto Press
Viking Press

Introduction

Introduction to First Edition 2009, with Revisions.

Every year for the past fifteen years, people who love reading, talking about books, and meeting award-winning authors, travel to Lakefield, a small jewel-like village nestled amongst ice-age drumlins in the heart of the Kawartha Lakes district of southeastern Ontario. They come by car, plane, bus – even boat – to attend the Lakefield Literary Festival. It takes place over three days in mid-July, on and around the birthdate of the famous Canadian author, Margaret Laurence, who lived in Lakefield from 1974 until her death in 1987. The Festival memorializes her life and work and serves as a fond remembrance of the last thirteen years of her life when she lived in the heart of the village on Regent Street.

The community felt a keen sense of loss when Margaret Laurence died, and so, during the years immediately following her death, the villagers sought ways to remember her time with them. The first public event held in her memory, organized by the Joan and Ron Ward family, was held July 29 and July 30, 1995. Looking to the future, it was billed as "The First Annual Lakefield Literary Festival." Key personalities lent their support to make the Saturday evening banquet a success. CBC Radio host Shelagh Rogers acted as master of ceremonies to a program entitled "Remembering Margaret: The Lakefield Years." Andrew Wainwright, editor of *A Very Large Soul: Selected Letters from Margaret Laurence to Canadian Writers*, read excerpts from Margaret's voluminous correspondence with members of the "tribe," Margaret's name for her fellow Canadian writers. The evening ended with a Somali tribute, which recalled Margaret Laurence's early African writings.

It might have ended there. That it did not is largely due to the organizational capabilities of Shelley Ambrose. At the time, Shelley was an associate producer of Peter Gzowski's "Morningside" on CBC Radio, one of the most popular radio shows in Canadian history. (As Peter's assistant, she had also produced all of his golf tournaments for literacy, as well as many concerts and onstage conversations). Shelley had acquired a summer cottage just outside Lakefield on Clear Lake. She could see the merits of the Wards' idea of a literary festival centred on Margaret Laurence's vast contribution to Canadian literature. Shelley volunteered her time and expertise; in addition, she used her contacts with the CBC to bring award-winning guest authors to the Festival. Although Shelley came to her lakeside cottage to rest, she spent her leisure time volunteering to "produce" the Lakefield Literary Festival, helped by a group of enthusiastic, dedicated volunteers, many of whom remain with the Festival to this day. Key among them is Brenda Neill, who became co-chair with Shelley Ambrose in 1998. She brought to the organization professional skills gleaned from 34 years of teaching in the local schools, which included a solid appreciation of children's literature and years of volunteer leadership in the community.

Many of the volunteers have similar deep connections to the village, while still others drive from Peterborough or Trent University to lend a hand. Another component of the Festival's success is the response of the surrounding business community. Local businesses and individual donors provide the sole support for this non-profit festival. With sponsorships and window displays, merchants are proud boosters of an event that now attracts authors and visitors from across Canada.

Lakefield has a rich literary heritage. This small Ontario community has been called "the cradle of Canadian literature" for good reason. Early in the nineteenth century, Lakefield (then North Douro) was the home of Susanna Moodie, Catharine Parr Traill, and Isabella Valancy

Crawford. Though remembering Margaret Laurence was (and is) a central underlying purpose of the Lakefield Literary Festival, our mandate includes honouring these famous pioneer writers and reaches out to include contemporary authors from across Canada, as well as those writing in the environs of Lakefield, Peterborough, and Trent University. Margaret would be pleased.

All during her professional life, she encouraged other writers, whether it was by reading and critiquing their work, by writing letters of advice, praise, and understanding, by establishing and actively participating in the Writers' Union of Canada, or by being a ready advisor to aspiring writers while she was Writer-in-Residence and, later, Chancellor of Trent University.

Over the last fifteen years, the Lakefield Literary Festival has evolved into one of the most successful small literary festivals in Canada. Certainly part of this success can be attributed to the beautiful village, the lake setting, the warm hospitality, and the merits of what can be done through skilful organization carried out by dedicated volunteers. The Festival has, in turn, been the recipient of the generous participation of some of Canada's finest writers. The Festival's mission is "to enhance the cultural stature of Lakefield and the surrounding area through remembering and celebrating its literary heritage and by showcasing current Canadian authors." It is a mission that Margaret Laurence would have fully approved: a festival celebrating her beloved "tribe."

* * * * *

From the start, the Lakefield Literary Festival was fortunate in the number of talented volunteers on the Festival committee. One such member was Alasdair Wallace, a teacher of English at Lakefield District Secondary School from 1970 until 1997. When he retired, he brought to the committee a wealth of knowledge on student writing and, in 1998, with vision and enthusiasm, he suggested that the Festival have a writing contest to encourage young aspiring writers. Alasdair was a professional photographer as well as a highly respected, much-loved teacher. It was Alasdair's belief in the talent of young student writers that was the springboard for what has become a very successful contest that showcases some of the best writing emanating from local high schools. His photography studio was the founding sponsor of the Young Writers at the Lakefield Literary Festival writing contest. Most unfortunately, the year following the contest's inception, Alasdair became seriously ill. After a long and valiant battle with his illness, Alasdair passed away in October, 2007. The committee did not want Alasdair's dream of a writing contest to disappear, and, in 1999, they asked me if I would take it on. Over the past ten years, the contest has evolved into what it is today with detailed contest rules, copyright protection, two grade divisions: junior (grades 9 and 10) and senior (grades 11 and 12), two genres: fiction and Nonfiction, and acknowledgement given to runners-up.[1]

Our mandate has always been that of its founder: to encourage our winners to see writing as a possible profession, a demanding profession that requires dedication and hard work, work that begins at an early age. Each year the contest yields amazing results.

All the entries are read by a panel of judges. Over the years, the core panel has remained stable. Even though they are all volunteers, the judges share a dedication to the importance of the task at hand.[2] Most are former educators familiar with assessing student writing. Each eligible entrant, that is, everyone who complies with the contest rules, receives a gift book. These books are generously donated to the contest by the publishers listed in the acknowledgements. The students are given new books, current books written by prize-winning authors. When resources

[1] In 2012, we added poetry to the two existing genres, fiction and Nonfiction. In that first year, nearly half of all the entries were poems.
[2] In 2011, we introduced "blind judging," in which judges do not know the name, gender, or school of the author whose work they are judging.

in schools are scarce, it is impossible to overstate how highly these books are valued by teachers and students.

For the winners, the awards ceremony at the Festival is akin to winning a junior Giller prize. With relatives, friends, publishers, and renowned authors in the audience, the winners are awarded an honorarium; they are guests of honour at the Festival's Saturday evening banquet; they receive copies of books written and signed by the current year's guest authors; and they receive an engraved plaque as a memento of their achievement. From 2000 to 2008, the *Peterborough Examiner* was the sole sponsor of the contest. The Managing Editor, Ed Arnold, and the Entertainment Editor, Werner Bergen, made it no secret that they enjoyed the winning entries as much as any of the newspaper's readers. The *Peterborough Examiner* prints the winning stories and those of the runners-up in a special insert in the paper during the week leading up to the Festival. They send a photographer to the homes of the winners and the resulting photos accompany the printed stories of the winners. This special insert is made available at the banquet, so that everyone in attendance has an opportunity to read the stories and even have them signed by the aspiring new writers.

It is easy to see the role teachers play in a contest such as this one. They are the ones who teach, mentor, encourage, and urge their gifted students to get their stories in for the deadline. By the end of several semesters, teachers have a very good sense of who writes well and who needs encouragement and motivation. Despite demanding curricula, the teachers in all the schools have found time to add our contest to their to-do list.

The stories contained in this anthology of winners and runners-up have been written by student writers, writers-in-the-making. The authors are young people attempting to find a style, a voice, a means of expressing their thoughts and feelings. They are exploring different ways of doing this. The contest asks them to write a story, either fiction or Nonfiction in 500 to 1000 words. Some writers are more successful than others. The best writers have more control and coherence, a willingness to take bigger risks, and a stronger command of diction, tone, and grammar. Others are less sure; nevertheless, the judges see in all of the stories at least one or more strengths. Some stories show remarkable sophistication and craft. Catherine Ward's "Autumn Epiphany" is a beautifully rendered metaphor depicting coming-of-age; Scott Dancey's "Dial Tone" reveals his strength as a budding mystery writer; Russell Woods' "Poems for a Blonde-Haired Girl" shows us how, with imagination, beat poetry can be transformed into story; Hilary Bird's "Genocide in Rwanda" has the intimations of a journalist. For courage, insight, and well-crafted writing, look at Chenoah Ellis' "All That I Am," Zoë Greenwood's "Unspoken: Depression and the Search for Words," Jessica Waite's "Jet Lag," and Amanda Steel's "Only Skin Deep." The junior division has produced some exceptional writing. For sheer inventiveness, look at Will Lamond's "The Piano;" for skilful use of idiom and tone, Matt Whitfield's, "Hangin' Out;" and for literary art history, Meggy Chan's "Old Mail." Tyler Banderob's "Greatest Max" shows how, in less than 1000 words, all the elements of a short story can be mapped out. We hope to add to this anthology of contest winners in the coming years. We hope, too, that the writers of the stories included in this ebook will contact us (message@lakefieldliteraryfestival.com) to let us know how their careers are unfolding.

A writing contest has the potential to provide a eureka moment. In *Margaret Laurence: The Making of a Writer*, the author Donez Xiques tells us of the role writing contests played in the development of Margaret Laurence's writing career. When Margaret was in her early teenage years she began submitting her writing to the *Winnipeg Free Press*, which had a weekend section devoted to "Young Authors." Young amateur writers between the ages of thirteen and thirty would submit their original stories and poems to the editor with the hope of having them published and critiqued. While still in grade eight, young Peggy Wemyss (the future Margaret Laurence) entered a contest held by the newspaper. She had laboured over "The Land of Our

Fathers" and although she did not win, she received praise and encouragement. They published her story and encouraged her to send in others. The "Young Authors' Section" was, according to Xiques' research, "unusually sophisticated." "Writers were fostered through the personal attention given to their work and the editor's responses to their letters." At this early age, Peggy Wemyss was experiencing what it was to become a member of "the tribe." She began to see herself as a writer.

Student writers can take comfort from the fact that everyone loves a good story. Contests, such as Young Writers at the Lakefield Literary Festival, provide one way of showing encouragement and appreciation for the good stories being written by aspiring writers. When young writers stare at the blank page waiting for the Muse to strike, they know that readers await. It is a huge responsibility to take on. We, the judges, thank them for plunging in, taking the risk, typing the required 1000 words. In addition, we hope that by doing so, they are revealing something of themselves to themselves: a voice, a style, a particular take on the world. Yes, they write for the reader (they have to write well, know the rules), but they also write to find out what it is they want to say and how they want to say it. The responsibility they take on needs to be tempered by one overriding aim: be truthful. Even the most fanciful fiction has an integral purpose. All successful writers know this, and they spend most of their professional lives perfecting their vision, their expression of truth. The judges look for this: truth-telling and a well-told, well-crafted story.

Lucille Strath
Coordinator of Young Writers at the Lakefield Literary Festival Writing Contest
May 2009

* * * * *

Introduction Revised 2018 with Addendum by Margaret Laurence 1983

In the last few years, there have been gradual changes to the Young Writers at the Lakefield Literary Festival writing contest; however, the core objectives remain unchanged. The judging protocol remains the same. The contest rules were adjusted to facilitate the electronic transfer of manuscripts to the judging committee. We no longer hold the awards ceremony at a Saturday evening banquet but instead hold it at the afternoon reading followed by a reception or picnic. We are unable to present the winners and schools with gift books. The publishers, who have been so generous in the past, can no longer supply us with complimentary copies of the guest authors' books. *The Peterborough Examiner* discontinued the printing of the contest winners' work. Nevertheless, we continue to publish the winning essays and poems in our ebook. The ebook is a permanent record of a winner's achievement. With the electronic publishing of their writing, students get a glimpse at the rewards that successful writers enjoy as a result of hard work and dedication. They discover that what they write matters; they discover they have a voice.

* * * * *

In 1983, the Peterborough County Board of Education printed a magazine called *Mine!* It was an anthology of the writings of contest winners from both elementary and secondary schools. The publication was the result of a county-wide writing contest of which Margaret Laurence was one of the judges. The *Mine!* magazine was put in my hands by the 1983 senior winner, Wendy Freeman, the former Lakefield Secondary School grade twelve student, Wendy Jopling. Wendy won $100.

Margaret Laurence was asked to write the Foreword for *Mine!* Because the Lakefield Literary Festival commemorates the memory of Margaret Laurence, it is fitting that the

Foreword be re-printed below with permission from the Kawartha Pine Ridge Board of Education. In the Foreword, Margaret Laurence expresses her support for writing contests and suggests how they can change the course of a young person's life. Her thoughts are as timeless and relevant today as they were when she wrote them years ago.

Foreword

When I was a young writer – and I mean very young, at the age of seven in Grade Two – I had the good fortune to be encouraged by my teacher and by my mother. That encouragement kept on throughout my school life, and in secondary school one of my teachers used to read my poems and stories and give me a serious analysis of them, a creative kind of criticism. In my mother's continually helpful response to my writing, and in the response of a number of teachers both elementary and secondary schools, and later in university, my writing was always taken seriously by someone whose opinion I valued. Only years later, when I was a published writer, did I fully appreciate that help given to me when I was a child and a young woman.

This anthology seems to me to be giving that same kind of supportive recognition to young writers here in Peterborough County. More than forty schools are represented here, and the students range from Grade One to Grade Thirteen. There is a vast difference in concepts between a six-year-old and an eighteen-year-old, and the difference is one of maturing and growing up, not one of authenticity. At all points along the path, these perceptions are valid and genuine, and must be recognized as such.

I am impressed by one thing above all – the originality and vividness of the writing. We are constantly being told that TV and all the other media are destroying the imagination of our young people, and damaging their ability to perceive their own lives. I do not think this is true. This anthology affirms these people's ability to perceive life in their own individual ways. One finds with the younger writers in elementary school a tendency to express their feelings through fantasy. In the older writers in secondary school, the writing becomes more openly into their own lives. I find this a natural progression. All these young writers, whether in elementary or secondary schools, are dealing with a high-tech world that is in many ways a more difficult one than that into which I was born, and they are doing it with thought and with a sense of their own human identity and an empathy for others. I find this extremely encouraging. This is not to say, of course, that all is happy in the garden of youth. It never was, and it is possibly less so now than ever. These young people are speaking their feeling about a highly complex world that is undoubtedly in dire peril. They may do it with fantasy, and in a number of indirect ways, or they may do it directly through their own personal experiences. But they must be read and listened to, for they have much to say.

I would like to pay tribute to the Peterborough County School Board, which has made this important anthology possible, and to

many teachers in both the elementary and secondary schools in our county, who have put so much effort and loving work into this book.

Most of all, I would like to thank all the young people whose writing appears here. Perhaps, at some point, some of them may have learned something from my own writing. I want them to know that I, too, have learned from theirs.

Margaret Laurence
Lakefield, Ontario

Originally printed in the magazine *Mine! Poetry and Prose from the Heart of Peterborough County*, November 1983.

* * * * *

Introduction Revised 2019

Beginning with the 2019 Young Writers writing contest the judging rules were changed to replace the 'runner-up' designation with 'honourable mention'. Furthermore, in future, only the winning or co-winning entries in each contest category will be published in the ebook.

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Introduction Revised 2022

The Lakefield Literary Festival was not held during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, in 2020, 2021, and 2022, the Young Writers writing contest went ahead during these years and was conducted online under the direction of Cynthia Rankin and Andrew Milner. Six judges met on a virtual platform to adjudicate the entries. The contest continued to be highly successful resulting in outstanding winners and many honourable mentions.

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Introduction Revised 2024

It is with great sadness that we must acknowledge the passing of Lucille Strath. The original idea for this ebook was totally Lucille's in 2009, to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the Young Writers contest. From 1999 until 2013 she managed every aspect of the Young Writers contest, including judging, and continued in her role as a judge until 2023. Her dedication to this project was absolute. To those of us able to work with her and to share her enthusiasm, she will be missed.

Lucille Strath Memorial Award of Merit

This award is sponsored by family and friends of Lucille Strath. Lucille was the coordinator and a judge of the Young Writers Contest from 1999 until 2013 and continued as a judge until 2023. She was also the inspiration behind the creation of the eBook, the archival record of contest history and past winning entries.

In any given year, the winners of the award may be individuals or members of a group and may or may not also be contest winners.

Lucille's abiding interest was to encourage young writers everywhere to participate and to broaden their skills through innovation and risk-taking. The writings of the award winners have been recognised collectively by the judges as having particular resonance with Lucille's literary values and her aspirations for emerging talent.

Award Winners

2026 For Unique Achievement in Poetry
Stella Johnston, Grade 12, Lakefield College School.

2025 For Achievement in Creative Writing and **Unique After-School Writing Circle**
The following members of *Writers' Block*, the Crestwood Secondary School after-school writing circle who submitted entries to this year's contest:

Ayyat Aburayyan, Grade 11
Alexandra Buxton, Grade 12
Alexis De Roose, Grade 12
Jazzmin Campbell, Grade 9
Isabella Cancelliere, Grade 8
Laura Oakes, Grade 9
Ivyquinn Yule, Grade 9

2024 For Unique Achievement in Poetry
The following members of the Multi-language Learning Program for newcomers to Canada at Thomas A. Stewart Secondary School who submitted entries to this year's contest:

Ussama Al Khalid, Grade 12
Zainab Sayed, Grade 12
Fardad Farajollahi, Grade 12
Ibrahim Sheikh Mohamed, Grade 11
Rama Sheikh Mohamed, Grade 10

Young Writers Contest

Winners(*) and Runners-up

Abraham, Emma (2016)
Aburayyan, Leen Radi (*2026)
Alleway, Tim (*2001)
Ames, Emily (2005)
Armstrong, Jenny (*2000)
Auger, Abigail (*2022)
Banderob, Tyler (*2008)
Barclay, Luke (*2009)
Barsanti-Morris, Nicholas (*2011)
Beda, Robert (2018)
Bell, Kyle (*2000 , 2004)
Bird, Hilary (*2003 , *2005)
Black, Ashlynn (2015)
Boothby, Megan (*2009 , *2010
2012 , 2012
*2013)
Borges, Lily-May (*2026)
Boyle, Brad (2009)
Brown, Liv (2017 , *2020)
Buchan, Alivia (*2018)
Burnie, Leah (2004)
Buttle, Sarah (*2010)
Caldwell, Kirsten (*2013)
Campbell, Evan (*2018)
Campbell, Claire (*2017) , (*2018)
Campbell-Verduyn, Lachlan (*2000)
Campbell-Weiner, Eli (2012)
Cantello, Cydney (*2016 , *2016,
2017, 2017)
Caruana, Carrie (2018)
Cathcart, Courtney (*2016)
Cavanagh, Hailey (*2020 , *2022)
Chan, Beatrice (2008 , 2009 , 2010)
Chan, Meggy (*2008)
Cheaito, Michael Jad (*2021 , *2021)
Clancey, Caitlyn (2013 , 2013)
Collett-Taylor, Wesley (*2012)
Conley, Greg (*2005 , 2006)
Conolly, Karina (*2023)
Conway, Christopher (2016)
Costello, Mackenzie (2017)
Damery, Quinn (2002 , *2003)
Dancey, Scott (2003)
Davies, Mary (*2019)
Debues, Matilda (*2017)
Del Mastro, Alicia (*2006)
De Roose, Alexis (*2025)
Diamandakos, Julia (*2010)
Dorman, Joshua (*2019)
Douglas, Kaia (*2017)
D'Souza, Naomi (*2023, *2023)
Dunbar, Ally (*2006)
Ellis, Chenoah R. (*2002)
Ehlert, Justin (*2022)
Findlay-Shields, Brigh (2017)
Forrester, Chelsea (*1998)
Foster, Caylea (*2007)
Found, Melina (2003)
Fuller, Kaitlin (2005)
Fife, Amanda Rosanne (*2002)
Fransky, Emma (*2016 , 2016)
Frost, Emily (2010 , *2012 , 2013)
Gagliardi, Meghan (2010)
Gao, Olivia (2015)
Gao, Richard (2017)
Gardner, Juliet (*2014)
Gaughan, Molly (2011)
Gavard, Grace (*2025)
Gordon, Jenna (2008 , 2009)
Green, Mackenzie (*2012 ,*2013
2014 , *2014
*2015 , *2015
*2015)
Greenwood, Zoë (*2003)
Guiel, Jasher (*2013)
Harris, Anna (*2020)
Hart, Terry (2004)
Hendsbee, Kirk (*2000)
Hill, Madeleine (*2022)
Hollingsworth, Kerry (2003)
Irwin, Rebekah (2018)
Jacobs, Sadie (*2018)
Jackson, Summer (*2024)
Jeremiah, Lindsey (2004)
Johnson, Heather (*1999)
Jordan, Dana (*2018)
Kernohan, Fisher (*2026)
Kim, Joy (*1998)

Knox, Stacy (2006)
Kraus, Vanessa (*2011 , 2011 2012 , *2012 2013 , 2013 *2014 , 2014)
Krocker, Lexie (*2016)
Lafortune, Max (*2007)
Lamond, Emily Ann (2004)
Lamond, William (*2003)
Langford, Allaura (2015)
LaRoque, Kristen (2006)
Larson, Shayla (*2012)
Leahy, Ashley (2014)
Lee, Eunsae (*2021, *2023 *2024 , *2024)
Liu, Nicole (*2019)
Lloyd, Izzy (*2020 , *2020)
Loiselle, Mirka (2010 , 2011)
Lu, Alisa (2018)
Luckhurst, Josh (*2004)
Luecke, Taylor Ray (2015)
MacLeod, Clementine (*2020 , 2021 *2022 , *2023)
Macdonnell, Betsy (2018)
MacKenzie, Kellan (*2021 , *2022 *2022 , *2023 *2023 , *2024)
MacMillan-Jones, Jeremy (2010)
Maranduik, Katie (2010)
Mason, Eric Francis (*2002)
Mauro, Samantha (2016)
Maxwell, J. J. (*2009)
McCuaig, Jess (*2005)
McLean, Rachel (*2008)
McLeod, Kate (*2004)
McMahon, Jordyn (*2026)
McMaster, Becky (2003)
McShane, Megan (2014 , *2015)
Menendez, Katie (*2006)
Mills, Hannah (2008)
Mills, Lydia (*2013)
Moher, Lauren (2018)
Motyer, Amanda (2005)
Motyer, Claire (*2013)
Narine, Geetanjali (*2014)
Narine, Vandana (2015)
Neilson, Camryn (*2015 , *2015)
Noble, Celeste (2014)
Oakes, Laura (*2025)
O'Barr, Erik Blackthorne (*2007)
Panchalingam, Anusa (*2001)
Pappas, Toula (*2022)
Pei, Rachel (*2023 , *2024 *2024)
Petrini, Samantha (2007)
Poley, Barett (2014)
Pond, Christopher (2007)
Preston, Morgan (*2008)
Prindiville-Porto, Alice Tierney (2018)
Pullen, Brody (2015)
Pullen,Nick (2006)
Rao, Chen (*2007 , 2009 , 2010)
Raval, Maya (2017)
Rees-Spear, Miles (2006)
Riddle, Tamsyn (*2012)
Ridgway, Allison (*2011)
Robson, Daria (*2001)
Romanuk, Kevin (2005)
Rubel, Jana (*2021)
Sanderson, Jill (2014)
Schmied, Lauren (2005)
Seward, Agatha (2005)
Sewell, Kassandra (2011)
Shenandoah, Jasmine (2014)
Shi, Sarah (2016)
Sibbald, Rebekah (*2011)
Sisson, Dan (2006)
Smith, Lisa Anne (*1999)
Smith, Lowell (2017)
Solomons, Alisha (2017)
Steel, Amanda (2006)
Stenner, Hannah Argumedo (2015)
Stewart, Peter (2005)
Taylor, Finley (*2019 , *2020)
Thompson, Alexis (*2019)
Thompson, Lucy (*2017)
Thusiyanthan, Thushika (*2020)
Toyé, Haley J. (2006)
Trithart, Lydia (2015)
Valois, Kristin (*2004)
van Vliet, Rachel (*2017, *2017)
Verjee, Mishal (2005)
Wade, Rob (2008)
Wadhwani, Sneha (2016)
Waite, Jessica (*2006)
Wang, Susie (*2025, *2025)
Ward, Cailey (2013)
Ward, Catherine (*2001)
Ward, Maria (2013)
Watts, Tonya-Leah (2012)
West, Celina (2007)
Westby, Kira (2006)
Whatley, Julia (2013)
White, Catriona (2005)
Whitfield, Matt (2003)

Wieler, Aisling (*2019)
Wigglesworth, Sophie (*2025)
Wilkins, Emily (2006)
Wilkinson, Clayton (*2014)
Williams, Sarah (*2014)
Windrem, Victoria (*2010)
Wingfield, Jennifer (2015)
Woods, Russell (*2005)
Yates, Jordyn (*2026)
York, Rachel (*2015 , 2016)
Zhou, Weijia (*2009 , 2011)

Young Writers Contest

Participating Schools

Since the inauguration of the writing contest in 1998, the schools listed below have participated.

Adam Scott Collegiate Vocational Institute

Clarke High School

Crestwood Secondary School

École catholique Monseigneur-Jamot

Holy Cross Catholic Secondary School

Kenner Collegiate Vocational Institute

Lakefield College School

Lakefield District Secondary School

Norwood District High School

Our Lady of the Wayside Catholic School

Peterborough Alternative and Continuing Education Program

Peterborough Collegiate Vocational School

St. Peter Catholic Secondary School

Thomas A. Stewart Secondary School

Young Writers Contest

Lakefield Literary Festival

Winning Entries – Senior Fiction
(Grades 11, 12, OAC)

Unattainable

by Jenny Armstrong

"Jump," you said, and I didn't even take the time to ask you "How high?" Instead, the second the thought crossed your mind and the word was softly kissed across your silky red lips, I jumped.

But I knew that just jumping would never be enough for you. It would never be enough of a gesture to show how much I love you. So instead, I jumped into the air. Then I flew high into the heavens, piercing through the soft white clouds that looked like dark ships sailing across the sea in the cool night air. Higher and higher I went until the Earth was far away, and the moon looked like a closer place to call home. There, I caught you the most beautiful cascading star I could find.

I held the star close, wrapping myself around it so that it would not fall and break. Then I carefully tumbled back toward the Earth below. Soon the star and I crashed back down to the hard earth. My back was instantaneously bruised, my clothes were ripped and covered in dirt, my legs bled, and my arm was seemingly broken, but I cradled and protected the star from being hurt in the fall. I brushed freshly fallen tears out of my eyes and winced in pain; my whole body ached and begged me to stay still, but my mind screamed, "*Go on! Get up! He's waiting for you!*" And so I did. After three failed attempts, my legs finally followed my commands and allowed me to stand up. I picked up the star in my left arm and hugged it close as I slowly hobbled away.

I then bought a piece of velvet. Only the softest velvet in the darkest hue of blue would do, for it had to look like a piece of a dark night's sky that had been stolen with the star. I found it and carefully wrapped the star up tight until all of its glory was sealed from sight. Next, I gently kissed the velvet, sealing my gift with all the powers of my love.

I went to your house, placed the bundle upon your pillow, and called out your name. You did not seem happy to be disturbed and appeared even more disgusted at the sight of me. But I just smiled, swept the stray hairs out of my eyes, leaving behind a trail of dust on my face, and pointed toward your bed. You gave me one more look of appalled confusion, then recovered, and walked gracefully to the bedside. I admired the ease with which you moved, and thought everything was worth it, if, through my gift to you, I could bring the finest thread of happiness into your life.

My eyes filled with the excitement of a child opening the biggest gift underneath the Christmas tree, as I watched you reach for the velvet, then slowly peel it back. Layer by layer, my gift was slowly revealed: a star in all its splendid beauty, stolen from the night and given to you with all my love.

As you finished unwrapping my gift, my eyes sparkled more. You looked at the star for what seemed like eternity, but I could not see your face to read your expression. Finally, you turned to me. Your eyes were empty, devoid of love, and unimpressed by the sheer beauty I had given you. Not even the smallest smile tugged at the corners of your mouth, and not even the slightest inkling of love entered your eyes. Instead with a bored yawn, your response to me was, "Is this all? What a waste of my time."

With those words, my heart, which had been so full of hope, plummeted like the star had, but with nothing there to protect it from the fall, shattered like a shell tossed at a rocky shoreline

in all of the water's rage. The excitement fled from my eyes and was quickly replaced by all the pain I felt. Desperately, I blinked back the tears that were so determined to escape, but to no avail. They descended down my cheeks like rushing rivers, carrying away with them trails of dirt and blood. All I could do was stare and cry.

What a pitiful sight I must have been. You looked at me as if I were crazy, then swept the star and its velvet encloakment into the trash. There, it too shattered like my heart. Then you walked away...

It was only then that I realized. Maybe I should have asked you, "How high...?"

* * * * * * *

Jenny Armstrong
Grade 12
Norwood District High School

Autumn Epiphany

by Catherine Ward

The chilly, late fall wind caught Beth's blond hair, tossing and throwing it around against the backdrop of a steel-grey, afternoon sky. She pulled her denim jacket tighter, wishing she had worn her sensible, winter one instead. It was an "I told you so," moment her mother would love.

The day was grim in Winston. Grey skies, miniature drifts of grey snow clinging to blades of dead and wilted grass, and grey people, setting into depression at the thought of another inevitable winter. She walked slowly, snuggling back into her coat as much as it would allow, trying to forget about the last few weeks.

Anna was always the outgoing one. She had the ability to capture everyone's attention. She dazzled them with sparkling white smiles, her silky, dark hair, and transfixing eyes darker than coal. In comparison, Beth was the fairer one; nonetheless, she acted as more of a shadow in social situations. She sported blond, shoulder-length hair, had green eyes, and was of medium build. Beth was just your average type, someone who blended in, and was often overlooked. Anna had been her link to the "good life." Parties, the popular group, and public recognition were Beth's only by association.

Beth's brow furrowed, and she drifted into a reverie. There hadn't always been problems with Anna – at least none she had immediately noticed. She dreamily recalled the trip to the coast that she and Anna had taken the previous summer. Delighted and utterly weak with ecstasy after months of begging and pleading, they had boarded a plane bound for Vancouver and two weeks of freedom, fun, and sunshine. She still heard the splash of water spraying the hulls of the yachts in the marina and felt the fine mist as comforting as a mother's cool hand on a fevered brow...

"You're getting yourself all wet Bethie!" Beth hazily made her way back into reality to find herself being misted by the spray from Mr. Layton's garden hose. "It's a little too chilly to be wandering around the streets soaked through! You seemed to be enjoying it though? Smiling as big as Texas when I noticed ye!"

"Just not paying close enough attention, I guess!" Beth joked. "This weather is scrambling my brains!" Mr. Layton laughed heartily, shook his head, and returned to washing his car, probably the last time he would do so before it was too cold.

Beth also continued on her way, while white clouds of breath launched themselves in front of her face, as she puffed up a small hill. Her smile was gone now. She floated back into her mind again and racked her brain for where, when, or why things had gone wrong.

Beth had thought it a coincidence that troubles between her and Anna began shortly after she started getting involved in things. She joined the art club and tried out her voice in a coffeehouse, surprising even herself by her hidden vocal talents. Through various activities, Beth had made new friends, but always Anna had remained number one.

Perhaps though, Anna had not seen it that way. Anger stirred in Beth – something she was not used to. Rarely did she ever provoke or promote fights, not wanting conflict, backing down early with a total lack of confidence. It was ridiculous that Anna could have been jealous. She had masses of friends and admirers all around her. Why would she not want the same for Beth?

Now, Anna and Beth never talked. Anna would walk by Beth in the hall at school, glancing at her, detached and cool. It was as if they were barely acquaintances.

Beth paused a moment on the paved sidewalk, overcome with a terrible ache that hit her like a truck. It came from her very core and made it difficult to breathe. She missed Anna desperately. She felt as if she had lost a large chunk of herself, so large, in fact, that she wondered sometimes if it was something physical, easily noticed by passers-by and talked about with cruel curiosity.

She looked above her, through dried and crumpled, crackling leaves clinging valiantly to stark, black branches that had given up on them weeks before. She stared at the hopeless grey sky, sure that if she could identify with anything at the moment, it would be those miserable leaves and that desolate sky.

Prophetically, a gust of wind came along and caught an unsuspecting leaf, plucking it forcefully from its place on the black branch and sending it gusting sporadically in large, lusty spirals. Finally, it came to rest, nestled in a nearby evergreen shrub, safe for the moment from similar attacks.

Beth stood, rooted to her spot watching the strange dance in its entirety. Calmness crept over and into her, basking her insides in a warm, fuzzy glow. She had always thought that description to be slightly nauseating when reading it in stories, thinking it to be completely unrealistic, but it was incredible how accurate it was.

As quickly as it had come, the moment was over, but it left a satisfying residual, as if her heart was wearing a sweater. Beth turned, meandering back the way she had come, deciding that she would start for home, head finally clear, and the hollowing ache gradually subsiding.

The realization had crept up on her while watching that battered leaf. It hadn't fought back; it didn't have to. It had completed its purpose and moved on. It would become part of the ground and help a new leaf just like it grow, come spring.

Beth understood now. She knew it wouldn't be easy losing the best friend she'd ever known, but like that small leaf, the connection had been lost. Anna had been a part of her for so long, she didn't know anything else. As things go, both of them had grown up and, as a result, grown apart. Letting go was never painless. However, Beth could recognize that when one came to the end of a path, new ones appeared with new options, leading the way to brighter tomorrows than one ever dreamed possible.

Although the wind still whipped around her, prying at her jacket, turning her cheeks cherry red, and tiny, fall snowflakes had begun to rage madly about, Beth felt as if her winter was already over. Spring was just around the corner, filled with shining opportunities and growing hope for new independence.

* * * * * * *

Catherine Ward
Grade 11
St. Peter's Secondary School

All That I Am

by Chenoah R. Ellis

Sitting
Here I am
Here is all that I am

I feel light-headed and I stop writing. What comes after the end? Not after the end of life, but the end of anything? When anything ends, what comes after? What happens after the story's over? Once the conflict is solved, what is there? What follows the nadir? I get up and I close the blinds, and then open them again; my physical aching is surpassed only by my dwindling mental state. They told my family I'd take a while to recover. I don't know how many whiles are in a lifetime, but right now it feels like only one. Everything around me is pale, and it makes me feel unhealthy. Someone sent me flowers. I hadn't cried till then. I didn't want to be vulnerable, but more than anything I didn't want flowers. I don't want people trying to heal me. They don't know that I'm the only one that can do that. I'm not sad or scared or anything that they tell me it's normal to feel. I feel enlightened – as if every unnameable burden has been lifted and replaced with something far more fantastic.

By the window
Shadowed in pretence
Covered in many truths

The truth is that the sun is shining so bright outside my window and reflecting off the mirror on my door that I am blinded. That is the only truth I am willing to recognize. Everything else is fallacious, created by everyone else to confine me to myself. I would rather be blinded by the truth than trapped by fabrication. But that doesn't matter; nothing I feel is acceptable. What is real is not who I am. That's what they tell me. As though taking drugs to fog my confusion makes anything clearer. They know these things, though. They haven't got feelings like mine; they can't hear their heart breathe, but they've got PhDs and a cheque from the government. What could I possibly know about myself? I am only insane. There is no synonym for insane. They need to make everything simple for us because we make everything so complicated.

In the corner of the kitchen
I've been here awhile
I hope you haven't been looking for too long

I didn't mean to do that. I was just dancing. Laughing. Who were you dancing with? What a stupid question to ask. I was dancing with myself. On my report they say I was dancing with the devil. They think I'm the devil. That's why I laugh. I can't possibly be as important as that.

Waiting for answers
To the questions
I have only just learned

I start to hum the tune to the static in my head. They ask me so many questions. I don't think it's important for them to know the answers. The answers are me, and I know them. I dance around like I always do. I'm okay. I'm not crying. I dance faster and faster until I can feel the non-existent breeze wash over me. Faster and faster. I scream out to the soundproof walls, "Can you believe I'm this good and I never took lessons!!" Silence answers. Just like it always does.

Hoping
For a solution
To any situation I must face

Is it good enough to hope? What is hope? Someone else's friend once told me that hope was an ally to those without ability. Ability. They think I have a lot of ability. You have the ability to get better. You have the ability to be normal. I know what I have. I have hope. I have hope that no matter what they give me here, no matter what they tell me, or what they make me do, I will never be normal. I don't need to get better, I'm the best. But they think not. And I felt sorry for them and their naivety, so I didn't try and explain. I pull the curtains closed and turn on the florescent light. It makes me feel ugly. I wash my face. The cold water has turned warm on my hot cheeks. The mirror depicts the image I am. All that I am.

It's dark outside
And my window to the world
Shows only my reflection

I'm here to prove that I'm okay. I've been sitting on my bed since the sun set. I get up and dance around the room. One sweaty hand attached to a scrawny arm, attached to me, opens the curtains. I stare out into what is the night. What is black? I wonder if the world just disappears when it's dark. Who would notice? Maybe it dances around itself, only stopping when dawn hits. All I can see is the reflection of my outline. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make them cry. Nothing's wrong with laughter. Nothing. You're a beautiful dancer. Thank you. I laugh aloud. No point in concealing my hilarity from my reflection. I squeeze my eyes tight. I try to write again. What comes before the beginning? Not before the beginning of life, but the beginning of anything? When anything commences, what comes before? What happens before the outset? I start to write; this is my beginning and what came before doesn't matter.

* * * * * * *

Chenoah R. Ellis
OAC
Lakefield College School

With a Full Moon

by Quinn Damery

For two months, Christopher had been forcing himself through sleepless nights and had spent his bleary-eyed days meticulously building his plans and scribbling his notes in a blank ledger, which he had found in his father's desk. In those two months, he had mastered slipping out of his second-storey window and leaping onto the oak tree in his front yard without making a sound. He could do it in the wind, fog, rain, and, as of last week, had even started throwing in some acrobatic twists during his dismount, just to spice things up a bit. Tonight would be his final exit from his second-storey window – his final loop-the-loop from the oak tree and the blossoming of his best-laid plans.

Christopher's mother had told him many times in his short life that he was blessed with focus and determination, and she often told her friends how amazed she was at his ability to direct all of his attention to a task once his interest was piqued. It was this blessed determination that had carried him through these two months with flawless self-assurance.

He checked his watch: 11:26 p.m, with a full moon. He had climbed out of his window a little bit earlier than usual tonight so that he could keep his promise to Madeleine. He had invited her to come with him, but she told him her parents would miss her too much; wouldn't his parents miss him too? He told her he thought they would, but had made up his mind and decided that the world was bigger than the four streets surrounding their neighbourhood where he had spent the entirety of his life. He said that if he didn't start exploring now, he would never get to see enough of it. Madeleine cried a little when he told her that.

Christopher climbed the drainpipe on the side of Madeleine's house and quietly edged along her rooftop towards her window. He carefully peered into her room, where moonlit shadows ran up and down her walls. Christopher tapped on the glass several times, heard a little bit of rustling on the bed, and then saw Madeleine swing open her window.

"I wasn't sure if you'd come," she whispered to him.

"I left early so I could make sure to be here," he whispered back. Even in their quietest voices, Christopher felt as if the whole world might be listening in on their conversation.

"Are you really leaving? You're not really going, are you?" Madeleine had been asking Christopher these same questions for weeks now, as it became more and more apparent to her that he *was* really leaving, he *was* really going.

Christopher and Madeleine spent the next fifteen minutes bantering back and forth about the schoolyard and the hallways, completely setting aside the fact that this was a final visit. Christopher would no longer play Peter Pan to Madeleine's Wendy, stealing her from her bedroom and telling her about his Neverland. There would be no more talking to the stars about flight routes and pickup points, and no more wild tales of adventures yet to come. A pause lingered between them, quiet and graceful like dandelion fluff.

"You shouldn't go."

"You shouldn't stay."

"People will miss you. Everyone will miss you; your family will miss you... "

“I know. I’ll miss them too, but if I don’t leave now, I might never leave. I might wake up and start telling people I don’t want to see the world anymore, but I’d be lying to them. I’d just be tired of trying to run away.”

“... I’ll miss you.”

In all his pages of notes, in both of his months of planning, after all of his visits to her window, it never once dawned on Christopher that Madeleine would miss him when he left. He hung his head a little bit and watched the moonlight tickle the hairs on his arm. Right there, right then, he admitted to himself all of the things he had kept secret from the world. He had a crush on this girl, this cute pony-tailed mystery who sat one row behind him and three desks to the left. He had hoped beyond hope that she would want to come away with him every time he asked her. He thought about giving up his plans every time she said she couldn’t. Tonight he knew that he would throw his caution to the wind one final time.

“You can come too, you know.”

She paused. She was thinking about it. She could go with him, and she wanted to. He made it sound so fantastic, with mountains and deserts and oceans. He had shown her pictures from *National Geographic*, told her about species of lizards as old as dinosaurs and places where pirates still existed. But she couldn’t leave her family; she couldn’t bear not to see them again. How could he? She knew he loved his mother and his father, but he seemed so ready to just turn away from them. He never ruled out a return home, but he never spoke about one either. She knew deep down that it wasn’t part of his plans. Once he left, he would never want to come home.

Christopher watched her eyes as she contemplated his offer for the final time. It was beyond him to understand why anyone would want to be rooted in one place for longer than they had to be when there was so much more to see. He could feel it out there, but he couldn’t touch it yet. He was busting at the seams to leave this boredom behind.

Christopher watched gingerly as Madeleine slowly tilted her head back up again. He watched her eyes to see if he could read her mind before she spoke. It was something he had done every time he asked her to leave with him, but it was not a trick he had mastered like the silent tree dismount. Tonight, he was just as mystified as always.

Madeleine had rolled the idea around in her head for almost a minute before answering Christopher. She wanted to have all the adventures that Christopher talked about. There would be danger around every corner, but not too much danger, just enough to make them feel brave when they had conquered their terror. But she also wanted to sleep in her own bed at night, wake up on Christmas morning with her mom and dad and baby brother, and see her friends at school every day. She didn’t have the itch to escape that Christopher had, and she didn’t have the fearless spirit that he bore so proudly.

“I can’t leave, Christopher,” she finally confessed.

For the last time, Christopher thought about staying and came closer than ever before. His heart spoke to his head, and the two were a stone’s throw from agreeing that this was where they belonged. But then one must’ve turned on the other because, swift as lightening, Christopher was shocked back to his desire to recklessly abandon everything around him and migrate to whereever his mind might wander and his heart would follow.

“I know you can’t,” he admitted. He knew all along, even when he couldn’t see it in her eyes. He checked his watch. 11:48 p.m, with a full moon. He would have to leave soon if he was to have a good start on his journey.

“Well... goodbye, Madeleine,” Christopher said, as calmly as possible. His heart and head were holding another debate, and it felt as though it might be heated.

“Goodbye Christopher,” she said, and then added, “and say ‘hello’ to the world for me.”

The icy light of the moon was shining exclusively on Madeleine’s face at this moment, as though a cosmic spotlight was directing the universe’s attention to the scene. Inside her moonbeam, this little girl cried for her little boy, her brave little dash who was going to forsake her windowsill for the unknown that lay farther than her eye could see and her mind could imagine. She cried for all the things he would not see – in the world he knew so well and on the four streets he felt he had to flee from.

In the shadows of the rooftop, Christopher slipped quietly down the slightly rusted metal and turned to see Madeleine one last time before forever took its toll. The moon still held her in its magnificent glare, and she hadn’t noticed that he was not beside her anymore. Christopher blinked, capturing this photograph and committing it to memory. He then turned and, silently as an oak tree half-twist dismount, became the adventurer he longed to be.

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Quinn Damery
OAC
Crestwood Secondary School

Dial Tone

by Scott Dancey

The clatter outside his office window twenty-six storeys above the streets of New York City didn't peak his curiosity. He dismissed the noise, assuming it to be a flock of pigeons. The main focus of his attention lay on his clock, which he read every minute. He passed his fingers through his thinning, grey hair and clasped the back of his head. He sighed.

The man slouched even further in his chair. It was 5:17. Almost time. He picked up a yellow envelope from the mess of papers spread haphazardly across his bureau. He took his letter opener to the envelope, slicing it open with all the skill and dexterity of a surgeon, and spilled its contents onto his desk, as from a dehiscent wound. On the envelope was written "Donald Grainger." Mr. Grainger was the man he would be prosecuting tomorrow for a triple homicide. No more guilty a man had the lawyer seen in all his years in the practice.

The ringing of the phone was harsh and abrasive and jolted the man from his thoughts. He picked up the receiver.

"Gustav Gilbertson, attorney-at-law," he said.

At first there was no answer, just a low static interference, as though the caller was in a parking garage. On top of that noise, he also heard a kind of high-pitched whistling sound.

"Hello?" he said again.

"Gilbertson," a man said. Gustav could tell he was whispering, even through the static.
"Yes?"

Again, nothing. The reception continued to waver, and Gustav heard a new sound: very rhythmic scraping.

"Who is this?" Gustav asked. He was becoming annoyed.

"You know," the man answered. His voice almost blended into the distortions.

"No, I don't think I do."

"We met yesterday. We're meeting tomorrow."

Gustav felt his entire body shudder.

"Donald? Is that you?" he asked.

The man's laughter cut through the interference like a knife. Gustav hung up the phone abruptly. He ran to the door of his office and turned the bolt, hearing it click shut with terrible security. Gustav sighed again. He was sweating through his white dress shirt. He loosened his tie a little.

When the phone rang again, as Gustav expected, he walked to the phone, placing his hand hesitantly on the receiver. He lifted it slowly.

"Uh, hello?"

"Mr. Gilbertson?" a clear, defined voice said. "It's Chief Ostling, with the NYPD."

Gustav sighed a third and final time.

"It's good to hear from you, Ostling. I think I may… "

"Sorry to interrupt, but Donald Grainger escaped this afternoon. A cruiser should be at your building in a few minutes."

Gustav was speechless.

"Just sit tight. We'll see you soon," Ostling said, then hung up.

The lawyer dropped the phone to his side, trying to ignore the irritating dial tone it emitted. After staring at it for a while, he placed the receiver back in its rightful place. He began pacing.

The phone rang a third time. Gustav pulled it from the desk and threw it across the room with no hesitation. The bell rang once as it struck the ground. Sweat coursed down the lawyer's wrinkled brow.

Suddenly, a phone began to ring from inside him. Gustav jumped before he realized that it was only his cellphone inside his suit jacket. He pulled it out, removing the jacket as he did so. He abruptly sat down on the floor.

Gustav pressed the "Talk" button and held the phone to his ear. He heard the same static interference and cacophonous chafing sound.

"You thought you were safe, didn't you?"

He was sure it was Grainger this time.

"Where are you, Donald?"

"None of your concern."

"The police are on their way. What do you hope to accomplish?"

"Retribution."

Gustav paused.

"What the hell is that supposed to mean? *You're going to jail*."

"Maybe, but not quite yet."

And that's when Gustav Gilbertson heard it. A gust of wind blew by his building. The way it struck the small alcove outside his window produced a howling effect. But Gustav heard it twice: once from the window behind him, and another time from his cellphone. The result was a disorienting polyphonic experience, like faulty surround sound.

The scraping sound finally stopped, just as Gustav realized it had been coming from behind him all along. He turned to see a man standing directly outside his closed window. The man extended his arms and shattered the cheap glass, sending deadly shards everywhere. The man's arms became lacerated, as did Gustav's horrified face. The man stepped through the alcove and entered Gustav's office.

"Donald?" Gustav asked. His voice sounded as if it was coming from far away.

The man laughed, his face silhouetted against the sunlight pouring in from the broken window. He walked on top of Gustav's desk and grabbed his letter opener before jumping off. When he spoke, it wasn't to Gustav but to his cellphone that he carried in his bloodied left hand. The lawyer realized that his own cellphone was still pressed tightly to his ear.

"You *did* think you were safe," the intruder said, as if confirming an earlier hypothesis. Gustav heard it twice. "I even risked life and limb out there on that ledge, thinking that you had a police detail protecting you before the trial tomorrow. Obviously you don't." He pointed to the door with Gustav's razor-sharp letter opener.

Gustav became aware of the sources of the sounds he had heard earlier. Not static, but wind. The scraping must have been the sound of his shoe against the concrete overhang.

"What are you going to do?" Gustav asked the phone.

"Retribution." His voice seemed to come from all around Gustav.

The man walked toward the huddled lawyer. Vaguely, Gustav heard the sounds of police officers in the outer hallway trying in vain to open his locked door. He found that he couldn't breathe, much less scream.

"Too bad," the man said quietly, referring to the officers outside. "Fortunately, I think we're almost done here... "

He resumed walking toward Gustav at an excruciatingly slow pace.

"... Don't you think?" he finished.

The man raised the letter opener into the air and removed the phone from his ear. He hit the "End" button.

Somewhere, Gustav Gilbertson thought he heard a phone tolling, but it was just his imagination.

The blade swung in a downward arc.

Click.

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Scott Dancey
Grade 12
Kenner Collegiate Vocational Institute

Unrest

by Kerry Hollingsworth

The sun dropped from sight, darkness fell, each light went out successively in its turn, and I was left alone. As day escaped with the setting sun my heart sank, my anxiety dilated, and I surrendered to the dread. Night was a formidable foe, one that I'd battled since I could first comprehend the words of a bedtime prayer that effectively ruined my life:

"Now I lay me down to sleep."

The only way I can keep myself from succumbing to exhaustion is by ingesting excessive amounts of caffeine. Staying awake, although not filled with grace or elegance, is a crafty dance. The moon is deceptive and the stars enchant. The weak of mind and the faint of heart submit in the early hours of night, lacking the will that's required above all earthly things.

Tonight the north wind seemed especially harsh. It found places to penetrate the cracks in my window that I hadn't caught before. I sealed more duct tape over the guilty culprits, ensuring that no draft would breach my walls tonight. I made the rounds of my room: The vent in my floor was covered, all loose articles were tightly secured, my closet was devoid of prowlers, and I had locked each bolt on my bedroom door twice, ensuring the impermeability of my stronghold. Home security is a matter not to be entrusted to someone else:

"I pray the Lord my soul to keep."

It wasn't that I am an insomniac. Insomniacs can't fall asleep. I chose not to. Everyone's afraid of something; that I'm petrified of one of the human body's most mundane needs is inconsequential. Perhaps if the world weren't populated with convicts and felons, or if children's play-areas weren't a breeding ground for sexual predators, I might be more at ease with closing my eyes to sleep, a time when one is most vulnerable.

I lay down in my bed and pulled the blanket to my chin. The covers immediately started tightening around my neck. I gasped for air and tore the blanket away.

Time passed arduously and night crawled in as I lay still as the dead. My ears throbbed from the otherwise ambient ticking of the clock. Or was that my heart beating? I checked my pulse: still alive.

Every soothing breath or blink of the eye was a momentary lapse – sleep's temptation. I can't close my eyes.

Night squirmed with its pervasive figures swaying, creatures tapping, and beasts scratching at the threshold of my windowsill. Shadows danced upon my ceiling, casting two-dimensional manifestations of the nightmares from weaker times past. Each creak in the house was a gunshot. Every mechanical hum drew blood. The silence between gnawed at my gut:

"If I should die before I wake."

There's something to be said about being in complete isolation when lines blur and colours grey.

I heard it. Somebody was in my house. Instinctively, I sat straight up in bed. Every fibre of every muscle was tense. I stopped breathing. Slowly and deliberately, the pounding of feet was amplified. Each step was more intrusive than the last. The gait was long and heavy, with a confidence in its destination. The steps drew near. Terror, it always seems, is not a feeling, but a taste beginning in the back of your throat. It's a blown-out match, a burst airbag, a smoking gun.

The last footstep fell outside my door. His weight shifted... and shifted again. Horrified, I heard the slow grinding of metal on metal. One by one, each bolt came undone to the last. The door was ominously pushed ajar, and the sound of my racing pulse was joined by another.

A face so generically unimpressive was what I noticed first. Then, like a flare gone off in the middle of a desert, I saw the glint of a blade whose functions were numerous, but whose purpose tonight was singular. Whether it was blind witlessness or the last of my dissipating courage, I lunged past him through my violated door to the outside where I was greeted by the sinister beings that lurk in the night. The intruder was on my tail, on the hunt:

"I pray the Lord my soul to take."

The only difference between desperation and madness is the absence of hope. I blindly tore through long grass, spiny shrubs, and the silent yards of suburbia. His expired breath was on the rear of my neck. Branches whipped my face as I ran through shallow woods searching for some evidently non-existent solace. My laboured breathing and clumsy dash were as much as my body would grant. I ran madly with no direction, no destination, and only a motivation.

I dodged barricades and hopped fences while the magnitude of pursuit swelled. His feet would trip mine up, forcing acceleration and pushing my body to a boundary that I'd not reached before. I can't close my eyes; I can't close my eyes.

The sun rose over the horizon. With all hope gone, I slowed up, dropped to my knees, and waited for him to decide my fate. Nothing came. I turned to find that I was by myself, placed alone on a road at the beginning of a new day. The sun had come to devastate the demons that command the night.

I walked home, my bare feet burning on the caustic pavement, my pyjamas soiled and torn. Maybe today will be better than the last. Perhaps the sun won't set today.

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Kerry Hollingsworth
OAC
Crestwood Secondary School

Blue Tiles

by Kristin Valois

You let out a loud sigh as you realize the cart that you've given your precious quarter to has a bum wheel. Attempting to manoeuvre through parked cars to the grocery store entrance, you stop, pat your pockets, and rack your brain for where you left the list. It can't be in the car, can't be on the desk... right next to the phone. Dammit! Pushing the cart is more of an obstacle than you bargained for. Its intense need to be oiled is almost as bad as the constant jerk to the right that threatens to send you careening into the grey-haired older lady who has stopped to feel the lemons. You fumble with your purse, fishing out your coupons carefully collected throughout the week. Aha! Lettuce is twenty cents cheaper this week, and, for Chrissake, you deserve a break once in a while; the grocery bill seems to get longer and longer every week. Plopping your purse down in the cart, you remember how much fun grocery shopping was when you were a kid, back when things were simple and you didn't have to foot the bill. You realize that not one positive thought has entered your mind since arriving here.

You're weaving through the aisles, bypassing the convenience food section because the last thing you need on your mind is guilt for a few extra pounds or the toxic preservatives. You're through the entire store, past the bakery section, where you make up for the lack of preservatives with brownies, scratching the guilt for the extra pounds because life's short, right? You're circling back through the produce aisles, trying not to step on blue tiles on the floor, just like when you were a kid. Except you can't break your mother's back...you compromise…stepping on the blue tile means *your* back is broken. Glancing at the brownies in your cart, you decide salad is going to be on the menu tonight; life may be short, but calories live forever. You hope no one has been noticing your odd aversion to the blue tiles. Radishes, every salad needs radishes... don't step on that blue tile right in front of the stand... and that's when you see her.

It's a perfect double take; your neck snaps around, your jaw drops, and it's all you can do not to let out a sound. She's picking up lettuce, holding it up, presumably checking for brown spots – there has to be a reason it's twenty cents off. The normalcy of the act stuns you. She's still tall. Her hair isn't the white blond it used to be back in high school, but it's still blond, pulled back into a bun. She's wearing a black turtleneck sweater, knee-length skirt, and black heels, and her legs look like they did back in high school too – tan and long and lean. You're almost too afraid to look up, up to her face that you know will also be the same as it was. Naturally tanned with long lashes, perfectly arched brows, piercing cobalt blue eyes. Maridy's still inexplicably beautiful, and you still hate her for it.

She puts the lettuce in her cart, and as she turns, you catch a glimpse of her face again and feel relief. One thing has changed – she wears glasses now. Out with the cheerleader image and in with the scholarly look. You guess that fifteen years out of high school probably should bring about some change. After all, you look completely different. As well you should. A lot has happened after high school, and you're a different person now. You don't need approval from anyone else. With that realization, it hits you. You have to hide! You can't be seen here, in a grocery store, undignified, clutching your coupons and pushing around your brownies! She cannot see you here, like this. You feel your face go hot and then cold as you try to nonchalantly pick up radishes. Concentrate on the salad. Radishes, mushrooms... with a dread in the pit of your stomach, you realize you need lettuce. You should have picked it up your first time around in the produce section, instead of hightailing it to the bakery department. How could you have forgotten? You're making salad... the spray nozzles start spurting water overtop the radishes, and it startles you.

You're not sure how to deal with this. She's over there; you're here, but you need to be over there. You can't do anything more to avoid it: you need the lettuce for the salad and, for Chrissake, the least you can do is be healthy. After all, she might not even remember you. Not many people you see from school do. Too bad the important thing is that you remember her. You think that maybe fifteen years is a long time to hold a grudge – that's supposed to be unhealthy. High blood pressure and heart disease are the number one killers among women. Your hands are clenched on the bar of the shopping cart; "Smile as you Save" stares up at you. The thought crosses your mind to just leave the cart and run. You absolutely despise seeing anyone from high school with their fake smiles and the vacant look in their eyes as they search their brains trying to find you. You're simply not remembered. You've faded into the background between their "big games" and "crazy parties." They might remember the jokes, but not the girl. Maridy would hardly remember a girl who followed her everywhere, idolized her, and wanted to be her. Your hands relax; you rub them together and fish for cream out of your purse to massage them. You take a deep breath, in and then out, and feel the cool wash over you. It's nothing at all; people see people from their past all the time. This time is different though. You know she can't be avoided; you can't play the tile game with her. You're not a lonely kid anymore, begging to be accepted. Besides, you know you look silly, hopping over the blue tiles, trying to get to what you need. It's the same way with Maridy. She's like a blue tile, but this time the rules have changed. If you step on her, she won't break your back.

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Kristin Valois
Grade 12
Thomas A. Stewart Secondary School

Prisoners of Another Man's War

by Leah Burnie

"I can't escape, Joseph."

"It's okay, Tommy Boy. I am not afraid, and I am sorry that we're both still here."

It was a cold winter night, and from his dimly lit window Thomas watched the people walking home, as he stared bitterly through the metal frame. He had been wandering in and out of consciousness this evening, like a drunk staggering in and out of his local pub. He sighed deeply, turned away, and curled up in his cheap metal cot to keep warm.

"You know," Thomas began, "I remember Father would come home around this time from the factory – or the whisky house – with another story to tell us about the war."

"Oh, yeah," Joseph recalled, "that sure as hell put us to sleep didn't it?"

"Of course," Thomas joked. "When he tucked us in, that man really made me question a thing or two about life. 'You boys are lucky there ain't no damn fightin' now. We had it rough, seein' fellas die right after we shared a good laugh or a good drink with 'em. I tell ya, it just ain't right what those "Germs" did to the world. Could make a man damn near crazy just to think about everything he'd miss, bein' there, dyin' there. I'm still sorry I was there."' Thomas laughed at the thought of his father's repetitive war speeches. He had them all memorized. He paused and shook his head. "It's ironic though, isn't it? A couple of years later we were fighting those same damn 'Germs.'"

"I suppose," Joseph answered, "but at the time we didn't all have much of a choice, so we signed up anyway."

"That's true," said Thomas. He sat up looking sullen and weary. His handsome auburn hair fell dull and unhealthy over his scarred forehead, and was tousled from his hand that frequently ran through it. His long lashes swept over his deep-green eyes like moss on a weathered rock. His young war-torn face was scarred with guilt, regret, and accumulating sorrow. The laugh-lines that once outlined his bold lips were fading, along with the memory of laughter. He risked a smile in remembrance of the past.

"Joe?" Thomas said, his smile vanishing as if it had never appeared. "I think this place is driving me mad. People come through here all the time, pointing, giving me looks. I don't want their damn pity. I don't even know what I did to deserve a place here."

"Well, Tommy Boy," Joseph said in comfort, "I understand. The drugs and nonsense being passed out here is enough to drive the strongest man into madness."

"Not to mention those dark shadows that lurk on the walls," Thomas said uneasily.

"What shadows?" Joseph asked, confused. "Don't be so melodramatic."

"Honestly!" Thomas cried. "Every night I see these dark shadows flash quickly on the walls; don't you see them?"

"No," Joseph said, almost mockingly.

“Well, sometimes I try to hide under the bed, but I’m too afraid to move. I hate this damn place; it makes me claustrophobic.”

“That reminds me of the time when Dad found us drinking his whisky in the barn,” Joseph chuckled.

“Oh yeah, and we hid under his bed because it was the last place he’d look!” Thomas laughed at the memories; those were the greatest times. “Then there was that time in high school when Mr. Harvey came to class still drunk from the night before and tried to teach us physics!”

“Yep, good ol’ Bobby Harvey,” Joseph said with a fading smile. “He died in cousin Georgie’s platoon a few squads ahead of us, somewhere in Poland.”

“I forgot he enlisted,” Thomas said sadly.

“Yep,” Joseph said, “well, why not? He had nothing left here anyway. His wife died of heart failure and his boy ran away. He might as well die fighting with nobility than with a bottle halfway down his throat.”

“It’s kind of like what Dad used to say of the war, ‘we were all victims,’ and so was he,” Thomas said dismally. “‘Machines trained to battle another man’s fight.’” Thomas’s eyes drifted toward the window again, looking at the now deserted city streets.

“So this is hell,” Thomas thought. *“It must be. I’m in a cell with little to do but wrestle with myself and my sins. My mind is aching, and my emotions and memories coil like these twisted sheets, and tangled, uncomfortable jackets.’*

“I wish now I never signed up,” Thomas said, so that Joseph might hear him. “I missed out on my world by trying to defend someone else’s. The things I miss most are the people and places I am beginning to forget. So much for being a war hero. Where is Dad when I need him most?”

Thomas shook his head and lowered it so that his tearful eyes could be hidden. He began to tap his foot on the bedpost.

“Calm down, Tommy Boy. You know sometimes I think you didn’t deserve a place here, or in this war; the world needs more of your philosophies,” Joseph said serenely with a wink. “It’s okay, Tommy Boy. I’m sorry... ”

Thomas suppressed a quiet grin. “I can feel them coming now. It’s getting colder,” Thomas shivered. The door of the cell slowly opened as two squat females hustled into the room.

“You can turn on the lights, Thomas, if you want. I was just coming to give you your medication,” said one woman kindly. She had thick square glasses and a neat brown bun on her head behind her white nurse’s cap. The other gazed at Tommy underneath short black bangs. She turned on the light.

“Good evening Charlotte,” Thomas said weakly, squinting at the brightness that entered the room. “I was just telling Joseph how cold it was in here.”

“Joseph?” questioned the black-haired nurse, confused. Thomas didn’t like her very much; her smell resembled the smell of sour milk.

“Oh, I see,” Charlotte sighed. “Would you like another blanket, dear?”

“Only if it isn’t white,” Thomas said sneeringly. “I’ve grown to hate this colour.”

“Yes, of course dear, I understand,” Charlotte replied. “Would you like the light kept on?”

“No!” Thomas groaned. “I can see more of that colour, and those shadows will come back.”

“Those are just the vehicles outside, dear,” Charlotte explained. “They can’t hurt you.”

“I know that!” Thomas snarled. “Just, would you please get me another blanket?”

“Of course, dear,” Charlotte said soothingly.

“Charlotte?” Thomas inquired as the nurses turned to leave the room, setting down his pills and a glass of water.

“Yes, dear?”

“I’m not crazy. I just feel like a prisoner... you know... in here.”

“Of course, dear.”

Charlotte and the other nurse then left the room, closing the door behind them.

“What happened to him?” asked the black-haired nurse, as they began travelling down the whitewashed hallway. Other patients were peering tiredly out of the tiny windows at the top of the other doors, longing to find a way out. The quick short steps of the nurses across the concrete tiles sounded like a small army as they echoed off the tall, brightly lit ceilings.

“Quite sad really, Margaret,” Charlotte replied. “He was found wandering around England after the war, alone and silent. Luckily he still had on his dog tag, so he was brought to the police; one of his squad leaders was contacted, and he transferred Tommy here, near his hometown.”

“Why?” asked Margaret.

“Well, apparently his brother took orders from him to check out an abandoned house, in a small town in Italy, and poor Joseph was caught and taken prisoner into the enemy’s hideout somewhere in town.”

“No!” Margaret cried, shocked.

“Yes,” Charlotte said sadly. “He was reported lost, but Tommy left his squad to look for him about a week later and found him lying, horribly wounded, outside of an empty schoolhouse. Apparently Tommy held him until he passed. His squad found him still clutching Joe’s dead body about twelve hours later. His father comes often to visit, but poor Tommy doesn’t want to see him.”

“Why not?” Margaret asked dully.

“He doesn’t know what to say.”

Back in his room, Thomas eyed the empty bed beside him and said, “do you remember what you said to me Joe, the day I found you?” He smiled weakly.

“I said that it was okay, Tommy Boy. I am not afraid, and I am sorry we are still here.”

Thomas sighed and let a tear fall as he gazed out the window once more. “I’m sorry too, Joe.”

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Leah Burnie
Grade 11
St. Peter’s Secondary School

Rippled Glass Observations

by Emily Ann Lamond

The water falls gently. You feel drops on bare legs as a sunbeam pours into your eyes. You stare down at flat stones, dark with a patch of moisture as glass reaches a point above your head. There is something about a greenhouse, the scent of dirt in your nose and the crispness of tulips, the intimacy of clear walls. It is damp inside the greenhouse, but it is a pleasant mist from mechanical devices, not the heaviness of a warm wet day. Here, it is possible to breathe deeply. The sun always seems to be lighting up the vivid greens and browns that crowd the glass room. You pass through an arch of fig trees and come across a dark dip filled with lazy goldfish. It is very silent in a greenhouse. Take long sniffs, sigh, and smile. There is no one to see you.

A cast-iron bench appears at an opportune moment when rest is desired. You sit for a moment in calming contemplation. A young couple strolls by, fingers entwined, casting bright glances around the room. He watches her spill a drop from a curved leaf, her upward gaze caught in a moment. His hand lifts as if to draw her close, but she is already there. Feathery fringes of plant shade the meeting of silent lips. You look away wistfully. An older man stops and stares into the shimmering pool of orange and gold bodies. A felt cap hides thinning hair. He strokes a purple iris, and a diamond falls from his eye to drench petals. He is distant from the world of roaring cars. A tired mother with a small girl points to a bending rose, its face opening into the face of the child. There is a high chirp of delight, breaking the tranquil length of forgotten time. You get up and turn to enter the adjoining brick building full of books, falling under a new law of solitude.

Voices murmur, keyboards tap, pages turn. The teenagers on the computers giggle foolishly as a little boy comes running. His anxious father, with an armful of books, chases after him and pulls him to the checkout. A girl shelving books slouches by with earphones blasting. In a far corner, two gangly boys watch movie credits with blank looks. People as plants. You feel drops on bare legs as a sunbeam pours into your eyes from a large window high above. A woman drinks from a water fountain, straight hair waving over her face as she bends. You stare down at smooth stone, moisture gathering and snaking outwards towards you from the fountain's trickle. There is something about a library – the smell of ink, paper that contains a hint of cigarette smoke, and the sense of knowledge hidden within. The air is regulated, moisture-free.

Sunlight streams over green and brown covers that crowd the shelves. You pass through aisles, occasionally picking up a book. A student lies in the middle of the stacks, absorbed in research. There is a worn red chair visible at the end of the shelving. In it perches a middle-aged man with a vacuous look. A few books lie unopened in his lap, mingled with a thin yellow sweater. His hands cradle his belongings in a moment of suspense. You move away. In an alcove at the back of the library lies a table covered with opened texts of all sizes. A tiny girl kneels on a chair and leans her whole body over a picture book. Her blond hair tumbles around her face as she flips pages and mumbles to herself the story she sees. She looks up from the pile of books and stirs, uncomfortable with strange eyes. Her words soften like dying rain. You slide away, so that she might not be disturbed.

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Poems for a Blonde-Haired Girl

by Russell Woods

I wake up. There is no clock and the windows are all covered; there might as well be no time. I wake up and I write you a letter. I send with care two hundred hopeful little words and a handful of poems that I kiss for good luck. I kiss your name on the envelope with my sleepy lips and seal it away back in the drawer with all the other letters to you. Even if I could find the courage to send my desire to you, I don't know where you are, where you've been, or where you're going. I don't see you around anymore. I suppose we didn't speak much near the end. There were just broken glances in between lovely and complicated glass.

This envelope reminds me of you. Sitting here, I can feel it being so cold without ever touching it or drawing it close. It is white and pale, yet too hard to be snow or innocence or purity. The envelope is a spitting image of you. Your name is upon it, scrawled in my worried handwriting, and I am thinking about your bleached blonde hair. You never wore your hair down, but that's the way I am thinking about it now. It's sweet and typically beautiful as it curls by your breast. With it tucked up and swirled away, I wouldn't have guessed it to be so long. I always thought you could have been a model, but for what, I never knew, maybe whisky or boxing gloves – if you weren't wearing any of that oily crow makeup. I close the drawer where all your letters are and yet, you don't just slip away as you have before.

I write a few more poems before I go to the kitchen or the shower. Only one is about you, and the rest are terrible. In the kitchen the morning is cold, and my feet are made from porcelain, like a doll or a toilet. I crack an egg in the frying pan, and it looks like a train at the end of a tunnel as it starts to hiss. There is no music in the world that is this kind of music. I sit and eat in silence with a warm coke. The yoke starts to look like your face. I think you were prettier than a broken egg, but it is hard to remember now.

We never made love, and maybe that's why I'm thinking about you now. You didn't believe in that kind of thing and knew the exact word for a pipe cleaning between friends. Another girl had once said "touching souls," but that's hardly as truthful. I turn on the shower and make sure the water could boil me if I wasn't careful. It is splintered mercury diving into my shoulders, and nothing else would feel so absolute. And in the steam on the shower doors, I write your name a thousand times over and then let the letters fade so I can replace them all over again. 1 suppose this is suffering, love sickness, but it feels more like a nine-pound weight in my guts. I have seen you in the shower over and over. You asked for your towel to dry your hair; you walked about the place naked. In the kitchen you would stand bare in front of the window and tell all the neighbours to stick it.

Washing the dishes before I leave, I remember when you would wake up in your stained old sports shirts and grab the closest bottle you could find, and I would make you up fries and a tough, purple steak. You'd finger through old magazines because novels had no pictures; you'd believe in cleaning the pipes before I left for my day, and you continued fingering through old magazines. The dishes are done, and my hands feel like the hands of a drowned old lady.

I'm catching the bus. The morning is unadorned; there is no dew on leaves and no sympathetic breeze, and you never wore jewellery. Thought it was too girly. You would roll down the window on the busted-up nights, and while other girls I had known wore big badges made of silver and gold, it wasn't for your ghost skin. Red lipstick made you look like a cannibal, but still you wore no fancy things. The women on the bus are wearing rings and necklaces resting on skeletal collarbones; they've got sick blue on their eyes, and it's done better

than you used to. I couldn't blame you for not caring like that sometimes. It made you savage and rude. It made me want to break windows and smash TV's and drink wine from a box during the hot 3:00 a.m. hours of July. The girls on the bus, pretty and skinny, couldn't do that.

I'm writing another poem at my desk when I've got nothing but time. It didn't start out with you in mind but found its way there eventually. The poems you used to write me come to mind. You wrote them drunk and sexy as hell, and they came out drunk and stupid as hell. I wish I had kept them, but they're in a big city garbage bin now. All the ink is probably some hobo's tattoo. I always told you it was good, but you knew I was drunk and that I couldn't write poetry either. I could only listen to Charlie Bukowski reading his poems and say the fat old fool drinks as much as us but just uses the drink better.

I've got no thick needle pain for food and the drugstore is across the way. It smells like you smelt, I'm sure. Other men are talking all about football and the women walking by, and I'm looking at my reflection in a spoon from my coffee. The traffic is busy today. And all at once, I can't help but see you some time ago.

You were lying across the couch in my underwear and my t-shirt and my scent. You held a pillow between your legs and turned off the TV. The room smelt like a railroad and felt like a coal mine – and there you were. Stretched out, you had a vacant motel loveliness. We were both sweating in the heat, and I unplugged the phone, closed the curtains, and lit the mailbox on fire. Your lips looked like rust, and the memory tells me they tasted like kerosene. The heat was getting to us, I recall.

The memory seems so new. Yet to be made. You held the back of my neck so I could feel your chewed-down nails. You didn't care, in this memory; more than ever, you didn't care.

We spent hours not caring, forgetting about all the things in the world outside the tiny olive room, and we didn't lie to each other about chances we may have had. The thoughts we thought out loud seemed so far away. We spent hours lying bare-skinned, tangled on the couch, where we fell asleep in our sweat and desire.

I go home full of courage made from longing. I pull out the drawer with all of your letters, taking my time to kiss each one. I mail each one to somewhere you might be, hoping these symbols find you, tell you, and bring you back to me.

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Closed In

by Emily Ames

The musty smell of herbal remedies and vitamins pours out of the small store like air being released from a balloon. This odour escapes and then dissipates into the fresh afternoon fall breeze. An elderly lady emerges from the doorway and carefully, with the help of a rickety metal cane, inches her legs forward to a low-standing wooden bench. She slowly bends her knees and moves her body onto the platform that is now beneath her. Her petite figure seamlessly disappears into the background of the building, which is now behind her. Her long, ragged '50s paisley brown dress and worn-in white sandals hardly contrast with the rusty bricks that make up her workplace and home. The only feature that really jumps out from this scene is the woman's hair. The bouffant-pompadour style best characterizes it; frizzy, white puffs flow up off her pale skin like that of a tormented Troll doll.

She takes a moment and surveys the familiar setting that lies in front of her: a typical two-lane road lined by a narrow concrete sidewalk. Cars speed past; their colours blend together like flashes of light. Music blares from a nearby store. A few people pass by on the other side of the street, where a substantial three-storey building is marked by the sign "Young Men's Club Association." The woman turns her head ever so slightly to her left to look upon the neighbouring building. A barbershop service is set up in a closet-sized room. Its doorway does not allow anyone over five foot six to enter without crouching. A generic "Closed" sign hangs from the window of the door.

The woman then takes out the obituary section of *The Globe and Mail* and spreads it out with two arms in front of her. The columned rows, neat headings, and rectangular pictures blur into one mess as her eyes seem to transcend the page that she is reading and rest somewhere in oblivion. The noisy sounds of cars and blasting hip-hop beats all combine into a droning hum as the elderly lady sits, dead still on the wooden bench in front of her tiny brick store.

Two young women approach where the lady is sitting. Their intrigued eyes gaze past her motionless body and travel into the store from the mildew-rimmed windows. Their expressions shift from captivation to smirks of disgust and contempt. When they are a few paces past the dive, one remarks, "That place should be shut down or something!"

"Yeah, like who would go there to buy their health food when all that stuff must have been sitting around for decades now? It's as if the whole place has been stuck in time for the last twenty years. I mean, just clean the store up already. Maybe then that horrible reek of stale vitamins won't scare away customers. It sure has warded off health inspectors. Or maybe that's due to that lady. She's always sitting there, aging away along with that goddamn store," the other girl quips in as the two walk away from the storefront, their ignorance in tow.

The elderly woman remains sitting on the bench for a few more minutes as if a trance has come over her. Leaves fall from nearby trees, foreshadowing winter's imminent arrival. They spread onto the sidewalk ground. Due to their change in colour, they are hardly recognizable from the ones of summer. Yet that simple transformation so easily alters its surroundings. Leisurely, the lady folds up her daily and makes her way back into the store.

She is greeted with the familiar, comforting mouldy smell once again. A small clearing on the linoleum-tiled floor leads her to a shambolic desk where bills and letters lie under boxes, piling up on either side. The desk's messy state is mirrored around the store. The room is jam-packed with products. Bottles of all colours line the walls, snaking their way around the rows and

circling the place with labels. No signs appear on the walls to direct customers to specific products. More boxes, leaning against the walls, clutter the floor and aisles, creating a large mound at the far back right corner. A small circular clock is mounted on the far wall. One arm ticks away incessantly as the lady perches herself onto a high stool, hardly visible behind the heaps of mess on her desk. Her bony shoulders curve forwards as if the strength of gravity is slowly forcing her towards the ground. The woman reaches out her hand and turns on the nearby radio. The sound of guitar feedback fills the congested room and then abruptly turns into a mix of fuzz over the sound of classical music. The reception keeps on getting worse, but she doesn't seem to notice, or really care. She just sits there blankly staring out at her stuff, her heaps upon heaps of stuff surrounding her like faded memories that at any moment could pass away, but never do.

When the clock strikes four, as if on cue, the lady switches off the radio and descends from the stool. She grabs a long, shabby fur coat and heads out the door towards the road and onto the sidewalk. Her body shakes as the cold, unforgiving winds attack her stockingless legs. Making her way towards the back of her store, she takes from her pocket a set of keys. Approaching a forest-green Volkswagen Gulf, she unlocks the car and sets herself on the faded-blue driver's seat.

She is well-accustomed to this ride. It takes approximately five minutes. Out of the parking lot, down the one-way street, up another, a turn here, down a busy road there, and up into a much larger parking lot than the one she began in. The elderly lady parks the car and hurries into the adjacent one-storey building, passing by the large yellow double-arced sign.

The smell of grease fills the restaurant. There is only one cashier on duty and only one other customer in line. The elderly lady looks at the signs that address the menu. They are large and easy to read, but she doesn't need any reminding of what she always orders. When it is her turn, she mumbles something practically inaudible, but the cashier seems accustomed to this and rings in the lady's order with ease. The bright decor of the place (or the promise of free smiles) does not appear to alter the old woman's mood a bit. She picks up her food-filled tray in a zombie-like way and sits down at a table overlooking the road.

Leaves continue to fall, this time from a few oak trees that line the driveway of the restaurant. The elderly lady sits there alone, consumed by her meal and her inner thoughts. She does not pay any attention to the changing leaves or the way in which they gently sway to the ground. Her slowly deteriorating coat is protecting her now from the change in temperature, and her tattered sandals don't seem to mind the cold ground too much. Bit after bit, she digs away at the processed cheese and microwaved ground beef. The world around her shifts and moves but doesn't shake the elderly women from her business. Once her meal is finished, she clears her tray and heads back out to her waiting vehicle.

Five minutes later the elderly lady is back in her store, surrounded by the consoling bottles and stale air once again. Yet this time, she does not sit down at her stool or venture into the evening air to rest on the bench. Rather, she picks up the plastic broom that is positioned against her desk and begins sweeping. Small dust bunnies fly into the air as the layer of grime is swept from its spot. With a sweep here and there, the elderly lady randomly stirs up the dirt on the yellowish-white floor. She cleans it as if there is no need for a dustpan. She slowly makes her way to the back right-hand corner of the store where a mass of Birkenstocks boxes are piled to the ceiling. Some remain open, with hints of brown orthopaedic sandals peeking out, while others are tightly closed. Larger boxes have been thrown into the mess, along with random medicine bottles and smaller boxes, creating a disorderly mass of junk.

The old woman continues her brushing, making her way around the main stacks, pushing the lonely pill bottles to the side beneath the aisles and behind the boxes. She begins sweeping more quickly now, harder, pushing the grime farther to the sides and deeper beneath the aisles. She then squeezes between two large mounds of boxes. There in front of her lies a body, a man's figure, outstretched, face down on the dirty floor, boxes all around. The elderly lady carries on her sweeping as before with quick strokes pushing everything under more mess, never having really altered the state of things from how they were before.

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The Watcher

by Amanda Motyer

The boy who called himself the Watcher was walking, in plain sight and yet not seen, towards the park which he liked to frequent. It was a beautiful day, crisp and overcast. The bright oranges and greens of the trees were contrasted and sharpened by the rolling masses of grey above them. But the Watcher, deep in thought, did not notice.

Invisibility. Such a tantalizing concept. Invisibility, the Watcher knew, was not, as many thought, a matter of making yourself actually invisible to the human eye, but of making yourself so normal, so ordinary, that people just wouldn't notice you. And to all appearances, the Watcher was just plain ordinary. No one gave him a second glance, and he was left to do his watching.

He remembered that he had once been told that there were two kinds of people on the planet: the people who lived their lives and the people who watched others living their lives. He, obviously, was in the second category.

The Watcher reached his destination and stood in his usual spot, casually leaning against the black chain-link fence that surrounded the property of 7 Moore Street, watching, waiting. Thinking. About people of course. People were his specialty. Some watched birds or the night sky, but the Watcher watched people. People had many faces, he'd learned. Not necessarily good and bad faces, as was the common misconception. There were many dimensions of good, just as there were many dimensions of bad. Each new situation could provoke a different response from the same person, therefore showing a different face.

His thoughts were finally interrupted as two people entered the park. They were both girls; one appeared older than the Watcher himself whereas the other could have been no more than five or six. She wore overalls and a striped shirt, and her golden hair was drawn into two pigtails on either side of her head. In her arms she carried a red ball.

The older girl sat down on one of the wooden park benches, pulled a book out of her bag, and began to read. The little girl suddenly threw the red ball and hit the older one in the head.

"What was that for?"

"You said you would play with me."

"I'm busy."

"But you said…"

"Leave me alone, okay? Go play on your own." She went back to her reading.

Dejectedly, the little girl went and picked up the red ball and then, in a fit of anger, threw it as far as she could. The ball bounced once, rolling to a stop at the feet of the Watcher. Slowly, he bent down and picked it up, turning it over as though it were a precious and long-lost treasure.

It was not perfectly smooth; small bumps on its surface gave the impression of sandpaper, but the colour was flawless, the red completely unblemished. Closing his eyes, he clutched it to his chest and felt the warmth of childhood innocence seeping through him.

“It’s mine.”

The Watcher opened his eyes to find the little girl staring up at him.

“What?” he asked, bewildered.

“That’s my ball.”

“Oh… yes. Here you go.”

The girl took it, and with one last glance up at him, quickly darted away. Discomfited, he also hurried away, but in the opposite direction.

The red ball. It had exuded power, the kind of power which is obtained by an object from someone’s attachment to it. The fact that a little girl treasured her little red ball made it priceless and irreplaceable. Such a concept was difficult for the Watcher to grasp, since he himself did not seek comfort from familiar objects, and yet this red ball, which did not even belong to him, was somehow different.

The Watcher had hoped he would never see her again. But he did.

He was on his way to the park when he heard a wail. The Watcher looked up and felt his heart suddenly stop beating in his chest.

The little girl, whose name he did not even know, stood in front of the black chain-link fence. The sun shone off her golden pigtails and the tears running down her cheeks. There were three other children nearby; in age they could not have been any older than the Watcher himself, but the Watcher would not have been capable of the looks of menace on their faces. It was not these looks that made his heart stop beating, nor was it the sight of the little girl crying. He had very little understanding of such emotions since, being a watcher, he seldom experienced them for himself. No, it was not those things. What made his blood run cold was that the menacing older children had taken the little girl’s red ball, and this violation was worse than anything he could have imagined. But doing something, anything, would be out of character for him. It was the little girl who convinced him otherwise.

She saw him, and her sad, pleading eyes latched on to his, beckoning silently. She had seen through his invisibility, and this time it wasn’t because he had picked up her red ball. It was this, her ability to see him, to notice him, and not have her eyes simply slide over him and move on which prompted him to action.

Despite his inexperience, his movements were smooth as he swiftly crossed the street and without a word, took the ball from the older children and gave it to the little girl. There was nothing to be said. The Watcher’s simple presence and his act of suddenly appearing out of nowhere were menacing enough that the offenders backed off.

“Thank you.”

He looked down at her. She had stopped crying; the treasure was hers once more. He was now being looked upon with gratitude, gratitude for doing something that anyone would have seen needed to be done. He turned to ensure the retreat of the offenders, and when he turned back again, the little girl and her red ball were gone. He never saw her again.

It was only after he had returned to his former existence that he realized what he'd done. It hadn't been just a simple act of kindness. For a minute – and it was really only a minute – the Watcher had not been a watcher; for a minute, he had been one of those people living their lives, one of those people who *were* watched. But only for a minute.

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Reflections: Pillars of Bliss

by Kevin Romanuk

He goes on a walk. Not a typically common or fashionable activity for someone his age, but one from which he derives much pleasure nonetheless. He walks not to be alone with his thoughts, but to give himself the time when his thoughts don't have to be alone with him.

He walks along a path that he has trodden countless times before. Over the years he has witnessed its former lushness be trampled away to bare dirt. The path knows him. It has stored his footprints and compared them; it has watched and felt him grow tall and strong. The path knows that when his strides were much shorter, he would use it solely for his own purposes: to reach his destinations, to use a convenient shortcut, never stopping to acknowledge the path itself. Now that his strides are longer, he can cross the path in a fraction of the time, but strangely, he does not. Strangely, it takes him much longer to walk this path. He knows the reason for this. By taking his time, he hopes to make amends for his previous unappreciative use of it.

He notices a sign. Clearly the sign was not erected recently. The sign has been there as long as he has walked the path. He has never read it. Today he does. "No Trespassing." He laughs to himself. He now knows how he will repay the path. They could place a thousand of those signs, and he would still walk it. No man should hold the right to restrict another from a path that only wishes to be walked upon and enjoyed.

At the end of this path is a place he comes often. His lake is accessible from this place. He could have gone to the waterfront on his own property, but he prefers this shoreline instead. He has tried to share this place with others. He doubts that it means the same to them. Perhaps he does not know what it means to them. He picks up a rock. Holds it in his hand. He notices a smoother rock, a superior rock. He picks it up as well. He throws the first rock into his lake, then the second. The second goes farther. Each disappears under the surface. He will never see either rock again. He sits down at the water's edge.

All his life he has had this place. Most of his life he has taken this place for granted. During his childhood he wanted nothing more than to leave. He wished he lived in the city, a place of convenience, a place of utility, a place to grow with others. Now that he knows his life will take him there regardless, he wants nothing more than to stay in this place and protect it. He wants more time here. More memories.

The gentle waves create a soothing melody as they slap against the shore. The wind is trying to make the water escape onto the land. The wind doesn't know that the water would prefer to stay where it is. He gazes out over the endless ripples. He remembers his friends in this place. He smiles; there is still time to bring them here again. His mind wanders, as a teenaged mind will, to a love of his past, a sexually charged encounter that happened in this very place. These memories are very dear to him. He cherishes them. He is grateful that he knows the value of good memories. He holds onto them as they are created.

It is time to go home. Not for any particular reason. Maybe others will worry if he is gone too long. His eyes see a rock just under the water, perfectly smooth and polished by the endless ripples. He wonders if this is a rock he has thrown years ago, returned from beneath the surface to be thrown again. He picks it up. He knows that if he throws this rock, it will go farthest. There is no splash after it is released from his grip, only a crash. He smirks. Someone will have to erect a new sign on his path.

Before he enters his house, he takes a deep breath and then spits on the ground. He always does this before he goes inside for the night. He has never really questioned the reason. He assumes that he does it because it is his last chance to do so during the day. He wonders if he does it to leave a mark of himself. To state to nature that he has been there.

He does not want to sleep. There is too much on his mind. Too much that warrants his attention. He opens his back door and sits on the pillared brick structure that lines the back of his house. He sat on rocks earlier; now he sits on bricks. He wonders if someday no one will notice a difference between the two. He wants to know why he wants to know so much. All day he has explored the minor details of his life. He explores these details of his life again at night, for contemplating life itself is too daunting a task at this late an hour. He listens to the ripples of the water once more.

There is music, the culminating festivities at some invisible midnight soiree. It travels across his lake so clearly, that had he known the words, he could have sung along. His mind stops racing. He listens intently to the words of the unseen musician. He wants to be there with them. He wants to join in on these festivities and bask in the company of others. He wants to socialize with this invisible group.

Suddenly, the hour, the next day's tasks, the desire to join in don't matter anymore. The voice of this man, rolling across his lake, up the slope to where he sits is powerful enough to block all other thoughts. The music of man blends so seamlessly with the sounds of nature. He cannot move, nor does he want to; he is mesmerized and trapped in the beautiful symphony as it washes over him, coating the land with a blanket of perfect harmony. He has read about moments like this, an author's attempts to describe the indescribable. The characters would cling to such moments desperately, willing to give up anything to prevent it from fading away. He always told himself he knew that feeling, lying to himself in a foolish attempt to quell his own desire for such a moment, but now here, in this place, in *his* place, he truly knows the feeling.

The music stops. Perhaps the song is over. He cannot say for sure. The individual words and notes ceased to be decipherable long ago. He now hears only the sounds of the waves again. They seem inadequate without the sounds of men to accompany them. He hears laughter and conversation. Clearly his invisible guests give no consideration to him. Their lives continue. They do not know that a stranger in the night was just with them. He wants to be angry with them, angry at the unseen, angry with the fact that he is unseen. He wants to throw his perfect rock across his lake to get some kind of acknowledgement from them.

He cannot be angry. He is anything but angry. What they gave him briefly far outweighs that which they took away. This is one of those moments he will hold onto forever. He decides that sleep is now possible. He whispers or yells a thank you. He cannot tell which. He turns to go back inside. He takes a deep breath. He does not spit. He does not need to.

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Jet Lag

by Jessica Waite

I was thinking about Haley again. I knew now that I had been thinking about her since the first flight yesterday, but it had been an unconscious type of thinking. With her image in my head, it was a kind of absent-minded stirring of my own emotions that wasn't unlike fixing coffee in the early morning. It wasn't until I was in the hotel room in Athens that the cloud of jet lag had cleared enough for me to realize what my mind was up to. In a way, it was the new scenery that was beginning to change my life.

You see, it seemed to me so far that Greece was nothing more than a narrow, ancient bridge between Rome and Mecca, crossed mostly by motorbikes and Vespas. Here on the coast, it smelled like the ancient body of water that might flow beneath that bridge, and if you cared to climb to the roof of your hotel, there it was smiling and waving, a monster of deepest blue gilded by sunlight. Looking at the Mediterranean, I got a sense that, while it was constantly moving, it was also completely unchanging. These were the same waters that tossed and shook jovially while Caligula ordered his troops into the surf, swords drawn, to attack Poseidon.

And here on the shore, Athens was pale and wet with fog and rain. I could remember our massive coach bus performing a tedious dance routine through the glassy, narrow streets, the windows soaked and grey. But here in the hotel, we were all safe and warm. All around us, Athens spilled out, its square white rooftops breaking through a low-lying mist up to the mountainsides. The mist broke like waves upon the harsh, sunny Grecian cliffs, seemingly above the weather, and rolled back to drown us in its weight.

There were four of us, flung out like tired, dirty clothes across room 306. My closest friend, Kat, was propped against the pillows of one tiny hotel bed, the consistency of which reminded me more of gym mats than mattresses. Her hair, usually red and straight and gorgeous, had started to frizz, her bun coming apart. You knew she was tired because she didn't have the energy to fix it – or perhaps, like the rest of us, she had simply forsaken the mirrors when she'd given up attempting to dust off the unflattering signs of travel. Her eyes were closed and she was breathing deeply.

The remaining dirty laundry, Dylan and Peter and I, were also in varying stages of unconsciousness. Dylan was most like a discarded bra, her arms draped over the back of the chair by the window. She was small and brunette, eyeing her pack of smokes on the nightstand across the room, blinking like a girl on tape set in super slow motion. Her boyfriend, Pete, was curled up in a ridiculous position against the second bed. He was crumpled like a worn pair of pants, stroking his makeshift 17-year-old beard. It was a strange, mottled, almost calico collection of colours, which didn't go with his fair, blond hair at all.

And I was lying across the foot of Kat's single bed, chewing my fingernails. I could feel my hair sticking up all over the place, though I remembered it being flattened at the back after the 9-hour flight. At this point, however, I didn't care enough to fix it.

We were four helpless travellers, struck dead by jet lag.

Soon, my thoughts were gambolling with one another in the delirious way thoughts do when you're beyond exhausted. We were thousands of miles from home in a country I couldn't have pointed out on a map, listening to the miniature honks and horns of the miniature European cars. They cycled through the roundabout outside our hotel with furious repetition, and if you didn't

watch closely, you could believe that it was the same cars and motorcycles, caught in a hellish cycle of forever cutting one another off (or of searching for the right exit), like some ancient Greeks punished by the gods.

In an hour, we'd be expected upstairs for supper. I didn't know how I was even going to make it to the elevator. I chewed my fingernail and thought about Dylan's smokes. I was surprised that she had given up on them. Her surrender spoke volumes about how tired she must be.

My fingernail gave way beneath my teeth, and at the same time I felt my mind slip away from the smokes and the roundabout. It was swept clean, like a tabletop that stood between two arguing lovers. Suddenly Athens was gone, and I made a startling realization about human nature as its place was filled by another image of Haley – *deep hair, larger-than-life laugh, small white teeth, and grey eyes that took you in and stirred you up and set you back down with a dazzling, cloudy flash that you would never be able to forget* – sleeping on the plane. It was a glance I'd stolen despite myself. I hadn't spoken to her since I cut her out of my list of acquaintances in a desperate attempt to get her out of my head. Eventually, I more or less stopped thinking about her. It was a tedious truce met with my own confused emotions under delicate terms: they play dead around Haley, and I'd feed them all the boyfriends I could to help. Unfortunately, "all the boyfriends" turned into one horrendous mistake that lasted a year and a half. He had given me a sloppy goodbye kiss before I got on the bus for the airport, and I had ruffled his sandy hair in a way that I was sure he could misconstrue for affection. Told him no European boy would steal my heart. I wanted very badly to love him. But I couldn't, not when she existed, even as a glimmer in my mind. When we had started dating, it had been worse. When he shaved, I could imagine that I was kissing her lips, not his. I could imagine her smile, somehow devilish just beneath its still, student-council surface. But it had been six months since she had crossed my mind in any definitive way.

Until today. Whatever day it was, jet lag had brutalized my internal clock. In my confused state, Athens was nothing more than a sea of greyish Mediterranean surf upon which the Parthenon bobbed and waded, high up on its hill. It was narrow streets that merged and split and spiralled together with no semblance of order. It was unidentifiable scents and bitter orange trees and a hundred million free-standing kiosks. It was angry drivers with homicidal mopeds. The imported cigarettes were too cheap, the food too expensive, and the liquor too available. This was what I knew so far.

I stared at the ceiling, working on my next fingernail. The ceilings here were just like the ceilings in Canada, but they weren't Canadian. They were Greek ceilings. Curiously, that observation triggered a realization: no matter how much distance you put between yourself and your life, no matter how far you run from that sole, catalytic problem, you are the same person. Your problems are still there, packed tightly to you, just as surely as you packed your toothbrush. Ironically, it was at the realization that I was the same person no matter where I was in the world that I felt myself begin to change. If I could accept that a change of scenery would not induce a change of heart, then maybe I could accept that I could not outrun my feelings for Haley. Maybe I had to confront them. Feeling a painful twang in my stomach, I twisted on the bed. How could a thought be so simultaneously uncomfortable and exciting?

I thought about the others and wondered what dark skeletons they had accidentally packed, fresh from their closets. I imagined us each worrying the same problems while our view of the world widened, our perspectives changed, and our lives altered each day we were here. And we had only been here one day... yet Haley had edged back into my mind. All it took was a glance.

I saw her sleeping and felt the way the shape of her face fit back into my mind with the ease of practice. It felt so good there that my stomach fluttered briefly.

There was a knock at our hotel room door, and Pete jolted awake. It was a tour guide or teacher, summoning us to supper, I knew that. But all the same, I felt a hot blush settle through me. My thoughts were on a girl, and before I could help myself, foolishly I imagined it was her at the door.

I got up from the bed to tell whoever it was that we were on our way. And if it was Haley, I knew that with my jet lag and exhaustion, I would be able to speak nothing but the truth.

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Jessica Waite
Grade 12
Crestwood Secondary School

Private War

by Dan Sisson

It is 5:30 a.m. Yawning, he draws himself from the warm cocoon of his bunk, gradually letting his mind join his body's wakeful state. While not naturally an early riser, the young private has become accustomed to this daily ritual synonymous with military existence. Much has changed in his life since his somewhat impulsive decision to enlist, his waking habits not of primary import among them. His intentions are honourable, he is told, sacrificing some degree of his youth in the service of a higher cause. As his mind gradually clears itself of the night's haze, he rises from his bunk, stretching in anticipation of the advancing day.

An acute twinge across his back reminds him of the withered mattress on which he combats the night, a tightness of the shoulders and neck prompting recollection of the previous day's labours. An icy shower marks his sudden return to the conscious world, the chilling spray submerging any hopes of reconciliation with the hours of darkness. The dry razor claws his face, leaving it crimson and raw. Now dressing, he draws the heavy standard boots over his aching feet, the throb in his muscles peaking briefly as he pulls on the brown fatigues, synchronizing his body with the colours of the dead world around him. The private steps to the barracks' entrance, leaving the shelter of the building for the universality of the exterior environs.

Fall in.

The sergeant paces, billowing dust encircling and shielding him from sight as he evenly observes the men aligned before him. He stops momentarily, rising to full height and drawing breath as he commences the morning briefing. He speaks of duty, of purpose, and of sacrifice. A comrade, it seems, is held captive and soon to be executed. The private listens and contemplates his superior's words: an aggressive midday assault on an enemy compound; the liberation of their captured fellow. The private smiles internally at the pure heroism of the task, a swell of pride rising within. The sergeant completes his address, all body motion ceasing along with the spoken word. He stiffens sharply and salutes, the collected dust of his uniform drifting off with the rapidity of the gesture. In unison, the collected body of soldiers mimics the gesticulation, a simple organism, an extension of the Alliance's might. The private, automatic in response, acts in accord with his fellows, unaware of the motion. His thoughts are elsewhere, drifting to an endangered peer and glory as yet unattained.

Dismissed.

In preparation for combat, one must maintain a calm and objective mind with respect to the potential for injury and harm. Imprudent and unwise preoccupations serve only to distract the combatant from the necessities of war: survival and selective victory.
- The Alliance Handbook of Military Might

The private breaks from the group, solitarily moving towards the armoury to select and arrange his kit for the noontime mission. Bands of servicemen surround him, technicians inspecting and repairing damaged machinery, pilots scrutinizing charts and maps, religious infantrymen kneeling in prayer, atheists reading or playing basketball. Each maintains routine, pursues superstitious activity to sustain luck and good fortune. The private has no such notions of providence.

Implements of destruction border the entrance to the armoury. Flickering caged bulbs line the ceiling, casting the room in a frail antiseptic glow. The private hastily selects his equipment,

shifting and sliding awkwardly among the steel cage walls of arms. Upon retrieval of the necessary gear, he promptly departs, unnerved by the oppressive presence of death within.

Upon entering a combative situation, the soldier cannot lose objectivity. Becoming overwhelmed by the chaos of battle serves only to reduce one's ability to analyse and examine surroundings. As an individual succumbs mentally to the distress of war, the physical hazards propagate exponentially.
- The Alliance Handbook of Military Might

Whomp-whomp-whomp-whomp.

The private stares blankly at the passing terrain, mesmerized by the homogeny of its structure, its singularity of colour. The world of dust and sand stretches beyond the horizon, a hollow sea infinite in magnitude, devoid of life. He turns away from the vacant land and surveys the interior of the helicopter cabin. The soldiers about him are now without ritual, separate from the relative security of the camp and the superstitions therein. The aircraft carries them independent of their own desires, the indefatigable chariot. Their faces are indistinguishable and indefinable, shielded and enclosed by heavy masks to save their lungs from the thick dust. Only the eyes are visible, each pair staring into those of a comrade, sharing the solidarity and stillness of the moment. No words are exchanged, nor fears expressed. One vomits in a corner, another whispers a silent prayer, others vacantly study their feet. The private closes his eyes.

Bring 'em home.

The helicopter hovers solitary and secluded in the open sky. Ropes descend from its belly, meeting the earth in an elemental bridge. The men grasp the cables, leaping from the sky to rejoin the land, their territory, their element. The private approaches the edge of the cabin, reaching toward the link to earthen stability. Fire explodes below. Hostile combatants lie in wait, casually observing the arrival of Alliance forces. Simultaneously, they leap from shelter, weapons raised. Alliance soldiers scatter, diving, rolling, ducking towards safety as the inferno encloses them. The private grips his weapon, training it upon unfriendly faces. While initially overwhelmed and disrupted, the private's peers gradually siphon control from the clandestine opposition, returning the world to eventual relative calm. The private plunges from the sky, sliding along the conduit to the ground. Its shipment discharged, the helicopter departs, draping the area in a blanket of churning dust and earth.

Swiftly and silently the soldiers traverse the ground toward their objective, a squat building in the near distance. The group travels wordlessly, vigilantly, and guardedly, observing the rooftops, fearful of unseen threats. The private walks slightly apart from the cluster, wary and unnerved by the sudden onslaught. As he passes a shaded side street, a quick motion draws his sudden attention. Weapon primed, he creeps toward the source of the distraction, alone and divided from his fellows. The weighty silence is stopped by the even sound of his heavy boots, a dense and decisive thud.

Gunfire.

He drops to the earth, shielding himself. The weapon discharges a second time, revealing its location to the private. He readies himself, swiftly rises to his feet, and fires. The formerly veiled foe drops his rifle, the metallic device clattering at his feet. The private stares silently as his adversary falls. Child conscript. A boy of ten years lies within a crimson pool, the bullet having pierced his heart. The private's grasp upon his weapon relents, the firearm falling to his side.

Explosion.

The concussion propels the private from his feet, driving the breath from his chest, and sensation from his mind. He seizes his weapon and sprints toward the main street where he left his fellows. As he reaches the corner, he drops to a knee and peers into the boulevard. Fire. Blood. Dust. The city centre, not 50 metres north of where he stands, lies in rubble. The target building is scattered across the promenade, an oppressive crater in its stead. Bodies are strewn in haphazard fashion through the street, playthings forgotten by an unconcerned child. The private wanders the ruins, surrounded and encased with death, subjugated and repressed by the enveloping devastation.

War is not as complex or convoluted as common conviction would suggest. Ultimately, there is but one purpose and goal of any conflict: survival. The concept of victory and defeat is merely an alternate interpretation of this fact. For victory, one must not succumb to that which befalls his opponent, endure beyond opposition's endurance. To win, survive.
- The Alliance Handbook of Military Might

A sole survivor, the resultant hero. Survival is often a callous and cruel reward, to emerge isolated and solitary from the chaos, naught but breath in the lungs and blood in the heart. An untrained Alliance pilot was the root of the "accident," mistaking his mission objectives for those of the infantrymen. An honest error, not a consequence of malice or antagonism, but simple incompetence. The pilot responsible later commits suicide, the grief and guilt overwhelming his young mind, additional blood spilt in the cause of victory.

Whomp-whomp-whomp-whomp.

The private thoughtfully observes the passing world, the endless expanse beyond the horizon. The helicopter calmly glides through the sky, carrying its payload towards its ultimate destination, unperturbed and diligent in its task. He surveys the interior of the cabin where medics are feverishly and fruitlessly attempting to revive the near-dead and the long-departed are stacked in plastic bags, hermetically sealed from the outside world. The mound of the deceased gradually swells as the hopefuls become the hopeless. The private removes his helmet, hoping for fresh air untainted by the blood-stained mask. As the sickly odour of his fellows enters him, he vomits. He returns his gaze to the world outside the cabin, wordlessly minding the sands below. His eyes relax, the rolling dunes pulsing and dancing before him, the heartbeat of the desert in time with his own.

Welcome to war.

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Dan Sisson
Grade 12
Lakefield District Secondary School

Only Skin Deep

by Amanda Steel

I wish I could tell you what I felt.

You're standing a good twenty feet away from me, one hand holding your skateboard, the other in your coat pocket. You stand in a small circle of friends, talking in a low voice, with an uncanny mixture of ease and excitement. Nevertheless, it strikes me as odd that I see you at all, since you weren't supposed to come back. You were, after all, out of my life.

I look at the scene with déjà vu, because this is where I first saw you months ago. Last March your hair was shorter, whereas now it wings out from beneath your hat. The people who surround you now were the same people who were with you back then. Last March your sweater fell on you loosely as well, but suited you all the same. A new brown shirt has the same effect today. The main difference, however, is that last March you were smiling.

Suddenly you're looking right at me, and it's not too hard to figure out what you're feeling. Shocked by what I see in your eyes, I take a step back, forgetting my lifetime rule: don't ever look scared. I've seen dislike and resentment in your eyes before. I've seen contemplation and concern. I've seen passion and warmth. This time though, I see nothing but fierce contempt, the will to destroy. The storm behind your brown eyes is unnerving. It takes only a few moments to figure out how you could justify such a look of disdain. Soon enough, the answer registers: you must have heard what I've done. Everyone else here knows about it, but I have to wonder who told you. Perhaps you found out from the same friend who sparked our falling-out months ago. It wouldn't surprise me in the slightest. I go to rub my forearm, more out of nervous habit than anything else, but I catch myself in time and regain composure. I look away and resume reading my book alone against the wall. I am all too aware of the constant glances my way.

Everyone here knows me. Some people are graciously indifferent to me. Some people might still call me a friend, but all they can do when I catch their eye is grimace and look away. I can't blame them, considering the situation. The clearest people in the picture are the ones who won't be calling me a friend for quite a while. Not after what they found out.

I hear my name whispered again, so I throw an insolent stare at the girl gawking at me. She closes her mouth and turns quickly, looking slightly embarrassed. I nearly smirk at her awkwardness, but I restrain myself. If you saw, it would mean direct confrontation with everyone, and I don't want that right now. I see more glances at me out of the corner of my eye. I snap my book shut, a bit exasperated. It's obvious at this point that I'm not about to sink back into my novel outside. Nor am I about to continue taking this kind of alienation, I decide, so I head for the warmth of the indoors. I head for the double doorways, which you and your friends block with a circle.

I walk slowly, seemingly unconcerned. I try to walk steadily, not looking at the ground, but avoiding your eyes. In ten seconds, I will be inside. I wish I could tell you how I feel.

"Hey."

You drop your greeting carelessly, but I feel the sting in the undertone. I swing my head slightly to look at you and match your gaze, trying to bounce back every ounce of pain you're sending me. It seems to have momentarily worked; you stare at your feet for half a second. When you look up, I respond.

“Hey.” Now, how articulate am I? Nevertheless, I learned a long time ago that it matters a whole lot more how you say something than what you actually say. There’s no need to waste a structured, “good afternoon” on you. I wouldn’t have meant it. I’m four feet from the double doors. You’re leaning against the one that doesn’t open. I find myself looking at my feet when I’m two steps from the door. I have never hated my shoes more. I’m less than half a foot from the door when my fingers find the handle. The group has gone very quiet. Two girls seem to have stopped breathing. I go to pull the door open when your voice pierces the silence.

“Can I ask you a question?”

I turn lazily to face you and cock my head somewhat to the side. My hand is still on the door. I stare right at you to let you know I’m listening.

“How does it feel when you cut yourself?”

Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee. Your head is tilted to the side, as if you have no stronger desire than to consider my answer, but the coldness in your eyes tells me I could drop dead before you, and you wouldn’t even blink. The way you carry yourself is impeccable.

I close my eyes and look away, flinching at your icy voice, colder than the October air. I strain myself to look back up, but my eyes are not completely dry. I even face you and say nothing for a few moments, thinking back to last March and how well it started. I remembered March to be my completion, though it was nothing but my undoing. I remember how I would have given anything to make you happy, but would have been happier just to give you up.

I felt lonely when you were with me, but emptier still when I was with him. I felt ashamed when I saw what I’d done to us. I felt scared when I thought of what you’d do when you found out – and powerless when you did. I felt like breaking when you walked away from me. I felt shattered when my friends did too. I felt angry and desperate and cold and I remembered how the little pain could get rid of the big pain. I found my scissors and let you go.

I draw a steady breath. I open the door and sink into the door frame.

“These cuts are only skin deep.” I’m almost shocked at my monotonous tone. Still looking at you, I take a few steps backwards through the entrance. “I don’t feel a thing.”

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Amanda Steel
Grade 11
Kenner Collegiate Vocational Institute

The Structure of Us Above Water

by Emily Wilkins

She looked at him through the grey sheet of moisture and wondered why he held his hands like that, spread out to the sides as if he was bracing for an impact, which we now know he was. He stood like a skin-and-sinew cattail in the loamy shallows, reflection north by northwest, a whitish smear on the surface stippled with mist like bad reception. The ice had sent his skin crawling with the legs of millipedes, and, with her nose only inches from the water, she observed that some frogs would still be buried down there like living fossils.

He had wanted to take the boat off its blocks, he said. Maybe find a way of chipping the old paint off the hull and refinishing it. He liked to think about the gleaming boat over the sloe pool and the way the summer crop of algae would adhere to the varnish and trail like siren hair behind it.

His trousers were rolled up to the thigh, exposing lanky limbs with a scattered growth of dark hair that disappeared into the murk like twin rotted trunks. She wished he would dry his feet and put them back where they belonged – in his socks and loafers. Some of the stones were still frozen together.

But he didn't know the ice the way she did; he hadn't been born around ice, learned its patterns, learned not to trust it. She knew that ice melted and then came back, always came back, and these interims of warmth could not break her confidence.

She asked whether he knew the feeling of stepping across the permafrost line? He had to ask her what she meant, but while she tried to explain it to him, he let his eyes drift back over the lake, imagining the answer for himself. He didn't know why she needed to put contour to these things, giving the melt a topography that she could trace knowingly and mistrustfully back and forth as winter faded in and out. For her there was one season: winter. Everything else was deception.

But to him the evolving seasons were a kind of affirmation that nothing had yet gone stagnant. If a season stretched on for too long, the body filled with a white noise that no euphoria could dispel, a physical anxiety like too much coffee on an empty stomach. Well, she crouched moodily at the water's edge, eighteen years of winter setting off a cacophony in her ears. Not exactly beautiful, not the sort of girl you could row around a lake. But the rain harmonized perfectly with her irises.

In her left hand she held a blackened stick that had softened from its long rot beneath the ice. It seemed a strange gesture, and he would wonder why she held it so tightly that the loamy flesh pushed up beneath her fingernails.

Where permafrost starts, she said, you can feel it like a new shirt. And she watched his back, picturing his face and the expression there, the fleeting ice-colours. Winter had taken his smile and worn it thin, although she thought she caught its haggard shape now, still internal, in his posture.

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Emily Wilkins
Grade 12
Peterborough Collegiate Vocational School

The Sunset

by Max Lafortune

I can still see the grass swaying in the wind as if nothing would ever change, the long, fluid blades stretching as far as the eye could see. How ironic it was that this summer would teach me more about change than I could ever have imagined. Mom got promoted; I got a new bike; he left…

Perhaps it started on that oh-so-famous last day of school awaited for so long (maybe since the first). I had officially finished grade one, and we were the oldest kids in the world, or so it seemed. It hadn't yet occurred to me that the biggest kid in my life was not a kid anymore. I ran all the way home with my schoolbag full of books to put away for the next few years. Little did I know that their true value was not found in grade one, nor would it be discovered for many years afterwards. Math, Science, English, French, and Art. I didn't really care about anything but art. I was an artist, just like him. I was always an artist and was sure I would never think differently. My sketchbook told a story, my story. From Australia to astronauts, from superpowers to sunny days, it was all there. Some sketches we'd drawn together and others, I had drawn on my own. It was an emotional toolbox, filled to the brim and full of excitement, frustration, happiness, and sadness. There were no rules, no plans, and no limits. We filled the last page together. It was a masterpiece full of colour and love. We made it together with nothing special in mind. Those were always the best ones, though. When it came to naming it, I could never do it justice, so I didn't. Instead, I cherished it, keeping it safe for the two of us. I would never lose it, I said to myself.

August 1st wasn't what I had expected it to be; something had happened. I knew my mother well enough to know that no matter how much she assured me that everything was fine, something was up. I thought maybe she'd lost her job. If only it had been that simple. August was by far the best month, however, so surely things would brighten up. It was sad to see the summer coming to an end, but nothing could have beaten those daily swims and ice cream sandwiches. "We need to talk," she said. I wondered what I had done wrong. "It's… it's him," she managed, before a tear streamed down her cheek. Numbness. I couldn't quite comprehend this statement, and yet it had resonated so soundly within me that I could feel the emotions pouring out. I was sad, then scared, then angry. I ran upstairs while trying to fight back the tears and grabbed my sketchbook. I searched for a surface upon which I could dispel my feelings, but realized that the book was full. I came to the last page, and without considering my actions, tore it out and began to crush it. It was so unfair. Why was this happening to me? What had I done that was so wrong? Then I saw the crunched-up sketch in my hand and could not believe my eyes. What had I done?

The next few weeks were hard, harder than ever before. We visited every day as if the hospital was my second home. I stayed as long as I could, sitting beside the bed and often dozing off beside him. He would say, "Don't worry, kid; artists never die, remember?" I wish I could have believed him. But then he said something that made me think. "Whatever happens, you know how you can find me," he offered.

And then it happened. I awoke one morning with my mom beside me, giving me that look which I had come to recognize. It was as if time had somehow sped up in the few weeks that we had left together, and now it felt as if they hadn't happened at all. With my family close beside me, I paid my respects, and we said goodbye for the very last time. I couldn't recount the feeling if I tried. It was unlike anything I'd ever felt. But, as the days turned to months and the months to

years, I gradually forgot all about the time we had spent together; instead, I became caught up in the less important things in life.

Grade 12 was busier than ever, with university applications, quantum physics, and varsity sports. One day, Mom asked if I would grab her a box out of the attic with some finance information in it. I picked up the box, but then noticed something I hadn't seen in quite a while. It was my sketchbook from my early days. I opened it hesitantly, only to find some memories I had long since forgotten. I carefully flipped through, absorbing each sketch one at a time. Then I turned the last page, and there was something extraordinary. It was my drawing – our drawing. At first, I couldn't remember if I had kept it or not, but then I was certain that I had discarded it on that oh-so-awful day. I picked it up carefully, as if not quite believing it was real. It was a sunset, a vivid portrayal of our favourite setting. Featured were two silhouettes, one of a grown man and the other of a child sitting next to him. The two observed the natural beauty, one which could not be matched. After a while, I heard the stairs creak as Mom came up to see what I was doing. "Oh," she said, "I couldn't let you part with that." We embraced without speaking, almost as if we knew what the other was thinking. Then she whispered, "turn it over." I spun the sheet to reveal a message that had not previously been there. "He wrote it to you," she revealed. It read: "You know I'm here. Don't ever forget." I couldn't help myself, as a single tear hit the page. At that moment, my grandfather was closer to me than he had ever been. Finally I had found him, and this time it was for good.

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Max Lafortune
Grade 11
Lakefield College School

The Cry of the Loon

by Samantha Petrini

The sun had yet to break the horizon. The water was perfect – the only disturbance coming from the even strokes of the paddle. The strokes were fast and powerful but made no sound. Those strokes were what I needed to try and calm myself. I was paddling with muscles that had been trained over the years so that I didn't have to stop and think. Thinking was the danger zone and would bring up so many horrible thoughts. Everything was still fresh in my mind – the screams, the hurtful words, the slap, and the loud bang that came as I slammed the door. The sound of the loons' mournful cries were something that usually calmed me, but today all it did was make me feel the anguish over what had occurred between my mom and me.

My parents had always said to their friends, "Tammy is such a strong, capable young woman." "We are so happy to have a girl like her." "She's our little angel." Where had those words and ideas gone? So many things had changed over the last few months. Nothing was the same. Everything had transformed and it was all too fast for me.

It started with the death of my father. My dad died of a heart attack about two months after his 47th birthday. I was always close to my dad, and because of that I was so bitter that a great man like him was stolen from me. I would never find sympathy in my heart for death. I was so bitter and angry that I completely shut everyone else out, including my mother. She said it really hurt her because I wouldn't talk, but I didn't care; I was hurt myself. That was when the fight between us started.

My mom is the type who wants to sit down and talk about her feelings, and that is one thing that I really can't do. I hate to communicate when I'm upset. During the past two months we would acknowledge each other, but that was about it. Early this morning I was up doing my routine, wandering around the house, because I can never sleep anymore, and that was when my mom heard me and decided to come and talk to me.

"Tammy, I'm really concerned that you are doing yourself harm because you won't talk about anything that happened that day. You need to talk about it and listen to me too." There was a slight pause, and then she continued, "I'm afraid that you feel responsible for what happened to your dad."

That hit me right where it hurt. You need to know that the day my dad died, he had been out training with me for my upcoming rowing match. He had complained that he was tired and weak, but I convinced him with my puppy-eyed face to come anyway. Later on that day I found my dad lying on the ground, dying, and I had no idea what to do. I just stood there and watched him die. I don't remember too much beyond those few moments, but they remain so clear to me. I do recall that I started yelling for my mom, and when she finally arrived, it was probably too late. I remember her screaming at me to move, to call 911, to do something. Her screams turned into painful sobs as she held her dying husband in her arms. The whole time I just stood there as this awful image was seared into my memory.

I do feel responsible because at his funeral everybody was talking about how I didn't do anything. That was the worst part. I already knew that I should have done something, but I froze. Now he's gone because of that. Everyone had nothing better to talk about except what I didn't do. Those whispers and disgusted looks hurt me in a way I never thought that I could hurt. In no way could they think that I would just let my dad, my best friend, die as I watched. They had no right!

My mom was right. I did feel responsible for my dad's death. The problem for me was that now she was addressing this. I had the words imprinted on my mind that she had screamed at me. "Run! Go get help now!" The look on her face was something that haunted me even more than her words. I was always so used to seeing the look of a proud parent, and this expression, this look of disgust and hatred, was a shock to me. Now she was saying that she was concerned about me. Every instinct told me that my mom hated me because I took away her husband. I really felt that I couldn't talk with her since I believed that secretly she blamed me too. I had this feeling because she couldn't even look me in the eyes for the first few weeks after my dad's death. She was avoiding me when I needed her the most. All of these feelings came out when she finally confronted me.

"Tammy, I just really feel that we need to talk about that day." That was how she got the ball rolling.

"I don't need to talk about it. I just want to forget all about it, not drag it back out of the closet. I know that you blame me and I blame myself, so let's just leave it at that." I really didn't have enough sympathy for my mom to even talk about it with her. I could see in her eyes that what I had said really angered her, and I prepared myself for the worst.

"How could you even accuse me of thinking something like that? You are my daughter and I love you. I don't blame you for anything that happened. Didn't you hear what the doctors said about your dad? His heart was weak and could have given out at any time."

At this point I just lost it and broke down crying. "Remember those words you screamed at me? You kept yelling at me to do something. Now you want to pretend as if you never once blamed me. I saw your face! I heard your words, and afterwards you couldn't even look at me until now. I know you blame me! I blame myself! If I hadn't pushed him to come training with me, if I had known what to do, then maybe he would still be here. I miss Dad just as much as you, but I am the one who has to live with all the 'what if's.'"

I knew that I had gone too far by accusing her, but she wanted me to talk, so now I was talking. "I hate you for blaming this all on me. I hate that you're the one here now instead of Dad!" Those words were like a fatal punch.

"I don't blame you, Tammy! Every day I wish I could have changed what happened, but I can't." My mom fell to the floor and sobbed, "How could you even wish I was dead?"

"I wish you were dead every time you act like this. Mom, I hate you!"

For the first time my mom stood up, looked me straight in the face, and screamed at me, "well, you only have me." Then she did something that neither she nor my dad had ever done before. She raised her hand and slapped me hard right in the face. I stumbled back accepting this blow, but then she did it again, all the time saying, "I love you, Tammy."

I ran. I went to the only place where I felt safe and comforted – the water. I got into the canoe and paddled as hard as I could. The tears were streaming down my face, but I didn't notice because my whole face felt numb. My mother had done something I had never experienced before. She had hit me.

I sat in the canoe a long time, hoping that my mom would call out for me, but I heard nothing. Then I remembered all the hurtful words I had said to her. It was as if I had slapped her

in the face too. I did love my mom and couldn't imagine her dying either. She didn't deserve to hear those words.

Things had to get better, and maybe I was the one who had to set things right. I sat in the canoe and watched the sun break through the horizon. I gazed at the awe-inspiring spectacle. In a matter of seconds something as extraordinary as a sunrise changes into the ordinary sun. Change was something that I would have to find a way to embrace. The loss of my best friend, my father, was something I could never accept, but I would have to move past it. My mom was not the enemy. Death was the enemy, but it was the inescapable enemy that I would have to face. My mom had experienced the death of her husband, her friend, just like me. I needed to set things right. Then I heard someone calling my name, and when I looked, I saw my mom standing out on the shoreline, waiting for me.

As I began to turn the canoe around, I saw a loon surface right beside me. It gave out its mournful cry, as if calling for its missing child. As I watched, a gosling began to surface.

It had responded to the cry of the loon.

* * * * * * *

Samantha Petrini
Grade 11
Lakefield District Secondary School

1807

by Celina West

The boat rocked back and forth; the only sound to be heard was the crash of waves against the large cargo ship. The bright sun cast looming shadows against the hull as flecks of seaweed surfaced in the water, adding a green tinge. The night before had brought a dreadful storm, one which caused the ocean to open up and almost swallow the ship whole. But now, all was beautiful and calm, and the day was promising to be glorious and bright. An observer off the coast of Africa would have seen the sailors mopping the deck and enjoying the sun, unaware that in the cargo hold below that deck another storm was raging.

The captain of the boat looked down from his platform, taking in the sight of his sailors and the endless ocean in front of him. A man of fifty, he was by no means young; many years on the ocean had weathered his once handsome face. He took one last look at the sun and descended the platform.

"Derrick! Go down below and bring the animals up for some fresh air," the captain said, a sly smile spreading beneath his long, matted beard.

"Yes, Sir," replied Derrick.

Derrick stopped his mopping and slowly moved towards the hatch in the deck's floor. He dreaded the moment of pulling it open, staring deep into the darkness of the cargo hold below. The smell was always what disturbed him. Working on the docks for most of his life, Derrick had seen and smelt many different things. And yet, the stench that rose from the darkness below was enough to make him retch. Derrick could feel the hot sting of bile rising in his throat, the tears glistening behind his hard-set eyes. It was the smell of hundreds of bodies and carcasses packed tightly together. It was the mixed stench of sweat, urine, and feces, as well as an overpowering smell of vomit. That was the worst. It was a smell so rancid that no one above board could ever escape from it. No matter where Derrick went, it followed him like a ghost, haunting him and reminding him of what he had witnessed.

As he pulled open the door, low moans and muffled whimpers swept through the darkness; they knew what was coming but could not muster the energy to fight. It was a losing battle for them, something they had come to accept long ago.

Descending the stairs, Derrick gazed at the horrific sight he had witnessed every day for the past three weeks of the voyage: naked black men and women, chained together side by side, covered with their own feces, unable to move. Their lifeless eyes, the whites in stark contrast to their dark, sunken skin, stared into the distance. Derrick and the other sailors unlocked the chains, unable to look at the human beings they were treating like animals.

"Let's go!" bellowed Derrick, as the men and women made their way up the stairs. There were those who were too weak to move. The dead from the previous night would have to be dealt with. The captain would find some way to dispose of their bodies later – in front of everyone, even the children.

Derrick squinted from the bright sunshine as he returned to the deck and proceeded to group the blacks together, shouting with an anger he could not explain.

“Time for the entertainment, men,” growled the captain as he surveyed the group in front of him. The years of being at sea had made him tough and hard, a man unwilling to compromise his pride and dignity for anyone. Many of the sailors worshipped him because he was “able to deal with the filthy vermin” in such a “befitting way.” But Derrick despised the man. As yet another man was being whipped and beaten, Derrick found himself unable to watch the scene before him.

The quieted whimpers of a young woman brought Derrick back to reality. A young girl, probably no older than twenty, her body weak and motionless, was being carried by four men to the side of a ship. There sat a large piece of wood, a shaft from an old carriage, with two sets of chains attached to either side. Wasn’t this the girl who had lost her baby last week, two days after its birth? The captain had decided that there would be “no need for a baby where the cargo was going,” and he had tossed the crying infant overboard without a second glance. The young mother had collapsed in tears, screaming for her child. Now she was about to meet the same fate as her son. Derrick could see in her lifeless dark eyes that she had given up the fight; she would never be profitable now. As the captain pushed her towards the edge of the ship, the only sound was the splash of the ocean as her body sank below the surface.

“Who’s next?” the captain asked, leering at the slaves in front of him.

“Pick me,” thought Derrick. “I cannot endure this massacre any longer.”

And with that last thought, First Mate Derrick Anderson threw himself overboard, leaving the carnage behind.

* * * * * * *

Celina West
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LoveStuck

by Rachel McLean

She knew she shouldn't be there. She knew she was just asking for trouble by showing up at his house, but she couldn't stop herself. She needed to see him; she needed to know if they could get past this, past what his parents had said, past all the obstacles that seemed to be being thrown up in front of them; she needed to know if he loved her the way she loved him.

She wasn't really sure what she was expecting; in fact Shannon had no plan at all. She knew she couldn't just walk up and knock on the door, but she had no idea which room was Craig's, so she stood outside the Weston mansion shivering in the September chill. *I should have brought a coat,* she thought as she wrapped her arms around herself trying to stay warm.

"What am I doing here?" she said out loud. Her blue eyes locked on the house, searching for a sign that coming here had been a good idea. She knew that family was important to Craig. After all, that was one of the reasons she had fallen so in love with him. She knew he was loyal, but part of her hoped that he loved her more. She slid her cellphone out of her jeans and dialed Craig's number. There were tears pushing at the backs of her eyes; she just needed to know whether or not to give up. She had been raised to fight for what she wanted, and all she knew was that she wanted this; she wanted *him*.

Craig was lying on his bed with his cellphone resting on his chest, trying to decide what he really wanted. His parents had given him an ultimatum: break it off with Shannon or lose his trust fund. It should have been an easy choice, right? Pick the girl he loved over his family's money... but it wasn't that easy. Craig knew his parents and he knew that when they said trust fund they really meant his place in the family. His family had always been everything to him; that was true until Shannon came along and he fell head over heels in love with her.

His phone began to vibrate, the caller ID showed Shannon's name. Craig hit the ignore button. *I can't do this. I can't not be with her...but how do I give up my family?* His thoughts were racing as he tried to figure out what his heart really wanted.

Shannon hung up her phone, worried. It wasn't like Craig to not pick up. He always had his phone on him. *Maybe he really did choose his family....No, I can't believe he would give up on us.* A single tear rolled down her cheek. *I guess I need to stop doing this....*Shannon wasn't the type of girl to wait around for something that she knew wasn't going to happen. She wasn't the type of girl who needed a guy to make her happy – at least she hadn't been, but then she met Craig and that all changed. *Why did love have to be so complicated?* Taking one last look at the house, Shannon started to walk away. She wouldn't do this; she wouldn't keep putting herself out there when she was getting nothing back....She may have been raised to fight for what she wanted, but what she wanted didn't want her back. There was no point in hanging on to something that clearly wasn't going to happen.

There was a knock on Craig's door as his little sister Anna barged in, not waiting for him to respond.

"C-RAIG!" she wailed in her seven-year-old voice. Her brown hair was a mass of curls. "Whatcha doing?" Anna crawled onto Craig's bed with him. He smiled at her. How could he give this up? He knew that if he picked Shannon, he would be turned out of his house so fast he wouldn't even have time to think. His family didn't marry girls like Shannon. They married girls who were raised to throw dinner parties and have perfect manners, not a girl who worked as a

bartender to put herself through school and didn't give a damn what anyone thought about her. In his family you didn't marry a girl who didn't have a dad and whose mother was an alcoholic. It just wasn't done. Anna curled up beside him.

"Craig... what's wrong? Why are you sad?" Anna asked. Craig smiled at her weakly.

"What makes you think I'm sad, kiddo?" He grabbed her and started tickling her. Anna jumped and giggled. *I can't choose Shannon over my family. I just can't.* Craig's heart broke at the thought of never seeing her again, but how did you give up this way of life? How did you leave a seven-year-old sister and parents who would bend over backwards for you? The answer is – you don't.

* * * * * * *

Rachel McLean
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Thomas A. Stewart Secondary School

The Drifter

by Jenna Gordon

Heat waves and mirages shimmer in the hot air just like the last glimpses of decency in this thoroughly corrupt world. A booted figure, swathed in flowing black robes, wanders at an even pace, seeming not to feel the heat or the loose sand sticking to her exposed flesh and stinging her eyes. She's like a speck of black sand in a desert full of white dust. Thinking of anything is better than letting the heat and regret drive her mad.

It's odd how silent the Badlands are, she muses with little empathy, when no one is screaming for blood or mercy. In the last thousand years, humans have gone from bombing each other into submission in the name of resources, to raiding what's now left of the villages that support the great Keeps, for no reason other than boredom and greed. Just as in ancient times, the serfs slave away and the Kings prosper. How's that for irony? We're repeating history. She smiles sardonically at that, but it is hidden behind a thick, crimson scarf. She's not sure why she wears it, especially in her line of work, but she likes the colour and the air of mystery it emits. So there it stays, knotted securely at the back of her head. Call it vanity, call it foolish, but don't say it to her face – not if you value your life. Her hands are seeped with bluer blood than yours, and she's never been one to put up with stupidity, no matter how high the cost.

The scarf flaps softly after the woman as she drifts, as if pushed by a strong wind, down a small hill dotted with tufts of brown grass and stunted, gnarled bushes. Smoke drifts on the not-so-distant-horizon. Smoke means a ruined village, and a ruined village means that whatever the Keepers haven't plundered for themselves will soon be in this woman's half-gloved hands. The black market pays well for the trinkets she is able to scrounge. That unseen broken-glass smirk appears on her face again as the lonely drifter picks up her pace.

* * *

It is worse than she expected, to say the least. Everything that could be burned is charred, everything that could be shattered is in a hundred pieces, and everything seems to have been ground into the parched earth by frenzied hoof beats of spooked horses and fleeing victims. The woman shakes her head and steps over a corpse, carefully skirting the pool of blood congealing around the crushed head. She mutters a quiet, "Sorry, friend," before rolling the body onto its front with her foot in order to delay the ravens from pecking at the man's clouded eyes. It's the least she can do, since the prayers for a safe passing have long since gone rusty on her tongue, the sentiments behind them ashes in the wind.

As she's wandering through the narrow alleyways of the small town, looking for something to take, she finds it to be a desolate, ruined shell – not unlike the woman passing through. Death hangs in the air like a flag at half-mast, and she believes she is the only living thing left in this ghost town, save for the ravens and the flies. After finding no valuables or trinkets, she resumes her walk, the very picture of loneliness, when she's proven wrong. She's wandering – drifting, as she's prone to doing – on the outskirts of town, near the graveyard when she hears a thin wail, a tortured howl.

Interest piqued, she walks forward cautiously, the noise getting louder and louder and more and more desperate the closer she gets.

There's a boy on his knees among the wooden markers, sobbing and screaming and grieving. There are two – no three – corpses near him, and he appears to be attempting to bury them.

The sight seems to yank at the jaded drifter's remaining heartstrings, and she stays where she is long after she should have moved on to more profitable horizons. She moves close, stops twenty paces from the lad, and leans against one of the larger grave markers. She watches and wonders. This scene is like looking into a clouded mirror, like looking into the past…then she dismisses such foolish musings. It will do her no good to get caught up in her memories.

Finally the boy looks up, tears and snot running down his face. His shoulders heave with his choppy, hysterical breathing. With eyes like a slash across his face and hair like spilled ink, he isn't a pretty sight. But he juts out his chin, narrows his puffy eyes, and asks in a tone that's wary and tired and too damned sad for someone so young.

"I'm Kale. Who're you and what do you want?"

"Nil. I was passing through, figured there'd be something of value in your ruins. Come with me, kid. You've got nothing left to lose."

Isn't it oddly uplifting that although the walls may be smashed and shattered beyond repair, the foundations are sound? This place could be rebuilt in time. She decides to stay then, simply because the challenge of fixing something so broken appeals to her.

That's how it starts. In the ruins of a nameless city, with corpses and death all around, a drifter meets an orphan and something begins to stir in the ashes of their ruined lives. This is their new start, a replacement family for one so tragically lost and a purpose, a lifeline for someone whose ties have all been severed by Fate's hand.

Carefully, Nil unwinds the scarf from around her neck and drapes it over Kale's narrow shoulders before knotting it securely at the front, as a mother might.

* * * * * * *

Jenna Gordon
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Where The Wind Blows

by Rob Wade

The cold wind swept through the empty city. It swirled in eddies around mounds of rubble and ash. In some places there were embers, which glowed brightly when kissed by the wind. The invisible currents surged through gutted houses, into empty rooms, and over ash-covered floors. The wind continued on its way, eventually reaching the town square. There it danced over the huge pile of bones that had once been the inhabitants of the town. It played a sorrowful melody as it passed through skulls and cracked bones.

Now past the city, the wind coursed across great fields, stamped down and ruined, salted and torn asunder. Nothing would grow here ever again. The city would remain untouched, its ashes eventually blowing away or being augmented by dust.

Passing the fields, the wind came upon a vast encampment. Savage men played dangerous games around cook fires, and more than one fell, his throat slashed, as the wind passed them by. The zephyr rustled the tents and stirred up flags. On these black flags only one image was present. The head of a wolf stood out, silver and fierce. The gust quickly passed through the rest of camp, through forest and field, eventually coming to a walled town no larger than the one that had been left behind.

The gust passed over and through the walls, making use of the many small cracks and holes. It passed over frightened soldiers, some no more than boys. The wind blew around houses, their windows tightly shuttered. It passed the blacksmith, the forge glowing brightly, with a multitude of men feverishly beating metal into instruments of war. Past the training grounds it went, stopping briefly to swirl around defenders, both young and old. The wind swept even farther, past the city, to where a train of people was fleeing, taking with them their valuables and animals. In this train there were very few men, and those that were there were either too old or too sickly to fight. The wind coursed onward, up into the mountains, where it joined its stronger brothers and lost its identity.

Mark tossed and turned in a fitful sleep. The small shop that was now serving as a barracks of sorts was hot and stank of sweat – and worse things besides. He imagined he heard the sounds of marching feet pounding at the earth, hungry for blood, women, and loot. As he thought of his own inevitable death and then of what he was selling his life for, he grew more calm. Even if he could hold them off for a minute, even a second, that was a minute or a second that could be used by the women and the sickly to escape to the capital. Of the many expressions on the faces of the men inside the shop, only one held a smile. Mark was determined not to sell his life cheaply.

A booming concussion woke Mark from his slumber. Another wave of sound assaulted him, and it took a moment for him to recognize the source as the town's warning bell. Getting up in a hurry, Mark went to his pile of equipment, donning his rusty chain mail. He picked up his sword and shield. The sword was new, one of the many weapons made in the forge. The shield, on the other hand, was antique. It had been taken out of some dusty attic, a remnant of an age past when his people had possessed an identity. Mark ran outside and joined the soldiers who were already forming into their lines of defence. While the men themselves surely didn't remember combat, their blood did, and it called to them. Grim masks of determination surrounded Mark, giving him courage. Blood would be spilled this night, and Mark could well guess which side would shed more blood.

The seething wave of humanity charged across the fields, bearing in on the small town. Guttural howls of glee carried across the battlefield, strengthened by the booming sounds of drums. Mark shivered. He had never seen so many people. Nor had he ever seen such savage people. Many of those approaching wore nothing more than a loincloth, and some brandished weapons no more advanced than wooden clubs. The space between defenders and attackers soon vanished, and the only thing that saved the defenders from being cut down was the wall.

Mark drew back his bowstring yet again, bringing the cord to his cheek. He let loose an arrow, and another man fell. He repeated this action many times, and many men fell. Then there was a great shaking. The savages had sundered the wall and were pouring into the breach. Dropping his bow and drawing his sword, Mark leapt off the wall directly into the press of humanity, his blade slashing. Completely forgotten was the training, and all that mattered to Mark was that his sword was reaching flesh. Something heavy collided with the back of his skull, sending his helmet flying. He sank down to the ground, the world becoming dark.

He could see nothing. Then a figure appeared, skeletal and garbed in dark clothing. The figure beckoned, and Mark was inclined to follow. The figure led him down a long stairway and into eternal night.

The wind poured down the mountainside. It passed by cities and farms, and eventually came to the scene of a great massacre. Women, children, the old and weak, all were dead and piled up. At a small encampment, men were talking amongst themselves. The wind had passed these men before as they had set out to ensure that none survived. The wind blew even further and was greeted by a familiar scene. The city was a heap of hot ash. Riding a strong current, the wind rose back up into the sky and was lost.

* * * * * * *

Rob Wade
Grade 12
Thomas. A. Stewart Secondary School

Gravelly Bay Road

by Luke Barclay

One

Why don't you write to me like you promised? Without you is like being alone with the sheer terror we felt after I threw that flat boot-shaped rock through that damn dirty window behind Mr. Lawson's discoloured barn. I miss getting into trouble.

Remember football in the house on rainy days? She hated it! Thank God, Ted "Lightning Rod" Fields caused her to keep us indoors… *The 49ers have the ball with seconds ticking down. Joe Montana digs his socks into the flowery, white tiles of the playing field and hikes the ball. The crowd of cabbage-patch dolls sitting atop the bread board falls into a hush. As Montana fakes a hand off to the left in slow motion, he curls to the right side of the field, avoiding the oncoming angry rush of brooms attached to dining-room chairs. He sees Dwight Clark barely open and tiptoeing the end-zone line. Gotta make a decision, gotta make a decision! He sees a hole through the waving broom handles and tosses a perfect spiral…* We didn't factor in one last defender – her precious teal vase with the ugly, triangular pattern sitting on the side table next to the sofa. You saw how upset he was, so you took the blame as tears ran down his cheeks onto a Bugs Bunny sweatshirt.

Little things separated you from everyone else. The farm isn't the same without you.

Two

I get it. Talk about hard – driving down old Gravelly Bay Road and watching the family wave goodbye in front of that friendly home. I remember it perfectly: slender, two storeys; a white porch with that broken railing leading up the front steps and circling down to the brown, creaky porch swing he was forced to fix numerous times; and two windows on the top floor that looked like droopy old eyes because of those sagging shutters.

I'll always miss home. That was never an issue. Sometimes you just need a change of scenery; sometimes you tire of routine; sometimes there's no end to the world out there full of wondrous colour, fresh faces. I have experienced things I never could possibly experience back home.

I am a bird that needs to fly. Sometimes the farm was my cage.

One

They miss you.

Since you left, she's been really stressed out, as if a baby robin had stumbled out of an egg and fallen through the white jagged stones bordering the pit of a twitching predator. I always find her in your room, a victim of old pictures and a made bed, as if a thick mist is fogging her brain.

I'm the invisible boy. There's always been an unspoken favourite – better in school, better looking, better at sports, funnier, taller – traits needing improvement. All my life I've tried to be this person so our parents could love us the same.

Where have you gone?

Two

They'll miss us the same. I promise.

I can't come home – not yet. When I sleep, I walk down a desert road, nothing but a sea of red sand forming heat waves that dance in sync with the sun. I kick a flat boot-shaped rock and hear my shadow

whisper. You should see the place I found: grubby and small enough to spit across. Dripping brown walls and tiny tear-shaped windows. Still, more light than I felt back home.

Parents live their lives through their children. I don't care about money or inheriting the family property.

Would you care they're upset when you don't want the life they chose? Would you let the red sports car and loud music blur past the life you could choose?

Since I moved out here to the city, I got a job serving drinks at a snug little pub full of characters teeming with troubles: wars, women, cars, work, marriage, booze, families, world – so many troubles I get troubled just thinking about it. Sure there are times when you'll be homesick and times your wallet's dryer than the Sahara, but you only truly learn from firsthand experiences. Hearsay is hearsay.

One is Two

It doesn't look like I'll be standing face to face with the open road any time soon.

He got sick. Real pale like something chased the colour right out of his body. All he does is lie in bed, too weak to stand. His blank, white bedroom walls so much like a hospital, it's like it was meant to be.

I wanted to show them what I was capable of (stop)

I've been called to step up to fill shoes a few sizes too large (stop)

I need you (stop)

I can't take care of this on my own (stop)

Come home soon (stop)

Two is One

I remember one day we took a fishing trip to Lake Ontario. The whole family went… *Perfect conditions. Water so calm the hot sun gave the lake a kiss as it skipped across the vibrant blue surface, leading a trail of sparkles. Smell of summer air so appealing the fish were just looking for an excuse to get caught. I was about seven years old and you couldn't wipe the frown off my face with a Klondike bar. Everyone in the boat, ankle deep in shiny legless acrobats. Everyone except me was taking advantage of those clueless bastards! I didn't find it out until a few years later but amidst my fishless tantrum, he had hooked one of his captured fish onto my line and threw it in the water. I never felt more excitement in my life. I almost poked his eye out as I screamed and scrambled to set the hook. I still have the photo taken that day of the skinny runt with the buzz cut and toothless smile holding up his scaly, rainbow-coloured trophy.*

Tell him I'll return the favour. Tell her to set the table for one more.

* * * * *

Luke Barclay
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Same Sky

by Brad Boyle

It was the nicest weather our city had seen in weeks, and with winter just around the corner, we embraced the warmth one final time before we started worrying about Christmas gifts. But that was that last thing on our minds; there were hills to roll down and trees to climb.

Today there was no need for jackets or gloves, just sunglasses to prevent the blaring, setting sunlight from tanning our souls. In the near distance, the scent of barbecues was growing stronger. We sat beside a patch of tall trees at the base of the hill, our clothes itching from the grass. We pushed handfuls of autumn leaves into comfortable piles. Cool dew stuck to our hands as we lay under the vivid sunset in a makeshift bed of red, orange, yellow, and brown.

For an hour of breezy silence, we became part of the earth, a piece of the beauty in a world where we were but temporary travellers. We allowed our heads to roll and face one another. By staring into each other's eyes, we came to the understanding that once we decided to stand up and walk away, no memory of this moment would survive the harsh winter ahead.

As the man dressed half-heartedly, a single thought repeated itself in his now-awake mind: they could not have been more wrong. In fact, this memory, which he had so desperately clung to for the past hard months, was the only one he had left of her, and he wasn't prepared to let it go. He wrapped a heavy woollen scarf loosely around his thin neck, barely gathered enough strength to lace his boots, and lit a homemade smoke before opening the door.

It was the calmest weather the city had seen all winter, which was fortunate because today was the day his old car had decided to gasp and cough for the last time. He let out a sigh that seemed to say "I can't afford gas anyway" as he kicked the flat rubber with his broken steel-toed boot. The breakdown wasn't unexpected, and his withering body was desperate for some exercise; the snowstorms – mixed with starvation – made it really difficult to be active. He walked to work.

The snow had been cleared from the roads (for the first time in three weeks), making them decent enough for travelling by foot. The air was nippy, but for once it did not singe the hairs in his nose after every breath. He hadn't been able to afford toothpaste for months and was growing tired of the aftertaste of stale, peanut buttered toast.

The blizzards held off for the entire day, an occasion as rare as stores giving away free samples the way they used too. The walk home seemed less tiring, more enjoyable; he could revel in its detail. He rounded the last corner onto the long, weary stretch of cookie-cutter houses. Despite the blinding glare of sun-settled snow, he saw the figure of a woman wearing a bright orange scarf. They were walking straight toward each other.

She was a beautiful young lady; he was a stubborn young man, and when her eyes fixed on him, her smile sparked the memory he had escaped from since he left the house that morning. At that moment, he didn't notice the crookedness of her stained teeth, or the fact that her orange scarf was actually browner than his sweaty socks. Their paths crossed only a few doors down from his, and he immediately understood why the woman was so alluring.

"Do you have a tissue?" She initiated conversation with a wink. The man shook his head and passed by; guilt rushed to warm his cheeks. "C'mon sir, I have children." As he stepped up to his

door, the lonely man wished she was following. But she was a streetwalker, and he couldn't afford her.

His boots slipped off without effort, and his socks stayed with them. He used the last bit of energy he had to grab some small pieces of wood (barely worthy of the title logs) and started a small fire in his fireplace. He sat warming his toes, recalling details of the strange woman. Lukewarm broth was not enough to fill his stomach and not enough to distract his mind from that memory. He lay down in bed and pulled a woollen blanket over his head, capturing his drifting thoughts.

Worst weather the city had seen...

...Since the flood, years back, still a teen...

...Watching the world shatter...

...deprived of the love that mattered most...

...Locked in a room upstairs...

...hoping no one finds him, or at least no one cares...

The present came to the man like a slap, facing his stinging feelings, his heart racing so fast. Lost images resurfaced from his past, soaring through his mind like quick songbirds, beauty taken for granted for so long... until the sky, it opens up... and his (my) mind began to...

...fly...

It's the most beautiful weather I have ever seen. I am the only one around for miles. The cloud factory is working overtime, and I can't help but stare at the endlessly drifting production. Although they do not form definitive figures, my mind begins to shape the vague wisps into animals running without a care. Faces smiling, frowning, angry, crying. Entire movies playing out right before my eyes. For hours, I stare at the scenes in my imagination floating through the gaping blue storybook, pretending you are there with me – together again.

But when the clouds end, I feel no disappointment, just wonder. I begin to think of all the people around the world who are also gazing up at the same sky, hoping that somewhere you are watching as well. For a brief moment I can feel you with me. Sitting on a park bench, you and I. Sailing across the Pacific. Climbing a mountain together, enjoying the view from three-quarters up the rock. Waiting anxiously beside your hospital bed. We are so close that we could hold each other in a warm embrace, never letting go, yet I am the only one around for miles.

* * * * *

Brad Boyle
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Life in 1000 Words or Less

by Jenna Gordon

It's a blustery, wet February day when he meets Joan Dark for the first time. Turns out she was born May 30th, 1987, in Domremy, France. He smiles a bit, thinking of flames and a child born among the ashes, and wonders if she believes in reincarnation.

* * *

He couldn't help but reflect on his own life and mortality as he watched his friend, Dave slowly lowered into the thawing March mud. Hollow eyes traced the engravings on the tombstone:

David Maxwell Johnston.

October 12th, 1988 - March 23rd 2009.

You will be sorely missed.

Who'd have thought he'd be spending his 21st birthday watching the internment of the best friend he'd ever had? Happy birthday to me, he thought bitterly to himself, and the tune was stuck in his head for the rest of the day.

Death strikes seemingly at random; he knew that – really he did. And that fact, combined with his friend's sudden death, sent him into a series of memories and musings over which he had no control. What would he be remembered for if he were to drop dead where he stood?

Well…in 10th grade he was the first in his school to beat *Contessa Imogene*, the latest fantasy epic for the PC system. He'd celebrated by sleeping for 72 straight hours to make up for all the rest lost while he gamed. He'd told his parents through his locked bedroom door that he was studying and doing projects for extra credit, even as the Contessa, in all her pixilated glory, flashed onscreen.

So there's that accomplishment. And he graduated high school – there's another. He was even in the top 10 of his class. It turns out all his computer time was good for something. But… he didn't go to his senior prom. He was going to, but beforehand, as he was about to leave, a call came through to his cell and he had to take it.

His…part-time job, you could say. It was a help hotline for all your computer and technology needs. And, like a responsible human being, he had sacrificed his own pleasure for the needs of others. Besides, he had told himself over six hours later as he hung up the phone, it's not like he missed anything important. Just hours with his best friend, drinking beer, and watching from the fringes as their classmates got trashed and made fools of themselves, is all.

Getting into a good college was celebrated with a quiet dinner out with his parents, an event he would have liked to skip; then he went home and blared techno music on his insanely expensive stereo until it felt as if his ears might bleed. His LJ account was updated with a new entry full of exclamation points and cyber-bragging before he went to bed.

* * *

As his thoughts occupy his mind's eye, his hands toy with his cellphone, texting, while music blasts in his ears. He's deaf to the world, and it's not like there's anyone left in the cemetery to care that he's tuning out his grief. So when he nearly trips over an oddly dressed girl flying a bright red kite, it's a bit of an understatement to say he's surprised. It would be more accurate to say he gapes up at her from the soggy ground, one earbud dangling in mid air, his broken cellphone in the mud beside him.

She laughs a bit and ties her kite to a nearby cross to help him up. He wonders what strikes him as odd about her, then realizes with a jolt that she isn't listening to music. There are no headphones hooked around her neck, no cord connecting the system to her ears. On closer inspection there's no cellphone, pager, iphone – nothing. She's not even wearing jeans.

"I'm Joan," she says with an open grin you never see nowadays on anyone over the age of seven. "Joan Dark."

He blinks, scrambling for something to say. "Hi." And it comes out too brisk, too rude. Her smile falters a bit, and all at once he's sad to see it go. Then she chuckles. "This is the part where you tell me your name."

"Uh. I'm, uh… Max. Max Waynes."

And there's a moment when he has no idea what to do with the electronics in his grasp – does he drop them and shake her hand? He's having trouble breathing and he can't think straight.

He's saved the trouble when she cheerily continues, a touch curious, too. "Well, Max – Max Waynes, why are you burying your head in those?" She gestures to his lifelines with a mildly dismissive air, and she's not sure of their names. "When it's such a beautiful day?"

He looks at her as if she just grew another head, then at the slate grey sky, heavy with rain clouds, then back at her. She smiles, and he can only answer a question with a question. "Why are you flying a kite in a graveyard…when it looks like it's going to start pouring rain?"

"Why wouldn't I? It's perfect kite-flying weather!"

He just looks at her. He wonders if she's insane.

"…Are you insane? Don't you have better things to do?"

"Nope. I wanted to, so I did. Besides, I think it's good to get outdoors and live. Every day."

"…Live?"

A nod. "Yes. Live. To be instead of just existing, like everyone else seems to. No one smiles anymore, Max-Max. Did you notice?"

He manages to nod, feeling guilty all the while. He can't remember the last time he smiled and meant it.

"I think it's just about the saddest thing in the world," she confides.

After nodding again thoughtfully, he looks up at her. In a beat, he tosses the broken pieces of his phone away from himself, before he can change his mind, and the cracked screen catches the weak afternoon sunlight on its way to being lost in the mud.

"Will you teach me?"

“To live?”

He nods. She grins, reaching to untie the kite.

“Of course.”

* * * * *

Jenna Gordon
Grade 12
Thomas A. Stewart Secondary School

Behind the Barbed Wire

by Chen Rao

The tangled barbed wire offered little welcome as more people were herded from the railcars like cattle through the gates of Birkenau in early March of 1943. As the Nazis' zeal for killing intensified, even the indigo sky was obscured by clouds of ash that hung low. A crow soared around a towering brick chimney three times before heading north. An eerie atmosphere shrouded the landscape. Occasional gusts swept the descending dust particles back into the air, making it hard to breathe.

Women and children edged toward the open gate in a line. Those newly selected by the SS were – according to routine – required to leave their baggage on the platform. A column of prisoners, men dressed in striped uniforms, passed close to them, moving in the opposite direction. Most were no more than skeletons, an ominous group of walking corpses. One man struggled for his balance, striving to make his grotesquely twisted body keep pace with the rest.

No eye contact was made between the newcomers and the labourers: two parallel lines that never physically met, yet were miraculously communicating on a soundless level, as each individual would inevitably reach the same destiny. Through the mist of unspoken panic, two tiny voices became barely audible.

"Are you still mad at me, Yitzhak?" a small fragile girl whispered after much rehearsal. Yitzhak didn't bother to answer. Hannah couldn't hold back any longer. "It wasn't my fault!"

"You said you'd be careful! Those marbles were the only thing I had left, and you threw them away! From now on, I'm done talking!"

"Move! Is something wrong with your hearing?" boomed a soldier accompanied by a ferocious German shepherd dog. The soldier gripped Hannah by the shoulder and shoved her forward, but Yitzhak was quick to act; he spun around in time to catch his sister just before she hit the ground. Getting up, Hannah watched quietly as Yitzhak checked her over for reassurance. The soldier scowled again while the children joined the line and picked up their pace. Soon, Yitzhak gave up on the idea of the silent treatment.

"Why didn't you pick up the marbles after you dropped them?"

Tears streamed down Hannah's cheeks. "I tried to hold onto them but the train jerked. There wasn't any space. With people and their bags around, I couldn't even see where they rolled across the floor, let alone run after them!"

Yitzhak sighed, "Yeah, I hated that putrid box. I thought the old grimy man in the corner was going to steal my slice of bread…"

"I'm thirsty, Yitzhak," Hannah said in a dull tone.

"Then don't talk much and try not to cry. You'll save water that way…"

They entered an open yard with poplars surrounding the perimeter. Some in the group shuddered at the sensation of this green, immortal species gazing down at them, abandoned in such a deserted place. The poplars stood ramrod in perfect stillness, as if refusing to offer an oasis to the defenceless newcomers.

A Sonderkommando prisoner stomped in and delivered instructions in German and Yiddish: “Achtung! When you go down, empty your pockets! Remove your jewellery! Fold your clothes neatly! Remember your drawer number to find your belongings after the shower!” He beamed enthusiastically. “Won’t it be great to get rid of the dirt and filth? A refreshed body and spirit are crucial for the upcoming labour! Now hurry up! Men to my left! Women to my right!”

The mass of women streamed toward the staircase. Hannah, caught up in the crowd, hesitated at the top as the guard folded his arms across his chest. “Sir, my brother isn’t here yet; I want to wait—”

“Shower first,” the guard snapped.

Hannah suddenly felt courageous. “He promised to take care of me, and I’m supposed to stay in his sight.”

“That’s a heartwarming story, but I’ve heard it all before and I’m sick of it!” His voice was threatening. “You’re wasting my time!”

“Hush, girl!” Before Hannah could talk back, the woman next to her appealed to the guard. “Little thing doesn’t know the rules.”

“All right! Schnell! Get her in there!” the guard snarled.

The stream of people resumed their course reluctantly.

The woman gripped Hannah in her tender, honey-like palm. While being led away, Hannah stuck out her tongue at the silhouette of the hostile guard, thinking that he would be out of luck if Yitzhak had his slingshot and marbles there.

After the last woman had entered the dim shower room, the levers locking the door were slammed vigorously. The thunderous bang echoed in the vacant hall.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the wall at the entrance to the men’s shower room, a small, begging voice made an effort in vain.

“…because I’ve lost everything and I simply can’t afford to lose her.”

The guard searched for an answer. “You won’t,” he responded after a split-second pause. “I guarantee you that she’s as safe as you are. You’ll see her soon.”

He then shut the door with lighting speed to avoid further interaction, though not fast enough to miss Yitzhak pushing tears aside in despair.

Something clicked in the guard’s mind: this child had sensed danger! Without knowing the details of what was to come, the boy had borne the burden and kept even the hint of fear from his sister. Staring at the ground, the guard shrugged. “I didn’t lie to you, boy. I didn’t say where, did I?” He sat down on a nearby bench and plugged his ears with cotton wool.

Gaining control of his trembling fingers, he lit his cigarette on the third attempt. The hall was chilly. The reverberation of death from the chamber crawled through the sturdy door, blending with the smoke he inhaled. His remaining sanity mocked his dumbness – his only solution to escape reality.

There was really never an option, was there? He chuckled bitterly, felt the vicious throbbing in his temples, and buried his face in a sea of sorrow.

A lucky Jew – a fluent speaker of the German tongue – the Nazis had found him having a certain value. By aiding to slaughter his people, his own survival was secured – at least for now. When this mission had been assigned, he had convinced himself that since literally no blood would stain his hands, he could learn to ignore the suffering and guilt. Now, he wondered when that day would arrive.

* * * * *

Chen Rao
Grade 11
Kenner Collegiate Vocational Institute

A Call to Embrace

by Sarah Buttle

It hurt to look. The sunlight sliced through the waves and pierced her eyes in such a way that it forced her to shield them with her hand. A furrow began to deepen in her brow. She squinted. Cool water splashed onto her hands and ran between her fingers, a refreshing and startling awakening from her distraction. Regaining her focus, she cut through the water with her paddle, each stroke propelling her further into the sparkling blue and white. The sun was setting, and soon the clear-white crystals bobbing on the water transformed into dazzling jewel tones; now pinks and reds and coral-oranges floated on the deep blue depths. She should be closer to home by now, she thought, and quickened her pace. Her paddle and arms united, forming arches in the air and forcing her forward against the resistance of the water.

She paused, panting. Her efforts had moved her forward a few metres, but in the middle of a lake, distance is measured by trees and rocks. She sat in the centre of a great glass pool, surrounded by a border of conifers. The leafy green walls were blending with the navy floor; night was settling in. White diamonds returned to the water in the form of stars and shone through the black blanket that now hung over her head. She was surrounded by darkness. She needed to get home, but now the question was not how *far* was home, but where *was* home? Feeling lost and alone was no new feeling for her. It was almost natural now.

She remembered it well. Rain had pelted the bus window as she peered out at the cold grey sky. It was a day that changed her life forever. As she walked up the lane leading to her house, seeing the car in the drive was a giveaway; something was definitely not right. When she stepped in the door, he met her with a giant hug, an embrace she rarely felt from her father. He didn't have to tell her. She already knew what he was going to say. And as she willed him not to speak, for his words not to be true, they still rang through the room and pierced her ears, stinging with venom. Her heart fell. She heard his voice, but it was not as she had heard it before. His gruff tone was now softer, gentle almost; his words, although quiet, hit her with such a force that they knocked the breath from her lungs.

Now, she thought she was alone on the lake. The lack of motors rumbling under the surface, and the absence of voices wafting through the surrounding air had convinced her that she was the only soul out there that night. Yes, there were fish beneath her, raccoons on the shore around her, and birds sleeping in the trees above her. But the silence had given her the false impression that she was solitary. A chilling cry reminded her that she was not. Hauntingly, it echoed over the waves, and together they crashed softly against the hull of her kayak, sweet and sombre tones resonating through the night. As she turned her head, looking for the source of the cry, she, too, began to cry.

The next time she heard its song, it had appeared beside her boat. The white string of pearls around the neck seemed to glow in the darkness. Its red eye appeared to be boring a hole through her own eyes and into her heart, where she felt its warm amber glow. Again it tilted its head towards the sky and let out a symphony of eerie echoes. Its call sent chills through her body, causing the hairs on her arms to stand upright. Tears continued to roll down her cheeks, but she did not reach up to wipe them away. Beautiful and mournful, the loon continued calling. To what, she wondered? A mate, a child? A long-lost companion?

She knew. She felt the loon. She was the loon. She wore the black cloth on her shoulders; she became the creature crying into the night. Her tears turned into the trills of the loon. She looked up, past the moon, past the stars. She looked up until she saw that beaming face, shining

down upon her. She released the call of the loon from somewhere deep inside her heart. From the emptiness into the darkness, she cried out for her. Mother, she called. I see you. I feel you.

I love you.

I miss you.

Her strokes sliced into the water, almost silently. The loon had left. With a flutter of water and wings, it had flown away. With it went her regret, her grief. Once again, she was alone on the lake, surrounded by darkness no longer. From her position in the boat she watched the rising sun creep up from behind the treeline, illuminating everything it touched with beams of warmth and rays of light. The surface around her was transformed into a glistening pool. Pinks and reds and coral-oranges shone on the surface of the lake like jewels. As the scene lit up around her, the lake came alive. Something inside her did as well.

She saw the dock to her right. The Muskoka chair sitting at the end looked inviting and comfortable, its wooden arms and sturdy back a welcome change from the plastic seat of her kayak. The water had become shallow here as she neared the dock; she stepped out and began dragging the kayak towards the shore. The silence around her was soon replaced by the sounds of the lake. The noises that accompany people preparing their boats for an early morning fishing trip blended with the sound of the waves from their vessels. She saw the figure of a man coming down the trail towards the water.

He quickened his pace when he saw her. They reached the dock simultaneously, and he bent down to touch her face with his chapped hands. Tears filled his eyes as he softly said her name. He took her hand, helping her out of the water and onto the dock. Together, they sat in the Muskoka chair and gazed out towards the lake. The warmth from their bodies seeped into her core and warmed her heart. Her father's embrace felt natural now, his presence reassuring. A cry floated across the water and touched them. Looking up, they watched the loon disappear over the treeline as it flew towards the sky.

* * * * *

Sarah Buttle
Grade 12
Lakefield District Secondary School

Hamlet: The Prequel

by Beatrice Chan

Standing in front of the class, Mr. Bilmurn summoned his Muse and read: "Must I remember? Why, she would hang on him / As if increase of appetite had grown / By what it fed on; and yet within a month, / Let me not think on't; Frailty, thy name is woman! / A little month; or ere those shoes were old / With which she follow'd my poor father's body, / Like Niobe, all tears; why, she, even she, – / O God! a beast, that wants discourse of reason, / Would have mourn'd longer, – married with mine uncle..."

A voice from the back of the class interrupted his soliloquy: "That's not true, sir, about her marrying his uncle. I mean, it wasn't his uncle at all."

Mr. Bilmurn turned towards the source of the voice, astonished. "Hamlet would know, I think, if his mother had married his uncle or not. Wouldn't he?"

"Well, maybe he hadn't seen the prequel, sir. I mean, maybe he was ignorant of the facts."

Mr. Bilmurn tried to remain calm. "And just what would those facts be, Beatrice?"

"It was actually like this, sir...

Many moons ago, in a far-off place, lived a handsome prince with a gloomy face. This place was Denmark, ruled by the elder of twin brothers, King Hamlet. The gloomy-faced prince was Claudius, the younger twin brother."

"Are you following me, Mr. Bilmurn?" Beatrice asked.

Mr. Bilmurn nodded reluctantly.

"Well, Hamlet became king only after he grew up, but before that, throughout their childhood, the twins had no playmates except each other. The games they played were not friendly, and they always seemed to end up fighting because the younger twin, Claudius, always won. The hatred between the twins grew as they grew, and so did the fierce competition between them. At first, it was about who could run farther or who could hold their breath longer, but it gradually turned to more serious contests with much higher stakes.

Now when the twins turned twenty-five, their father became ill. Hamlet appeared to be upset, but actually he was excited because if his father died, he would be king. Claudius did not see it this way, of course, and became very angry with his brother. In his anger, Claudius accused his brother, Hamlet: 'How can you not care about our father's life? Do you feel no pity or love toward him?'

Hamlet replied bluntly, 'I feel no love for anyone, least of all you. You have been in the way of my success since you were born. But I am the eldest, and I will win at least one thing before I die. You watch and see. When I am King, you will be the most miserable person in this whole goshdarn country.'

'You have no feelings or thoughts for anyone. You would steal the wife of your best friend if it gained you power,' spat back Claudius.

'Nah,' replied Hamlet maliciously, 'but I'd steal my brother's girlfriend, his sweetheart. That I *would* do.'"

"Do you get it, Mr Bilmurn? Can you guess what really happened?"

"Ah…no, Beatrice, I can't say that I do. You'll have to give me a few more details."

Beatrice rolled her eyes. Some people just had no imagination, she thought to herself. "Well, here goes," she said as she continued her story.

"So Hamlet went about trying to steal Claudius' girlfriend. She was a pretty thing named Gertie Kiersted, a real Danish princess (you could tell because she could feel a pea through twenty mattresses), who was head over heels in love with Claudius. Hamlet did everything that a good suitor would. He sent her roses on her birthday and Saint Valentine's Day. At Christmas, he sent her three turtle doves, two French hens, and a partridge in a pear tree, but all in vain. What he didn't know was that Claudius and Gertie were secretly engaged and that there was plenty of hanky-panky going on.

In fact, Gertie woke up one morning and discovered that she had a bun in the oven – the hanky had become a little too panky, if you know what I mean. Now she was in trouble. What would the neighbours think? She put on her royal thinking cap to try to save herself and her true love, Claudius, from the inevitable social disgrace. They could get married right away and no one would be the wiser, but royal law in Denmark stipulated that the elder brother had to marry first, and it looked as if Hamlet, out of spite, had no intention of marrying anyone other than his brother's only true love. They could elope, she supposed, but that would be a life not fit for a princess. So Gertrude swallowed her pride, and to protect her only love, Claudius, and their love child, she sent a message to Hamlet. This is what it said:

Darling Hamlet,

All along I have loved only you. Let's get married …tomorrow.

Gertie

Hamlet was overjoyed. He'd won the battle for his brother's girlfriend; he'd finally beaten Claudius at something. Just to make sure she didn't change her mind, Hamlet and Gertie were married the next day. And nine months later, Hamlet became the proud father of a bouncing baby boy.

'We'll call him Hamlet after me,' he said grandly.

Gertrude could do nothing but agree, and there were never any brothers and sisters for Hamlet. He was the only one.

As you can imagine, Claudius was devastated by all these events. He never knew why Gertie had deserted him, and she, to save his honour, never told him. But she dreamed of him, and he dreamed of her for the next twenty-five years.

Little Hamlet always thought Big Hamlet was his father and that Uncle Claudius was a grump. Imagine his surprise when a month after Big Hamlet mysteriously died, Mama was marrying old Uncle Claudius without a thought for the memory of her husband or the feelings of her son. And what made it worse was that they seemed to be happy. Little Hamlet, after a ghostly midnight chat with his dead father (the skunk!), decided to do the honourable thing and take revenge on the 'imposter.' What he did not know was that the 'imposter' was his true father and that his father was his true uncle (and a scoundrel on top of that). Gertie, in her marital bliss, was so head over heels happy with her true love that she plumb forgot to tell Hamlet Junior all about it. (Oops!)

And you know the rest of the story. Little Hamlet was out to get Claudius because he didn't know that the ghost was just his uncle, not his dad. Claudius didn't know that Little Hamlet was in fact his very own flesh and blood, so he got really sick of his bad attitude and sent him off to England to be killed. Poor Gertie drank a cup of poisoned wine when all she was trying to do was toast her son's achievements. I guess if she hadn't died so quickly, she would have told Little Hamlet about his real dad and it would have been happily ever after. But it wasn't."

"Isn't that so romantic, Mr. Bilmurn, and so sad?" sighed Beatrice.

"A little far-fetched I would say," he replied, shaking his head. But not any more far-fetched than this whole play, he thought to himself, bemused.

* * * * *

Beatrice Chan
Grade 12
Lakefield College School

What Grows In Between the Hedges Between

by Meghan Gagliardi

While I was hiding in trees and tearing cotton dresses, something was growing. While I was pirating the neighbourhood, parading the freedoms of a charmed, insatiable girl, the man next door cautiously planted poetic devices, feeding his pristine lawn with free verse and subtle texts. I don't remember him well; even now, the events I claim exist in my memories are really only repeated narrations, stories told to me before bed. What I do remember is vague; most of my imagery begins to overlap as the years pass, and soon my memory will refuse to separate the face of my dead grandfather from that of the man next door. But I recall with certainty his irritation when I would brave the hedges between us and arrive with the pageantry of a child into his backyard.

My neighbour was a quiet, contained man, and I do remember interrupting his otherwise peaceful afternoons with the seemingly unconnected marvels of youth (before I'd read Frost and before I understood the reason for a wall), when I believed the whole world was an extension of my own bedroom window. My neighbour, Mr. Stevens, was reflecting on his life, courting yesterdays and writing poetry, while I was running through an open field, promising myself to tomorrow and writing a future. Somehow, our potential met, bursting wide and enveloping our bright street, colliding somewhere between suit jacket and yellow shoes. We were living at odds, separated by the countless years between us, both surrounded by the flourish of childhood – those moments when a day grew large and hopeful in the morning, when plans were defined by what could be most delightfully explored. He had a whole world to remember and protect, whereas I had a whole world to sail across, mark down, and tack to a wall. To me, his life was set up and put away, but Mr. Stevens could only say he had yet to meet Gordon Lightfoot.

So today, when time has seemed to shift more than pass, I hear a story about the man next door, just another to add to my supposed memories. Standing in a room where he was once a teacher, I read aloud a poem about a man who was afraid – statues at an intersection, watching a life's work flit across the street and just out of sight. Mr. Stevens watched, just as he watched me from a distance, with mild interest, with a removed air. Mr. Stevens bore witness to his life; I sensed it as a child and I fear it as I age. He wrote about the moments he had not lived. Mr. Stevens did not speak to Gordon Lightfoot but wrote it in a poem instead.

I worry that I am contained by this same disease. I worry that every embellishment and every sound pull me farther from intention. In every creation I worry I am slowly filtering out the glow of truth with pages of black ink. Mr. Stevens watched, and he recorded what I can only imagine are journals full of portraits of my family, pages that detail the roses climbing up the side of my house, the sharp corners of my rooftop. My quiet, forgettable neighbour now owns something that belongs to me. Those scrapped papers siphoned off the details of my life that I was too ignorant to hold on to, and despite the dedication of my reflections, I cannot recall those silent moments.

Today Gordon Lightfoot comes to town, and shuffled in between things I'd carefully place in a box and stack at the farthest corner of my closet, Mr. Stevens comes to mind. Somehow, sometime, we were sleeping two brick walls apart, and in the quiet dreams of a little girl, Mr. Stevens was sending letters and spoiled papers. Rough pen scratches in darker ink than I would choose for myself, and the ink blots and the words meld together until I've given in and written about someone I've never met. I start writing Mr. Stevens' story, about the evening he meets Gordon Lightfoot; now I own something of his. Between our brick walls we will meet, and I will extend my delicate hand and take back the memories of myself as a child, leaving at his doorstep

only a small stack of papers painting the stories of his life, the truths I have created by writing them with enough passion so that somehow they are fulfilled.

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Meghan Gagliardi
Grade 12
St. Peter's Secondary School

Healing the Soul

by Jeremy MacMillan-Jones

Sitting here. Just sitting. How many times in the past years have I thought about that day? The numbers fade away in the thousands. But still the question is there. Why? What made me that vicious?

Prison is hard on the body, but what people don't see is how hard it is on the mind, the soul. I have been ruined by the hard walls of prison, my mind waging war on my body and soul until all that is left are the guilt and hatred of uncounted years in this place. Betrayal by another is what most people are afraid of, but that is only the beginning. Being betrayed by someone is hard, yes, but when your own body betrays your mind and then society betrays you, every last shred of warmth and kindness is ripped unceremoniously from you. After that, nothing will ever be the same again. I cannot trust any more, for I know that the bond will, without a doubt, be shattered. That shot rings throughout the stone, concrete, and steel bars; it rips into every aspect of my life.

I get these visitors who think that they are helping. I don't care if they are lawyers, psychologists, monks, politicians; I don't even know what they are. I stare through them and wish they weren't here. What they say to me blurs into disjointed strands that always include forgiveness and love. I don't want these. I just want to fade away like my thoughts.

I think I can hear the food cart. That's weird, because it's coming at a different time today. I can hear something clicking on the floor that isn't the warden's boots. It's so unexpected that I almost get interested. They're just around the corner – wait, that's my door opening. In walks the warden, with a puppy. Is he serious? A dog? What does he think I am, some bedridden hospital patient? Goddammit!

Weeks have gone by, I guess. He left the damn dog with me. I have to feed and walk it and whatever. He thinks it is supposed to help somehow. Can't he see that I don't need his help and don't want it? It's enough for me to enjoy the hospitality of prison by myself, thanks. I can't even bear to look at the dog because, knowing what I did, I don't think that I could stand looking at that innocent, happy face.

It now seems that years have passed since I was given Buddy. Against my wishes, he's starting to grow on me. I don't really know when it was, but after a while I began to feel comforted by his presence and I started talking to him. The funny thing is that I think he understands. The warden comes by every once in a while, and when he sees us together, he gets a smile on his face. I really don't care what he's thinking, but at least he isn't yelling at me anymore. In fact, I find that I don't really care what anybody thinks about me anymore.

Something strange happened last night. I was in my bunk sleeping when suddenly I woke up. I was panting and sweating, all worked up. I used to do this a lot right after I was put in here, but this time, Buddy just looked over at me and I was calm again. I think that I'm starting to understand why the warden gave him to me. I don't even mind picking up after him now because I think that we're really starting to be friends. I look after him and he looks after me. I think I understand friendship all over again.

The warden and I talked for a while today. He's actually a very nice man, contrary to what I used to think. We even support the same hockey team. He was telling me that I have the opportunity of parole in two years if I keep up my good behaviour. Apparently I've been in here for eight years already, though I could have sworn it was twenty. Before I spent these eight years

in here, I wouldn't have even wanted parole. I would have just sat and felt miserable; I would have killed myself had I ever been given the chance. Now, I feel that I could live with what I've done.

Buddy and I were let out on a guarded walk today. It was just short, but it was the first time I had been out of the prison centre in nine and a half years. My parole hearing is in five months, and I feel positively jovial about it. My time here is almost done, and I even feel that it might have been worth it. You see, before I was convicted, I hated the world and everyone in it, especially myself. I couldn't stand the things that I had done, but I couldn't see any other way out of those situations. Because of that, I betrayed every last moral in me and more. I also betrayed the whole of society because I figured that nothing was going to make it hurt more. Now, I am starting to see that the same society which condemned me to prison has forgiven me, and I've forgiven it. However, even knowing that, I do not think that I would have been ready. But, I have forgiven myself for my trespasses, and that lifted a ten-ton weight off my chest. I can live with myself now. The thing is, I also know why I was able to make these changes. It was because of the love that Buddy showed me. His unconditional love, with nothing asked in return, allowed me to see what was lacking in myself and understand it. I finally learned, through Buddy, that forgiveness is the greatest weapon available. So now I can answer my question. Why? Because I hadn't learned to love – and to forgive.

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Jeremy MacMillan-Jones
Grade 11
Peterborough Collegiate Vocational School

Guarding the Vermillion Soul

by Chen Rao

It was Peach, my step-mother, who had dreamt of Grandma's death. Father had been smoking since dawn, contemplating the ill omen about Grandma, who was in the emergency room in hospital after a sudden severe heart attack.

Then the phone rang.

Peach answered it with dreaded anticipation. As she replaced the receiver with a subtle nod, Father's face broke with incomprehensible sorrow. I looked to the ceiling as the last swirl of smoke rose up and shrouded the light above.

Grandma had lived a full and accomplished life of ninety years. She had been a well-respected court judge, a woman of extraordinary equanimity. Her funeral was therefore referred to as a "happy sadness." No traditional solemn funeral music was played over the heads of the gathered relatives and guests, who chatted in low voices or played mahjong during the days of *shouling* (guarding of the soul).

The number of in-laws astounded both Peach and me. When Father went out for more incense and paper money, we busied ourselves with entertaining groups of relatives, most of whom we had never met before. Peach was frustrated by the complicated family relationships, and I would be no expert even if I hadn't left China three years ago. When one relative walked in, I heard Peach's sweet voice calling him "Old Uncle," then two minutes later, "Grandpa," for she was running around with dishes of sunflower seeds and had clearly forgotten the title she had used earlier.

A handsome boy around my age stepped into the room with his father. I offered bottles of water and candy dishes as they sat down on rattan chairs. The boy had long, thick eyelashes and eyes that shone like black diamonds. Although he was articulate, I was taken aback when I noticed his half-inch-long nails: did he have no concern for personal hygiene?

Instinctively, I knew that the father was different: he remained quiet as his eyes wandered over the surroundings with fascination. Above the circle of *huaquan* (bamboo sticks supporting huge circular planes of flower-shaped white paper), which were ornamentally displayed around the room, there was a tribute couplet written in gold ink that hung vertically on both sides of Grandma's picture:

Though the face dissolves into the end of day,

The wisdom remains for those who stay.

When the boy was ready to go home, the father's relief and delight was evident, for a smile stretched across his round face as his son helped him up.

"Is the boy's father mute?" I asked my uncle after the son and his father walked out.

"Mentally challenged," my uncle whispered back. "Since the boy's mother abandoned them, the man cannot even bathe himself. Now the two are living on a disability pension. The boy does extra tailoring to help out."

So his long nails were for folding fabric! Sympathy welled up inside me, along with the guilt of misjudging the boy's character. The degree of maturity required for him to face others' mockery with dignity and openness struck me profoundly.

Turning toward the sound of approaching footsteps, I saw a young, petite girl holding hands with an old woman, whose hair had turned silver and whose forehead was creased like trenches plotted out on a war map.

Peach hurriedly brought two cups of tea to the table and asked the girl, "How did you and your grandmother get here?"

The girl shifted her feet and glanced at the ground. Her voice was barely audible: "She's my mom."

Before the conversation became a total ruin and Peach shrank from shame, I interjected, "How did you get here?"

The girl's mother answered timidly, "We got up early and walked ten miles." She added, "I've come to pay my respects." Her right hand, calloused and wrinkled, reached shakily into her half-torn black canvas bag. She fished out five one-hundred yuan bills, their vermillion colour especially harsh under the afternoon sunlight. The mother must have known that each of her siblings had contributed five hundred yuan to the funeral. Her desire for the same decency, or her urge to save face, made her hold out a hand with the crumpled bills gripped inside.

Neither Peach nor I made a move. Auntie came to our rescue: "Younger sister, you came!"

Auntie pulled her sister aside. "Why are you contributing so much?" Her voice was hushed: "It's the heart that counts. I will only accept two hundred yuan if you insist on giving money."

By then, the little girl had followed her over and clung to her mother's shoulder. Auntie noticed her presence and mumbled how tough a life her younger sister had led.

"Be good to your mom, hear me?" Auntie tugged at the girl's coat hem vigorously. When the girl smiled and nodded sheepishly, Auntie's eyes softened. She stuffed a handful of candy into the girl's pockets.

After the mother and daughter left, she shook her head at their vanishing backs: "My sister married well and worked hard to become one of status in her community. Her only son died at the age of eighteen from leukemia. The family was drained of its original wealth, as well as its spirit."

"If she's so poor, why did she have a second child?" Peach couldn't see the logic of how an extra mouth would help much on the farm.

Auntie shrugged. "That girl was adopted. With failing health, my sister is now in no position to hold the family together. And the father couldn't care less about a child who has no blood relationship with him. However, my sister is still trying to support this girl."

Suddenly, I found it a great comfort that Grandma, a reputable judge when alive, now watched the episodes of despair and hope simply evolve without the pronouncement of a final judgment: no redemption, no repayment, no resolution. The unfinished works of the deceased were seamlessly sewn into the continuum of life, passing forward the bonds of heritage and guiding the future with a humbled hand.

The three years I was away had opened a deep chasm between my past and present life. I had come back to a spinning city with extravagant projects and unspoken optimism for an even brighter future. Yet, I realized that the insecurity and agitation which lay at the deep core of society could not be conquered by the camouflage of material goods, but only by the ties of family – blood or not – for these are the laws of nature that override everyone's fragmented memory and requests for identity.

I was pulled back into reality when Father said, "Let's burn the new incense I bought – the fire must not go out during these seven days."

So I held the incense and bowed three times towards Grandma's picture, thinking of the kind way she looked into my own eyes.

* * * * *

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Speed Limits

by Nicholas Barsanti-Morris

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Coming out into the other side of the lot, I skid again just for flair and hit "stop" on the watch. Fifty-five, one-four. I scratch a number out and write the new one in. Just then a pair of headlights makes me squint. The engine of an old BMW shouts poetry at me. I no longer feel alone, but the irony, velvety thick, is that the glass and metal between us is as close as we twins will get. Apparently!

* * * * *

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The Model Citizen

by Allison Ridgway

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

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

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

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

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

Why would he follow me? It wasn't my fault that I tripped over him. I seem to remember passing by him before. Yes, I am sure he sits in the same doorway every time we walk past on our way to the restaurant. Funny, I never really noticed him before. Did he notice us? Perhaps he was planning this all along, to follow me home one night, a wolf to its prey. I come to a dead end.

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

When they find me tomorrow, they'll know. They'll see that I wasn't walking back home. Jasmine will know that I lied to her, telling her that I couldn't go to her house after dinner because I had to help my daughter with her homework. But I lied to my daughter before, telling

her that Mommy was busy and that she had to become self-reliant. I lied to my husband, telling him I'd be at Jasmine's house until midnight. To admit even to myself that I am cheating on him with another man would be impossible.

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

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

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

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

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

It wasn't even opened.

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

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

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

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

"There, but for the grace of God…"

* * * * *

Allison Ridgway
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Moonlight Ben

by Kassandra Sewell

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

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

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

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

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

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

I picked up my brother's hand, just to feel his skin against mine, to remind me that technically he was still there. I set it back down gently and walked to the window. There was a lock on it. It was stuffy inside the room and I wanted air, but sometimes you can't get what you want. I looked up at the moon, remembering better days.

Like the days I would spend with my brother when we were kids. We had really great times. He was seven and I was eleven, and we'd have all sorts of adventures. I miss them all the time. All we ever needed to be entertained was a cardboard box. I remember how we thought the moon always followed us, no matter where we were at night. I used to be annoyed that the moon followed us, feeling we couldn't escape. There were times when I didn't like the fact that Ben followed me, too, as if I couldn't escape him. Now when I look at the moon, I just see Ben. I

used to think he'd never leave me alone, just like the moon. He'd always be there. Now I'm older, seventeen, and he's thirteen, and I don't think that anymore.

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

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

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

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

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The Sacred Pool

by Weijia Zhou

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She felt like stamping her feet and screaming out loud, but that was what little children do, and she was almost an adult. If only she knew what she would do when she became one. After a long, tense silence, she finally said, "Sometimes …." She paused, then continued on. "Sometimes I think the Sacred Pool is nothing but ordinary water!" she finished hotly. Immediately she regretted her words.

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

Jasmine put down her bowl and shook her head. Sparrow didn't understand how she felt; how could she? After all, Sparrow already knew she was a weaver. Sparrow had never had the anxieties or

the fears of *not* knowing. But even though she thought this, all she managed to squeeze out was, “It’s not that simple!” She stood up hurriedly and ran out.

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

* * * * *

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Make Some Noise

by Emily Frost

There are many different kinds of quiet. There's the tense quiet right before the storm. There's the comfortable quiet shared between close friends. There's the angry quiet after a fight. There's even a happy quiet when someone is at peace and content.

And then there's the sad quiet when someone can't find the words to pretend that everything's okay and thus resorts to a grim silence. Some people can't distinguish between the different sorts of quiet, but I'm something of an expert. I'm a quiet person who comes from a quiet family in a quiet town, you see, and so I've had a lot of experience dealing with the different kinds of silence.

I can't see his face. He's turned away from the house, sitting by himself in the backyard on the deck swing that my dad put together years ago. All I can see are his tensed shoulders and his shaggy hair, which is in desperate need of a trim. Mom puts her hand on my shoulder, and I realize I've been staring out the kitchen window for a long time.

"Go to him," she urges softly, and so I do. I put on my rain boots because it's the middle of April and the ground is no more than glorified mud (a clinging remainder of the longest winter we've had in ages) and make my slow but steady way to the deck swing. I sit down beside him, and he shifts ever so slightly, just enough so we can both sit comfortably.

"Are you okay?" I ask, injecting as much warmth and compassion into my voice as possible.

He shrugs, tossing his shoulders in a way that makes me think of vulnerability. People try to hide their vulnerability until they can't. "I'm all right. You should go back inside. It's cold."

"Says the boy who left his coat inside," I tease lightly, and I'm rewarded with the barest hint of a smile. "Come on back inside. Mom made some tea. Plus we've got birthday cake for the birthday boy." I'm not sure what I thought I'd achieve with this thinly disguised bribe, but he barely reacts.

"I'm all right," he says again, refusing to be comforted. Sitting on the deck swing offers a breathtaking view of the half-frozen lake, with the long sloping yard leading down to the narrow pier that has survived against all odds over the years. This is where his gaze is focused, as direct and undeterred as the path of a bullet shot from a gun. "Really. You don't have to worry." He breaks off his gaze and elbows me in the side, smirking.

I smile. "You know I can't help but worry. I still remember what happened last year on your birthday when …"

His smirk fades fast, and I backtrack immediately, but it's too late. He's retreated back inside himself, and I'm forced to finish my sentence mentally... *when she wasn't there and it was like a part of you had died with her.*

"Sorry," I mumble, not because I've done something grievously wrong, but because apologizing is just what you do when you misstep and you want to fix it. He takes a deep shuddering breath and turns to me with what only the most generous soul would call a smile.

"It's all right," he says. "It happened almost two years ago. I should be okay by now. I am okay. I'm all right. Don't worry about me."

"You're my best friend," I say, reaching to pat his hand. "I'll worry about you anyway. And no one expects you to be okay. Grief doesn't lessen over time. It just becomes more manageable."

"It was so stupid. A car accident. It just feels like something so completely avoidable. She died and it was completely avoidable, yet it happened and I still miss her every day. We had a tradition for my birthday, you know. She'd bake a cake and we'd go swimming, even though it's like fifty below freezing this time of year."

His voice is so sad, and so lost, and all I want to do is find the right compass to lead him back to safety. I feel that I'm always searching for the perfect words to make everything better. I know they exist, but I haven't found them yet. "I'm sorry. God, I'm sorry."

"Not your fault," he mumbles. "Just a stupid accident."

I stand up and pull him to his feet. He allows himself to be dragged upright with the utmost reluctance. "C'mon."

"What are you doing?"

"We're going swimming," I say, and give his hand a tug towards the lake. "C'mon. I'm sorry she's gone, but I'm here and the lake's here and it's your birthday and it'd be a shame to let this opportunity go to waste." He grins a little at my breathless speech, and without another word, we're running like children to the shore of the half-frozen lake. I'm soaked to the bone within seconds, and it's even colder than I had imagined. I sense that something is different. We're no longer hindered by reality, by the depressing facts that adults learn to live with. Something has changed, and I know that we've escaped from the jail of quiet and that finally he can begin to heal. It's not swimming so much as wading, but I can tell from the unadulterated happiness in his eyes that it counts. One of the most beautiful aspects of being a teenager is the complete freedom to select which emotions to focus on and which to ignore.

There are many different kinds of quiet. There's tense quiet and angry quiet and happy quiet and sad quiet. But there are many different kinds of noise, too. There's unhappy noise and sad noise and there's the best noise of all – the noise your best friend makes when you splash him with freezing cold water in the middle of April.

* * * * *

Emily Frost
Grade 11
St. Peter's Secondary School

Bless You

by Megan Boothby

Lizzie knew lots of things about mothers and how to handle them, but she didn't know how mine had gone blind. She said sometimes that there were things in the world so beautiful you could only see them once, and afterward you couldn't see anything else because just glimpsing that something was such an honour.

"What'd you think it was?" I used to ask.

Lizzie always shrugged.

"Only the Universe knows."

When Lizzie babysat me the first time, I was with the Stone Lion in Promenara Park. Long before, Mum had arranged for her to take care of me every day after school. Straddling its broad cement back, I sat like a conqueror astride his carnivorous steed.

"It used to talk to me."

I looked over, thinking she was a boy at first – there were workboots and a black sweater and floppy red hair – but then she glanced up, and I could tell the difference.

"The Stone Lion," she insisted, motioning with a vague hand to the statue. "It's seen everything there is to see. When I was little, I'd sit right where you are now and imagine I was looking through its eyes at centuries. The Stone Lion's been around so long it's watched the stars switch places in the sky."

I was pretty sure she was joshing me; a smile tugged at her lips. But she wasn't wearing any make-up, just like Mum, and that made me want to forgive her for fibbing.

For as long as I knew her, I always forgave her.

Lizzie and I lay in my backyard sometimes, looking at stars. I pointed out the Big Dipper, and she rolled over on her stomach to look at me.

"Danny, do you know what the first word I ever said was?"

"What?"

"Bullshit."

My mouth formed an O.

"No! That's a *bad word*!"

"I know. But when I was a baby, it was my dad's favourite phrase for something he couldn't believe. My mum says it was the first thing he said when I was born and he held me. So it was the first word I knew too."

"My first word was ROAR!" I launched myself at her, and we rolled giggling across the dewy lawn. When we stopped, she lay on her back with her feet against my hips, holding me up at the ends of her legs like an airplane.

“Now why would you have said that?” she whispered, her voice gone as quiet as Mum’s when she was praying.

“I was talking to the Stone Lion. My Grammy took me there to visit it as a baby.”

“I see.”

I didn’t like the way things felt right then, like somewhere else another world was dying, and it washed right across the galaxies into ours.

“What’re you thinking?” I said, wiggling my arms up and down like wings.

“Right now, from down here, you look like part of the night sky,” said Lizzie. I looked at her then, and I knew she wasn’t happy. She talked a lot about leaving and finding The Answer, which I thought might be like a really special cheat sheet for a test. I didn’t understand – if she wanted a perfect score so badly, why didn’t she just steal it from the teacher’s desk?

Lizzie stared up at me. “Ya know, Danny,” she said, her eyes shifting back and forth, “sometimes, when I’m lying awake on rainy nights next to my window, I imagine what my life would be like if I moved to a big city. You ever imagine that?”

I shook my head, still hanging in the air.

“I see myself as a slightly more lesbian-looking Audrey Hepburn sitting on the fire escape,” Lizzie continued, “strumming a guitar, eh? *Moon River*.”

I pondered this and decided I didn’t know what it meant.

“Why?”

“Because sometimes I feel…” Lizzie started, and I never heard the end.

Later I asked Mum what lesbian meant, to which she simply replied with her typical,

“Bless you.”

Mum blessed you whenever she wanted to clean your mouth out with the all-powerful soap of the Universe.

Some afternoons on the way home from the Park, Lizzie stopped at her house in the shadiest corner of Willow Court. We played a familiar game called “The Quietest Mouse,” where we saw how silent I could be at the foot of her driveway.

“You can’t come in, Danny,” she always said, dead serious, and I waited for her.

And sometimes she brought her guitar out and sang for me.

“Lizzie?” I asked once when she was finished. “Did you mean what you said, a long time ago, about the Stone Lion seeing the stars move? Can they move? My Grammy said they were the one thing that would never change.”

She shrugged.

“Why? Do you find that disturbing?”

I frowned, and Lizzie laughed, like a whisper underneath all the night’s other sounds.

“Don’t worry, Danny. I don’t know anything.”

That night was the last time I ever saw her. Before she left, she kissed my cheek and whispered,

“Stone eyes see more than our eyes, and I don’t think there’s much more, you know, than stars and Stone Lions,” and then Mum said I’d stopped needing a babysitter, and Lizzie vanished like dew rising up into misty shafts of sunlight – evaporated.

She wrote me a letter once, a year ago, and as I read it, the mountains outside turned their wide white eyes away until I felt like the centre of a movie screen that was slowly zooming out.

It was you, she wrote. *You were too beautiful*.

There was something there, something ever so close to me, like a shadow I couldn’t quite glimpse. And as I wondered – I’d never know for sure – it crept inside me. Something about blindness and leaving and stone, about seeing and staying and infinite eyes that had watched the stars grow old and die and move on to broader fields and brighter pastures.

“Bless you,” I said to my window, but the sky was clouded and silent.

* * * * *

Megan Boothby
Grade 12
Peterborough Collegiate Vocational School

Ballad of the Jazz Man

by Kirsten Caldwell

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

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

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

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

She places her hand on the inner part of my thigh, squeezing it seductively. Her lips meet my ear, and in what almost sounds like a single breath, she mocks me and asks that we meet in her room. I take short puffs of my Kool and stride after her, a mouse after a cobra. Her hips shake from side to side and her mocha skin smells like hibiscus and vodka. As I chase after her, I pass by a mirror. I halt in absolute terror. Before me stands a man with dark skin and a wedding band. She looks back and calls towards me. I ask her to go on, saying I'll meet with her soon. Who is this man? I don't recognize him. He is a man with no morals and no compassion. *What would my wife say?* Worse. *What would my mother say?* But what pierces my heart the most, *What would my five-year-old daughter say?* Did I really think I could chase women forever? That my life at home won't catch up with me? I am treated like a god here, but at home I am the sole provider for my family. All that resides with them is responsibility, annoyance, and nagging. Suddenly, the man looks more in control, cooler, classier. I turn away from him and stride towards the elevator. As I enter, a small voice in my head asks: *What about your family?* I push the fifth floor button. *Fuck 'em,* I say back.

Have you ever had that feeling of the wind being knocked out of you? In fifteen seconds,

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * * * *

Kirsten Caldwell
Grade 12
Kenner Collegiate Vocational Institute

A Glimpse of Forever

by Claire Motyer

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

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

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

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

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

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

And out of nowhere, it came. An eye-piercing light and squealing tires and burning rubber and tangled metal and vicious screams and scattered dreams and then, silence. Alice's stillness

echoed in the ones left alone, who held on to each other's shoulders for fear of losing what they had all been once together; they ached from a physical pain that was not theirs, not even Alice's, but from some external force.

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

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Claire Motyer
Grade 12
Adam Scott Collegiate Vocational Institute

A Different Kind of Rabbit Hole

by Caitlyn Clancey

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

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

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

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

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

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

The summer before high school began, the young girl found herself isolated. No one returned her calls. No one invited her to their house, or to the mall, or to the concert they all attended together. When her birthday arrived in late August, her mother asked if she wanted to have her friends over for a party. The young girl pretended they were all busy.

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

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

It seemed impossible. She was the girl they confided in when they had no one else to turn to. She knew something personal about each of them, something she pinky-swore never to reveal and still, to that day, kept locked away inside of her chest. It didn't make sense for them to

pretend she was never a part of their lives because she was at one point. She had been one of them and now she wasn't. How could they act like it never happened?

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

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

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

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

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

* * * * *

Caitlyn Clancey
Grade 12
St. Peter Catholic Secondary School

Going Home

by Emily Frost

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

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

The road stretches ahead of him, disappearing into the city that has been burdening his thoughts for weeks. The city itself is the shell; he is only interested in what the city contains. Somewhere within its noisy, crowded depths, his destination awaits. After weeks of travelling on foot, he feels an unexpected surge of strength return to his aching bones. He will reach the city before dusk falls, and he will reach her side before the moon completes its ascent into the night sky. It strikes him suddenly that he has never been farther from his house than he is in this current moment. In his youth, he dreamed of travel and of adventure, but those dreams faded over the years until the day he received the phone call from the city. The house is probably exactly as he left it, with the painted shutters and the porch swing he's been intending to fix for years. He built the place when he was young and in love, and in a burst of unintended poetic parallelism, he left it when he was old and in love. The house had ceased to feel like home when she left, and her absence had been tangible and painful. Perhaps he is returning home with every step; his home is, and always will be, her. With each step, the weight on his shoulders lifts until he no longer feels as if he is about to drown without her. She is close, so close.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Emily Frost
Grade 12
St. Peter Catholic Secondary School

All Summers in a Sea-Glass

by Vanessa Kraus

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

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

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

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

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

I open my palm, and the sea-glass glints in the last flickers of the dying light, a tiny beacon, a lighthouse that was never there. It's warm in my hand and smells of the water. I grin as I imagine presenting the simple secret of time travel to a roomful of porky balding men in white lab coats: a broken piece of refuse fished out of a lake! Perhaps it is not valuable enough

to demand a place at a university, or an institution, or in the homes of the nation, but for me it is worth more than all the balm in Gilead, because it did what the wedding could not: it brought me back.

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

* * * * *

Vanessa Kraus
Grade 11
St. Peter Catholic Secondary School

The Rock

by Vanessa Kraus

The town I grew up in is gone. Only a few things scattered across the rocky expanse suggest that Goose Point existed: burnt timbers, broken bricks, the rusted blue-whale skeleton of the O'Learys' van.

Once, I brought a boyfriend here, and he couldn't see the town. I pointed out the piles that had been the store, the church, Mrs. Clevan's, where she cut everyone's hair. As I pointed, he kept shading his eyes, thinking it was somewhere in the distance. I thought later, though, that no-one who hadn't grown up here could construct a town with the pitiful building blocks that remained.

There wasn't much more when I lived here, but it had become even smaller after I had moved away. My father told me the story over the phone from my Aunt Mattie's. Late one night, some drunks had tied a flaming branch to the tail of the Browns' beloved mutt Lester. Poor Lester had run home looking for help. The flames engulfed him and spread until everything burned. Good thing the poor boy's wailing had roused the whole town, my dad remarked, or the citizens of Goose Point would have burned to death in their beds. The sound poor Lester made, he said, was the most horrible thing he'd ever heard. It would come to him at the oddest moments, when he was putting on his socks or making his lunch or out fishing, and he would have to sit down with his head in his hands, so painful was the memory.

In the end, it was too expensive to rebuild, so the citizens of Goose Point simply dispersed to the homes of friends and family across the island.

But even before Lester, Goose Point was small: a handful of houses, the Tawes' store, the church, and the post office. That, and, across the bay, our cabin.

Every year, as soon as school was out, my sister Callie and I would run, leather schoolbags slapping our thighs, braids bobbing up and down, to the boat launch. The night before, my mother wrapped cod cakes and baked potatoes and put them into the great wicker basket, and we knew what that meant. My Uncle Caleb would be waiting in his boat, the *Maggie,* named for beautiful red-haired aunt Maggie, who died before we were born. We would leap into the boat, and set off across the bay. Callie and I would rip the pages out of our scribblers full of arithmetic and geography and throw them into the ocean, watching them sink, drifting out of sight like black-veined jellyfish. On we went, leaving a trail of sinking sheets like breadcrumbs, across the bay towards the tip of Goose Point, which we just called the rock, where our cabin sat.

Although it was no more than one room, it was our castle the whole summer long. We would spring from the boat and run up the point to meet Dad and Mother, who had sailed up earlier. We would drop our shoes and schoolbags in the corner, not to be touched again until September. All afternoon we would build castles with pebbles, searching for crabs and treasures in the tide pools. And all afternoon we'd listen, for although we watched the sky anxiously, it was Dad's shrill whistle, and not the setting sun, that determined when it was too late for games.

The cabin had few furnishings: a table, two chairs, and the wooden stand that held my grandmother's record player, an old Victrola with a big brassy bell like a bizarre tropical flower. Dad and Uncle Caleb had carried it across the bay in the boat, just after Mother and Dad were married, and Mr. Clevan had panicked, because he thought that the rowboat with the bell peeking out was a German submarine. Mother rowed him across the bay herself to prove that everything was all right: the war was over and there were no more submarines.

Callie and I would wait anxiously as we munched our supper, waiting for the moment when Dad would brush the crumbs off his mouth, slap both hands down on his knees, look to Mother and say,

"Well, Gracie, innit time we had a bit o' music?"

Uncle Caleb would rise and go to the Victrola, flicking through the records as though making a careful decision, although we all knew what he was going to pick. There were five records: two symphonies by Brahms and two by Beethoven, which the adults would listen to while we slept. But for now, there could only be one song.

Down at an English fair, one evening I was there,
When I heard a showman shouting underneath the flair….

We'd all sing the first time.

"I've got a lovely bunch of coconuts
There they are, all standing in a row
Big ones, small ones, some as big as your head!
Give them a twist, a flick of the wrist,"
That's what the showman said!

I was twenty when I finally tasted a coconut. I had been living in Toronto for a while when out of curiosity I went to the exotic grocery near my apartment and chose a fuzzy brown nut the size of a bowling ball. The kindly West African shopkeeper took a worn steel hammer and split open my coconut with a practised swing, grinning toothlessly. He grinned even wider as I slurped down the sweet milk and the tender flesh, my eyes squeezed shut in wordless delight. Nothing had ever tasted like it, nor had anything ever been so clean and white. Not fresh linen, not snowfall, not seagulls.

"It tastes like *snow!*" I squealed, childishly, although it didn't taste even remotely like it. The shopkeeper laughed and nodded. Whether or not he understood me, I'll never know.

"I've got a lovely bunch of coconuts,
Every ball you throw will make me rich!
There stands me wife, the idol of me life,
Singing roll a bowl a ball a penny a pitch!"

Dad would stand, bow elegantly to Mother and take her hand, leading her across the floor in a lively waltz. Dad's feet in their boots would become surprisingly light, and Mother's eyes would sparkle like a storybook angel's. Callie and I, giggling, would take hands and follow clumsily, while Uncle Caleb kept time, smiling and laughing.

I once asked my mother why Uncle Caleb never joined us. She kissed my forehead and said that Uncle Caleb never danced, not anymore, which meant not since red-haired Aunt Maggie had died. I asked why Uncle Caleb never found another wife, and she said that Uncle Caleb used up most of his love on Aunt Maggie, and what was left he kept for us. I felt horrible, knowing that I was the reason Uncle Caleb was alone; one night I told him that he could stop loving me if he wanted, and use that love to find a new wife. He picked me up, squeezed me in his giant arms, and said he'd rather love me than all the wives in the world.

"Roll a bowl, a ball, a penny, a pitch
Roll a bowl, a ball, a penny, a pitch
Roll a bowl, a ball, roll a bowl, a ball
Singing roll a bowl a ball a penny a pitch!"

We would dance until the record finished, and then we'd start over again until the floor trembled and the walls shook, until we collapsed, red-faced and sweaty on the floor, rocking with exhausted laughter. Callie and I would change from our soaking dresses into soft nightshirts and lie on the mats that Mother had brought over. We were lulled to sleep by the murmurs of the grown-ups talking, under the delicate strains of Brahms and Beethoven, every night until September placed her work-booted foot onto the shore of the rock and sent us trudging back until next summer.

* * * * *

Vanessa Kraus
Grade 12
St. Peter Catholic Secondary School

The Warlanders

by Mackenzie Green

When we were young, we decided it was a good idea to slice our palms with zebra mussels and make a blood pact. The three of us stood in a circle at the pebbly beach, shaded by warped evergreens, where Grandpa couldn't see us if he glanced over. Lifejacket clamped securely around her chest, Laina waded into the lake, waves carving dark patches in the edges of her shorts. Cam, her brother, trudged beside her, and I pried a mussel off the side of a rock before taking my place in the lapping water across from my cousins.

I cleared my throat. "I, Anna Holland, promise to never lose my imagination." The edge of the zebra mussel glided across my palm. As a small crimson slit appeared, I solemnly regarded my imagination as a concrete object, a cottage treasure like a slab of mica or a smooth piece of beach glass. I handed the mussel to Cam.

"Come on, Cam. Say something," I urged. He dropped his head to look down at the water, his eyes rolling as he did so. At 11, although only my elder by a year, his interest in our familiar pastimes and games of pretend had hastily subsided since the beginning of the summer. At last, Cam mumbled out the pact and sliced his skin.

Laina, the baby of our group at age six, held out her hand for the zebra mussel. Instead, I plucked a pebble from beside my foot to give to her, and Cam cast the mussel into the lake. Laina rubbed the water-smoothed stone across her hand.

"We promise to never break the bond of the cousins or disobey the laws of Warland," I chanted as the three of us stretched out our arms and touched our palms together. After a few moments of silence, my cousins and I proceeded to the dock, where we sat with our feet dipped in the water. Our eyes scanned the lake, vast and impassable, that kept us contentedly stranded on the island at our grandfather's cottage for the summer.

"I hear an army of sea monsters is making its way to Warland," I said after several minutes, motioning towards the white-capped waves charging toward us.

"Fire the cannon!" Laina hollered. Through a thicket of shrubbery I glimpsed our cannon, a fallen tree with its splintered trunk aimed at the water. Cam, finally showing interest, pulled the stub of a charred stick from his pocket and began to draw a rough sketch of the island on the planks of the dock. Carefully, he mapped out a plan of action for the upcoming battle, sketching a circle around the point of land that jutted out into the lake: Warland, we'd called it for as long as we could remember.

* * *

"Anna, Cam killed my imaginary friend!" Laina shouted. She lashed out at her brother with clenched fists.

"I had to, Laina; he was in cahoots with the sea monsters," Cam said in his defence as he fought against his sister's futile blows. I jogged through the branches that criss-crossed the entrance to Warland and came up beside Laina, pulling her away from her brother.

"Cam broke the pact," Laina whined as Cam smirked and walked away from us.

"He was just kidding, Laina. I'll talk to him," I said, eventually sending my cousin away to fight a band of lake-gremlins swimming toward the boathouse.

I found Cam outside the entrance to Warland, firing a basketball at a makeshift hoop we'd nailed to a tree.

“Stop messing with Laina,” I told him. “She’s getting all up in arms, and Grandpa can’t deal with it since he’s sick.” Cam didn’t answer, so I tried again: “You’re supposed to be following the laws of Warland, you know.” I pointed at the scar on my hand from the previous summer as a reminder.

“Whatever, Anna,” grunted Cam, taking another shot. I watched the basketball roll around the rim before dropping in. “Your little pact isn’t gonna matter when I’m playing college ball.”

I snorted. “Seriously, Cam? You’re only twelve.”

Cam’s next shot missed; the ball ricocheted off the tree trunk and bounced toward the water. He chased after it, and I followed him down to the beach. Cam snagged the ball before it somersaulted into the lake. He took a seat at the water’s edge.

“Did you lie when you made the pact?” I asked.

Cam was silent, eyes fastened on the horizon. The sun was a white-hot orb in the centre of the sky, and the water caught its light among turbulent peaks and valleys.

“Cam, just be a kid for a couple more summers,” I said. After a moment I added, “And stop using Laina’s imaginary friends for target practice.”

Cam picked a zebra mussel off a rock and flicked it into the lake. “It’s not my problem if an invisible little kid won’t get out of my way.”

* * *

Few summers had stickier air and warmer water than the following summer, the summer Grandpa died. Our parents sat around a table inside the cottage poring over an array of official documents. They shooed us children outside to sag under the weight of the heat as fat flies buzzed in our ears. We walked side by side down the hill that led to Warland and trod across uneven ground to the tip of the island, where rock met unbridled, grey lake.

“We could fight some sea monsters, I guess,” said Laina. No one responded, and eventually she wandered away from us.

“Anna, they’re selling the cottage,” Cam said abruptly. At that moment the sounds of the island, the waves, the wind, and the occasional bird cry, became like blasts of gunfire.

“No…” I began, but Cam cut me off.

“Warland’s over, Anna. So are summers up here.” He motioned around us. “All of this is gonna be gone.” Cam stood up. “We’re too old for this anyway.” He turned and walked away, leaving me sitting on my hands, watching the water. My fingers tingled against ragged rock below me. I felt the sudden urge to aim our tree trunk cannon at the cottage and send a boulder from the beach through the front window. Facing the lake, our cannon would no longer be useful; Warland’s enemies had long since overtaken the island.

* * * * *

Mackenzie Green
Grade 11
Crestwood Secondary School

Ghosts in the Snow

by Barett Poley

I was a Wehrmacht soldier on the Ostfront in the winter of 1941. Part of the Northern Group Battalion, I was a proud soldier. I was raised in Berlin, and when my father did not return from the Western Front in 1918, or 1919, or 1920, I knew, even as a small boy of five, that I had been chosen to take up his mantle. Even though my people were discouraged and disbanded, I was taking any risk I could to regain the honour of my father.

It was cold then in the late November snow. In a city near Moscow, I felt the burn of the outside world on my feet beneath my boots, soaked through and wrapped doubly with towels. Having been pinned down for an hour and having lost contact with the other platoons in the area, we waited as the twilight snow blinded us. Ghosts in the snow approached us, silhouettes with guns drawn, images too blurred to tell if they were Russians or members of the Wehrmacht.

"Halt! Wer ist da? Sie sind Freund oder Feind?!" yelled the Kommandant, his rifle raised and trained upon the phantoms. It would not make a difference, I thought to myself, for bullets know no ally.

Whispers in the wind were our response, and with the harsh breeze came a new torrent of snow. I wasn't sure if it was the wind or a response lost to the elements, and so I crouched at the ready, the metal bolt of my rifle stinging my palm where the wear of war had whittled away the wool of my gloves. German gloves, I reflected, made by German hands like my own. The Kommandant looked at us, the five of us who remained, and ordered in a hushed tone that we move inside the houses roughly a hundred metres to the front of us.

There had been a brief pause in the fighting, due presumably to the snow. Though the world seemed calmer as we crawled through makeshift trenches, we saw flares of orange, supernovas in the grey dusk, projecting shadows of men, far grander and more ghastly than I'd ever seen before. Were they friend or foe, those who fell with screams in the night? Was it a friendly bullet that struck them? It occurred to me again that no bullet was friendly, regardless of its origin.

Finally we made it to the doorstep of a building and, huddling ourselves quietly inside, we found an abode of peace for a moment in the shelled carapace of some poor Soviet's home. On the ground I noticed a picture frame, turned sideways and shattered, as if someone had meant to take it in haste; instead it had been knocked off a shelf and broken.

A voice came over us all, as if it were the call of God; in truth, it came from a Soviet loudspeaker. The words were in German, but the Russian accent was blatant and laughable. "Achtung! Die Sowjetunion ist nicht der Feind der Wehrmacht! Gib deine kapitalistischen Führer, die nichts von dir wollen, aber der Tod! Wir sind nicht deine Feinde!"

The Kommandant grinned at this. "You hear that, gentleman?!" he boomed "These men are our friends! The Soviets are our *allies*! I couldn't tell from the dirty bullets flying at us from all directions, but mein Gott, I have been enlightened!"

The other four grinned, I among them. The first words spoken amongst us in an hour had given us a morale boost, and so we gripped our rifles with the tightness of patriots when we realized our presence had not gone unnoticed. From another room we heard yelling in Russian, and though we could not tell if they were yells of warning or the orders of hell itself barked from the mouth of the Russian Kommisar, we knew they were yells made on our behalf.

“Hans, to the front. Jorge, you watch our sides. We clear the room ahead. We will make it through this, Gott willing.”

The whole ordeal lasted less than a minute, and as far as we could tell, there was only one survivor. He sat at a small fire in the middle of the room. Blood dripped from his mouth and from a wound in his chest. He was a handsome young boy, and I could see that there was a tear in his collar.

Grimacing at his sorry state, I cocked my rifle, the cold biting against my hands where metal met flesh, and I put a bullet to his head. Metal met flesh again at my command.

It was four or five days later that we were made to retreat, being surrounded by troops on most sides and having depleted our ammunition, as well as those rounds left in the guns of our enemies. Night was beginning to fall, and the fighting calmed, so it was then that we made our escape from the building through an urban centre and courtyard. A loud crack dulled my senses. I tripped in a snow bank. On my knees I could see the scarlet in front of me.

My rifle was nowhere to be found when I finally stood up again, but I limped to an alleyway for safety. There I was met with a warm fire. A lone soldier sat there, and like me, he was unarmed and injured, a wet bandage stuck limply to his head. He looked at me and motioned for me to sit beside him, and so I did. He had a bottle of vodka and a single cigarette.

In the dusk, we shared the alcohol and the bitter Soviet cigarette, neither warming us as much as we’d hoped. I noticed that there were more soldiers gathering around us, both Soviet and Wehrmacht.

I turned, tired and dazed, to thank the soldier beside me for the drink and the company. I looked closely at his face. He was a handsome young boy, with a tear in his collar. We were ghosts in the snow.

* * * * *

Barett Poley
Kenner Collegiate Vocational Institute
Grade 12

Norma-Jean

by Jasmine Shenandoah

It was quiet now that the laughing and crying had ceased. The room was dark, the peeling wall plaster, covered up by the Clark Gable posters, reminded her of her absent father. The burn on her cheek, where her mother had struck her, was slowly starting to soften, sinking deeper into her skin until it marked her soul. She crawled to the window from the place where she had slumped onto the floor and poked her head through the curtains. The lights of Hollywood glowed against her cherubic face, reflecting the stars in her eyes. One day, she thought, I'll leave this all behind.

Norma-Jean stood and cautiously opened the door to stare down the barren hallway. Now that her mother's fit had ended, the filthy halls echoed with her faded cries. From the outside, the house seemed friendly and innocent enough, but on the inside its core rotted like a month-old apple, its decaying fuzz contaminating the joy of Norma-Jean's soul. As she tiptoed down the hall, she stopped outside her mother's door. Soft murmurs in her mother's voice comforted someone who was not there, for she was alone. Norma-Jean sighed and continued down the hall, crept down the creaking stairs, grabbed her coat, and left.

It was a long walk to the movie theatre, but she knew the way well. She fell into the trance of the happy routine, her footsteps retracing a path she had walked many times before. She passed familiar houses, lit from the inside by candlelight and smiling faces. She tried not to dwell on these happy families, the dinners at long tables, birthdays and holidays celebrated with laughter and music – a childhood she never had. She passed the police station, with its faded sign *To Protect and To Serve*, the white letters of a prouder era. The police doors opened, unleashing the laughter of the rowdy men who had been on the job for too long. They lit up their cigarettes, the ashen smoke blowing away the cares of the day. Through the fading light, a man, if he could be called that for he had scarcely graduated from boyhood, caught her eye. He was scrawny, with uncombed maple-coloured hair and a kindly but sad face. He was less rowdy than the other men, who were busy pushing one another around and letting loose raunchy jokes. Feeling her eyes on him, he looked up, catching her gaze. Norma-Jean held his stare, causing them both to smile. One of his buddies punched him in the shoulder, bringing him back into the fishnet of testosterone. When he had untangled himself from it and returned his gaze to the girl, she was already gone.

From nearly a block away the lights of the movie theatre enchanted her. Posters boasting films starring Fred Astaire and Gene Kelly beckoned to her with glamorous photos and emboldened titles of movie studios.

She paid the movie attendant, "One ticket to see *You Were Never Lovelier,*" and handed over the precious change, the 37 cents that she had worked all week to save. She entered the movie theatre, slipping deftly past the long lineup at the concession stand, her red skirt swishing around her knees, and sank into one of the deep cushioned chairs in the theatre. As the lights were lowered, Norma-Jean was able to let out a sigh, releasing all the stress of the day. The movie began, credits rolled before the bright-eyed actresses appeared on the screen, and she was able, slowly, to let her worries fall off her like sweaty clothes dropping to the floor after a long day. Her memories were erased by the music, the romantic plot, and the witty one-liners. She forgot it all: her mother, her empty stomach, the girls at school who made fun of her patched clothes, the way she was bounced around to foster homes when her mother grew tired of her, and the fact that she had never really felt wanted or loved by a single human being. All of that disappeared as she immersed her shadow of a soul in the show onscreen, so much so that it became a part of her, a dream she would later replay over and over again in her mind. Eventually the dream ended, and the lights came up on the dark movie house like the dawn of a new day. People slowly filed out of the theatre, but she stayed in her seat, staring at the screen, silently willing the sun to set and the dream to dance over the theatre once again. Soon the theatre was empty, and it was almost closing. One of the movie attendants asked her to leave. And so

she did, but unlike the others in the theatre who had left eagerly with thoughts of warm beds and home, she had no family to return to, so she made her way slowly back to her house.

The lights of the theatre faded into the distance, along with the smell of popcorn. She walked back the same way she had come, passing the old police station, but the boy was no longer outside smoking with his friends. She sighed. She was lonely walking home by herself, but she knew she would be even lonelier once she finally made it there. Lost in the tangled mess of her thoughts, she turned the corner, unaware of her surroundings, and bumped into something. When she got her bearings she realized it was a tall man, perhaps one of the officers she had witnessed earlier on their smoke break.

"What the – ! Well, aren't you a pretty little thing," said the stranger, recovering and taking a step back to look her over.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I wasn't paying attention . . . . " Norma-Jean suddenly realized how handsome this tall stranger was. "Oh, I'm all shook up now," she moaned, lifting her hands to her face as if she was going to faint. The man quickly interjected, putting his arm around her to stead her.

"Would you like to sit down? We could go into the Old Mill." He pointed to the bar across the street. Its windows were painted with light and bursting with the laughter of raucous drinking and merriment. In that moment she decided she would not be lonely anymore.

"Yes," she nodded, batting her big blue eyes at the unassuming man. The two stumbled across the street and into the bar, where the man pulled out a chair for her.

"What's your name, gorgeous?"

She racked her brain, looking for a name to give him. "Marilyn," she decided, after the actress Marilyn Miller.

"Well, Marilyn, do girls as lovely as you drink nowadays?"

"Why, of course! It makes the world a rosier place!" she lied, having never before had a drink in her life. And so the night went on with the young man plying her with drinks, and with her lying about who she was, feigning that she was some glamorous young actress on the brink of stardom. When the bar was about to close, he walked her home. She felt tingly and warm, leaning on him as they made their way through the deserted streets. At the main intersection though, he turned right instead of left.

"Whhere are we going?" she slurred, "My house is *that* way!"

"I thought you might like to see my place first," the man said, still bulldozing on. She suddenly realized, through the drunken fog consuming her, that in her attempt to banish her loneliness she had made a terrible mistake.

"No," she murmured, "No, I want to go home!"

"Shhh, we are. We're going to *my* home."

"No!" she shook him off and made to leave, but he grabbed her arm smacking her body tight against his chest.

"Come on," he cooed, "you've been flirting with me all night."

"I want to go home!" she struggled, trying to break free. Suddenly a light blinded them both. It was the kind-faced boy from the police station.

“Get on out of here. I’ll walk the lady home.” The man opened his mouth to protest, then took in the smart police uniform, shook his head, and begrudgingly disappeared into the night.

“Are you all right, miss?” the young officer asked, staring sincerely into her face. She nodded, and he took her arm. “Don’t worry I’ll get you home safe, miss . . . ?”

“Norma. Norma-Jean.”

He smiled. “That’s a lovely name!”

“You think so?” she grimaced, “I’ve always hated it. I’d prefer something much more glamorous like Gene or Marilyn.”

“I think I like you fine just the way you are,” he said smiling at her shyly. She smiled back, feeling reassured by his gentle manner and presence. They had reached her house, but she wasn’t ready to go inside just yet.

“Do you ever feel lonely?” she asked, “Like you’re on this island all by yourself and you haven’t a paddle or a boat so you’ll never get out! Do you ever feel that way?” He cocked his head and studied her intently, realizing that she wasn’t just some girl who had had too much to drink, but perhaps someone whose soul was searching for something beyond this small neighbourhood of shambled dreams.

“Yes,” he said, “sometimes I dream of getting away from all of this and really living. I don’t know how, though.”

At that she ran to him and threw her arms around his neck. “I’ve never met a man like you before; you’re . . . so kind.”

He blushed and looked away.

“You can kiss me, you know . . . if you want,” her lips inches away from his.

He examined her with a startled look, and then, as if he could see something of himself reflected in her eyes, he leaned in and kissed her ever so slightly.

Norma-Jean smiled, “Will you come by tomorrow?”

“Yes,” he breathed without skipping a beat. She smiled, releasing him from her arms, and made her way into the house. As he turned to head back the way he had come, she watched him through the window until he had faded into the night, the way dreams do in the morning. She went up the creaking stairs and could hear her mother’s heavy breathing even from the landing. She climbed into bed, gazed at the distant stars through her window, and told them that she would never again be lonely.

* * * * *

Jasmine Shenandoah
Grade 12
Lakefield College School

Letters to Stone

by Mackenzie Green

Dear Stonewoman,

Yesterday a little boy with blond hair and jam on his face pointed at your bare grey chest and laughed. I thought you'd want to know.

Before the workday begins and the sticky children arrive for the art workshop I teach, I use my left arm, flexible only at the wrist, to grip the joystick and direct my wheelchair through the gallery doors. My other arm stays locked to my chest, and a single crutch rests across my lap. I steer through the spacious lobby and up the wheelchair ramp into the elevated room that contains a dozen paintings and two sculptures.

She stands by the window: a rectangular mahogany base, the understated shape of legs fused at the centre, stretching up to a trim stone torso. There is a head above that, with the subtle suggestion of facial features and several ripples of hair, carved painstakingly from the dark grey stone. Sunlight, flooding through the wide window behind her, seems to give her a visible soul that radiates outside her motionless form.

There is still some mobility in my right leg, so I stand up, leaning on my crutch, and move closer to the sculpture. With my neck immobilized by struts of bone, I move only my eyes to glance at the plaque displayed on a stand beside her. It's a black metal plate fixed to a marble base: "*Stonewoman* by John Eastlack – granite, 1984."

I had a dream last night that Stonewoman was running through a field of tall grass, her movement natural and vivid in my mind.

"Move," I whisper, just to test. Her limbs remain still. After a moment I sit down again. I twist the joystick and roll towards the reception desk of the gallery, lamenting the aptitude of the moniker bestowed upon my disease: "Stone Man Syndrome." Like a hobby carpenter fooling around with wood and nails, my body has built itself a second skeleton. With any bump or bruise, muscles and connective tissue are replaced by bone; a fall locked my left leg straight like an icicle, and surplus bone immobilized my right arm after a collision with a wall.

I'm sorry about the laughing children with their twirling limbs. They mock your rigidity. Or maybe you're not motionless at all. You can tell me, you know, if you free your legs at night and traipse around the gallery. I won't let your secret out.

Sincerely, Annika

In the evening, I keep my ground-floor apartment in semidarkness with music playing, like in an orchestra hall. I live with my sister Gwen, but she won't be home from work for another hour. With so much time spent in my head, I often compose letters to Stonewoman to entertain myself. I close my eyes for a second and nearly drift off. When my eyelids flicker open, my gaze rests on a small antique clock that sits on a shelf in the corner of the room. The thread-like lines of spider webs seem to anchor it to the wall, and it is half illuminated by weak light coming through the window. From my angle, the clock's curved silhouette appears to mimic Stonewoman. I can't quite reach the shelf from my wheelchair, so I stand, leaning on a nearby table for support. I try to take a step forward. I feel my toe catch on a fold in the carpet…

Dear Stonewoman,

I lie on the floor with my right leg trapped beneath me. One night I dreamed that you took my hands and hoisted me from my wheelchair. Please help me up off the ground. The door of my apartment is open. Come right in.

Stonewoman did not save me. I wake up in the hospital and it smells like the pink soap you find in public bathrooms. I can feel the flare-up on my leg, the swollen lump where a new growth of bone will eventually form. I close my eyes.

At 2 a.m. there is an image in my mind of Stonewoman as a flag, her grey body rippling in the breeze. At 4 a.m. she is a child dancing about, shouting my name. An hour later she's the newscaster on television saying, "I like to pretend to be still and useless like Annika." She repeats it over and over with a lilting, deranged voice. For two weeks in the hospital I am harassed by stone. The morning I am released, I go to the gallery.

Dear Stonewoman,

WHY do you torment me? You are stone that can move and I am a human that cannot. I am coming to see you and YOU WILL WALK OR…

ANNIKA

I drive my chair through the gallery doors and the wheels groan as I ascend the ramp.

"Move!" I screech, although it is a muffled sound from behind a stiff jaw. I am directly in front of her now. "Why won't you move? I know you can!" I jam the joystick forward, towards that deceitful, taunting statue. The wheelchair accelerates. Barrelling along, I fasten my eyes on Stonewoman's face. My chair collides with the sculpture. Like a thin tree uprooted by ferocious winds, Stonewoman tumbles onto the tiled floor.

I will stand on top of her broken body. As the thought sparks in my mind, I extend my legs forward and push on the wheelchair for leverage. I feel my hand slip across the arm of the chair like a dropped ice cube. The wheels roll backwards, out from under me, and instantly I brace myself for the impact. I hear a crunch as I fall, but the sun is in my eyes and I am stunned for a moment. I lie on the ground like a Cheerio tossed by a child in a highchair. Inches away is Stonewoman's severed head.

"Why didn't you move?" I say to the shattered chunks of granite that lie near my face.

I hear footsteps. At the edge of my vision is a young boy. His eyes dart maniacally, limbs whirl like maple keys, head rolls around like an orbiting planet.

"Mummy, come look!" I hear the boy squeak. A flailing arm becomes rigid, one finger fixed on my body like the barrel of a gun.

Dear Stonewoman,

A little boy with blue eyes and Band-Aids on his knees pointed at my stiff body today. The plaque with your name had fallen next to my head, but he couldn't read it.

* * * * *

Mackenzie Green
Grade 12
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Red

by Rachel York

November 12th

I saw Frankie today by the tiny convenience store that sells those tiny neon sugar sticks . . . what are those called? Pixie Sticks? The sun was out; it was warmer than normal. Most Novembers, the wind is harsh and the ground is littered with tufts of snow. Not this year. Maybe it's that global warming thing everyone talks about. But I was glad for the sun; it lit up Frankie's hair like fire. It twisted and shone like tiny little sparks. I can never keep my eyes away. Green eyes pierced through pale features; however, if you looked closely enough, there were hints of blues and yellows spackling the iris. Frankie was beautiful. Have you ever seen those old movies, you know, the ones set in the 1800s? The girls wore those dresses that were so tight they would faint, but they all had this . . . elegance, they looked so regal. Frankie had that, the calm and peaceful atmosphere completely surrounding and suffocating.

December 2nd

The snow covered the ground in layers now, and the sun only peeked out from its blankets of clouds when it felt like it. Today, like all other winter days, Frankie wore a green jacket at least two sizes too big. It completely consumed Frankie, only to flare and bunch up at the right spots. It was one of those jackets that are stuffed with so many feathers that it made those little rolls in the jacket, you know, the ones that kind of make everyone look like the Michelin tire man. I guess they put all that stuffing in there for warmth, but Frankie gave that off anyway, no jacket needed. I wondered if it were a hand-me-down from siblings. There were many. Three brothers and two sisters. Being the middle child must have been tough.

Inside the school Frankie shed the jacket and placed it in a locker, the one exactly 16 lockers away from mine. It has a broken hinge that screams, "Fix me!" whenever it's opened. Delicate snowflakes were scattered in Frankie's matted hair, looking like ash in a fire. The jacket revealed a long-sleeved shirt, also green, a lighter green with darker green stripes. The tag that stuck out at the back looked worn and faded so you couldn't read the washing instructions, you know, the ones that are a bunch of lines and triangles, which basically means "give to your mom." Frankie doesn't have a mom. I wonder who washes Frankie's shirts.

December 18th

It's almost Christmas, you can tell. You can feel it in the air. It seeps in through the cracks of the wall and drowns you. I'm not really sure what Christmas is about anymore. I mean, there has to be more than all the gifts and clichés that completely surround this insufferable season, right? I was beginning to lose hope in Christmas when Frankie walked in, an elf hat perched on that flawless head, framed by the pieces of red hair that stuck out and little wisps tucked behind an ear, that was, like Frankie, perfect. I walked closer. Only 12 lockers away, I heard soft humming . . . a Christmas song? Maybe Frankie wasn't so perfect. I mean I hated Christmas, the whole Christmas season (did I really just quote the Grinch?). Locker 16 squealed open, and the much-too-big jacket was placed inside. Frankie wore a bright Christmas sweater and a smile. A smile all teeth and dimples. It made me want to believe that Christmas could be more.

It was in fact, not as bad as I thought. That's the thing about Frankie: you're completely set in your ways, (I don't like redheads, period) and then Frankie walks in, red hair, light freckles, big green eyes, and God, the next thing you know, you don't know how you ever lived without seeing that mess of colour. You don't know how you ever lived without Frankie.

January 6th

When Frankie and I first talked, I couldn't find the right words; it was like nothing I said could possibly contain all my thoughts and feelings. Is this what it's like to be in love? If you've never felt it, how do you know if you're really in love? All the cheesy love songs say it makes sense: you just get it; you're in love. How could I be in love with someone I'd never talked to? Maybe I was only in love with the idea of Frankie, this picture-perfect figure I created in my head. I hate love, romance, and those stupid movies where everything works out like a fairy tale, because that's not realistic. But maybe that's when you know you're in love: when everything you hate about love, people, and the world all collide, explode, and disappear. Bright colours and sparks rain down around you like fireworks.

Or maybe, love isn't any of those things. Maybe love is simple, a yes-or-no question that answers itself. I'm not really sure. Love, if that's what I'm feeling, has me all tied in knots. I'm not sure which way is up or where I am, and I have kangaroos in my tummy (because butterflies simply do not suffice). Feeling like this, like I'm lost out at sea and Frankie is the only thing that can keep me afloat, is horrible. It's like drowning over and over again, only to be pulled out of the water before you die. Then, once you think everything is okay again, you're plunged back. But at the same time, it's wonderful. It's sitting by a warm fireplace, wrapped in a blanket, completely surrounded by the smell of burning wood and hot cocoa.

Of course, I couldn't say any of this, but I wanted to say something (anything besides staring with my mouth gaping like a fish). I was caught off guard when Frankie spoke first, before I had a chance. "Hey, Eli!" My mouth went dry and my hands were trembling. This was it, the beginning of everything. All of who I was and who Frankie was melded into one whole being, and I couldn't separate Frankie's red hair and green eyes from my blue eyes and black hair. I was completely lost and knew exactly where I was all at the same time. I was floating in space. I couldn't breathe. We were one, and I knew this was love. "Hi, Frankie."

February 14th

After that day, everything spun and spiralled out of control, like a never-ending ball of yarn, so tangled you can't unweave it. Frankie and I were caught in the web and strung beside each other, holding forever in our hands, trapped in our own world of movies, late-night phone calls, home-cooked dinners, and finding out who washes Frankie's shirts (an older sister). I unravelled the mystery of Frankie, and what I found was much better than anything I could have dreamed up in my head. After all this time, we were here in the chasm of unquestioning and unbreakable love that we knew would swallow us whole. But neither of us minded one bit. We didn't care what anyone thought, we didn't care what anyone said. We were so wrapped up in each other that the world could have fallen completely apart and scattered around us in a million pieces. With Frankie and me, everything was connected: one soul, one brain, one heart. I guess that means I love him.

* * * * *

Rachel York
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Thieving Eyes

by Ashlynn Black

In my experience, fatter people made the best targets when it came to thievery. Others in my profession preferred going after people with nice clothes or people with a noble nose stuck up in the air, (targets I, too, stole from if I could). But I usually had more success with the plump. They were big, so it was easy to sneak up on them without being seen, and they were never in top physical condition, so they were easy to outrun if need be. Sometimes they did not even try. Also, not many people had the luxury of being fat in those hard times. If someone was actually fat, it meant that person was overeating. And if that person was overeating, it meant they had the money to buy a lot of food. What I am trying to say is that a chunkier man had the better chance of having a chunkier purse.

It was solid reasoning, and I knew this, because, as a young pickpocket in the muddy streets of Venice, it was my *job* to know. Knowing the facts could mean life or death on the streets. I have seen that lesson learned before my very eyes. But I was always the kind of girl to observe and learn before jumping in anyway. Calculated risk was my specialty.

I remember thinking about this as I saw a gigantic man waddling down one of those muddy streets, where the faint yellow light spilled through the windows above. I quickly made a calculation and started following him from a short distance, making observations in the shadows so that nothing would surprise me when I acted.

He hummed an off-key but catchy melody as he walked, tripping over his own feet every few steps, then chuckling at himself, obviously drunk. Not surprising for Venice though, and definitely not surprising on the first night of Carnival. I could hear muffled music and drunken laughter several streets over. If the man were to have turned around, I would have definitely seen the mask he wore.

When I had my plan, I doubled my pace. Matching my steps with his to hide my approach and wasting no time, I cut the money bag dangling from the rear of his belt clean off, easing back into the shadows without a sound and quickly travelling in the other direction. I was just leaving that street when the man finally learned of his misfortune, screaming that he had been robbed and trying to call the guards. I stopped and looked back at the faint shadow that was the man. “Welcome to Carnival,” I said, barely above a whisper as I smirked, “where the drinks are strong and the thieves take advantage.” With that I left the area.

I counted the contents of the purse, as I went over small bridges while occasionally passing drunken masked partiers as I made my way towards the centre of the city.

Unfortunately my theory did not come through that one time. He barely had enough to buy two apples – probably spent it all on wine. But it was not as if I needed it to buy apples. I just usually used apples as a way to judge expenses (I could have bought five apples for this, or nine for that matter). It is a habit I still have to this day. I do not know when it started, but I think I got it from my mother before she disappeared.

When I was smaller and less wise, my mother would always show up with apples for herself and me. Ripe, fresh, red apples, you know, the expensive sorts. And I knew she got them for free because even back then I understood we did not have the money to purchase apples like that. Things like that happened a lot, her getting stuff for free, I mean. I did not know how she did it. So naturally I associated her ability with magic. Not until she disappeared and I had to grow up,

did I figure out the truth behind her "magic." I had to start getting free apples too, among other things. And it was not as magical as I had thought.

That sparked my life as a thief, a pickpocket, one of the hundreds of children in this city who preyed on the purses of others. But I guess it was always in the cards for me; I just did not see it when I was young. I quickly became a prodigy in the fine art of taking what was not mine. Being the best, I soon attracted the attention of the Thieves Guild. And that is why I am telling you this story.

I encountered more and more revellers as I entered the district where most of Carnival was being celebrated. People in beautiful masks played Carnival games, danced, and sang in off-tune drunken glee as I admired how much fun they seemed to be having. I would have loved to join in, but this night was an important night for my profession, and I was already late for a meeting.

I turned the corner of the street and entered a large public plaza, a beautiful open space lined with closed shops on all sides and decorated with countless red lanterns to keep the night at bay. There were no spots untouched. Throughout the plaza, performers were entertaining for coin, and side games were scamming people out of these coins. And there were people, oh yes, all under the light of lanterns. This, I knew, was the heart of Carnival in all its glory. The only darkness came from where the plaza met the Venetian Lagoon on the opposite side. It was as if reality itself had been ripped away in that one spot, leaving only black. But it would not be like that for long. The people had found a way to fill that dark corner, and that was why I was there.

Someone tapped my shoulder. I jumped and turned to find a boy trying not to laugh behind me, the boy I was meeting, Leo. "Stop scaring me!" I said, smacking his shoulder. Leo laughed, but I did not find it funny. He always loved scaring people, and I was always his primary target. If we had not been lifelong best friends I would have punched him in the face a long time ago. Luckily he was good at bringing my anger back down to safe levels.

"A rose for my rose," he teased as he produced a blood-red, thornless rose out of nowhere and placed it in my hand before I could react. That sly smile, which he liked to show when he was trying to be smooth, spread across his face, even if it did not quite work for him as he might have believed. It might have worked when he was older and more experienced. But for now, Leo was still just a kid like me.

He was getting there though. His face was already starting that transition from boy to man, with baby fat disappearing to reveal high cheekbones and his jawline just starting to sharpen around the sides. I could already tell he was going to have one of those handsome wolfish faces when he grew up. Top that off with amber eyes, forever-messy hair, and that permanent "I'm always one step ahead of you" look he had, and he could be quite a lady's man one day. He would be the one the father chased out the window with a fire poker the morning after. That was going to be Leo. And I would probably be that friend who had to help him avoid the guards, all while trying my best to sober him up. That is, unless he was paying attention to the meaning of a red rose. Red for romance…probably not, though. I doubted he was thinking about colour when he snatched it. But it made me think sometimes.

I smiled at him as a thank-you for the rose, my anger disappearing. He smirked and led the way into the crowd towards the lagoon side.

"Are you ready?" he asked after a few seconds of silent crowd weaving. I nodded, fitting the rose into my hair for safekeeping. "Good, because we do not have much time. The fireworks are starting soon and I am not sure how long they will last, so we will need to work fast." That was fine; I did not need much time. Once the display started, half of Venice would be looking up at

the sky, a pickpocket's paradise. I would be able to buy a hundred apples if I wanted after that night. But it was not just coin on my mind. No, that night was important.

Leo and I had both been chosen to be in the thieves' games that night, where the two who gathered the most coin in the night would be admitted into the Thieves Guild ranks. It was a giant step. So that night could not be left to chance. We were great thieves, two of the best. But the competition was fierce. Knowing about the fireworks display was our greatest edge. People were already starting to make their way to the water, like sheep being herded, ready to be sheared. That night, we were stealing our future.

We stopped to wait at the giant fountain located in the centre of the plaza. I quickly became captivated by the falling water as it glimmered in the lantern light, glowing like pure liquid gold, only made more brilliant by the night sky behind it. I couldn't look away. Leo, however, barely gave it a glance. Instead, he leaned over the side and scanned the depths of the pool for wishes in the form of coin, the real treasure in his eyes. But the waters had already been robbed clean, probably within the hour, by another competitor in the game. He grunted and shoved off the side of the fountain, forcing me to tear my eyes from the water and look at him.

His eyes went wide and he started digging into his giant pants pockets, finally pulling out two porcelain masks. One was blood red with black splatter lines and droplets. The other had the exact same pattern, only dark blue. He passed me the blue one (it brought out the colour of my rose). "It is Carnival after all," Leo explained as he put on his mask. "Almost time," he observed.

"Let us go then," I said calmly, straightening up from the edge of the fountain and walking away as I worked to tie the straps at the back of my own mask. He followed after a second.

Wordlessly, we quickly mixed in with the countless masks all waiting for the show to begin over the water. We separated at one point. I do not know when, but it was best not to be near each other when we worked. Two were easier to notice. We would meet up later to count.

I stopped when I figured I was deep enough into the crowd and waited for my opportunity, which did not take long. A loud crack echoed over the water and into the plaza, immediately followed by a thin stream of light reaching toward the sky. I watched it for a second between the people in front of me, a little disappointed. It was my first time seeing fireworks, but I had heard great stories about them and had built my hopes up. I found my shoulders slouching for half a second, when suddenly the stream of light exploded into hundreds of little sparks at the top, making an even louder popping sound, then showering the night in gold that put the stars themselves to shame, ten times more magnificent than the fountain water. My eyes lit up while everyone else cheered. More fireworks were launched, exploding in countless combinations of countless colours. I gaped like a child shown a magic trick, for this was real magic – nothing like my mother's. I would have stayed there forever had it not been for the sounds of the people who called me back to reality. I forced myself to look away and focus on the people again. I started wandering through the crowd, listening for the satisfying cracks of the fireworks but never looking up. I had a job to do.

I picked the first man because of his clothes, well tailored with quality fabric, expensive looking. I got ready and took a step towards him. But I stopped all of a sudden when the crowd erupted in "ahs," along with even more cracking echoes, much louder than before.

I could not help it. I looked up. And, my God, it was brilliant. Dozens of rockets flew up into the sky, all at once, so they exploded only seconds apart. Coloured sparks mixed in countless ways, like sparkling paint mixing on a black canvas, a moving work of art that gave me goose bumps.

That was it for me. I could not look away. The child in me was happy to watch the fireworks, but the thief in me wanted to start stealing, and the practicality in me was yelling at me to get to it. But I could not bring myself to act. Maybe that was a bad idea. I was throwing away my promising future after all. Maybe if I looked away, I could have won the game, become part of the guild, and made a reputation for myself as one of the greatest thieves in Venice, along with Leo, of course. Maybe I could have had a thousand apples if I had wanted.

But thieves live in the shadows. They never watch fireworks; instead they sift through the grey crowds for treasure. They never look at the way fountain water captures lantern light; instead, they just search the cold water for coin. There is no space to admire the world, only to take from it. And that is no way to live. So I stood there, not caring about what tomorrow might bring as I watched fire paint the night. But I kept a firm hand on my own money purse the whole time.

* * * * *

Ashlynn Black
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From the Fireplace

by Christopher Conway

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.

* * * * *

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Closet

by Rachel York

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.

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Rachel York
Grade 12
Lakefield District Secondary School

The Stickiest of Situations

by Rachel van Vliet

I am burning hotter than magma. Somehow the sun's rays are catering exclusively to my body, making me a concentrated mass of painful heat. The ice formerly floating along the surface has long melted, but its glacial juices do nothing to quench my flaming plea for relief. My lungs would soon surrender to the sugary liquid in which I marinate. This will allow my corpse to rise and finally reach the oxygen at the top of this prison – although it would then be futile.

If only I had fallen sooner, I think regretfully to myself. I recall seeing the tank of harsh liquid full of ascending bubbles only an hour prior to my fall. These bubbles could have been my lifeline. I would have manipulated my frail body toward one, and it would have briskly carried me to the decadent oxygen at the gateway above me. Those heroic casks of air have long popped. I am sentenced to this decarbonated, aspartame-infested hell for the duration of my life – an interval that promises mere minutes, and agonizing ones at that.

The scent of ginger that lingers in my nose is not a welcome one. When I first tumbled into this tub of liquid, I was pleasantly surprised by the organic smell of spicy ginger. But, alas, the duration of my visit served both to fill my lungs with syrup and to fill my nose with distaste. The once-refreshing scent is now one most foul and stale. I long to scrape every stinging particle from the cavity of my nose just to rid myself of the piercing odor.

My eyes dart around me, but I know my sight is restricted. The blurry image of moving figures is available for 360 degrees. Appearing in my sightline are the same fuzzy visions that had been there when I first fell into this tank. I can scarcely identify a woman in a yellow dress, who is making conversation with a taller figure, whose clothes are a dull, charcoal grey. The image is foggy, as though projected from an old television set that struggles to keep its signal. If I turn my head in the opposite direction, I can see three tiny figures, made up of soft pinks, delicate blues and light yellows. I think of a freshly peeled banana when I see the pale-yellow figure. It crawls across a strip of navy blue, while its pink and blue counterparts remain stationary.

The muffled loom of conversation fills my sore ears. My brain is only able to conclude that there is indeed a muddled sound but it makes no inquiry as to what the people are saying. They could be laughing at a lighthearted joke told by a friend – maybe he butchers the punchline, but that only adds to the humour. Perhaps they're transferring the latest gossip from ear to ear, like a fuse of electricity, whose spark travels quickly and without pause. The new neighbours moved here from Ireland (Dublin, I think) and Mrs. Petri has another baby on the way (at *her* age?) and the Hudson family is thinking of adopting a new dog (oh, I do hope they keep it quiet) … Or maybe they're discussing matters most pressing to human beings, such as taxes or the stock market or politics or groceries or the weather or whose child is the most successful or whose house just sold for above the asking price. The unintelligible sounds stay a mystery to me, for they may as well be extraterrestrial noises – indecipherable, yet heavily intriguing.

Of course, all these details act as mere distractions from the plight I presently face. I am moments away from drowning. I direct my eyes towards the top of the glass cup. The sun is beating down and nearly blinding me with its intense rays.

But something has changed… The sun no longer taunts me with its omnipotence or its godlike radiation, no… It now fuels my determination as never before. The disdain I had felt has melted, along with the ancient ice cubes from the surface. I want, no, *need* to escape.

I begin shaking my wings, fluttering them in attempts to push my body upward. All six of my legs kick forcefully, leaving trains of soda pop in their tracks. I am elevating.

My joy prevents me from noticing the hands wrap around the glass. A smooth, fleshy blanket hugs the cup, and my eyes meet the pink swirls that envelope the exterior. Then, all at once, the cup is raised – with me inside it. It happens so quickly that I am unable to assess the situation and the environment that changes around me. I am raised higher and higher until…

"Ew! There's a fly in my drink!"

The glass is released and I fall toward the earth. The cup hits the ground softly without breaking. I, however, smash roughly against the side, ginger ale sloshing along either edge of the clear cylinder. I lie on my back, coughing and sputtering. The beverage continues to drain onto the grass, leaving me the oxygen it did not need. My lungs begin singing with ease, their hard work at last paying off. My sticky body is as sore as can be, but I could not be happier.

Knowing I need to act fast, I heave over onto my belly and crawl out of the cup as quickly as I can. I find sanctuary in a tall bed of grass next to a table leg – an apt place to recuperate before my wings are set for flight. I scan the garden party from my newfound perspective. I see the three babies crawling gleefully along the navy-blue blanket on the lawn. I see the yellow-dressed woman, seemingly bored trying to keep conversation with the pontificating businessman. I hope everyone is enjoying themselves. I, for one, can no longer complain. I am alive and will one day be able to recount my story – of the fly that fell into the glass of diet ginger ale!

* * * * *

Rachel van Vliet
Grade 12
Adam Scott Collegiate Vocational Institute

When Earl Met Rosie

by Cydney Cantello

When Earl first met Rosie, she did not take to him as he had to her. She was a preacher's daughter who had read the Bible from Genesis to Revelations; she could not possibly learn to love an artist on a waxed up-motorcycle. Earl, however, was known for his relentless habits and came every Sunday to her father's church, nodding at her with an exaggerated wink each time her eyes fell on his face. In defeat, Rosie gave in and allowed Earl to take her on *one* date to a fancy restaurant, where he would be made to wear a button-down shirt in place of his cracked leather jacket. *One date*, Rosie had sworn to herself, painting her thin lips pink. Though she would never admit it to Earl, she had a wonderful time that evening. After the bill had been settled, Rosie headed towards the door with a purpose in her stride, until Earl paused to book another reservation – for the same time the following day.

* * *

Rosie picked the name "Aster" from a gardening book. She read aloud to her swollen belly every afternoon while Earl served her a cup of camomile tea and a buttered biscuit. Their home was modest. It was cramped already with only the two of them and Huckleberry, their British shorthair.

Earl spent his afternoons in his studio oil painting, flowers mostly. He would let Rosie know beforehand, and she would laugh at him. "It isn't a studio dear; it's a closet!*"* She was not mistaken, either. His studio *was* their closet; it was hot and stuffy, and Earl found it unbearable in the summers – only enough room for an easel and a stool. The closet stood in contrast to the vast fields that he had brought to life and which now surrounded him, tacked to the walls.

This is where Earl had been when Rosie shouted for him. He rushed her to the hospital in their '56 Ford Thunderbird, her father's wedding gift to the couple. Amidst her cries, three and a half minutes apart, she warned Earl that he was taking the corners with too much haste. Eyes the colour of coffee grounds, mesmerizing like Rosie's, met the world two hours later, and Persian-pink beads spelling "Aster" were wrapped around the newborn's tiny wrist.

* * *

With time, Rosie did not paint her lips as frequently as she once had, but Earl didn't pay any mind. He was focused on finer details, for instance, the wrinkles by her eyes and the way her fish-bowl glasses magnified them.

One day Rosie lost her footing on the stairs, as though she were stepping on loose stones. They were late to church, and she had taken her grip off the railing to uncap her lipstick. Earl no longer had the muscle to carry her to their vintage car and instead called for an ambulance. He held her hand as she lay on the gurney and mumbled something about the paramedics taking the corners too harshly.

The doctors directed Earl to the waiting room during Rosie's operation. Defeated, he lowered himself carefully into a cantilever chair as though entering frigid water and avoiding a shock to his brittle bones. His hands were streaked with pinks and blues. A telephone was near, but being a minister's daughter, Rosie would not have allowed him to distract Aster during a Sunday service, not until they had pleasant news.

Earl had drifted off to sleep remembering Sunday mornings at church and a beautiful face scowling down at him from the choir loft. Would twenty-year-old Earl have ever thought he could have made Rosie his wife? He was doubtful.

As the doctor had advised, Earl brought his wife home in a wheelchair after she had received a hip arthroplasty. She had also struck her head rather hard, like a stone breaking the water's surface, and she blinked unknowingly at her own reflection in the car window.

Rosie chose to stay in a wheelchair. She was often wrapped in a blanket the colour of thin lips on her first date. Every morning, Earl clothed her and ground her pills into a fine powder to be eaten on her toast with blueberry jam from the market. She asked to be seated by the window to watch the robins in the garden, but she never stayed awake long. After examining the way her curls hung loosely against her neck, Earl decided to carry his easel and paints down to the living room. He started with the curve of her cheek.

"Who is that, Earl?" Rosie would ponder most days when she woke. Even as the face began to take shape, she could not recognize her own beauty. Earl was unsure of his skills in his later years, but he knew Rosie was growing forgetful. He could only muster a weary smile and reminisce about that *one* date.

It was a Sunday afternoon, and Earl dressed himself in a button-down shirt and combed what was left of his silver hair. He changed Rosie into a floral blouse and cardigan, arranging a string of pearls around her neck. He took himself to the kitchen, and while the kettle whistled, he cooked up spaghetti and meatballs, presenting the plates with as much care as he took with his art.

Rosie wheeled into the kitchen, her lips as pink as the colour of sweet peas. She looked at the meal with a vacant smile and smoothed a napkin across her lap. Her shaking hands made it difficult to twirl the noodles around her fork until Earl replaced the pasta with vanilla ice cream. Rosie took the chilled spoon from the bowl into her frail hands and studied her image. Then, utensil still in her fist, she rolled herself into the living room, as Earl trailed behind.

With the spoon held at eye level, she examined herself a moment longer and then angled it so that its concave surface now reflected the canvas.

"Is it me?" Rosie asked hesitantly, tracing her finger along an arabesque of thick paint.

Earl nodded.

* * * * *

For my Uncle Don and in memory of my Aunt Rosie, whose love never ceased to amaze.

Cydney Cantello
Grade 11
Crestwood Secondary School

A Good Guy

by Brigh Findlay-Shields

Marshall McCabe had tried to be a good guy. Really, he had. After Lauren, his college girlfriend of two months had become pregnant, he'd stayed with her. And even when they lost the baby another month later, he stayed.

So months turned to years and eventually here he was, wed to Lauren at the ripe old age of twenty-nine. Twenty. Nine. He had spent the last ten years jumping through hoops to accommodate Lauren and her gluten-free lifestyle. And his mother, who always resented him for settling. And Marge, the fat janitor who always got up his ass about not recycling or recycling yogurt cups. He could never remember what was right.

Marshall stood in the aisle of GreenEats, the more expensive of the two grocery stores in Rosewood. It had a black-and-white tile floor and high, vaulted ceilings. The employees all wore black button-downs and dress shoes.

He stood in the dairy section, which, as Marshall thought, was really no more than one kind of cow's milk and the rest soy or nut. A bottle of Diamond Joy's Pure Vanilla-Extract Enriched Almond Milk cost $12.99. At Vince's Basics, the generic brand was $1.99. He put the Diamond Joy bottle into his basket. Lauren refused to drink anything else.

He stepped between the huge displays of Californian pistachios, where a middle-aged woman was eyeballing one of them. She had her bleached hair pulled into a low ponytail, and her manicured talons were nervously tapping at her shopping cart's handle. He noticed that the inside of her tanned fingers were stained yellow. She was a shadow of a person, dressed in child-sized yoga clothes with only her Gucci handbag and some Princey's Fresh 100% Organic Kale sitting in her cart. Marshall winced. That woman reminded him painfully of his mother, who was currently recovering from her third facelift, distracting herself and pretending that her husband was actually on a business trip rather than with his tall, tanned, twenty-year-old mistress in Bermuda.

Marshall looked down at the neatly written list that Lauren had created for him in bubbly text. Besides the almond milk, she had asked for toilet bowl cleaner ("For the maid! She can only afford the stuff they use in motels! *Motels,* Marshall!") and tofu. Marshall hated tofu. It was bland and spongy, and simply took the flavour of whatever else was around it. Tofu had no substance, no backbone; it was the runt of the food pyramid, a complete joke. It wasn't even real meat. Nonetheless, Marshall added the black-label tofu to his basket.

He was done. With the list, that is.

He thought of Lauren, who was at home, probably watching reality television and painting her toenails vermillion. She had quit her marketing job when he had received his promotion so that she could "focus on family," but that was two years ago and they still had no children and still weren't a family. She was barren, the miscarriage having done permanent damage. There was no hope for conceiving, but she still went to bed every night in La Perla lingerie hoping to entice him into pretending it was still the good old days. He hated the lace, the mesh, the garters, and the slips; he found it tacky and overdone. He wished she would just wear a pair of flannel pyjamas. He wished she would clean her makeup off his side of the counter – she insisted on two sinks but still used his side. He wished she wouldn't wear those heels all the time, either, because

he didn't like her being two inches taller than him. He wished she would stop being friends with the good-looking neighbour whose hands went a little too low when they hugged.

He dropped his basket. He wished he and Lauren could fix themselves, be happy again. He strode towards the exit. He wished he had the guts to leave her. As he passed the checkout, a young cashier looked at him with big doe eyes. Her mouth was bright red. He walked out of the store.

He quickly found his way to his car. A Mercedes-Benz, a classic luxury car, something he was proud of. Lauren hated it and had a webpage for a Rolls-Royce bookmarked on her phone ("I can't pull up to brunch with a Benz, Marshall. My girlfriends will think we're poor"). He felt as though he could literally sense the blood pumping through his body, pulsing through his temples all the way down to his Calvin Klein socks.

"I want to do something," he announced to nobody. "All my life, all my life… All my life I've waited around…I always think but never do…All my life…All your *life,* Marshall!" Drumming his hands on the wheel, he looked at the time. It was 6:15.

He ran his hand through his thinning hair and thought of his father, who had gone through hair transplant surgeries to try to keep his youth. Marshall Sr. had stayed away from divorce, marrying a dependent woman and then philandering. But he wasn't like Marshall Sr. He had always tried to be a good guy. He thought for a fleeting moment of calling him, but just as that idea crossed his mind, he started the car instead and simply began to drive.

"You're a good guy, Marshall," his mother had said to him when he was seven and had helped her stop her nose from bleeding. "You'll always be my good guy."

He turned down Centre Street, past the Waxing Centre where Lauren made her legs and upper lip smooth. He passed by overpriced nail salons, fancy restaurants, a pet groomer's, until finally the country clubs began appearing, each one in turn becoming more and more grand, with acres of green sprawling fields in pristine condition. He was now leaving Upper Rosewood and entering a place where he knew Lauren would never be caught dead: Lower Rosewood.

It grew out of the darkening horizon, a collection of small homes nestled in a valley. It had been called Lower Rosewood for being literally lower than the other Rosewood in terms of elevation, but later, as time wore on and richer businessmen and lawyers began to fill up the suburbs of Upper, the two Rosewoods became polar opposites. Marshall had visited there only once when they had to stop for gas on the way to their summer home when he was eleven. He had learned in his teens that Lower was off-limits because the bar there, Gilinsky's Pub, was where his father often courted women.

And Gilinsky's was right where he was going for a pint. Or maybe even two. He would call a cab. Or, hell, maybe he'd stay in the crappy motel in Lower.

He pulled into the almost-full parking lot, quickly scanning the area full of minivans and Sunfires. Finding a spot near the rear, Marshall took a deep breath and started towards the pub. The door opened as a couple walked out, talking excitedly; an eruption of men's laughter from inside the building along with a blast of warm air blew his way. The neon sign was glowing above the low, non-threatening building, its door wide open in a "come-hither" sort of invitation; Marshall strode in quickly.

The room was full and crowded, but there was a seat at the bar. He took it and looked around; smoke hung low in the air, and a large group of men to his left had just ordered a round and were loudly praising the downtrodden-looking waitress. There was a pool table, where

several stout men were quietly playing, and to his right more tables with more couples filling them. He smelt beer, tobacco, and chicken wings.

The young bartender served him, and Marshall sat there, nursing his beer and pretending to watch the game. He laughed a little in spite of himself, scanning the crowd around him and thinking disdainfully about how much Lauren would hate a place like this. He thought so hard about Lauren and her hatred of affordably-priced food that his eyes seemed to deceive him: a woman who could be her doppelganger had appeared at the door with a tall man next to her, slipping off her fox fur coat and holding her at the waist.

He turned around to the bartender, who was asking him what more he wanted. He ordered another beer and took several swigs, then looked back around to the Lauren-lookalike, who had been seated less than two metres away from him. Her back was turned to him, but the man's wasn't. Immediately he recognized him. It was his neighbour, Jim, the handsome one. *Jim, out on a date? He didn't seem like the dating type,* Marshall thought. *Good for him.*

He thought about getting up, but Jim looked like he was enjoying himself, so instead he just watched. As Jim talked, fake Lauren tilted her head to the side and reached out her hand to touch his. She had a ring on her finger. A large diamond, around seven carats in a brilliant emerald cut, set on a platinum band. Her nails were red.

Marshall got up. He slowly walked towards Jim, whose dark eyes darted from his date's face to Marshall, and suddenly his chiselled, coy face morphed into one of panic. He took his hand off the table. Marshall turned slowly towards the fake Lauren. Except it wasn't fake Lauren; it was the real Lauren, her glossy mouth hanging slightly open and her round eyes fixed, unblinking, on Marshall. In front of her was a jewellery box, a velvet one, and inside was a brilliant ruby necklace. Marshall stared at the red and it stared back, and all he could think about was the red of Lauren's nails and the red of the cashier's mouth and the red on his mother's face when his father got mad and the red carpet below and red, red, red. He had tried to be a good guy. Really, he had.

"Babe," Lauren started.

Marshall turned on his heel and walked out into the cold.

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Brigh Findlay-Shields
Grade 12
Thomas A. Stewart Secondary School

Chop Off My Finger, or Remove My Heart

by Evan Campbell

At some point my heart began to flutter with every breath I took, but I didn't want to replace the organ. Together, we have learned the intricacies of life. The difference between a daisy and a rose. We have learned how to keep going, to persevere through clots that wanted to block us from each other. We have fought the demons in my brain and the monsters in my skin and the arrows through my chest. But losing my heart would mean losing my pain tolerance, leaving nothing to protect me from a loss. Like the loss of a marriage or the loss of a wife. Or, the loss of a heart….

But every mother who has given her child up for adoption would understand, even better than I, why I choose to drive to the heart shop today.

When I get there, a woman dressed in jean shorts and a buttoned-up red t-shirt can be seen inside. She is leaning against a counter, her long legs and arms positioned to pollute the air with her confidence. As I approach, she quickly glances over my roughed-up jeans and safety vest, radiating out like a spider who has caught a fly. Before coming out to greet me, she turns around and bends across the desk to grab the clipboard and pen that rest on the far corner.

"Hello there, may I help you with something?" she asks.

Her voice is husky in a way that leaves me twitching to hear more.

"I wish to sell my heart."

"Well, of course, we have some of the finest hearts for you to upgrade to." Her eyes draw out all my inner secrets. "And I'm sure I could give you a great deal for your old heart too."

"I think you misunderstand me. I want to sell my heart, not trade it in."

This time her eyes gaze over me slowly. Before, she looked at me like she was looking at a living room through a window, but now she can tell I am more of a basement kind of person.

"Well, I'm sure we could find an arrangement, but I can't offer a price without knowing what kind of shape it is in…." Her voice trails off as she takes a step forward, as if getting closer to me will invite me to open up.

So I do. But I've already prepared my foyer to look as clean as it can be. I tell her about how my heart has been beating since the moment it started. It's loyal like a brother; it will beat and beat through rain and snow and sickness and health. I tell her about its honesty too, about how it always beats at a rate that matches how I am feeling. It quickens at the start of love. It quickens even more at the loss of it. But most importantly, I tell her it loves in a way no heart has ever loved before and it never stops. It just keeps beating, and beating, and beating.

But fooling a salesperson is like trying to fight a boxer, so she must know that there are weaknesses I dare not tell her about. But unlike a boxer, she's seductive, as no other woman has ever been to me. She runs her fingers over my chest and asks me:

"What else?"

I stumble backwards at the touch of her hand.

“That’s it. That’s all of my heart.”

But she knows otherwise; she takes her fingers and wades her way through my blood and into the home I didn’t dare show anyone else, and she says:

“What else?”

I find myself unable to lie to someone so beautiful and taunting, so I tell her about the arrow stuck deep within my heart. I tell her about how the entry wound was patched up by an untrained army medic, who had his own heart broken as well. But rather than fixing the clumsy job he made, I hide the scar with as much skin and as many smiles as I can.

Then I tell her the worst part: that every time my heart beats, the arrow wiggles just a little bit, keeping me alive, but also reminding me of the pain that life has brought. I tell her that its beating has grown into a chant: “I am alive. I want to die,” it says.

I am alive. I want to die.

Her hand, which has been dancing along my bloodstream, is withdrawn. The warmth of my blood is replaced with a stream of shame. Her lips, once rosy red, draw themselves into a thin, pale line.

“No dealer will ever put a price on an already pierced heart,” she says.

I feel her stern but pitiful glare, though I cannot look up.

“You know an arrow-pierced piece of art is forever owned by the artist,” she says. “I cannot free you. They call it He-art for a reason.”

I do not need to look up to know she has gone back to lean against the desk, waiting for another fly to land in her trap. This conversation was just a job for her, but for me it’s a reminder.

I leave the shop to catch a cab. When I walk into my home, the sound of *Call of Duty* rings through the house. My son must be home. I’d call to him, but getting a response would be unlikely. Instead, I go to my bedroom and exchange my sweater for a t-shirt. Then, hesitantly, I open up the top drawer of my dresser and pull out a wooden box. As I open it, I can hear the moan of the violin that is engraved on its top. Inside the box, a golden ring sits outlined against rich blue fabric that works as padding on the bottom.

I sigh and look down at my finger.

It was finally time to become someone else’s work of art.

* * * * *

Evan Campbell
Grade: 12
Thomas A. Stewart Secondary School

Amore et Bellum

by Rebekah Irwin

Sunbeams seeped through the window and cast their golden rays upon the luckiest of objects in the room. It was truly the most wondrous of days. It was the kind of day that could be characterized by childlike grins and ticklish laughter as spring flowers blossomed into the marvellous hues of a late Easter. Unbeknownst to the young woman who daydreamed while she stared out at the epitome of spring days through the polished glass of a picture window, was the scene occurring out of reach across the great expanse of ocean, separating humanity from immorality, decency from cruelty.

She rose from her small desk in front of the window to begin her day. As she stood up, the golden band that encompassed her ring finger sparkled in the sunlight, the reminder that he would always be with her no matter the distance. As she left her bedroom, she heard the familiar sound of a bicycle. Its whirl could be heard even above the noise of the busy streets. The sounds of automobiles, horse-drawn buggies, and the streetcar were constant; yet the bicycle offered a fresh one. She waited for the louder whizzing when it would fly by the house, and she started to smile, but instead, she heard the bicycle skid to a stop. Within moments, there was a sharp rap at the front door.

"Telegram!" the voice of a young boy called.

She hurried to open the door. Rarely did anyone send her telegrams.

"Good morning," she said, smiling. "It's a lovely day, isn't it?"

The boy looked solemn. "This job hardly ever makes for a lovely day, ma'am."

Her smile faded.

"A message from the War Department." He held out a thin strip of paper.

She received it with trembling fingers. Anxiety weighed heavy on her chest and unsettled her stomach. The sun seemed too bright and the streets too loud. She unfolded the strip of paper.

We regret to inform you… Name. Rank. Serial number. Killed in Action….

She sank to the floor. Yearning tore at her chest as the slip of paper fluttered to the ground. She sobbed into her hands. In the sunlight, she caught a glimpse of the sparkle from her wedding band. He said he would always be with her.

"The army will send his belongings with his body," the boy said. His was a face that had seen this type of pain so many times before.

She felt she could say nothing. Her entire being knew complete and utter anguish. She wanted to apologize to the boy, but she could not. Instead she raised her tear-stained face and choked out: "He was far too young to die."

"Pardon me, ma'am." The boy looked down and faced the saddened soul who wept before him. "But bullets know no age."

* * * * *

Rebekah Irwin
Grade 12
Adam Scott Collegiate Vocational Institute

Colours

by Betsy Macdonnell

My palms were leaking sweat. To me the couch felt as though it was deliberately making me uncomfortable, mimicking the feeling in the air. Tension beyond belief. The walls were painted a sunny yellow, but today, all it reminded me of was urine. I avoided the sunken, tear-stained eyes of my mother. Adults were talking – my school counsellor, my teachers, but in the room it could've just been the two of us. No child ever expects to break a parent's heart; I certainly never did. But here I was, in this stupid yellow room, watching my mom's heart shatter into a million little pieces.

The reason for this heartbreak started months before. It was the winter of my seventh grade, and I felt as if my life were falling apart. My reflection in the mirror no longer became a friendly face but someone I despised. I was a stranger to myself. I wanted to feel whole again; I wanted to be perfect. In a warped attempt to do this I gave my meals to the toilet immediately after eating them. I was secretive, sneaking up to my third-floor washroom, leaving the tap running to hide the heaving sounds from my body. Weighing myself became a habit. I rejoiced in the small numbers, and I punished myself for the larger ones.

One day, the number was bigger than I had hoped for. In retrospect, I think this number was small, but back then, it signified a failure. The world turned red. I was angry; I was upset. I wanted to take it out on someone, but instead I turned on myself. I pulled a tack out of my green-and-pink-striped bulletin board and put it to my arm. I let the tip glide across my fair skin. The red of my mind externalized itself, leaving its traces on my arm. I felt relieved. That was all it took. I slipped on a hoodie and went about my life.

I wish I could tell you that was the only tack to touch my skin. It would be a much happier story that way. I wish I could tell you that after that incident I realized I'd made a terrible mistake. That I stopped weighing myself, and that the bathroom became just another room again. I wish that was the story I was telling you, but it isn't. The trails left by tacks turned to scars. They told the stories of my internal pain along the outside of my body. My life was stained with red. It was the colour I saw on the insides of my eyes as tears streamed out. It was the colour of the trail that led me to the toilet, time and time again. It was the colour of my arms, my thighs, and my stomach. It was the colour of my faults. I kept my arms covered – always. As the days got warmer, I didn't let my skin feel the sun, for with the sun would come my secrets. The sun meant vulnerability, and as far as I was concerned, vulnerability wasn't an option. Until it was the only option.

I was sitting in class, wishing I could be anywhere else. My arms were sore, and I was tired after yet another sleepless night. My wish was granted. A friendly face appeared at the door of my classroom, that of a teacher I'd had two years prior. She asked me to come with her and walked me to her classroom. Confused, I sat there and let the innocence of the room wash over me. It seemed like a lifetime ago that I had sat at those desks. It was before puberty, before mean girls, before stupid boys, before all of this. It was a time I remembered fondly. It was a time where the sun shone more days than it rained. It was a time when I was happy. Her mouth formed words, but her eyes screamed the truth: "I know."

That was it. My façade broke. I was no longer strong, or weak. I was no longer hiding, lying, covering the truth. For the first time in months I was forced to be real. I was forced to let someone into the warped inner workings of my mind. The reality of it hit me like a wave.

Suddenly the story came pouring out, the way it is right now on these pages. My body crashed with every wave that hit, as I realized the consequences of my actions. You don't truly realize the impact you have on other people until you hurt them.

The school was obligated to tell my parents. In less than twenty-four hours my secrets would be out in the open. My life was about to change, and I was terrified. No one ever expects to break a parent's heart. But here I was, trying to figure out the best way to do it. Is there really any good way to break the heart of someone that loves you? Hours turned into minutes, minutes turned into seconds, and suddenly I was right outside that door. Outside of that room with its urine-coloured walls, its uncomfortable chairs, and the heartbreak I could no longer avoid. My hand felt its way to the door's handle. With discomfort I turned it, and all that was left to do was push.

It is commonly said that you never forget your first heartbreak, but what is less acknowledged is that you never forget the first heart you break. Looking into the tear-stained eyes of my mother I knew that was true. How could I have hurt the one person who loves me more than anything else? The woman who carried me, who sang to me, who promised she'd love me more than the moon, the stars, and the universe. How could I have been that selfish? I locked eyes with my mother, both of us in tears. The truth no longer stood between us; instead, it encompassed us.

That was the first step to recovery. When a part of your life is hidden, it seems a lot less manageable. Despite my initial fears, the love and support of my family helped me to take the next step. My brothers' innocence made me want to get better. My mom's unconditional love made me want to heal. And my dad's unwavering acceptance in the way he would kiss my broken arms before bed made me want to love myself.

Recovery isn't linear. It mimics the surface of the earth, rising and falling at the appropriate times. Some days there are ten steps backward, and one step forward. Other days there are ten steps forward, and one step back. One day isn't more important than the other; each day there are steps forward. Recovery is turmoil and triumph. It's acceptance and anger. It is strength caused by weakness. It is the ability to move on.

Red is no longer the colour of my life. The once hellishly raised grooves of my arm are now merely indents. They no longer define my body, or my soul. But they have sunk into my skin; they are a part of me and always will be. The lines once red are now white. The colour of fresh starts.

* * * * *

Betsy Macdonnell
Grade 12
Lakefield College School

Cigarettes

by Joshua Dorman

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.

* * * * *

Joshua Dorman
Grade 12
Crestwood Secondary School

Nametakers

by Finley Taylor

The author's feet beat hard and heavy against the earth of the forest floor. Behind him, the husk of what was once his house lies desolate, its walls trampled into the dry grass by his pursuers. His throat is raw, and his legs are beginning to feel molten. If he could take just a moment to rest under a tree, he would, but no. Though his pursuers move with the patient pace of the dead, they are coming from all sides, and even a few quick breaths taken in respite might end him.

Despite the rattling groans and whispers that come from around him, the author finds his mind drawn towards other sounds, a speech heard months ago. A speech, which, at least in his mind, was worse than the hollow chorus that surrounds him now.

I'm sorry, David had said, *but you're just not grabbing the audience. What sort of name is Joe Smith anyway? And Jane Deadly? Seriously? Naming a doomed character Jane Deadly isn't foreshadowing, it's just lousy writing…*

As he rounds a twisted birch tree, the author finds himself facing Johann Lukasewicz, arms outstretched in his funeral best. The author had written Johann as a kindly merchant, but there is no kindness in his hollow eyes now. The author, his reactions heightened by adrenaline, wrenches his body to the side and breaks Johann's grip. Leaving the apparition behind, he continues his panicked dash towards the town.

Names. They had always been his greatest weakness. His plotlines, twists, worldbuilding had been called exemplary. But, as critics, his publisher, and David had always said, all of that was secondary. It didn't matter how flowery the backdrop was. In the end, all his troubles boiled down to the simple fact that nobody could relate to a bland man named Joe Smith. Perhaps he could have turned it around, made them nuanced characters, but in truth even he found the names uninspired. He would struggle feebly for a while, weakly trying to stuff personalities into the insipid mannequins that occupied his tales, but eventually he was always forced to hand David a manuscript populated by soulless dullards.

The author thought he knew exhaustion, but he has never before felt as tired as he does now. He would call himself breathless if the woods were not filled with the empty lungs of his pursuers. He stumbles over a rock, and the shades behind him grow closer.

The author maintains that truth is stranger than fiction, and when forced to generate names that could drive a narrative, he turned to reality to populate his fantasy worlds. He'd considered copy-pasting lists of staff members from cafés, but he couldn't risk a lawsuit. And so he had turned to the one place where his subjects wouldn't complain.

The graveyard.

A thousand names, waiting to be used, made more vibrant than their bearers had been in life. He had travelled to lakeside cemeteries, funeral homes. He had even raided the crosses of the military memorials, taking names whose missing owners had long since been shredded into the mud of the Somme.

He'd felt guilty of course. He imagined bereaved family members would be rather distraught to see their loved ones turned into sorcerers and goblins. *I'm revitalizing, not bastardizing* he'd

told himself. But now, as the forest grows thick with the groans of vengeful phantoms, he comes to realize he's robbed these dead of the only shred of identity they had left. And so they've come, all of them. When they'd first climbed the walls of his house, shattering its foundations and leaving it a ruin, he'd thought they'd moved as a unit. But as he'd fled he'd witnessed infighting, rotted bones and skulls broken in a grizzly contest. All of them wanted the same thing: his name, he suspected. If he could, he'd have given it to one of them, but as the parade of corpses so aptly demonstrated, names are tied inextricably to bodies even after the soul departs, and he suspects that he would not survive handing over such a prize.

Phillipa Saxon, the heroine of his story, streams around a tree to cut him off. In his story Saxon is an imperious woman, but the real Phillipa was cremated years ago, and now moves as a cloud of ash in the shifting form of a murderous hag. The soot of her form coalesces into claws, but he sidesteps her attack and continues to run, his mouth filled with dust.

They are almost upon him now. To his left is the waterlogged corpse of Lilliard, the orphan boy who leads Phillipa to the capital, and to his right is the embalmed body of Dalbridge, the scheming necromancer, stiffly dragging a toe-tag and morgue sheets behind him. He is glad, at least, that no soldiers have come, for as old as their weaponry may be, it might still serve to kill him from afar.

In the distance, the lights of the town glint. He highly doubts there is safety in numbers, but there he might find brief respite. Emerging from the treeline, the author takes a breath, then a step.

And finds his leg sunk to the knee in cloying mud.

Marsh is his first thought, but no. These woods are dry.

It is only when the decomposed hands of bloody mulch begin to pull him deeper that he recognizes the soldiers.

Bodies torn asunder by the war, they have become one with the mud, a vengeful slurry of soil and blood. He would scream, but already they surround him and force their way down his throat. There is a struggle, then silence.

The other pursuers momentarily pace about atop the swamp, but they recognize when their prey is beyond them and regretfully begin to stumble back to their graves. The author will be recovered someday, but by then he will not be the author. He will be a bog-man. An unclaimed body. As faceless and nameless as a soldier dead in the mud.

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Finley Taylor
Grade 11
Adam Scott Collegiate Vocational Institute

History doesn't see us

by Jana Rubel

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. Beeeeeeeeeeep. 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.

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Jana Rubel
Grade 11
Lakefield College School

The Collection of Unsent Letters in the Pocket of James Harbour

by Hailey Cavanagh

This collection of letters, along with a dried cherry blossom, was recovered in the breast pocket of James L. Harbour, a soldier on the frontlines of the American Revolutionary War, shortly after his death in the Battle of Saratoga.

Dear Evelynne-May Connell,

For every letter I write home, I write one to you. Never do I send them, though I pray that one day they will be granted emergence into your life. My inspiration comes from the hope that you do the same from where you are, which having known you for as long as I have, I expect is somewhere of great importance and growing prosperity.

I believe if you knew how I imagine you, you'd find your father's scythe to cut me down where I stand. No matter the length of time that has passed, you live in my mind as you always were. I cannot, even with immense effort, visualise your hair short. I know, however, for what it stands, and feel only a sense of pride at my imagining it.

Bern Druss, the Gentleman with Three Outs in our battalion, is watching me with claws twitching. The prig is desperate to catch me in an act that will discredit me, and so I must lay my pen to rest.

With all the grand love of falling white cherry blossoms,

James (Leonardo, at your insistence) Harbour

Dearest Evelynne-May,

Or Elliot-Matthew, I suppose. I'm writing to inform you of my day. It was, unfortunately, rather mundane – mainly cleaning tasks – but marriage is the topic of countless mundane stories, one after another. My God, I can practically hear your scoff. But laugh not, for I shall convince you someday of my aptitude for husbandly duties.

In other accounts, there is word that your battalion shall meet mine shortly. I had promised myself never to credit this on paper for fear it may provide me with false hope, but I could not keep something so important from you, now or ever.

From merely a suitor,

Jamie Harbour

My Evelynne-May ~~Harbour~~ Connell,

A feeling of true whimsy has overcome me today, as it is raining. Of course, you know to what I'm referring. It perpetually saddens and warms me to think of the memory of soaked sandwiches and the look on your mother's face as we stampeded into the foyer, leaving puddles in our wake.

I heard from your mother recently, at which time she told me your brother is recovering from fever but will not be returning to battle. She wishes you love, but I'm certain you've heard the words from her pen directly.

It is ever difficult not to be overcome with melancholy upon remembering the truth of my absence from your new life as a forbidden soldier. While my pride is abounding, any reflection on where you are fills me with a bitter terror. ~~If you were to be caught~~ ~~If you were to be~~ So many brutal actions could befall you, and it is my only mission to pray hard enough to protect you where my arms cannot.

Stay far from danger, your forced illusioned,

James Harbour

Dear E.M.,

Remember that name? Your look upon my calling you that led me to my love for you. I wish now that I'd told you so before.

I hope, sincerely, that you are doing well, and that you have done all you set out to do. I pray each night that our childhood games, of which you were always the hero at my expense, will become your reality, as your dreams have always grounded you in a way that I only experience when I think of you.

Let no one deter you from becoming, not what you want to be, but what you must be in order to keep your soul afloat.

With love and constant support,

James (or rather, the damsel)

Dear James,

I have never displayed such cowardice in the written word as I have in my delay to write this letter. I have attempted to find the words for the past week, but each time I was overcome with too much sorrow to continue. We received word of the death of our beloved child, Evelynne-May, a week ago. She was the light of our lives; my husband and I know how much you cared for her. We are holding a memorial by the "cherry" tree, and though we know you cannot attend, we will hold your presence in our hearts.

With love,

Mrs. Lilian Connell

My Dearest Evelynne-May Lucia Connell,

You are the gift for which the world has been waiting. The giddiness of childhood swept us both up in the chaos of falling in love, and it has remained relentless in me every second since. Your words have burned marks into my skin like chalk dust on fingertips.

My grief has never been so evident as it is now, so utterly consuming and fracturing. The thought merely of your protective glance is enough to rile me into a frenzy of longing so strong it may drag a wrench through my chest until it pulls me to the ground, melding my essense to your own.

And though it makes no sense, I want nothing more than that to be true. I want to disassemble my bones and bag them and give them to you to carry gently against a current.

The impossibility is a torment that is as indescribable as the purpose behind human nature itself. I am the flagpole of a burned flag. I am frozen, watching the ashes scrape the sky and be pinned down by rain. Letting go of you is the only thing I am incapable of doing, and I sincerely hope I will perish with my persistence to hold on. I hope it will drown me, this bridge that was never quite built and hangs limply over a cliffside.

I am writing today, however, to talk about the mundane. The weather was calm. It didn't rain.

Your loyal friend, forever deeply in love with your soul,

Jamie Leonardo Harbour

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Hailey Cavanagh
Grade 11
St. Peter Catholic Secondary School

On Rocky Shores: Self-Reflexive Fiction

by Justin Ehlert

When I start writing, I have a process. First, I look for any story ideas that have been knocking around in my head for a while and see if I can use those themes or settings. As I begin this piece, however, I have nothing. Next, I try to think of an interesting setting. I then pair a theme I like that goes with the setting. Using those points, I will see if any story threads form.

For a setting, I'm picturing a lake. Having a lake on its own doesn't sound very engaging to write about, and for me, being engaged in my writing is important, so maybe this lake will contain a secret. I like this idea, so I'll see where it goes. First, I have to expand on the setting.

I want the lake to be on the smaller side so that from one side of the lake you can see the other. This lake won't have sandy beaches but rather lithic cliffs that tower above the edges on the far side, and rocky shores that our main character will be standing on in this opening scene. The story opens with a solemn character staring across the murky waters. This can allude to a parallel between the character and the lake itself. This was not intentional, but I like the metaphor regardless.

Ideas are coming together in my head now. Next to this lake lies a log cabin where the character and his father would spend every summer together. This builds a rapport between the characters and the lake. Something like: the character has just lost his father so now he has returned to the place where they spent the most time together. This also recontextualizes the dark murky lake into a reflection of the character's mental state.

As he stares at the dark, turbulent waters, they swallow his reflection, leaving only the darkness to scrutinize him. I like this opening because it focuses on the setting and mirrors the mood of the character. Our character reaches down and picks up a flat, smooth stone. I think I'll make the character a guy… maybe make this piece a reflection on the relationship between him and his father, as this is something that is more personal to me.

As our character turns the stone over in his hand, running his fingers over its sleek surface, he's thrown back to the first summer he was here with his father. Writing this gives me an idea for further points in the story. As the character interacts with his surroundings, he is overwhelmed with memories of him and his father.

On the first summer here, he recalls his father showing him how to pick the best stones for skipping. Now, I need to include something unique to make the experience more impactful on the main character. His father would pick up a stone, do an exaggerated weighing motion with his arm before rubbing the stone on his hand. If the stone was the right weight and smoothness, it was perfect for skipping. He made his son go through the same routine before sending him off to find his own. I like the way this interaction plays out. It gives an insight into the dynamics in this relationship.

For this next part I'd like to dive deeper into the characters through more of these past interactions. This location is of importance – such a place would have all sorts of memories that hold emotional significance.

Looking off to his left, he can see the dock that he and his dad built together. He remembered the first time his dad took him out on a boat, taught him how to tie boat knots and how to get in and out without falling into the water (though that lesson was learned the hard

way). He still remembers the first time his dad took him fishing: the thrill he and his dad experienced as he reeled in his rod, the grin that split his face as he caught his first fish. He knew his dad had kept the photo they took of his catch on his mantlepiece.

Out on the dock was where he first told his dad he was getting married. He felt the clap on his shoulder and saw the twinkle in his dad's eyes. His dad told him he was proud of him, that he'd always be proud.

I believe this is the best time to switch the tone. I knew early on in this story that the character had to lose his father. But being truthful, writing the next part in direct contrast to the happiness of the previous paragraph is going to hurt. I hope that's an experience we can share as you read.

It was also on this dock that his dad first told him he had cancer. That he was dying. He can still recall the look on his dad's face as he spoke those words, his gaze lost in that deep blue water. His dad always seemed so full of life, but he didn't think his dad ever looked as old as he did at that moment.

I think I'm going to refrain from writing the main character's reaction to this news, but rather leave it up to the reader's interpretation. It was my goal that the glimpse into the connection between the characters will show the devastation the son experienced at this moment. But now it's time to conclude the story.

He was broken out of his thoughts by a shout from behind him.

"Dad!" his son shouts, "what are you doing over there?"

Looking out across the water one more time before turning to meet his son, he smiled.

"Come over here, let me show you how to pick the perfect stone for skipping."

I like the contrast between the sadness that exists in the past and the hope for the future. Looping this ending back into the beginning gives a sense of completion to the cycle of this father-son relationship.

* * * * *

Justin Ehlert
Grade 12
Peterborough Alternative and Continuing Education Program

Come Pick Me Up

by Clementine MacLeod

He told me 1:00 am, but it's only eleven by the time he calls. I'm sitting on Della's couch, her head on my arm as we watch TV, but I pick up anyway.

"Hey, Mari, can you come now?" I can hear the party behind him, all-girls screaming and baselines, but his voice still sounds quiet. Tired.

"Yeah, ok." I sigh. Della pauses the show and looks up at me.

Everything ok? She mouthes. Reflexively, I nod. Though, I guess I still don't know.

"What happened?" I ask Jacob.

He swallows at the end of the line. "Angie threw up." I wait, hoping for more details, but my brother just breathes and stays silent. "Maria, just come, okay?"

"I will. Send me the address."

He does, and Della watches me as I gather my things and leave. She doesn't move from the couch. I almost walk over, maybe kiss her goodbye or something, but I don't.

"My brother," I explain, "I need to pick him up."

"Okay," she sighs, "Yeah, okay, see you."

I smile tightly, already feeling like shit. Why am I leaving? I think suddenly. Jacob could get a cab, like any normal person, and I could stay curled up with the Della (miles out of my league and stunning). Still, I grab my keys and force myself out of her room.

I won't tell Jake about this, but I want to.

The address he gave me is twenty minutes away.

Crap.

I keep the radio low as I drive, considering what shape they'll be in when I arrive. I think of all the times I've picked Jacob and Angie up since getting my license, how it must outnumber the number of times I've driven myself to any kind of function. Even before I could drive, it would be me Jacob would call. Whether he was drunk or high or just in trouble. It was me.

I could pretend to be confused. Why would a person call their twin sister instead of a friend? Someone who surely wouldn't rat them out to their parents? I know the answer. He calls me because he knows I'll come.

I smooth down my hair as I pull into the long, country driveway. I don't know whose house this is, but they've got those tacky, rent-a-sign letters posted up on the lawn. *CONGRATS GRADS!* Complete with a cartoon hat and diploma.

Of course, it's a grad party. Of course, they're all celebrating. Of course, Jacob's leaving for Michigan next month. Of course, it was him, of the two of us, to get a scholarship and go away to school. Of course.

Still, there's no room in my heart for resentment as Jacob and Angela stumble out of the party arm-in-arm. I almost laugh at the sight of them. He opens the car door.

"We gotta drop Angie off first," he slurs. He is drunk, but I know from a single glance that Angie's much worse.

She collapses into the seat and he steadies her with an arm. I watch my brother smooth down his girlfriend's hair and whisper something in her ear. They've been dating forever, but it still surprises me to see him like this. So gentle, so caring. I love Angie, but she's always been like this. Wild, spontaneous, and peroxide blonde – as if plucked out of a crappy 2000s movie, not rural Arizona.

I don't know much about how relationships work, but I know that, for them, Jacob is the responsible one. The thought alone is laughable. Unimaginable, if I hadn't seen it firsthand. The number of times Jacob has single-handedly made a good decision is just about equal to the number of steady girlfriends I've had.

Absolutely zero.

Still, as I drift into Angela's parking lot and watch him carry her into the house, I know that whatever sense that boy has, he uses it with her. The thought pushes on the side of my brain that knows their move to Michigan will be a disaster, telling me that their survival, both physically and as a couple, is more than just luck. I don't know if this small bit of hope will ever win out, but it is there.

Jacob climbs into the passenger seat and groans. I don't blame him. When we pull into our driveway and tiptoe into the house, it's me who tells Mom we're back. It's not that Jacob would be too obviously drunk – he's always had a knack for sobering up around adults – just that I'm always the one to do it. She nods and says goodnight, already back in bed by the time the words leave her mouth.

I go back downstairs to find Jacob in the kitchen, nursing a bowl of cereal. I pour myself a glass of water and get him one, too. He takes it but doesn't drink. I sit down next to him and we begin our night-out ritual. The debrief. He tells me about the party. Angie was the drunkest one there, and they had to leave before it got good. I listen to him intently, watching his eyes for non-verbal cues and to judge his sobriety. He finally takes a sip of water before asking me about my night. About Della.

"I'm surprised you remembered," I say truthfully.

Jacob shrugs, "It's not like you get that many girls." He smirks into his cereal and I shove him lightly.

"Just you wait," I joke, "I'll have to fight the college girls off with a bat."

My brother laughs at first, but something sobers him halfway through the action. He looks me in the eye.

"Maria, thanks for picking us up," he tells me.

I swallow and look away, "Yeah, no worries. Anytime."

I stand up to leave when he catches my arm. “It’s gonna be weird without you next year.”

For a split second, he looks really young.

“Don’t worry,” I tell him, “We’re gonna be fine.”

And I think I actually believe it.

* * * * *

Clementine MacLeod
Grade 11
Adam Scott Collegiate Vocational Institute

Downpour

by Eunsae Lee

She had given up on her umbrella six blocks ago. The bottom of her paper bag had torn, condemning the cheap box of chocolates to a large, murky puddle. A tragic image. She had thanked the heavens for plastic wrapping and then surrendered to the rain in order to gather her things.

She walked past the closed painted doors of little shops and the muffled noise of local pubs. A turn into a narrower street, then another. The windows became darker and darker until she relied on the faded streetlamps to see ahead. Dusk and the deafening sound of rain on the cobbled street offered her a strange sensation. If she had to pick a word to describe it, she imagined it would be silence.

Silence. She had become a stranger to its intimacy. Organizing a funeral had turned out to be a cluttered, chaotic ordeal. A solemn phone call from the hospital and everything was replaced by images of her small hometown. She was suffocated by relatives whose names she couldn't remember. As obscure faces showed up to the old, wooden church on the day of the ceremony, she had tried to figure out appropriate facial expressions. All grim with slight changes for each occasion: offering condolences, receiving flowers, standing by the casket, more flowers…

A string of formalities, slow and hazy, like an old film playing out in front of her. Sad phone calls and white petals haunted her for weeks. Her mother would have scorned all the gloom. Although weak and weary in her bed at the hospital, she had refused to drown in the bleak white curtains. Always smiling, softly humming. She had insisted that her guests wear bright colours to her funeral. But all her laughing couldn't prevent the sombre coats and dresses.

The quiet light of a street lamp flickered as if to invite her back outside of her memory. Still walking.

Again the crash of heavy raindrops on stone. This time, it built a fiercely vivid reality around her skin. The alley was lined with faded brick townhouses. Twisting arms of ivy dove from one door to the next. She slowed her pace.

143…144…145…

She stood facing a firm brown door with a simple wreath. A chocolate finish. The envelope in her hand was soaked to the point of dissolving into her palm. Grimacing through wet strands of hair, she tried to make out the lettering that was nearing unintelligible.

Gwyneth Miller

146 Carnell St.

For a while, the days had been a tense, threatening greyscale. It was a sense of freedom that flooded her when she had first read the letter. An unexpected invitation to dinner from an "old friend" of her mother's. An escape from stale grief. Something about the swooping handwriting promised stories, promised vitality. She had only heard Gwyneth's name once; it had belonged to a tall woman in a lemon trench coat at the funeral. She remembered seeing her sitting calmly at the back, apart from the messiness.

Four knocks, and the door swung open. The scent of ginger and warm spices rushed out to greet her. Suddenly feeling clumsy, she held out the wet box of chocolates.

“Hi, I’m Claire’s daughter. I hope I’m not too late for dinner.”

Through the doorway, she glimpsed walls full of tapestries and shelves holding little trinkets. The stillness of the rainy night seemed to extend inside.

A smile. “Of course not, you’re just in time. Come in dear.”

Gwyneth wore a deep blue fabric and a strong face. After offering her visitor a towel to dry herself with, she welcomed her into the kitchen and led her to the round wooden table. Her voice was serious but kind. On the wall, their shadows sat down on the cushioned chairs and leaned into conversation.

When the plates were cleared and the mugs were emptied, Gwyneth went upstairs to bed, leaving her to sit in silence. The unravelled stories had wrapped around her body like a scarf, a tender quilt. She couldn’t quite name the colour. Old photographs rested on the table and kept her company. When the warmth of the standing lamp became heavy, she opened the window as if from old habit.

Outside, a steady downpour.

* * * * *

Eunsae Lee
Grade 11
St. Peter Catholic Secondary School

Pay Back

by Clementine MacLeod

I'm alone when I see her, which of course makes it worse. Well, I'm not *alone* alone – the old man in the corner, some soccer moms, and the cute barista populate the café, but no one I know. Except for her.

Then I see Lucie. I recognise her so immediately I forget we aren't friends. Like somehow my knowing her freckles and scar and the way she ties her hair back translates to love or at least goodwill. It doesn't, though, not anymore.

To be fair, it's not like I'm looking at *my* Lucie. The girl at the counter is different – some kind of hologram, an alternate universe version of my former best friend. It's been a year since I've seen her and it shows. Her hair is blonder, straight, and she's wearing her glasses. I look different too, since our final showdown in the school parking lot, but I see myself every day. The changes are easier to ignore.

She's with a boy I don't know, which makes sense but feels all kinds of wrong. I don't get updates on her life anymore. Not even via Instagram. A little over a year ago, I would have known if a boy smiled at her. Now, she's got a whole person on her arm I've never even seen. He's looking in my direction, and I stare down at my coffee so we don't make eye contact. It's a Cafe Misto, edited perfectly with measured additions and subtractions of sweetener and oat milk to achieve the effect of a latte, without the extra two bucks. This trick, I learned from my roommate out East and has since become standard practice. Never before uni had I cared that much about a few dollars.

I'm acutely aware of Lucie in my peripheral but busy myself on my phone. Her voice echoes in the small cafe, and the cadence of it is exactly the same. To the point where I don't even register her words, just hear everything at once. Every car conversation and post-party debrief, the arguments, the *I love-yous*, and the final, pathetic, *I'm sorry*. I've spent a lot of time this last year decoding whether or not it was sincere. I've come to the conclusion that it doesn't matter. Nothing changes either way. That was the end.

Lucie and her boy get their drinks and mill about for a moment as if deciding whether they should stay. I try not to make it obvious, but I'm hanging on their every movement. Then, the boy nods and Lucie strides to the counter. She grins and bats her eyes at the barista, cups her hand around her mouth and whispers something in his ear. I don't try to hide my scoff. It's so cheap, so *Lucie*. Of course, she's gonna flirt with the barista when she came here with a guy. Always looking for attention. Always getting it.

I go back to my phone, and she finally leaves. The air clears and I'm able to breathe again. My relaxing morning resumes, and I polish off the last of my not-latte. Gathering my things, I'm just about ready to leave when my bubble is punctured by a polite "excuse me."

It's the barista. Surprised, and unequipped to deal with a person that attractive, I offer no answer save a wide-eyed look. He smiles and hands me a full cup.

"This is for you," he explains. "That blonde girl who was just in here bought it."

I blink. "For me?"

He nods and, before I can ask, goes back behind the counter. I scan the cup. Caramel Latte with Oat Milk. For "Lucy." My order back in high school. A full six dollars. I stare at it for a moment, half expecting to see a handwritten message or phone number. *Call me! I miss you! My new number!* But there isn't one. Just the label. I look outside to see if she's still there. When she isn't, the fluttery feeling in my stomach is squashed. I read the cup again. Not really my order. Not really her name.

I thank the barista as I leave and put the drink in the cupholder of my car. It stays there for the duration of my ride. Despite myself – and traffic laws, I keep looking at it. Like a drink and the two letters missing from the end of her name could make up for a year of lost friendship. Six dollars – a remedy for the biggest betrayal of my life. It's not enough, but it's something. I would have never, in a hundred years, bought her a coffee. But I would have never, in a hundred years, done what she did to me.

When I'm home, I put the coffee on the dining-room table and sit on the couch. Ten minutes later, my sister comes in and asks if it's mine. I say yes, and she asks if she can have it.

"Sure," I say, "I'm not gonna drink it."

* * * * *

Clementine MacLeod
Grade 12
Adam Scott Collegiate Vocational School

The Ceiling Man

by Eunsae Lee

The last few weeks have been a bit of a challenge for my family. Everyone is irritable. We have a Ceiling Man, you see. He's always walking around our house, body stretching upside-down from the ceiling. There doesn't seem to be a purpose to it; he follows a random path, but his steady pace never stops.

He appeared one morning on the upper floor. My sister discovered him when she almost smacked into his forehead. She screamed her spider-spotting scream, so Dad put down his bowl of cereal and marched upstairs to deal with it. The rolled-up newspaper wasn't too helpful in the face of a full-sized man.

Every morning, Dad grumbles about the whole affair. It's infuriating, he says, that we can't even make him pay rent. We have tried talking to our guest, but after a few attempts that were answered by silence, we felt kind of ridiculous. At my sister's misty-eyed request, we've even tried to feed him. After a tense planning session, we agreed to leave a sandwich on top of the living room ceiling fan. It went ignored, and we had to give up when the whole room started smelling moldy. I don't think he notices us. Or maybe he's just terrified by these loud, inversely oriented people in his way.

We have wordlessly agreed that it feels right to avoid physical contact. This is a little difficult, however, because unfortunately he is quite a tall fellow. At the dining table, we get ready to duck when he enters the room. At first, we used to jump out of our seats and wait outside until he left, but we quickly got tired of returning to cold food. And he wanders out to a different room pretty soon anyway.

We've seen cases of this on the news; it's the *worst* type of pest because of its outright indifference to us floor people. Besides, whereas mice may multiply, a Ceiling Man definitely lives longer. I've done some research that shows he apparently ages at the same rate as us. Meaning he'll be around for quite some time. That drove Dad crazy. He picked up the phone with a fiery determination, but every pest control business in the city was busy with earwig season. Then we called the authorities, and they said there wasn't anything they could do. It seems they can't take a man into custody without a valid offense. When the city zoo finally returned his call, Dad couldn't get the words out. He doesn't believe in wildlife captivity.

I have to admit, we have discussed escorting the Ceiling Man out the front door. But after some heated debate, we concluded that it would be immoral to force him into the open air. It would be like pushing him off a cliff. Mom says that it's in times of trial like this that we truly have to prioritize our humanity.

When the neighbours heard about our predicament, they consoled us with the fact that we only have one. They told us that in the big house around the corner the Ceiling People walk in a group and their staggered stomping drives the family mad.

My parents didn't find that very comforting. However, our Ceiling Man seems to remain solitary and we're all pretty used to him by now. Besides, I find it hard to villainize him. I mean, it's not as if he eats our food like most pests do. I don't think he carries any diseases either. I've never heard him cough. Also, he knows his manners and won't open any doors that are shut. We make sure to close them before bed, and he seems content to wander through the halls at night. It's like white noise.

Sometimes I'm sitting on the sofa in the basement watching TV, and I'll see him coming down the sloped ceiling over the stairs. He usually walks toward the back of the room first. Last week, I swear I saw him bump into the wall and stumble a little. I tried not to laugh. He seems very shy, and I don't want to embarrass him.

My sister isn't as concerned about his feelings. She follows him around when she is bored, or when she doesn't want to do her math homework. Giggling, she will try to mirror his exact movements until Mom frowns at her and tells her to leave the poor man alone. She enjoys telling him about her day, too.

I think she might have named him Truffles.

He won't admit it, but I know Dad is grateful to be free of my sister's nagging to get a dog. His complaining at breakfast time has warmed toward affection, too. I've seen him look around wondering why he doesn't hear the footsteps nearby. In fact, when pest control finally called him back, Dad didn't answer.

Anyway, I'm pretty certain that Ceiling Man is into Britney Spears. I've definitely noticed him speeding up a little to be on beat to "Toxic." Maybe I'm imagining it, but he even struts a little. He's way better than my friends, who won't listen to any older stuff.

My parents say that we have to do something about him before the holidays and our relatives come down. It's part of their morning routine to bring it up. But I have a feeling that Grandma is going to make a new friend this year!

* * * * *

Eunsae Lee
Grade 12
St. Peter Catholic Secondary School

Euphony

by Sophie Wigglesworth

Noise. Heat. Light.

She couldn't stand it.

Sensations pressed in on her, flashing and hollering like garish advertisements, every outburst buffeting her carefully constructed barriers, flying in her face, clamoring for her undivided attention – all while her mind frayed into a million tangled threads, each one struggling to keep up with the onslaught.

When that monster had its hold on her, the vision was all the same – context and catalyst aside. The twisted faces, the vivid perplexing colours, the hot hungry flames burning faster and faster and…

I need to get out of here.

Gripping the log beneath her with rigid fingers, Arietta angled her face from the blazing heat so she could finally breathe.

Just a campfire. Just your friends. You know this place.

But she just couldn't stand it anymore.

Casually, she rose and strolled away, hoping to leave unnoticed. Right then, she knew exactly that what she wanted was to curl up concealed in some dark hollow and lose herself to the static. To *escape*. This strange mood seldom came upon her, but whenever it did, it was always welcome.

Arietta paused at the shadow's edge, just outside the ring of firelight, and observed her rambunctious friends. Not one of them acknowledged her; they just kept on chattering away as if she'd never existed.

So she began her trek. It wasn't easy going, and much to her chagrin, not particularly quiet, either. At first, she couldn't help the ruckus she made, crashing through the undergrowth like some hulking cryptid; soon enough, however, navigating the unfamiliar terrain of this whispering world seemed like second nature.

Now the trees thinned out, and piles of uneven boulders rose from the earth. Emerging into a clearing, Arietta came to stand at the crest of a large moss-covered rock; besides the rustling of leaves, it was utterly silent and black.

This is a lovely place, she thought sleepily. Nestling into the thick moss, she wrapped herself up into an impenetrable ball and exhaled softly. Here she could lose herself, forget for a few fuzzy hours the reality that awaited her inevitable return. The creeping dread, the nagging doubts, the choking anxiety, the endless responsibilities… Here in the silence, all those burdens were mere trifles, wisps of smoke dispelled with a breath.

Now I can rest for a while.

As she sat there enjoying the silence, staring at nothing, a faint sound began to advance upon the edge of her perception. With vacant curiosity, Arietta listened to the *skch-skch-skch* of approaching footsteps. Then an unpleasant jolt of realization yanked her out of her dull dreams.

It can't be them! she thought, gripped with panic. *They can't be out searching for me already! I only left minutes ago… didn't I?*

Frantically she scrambled up; the thumping of the intruder's feet was closing in. Quiet and quick, she hurried up the slope and hid behind a thick pine tree. Just in time, too! The clopping of shoes on stone soon announced the stranger's arrival.

Cautiously, her heart hammering in her chest, Arietta peered around the tree to observe the one who had invaded her silence.

In the filtered moonlight she glimpsed someone. A perfectly motionless interloper, standing at the peak of the boulder she'd been curled up on moments ago. The figure was holding a large bulky object, balancing it on the ground; she couldn't quite figure out what it was.

Then, a sigh and murmuring.

"How quiet…"

Arietta's heart spasmed.

HIM.

Even in such stifling darkness, she knew that sound.

And of course, that wasn't just any object – it was an acoustic guitar!

Now strangely nervous, she watched him sit and settle his instrument into position. His deft fingers strummed a few chords, and the empty clearing was all at once filled with sound. Heedless of his enraptured audience, he played on and on, the music low and controlled, but ever growing with the quiet resolve that was his essence.

Arietta closed her eyes against the darkness, basking in the musician's gift. Already she could feel the static fading away, the aching, anguished tension inside her loosening, relaxing its grip, dissolving to leave peace in its place.

Then… then, he began to sing.

"They were sitting, they were sitting on the strawberry swing… every moment was so precious…"

A sound so distinct, so comfortingly familiar. She marvelled awhile at the glorious euphony flowing smooth and rich, rising and falling with the strings, stretching the highest notes in a way that always filled her with warmth.

"Now the skies could be blue, I don't mind. Without you it's a waste of time…"

All the melancholy, all the fear, melted in the gentle strength of his song. Arietta pressed herself against the sturdy pine to get her swirling emotions under control.

"Without you it's a waste of time…"

Of its own volition, the music broke out of her, unable to be restrained. It began as a fragile whisper…

"Could be blue, could be gray…"

…and kept building as she worked her way towards its source, seized with trepidation and longing and giddy joy.

"Without you I'm just miles away…"

By now she was right beside him. The musician's voice faltered, and he trailed off as he turned to gaze at her in surprise. But somehow, despite this sudden confusion, his practised hands kept on playing that lovely melody she knew so well.

So she sang the last line herself:

"Could be blue, I don't mind. Without you it's a waste of time."

The sense of catharsis lingered. It hung in the cool air as he finished the song, strumming out the last few chords with tasteful delicacy. A satisfied hush fell over the glade, and the tireless breeze sang on alone.

For once, with tears of gratitude staining her placid face, she could finally breathe easy.

Harmony. Serenity. Comfort.

It was all she had ever wanted.

* * * * *

Sophie Wigglesworth
Grade 12
Chesterton Academy of Our Lady of the Wayside

NO WINNER DECLARED IN THIS CATEGORY

Young Writers Contest

Lakefield Literary Festival

Winning Entries – Senior Nonfiction
(Grades 11, 12, OAC)

Pink Granite

by Chelsea Forrester

I'm the first one to admit it. I had a sheltered childhood. I was living in the country, where there seemed to be no crime or violence. The only television we watched came from wholesome family channels, certain fluff on PBS and TVO. The eighties were for me a happy time of neon colours, puffy hair, and light pop music. My sister and I never fought, and so the only conflict I knew was a vague observation of some of my friends' families. I was a happy-go-lucky kid.

The idea of death never entered my Brady Bunch world until I was six years old. One spring day, my cat killed and dragged home a rabbit, a tiny speckled grey bunny. Blood covered the soft hair around its head and neck, which hung loosely. The milky eyes were still open. My cat paraded around the front porch with this lifeless rabbit in her mouth until she got bored and dropped it on the welcome mat.

My mother put the rabbit in a blue shoe box padded with Kleenex and cotton batting. A tiny funeral party solemnly proceeded down the hill at the side of our house to the field behind the vegetable garden. It had been raining for days. The ground was soggy and made weird sucking noises as we lifted our rubber boots through the mud. My father dug a hole, and the blue shoe box was lowered into the dark puddle. I found a chunk of pink granite nearby to place as a memorial to the rabbit we had known only in death. I don't remember crying, but I know that I thought about the blue shoe box for a long time, sometimes lying in wait under the shrubs and grass in the back field. It was then that I began to understand: nothing is forever, and there will be a time when everyone will be placed in their own blue shoe box.

Over the next few years a strange sort of collection grew up in that back field: a bird that had smashed into our kitchen window; a kitten we found drowned in the ditch; and numerous rodents and frogs. They had all checked in to our pet cemetery, housed forever in various makeshift coffins.

Each time another hole was dug, I lost another grain of my childhood. Death scares one. The idea of non-existence, a world somehow surviving without you, frightens people. It is hard to imagine how life could move on without us. But it does, it has, and it will continue to move on, to start over again.

Today I have a fascination with death that many people consider quite morbid. But when I think of a graveyard or funerals, I remember the space behind the garden, dotted with pink granite memorials.

And someday perhaps, I will return to my cemetery in the back field to stay a while.

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Chelsea Forrester
Grade 12
Lakefield District Secondary School

The Memoir of a Domino Player's Granddaughter

by Lisa Anne Smith

I remember well sitting at my grandparents' table on warm summer nights, the sound of cicadas coming through the open door and the flicker of August sheet lightning flashing in the distance. After dinner was through – an old fashioned meal of thick-cut ham, mashed potatoes, corn, and my grandmother's famous apple pie – and the dishes had been cleared away, my grandfather and I would spread a clean tablecloth over the smooth surface of the table and play dominoes. These dominoes were not the kind made of something cold that looks like ivory, but the ones with coloured paper dots and black plastic casing. We would play all evening, just the two of us, munching on the carrot and celery sticks we hadn't finished at dinner, joking and laughing until we cried. I loved to watch my grandpa laugh. His clear blue eyes would squeeze shut and the muscles of his face tighten, restricting his deep-down laughter in such a way that he only chuckled. Sometimes, though, the laughter was too great to be contained, and a boisterous guffaw would explode from his chest, his mouth thrown open to share with me his profound joy.

It is because of moments like these that I remember my grandfather so fondly: summers spent together, days of haylofts and barn cats, John Deere tractors, swimming, and trail rides on the ridge. And my grandfather, incredibly, still maintained this active lifestyle until his eightieth year. His shoulders were still wide and strong, the muscles not atrophied like those of other eighty-year-old men. He still dug potatoes, meticulously wiping them clean of the dark earth before placing them in empty margarine buckets. Every June, he would still monitor the wind and sky for signs of rain, awaiting the right moment to start the haying, and, come threshing time, he would spend long hours under the heat of the August sun.

But last year, on March 30, my grandfather's eightieth birthday, all this changed. This date, however small and insignificant it may seem, marked the day when my grandfather admitted, unwillingly, that his body was failing him. It was the day that represented the beginning of a new stage in my grandfather's life: his retirement.

When my grandfather retired from the Word of Life Bible Camp, where he had lived and farmed for two and half decades, the staff gave him a plaque in gratitude for his dedicated service. They also threw him a party, inviting everyone who knew him to attend the celebration. We gathered in the meeting hall, all one hundred and ninety-two of us, chatting busily with one another and nibbling tiny crustless sandwiches.

Throughout the party, my grandfather sat at the front of the big room, awkwardly perched in the oversized plastic patio chair which had been decorated with streamers as his throne. Sometimes people would journey to the front to say a few words to him, but mostly my grandfather sat alone. It was not a celebration. Instead, it was the death of Burt Marshall, farmer, and the beginning of Burt Marshall, old man.

My grandfather died on February 21, 1999. The funeral was a sombre affair, held in a dimly-lit room of the Knox Funeral Home in Owen Sound. During the memorial service on the previous day, I stood motionless against the wall, uncomfortable in my too-tight shoes, watching the respectful coming and going of people as they offered my grandmother well-meaning, but useless words of condolence.

At one point during that afternoon, an elderly man, who reminded me of my grandfather, entered the room. His eyes were bright and, just like grandpa, his hair, although greying, was still surprisingly dark for his age. He approached the open casket slowly, lingering a moment over the

stiff and tranquil body. I heard him say to the woman beside him, "That Burt Marshall, he sure was some farmer."

And it is true; my grandfather was an incredibly skilled farmer, recognized as such by his acquaintances and by himself. But he was also much more. To my grandmother, he was a faithful husband of fifty-four years, and to my mother and her siblings, a dedicated father. He was an active member of Grace Baptist Church, a valuable player on the Owen Sound Curling Club's over sixty-five men's team, and a lovable Uncle Burt to the children who attended the camp every summer. He was a man who was many different things to many different people. I only wish he had been aware of this, that he had known of the deep affection people had for him, which seemed to go unnoticed at his retirement party. I wish he had known that, to me, his identity was not that of a farmer, but of a passionate domino player, a weathered horseback rider, a good-hearted jokester, a caring grandpa. My grandpa.

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It's a Wonderful McLife

by Kirk Hendsbee

The day is Sunday, the Lord's day, but who has time for salvation these days? Instead, I stand in a line, having taken my designated spot after passing the destitute hordes of screaming children and semi-conscious parents. Waiting to make my selection, I feel as though I've been sucked into a well-lit scene from George Orwell's *1984*, fully equipped with several slack-jawed and hazy-eyed brainwashees. In reality, though, it's only the foyer of a generic McDonald's restaurant. After a few minutes the line shuffles me to the front where I have the joy of speaking to "John," my personal server, whose blank stare remains throughout our little discussion, during which I order a Big Mac with fries. I imagine that this scene is repeated many times every day in fast-food restaurants from Hong Kong to Berlin, and as globalization continues to connect countries to the "Global Village" at a breakneck speed, the number of customers at McDonald's increases. It's a documented fact: a country's level of development can be measured by, among other things, the number of McDonald's restaurants per square mile. Whether that's good or bad, it can't be denied that fast food has become a way of life that encompasses more than just what we eat. The fast-food way of life has become a revolution that's going to affect what we do today and what our children and grandchildren do tomorrow.

Fast food has become a symbol and metaphor of our times, a time when pre-packaged assembly-line meals are flung off the teenage-run conveyer belt as fast as they can be crammed down the throats of the harnessed masses of corporate vice-presidents, junior vice-presidents, and executive junior vice-presidents. Fast food has become a symbol for the twenty-four-hour-a-day workaholic rat race where parents work desperately hard just to scrape together a decent life for their kids, who, in the end, are the most profoundly affected by this fast-food phenomenon.

Kids are growing up independently in this new world-on-speed, free from parental guidelines and supervision, but somehow it's still a shock to everyone when they decide to start offing each other at random. Why are we surprised? Look at the environment these kids are raised in: quasi-sterile pastel-painted restaurants where they nurse a Coca-Cola quietly because mommy and daddy have headaches. Talk about repressed emotions! These kids are nearly quivering with unreleased rage by the time they're fifteen. So should we shut down all of the fast-food joints from Mexico City to Whitehorse in order to remedy this horrible conundrum? Well, that's assuming McDonald's and friends are to blame for this fiasco, which they're not. Sure, they're despicable, but fast-food joints and the lifestyle they represent aren't the perpetrators in this tragedy; they're simply the indicators. What they're indicating is that we've become a world of cellular parents and mobile kids, where Mom cut the cord long before the day she had to be manhandled from the boardroom into an unscheduled childbirth. In the end, technology hasn't improved our lives; it's created a world where the office, and hence the work located within it, can be carried around. This is the world in which the future generation will toil.

It is the future that's going to bear the brunt of the fast-food life. Now that 1999 is over and we've parachuted into the magical twenty-first century, don't expect technology to slow down or become more docile. The millennium that we embraced with pretty fireworks and pop songs is just one really big prison filled with cubicles instead of bars. Now it's time for us to wake up and live McLife, even though it's much different than we were all expecting; there have been a few changes that we weren't briefed on, it seems. First, the nine-to-five workday has become a thing of the twentieth century, replaced by the much more efficient method of being surgically attached to a workstation twenty-four hours a day. Secondly, food will be served in continually smaller portions of time until a procedure can be devised to entirely eliminate this time-consuming period from the human daily schedule. Finally, it's time to stop dreaming. That

Jetsonian apron-clad robot that looked after the house, made a double-egg-ham-and-toast breakfast, and raised the kids just isn't in the works. So grab a Poptart, lock the windows, plop the toddler in front of the boob tube, and hope with all your might that your kid doesn't grow up too desensitized to the world.

So what's going to be the result of all of the pagers, cellphones, laptops and high-speed internet connections? The outcome, in short, will be the development of the next generation of workers: a generation set to become zombie-like in personality and as machine-like in work ethic as the tools they so highly value. These workers will be the kids that grew up with Bert and Ernie as their father and the Blue Ranger as their mother. They'll eat and drink the workday while choking down high-protein beverages and selling stock in Taiwan. They'll be the kids who are too busy selling bonds in Mozambique to care that the ecosystem is collapsing around them. But most importantly, they'll be the pass-the-buck generation, a trick they're soon going to learn from their parents, who have used it extensively in the past few years. You see, just as fast food promotes fast living, it also promotes fast blaming, because who has the time to actually unplug for a second and analyze a problem? Certainly not anyone caught up in the fast-food life. However, that's no longer an obstacle, because in a world of endless corporate and political command chains, problems don't need to be fixed. Simply blame someone else and give the job of cleaning up the mess to an employee of lesser rank. It's the rinse, lather, repeat effect, where a solution is never found, but no one ever loses their job. That's the cost of globalization; it's hard to pin blame, so nobody really bothers.

You'd better be prepared for the global revolution, because it's coming to a home near you, and it's going to change the way you do just about everything. In twenty years the term "homemaker" will be taboo as double incomes are required to sustain the expected standard of living. The term "pacemaker" on the other hand, will be entered into common knowledge as booths to install the little device are placed in all of the major business sectors. As for the present, we're just entering the twilight of the twentieth century and the dawn of a new revolution, a revolution directly linked to the fast-food life. And as I sit at McDonald's, eating my Big Mac with fries and pondering that new horizon in the near distance, I take the time to wonder if the world has a choice with regard to the fast-food life. Can we simply choose to avoid it the way a boxer ducks to avoid a punch, or is it our evolutionary destiny? I certainly can't say, and even if I knew, I wouldn't have the time to explain it. But it's OK, because I'm sure there's someone else around here who can handle it...isn't there?

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Kirk Hendsbee
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Making the Bland

by Tim Alleway

I'd like to announce that I am officially giving up. No, that's wrong – I'm giving in. I'm giving in to the enormous pressure that corporate-creationist pop has put onto the music lovers of earth. A thick, heavy, bubblegum-flavoured influence has burrowed its way deep into our heads, invading our airwaves and musical consciousness like a metaphorical tick that would writhe, push, and infest itself to the point where it is heard, but simply unfought, unnoticed. But really, why would I want to resist it? Why wouldn't I want to buy into such a popular musical phenomenon?

The thought of sitting back and relaxing, letting O-Town's "Liquid Dreams" lull me into happy submission, just makes me smile. Of course, initially, I may have to fight the urges to think that something so innocent-sounding could actually be a vague reference to – gasp! – nocturnal emissions! But then after that, there'd be no cares and no worries! I'd just let my mind and opinions gradually soften up, and pretty soon my brain would be more sweet, candy-coated and sheltered-over than a football-sized Skittle. What a sweet deal!

Never again would I have to think to myself, whilst strolling down the aisles in Music World, "Hey, that song really struck a chord in me! Listen to those lyrics! Such musicianship! I should pick that album up!" No, I could just skip right over to the Top Ten rack, then fill up my sparkly, pink trough with the sweet, sweet goodness that is our society's bubblegum pop.

Of course, once I join the masses, I'll probably have to destroy all of my psychology books and burn pretty much anything on my shelf that provokes self-introspection, to make room for my 'N Sync action figures. What do you think Brittney Spears' favourite brand of antacid is? I'll have to make sure I'm well stocked because I know the transition away from depth and complexity into the new realm of hundred-dollar tickets and "gettin' down and movin' all around" won't be without its share of nausea. But it'll be worth it! I can lie back, and, having already numbed myself into questionable contentedness with Christina Aguilera's unrelenting presence, let each new band entertain me each week! All the catchy two-riff songs, the wildly innovative ways to rhyme "lazy" with "crazy," and, of course, the mind-blowing usage and range of the word "baby." I just can't wait to be subdued, a proverbial unthinking pancake being smothered with the non-threatening, baby-doll, t-shirt-wearing, thong-flashing, pierced-belly-button syrup that is today's pop music.

And for those who wish to stay unindoctrinated, I'll have to ignore what they say. Originality! Actual personal reflection and meaning? That's crazy talk! Now, let's see more people doing choreographed spins on fold-out chairs! I'll have to ignore it when people tell me I've been brainwashed. When someone tries to trick me by slipping in Jimi Hendrix, or Tool, or, heaven forbid, a Led Zeppelin track into my mp3 player, I'll have to dispose of it immediately; then, while clamping my hands over my ears and singing "I Want It That Way," I'll just try to envision Brittney's tummy, a plasticky, tanned, and perfect six-pack that I could never achieve (even through extensive research in *Teen Beat* and constant dancing to her videos), swaying back and forth in my face.

Maybe what we need to do is, without risking *too* much independent thought, form some kind of small shanty town that could grow into a metropolis, which could evolve into a country (a nation of pop fans) to segregate ourselves off from the rest of the world. We'd be "Backstreet Boysians," or "Aguilerians," or whatever. We wouldn't need to choose one specific pop song as our national anthem because it could just change every week! And we wouldn't need school, or

jobs, or social lives, because the answers to our deepest fears and problems could be found simply by "shaking our bonbons." And we will just ignore the cold, blatant fact that our eyes and ears are shut to melody, meaning, and depth in music. After our civilization has formed sick and obsessive pop-based religions, thereby having martyred all its pop icons, cracking the sweet bubblegum womb of all moral fabric we'd have created with twelve-year-olds eating Ecstacy and losing their virginity to Justin Timberlake look-alikes over the background ambience of b4-4, we'll be forced to move on, consolidated by our undying love for pop music, and eventually focus on the next big thing.

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Tim Alleway
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The Invisible War

by Amanda Rosanne Fife

I'm munching my chicken, watching my family's eyes trained on the TV through the doorway. We're having dinner, for God's sake; just turn it off. If you leave it on, one of you will say something about it. And then – once it's come into the sacred silence of our dinner conversation – the very discussion I've been avoiding will start.

In the end, my sister puts it up in the air. My father seizes it immediately, grumbling dejectedly about all the people killed and how he wants to see the terrorists who crashed those planes suffer for all the horrors they caused. He says he wants to know about the third plane – if it was related or not.

I want to tell him to shut up and quit talking. But instead I tell him what a girl in one of my classes told me – that the third plane was headed for the White House and that if the president had been killed, there would have been nukes shot off at every suspected country inside of a few days. This enrages him and he proceeds to tell me that I am grossly misinformed – no one is going to bomb anyone else until all the details are assured. "They don't want a war."

I would think differently from the way they talk about it on TV. They throw the word around like it's nothing special. "War imminent for United States..."

The conversation all goes downhill from there until I am debating the need for war, disputing the great conflicts of our history. "Whose brilliant idea was war anyway? Why do we kill people who kill people to show that killing people is wrong?"

"How else but with retaliation can we stop them?" my mother asks.

I am glowering now, trembling inside with the need to scream.

"We don't need to sink to their level to stop them," I grate.

"Let me put it this way," she explains. "If you're in the yard at school and somebody pushes you down, and you don't do anything, they're going to come and do it again. If you don't defend yourself or get your friends to help you – like the U.S. is doing with the Allies – they're going to come back with all their friends and run you into the ground!"

I sit there trembling with rage as the realization strikes me. They let me be a victim of war...

They let me lie there in that hell, entrenched in the war that was my daily life, living as the passive example they taught me to be. For three years of emotional and sometimes physical abuse I did what they told me to – because they were my parents and I was the child who knew nothing of the real world. I had to trust them. Obviously my gut instinct to tear my peers' throats out with all the rage that I felt burning in me was wrong and horrible. So I did what they taught me to.

And they taught me to take it – to be pushed down over and over and take the sheaves of insults and ignore my enemies. They were the ones, sitting there on my bed as I sobbed, convincing me in those deceptively soothing tones that my tormentors would lose interest and go away! They would not sit by and see a country fail to defend itself against international terrorists,

and yet they sat by and watched their own daughter be terrorized into an emotional and social oblivion, passing it off as schoolyard troubles when it was truly nothing less than war!

I had certainly known before then that my parents were capable of mistakes, but it never occurred to me so clearly as it did at that moment. I felt as though my entire existence had been betrayed, as though they had molded my life to be a war, if only through their own stupidity. I wanted to scream, to hail my anger out on them, but my tongue held fast in my throat. These were my parents and all that we had been through together because of my childhood wars had strengthened us indeterminately. My mother and I, especially, were deeply linked. She had been my rock, my lone solace in those cruel years, and to turn and blame my suffering on her seemed worthless and more destructive than healing.

Back in the present day at the dinner table – as all these revelations spin in my head – I half consciously carry on my argument to its climax. I never say a word about my sense of betrayal. When I finally leave the table in furious tears and throw myself on my bed, my mother comes to comfort me and agrees, as I sob into her collar, that the example she gave was insensitive. Even in her righteousness she still finds it in her to see my deeper pain. She is one of the few who ever understood about the agony I feel. The only one, I think, who can see those festering slivers of harsh reality that still dig at my soul, even years after their infliction. Most people consider my past over and buried in my wake – Mom knows better.

I hope that I can someday be something of the mother that she is to me now. She is my friend more than anything else, my deepest confidant and my solace in the darkness of life. When hell on Earth has befallen me, she has been there, and to turn to her now and tell her that she taught me to increase that hell would be as close to a sacrilegious action as this atheist could ever get.

In my own way, I forgive my family for their blind betrayals. And even so, if I could change my childhood, I'm not sure I would. If I did not suffer, I would not know happiness. If I did not need security and love, I would not know my mother as dearly as I do. Above all, however, reigns the thought that we are the sum of our experiences. Without the wars I've braved – however much I suffered in them – I would not be me.

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The End of the World is Being Written

by Quinn Damery

It's 6:15 p.m., and it's time to get to work. I pull out my rough notes and prepare to shape my raw thoughts into a polished masterpiece. Truth be told, I don't really want to be here. I'd much rather be reading a book, examining the local geography with close acquaintances, or even learning how to cook a soufflé. Anything but writing an essay. Essays are the thorn in my side, the bullet in my brain, the knife in my heart. Essays ruin my life, but more importantly, they are ruining our world and its future inheritors.

For decades, parents and teachers have censured students for their poor planning skills. Historically, procrastination is a mainstay in the personality of the teenager, and essays created it. "Write a fifteen-hundred word essay on how MacBeth's tragic flaw is his ambition." Shoot me in the head. Please, I beg of you. I'd rather shove my face into a box full of razors and blink. Every single mentally sound student I have ever met abhors the idea of writing an essay; so, as with almost every persistent virus in humans, they develop an antibody to them: procrastination. Teenagers will redirect their attention to any non-essay-oriented endeavour. During those death-row moments leading up to starting an essay, I will redirect my attention to cleaning my working space until it maintains the polished sheen of a sweating, bald man's head. Once, while I was starting an essay, my mother walked through and commented on how clean the computer room had become. She commended me on a job well done. She could have asked me to clean the entire house, and I would have done it. (However, another teenage antibody, referred to as "laziness," prevented me from taking on this task of my own free will). Little did my mom know that the sudden cleanliness of the computer room and my assigned task of writing an essay were in direct correlation with each other.

This awful characteristic is almost impossible to lose, too. Forget smoking and cocaine; procrastination is the hardest habit to break. You can see the evidence of long-lasting procrastination all around you. Ever notice how the government puts deadlines on national projects about ten to fifteen years in the future? It's because tasks like cleaning up the environment are almost as daunting as writing an essay. Nobody wants to tackle an assignment that large ever, much less right away. Musicians can write and record an album in about a month. Why do they always take six months to lay down tracks, you ask? They're spending the first five months cleaning up the studio.

I resent the outcome essays will have on my character traits. I'll never be able to take on a job right away. Eventually, I'll completely lose confidence in my abilities to perform as an active member of society. I'll turn into a recluse who never does anything significant, but has a very clean dwelling. That's no way to go through life, constantly dusting surfaces. Essays are going to ruin my life and the life of every other person in the world.

I once watched a very informative report on the lifestyles of teenagers, done by the investigative journalism television show, "20/20." (Note: I was scheduled to be working on rough notes for an essay at the time). This report stated that teenagers require a minimum of eight hours of sleep a night in order to maintain a healthy lifestyle. The essays assigned to teenagers completely demolish this expectation of healthy living. The previously analyzed procrastination habit produced by essays inevitably leads to late nights slaving over a cancer-inducing computer screen. Essays are making a total mockery of the reputed journalistic skills in "20/20"! When I procrastinate long into the night, I'm surrendering precious hours of sleep, turning them into minutes, and those minutes eventually give way to seconds. "The conclusion – one paragraph, the purpose of which is to impress on the reader the thesis that has been

developed" (M.L. Ford, *Good Techniques of Writing*, p. 48). By the time I write that final, all-important paragraph of the essay, I'm lucky if I can even remember what sleep is, never mind whether I will be able to obtain any tonight.

As I turn my gaze away from the frigid computer screen and out my window to see that the sun has replaced the moon, I'm flabbergasted. "The sun? But it's nighttime! What time is it? 7:30...a.m?! That's impossible! I didn't sleep! It can't be morning if I didn't sleep, can it?" My mind struggles to grasp even the most basic concept of time. "I was up all night writing this thing? It's not even that good! I've wasted my time! I'll never be able to get those hours back!" The essay-ridden nights of sleep deprivation don't come without their long-term effects. Sleep cycles are thrown off for weeks. Students spend spare minutes between classes with their heads against pillows while they stand inside their lockers, desperately trying to regain what they lost. The teachers –the same teachers that assign essays – have an all-too-simple remedy for the slumber-less students: "You should really get to bed a little earlier; catch up on some sleep," they say. "You should stop giving me essays," is my quick-witted response. "They're ruining my life."

Some might argue that essays are a good thing. These people believe essays help individuals build logical reasoning capabilities. Have these people taken a look at the state of logic and reasoning in the world? It's in shambles! Pollutants from automobiles are deteriorating the ozone layer, which is causing more ultraviolet rays to enter our atmosphere, which is causing the polar ice caps to melt, leading to elevated sea levels. The logical and reasonable solution? Instead of repairing the ozone, they invented a car that will run off the water from the oceans that were raised because of the hole in the ozone caused by the pollutants from fossil-fuel-burning automobiles. Of course, when the oceans dry up because we're all filling our gas tanks, we're going to be equally screwed.

The other point that "pro-essayists" tend to make is that essays provide students with a strong foundation to learn how to argue. I speculate that arguing is just their form of procrastination and that they really have an essay of their own they should be attending to. With the amount of international tension, religious terrorism, and professional sports team rivalries present in the world, I think we could all do with a little less arguing. Can you imagine it? World leaders would be drinking pina coladas and discussing their favourite episodes of "Friends." Eventually, the world would become a much more compromising and relaxed place.

If we removed essays from our lives now, we could estimate that, taking into account about twenty years of habitual procrastination and five years to work out the kinks in our sleep cycles, the world would be a better place by the year 2027.

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Unspoken : Depression and the Search for Words

by Zoë Greenwood

Doctors ask questions that require "Yes" and "No" answers, or "How does it feel when…?" "Tell me how you felt when…?" "What were you thinking when...?" They tell you to fill out forms. Blank spaces. Boxes. You are provided with the answers: "Always"… "Often"… "Sometimes"… "Rarely"… "Never." It's so simple, how could it fail? At the end there will be a diagnosis, and you will leave with a piece of paper (again) and a feeling in the pit of your stomach that this will never end. This will eat you alive. Prognosis: fatal. Six months to a year.

I assume that they do not understand, cannot understand, maybe don't even want to. Just another one of *those kids*. Get her in and out as quick as possible, and on to the next one. I assume that they want to tie me to those boxes, those answers. Always, often, sometimes, rarely, never. How can it be that simple? But perhaps the doctors are seeking just as desperately as I am. They seem so badly to want to confine this to a specific set of words. Demanding that you speak their language when talking to them. "Yes, Doctor, I often feel a) hopeless b) sad c) tired d) all of the above." They want to assign a title to everything I am feeling. Disorder. Dysfunction. Anxiety. Panic. Manic. Bi-polar. Depressed.

But none of their words fit, and none of their prescriptions work, and none of their diagnoses are correct. And now it's been seven years. Which is not long, really, considering how much longer it is for some people, but it is still painful. Still frustrating. And I am cursed with that deadly combination of art and pain. And something inside of me aches to figure it all out, to explain it in perfect sentences, to cure myself of all of this horror through the beauty of *my* language and *my* words.

But how can I explain it? How can you talk about the disease of sadness in a way that will rid you of it? It fills you up until it is all you know. It becomes every word you speak. Reflected in everyone and everything you see. While you're driving down the street one day, the beauty of the rain on the windshield makes you cry. Self-contained and insular. My world consists of me feeling. Everything. So intensely. All the time. And the longer it lasts, the more I want to break it down into a series of carefully planned paragraphs, numbered poems, chapters and titles, and entire books. And the more time I spend trying to do that, the longer it lasts. The systemization of desperation. Vicious cycle. Cruel ironies.

I can only assume that things were once easy. I'm sure there was a time when they were. But I can only assume. Now, I cannot function on most days. Not the way I should be able to, not the way something inside of me keeps telling me I can. I wake up and the air is dry; colours are flat or too gorgeously intense. My stomach aches, maybe from the medication, maybe not, and my face is puffy from tears I don't remember having shed. "I can't do it," is the only thing I can think. The only thing I can say. And for another day those words consume me. This is not me. But what else am I? This is all I know. Again, my words fall dead from my lips, my excuses are laughable, my laughs are contrived, my body is numb and sick and not my own.

It happens slowly, this thing… this thing I know so well but cannot put a name to, not without feeling I am lying to someone. Maybe myself. It creeps up on you, seeping into your blood stream, negotiating with your subconscious, making deals with your inner demons. It takes you down one day at a time. A vicious battle that most are destined to lose. I live with this and I can barely explain it. I struggle for words so desperately that my fingernails make my palms bleed, my jaw locks up, and my heart feels as if it might break my ribcage.

Yes, Doctor, I do write my feelings down. Yes, that's what they tell me... a good way to cope. Yes, that's what they say. No, I don't think I can tell you what I write; you see, my mouth doesn't work the way my hands do.

How do you say it? How do you talk about the way you feel as if you are choking every second of every day? How do you say that now you understand why all those stupid clichéd metaphors really aren't stupid. Tunnels, dark clouds, heavy weight on your shoulders; suddenly those pictures are common visitors. How do you explain that death is so familiar that you have begun capitalizing it? Death sucks at your heart until the noise of its beat becomes an annoyance. Death runs her fingertips over your wrists and shakes her head at you as you lie in a hospital bed, drifting in and out of consciousness to the sound of your vital signs beeping away. She says, "not this time, sweetie, not this time." And you want to scream at her, but once again, you just cannot find your voice.

Yes, Doctor, I often think about dying. No, Doctor, I rarely feel violent. I just want it to stop. Just stop. Just stop. Just stop just stop just stop just stop stop stop.

I am beginning to think that this sickness will eat away at my generation until we are nothing but bones. Sad reflections of what could have been. Just numbers on health cards, just files, eventually forgotten by all those who remembered. I see it in people's eyes every day – this disease shows like nothing else. It ages without lines or wrinkles, makes you walk too slowly, think too quickly, and want too much. I see it in people every day. The pain is on their skin, on their lips, in the way they move their hands. They are so tired. They have tried and tried, although few believe them when they say that. They have dealt with their childhood trauma, their malnutrition, their sleeping problems, and still... still...

Still lonely when I am surrounded by people who love me. Sad because there is too much beauty in the world, and I just can't be a part of it. Angry at only myself. Searching and searching for something I cannot name. Desperately trying to find the thing that can save me from this. Wearing myself out. And down. Crash. And burn. Slow, slow Death.

But I cannot say it like that. I don't think anyone can. They are words that live in your fingertips, not on your lips. They would sound alien delivered by my voice. And so I remain stuck, like so many people. Stuck with this disease I do not understand in a world that does not understand it, desperately seeking words that will never be enough. The doctors who will not let me recover. The writer who cannot save herself with words. A sickness that owns a language that cannot be spoken. People who just won't heal.

Perhaps when I am older, I will stand before the mirror and stare at my breasts, which have started to sag, my skin that has lost its smoothness, the body that I once hated for rising above one hundred pounds, and I will hate myself for ever having got so lost in something so horrendous that I wasted away my youth. Perhaps eventually, the drugs will work, the doctors will assign me a title, be satisfied with my test results, understand me in their own way, and send me away forever. Perhaps this will pass, and I will finally let go and breathe without choking, sleep without crying, eat without guilt, and love without pain. But I don't think the right words will ever make it off my tongue. I suppose that that is the curse of art and of writing; depression is hard, but it is even harder to admit that the thing you love more than life, more than yourself, the thing you love in a way that is beyond touch and tears and time, will not be able to save you from it in the end.

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Zoë Greenwood
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Twins Tower

by Becky McMaster

So I didn't wear red, white, and blue. It's not because I don't care or don't think it's a tragedy. It's just that sometimes one day of mourning is enough. To spend a whole week with tears streaming down my face was too much. I never want to relive the week of September 11th, 2001, but it's not for the same reason as the rest of the world.

Please don't think I'm cold-hearted. I cried when the plane hit the tower. I knew how people's hearts would break. How families would be ruined. Life is more precious than we think. Newly-widowed women had to tell their children why Daddy wouldn't be coming home anymore. Husbands had to bury their wives. Families prayed that their loved ones would be found, just so they could know the truth. I understood the fear and the pain, and I mourned with the rest of the world. At home, alone with my sister, we watched the television just like the rest of the world. I was in shock. Speechless.

But here is where my experience is different. The phone rang. My parents called from the hospital. Dad was still recovering from his bypass surgery, so my sister and I were home alone. We'd been trying to call them, but in all the confusion, no one could put us through to their room. They seemed so calm. Dad was healthy enough to come home now, but, with all the excitement, the nurses got things mixed up. They probably wouldn't have got out of Toronto anyway; there were so many people from the planes that had made their emergency landings. Dad says this is what it was like when JFK was shot. Everyone would always remember what they were doing and where they were. It was a moment that would define our lives.

Sometimes personal tragedy can cloud one's mind. I can still see the images of two burning towers, but only after I push the sight of two tiny babies out of my mind.

On September 10th, 2001, two beautiful babies came into the world. Both perfect. Both warm. Tiny little fingers and cute little toes. Skin so soft, so thin, so perfect. My brand-new niece and nephew, Rosemary and Galen, were born that day. Too soon and too early. They were born so their mother wouldn't die. Galen never saw the world or felt the warmth of his father's touch. Rosemary was the little miracle. The doctors didn't think she was alive, but with his giant finger on her chest, my brother felt her heart beating. Too small to open her eyes, and with skin so thin you could see the amazing vessels that carried her blood. Have you ever seen an egg a few days after you put it in vinegar? That's how delicate the twins' skin was. They were 18 weeks old. Perfectly formed, but just not right. Something had gone wrong; the placenta was leaking fluid and infection had set in. Bekka's fever was too high, so the doctors thought it would be better to induce her. My mom coached her through it. Bekka said she'll never understand why Mom stayed when she knew what the outcome would be. Dad couldn't leave his hospital. He could see across the road where the delivery was happening, but my mom went back and forth to tell him what was happening. It was decided that my sister and I wouldn't be told until my parents got home. It was probably the right idea. So I found out on September 12th. Try explaining that to your teachers: my dad had his bypass and my niece and nephew died, and never mind the fact that I don't know whether my relatives who work at the Pentagon are alive or not.

My relatives at the Pentagon weren't working that week, and my dad has recovered well. My brother and sister-in-law will never fully recover; neither will our family. Rosemary and Galen were cremated and their ashes put in a tiny urn with a little dove on the front. The leftover ashes that wouldn't fit in the urn (and some of the flower petals that didn't burn) were put into little charms for necklaces. The names Rosemary and Galen were written in hieroglyphics on the

sides, and my brother and sister-in-law each have one. Just this year, my brother had a tattoo put on his forearm with Nefertiti holding twins and Rosemary and Galen written in hieroglyphics down the sides. The twins will never be forgotten.

And this year September 11th came again. Shortly after the anniversary, I got involved in a conversation with a woman who had been in the hospital during the attacks. She hadn't even been conscious on the 11th and said she felt like so "cold-hearted" for not caring. She's just happy to be alive. I understand how she feels. The world looks at us differently. They look down on us for not mourning with the same intensity as every one else in the western world. But not everyone mourns in the same way, and we aren't all grieving for the same reason.

I wish I could escape the world on the 10th of September. I wish I had held my niece and nephew and had been able to kiss them. They are tiny little angels, and I wish they could know how much we loved them. The world stands still on the 11th, but my world died the previous day. Please, let me mourn in peace, in my own way. Please, let me heal my heart. I lost a dream too.

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Becky McMaster
OAC
Crestwood Secondary School

Why Generation Y

by Josh Luckhurst

We elude definition.

We have been born into trouble and raised eyebrows and whispered suspicions and wagging fingers. Monitored and dissected before we can speak, we are told of mistakes not to make.

"Do not make mistakes. Do not repeat these mistakes. Are you listening? Do not even think about it. Do not screw this up." We are told this from the beginning.

We are run through the wheels of grand systems, fitted, and pressed.

We are appropriated.

We are cookie dough.

We have shouldered the consequences of actions we never took and we march, under bombardment by well-meaning threats and giggling media, under advice to never, ever do things we don't understand. It rings in our ears as we walk in single file:

Do not.

Be not.

Fear.

We have been ushered into bright halls and are accosted on all sides. We do not yet know what is happening. We have covered our eyes with our hands and are blinking hard, but everything is blurred. There are fingers grasping and prodding and correcting and straightening, to the tune of a symphony of rules. They divide us a hundred-fold and scream in our ears. We wonder if they realize we can hear them but do not want what they are selling.

Many "whats."

Many "hows".

No "whys."

We are expected to rebel, given channels and padding and product endorsements. We wonder what we are to rebel against. We have middle-class lives, white-walled ambitions, and authority figures encouraging smiling, empty angst. Within their boundaries, of course. Of course. We are to worship symbols of symbols of symbols of memories of what it felt like to hold something genuine. We ask for something more, but are laughed off and given papers for our pleasure.

We want none of this.

We have dimmed the lights and see better, a parade of mannequins and jesters, clad in confetti and neon – and all of it for sale. Pretenders and provokers, all of them visions of refined happiness. We see that they continue to not make sense. We have given up trying to decipher

their codes, throwing our hands in the air. We will never speak their language. We will not speak their language.

We grin.

We leave the building through the back exit into the most unfashionable of alleys. We know we are being chased and we confound at every turn. We recognize each other and run together. When they come looking, we are not to be found. We plunge deeper and farther away from where we are encouraged to go. We are writing our own tablets and singing our own songs.

No categories.

No division.

We do not need them.

We do not need *them*.

They frown and ask for reasons. They want us to explain ourselves. We turn up the volume. We do not know our selves. We never had purpose to begin with; how are we to have one now? We know one thing only and have practised it to an art:

We like this game.

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Josh Luckhurst
Grade 12
Thomas A. Stewart Secondary School

A Defining Moment

(Some Memories Never Die)

by Kyle Bell

In my opinion our defining moments in life are events that change the way we perceive the world, forever altering the course of our life, or that of someone around us. Events such as these do not happen every day, but when they do, they are the type of occurrence that will stand out in our memories forever. I can remember several of these instances, and yet there is one that stands out clearly in my memory. It hits me with such a striking impact that I remember the details of it to this day.

I was eleven years old at the time and in the middle of my sixth year of hockey. At this time, hockey was one of the main focuses in my life. On one particular cold, rainy night, near the beginning of the season, while driving home from a game, my experience occurred. I remember arguing with my dad, as we often did after games. He was telling me what I'd done wrong and how I had to fix it. It was the typical "constructive criticism" rhetoric that I had heard on so many other nights. We were so caught up in the argument that, for a moment, we almost failed to notice the boy running along the side of the road. Without any reason, he changed direction and started to run directly towards our car.

We halted our conversation in midstream and veered to the right to avoid the runner. As we moved out, so did he. We were getting steadily closer, and he still wasn't backing off. I got a brief glimpse of his face before he reached the car, and what stands out most in my mind is the complete absence of any fear in his expression that would suggest he realized the severity of what he was doing. We couldn't move over any further on the road without going into the other lane, and before we realized he definitely was not going to get out of the way, it was too late.

Everything happened in a matter of moments. The brakes of our car screeched in protest as my dad frantically tried to stop the car. The runner jumped into the air, attempting to vault himself over our car. The front window shattered, spraying glass all over my lap as the runner's knees connected with our windshield. I sat there wanting to say something, but the words caught in my throat. I remember thinking afterwards, what would happen to us for hitting this person? Was he dead? Had we just killed someone?

What we found out later that night was confusing to me at the time. The person we had hit was in fact only nineteen years old. After he was taken to hospital, a large quantity of drugs was discovered in his system. When I was told this, I still didn't understand how something could be powerful enough to make someone do something like this. The boy's parents told us he had been involved with drugs for some time before the accident occurred. They hadn't spoken to him in months and didn't even know where he was. They went on to tell us that it was with drugs that their problems began. They had urged their son to get help, but he had refused, telling them he didn't have a problem. Some of the kids that went to high school with him claimed that he had boasted to them of his athletic ability while under the influence of drugs. He had told them how much faster he could run and how much higher he could jump. He thought he could fly.

Although the news of his condition removed me and my father from any legal responsibility, it didn't change the sickening feeling of guilt we would have for a long time afterwards. It may have been an accident, caused by elements out of our control, but it was one of those times when I simply asked myself, "Why?" Why did this have to happen? Why would someone ruin their life this way? I suppose we all have some small piece inside of us that dares us to do what we

know is dangerous and wrong. How well we control this part of us may often be the difference between a happy life and a miserable one, and even between life and death.

Some time after the accident, I remember asking questions about drugs. I don't recall exactly what the questions were, or even the explanations, but what stands out in my memory is how I reacted to what happened. I sat there with a lap full of broken glass and looked across at my dad, who was in a state of shock. I can only imagine what he must have been feeling. I was only in the passenger seat, and I was maybe as scared as I've ever been. I had never seen someone nearly killed up close before. To me it seemed like something that could only happen in movies. Not real. Not a harsh reality I would ever have to face in everyday life.

Much later, the severity of what had happened would hit me much harder. A 19-year-old kid was in the hospital with injuries that would completely change the course of his life. It would be years before he might walk again, and even if he did, his life would never be the same. In a flash of mere moments, a normal kid from a town I lived in had nearly been killed. If drugs could cause this, if they could snuff out a person's life as easily as a flame might go out on a candle, then they were something that I would avoid at all costs. Our goals, our aspirations, our chances to make something of ourselves should not be taken away by a stupid decision we make to involve ourselves in what we ultimately know is wrong.

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Kyle Bell
Grade 12
Adam Scott Collegiate Vocational Institute

I, Tortoise

by Lindsey Jeremiah

With the return of first-year university students for commencement, came the thought that perhaps I have been left in the dust. However, by not adhering to the big fat double cohort and jumping on last year's bandwagon loaded with 17-year-old university-bound teens, I feel I somehow will come out in the lead. I will not beat them to the finish line, but I'll still win. Call it the classic "tortoise and hare" syndrome.

Students who anticipated the pandemonium resulting from the infamous elimination of OAC (Ontario Academic Credit/Grade 13 year) and watched from the sidelines this year will be rewarded. When they venture into the "real" world, they will be prepared and right on schedule.

The elimination of OAC has created a pressurized atmosphere. Students are pressured even more now by their parents, who feel pressured to pressure their children! In addition, there is the necessity to earn sufficient money for tuition and living expenses with one year less to work and save. According to statistics from the University of Western Ontario's *2004 View Book*, the average cost for a first year student living away from home is conservatively pegged at $16,000. This is of no concern to students planning on independent financial support. For the rest of us, however, that one extra year of being able to make money while still in high school would have made a difference, even at a whopping $6.85 per hour.

The outgoing Ontario Tory government really did have its priorities out of line. In losing Grade 13, we have lost both teachers and courses, which are the substance of any high school and are thus invaluable. For seeming so very concerned with education, you would think the Tories would have devoted more attention to high schools where, according to Stats Canada, more students end their educational careers than move on to the next level. No one ever fully explained how slashing $2 billion from the budget was supposed to improve education. Further, the Tory deregulation of university costs has robbed many of the opportunity for a post-secondary education. Those students unable to afford the outrageous expense should have access to the highest quality education possible, without having to drop sixteen grand to do so.

On top of this political disappointment, I have recently heard many stories from students about the underage drinking scene – and they, of course, were sloshed when they told me. It does, however, seem odd that with such an open issue as this, the Tories would not have a thought or two to express. Yet I didn't hear a single comment, let alone a genuine concern, expressed by any Tory anywhere! I suppose sending 17-year-olds, who aren't even considered legal adults, to a place often referred to as a 24-hour party isn't an issue anymore when the consolation prize is that the government makes a few bucks as students start binge-buying highly-taxed alcohol.

On the other hand, I suppose the double cohort could be looked at as a way to cut provincial expenses and, perhaps, better prepare kids for the "real" world by applying a little stress. Maybe the rush sensation will even make them work that much harder to achieve great marks and one day work for something as great as say... the government. On the other hand, as a student representing the tortoise's view, I can verify that the extra time has given me the opportunity to grow up at a comfortable pace, achieve the grades, and raise the funds without feeling totally spent, like too little butter scraped over too much bread.

Since this time one year ago, I have changed my career and university choices at least five times. This leads me to wonder if those who left on the bandwagon would have done the same if

given the time for reflection. We need to realize that growing and becoming familiar with yourself as a mature person is a process that cannot be rushed or filled in on an info sheet. Maybe Ontario had it right in the first place. This is why Grade 13 should be reintroduced, and damn the expense. It has always been an essential year to students. Perhaps the new Liberal government has some ideas about this. I certainly hope so.

Perhaps some teens made the right decision and will be performing their first triple heart bypass by the age of 23. However, for those 17-year-old "grown-ups" out there flapping around inebriated on a campus five hours from home, I can only wonder if they'll wake up, or one day be caught brooding over their $40,000 hangover in a cloud of tortoise dust.

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Lindsey Jeremiah
Grade 12
Lakefield District Secondary School

Genocide in Rwanda

by Hilary Bird

Some called it human revenge, some political action, others a move to maintain power; I call it a merciless extermination of the innocent. It was the second largest genocide of the 20th century, one that swept through the country of Rwanda and left over a million people dead in its tracks. It took only 100 days for the guerrillas of Northern Rwanda, the Hutus, to butcher almost 15% of the country's population, to bring almost an entire race to extinction. Over the span of seven years, Adolph Hitler and the German Nazi police murdered over six million Jews. Over the span of 100 days, the Hutu rebels of Rwanda murdered almost a million Tutsis, and the world did nothing. "They knew how many people were dying. The world is racist," says Canadian General Romeo Dallaire. "Africans don't count; Yugoslavians do. More people were killed, injured, internally displaced, and refugeed in 100 days in Rwanda than in the whole eight to nine years of the Yugoslavia campaign, and there are still peacekeeping troops in the former Yugoslavia while Rwanda is again off the radar. Why didn't the world react to scenes where women were held as shields so nobody could shoot back while the militia shot into the crowd? Where boys were drugged up and turned into child soldiers, slaughtering families? ... Where girls and women were systematically raped before they were killed? Babies ripped out of their stomachs? ... Why didn't the world come?"

I wonder what the United States would have done if Rwanda had (or if there were rumours of) weapons of mass destruction, or if the Hutu rebels had tried to kill the president's father?

You would think that the spectre of the genocide would engage the western world's attention and sympathy the way the recent tsunami did, but it didn't. You would think that the spectre of the genocide would trigger the western world's military and economic power into a rescue effort like the response to the tsunami did, but it didn't. You would think that the spectre of the genocide would prompt us, the richest people in the world, to do something, but it didn't. We all slept while 800,000 Tutsi people were slaughtered not even half a world away. They are the forgotten race of the 20th century.

It started April 6th 1994, when President Habyarimana's plane was shot down, after he threatened to enforce the Arusha Peace Accords, a demand for peace in Rwanda. Then the slaughter began. It went early into the morning of April 7th, and after the night had passed, 8,000 Tutsi and moderate Hutu civilians lay dead, villages were burned to the ground, thousands of children were left orphaned, and a country lay in pieces with 15% of its population dead or fearing for their lives. The news channels around America flashed updates on the massacre as we all sat in our living rooms, glued to our televisions and radios, anticipating how our heroic governments would yet again intervene and save the day. One day after the slaughter, then-president Bill Clinton released a statement to the world with his plan of action saying, "I mention it only because there are a sizeable number of Americans there, and it is a very tense situation. And I just want to assure the families of those who are there that we are doing everything we possibly can to be on top of the situation to take all the appropriate steps to try to assure the safety of our citizens there."

We were shocked. We had just heard the president of the only superpower on earth, say that his plan of action was to remove all American citizens – hundreds of whom were peacekeepers – leaving the Tutsi civilians to fend for themselves against a force which was heavily armed and which had only one thing in mind: mass extermination.

Why didn't we intervene? Was it because the daily reports of the killings delivered to the White House over the span of three months were not enough? Did another million people have to die? Or was it because Rwanda is a small central African country with no resource or strategic value and therefore of no interest to the US? And so the American government got "on top of the situation" and airlifted hundreds of American civilians out of Rwanda.

Then what? What was next? Well, we merely became bystanders to what was about to be one of the greatest mistakes made by President Clinton and the United Nations. We watched from the sidelines as people just like you and me were smothered in an unimaginable world of terror. We all swept the "tense situation" under the rug. We pushed it aside, forgot about it, and tuned into to the O.J. Simpson trial that occupied every news network in North America.

It took only 9 days for 72,000 Tutsis to be murdered. The Rwandan countryside was littered with bodies, many in mass graves up to six feet high; others hung from trees to show just how "powerful" the murdering Hutus were. On April 19th, with an estimated death toll of over 100,000 people, the Human Rights Watch called on the UN Security Council to use the word "genocide."

Defined by the *New Penguin English Dictionary*, genocide is "the deliberate and systematic destruction of a racial, political, or cultural group." If not genocide, how else can you describe it? The use of the word "genocide," by itself in any United Nations documents would have legal consequences, and the UN would have to act; it's the law. And if forced to intervene, there was no question in anyone's mind who in the UN would be called upon to foot the bill: the US. When asked whether what was happening in Rwanda was in fact genocide, Kristine Shelley, a State Department spokesperson, was evasive in her reply: "... the use of the term 'genocide' has a very precise legal meaning, although it's not strictly a legal determination. There are other factors in there as well." Poland, Czechoslovakia, Argentina, even the Pope, but not the UN, called it genocide. Many times throughout the numerous debates about the situation in Rwanda, the word was thrown about but never documented; therefore, in the eyes of the law, it was all right for the UN to sit back and watch.

So what about the US? What were they doing while all this was going on? Well, they were refusing request after request for more soldiers, equipment, and intelligence. Why? Because it wasn't in the "nation's interest" to intervene. Humanitarian aid should be just that; it should not be tied to national interest; it should not be conditional. When begged by Canadian General Dallaire (the UN's top peacekeeper in Rwanda) for US equipment to block hate messages sent between Hutu clans, the US felt it was too expensive at $8,500 an hour. Compare that to the $87.5 billion spent in Iraq; however, that was in the United States' "national interest." It was only a month after the massacre began that Clinton signed a Presidential Decision Directive, a document limiting the US's military involvement in international peacekeeping operations and a slap in the face for the country of Rwanda.

I find it ironic that the Charter of the United Nations states that the obligation of the UN is "to aid those in times of humanitarian crisis, reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in equal rights of men and women and in nations large and small." Rwanda was in a time of humanitarian crisis, yet the UN did nothing. Thousands of helpless women and girls were systematically raped till the point of death; their human rights were not being upheld, yet the UN did nothing. Thousands of child soldiers were forced at gunpoint to slaughter their families and friends; their human rights were not being upheld, yet the UN did nothing.

Over 800,000 people died in Rwanda in 100 days; that's nearly 15% of the country's population, gone. The world did nothing. In doing nothing, the world failed the people of Rwanda.

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Hilary Bird
Grade 11
Lakefield College School

The Reality of the US/Mexican Border Situation

by Peter Stewart

On April 1st in the appropriately named town of Tombstone, Arizona, roughly five hundred volunteers began pouring into local campgrounds, motels, ranches, and guesthouses. They are the Minuteman Project. This vigilante group is patrolling the Arizona/Sonora border for at least one full month in an attempt to fill the gaps where they feel the official border patrol has severely fallen short. To date, over 820 volunteers have taken part in the Minuteman Project. They are of all ages and various ethnicities.

With a constitutional right to "observe and report" illegal passage into their homeland and a valid crisis at hand, there seems little wrong with the Minuteman Project's active citizenship. In Arizona alone, 580,000 migrants were caught by the border patrol during 2004, but this is only an estimated one-third of the total migrant flow across the state's border. That would bring the total flow of undocumented people entering Arizona to above one million in just a single year. On top of this mass migration, there is the constant flow of illegal drugs through many of the same desert areas that the migrants use to cross over. This, coupled with the threat that terrorists could infiltrate the United States via a five-day trek through the desert, would suggest that further border patrolling and vigilante observation are more than understandable; they are completely necessary.

However, local vigilantes can be directly linked to vandalism and an abuse of the human rights of many migrants. A campaign that began a little more than a year ago called "Agua Para la Vida," which aimed to provide migrants crossing the desert with drinking water, was sabotaged by local vigilantes (several of whom are leading the Minuteman Project). There have been incidents in Arizona and California of vigilantes abusing captured migrants by pistol-whipping and unlawfully detaining them. Local human rights groups such as Derechos Humanos and Border Action Network have expressed their grave concern about the human rights of migrants in the regions patrolled by the Minuteman Project. On top of this, UCLA has sent observers to monitor the behaviour of the vigilante volunteers.

On a volunteer trip to the border region of Agua Prieta, Sonora, and Douglas, Arizona, I had the opportunity to see the reality of this issue. At a Mexican YMCA, I met with young people who had been deported after being intercepted by border patrol while crossing the desert. A 16-year-old girl told me the story of her friend, who was humiliated by border patrol; she had heard no word of his location since her deportation. In Nogales, Sonora, I met two men at a drug rehabilitation centre, who told me they had both crossed the border illegally many times and had lived as undocumented people in the United States. One had gone to high school in Tucson, while the other had worked in construction there.

In 2004, roughly 500 illegal migrants died while crossing the border. Most migrants take only a couple of litres of water with them on the five-day trek. The daily recommendation while in the desert is six litres. Sadly, the number of deaths reaches a record high every year. While in Douglas, I took part in a vigil performed weekly by the local grassroots organization, Frontera de Cristo. We walked towards the border crossing, laying small white wooden crosses at the side of the road, one by one, in the shadows cast by the spring sun setting behind the brown rusting wall that lines the border. Each cross had written on it the name, along with the date of birth and date of death, of a person who had died crossing the border.

While in a secluded region of the desert, standing on the Mexican side of the border, I spoke with an American border patrol officer several feet away from me on American soil. Between us

was a simple barbed-wire fence that was flattened to the ground in the dried-out riverbed where I stood. Scattered all around were belongings discarded by migrants as they crossed the border. This is done in an attempt to look less conspicuous once they reach inhabited areas. There's a telephone, a backpack, a sweatshirt, an old frayed hat half buried in the sand. On a hillside several kilometres away, I could see the sun reflecting off a parked border patrol vehicle; someone was watching my interaction with a colleague. I asked the border patrol officer what she thinks of the vigilantes. She said she sees vigilantes on a regular basis and is upset that a group of hundreds of volunteers from all over the United States would be flocking to her county in several days to take on the job they are alleging her agency is unequipped to do.

The same day I met with the border patrol officer, I came across a group of twelve migrants hiding beneath a railroad bridge. They were all young men, each dressed in black with several layers of clothing and a heavy overcoat. They brought little with them. Several of the men had small packs, but otherwise they travelled empty-handed. I sat with them, gave them some food packages and water, and spoke about the journey they were to commence come nightfall. I quickly figured out that they were being led by a Coyote, a professional paid to guide them across the desert, and that they had no doubts that they would make it into the United States. I asked the simple question, "Why are you doing this?" A short man who was from the south of Mexico spoke up. His short and seemingly simple answer actually encompassed the profound and far-reaching reality that has created this border crisis. He said, "For a better life." It struck me at that moment that I was no different from these young men. Why would these people risk their lives to get across the border? There are obvious reasons, such as the exploitation of their farming markets by NAFTA, but really it can be simplified to the innate desire to better one's life.

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Peter Stewart
Grade 12
Lakefield College School

Divinity

by Mishal Verjee

It is easy to observe the divinity behind a burka-clad woman kneeling in prayer towards the Al-Aqsa Mosque. The words of the Koran engulf her like waves of an ocean as she submits to the will of Allah. She is certain that the benefits of establishing her devout existence compensate for the century-long holy wars that have tainted her country with the putrid odour of bloodshed.

Despite my Islamic heritage, it is not easy to see the divinity in me.

I am a walking contradiction. I am a Muslim woman whose most cherished childhood memories pertain to Easter morning egg hunts, whose favourite topping on her pizza is bacon, and whose fingers can count the number of times she has been to a mosque. One may consider that my actions display incongruity, but on the contrary, I believe religion to be casual.

Just as a storm spins off whirlwinds, this statement generates its own tumultuous set of responses. Some tackle the topic with a more doctrinaire approach: God has handed us His lore, and it is our obligation to practise what it edifies. In my opinion, delineating religion is like attempting to define love. Invite advocators of any faith to share the most significant thing that fuels their devotion, and they will inform you that it is nothing but a feeling – a sense that there is a higher power outside of our own scope of knowledge. For this reason, I do not designate certain times or routines to elevate my belief to a state of faith; I just have faith.

The contentious issue of religion is particularly pertinent in today's society; therefore, I strive to increase my level of religious comprehension in many facets of my life. I have been fortunate enough to travel the world extensively and have thus encountered an array of exceedingly diverse religions. After exploring the profusion of sixteenth-century churches along the cobblestone streets of Quito or simply hearing the intricate bell chimes from a dilapidated Slavic church in Dubrovnik, I always take a moment to ponder the gamut of my spiritual experiences. The self-discovery that accompanies a silent reflection is inevitable.

I believe that the world we live in today has digressed from the fundamental principles that hold humanity together; compassion, unity, and benevolence are muffled melodies in a world of cacophony. In a world plagued by self-interest, it is ever comforting to have God in close proximity, eager to demolish our worst impulses and augment our best. When I lay my head down at night to contemplate my meaning on this earth, it helps to know that there is someone out there in the cosmic universe that knows the answer.

Although it may not be blatantly evident, there certainly is divinity in me.

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Mishal Verjee
Grade 12
Lakefield College School

I, River Nymph

by Ally Dunbar

Every day in the summer, I head to the same place around the same time. I cannot explain why I do so. I am compelled, required, drawn to the river at the end of my dusty road. Sparkling, soft, deep, dark, cool… it calls to me.

The swiftly rushing river is more than an escape from the shimmering heat. It is an escape from life and all that defines it: minor teenage issues and angst, family and friends. I swim to escape boys, work, school, duties, and priorities…my future. Swimming is an anaesthetic.

The plunge is a cooling shock followed by a watery kiss, a liquid embrace. When I am completely submerged and deaf, there is no way of knowing what is going on elsewhere; it is only that moment, breath held, eyes open but blind, those precious few seconds that matter. I can see myself: pale skin gleaming against the water's darkness, hair streaming wildly, dark eyes flashing in the depths.

I swim alone and am frequently told to stay away from the river. I am asked to seek the security of a falsely blue chlorinated pool…avoid bacteria, undertows, rusty nails, creatures that bite and sting, sharp rocks that welcome smooth flesh. My boyfriend teasingly tells me horror stories of muskies that bite swimmers in rivers. He isn't aware that this terrifies me. Yet still I swim there. My mother scolds, tells me to "be careful, look in the paper, another poor child drowned in a ditch…be careful, Ally…be safe. Don't swim across the river, you're not strong enough; the current will sweep you away…"

I know the dangers of the currents; I know they can kill. One day, while sitting on the riverbank, I saw a donkey, bloated and shaggy, drift along in the current, being borne downstream. Its lips grinned at me, exposing stained teeth forever barred in a horrific, clenched grimace of death. Its white-rimmed shining eye gleamed, regarding me before it was swept past. I knew the donkey; it belonged to one of my neighbours. It was old and weary, carrying burdens all its long life, only to rot in the river. Did it slip and fall, or did the bawling cows crowd it and push it out of the way to fill their greedy mouths with water? I suppose that in the end it didn't matter; nothing really did. I went home, considering the river's graphic warning.

I remember many days by the riverside, sitting and watching minnows flicking around my legs and toes, the bolder ones placing butterfly-light kisses on my skin. Tiny flashes of silver are replaced by a larger, duller rusty silver, marred by black letters, scarred by the mark of evolution and civilization. This silver water-born object, so unlike the perfectly linked scales and grace of the minnows cutting through the water, strikes me as an attempt by the human race to imitate the fish and claim the river as its own. The conservation authority's motorboat roars rudely and shrilly as it skims back and forth along the opposite shoreline. I eye the men on board; they strike me as predators. My instinct is to slip into the water, glide over to the boat, rise from the depths, and scream at the men. An animal scream, long, low, and full of threat. A scream to summon the river nymphs to support my cause. A scream to make them retreat. Scream.

This is not the first time the river has been sullied. Many boats cruise through, some large and smelling of barbecues, with fat men and women clinking drinks and waving drunkenly to me, squealing with laughter as they toss a dog off the boat and watch it paddle frantically back. Other boats are smaller speedboats that leave the river in chaos, oil glinting on the surface and spreading with the purposeful intent of a disease, a tumour…waves crashing violently against the shore's rocks.

The people, oblivious, smile and wave, shout their greetings at me, the lone girl on the shore. They don't notice as I slip into the water and sink from prying eyes. Without giving a response, I swim to the middle of the river and dive down. Legs kicking and arms stretched in front of me, lungs closing, mind screaming for oxygen, something deep within me reaching out, but my body holding back, turning back…giving into the needs of the human shell I am limited to and confined in. My eyes watching as the rippling, liquid sunshine surface approaches faster and faster. Head breaking the water's surface in a stream of water droplets and ripples. The air sucked into starving lungs that burn and ache with need.

I wonder if the nymphs beneath me laugh at my disadvantage. Do they contort their faces into hateful smirks? I long to join them in their hidden underwater caves, to morph into their beauty and ability. I long to lure the voyeurs to the water's edge to enact my revenge. I want to dive down deeper than imaginable, through and past the mist-like darkness to the other side. I dive down deep and dream.

Sometimes after it has rained, when the river is swollen pregnantly and rushes by me (where is it going so quickly?), I wonder if I will die swimming. Will it be a frantic struggle laced with pain and fear? Will I fight the current only to be submerged and allowed a breath at its mercy? Will I cry tears, adding to my watery hell? Will I lose my mind and adorn myself with great wreaths of flowers, sink willingly into the depths while chanting nonsense sea shanties like the beautiful, doomed Ophelia? Will the nymphs take my hand and guide me to the depths to join them at last?

Will I go as the donkey? Carried along to be lodged in the dam, legs twisted at odd angles, half submerged, and visible amid the foul foam? Or will I be anchored in by the reeds, lain in shallow, murky waters to be feasted upon by my friends the silver minnows?

For now, though, I am just a dark-eyed girl lying in my bed, feeling the waves lap at the blankets and my body, sensing the gentle waves rolling over my old quilt and rocking my pillow soothingly. I smile, close my eyes and slip into the realm of nymphs and fish, escape my mortal restrictions as I sink into the waters once more.

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Ally Dunbar
Grade 12
Lakefield District Secondary School

Strokes of a Paddle into the Sunset

by Stacy Knox

As I placed my paddle into the water and made the initial stroke, my mind became tranquil. With every subsequent pull of the paddle over the calm lake, I was one stroke closer to the setting sun, one stroke closer to our next campsite, but mainly, one stroke closer to my final destination. Home.

That initial stroke, I thought at the time, was going to be the hardest one of my ten days on Lake Temagami – not hard physically, but mentally. I was scared of what was next, always pondering what the next stroke would bring: the knowledge that, together, all the individual strokes, no matter the length or force, would bring me to the next moment, the next hour, the next day. But the thrill of finally being on the extraordinary lake kept me from doubting my capabilities. "I can do this" was the motivation always in the back of my mind.

Being with the same nine people every day, watching them stroke their paddles in identical movement could drive some people crazy from the sheer repetition. However, being out in the scenic purity of the lake, watching the shorelines pass by, no one could give in to their frustrations; the constant blanket of peace around us was too inspiring.

The strokes of my paddle brought many things to my mind each day. The sound of rippling water moving from the paddle to the side of the canoe and the wind whistling past by my face began to overpower the memories of the city noises I had left behind.

When I would lean my paddle to rest at night on whatever tree looked suitable for my small companion, I would feel as if I was neglecting a small part of myself. This was the time when I could reflect on my day, find that perfect spot on some remote island to rekindle my thoughts. West-facing rocks overlooking the water were like a magnet to me. I found myself always seeking such a place to be alone with my thoughts; it felt as though I had not done this for years. This was when I also realized that my persistent adolescent worries about guys, looking a certain way, and peer pressure would set with the sun. My thoughts became deeper. I was questioning my life for the first time – not questioning the presence of it, but the reasoning. Why was I here? What was my purpose? Would I ever see this postcard image again? These thoughts flooded my head night after night. The next morning, I would wake up and go back to where I had left my paddle the night before. I would pick it up, brush it off, and, for some unknown reason, grip it and take a stroke in the air. Not to make sure that I still knew how to do it, but to make sure that it was my paddle, that, even though my thoughts had changed, physically I had not changed, and that my grip on my paddle was the same.

The last few strokes of the ten days brought me to realize that I had grown up and matured, but my paddle had stayed the same. It was always just an object, one that I had relied on to bring me out of that surreal utopian world. It was inanimate, not alive. But it had rejuvenated me; I had completed something I had set out to do. It had paddled me over the water, through the lakes, ponds, and streams; it had accompanied me up mountains and back. Not once had I questioned its reliability. Every stoke it made brought me closer to myself.

Paddling back to civilization and pulling up to the docks with the sun at my back completed my journey. Physically, the path we had taken was a full circle; mentally, it was parallel to what I was feeling. I had started out worried about what was going to happen. I returned knowing so much more about myself and what I could do if I set my mind to it.

Laying my paddle down for the final time, I once again had the feeling of neglect that I had felt many times previously while laying it down at night. However, this time was different: I wouldn't be picking it up the next morning to venture forth again. I would not have to worry about what was coming around the next bend or over the next rapid. I wouldn't have to be concerned about what the next stroke would bring. I had always taken that carved piece of wood for granted, but now I cradled it as the horizon cradles the sun.

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Stacy Knox
Grade 12
Lakefield District Secondary School

Music: Universal

by Nick Pullen

Millions of years ago, someone, somewhere in a cave, banged some sticks together and discovered rhythm. For some arcane reason, the sound pleased him, and he showed it to his friends, who also enjoyed it, and music was born. Perhaps the steady rhythm reminded them of the human heartbeat or perhaps they needed something to pass the long hours around the campfire. It is probably best not to delve into the specifics of it, but the fact is that it happened, and humans gave birth to the most accessible of all the art forms they have devised. It takes no formal training, natural talent, or even any intelligence to respond to music in any of its forms – only a pair of working ears. Indeed, I can safely say that there is no person on Earth who is not capable of being moved by some type of musical experience. It brings people together with no strings attached, no conditions, and no other common link. People who have never met can go to a concert and bond without asking questions, because they are equally enjoying what is happening on stage. Yet, it is a strange element of modern life that such a powerful unifying force has become such a bitter bone of contention between people. Music has always had the power to divide as well as unite, whether it is by race, by generation, or by intellectual conceit, but never have the various genres available been so blatantly balkanized. Picture a glass window that has begun to crack and split over time. When there are just a few cracks in the glass, that is manageable, but when the glass is so filled with hairline fractures and spidery, searching splinters that the edifice threatens to break altogether, perhaps it is time to consider a new window. While not going so far as to say that music is dying, I would like to propose that perhaps the power to inspire, to motivate, is leaving popular music, and something drastic needs to be done to bring it back together.

Centuries were spent developing musical traditions across the globe, with various intricate and unique styles evolving around the globe. Europe, China, and India in particular developed advanced musical traditions, with systems of notation, detailed and beautiful instruments, and even whole classes devoted solely to creating music. We have spent eons learning to make noise from blowing into holes, beating various drums, and plunking or scraping various strings, and we have developed an immense classical structure to support more innovation in this field. At the same time, the less fortunate, who could not afford such artsy pastimes, were hammering out their own cruder, but no less meaningful rhythms on a slightly more limited, but no less useful, range of instruments. This became folk music, which exists in some form in every culture, from Irish reels to Native chants to American Country music. This was the first split in the window, between the music of the rich and that of the poor.

The twentieth century has seen the process of discovering that we could make all of the sounds we'd developed and more, with just some guitars and a drum kit. The evolution of rock and roll took music in a direction that was at once more democratic, as any kid could plug in a fifty-dollar guitar and have dreams of stardom; at the same time, it became more elitist, as age became a crucial dividing factor in what was good or bad music. Now there were three sections to the window: one for the kids, one for their parents, and one ever smaller space for those dedicated to the cult of technique and skill that classical music was fast becoming.

Rock and roll has since proven itself to be able to play host to an even greater number of styles: Rockabilly, Blues, R & B, Motown, Soul, Swing, Calypso, Heavy Metal, Hard Rock, Punk, Emo, Disco, Alternative, Dance, Salsa, Psychedelia, Folk- Rock, Country-Rock, Speed Metal, Hair Metal, New Wave, Grunge, Rap, Hip-Hop, Art Rock, Progressive Rock, Death Metal, and countless others, all now fall under the banner of Rock, and most of those are completely and utterly opposed. So much so, in fact, that when one considers that if you trace

back the roots of Rap, today's dominant black music genre, you will find it shares an ancestor with Death Metal. Both of these genres can eventually be traced back to the Blues, and yet to compare them seems ludicrous, to say the least. Indeed, not only do all of these different camps exist in today's youth music, but there is also a significant group of young people who look for musical inspiration in the music of a previous generation. I fall into this category of people so cowardly, so uninspired, so lacking in originality that they need to be told that their music is "classic" before they can enjoy it. Play us something new, and we will judge it before we have heard even a note of it and convince ourselves that we hate it. This is something new. Never before has a generation ever looked backwards for their musical inspiration. Now the window is hardly even a whole structure anymore, and you would be hard-pressed to find a piece of it that has retained enough integrity that you can look through it to see… what? Is it God we're looking for, some sort of meaning for our lives?

No, perhaps not, but the fact remains that music gives humanity something transcendent that we can all hold on to in our lives. Truly great music will always have the power to send shivers up our spine, but we can't be sure today whether we listen to that music because we truly love it, or because we dislike some other type of music and are trying to find a counterpoint for it. The dividing aspects of music now outweigh those aspects that bring us together, and sooner or later, someone will have to come and tidy up the loose ends and bring us back together again, like Elvis or the Beatles once did. I just hope whoever it is shows up soon.

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Nick Pullen
Grade 11
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Where My Spirit Rests

by Kira Westby

"It is important to encounter and acknowledge the life of the land. To know it is to be young and ancient all at once."(O.R. Melling)

I stand on the shore of the rocky point, staring out at the lake. It is the end of a narrow channel, and before me the lake broadens, stretching as far and wide as my eyes can see. Over the years, I have stood here too many times to count, caught up in the beauty of the world around me. Sometimes, it was in the falling darkness of a cold, windy evening catching a glimpse of the most radiant sunset – the distant shore black against the sky's brilliant shades of red and orange that faded into inky blackness, etched with wisps of cloud. At other times, it was during the lazy days of summer when I was sitting on a nearby fallen tree, dressed only in a bathing suit and shorts, feeling the roughness of the bark under my bare feet and the hot summer's sun on my shoulders, while lazily waving at boaters as they pass by. But the summer seems an age ago now. The seasons turn again, and I am bundled up against the cold, westerly wind that blows the water in steady lapping waves against the shore.

The waters of Chandos are deep and wide, and made of many bays. The shore is dotted with cottages – the huge modern summerhouses, and the smaller wooden clapboards that remember another age. But now, in early November, most docks are pulled out of the water in anticipation of the deep freeze of another long winter. The landscape resembles a Group of Seven painting, aflame in the bright colours of the fall foliage – reds, yellows, oranges all mingling together, interspersed by the dark of the evergreens. Fallen leaves fly all about me in the wind, drifting to their final resting places, some floating away on the surface of the water. The fragrant scent of burning wood from our chimney drifts to where I stand, my nostrils flared to capture this scent that is tied to many childhood memories. I remember running around the yard beside the cottage, the cold air burning my lungs as I jump and roll in the huge pile of leaves carefully raked up by my determined younger self, cheeks red from the cold. I can hear the laughter of my grandmother, and for a moment, I am convinced that if I turn around, I will see her again, walking down the hill to me in her jeans and plaid thermal jacket.

The cottage on Chandos is where I have spent nearly every weekend from May until late November for fifteen years of my life. This is the place where my spirit will always rest. Uncountable memories of this place linger deep in my mind: memories of days spent wandering in the surrounding woods; hours spent sitting on the wooden dock, smiling and laughing in the warm sunshine; mornings, watching the mists drift across the smooth flat surface of the water as the sun rises higher; sitting on the dock as the air grows warmer, my feet dangling in the water, my coffee mug in hand, with the contented thought that the day ahead is mine, with no schedule, no plans, just the spontaneity of another summer's day.

Night opens another world; the shadows grow longer until the familiar is lost to the utter blackness that is unbroken by street lamps. I remember so many nights: nights of campfires, of watching the dancing flames that pop and crackle as the sparks fly upward to the multitude of brilliant stars above; nights of after-dinner porch reveries that seem to last for hours, sitting by the light of the citronella candles, listening to the music of the 1950s and the rising and falling voices of my family that drift through the open windows and screen door; nights spent lying on the dock, gazing up at the heavens. The darkness swallows what my day-eyes know, and it is another world entirely as I look around me. The distant sounds of music from another cottage drifts up the lake, and I hum along as I lie there, all knowledge of light years and gaseous suns

fading from my mind until I am lost in the primal wonder of imagining what lies beyond what we know here.

But now the time has come to close the cottage again for the long, dark winter ahead, when the deep freeze locks the lake and the deep snow silences the woods in a quiet thoughtfulness. I stand on this shore and try to absorb every detail of the scene before me into memory. I bend down and trail my fingers through the icy cold water one last time. The wind seems to die for a moment. Suddenly, I feel as if I am alone on the lake, the only human being for miles. The haunting cry of a loon rings out, echoing across the lake, resonating through my body. It is a cry that speaks of loneliness, of solitude – a cry of the north. It reminds me that even as I say goodbye, there is another opening weekend to come, another summer to look forward to. I tuck my hands in my pockets and smile as I turn away from the lake and walk through the tall grass towards the tree-covered hill that climbs up to the cottage, my whispered words of farewell caught up and lost in the wind of the Canadian north.

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Kira Westby
Grade 12
Holy Cross Secondary School

The New Fixation

by Caylea Foster

I have come to accept my current state of "singlehood," the life of a lonely wanderer. In fact, I embrace the solitude with open and welcoming arms. However, this does not seem to be the case with most of the young women my age. As with most teens during their high school career, the wondrous prospect of a significant other is almost too much to bear. It is in this insatiable need to be accepted by the opposite sex that many people lose focus and become encased in a world of lies. A young woman caught up in trying to find a boyfriend loses sight of the purpose of her being. Unfortunately, this blinding sensation extends to the educational aspect of a teen's world as well. It deeply saddens me that my fellow classmates have sacrificed their intelligence for a life of dominated servitude to those who claim to be our equals. I would have thought that our society had developed beyond "dumbing" ourselves down to feel that we are wanted.

The immediate cause of this intellectual black hole is rooted within the girls themselves. The high-school years breed a whole new kind of female, a hybrid, if you will. This male-manipulated monster does not understand the meaning of homework or exams. It does not know what a test is or how to spell the word *hypothesis*. This thing does not realize the ramifications of global warming or what CNN stands for. Instead, this creature prioritizes popularity and acceptance above all else. The desperate need to feel wanted and attractive is what drives it to excel. And in our society, what do we all need to be accepted? The obvious answer is a beautifully toned physique, but the underlying message that is sent to the youth of our nation is not so simple. If you have a man at your side, you are considered the entire package. Brains, beauty, and a boyfriend – isn't that right? Isn't that what *Cosmopolitan* magazine preaches every month: to acquire a love, both pure and innocent? Well, personally I have had it with stereotypes and ridiculous expectations. Not only is this packaged deal overrated, but it doesn't actually happen. In order to get that boyfriend, you have to sacrifice something. Since beauty is one characteristic that cannot be forfeited, why not yield the intellectual side of a woman? I mean who needs a girl who can say the alphabet when she looks good in a dress and kitten heels? And so begins the formation of a leviathan, an idiotic and intellectually stunted individual who has nothing better to do than search her horizons for someone only bound to destroy her.

Men, however, cannot be discounted from this phenomenon. They cannot be exempt from blame when the male faction of our society actually supports it. I realize that not every guy in high school wants that bimbo-blonde-Barbie who can't tie her own shoelaces, but subconsciously every man wants to be superior. They have grown up with the knowledge that men have dominated every facet of life since the creation of Earth. They are the principals of the high schools and the leaders of war-torn countries, the creators of fire and the primary agents of change in our society. To be intimidated by a supposedly weaker sex is not only devastating but also damaging to their precious sleeper hold on western culture. So the male teenagers of my generation (and others before it) have used their combined diminutive intelligence to devise a standard against which every woman will be measured. Women must not only be physically perfect, but also intellectually inferior in order for them to be considered remotely attractive. Look out girls! Not only do you have to wear makeup, but now you have to have an IQ of 50!

To give up what sets us apart from the other animals on this planet is demoralizing and criminal. We should not have to apologize for having the aptitude to finish a sentence or do spectacularly on a test. We definitely should not have to dumb ourselves down just to be able to be thought of as "girlfriend material" by the very people who oppress and belittle us. This trend has only caused the feminist movement to backtrack, taking us back to the days of frilly white aprons and tweed skirts. Back to when women were only good for cooking pot roast and looking

pretty. What are we doing in school, if not to learn and gain knowledge? We sit in class every day listening to a teacher preach about the importance of tone and diction, only to throw it away like last year's patent leather pumps once a pretty blond boy sends a smile our way. I don't know about you, but I refuse to live a life of slavery. I refuse to lower my standards just so that my unappreciative boyfriend can drool over my best friend and act like a complete dim-wit in public. Is this the life we have chosen for ourselves? For our daughters? One can only hope that the few girls remaining in my generation will be smart enough to realize that this atrocity can no longer proceed, that our passion and zeal is too priceless a commodity to give up to our unworthy counterparts. Man may have created fire, but women know how to use it.

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Caylea Foster
Grade 11
Lakefield College School

Harry Potter as Means of Crushing a Naïve Youth

by Morgan Preston

Over the course of one's life, one enters into relationships that change one's life. Such relationships can be deeply moving or overwhelmingly hurtful. They strike us deep in the soul, and the world is never quite the same again. There's just something about that person or thing that touches us and allows us to identify with it. I had such a relationship once, an intense, rocky relationship that left me cynical and jaded, but wiser in the ways of the world.

My tempestuous relationship with the *Harry Potter* series began when I was in grade three. I was eight years old and very impressionable when Mrs. Morrison started reading the first book in the series to the class. I just *had* to have every single one that followed, as did the rest of my class, but that was hardly uncommon at the time. The next few years of my life were heavily influenced by the boy wizard and his spells. I suffered the first great disappointment of my life because of it (having left my bedroom window open on my eleventh birthday and receiving no owl informing me that I was a witch). To make matters worse, my Nannie was discussing with my mother an article she'd seen in the paper about a woman who was trying to have the books banned from schools. "That's ridiculous!" she said, puffing on yet another cigarette. "Kids aren't stupid; they know it isn't real. You do, don't you, Morgan?"

Also, the first crush I ever had began because of Harry Potter. A boy at my bus stop had taken my copy of *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* and held it above my head. Being unable to reach it, I was worried that he would drop it in a puddle and ruin my book. That was when, seeing my distress, another boy from my class stepped in as a mediator. "Give her back her book," he said. "They're expensive." Oh, the chivalry! I was smitten! Most of the significant events in my childhood seem somehow connected to the series. And, as Harry and I were roughly the same age each time a new book was published, it was almost as if we were growing up together.

My life was rather mundane, completely unremarkable for quite a few of the years after I was introduced to the series. I reread the books, rewatched the movies, bonded with certain characters (a particular werewolf teacher to be precise), and developed theories as to how I thought the series would end. I was just like any other fan.

But then, in late 2006, I was making the usual rounds on the internet when I saw it: Book Seven had a title! A few months later, there was a release date: July 21st, 2007. Now, there were theories that they might have picked a date significant to the series to release the final book: July 7th (or 07.07.07), July 31st (Harry's birthday), or October 31st (the anniversary of Harry's parents' death). But by some twist or blessing of fate, they picked July 21st, my seventeenth birthday!

Surely this was a sign. How could such a coincidence end in disaster? All my theories would prove true, and all the characters I cared about would be spared from the alleged "bloodbath" that Book Seven was supposed to be. I was one of the few, special, anointed fans. It was all ending on my birthday.

I felt so special that I wasn't even worried when I read reports of leaked copies of the book, whose plot differed from the one I had planned in my head. I saw a version of this leaked book, pictures of every individual page someone had taken. I laughed it off! This couldn't be the work of J.K. Rowling; everything in it seemed contrived, cheesy, and rushed. Therefore, I reached a conclusion: it was all an elaborate hoax put on by some fans with too much time on their hands.

And what a joke! I loved the idea that it was a fake because it meant that I could still be right, but have the fun of being worried before getting the book.

My birthday rolled around eventually, after an agonizingly long wait. I was seventeen and had the copy of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* in my hands. My heart was racing, wondering if what I had read on the internet was true (Surely it couldn't be? With the characters that had been killed in *that* version? Impossible!). With a trembling hand, I turned to the back of the book to read the last few pages (a bad habit I admit I have).

And to my horror, what did I see? That godawful epilogue that everyone had laughed at on the internet! How could such a cheesy thing be at the end of something that had been a huge part of my childhood??? I was dumbstruck, horrified, appalled. "Don't panic yet," I told myself. "Maybe they just got ahold of the crappy epilogue." But, as I flipped through the book, everything was there as it had been on the computer. My theories and hopes were being shot to oblivion. How could it end like this? How could the author have done such a thing to the *one* character I wanted to get out of the series unharmed? I was angered and refused to touch the book for weeks. To this day, I have never finished the tangible version of the book. It sits on my bookshelf, collecting dust.

That's two birthdays you've ruined, J.K. Rowling. I'd better be getting something *really* nice for my eighteenth.

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Morgan Preston
Grade 12
Holy Cross Secondary School

What Romeo Knows

by J. J. Maxwell

I've been playing competitive sports ever since I can remember. Depending on the season, I can usually be found on the rink, pitch or field. Last year I would never have thought I would turn down a season of rugby, and least of all for something I'd never done before. I've learned that I can surprise myself.

The opportunity came from my English teacher. I was thinking about it as I walked my three-year old sister to the playground during March break; I remember a warm breeze kept blowing her hair into her eyes. I was confused in much the same way.

My teacher, Ms. McElwain, was directing our school's production of *Romeo and Juliet* and had offered me the role of Romeo. I was a bit taken aback at first. Acting had never appealed to me, and although I had always enjoyed public speaking, acting seemed too "artsy" for me. I was the "conservative athlete from out west (Calgary)," and acting didn't fit that role. The idea scared me because it was so different from anything I had ever done. I didn't want to miss a season of rugby. I didn't want to let my coach or teammates down. I didn't want such a big change in my life.

I decided not to take the acting role. I was going to stick with what I knew. I decided this the day before I got onto the plane to come back to school.

Ms. McElwain had obviously been thinking about me prior to my first English class. She started talking about the benefits of trying new things as I read what was written on the whiteboard.

Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things that you didn't do than by the ones you did do. So throw off the bowlines. Sail away from the safe harbor. Catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover. – Mark Twain

It got to me. I always told myself that change was good, but now that it was staring me in the face, I was backing down. I realised that it was my fears that were holding me back.

I changed my mind two minutes before the first rugby practice. I felt sick as I watched the rugby team run around that first day, but I had made my decision. Rugby would have to wait till next year.

The weeks went rolling by, and I was put outside my comfort zone almost every day. I had to learn hundreds of Shakespearian lines, make a new group of friends, sing a solo, and figure out how to act in less than a month. I had to kiss a girl whom I had never met, who was two years younger than me, and whose mother was battling cancer. Emotions were high, time was tight, and the pressure was on.

I'm not sure I will ever fully comprehend how much the character of Romeo changed me. Shakespeare allowed me the opportunity to try on someone else's shoes, which provided insight into my life. Romeo's speech taught me authenticity and passion. Authenticity seems to be an innate quality, and it was easy to learn how to be true to myself when I became an authentic person for a few hours every day.

Over the course of the play, Romeo finds the courage to carry out difficult actions and proves to be true to his commitments. Romeo goes through a lifetime of emotions in a few short

days – and he took me with him. For those five days in May, my life, much like Romeo's, was turned upside down, resulting in fears and inhibitions being left behind. Far from being "Fortune's fool," I came out of my acting experience with a respect for the unexpected moments that life throws our way; being caught off guard keeps things interesting.

Playing Romeo left me much more composed than I had been only two months earlier. I know that whatever lies around the next corner is anything but "dull earth."

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J. J. Maxwell
Grade 12
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Dead Simple

by Beatrice Chan

"I've seen people get their hands cut off, a 10-year old girl raped and then die, and so many men and women burned alive… So many times I just cried inside my heart because I didn't dare cry out loud."[3] These are the words of a soldier – a 14-year-old girl from Sierra Leone – a child soldier.

According to the 1989 *Convention on the Rights of the Child,* children have "the right to protection against exploitation and violence; protection against torture, or any other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment both in times of armed conflict and in peace." The *Convention* categorically prohibits armed groups from recruiting anyone under 18 years old.[4]

Despite this, in over 50 countries, the number of children under the age of 18 who are soldiers is about 300,000, one-third of which are girls.[5] In conflicts, many non-governmental military organizations fill out their ranks with children under 15, some as young as 7 years old. Even governmental armed forces may recruit children under 18. Although the use of child soldiers is blatant in Africa, the tendency to militarize children is more widespread. For example, in the United States, the government has programs for approximately 400,000 high-school children that teach them how to think and act like soldiers. More than half of all European states accept under-18-year-olds into their armed forces, and the United Kingdom routinely sends 17-year-olds into combat. In Latin America, Asia, and Africa, military high schools are common.[6]

The effect of the use of children as soldiers is appalling. Graça Machal, the Former UN Secretary-General's Expert on the Impact of Armed Conflict on Children, provides a horrifying description of the effects of war on children: "Youth are killed, tortured, raped, and forced to participate in unimaginable acts of violence against other human beings, and many times against their own families. The bankruptcy of human and moral values evident in this situation needs no further explanation."[7] In the name of humanity, the use of child soldiers must stop.

Why must it stop? That is dead simple – fighting a war is dangerous. According to UN statistics, 2 million children were killed, and 4.5 million were disabled in action in wars around the world in the 1990s.[8] Military life affects children disproportionately harshly: They suffer higher casualties, are injured more often, and have more health problems than adult soldiers because they are less able to take care of themselves.[9] HIV is especially prevalent among child soldiers.[10] Child soldiers are deeply affected individually, and, by extension, their societies suffer. In the next generation, this toll taken on children will result in a reduced population, in which more individuals will need health care, and fewer people will be able to work and fuel an economy recovering from war.

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[3] http://www.un.org/cyberschoolbus/briefing/soldiers/soldiers.pdf
[4] http://www.un.org/cyberschoolbus/briefing/soldiers/soldiers.pdf
[5] http://www.un.org/cyberschoolbus/briefing/soldiers/soldiers.pdf
[6] http://www.un.org/cyberschoolbus/briefing/soldiers/soldiers.pdf
[7] Graça Machel, *The Impact of Armed Conflict on Children*, (UNICEF: September 2000), p. 4
[8] http://www.un.org/cyberschoolbus/briefing/soldiers/soldiers.pdf
[9] See UNESCO's *Report on the Project in Sierra Leone* and UNCHR's "Critical Issues: Child Soldiers" in *Action for the Rights of Children*, September 2002, p. 37.
[10] http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PNADI662.pdf

Those children who escape death and serious injury often suffer in other ways. Child soldiers are often drugged with a plethora of narcotics, including marijuana, cocaine, and alcohol in order to induce them to commit violent and unthinkable acts, which they would not do under normal conditions. Ishmael Beah, in his book *Long Time Gone*, tells of his experience as a child soldier: "First, you know, you get your own weapon and everything and the magazines and the bullets, and then they give you drugs. They would take cocaine, marijuana, and sometimes cocaine mixed with gun powder, known as brown-brown. The kids would watch *Rambo*, then head to the killing fields." When child soldiers are rehabilitated, the first step taken is to detoxify them from all the drugs they have been using; however, this is not always successful.

Child soldiers who are girls are more likely to experience another level of horror. They are routinely subjected to sexual abuse with no recourse, often over a prolonged period of time.[11] A 19-year-old girl, describing her experience in the National Youth Service Training Program in Zimbabwe gave the following description: "There was no one in charge of the dormitories and on a nightly basis we were raped. The men and youths would come into our dormitory in the dark, and they would just rape us – you would just have a man on top of you, and you could not even see who it was. If we cried afterwards, we were beaten with hosepipes. We were so scared that we did not report the rapes. The youngest girl in our group was aged 11, and she was raped repeatedly in the base."[12] In these conditions, rape often results in HIV infection, physical injury, or pregnancy, and always results in emotional trauma, for which there is no healing salve.

Not just girls, but all child soldiers are in need of emotional healing: Over 10 million have been psychologically traumatized.[13] On a regular basis, they have witnessed killing, raping, and pillaging on a grand scale. Some have been forced to witness the killing of family members. A former child soldier from Uganda, aged 13, told this story: "Early on when my brothers and I were captured, the LRA [Lord's Resistance Army] explained to us that all five brothers couldn't serve in the LRA because we would not perform well. So they tied up my two younger brothers and invited us to watch. Then they beat them with sticks until they both died. We were told that it would give us strength to fight. My youngest brother was 9 years old."[14]

Worse still, many child soldiers, manipulated by adults, have participated in atrocities. To survive, they have been forced to kill their friends, often in cold blood. A 17-year-old street boy, who joined a paramilitary group in Colombia at age 7, testified, "They give you a gun and you have to kill the best friend you have. They do it to see if they can trust you. If you don't kill him, your friend will be ordered to kill you. I had to do it because otherwise I would have been killed."[15]

The memory of these acts haunts child soldiers, as Ishmael Beah points out: "Once the drugs wore out, then the memories started kicking in so quickly, you know, what you had been pressed to do was actually so bad, but now you had the consciousness to know that." Guilt trails child soldiers like a ball and chain: A 16-year-old girl after demobilization from an armed group recalls, "I feel so bad about the things that I did. It disturbs me so much that I inflicted death on other people…I still dream about the boy from my village that I killed. I see him in my dreams, and he is talking to me, saying I killed him for nothing, and I am crying."[16] On the other side of guilt, some child soldiers sadly lose all respect for everyone: "I can do anything to anyone, all the big, big people were scared of me; I was the commander in my village."[17]

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[11] UNCHR's "Critical Issues: Child Soldiers" in *Action for the Rights of Children*, September 2002, p.29.
[12] http://www.child-soldiers.org/childsoldiers/voices-of-young-soldiers
[13] http://www.un.org/cyberschoolbus/briefing/soldiers/soldiers.pdf
[14] http://www.child-soldiers.org/childsoldiers/voices-of-young-soldiers
[15] http://www.child-soldiers.org/childsoldiers/voices-of-young-soldiers
[16] U.S. State Dept. *TIP Report*, 2005.
[17] http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PNADI662.pdf

The militarization of children everywhere in the world must be stopped. To this end, the issue must be publicized and denounced. But more importantly, child soldiers themselves must be given an opportunity to reclaim their childhood, to re-establish their self esteem, and to re-enter the normal world where humans reach out to one another, not with an M-16, but with helping hands.

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Beatrice Chan
Grade 11
Lakefield College School

Ephemeral Ties

by Victoria Windrem

I am aware of a growing anxiety that is building within the confines of the car. It grows more pronounced as the trees become sharper and the rock more exposed. This trip feels like the last, although I tell myself it is not.

Every year, for my entire life, we have made this journey. "The long drive," my mother used to say. Each stop was familiar: breakfast in Gravenhurst, coffee in Parry Sound, ice cream at French River. If it wasn't too late, we had dinner in Sudbury at the ageless restaurant with the white house on the rock behind it, a house that appeared to balance on the face of a small cliff. The expedition into the big mining city would barely be accomplished before we backtracked to that long dirt road to our destination.

We only ever called it "camp." I can remember having to explain to my friends that this did not mean counsellors, swimming lessons, and hundreds of kids singing choruses of Kumbaya. It was where my great-grandparents and great uncles lived, an isolated piece of land in the bush on which they had built a house. It wasn't much, but my memories of the place all centre on the camphouse and the lake that lies on its shores. It is even more important to my mother, for she spent whole summers there as a child. The water was a playground, the land an anchor. For her, the North Country is like a distant homeland. It is so disconnected from her present, yet the foundations of her childhood will be forever rooted in that place. The camp.

In past years, I've watched my mother's anticipation build with every rest stop. She would take a breath of relief with the sight of Shield country and pine. As we turned onto the camp road, she became alert, taking in every familiar detail, her history playing out like a film framed by the car window, though dust and scratches on the glass contaminated the image.

I, too, would smile broadly at the sight of the tall pines standing in long, straight rows – the pine flats. I've been told that this place used to be a prisoner-of-war camp. I couldn't tell you which war, but the knowledge sent my well-used imagination spinning. Even now I picture long lines of men with foreign accents planting those trees. It was said that, although they were prisoners, the life and the work suited them better than the battlefields at their backs. As we would drive by, I could see them in my mind's eye as they marvelled at the remoteness of this place and the unlikely prospect of their returning home. The idea of a new life glittered in their eyes, despite the loss of what was once familiar.

So much is different now. The changes that one death seems to cause are almost incomprehensible.

Logically I know that the absence of one old man, "Poppy," as my mother innocently and affectionately dubbed him, did not bring about all the changes. Perhaps our grandfather's "going away" did create the gaping chasm that now separates our family, but it couldn't have caused the other shifts in my world.

Unfortunately logic has never been my master.

This trip seems not so much like a journey, but a goodbye. Many of the evergreens that make the northern soil foreign to the massive farms of the south are now a lifeless congregation of stumps. The mighty Shield, once constant and strong, has now, in places, been reduced to cold rubble for the passage of roads. The little house behind the restaurant is gone. Its exciting ambiguity is lost to dying memory.

My dear pine flats, which used to make my imagination burst at the seams, now look like a graveyard. They tell me their original destiny was to become clean, white paper. Perhaps it was never my right to think of them as my own. Nevertheless, I do, and their sudden absence feels like a great injustice.

Even the tired, old camphouse has mutated, the result of someone's half-baked attempt to imitate the outside world; the additions and partitions look unnatural. The shores of the lake have slowly receded. The water creeps further up the bank each year – some distant CEO's idea of preserving an industry in a faraway corner of the lake. The beach that both my mother and I (and even my grandmother) played on is all but gone. The lake, once clear and beautiful to me, is now ominous. Its former beauty is tainted by spectres of so-called progress.

Instead of excitement in my mother's eyes, there is tension. Her beloved homeland has changed, with only an evasive shadow left as evidence of its former beauty. Even though my memories of that place do not go back as far as hers, the sting is still sharp. I now feel alien and uncomfortable here. The people have changed with the landscape. It is a fracture I fear can never be repaired.

Even if this is not the last time we make this trip, I think this is the last time I will be able to catch a glimpse of the landscape's former magnificence. The changes began to creep up around us several years ago, but it is only now that we truly feel the loss. The goodbye that we came to make has been stolen. The past is already gone.

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Victoria Windrem
Grade 12
Kenner Collegiate Vocational Institute

The Colour Scarlet

by Rebekah Sibbald

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

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

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

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

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Rebekah Sibbald
Grade 12
Lakefield College School

Student Basic Law

by Molly Gaughan

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I shouldn't have worried. Everyone, from the teachers to the students, was excited to see me. They rarely have exchange students, so I was quite the novelty. They were all curious about

Canada. I answered as best I could, even when the girls pulled me aside and asked me, giggling, if I had a boyfriend and if I thought the boys in my class were cute! I chatted with kids sitting next to me, and then we went out to lunch at nearby fast food shops – local *dai pai dongs* alongside international burger chains. I also lined up for the daily morning assembly and had my temperature checked – apparently a relic of the SARS scare.

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

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

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

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Molly Gaughan
Grade 12
St. Peter's Secondary School

The Fear of Falling

by Shayla Larson

I was a precocious child. I was the baby racoon who strayed out onto the weakest branch, never considering I could fall. The confidence of innocence coloured my world, and I was fascinated, intrigued, and bubbling with optimism. My parents taught me that I could achieve anything, and my family was the rock from which I dove into the waters of adventure. My cup ran over with the exuberance of life. I had everything.

I had two older brothers who served as my role models. It never occurred to me that my gender and size could limit me from achieving any of the goals I set in order to be just like them. I basked in the glorious sunshine of their approval. They played hockey and soccer, so I followed. I played both sports with fearless passion from the age of three. Uncompromising determination allowed me to gain the skills necessary to play AAA hockey on a boys' team as my skills convinced coaches to overlook my gender and size, and I was thrilled when people said I was as "sweet as pie, but tough as nails." Playing city-representative soccer in the summer reinforced my accomplishments as a female athlete.

Extremely competitive sports defined me. I was a freight train barrelling through life. Competition was my drug of choice, and I thrived on full throttle adrenaline. I set extremely high goals, considering my destination to be definitely determined. I would earn an NCAA hockey scholarship, play on the Canadian Women's Olympic hockey team, and make my family proud.

But then the branch broke. I did indeed fall.

Everything changed in a heartbeat. An innocent tobogganing accident turned into a seven-week stay at Sick Kids Hospital in Toronto, a total of fifteen surgeries, a lifetime of physiotherapy, and the crushed goals of a thirteen-year-old girl. With each operation, the IV that dripped into my veins slowly emptied my cup drop by drop. Time stopped for me as the rest of the world turned: games unattended, practices missed, friends playing at childish games as each drop drained my dreams.

Thirteen was the age when I truly lost my innocence. My injury forced me out of my perfect childhood dream and into the adult world of pain and suffering. I focused on taking my hospital stay day by day. Thinking about my future, which had previously brought happiness and joy, only caused insufferable pain and fear. Fear of the unknown. I wondered if I would ever be able to skate or even walk again. The emotional anguish was dulled by the drugs necessary to control the physical pain. In a contest between morphine, Valium, and OxyContin, the latter became my body's literal drug of choice.

Embarrassment compounded my loss of innocence as, along with the utter devastation of my injury, I endured a humiliating loss of privacy. I could no longer eat, sleep, dress, shower, or go to the bathroom by myself. In growing up, a child is rewarded for independence, whether that is walking or going to the bathroom. The sheer embarrassment of having my independence taken away from me once I had earned it was maddening.

The final stake in the heart of my innocence came later in my hospital stay when I was more alert. I learned that although my accident had caused a simple injury, medical mistakes had created the complications responsible for the permanent physical and emotional damage I now suffered. I boiled with rage toward the doctors who had, in their careless selfishness, allowed this to happen to someone so young. I had trusted those doctors during the worst time of my life and they had let me down. This realization tore at the fibres of my very being and forced me to

swallow bitter contemplations of revenge. How could I trust anyone again? The most respected and trusted members of our society did not care enough, or pay enough attention to treat me, a thirteen-year-old girl, properly.

It took time, physical therapy, withdrawal from prescription drug addiction, and the love of my family, but eventually I was able to push my anger down. I began to contemplate the meaning behind my accident and I recognized it as a possible turning point in my life. I had come to a junction in the tracks and was forced to choose one of two paths. One path led to anger, resentment, and self- pity. The other led to effort, reinvention, and courage. I chose the light.

Rather than dwelling on what I had lost, I was determined to persevere in maximizing my potential by diverting my competitive drive from athletics to the pursuit of knowledge. Revenge was not going to give me back my perfect leg. I looked at my glass as being half full and was determined to fill it again. I became grateful for what I still had and recognized that I was still much more fortunate than many of the patients at Sick Kids Hospital and the countless children dying of starvation and disease around the world.

Having personally experienced the power medical care professionals can have on a life, I developed a curiosity toward the knowledge they possess. I have forced myself to see how doctors have helped me rather than focusing on the mistakes some of them made. I am now determined to become a doctor myself. I will use these hands and this love to help others. I will care enough. My new drugs of choice are the study of the human body and the ability someone can have to save another's life. I have promised myself that I will do everything in my power to help people in need.

This experience has been, and continues to be, my biggest challenge. I will continue to battle my injury for the rest of my life, but I will never give up. It has made me into a more compassionate, caring person. It has changed my goals completely. It has taught me that I cannot control what life gives me. Yet it is completely up to me what I do with what I am given. My life will be what I make of it. This experience has taught me never to be afraid to climb back up that tree, even though I know the branch could break.

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Shayla Larson
Grade 12
Lakefield District Secondary School

You Can See Heaven from Deck 12

by Megan Boothby

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

Her name was Elisabeth.

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

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

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

I liked her, from a distance.

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

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

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

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

I rambled awkwardly.

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

She stumbled in her semi-broken English.

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

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

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

I never learned her last name.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

But the view from up there is worth it.

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

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

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

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

* * * * *

Megan Boothby
Grade 12
Thomas A. Stewart Secondary School

One Slice

by Caitlyn Clancey

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Brave as a Wolf, Free as an Owl

by Mariah Ward

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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The One-Eyed Wonder

by Julia Whatley

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

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

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

When the vets at Guelph told me that Romeo might never be able to jump with only one eye, I was completely devastated. I was sad not only for myself but also for Romeo because he made it so clear that he truly enjoyed it. Some horses will go around a course of jumps and do well, but something about the way Romeo approaches his job is different from the others. His eyes truly light up at the first sight of a brightly decorated jump in the show ring. His ears are perked throughout the entire course, and everyone who watches him has a smile on their face the whole way through because they can see how much fun he is having. I was also told that beyond jumping, even just doing dressage could prove to be very difficult for us, as Romeo could become easily spooked.

We arrived at Guelph four days after Romeo's operation. I heard nothing but praise for how brave and friendly Romeo had been before and after his surgery. The poor guy awoke from anaesthetic, surrounded by strangers and missing an eye. Despite the circumstances, Romeo managed to maintain the charisma for which he is so well-known, never complaining and never

ceasing to put on his most adorable expression whenever a human approached him. He endured a two-week recovery, having to stay in his stall at home.

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

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

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

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The Men of My Circus

by Juliet Gardner

I sit here, the fore of my head resting against the folding of my fingers. My eyes blur and crystallize the filaments of my world, I have so much power. As I look right and left, I can see so clearly that I have very little power. My toes snuggle against one another beneath my layers of sock and boot and hurt. The music, unsuitable for the moment, streams through black buds and into my ears but stops there, never reaching my heart. A breath starts deep in my stomach and moves up through my neck as it contracts, and I sigh. I spot bits of my ever-paling skin peeking out, a sliver of my wrist, my knuckles, none of my (never my) pain shows. My mouth stays closed and quietly pushed forward, a silent and never-ending kiss to the air and nothing else, nothing else.

My fingers reach for the water, and soon enough soft icicles melt into me and streams forming patterns, rattle their dance through my insides. The slope in my cheeks is exaggerated as I gulp, gulp, gulp, and I feel like a swan, like a Grace, like the smallest being.

I can remember promises of breaking long before heartbreak. I leapt into your arms when you arrived home too late (it's much too late now) and you caught me (how could you not . . . I was so young, so very tiny hearted and minded and started). But now I can see the profuseness of your apology for working was a guise . . . so many guises . . . . Did I ever see you without a disguise?

I run my cleanly pink tongue along my calmly whiter-than-skin teeth, and when you saw me last, these teeth of mine were few and far between. You knew me only as your gap-toothed daughter with the dark brown bob and ever-trusting eyes. Father, the changes are disparate.

The hint of my wrist I stare at once again. I shove my sleeve higher until the fore of my arm is completely exposed and I marvel at how anyone could cut it up. My deranged men, why do you do this to yourselves? You may make sad and great stories and lead sad and great lives, but I am so far from great when you so sadly cry and die.

People ask about Death, wanting to know if it was a crash or a burn. Was it quick, a car accident, instantly dead, or long and drawn-out, agonizingly slow, cancer? But suicide was a crash, and ever since, the rest of us have been burning. Sometimes afterwards, I wondered if I was really the ghost, drifting from place to place but never really arriving anywhere. I would watch as people's words floated up through the air, landed in front of me, just to disappear, never having reached me at all. Everything was inanimate; no one really moved much or said much or felt much. I worried that if I poked them, they would turn out to be as light as a feather and float away in the ever changing wind until I couldn't find them or myself again. The sun was cold and the moon, black.

Memories of you take over again and again and again. So much darker than I was, your skin and eyes and mind. The day when you came to take my brothers and me out for ice cream, and there was a pain in my chest, I could not identify the reason, but now I know. You were distancing yourself. My little eyes saw your too-big, too-much, and yet such a slow, inevitable suffocation. The next day in a park, where you should have been taking my hand and showing me how to play, you took your own life.

And still I sit here, the folding of my hands resting against the fore of my head. Listening to my inner turmoil, hoping for the men still left to fight against themselves and win, and win for

once. They are so covered in swords that stick into themselves and other people, and I worry, always full of such consuming worry.

There are moments when I wonder why teapots don't have two ends, and why it can't be autumn all year round, and how emotions can be so present but still invisible to someone looking from the outside. So little is fair at times that it's hard to separate the sense from the non. I have grown up in a circus; our first performance and most memorable act had all the elements of a tragedy. Now the Tragedy's family lives on, and I see the sons walk their tightropes, listening to the audience gasp in concern for their physical safety. Only a few of us know it is their minds we should be asking about. And I am in the middle of it all, only sometimes noticed, as I manipulate some things and have no power over others. Searching for my control and place but finding only anarchy with some beauty thrown in to make it all the more compelling. "Come one, come all," an inviting, grim voice chants. "Watch as the family of dangerous minds takes care of and searches for and loses one another and themselves, all the while jumping through hoops and leaping over obstacles that you daren't dream of."

You read to me during the dark nights. I huddled against the covers and thought about the words and the endless mountain you were to me. Now I read my own words and crowd into the covers all by myself, and if it seems sad, it's because it is. My father, my brothers, so obsessed by the idea of protecting me from harshness and brutality, when you are the only ones who have shown it to me. The "sorrys" are unending and the "what ifs" list infinite, but reality is what you so rarely focus on, a giant and apologetic cop-out. How many times have you abandoned me for hospitals and pills and whispers of a better future? It is always so loud around you with your constant ideas and brilliance and cruelty. Alone once again, it is so silent in comparison, and so I focus on how I sit.

The fore of my head rests against my fingers. The fore of my head, which holds a few promises of premature wrinkles, so close to my hair where I have found strands of grey since before I hit the double digits. You are the hurt that I hide under, you are the breath that's more like a gasp. You are the salty sadness that graces and slides down my skin, and you are the antagonist. You, my father, who is not here. You, my brothers, who are only here in some ways. My men, I love you just as sincerely as you confuse yourselves, so you know it is vast and unending.

My ever-paling skin you called "snow white," like the princess. You have always treated me as one. Sheltering, pampering, under- and overestimating. The princess of the house and your heart. I may be the palest of them all, but I am no longer the smallest and never was, I the weakest. You can open your minds to insanity and manic states; surely you can stretch it enough to accommodate my strength, because that is real. That is real.

This world is a circus without a shelter, full of blankets and drugs and words to hide behind. This is sad and great. We are all sorry. My wrists, your wrists, his wrists: do keep them bare. Minds are crowded and hearts are emptied post- and pre-breaking. Feel this as strongly as I mean it, know this as harshly as it is, do not look away, do not think away from it and this and me. The fore of my head rests against my fingers. I remember not enough and too much, never the right amount. When everything is full of wrongness (and when is it not?), I have grown so much so fast.

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The Universal Remedy

by Celeste Noble

Three years ago, my father underwent extensive brain surgery. After the ordeal, he behaved differently. His responses were slower and he spoke out of context. This caused a huge communication gulf between the two of us. We had a healthy relationship, but when his symptoms grew worse, we began to argue more frequently. Although I tried to remember that his behaviour was due to his trauma, it was difficult to avoid getting upset with him. I missed him telling me stories and us talking about my future. He was not only my dad, but one of my best friends. I became angry at him for contaminating our relationship, and every fight made me feel as if I was losing my dad more and more. I wanted him back, but I feared that the damage was permanent.

Last spring, we organized a father-daughter camping trip to Algonquin Park for the upcoming summer. However, between the time that we booked the trip and mid-July, the tension had grown to a breaking point. My father and I fought regularly; we could barely hold a conversation without conflict. As we embarked, all I could think was, "Great, a week of fighting."

The first two days were a challenge. We portaged, we argued. We set up camp, we argued. It was tedious and miserable. Our mutual regret at going on the trip was like a stench in the air. The lush landscape and sparkling waters did little to dull our sharp words. Even the stunning sunsets, which cast this prehistoric world in a vibrant orange at the end of the day, only put our arguments on hold.

After sunset, it was mostly silent. We were physically exhausted and emotionally fatigued. The haunting cries of loons were the only answers to our unspoken problems. The trip that was supposed to bring us together had only fractured our relationship more.

On the third day, we paddled to a lake with a lookout climb. It seemed like a great excuse to take a break from the confinements of the boat. The sun-dappled waves rocked our canoe gently, like a mother soothing a child. However, for two people who were at each other's throats, the serenity turned into a turbulent nightmare.

The blistering heat dissipated under the boughs of the pine trees, and we began the hike with hopes for a beautiful view. The trail quickly became steeper and very narrow. It seemed like a path cut by an overflowing spring rather than by a human being. The hike was much more difficult than we had expected. At first, we argued over who had the idea to go on the hike. However, as we ascended, our breathing grew heavier until we could no longer find the breath to bicker. The unstable ground demanded all of our attention. We quickly became frustrated, winded, and sweaty – a bad combination. Both of us needed to turn around, but neither wanted to be the first to surrender to the temptation of a retreat to our canoe. Perhaps we both realized that the canoe's "sanctuary" would shield us, but only temporarily, from dealing with our fear and hostility.

Instead, we crested the hill and finally collapsed, side by side, in a small clearing of long green grass. We gulped down crisp clean air and filtered lake water. Then we went to look at the view. We were struck speechless. Our breath was lost again, but this time in amazement. A light breeze blew through my hair as an osprey cried loudly from somewhere over the lake. The horizon seemed impossibly distant, composed of rolling waves of towering green trees. The turquoise and navy of small lakes and rivers splashed across the canvas in front of us. No skyscraper, apartment complex, or superstore tarnished our vision of the uninhabited expanse of

this extraordinary countryside. The awareness of being completely surrounded by wilderness consumed us.

As we gazed out over this beautiful panorama together, a comfortable silence descended, and I contemplated our relationship. You cannot change the past or choose your family members. Dad and I were going through a hard time, and we needed each other's support. I loved him though, and nothing could change that. I believe that the merit of each relationship is judged on its ability to weather hard times. I knew that the bond between father and daughter rivals the strongest connections; therefore, we could be strong enough to bridge this gulf.

Reluctant to break the spell, we gazed at the beautiful vista for a while longer before descending the hill. Our way down was easier. The terrain was no longer against us, and we no longer fought each other. As we made our way to the canoe, I could feel the tension evaporate and the slate of our relationship wiped clean.

When we finally made the trek back to the mayhem of society, the calming and sacred effect of Algonquin Park remained in our souls.

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The Ancient Art of Written Correspondence

by Mackenzie Green

I have been engaged in a conversation for the past twelve years. Granted, it has been a conversation in writing rather than a spoken exchange. This is undoubtedly a good thing; my vocal cords would have dried up like unrefrigerated cheese slices if I'd been talking for nearly three quarters of my life. Letter writing is a lost art form, an antiquated practice in an age of hyper-communication. The letters you send, if saved on the receiving end, provide an account of your life full of detail and personality. What some might consider "oversharing" is acceptable, even encouraged, in the long-winded forum of a letter. Additionally, receiving letters is infinitely more exciting than modern forms of communication, and there is the benefit of taking a brief interlude for reflection (and maybe a little unabashed self-absorption) as you write. My pen pal's name is Martha, and she was my kindergarten teacher.

I began to write letters the summer after a very scholarly year as a kindergarten student, where I built sandcastles that could have stood in a medieval kingdom and created macaroni artwork that belonged in the Louvre. After moving away from Peterborough, Martha sent me a letter along with a little set of cards I'd won on the last day of school. I'd forgotten to take the cards home in the blind, primal frenzy to leave kindergarten behind forever. I wrote back, and then a few weeks later I excitedly fished another letter out of my mailbox.

Despite my merits as a kindergarten student, I expect my early letters were fairly uninteresting to read, an indication of my age as blatant as baby teeth and a height below four feet. I don't know whether Martha has kept the letters I've sent her – I've never asked. It would be interesting one day to pull out a box of my letters, if such a collection exists, and peruse the events of my life from the past 12 years.

Although people communicate more frequently in this technologically advanced age, it is arguable whether the depth of our communication and the content of our interactions are the same. Furthermore, in our world of texting, emoticons and short forms can cloud true character. Within the framework of a letter, it is much easier to tell a thoughtful, erudite individual from an insufferable troglodyte! Letters reveal personality and illustrate the world from the perspective of the writer, preserving a record of the writer's life. Now, I'm not saying I'm going to become famous, but if my talent for knitting eventually elevates me to celebrity status, a collection of letters will be the simplest way to appease greedy biographers in the (hopefully) not-so-distant future.

Not only does a letter contain more meaningful content than a text, but finding a letter in your mailbox is undeniably more thrilling than receiving any other form of communication. Imagine the scene: you wake up one morning to the light of your cellphone, a beacon in the semidarkness, full of excitement and possibility. You snatch the phone off your bedside table and contain a squeal of glee as you read a text from your cousin. "Hey, what's up?" it says. You jump from your bed, reaching up for a quick fist pump, and take a victory lap around your room before lying down again with the realization that you are officially the least cool person on the planet. Receiving a text is not particularly exhilarating. It's expected. It's commonplace. Seeing Martha's neat, even letters across the back of an envelope has always been an indication of a wonderful day for me, a good omen. I tear through the top of the envelope to pull out pages of writing on decorative notepaper. Opening one of her letters is like swinging at a piñata – you don't know exactly what's going to be inside, but it's a piñata; it's always going to be pretty darn great.

You have to admit that there's something very picturesque about letter writing. It brings to mind ladies in floor-length dresses writing with fountain pens as they keep up on their communications in a time before you could ask Siri to dial up your friends for a chat. In addition to the excitement of receiving a letter, written correspondence is a welcome nod to a simpler time. It allows you to pause for self-reflection – and perhaps a touch of shameless egocentricity – as you detail the minutiae of every aspect of your life. It's unusual for someone to take an hour out of their day to step back, relax, and contemplate the events of past weeks, especially without being interrupted by the bumblebee vibration of a cellphone. We move through life at the speed of those creepy black spiders you find in your shower – really freaking *fast*. Letter writing is like a short interval on the treadmill, where time and effort are still put in, but your forward progression stops for a little while. Your life does not resume until you've written the letter, synthesizing a series of events into a neat package.

When I was younger, during a period we'll call The Era of "I'm too Lazy," letter writing was a struggle for me; I griped and belly-ached as my slow penmanship crossed the page. However, now that my laziness has been trumped by a little maturity, I've come to appreciate the time I take to write letters. It's comforting to know that if I ever become astonishingly famous, Martha, if she has kept my letters, could probably sell them for a lot of money. However, since this is unlikely to happen, I can take consolation in the fact that through my years of letter writing, I have taken a few hours out of my day for thoughtful rumination to explore and share deeper ideas than those contained in a simple text, and hopefully to allow Martha to return from fetching *her* mail with a vibrant piñata clutched in her hands.

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Mackenzie Green
Grade 12
Crestwood Secondary School

Hospital Flowers

by Taylor Ray Luecke

It was my first time in the crisis centre. It was a Wednesday. Through the doors of the waiting room, past the sea of wheezy coughs and groans of pain, I followed the blue footprints on the floor to a large, almost disproportionate door. AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY, it read. I felt as if I had a jump-the-line pass. Although I had been rushed to the crisis centre that Wednesday morning, I was not the one wearing the hospital band around my wrist. My wrist wore the trembling hand of my sister, Kat, related not by blood but by soul. I recall her distant eyes, her racing heart and pursed lips. Never had I seen my sister in so much pain and never had I felt so afraid or so helpless.

"Follow me," said the nurse. It befuddled me how anyone could be so calm in this prison of illness. She was short with a limp and had on red scrubs, her hair cropped and greying. I could only imagine how quickly a crisis nurse's hair could turn grey. The door creaked open and we found ourselves in a mile-long taupe hallway. It was the colour of an ancient page of an aging book – stomped on, spat on, rained on. The hue strangled me. I wondered how many lives these people could save simply by painting the walls an appealing colour. The hallway was eerie and abandoned, making my knees weak. I tightened my fingers around Kat's in the hope that she didn't perceive those walls the way I did. The hallway opened up to a circus of bustling doctor coats, tense expressions, wheelchairs, and stethoscopes: the emergency room. We followed our guide through the mess of hospital gowns, my eyes bound to suffering faces in every direction. Once again, we were led to another dingy hallway.

"We made it," exclaimed the nurse, chuckling as she reached for the card attached to her lanyard. She scanned the card against a small box next to the door, and it lit up green, releasing a satisfying *beep click*. As the door swung open, I followed Kat closely, still quaking for the sanity of my sister. When we entered the room, I didn't quite notice him at first, but there stood a man. Lined along the shortest wall to my left were five green chairs. To my right was an office of glass, where doctors squinted closely at documents and nurses peered narrowly at the patients outside. This place made me nervous.

"I think it's best that you leave me alone with her," the nurse explained as she rested her hand on Kat's shoulder. "I'll have to ask some very personal questions." *Shit*, I thought. I buried my nerves, gave my sister a quick kiss on the cheek, and squeezed her tight. I watched her go. She clenched her right hand into a ball close to her body and her left hand between her teeth as she gnawed on the knuckle of her index finger. She didn't say a word. I could feel her strain from a mile away.

Long after the nurse had disappeared with Kat, I found myself standing in the middle of the floor, helpless. I couldn't think of where to put myself so I sat on one of the five chairs situated across from the glass office. My fingers tangled within each other so tightly that they felt sticky with super glue. I tried to look relaxed. I distracted my worried thoughts by looking around the room. It was long, bare, and intimidating – no windows and only six doors, one being the gender neutral washroom about fourteen feet in front of me. I watched the only other person in the room pace back and forth between the washroom and his chair, occasionally taking a gulp from his super-sized paper cup. The man was bald; the only visible hair was just above his upper lip and even then, it was sparse. There was something about this man, something intriguing, something different.

"Is that your sister?" asked the man. His eyes pierced through me. "Is she going to be all right?"

“She’ll be okay, I know she will,” I replied without a blink. My eyes wandered to the hospital band around his wrist. “How are you? Are you okay?” As if he had been waiting for someone to ask those questions all day, he straightened his back, readjusted his chair, and took a deep breath.

“Well, you know that whole depression thing? I’ve been dealing with that shit all my life.” He glanced down at his shaking hands. “I was on this medication for a while, you know; it wasn’t prescribed but it wasn’t from the streets either. My sisters are all nurses so they keep a close eye on what I am taking.” The man seemed very comfortable with his words. “And then, out of nowhere…BOOM. The meds stopped working. I’ve been a walking train wreck ever since.” I watched him reach into his pocket and pull out a handful of hospital bands. He walked towards the garbage can and snickered at the pile in his fingers before finally throwing them in the trash. He ambled across the room again, his steps echoing in the gloom of the room. He walked back and took another swig of water. I said nothing, pulled a yellow ukulele from my backpack, and handed it to him.

“Here,” I said. “Just hold this. Feel the strings; it’s surprisingly therapeutic.” He looked down at it and wrapped his fingers around the neck of the instrument. A grin formed on his face, revealing smile lines along his cheeks. He strummed a few makeshift chords.

“This is delightful!” He was beaming at this point. “You know, I hear that *Smoke on the Water* is the first song that anyone learns.”

“It’s true; anyone can play it,” I said with a giggle. He twiddled around with the strings before realizing that he was in fact playing *Smoke on the Water*. He pouted his lips and scrunched his forehead, as if he were the lead ukulele player of Deep Purple. I began clapping to the beat and bobbing my head, making a hush sound with my throat to mimic the screams of the imaginary fans he was performing for.

“And the crowd goes wild!” I screeched. In that moment, the receptionist opened the door to her glass palace and stood in front of us.

“These walls aren’t soundproof you know,” she hissed. The man and I looked at each other, rolled our eyes, and watched the woman walk back into her office.

“I guess the fun is over,” said the man.

“I guess so,” I said as he put the instrument back into my hands. I began tucking it away in my backpack when the receptionist exited her office for the second time. In her hands she held a piece of paper, a freshly printed photo. Her low heels smacked against the floor, revealing a resonating clickity-clack. The two of us watched her step towards the wall across from us as she hung the photo with scotch tape. It was a black and white photocopy of a bicycle. The basket on the handlebars enclosed a bouquet of sunflowers beaming that same ukulele yellow. Admiring the small and only photo on the wall, she took a step back and slouched onto one hip.

“Do you think this looks okay with the colour of the wall?” she asked. I felt my body melt into the chair beneath me.

I couldn’t help but think it was her first time in the crisis centre too.

* * * * *

Taylor Ray Luecke
Grade 12
Crestwood Secondary School

Universal

by Hannah Argumedo Stenner

One of the many benefits of taking a wide range of courses throughout school is being able to see how the most different of disciplines overlap. One of my favourite intersections is the way that physical science can be applied abstractly to social science. The laws of physics have an interesting correlation with the routine of human life. Since human interaction is just another simple motion of the universe, the laws of physics can be applied to help better our understanding of one of the most complex ideas in the universe: the way humans interact with themselves and with one another. Of course, these laws must be modified and read ambiguously in order for this to work. They must be interpreted with an open mind, knowing that it is the principles that are being used, not the exact properties and physical functions of the laws.

Think of everything you do as a wavelength. As you go up and down, you create crests and troughs. The middle is called a node – the smallest moment where you fall perfectly centred. If you meet another person travelling at the exact same frequency as you, you clash perfectly, and together you create an interference pattern. This pattern is full of super crests and super troughs, where the crests and troughs are twice the amplitude. Together, you create something larger than life; however, if a crest were to line up with a trough, you would create a node, and as they cancel each other out, it ceases the change in amplitude. In order for either of these things to happen, you have to be travelling in opposite directions.

If you want to change your direction, think of yourself as an object moving through the universe. Newton realized that every physical object has inertia, which means that it will continue to do what it is already doing unless acted upon by an outside force. To apply this to your life (not the real world, which is in fact the physical world, but the fake world we have created full of interactions and materialized things that we ironically call the real world), you must find the force that compels you to change course when necessary and then avoid the forces that get you off track. These forces may be people or they may be mental or physical addictions and habits that you have acquired. Newton also stated that every action force has an equal and opposite reaction force. This is a law that should be remembered in everything that you do. The results you get are reliant on your amount of output.

Of course, I can't go on too long about physics without bringing in the space-time continuum. To explain it briefly, time and space are both "directions" in which we travel. There is a limit to how much we are able to travel, and this amount is shared between the two directions. When a particle is travelling at the speed of light, it is using everything it has to travel through space, so time would stand still. If the particle were to be sitting still, it would only be travelling through time, so essentially time would speed up. Our human perception of time is warped by the measurements that we have fabricated. Both time and space have complete control over our lives, and for some reason, we try to tame and domesticate them both, as if to try to have dominion over our rulers. We must balance out our lives and not follow time and space through measurements, but through observation. We must realize how we use these, and just as space and time are regulated on the continuum, we must self-regulate using our own scale. There is only so much room for us in both directions, so we must teach ourselves to travel accordingly. It is not that I am worried that we will live shorter lives due to lack of movement, or travel at the speed of light to become immortal, as that is preposterous. What I believe is that we must know how to use our resources to fulfill our minds and spirits. Every aspect of life must be balanced. Think back to everything being a wavelength, and how the creation of interference patterns comes about. When people talk about the stars being aligned, they mean that good things are happening in life.

Although these fields and concepts I am bringing together are not related, and these laws were created for the physical world only, it is not surprising how easily they can be transferred. We may be capable of thought processes, but our brains, like the rest of our bodies, are a fraction of the universe. We are not in it, and we are not controlled by it; we are physically it. No matter what we study, we are, in a way, studying ourselves. If you study anything rigorously enough, you start to realize how even the mundane is a phenomenon. Everything is so ambiguous, yet at the same time, so utterly specific.

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Hannah Argumedo Stenner
Grade 12
Thomas A. Stewart Secondary School

Home Within the Sky

by Lexie Krocker

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 checks. 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.

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Lexie Krocker
Grade 12
Lakefield College School

A Community Salute: Embracing an Unconventional Childhood

by Samantha Mauro

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.

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Samantha Mauro
Grade 12
Lakefield College School

Broken Crayons

by Rachel van Vliet

When I was very young, I carried crayons with me wherever I went. Before packing my schoolbag each morning, I would check to make sure my crayon box was tucked safely in between my school books. Whenever I had free time, I would bring them out, find a big white piece of paper, and scribble drawings of little monsters until I had filled the page. My lack of grace and precision never proved to be an issue. If I coloured outside the lines of where the monster's body was meant to end, the monster gained a tail. If I made that mistake more than once, the monster's coat grew long and thick, and each scribbled accident became a strand of scraggly, unrestrained hair. Each monster was uniquely drawn and carefully etched into a clean sheet of paper, where it would patiently stay. I would take diligent care of their paper worlds – protecting them from tears and crinkles, and preserving the paper's quality – to keep my monsters safe.

The drawings began to pile up, and as with any large collection, some of my papers began to go missing. I became involved in school activities, and the pile did not grow for quite some time. I started to worry intensely about my grades in school, and with this obsession came more time spent doing homework. I would still sketch the occasional monster and give it the colour from one of my crayons; however, crayons have a way of breaking, getting lost, and shrinking right down to the last flake of wax. My crayons were put in a drawer, and I forgot about them.

I started to carry pencils with me; I needed them to learn calligraphy, write out math equations, and take down notes on the Pythagorean theorem. The pencils I carried would come and go. When I lost one, I would replace it with another of identical nature – I found pencils to be tediously similar in the way they produced grey impressions. In emergencies, I would make use of a pen. I would fill the margins of my school notes with drawings of my monsters. When I studied my notes to prepare for a test, I would notice them in the corners of each page and smile to myself. In class when I would get distracted, I would draw the monsters on my arms with a smooth blue-ink pen.

As I entered adolescence, I noticed my friends change. The girls started to coat their eyelashes with black ink to make them appear fuller and smear their skin with flesh-coloured paint to hide their tiny flaws. The boys began to reveal their apathy and the importance of being uninterested. I felt myself change too. The light-heartedness and ease that used to fill my chest felt as though they had been devoured – replaced by a heavy, dull weight that used me as a domicile for its nesting. Despite its ever-growing weight, I carried it around with me wherever I went.

Every day I would wake up, drag myself out of bed, pack my water, books, and supplies into my backpack, and carry it to school. I found each day to progressively worsen, growing more strenuous with each impending second. The weight began to hurt my chest, and it became so that the prospect of attending school was unthinkable. I spent many a day in bed, unable to sleep yet incapable of getting up, as the dullness was keeping me from living.

My mother took me to the doctor to find a remedy for the strain. The doctor gave me little orange pills that I was to take every night. So I carried the little capsules with me, along with the optimism that the dull weight would retire. But the heaviness remained, and it was starting to swallow me whole. Each day I felt small pieces of myself drift away upon sight of even the most minor vexation. When someone yelled at me, I could feel myself shatter. When I made a mistake, I could feel the colour melt away from my body.

The aspects of life of which I used to be so fond had transfigured into shards of broken spirit. The crayons I had carried were forgotten. The joy I had carried was lost. The margins of my notebooks were empty, no longer the territory of my drawings. The blue-ink creatures that used to line my arms were replaced with sleek, blue threads, which ran deep into my flesh in twelve straight lines. While lying on the hospital bed, as the doctor sewed my skin, it dawned on me that I never ceased to carry my monsters. They had transformed from the colourful, childish doodles to ghoulish, spine-chilling leeches – and they had found irrevocable affection for their new home. I stopped carrying my monsters on paper, but they had moved remorselessly into my chest, and I carried them every day.

So the doctors gave me some yellow pills to accompany my orange ones, and I carried them with me and swallowed them each night. I gradually began to tame my monsters and see clearly through my clouded eyes. Their claws became edgeless compared to the jagged ones that formerly scratched me from the inside out. Their fangs reverted to rounded, gentle grins that lacked any capacity to appear menacing. Their eyes regained their warmth and did away with the anguish and torment that used to plague them, and, steadily, so did mine.

I still draw my monsters from time to time, having realized I much prefer them on paper. I keep up with my studies and function properly most days within most weeks. I now carry myself with caution, knowing I am a work in progress. I carry myself with awareness, thinking of those who are far less fortunate than I am. I carry myself with prosperity, understanding that I deserve to be alive.

As I draw near the end of secondary school, I carry my values wherever I go, as they are the belongings most precious to me. I continue to live each day with my newly acquired sense of wonder and I think often of the doctor who stitched my wrist. I think often of my monsters and how much they have taught me. Were it not for my monsters, I would not have learned the value of life and the importance of cherishing each minute I breathe.

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Rachel van Vliet
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The Art of Failure

by Claire Campbell

I remember in my very first high school class, my teacher projected a big circular chart on the board. The middle was a blue circle with the words "comfort zone" printed in the centre; the outer circle was yellow and labelled "stretch zone"; and the final circle, a strikingly bright red, had the words "panic zone" written in big, block letters.

I had always had incredibly high expectations for myself. I did well in school, I was in two bands, and I swam competitively. I excelled in areas with predictable outcomes: Studying hard correlated with good grades; practising repertoire made my technique better; and swim practice helped make my times drop. The predictability of it all is what I liked so much. I was comfortable knowing that I controlled my success; how well I did was entirely up to me. It wasn't until high school that I was forced out of that comfort zone I thrived in.

You see, the problem with making friends is that you cannot make people like you. You can check off all of the criteria you believe makes the ideal person, but the unfortunate truth of it all, the truth from which we so frequently blind ourselves, is that we aren't in control. Your social success lies entirely in the hands of others, and despite all the efforts you throw into a friendship, sometimes it just doesn't work. These "failures" defined my high school career for two years. The failed relationships, the missing invitations, and the lack of a social circle swallowed my successes whole. I spent countless hours obsessing over every aspect of my life. I evaluated and re-evaluated all of the elements of myself that others didn't like.

The most difficult part, though, was that this was all in my panic zone.

Before ninth grade, I had never left my comfort zone. I didn't have any reason to. I went to an elementary school with 100 kids; I was in, what my parents liked to call, "the Montessori Bubble." And this bubble served its purpose, acting as a sort of extended womb; I grew up in a school with my hand held every step of the way. I was coddled in every sense of the word, and I wouldn't have traded it for the world. I learned about courage in an environment where "failing" was never a possibility, and that's an incredible gift. I grew up fearless of the future. There was no reason to doubt myself because never once had I not succeeded.

Because of my irrational confidence going into high school, I had a massive comfort zone, followed by little-to-no stretch zone, and a panic zone I had yet to encounter. On my very first day, I found it.

Everything about my first day of high school was terrifying. I had never been exposed to more than 100 kids, and there were 360 sitting in the chapel. I had never had to make friends, and now I knew nobody. And most importantly, I had never done an icebreaker game in my life, and by 9:00 a.m., we had done more than twenty.

This all became overwhelming rather quickly. Two hours into my grade-nine orientation, I passed out, had a seizure, and woke up to a panic attack, all because I was so scared.

Fear, like failure, isn't something that's easy to quantify. I found it incredibly difficult to explain to the ER doctor why I had passed out. I tried to explain the activities we had done that

morning, but every event was veiled with an immense negativity I couldn't quite put into words. I had found my panic zone and was remarkably unaware of how I was going to live in it for the rest of my life. I was afraid of failing, and that's not something that you can just avoid.

The next day, I made the best decision I'd ever made: I went back to school. I took a deep breath, put on my favourite t-shirt, and tried again – this time, with a water bottle in hand.

That moment summarized my first two years of high school. In 730 days, 16 courses, and too many "failures" to count, I learned the most important thing I ever will. Falling off isn't the hard part; it's getting back on the horse. Anyone can have an unfavourable outcome, but the key is learning how to not be a failure while failing.

It took a few tries, but I eventually found my stretch zone: the beautiful bridge between thriving and being unconscious. The stretch zone is defined as the area of relative comfort where we can grow as individuals, the zone where if "failing" occurs, it becomes a place of learning not of defeat. The diagram my teacher had projected on the board made an incredible amount of sense, but it lacked an important detail: your zones are not static. They move and change as you grow, and that's the beauty of it. Finding a place where I felt comfortable to try new things and step out of my comfort zone is how I re-found my success.

Success is not defined by an absence of failure; it is simply the presence of growth.

So now, with one year left of high school, I find myself constantly out of my comfort zone and absolutely thriving. I have found a home in my beautiful, yellow, stretch zone, and take every day as an opportunity to try something new, and be okay if it doesn't quite work out. I am in a constant state of growth, and simply put, I am working to master the art of failing.

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Claire Campbell
Grade 11
Lakefield College School

Aflame With Hope

by Alice Tierney Prindiville-Porto

Hope is a flame. Hope is my source of strength. It allows me to cultivate peace and compassion through doubt and uncertainty. The power of hope lies in its ability to alter perception. Hope is a flame inside of us. It is constantly burning, whether we can recognize it or not. Even when we cannot feed it and it withers, our flame does not go out.

Each time we meet an obstacle, we have the opportunity to choose hope. Our world is ablaze with division that has a capacity to lead to our demise. If there was ever a time to spread tolerance, and ultimately acceptance, it is now. To do this, we must shift our perception of community from "others" to human beings. This process of shifting perception requires vulnerability and depth that can only be accessed through hope. Choosing hope is going to save us.

Each time we meet an obstacle, we have the opportunity to choose hope. Our flames fuel advancement. My flame aspires to light a path for all beings, in the name of feminism. As a young girl, I loved stories of women who defied social norms. Pandora kept hope in a box, for she knew that we would need it. From studying Jane Austen's heroines to Rosa Parks, I relished the opportunity to establish a complex identity. In grade eight, my Humanities teacher introduced me to intersectional feminist literature by handing me a copy of the story, "Yellow Wallpaper" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman. Suffice it to say, I was hooked. I identify as an intersectional feminist who advocates for all individuals. This philosophy recognizes that oppression for women is influenced by overlapping identities such as, race, ability, ethnicity, religion, and sexuality. Feminism involves living with this awareness. Feminism is my hope, and thus my advocacy.

Each time we meet an obstacle, we have the opportunity to choose hope. The obstacles of my childhood led to a herculean event. On October 12th, 2012, when I was physically removed from the care of my mother, my father received sole custody of me. For a variety of reasons, it was decided that in order for me to transition smoothly from my mother's care to my father's care, I was to be sent to a wilderness therapy survival program for 89 days. These physically and emotionally taxing three months brought me into a period of extreme darkness. It is not hyperbolic to state that for me to simply exist during this time took every fibre of my being – and then some. Giving up became increasingly enticing as I got colder, covered in more dirt, and isolated from human beings. Only my hope for contentment and enlightenment as an independent adult provided me with the ability to endure. Choosing hope gave me an existence.

Each time we meet an obstacle, we have the opportunity to choose hope. In April of my grade 11 year, I became aware that my financial situation might not be able to provide me with a final year at "The Grove". This possibility broke my heart. Lakefield College School is a place that has taught me what it means to lead a life of love, curiosity, and happiness. This community has redefined for me what it means to truly live. This belief in others was magnified when, extremely distraught, I shared my truth to those closest to me. And how they responded is what is special about my Lakefield experience. I heard their cry to me: take charge of your destiny. They proceeded to provide me with the necessary resources to do so. I began to have crucial, and at times challenging conversations. One of those led to meeting with my Head of School. During this time, my room was covered in sticky notes that bore words inspiring resiliency: Faith, Trust, and Hope. This did not mean I constantly maintained a positive mindset; in fact, roughly one day a week I would end my day falling asleep with tears in my eyes. My flame withered but was not extinguished. Finally, on June 15th, I met with the Headmaster, and he shared the news that I

would be returning here in the fall. This school supported me in choosing hope. This sacred space, my school, allowed me to recognize my flame. It is difficult for me to express my love for LCS through words. But, I sincerely wish for my teachers, staff, and peers to know how profoundly they have impacted my life. From the very bottom of my heart, I thank them.

Each time we meet an obstacle, we have the opportunity to choose hope. May we go forth and recognize, fuel, and stoke our flames. If we invite this force into our lives, hope has the ability to transform our narratives.

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Alice Tierney Prindiville-Porto
Grade 12
Lakefield College School

Everything but the Kitchen Sink

by Alexis Thompson

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.

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Throw Me an Apron

by Anna Harris

Every December without fail, my family buckles down for a full day of Christmas baking. It's not your average cookie-and-pie-filled day of fun family bonding, but more so a factory operation with a single end goal: producing as many Dutch sausage rolls as four people can manage in a single day – *worstenbroodjes*. Although the pronunciation of these delicious meat-filled bread rolls is difficult for most Canadians, it is widely agreed by our taste testers that the end result is a delectable replacement for any snack or meal. At Christmas and New Year, the *worstenbroodjes* get distributed by the dozens to our friends and extended family, while any remaining go into our freezer to be enjoyed throughout the year. We're lucky if they last until Easter.

On the first day the whole family has off for Christmas break, my parents get up early to start the process. My dad prepares and kneads the dough so it can start rising, while my mom starts mixing the ingredients for the sausages and forming them. My brother and I stumble blearily downstairs as soon as we wake up, usually to be thrown aprons and told to commence the assembly line right away. My brother tends to be the last to emerge from his room. He rarely loses sleep for anything, and this day is no exception. Of course, this earns him never-ending scorn from me about how he affects our productivity with his absence, but I can never stay irritated for long when there's so much to be done.

A typical batch of *worstenbroodjes* requires quite a few steps: make the dough, knead it, and set it to rise somewhere warm. Then, divide it up and roll each piece into smooth, golf-ball-sized spheres and let them rise again. While this is happening, mix the meat and spices together. Form the mixture into small sausages, then cook them until they're medium rare. When the balls have risen, use a rolling pin to roll them into flat circles and place a sausage in each one. Fold the sausage up, like wrapping a gift in paper, and seal the edges with water. Dust the bottom of each formed *worstenbroodje* with flour, place them on a baking sheet, brush them with egg wash and then stab each one precisely three times with a fork for aeration. Put the tray in the oven, then repeat *ad infinitum*.

In this enterprise, my dad is the Dough Overlord, my mom is the Sausage Queen, my brother, dad and I are the Ball-forming Experts, my brother is the Chief Roller, I'm the Egg-wash and Fork Master, and my mother and I are the Package-forming/Assembly Specialists. Our recipe has been perfected over the years, passed down from my mother's Dutch grandparents and then given personal touches based on our family's preferences. The result? A perfect white bun that's golden and slightly crisp on the outside but soft and fluffy on the inside. Its flavour is intriguing, levels above bland grocery store bread, but subtle enough to flawlessly complement the juicy, mildly spicy sausage lying perfectly cooked on the inside. They're a bun and a sausage that would each be great on their own, but together they're sublime. As my mom would always say, "it's a party in your mouth." My brother in particular agrees with this statement and prides himself on being the *worstenbroodje* taste-testing connoisseur. Naturally, this means he has to try every single batch and decide whether he likes the level of spice. Unfortunately for him, our parents are more fond of the heat, so he usually has to settle. And me? I'm a vegetarian, so I don't eat them.

I have never visited the Netherlands, but from what I've seen and been told, our *worstenbroodjes* aren't very similar to those made by other Dutch families. They aren't anything like the basic sausage rolls you can purchase at the store, either. The recipe and tradition are unique to our family, something special I look forward to making every year. It's an almost therapeutic day of muscle memory and familiarity in between the stresses of school and the

chaos of Christmas, with the ultimate reward at the end: amazing food that provides a source of unity for all *worstenbroodjes* lovers. Not participating in this crucial consumption aspect of the tradition has been difficult.

Worstenbroodjes and I had a rocky start to our relationship. Although the process has always been a much-anticipated tradition, the product itself has produced mixed emotions over the years. As a young child, I didn't like the taste of red meat, so my parents started baking some risen dough balls without the sausage for me. We called them Anna-*broodjes*, meaning Anna-buns. As my taste buds became more refined, I grew to love the taste of *worstenbroodjes*, so it wasn't until I decided to be a vegetarian in high school that I realized I may have ruined my favourite holiday tradition for myself. I couldn't bear the thought of going back to eating plain baked dough without the sausage, but I couldn't justify going against my values unnecessarily.

As Christmas approached, I wondered if the magic of our *worstenbroodje* baking day would be lost for me. I've always been passionate about cooking and baking, but much of my motivation lies in the end product; I'm a sucker for gourmet. So last year, it was as much a surprise for me as for anyone that when production day came around, I rolled out of bed and stumbled blearily downstairs the moment I was woken up by the whirring KitchenAid mixer. Inhaling contentedly the smell of fresh dough, I eagerly grabbed the apron my mom threw me and joined the assembly line. Sometimes, I've realized, the process matters more than the product.

Of course, it helped that my dad and I came up with a vegetarian alternative that was just as tasty: stuffing the buns with curried mashed potatoes instead of sausage. Now we just need a name: how does *aardappelbroodjes* roll off the tongue?

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Anna Harris
Grade: 12
Lakefield College School

From My First Hit

by Michael Jad Cheaito

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.

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Michael Jad Cheaito
Grade 12
Lakefield College School

A Blank Canvas

by Toula Pappas

I am staring at a blank canvas. There is a blank white canvas sitting on the table in front of me. The brushes are dry and still in their packages, looking at me with their judging-brush eyes. The clean glass of clear water has a steady ripple from the subconscious tapping of my foot. What am I supposed to do with a blank canvas? Am I expected to fill it with my words, with my thoughts, with pretty pictures? Paint splotches and colour pallets dance around in circles in my head. How do I paint something that is just as empty as the house I am standing in? For months, I have been standing in the same room, in the same clothes, stealing glances at the same canvas looking back at me in this very moment. When I wake up, I know I have things to do. I know there are responsibilities and commitments, and that I must hold to my promise.

My hands are getting so sweaty; the pencil I have been holding for at least an hour continues to roll its eyes at my unmoving arm. My cell phone buzzes quietly in my pocket. It is warm against my body, retaining every degree of body heat that escapes from my skin. The temperature everyday has been getting higher and higher as opposed to my mental capabilities. My seasonal depression ended with the winter, but as summer quickly approached, the capacity for the number of life experiences that my brain can take in is rapidly decreasing. I want to take my phone out of my pocket, read the notification bar, and look at who has decided to text me, but I do not have the willpower it takes to force my hand into my pocket.

Lately, it has been hard to do anything other than stand and stare at my emotional support canvas. The emotional connection I have formed with an inanimate object is something I did not expect, but after the two years of extensive, unexpected time spent looking at a screen, I shouldn't be surprised. Blank canvases used to put a smile on my face; they used to fill my head with possibilities and hope for what I could create. They used to make me happy; they used to get me excited to buy new paints.

I have taken art classes since I was a child, spending many years on colour theory, sketch drawings, and clay molds. But year after year, as I got older, all I can remember is the gradual dislike of any form of creation. Don't get me wrong. My coping mechanisms tend to be any form of art I can find, but as the years go by, all I see is the negative. My feet are beginning to hurt, the pain spiking up my ankles and through my calves. Should I sit? Should I stand and welcome the pain? Should I fall and never move again?

All the questions I can come up with might always have an answer, but I can never seem to find one, and even if I do, I struggle to accept it. The mental connection I have formed with the cracked phone screen in my pocket reminds me of what I can never let go. It reminds me of what I hear in my head every moment I spend outside my empty house. Sure, the people closest to me reassure me that nothing is wrong, that whatever I am thinking is exaggerated by the constant stream of social media expectations. But there are times when I realize that I am not much different from the blank canvas I have been staring down for the last two hours.

The clock says it is time to sleep. I set my pencil on the table in the spot where it lies day after day, where it waits for me to pick it up every morning. The repetition of my movements gets lost in the steps I take to go upstairs. I turn off my phone and get into bed. Staring now at the ceiling, I know I won't sleep for another couple of hours. I think this all happens in my head, but sometimes I wish that it didn't.

Maybe the time would go by faster that way.

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Toula Pappas
Grade 11
St. Peter Catholic Secondary School

Things That Pour Out as I Sit Alone

by Kellan MacKenzie

My Dog, The World

When I walk my dog, the wind circles through my torso. It's not entirely unpleasant. It feels like being alive, taking up space. I walk her in the early mornings when I need a reminder of the fact that I exist. It stills the crashing waves of my soul.

To be known by my dog is to be known crunching through the snow a bit more hurriedly than I would like. She knows my off-tune humming in the quiet before the day begins. I imagine that her world encapsulates one thing at a time. Bootlaces, singing, mint tea. Me. It's nice to be known by my dog.

Sometimes, on weekends, she scratches my door. It wakes me up every time, and I don't mind. She doesn't understand why I'm not rushing awake yet, filled with apprehension for the day ahead. She doesn't understand why I don't gobble my breakfast, brush harshly at my teeth, and hurl my things together in defiance of the day ahead.

She understands the slowness, though. It's a steady, flowing way of living. She is at home in the tangled bedsheets, the drowsy hand that invites her up.

I watch her rib cage rise and fall, rise, and fall, and I listen to her gentle breathing beside me. My lazy dog knows no worries. I love her very much.

Rotting

Outside it is windy and gray and April, and inside I stew on my bed and rot away. It's been three years since I started to keep a journal, and yet I feel restless and discontented. The French call it "ennui."

In these moments, my head might combust from the nonsense circling in it, refusing to find meaning or coherence. I never know what I'm thinking or how to articulate these feelings. My watermelon tastes of gasoline. I'm sorry I was cruel. I hate my jealousy. I want to stifle it until it dies.

I worry that I am going to lose my eyesight before I turn twenty. I worry that I'm incredibly unlikeable. My skin tightens around my stomach and neck and cheeks. My throat burns with unresolved bile. I am overwhelmed and exhausted. The world is so loud that I forget to breathe between the minutes.

Muffled

When I was young I was limitless and gloriously stubborn. My memories are bright and easy. The shadows fall when I realize that I was always a girl, and I wish I could have grown up as a person instead. I have a tendency to lie awake at night, analyzing interactions and wondering how my words would have been perceived if I were a boy. I like to pretend nothing would change.

Everything would change. Women are grown with guilt sewn into us. If I were a boy I would be loud and bold. But I am a woman and when I am loud, I apologize. Reflex. It's enough to pull at my sleepless mind. It's enough to create a twisted hatred toward my femininity.

Still, the only genuine relationships I have are with women. It's easier to be gentle, to bare your soul when the person next to you is trapped in the same box that you are.

And when the world shushes me, I go quiet. It's fine, of course, because I hold the truth: I am strong and wonderful and passionate and worth knowing. But if I soften these pieces of myself, no one else will ever know. And that is a tragedy.

Dreams

In my dream last night, my sisters and I chased each other through a vast glass building tinted green and blue with walls that spread sun rays through the halls. The air bled music and joy.

Sometimes I feel so overwhelmed with joy that I can't breathe. Sometimes I feel like every part of me is completely okay. Sometimes I am selfish and I love it.

Inside the clarity of another dream, I stood in a river; turbulent water whipped around me, gushing and ruthless. It beckoned me with tugs at my knees, my hair, my fingers. I wanted to move but didn't. I stood still because watching the world pass me by was better than being swept away forever.

There's a lot going on, isn't there? I'm glad the snow always feels the same.

Always Me

My muscles are loose and there's nothing biting at my heels. Today, there are no lists to make, no places to be, no thrumming in my head. Nothing stops me from making a ridiculously elaborate warm drink and returning to bed. Earl Grey tea, frothed milk, honey, and some jazz. I never noticed the guilt I anchored to resting. It's nice to be still for a day.

Oh, and finally, it's done! My world has shifted again. A swelling climax was reached and the new chapter slid in so seamlessly that I hardly noticed the previous one's departure. Everyone is amiable and passionate. It's bittersweet as it flies by, but life goes on.

And also, today I walked by a window and felt not exactly beautiful, but in charge, like owning myself. Like a person. Like me.

So today I won't worry about the future or the past, or what could have been. Today, I'll go back to bed and fade into the warmth of all the things that can wait for tomorrow.

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Kellan MacKenzie
Grade 11
St. Peter Catholic Secondary School

Bathtub Broodings on a Friday Night

by Eunsae Lee

Some dusky hour or other. House party. The dampened sound of heavy bass and laughter, yelling, and the bathroom walls standing as dams against it all.

Inside, I share the bare, yellowish bathtub with a few scattered specks of confetti and two empty cans. Sitting with my legs dangling over the ledge, I feel the lines of the tub curving into my back. I am reminded of the big cardboard boxes from childhood that I tried to squeeze into, elated by the idea that I would fit. The world was for playing in, and there is a quiet joy in remembering that.

It's been past any sort of sensible bedtime for hours now – hours of loud conversation downstairs that has blurred into one vaguely exciting, purple-lit picture. People are smiling with teeth, the whites swirling into their faces and obscuring them. Friends, friends, not-so-friends. All of them strangers. There are still a few more months until graduation, but these faces have already started to fade in my mind. Who knows in what distorted ways I'll remember them in a couple of years? And how will they remember me? Four years of trying not to care about what others think obviously hasn't got me very far. I thought that, by now, I would have grown into someone who didn't worry about this stuff.

What else have I forgotten to learn?

Sometimes I feel that I have lost something important, something I can't put a name to. Like it has fallen out of my pocket into an endless puddle. There is an urge to get on my knees and comb through the mud, get as messy as I can, knowing I won't find anything.

And sometimes I think I'm doing things almost properly. Like being a girl. Here I am, eyes stinging from smudged eyeliner and a stray eyelash or two. Glitter everywhere. Feeling vaguely romantic. And the hair! It takes a sort of insanity to take the red-hot metal of the curling iron to your hair and listen to it sizzle. To twist it into impossible curls that belong on a stick-figure, and then like it more than your real hair. To want to flatten yourself into a drawing. Sometimes I have what it takes.

A muffled thud and a shattering sound from somewhere vaguely below. A bit of a hush, then the buzz of laughter returns to the walls.

I'm fiddling. Sticky hands – must have spilled something at some point. I look at them and the light washes them in a bright, sickly white. A bunch of chunky rings on rather stubby fingers. The wrinkly lines are more visible than ever, but I don't mind. It's actually a relief to see them in focus, fished out of the current of shadowy pink and purple. I stare at the familiar lumps and bumps of my knuckles, the callus on my middle finger that exposes my awful pencil grip, the greenish-blackish dot embedded in my left thumb that I'm pretty sure is pencil lead… I wouldn't want to live with hands that aren't mine.

Earlier, I stole some grapes from the freezer downstairs to snack on all night. I stuffed them into a ziplock bag that I brought to keep my phone dry. Then I lost the bag. I think I became braver when I turned eighteen.

You get braver when you get to know the fleshy bits of yourself and learn to live with them. The awkward things, the jealousy, the nights you feel like a toddler. The fact that you can't really dance. A truce with the body. It's not all hard; imagine sprinting across a clovered field, legs swinging wildly and skimming wet grass. I imagine being invincible.

And I find that I am. The feeling balloons into my body. A stillness, oddly familiar. Cramped legs, bathtub, and glitter. Weightless.

* * * * *

Eunsae Lee
Grade 12
St. Peter Catholic Secondary School

Right Now: The Ambivalence of Growing Up

by Grace Gavard

I recognized the pre-show playlist coming to an end, having watched countless videos of this same moment but in other cities across the world. I was feeling thankful for the gentle rush of the AC to keep me cool, despite the warmth of the bustling crowd and the excitement showing on my own cheeks. The stage lights dimmed and the venue turned a dark shade of blue while light bulbs shone on stage, warm white and flickering dramatically. Gracie Abrams sat down at the piano, stage left. The first note rang through the venue, followed by cheers, then hushed whispers. Her song, "Right Now" began, and the crowd eventually fell silent, taking in the slow start with intensity. Standing a couple of rows back from the front barricade, I turned to see fans start to hold up small pieces of paper. Pink, blue, and yellow hearts began to litter the crowd, illuminated by the phone flashlights beaming through them. My own heart warmed as I realized what was going on and remembered the project another fan had worked so hard to bring to life. Reaching into my back pocket to retrieve the paper heart she had given me while waiting in line outside the venue, I held it up against my phone's flashlight to let the light shine through. My blue heart joined the other ones around me.

"Look at me, I feel homesick, Want my dog in the door . . ."

Looking up and out at the audience, Gracie placed her hand over her heart in appreciation. We sang along softly, the lights glimmering and the stage lights reflecting the colour blue onto our faces. I could feel every note travelling through the ground and passing by my heart before reaching my ears. Listening closely to the lyrics, I took them in for what felt like the first time.

". . . And the light in the kitchen, from the fridge on the floor"

As Gracie intoned the subtle yet painfully sweet happenings from her childhood home, I felt as though I was listening to her describe my own experiences. I longed for the familiar comfort of my mom's embrace, even though she was just outside, waiting for me in the car. I thought of my bed that I would settle into after my parents had driven me home. My dog would be waiting for me at the door, tail wagging furiously.

"This is somebody's hometown. Never been here before"

In front of me, a group of three friends fell into each other for a hug. All taller than me by just a little bit, one rested her head on another's shoulder as they swayed back and forth to the music. I watched the way their hands lifted periodically to wipe away tears as they took in the moment. I didn't fully understand the reason for their tears, yet I felt a strong sense of connection to them. I glanced over to my friend standing beside me, tears beginning to well in my own eyes.

"Am I losing my family, Every minute I'm gone?"

As the song reached the end of the second verse, Gracie's voice shook slightly. No one could fault her, as ours were shaking too. The friends' hug drew tighter, almost as if there were an invisible ribbon tied around them, drawing them ever closer. The lights began flickering at a faster pace while my heartbeat sped up as well. In that moment, the focus wasn't really on the singer as much as on the community she had created and the mutual feelings of everyone in the room.

"I'm so high but can't look down. Left my past life on the ground"

I felt the mood change and morph into something a little more heartening. The echoes from the crowd became louder and more passionate, teary eyes fading into pridefully optimistic smiles. Overwhelmed by the fervour of the crowd, I tried to create a mental record of this exact moment. I knew this feeling would come back to me at some point. I wasn't sure when, but I knew it would.

"Think I'm more alive somehow. I feel like myself right now"

Lifting her fingers from the keyboard, Gracie rested her head in her hands. The entire venue, taking a moment to come to terms with the end of the concert, stayed quiet for only a moment. Soon enough, the cheers were nearly deafening, leaving a ringing in my ears for days to come. Gracie stood, waving and blowing a few kisses while leaving the audience with this positive endnote, "I love you so much, Toronto. Get home safe."

At the time of the concert, I was nearing the end of my Grade 10 year. With no concept of what I would be doing after high school, I felt content with my life as it was. My family never more than an hour's drive away, coming back from school to a home-cooked meal, and my childhood friends by my side as we walked from class to class; I was familiar with it all.

Now, as a senior in high school, I continue to look back to this moment, and my connection to the girls in front of me only grows. My blue paper heart is still taped into my journal alongside a written recollection of the day. Maybe theirs are too. I still don't know if the girls were seniors about to leave for university or maybe friends who had met after high school. I can only guess that they were around that age and experiencing similar feelings to the ones I'm feeling now. The loss of familiarity in a life that had slowly been built around ourselves. The excitement for another chapter and new possibilities.

* * * * *

Grace Gavard
Grade 12
Adam Scott Collegiate Vocational Institute

Freedom Through Awareness

by Leen Radi Aburayyan

I grew up believing checkpoints were ordinary. They existed quietly in conversations, something my parents spoke about with practised patience. I heard about delays, long waits, and unpredictable crossings, but I never tried to fully imagine them. To me, they were distant inconveniences, part of a place I belonged to but did not yet understand. I accepted them without questioning their logic, the way children accept most things.

In June 2022, that acceptance began to unravel. The heat was the first thing I noticed as we stood in line at the border, unmoving for hours. There was no clear beginning or end to the line, only a slow shuffle forward. Suitcases scraped against the ground. Children cried until they fell silent against their parents. Elderly men leaned on canes, swaying slightly as they waited. Time stretched in a way that felt unfamiliar. No one complained. The silence was not acceptance, but rather resignation.

People adjusted themselves, conserving energy and emotion. Every few minutes, a voice called someone forward. When my name was called, my body reacted before my mind. My heartbeat quickened. I became aware of everything: how I stood, how I spoke, how I might be perceived. The questions were simple: Why are you here? Who are you visiting? How long will you stay? But they carried an unspoken demand – justify yourself!

I answered carefully. It was not enough to respond; I had to convince. I had to present myself in a way that would be accepted, understood, allowed. In that moment, belonging felt conditional. I had worn my hijab that day without hesitation, the way I always did. But standing there, it felt different, no longer just a part of me, but something that could be interpreted before I even spoke. By the time we crossed, exhaustion had settled in. But what stayed with me was the quietness of everyone around me. That silence unsettled me more than anything else.

It was then that I began to understand that this was not an interruption of life; it was woven into it. Inside cities, life seemed to resist that reality. Streets were filled with movement. Shops spilled light and conversation onto the sidewalks. Children ran through narrow roads, their laughter rising above the noise of passing cars. For a moment, everything felt normal. But that normalcy was fragile.

The moment we travelled between cities, it fractured again. Another checkpoint. Another line of cars stretching farther than I could see. Engines idling under the sun, drivers waiting without knowing how long the delay would last. Movement was no longer assumed. It was granted.

“What happens if the checkpoint closes?” I asked.

“You stay,” my uncle replied. “Until morning.”

The simplicity of his answer revealed something deeper; staying was not a choice.

In Canada, movement had always been effortless. I measured distance in time, not permission. The idea of being unable to reach home had never crossed my mind. There, it was an ordinary possibility. However, a memory from my childhood returned with new clarity. When I was twelve, my uncle took my sister and me to pray at Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem. He showed permits and even claimed to be our father so we could pass. At the time, none of it felt unusual. What I remember is the brightness of the courtyard, the movement of people entering

and leaving prayer, the smell of freshly baked ka'ak, and the colourful sweets sold by vendors. I remember the ease of that day.

Years later, the memory felt different – not diminished, but deepened. I began to understand that even this moment had been shaped by restriction. Access to a place so central to identity and faith had required permission and negotiation. What I had experienced as freedom had, in reality, been conditional. There were also places that were inaccessible for other reasons.

Gaza had always felt distant to me, defined more by headlines than lived experience. That changed when I spoke with my cousin's wife, who had lived there. She described her home being destroyed, her belongings buried beneath rubble, the fragments of a life that could not be recovered. She spoke calmly, but the weight of her words was undeniable. I realized then the limits of my own understanding. I could listen, but I could not fully grasp what she had experienced. The distance between us was shaped not by geography, but by what I had never had to endure. That realization stayed with me.

In Canada, my concerns had always existed within stability: school deadlines, plans, routines that never threatened my sense of security. I woke up each day expecting consistency. Safety was not something I thought about. It was something I assumed.

In Palestine, that assumption did not exist in the same way. Movement was uncertain. Access was controlled. Even routine actions carried unpredictability. And yet, life was not defined solely by restriction. I saw hospitality that was immediate and genuine. Families shared meals, neighbours exchanged stories, and communities held onto connection in ways that felt intentional and deeply rooted. I saw pride in language, culture, and faith that remained steady despite everything around it. There was strength in that balance, the ability to carry both hardship and hope at once. It challenged the simplicity of how I once understood the world.

I used to think that innocence meant not knowing. Now I understand it can also mean accepting what is familiar without questioning whether it is fair. This shift did not happen all at once. It emerged gradually, shaped by small observations.

In the waiting.

In the questions.

In the answers that required no explanation.

I did not return with a completely new perspective, but with a clearer awareness of the one I had always lived within. And once that awareness took hold, it changed how I move through the world – not all at once, but in the questions I began to ask, and in what I now no longer accept as simply normal.

* * * * *

Leen Radi Aburayyan
Grade 11
Crestwood Secondary School

Young Writers Contest

Lakefield Literary Festival

Winning Entries – Junior Fiction
(Grades 9, 10)

The War of Sciana

by Kyle Bell

"Why must you always question my authority, Scrall? I hope you enjoy whippings because that is what you shall receive if you continue to concern yourself with my motives. We will search for the dagger as planned, guarded or not. We will need its powers if we are to defeat the wretched elves and take back our land. For six years we have fought for the land of Sciana, which is rightfully ours. The dwarf gods must look upon us in pity as we hide and run in our own land."

"I agree," said a dwarf named Keltsar. "It is time we brought honour back to our people."

"Into the cave," yelled a dwarf named Fenn.

The small party proceeded onwards into the supposed lying place of the dagger of Tiemolk. The dwarves had been searching for its whereabouts for some time. Perhaps now, they had finally found it.

The leader, Jorb, was the first to enter the cave and was immediately overcome by a powerful stench. Scrall entered and was about to open his mouth when he was silenced by a fierce glare from Jorb, who then abruptly turned away.

"Spread out," Jorb commanded. "Keltsar, you and Fenn take the left passage, Scrall and Wick take the middle, and I shall take the right."

Keltsar and Fenn came to a dead end and had to turn back. They then started down the middle tunnel, following Scrall and Wick. After walking for a while, they heard screams ahead and rushed forward to see what was wrong. They turned around a bend and right there, straight in front of them, lay the most hideous creature they had ever seen.

"It can't be," stammered Fenn. "The trolk are but a myth."

The creature had Scrall's leg encased in its jaws, and he was flailing wildly to escape its grasp. Keltsar and Fenn joined in Wick's effort to harm the ugly creature, but their swords were as useless as toothpicks against the trolk's scaly hide. It swatted them away effortlessly, as though they were mere flies, and continued making a meal of Scrall.

Suddenly, from behind, came a screeching battle cry as Jorb ran full force towards the trolk. Then came an ear-piercing sound the dwarves would never forget. The trolk let out a blood-curdling scream as it struggled furiously against the amount of pain that now engulfed it. With a last desperate gasp, the creature fell motionless to the ground. Jorb pulled away and turned to the other dwarves.

"Men, we have our dagger."

* * *

Far off in the land of Enquist, the elves plotted ways to secure the land of Sciana. Their king, Aedan, stepped forth, overlooking their plans for what could be the most important battle yet and their best chance to banish the dwarves forever.

“What is this?” he exclaimed to Kale, his leader-in-command. “Why would you have such a number of us fight on the ground, where we are at a disadvantage to the dwarves with their battle-axes? Our strength lies in our archers and our skills with our bows and arrows, not on the ground in hand-to-hand combat.”

“But m’lord,” stammered Kale, “we have the power of our sword, Rivenguard; surely it shall lead our warriors to victory.”

“In this we shall take no chances, Kale. Set up plans for our archers to be ready in the treetops by my orders.”

“Yes m’lord.” The elf commander quickly left the room.

Aedan turned to his queen, Lilanthe. “This must be the last, my wife, for I don’t know how much more I can endure. So many have been lost in our battles for this piece of land. I do not wish to lose many more of my brethren.”

* * *

Two weeks later, as the sun rose brightly above the horizon, the armies marched forth to meet each other. The dwarves strode forth in their shining battle armour, battle- axes glinting in their hands. Their leader, Jorb, carried the great dagger; its power could be felt resonating through the earth.

The elves came forth from the other side of the forest. Many were hidden in their camouflage-green armour. Their magical sword, like the dagger, vibrated with power.

With war racing through the minds of both elves and dwarves, there came a great flash in the sky above them. They all looked upwards in astonishment, for it looked as though the heavens were opening up. Then, unexpectedly, two images drifted from the sky and set themselves between the armies. The elves and dwarves gaped in awe. For there, standing in between them, were both their gods.

In unison both the images roared, “End this. The land is to be shared amongst you, not fought for with bloodshed. See to it that things change, else you both shall suffer greatly.”

Then as abruptly as the images had appeared, they were gone. From that day on many changes were made. Peace was at hand. War was at its end.

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Kyle Bell
Grade 9
Adam Scott Collegiate Vocational Institute

Bitter Cold

by Daria Robson

It was freezing. The vexatious wind howled, teasing the trees and tossing the few remaining multicoloured leaves. The full moon slid across the cold, star-filled sky. Below, the wooded end of the park was silent. There were no birds, for they had all flown south or were nesting in the tall branches of the swaying trees, and all the creatures of the woods were snuggled up nice and cozy, safely asleep until spring. The wood was deserted save for one lonesome figure, huddled close, deep in a corner. Her back was pressed up against a tall oak tree in the bushes, knees curled up tightly against her chest in an attempt to draw as much warmth to herself as possible. Her small, bony fingers clutched a tattered, thin corner of a blanket, once a light blue, but after so many nights spent like this, now a light shade of brown. Her frail body was shaking with a force so impossibly strong.

She kept thinking about happy memories to distract her mind from the gnawing cold, but that alone was a challenge, for her short life of merely eleven years hadn't been full of happiness. There was a hot, steaming bowl of chicken soup and a comfortable bed with lots of pillows and downy comforters surrounding her. Just thinking of warm things sent shivers of heat coursing through her veins. Gradually, though, the numbing sensation in her feet became unbearable and she had to move, knocking herself out of her reverie. She blinked, causing the tiny crystals of ice that had formed on her eyelashes to break off and flake to the ground.

As the wind abruptly picked up again, the girl tried to hide herself under her blanket. No good came of it. Had she made the right decision to leave her house two weeks ago? It wasn't as cold then. Maybe she should go back, but to what? There may not be anything to go back to except more pain, but for how long would she be able to last out here in the cold without any shelter? As she wiggled around, curling into an even tighter ball, she knocked her arm sharply against the trunk of the tree. She snapped her arm back against her chest, wincing at the violent burst of pain. She slowly pulled up her sleeve, her numb fingers barely able to grasp the cloth, and glanced at the still tender bruise on her forearm; it had only just begun to diminish in size. She touched the raised scab on her once-swollen lip. No, she thought, I made the right decision.

The girl tilted her head up towards the sky brimmed with clouds and heavy with snow. I should get some sleep, she thought. It's going to snow. But no matter how hard she tried, she just couldn't find sleep. The cold wouldn't let her be. Suddenly, a fit of coughing overcame her. Painful spasms racked her tiny body. She moved her hand up to cover her mouth. The spasms subsided. As she slowly removed her hand, she noticed it was covered with specks of blood. She quickly forgot the pain, for she had learned at an early age to deal with it. Instead, her mind raced back to the last time she had a fit like that.

When her cough came, she had been sitting on the steps of Sandy's Variety, asking the passers-by for spare change. The store clerk came out at the sound of her coughing. She picked her up, carried her inside the warm store, and gave her a steaming bowl of soup and crusty, delicious bread. She felt so content. She remembered the kindness the woman had shown her.

She slowly opened her eyes and looked around. With a sudden burst of happiness, she realized that she was no longer cold; she was warm, no not warm, hot! The heat was so intense that she removed her shirt and pants, tossing them to the side. For the first time in a long while she smiled, looking up at something only she could see, eyes shining. She held her knees close, not because of the cold, but for the comfort it brought. She closed her eyes tightly. When she opened them again, she could see tiny snowflakes falling all around her. She was overcome with

the urge to laugh out loud, a tiny sound but full of emotion. The effort soon left her exhausted. Taking one last look at the trees lightly covered in snow and oblivious to the wet trickling down her cheeks, she whispered her last words: “Thank you.” Her eyes closed one final time. Her limp body slumped to the ground. Two snowflakes landed lightly on her eyelids, frozen in place for moments, before slowly melting.

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Daria Robson
Grade 9
Kenner Collegiate Vocational Institute

The Peculiar Theft of the Opal

by Eric Francis Mason

As twilight descended on the serene landscape of Vavasour Hall, a faint breeze stirred the oak trees. The well-tended flowerbeds and gleaming marble pillars attested to the wealth of its owner, Lady Holbroune, countess of Surrey. A banquet was to be given in honour of her niece, Claudia, who was staying with her for the duration of the holidays. It was she with whom Lady Holbroune was speaking.

"Claudia dear, would you please tell Thompson that Lord Holbroune is not to burn incense during the time the guests are here?"

Lord Holbroune, Lady Holbroune's son, had recently converted to Hinduism and was eagerly embracing, not to mention devoting all his cash to, the entire mysticism that surrounded the religion. Her thoughts were interrupted by the arrival of her first guests.

"Senator and Mrs. Warburton of the United States, m'lady," announced Thompson, the butler, with a slight bow.

"Lady Holbroune," said the senator, "I want to tell you how proud I am, along with my wife, to be your guests tonight." Here he indicated the figure behind him arrayed in pants and extracting a cigar from her sequined purse.

"I am very happy to have you here, Senator, and you too, Mrs. Warburton," replied Lady Holbroune untruthfully, hiding her dislike of her guests.

The other guests began to arrive, and shortly Thompson announced that dinner was, indeed, served.

* * *

In the mahogany dining room there was a feeling of quiet contentment, occasionally shattered by conversation arising from Mrs. Warburton's area. The Bishop St. Dennis complimented his hostess on the excellent quality of the beef ragout.

"I am exceedingly glad you enjoyed it," replied the countess, but her attention was diverted by the inquiries of Colonel Venier, a collector of oriental art, on the subject of the fabulous Duboni Opal she was now wearing.

"Yes, it came from India and was a present from my late husband." She blushed a little and added, "Its estimated worth is 100,000 pounds."

"It is indeed a wondrous jewel," said Lord Holbroune's friend, the Greek poet Mr. Spriodon Tanalonzo, who gazed rapturously at the opal. "I wish I had its full worth for the financing of my new play."

"It'll be smashing, mother," said Holbroune arrayed in silk and velvet and sporting a large turban. He was interrupted by Mrs. Warburton complaining about the lack of money for the suffragettes and the weight of her large necklace.

“Absolutely scandalous, the lack of funds,” she said. “I do declare I have a blister on my neck from the weight of the necklace. Ornaments are always so heavy nowadays!”

* * *

Thompson was serving cocktails in the drawing room after dinner, and the guests were all quietly conversing with each other, with the exception of Bishop St. Dennis. The colonel was discussing Far Eastern Art with Lord Holbroune and the poet Spriodon. Claudia was contemplating the finer points of Plato with the senator, while his wife and Lady Holbroune were considering the latest Paris fashions.

And then the lights went out.

There was a scream and confusion reigned. When the lights went on again, Lady Holbroune said feebly, “My necklace, it’s gone!”

* * *

The persons and possessions of the guests were searched thoroughly, but to no avail. As they sat in the drawing room, Mrs. Warburton said shakily, “All this commotion, I really must have a cigar.”

She extracted one from her husband’s cigar case, but he protested.

“Remember your digestion, darling,” he said. “I wouldn’t think it advisable so soon after dinner.”

Bishop St. Dennis was conversing with Lady Holbroune. Suddenly he uttered an exclamation.

“Why what’s this?” he said. “Pray excuse me.” And with a deft motion, he abstracted a scrap of silk from the countess’ earring. As he examined it, he observed that it was of a delicate Asian texture. Asking her permission, he inserted it in the pocket of his simar.

“I would now like to examine, if I may, the fuse box,” the bishop inquired. He was led to the fuse box; then he examined the surrounding area outside, the rose garden. He observed several footprints of small sturdy shoes.

“Yes,” remarked the bishop, “if I may speak with the gardener’s son, I believe I shall have the answer to this unusual problem.”

* * *

The guests had now reassembled in the drawing room and suspicious glances darted around the room. Even the cheerful Mrs. Warburton felt the solemnity of the occasion as the bishop rose and began.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I have come to a conclusion.” He turned to the senator with a small smile. “May I oblige you for a cigar, sir?”

The senator grinned and open his cigar case, but instead of taking the one offered to him, the bishop selected one, peeled back the label, and took the Duboni Opal from its hiding place. The senator, his face suffused with blood, shouted an oath.

"Yes," continued the bishop, "it was merely a matter of remembering some seemingly insignificant details. The senator was in financial debt. Mrs. Warburton's ornaments are made of paste, evident by the fact that she announced she had a blister. This was due to second-rate jewellery, which can cause a rash on delicate skin, and not to the weight. Also, when Mrs. Warburton requested a cigar and chose one herself, her husband feared it might prove to be the one in which he had hidden the opal. The condemning evidence, however, was the testimony of the gardener's son, who had been persuaded to shut out the lights at 9:00 p.m. when we all would be in the drawing room. The silk I found on Lady Holbroune's earring was merely a red-herring to cast suspicion onto Lord Holbroune. It was too clean-edged to be a tear." The bishop turned to the senator sadly. "It was very unwise."

* * *

The police were duly telephoned. As they escorted the senator out, Claudia remarked to Bishop St. Dennis,

"What an auspicious beginning for the holidays!"

* * * * * * *

Eric Francis Mason
Grade 9
St. Peter's Secondary School

The Piano

by William Lamond

The piano had always been there. It loomed in the parlour like some prehistoric beast in its lair, enticing those foolish enough to come and attempt to plunk out a tune, only to be utterly disappointed by the horrible sounds produced by their untrained fingers stumbling across the keys. At length it was abandoned, a mere piece of decor in the largely unused room.

Mike had known the piano since he was very young. When he was a small child, its towering bulk and imposing gothic carvings had terrified him, and he had avoided the parlour at all costs, but as he grew older, it became less frightening. Mike grew bolder until one day, during those teenage years when one thinks oneself invincible, he approached the piano cautiously. He slowly pulled out the ancient, heavy wooden bench and sat down. Resting on the piano in front of him was a yellowed, dusty copy of the "Moonlight Sonata," by Ludwig van Beethoven. Mike looked hard at the music, looked down at the keys, and looked back at the music. He realized that he had no idea how to play the piano. Still, he decided that there was no backing down now and tentatively put a finger down on one of the keys.

Suddenly, an invisible force caught hold of his hands, giving them a life of their own, and they started playing the first movement of the "Moonlight Sonata" perfectly, without Mike willing them to do so! The chords flowed easily from his nimble digits, smoothly making the transition from phrase to phrase, and accenting and decrescendoing in the proper places, all in perfect rhythm. Mike was amazed and excited! He moved into the second movement, effortlessly bringing the music off the sheet and into reality. Mike began having visions of himself as a world-renowned pianist.

By the third movement, however, Mike was becoming worried, because, no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't prevent his hands from playing. He finished the "Moonlight Sonata," and to his horror, instead of stopping, his hands sifted through more music and brought out George Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue."

Mike was glued to the bench as his fingers kept playing. While he tried desperately to get control over them, tears of frustration ran down his face. He began screaming for help as his hands methodically polished off Bach, Satie, Debussy, and Chopin. But no one came to his aid.

Mike knew that if he couldn't stop his hands, he'd spend the remainder of his life sitting at this keyboard. His mind raced as he fought down panic while trying to think of a way to stop this terrible phenomenon. He finally came up with an idea. He thought as hard as he could about a very, very fast piece, and, to his amazement, his hands seemed to obey his mental request, picking up a piece marked *prestississimo*, an incredibly fast tempo marking. Mike's fingers cracked their knuckles and hovered over the keys for a moment. Then, they drove into the piano with such force and speed that all Mike could see was a blur over the keys. But his plan worked! The incredible velocity at which his fingers were striking the keys travelled as kinetic energy through to the strings themselves, and Mike heard loud cracking noises as the strings began to break under the stress. The piano started creaking and shaking, its feet thumping against the floor, the ivories under Mike's hands growing hot and searing his fingers, as if the piano, in its death throes, was trying desperately to shake him off. The cracks sped up into a loud, harsh whirring noise that engulfed the entire house until there was a tremendous bang and a brilliant flash of white light. Mike was thrown halfway across the room, and when he could see again, there was no trace of the piano, not even a splinter!

Extremely shaken, Mike walked out of the room, resolving to take up sculpting, or watercolours, or gardening, anything other than playing the piano.

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William Lamond
Grade 9
Peterborough Collegiate Vocational School

Hangin' Out

by Matt Whitfield

So I'm down at the store with Jeff, right? We're just hangin' out, doin' nothin', right? Just waitin' for someone maybe to come along who could, like, buy us some smokes or beer or somethin'. There was a party that night, I think. Sooooo many parties, dude! So we were just, like, killin' time.

So we're just, like, sittin' there on the steps, right? And guess who comes along? That goddam little dirt, Zack. Now, man, don't get me wrong. I got nothin' against the kid. I just don't like him. Don't mind him, really, long as he stays the hell away from me. People got their place in the world, and his is nowhere near mine.

So, like I said, I got nothin' personal against the dirt. But Jeff, man. Jeff hates that kid. Damned if I know why, but Jeff can't stand him. At all.

So Zack's, like, walkin' along, right, and he notices us on the stairs. He sees us, and then sorta stops, you know. Hesitates. That's the word. He hesitates, but he keeps walkin'. Jeff notices him, trails off from what he was sayin'. He stands up, stares at Zack. Zack's, like, panickin', he's lookin' away like he can't see us.

"Hey, faggot," says Jeff. "Where the hell you goin'?"

Zack, he looks up at Jeff. Jeff's got a good six inches on Zack, right, and he's, like, buff, man. He could kick Zack's ass without breakin' a sweat.

So Zack, he's, like, pretendin' that he's all calm and shit. "I'm going in the store," he says. "Could you please get out of my way?"

He's tryin' to play it cool, but his voice, like, cracks, and he's panickin'. I can see it in his eyes.

Me, I'm just sittin' there on the steps still, watchin'. Like I said before, I don't have nothin' against Zack. He's a pissy little asshole of a kid, but he never did nothin' to me.

Anyway, Jeff, he laughs, and he says, "You hear that? The faggot wants in the store! Should we let him in?"

Me, I don't wanna get involved, really. I mean, that store's right by the cop shop. Any of the pigs went out to get a candy bar, could've been trouble. Besides, I'm kinda feelin' sorry for Zack by this point. Prob'ly he was just buyin' milk for his mommy or somethin' like that, and really, why should I care? He means nothin' to me. I don't care about him enough to hate him.

So I shrug. I say, "Meh." I do nothin'.

I do nothin' when Jeff grabs Zack by the collar, throws him up against the wall. I do nothin' when Zack whimpers for help, nothin' when Jeff smacks him. Do nothin' when the blood, bright, bright red, drips down onto the ground. Do nothin' when Zack runs home cryin', all his money gone, bloody nose, bloody clothes, bawlin' his eyes out, cryin' for his goddam mommy. Do nothin' when Jeff throws stones after him, laughin'.

Do nothin' that night at the party. Jenna, she comes over to me, and she tries to get somethin' goin', right? And don't get me wrong here. I like Jenna. She's hot, man. Hot with a freakin' capital H. Any other night...

But tonight I'm just doin' nothin'. All around me, people are havin' a great time, gettin' drunk, gettin' stoned, gettin' laid. All around me, people are laughin', jokin', enjoyin' theirselves. And there's me, sittin' on a couch in the middle of this party, just sittin' there, doin' nothin'. Doin' nothin', starin' into space. Thinkin'. Thinkin', shit, I did nothin'.

* * * * * * *

Matthew Whitfield
Grade 10
Peterborough Collegiate Vocational School

Let's Play Pretend

by Kate McLeod

I pulled the purple diary from the clutter of the closet. I opened it and giggled at the picture that fell out. It showed a sticky-faced Lauren, grinning from ear to ear, with her arm around my shoulders. It had been taken last month at the zoo, less than two months after I had stepped in to fill the gap in their small family.

"Hey, sleepyhead!" cried Lauren as she opened the door to our shared bedroom and clambered onto the bed. She smelled of toothpaste and the flowery shampoo her mom bought at the drugstore. I handed her the picture. She sighed, "I wish mom would let me hang it up." I shrugged and turned back to the diary; it was my turn to make an entry. With the pink marker I clutched in my hand, I drew a picture of the two of us on the swings at the playground.

"We should go to the park," I said, admiring my artwork. She glanced out of the window and shook her head. "We can't. Look at those clouds."

I nodded. "Then let's go get breakfast." I pulled on my slippers, and we headed down the stairs. As we passed the dining room, we saw Lauren's mom sitting at the table talking on the phone with her head held in her free hand. Parts of her conversation drifted into the hallway.

"I just don't know if I can keep it... a new baby... Lauren...." I looked over at my friend, her eyes wide with shock. Her tight curls jumped as she shook her head and ran back towards the bedroom. I tiptoed up the stairs behind her, not wishing Mrs. Austin to notice us.

When I reached the bedroom, I found Lauren with her Barbie suitcase already half-packed. She gave me a meaningful look; I nodded and added my teddy bear and pyjamas to the pile of things to go into the suitcase. She smiled brightly and hugged me.

We crept back down the stairs; this time each of us carried one end of the tightly packed suitcase. I pulled on my running shoes as Lauren looked thoughtfully at the fall jackets hanging on our hooks. She shook her head firmly, leaving them untouched. She helped me to get the suitcase over the railing of the back porch. We then jumped after it and began hiking down the block.

We spent the morning wandering around the neighbourhood. We stopped to visit Ms. Jenson, the librarian. She let us each take out a book and gave us cookies to take on, what she called, our "adventure." We went from there to the park, where we spent an entire afternoon playing pirates with some of the local kids.

One by one, they began to drift home for dinner. I could see Lauren was hurt but resolved. "We don't need them," she told me, "We can just stay here tonight. The Indians slept outside. We'll play Pocahontas." I was uneasy about this decision, but I trusted Lauren and told her so.

We ate our cookies and then read our books until it began to get dark. Suddenly, the forests surrounding the park, so perfect for playing hide-and-seek or Robin Hood, seemed dangerous, full of things that I was certain ate pretend Indians. Lauren cast a similarly uneasy eye over the forests but turned, as if unconcerned, back to her story. I returned to my book until I noticed the droplets of water blurring the words on the page. I looked to Lauren for an answer and watched as her eyes lit with an idea. "The library!" she cried triumphantly. I quickly agreed, happy to get away from those woods.

We started up the streets we had walked a thousand times before, but in the dark they were much harder to follow. My stomach flip-flopped as passing cars made the shadows dance eerily around us. We clasped hands and continued our march, with the Barbie bag bumping along the sidewalk behind us.

Soon, none of the buildings looked familiar. All were much bigger than any I had ever seen. The streetlights made the windows gleam like laughing eyes. But none seemed to be laughing at anything I would find particularly funny. We huddled in the doorway of one of the nearest and least-menacing-looking buildings to give ourselves a moment out of the pounding rain.

"What if she can't keep it?" she asked me.

"The baby?" I asked, as if she'd already told me.

She nodded. "When Daddy died, she cried all the time and kept asking the ceiling why she couldn't keep him. I don't want her to start crying again if she finds out she can't keep the baby either. Maybe…" she was cut short by a pair of blinding headlights pulling up in front of the doorway where we were huddled.

"Lauren?" called the voice that stepped out of the car. It moved into the lights and we saw that it was Mrs. Austin; her face was red and streaked with tears.

"Oh, no," whispered Lauren dispirited. "She's not allowed to keep it. I just knew it."

The next morning Lauren came solemnly up to the bedroom where I was anxiously waiting. Her mother had called her down earlier for a talk. I thought she must have been angry about having to come and find us.

"If we had taken our jackets, I think we would have been okay," I started to tell her, but she shook her head. "She wanted to talk about the baby. She says that no one is going to take it away from us, that it's ours for good now. She said she's going to need me to help out a lot. I'm going to be a big sister, you know." She stared fixedly at the floor.

"Then what's the matter?"

"She says I need to stop playing with you now that the baby is coming." She laid a picture of herself in front of a monkey cage on the bed. Her face was covered in cotton candy and her arm was held at a strange angle. "She says that eight is too old to have an imaginary friend."

* * * * * * *

Kate McLeod
Grade 10
Crestwood Secondary School

The Gift

by Terry Hart

"Happy birthday to Harry, happy birthday to you," my mother and I sang to my father on his 38th birthday. I was so excited for him to open my present that I could barely contain myself.

"It's kind of small," he said jokingly as he slowly unwrapped it.

"Good things come in small packages," said my mother with a smile.

"Hurry up, Dad," I said impatiently. He went even more slowly. He pulled out the tiny, roughly carved canoe I had worked so hard on. "Not bad for an eleven-year-old," he said.

"Dad, do you think that maybe we could go on a real canoe trip someday?"

"Sure, son – someday," he said. "Now, where's my cake?"

Then he put the little canoe with his other gifts, as if it was nothing special. I could have bought him a cheap-looking model that was made in China, and he would have been just as happy. I was crushed.

I went upstairs without saying goodnight. I opened the window for some air. The night was calm and cool, and I listened to the sounds of the city for a while before turning out my light.

* * *

Five years went by. I kept asking my dad when we could go on a canoe trip. He always came up with excuses. He was too busy with work, he didn't like the outdoors, there was too much to do at home. But then, on my seventeenth birthday, my wish finally came true.

"I've decided to take some time off work to go up north on this canoe trip of yours. So it'd better be worth it." He still didn't sound very enthusiastic about the trip.

"Come on, Dad. It'll be fun."

"Yeah, I'm sure it will. But when I'm not working, I'm not making any money."

Of course, I knew we were financially drained. My mom had recently lost her job, and we had been forced to use some of my savings.

"What about the money Grandma gave me?"

"Sure, that'll go far," he said sarcastically.

"If you're not going to enjoy this trip, then there's no point in going," I grumbled.

"Listen, Ian, I've already gone to the trouble of making all the necessary arrangements at work. I know how much this means to you."

Well, it obviously didn't mean much to him.

* * *

The five-day trip would consist of driving up to northern Ontario and paddling the Albany River. As the river was a very demanding one, the outfitters convinced us to rent the best (and therefore most expensive) equipment.

"I thought canoeing and camping were supposed to simplify things," my dad complained. Neither of us spoke much during the long drive. It felt great to finally reach our destination. No traffic noises, just the sounds of nature, which was exactly what I was hoping for.

I was so happy to finally be in a canoe with my dad that I started off paddling very fast and accidentally splashed some water on him. I froze, expecting him to yell at me, but suddenly I was drenched from head to toe. We laughed together for the first time in years.

Later that day, we found a nice campsite and set up the tent. After we ate, we sat around the fire talking. It was great to feel so relaxed with each other. We watched as the stars grew brighter and my dad pointed out a bunch of constellations to me. I had no idea that he knew so much about what was out there.

"I always wanted to be an astronomer," he said.

Each night, we settled into our routine of talking around the fire and watching the stars. On our last night, the northern lights appeared and we sat there in awe. And then he said the strangest thing.

"Thank you son."

"For what?" I asked.

"I'll be honest. I really wasn't looking forward to this trip. But now, I'm really glad we could do it together Even though it was a gift to you, it has turned out to be very rewarding for me."

I was speechless. I went to sleep that night content and without a worry in my head.

The next day, as we paddled ever closer back to the routines of our everyday lives, I tried to keep in my mind all that we had experienced together – the river, the stars, the beauty of the outdoors.

As we came around a bend in the river, we saw a baby moose and her mother eating lily pads. Then they moved on, and we watched them disappear, completely unaware of what lay ahead.

First the sound came, like the roar of a lion. Then I saw in horror that the river came to an end a few metres ahead.

"Dad!" I shouted. "Waterfall!"

"Quick, Ian! Grab that branch"

I grabbed it and held on with all my might, realizing just how fast the water was moving. Yet everything seemed to be going by so slowly. I turned to see my father paddling wildly, desperately trying to stabilize the boat. He looked back at me and our eyes met. I will never

forget how scared he looked. Then my father disappeared over the edge of the falls. I tried to yell, but no words came out. I had the sickening feeling that I would never see him again. I panicked and felt the sudden urge to let go of the branch and swim after him. But I held on. With tears in my eyes, I pulled myself up and climbed to shore. I ran along the bank of the river, but all I could see was the black, devilish water and no sign of my father or the canoe.

Search-and-rescue teams were sent out daily, but they found nothing. My mother and I were completely overwhelmed with grief. I kept seeing my father's face, reminding me of the awful truth – it was all my fault. If only I had swum after him. If only we hadn't gone on this trip. If only I hadn't given him that stupid little carved canoe.

Two years passed before I was able to return to the river. As I knelt by the shore below the falls, I peered into the water. There, in a small pool, I saw the canoe that I had carved so many years ago. My father had carried it with him! The pangs of guilt disappeared as if they had never been there. My father had loved me and would always be with me in spirit. It was the greatest gift I could ever have received.

* * * * * * *

Terry Hart
Grade: 10
Adam Scott Collegiate Vocational Institute

2005 Junior Fiction Winner

A Strip of Yellow Lines

by Jess McCuaig

It was a small town. Battered and tired. You know, those one-street towns you drive through on your way to something bigger and better. Every evening, when the sky was a palette of pastels, I would stand on the oil-stained pavement just staring down a strip of yellow lines. More than anything, I wanted out.

I started climbing when I was no taller than my father's kneecap. Crib rails were no match for me. By the time I stood at his waist, I had climbed every tree in the neighbourhood. The scars on my arms and legs were like badges representing every fall. I was never one to be confined.

The world was unknown to me. The farthest I had seen was several fields' length. As far as I was concerned, the tallest tree on Earth wouldn't offer an adequate view. I knew that many marvels lay beyond my sight, for the books I read told me of them endlessly. But I was tired of reading. I wanted to experience life like the people in hard cover novels did, first-hand.

My seventeenth birthday brought along sweet opportunity: the smell of gasoline as I filled the tank, and later, burning rubber as I stepped on the accelerator. The fields disappeared with my longing in a blurred image behind me. Each time I went a little farther until one day I didn't return.

* * *

Mud oozed through my fingertips as I fell for the hundredth time that day. Footing was treacherous in the Ruwenzori Mountains. A local had offered to hike up with me. He reached out to help me up. A loud sigh escaped my mouth. Aching muscles, mud-crusted clothing. The tiny crisscrossing crevices running across my hands brown with dirt.

"Just like my days in the sandbox," I thought with a smile.

That thought had crossed my mind frequently since the time I began my worldwide ventures. Now on my feet, I looked around. Half a day's climb put me in my euphoria. Mountains, Earth's shoulders, were available any time I wanted to see over the crowd.

The view was...well! The sun was at the angle in the sky that makes you close your eyes and drink it in. And the breeze lifted my hair off my shoulders into a furling ribbon behind me. The birds circled below. With arms stretched out, being airborne didn't seem so impossible. Having the ability to break the limits, to push the –

"We should be heading back now, don't you think?"

His words made me start. My guide stood rather awkwardly, rubbing one toe in the dirt. My face flared. I answered quickly in the affirmative; my tone made it clear I had forgotten he was there.

That night the sky was a midnight cityscape, in total darkness with a few lights on. Tomorrow I would be relocated. As per usual, I tossed and turned all night, and my brain kept up a hearty conversation with itself.

* * *

Paint fumes were twenty times stronger in the hot Uganda sun and primer glistened on the freshly coated walls. Predictably, the roof was mine. Heights were no problem to me. The shiver sent up my spine wasn't a horror movie chill but rather the kind an author would get when he held his first published novel in his hands. I had been stationed in Kotido for about three weeks, working on a community centre project. The whole village had come out to make sure it was completed with great care. During my break, I sat speaking with Ochen, a man I had befriended upon arrival in Kotido.

"Where is it you come from?" he asked.

I remember trying to explain, but he didn't recognize the city names I mentioned. With a stick I began to draw a map in the warm sand. The heat was starting to get to me. I hadn't finished drawing North America before I passed out.

* * *

Confusion enveloped me. I squinted into fluorescent lighting. I was lying down in a very modern room. It was stark, but the designer had tried to force character upon it with floral curtains, subdued blue paint, and a rose-coloured armchair. The sterile smell of the place was very familiar.

A woman clad in pea-green scrubs strolled in. Immediately I knew I was in some sort of medical facility. I had almost forgotten what the overwhelming smell in my nostrils was. The last time I had been in an up-to-date hospital was when I broke my arm as a child.

"How are we feeling today, dear?" asked the shuffling nurse, plumping my pillows in what seemed like a choreographed routine.

It wasn't until then that I realized I wasn't feeling quite my usual self. I was tired. Extremely tired.

* * *

His lips moved, but the man in the white coat with the clipboard didn't make a sound. Still, I knew what he had said, and it felt like a bullet hitting my chest.

* * *

Losing my hair wasn't what bothered me. The fact that I had lost the drive and ability to do what I loved most nearly brought me to insanity. I stayed in the hospital for almost a year undergoing various treatments, but nothing helped. As time wore on, a new sickness began to grow within me, one that could not be medically treated.

My heart was far wearier than my deteriorating body. It was strange when I first acknowledged what else might be killing me. For once in my life, I wanted to go home.

* * *

I remember the ride home in my dad's beat-up yellow pickup truck. My heart beat at a steady pace, and my breathing relaxed as I saw familiar houses greet me. If I were to stand now, I would reach my father's chin, but I'm having trouble getting enough strength to do so.

This is still a small town. Peeling paint and cracked sidewalks. You know, those one-street towns you drive through on your way to something bigger and better. Tonight I sit beneath a painter's masterpiece on oil-stained pavement. I no longer stare down the yellow lines; I already know what's out there. My gaze is focused on the sky. My next journey will be upon this road. I was never one to be confined.

* * * * * * *

Jess McCuaig
Grade 9
Peterborough Collegiate Vocational School

The Medicine Hut

by Kaitlin Fuller

Jebediah laughed as he finally pegged one of the sheep with a stone. He'd been wandering around causing trouble all afternoon: first pushing one of the little kids into a mudhole, then letting Mr. Nygun's cattle out, and now bothering the sheep from his perch in a dry old tree. Hearing a faint shuffling, he quietly parted the brittle branches to see the road. An old man hobbled painfully down the compacted dirt. He wore many layers of fancy woven silks, and long strands of beads around his wrinkled neck. His many bracelets jingled with each step, and his wispy white hair fell back behind his shoulders. A large gold medallion glinted on his chest. He walked with an intricately carved cane that curled into the head of a dragon. His strides were slow and pained, but he didn't seem to be affected by it.

Jebediah smirked and trotted into the main road, coming up behind the old man. "He's an outsider," he thought to himself. "He'll be sorry he walked down *my* road."

Strutting up mere inches from the ancient man's heels, he stomped on his beautiful robes. But to Jebediah's surprise, the man didn't turn around. He kept up his painful pace as if nothing had happened. Jebediah, visibly irked by the lack of reaction, strode up beside the old man and knocked into him.

"Watch where you're going!" he hollered into the man's deeply lined face. And still the man walked passively on down the road, seemingly lost in some fantastic daydream. Now Jebediah was getting mad. He stomped his foot and stood right in front of the trespasser.

The old man finally seemed to register Jebediah's existence. His large, gnarled hand twisted firmly around his cane. A small, almost pitying smile played across his face. In one swift, imperceptible motion, he brought his cane down and cracked it over Jebediah's skull. With a yelp, Jebediah clutched his splitting head. He let loose a string of words so vulgar that his mother would have disowned him. Lunging at the old man, he tore the cane from his bony hands. Stumbling back a few steps, he held the cane over his shoulder like a baseball bat.

The old man's smile still hadn't wavered. Jebediah became absolutely irate – and the sweltering noon heat wasn't helping matters. He tightened his grip on the cane and wound up. With a furious yell, he swung the cane over his head and brought it down with all his strength. A strangled yelp came from the old man.

Jebediah looked at the splinters he held. He had smashed the beautiful cane over a rock in front of him. The old man regarded him with disgusted dismay. "Now that was a very foolish thing to do," he said in a calm and calculated voice. "I think I shall go find your father and tell him about this. That was a very valuable item you just broke."

The last thing Jebediah wanted was trouble with his father. The village had fallen on hard times with the drought that had begun almost two months ago. His father was an elder of the village, and a lot of pressure was on him to help bring about better times. He was more irritable and angry with each passing day. They couldn't afford to replace this old man's cane.

"No," Jebediah squeaked, "Please don't tell my father; I'll do anything."

“Hmm,” the old man arched an eyebrow, “Is that so?” Jebediah kicked at the dirt and shrugged. “There is another option. You will come and work for me at my shop. You shall work off the damage you’ve done, and not a word will be uttered to your father.”

Jebediah didn’t know what to say. Working at this man’s shop seemed like a crazy idea... but the last thing he wanted was for his father to know...

“I guess I have no choice,” he muttered, running his hand through his dark, curly hair. “What do I have to do?”

“Good decision, boy. You’ll be working at my medicine hut,” he replied. “Meet me there at dawn. It’s ten minutes up this road; you can’t miss it. By the way, you may call me Twajibed.” He turned and hobbled back the way he had come, not giving Jebediah a chance to reply.

Confused and unsure, Jebediah stared after Twajibed while the sun made a rippling heat-mirror of the horizon.

“This is odd... but I guess I have to do it,” he quietly said to himself.

* * *

Jebediah rapped on the door of the little hut. It had designs like those on the cane. He was about to knock again when it slowly swung open. No one was behind the door; only an indigo wisp of smoke greeted him. He tentatively stepped in as the door creaked shut. He was absolutely astounded. There were shelves upon shelves of interestingly coloured bottles and fluids.

Long garlands of strange beads were strung along the low ceiling, fencing in the indigo smoke. There were no lights, just an eerie glow whose source couldn’t be pinpointed. A complicated series of vials and tubes was set up on an ancient mahogany desk. Liquids within them bubbled and steamed. Tiny, lizard-like creatures turned and rolled in the larger vials. Jebediah became mesmerized by their unnaturally slow and smooth movements... He inched closer...

“Boy,” a voice hissed, “*Never* touch those if you wish to keep your soul. I have but one rule: I command respect.”

“Oh, hello Twajibed,” Jebediah said flatly, watching the man approach from a dark corner. “So what am I supposed to do and for how long?”

“First, we must make something clear. You shall not touch what is not yours if you are not instructed to. There are very – and if you roll your eyes one more time, I shall cut them out – powerful items in here. Please boy, I wish nothing to harm you, so just heed my words.”

Jebediah simply cocked his head and shrugged. He thought this senile old man had to be overreacting. Twajibed promptly set a crate down in front of Jebediah and smiled.

“You will wash these.” He indicated the contents of the crate. “Then come and find me for further work. And, you shall be here for as long as I deem necessary.” He shuffled off to the corner he had come from, again not giving Jebediah a chance to speak.

Jebediah set to work. He scrubbed box after box of dirty vials and instruments. He soon got bored and tossed his washcloth into an empty crate. A large, shallow stone dish caught his eye. It

stood on a pedestal in the far corner of the hut. Jebediah looked around casually to make sure Twajibed wasn't near. He carefully crept over to the dish. The smoke seemed to be coming right out of the bubbling liquid. Jebediah passed his hand swiftly over the strange liquid. It began to settle and the smoke stopped. He stood on his tiptoes and leaned in over the dish. A crystal-clear image of a lush forest appeared. A voice floated up towards him as a shadow dashed by.

"Come in, come play... come in, come play..." it repeated over and over.

The soft, captivating voice seemed to drown out all other noise and numb all his senses. He felt as if he was floating. The shadow dashed by again.

"We're all having fun, join us..."

He felt himself being drawn closer to the picturesque forest. It was as if a collar had fastened around his neck and some unseen force was slowly tugging him forward. The adrenalin raced freely through his entire body. It made every part of him ache with an odd pleasure. What was happening? What was this thing doing to him? He had to get to it. Maybe it would make him feel better... make this end...

In the blink of an eye, he was hurtled through time and space and found himself in the clearing in the mirror. A symphony of chirps, purrs, and groans chorused around him. He looked up at the sky. Instead of a magnificent blue, he saw the smoky silhouette of Twajibed's shop.

"I knew you couldn't obey the rules."

All at once, the beautiful landscape began warping and melting. The calming sounds of animals turned into a cacophony of howls and screams. The sky bled a crimson red, and the ground crumbled and rose to monstrous peaks. The soft voice grew to a demanding roar: "There's no escape."

"There has to be; this is all a dream!" Jebediah thought frantically.

"It's not a dream; you're ours now."

How did it know what he thought? He had to get out of here. Jebediah leaped up and tripped over a mass of rocks. He slammed against the black earth, scraping his hands and knees. He realised with a sudden horror that this was all very real. A circle of shadows surrounded him where he lay, and the very earth itself seemed to moan and wail.

"You should have listened," one shadow hissed.

"You broke the rules," another one cut in.

"You're all ours," yet another taunted.

"You'll never leave," one said as it reached towards him.

"You will suffer with us... with us all," they hissed.

"For eternity." They began closing in.

Jebediah screamed as the shadows all slid towards him. A cold, strangling grip worked its way from his stomach up his throat. He couldn't breathe as the shadows leaned over, closer and

closer. The screams and wails grew to such a deafening pitch that he could no longer hear. The world was still crumbling around him; only now it was completely silent.

"It's over." The shadow's sweet voice tore through the unbearable silence. It held such a horrifying quality that Jebediah's veins felt as though they had turned to ice. The world turned black and the feverous screams roared back. A pair of bloodshot eyes snapped open in the darkness, taking a new hold on his battered soul... it was never going to end. Jebediah had breathed his last free breath.

* * *

Twajibed swept quietly around his shop, pausing to frown into the murky dish.

"It's a shame..." he sighed, before waving his hand over the basin.

A thin black and red string of smoke floated to the ceiling before it faded back to its normal serene indigo.

* * * * * * *

Kaitlin Fuller
Grade 9
Adam Scott Collegiate Vocational Institute

Einstein's Bus

by Catriona White

He hated the sun, and the sun hated him, which was exactly the reason a silent groan had slipped from him when the sun climbed out of a cloud and glared into his eyes. He laid his head against the icy window, his hair leaving fine, spidery imprints. The bus continued on the path that put him directly opposite the sun's rays. It glinted off the snow that hadn't been turned sandy and brown, so his attentions were drawn elsewhere.

Only a few people were on the bus this morning, and they all sat facing forwards, still harbouring a hope that their friends would join them.

He fidgeted with his bag, hoping they were about to arrive at school. But he looked out the window (they had turned a corner and left the sun behind them) and found they were barely a quarter of the way there. By the first bus stop, he often found the ride agonizingly long, especially without his friends.

He continued to look out the window because the nothingness out there was much more stimulating than the nothingness inside the dirty yellow bus. He peered down into the hunter-green mini van that held a harried driver...

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Eliza herded her screaming children into the mini van, already filled with sticky messes and unnecessary clutter. Eliza hadn't had time to clean any of it. While the kids, Brittany, Becky, and Barry clattered into the van, they failed to notice their mother placing a suitcase in the back.

She climbed in the front and caught her reflection in the mirror. She had forgotten to brush her pale brown hair or apply makeup and was wearing her husband's U of T track sweater by accident. A sigh slipped out, though she felt a scream would be more suitable.

She had married too young, a fact that mocked her daily. Then suddenly she was a housewife with three kids and bored out of her mind.

She glanced back at her troublesome children. She loved them, she really did, but she could not remember the last time she had done anything for herself. If she didn't do something, she would inevitably become bitter. That would surely hurt her children. Filled with overwhelming excitement, she clenched the steering wheel. After all, in an hour she would have a new life! If only Barry would be quiet.

Eliza looked up to see a school bus next to her and a round-faced boy staring down at her. "He looks like a nice boy. I hope my son turns out like him," she thought.

***

He stared a moment more at the woman until their eyes met. He averted his downward, not wanting to be seen staring. But when he looked back, the car had disappeared into the sun.

He tapped his fingers to the beat of "Drink Milk, Love Life," until they became sore.

He sighed once more, wishing he had the ability to disappear in a blink. He began frantically blinking, hoping his untapped powers would suddenly appear. But he stopped when a heavy-set girl, wearing clothes much too tight, gave him a funny look.

He turned towards the window, a blush creeping along his golden skin. They were into the has-been suburbs, the houses that used to be new and now were run down and outdated. Running on the sidewalk was a man who looked as though in another time he had been handsome. He was decked out in a navy jogging suit and his partly bald head shone in the bright early morning sun...

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Barry applied his S.P.F. 30 sunscreen liberally to the top of his head. He had learned the hard way not to run without it. It made his already odd-shaped head look even stranger when it was red and peeled, especially in mid-winter.

He did his pre-jog stretch. Being a former Olympic athlete (a fact he would brag about to any willing and sometimes unwilling listener), he prided himself with his top-of-the-line workout regime. Of course, he was not in nearly as good shape as he had been at the Olympics.

He used to be a runner – and a great one at that. He had won meets and had sponsors. He had even been in a commercial for a breakfast cereal. It had been some sugary cereal that doomed its eater to obesity. He had reached the top at age nineteen. He used to think that was a good thing, until he faced the harsh reality that once you reach the top, the only place to go is down.

That's not to say he didn't go down without a fight. He was determined to stay in top condition because you never know. His house was full of memorabilia of his heyday; trophies and photos were all he had left.

Every day he jogged, hoping that today he would rise again, that today would be different. And every day the same yellow bus went by, with a boy that reminded him of when he still had had a chance...

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The boy stared at the jogger long after he had passed. Something about him was vaguely familiar.

After a moment, he realised that they were approaching his friend's stop. Hopefully he would get on and provide salvation to those dying from boredom.

The bus glided to a stop and the doors swung open. His friend grinned at him as he leaped up the dingy steps.

"Hey Barry!"

"Hey," he replied nonchalantly.

"You goin' to track tonight?"

Barry ruffled his hair confidently and grinned.

“Course, a future Olympic runner can’t skip a practice!”

* * * * * * *

Catriona White
Grade 9
Peterborough Collegiate Vocational School

2006 Junior Fiction Winner

In the Hands of Fate

by Alicia Del Mastro

There was a strong smell of fresh fish and tobacco in the air. The streets of Frankford were crowded with specialty shops selling everything from the finest hand- wrapped cigars to delicate fine bone china. I suspected that the shops did very well since Frankford was the only city off the coast of the Silver Sea for miles and miles. I walked in and out of the stores, admiring the different cultures that made up this very welcoming city. With the exception of one awkward man running a newspaper stand, the people were very friendly and talkative.

I had arrived in Frankford just a few days previously, in search of my long-lost brother. I had an optimistic feeling about this day, which led me to believe that I would finally see him again. I only vaguely remembered him, as I was very young when he had left home. He was a caring brother but had spent much of his time alone in his bedroom and never bothered with his siblings. My parents told my sister and me that he had left to find happiness and a life of his own. They said that he would be back to visit, but he never did return. Now, looking around this wonderful city, I understood why he never came back.

It was almost noon, and the grumbling of my stomach indicated that I was ready for lunch. I tied up my long blonde hair and attempted to catch a cab. The whole city had a lunch break at noon, and the streets were suddenly crowded with hungry workers, who were pushing and fighting over the nearest modes of transportation. I couldn't believe how greedy everyone became when they had to get somewhere. The quiet, calm city I had been enjoying was now a crazy circus packed full of animals.

A very strong, impatient man shoved me out of his way. It sent me tumbling to the ground, and my purse and glasses went flying through the angry crowd. I crawled on my hands and knees, searching frantically for my glasses. I heard children laughing at the sight of me, an intelligent business woman, scrambling around on the ground in a skirt and high heels. I finally located my glasses, and at that instant, the strange newspaper stand worker grabbed my purse and darted away.

I saw the man turn down a grubby alley. I figured I had nothing to lose and decided to run and catch him. With high heels in hand and determination in my veins, I ran down the alley after him, screaming. Briefly glancing at the sights around me, I realized that the city was actually remarkably unpleasant. The dumpsters behind the shops were overflowing with garbage, and rats were feeding off scraps of rotten meat, carelessly dumped near the rear entrance of the butcher's shop. Even the sun refused to shine in this dismal alley. Ravens flew overhead, encircling their next prospective meal. I felt as if I was in a horror movie.

The man continued to run at an even pace. There was something strange, yet familiar, about the expression on his face when he frantically looked back at me. I was finding it hard to keep up, and all the obstacles in the alley contributed to slowing me down. I tried not to lose sight of him. When he turned a corner around a decrepit building, my heart sank. I was sure my hopes of getting my belongings back were shattered. Around the corner, there was a 12-foot chain-link fence. Beyond the fence, I once again saw the welcoming street down which I had first ventured. This time, however, it didn't seem as welcoming. In my disappointed and exhausted state, I looked around. To my bewilderment, there was the newspaper man, crouched down in a corner with nowhere to go.

I wasn't sure how to approach him. Cautiously, and attempting to avoid shaking, I asked for my belongings back. Initially, he did not look up at me. I repeated my request a little louder,

thinking that I might not have been heard. The man looked up at me with sorrowful eyes. I could tell by the hard lines on his face that life had not been easy for him. His torn clothes, worn hands, and messy appearance made me feel sorry for him. I empathetically decided to forgive him for what he had done. Maybe his actions were out of desperation. I never realized until that moment how lucky I was, how blessed my life had been, thanks to my parents. I slowly reached out my hand to this stranger. I expected my belongings back at that moment, but instead he reached out his hand and touched mine. For a moment I felt connected to this man, not out of sympathy but for some reason that I couldn't quite grasp.

In silence, he handed me my belongings, and I slowly turned my back and walked away.

"Sara, I have missed you."

I was shocked at the sound of my name. I turned sharply to see where the voice had come from – but all I saw was the pathetic man who had caused me all this trouble. Once again, I turned and walked away. Was I imagining my name being called in this alley, so many miles away from anyone who knew me?

"Sara, I have missed you."

This time, the voice was unmistakable. I turned and headed toward the man. Tears were now swelling in his eyes. Staring into them, I realized that this stranger was no stranger at all.

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Alicia Del Mastro
Grade 10
Lakefield District Secondary School

Lobster Boxing

by Greg Conley

It was May 15th, 1976, as I recall, two days before the infamous Coonel Street Riot. I had been working in a fish shop, a job which surrounded me with some of the strangest odours known to man. This may sound like an easygoing, well-paying job, but you may have forgotten that all of this occurred during the Great Fish Shortage of '76. My employment became a less than an enjoyable task, working in a store whose fiscal future relied on fish alone.

I pried open the crate and sighed – yet another load of frozen trout. Every day, another pile of frozen trout. I popped them in the microwave for a while to thaw them out and then searched around for the fishmonger's friend: a padded mallet. Assuring myself that there weren't any customers in the store, I pounded the trout flat and dropped it in the bin labelled "Halibut." I performed this task with a certain level of detachment, as one must during any similar circumstance. Pummelling a malleable fish into a more inviting shape is not, as the French say, "*un* pleasant experience."

I was just finishing my work when my co-worker Brian entered. He gleefully pointed out that one of the fresh groupers I had been working over had slipped in with the fresh pollocks, since of course he knew they were, in fact, both stale trout. I glared at him and had another go with the mallet at the uncooperative grouper, until it became slightly more "pollocky."[18] Brian seemed to think he had reason to feel smug around me, but his smugness was betrayed by uncertainty. In an effort to raise sales, our fish shop had staged a Lobster Boxing tournament, and Brian and I were the only remaining contenders for the gold prize.[19]

Although I was able to maintain an air of aloofness about the competition, secretly I was quite proud of my lobster. I was giving it the utmost care and was feeding it on a pure *gefrumble* diet.[20] It had defeated all the contenders it boxed and had the muscle tone of something with a very good muscle tone. It was undefeatable.

On the 17th, all was ready. The miniature boxing ring was set up in the middle of the floor, and a huge crowd showed up at the fish shop to watch the match. They did a very good job of appearing to be interested in purchasing fish – without actually buying anything. The lobsters were dropped into the ring, and the bell proclaimed that the match had begun. Brian's lobster's exoskeleton rippled with the power underneath it, and my lobster retreated into a corner, where it became entwined in the ropes of the ring. Brian's lobster stepped forward for the coup de grace and then collapsed from the sheer weight of the atmosphere above it.[21] I was the winner! Although quite jubilant, I stood perfectly still.

Brian, on the other hand, was much less amused. He had been waiting weeks for his moment of victory, and now his lobster was dead, defeated at the hands of 101.3 kilopascals of pressure. He needed revenge, and I was his target.

Before I could react, Brian had reached the halibut counter and was flourishing one in my direction. "Don't point that trout at me," I warned, casually reaching for the concealed perch I knew was hanging at my belt. "It could go off." Oops! The gaping audience had now, with the

[18] Meshster's Dictionary defines "pollocky" as "An adjective denoting similarity or resemblance of the subject to a Pollock."

[19] A ceremonial mallet and all the Taste-eze™ Specialty Prime Simulated Lobster Product you can eat (.0671 ounces, according the National Food Board of the Republic of Congo).

[20] Quite the little achievement, since I have yet to discover what *gefrumble* is.

[21] Sometimes, things just happen. There doesn't have to be a reason.

help of my little slip, made the connection between the cheapness of our goods,[22] and the strange flavour in the anchovy paste. The crowd rushed us, but I escaped with my champion lobster and grabbed the .0671 ounces of Simulated Lobster Product as an afterthought.[23]

Yes, it may seem that my moment of glory was cut short, but I am still living it today. The shop was audited and shut down after the riot. I lost my job, but there are plenty of jobs. There was only ever one Coonel Street Lobster Boxing Championship, and I am glad to have lived it.

* * * * * * *

Greg Conley
Grade 10
Adam Scott Collegiate Vocational Institute

[22] Fresh Coho Salmon fillets, 76¢ a pound! Perfect for barbecues! Now with absolutely zero dyed trout!

[23] Actually, the Simulated Lobster Product consumption proclamation was a mistranslation. It would seem that .0671 ounces is the most Taste-eze™ Specialty Prime Simulated Lobster Product two people can eat. That's one trip to the hospital I don't want to repeat.

The Silent 'H' in 'Herbs'

by Kristen LaRoque

Our story does not begin in "a land far, far away" nor does it occur "once upon a time." However, it does involve a main character of such intrigue as to constitute the telling of this tale.

Somehow, it is not quite fitting to start at the beginning, and to work backwards seems quite absurd. Perhaps then, we should start in the middle and more specifically, in the middle of a mid-life crisis, and more specifically still, in the middle of a train of thought...

"There were never any limits to this life...well, only those you imposed yourself. In fact there were hardly any other outside forces at work. Yes, you certainly made sure to eliminate as many as possible – including fate, it seems. No doubt it was strangled out of your everyday life through the ceaseless use of your daytime planner and wristwatch. And the endless responsibilities which you so selfishly and faithlessly took on yourself so long ago. Control had consumed you; thus, you were controlled by your pursuit of control. The irony was almost overwhelming..."

Such was the way our character muddled around in her mind, often spending the moonlight hours forming stiff cords of thought, weaving herself in and out of reality, and receiving a pleasant degree of rope burn. Indeed, one could conclude that her mind rants often had the power to render her exhausted to the point of mental incapacity. By morning, she was quite incapable of sensible interaction, with the exception of that which occurred between herself and her dear herbs.

There was definitely a point in her past when their relationship was more or less an obsession that involved the careful consideration of the silent "h" of the word "herb." Indeed, our character would hope that you would be acquainted with that linguistic technicality and thus empathize with the fact that she herself had once paid very close attention to it. The reason for her doing so was quite simple: if she were to falter in her pronunciation of the word, she just might compromise her image as an expert, as the all-knowing being that graced the office and deserved everyone's admiration. She had been working toward it for a good many years and had gained sufficient knowledge for such a title (ever encouraged by the prestige associated with it). She became engrossed with the idea of adding another badge of intellect to her patchwork persona, hoping that the final stitch would tie it all together and bring meaning to her life.

Her efforts in achieving such a conclusion never ceased; however, they were never fruitful either. Thus, a looming feeling of failure and of lacking something had always surrounded her, consumed the space between her and her front door, and left footprints on the welcome mat.

Eventually, it was a feeling that ceased to exist.

In fact, this placid evening had given her the opportunity to become tangled quite elaborately in other thoughts, so much so that that cloud of dissatisfaction dissipated. She was enjoying, for the first time in a long while, clear skies.

She awoke from her complacent reverie and stood abruptly, disorientated to the point of stumbling into a planter pot containing her beloved chives. It was knocked to the ground with a crash that sent bits of painted clay all about her. Though it was a seemingly minute reality jolt, our dear emotionally fragile character was struck with a fury of sensations in response to it that rivalled the intensity of a hurricane. Indeed, they had been roused from their once dormant state

by the reappearance of life – a thing which finally occupied the innards of our now uninhibited character.

At this point, it became clear to her to that the concept of things beginning – and then later ending upon the completion of their term – prevailed only to some degree. It was coupled, of course, by the idea of continuation, a free-form thought that left plenty of room for speculation as to what existed beyond the final breath, the last moment. Though she knew it was certainly the end of the pot and of the Mexican motif that adorned it, it was not, however, the end of the chives within it. Thus, she included them in an honorary omelette, not only to pay homage to the broken planter in which they grew but also to satisfy the hunger that had arisen within her during her revelations.

A few weeks before this point, our character would not have acknowledged her need for food, as it would have been buried beneath scads of paperwork and fast-food packages. Or perhaps, if she did give it a fragment of attention, she would have sent her assistant to the nearest coffee shop in order to supplement her meal with a caffeine boost. That, and a microwave dinner when she got home, would be enough to sustain her until her favourite soap opera came on. Thereafter, the melodrama would suffice until sleep prevailed.

Twenty-seven years of functioning in this manner had caused her once lively spirit to fade like the neutral beige confines of her cubicle. Thus, on a particularly sunny day (following a particularly uneventful office party), she put forward her best foot (along with her notice of resignation) and walked out the door.

Her liberation was not accompanied by grand fireworks or jubilation, but by a subtle inclination to explore the possibilities and allow life to simply happen. Her kitchen floor was littered with the remnants of the clay pot, her daytime planner was in the garbage, and she, our main character, the heroine of this tale, had just finished the last bit of a most delicious chive omelette.

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Kristen LaRocque
Grade 10
Peterborough Collegiate Vocational School

Sums

by Miles Rees-Spear

The soccer ball bounced off one of the aluminium walls, creating a dull reverberation through the cavern. Mariah sighed. There were never enough kids around in the tunnels, and most were always on work duty, learning to operate the giant combines in the harvesting caverns. Mariah was too young to do this and so was often left alone while the others worked.

"Come on, Rawley," she yelled to her dog, who was currently chasing the soccer ball. She picked up the ball and walked off down one of the many branches in the networks of tunnels. The large UV lamps on the ceiling created a strange sheen on the walls, and as she walked it bounced reflections of Mariah everywhere. Occasionally, she would pass hallways filled with the sound of machinery and people working. The tunnels were like a hive, always busy and expanding, filled with buzzing activity. Giant cooling tanks ran from the ceilings to the floor, collecting moisture from the earth and purifying it for drinking. As she walked, she ran her hand through condensation that that had formed on the wall and then shook the droplets off her hands onto Rawley, who sneezed. Mariah laughed at his antics. He was always chasing after things or barking at random.

Rawley was one of the few animals in the caverns that wasn't livestock. After the Great War, most species had died, so the cavers wanted to protect the surviving animals for their return to the surface.

At her age, Mariah knew the tunnel system like the back of her hand. She knew its dead ends, its twists and turns, and all the other places worth exploring. As she walked, she knew exactly where she was going and why.

She walked up to one of the metallic doors and knocked. As she waited for a response, she listened to the low hum of machinery in the background.

"Come in," said a voice from inside. Mariah walked in.

The room was decorated strangely. Growing up in the tunnels all her life, she was not used to the collections of objects that people from the old world accumulated. To Mariah, photographs, paintings, posters, all seemed silly things to put on your wall. It was very different compared to the spartan life that Mariah had lived since she was born.

Seated on an old wicker chair in the middle of the room was Aunt Alice. She wasn't anyone's real aunt; she had just taken on that kind of role. Alice carried a certain aura of difference about her, one of the most striking things being her deep colour. Mariah had never seen the various hues of the old world, but she knew that people in the caves were pale, white, and ghostly because they had lost the natural skin tone that comes from exposure to the sun. Alice was much older than most of the others and seemed to see everything differently as well. Many in the caves could not remember living on the surface, but Alice could. She had been a young girl when she had been evacuated. Since Alice was too old to work and Mariah too small, they often spent time together.

"Well?" asked Alice smiling. "Have you come to hear a story?" Mariah nodded.

"I'd like to hear the one about how it started. Why everything happened the way it did." Mariah had heard the story before, but she liked to listen to Alice's voice, and this story was one

of her favourites. Alice looked troubled. It was one of the stories that she was sensitive about. She only told it to Mariah because she felt the girl needed to know the history of those before her and the nature of their misfortune.

"Well then," Alice began, "It started like this. When I was a small girl like you, everybody used to live on the surface (Mariah could hardly imagine what this would be like). People lived together in huge cities all over the world. However, with the great freedom of space came the horrors and dangers of war. All the time that I was growing up, countries were striving to become more powerful. The resources that the world held were continuously mined away. So much was wasted or destroyed through the pollution from the factories and the cars. All this would have ended the world if greed and anger had not done so first. Some nations (it does not matter anymore which ones) began to expand their empires, constantly seeking more resources and more land. This sparked hatred and hatred sparked wars." Alice paused, wincing as if the memory seemed painful to her. "The wars of my time were terrible. They were fought with weapons of horrific strength and with nuclear bombs and missiles that laid whole countries to waste. Those that were lucky were evacuated to the caves as a last resort, to wait out the half-life existing on the world above and to emerge once again to the sunlight." Alice stopped and seemed puzzled by her own story. "I still don't know how," she said.

"How what?" asked Mariah after a short silence.

"How, with one touch of a hand, people could erase everything that humankind had worked so hard to achieve... the total sum of our time as a civilization on earth." Alice sighed, shaking her head. Mariah sat and thought about this for a while. The room was suddenly covered with a thick blanket of silence, interrupted only by the humming of the electric light illuminating the suspended dust particles in the air.

Mariah got up after a while and left. Alice had gone into one of her quiet moods, and Mariah knew better than to ask questions which would only annoy her. With Rawley at her side, she kicked the ball slowly down the passageway and thought of the old woman's words.

High above her, the sum of human greatness lay blackened and bare under the relentless sun.

* * * * *

Miles Rees-Spear
Grade 10
Lakefield College School

Josslyn

by Haley J. Toyé

The Queen came into her two daughters' bedchamber. "Well," she asked, "any requests for a story?" The oldest, Alanna, sat up. "At the banquet tonight, Sir Myles was telling us about the legends of Lady Josslyn. Could you tell us one? Maybe the one of how she got her famous companions?" The Queen smiled. "I think I remember that one," she said, and sat down on the edge of Aveanda's bed.

"A pale morning sun filled the forest with its greyish-yellow light. A girl lay sleeping half way down a riverbank, and as the sun rose, its rays glanced off her sword edge, sending a sharp light into her eyes. Blinking, she sat up and looked around, orienting herself. Josslyn had been riding hard for three days straight with little sleep and small rations. When she had run out of light the previous evening, she had used what little strength she had to create a makeshift camp. Her sloppily made fire was out, and her things were tossed beside her unpacked bedroll. She had slept directly on the ground.

She stood up and staggered down to the river. After a quick splash, as much to get clean as to wake up, she led her jet black horse, Hoshi, down to have a drink. The mare had earned her Konota name because of the silver star on the top of her head. Knowing the horse would stay put, Josslyn climbed the bank and walked to where the land levelled out. There, she cleared away all the rocks and branches from the little clearing. She proceeded to stretch and then moved to a blocking exercise and afterwards, pattern dances. She focused on her movements, her sword whipping around her and gleaming brilliantly as the sun was released from the horizon's grasp. Just as she was about to do a downward stroke to end the battle with her invisible opponent, something caught Josslyn's eye.

High up in a tree, yet still low enough that the sun hadn't reached it, an object was glowing. Josslyn planted her sword in the ground and walked to the base of the tree. She took one look around and began to climb. The wind picked up, the tree swayed, and branches whipped at her face until she could barely see. When Josslyn looked up, the deep blue light coming from the object pulled her onwards. She stood up on a branch, reached out, and grasped the glowing object. Suddenly, the tree stopped moving and the wind died. Josslyn, who had been bracing herself hard against both, was ejected full force towards the ground. She landed with a thud. After regaining her breath, she looked down at her hands. The object resembled a sword. It was long and sleek; what was unique about it, however, was that it wasn't made of ordinary steel. It was a midnight-blue stone with a silver grain look to it. Running her finger along the edge proved it was double-edged and sharper than any sword Josslyn had ever held. "How?" she whispered. "How or what could've made this?"

In all her time as a page, a squire, and now a knight, Josslyn had never heard of a sword made of anything but steel. As she walked back to her own sword, which was exactly weighted for her use, she was startled to realize that the stone sword felt as if it too, had been made just for her. Both hilts were wrapped tightly in black leather and both bore the same silver emblem of a dolphin jumping over a full moon. The stone sword had stopped glowing, and she realized, with a jolt, that her own sword was starting to burn in her hand. As she tossed it away, her sword burst into flame. The flame became smaller, and a blinding light emitted from it so that Josslyn had to turn away. Falling to the ground, the flame darkened, and Josslyn walked over to discover a blue stone dagger. She cautiously picked it up and slid it into her belt. Then she put her new sword into her scabbard. Josslyn called Hoshi over, packed up her camp, and covered their traces. Lord Jasson, the Royal Training Master, had drilled into her that any traceable man or woman was a

dead one. She mounted Hoshi and clicked her horse into a trot. Josslyn left the forest and started off on the road home. She didn't know it then, but she would remember those past few minutes for the rest of her life."

The Queen took in a slow breath and sighed. "Do you really think that happened?" inquired Aveanda. At ten, she was already a very critical person.

"Why would I be telling you if it didn't? You know, Josslyn was her second name; she never revealed her first."

"I wish I could meet her," sighed Alanna wistfully. "I hope to be as great as her some day."

"And you can be." The Queen smiled. "But not tonight; tonight you both must sleep so you'll be bright and fresh for court tomorrow." She kissed her daughters' heads affectionately. "Good night, my princesses."

The Queen left her daughters sleeping and went to her own chambers she shared with her husband, the King. After she put on her nightgown, she walked over to the door of their private closet and opened it. Inside, was a weapons rack, and on the top of it sat a matching sword and dagger. Both hilts were wrapped tightly in black leather and both bore the same silver emblem of a dolphin jumping over a full moon. The sword and dagger waited quietly – for her and for another adventure.

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Haley J. Toyé
Grade 10
Peterborough Collegiate Vocational School

Constantine's Last Walk

by Erik Blackthorne O'Barr

The cannon fire grew closer with each thundering belch of rock and iron, as the walls of Constantinople, a wonder of the world that had never been breached save for treachery, groaned under the strain. Buildings crackled with scorching heat, set ablaze by pitch-covered arrows. The shouts and screams of the dying echoed in the empty streets of the once great city. And Constantine XI Palaiologos, last emperor of the Byzantine Empire, last emperor of the Romans, and last emperor of the greatest and most influential nation the world had ever seen, walked quietly amongst the rubble.

The formerly magnificent city, the largest and wealthiest in the known world, where peoples from three continents had mingled and traded and fought, was now little more than a collection of dusty, sleepy villages surrounded by the enormous walls of more glorious years past. The crumbling homes and churches were empty and lifeless now, the few souls remaining like ghosts, flitting amongst the old marble and broken cobblestone. As Constantine shuffled in his long purple robes for the final procession to the Hagia Sophia, the greatest church of Christendom, church bells rang mournfully throughout the city for the last time. The sky was deep crimson, like a fiery halo around the city. A sign of an apocalypse, perhaps? Constantine neither knew nor cared. His city was to fall, his empire crumble to dust and remain only in memories and texts, and he was to be remembered as the person who let it happen. He had tried, of course. He had desperately sought aid from the Latins, the people who had destroyed his great city before in 1204. He had desperately sought aid from the Venetians, the Genoese, even the Pope. And now, trudging through the rubble-strewn streets, he sought aid only from God.

Crack! Another round of cannonballs smashed against the stone fortifications. The buildings shuddered. The procession continued; the priests in front of him, carrying the last remaining holy relics of times past, shuffled like dead men, accepting of their fate. The handful of citizens who had not fled in the last few years now lined the streets singing hymns. It looked like a funeral. It was. Constantine paused in the street, cleared his throat, his voice trembling with regret, yet not without a hint of hope. He spoke to the people now crowded around him, to the priests who had stopped in their tracks, and to the few soldiers left not defending the walls. He told them that there are few things worth dying for, and that all of them were now present at Constantinople. He thanked them for staying and fighting in the face of certain defeat. He thanked the Italian soldiers who had remained for an empire not their own, the small band of people who had answered his call to save the last great city of the Romans. He thanked them for their contributions and for accepting the fate that he, too, would suffer. He asked them to remember their ancestors, from Alexander to Trajan, who had gone to the ends of the earth. He turned to Giovanni Giustiniani, the leader of the band of Genoese who had stayed, fought, and died in the vain defence, and asked him to take his wife to safety by ship as the city was overrun. And finally, he asked the people to forgive him, forgive him for any crimes he may have committed, for any ways in which he may have wronged them, and for presiding over the fall of the Roman Empire.

Constantine looked over his ruined city and his shattered people, and thought of the impermanence of it all. Perhaps it was brought on by the spectre of death, but it seemed as if time was on a shorter scale. The millennial history of Byzantium was destroyed by sword and fire in only two months. The life of the last emperor would end in a day, perhaps a week if Giovanni and his men could hold out. Yet death, true death, Constantine felt, would not come to him. He would live on, if not in heaven, then in memory, along with his empire. And so he asked for forgiveness in order to live eternally with a free soul. He went to his palace, with its peeling plaster and chipped mosaics, and asked for the forgiveness of his family and friends, for all the

wrongs he had done to them; finally he went back to the Hagia Sophia, the last remaining house of God, now filled with people. He confessed his sins to the few emotionally shattered holy men, and under the red sky he went to the battlements to await his impending oblivion.

It took six hours. From midnight to the dawn of the sun, Constantine held the walls as they came crashing down under cannon fire. Giovanni Giustiniani had perished as the city burned, the flames matching the heavens above it. Thousands had died trying to take the walls, and yet the Byzantines and their emperor held them off. Finally, at six o'clock, on May 29th, 1453, the walls were taken – the walls that had stood strong for one thousand years, repelling invaders from the deserts of Arabia to the icy forests of Scandinavia. And at the main gate to the Queen of Cities, the last army of the Romans stood their ground against a force twenty times their size. Constantine watched as they fought desperately. His mind raced. He might be able to surrender to the Sultan. He could try to flee by ship. There had to be a way to escape. But his mind simmered and cooled: there was only one escape.

"The City has fallen, but I am alive," the Emperor whispered. He threw off his purple imperial regalia. He took off his crown and laid it on the destroyed cobblestone ground. He removed his insignia, unsheathed his sword, and charged at the swarm of enemy forces, swinging his weapon to and fro. The last stand of an empire and a fitting act of defiance for one who now is with his people once more, for eternity.

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Erik Blackthorne O'Barr
Grade 9
Peterborough Collegiate Vocational School

Free for the Summer

by Christopher Pond

It was the end of June. School was still in for most people, but we had just finished our exams so we were free for the summer. I was sixteen, with all the freedom in the world and the keys to the car. I had called some of my friends the night before, and we had decided that to celebrate our freedom, we would go canoeing. So we drove north through Burleigh Falls on Highway 28, with two canoes and a kayak on the roof of the car. When we reached Eels Creek, the four of us were tired of being in the car and ready to go paddling for the day. The boats splashed into the water, lunches were stowed, and we pushed off from the shore, I in my kayak, Dylan and Ian in a canoe, and Chris in his canoe.

Eels Creek snakes south, crisscrossing the highway until it makes a turn to the east, then flows under the highway and down to Stoney Lake. It is not an extremely challenging paddle, but there are parts that can become dangerous if you do not know where you are going. In the summertime, the water is relatively low and many of the spring rapids are too dried up to paddle through safely, but about one kilometre from the takeout place there is a waterfall – High Falls. High Falls is not a cliff where water goes cascading over the edge; it is more like a steep slope with many boulders disrupting the flow of the water.

We were packing up after our lunch at a portage that must have been the poison ivy capital of the world, when Chris decided he wanted to explore in the woods. We were to continue on – he would catch up. The three of us headed down the creek, excitedly talking about our plans for the summer and savouring the sound of our boats as they sliced through the water.

You know that you are nearing the falls when the water grabs your boat and you start fighting the current to reach the safety of the shore. You can't see the falls, but they're there. On this part of the creek the surrounding land looks as if you are on the Canadian Shield, because, rather than being limestone as at the start of the trip, the rocks are granite. Reaching the swifter current, we pulled our way to the portage around High Falls, hauled our boats out onto the granite outcropping, and walked down to the bottom of the falls, where the water swirls and bubbles like boiling water around the boulders in its path. We hiked back up to the top to grab our boats and carry them down and around the falls. Chris should have been there by that time, but he was not, and I was getting anxious. Where was he? By the time the boats had been put back into the water below the falls, Chris had still not arrived.

"Where do you think he is?" I asked the others.

"Aw, he's probably found some good place to watch birds; you know Chris," Dylan said.

Dylan and Ian paddled the rest of the way down the creek to meet up with Ian's dad and get my car. They had the keys. I decided to wait for Chris.

It was getting late; the sun had started its journey toward the horizon when I heard it, a small cry above the tumultuous roar of tumbling water. I looked up to the top of the falls and could just make out a flash of yellow beyond the crest. Chris's lifejacket? "Chris," I called. No answer. Because you cannot see the top of the falls from the beginning of the portage, the only way to see who or what's there, is to climb up the falls…a pretty stupid thing to do. I tore off my shoes and socks and half ran, half swam to the base of the falls, where I started to climb. It is nearly impossible to scale a rocky hill with white water pummelling down on you, but with many slips and scrapes I finally reached the brink of the falls and found Chris's canoe, wedged between two

rocks less than six feet from destruction. His crippled and shattered canoe was rapidly filling with water, but he was no longer in it. I turned to see Chris lying face down on a rock with his legs floundering like waterweeds in the strong current.

"Matt," he groaned.

"Thank God, he's still alive," I thought.

"Matt," he said, "I need to get out of here."

"What happened to you?" I asked. He winced.

"C'mon, we've got to get moving," I said. "Can you stand?"

He shook his head.

Chris's left leg was bent at a sickening angle. At first I thought that it was the water playing tricks on my eyes, but no, he had a badly broken left leg. I grasped his hands and "floated" him to the bank, where, with much difficulty, I hauled him up on my back and carried him over the portage to where my kayak was waiting. Chris looked up at me and said, "You should carry on; leave me here until you can get a canoe."

"But the others will already have the canoe strapped to the top of the car," I said. "Besides, you don't want to lie here for that long anyway."

He nodded. "Okay."

When we did reach the end of the creek, there was a note on my car, *"Hey Matt, Had to leave for town. Ian had to go to work. Your keys are under your mat, in the driver's seat!!"* (Their standard joke with my name). *"See ya."*

Speeding down Highway 28 with Chris lying in the back and one less canoe to carry home, I began to question how much freedom we would have for the rest of this summer.

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Christopher Pond
Grade 9
Peterborough Collegiate Vocational School

Greatest Max

by Tyler Banderob

Max may have been seated at a desk but he was speeding along, not through space, but through that morning's algebra assignment. While others groaned and cringed at finding out the ever-changing value of x in sixty-five different questions, Max grasped something that others could not. Mathematics was special. In English, History, Anthropology, and every other subject there was ambiguity, a profound lack of a clear answer. Who knew what Shakespeare meant in Sonnet 130? Who could tell what the ethical solution to overpopulation was? But anyone who knew that $3x + 7y = 41$ and that $9y - 40 = x$ could infer that x equalled two and that y equalled five...no grey area or uncertainties. That was the glory of mathematics. There was always an answer.

After discovering that the area of a certain circle was $A = \Pi(ayz)(abz)$, Max put down his pencil and looked out the window. For a school, it was a tall building, and he sat four floors above the earth. He could see his town spread out over the hills, and all of the cars running down their tracks like clockwork. He realized that he was counting the number of black vans that drove below him. His dad might have been in one of them; his mouth tightened and his nostrils flared at the thought. That was one car not spinning to the clockwork. It was headed west and would not stop for hours. Max slackened and fell back into an unsympathetic chair. Last night, Dad had waved about his last paycheck that would not be siphoned off by alimony. Also the last paycheck that he would earn in this town.

A steady scratching of chalk on slate pulled Max forwards in his chair, out of the previous night and into the start of a new math lesson.

"I should hope you've all been able to make progress on the ISU," began Mr. Bronfman, "because we start a new unit today." Bronfman had an enthusiasm about math that even Max found odd. He spoke as if every expression was an epiphany, as if every number was a great truth. Though it was – it was merely a bit exhausting to be constantly so attached. The sermon continued. "We learn today about linear equations. It is very simple. We merely try to find the intersection of two lines on a Cartesian graph."

Max rolled his eyes. Graphing, after all, was time-consuming, inefficient, and no more revealing than an equation.

"Now," said Bronfman, "Look at these two equations, here." He scrawled out $y = (3/4)x - 3$ and $y = -(2/9)x - 2$. "Graph these lines. Tell me what you see." Somewhere from the sea of desks came a squawk: "They intersect!" "Very good Julie, very good. And how about this?" Bronfman erased the second equation and replaced it with $y = (-6/-8)x - 3$. After a few moments, another obscure squawk emerged: "They're the same line!"

"That they are," replied Mr. Bronfman coolly. "The lines you saw before had one point of intersection. With these ones, the lines are in constant contact, so they have infinite solutions."

"Infinite solutions," thought Max, a grin growing out of the right side of his mouth, "such a testament to the logical power of math. There was always a solution, and in this case there were unlimited solutions." Max looked out of the window for a moment, looking for black specks that were not set into the clockwork. Mr. Bronfman paid no heed to Max's thoughts and proceeded. He erased the second equation and replaced it with $y = (3/4)x + 2$. Bronfman paused and

surveyed what was now written. He faced his class and could barely suppress a smile, like one who is about to perform a prank – cruel to its victim but funny to all others.

"What will these lines do? Is nobody going to answer? Max, you've been quiet. What do you think this pans out to?" Max attempted to work out the equation, but soon realized that the numbers did not match. Solid numbers claiming that they equalled zero, fractions pretentiously saying that were the same amount as greater numbers. For an eternal moment, Max scrawled and scrawled and scrawled, and the page became cluttered with failed equations and then droplets of sweat. Max looked over the edge and into his work. He faintly heard Mr. Bronfman's voice, stripped of conviction and laced with improvised compassion.

"Max? Max?" Max, pallid like his own paper, looked up and stated three painful syllables acknowledging both defeat and ignorance. "That is the thing, class," said Bronfman, hastily returning to his pontificating. "If you look at these lines and graph them, we see that they are parallel and will never intersect. Max couldn't find an answer because, in this question, there isn't one. It has no solutions."

No solutions. Max, already the victim of a troubling day, week, life, felt a strange, internal pain, as a pillar of reality cracked, tottered, and fell with agonizing slowness. Bronfman went on to express how the two perfectly straight and parallel lines would never connect – ever. The homework assignment was copied down mechanically and completed in class, as always. Max looked out of the window by his desk and saw with sweat-soaked horror that a black van was driving on its own parallel line out of the city and into the horizon. But he saw it not as an aberration of clockwork. For the town four storeys down was a graph where all the lines had forgotten their sacred functions and ran about as it suited them; they could not be governed, and all sense of guarantee died.

A shell went through three more periods that day and a lunch break. It went home and lay in the bed that used to belong to a boy named Max. Its eyes were opened but it looked at nothing. There was a math textbook on its chest, which the shell raised up. It flipped through the pages full of false promises of certainty. It cast the book aside onto the floor. It reflected that it could never enter the fourth-floor temple again as a believer. The shell had no regrets. It turned over to face the wall and slept.

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Tyler Banderob
Grade 10
Peterborough Collegiate Vocational School

Old Mail

by Meggy Chan

Mary looked out through the window of her studio in the Chateau de Beaufresne. Beside her on the table was a neat stack of old letters with American stamps. The faded postmark on each letter was the same – Philadelphia, PA. At this time of day the room was very bright with sunlight streaming in from the big French doors. The room was filled with Boston ferns, and there were many paintings. One, her own, was still on the easel, unfinished. On her desk, facing the window, in a place of honour, was a small framed photograph of a tiny Pekingese dog.

As she sat there looking through her letters, one of them in particular caught her eye. It was a letter from her father, dated April, 1890.

Dear Mary,

Your mother is so pleased to have had you home, even if it was just for a short while. She sends her fond greetings and asked me to include this clipping. She knows you would be proud to be in the social column of the Philadelphia Ledger.

Love,

Papa

The clipping dropped from the letter, and Mary bent to pick it up. She carefully spread the small piece of yellowed newsprint on the table beside her and read:

Mary Cassatt, sister of Mr. Cassatt, President of the Pennsylvania Railroad, returned from Europe yesterday. She has been studying painting in France and owns the smallest Pekingese dog in the world.

Mary laughed quietly to herself, an amused laugh with just a tinge of bitterness. Imagine. All they could say about me was that I was the sister of the president of the Pennsylvania Railroad Company and that I owned the smallest dog in the world – truly an accomplished woman.

“Madame Cassatt, la poste est arrivée,” announced the matronly woman who was Mary’s long-time housekeeper.

“Thank you, Mathilde. Put it on the table, please. I’m reading other mail right now,” Mary replied uninterestedly.

“And lunch, Madame? Will you be taking it alone?”

Mary looked up from her mail. “Yes, alone. Edgar is gone and so are Charles and Jean Léon and Lydia. We had such lunches together.”

“Lunches, oui, and paintings, many paintings. I like the ballet scenes best. Forgive me, Madame, but I always was a little enamoureé of Edgar Degas. Do you remember, Madame, the first time he saw your paintings? He said, ‘I never knew a woman could paint so well.’”

“He was a master. I owe him a great debt. It was he who invited me into that free impressionist world,” replied Mary.

After Mathilde left, Mary continued looking at the letters, carefully reading through each one. Here was a birthday card from Great Aunt Helen with a lavender sachet tucked inside. It still smelled faintly of lavender.

Dearest Mary,

Happy 25th Birthday! Your mama tells me that you are studying art in Paris. How lonely you must be there. Surely you could come home and study painting or drawing at the art schools here. I'm sure that your mama could find you a suitable husband, one who would speak English. Then there would be no need for us all to worry. Be a good girl and come home.

Fondly,
Aunt Helen

Twenty-fifth birthday! That was thirty-five years ago. She could still remember how indignant she had felt when she read that card. A husband indeed! Well, somehow she had managed rather well without the proposed husband.

The next envelope on the stack was embossed in gold leaf and lined with gold foil. She gently pulled out the contents – an invitation to her brother Alexander's wedding with an enclosed photo of the bride-to-be, Sarah McLeod. She sighed. Alexander never could understand why she needed to leave America and come to Paris. Alexander of the Pennsylvania Railroad and the social graces. Alexander, who always did just what he needed to do to be a successful man. Sarah was a pretty girl but always a bit silly.

Mary flipped through the next few letters quickly until she found the soft pink envelope so characteristic of her sister, Lydia.

Dear Mary,

I have finally secured a ticket to come over to Paris and stay with you. Mama is in her usual tizzy preparing my wardrobe and giving endless advice. I am so excited that I am going to be with you – permanently, I hope. Alexander and Sarah take good care of Mama and Papa. I can hardly wait to see your paintings in the gallery. When I tell my friends that you are a famous painter in Paris, they are always impressed, though they have never heard of you. I will cable the details of my arrival as soon as I can.

Lovingly,
Lydia

Mary smiled at the thought of her hovering mother and her faithful loving sister. With her American naïveté, Lydia had cheered her and had been her subject for so many paintings. Mary's favourite was the one of Lydia working a tapestry loom. It had been so many years since Lydia was taken from her. Mary remembered the swollen limbs, the pain, and the inevitable death of her sister. She was glad to have captured her for ever on canvas.

The next envelope bore the manly script of her brother. She thought of it as "the guilt letter."

Dear Sister Mary,

This is to let you know that Papa has passed away suddenly. Mama is grieving terribly and wishes that you would come home. A short stay in Paris was a good idea to expose you to the art and follies of Europe, but surely 21 years is long enough. We have quite forgotten what you look like and have never seen the paintings Lydia was always describing in her letters. I fear you are no longer a proper American. Please consider returning home at once. I will see to the arrangements.

Sincerely,

Your brother Alexander

It didn't work, she thought. I didn't go back to Philadelphia. Not then and not later when Mama died. Perhaps I should have, but I was so busy painting. I was so alive.

Next was a quick note from Edgar Degas scrawled in his characteristic handwriting.

Chère Amie,

I send this newspaper clipping to make you smile. Critics always seem to know us artists better than we know ourselves.

Edgar

Mary unfolded the clipping and read the critics' remarks from the *Journal de Paris:*

Mary Cassatt, renowned painter, remains exclusively of her people. Her style has a puritanical simplicity and is a direct and significant expression of American character.

Mary, feeling old and frail, rubbed her eyes. She thought rather dryly, isn't it funny, that in Paris they think of me as a wonderful American painter, but in my own country, America, all they know me for is being the sister of the president of the Pennsylvania Railroad Company and owning the smallest dog in the world.

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Meggy Chan
Grade 9
Lakefield College School

The Last Eight Minutes

by Beatrice Chan

"There goes the last ship," said Atticus as he watched the white streak of light shoot across the sky. "The end of an era."

"I wonder how many people stayed to witness the end of the Sun," replied his wife Lillian, sitting down on the porch, which was littered with scientific instruments.

Atticus, a tall, slim man with a slight stoop and white hair, crossed his legs as he gazed at the noon sky. "I don't know, but it doesn't really matter. What matters is that you're here and I'm here. Together."

Lillian smiled at her romantic poet-husband. She lovingly thought, he's tall and slim, and I'm short and stout. He gathers feelings, whereas I gather facts."

"A penny for your thoughts, Lil."

"I was thinking that we couldn't be more opposite."

"You always say we're opposite, but we usually come to the same conclusions. Not so opposite, I think. I wonder what it feels like to fly out of this dying solar system on one of those ships to colonize another planet," said Atticus. "The ancients from Europe had a similar experience when they sailed for the New World. It's the stuff of poems."

"I don't have your imagination, but I know that I wouldn't want to be on any of those ships. Imagine what kind of people we'd have to live with – all young, beautiful, smart, rich or connected. Yuck!

"What was the official slogan? 'A better race for a better place?' Something like that?" laughed Atticus.

Lillian winced. "A poet didn't write that one. Imagine, Atticus; a thousand years ago humans couldn't travel at the speed of light."

"And now there won't be much light," said Atticus.

Holding a farewell party with just the two of them was Atticus's idea. An octogenarian, he was too old to leave Earth on the ships. Lillian, who was twenty years younger and a member of the International Astronomical Society, could have procured a place for herself. But she had decided that she did not want to live with the "cream of society" in a new space colony for the rest of her life. Mostly, she did not want to leave Atticus.

"I wonder how many people are doing what we're doing at this moment," wondered Lillian aloud. She briefly checked the monitor on the table beside her and noticed a steady decline in luminosity.

"Why wouldn't everyone be watching the sun die?" questioned Atticus.

"Many people are afraid to face the sun's death. They think of the sun as eternal, just like the ancient Egyptians, who worshipped the sun. Ra, they called him, but Ra was hotter then. Back then, you couldn't see the rest of the stars during the day because the sun was so bright."

"It's hard to imagine no stars in daytime. A bit dull, I suspect. You're right about people and the sun. I expect that some people are doing their daily work pretending the sun won't die. Others are hiding with their tails between their legs, hoping to be whisked away magically," sighed Atticus.

"And others are looking at those government-order pills and trying to decide whether to take them now or later," said Lillian in a flat voice.

"The chill pill. It puts a chill in me to think about avoiding the future by embracing a suicidal death."

Atticus looked over at Lillian. She was sitting quietly on the antique wicker chair listening to his remarks, but without her usual response to his dry humour.

"Lil? What's wrong?"

"Atticus, do you have any idea what it's going to be like? There'll be no sun, no familiar time marker telling us when to wake or sleep. A day won't have a definition anymore because no matter how long the Earth revolves upon itself, the light source which defines daytime will not be there." She paused while this sank in.

She began again. "A year will be meaningless because it is simply a measurement of time for Earth's orbit around the sun. The moon will be invisible. No Venus, no Mars, no familiar planets moving through our sky. I'm not sure I'll be able to stand it, Atticus. I'm glad that I have the pill. Glad for a way out."

Atticus stared at his wife. She was so factual…and so afraid of losing track of time. "You could keep track of time using your atomic clocks, Lil. They're much more accurate than the sun, though admittedly much less inspiring."

Lillian didn't answer, and they sat in uneasy silence. She turned her attention to her computer and Atticus lost himself in his own thoughts.

"Four minutes until the sun dies," muttered Lillian as she hurriedly typed notes. She looked over at Atticus. He looked up and met her eye, a poem forming on his lips:

Ra is dead.
He has been long in dying
We can't expect to outlive God.
But paintings outlive painters
And poems outlive poets.

"It's over, Atticus. The sun has come to the end of itself, extinguished like a match. Yet it still has a visible diameter – 2.03 cm, to be exact, an illusion caused by the great distance between us and the sun. In less than eight minutes, even that illusion will be gone." She reached into the bowl on the table and picked up a white pill between her thumb and forefinger. Sobbing she said, "I'm going to take it, Atticus. I can't face this. I thought you'd be the one to crack, but instead it's me."

Atticus got up and took her in his arms. Then he gently sat her down and seated himself across from her. He said coaxingly, “Lil, tell me about the late great Sun. Tell me in your language. Tell me and you’ll feel better.”

Lillian had tears in her eyes. She breathed deeply to quiet her sobs and began, reciting the facts like a mantra. “It all started in a nebula of gas and dust. Gravity pulled the dust and gases together to create the star. Under temperatures of 10 million degrees, the star’s hydrogen fused to form helium. Then the star got hotter, allowing fusion of helium into carbon and oxygen. Expansion and cooling followed. Space winds started to blow away the outer layers of the star, cooling the core and leaving the black dwarf we know as our sun.” She looked at Atticus and breathed deeply again.

“There, Lil. Those are the facts. Not so terrible. Now stop talking and sit quietly with me, my love. These are the last eight minutes.”

Eight minutes went by slowly. Holding hands, they chanted softly, “… five, four, three, two, one,” as they counted down the last seconds of the sun’s light.

“Do you want to hear my final poem, Lil?”

“Yes,” she said firmly.

“It’s not really mine. It’s an old song my great-grandmother used to sing. I want to sing it to you.”

Looking into his wife’s eyes, Atticus sang, “You are my sunshine, my only sunshine. You make me happy when skies are grey. You’ll never know, Lil, how much I love you. Please don’t take my sunshine away.”

Lillian smiled softly and threw the little white pill off the porch to be lost in the shrubbery.

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Beatrice Chan
Grade 10
Lakefield College School

The Treehouse

by Hannah Mills

The summer I was nine, Walter and I built the tree house. We knew how it would look – not too fancy, kind of old – and that we'd use it for an observatory to spy on the neighbours. We also knew we'd build it in the apple tree. It was easy to climb and, most importantly, easy to fall out of, giving our hideout that feeling of danger all good forts have.

It would be perfect.

We got some old boards from a construction site and, mismatched though they were, a thrill came over me at the thought of putting them together.

Walter climbed up and began a wall in the crook of the tree.

"Pass up the nails, Kate," he called.

I weighed the box in my hand, estimating how hard to throw it. But I also thought about the tree. It was alive. Tall and beautiful, this tree brought me shade on hot days and adventure on dull ones. When I thought of those sharp nails digging into it, I felt faint.

So I put the box down.

"Do we have to use nails?" I asked.

My brother crossed his arms.

"Kate," he began, with the authority of one who has seen the world, or who has at least been on a ferry by himself. "Kate, my naive sister, have you taken industrial arts?"

"No."

"Well, then, I don't think you know about building tree houses. You can't build one without nails."

"But Walter," I whined. "The tree hasn't done anything wrong!"

"The tree?" he asked, incredulous. But when he saw our mother watching out the kitchen window, he changed his tune.

"Fine, Fine! We don't have to use nails. Please, Kate, don't get all mad." He sighed and sat on a branch.

I'd won.

We attached the boards with thick ropes rather than nails. The result was a very unsteady little house, held delicately in the arms of the tree. Inside, the dappled sunlight was warm and the shade cool and deep. It had no roof, so when you lay down you could see flecks of sky through the green of the tree. The smell was heavenly, perfumed with leaves and silence; if there was a smell to silence, that was it.

I'd never liked a place better.

Walter and I spent most of the summer there, napping and reading. From the topmost branches I could see down to the harbour, over the rows of houses to the sea beyond. On some days when there was a breeze from the harbour and the smell of the sea blew in, I dreamt of the world, vast and grand.

That fall Walter grew busy with Biology, Algebra, and other things I couldn't pronounce. Soon it was just me in the tree house, and I took to writing a journal there. I also had a survival kit, including a kettle, some cards, and a spyglass (should our house ever be invaded by burglars). And I began to think more about the tree.

I pictured its roots going deeper and deeper. How far could they go, what cool places did they cut through, what secret rooms of the earth were there, dark and still? It was impossible to explain this to anyone. The only person who might have understood was Walter, and he'd changed. Whereas he'd once been a daring and laughing companion, now he sulked and seemed to despise the house we'd made together. Mum said he was growing up. I thought he was losing his soul.

One day when I was in the tree, Walter called to me from below. "Hey! Kate! Get down from there!"

"Why should I? You can't boss me around."

"Kate!" He looked up at me. It was funny how small he looked.

"Jesus, Kate. It's embarrassing."

He'd never said that word before.

"I've got friends coming over. Get down."

He was getting mad, and so was I. Little sparks of anger blazed in my chest.

"You think you're so big, Walter," I yelled, "but you aren't. If you were so tough you'd come and get me instead of waiting down there."

As a final flourish, I spat on him, watching in slow motion as the spit hit him in the forehead. Now I'd done it.

Growling with anger, he began to climb. It didn't seem to matter how insecure the ladder was, he was mad and nothing would stop him.

"Come on," he snapped as he emerged into the tree house. "Wow," he added, looking around, "it's got smaller in here."

"No, you've just grown."

He turned as if to grab me, but I was too quick. I would not leave my tree! Walter was wrong, he didn't understand.

He lost his balance for a split second, teetering on his heels near the edge of the platform. I moved before I could think and gave him a hard shove to the chest. We were both frozen for a second, each realizing what I'd done, his eyes growing wider and wider...

And then he was gone.

I heard a thud and looked to where Walter lay, spread-eagled on the ground. I had a wild fantasy of his funeral – images of black dresses and the smell of church – before I rushed to him.

By the time I got to the bottom of the ladder, I was crying, and Walter, not dead, was sitting up. He seemed embarrassed when I threw my arms around him.

"It's only a little fall. Stop it." He did his best to push me away, but he was still shaking and I could tell he was sore.

"Walter, I don't know why I did it, I'm, I'm – " It was a shock when Walter stood up and pulled me to my feet.

"Sorry," said Walter, and I felt he was apologizing for both of us. As we began to walk inside, I looked back at the tree. Strange: looking from the top rather than from down here, it had seemed much farther for someone to fall.

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Hannah Mills
Grade 9
Peterborough Collegiate Vocational School

Footsteps on a Dune

by Megan Boothby

"Hey, can I ask you a question?"

"Hmm? Oh, sure." I motioned to a spot next to me on the dried limestone and went back to playing in the little pool of rainwater with a twig.

"Why do you write?"

I dropped the twig still hanging damply in my palm and looked in surprise at my little brother. I marvelled at this baffling question.

"What? Where did that come from, Reilly?"

"Tell me!" he insisted.

"OK! I'll tell you why I write, but it could take me a long time."

Reilly opened his mouth to respond, but at that moment a call came from the campsite.

"Supper!"

We hopped off our boulder and rushed down the leaf-covered hill to where our parents were waiting. I never did formulate the words to tell him why I write.

* * *

The wind buffeted me from all directions. It whipped my hair across my face so densely that I was rendered virtually blind. The roar of Lake Ontario waves crashing filled my ears, and I squinted in the brilliant sun as I stumbled away on the dune toward my brother. He was perched in the shade of a larch tree, watching me struggle through the sand. The sun glared off the aquamarine water – beautiful despite its deficiencies in cleanliness. I plopped down beside Reilly and sighed. I had an idea, a way to begin an answer to his difficult question.

"Hey buddy, remember that question you asked me last fall? About why I write?" He rolled his eyes into his head, as though searching his brain, and then said, "Yep."

"Well, look around. See the dunes, smell the water, and hear the waves and the trees? Feel the beach grass and sun-warmed sand under your feet and the wind on your tanning face?"

He nodded.

"This is why I write," I said and spread my arms wide.

"I don't get it." He frowned, confused.

"Just think about it for a while," I told him, then got up and fought my way back down the dune to the shore. On my way, I muttered, "I hate walking up and down these dunes. You take a footstep forward, but it doesn't feel like you're really getting anywhere."

"Huh" said my brother.

* * *

If snowflakes were conscious, I wondered, would they find their swift ride from the flat grey clouds above exhilarating? Days before Christmas, my thoughts strayed aimlessly while I lay in the snow behind the garage. I faced the sky, feeling the snowflakes fall on my face and melt like cold kisses. There was a crunch and a puff of breath as Reilly retired his snowman-making efforts and flopped down beside me. Together we silently watched the snowflakes swirling in uncountable numbers, creating a miniature hurricane in the sky. Each flake went in its own direction, stitching a pattern of complicated beauty on the backdrop of the clouds.

"This is why I write, Reilly."

I barely had to whisper.

* * *

My polished paddle sliced the brown glass of the lake as fine tendrils of mist curled around its handle. I shivered in my sweater and lifted my paddle to my lap, not noticing the drops of icy water. For a moment there was pure silence, and I breathed deep and calm.

"Are you going to paddle or not?" Reilly asked, shattering the stillness.

"Yes." I dug my paddle in deep and took pleasure in the sudden strain. We paddled in the early morning, surrounded by peace.

Unconsciously, we slowed the canoe, the ripples and splashes ceasing in time for us to hear the call of a loon echo hauntingly across the lake.

"This is why I write," I said, and we dipped our paddles in once again.

* * *

We clambered towards the top of a massive jumble of cave-filled, tree-covered boulders, nearing the uppermost ledge. With a final push we levelled out onto the flat top of the biggest, highest rock and turned around.

"Whoa..." murmured Reilly.

We were looking out over a jagged valley, a scar cut deep into the land by a long-ago stream. It was covered now with a thick blanket of leaves, fallen from the ancient sugar maples. The trees rose from the valley like pillars of natural architecture, their leaves in all shades of red, orange, yellow, and brown, dusting the forest floor and making it look like an exotic carpet. Our breath mingled with the strong fall wind, picking our hair up away from our faces.

"You know Reilly," I said softly. "This why I write."

* * *

The sunset was liquid orange against the black horizon of the Great Lake. Waves lashed against the solid spit of rock where I stood beside my brother. In front of us stretched endless water and the evening sky; behind us was the end portion of the hiking trail leading into the woods. For almost three years I had been trying to answer Reilly's question. I turned to him now in the dusk and began to repeat it.

"Reilly..."

"I know," he said. "This is why you write."

I smiled. He finally got it.

"It's like…"

"No." I cut him off. "Don't try. It would be like…" I struggled for words.

"It would be like taking footsteps on a dune."

I wrote it down in my journal and laughed, the sound echoing into the darkening woods. I had no idea what might lie ahead, but I knew that I would always have everything that mattered.

So I put away my pencil and started with confidence down the unknown path.

* * * * *

Megan Boothby
Grade 9
Peterborough Collegiate Vocational School

Fly For Me

by Weijia Zhou

Thump, thump, thump. She heard someone on the stairs. The floor creaked in the hallway. A moment later, the girl heard a knock at her door.

"Dinner's ready; won't you come out and eat?" a voice begged.

The girl didn't reply. It was her neighbour from across the street who had been good friends with her brother… her brother who… No, don't think about it, she told herself firmly. The girl ignored it all as her name was called several times; the doorknob jangled but refused to open.

At last, her neighbour gave up. "All right," she called loudly, "I'm leaving the food here; when you want to eat, please come out. You haven't eaten for days."

There were more footsteps on the stairs. A deeper voice said quietly, "How is she? Any luck?" It was her neighbour's husband.

"She is still refusing to come out."

"How many days has it been since the accident?" he said. "She's still not eating? We really need to do something."

"You can't blame her for being like that. Poor girl, her brother…" she trailed off. "It's such a tragic accident. And he was practically the only family she had left."

"Stop! Stop it!" The girl wanted to scream, but she only whispered the words, "Stop talking about my brother." She pulled the covers over her head and blocked her ears with her hands. Yet the words kept coming, each one sending a stab of pain in her chest.

"What she needs is to grieve, cry it out. Sitting cooped up in that room of hers isn't going to help a thing," her neighbour said harshly.

Did he think she didn't want to cry? She had tried, but the tears had refused to come – not when she heard the news, not at the hospital, not even at the funeral. It was as if she had forgotten how to cry. "No! Stop thinking about it!" she screamed at herself.

"Calm down, my dear. I'm sure if we just give her some more time, she will get over it. Come on, let's go." Finally there were footsteps again. They were loud at first but quickly faded away.

How could she ever get over it? How could she stand not having her brother there to comfort her when she was sad, to help her out when she messed up, to laugh with her over some lame joke, to fight with her over the television set, or to just be there? She hoped against hope that this was all a mistake, a dream. She didn't want to be all alone.

She suddenly felt tired; she wanted to stop thinking. Maybe sleeping would help her forget all her pain. But her dreams, or rather nightmares, didn't give her any peace. There were scenes of the funeral, scenes of her brother laughing, scenes of the nurses at the hospital, and the face of the teacher who had told her about the accident. Finally they faded away, and she found herself in a very different dream.

To her surprise, in the new dream she found herself standing on the hill where she used to fly kites with her brother when she was small. She looked around, and on the very top of the hill, he was there. She sighed in relief. So there was no accident; he was fine. Everything was all right.

He held out two kites in his hands. “Hurry up,” he called. She ran to the top of the hill as fast as she could and threw her arms around him.

“Hey!” Her brother laughed in that familiar way of his. “What was that for?” Still laughing, he handed her a kite. She realized that it was her favourite, the beautiful blue one just a shade darker than the sky.

They ran, her with her blue kite and her brother with his red one, until their kites caught the wind and soared up into the sky. She watched, amazed, as she let out more and more string. She had never seen her kite fly so high before. Her brother was just as successful; his red kite even fought to go higher than hers.

For a while, all they did was laugh and talk about random things, just as if it was an ordinary day. Then suddenly everything changed; her smile froze on her face, and she felt dread in the pit of her stomach. The cool wind suddenly made her shiver. The sun seemed too bright. A violent wind blew, then plucked the red kite from the sky the way a frog would do to a fly. The kite slammed into a tall tree halfway down the hill. She heard the frame crack and the beautiful red cloth tear.

“That doesn’t look good.” Her brother calmly looked at his kite.

Suddenly she felt a sharp tug from her own kite and was surprised to see it being pulled closer and closer to the old tree where the red kite still lay.

“Oh, no!” said her brother as he realized what had happened. The red kite’s string had tangled with the blue kite’s before it crashed. Even now, it pulled the blue kite closer to its doom.

Her brother fumbled in his pockets and came up with a pocketknife. “We’ll just cut the string, and then you will be fine.”

She screamed, “No! Don’t!” She felt as if she was losing her brother all over again.

“What’s the matter?” he asked. “It will be all right.”

“But it was your favourite!” she shouted again.

“Look.” He walked over to where she stood. “My kite’s ruined. Even if I were to somehow get it down, it would never fly again.”

“Yes it will,” she whispered stubbornly, but he only shook his head.

“Besides,” he continued. “The way it is, my kite will drag yours down too, and I will never let that happen.” He patted her head gently as he always did. “Once your kite is free, we’ll fly it together, all right?”

He reached out to cut the string. She tried to stop him, but suddenly found that she couldn’t move. She screamed, but there was no sound. She realized her brother was saying something.

“Fly your kite for me, ok?” said her brother, and then he was fading, along with the kites, the hill, and the sky. “Promise me.” And all she could do was nod as everything disappeared.

She woke up tasting salt in her mouth and warm tears on her cheeks. She climbed out of bed, then unlocked and opened her door. As she stepped into the hallway light, she heard her neighbours arguing downstairs. Quietly she whispered to the air, “I will fly for you.”

* * * * *

Weijia Zhou
Grade 10
Peterborough Collegiate Vocational School

Face the Wind

by Megan Boothby

Angie is painting the wall in the attic.

I look in the door and see her there, brushes and buckets surrounding her, and it is as if she has always been here, this woman who is really just a girl, wearing a cardigan and Birkenstocks.

It does not seem she came only the day my father left, months ago. He went to the place where everything is hot and the sand explodes beneath your feet. To my mother, Angie is invisible – a memory of life as insubstantial as thought.

However, it is also true that my mother barely sees me.

I wander into the attic room, looking at Angie and her painted wall. In the morning light, her features glow like a faded halo; the wall is golden.

Angie is beautiful in a strange way. Her face is sharp and narrow, and her hair is brown and very straight, like ironed earth. Her eyes are brown too, often downcast and shy, but I know that sometimes they smile. It is only a matter of catching them in the act.

"What is the wall going to be when you're finished?" I ask. Angie spins around, startled by my presence. There is white paint on the tip of her nose; it is splattered on her cheeks as well, decorating her jeans and hair as though she is a living canvas.

"It's going to be a mural of wind," she says, relaxing. "Wind carries the souls of angels. Did you know that?"

I shake my head.

"Facing the wind is just like dying," Angie adds quietly.

"How would you know?" I ask, pretending to scoff. "You've never died."

Angie says nothing in response, so I stay quiet too and watch her paint. It is peaceful, and I am happy.

Days later I take Angie flying. As we walk along the coastal path, Angie talks on and on about things she remembers. She talks as though everything is in the past, and it makes her so sad that a few tears run down her face in rivers of memories.

"Angie," I say as we near the Cape.

"Yes?"

"You'll always stay, won't you? Even when Dad comes home?"

Angie sighs and only says, "You'll be glad when I have gone" in her typical composed way. Her voice is light, but her tone makes my stomach hurt.

To distract myself, I pull Angie through the trees out onto a spit of rock, and we stagger in the force of the gale that hits us there. We are out on the Cape now, where the wind is fast and fierce like a dragon's breath.

“Fly!” I shout, and Angie catches on instantly, laughing, excited. She has not laughed in a long time, I can tell. We unzip our coats and hold out the ends like wings so that we are caught, and if we close our eyes, it feels just like flying.

“Face the wind,” Angie tells me, her lips against my ear so that she might be heard. “It makes you fly way better.”

“I thought facing the wind was like dying,” I say smartly.

“What is the difference between dying and flying? They feel the same to me,” Angie says, and I do not question how she knows. We fly all afternoon, and it is so wonderful that for once I am not worried about my father. I smile.

When we arrive home, windblown and smiling, my mother is sitting at the table, crying. She takes me into her arms, not seeing Angie. She tells me things about my father I do not understand, using words like *roadside bomb* and *missing*.

It makes my heart hurt, and in confusion I go to Angie’s room.

“Will my dad be okay?” I ask her. Angie looks distraught, and although there is no paint on her nose today, she seems younger than she is, younger even than me.

But her voice is certain.

“Yes,” she says, and then I am crying. I can sense that Angie doesn’t know what to do because she never lets emotions complicate her, never lets them show on her face. She hugs me.

It is a moment I never want to end.

Angie stays all summer. One night, as the light is fading and I sit and watch her working, a car door slams in the driveway. I ignore it.

“Your mural is almost finished,” I say to Angie, who nods and strokes her brush along the yellow-red surface. I cannot say why, but when I hear my father’s voice in the main hallway, then leap up and run down to embrace him, in the back of my mind I am still thinking of Angie and all of her unexplained mysteries.

When I climb the stairs that evening and discover she has gone, I am somehow not surprised. I find that she was right, and I am glad in a bittersweet way because her leaving meant my father coming home. I look at her painted wall, now finished – the orange sky and swirling white wind, and in the centre an angel with brown hair like ironed earth.

With a sad smile on my face, I dip Angie’s paintbrush into the pure black paint and write across the bottom of the wall, *Face the Wind*. No one will see the mural but me, I know, for it is only as real to others as the girl who painted it.

I do not know how real that is.

Slowly, I open the window in the attic room and think about my father and all the other fathers who are fighting. I wonder if those children have angels to watch over them, and if any are as wonderfully human as Angie.

I feel the wind on my face soothing me, and I close my eyes.

For a moment, it feels just like flying.

* * * * *

Megan Boothby
Grade 10
Peterborough Collegiate Vocational School

2010 Junior Fiction Co-winner

Snap!

by Julia Diamandakos
2010 Junior Fiction Runner-up

Once upon a time, there was a magical land called High School that little girls like me dreamed about. In High School, girls and boys became "young ladies" and "young men." They made new friends, sat with them at specific tables for lunch, grew beards, and got taller, prettier, and smarter.

But the most intriguing part of High School was that everyone paired off into couples. They went out on dates and arrived at prom in limos, kissed on the dance floor and fell in love. Real love, not silly puppy-dog love.

I remember my best friend Lucie telling me about her older sister's experiences in High School: "… and then her friend told her that he had a crush on her, and she had had a crush on him for the whole semester! So, the next day at school, she walked up to him and said, "hi," and he smiled at her. This was before lunch… and by lunchtime they were -boyfriend and girlfriend!"

I recall my shocked reaction: "That happens in real life?!"

Up to that point in my life, I did not think it possible that the object of your affections could ever like you back. It was a strict rule in elementary school to have crushes on boys that would never give you a second glance. To have a miracle like that happen… well, that was the stuff of fairy tales and cheesy movies.

Thus, my fascination with High School - where anything is possible - began. Years later, I am in High School. It is not like I imagined. At all.

It seems like everyone around me has found love. The girls who are shyer, dumber, uglier, meaner, they have all found love - the one thing in my life that seems unattainable. The one thing that is always just out of my grasp.

I have a competitive streak - it's true. Everything I have ever wanted I have worked for and obtained in a snap. Top grades? Snap. First place in musical competitions? Snap. M.V.P. of my rep basketball team? Snap. Perfect body? Snap. Gorgeous hair? Snap.

Snap, snap, snap.

I am conscious of the little sounds of my heart slowly breaking - snapping apart with each shared smile, each kiss blown across the room, each act of love I am foreign to. I wish that Steve, the cute brown-haired boy who sits in front of me in English, would offer to be my tour guide - show me the sights of this foreign land called High School Love.

I have always been the most mature of my peers. I know about topics otherwise considered taboo. Not only did I mature mentally, but physically I developed early as well. I grew into the "hourglass" figure before all of my friends and got my period first. 1 was the first one to learn about everything. I was always the first, the first, the first.

It always seemed fitting that I would receive my first kiss *first*, have a boyfriend *first*, fall in love *first.*

Now, I stand alone like a fool, as everyone surpasses me in the race of Life. I had a head start, but just as in the story of the Tortoise and the Hare, I have somehow become the unlucky rodent stuck in last place. I always dreamed I would be first, but now it seems I am last.

I quiver as I learn the hard way that you can't work for love. There is no first-place medal, no curriculum to memorize, no formula that works every time. It just happens.

And, apparently, not to me.

I long for love (preferably Steve's). I want to *experience*. Don't get me wrong - I have more than enough love in my close family - but I long for the stuff of romance novels, the love that inspires! I yearn for passion, hunger and thirst for affection, desire the touch of a lover. I ache for the warmth that can only be found in the arms of the one you love.

Religion class: what a joke!

We are studying stories in the Old Testament - or rather, we are supposed to be studying stories in the Old Testament. Mostly, we are all just talking. Our teacher pretends not to notice, so he doesn't have to assert himself against our whole class.

Right now, Lucie is doing all the talking and I'm doing all the listening. She's talking about Pete, her boyfriend - again!

I absentmindedly pretend to be interested in her monologue while I flip through the Bible. Pbuftpbuftpbuft. That's the sound the pages make. A story catches my eye - Noah and the Flood.

I scan over it quickly. I shiver as I think about what I would have done, coming face to face with the Ark. All the animals lined up in pairs, taking the next big move in their lives together. Would I enter the Ark alone, no callused hand gripping mine, telling me not to worry, we would be all right, just hold onto his hand?

In anger and dismay, I slam the book shut. I don't want to think about that right now. An annoyed Lucie asks me, “Were you even listening?”

I scoff. “As *if* I wasn't listening!” I tell her, emphasizing my words in such a way that she won't question me further on the subject.

I sigh and go back to ignoring her. I focus on the pair of girls in front of me, eavesdropping on their tête-a-tête.

One of the bubbly girls excitedly whispers to her friend, “Hey, did you hear about Jeff and Sara? They're going out now!”

What is the world coming to?

Time for my next class: French.

I purposefully fumble around in my locker, awarding myself a few more seconds of non-French time. Shutting my locker and twirling my lock into position, I head off to French.

“Natalieeeee!”

I turn at the sound of Lucie calling my name, finding it odd that she is up in the science hallway, where my locker is, instead of in the gym hallway, where her locker is, at the opposite end of school.

“What?” I ask, half worried. She doesn't come to me between classes unless it's an emergency. “Did you get my texts?” Immediately I feel pulsating vibrations from my pocket.

“Just now. I – ”

“Whatever! It doesn't matter!” she yells excitedly, interrupting me. “Billy told me that Steve has a crush on you! Steve told Billy himself!”

“*What?! No way!”*

“Yes, way! Look, there he is right behind you!”

I turn around, composing myself. I take a step towards him. He comes right up to me, and says, “hi.”

He smiles.

It was just before lunch!

* * * * *

Julia Diamandakos
Grade 9
St. Peter's Secondary School

Failure is Not an Option

by Emily Frost

"Mackenzie, Alice!" The art teacher, Mrs. McCormick, reads my name aloud as her gaze sweeps the orderly rows of desks. I raise my hand, and she settles her narrow blue-eyed gaze on my face, committing it to memory. She has fly-away gray hair, the kind that looks wispy and thin, sort of like a half-hearted attempt at order. I begin to doubt she'll have the passion for the arts necessary to teach us properly.

On second thought, most of the kids here don't really want to be taught. Or more specifically, they can't be taught. They won't try, and I'll end up looking like the keener again, that girl who tries too hard for everything. Even though art is the one thing I don't really try at, it'll still end up that way, and once again, I'll be at the laughing end of their jokes.

Sometimes it's difficult being an overachiever. Most people don't appreciate that. Most people assume that because of my good grades, my life is also easy, as if I didn't work hard to get them. Most people assume intelligence comes naturally, and I guess sometimes it does. But I've always had to work hard to get those marks – always doing the extra bit, going a little further than strictly necessary.

The teacher finishes taking attendance and places the folder neatly on her orderly desk before turning to face us. It's only first period and everyone's still half asleep. You can almost taste the weariness in the air, the tangible scent of sleep lingering over us all like some formidable sheen of despair. Our rest has been disrupted, and we've been dragged into this classroom, somewhat against our will. It does not make us happy campers.

Mrs. McCormick begins to talk, but her voice is like the whining of a broken stereo - annoying and unwelcome. I don't particularly feel like listening, but because it's not an option, I force myself to blink a few times and concentrate. Her words slowly begin to make sense, and I listen as she tries to convey her desire to teach, her love of the arts, her struggle for self-fulfillment. She makes it sound like being at this school is a dream come true, like she's actually happy to be here at 8:30 in the morning, talking to a bunch of unresponsive, half-asleep teenagers. And for a few minutes, she almost makes me believe her. Then reality snaps like a whip. I wake up and realize just how empty and hollow her words are, how this class is going to plummet in a steady downfall until it's unrecognizable as an optional course that we, of our own volition, chose to take.

With that, she sends us off into our creative zones, encouraging us to pick up our painting utensils and paint pretty pictures. I do so willingly and face my empty canvas like a soldier preparing for the coming onslaught. Armed with only my brush, I begin to attack the white expanse, intent on making something out of nothing, on bringing the canvas to life with colour and explosive designs. Slowly but faithfully, the rest of the world fades from my mental radar, and it's just me and the painting and my brush, making steady, rhythmic strokes, with desperate determination to change the world. Before I know it, the little cooking timer has chimed, and Mrs. McCormick strides around the room, her critical eyes surveying the paintings displayed.

"Add more depth here. It's lacking heart," she advises, and I see the boy's shoulders slump, even as he smiles brightly at his friends like it's just a big joke. Who really cares? Art shouldn't be judged, I think. It's all about expression, and no one can express what you think better than you can. I stand slightly back and look at my painting. I've drawn a disaster – there's no other way to say it. And what is more apt to describe the explosion inside of me? A jumble of colours, just like emotions, litter the canvas, entwining and encircling like an endless mess of hurts and

loves, desires and hates. Other students have drawn trees, harmless flowers, and pretty meadows. I've filled the entire canvas with an outburst of hot, raw feeling. I look at my painting again. It's really quite violent – the beauty is lost in the brutal, almost crude slashes of dark, angry colours. Perhaps it was once lovely, but now it is an ugly portrayal of destruction – bitter and hideous in its cruelty like some tame creature turned unexpectedly dangerous.

Mrs. McCormick wanders to my art easel with a tilted head, and I feel as if I've just handed her my diary. It's confusing but undeniably frightening – why do I care what this woman thinks of my painting? Only a few minutes before, I'd been insulting her career choice, her superior attitude, even her hair. And now I am nervous to hear what she thinks of my art? It's really very hypocritical of me.

It seems like the longest ten seconds of my life while she gazes at my painting. Her face is absolutely expressionless, with only a slight glitter in her eyes as she turns to face me.

I see her mouth move, and I can almost hear the words, but they're strained somehow, as if I'm hearing them from a great distance. It's only when she's walked away to inspect the next piece of art that I hear what she's said, like an echo. It reverberates inside my skull until it hits home and clicks into place.

"You tried too hard."

* * * * *

Emily Frost
Grade 9
St. Peter's Secondary School

Paper Sky

by Mirka Loiselle

"*Ready-or-not-here-I-come!*"

James gasped with delight as the cold water of the creek splashed across his bare legs, the water droplets shattering in the air like tiny crystals. Behind him, he could hear his sister Taylor chasing him, laughing and calling. The day was mild, with an occasional breath of cool air that gently swayed the leaves above.

Leaping over a tall boulder, James left the creek and began tearing through the forest. Taylor was yelling something behind him, and so he slowed down a notch, letting her catch up. She barrelled into his legs, and they both fell to the ground, tumbling down the gentle slope.

"Geez, Taylor," James said when they came to a halt. "You've got to warn me before you do that."

"You run too fast," she whined. Scrambling to her feet, she began tugging at his sleeve impatiently. "Come on, I wanna keep playing."

"Nah. I'm tired. Let's take a break."

Taylor shrugged and sat down cross-legged beside him. James lay in the sun, breathing in the sweet air of the forest and staring up at the yellowy-stained sky. "Can you believe it?" he whispered to his sister. "The sky used to be blue."

Taylor looked up, squinting. Her small face wrinkled in disbelief. Suddenly, she looked away and pointed to a bush a few feet away. "What's that?" she asked.

James sat up. Something red and pointy was sticking out from underneath the bush. Crawling over, he pulled out a hard rectangular box with neat gold lettering printed on the top. As he picked it up, he realized it wasn't a box at all: the top flipped back to reveal the delicate yellow pages inside. He felt the pages cautiously. Paper. Real paper.

Taylor had joined him. "What is it?" she asked.

"I think..." James flipped through the pages, some falling away in his hand. A strange smell wafted up towards him, a mixture of old wooden furniture and after-dinner mints. "I think it's a book."

"That?" Taylor laughed. "That's not a book, James. Books are made of metal. They're electronic. You listen to the story; you don't *read* it."

"No, but look." James turned to the very first page:

To Alison Cooper

December 25th 2012

Love, Dad

"2012," breathed James. "This thing is *old*, Taylor."

“Hey, James, look.” Taylor pointed to the date. “She got the book for Christmas.”

“Yeah, she did.” James smiled. “Isn’t that funny. Hundreds of years later, we still have Christmas.”

Taylor frowned. “People were kind of stupid back then, weren’t they? I mean, look how thick the book is! That would take *ages* to finish! What’s the point?”

James wasn’t sure. “I guess for fun?” He looked down at the ancient object in his hands. He’d seen a few books in museums, locked up in glass cases. To him they were just artifacts, puzzle pieces from an old alien world. And yet there was something strangely majestic about this book, almost powerful, as if it was daring him to open it up and discover the mysteries inside. He held it up to his face and breathed in the strange smell. Did you buy the smell with the book, already sprayed onto the pages? Or was it something that gathered there over time, like dust on forgotten boxes or the tea stains on his mother’s desk?

“If they’re so fun, why did they stop making them?” asked Taylor, still skeptical.

This, James could answer. “Because they’re made of paper, and paper comes from trees. In the olden days, lots of things were made out of trees, and so they started running out of them, just like they started running out of oil and water and all that stuff. This was before space travel, before we were able to use the resources on other planets. Books took up a lot of room, too, since they could hold only one story each. So paper books were replaced by electronic books with a screen, and then the Story-Tellers most people use today.”

Taylor nodded. “*I* think listening to stories is a much better idea. I don’t even like reading.”

“Reading isn’t that bad, Taylor.”

“It’s just words on a page. No pictures even.”

“That’s not true. Some old books had drawings.”

“Yeah, but they didn’t move. Like I said, stupid.” Taylor crossed her arms and jutted out her chin, which she always did when she knew a fight had been won.

James stared at the book and frowned. “No, you’re wrong. It’s not just words on a page. And there *are* pictures; you just make them with your mind. It’s like...” James struggled to explain. “It’s like a film, only better, because you can decide what the places and characters look like in your head, and if you don’t understand something, you can stop and read it again. It might take a while, sure, but it doesn’t matter because as you read, you don’t even notice time going by. You’re sort of inside the world of the book.” James stopped and looked at his sister. She was staring up at the sky.

“James,” she said softly, “was the sky blue in 2012?”

“Yeah.”

“So Alison Cooper saw a blue sky?”

“Yeah, I guess she did.”

They sat in silence for a second, watching the toxic clouds above them. A crafter, no doubt heading for the stars, passed overhead, humming faintly.

Taylor looked back down at the book. She reached over and ran her fingers across the golden letters. “If I read the book...would I see a blue sky in my head?”

James smiled. “Wanna find out?”

Taylor nodded, but when he offered her the book, she shook her head. “Read it with me,” she said. “So I can stop you if I don’t understand the old words.”

And so James opened the book, and together the two siblings sat silently under the cloudy sky, and read.

* * * * *

Mirka Loiselle
Grade 9
Peterborough Collegiate Vocational School

The Man Across the Street

by Katie Maranduik

The man who lives across the street from me wouldn't typically appear to be the kind of guy who would raise the hair on the back of your neck and send goosebumps up your arms. But he is. He's all that and more. Trust me.

He's in his late forties, early fifties. With his size, some might say it would be easier to jump over him than walk around him. His hair is the colour of cardboard, his teeth slightly offset. He lives with his mother, or at least I assume this is their relationship as he is constantly yelling, "Ma, where's my shirt?" just like a seven-year-old. Periodically, he is visited by his five children, a nasty bunch always sporting last night's dinner on their rumpled shirts, and although the fact that they are his kids is again just an assumption, it has much careful thought placed behind it. You see, the little hooligans share my neighbour's gross cardboard hair and horrible country slang, and thus I conclude that those youngsters are his, a fate I wouldn't wish upon anybody. These squealing kids are over almost every weekend, along with every other family member my neighbour manages to squeeze into his unkempt yard. Apparently the constant watching of my house takes priority over gardening.

His yellow moldy lawn chair faces my house from his garage, which he has turned into a small kitchenette, complete with a refrigerator and a microwave. Quite frankly, I await the day when I will look into my neighbour's garage and see not a normal one-car storage space, but a fully equipped Dunkin Doughnuts with NASA-level surveillance equipment. This man chooses to sit for hours, observing my house relentlessly. Why? Nobody knows for sure, but we have our theories, my friends and I.

My friend Hannah, who strongly believes the best in everybody, says that he must be bird watching. We have a cedar hedge in our front yard, where a particularly stubborn red cardinal seems to have nested. The cardinal is a brilliant shade of red and, vain as he is, often admires his reflection in our car window between the hours of seven to ten in the morning. It is interesting that my neighbour would be so intrigued by this conceited cardinal as to watch him all day, everyday, for the past five years. Without bird-watching binoculars, I might add.

As Reilly so over-imaginatively puts it, it is quite apparent that my mysterious neighbour is a knight here on orders from the Queen of England. On orders here because, unannounced to me, I was secretly adopted and am actually a princess due to inherit the throne and, therefore, in need of protection from the royal guard (to this I immediately respond with a look that questions the sanity of my best friend of seven years).

Jett thinks he's a hit man hired by this girl at school who's "detested" me since I moved in. Sam thinks he's a zombie who hasn't the ability to turn his head, so he is stuck staring at my house for ever. Cassidy thinks he's a government agent who will at some point kidnap my entire family for top-secret genetic testing. Austin thinks he's a Predator, like in the movie *Alien Vs Predator*, and that he's planning to kill the entire human race – beginning with me.

In my personal opinion, he's a serial killer. You know, the real hard-core psychopath type. The kind who picks his victims, stakes out their neighbourhood for years, watching them – what they eat, what sports they play, when they wake up in the morning, when they go to sleep at night, what birds nest in their hedges – then suddenly, springs out of the blue, killing his victims slowly, making them watch as he slices their veins and severs their arteries, placing pieces of their liver into their own bare hands. The kind who makes them feel the deep cut of the knife into their bare skin, cold, sharp and precise; the kind who makes them taste the metallic blood in their

mouths and smell the thick scent of their own fear on their breath. The twisted, deranged kind of murderer who finds pleasure in finally letting his victims die only after they have formed pleas for death out of jaws that conceal no tongues.

Yes, this is why I live in perpetual fear of the man across the street. Why I am constantly afraid that he will either shoot me, eat me, kidnap me, annihilate me with his advanced alien technology, torture me or maybe all of the above. Why my knees constantly quiver, my skin always crawling whenever I see my neighbour's rotten eyes looking at my house from the comfort of his moldy yellow lawn chair. Whenever I catch a glimpse of him, I begin to squirm. The way he looks right into my house, so intrigued, so fascinated, deprives me of sleep every night.

Even if I don't know his story, what I do know is that my neighbour still sends jitters up my spine. My neighbour, the man who has successfully eliminated the meaning of the phrase "peace of mind," the man who sets off every possible alarm, who raises all the red flags which warn me that hit men, zombies, secret agents, extra-terrestrials, or serial killers may be lurking close by. The man who creeps me to the core. The man who, as I so embarrassingly just found out, has a TV installed in his garage which, when being viewed from his lawn chair, makes it look as though he is watching my house. The man who is actually watching a rerun of *The Simpsons*.

* * * * *

Katie Maranduik
Grade 9
Kenner Collegiate Vocational Institute

Chasse Galerie

by Vanessa Kraus

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

We all nod our understanding.

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

We take our places in the canoe, paddles in hands. Sébaste says the words: a strange collection of nonsense and pleas to the Devil to carry us straight and true. We hold our breath; and like magic, the canoe starts to rise, trembling, as though some invisible two-year-old has picked us up in a chubby pair of hands. There are shouts, laughs, and general disbelief; then we are off like a shot, headed towards Gatineau.

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

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

We touch down in front of our predetermined landing spot. It's a shabby little joint, but the bass is pumping, and the girls are dancing hard. We stash the canoe in an alley and make our

way in. We fit in right away; I find a pretty redhead called Lucie. It takes me only a few dances to be right back in my element. The smoky club is like a glimpse of heaven after six months of being trapped in the detention centre.

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

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

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

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

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

* * * * *

Vanessa Kraus
Grade 9
St. Peter's Secondary School

Correspondence

by Vanessa Kraus

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Freak!”

“Weirdo!”

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

“Yeah, go play in your fantasy world!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Maybe someday, she would find out.

* * * * *

Vanessa Kraus
Grade 9
St. Peter's Secondary School

A Spin in the Dark

by Mirka Loiselle

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

I don't know how long I lay in the grass. Minutes, maybe hours, crept by, and eventually my tensed body began to relax. The rich scent of wet earth wafted up to my nostrils and I breathed it in, taking in the absolute stillness of the night air. Lying here in this empty field, I could almost feel the earth curving beneath me, running past my outstretched palms. Suddenly I became

conscious of the vastness of this planet. Here I was, clutching onto this rock we call Earth that spins continuously round a giant sphere of heat and gas at speeds beyond human comprehension, whizzing though the mind-boggling darkness of space. Just a tiny dot in the Universe.

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

But not today.

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

* * * * *

Mirka Loiselle
Grade 10
Peterborough Collegiate Vocational School

Slipping Under

by Mackenzie Green

Underwater, it isn't blue. This is the last thing I notice before I realize I can't breathe. I lash out with my arms, slicing through the brown haze that lingers in front of my eyes. Tiny white bubbles, like the ones in a glass of Coke, burst against my cheeks. I try to swim again. The sky hovers far above me, obscured by waves of impenetrable glass that are pulled and tossed by the wind. A scream crawls up my throat, stopping behind my teeth as it meets freezing water. The place I've been avoiding for my entire life is consuming me, tugging me downwards. Weeds ensnare my feet, slippery tendrils weaving around my legs. How did I get here? Where is *here,* besides being the place I'm going to die? I don't remember.

One thing surfaces in my mind. I remember our tenth grade science class and my best friend Cassidy's innate tendency to be helpful. I'd always admired that about her.

"Tori Flynn, how long does it take for someone to drown?" the teacher asks.

"Uhh…" I glance over at Cassidy and she automatically swivels her head to look at me. We've been best friends for so long that whenever one of us falters, the other is there to step in.

"Depends," she mouths at me. Her lips stretch into a smile.

"It depends. Are they panicking?" I say, shifting my eyes back up to the teacher. Do they know in the back of their mind that it doesn't matter what they do, that they're going to die anyway?

I push with my arms and kick my legs. This time I move upward. My head breaks through the surface long enough for me to gasp a breath. The air sears my throat, and then the waves close over my head and I go back under.

It is the summer Cassidy chops off her long, blond hair and dyes it black. She stops borrowing my pink sweater and wears dark clothes when we go out. As we walk towards the nearest pizza place, I wonder when our friendship began. It must have been sometime between her fifth-grade boyfriend breaking up with her and my parents getting a divorce.

"What were you doing with Riley McMichael yesterday?" Cassidy stops walking and looks at me, her dull grey eyes like circles of concrete. Her tone is accusatory.

"Nothing," I tell her. She laughs, but it's too high-pitched.

"Tori, don't lie to me. I saw you with him at Francesco's Café." Her voice is still playful, but something is hidden beneath it.

"We were just having lunch." I frown; it is too late to fend off her suspicion. "I was helping him with his English homework." It is the truth; it wasn't a date. I wish it was, but it truly wasn't.

"Right…" Her voice trails off, spiked with skepticism. Resentment is pulling her face into a frown that I've started seeing a lot more of lately. "Tori, you're supposed to be my friend. You know I've had a crush on Riley since eighth grade." She turns and strides away from me, forgetting our lunch plans. Even though we are best friends, I still keep secrets from Cassidy, like the fact that I've loved Riley just as long as she has, and that my aversion to water is because I can't swim.

Sharp pains tear through my lungs like slivers of glass. Tiny sparks flare in my peripheral vision. I try to reach the surface again, but my arms are weak, my joints cold and sore. My lips part and water floods into my mouth. It tastes like metal and rotting wood. My hair blindfolds me, sticking to my face as water pummels my body. Why do I have no recollection of falling into the water? I try to think back, but my mind is blank. I watch my hands yield to gravity and sink to my sides like dead leaves. The pressure overhead increases. Everything becomes black.

We are standing in Cromwell Park. I can't recognize Cassidy anymore. The girl in front of me, with her pinched features and caustic stare, barely looks like the girl who used to be my best friend.

I will never forgive Cassidy Ingram for the acid words she has hurled at me during the past month. From the day I started dating Riley McMichael, she has slashed at our friendship until it has become irrevocably mangled.

"How could you do this to me?" she says. The anger and pain surge behind her eyes. "Are you trying to ruin my life? If only you'd just told me, if only you hadn't lied and gone behind my back…"

"Would you hate me less?" I ask.

"Don't talk to me!" she shouts.

The river behind us gushes past the rocks, chortling in dialogue with the jagged shore.

"Cass, I'm sorry."

"No, you're not! Just...just go to hell!" She thrusts out her hands and suddenly I am plummeting. My head cracks against the river's edge as I try to grab at the mud-slick rocks, but she doesn't notice. She is running away as I slip underwater.

"She's coming to!" someone shouts. Water is trickling down the sides of my face. I am on solid ground again. I open my eyes, and the splatters of paint strewn on a canvas above me gradually take the shape of tall aspens and purple clouds. Streams of red and blue pulsate inside my head. A man in a paramedic's uniform is crouched beside me.

"You're very lucky someone spotted you," he says. "What happened? Did you fall?"

Cassidy will be in trouble if I tell the paramedic what happened, even if she didn't know I can't swim. What would the old Cassidy do if she were in my position? The girl with the blond hair that twisted down her back like dandelion chains. The girl whom I admired so much for her kindness.

"I don't remember," I whisper.

* * * * *

Mackenzie Green
Grade 9
Peterborough Collegiate Vocational School

Windblown

by Mackenzie Green

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

"Nothing," I mumbled.

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * * * *

Mackenzie Green
Grade 10
Crestwood Secondary School

The Procedure

by Cailey Ward

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

My shock was interrupted when a moose calf and its mother bolted out of the bush. They were the first animals I'd seen that weren't in an ibook. They were so peaceful, drinking water from the river. They looked up when I snapped a few pictures, then returned to drinking. A deep rumble of thunder startled the moose and they ran off. The storms seemed to be getting more frequent. I'd seen beautiful pictures of snow, but it never fell anymore, just rain.

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

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

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

"Hello," I said calmly.

"Hi," she whispered.

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

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

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

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

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

"I know," she answered weakly.

"Have you heard of Algonquin Park?"

"No," she said, unsure.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Neither have I," George added.

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

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Cailey Ward
Grade 9
Lakefield District Secondary School

Fire Escapes: I Will Forget

by Sarah Williams

I've read about people who have been trapped in elevators. Everything is tolerable until the steel walls with ghastly decorative panelling seem to shift closer and closer to you; the floor of the car with the bedraggled carpeting and a questionable stain moves higher and higher towards the roof with the fluorescent lighting above plastic diffuser panels, which move lower and lower towards you until the floor and the roof are holding hands, and you're stuck in between the two hoping that you do not become another questionable stain on the carpet! That's how I felt before I arrived in the city. Thankfully, the elevator I am currently on holds no resemblance to the aforementioned one. It brings me the promise of a new beginning. I will try to forget the image of the grimy white picket fences of suburbia in favour of the glimmer of the gutters that run down the walls of my new home. *Ding!* The elevator tells me I have reached my floor, and my arms protest as I carry the one box that the movers aren't allowed to bring into my new apartment.

I don't need to switch on the lights to see my new home. The neon signs that litter the street below paint my furniture red, blue, and yellow. The colours swim over my box as I set it beside me on the couch. It groans with age and the weight of my memories. Suburban life was my broken elevator. There, the world was small and filled with trivial pursuits. Did your parents ever lecture you about having a personal space bubble? Mine did. You know, the serious talk about there being "a certain area around your person that, if intruded without your permission, is not acceptable. Do not be afraid to tell him or her to move away." In the suburbs, your personal space may be respected physically, but there is no privacy. There, everybody knows everything. Here, the city's lustre will hypnotize me, and I will forget.

After a time, an obnoxious honk followed by a "Hey! Watch where you're going buddy. Come on!" stirs me from my thoughts. I rise from my seat and close the window, then turn to face the couch. My box is still sitting quietly and comfortably, almost forgotten. Where am I to hide the items inside of it? I scan my apartment. The living room will not do, as it is a place where I will make new stories – ones that will be told when my family and friends gather around a table and feast on turkey, stuffing, rice, and pudding. Stories where the plot may be tweaked, worn, and torn, but where the laughter has been passed down through generations. The kitchen will not do, as it is the heart of my home. One day, my fridge – which stands solemnly in the corner – will be littered with to-do lists, magnets, and other sorts of art. My countertops will be dusted with flour and my sinks littered with dishes. The bedroom will not do, as it is a place to rest with my thoughts. Nothing should prevent me from a peaceful slumber. Every night I will fashion a cocoon out of my covers and wake up a butterfly.

My question is yet to be answered as I kneel in front of the box. The cardboard – after being stuffed, sealed, carried, and cushioned – is soft and losing its shape. I decide to unpack, hoping a location for the contents might come to me later. The silver tape around my box is old and stale, so I do not find it hard to remove. The flaps are easy to manoeuver as well; I simply push them back, and they listen to me. Next, I am greeted by a strip of bubble wrap that rests on top of my belongings. It is taken aside and saved for later since one is never too old for bubble wrap. My most prized possessions wait for me inside. Their light casts a shadow on my face as I peer into the box. My dreams are neatly stacked and sturdy like fire escapes that hug the sides of apartment buildings.

I will store my dreams on the fire escape, so that I can flee if signs of peril begin to creep their way into my future. After all, an emergency exit is the best place to put the objects closest

to your heart. I pick up the bubble wrap – and my dreams. They are cradled to my chest as I journey towards my chosen hiding place. With each footstep I pop a bubble. Fire escapes were once a very important aspect of safety for all new urban establishments; more recently, however, they have fallen out of use. Now they serve as playgrounds for cats and locations for secret rendezvous. *Pop!* My last bubble bursts, and I stand outside on my stairway to safety. I let go of the plastic. It's not useful anymore – not after I have squeezed all of the fun from it. It settles beside my feet on the steel grating. The grating is painted black, and there is an empty flowerbox that sits on the rail in front of me. I rest my dreams in the dirt. Hopefully, it will rain, and they will bloom when spring arrives.

Satisfied, I make my way back inside. My dreams will not be scrutinized here the way they were in the suburbs where I came from. Here is a place of new beginnings. But, just in case, I will be able to uproot myself from any inferno and find a new city to conquer. I will have the strength of the steel that climbs these buildings. I will keep my angles and my shadows. I will be littered with bits of rust and beauty. I will forget again.

* * * * *

Sarah Williams
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Lakefield College School

Escape

by Camryn Neilson

The room itself was small, barely big enough for a bed – not that there was a bed. But there was a window. An old, dirty window that allowed the late afternoon sunshine to come through in strips, illuminating the dust specks which floated in the air like little fairies. It was the sunlight that gave the room its warmth, despite its emptiness.

However, it wasn't quite empty. The suitcases were still in the room, stacked against the wall. The cases were brown, but it was hard to tell whether that was the actual colour or just dirt. They were threadbare now, worn from years of travel, years of love – but not exactly years of care. They were covered in stickers, with names of places that the cases (along with their owner) had stayed in. Really, it was the stickers that held them together. But the cases were bland compared to the desk near the window.

It was old, heavy, and made of solid wood. Too big to take anywhere, it was the kind of desk you might find at an antique store. It even had secret drawers and ones with metal locks, the keys to which had long since gone missing. Unlike the suitcases, the desk was in beautiful condition, save for the few scratches from her printing tools and the splotches of paint that had fallen astray as she had worked. The only piece out of place was the letter, handwritten in beautiful cursive. Even unread, something about the way it sat on the desk lent a slight melancholy air to an otherwise warm-feeling room.

There were the suitcases, the desk, and her. She stood on the threshold, fingers tapping her forearms as she surveyed the room one last time. Brown eyes, tired from the hours of packing, glanced over every corner and crack in the floorboards, committing them to memory as she looked for something she might have left behind. Sighing, she stepped across the floor, tracing her fingertips over the grain of that beautiful wooden desk.

She looked at her watch, checking the time only to realize how very little of it she had. If she were to wait any longer, she risked the chance of passing him on the stairs. Taking the handles of the suitcases in her ink-stained hands, she blew her wavy brown hair from her face with a puff of breath. She only stopped for a minute to lock the door behind her, and with it closing a chapter of her life. As she shoved the keys into her pocket, she could already see the new beginnings, like flowers blooming in spring.

The air outside was heavier than the air inside, and only slightly less hot. The heat of the sun weighed down the air, so that she could feel it pressing into her skin as she carried the last of her belongings to her car. Checking the boxes, she looked over everything once again, wanting nothing left behind. Not that she would be able to get anything else now and still escape unnoticed. Her hands pressed against the paint on the trunk, sun-heated metal burning into her skin.

The sound of her footsteps echoed hollowly in the open space of the parking lot, an insistent reminder of what she was about to do. She ignored how it seemed to call to her, telling her to turn and stop this. To go back and curl up on the old couch, the one with the fading blue dye and the stuffing coming out, and read one of her old paperbacks – the ones with the stained, dog-eared pages, the spines cracked, and the covers worn off in places. To pretend that nothing was wrong.

Shaking the melancholy from her shoulders cooled her despite the surrounding heat. She pretended the leather didn't burn her thighs as she clambered in, somehow still gracefully. The

engine purred as she turned the key, like a large cat, perhaps a tiger, welcoming its owner home after a long time apart.

She drove for hours in the wrong direction, purposely, so that no one would know where she ended up, should she decide to stop at all. It was growing dark by the time she broke from her never-ending drive, the sun's final rays painting the sky red and orange, fiery and bloody. Perhaps a struggle had broken out in the heavens as she'd driven, transforming the sky into a wartorn battleground. Or maybe it was something else entirely. Maybe it was an artist like herself, who had accidentally knocked paint onto her canvas. And having looked at the swirls of colour on the blue background, decided she liked it better this way.

She preferred the war theory.

Something about the way the orange seemed to flicker, like the cities of heaven burning, the red creeping out like blood seeping from the fallen angels. Lucifer was wreaking havoc again, and God's army was forced to subdue him. She wondered if they'd won the battle, if they'd forced the rebellious angel back into Hell. The colours seemed ragged against one another, but just in the distance, she could hear a roll of thunder. Satan's cries as Michael once again threw him from the sky, sending him back into his prison.

Perhaps it was a trade. Because on that same day, she was regaining her own freedom.

* * * * *

Camryn Neilson
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Fireworks

by Allaura Langford

A boy named Dylan had asked me to come and watch the fireworks with him. They were for all the people at the trailer park. It was the end of summer and everyone at the park would be heading back home soon – including Dylan.

I had only met him the week before and already loved everything about him, from his handwriting to the way he said the simplest words like "the" and "hello."

He was 17 when I met him, and I was 14. Dylan had blond hair and blue eyes, just like me. From the day he asked me for my phone number and sent text messages, he seemed absolutely wonderful. It's odd because he was just like me, and I don't think I'm that wonderful.

I had just got off work when Dylan came to pick me up. I was still in my work clothes, which smelled like food because I work at a restaurant. The restaurant's right near the trailer park, so naturally Dylan went there often; the first time I met him I was all gross, smelling like grease, and yet he still asked me for my number.

We sat outside for a bit, just talking and getting to know each other more. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon and the fireworks display wasn't until 8:30, so we had a lot of time to spend together, which made me very happy.

He told me his likes and dislikes. We played a game on my phone for about twenty minutes, and then he said he wanted to take me to meet his parents.

It took us a while to get to his trailer because we took a detour through the woods and sat on a little hill just talking about life. It was lovely.

"This is where we'll be coming later for the fireworks," he told me, pointing at the big field in front of us. There was a lake over to the right of us, and I looked up to see that the sky was the loveliest shade of blue. The way it broke through the trees was just breathtaking.

"It's really pretty," I said.

"I'd say beautiful." But Dylan wasn't looking at the sky or the trees. He wasn't looking at the lake or the field. He was looking at me.

When we got to his trailer, his stepdad and his mom were sitting on their little deck, and he introduced me to them as "Allison." He was the only one who ever called me by that name; everyone else calls me Allie. He told me both names were beautiful but that Allison suited me more. His parents were really kind. They offered me a drink and some food, but I told them I wasn't hungry, that just a drink was okay.

His mom decided we should all go down to the beach, and so we did. Dylan and I walked along the shore. I wanted to hold his hand really badly. He asked me what my zodiac sign was and I told him Cancer. He then said he was Pisces and that Cancer and Pisces go great together. It made me smile. I felt so free and happy with him.

His family's boat was tied up at the docks, and we jumped on it and onto another boat that wasn't his. We kept doing this until we got to the end of the docks. Jumping in other people's boats probably wasn't the best idea, but I didn't care because we were having fun. I almost fell in the water twice but he caught me both times.

When Dylan decided to show me around the park, away we went. As we walked by the pool, he made fun of all the little street names; his playful mood was highly contagious.

He took me to the basketball court where we played together. I was showing off because I could get it in the hoop more easily than he could. We left the court after that but he wasn't mad or anything; it was all just fun.

Dylan took me to a road that looked like it went on forever and said, "let's go." I had to take my boots off because they were hurting my feet, so I was just walking around in my socks the entire time. He pointed out the cross tattoo on my left ankle and said he liked it.

We spent the longest time on that road, walking and talking. He told me what books he enjoyed reading and that his favourite movie was *The Fifth Element*. He even sang me his favourite song, *Sweater Weather* by The Neighbourhood. It's one of my favourite songs now too, but I can't listen to it without thinking it's him singing.

Dylan described his home and the performing arts school where he studied music and musical theatre. I told him about my love for painting, especially when I'd go to the park with a canvas and some watercolours. I'd usually stay there for hours before coming home. Later on he told me that my passion for art was the thing that made him fall so hard for me.

We ended up just sitting on the sidewalk, drawing pictures with sticks in the sand. I drew a pair of eyes and he wrote my name. Everything he did just made my heart melt.

At 7:30 it was time to head back, and he held my hand the entire way to his trailer. We sat on a big rock that was only a short walk away from it. We talked about whatever we felt like. He told me how he hated the fact that he was always so nice to people and that they just liked to use him and use him and hurt him and hurt him until he snapped. It made me so mad that people would do that to him. I couldn't ever imagine myself trying to hurt him on purpose.

We walked back to the trailer and watched his brother play video games for about five minutes. When Dylan's brother's girlfriend came in, Dylan introduced me. Then he introduced me to his other brother and that brother's girlfriend. Those girls were really pretty and I couldn't understand why Dylan was looking at me and not at them.

His mom walked in, handing Dylan a blanket for him and me to put on the ground while we watched the fireworks. We headed to the field that Dylan had pointed out earlier; there were a lot of people there already. Together we wandered over to a little tree and laid the blanket down almost underneath it. We just sat there together, no words. And then the fireworks started.

Oh, it was so beautiful! The fireworks just lit up the sky and my heart with it. It looked like the entire world was a blaze of purple, blue, and gold. I looked at Dylan and he was looking at me. I think we were both seeing fireworks.

That night definitely changed me. In the days that followed, Dylan and I kept talking until he left to go back to his home in Oshawa. That city was about two hours away from me. He stayed in touch through Facebook, came for Thanksgiving, and ate dinner with my family and me. I asked him if he'd be my boyfriend that night and, of course, he said he would. He also said he wanted to be the one to ask me out, but I said "too late" and kissed him. The day before that we got lost in the woods and shared our first real kiss under a tree listening to songs by The 1975. It was one of the best days of my life – aside from the night of the fireworks.

He's gone now. The distance got to be too much and I did something he couldn't forgive. I think it hurts more, knowing that I got to fall in love with him the way that I did and that I'm

probably not going to feel the same way for someone ever again. He's gone and that's okay. I'll move on, but truthfully it's always going to be him who can make me feel like that.

I fell in love with him completely and entirely. I fell in love with the way he said my name and the way he fell asleep in my bed. I fell in love with all of the words that came out of his mouth and the songs that he sang. I fell in love with all of him. He was, is, and always will be the fireworks that light up my sky.

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Allaura Langford
Grade 9
Lakefield District Secondary School

Crepacuore

by Cydney Cantello

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.

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Cydney Cantello
Grade 10
Crestwood Secondary School

The Teahouse

by Sarah Shi

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….

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Sarah Shi
Grade 10
Lakefield College School

One Sock

by Kaia Douglas

I'm riding home from school because I can't take it. I can't see. I'm blinded by my uncontrollable tears. The past day I've felt so numb. I've tried to cry, tried to feel something. Now I can't stop crying. I'm oblivious to the world around me; I'm just a sobbing, heartbroken shell of a person. My flowery, cheerful bike is a distant relic of my mood yesterday morning. I don't care what I look like, though. The other people on this path have no idea what just quietly turned my heart inside out.

I shouldn't be riding a bike in this state. It's like drunk driving; I can't see or think. I glance down toward the river. The day is hot, but I know that the water is chilly from the recent ice melt. Frigid. Cold. But, I want anything that will take my mind off the wrenching desolation. I lock my bike to a tree and collapse on a rock beside the rushing water.

She was too young. Her name was Michelle Anne Rose and she died of cancer yesterday. I got the news after school, when my family was gone. I was home when my phone rang, my cell phone, not my home phone. Funny, nobody ever actually *calls* my cell phone. I was curious. It was Lynda.

"Hey, Meep! What's up?" I said casually.

"Clara, Clara, Clara, sit down!" she answered urgently. I heard a trace of tears in her voice. *Oh no*. Lynda never panics.

"What's happening?" I blurted out, fear filling the space where my heart had been.

"Are you sitting down?" Lynda's hysteria closes in on me.

"Yes! Just tell me what's going on!" I screamed. I wasn't sitting down.

"Clara… I just got a text from Michelle's mom… and, Clara…Michelle passed away today."

The next few moments were a blur. I was dizzy. I couldn't breathe. I was crying. I think I may have yelled at Lynda to tell me that it was a lie, but she just cried too and told me that it wasn't. It was all real. Michelle was gone.

The cold water rushes past my feet. I tried to go to school earlier this afternoon to "take my mind off it," but, who was I kidding? You can't just temporarily forget about this kind of thing. Not even for one second.

Losing a grandparent is tough. It's so hard. But this was different. Michelle wasn't even three hands old yet. Michelle was a self-declared child and would only order off the kid's menu to prove it. Michelle was only just getting started in her life. Then she was suddenly wrenched away from it.

I catch myself using the past tense in my head. *I shiver*.

For the first time since I got the news, something distracts me from my selfish pain and I remember her parents who have just lost their only child. All my anger vaporizes and is replaced by brutal sympathy. I cry honest, hopeless tears, for a very, very long time.

Mark Perry's song goes around and around in my head.

Our little world has shattered

It will never be the same

Laughter turned to tears

At the mention of her name

My crying recedes into focused deep breathing for a moment. I see something floating in the sky. The wind dies down and a perfect maple leaf drops gracefully into the river. I try to keep my eye on it but almost immediately lose sight of it. I realize how easily beautiful things can vanish.

My mind wanders to the first time I saw Michelle after her leg was amputated. I was going to her place after school, preparing to be a grief counsellor because, I mean, she had just lost her freaking leg. She was more cheerful than ever and bragged that she didn't have to worry about mismatched socks anymore. I attempt a smile at this memory and manage a kind of grimace through my grief. I even let out a sort of sniffle-ish laugh. *Oh, where are you?*

Michelle was a Christian. I'm a Nature-Loving Pagan. I don't believe in the whole Golden-Gates-in-the-Sky thing. No, but I think that Michelle is in a better place than that. Now, her spirit embodies all flowers, trees, rivers, and birds. She's everywhere. Nature is Heaven. Michelle is my guardian spirit, no matter the religion.

I'm drawing hearts with my finger in the soil. I notice a small white flower beside the rock I'm sitting on. "Michelle," I whisper to her, my heart free for a moment. I smile with shiny, damp eyes.

Today I'm wearing these really thick fluffy pink socks under my Birks. It's June so I don't really know why that happened, but I could ask that same question about a lot of things. My hands, now in control, take off my right sock. I tentatively put it in the rushing river. It floats. I let it... go.

This is my One-Sock moment.

And all the special moments

That quickly come to mind

Help to gather strength

For the ones left behind

As I climb back up to my bike, I decide that grieving isn't about pushing away the tears and forgetting it all happened. It's about welcoming the tears and pain and making peace with the situation that, well... sucks a lot. It's about learning how to find Michelle in this new reality. I'm never going to completely get over this. That's a good thing, because it means she meant a lot to me in the short time I knew her.

"I love you Michelle," I proclaim as I jump back onto my bike and ride home, head held high.

A new angel flies tonight

In the skies up above

And she knows well

She leaves here with our love.

- Mark Perry (New Angel)

In Loving Memory of Hailey Holmes
who continues to inspire me with her unbeatable spirit
Dec 31st 2001 - June 1st 2016

* * * * *

Kaia Douglas
Grade 10
Thomas A. Stewart Secondary School

Doctor

by Mackenzie Costello

I could hear my shoes slapping against the hardwood floor, leaving a muddy trail behind me.

I always saw places like this in movies. I used to imagine that the rooms would have a different personality than my own; while my room was like some wrinkly old man, there were rooms like this that snorted and turned their polished noses up at rooms like mine. They were the kinds of places that knew they were pretentious, knew the rosewood headboard was unnecessary and the floor-to-ceiling windows were just to show off, but they didn't care. They were the kinds of places that housed people like *them*.

Which is why, when I stumbled into one of these rooms, I wasn't surprised by how it looked, but by whom it belonged to: Doctor.

Doctor was the only person I really knew. And you can take that however you want, because it's the truth, any way you slice it. For as long as I can remember, we would get together twice a week, sometimes even three times – we never braided each other's hair exactly, but if I squinted a little, I could see him as a friend.

In the minds of some of the other people here who saw him once every few months – well, technically we weren't supposed to talk to each other, so I tried to ignore anybody who did – the rumour was that I must be *the one*.

Anyway, I knew Doctor. I knew this was where his room was (and I knew exactly how he'd react if he found me here). But I still felt the urge to go out and double-check the sign on the door, even though that would mean running into…

I heard the footsteps trudging along the concrete floor outside slow to a stop on the other side of the door. I clutched the doorknob. They could probably hear my breathing and my heart, and feel the blood pulsing through my body when they touched the door. What if they're from the outside? What if there are more of them? They would have set off the alarms – unless they deactivated those, or… or maybe I'm too far away from the entrance to hear them.

Or I'm hallucinating everything right now.

My hands eased off the doorknob, but they didn't stop shaking. Hallucinating was the most reasonable answer, but Doctor hadn't given me anything in a few weeks. Unless he snuck it into my food and didn't tell me – why wouldn't he tell me? That didn't make any more sense than the figure that had sent me bolting here. It wasn't like Doctor never had other people come visit him, because he *did*. It was just that when he had other visitors, he always told us in advance so we wouldn't sprint into his room in a moment of panic… *Doctor can't be angry with you*, I thought, but that sent my brain spiralling deeper into a pool of anxiety, as I thought… *yes, he can*.

Hearing the footsteps grow fainter, I sighed and slid down to my knees. I had no way of knowing how far away they were, which meant that I wasn't going to go out there until somebody came in here first.

I pushed a desk in front of the door and collapsed onto Doctor's bed. It really was better than mine…

Of course it's better than yours. He's Doctor.

Something fell to the floor and I jumped to my feet. Whatever Doctor had given me, it was definitely working: even when I thought I was starting to relax, a piece of paper would fall and my heart would leap into my throat. I could just picture Doctor showing this to the others in a lecture…*"and as you can see, the hallucinogens are starting to affect the subject's common sense. What could be the dangers of something like this?"*

"Well, sir, as you noted, the hallucinogens might make her act irrationally. Violating your privacy, stealing, etcetera. This is all just a hypothesis, of course. If her morals were strong enough…"

Oh, wait.

It wasn't like I intentionally walked over to the letter thinking, *right now's a great time to spy on Doctor's life*. I wasn't going to pick it up at first – he'd hidden it under the sheets, and it wasn't even open yet (opening it somehow felt worse than reading it). If I hadn't lain down on his bed in the first place, I never would have found it.

My brain understood all that logic. Accepted it. I would slip the letter back under the sheets and be done with it. When Doctor found me here later, I would explain what had happened and apologize, and he would know that I hadn't really done anything wrong. But then I saw her name, in tiny, exact letters, on the corner of the letter. And my brain switched from Spock to Kirk in a matter of seconds.

On quiet nights, if someone asked nicely enough and Doctor was feeling generous, he'd put on a VHS for us to watch. He had half a dozen of them hidden away – mostly *Star Trek*, but a few episodes of *The Addams Family* too. He used to have more, but then the tapes started to wear out, and Doctor screamed at us, saying we were wasting a luxury...

Quickly, I made my decision, tore open the letter, threw the envelope over my shoulder, and scanned the contents... I had no idea that the older ones were allowed to send letters here – she would remember me, wouldn't she? She'd moved to Doctor's other facility when she was twenty, the same as everybody else. That was only a couple of years ago…

I was only slightly disappointed when it was addressed to Doctor. I scanned through the letter looking for my name, and when I couldn't find it, I settled on the first paragraph.

It's taken me this long to find a piece of paper and a pen to write with. I used to think that you were stingy on supplies; now I'm realizing what that must have cost. Do you have runners out here, killing for that stuff, or do you do that yourself?

A sliver of ice ran down my back, making the hair on my arms stand on end. *This has to be some kind of inside joke,* I assured myself (only half-heartedly).

I guess it's not like you've been killing us. I've been out here for nearly two months, and I haven't recognized anyone from the compound. They might be in the shells, I don't know. Just yesterday I started phasing out. "Caught the bug," as they say (but honestly, it feels more like the bug caught me). I've started writing this letter a dozen times, but I keep slipping in and out of reality too fast to concentrate on the words. That cure you gave us – well, I have a strange feeling you already know it doesn't work.

With shaking hands, I refolded the letter neatly into three sections, slipped it into the torn envelope, and methodically placed it under the sheets. My hand brushed a pile of unopened letters, and I hoped that meant Doctor wouldn't notice the one that had been opened.

I walked out of Doctor's room. I saw the muddy footprints tracing the path of the intruder (I knew they had to belong to the person I'd heard sneaking around earlier; nobody in here had mud on their shoes), and I walked past them. I walked to the dining hall – it had to be lunch by now – and

with every step, the question of exactly how many letters had been under Doctor's sheets pounded in my brain. How many of those people did I know? How many were in "the shells" now?

Without thinking about it, I started following the muddy footsteps. It wasn't long before our footsteps merged into one set of prints, and it was difficult to tell if there had ever been two separate people.

The more I thought about it, I couldn't remember if there had ever been two sets of footprints.

* * * * *

Mackenzie Costello
Grade 10
Kenner Collegiate Vocational Institute

The Sound of Gunfire

by Richard Gao

The man pored over the coordinates. They were preparing to change the course of seconds, minutes, days, months, and years of history. On his lab coat was a badge showing the Star of David, coupled with the cyclamen, the national flower of Israel.

"So where will the arrival destination be, Mr. Xavier?" said the group leader anxiously, his rifle slung menacingly over his shoulder.

"The location has already been set; it will be this room right here," replied the man, pointing to a small space on the grand map of the building.

Across from the computers, was an odd-looking machine; it was scarcely the size of a public washroom stall, plated with black and chrome, and with a strange assortment of antennae protruding from the back. The men had trained vigorously for weeks and months to get ready for its use.

"All right, men, I want you to know that this will be a turning point in our history, a turning point that did not happen in our past, and thus, the reason why we will make it happen," said Mr. Xavier, giving a salute.

"Yes, sir" said the group of three men in unison, followed by their own salutes.

They entered the machine sure-footed, having practised this many times.

"Farewell, you are doing a great service for your people," uttered Mr. Xavier, as the door shut with a soft hiss.

The group leader, David, a large, burly man, set the dial with shaking hands, "February 27 1925," and it clicked into place. A fat, grubby finger gingerly poked the button, starting a soft humming vibration. The group of three strapped themselves in with their safety belts, just before the soft humming grew into a tumultuous rage. The shaking and spinning hit a climax. The two others on the team, Noam, a tall, lanky man with glasses, and Yves, a short stocky man, were surprisingly calm considering what was to come. After a sudden jolt and a mechanical *beep*, there was total silence and stillness in the air.

The door hissed open softly, and they were out.

The machine had appeared in what seemed to be a supply room, with brooms, buckets, and mops strewn in a haphazard way. The men stumbled in the darkness as they made their way out. Across from the room was a sign that read "this way to main hall" in German, with an arrow pointing to the left. Beside the sign was a map of the place, with its name labelled underneath, "*Bürgerbräukeller, Berlin.*" When the three men flicked on their microphones, the soft background static indicated that they worked. Then they parted ways, each without a word, for they had practised the plan so thoroughly that it required no discussion. Yves went left, down the harshly illuminated hallway; it was a strange sensation to hear the throng of so many people, yet see none. Noam's job was to keep guard and prevent anybody from seeing what was in the supply room.

David made his way further down the hall and up a narrow staircase leading to the balcony, his rifle weighing him down. He eventually made it up to a balcony that had been long abandoned after construction; it was supported by thin planks of wooden scaffolding, hanging

precariously over the main hall. It complained with a series of ominous groans and creaks as David stepped onto it. But he was too focused to take notice. This was it, he thought, the only chance he had to change the course of history, to save millions of lives, and to kill the man himself – Adolf Hitler!

He raised his rifle anxiously over the raucous crescendo of the crowd, then rested it on the guardrail, waiting for Yves's cue to fire. The balcony squeaked again, louder this time, but still David ignored it. Resolve and determination blocked off the deafening din of the crowd. David had no idea what the man had just said, but it must have been quite provocative, as it riled up the crowd into a storm of clapping and cheering. Then came a sudden flash, accompanied by a thunderous roar that shook the hall. Yves had done his job, and the crowd was awash with confusion and agitation. David traced the scope over to his target, who had stopped speaking and now cowered behind the podium. However, the next crack was not the sound of gunfire, but the balcony lurching forward beneath David's bulk, knocking his rifle down into the crowd.

"David? Are you there? Now's your chance!" bellowed Yves into his microphone over the roar of the crowd. No good. David was too far gone to hear Yves's pleading. Their chance to change the course of history was over, thought Yves gravely. There were now several guards around the podium. Another loud crash ensued, and David's balcony came down. At this point, Yves was too concerned with his own life to direct any attention towards the group. Guards were rushing into the crowd to make it to the fallen balcony. "Noam! Noam?" hollered Yves into his microphone, while pushing through bewildered hordes of people. "We've got to go back, now! David's a lost cause!" Noam barked something back, but Yves was too busy trying to escape to hear.

Noam finally saw the familiar silhouette of Yves after minutes that felt like hours of hushed malice as the guards drew closer. "Wha… what...?" blurted Noam before Yves pushed him into the machine and shut the door. Yves jammed the button, starting the humming and blotting out the cries from the Germans in the distance. "Are you telling me you left David?" shouted Noam in anger and disbelief. "Well, he was…" Yves was cut off. "Do you even know what this could mean, Yves? What leaving someone back in time could entail?" hollered Noam over the screech and shake of the machine. "Shut up, Noam; would you rather I died as well as David?" bellowed Yves over the ear-piercing, mechanical thunder.

Beep

All was still.

Noam got up angrily and opened the door forcefully, denting the metal. The first thing they noticed was the air. There was a strong, bitter, chemical smell, along with something burnt. "No, no… Noam, what have we done?" cried Yves. The last thing the two men heard was frantic German, accompanied by gunfire.

* * * * *

Richard Gao
Grade 9
Adam Scott Collegiate Vocational Institute

Eli

by Dana Jordan

Do you know what it feels like to be falling, but never hit the ground? To feel like a stranger in your own skin. Never comfortable enough to feel at home, but not desperate enough to leave. That was my dysphoria. Sometimes it made me feel claustrophobic, a caged bird.

When it got really bad, I felt so alone. Deep within myself, I sought an abditory.

Other times it wasn't as prominent. I tried to convince myself that maybe I was just a girl going through a phase. But my dysphoria served as a sour reminder that "who I am" was still there, latching on to my periphery.

I traced the familiar sheets, lying awake in my garish bedroom, wanting, but unable, to get up. Procrastination I knew all too well. I tried to wish the butterflies on the wall into subtle hues of green; I wished I could just tell my mom that this room wasn't me anymore – *this* wasn't me.

Sometimes fantasizing about tiny things allowed me to hide from the bigger picture, although not for long. It took all of my energy on days like this, but eventually I forced myself to rise, trying to abandon the thought.

However, as if the shadows were whispering to me, I knew.

I couldn't pretend anymore.

My mom wouldn't kick me out. She really loved me. Although she wasn't exactly left wing, eventually everything would be okay. It had to be. No, this was more of an internal battle, one that'd been waging for years.

I wasn't the transgender person you hear about, the one who always knew they were different. As a kid, I wore dresses and played with dolls; hell, I even threw my share of tea parties. Still, I wondered… Was it okay to be feminine as a trans boy; would I really be accepted in the community?

Was I trans enough?

Despite any doubts, I wanted to come out. What'd probably kept me from taking the leap for so long, was that I was scared. Not that my family wouldn't accept me, but that they wouldn't believe me. Deep down, I knew that I was a boy. That was all that mattered.

It was a slow Sunday morning, but from the edge of the bed where I'd been sitting, these thoughts raced through my head. I brandished the scissors that had been lying on my bedside table. I saw them glint in the fluorescent light and gripped the handles hard. Slowly at first, I began chopping, but as I gained momentum, I couldn't stop. Each strand of hair that fell defeated onto the ground made me feel as if I was a king conquering a battle.

The release of surfacing to breathe, lungs aflame.

"Eli," I whispered to myself. The boy reflected back at me was unfamiliar simply from newness. Nonetheless, as my shadow, I'd known him my whole life.

I search even now. For the words to illustrate the feeling of affirmation and security which that expression of masculinity had given me. After all this time, I can only find one word. Safe. No longer a victim of scrutiny – from myself or others.

“Eliza!” my mom hollered from her room in our small apartment. “C’mere.”

“Coming,” I called back, some of my newly acquired confidence dissipating with the sound of my birth name. I was brought back to reality with a sharp snap.

I could already envision the look of horror on my mother’s face, when she would see what had mere minutes ago been her “daughter’s” treasured auburn locks, now plundered.

Trying my best not to panic, I had reasoned with myself. This was the opportunity I’d been waiting for.

As I crept down the hall toward her room like a ghost, I could barely feel my feet on the ground. I brimmed with anticipation, and my stomach gave a violent hurl. In. Out. Breaths came and parted so fleetingly, pulling me back under, into a dark place of monstrous waves, unleashing the anxiety I’d been working so hard that year to tame.

I hadn’t apprehended how difficult those two words would be to utter. So foreign to the tongue. I can’t explain their power. The feeling. My hand on the door, I pushed, eyes shut briefly. I realized that there would never be a perfect time. Now had to be good enough.

I could already see her eyes opening wide with shock and concern, but I quickly cut her off.

“Mom, I need to tell you something before you say, or ask, anything about…” I gestured vaguely at the messy masterpiece I’d created.

“I…well…what?” she crossed her arms, flustered.

“I’ve been wanting to tell you this for a while. I hope you support me, because it’s not just a phase… it’s who I am. I haven’t given you much proof of that yet, but…”

“What is? What are you talking about?” She was impatient then. Trying in vain to find the missing puzzle piece, but searching in all the wrong places.

Where she was from, those deemed “others” were silenced. However, times were changing, and after some experience and education, so would her mindset. She wanted me to be myself. Always.

I’m one of the lucky ones. You shouldn’t have to be lucky to be loved unconditionally, but some can’t say as much.

“I don’t understand Eliza…”

“It’s Eli.”

* * * * *

Dana Jordan
Grade 9
Thomas A. Stewart Secondary School

Teeth

by Fin Taylor

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.

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Fin Taylor
Grade 10
Adam Scott Collegiate Vocational Institute

Runner Up

by Clementine MacLeod

Simon stands at my shoulder, much closer than he normally would. For support, theoretically, but he really shouldn't still be here.

"Go to your line," I tell him. Funny how though he's older, I'm the sensible one. Yet, somehow, I'm still inferior. He may be stupid, but he's a damn good runner.

My brother pats my shoulder a little too hard, his version of a hug. "Don't suck, okay?"

I smile, but it's just for show. *Not sucking* might not be possible. "Whatever," I say, "Good luck."

Simon just nods.

I check my watch as our line starts to move. The thin, athletic, better-than-me girls smile and bounce from foot to foot. The track is wide and somehow looks longer than the one back home, as if the expensive orange rubber has elongated the familiar 400 metres into something else entirely. "This'll be fun," the girl to my left squeaks nervously. Her I recognise. She's from my district – short, super skinny, and, obviously, gorgeous. All that, and she's crazy fast.

"Don't be nervous," I tell her, ignoring the anxiety bubbling beneath my ribcage.

She grins and, yeah, she's got perfect teeth. "Ugh, easy for you to say! You're literally *so* good." Okay, so as nice as this sounds, it's total BS. First off, she's better. Not *we're always neck-and-neck-but-she-usually-wins* better, either. Like, I could run the greatest race of my life and not be good enough to feel the dirt off her shoes. *Dawn*, I realize, *that's her name.*

I grin back. Whatever, I'll bite. She's just trying to be nice. "No, seriously," I assure her, "You're gonna kill it."

She shakes her head and says something stupid about how bad she is. I'm so goddamn sick of impressive people complaining. I get it. She's here to win and anything else would be catastrophic failure. But it isn't like she'll *lose.* She's striving for perfection but the worst she'll get is third. Sure, I'm here to do well, but for me it's a pipe dream. Running every day and trying my absolute hardest will get me fourth and Dad will be proud. Kinda pathetic, when you think about it.

We get to the starting line and watch the guys set up. There are a few from my school and I shoot them an encouraging smile as the gun goes. They'll do fine, and if they don't, well, I don't really care. I'm not bitter or anything, but those guys have always been the ones whispering. Saying I'm nowhere near as good as Simon or my sisters. They're right, obviously, but it sorta sucks to hear.

We're told to take our places and my usual pre-race thoughts flood my brain. I should just throw it, show everyone I suck as much as they think I do. It's not like I'll be any more embarrassed. Shaking my head, as if to physically rid myself of this mindset, I approach my mark.

Whatever, I'll do my best.

The gun goes and we're off. Dad's voice replays in my mind, *just choose one of those girls you think is so good and stick to her. Don't let her get away from you.* Dawn's a few feet away, pulling away from the pack with every stride. *Screw it*, I think, and I muster up the strength to match her pace.

Christ, there's no way I'm gonna keep this up. My motivation, though, is coming from the same part of my brain that keeps telling me I suck, and that means I can't slow down. I'll try my best. It's not enough, I know, but what else can I do?

Now, it isn't just Dawn I've gotta beat. Obviously, there's tons of others who are better than me. Better, fitter, thinner, richer (by the looks of their shoes), and they're gonna beat me just like they do every year. This doesn't make me wanna go slower. It should, obviously, but I've decided I've got something to prove. To Simon, to those guys in my grade, and to Dad. To myself too, I guess, but that isn't the point.

We loop back to the starting line. One lap in and I'm already screwed. I catch Dad's eye on the sidelines. He's nodding, eyes wide, and yelling something I can't hear. He wants me to try, but I'm starting to think even that won't be enough. *God, my lungs hurt*. I block out my thoughts and focus on Dawn's feet, matching pace. *Just breathe*, I repeat to myself, *breathe and run*.

Lap two and three fall away in a haze of pain and shallow breath. Dawn's pulled ahead quite a bit and my plans to stick to her have failed royally. Good news is that a few of the others have fallen back, too. Without meaning to be, I'm in second. *Second*. The word rolls around my brain as if jostled by my bouncing steps. I've never done this well before.

It's such an accomplishment that I almost don't realize I'm *gaining* on Dawn. Like, *gaining*. If I put in a good push, I could *win.* The thought alone pushes me further. But I'm so tired. My lungs throb and the muscles behind my knees are on the verge of giving out. At this point, I'm begging my body not to collapse. But she's *right there*.

Dad's voice cuts through the crowd and, like that, we've got 200 metres to go. I'm pulling a sprint out of some deep recess of my body and I'm getting closer. I can feel the vibrations from her shoes. I can *hear* her breath.

But there we are, 100 *freaking* metres from the finish, and Dawn starts sprinting. She's fast and light and there's no way I can conceivably do this. She crosses the finish line and, seconds later, so do I.

Second place.

Runner up.

Silver medal.

First loser.

But for me, Callie Henson, the not-thin, not-pretty, not-better than you, Untalented Henson Sister, it's a goddamn triumph!

* * * * *

Clementine MacLeod
Grade 9
Adam Scott Collegiate Vocational Institute

Artificial

by Kellan MacKenzie

"*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.

* * * * *

Kellan MacKenzie
Grade 9
St. Peter Catholic Secondary School

How to Go About the End of the World

by Kellan MacKenzie

When the End of the World comes, they send Sarah and me to collect the food. The parking lot is empty, space filled by our footfalls that crash across the pavement. The foggy night amplifies the sound. Each step a wave breaking. My mind breaking.

Sarah rattles the door of the grocery store with no results. She tries again because she's that type of person.

Sarah's got paint strokes of exhaustion smeared under her eyes. There's a lively feeling to her, always glancing around and fidgeting, swaying to imaginary music. Look closer and there's movement behind her eyes. Life. Something beyond this world has transformed her into a creature doomed to die. Next to her, I'm hollow. I avoid looking closer.

She's trying to jiggle the door again.

"You've got a brick, moron," I snap (because I am going to die, and I don't like her very much).

She responds with a motion that brushes my impudence aside and unzips her patchwork backpack.

Now, we're stepping over the newly-broken glass into the storefront. Fluorescent lights scatter across Sarah's sea-dark skin.

We both linger for a second and gaze at the vast shelves of slowly decaying food. The store is a long-buried remnant of last week, void of the life that once warmed it.

"I came here for groceries on Thursday," she whispers.

"I worked here."

I whisper too because it feels right to whisper around dead things. I am the first to approach the shelves. I do it gently.

Sarah's filling her backpack with bright cans of non-perishable items that will be gone in days.

Some part of me wants to help. The other part of me is a hospital overflowing. The sick thoughts start to leak out.

It's the labels, all colourful and cheery. It's the way Sarah's humming to herself as she works. It's the idea of *tomorrow*, taken away in seconds. I splinter.

"Hey Sarah, it's the End of the World, capital e, capital w, and you think gathering your artificial long-lasting food is gonna help at all?"

Sarah blinks her stupid (alive) eyes at me as I continue.

"You think we're gonna be here next week, Sarah? You think there's gonna be a 'here' left?"

She might cry. I hope she cries. She's staring back and forth between me and the cans, and I can't help but notice the dark circles crowding her eyes. I've got the sudden urge to wipe them off like they're grease stains. She's so *whole* it hurts to see her weighed down. Hurts to see her existing. Hurts when she doesn't cry and instead stands and dusts off her worn leggings.

"Let's go then. Produce section?"

Unaffected. Why should she get to be so candid when I feel so much pain?

"You're dying, Sarah! We're dead." My voice catches, and I watch her digest my words, as if the thorns aren't tearing at her throat. After a moment, she puts her hand on my shoulder.

"Time's running away," she says slowly, fierce. "Let's throw her a party before she leaves. The Earth is still spinning and our legs can still dance. Don't just let the seconds tick away."

And then she's off, bouncing slightly with each step. The seconds tick away. I stare at a can of black beans. I'm going to die. I want to die dancing. I follow Sarah.

A neon sign proclaiming the health benefits of tofu lights our path. Sarah's whistling a distant song about living forever and the irony is so thick that I burst out laughing. A pause, then she joins in.

I'd like to keep her laugh in a jar.

We link arms and skip to the tropical fruits, collect things that are raw and real. Sarah says something honey-smooth that sticks in my mind like the bite of fresh air. I reply clumsily. Repeat.

She likes strawberries, she says. *Tell me why.* She used to play in the strawberry shoots growing behind her house. *I like strawberries too.*

I hold up a wilted piece of lettuce. *Look. It's us.*

"No," she replies, placing a strawberry in my hand instead.

I think her spark is catching.

My fingers bump the bottom of the orange crate, which means we're done, so we walk leisurely, arms linked, to the storefront. I don't know when I saw the fire, only that I've been aware of its presence for longer than I'd like to admit. Really, it's always been there in my rib cage. Flames like a deep sleep are coming to pull the city under. The End of The World.

"Burning city," remarks Sarah. I turn away while she wipes her eyes.

She is everything, dying. A galaxy being extinguished.

Sarah and I sit together on the concrete curb watching the flames approach. There's a rhythm to them, forward, back, forward, forward, the beat of a distorted song. We are still dancing. We are both alive.

Sarah pops open a ginger ale and offers me one.

"Thank you," I say. I'm not talking about the ginger ale.

The fire is snapping at the air around us so we lie back and watch the sky bleed.

Sarah's eyes are still. "You know, the stars used to be so good. Bright enough for launching entire ships."

Smoke catches at my skin. "Do you think anyone cried when they went away?"

"No." She considers for a second. "I think we all felt it, though."

We don't speak again. I take her hand, and she gives me a strawberry because we both love strawberries.

* * * * *

Kellan MacKenzie
Grade 10
St. Peter Catholic Secondary School

A Silent Sacrifice

by Naomi D'Souza

"She hasn't been communicating much today. You know, the way she usually does."

Finally, I'm outside. Weeping willows. Jabs of hot, painful lightning.

"I don't know! There's nothing we can do. She thinks it's her own battle to fight."

Raindrops trickling down like pennies. Bitterly cleaving thunder.

"I just wish – I just wish . . . I could be a better mother . . . for her."

And a rhythm in the midst of it all – a symphony, cascading like tears.

"But I'm not."

Those words, said on the phone, had been suffocated in static – but I'd still heard them. Sticky tears had streamed down my cheeks; I couldn't call out to my mother from the kitchen, couldn't tell her what I wanted her to hear the most.

Now, spears of wind hurl themselves around as I walk down the street, holding the orange portfolio that my father forgot to take to work. I'm thinking, *what kind of a daughter am I? I can't even tell my own mother that I love her.*

A bunch of papers are plastered all over the next street. LOST DOG, they say, HAVE YOU SEEN HIM?

My head throbs. Questions! They're everywhere. I think of all the questions I'm asked every day. "*Yes*" or "*no*" ones are fine. But "*How are you feeling*?" is a question that always gets me. Sometimes, I ache for it. Other times, it's the last straw. Emotions surface like crazy, and I have no choice but to keep them bottled up. To seal the cap even tighter.

Which is why I envy other people. They can do all sorts of things with words, as if bending a kind of magic to their will. They can yell out a word in fierce anger, choke on it with laughter, state it icily and cut right to the core, sarcastically mutter it under their breath . . .

I can't speak, in case you're wondering by now. I was born mute. I know sign language, but it's turned out to be pointless because no one else does, except my parents. I figured it's just easier to write down replies on a notepad.

Everyone has got something I don't have, something special.

A voice in this world.

Meanwhile, I'm in this world chained to the bottom of the ocean. I can't do anything about it.

Now, as I shove through swarms of people and they jostle me, I feel annoyed. They're all prattling like a flock of seagulls. *Chatterboxes*. I follow them to a streetlight, and we've got to wait before crossing. I'm just itching to be out of here. Crowds don't mean anything to me anymore.

Maybe you're wondering what I mean by that. Well, let me clarify something first. It may seem totally off topic, but I promise it's not.

There's a difference between being alone and being lonely. Being alone is a physical state where nobody is near or around you. For instance, you could be all alone in your bedroom. Maybe you want some company, maybe you don't. Either way, you could go right back outside and not be alone anymore. It's a choice.

Being lonely is different, though. That's where you could be in a room full of laughing, talking people, and still feel completely, utterly alone. Like an outcast. The one who doesn't belong, who never will.

The fly on the wall.

That's loneliness. You *want* to fit in, to be accepted, to be understood, but you aren't – and that hurts.

I jerk out of my thoughts. There's a small girl up ahead, about five years old. Blond pigtails bobbing, eyes sparkling. Right in the middle of the road – on a green light!

I don't think the truck driver sees her. He's roaring nearer, high up; she's bending down to pick up a doll she's dropped, crouched she's too small to be seen! Almost instantly, she stands up again and realizes her mistake. Terror crosses her face.

It's going to happen quickly. In my mind, I see a horror movie playing out. I hear her silent screams, calling out for her mother. I don't need her voice to know what she's going through. The unspoken words are as clear as daylight.

I think of the headlines that'll cover the newspaper tomorrow. LITTLE GIRL, they'll say, blaring red. RUN OVER BY TRUCK ON HARTLAND STREET.

Full of life. Gone.

Most of the people haven't noticed. One lady across from me turns pale and lets out a strangled gasp. A man across the street gives a start.

But nobody moves. Then I realize what they're all thinking: it's too late. The horror movie is beginning and nobody is ready for it, nobody wants to see it. It's their life or hers.

My thoughts suddenly change direction. Drastically.

It's *my* life or hers.

They've all lost their voices. They don't know what it's like. But I do. I lost my voice a long time ago.

Without hesitation, I run, shoving my whole body against the little girl, throwing her out of the way. I wonder what her name is. Catharine, Shayla, Lili . . . She lands on the pavement. Hard. And I hear a crunch and feel the wheels. Seething pain.

I hear screams. But I know they're not mine, because I never could scream. It's everyone else. The bystanders. The ones with the voices, the ones with an influence over the world.

My thoughts start to move like the gears of a clock that is working too slowly. Rewinding themselves. Then, jerking forward. Now, screeching to a standstill. A wall of cold, unyielding asphalt is slowly rising up to meet me. It reeks of blood.

Maybe, just maybe, I do have a voice in this world. Maybe I've found it after all the searching. Sometimes, actions speak louder than words. Way louder. My mother will be proud of me today. Today, she'll know that I care. So will that little girl.

I guess I finally made a friend. And I finally *said* something to her, too.

That last thought made me really happy.

* * * * *

Naomi D'Souza
Grade 10
Our Lady of the Wayside Catholic School

Stronger Than Hate

by Rachel Pei

"Diet Coke, please, not Pepsi – I can't *stand* Pepsi."

He's peculiar like that.

Smiling and nodding, the blonde waitress turns towards me. "And how about yourself, Mrs. Brooks?" she asks cheerily. "What will you be having today?"

My attention strays from the waitress to the man across from me, and I understand him well enough to know what he's thinking. *Mrs. Brooks… So she kept the name.* Suddenly, I can't bring myself to meet his searching gaze. *Why?*

My words fall out almost inaudibly as I reply, "Water will be just fine, thanks."

After a few futile attempts at conversation, the waitress leaves the table in a huff, probably deciding that Mrs. Brooks and her companion are her most unsociable customers by far. I study his face. Five years have aged him beyond what I could ever have foreseen, and yet, the distinct features I remember are still there. The same curved brow, hooked nose, and proud forehead are all framed by wavy hair, now streaked with silver. His beard is rather unkempt and so is his hair. He glances over at me, seeming to grow more nervous with every breath. I'm aware of how his eyes travel over my own dark brown curls and tightly pressed lips.

For a moment that seems to stretch into eternity, neither one of us says a word; instead we sit motionless at the table. Chatter rises from all sides as folks trickle in, about to begin their Saturday brunch. We don't pay any attention to them, though – just continue staring silently at each other.

At last, he summons up all of his courage to ask about the kids.

"They're fine," I reply hesitantly. *Is this it? Has he called me here just to take my babies away from me?* At once, a mixture of anger and regret fills my heart. *Regret for what? That he hasn't changed like I had hoped?*

His eyes wander aimlessly before he swears and smashes his fist against the table. As prepared as I was for any scenario, I flinch as if he had hit me instead of the hard surface in front of us. That's when he chooses to blurt, "I'm sorry, okay? Sorry for everything. And I'm gonna keep saying I'm sorry until you actually see that I mean it!"

Already, customers are turning around in their seats and glaring at him. I can't blame them. Nevertheless, flushed with embarrassment, I study the hardwood floor. These are all people I recognize, as this town is small and everyone practically knows everyone else. Since my parents lived here, moving to town with the kids seemed like the most reasonable option for me five years ago.

Now, he takes a deep breath, calms down, and looks at me, seemingly determined to do something. Out of his jeans pocket he pulls a wad of bills. It's a collection of tens, fifties, and hundreds, all wound up together with a rubber band.

"Here," he says, a serious look on his face. "Take it. It's all I've got left. I'm going to be a better man now, save stuff in the bank again and work. I promise – for you and the kids."

It seems too good to be true. For the first time in several months, my world feels lighter at the prospect of some kind of hope. Hope for us as a family. Hope for a brighter future, possibly with a father for my children. But still, there are too many 'maybes,' and I quickly reproach myself for my naïve optimism. How can someone like him have a change of heart? It's almost impossible. It *must* be impossible. And yet…

He looks intently at me, trying to guess what I make of his promises. At once, he knows. He knows the struggle inside me because it's right there in front of him, showing plainly in my eyes despite myself. I see that the shock, the realization of my unspoken feelings, fills his awestruck expression. It's the final resolution. Immediately, he knows he isn't worthy and never was.

It is love – love despite hardship, despite betrayal, despite abuse. It is love which binds me to this man who was once the light of my life. Now, it is love that causes me to cry as I've never cried before.

"Dalia, oh Dalia…" he murmurs softly and takes my hands in his. Then he too begins to sob.

Rays of soft sunlight, seeping in from the window, illuminate the tears on our faces. Outside, bright-coloured petunias seem to bloom and blossom as never before.

* * * * *

Rachel Pei
Grade 10
Our Lady of the Wayside Catholic School

The Departed Train

by Laura Oakes

The sound of the tracks beneath Leto rumbled as he sat quietly. There was an eerie silence everywhere. It was as if time itself streamed around the train while it rolled along the countryside. Leto had long forgotten where they were going. People had boarded the train and left once more. Now he was waiting for someone to come along to talk to him. A voice other than his own. A voice that didn't remind him of his father.

The whistle blew. A stop? Was someone getting on? A surge ran through Leto, a glimmer of hope appearing on his face. It faded when he realized it was probably just another routine stop and nothing more.

Footsteps were unusual; he had become good at listening for sounds that didn't belong. Leto's pale blue eyes watched through the small, grime-filmed window. Approaching was the Conductor, a man of little expression but a soft spot for the young boy.

A loud clang rang out, drawing Leto into his memories. The war felt like it was just yesterday, yet so long ago. It had been quiet in the town where lived, far from the fighting. Safe.

It was the screeching of metal, the sound of the wheels on the rails becoming just a touch louder for a moment, that yanked Leto from his thoughts. "Good evening, Mister Conductor." Leto spoke quietly to the older man, although there was no one else to bother.

A faint twitch of the lips passed over the man's face as he nodded in return. "How are you today, Leto?" the Conductor asked, setting down a bowl of the foul-smelling, beige gruel they called soup.

"I'm fine, Mister," Leto responded as he sat up a touch straighter, trying to look convincing.

He smiled weakly at the Conductor, who ruffled the boy's already messy, wiry hair and sighed. "We'll be there soon, son."

Leto smiled at him again. He knew it was a lie. They had been travelling for a long, long time. He didn't remember the last time that he had set foot on the ground he watched speed by or when he had played with other children.

Leto ate his bowl of soggy mush with the chipped spoon and curled up against the window. He watched the horizon, the sun dancing its way farther. Much like the day's hours, Leto's eyes were slowly closing. When the sun had set, his head lay limp in slumber against the glass pane. The Conductor walked in, gently throwing a blanket around the small form of the frail, skinny boy.

The train whistled when they pulled into the station. Leto remained deep asleep. Shadows watched the train, their crimson eyes tracing it, searching as it came to a halt. While the figures embarked, quiet whispers of the past were all that could be heard. Some were soldiers, some mothers with children, others wives and husbands. There was a quiet echo of familial bond, an underlying memory of what had once been. Before…

Well, before…

When Leto woke the next morning, it was a dim, dark, stormy day. As his eyes opened, lightning danced across the sky. Leto looked around, blinking. An old couple, the man whistling,

sat among a family of shadows across the aisle. Leto's eyes widened in fear and confusion. He searched for the Conductor in the crowd.

Feeling a gentle hand on his shoulder, he relaxed. He knew who it was. He looked up to see the Conductor. "Where are we goin' again, Mister?" Leto was confused, worried.

"Home," the man said gently, "home, lad."

Leto sat back down. In the span of seconds for Leto, days passed in the world outside the train. When they rode past towns, villages, and cities, people would sob and wave their loved ones off as they got on the train.

And before Leto knew it, the train came to a screeching halt! The only movements were the rising and then swift departure of the shadows. Leto hardly realized what was going on. Before he could grab his coat and bag, the train continued. The Conductor came and sat beside Leto. "Lad... we're almost home."

Leto blinked. He had only looked away for a moment; he swore by it. But when he looked back, the train itself was plummeting over the edge of a cliff into the abyss below. "Where are we!? Where are we going!?" Leto cried out in fear, seeing a raven dive down beside the window.

The Conductor took Leto's hand gently and smiled. "Home, lad. Home."

As the bottom of the seemingly endless pit came into view, the raven sang in a low, calming tone. Images flashed in front of Leto's eyes, memories of his past, his parents, his home, his friends, and the world he once knew. He was snapped back into focus when the train came to a sudden stop.

Leto looked around, still holding the Conductor's cold hand. At the edge of the platform stood Leto's father. But no, how could that be? Leto's father had died long before.

Unless. . .

Leto's eyes welled with tears. He looked up to the Conductor, the world around him fading as he remembered it all too clearly. The smell of gunpowder, the shouts, the screams of bullets and artillery, a chorus of commands and crying, a stabbing pain in his side, the bright red of his own blood that coated his hands, and the suffocating smoke that filled his vision. The train's whistle was all that pulled the boy out of the memories that felt too real.

The Conductor slowly and carefully picked the boy up, carrying him to the doors. They opened and Leto's father stood there, a gentle smile on his face. His eyes were sad, but he was forcing himself not to cry. His hand was outstretched, silently beckoning.

As Leto took it, the world was finally dimming into the peace and solace of darkness. The only sound was that of the rhythm of the rails as the train rolled onwards.

* * * * *

Laura Oakes
Grade 9
Crestwood Secondary School

The Walk

by Jordyn Yates

I've walked these streets enough times to know that I don't need to think about where I'm going. Past the flickering streetlights, past the empty bus stop with its rusted bench, and past the convenience store that closes too early. I don't have a destination; I just walk. It started a few months ago. Time feels different at night – stretched thin, like it could snap if you pulled too hard. During the day, everything moves so quickly. School bells, crowded hallways, voices layered on top of each other until it all becomes noise. But at night, it's quiet... a quietness that feels honest.

My parents think I'm asleep. I wait until the house settles into stillness, except for the hum of the fridge, the soft tick of the kitchen clock, my dad's low snores drifting down the hallway. That's when I slide out of bed, pull on a hoodie, and climb out of the window. The window sticks, always catching on the frame. I hold my breath every time, as if that somehow makes me invisible. Outside, the air is colder than I expected. It presses against my skin, awakening me in a way that nothing else can.

I've walked in the rain before. Not heavy rain or storms, just that steady kind that soaks into everything it touches. The rain makes the streets shimmer under the streetlights, filling my whole world full of reflections. I like it; it feels less solid, less endless. Sometimes, I think I'm trying to disappear into it. There's a stretch of road about ten minutes from my house where the streetlights die out. One always flickers, another is completely dead, and the rest are spaced far apart. That's my favourite part. It feels as though it's the edge of something, and that if I keep going, I'd step off the edge, away from it all.

Once, I saw someone else out there. Just a shape, standing under one of the working lights. I slowed down, unsure if I should turn back, but it didn't move toward me. The person simply stood there, hands out of sight, looking down, perhaps waiting for something. When I got closer, they glanced up. We said nothing as we passed each other. But for a second, I felt seen in a way that made my chest tighten: not judged, not noticed in the way teachers notice when you're not paying attention. Simply... recognized. Like they knew why I was out there. I never saw anyone else on my walks.

There's a sound the country makes at night that you don't hear during the day. It's not one thing; it's everything combined, only softened. A distant car engine. The faint buzz of electricity in the powerlines. Wind moving through trees and around bends, carrying the whispers of animals. People think that when you're out here alone like this, you must be searching or running away from something. But most of the time, I'm just here, walking. Thinking sometimes, but other times, not thinking at all.

On the longer route, there's a clock tower about twenty minutes from my house. Every hour, it chimes out, loud enough to cut through every other sound. At night, it feels different – sharper, more deliberate. One night, I stopped right beneath it. When it struck the hour, the sound hit me dead on, like a tidal wave. I counted the seconds without meaning to. One, two, three... all the way up. I can't remember what the time was, only that it felt late, long past the hour when any person had a reason to be up. As the last chime faded, the silence left behind held more weight. I discovered then that the night does not care that you're there. You could walk for hours on end, around the same blocks, stand under every light, and nothing would change. There's something comforting about that.

During school, I feel that everyone expects something from me. Pay attention. Speak up. Fit in. Be something. Out here, there are no expectations. The roads don't question you, the dark doesn't need explanations. They just exist. I tried to explain it to my friend once. Not the walking, but the feeling. I was sitting with her at lunch, picking at my food, when she asked why I always looked tired.

"I can't sleep," I said.

"That's it?" she asked. "You seem to be somewhere else half the time." Maybe I am, I thought. I just shrugged.

"I don't know. It's nothing."

Tonight the air is clear – no rain or wind. The sky is darker, the stars dim. I walk my normal route, hands tucked in my pockets, head down. When I reach the stretch with the broken streetlights, I stop. For a moment, I think about heading back home and climbing through the window, pretending I was never out. Instead, I take a step forward, then a few more. The darkness feels heavier without the lights. My heart races, but not from fear. Uncertainty, maybe, or the feeling that something's different. The road stretches in front of me, strange now. After some time, I stop and turn around. The lights behind me seem farther away than usual. For a second, I feel it again. The pull to keep moving, to disappear into whatever's next, to leave everything behind. Instead, I stand still, caught between the dark and the dim glow behind me. Soon afterwards, I inhale and start walking back home.

When I reach my house, the window sticks the same way. I slide it open, climb inside, and close it quietly behind me. My room feels smaller than I remember, warmer. I lie down and gaze up at the ceiling. The clock chimes again, the sound distant. I don't count this time, I don't need to. I've walked through the night long enough to know it never ends. It simply waits, patient and unchanging, for the next time I stroll back into it. I always do.

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Jordyn Yates
Grade 10
Thomas A. Stewart Secondary School

Young Writers Contest

Lakefield Literary Festival

Winning Entries – Junior Nonfiction
(Grades 9, 10)

Accepting the Truth

by Joy Kim

It was a sunny day, the beginning of a fresh new week. Having endured the hated, one-hour bus ride from school, Joanna walked up the stairs to her front door, proudly clutching her English test with its big red "A" in the corner. The thick blue carpet silenced her eager, running feet as she raced toward the sweet aroma of her mother's oriental cooking. Speaking in her first language, Korean, she cried excitedly, "Mom, mom! I got an 'A' on my English test! 84%! Isn't that the best thing you've ever heard?"

In a quiet voice, without emotion, her mother replied, "That's nice, Joanna." She went back to frying fish.

"Oh," Joanna sighed, a little disappointed. She walked quietly to her room. She had no idea what was wrong with her mother. Slowly she put it aside, lay on her bed, and gazed at the painting she had done on the ceiling. It had taken ages to finish all the beautiful small angels painted there a few months before. Joanna was proud of her work, the angels she had loved as the Bible had described them. She was glad now she had painted her ceiling that way, in spite of the sore back it had caused.

Joanna suddenly felt blue. She put her favourite CD in her player, the *Titanic* soundtrack, and went to her desk looking for pastels and paper.

Working on an Easter card for her best friend Julie, Joanna didn't notice an hour had gone by until she completed the card, held it up, and felt satisfied with the finished product. It must be time for supper; her mother hadn't called her. Oh well, she had probably left something ready and gone to work.

It was at that moment her father appeared in the doorway.

"Kibbum," he used her Korean name rather than the Canadian one her friends used. He sounded very solemn. It must be about Mother, Joanna thought. The two sat down on the floor at their low table.

"What do you want to tell me, Abojee?" Joanna spoke softly to her father in the respectful Korean way.

"Last night," he sighed heavily, "while you were asleep, your mother and I had a phone call from your aunt in Seoul. Your uncle, my brother Dong Soo, was beaten last night by a gang of drunks on the street. He is in the hospital having surgery. He is badly hurt. He is near death."

Her father's voice was very controlled. He seemed to be both horrified and sad.

Joanna quietly set the dinner table, while her father set out the kim-chi, the hot salad which went so well with rice. Dinner was silent. Joanna felt so shocked that she had to talk with someone. After dinner she walked to the hall telephone.

Julie answered. "Jo, how are you? What's up?"

"I have something to tell you, but you have to keep it a secret. Promise?"

“Of course,” Julie replied. For the next hour, the two friends discussed the news from Korea and the feelings Joanna had. Talking to Julie made Joanna feel better.

“Thanks, Julie,” she said.

“No problem, Jo. Don't worry too much. And let me know how it’s going for him.”

For the next few days the Kim household, usually very happy, was quiet and sad. Every night Joanna could hear her mother crying softly in her room and her father comforting her. Even at school Joanna's personality changed. She couldn’t be outgoing and talkative. She was withdrawn, and her friends wondered why, but she seemed so glum nobody asked her about it.

By the end of the week, Joanna’s family was feeling better, having accepted the bad news and having heard no worse. Then the phone call came. It was ten o’clock at night. Joanna’s father answered the ring, and Joanna found herself drawing a deep breath. Shock came over her father’s face. Uncle Dong Soo had died.

Her aunt tried to console them. She said that Dong Soo’s injuries were so great that he would never have recovered fully and be the man he used to be. But they were so far away, and the tears would not stop for a long time.

At midnight Joanna lay in bed, her eyes open, but her tears gone. If she looked hard, there were moments when she was sure she could see Uncle Dong smiling down on her from among the angels in the scene on the ceiling. Once again she felt safe.

* * * * *

Joy Kim
Grade 9
St. Peter’s Secondary School

Survival

by Heather Johnson

I walk down the nighttime streets of Clifton Hill with my friends Chela, Morgan, and Amy. We quickly cross the street and enter a dark building. We pay at the door of The House of Frankenstein. There are fake spiderwebs everywhere, and in the corner there is a crocodile that snaps out at the people who walk by.

"I'm not going first," I say.

"I'm not either," says everyone else. We push and shove each other to the front, but everyone keeps running to the back of the group. We manage to move about three steps from where we started. Finally, we decide to wait for somebody braver than we are to lead the way.

Luckily, as if by fate, a nice family goes in front of us. They laugh when we tell them we're too chicken to go through all by ourselves. We all walk up the stairway that has exactly thirteen stairs into a hallway lit with only black light. There is glowing paint splashed on the otherwise black walls.

"This isn't so bad," I think, and then we turn the corner.

I feel somebody grab onto my backpack for protection, and I, in turn, grab Morgan's arm. The family walks bravely in front of us, sometimes screaming just to get us all to scream at the approaching horrors.

There are too many hallways! There's even one that looks like a torture chamber with a dead end, which is the worst. We're scared enough walking into those hallways; it's just plain cruel to make us walk all the way back through them.

After we leave the torture chamber hallway, we hear a song start to play that everybody recognizes. I sing the words silently in my head, "All around the mulberry bush, the mulberry bush, the mulberry bush...." We cluster even closer together and prepare ourselves to scream at anything and everything that could jump out at us. There is a huge colourful box in a cage on my left that looks familiar, but I can't quite remember where I've seen one before. The music gets slower and slower, as if some giant machine is shutting off. Bang! The lid flies open and an enormous clown pops out of a jack-in-the-box and laughs wickedly at us. We all scream and run as fast as we can away from the evil clown.

We turn to go into yet another hallway, and it's pitch black. How are we supposed to find our way out of this? Flash! Oh, there's a strobe light, how helpful! Although it provides some light, it only comes on for a split second, and it takes so long for it to come back on! Flash! I jump as I see a wide-eyed person standing right in front of me. I scream at her. Flash! Oh, it's just a mirror. Everyone else screams too before realizing it's a mirror. Flash! With some help from the people in front of us, we are able to find our way out of the mirror maze. I'm so glad to get out of there. It feels way too much like I'm in a dream.

Hallway after hallway, we finally come to the end. We turn to go down the stairs when the family in front of us screams, making everybody else scream, too. They just laugh at us; we scream too much.

"It's been nice screaming with you," they say as they leave.

“I can’t believe we did that,” Chela remarks. We all agree with her.

“Wanna do it again?” Morgan asks, grinning.

“Okay.”

We all laugh, and pay at the door.

* * * * *

Heather Johnson
Grade 9
Thomas A. Stewart Secondary School

A Military Life or Just as Bad

by Lachlan Campbell-Verduyn

"Line up in alphabetical order, have your ID out, state your rank, mission, and military significance." I haven't joined the army, nor the navy, and I definitely haven't signed up for boot camp. Worse, I belong to a large family of six people.

Don't get me wrong. Each member of my family is nice, loving, and sweet... when they are by themselves. Together, though, they can be worse than the Mafia. They don't use guns, knives, or baseball bats (not very well). But they have wit – or think they do. The teasing is unbearable. Every aspect of your physical appearance, your friends, your habits, and your schoolwork, which falls below their standards is dragged up and tossed back and forth. Mealtimes are the usual wrestling ground. Some days, we team up and pick on a certain person. At other meals, it's everyone for himself. If you're not quick, the others pounce on you. There are many traditional subjects that we use at almost every meal, and the collection of memorable comebacks grows and grows. Fortunately, we all know it's in good fun. Our friends sometimes don't. The newer visitors are not submitted to the bantering, but our closer friends are prey to it when they come over. Most of them have a good sense of humour; they don't have much choice if they spend any time at our house. These friends can hold their own in the daily routine. Those who can't take it as well are dropped from it, at least momentarily, out of respect. Personally, I enjoy the comradeship in these games even if they can be a bit trying on my patience.

At school, we escape the teasing, but not the large family status. Teachers and students alike remember older siblings, whether for good or for bad. If your elder was good, teachers might expect you to be smart, dedicated, and attentive. On the other hand, if your sibling didn't have such an amazing reputation, teachers might automatically put you in their bad books, expecting you to follow in your sibling's footsteps. Although this aspect of family life is not so enjoyable, having older siblings is a blessing in high school. To be known and to know older students enlarges your group of friends. It's always nice to know older teenagers, with new ideas, new hobbies, and more often than not, new drivers' licenses.

My family consists of two brothers, one older, the other younger than me, as well as a younger sister, my parents, and my grandparents; however, we must not forget my cat, as well as several other pets, and a rather impressive number of aunts, uncles, and cousins. Up to now, I have only mentioned my closest family members. I must not neglect the others who all play important roles in my life. Our pets, especially the cat, not only hold a sentimental place in our family, but often take a part of our teasing. We tease each other about our pet's habits, and we tease the pets themselves. It seems that if no one in particular is the focus of our fun, we shift the game to the cat, who is unable to defend herself. She's too fat, too grey, not playful enough, too young, too lazy... the list goes on. She could be the world's only perfect cat, and my family would complain that she was too perfect. I think that cat-teasing is a family trait because my aunts and uncles don't enjoy cats much either. Yes, it's true. They also participate in this sport. Really, if only there were an Olympic teasing team, we would all have gold medals.

Truthfully, everyone in my family enjoys a large number of relatives. We have inside jokes and traditions; we laugh together and tease each other. Although we all pretend to detest the teasing, it does develop our wit and sense of humour. Everyone profits from our abundance of family members, even the cat who gets fed by six different people, each supposing the others have forgotten. No wonder she's subject to our teasing.

To be a professional teaser in this family, practice and training are necessary; it's war. "No talking in line, shoulders back, suck in that belly, stare straight ahead."

It's really not that bad, or is it?

* * * * *

Lachlan Campbell-Verduyn
Grade 9
St. Peter's Secondary School

All is Fair in Love and War: A Memoir

by Anusa Panchalingam

"Good afternoon, Mrs Willie," I say as I enter her room.

She sits in her wheelchair, looking out of the window. She is wearing the same old red skirt and white blouse she usually wears, and on top of the blouse she wears a beige-coloured, long sweater.

I volunteer once or twice a week at the Civic Hospital to fill my volunteer hours. My job is to take care of Mrs Willie, a 65-year-old woman who is originally from Amsterdam. Unfortunately she has a bad memory. She retells her stories over and over again, but as a volunteer I have to be patient and listen to her repeated stories.

"Hello, I didn't notice that you were here, child. Isn't it a beautiful day?" says Mrs. Willie.

"Oh, yes! Do you want to go for a ride through the park, Mrs Willie?" I politely ask.

As I push her wheelchair through the hospital hall towards the park, she exclaims, "You know what? When I was a child, I would spend the whole day outside with my friends if it was a beautiful day, but these days kids sit in front of the television. Telephone and television were considered luxuries in my days, but their absence didn't mean we didn't have fun. We usually played the guitar and harmonica at home. Boys went to school and girls helped at home with household chores."

She rambles on as usual about her past life, all of which I've probably heard about a hundred times. I just watch the trees until she is done, but then suddenly her voice becomes softer and quieter and then stops. I look at her face and notice that her eyes are staring at something. I follow her eyes and see a mother with four children playing ball on the right side of the path through the park. I sense that Mrs. Willie is going back into her memories and that she is becoming emotional. So, I push her towards a bench without distracting her. I sit beside her on the bench and watch her.

Then she says, "That family is just like my own family. The only time my family was always together at home was during the war. Oh yes, did I tell you about my life during the war?"

"No, you didn't," I say.

She begins to tell her story.

Well, the war was from September 1939 to May 1945.

I was 4 years old when the war broke out in the Netherlands. My mom was listening to the radio and all of a sudden she moved to the window and stared outside and repeated "War! War! War!" She sounded so desolate that even now I still can envision her standing there.

Only for the grown-ups in my little world of mom, dad, brothers and sisters, and neighbours was war awful. For me, it was fun.

For the first three years of the war, my dad could go to work. After that, the Germans wanted his factory for their purposes. So, in 1943, my father was home from work. My sisters and brothers, who had been attending school, had to stay home as well. The country train that transported them to and from school discontinued running. The Germans had taken over almost all the schools, so anyone who had been attending school stayed home.

We lived approximately three quarters of an hour by train from Amsterdam. Our rural area was called Brock in Waterland. We didn't have electricity, and our light came from a gas lamp. My mom cooked on a gas stove; she was a very good cook. We had very little to eat after my father stopped working, so my dad and two brothers went to the farmers in our area to trade bed sheets and real coffee (that my mom had purchased before the war, knowing that this would be a very lucrative trade item and high in demand). My mom had a feeling that a war was going to break out, so before the war began, she bought as much flour, sugar, coffee, tea, towels, and bed sheets as her income would allow.

My mom was very industrious. She would clean a farmer's small dairy (a small cool sterile building, where the farmer would bring the milk from his cows). The farmer would give her a small pail of milk every day. My mom would take the cream from the milk and put it in large mason jars. We would cook and drink the milk or make porridge with it. We would sit around the coal stove and shake the bottle until the cream would form butter on top. We used the buttermilk for porridge also.

I loved to sit around the stove with everyone at home. Some were reading, but my dad and brothers had harmonicas and would play all kinds of songs. Of course we all took turns shaking the cream to butter.

Butter was an unheard-of luxury during the war, but we were so blessed to live outside Amsterdam, surrounded by farmers. Not that the farmers gave you anything for nothing. There were some very good farmers, but there were some that got rich during the war.

Sometimes the German soldiers would go from house to house to try to find men over the age of sixteen to work in their factories to make their weapons. Those men would then be taken away and would often be brought to Germany to work there.

My parents had taken in two young men who were hiding from the Germans, so that made five men who were trying to stay out of the Germans' clutches.

Those surprise checkups were called "razias." During most of these times, my dad, brothers, and the two men, ran into the fields and just lay very quietly for hours until the soldiers went away. They also had a hiding spot under the stairs going up to the bedrooms and over the basement stairs. There the five of them would sit extremely quietly in very cramped quarters. The soldiers would ask my mom where all the men were who lived there.

She never blinked an eye and told them the same story... "I don't know! If you people wouldn't take away all the food, then maybe they could stay home. They've gone to find food." As far as I know, the Germans never treated her badly and just left.

Often after lunch, my sisters would put the table and chairs to one side, wind up the gramophone, and play some dance music; they would dance with my brothers and the two young men. Sometimes someone would dance with me. I thought that was just so wonderful.

I knew very well that the war was bad because my mom and dad would talk about it. A person here and there would be taken by the Germans and mistreated badly. There were many

more gruesome stories told at the table. I listened and felt very sad for those people. There is this one story, which really made me sad...

This was about a little boy who very innocently betrayed his father, who was hiding in the house somewhere. The Germans had asked the mother if she knew where her husband was and she had said "no." Then one of the Germans asked her little son, who was about three years of age.

"I'll give you a chocolate bar if you tell me where your daddy is." So the little boy told him where his father was hiding. The man was pulled out of his hiding place and taken away. The little boy never saw his father again. I don't need very much imagination to understand that later in his life this boy would just feel horrified and depressed about what he did that day, even though he was small. It was a degrading thing for that German soldier to stoop low enough to get a little boy to betray his father. As the saying goes "all is fair in love and war."

Mrs Willie starts to yawn, so I tell her that we can continue our talk tomorrow and that she should go to bed.

"You are right. I am a little tired," she mumbles. I take her to her room and wait until she is comfortable and ready to go to bed. As I go to close the curtains, she says with a slight smile, "I had a great family and a great life!" Then she falls asleep. I turn off the light and close the door.

There aren't that many people who will claim that, despite many hardships, they've had a great life. Mrs Willie is a strong person for having this outlook on life. If only we all could look back on our lives with the same acceptance and happiness.

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Anusa Panchalingam
Grade 9
Peterborough Collegiate Vocational School

Finally a Minority

by Hilary Bird

We always think of racism as being like black and white… simple, though painful. No one ever thinks it is as complex as it is. Well, at least, I didn't until now. Racism isn't always meant to be hateful or hurtful; it comes in all forms, yet hurts just the same. I've always been one of the "normal people" at my school. I've never been considered weird or "uncool." I've always been looking out from the inside, never the other way around. Yet, there was one short moment in my life that changed my whole perspective on the world and on my life as I knew it.

The sun shone down through the trees like a burning flame. My back burned from the rays shining down on me. The birds sang, and I could hear the goats' hooves slam against the pavement as they ran in a herd. The sweet melody of friendly chatter among the locals filled the air, and the aroma of the frangipani trees entered my nose. My legs ached as I started on my painful journey down the steep rugged hill which led directly to my new unfamiliar school. My heart pounded; it was another day I would have to live through – and more hell.

My long, pleated, dark-green skirt (not one of my most stylish school uniforms) waved in the wind as I slowly climbed up the concrete steps at my new school to my Form 2 classroom. It had been two weeks since I started here. I was in an unfamiliar place at a time in my life when nothing was exactly familiar to me. Why my family decided to take me out of the school where I was happy and drag me to this new place, which I was supposed to call home for the next year, was very unclear to me. All I knew was that I was in some Caribbean island and that I had to deal with it. I stood on the platform at the top of the stairs and looked around. I stared at the rolling hills and saw a bird fly up. "God, I wish I was that bird," I said to myself. I wish I could just fly up and get off this island. I was beginning to go stir-crazy.

I walked slowly to a big door with a hole in it, opened it slowly, and walked in. I kept my head low trying to avoid any confrontation that I knew I didn't want. I sat down beside my friend Sophie. I broke the silence by pulling out my chair and felt as if I was breaking a law by doing that. The teacher glared at me, along with the other thirty classmates who filled the stuffy room the size of a normal bedroom. Emotions ran through my head and all through my body. I wasn't just scared of that moment; this whole place scared me. The class was silent, not in a peaceful way but in an uneasy way, one that caused me to sweat in utter fear. "You are late," Mr. Johnson said. Mr. Johnson was my math teacher. He was a short, stocky man and looked harmless, yet I knew he wasn't. I was scared of him, and he knew that. I hadn't made many friends, and the few that I did have weren't exactly angels.

The class started. Mr. Johnson let me off because I was new. Sophie and I started talking about life and how she'd been to Canada before. My head swerved around to meet the eyes of a sixteen-year-old girl staring at me as if I was some sort of freak. She intimidated me, and the words that were just released out of her lips shot through me like a poisonous dagger right in the chest. I was surprised and confused at the words that filled my head. "Hey, white girl, lend me a pen."

I was tough. Well, at least I thought I was, yet nothing in my whole life could have prepared me for what had just faced me. I reached into my bag, grabbed a pen, and threw it back to her. I put my head down on my desk and started to look back on what had just happened. I started to cry, and Sophie looked at me in shock. I didn't even think that they knew my name. I wasn't anything to them. I was a colour and just a colour. I had been called "white girl" for the last two weeks. I was the only white girl in the whole school, and apart from my brother, I was the only

white person. I didn't see that. I saw people, not colours. That was the first time I have ever been affected by racism, and now I knew why it had such a bad reputation. To them I was different. I guess my colour was how I was different from that girl. I knew that this intimidating stranger didn't mean for that comment to bring pain; it was a part of her culture and didn't mean anything to her. But it meant something to me. I was finally a minority, a major minority. We never really think of racism that much, but it was an eye-opening experience. I was no longer in my own little world. I was now a sitting duck in a world of hunters. I was open game. I didn't have a respectable status here and I knew that would take a long time to earn. I had to deal with that. I slowly brought up my head, told Sophie that I had something in my eye, and finished my math. My whole perspective on life had changed in only a few minutes. I knew then that the world isn't exactly a little ray of sunshine to live in; it can sometimes be a storm cloud. I needed to deal with what life threw at me and I was going to do that.

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Hilary Bird
Grade 9
Lakefield College School

Family Strength

by Melina Found

It had been a regular day for me so far. I had my usual mediocre lunch, had my usual classes, and was now struggling to lug home my "average" amount of homework. I let myself into the house; I was the first one home, so everything was nice and quiet, just the way I liked it. Cranking up some tunes, I made myself a piece of toast and some hot chocolate, and then flopping down on the couch, I decided to tackle my hideous amount of homework. I wasn't expecting anything to really happen that night, and why would I? It had been a very average day; however, today was going to be the day when I would be forced to face the most intense event of my life.

My mom and brother came home next, in a big rush; I quickly shut off my music and made myself appear to be really concentrating over my long division problems. There was then the usual "How was your day?" questions to which I replied, "It was a normal day... I have a lot of homework though!" I was advised to "Get at it," so I did.

Last my dad came home. He looked a little stiff and tired, but that was to be expected of a high-school teacher who taught shop class. I didn't really think anything of it.

Supper was cooking, and from upstairs my mom called down for me to set the table and pour the milk. She and my dad were upstairs talking. By the time they came down, dinner was ready and I was ladling it into bowls. I didn't notice my mom's red eyes.

Dinner was casual – homemade chicken-noodle soup. It was kind of quiet. Usually my dad has a story to tell from his exciting day teaching high school, but he didn't say a thing. I still didn't notice anything. I was a growing kid and I was hungry, so my concentration was focused on consuming my tasty soup.

My dad suddenly started to speak.

"Melina, Riley... today I went to the doctor's office... to get a mole looked at on my back..." He was talking calmly and slowly. I stopped eating and listened.

"They had taken a sample of the mole about a month ago, and today I found out I have melanoma." I was listening. I knew what it was; it was a disease that everyone fears, but somehow, dumbly, I asked "What is that?"

"It is a form of cancer," he answered me calmly.

Now I had to believe it. My dad had said it himself; it had come from his own lips... my dad had cancer. I didn't know what to think. My head was spinning and I thought I was going to be sick.

"I had another piece of the mole taken off my back again today."

"So that is why he was so stiff," I thought to myself, sickened.

"The results of this test will be back in about two weeks."

I wasn't hungry. Somehow I got myself to say, "I think I'm going to go upstairs." I felt as if I was on fire; every inch of me burned. I just wanted to get away from this dreadful feeling.

I went into the bathroom and sat down. A few minutes later my mom came up. Tears were gushing from her face, and that got me going. She grabbed onto me and hugged me, hard. I had never

seen my mom so scared before. She was terrified, as was I, but at that moment I decided I would be strong and help my dad through this. I couldn't just fall apart and cry all the time.

We cried together for a few more minutes, and then my mom pulled away, drying her eyes with her sleeves.

"I need you to know that everything is going to work out, okay?" She looked at me, her red eyes still rimmed with tears.

I nodded; I really didn't want to speak.

I went back downstairs and gave my dad a hug, a smile, and a kiss. I decided I wouldn't do my homework that night. I felt as if I had been kicked by a horse, and all I wanted was to wrap my sheets around me.

The next week went by in a kind of slow motion. My mom had called my school, just to let them know what was happening. My close friends were sombre when I told them and all said something positive to me.

I had started my struggle; I was holding the weight of all this and keeping a level head. I was going to stay calm and not show all of my fear to my dad. I figured he was already stressed out to his maximum; he didn't need to see me freaking out.

I was sort of calming down by the time his next test results came in. I figured, they would say they had cut out all of the cancer and that he was fine, but would just have to go in for checkups or something. I was wrong.

My dad came home, and this time I was anxious for him to come home. I wanted him to walk through the door and tell us he was rid of cancer, that we wouldn't have to utter that vile word again. He didn't do that. Instead he told us, still very calmly, that they had found more cancer and that he would be going to a plastic surgeon in the next week to have an even larger hunk taken out of his back.

I felt as though I was a bird, just about to fly through the cage door of victory when I was brutally shot down. But still I decided I would be strong, I would stay level headed, and that we as a family would beat this.

The next three times my dad came back from the doctor (these three appointments spanned out over three months) he brought with him that bad, hateful news – he still had cancer. I was frantic. They were going to try again to cut out the cancer, and I was wishing with every fibre of my being that he would come home with the news I so desperately wanted to hear.

The next time he came home, he did have that news! It was joyous! It was victory! I wanted to give him the biggest hug, but that had to wait until his back was better. I called every one of my friends, thanking them profusely for all their support.

I was soaring!

* * * * *

Melina Found
Grade 9
Peterborough Collegiate Vocational School

Snowmen Priorities

by Greg Conley

When I was six years old, my uncle came to visit my family in Ottawa over the Christmas holidays. He was a university professor in Vancouver, so we didn't see him very often. He only ever managed to come over during the long holidays and always had a lot of marking to do. That particular year, he had over one hundred papers from his students, and spent more time downstairs with his laptop and his boxes of work than he spent with us.

Ottawa is very close to the Gatineau Mountains, and so there is frequently a very large amount of snow. Our house was in the suburbs and had a big, open yard that seemed to attract the snow, occasionally reaching depths of almost a metre. This hadn't happened yet at my sixth Christmas, and there was less than 15cm of snow. One humid, warm night, there was a fall of particularly wet snow, which stuck to telephone poles and frosted the windows. At this age, I loved to play in the snow with my parents (making snowmen, digging tunnels, building forts to protect myself from non-existent neighbouring children); however, on this occasion, they were spending the entire day downtown shopping. I had been left with my ever-busy uncle. I wanted to make a big snowman (or enormous, from my point of view at the time) in the sticky, wet snow, but my uncle was too busy with his students' papers to help me make it. I went out to craft the colossus by myself.

By this time my uncle had grown sick (literally) of the cool temperature of the basement and was working in the dining room. He was bored, of course; very few people like to mark one paper after another, especially when there are eighty left to read and grade. He saw me struggling to push a large ball of snow around the yard. This ball was then placed on top of another (an even more poorly constructed lump), and the whole thing crashed (well, crashed slowly – it was more of a flop) onto the ground, where it completely fell apart. I was just about ready to give up and come in, when my uncle reached a decision and came out to help me. My parents came back later in the day to a majestic snowman, about six feet tall, and a house full of wet boots and coats. The snowman had taken us about three hours to build, but in the end my uncle didn't care. He decided that spending time with his family was more important than grading his students' work. He could always grade on the plane, and he only had a week and a half to spend time with us. He told me this when I asked him why he had come outside with his cold; it didn't really make sense to my easily distracted mind at the time since I had always been taught to finish my homework before I could play. My uncle hadn't finished his homework, and he certainly was playing. I was having fun building the snowman, so I didn't give it a second thought.

When I got a little older (a few weeks older, in fact), I realized what it was that he was getting at. Sometimes, even necessary work shouldn't be the highest priority. He got his marking done during the rest of the holiday he spent with us, on the plane, and in the days afterwards. I certainly appreciated the time he spent with us. I think we had a much better and more memorable holiday, simply because he decided to come outside to make a snowman instead of working.

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Greg Conley
Grade 9
Adam Scott Collegiate Vocational Institute

Just Like Him

by Lauren Schmied

Light trickled down gently though the trees, making each rock on the gravel road sparkle. A stone bounced across the road when I kicked it with the tip of my shoe. Music hummed quietly in my ears while I fiddled with the volume of my mp3 player. It was as if every moment of every day should be like this: no problems, no worries, just the true calm, beautiful life that most people live.

Hearing the sound of my alarm broke me from the trance of my beautiful dream. I dragged myself from the warm, soft, secure sheets in my bed and into the shower. If only dreams were real. As the hot water poured over me, engulfing me into its liquid world, the shock of the events of yesterday came flooding back. It felt like being smashed and thrown around by a tsunami. He was gone. Have you ever met someone, become close – very close – and then drifted apart and not talked for a very long time? Don't let it happen.

I closed my eyes as the water droplets rolled down my cheeks, imitating tears. I let my mind drift back to the events of yesterday.

The score was tied, 24 - 24, and our opposing team had the next serve. "Come on girls; we've got this!" encouraged our coach to the left of us. We had been on a losing streak for the last four tournaments and were getting sick of it. The girl tossed the ball into the air and, with a loud smack, sent it soaring over the net.

"I got it!" I yelled as I stepped back to volley it into the air for a grand spike.

"Out!" screamed a girl to the side of me. Quickly I made a decision. The ball looked like it was going out. As I scrambled to get out of the ball's way, it hit directly on the line. The sound of defeat echoed loudly through the gym and into the ears of our team.

"Shoot!" I yelled, half to myself.

"In," said the ref, as the shriek shrill of his whistle ripped through my eardrum. "Oh, man," I thought, "another tournament lost." I grabbed my bag, slung it over my shoulder, and slouched out of the gym. My friend Meg was trailing behind me, rambling on rapidly about something that I didn't listen to. We headed out the front doors to where my mother awaited with anticipation. Throwing our bags into the trunk of the car, we slumped into our seats.

"I heard there was a boy who got in a car accident last night," I mentioned to my mom. "What was his name?"

"Mac Williamson – and he died," my mother said bluntly. All of the cars, people, trees, and homes melted from my view and were replaced by empty, cold, hard tears that clouded over my eyes. My mind and body froze.

"Are you okay?" asked Meg curiously as she slid her hand onto mine. I didn't respond, frozen in time as images of the occasions when Mac and I had met, talked on the phone, and hung out spun in circles, leaving me cold and confused. We dropped Meg off. She hugged me warmly, but as she let go, I felt chills. All I heard was her say goodbye and the door click into place behind her.

My mom drove to the grocery store where she left me in the car to dwell on the loss of my friend. As I fumbled with my cellphone, I dialed my best friend's number. She had gone to school with Mac. Together, on our phones, we sat and cried.

The darkness of my car shaded me from public display as globs of mascara and tears tumbled down my face.

Feeling the steaming water from the shower break through the cold shell of memories that surrounded my body with misery, I let all of the memories of Mac and me slip through my fingers. I tried to grab hold of them, but they were gone. Just like him...

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Lauren Schmied
Grade 9
Peterborough Collegiate Vocational School

Annie

by Agatha Seward

The clock ticked. No one moved. I felt that if I did, I would have shattered the air. The clock ticked again. I slowly lowered my head and saw my hand shaking. My eyes filled up with tears but I forced them to stop. I took a deep breath as I told myself over and over that I could cry at night when no one was around to hear me. I looked up, hoping to see a familiar face. I looked across the table and saw my siblings, motionless. My eyes stopped at my mother. Her head was down to hide her tear-stained cheeks. She never cried in front of us.

"Okay, kids," she swallowed her shaky voice and faked a tiny smile; "it's time to wash up for bedtime."

No one wanted to be the first to move, but eventually, one by one, we drifted on a cloud of misery to bed. I was relieved; I would be able to cry into my pillow all night. Except that night, I was past the point of crying. I think we all were. I never went to sleep that night. I just stared up at the ceiling and thought of Annie.

Annie was my young aunt, but I knew her as my second mother and best friend. If Mum didn't let us have dessert one night, Annie was the type of person who would sneak it to our rooms later. And when we were bored, she would sit through countless hours of "Barney" with us. She lived with us for as long as I could remember, and my mum looked after her because she had cystic fibrosis. We all loved her so much, and since our dad was never around, she helped look after us. To be bored when Annie was around was impossible. To us, she could do anything: bake a birthday cake, draw with us, slide down the slides forty times in a row, anything. She had so much life inside of her, yet only a few years to live.

On the day of her funeral, I went to my mum, who was doing the dishes. I walked up to her and hugged her. While my face was buried into her jeans, I asked her why Annie was gone. My mother hugged me back and we cried together. Our hug lasted for a long time and she comforted me.

"I can't go," I told Mum, while still clutching onto her with my tiny trembling hands. She understood my request. I was only five; five-year-olds weren't supposed to go through this pain. The saddest thing in my life should be only when I scraped my knee. I couldn't bring myself to stare into the face of my lifeless aunt. I brought myself to my uncle's (Annie's husband) funeral six months earlier, and it was hard, too. He had cystic fibrosis, like Annie. I never thought about the disease when they were alive, but when they died, I hated it.

Annie was like an angel; no, she *was* an angel. She came to Earth and loved us when we needed it most. She taught us lessons early in life and then returned to heaven to watch us from there. People say that you get your personality in the first five years of your life; I think Annie contributed a huge part to mine because people say that when they look at me, they see Annie.

"Come on kids, it's time to go to... " my mum stopped to take a deep breath, but she never finished that sentence. I still sat at the table and watched all of my brothers and sisters put on their shiny, black church shoes. My mum's friend came over to watch me while they were gone.

When they had left, I stayed on the stool and asked myself "why?"

"Why did she have to die?" I thought, "why now, why ever?"

It was our usual time to go outside, but I never did so without Annie. She had been in the middle of teaching me to ride a bike. She told me that next week she was going to take my training wheels off permanently. That wouldn't happen. I didn't know how I would ever go outside again. If Annie couldn't enjoy it, neither could I. In the past, whenever "Barney," or another of our favourite shows, would come on, I would always want to believe that Annie would come to sit with me. Even at her sickest moments, she would insist on helping my mother make dinner or school lunches for us.

I sat lifeless, staring out the window, watching time go by without me while I thought of the memories. I must have sat there for a while because, during that time, my family came home. They flooded through the door and sat at the table with me. We all wiped away our tears as we listened to the clock ticking.

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Agatha Seward
Grade 9
Peterborough Collegiate Vocational School

The Road at Night: Through the Eyes of a Child

by Katie Menendez

One of the most whimsical experiences in the world is driving at night. The lack of light gives you the feeling that you are the only living thing in the universe, travelling outside of time to an unspecified destination. No lights, except for an occasional burst when you pass through a town, gone almost as soon as they can be registered. The silver stars and the moon are the only objects to focus on, though even they tend to blur and lose their sharpness. This is especially true if you are not wearing glasses and find yourself in that state of semi-wakefulness, so easily brought on by the hum of wheels on pavement and the late hours.

One late-night ride that I hope never to forget occurred many years ago on Highway 7 between Kaladar and Peterborough. My three cousins, two sisters, and I had been spending a week at the cottage on Mazinaw Lake with my grandparents. My Uncle Nigel had arrived in our station wagon to chauffeur us all back home. Just as day was deepening to dusk and the mosquitoes were beginning to whine, we all crammed ourselves into the car and left. Six children carry a lot of luggage, and we were also bringing home the canoe, life jackets, and paddles. Fitting in passengers was a huge challenge. Luckily, our station wagon had two seats facing backwards in the trunk. In went my cousins Emily and Fiona, along with as much stuff as could be squeezed in around them. The rest was piled at the feet of those in the back and the passenger seats. The car was so full that I could lean forward and rest my head on suitcases that were squished in behind the passenger seat in front of me. I do not believe that another toothbrush could have been accommodated.

So off we went, late at night, six girls and a carload of gear, on a drive of an hour and three-quarters. For the first little while, it was very noisy in the car. Six cousins can make a lot of noise, especially given the excuse of too much stuff in too small a space. But as the night grew darker and the stars began to appear, the hubbub slowly calmed until we were travelling in that lovely cozy silence of a summer's evening spent in the company of those you love. I do not remember if we spoke of anything significant, or even if we spoke at all once peace had descended. However, it is most likely that very few spoken thoughts troubled the comforting atmosphere. The only thing I really remember clearly is sitting with my legs drawn up on the seat and my body leaning over, resting on the mound of luggage in front of me. It made a perfect bed, and I must have fallen asleep, for I was hardly aware of a thing until we were home. Even then, I probably only woke up enough to pull on a pair of pajamas and fall into bed, the steady motion of the car still felt in my bones, rocking me to sleep.

The only thing that could have made that ride more complete would have been a song or a lesson from my father. Most long family car rides involve some kind of discussion. I believe it has something to do with the fact that our lives are normally so busy that we never have time to really talk without someone thinking about what they should be doing instead. But in a car, there is nothing to do but listen to music or talk to each other. This is especially true at night when you cannot really see anything outside the windows. Family conversation runs from the subject of expensive medical treatment for premature babies to a lesson on the history of world civilization. Sometimes, the topic will come from something heard on the radio or a question from the backseat; but wherever it comes from, the theme is certain to be lectured, deliberated, and discussed by all and at great length. For some reason, however, my father seems to have the greatest role in this, perhaps because he knows so much or just because he enjoys giving his opinion. Whatever the reason, the measured cadences of my father's public speaking voice are certain to fill a car at any opportunity.

Another activity to which my father puts his voice is song, especially on late-night car rides when everyone else is asleep. There is nothing as comforting as dozing in a moving vehicle with your cheek pressed to the cool window and your father singing to himself as he taps out the rhythm on the steering wheel. The songs he sings are old family favourites that I rarely hear anywhere else. They are timeless and simple, yet carry the entire range of emotion in their melodies and lyrics. Many of them do not seem to have been written at all, but have emerged, like a landscape over thousands of years. Even if some inspired soul did create them, it is certain that the versions I know are not the ones originally put down on paper. My family and our experiences have embellished them, adding rich memories of warmth and peace that make these tunes the most beautiful ones on Earth. Each of them is an album for a host of memories, including many long car rides through the night.

Although, each journey is unique; no matter the season, destination, or road, they all carry the same magical qualities that make them such memorable experiences. For where else can you find such security and comfort as when you are curled up, speeding to your destination in the dark under the moon and silver stars?

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Katie Menendez
Grade 10
Peterborough Collegiate Vocational School

Education: Comparing East and West

by Chen Rao

"No homework today? That's absolutely terrific!" If I heard these words in my hometown, Chengdu, China, I would think you were pulling my leg. Otherwise, you would be just crazy, fooling around and making fun of me. But for the Canadian-born students, flexible studying is nothing but a common daily occurrence.

Let's compare this with the homework ordeal for students in China. The enormous size of China's population results in a number of serious problems and social issues. One of the problems is that people are under too much pressure, especially teenagers. In the near future, they will have to be involved in public competition for a place at university.

Unemployment is also a terrible reality in modern China. Furthermore, in order to find a job, extremely high levels of training in technology and education are required. Some parents have impossible expectations for their children. Chinese people rarely use the expression "All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy."

On the other hand, Canadian, western-style education is obviously dissimilar from the Chinese model. As an ESL student who has been here for six months, I have found quite a few significant points to compare in these two educational systems. Canadian students with the right qualifications can select and apply for admission to the university they choose. They don't face the same difficulties as Chinese teenagers.

Many Caucasians are impressed by Chinese students' performance at school. "They are incredibly omniscient! They are smart at math and achieve almost 100 %!" But essentially, western people haven't realized that those "eggheads" are well trained. Students in China never get a chance to enjoy their childhood because they try really hard to buckle down so that they can do an excellent job on quizzes and exams. Their accomplishments are well deserved; indeed, they have paid a lot for them. In the western educational system, teachers emphasize the importance of working as a team. Therefore, Canadian students are much more talented in a variety of ways. Specifically, they have unlimited imaginations for brainstorming, problem solving, and using equipment efficiently. They are attracted to new ideas and are willing to take risks.

Eastern education pays attention primarily to the examination. Exams help develop useful skills, but these skills are not always used in real-life situations. Although students get high marks, they may not be interested in learning. Western education focuses on learning as a permanent strategy, but, because of the relaxed atmosphere, students seem lazy and easily satisfied. Because Canadian students are used to a flexible studying environment, they aren't pushed too hard.

Fortunately, these two educational styles are interdependent. Neither of them is a perfect plan, that's for sure. (By the way, I don't think there is a perfect method in the world at all.) Each system has its particular advantages but also some disadvantages. Maybe what we should do is combine them in a uniform way. Then students will be able to experiment with both formats. That definitely will make it easier to reach success in education.

Actually, all students should remind themselves that being successful depends on plenty of other prime factors besides the operation of an education system. A positive attitude determines the future.

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Chen Rao
Grade 9
Peterborough Collegiate Vocational School

The Première

by Tamsyn Riddle

It was a warm summer day, but you would have thought the Dark Mark was hovering over our houses, mocking any sign of hope or happiness and changing everything in an instant. It certainly would have sounded like it from the tone of the phone call between Mia and me. We cried and sulked for several hours and wound up concocting various scenarios that would change the tragic course of events our lives had suddenly taken.

"We could buy them off someone."

"Who? Besides, that's too embarrassing; we'd have to admit that we didn't get them in time."

"ebay, then."

"Too unreliable."

"Let's call them and beg."

"What if we just snuck in?"

And so it went; we became more and more desperate as the realization that it was hopeless gradually sank in, slowing the conversation to a stuttering halt and weighing down any hope that could have remained. There was no chance; it was over, and we were the ones to blame. I felt that my whole life had been leading up to that moment, and there it was – gone. I had never felt this much like I was receiving a Dementor's kiss.

Now might be a good time for me to mention that the reason we were so gutted was that we were unable to get tickets to the Peterborough première of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows Part 2*.

Yes, we were crying over movie tickets. And yes, we did consider breaking the law a few (or a dozen) times. It would have been worth it, but I digress.

We knew we were exaggerating, and we knew it shouldn't have been such a huge catastrophe: it was only Peterborough after all, and only a movie.

But somehow that made it even worse. I tried to console myself, but it hit me like a Bludger: we were not true fans.

I felt like Harry when he realizes that Dumbledore was not who Harry thought he was all along: angry, confused, sad, and more than a little betrayed. But for us, unlike in the book, there was no happy ending, no surprise trip to King's Cross station where everything suddenly makes sense. We simply were not going to see the première of the last Harry Potter movie.

No one else understood. My parents showed signs of concern and our friends acted disappointed, but all of them seemed to think we were overreacting when we said this was the biggest disappointment of our lives so far.

But was it? I thought about what had been leading up to this tragic change of plans. We had been reading and re-reading Harry Potter since we were six years old; our shared obsession was one of the reasons we became friends in the first place. We always played pretend, and although the games changed frequently, we often came back to ones about characters at wizard schools almost exactly like those in the Harry Potter series. As we got older, our appreciation for the books grew, leading to in-depth discussions that always ended in a blissful, satisfied sigh of "I

just love Harry Potter so much." We went to the Harry Potter exhibit at the Science Centre in Hogwarts robes (or as close as we could get) and plotted what we would do for the première of the last movie.

I found myself getting annoyed with everyone for not understanding. Couldn't they see how important it had been to me, to us? Could they not even contemplate loving a world so much that you wanted to immerse yourself in it as fully as possible?

It wasn't that unreasonable to be upset. So what if no one else understood? They just didn't get it, and we didn't have to pay attention to them. Besides, our love of Harry Potter had always just been between the two of us.

That was when it hit me, a wave of sudden emotion with an effect as staggering as the love potion on Ron in the fifth book.

Other people didn't matter when it came to Harry Potter. So what if we would be watching the movie two days after it came out, surrounded by casual fans wearing normal clothes and not screaming at the opening theme song? The best part of being a fan of Harry Potter, at least for us, wasn't about them.

It was about us, sitting beside each other, wands in hand and Hogwarts capes on, waiting for the movie to begin. It was about joy, affection, anticipation, but also fear, fingers clenched and gripping the seat's armrests in heart-stopping terror and the wordless exchange when we decided that, no, we could not cover our eyes for this part. It was about laughing amicably at Harry as if he was someone we knew, the "Oh my god, he's *such* a fool" that could turn to an impassioned defence in an instant if a non-fan dared to join in the criticism of our beloved main character. It was about sleepovers when we almost forgot that we knew what would happen next, taking breaks from reading to pass ideas back and forth before diving back into the action. It was about discussions where each sentence started with "but" or "and" because there was always more to say. It was about us seeing the Warner Brothers sign and hearing the theme song we knew better than Hermione knew the contents of her textbooks, and it was about us sharing a look of excitement so intense any Hogwarts student would have thought we were watching a Quidditch match, not a movie. It was about our love for something magical in every sense of the word and so much bigger than us. Ultimately, it was about me, Mia, and Harry.

So what did we do? We saw the movie as soon as we could, dressed up in Gryffindor robes, pretending it was the première. We bought Coke and acted like it was butterbeer, commenting on how many Muggles there were as we talked through the previews. And when we realized the movie was starting, you bet we exchanged a look of pure joy and screamed as loudly and excitedly as we would have if we were at the première. After all, we owed it to Harry.

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Tamsyn Riddle
Grade 10
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The Mercury Girl: A Commentary on Beauty

by Vanessa Kraus

I spent five weeks of my science class studying optics. I must say, to my intense regret, that several things about the world are now less mysterious to me: I know the exact formula for moonlight sparkling on a lake, and which colours are really present in a rainbow. However, one of the most interesting things I learned was how pictures appear in mirrors. It's quite marvellous, really; light rays cross in front of reflective surfaces and, depending on what kind of mirror you have or where the light is coming from, you get larger or smaller images. There are two defined types of images: a virtual image, and more commonly, a real image. It's called a real image because light is actually arriving at the location of the object creating the image, in other words – you. So, your reflection in the mirror is nothing more than a fluctuation of light on a shiny surface. So why is it that every morning, and several times a day, we glance, gaze, stare, and sigh at what we see on that glass? Don't get me wrong: I doubt I would leave my house in the mornings without looking in the mirror at least once. However, we should concern ourselves less with how many times we look in the mirror and more with what we think we see.

If anyone looks at paintings from the Italian Renaissance, or most periods of French and German art, he or she can tell you right away that the women depicted in them are pale, elaborately dressed (or nude, but that's another essay altogether!) and well-fleshed. Simple enough: being well-rounded proved that you weren't starving; therefore, you had money. These were the beauties of only a few hundred years ago. If you showed any one of those women a picture of a young woman today, you can only imagine what her reaction would be. Nowadays, it appears that women classified as beautiful are in fact dangerously thin, golden-skinned, and usually wearing as little as possible. How quickly we change our attitudes! Because of the average lifestyle of most people today, this ideal is practically unattainable, since not many working-class citizens can afford the time or the money for personal trainers and trendy minimalist diets.

And let's consider this: how many of the willowy girls gracing magazine covers and film screens have done anything more strenuous than stand in front of a camera? How many do you imagine have worked thankless jobs with detestable hours or baked a batch of cookies with their children? This new ideal is not natural. Women are naturally curved: it's in the blueprints. Feminists forgive me, but we were designed to bear and raise children. Most "beautiful" girls don't even look as if they could lift a six-pound child, let alone carry one for nine months. My point is that we push for an outrageous goal, rather than admit to the beauty of a natural feminine form. The rates of deaths related to anorexia nervosa and bulimia are through the roof, most tragically among young women. It certainly makes sense: every advertisement they see, every movie they watch, every song they listen to, tells them only one thing: *Sorry honey, you're not good enough.*

Let's go back in time again to the reign of the Southern Belles, those glamorous Scarlett O'Haras and Amanda Wingfields. Picture those sparkling young debutantes entertaining gentleman callers on their porch swings, not solely by virtue of their beauty, but also through their refined wits and intelligent conversation (perhaps not educated, but at least intelligent!) Now, consider again the young women of today. These poor girls are judged solely on the basis of their appearance. So, those educated girls, the talented ones, who are not considered beautiful, are bypassed completely in favour of those who are. The world has come to a truly sad place when a pretty face and shapely form are valued over intellect or life skills.

Perhaps that is why more and more marriages today end in divorce: partnerships are no longer based on the compatibility of two individuals, the shared experiences and interests, but

solely on the physical attractiveness of the two. It does not seem surprising that relationships such as these would "burn out" much more quickly, once the pair realizes they have nothing to talk about outside the bedroom. Hollywood does not seem to be helping to establish this point by showing countless escapades of the pretty young couple with a thousand faces married just out of high school, or getting pregnant in university, or any other circumstance that is not romantic or comedic in the least when faced by the real world. We must begin to understand again that marriage is not a game, or a movie, but a commitment that takes an intense amount of effort (from both sides) to maintain.

What is the solution to this endless race, this ridiculous pursuit of the perfect people hidden somewhere behind the glass? A fairly simple one: returning to the simple fact that what we see in the mirror is not real. One of my favourite quotes about reflections comes from Charlie Fletcher's children's book, *Silvertongue.* A character informs a young woman that "what we see in the mirror is a reflection of the past, because of the microsecond it takes for the light to reflect. So who we are in the mirror is only who we were." Therefore, we must simply accept the fact that how we think we appear is an illusion, that ideals are unrealistic, that it is not the imperfect girl on the other side of the mirror that is who we are, but the reflection we cannot see: the one ingrained in the eyes of our friends, our family, the ones we love. This is who we truly are. Many have said that actions speak louder than words; they also speak much louder than an illusion trapped behind glass, one with no voice at all.

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Vanessa Kraus
Grade 10
St. Peter's Secondary School

Passing Thoughts

by Clayton Wilkinson

The night is cool and refreshing on my body after the hot day. Beside me, my boat rests bottom up on the flat, rocky shore. The moonlight skips and dances over the waves of a settling lake; a cool wind blows through my hair, which reaches down to my chest. I close my eyes and take in the smell of the lake and the surrounding pine forest. When the wind drops off, I open my eyes to the soft light of the night and slip into the warm water, heated by a day's relentless punishment from a relentless sun. The water is smooth on my body, sore and slightly stiffened from the day of travel on the water. I float on my back, holding air deep in my lungs; my hair drifts loosely around my head, a few stray strands traced across my face. The stars are numerous; they remind me of a glowing mist made of millions of tiny water droplets glowing with an inner light of their own. I let out the air in my lungs and sink beneath the surface. I roll over and strike out for a rock partially submerged in the black waters of the lake, the dark waves lapping up against and over its small tip, barely visible above the water. I swim over and sit on the rock's mossy surface. Moon-ringed wavelets break against my chest as I sit in the natural chair shaped into the rock … and I think about people.

Humans are strange creatures when you get right down to it. Struggling to gain power and control over each other, they squash the heads of others as they climb upwards in the struggle to reach the top and fight the world. Once they gain that lofty perch, it is only to be struck down by the next people vicious enough to claw their way to the top. And where is the top?

I think back to hell, the hell someone decided to nickname "school." I think back to how people would go out of their way to be cruel to those they believed to be beneath them. It's as if men and women are crowding onto a ladder standing straight up, leading nowhere, men and women crowding to get to the top with people beneath them, stepping on the fingers of all below them for no reason other than to hear them cry out in pain.

And then there are the people like me, standing a few feet away from the ladder. They are looking on in confusion and wondering what they hope to gain by reaching the top with a power play. What power would they really wield? After all, it is just a game, a meaningless and pointless game that leaves everyone hurt with bloody knuckles at the end of the day. You all still go home with bruised, split, and bleeding knuckles, and for what? None of this makes any sense.

Why do I bother, I ask myself? I slip down the rock until my nose is millimetres above water, blowing ringlets over the smooth surface.

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Clayton Wilkinson
Thomas A. Stewart Secondary School
Grade 10

The Toonie

by Megan McShane

I have a toonie that lives in a small box in my room. A touch of pure nickel and a dash of copper alloy make up a small coin that I hold most dear to my heart. Its worth in money is a mere two dollars, of course, but the memory that it pumps from my fingertips to the depths of my head, heart, and soul every time I hold it is worth so much more.

I'm working as a gift wrapper at a jewellery store over the holidays. I've been meeting many people – mostly young men who realize, at the last minute, that they haven't bought anything for a wife or girlfriend. However, I've also been meeting some lovely families, kind women, and, as always, the Christmas Cranks. I'm meeting a lot of friendly elderly men too, as they search for just one more gift for a wife to make her holiday special; as well, there are some selfless young children giving all the allowance money they've saved up to get Mom another charm for her Pandora bracelet.

These thoughtful elderly men and benevolent kids are my favourite shoppers. I love to "chat it up" with them about holiday highlights in previous years or to let the little ones help me make the bows. The season of giving is upon us, and I wouldn't want to be spending it doing anything other than watching the cheer and the desire to give filling the stores.

I stumble across a new favourite during this particularly busy afternoon, only two days before Christmas. I'm not in the best mood; the rush and consecutive little bursts of Christmas Cranks have probably got under my skin.

Our relatively large sales floor space is packed with shoppers, from the back to the front of the store and even spilling into the halls. I'm watching as people point their grimy shopper paws at Swarovski crystals behind locked glass, glass that I will later have to polish if they point any closer. My feet are aching from standing for seven hours straight, and I've already nicked my fingers with the scissors too many times for one day. "Jingle Bells" serenades customers into buying just one more Pandora charm, just one extra set of diamond earrings. Earlier today I had a thirty-second wrap go wrong when I dropped a five-hundred-dollar Citizen watch right in front of the customer who had just invested in this beautiful gift.

One prissy woman storms over to me, demands to know why she isn't being helped, and is quite disinterested in my explanation. She merely glares as I tell her that I, in fact, cannot help her, as there are only so many sets of keys for the employees, all of which are currently being used. I would like to tell her that if she truly wants the best possible service, she most likely should have planned to pay us a visit *before* the Big Day is only days away.

I am not a Christmas Crank. I love Christmas. However, one too many rude shoppers in a day can unfortunately make you a little more sensitive to negativity and the nasty people around you.

Another customer approaches me, a young man buying a Pandora gift charm; he brings it to me for wrapping. He doesn't seem extraordinary; I have seen about one hundred duplicates of him today. Yet, this young man is not a duplicate. He is indeed extraordinary.

"Hi there, how are you?" I ask.

"I'm good, thank you, and yourself?"

"I'm good! Did you find a charm you liked?"

"I did actually, for my girlfriend," he tells me, watching as I work my magic. With a crinkle of gold paper and the snap of a bow, the little plain white box turns into something magnificent, a gift anyone would be eager to open from under their tree come Christmas morning.

The young man continues, "I'm going to Afghanistan with the Canadian Forces just a couple of weeks after Christmas and I wanted to find her a charm about, oh, you know, being a military girlfriend or a soldier's gal. I just thought of it this morning. Something to keep her company for the while that I'll be gone."

I finish wrapping his gift and look up at his humble, thoughtful eyes. "I am sure that she will love it."

"I hope so!"

"Here is your gift, sir, finished and ready to go!" I tell him to have a wonderful Christmas, and he reciprocates.

"Be safe – and good luck out there, okay?" I say, looking at those same humble eyes that I've quickly grown to respect and admire.

"Thank you so much," he says, pulling a toonie out of his pocket and placing it on the counter. He tells me that his girlfriend will never believe he wrapped it himself. I thank him for the tip and he is off.

This young man has heightened the respect that I have for soldiers. He has restored my hope in finding truly remarkable people in the world. He has sparked an entirely new sense of gratefulness within me. Most importantly, he has given the gift of a Christmas story that I will always treasure, a gift held within this toonie.

I will forever cherish this toonie as a gift for doing a simple service, given to me by someone who does such a tremendous service for our country. I am honoured that this man appreciated my help enough to give me such an irreplaceable gift. A touch of pure nickel and respect, a dash of copper alloy and hope that live within a toonie in a small box in my room. This gift is the best I have ever received and calls to mind a memory I will never forget.

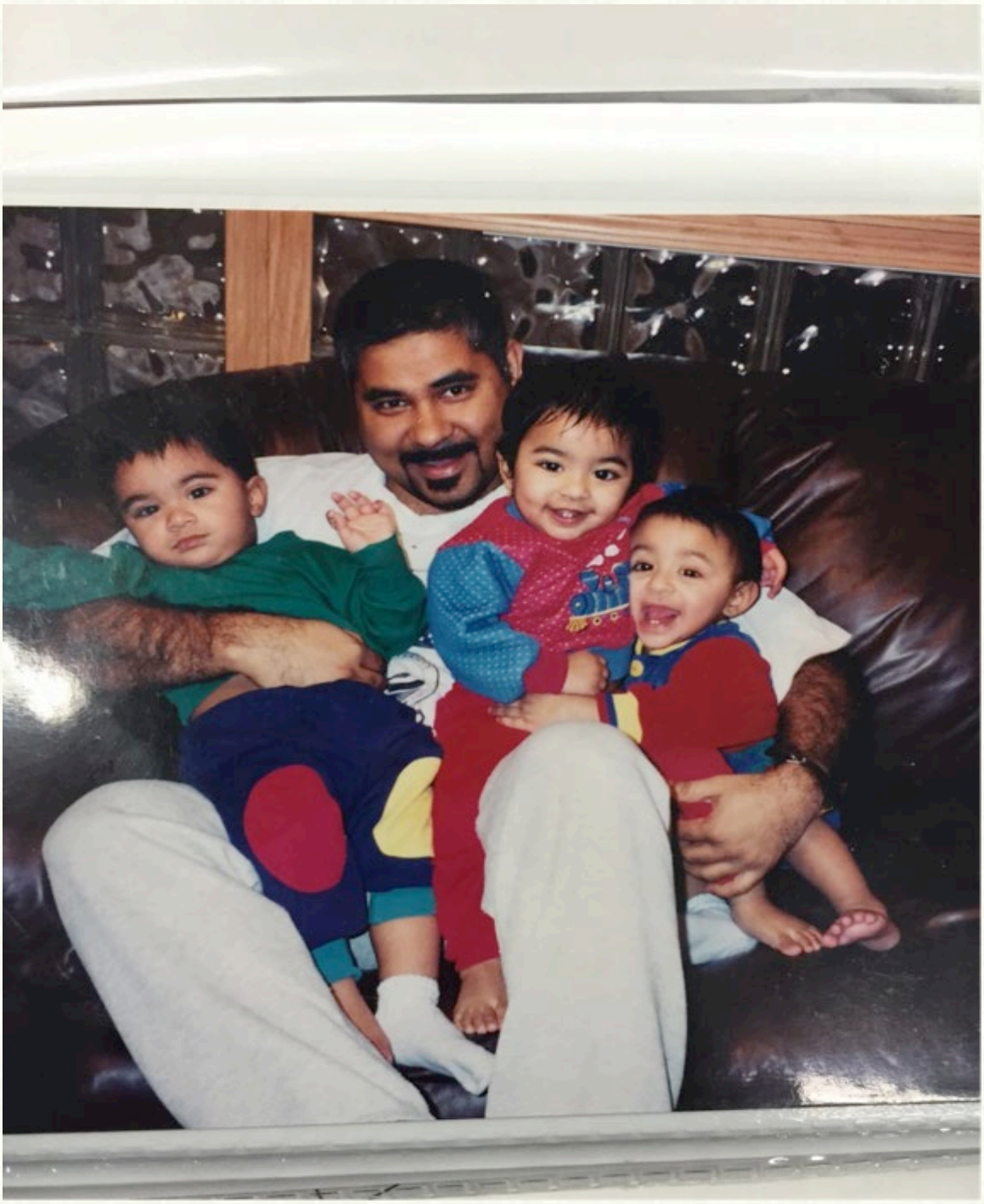
Thank you, sir, for all you do. My hat comes off to you.

* * * * *

Megan McShane
Grade 10
Lakefield College School

Snapshot of Innocence

by Vandana Narine



I look back on this photo, giving it more meaning than the typical, sickeningly nostalgic teenage-white-girl-at-heart might give it. I look at this picture, and see distortion, transition, and transformation from who and what those people were in the photo to what they are today. The stark contrast between then and now is astonishing. The growth is exponential, physical, mental, and emotional. And yet today, I see miniscule pieces, in their former selves, of the people in my great support system.

My father is recognizable to me, but he is not completely as I know him today. His eyes shine brighter than one hundred tanning beds, his cheeks rosy, rounded apples, his lips pink and spontaneously glossy. He is so young, freer at twenty-eight years than now at forty-three, even though he'd just fathered triplets. He has yet to fully gain "jiggles" – the name I gave his rather larger stomach about seven years later. A new parent to triplets, his hair is still an impossible thick, full sea of black that I loved feeling against my powdery baby skin. He hasn't yet had to deal with his daughters' choice in boys or his son's disregard for hygiene. He hasn't yet had to deal with teenage outbursts and his children's successes and failures at a competitive school. His hair hasn't yet begun to grey and thin out; his back hasn't yet begun to act up.

Though he is older, now with many prestigious awards, three exquisite teenagers, and "jiggles," this snapshot captures a part of him that has stayed the same over fourteen years. When he's truly happy, in the garage or on the driveway with his kids and wife cleaning or shining his motorbike, he illustrates the essence of the snapshot once again: his eyes twinkle with joy; his hearty laugh fills the space; his face beams. He's basking, not in our utter newness and adorableness, but our witty banter, our opinions, and our thoughts. Just as he's changed, we have too.

In the picture, my brother is entirely a little shadow of what he is today. He reminds me of a solid little hot-wheels truck in his solid colours; he's square, a little chubby, jaw set, and lips pouting. The little "hot-wheels truck" would always try his hardest to win a fight with Dad, wrapping his tiny arms around Dad's neck like a vice and securing his gums on Dad's nose. He's always been a tough little guy, never ceasing his slobbery fight. Seeing him reach outwards in the photo, I imagine him wriggling like a worm trying to escape from Dad's firm grip. His eyes stay blank and bored, even though they are focussed on the camera.

Today, his rounded face has morphed into something structured with a defined jawline. His outstretched arm reaching away from Dad definitely foreshadows his rebellious antics as a teen. Though some of the play-fights have mutated into very legitimate arguments, their playful bond has become even stronger as they've grown older together.

My sister in this snapshot is quite possibly the most adorable thing I've ever laid eyes on. She's centered in cylindrical perfection, in her reflective teal and red top sprinkled with polka dots. This was before her first crush, her first heartbreak, her first fight. Before her first bad grade, her first speech, her first test of character. The nearly toothless smile on her shiny, rounded face reveals defined dimples at the corners of her mouth. There's so much this little baby doesn't know – even today. Being the youngest, Geetanjali has always been the most naïve. Even though her rounded face has thinned out and sharpened her impeccable cheekbones, even though any trace of her chubby days is gone, she's still the baby of the family. Yes, she's a strong young woman, but to her family she'll always be the small, playful baby in the photo.

The eldest and smallest child in the photo is me. This snapshot captures a very vulnerable and still prevalent side of me. I'm clinging to my Dad as if I wouldn't let go if you paid me in animal crackers (my favourite food at that point in time). I've always been dependent on my family; they are my biggest and strongest support system. As a premature baby, obviously I needed my parents physically. My tiny limbs couldn't possibly grasp, hold, and use everything they needed. Now, I need my parents more emotionally. My Dad's fuzzy arm is holding me and keeping me close in this snapshot, just as his wisdom and advice support me today. I continue to smile almost every waking hour of the day; back then, it was because of my naiveté; now it's because I'm in awe of my potential and that of the many amazing individuals around me.

The physical pieces of this picture contrast with what they are today. However, I realize that in our youthful innocence, many of our emotional and mental traits are set and moulded. It is

through experience, through living life, that we put to use the skills and qualities with which we were born.

* * * * *

Vandana Narine
Grade 10
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A Poet Named "a"

by Cydney Cantello

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.

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Cydney Cantello
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Algonquin's Children

by Emma Fransky

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.

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Emma Fransky
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Crestwood Secondary School

Craving Hunger

by Claire Campbell

I watched in horror as her ghostly frame crumpled. It started with her knees; I ran towards her as they buckled, and I cried out as she fell to the floor. Her body convulsed and shook as her brain tried to regain control of her limbs. Her eyes rolled back into her sunken face and her complexion turned a sickening white. The air was sucked out of the room as her head made contact with the cement ground below and bounced, then bounced again as if a hard plastic cup had been dropped. A hollow echo filled the silence. I had an indescribable pain in my stomach, but not like hers.

We grow up in a society that fosters an unhealthy relationship with food. We are told over and over again to watch what we eat and be mindful of our figure: magazine covers, television commercials, and Facebook ads are populated with photoshopped, airbrushed images of models who've spent innumerable hours getting painted to look as "perfect" as possible. And then we're expected to look like that. Vic took that to heart. Obsessively comparing herself to others fostered her Body Dysmorphic Disorder at a horrifyingly young age. Much like the five-year- olds who are being diagnosed with anorexia[24], she hadn't stopped struggling since she got a mirror in her room. This culture, obsessed with body image, had shattered not only her reflection but her innocence; the mirror she worshipped at morphed into the monster that almost killed her.

There is evidence everywhere that media affect more than just girls. Teenage boys who frequently expose themselves to online porn are experiencing erectile dysfunction. They are no longer aroused by real people,[25] because actual people can't live up to the plastic editing of online images. This leaves women of all ages chasing an unrealistic body image.

Vic had found a diet online. Like millions of other young men and women, she responded to the media's force-feeding of dangerous diets and falsified nutritional information. These "miracle" diets helped her fit into the societal mold of perfection: skinny. But she interpreted the results as due to her diet, whereas we could all see it was her lack of eating. It was impossible to convince her otherwise because her drive for "perfection" only intensified as these diets tore apart her heart in more ways than one.

The idea of watching what she ate escalated from watching it go down to watching it come back up, every single time. The first year she excused herself to go to the camp bathroom after every meal. Three years later, she avoided the dining hall altogether. Bulimia and binge-eating disorders affect 1 to 4% of the population, almost all of whom are young women, so maybe we should have seen it sooner. Maybe we did, but because of the shame and ignorance surrounding the topic, 20% of women are suffering with an undiagnosed eating disorder. Ignorant questions like "Why don't you just eat?" or cruel remarks like "Aren't you hungry?" prevented her from seeking help. But what people need to understand is that eating disorders aren't altogether uncommon; 15% of women will suffer from an eating disorder at some point in their life. Those women are sisters, mothers, and daughters, but for me, it was my friend.

The stigma became undeniably evident after she was lifted off the ground by the paramedics, and her body was thrown onto a stretcher and loaded into the ambulance. The camp continued like nothing had happened.

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[24] "Anorexia Nervosa Can Strike and Kill as Early as Kindergarten - ABC ...." 25 Feb. 2012, http://abcnews.go.com/Health/anorexia-nervosa-strike-kill-early-kindergarten/story?id=18581747. Accessed 20 Apr. 2017.

[25] "Online porn addiction is causing a rise in erectile dysfunction in young ...." 15 Aug. 2016, http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/online-porn-addiction-causing-rise-8636996. Accessed 20 Apr. 2017.

But it had, and we'd all seen it.

Eating disorders have the highest mortality rate of any mental illness,[26] yet the camp ignored the problem. Hiding behind the idea of "protecting the children from this terrible tragedy," the camp hid the obvious: the staff had not acted to prevent the escalation of Vic's illness, and they neglected to help us cope with what had happened. They failed us. They had failed Vic. The signs were there, but in hopes of it going away they had refused to see them, and she had paid the price.

Vic's fear of again becoming overweight left her chasing the idea of being skinny and craving hunger.

The girl I watched fall victim to eating disorders physically crumbled from malnutrition. She was haunted by the incessant teasing, the being-made-fun-of, the name-calling, so that she deprived herself of a basic human need: food. The misunderstanding of her illness led her not to seek help until it was too late. She was hospitalized for two years after she collapsed at camp. I haven't seen her since.

Eating disorders are responsible for the deaths of 20% of people who've suffered without treatment.[27] Thank goodness that wasn't the case with Vic. But as I watched her bones creep farther and farther out of her whispery frame, that pain in my stomach grew. And despite the fact that she is now recovering, that sharp ache refuses to subside, because everywhere I look, the images of those bones surround me.

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Claire Campbell
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[26] "Eating Disorder Information and Statistics - Mirasol Eating Disorder ...." http://www.mirasol.net/learning-center/eating-disorder-statistics.php. Accessed 20 Apr. 2017.
[27] "Eating Disorder Information and Statistics - Mirasol Eating Disorder ...." http://www.mirasol.net/learning-center/eating-disorder-statistics.php. Accessed 20 Apr. 2017.

Pain

by Nicole Liu

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.

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Nicole Liu
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There Are No Right Answers in Improv

by Izzy Lloyd

I'm standing on stage, pretending to dig up dinosaur bones with my fellow archeologist, when an offstage voice calls, "New action!" I put down my invisible shovel and begin reburying the bones, only to be interrupted seconds later with, "New action!" Before I know what I'm doing, I find myself squatting down, eating fistfuls of fossilized dinosaur remains while my scene partner watches in horror.

This is just one example of how an improv scene can go from reasonable to completely absurd in no time at all. Odd as that experience was, it is by far not the weirdest one I've witnessed.

I enjoy all forms of acting, but improvised theatre, or improv, is definitely my favourite. Unlike other forms of theatre, improv is almost completely unscripted and forces you to come up with new ideas on the fly. The answer someone gives you may be completely different from what you expected, but you still have to accept the offer and move on. In that way, improv is a metaphor for life: you never know what will happen next, but you take what you get and roll with it.

I believe that everyone should try improv at least once in their life. Many people will argue that they can't do it because they aren't creative enough, or they can't come up with ideas that quickly, but the thing that no one tells you is that you don't have to be *good* at improv to have a great time doing it! In improv, there is no such thing as a right or wrong answer – only the unpredictable and the unexpected.

The reason why I love improv so much is because it helps me get out of my comfort zone and take risks in a safe, supportive environment. Improv is all about surrendering yourself to the absurd, which is convenient when all your ideas sound crazy out loud. There's a sort of rush that comes with making a complete fool of yourself in front of others, and a feeling of comfort in watching them do the same.

I became interested in improv around the time I went to my first acting camp, led by Linda Kash. My memories of that experience are blurry, but certain aspects of it still stand out in my mind: we had to perform an original play (Easteropolis and the Grumpy Goons of Grumpville), which incorporated various pieces of music, including "Let It Go" from *Frozen*. At the time, I thought it was a hilarious work of genius, and I still do. It was completely ridiculous, but I loved being a part of it. Thanks to Linda Kash and her team of people who are willing to put up with children, I began my lifelong love of theatre, improv, and abstract humour.

I have never laughed harder than I have during improv classes. You would not believe the freaky nonsense teenagers can come up with, given the right prompt. It's been said that laughter is the best medicine, and while it isn't a miracle cure, it can certainly help. For me, doing improv is like therapy. It always makes me smile, even if my week has been absolutely horrible, and I leave each class happier than when I walked in. Sometimes a little break from reality is all people need to make their day a thousand times better.

I struggle a lot when it comes to making up my mind, but it is much easier to do when I know there won't be any real repercussions, other than a possibly awkward scene. When faced with a decision, I tend to get very nervous and feel the need to analyze the pros and cons of every option before I make a choice. However, improvising forces me to make split-second decisions

without over-analyzing my actions. Although I continue to find acting impulsively stressful, improv has made it much easier for me.

Improv has played a key role in shaping who I am today, and in helping me become a more confident, happy, and decisive person. In a society that puts so much emphasis on planning for the future, we need to remember the importance of experiencing life as it happens. At its core, that's what improv is all about: being in the moment. So get out there and make a fool of yourself, because life's more fun with a little spontaneity.

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Izzy Lloyd
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Pinocchio; A Guide to Being a Real Girl

by Clementine MacLeod

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 Pinnochio 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.

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Clementine MacLeod
Grade 10
Adam Scott Collegiate Vocational Institute

Running

by Madeleine Hill

I skipped a grade in elementary school. It didn't seem like a big deal to me. I was going to be able to push myself to do harder work, and I would get to go to high school a *whole* year early. I was getting a head start on life. It was naive of me to think that it would allow me to feel ahead of everyone my age, rather than constantly feeling stuck behind those older than me. I never expected that the hardest part would be the questions. Or, more specifically, *the* question:

"Do you regret it?"

I regret that I had to watch my best friend deliver her valedictorian speech to a graduating class I wasn't part of. This was a speech we had talked about for years, one we had always assumed we would experience together. She delivered the speech to a class I had spent nine of the most formative years of my life with, yet I didn't walk across the stage with them. I sat in the audience, applauding as I watched them all move on without me. It's funny that way, discovering just how little people truly need you in their life.

I regret that I never kept in touch with all the people I left behind. Maybe it is my fault for not trying hard enough, maybe it's theirs for not trying at all. I don't like to dwell on it. I try to tell myself that it doesn't hurt, that we all would have lost touch anyway as we went to different secondary schools, but I know deep down that isn't true. I know that thinking about it won't help, but I wonder if they feel I abandoned them. I regret that I never apologized.

I regret the weight that came with starting high school at a younger age than everyone else. The constant fear that I would not be good enough for them, that I would always feel inferior to everyone around me. I always felt like I had to prove to them, and to myself, that I belonged there. I often wonder if things would have been different if I had chosen to stay put in elementary school for another year. I don't know that I would have carried that same burden.

However, the thing that I regret the most is the time lost. Although I know I did not *truly* lose any time, it feels like everyone else has the luxury of walking at their own pace through their lives while I am always running. I am running to catch up to people I can never catch, people I was never meant to try to catch. I am running to try to figure myself out in the same way that people with an extra year on me already have. I cried on my 15th birthday because I realized that I don't see my birthdays as a breath of fresh air anymore. Rather than being thankful for a new beginning, I only felt glad I had finally taken another step forward. And yet I will always be a year behind.

I will run myself into the ground trying to catch up to people running a different race than me.

I hope that someday I can reflect on my choices and understand that I made the right decision. I want to be able to tell myself that I didn't make a mistake, but I don't think it is fair to truly believe that could happen. I don't know what the rest of my life will look like, and I don't know what it would have been like if I had decided to walk through it instead of running. All I know is that what's done is done, and I've never been a fan of walking anyway.

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Madeleine Hill
Grade 10
St. Peter Catholic Secondary School

Rainy Days

by Rachel Pei

I hate rainy days. It's just the atmosphere, the gloominess, the dark. The room suddenly feeling tiny, the walls closing in. The worst part is that there's nowhere I can turn to see a smiling face. Only shadows, mere shadows. And wisps of the past. Not real, no . . . just thoughts. Dark thoughts. But then again, the whole world feels dark.

A cage. That's what it is. I once read a book about a girl in a cage. Her name was *Catherine, called Birdie*. I guess I'm a birdie too, in a way. I'm like her. We want to sing with the other birds and fly far, far away from all cages, darkness, and gloom. But no. We have no choice but to watch everything from behind iron bars, forced to see but never to touch.

We can only imagine.

So now, that's what I do. I start to imagine a day when there's no rain, only sunshine. Just light in my eyes as I run with the wind, inhaling lungfuls of fresh air. And here, I'm raising my call with the other birds and singing my song. My song of freedom.

I savour the word – the sweet, tantalising word. Freedom. Maybe that's what I really want. Is that bad? Is it . . . ungrateful? At this point, I don't really know. Everything is in turmoil, a vortex in the sea. Words and thoughts slowly whirl into a gloomy mess, like ash tossed around by the wind. All in my mind.

What is a mind? Is it the same thing as a brain, a physical thing? Whatever it is, it brings the swirling darkness. Even now I try to fight it, but the black hole is too strong. It sucks me in, body and soul. And I can't take it anymore – it becomes too much for my little mind . . .

A scream.

A howl to the skies.

Though silent, it fills all things. Just as a pebble creates ripples along the surface of a pond, so too my cry releases quavering waves throughout my whole world. I send out everything I was, everything I am, and everything I will be – all of me.

And it's exhausting. Not only for my body, but also for my very being. I need a moment to catch my breath. Although in reality this moment only lasts a couple of seconds, in my world those seconds seem like eternity.

It feels good to let it out. I open my eyes. I had no idea they were closed; it just seemed kind of natural. Like waking up from a dream, it shocks me. And yet I wish it were a dream. Life would be much easier that way. Outside, it's still raining, raining cats and dogs.

Just then, the back door creaks open. Slowly, faintly.

Sounds of dripping come from the edge of the roof.

As usual, the ground is wet and muddy. Another awful thing about rainy days is the mud. But in the midst of the ongoing storm, something catches my eye. It's something bright and shining on the ground. And suddenly an irresistible longing for this warm, inviting light fills me. As I bend down to look closer, I realize it's only a flower.

A small, yellow flower.

The blooming flower of Hope.

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Rachel Pei
Grade 9
Our Lady of the Wayside Catholic School

Seven Minutes

by Summer Jackson

They say the human brain continues to live for seven minutes after the body is dead to replay its happiest memories. The mind remains active; meanwhile the heart is completely still. It makes me wonder what I'll think about. If I were to die today, what thoughts would occupy my seven minutes?

Would I be able to hear the flicker of the switch as it turned the lights on or the crackle of campfire as it flared shades of bright red and orange when the sparks floated up into the sky and somehow disappeared to be no more than just another star, illuminating my sleepless nights, burning what would later become my last marshmallow?

Would I think about the times you made me laugh, all my crooked teeth showing, no longer hidden behind my lips, which would later become forever closed inside my casket?

Would I think about the times we sang as loud as we could to our favourite songs when they came on the radio, which you had purchased just for me because, even though I could have easily connected my phone to the car and played my favourite song on repeat, you noticed how I liked the thrill of not knowing what would be next?

Would I think about the time you wanted to go outside and dance in the middle of the shining wet road in the pouring rain, but it took you too long to put on your navy blue raincoat, yet you went outside anyway even after the rain had stopped and danced under the old maple tree in the water droplets that were caught in the chartreuse-coloured new spring leaves?

Would I think about how you recounted all the stories from the 600-page romance and fantasy novels you read every night in the dim white glow of the small flashlight you kept beside your pillow, which I know I may have seemed bored with while listening, but I swear on my last seven minutes I really didn't know how much I would be missing hearing you talk about what happened in Chapter Four?

Would I think about how you missed the turn to the grocery store and passed an old billboard advertising a berry farm only thirty minutes from where we were, and then somehow, we ended up in the car missing more turns while eating freshly picked dark-red strawberries?

Would I think about how you complimented my eyes and told me you loved the bright blue hues that showed around the edges of the rest of their stone-cold gray and how after that I suddenly stopped wearing light-brown, natural-looking theatrical contact lenses?

Would I think about the way I used to critique myself in the mirror until I was biting my misshapen lips, trying to hold back tears because I was disgusted by the way I looked when I cried until that one day I wore my white fake wool sweater and dark-blue loose-cut jeans, and we went outside at lunch and I was twirling on the pavement singing my favourite song and you told me I looked beautiful?

Would I think about the secret elegies I wrote in my notes app, which practically begged you to stay so I might as well have been on my knees or how in the end they didn't really end up mattering because, regardless of how I sounded like a Hollywood actor reading a well-written monologue, I never actually got the courage to say them to anyone but myself in the bathroom mirror?

Would I think about the phrase ‘I love you’ and how I threw it around so casually because, although I have had nightmares more terrifying than anything that's ever shown on TV, I could never have expected to ever have to speak the horror of having to add ‘goodbye’ on the end of that sentence?

Would I think about how you were like a lighthouse that lit up my sea of self-pity and tossed a buoy to save me from drowning in the raging ocean waves of consternation or how you were the abundant glimmering ivy that grew over my old brick wall and kept it from crumbling?

Would I think about the way it felt when you hugged me, the way it felt like all my problems were suddenly nothing but dust, and I was finally safe from all the fears that haunted me in the silence of the night while I was in your warm embrace?

Would I become so consumed by panegyrizing the way you were the only one who was ever able to make me feel like I was worth anything at all and made me truly believe that I actually deserved to be loved when I was at my lowest and my heart was sinking down into the deepest pits of my empty stomach, how you were the only one who ever made me feel truly confident in myself and how you not only took that confidence with you when you left but also took the smile you gave me, and the safety I was finally able to feel, and how you took with you the only seven minutes I had that were worth replaying when you switched off the light in one final flicker before you left?

I know exactly what my seven minutes would be, and I know exactly who would be featured throughout all of them. I don't expect to be *your* seven minutes. If I were, you would probably still be here creating an eighth minute with me. I won't ask for a lifetime, I won't even ask for seven minutes. I just ask that I am at least one of your 'what I would think abouts' as you were all of mine, and I pray you know that before I'm in my seven minutes, not a single second would be wasted on anyone else.

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Summer Jackson
Grade 9
Adam Scott Collegiate Vocational Institute

COVID Days: A Memoir

by Susie Wang

I can't write about my childhood without mentioning COVID. It wasn't just a chapter; it was the whole book! Four years of my life. Gone, but not really gone. It's like a tattoo on my memory – permanent and inescapable. COVID didn't just happen to me; it shaped me. It was the backdrop to my teenage years, the filter through which I saw the world, and the reason I'll never look at a QR code the same way again.

Let me take you back to the online classes. Oh, the online classes! If there's one thing COVID taught me, it's that I have the attention span of a goldfish in a room full of shiny objects. Grade seven was supposed to be the year I learned algebra, geography, and maybe even a little self-discipline. Instead, it was the year I mastered the art of multitasking: Zoom in one window, video games in another, and a TV show playing in the background for good measure. I'm pretty sure my brain absorbed nothing but the theme songs of random Netflix series and the sound of my teacher's voice saying, "Can you hear me? Is your mic on?"

By the time COVID ended, my brain felt like a hard drive that had been wiped clean. I couldn't tell you what I learned that year, but I could recite entire episodes of television shows. It wasn't all bad, though. Those online classes gave me a front-row seat to the chaos of virtual learning. Kids forgetting to mute themselves, teachers accidentally sharing their screens with embarrassing tabs open, and the occasional pet making a cameo appearance. It was like a reality show, and we were all unwilling contestants.

But COVID wasn't just about online classes. Oh no, it was so much more. Remember the quarantines? If you were lucky enough to be in a class and experience a "close contact" with a COVID patient, congratulations – you hit the jackpot! The school would lock us up like prisoners, move us to a different floor, and leave us there for two weeks. No teachers, no lessons, just a bunch of kids with too much energy and not enough supervision. We turned the classroom into our own little world: soccer games in the aisles, ping-pong matches on the desks, and TV shows playing on the projector. It was like *Lord of the Flies*, but with Wi-Fi.

Of course, there was always that undercurrent of fear. We didn't know what was going to happen next. Would someone get sick? Would we lose someone we loved? The uncertainty was like a shadow, always there, even when we were laughing and playing. And then there were the QR codes. Oh, the QR codes! They were like our COVID passports, little squares that determined our fate. Green meant you were safe; red meant you were a pariah. Every morning, we'd line up at the school gate, phones in hand, waiting for the scan. If your code was the wrong colour, you were sent home, treated as if you had the plague. It was a weird time to be alive.

And let's not forget the lockdowns. The best (or worst) one was when our entire building was sealed off for three months. Three. Months. No going outside, no fresh air, just the four walls of our apartment and the endless loop of bad news on TV. I remember staring out of the window, watching the empty streets and wondering if the world would ever go back to normal. Going outside felt like a luxury, like something only rich people in movies got to do.

But here's the thing about COVID: it brought people closer. It separated us physically, but it forced us to connect in ways we never would have done before. Families spent more time together, friends found new ways to stay in touch, and we all learned to appreciate the little things, like a walk outside or a hug from someone we love. In a weird way, COVID taught us how to be human again.

So, yeah, COVID was a mess. It was fear and loss and boredom and chaos all rolled into one. But it was also my childhood. It's the reason I'll never forget the sound of a Zoom call disconnecting, the sight of a QR code on my phone, or the feeling of being locked in a classroom with my friends, laughing like the world wasn't falling apart outside. COVID changed me. It changed all of us. And whether we like it or not, it's a part of our story now. Forever.

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Susie Wang
Grade 10
Lakefield College School

The Anger of Loving You

by Jordyn McMahon

The house I grew up in never seemed to be settled. Floors creaked at the slightest shift, almost as if they were listening. Doors were always half closed, never fully shut, like someone had left them that way in a hurry. You learned to measure your voice within the house, making words sit on your tongue before letting them out.

A kitchen chair was pulled out from the table on an angle, misplaced, like a warning. Some days the house felt too quiet, the kind that made every tiptoe echo. Other days, it shifted without warning – the slam of a cabinet or someone stomping up the stairs. Glasses left half full scattered on the countertops, fermenting into molding experiments. Barely enough room for the bags of marijuana spilling into the spaces between them. Where was I amidst this mess? Though I was her daughter, her baby, only a single picture hidden on the fridge among the pinned neglected bills.

My mother was not well, and her instability shaped everything and everyone near her. The people I loved most learned to move around her carefully, choosing words wisely, or not at all, because even speaking might make it worse. A look, a tone, something slightly off. She gave the house its personality – her voice bleeding through the walls, rising and falling without warning, until it shaped the house into something I was always bracing myself for.

She hurt me, not always loudly, not always in ways that others could see. There were moments when I would do something simple and watch it backfire, her expression changing before I even understood why.

I couldn't spell "alligator" at seven, but I knew how to sit still in a room where it didn't feel safe to speak. A smile on the bus ride to school, a white glittery dress that didn't belong to the day, chosen because nothing else was clean. Lunch was a dented ravioli can, sent to school without any way to open it. Clothes in rotation for days at a time. Empty detergent bottles sat under the sink, some smelling less of chemicals and more of poison.

I learned to stop speaking mid thought, to weigh my words before letting them out – hoping for a good day to come. I stopped moving through the house carelessly – like it was safe, but instead moving like I needed to be ready. I grew up faster than I should have because there was no room for softness.

Doors slammed hard enough to make the walls feel closer. Voices rose until they filled every corner, while objects became part of whatever came next. Silence followed because speaking about it felt heavier than staying quiet. Home was not a place to rest; it was a place to endure.

The architecture of my childhood did not settle slowly; it collapsed in a blur of motion. The violence finally had an end when she turned her anger toward my brother one night.

We moved with the same urgency we once used to dodge the warped floorboards and droopy ceiling tiles, but this time, the stakes were our own lives. As we drove down backroads at 110 miles per hour, we watched my mother chase the car until she was a small, fading point of anger in the rearview mirror. We weren't just driving away from a house; we were outrunning a woman who had spent years ensuring that *nothing was ever her fault*. The escape was the last

loud moment before the heavy silence of my new life began – the moment I stopped bracing myself for her volatility and started breathing for myself.

There was a void where a mother should have been, and for a long time I believed that void meant that something was wrong with me. But as years passed, I began to notice something I hadn't before – calmness. The emptiness hurt, but it did not harm me the way her presence had. Still, I can admit what once felt impossible to say: leaving her was painful, but it would've hurt more if we had stayed.

In the house where I spent my days, silence was never peaceful; it was a "brace", a shared breath stretched between the slam of a cabinet and the next rise of a voice. I measured my own worth against the days she would disappear without explanation, wondering if I was worth being remembered. I had been raised to believe that a mother's presence, however destructive, held the roof up. She closed and sealed the doors; fathers, grandparents, aunts, and uncles were all locked away, one by one, while I watched her swallow the key.

I prayed for her to get better, holding onto the idea of ever having a kind mom. But the structure of our home taught a harder truth: some people never really get better. I stopped praying for a different mother and started learning how to survive the one I had.

Watching other girls my age with their mothers is a kind of quiet torture. At sixteen, I am surrounded by girls who are "best friends" with theirs, sharing a softness I never had. While they have a constant source of support, I am left to manage the void where a mother should have been, a space I once believed meant I was broken. There are still nights where the absence becomes heavy, and I grieve the version of her that never existed.

It aches to realise she controlled access to love so tightly that she locked herself out of my life entirely, choosing destruction over her own children.

I am mourning a ghost. Yet, even through the pain, I recognize that this emptiness hurts, but it does not harm me the way her presence did. I am learning that I would rather miss her from safety than be destroyed by her in a house where there was no room to breathe.

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Jordyn McMahon
Grade 10
St. Peter Catholic Secondary School

Young Writers Contest

Lakefield Literary Festival

Winning Entries – Senior Poetry
(Grades 11, 12)

In the Summer

by Wesley Collett-Taylor

The sun burns your skin into paper,
rough and thin, until your elbows crinkle, then
tall people with clothes
you don't understand spill dirt and ink on you.
They smell like smoke and burnt sugar,
like the factory down the street.

And driving lessons are hell because your feet
have a mind of their own;
but the sky is bright and
walking's easy,
and summer school sucks, but at night
you get drunk and contemplate the light pollution
until maybe, the sun rises.

Every next morning there's a perfect silence.
Rusted construction chains hang
from the bridge over the river, swaying
in the jackhammer dust. The air is cool
and tastes like someone else's teeth
in a clumsy first kiss.

The sun shines in the back of your throat
and burns your birch-white skin.

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Wesley Collett-Taylor
Grade 12
Peterborough Collegiate Vocational School

And Does the Whale Commune with God…

by Megan Boothby

Dream of Newfoundland; try
to climb the swaying, rippling cliffs
behind the boxy house, bladderwort green,
and look over peeling stages, the crumbling ghosts
of fishermen crying to a broken sea.
There are slugs in the waist-high grass –
hands grip,
slip, stone and moss and rushing ears
catch the waves, like tired sighs.

The perch –
half safe, dangling limbs and thoughts
suspended
on the back of a sleeping dinosaur.
A town blinking in a curved below;
cod boats clink
and voices fade like aches into the blue
then lavender sky.

Two islands –
a flash of white between; a heave
of breath becomes drifting wind.
The whale, tail acknowledging the clouds,
who nod back, a lighthouse winks
and God, blowing with a soft strand of hair
across seeking eyes, found.

Atlantic tongue, salt season sacrifice
and the taste of night like a cool promise:
never go home.

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Megan Boothby
Grade 12
Peterborough Collegiate Vocational School

The Suburbs

by Eli Campbell-Weiner

How long does it take to fall into the dark hole of yesterday?
Because I've spent centuries falling down this rabbit hole of forever-after
And the sun-drowned ink splotches composed of dice dares and candy shocks;
The contours of ambivalence lament locksmiths of light.
I've got a thousand promises of screaming my body through stoplights
And trick flights and mesmerizing nephrites,
Sundial magic show cotton-spun drones
And microphone matches and firefly satches,
Ziplocking memory into prepackaged bags of air,
Because my mind is stale and used and cooked
As of too long ago
And I need something fresh.

Earthbeats and heartquakes and soundbeams and moonscapes and
Lifedrums and earstyles and sunshifts and geardials.
A life of concocted compound words.

If a city cries, does it rain in the suburbs?

Because the battering of rainstorms in the Manhattan of my brain
Has sent my monsters into labyrinths of no-exit streets
And crescents and no throughways
And monotonous square patches of
Sterilized grass sheets.
Monsters crafting nightmares out of imprisonment
In time with my heartbeats.

If a city cries does it rain in the suburbs?

Because the thunderstorms are shocking my mind
Into shaking pulsing messes of sadness –

And I spend a lot of time shaking.

Shaking the hands of people I'll never meet again,
Spending hours shaking ink out of a pen,
Trying to write melodies between lines of algebra,
Poetry in the spaces of history,
Shaking my etch-a-sketch soul clean of impurity
Because today I need a clean slate.
Today is a new day.

And I shake when I see something worth crying about
And I shake when my body can twist but shouts blanks.

This week I've been shaking non-stop.
I've got violent contortions making my heart rate drop to levels
That even hospital patients would find violently silent.
Food turns to volcanic ash in my mouth,

Eruptions eliciting self-hate to grow in fertile ash-filled cavities
Between rows of teeth longing to bite the neck of sanity.
Anxiety paralyzes the outer edges of touch,
Shaking and contorting my nerves like I took bad ecstasy –
The kind that makes you scream for the days when you listened to your mother
And remembered that the monsters under the bed
Won't escape by draping a white bed sheet over your eyes;
The only way to kill werewolves is by using a silver bullet,
And the only way to chase the invisible monsters
From your bedroom or your nightmares
Is to shine a nightlight on them and search for saviours in shadows.

To remember that a bleeding neck can be bruised by love.

Gravemares and nightyards and glassmarks and scarshards
and concoctions of a thousand other misspelt words,
because when the city floods you'll see me screaming for a lifeboat,
the Tollund Man emerging,
shaking and starving,

lost in the labyrinth of the suburbs.

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Eli Campbell-Weiner
Grade 12
Kenner Collegiate Vocational Institute

Carry

by Jasher Guiel

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

tiny, frail,
have wrapped around mine?
What would I have sung
to hush your cries?
A faerie in the bell-jar.
A glass casket
for a slumbering princess.
Our fairytales have failed us.
I could not carry you.
I tried.
There is a crevice,
a break in my earth
where there once was
a small,
morning form,
early in its dawn.
A tiny sunrise.
The great light
weakened by the sky,
its bearer.
Its carrier.
Its mother.
Her breast left to dry.
Empty.
A Rachel,
barren.
A sun retreating,
refusing to rise,
refusing to complete its cycle.
I could not hold you, but I will carry you
in other ways.

* * * * *

Jasher Guiel
Grade 12
Crestwood Secondary School

Duck Song

by Vanessa Kraus

(For D. L.)

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

* * * * *

Vanessa Kraus
Grade 11
St. Peter Catholic Secondary School

The Murder House

by Mackenzie Green

Natalie and I turn cartwheels
and roll our bodies in the soft grass,
loose plastic bags.
Ruddy-skinned men heave boxes into the house.
Lemonade,
too-sweet, plastic cups half-full on the porch.
Mother calls.

The hardwood in our home is nicked and bruised
like tanned arms in the summer.
And in the centre, a dark patch.
Brown-red, like spilt wine.
Almost amorphous, but out of the corner of an eye,
slightly human.
"Murder House," we whisper.

"Ghostie's gonna get you!"
Nat's glee edges on fear,
like a child leaning over the balcony,
cars buzzing past in the harsh fissure between skyscrapers.
At her words, a hollow presence confronts me.
Polar air, a signal of autumn's abrupt arrival,
squirms its way through the attic floorboards.

A flashlight flickers within our makeshift tent of sheets and chairs,
a subtle phantom glow
inside a draped temple.
At times, there is a woman imprisoned in my mind,
a crumpled figure that matches the bloodstain on the floor.
Body concave,
stomach sheathing a blade.

Winter comes, and Nat and I gallop in the backyard
through piles of snow.
There is a white horse beneath me.
Dark, childlike eyes, I imagine.
The sun is the tip of a hot poker, scorching blue linen.
Natalie canters around the swing set.
Laughter bursts from deep within her chest.
A sound like teeth against glass.
I whirl around,
muscles slivers of ice,
arching around my bones.
Wide eyes find the highest window in the Murder House,
just below the peak of the roof,
crested with gingerbread.

Frost clouds the small pane,

obscures a dark image.
When I stare, she is gone.
But for a moment,
when I am a spiralling body,
the pale face of a woman
is framed in the window.

* * * * *

Mackenzie Green
Grade 12
Crestwood Secondary School

Gens de Voyage

by Vanessa Kraus

It is Thursday,
the plum tree is blooming,
and the Roma are leaving.
Their ruddy children
burst with life,
cheeks streaked with dirt,
darting between caravans,
long skirts and headscarves blow,
lush with blossoms.
The trucks start up
with rusty groans of protest
and soon they will all be gone again.

Our children are inside,
politely playing,
the dogs tied up in the yard.
They must adapt,
say the well-mannered citizens,
drinking their coffee,
reading the Politics
and Household Hints
in their neatly folded newspapers.
They must make an effort to adapt,
or they will spend the rest of their days
travelling.

I salute you,
bright glass beads
rolling loose.
The blooms of my headscarf
are lost in the darkness of my hair,
the sound of my high heels
masks the whispers
of my long skirt.

* * * * *

Vanessa Kraus
Grade 12
St. Peter Catholic Secondary School

The Quick Brown Fox Jumps over the Lazy Dog

by Ashley Leahy

Aerial dancer, she was called, she of gleaming hide and dreaming eyes. Born a riddle to the world and hunted to the point of extinction, she is the last. Children know of her; over and over, they beg for the tales, the fables, the lore. Down from the mountains and across the lands, she races ever onward, unto the ending of the world. Elegant, ethereal, an enigma, she keeps a weathered eye upon the horizon. From the depths of the valley a call rings out, to each unencumbered nook and crevice. Golden and ringing, it is a voice, calling to them. “Hunters...Hunters...to horse and to hound.” In an instant the peace of the day is shattered. Just as in ages past, the hunters are upon her trail once more. Kill her...catch her, see her dead. Long and silver, the coveted prize, the horn upon her head. Means, cunning and unfair, are employed to lay her low. Nearer to the gorge, to the precipice, she races. Over the edge stones tumble and fall, but her cloven hooves hold tight to the wall. Pounding, bounding, pressing tight upon her trail, the hunters come. Quiet and still, she huddles in the deep shadows of a briar thicket. Rowan leaves rustle, drift down in a scarlet cascade, drawing the hunters’ line of sight. She springs out and away, into the heart of the forest. Trees, massive and ancient, cluster close about her, a phalanx of guardians serving the Last. Unicorn, she is, but is she the Last? Veering away into the deepest reaches of the wood, she plunges. Webs of gossamer moss hang from the trees, bearded and old they appear. Xenocrysts shine and glimmer in the fragmented light, as she spies a shape, seeming eerily familiar. Young and wandering, an innocent, a foal with a horn of silver upon its brow... Zenith is the name of this orphan wayfarer, who is no longer alone.

* * * * *

Ashley Leahy
Grade 11
Adam Scott Collegiate Vocational Institute

Happiness is Bliss…

by Jill Sanderson

Happiness is bliss… or so they say.
I say happiness is temporary.
But then again,
all emotions are.

Anger
is the hardest emotion to maintain,

Sadness,
however,
can last a long, long time.

When sadness endures, we call it depression.
When happiness endures, we call it euphoria

or mania.

Usually we flip-flop between these core emotions,
with others woven in between.
It's ok to change how we feel,

until it's not,

until it becomes

random,

uncontrollable,

until it becomes extreme,
until it hurts you,
until it hurts somebody else.

This inability to control
drastic changes in emotion
can affect not only your mood
but your actions…
your perception.
The term used to coin this phenomenon is
manic depression,
bipolar disorder.

It is a very misunderstood illness,

and by that, I do not mean it is not as bad as it seems…

it is worse.

I used to have the *best* dad.
I don't remember much of that man anymore,
he has been gone for so long,
he is nothing now,
nothing but a dying memory,
he has become a prisoner of his own mind,
unable to escape,
not that he ever tries…
From what I do remember
he was a good man,
a great dad.

I remember our Saturday afternoons at the biggest hill in the world,
our walks in the woods,
our rock collecting,
our grocery shopping,
our model building,
our car rides,
our beach days,
our talking,
our laughing,
our ability to *be* without the feeling of
concentrated hate.

I was Daddy's little girl
then.

That all seems so distant now
almost as if
I imagined it.

I hate him
or at least
I hate his illness.
But his illness is him;
it's who he's become,

it is all he is now.

He has let it define him,
he has succumbed to it

and now… I am left to pick up the pieces,

the pieces of his broken brain,
his broken life

I am now a prisoner
of his broken brain,

his broken life.

Happiness.

Is it bliss?

Or is it just an illusion?

In my family… it is an illusion.
In my life… it is an illusion.
In my reality… it is an illusion.

I try to avoid it,

him

at all costs.

I try to not let it affect me.
I try to be strong,
to be brave,
to be blithe,
to simply
be.

I put on the illusion of happiness
for him,
for me,
for us.

But really…

if I seem happy
or

free

it is merely
a temporary
illusion.

* * * * *

Jill Sanderson
Grade 12
Norwood District High School

Sky-Storm

Mackenzie Green

The sky begins to fall in droplets,
thick navy tears soaking your hair,
tracing a path across your scalp,
slithering down your neck.
And you watch as the stars take their tumble next,
striking trees and cracking like glass orbs.
Their light throbs outward,
a pulsing flame throwing sparks
against the sky-storm
that floods midnight-shrouded forests
and lifeless grassy fields.
An Earth-bound speck, you wade through the fallen blackness
and pretend it is an undulating sea,
wave peaks growing higher as the sky now cascades in torrents.
You stare up, when the sky is gone,
and it is an open wound, livid red,
changing to purple, green, and blue,
as the heavens seal their broken skin,
heal themselves.
The stars grow again, in time,
to replace their shattered ancestors.
They germinate like seeds, first life on ravaged soil.
Eventually the solar system is reassembled,
as if by a bricklayer,
piece by piece, planets fastened with mortar to the night sky.

* * * * *

Mackenzie Green
Grade 12
Crestwood Secondary School

My Favorite Colour

by Brody Pullen

In a room full of assholes
I say nothing but listen,
muting the words that they are saying,
because all I see is you
in your brand PINK clothing,
but it's not pink, it's green,
my favourite colour.
So I sit and watch from a distance
because I know nothing will happen between us.

* * * * *

Brody Pullen
Grade 12
Crestwood Secondary School

A Maze of Surviving

by Lydia Trithart

I

Wild daisies push through heavy soil
to grow in wild hearts and wrap little minds in braided flower crowns,
pulling tight around sky-blue veins and drowning heartache in warm summer rain;
they push roots deep into dark forests
where little girls often get lost.

The Giants told her that her head was too far buried in the clouds
to do her any good,
but even then,
perhaps,
she inherently knew
that it was always safest to hide behind thistles and brambles,
and to never keep both feet on the ground,
where they might be kicked out from underneath her.
But she never needed anyone to save her;
she knew her world,
and she was safe.

She'd just turned six,
had a happy family and
she was smart,
did well in school,
years above the reading and writing levels of her peers.
She was promised the brightest future her green eyes could stand;
she knew nothing of broken hearts
or hate,
or of living solely off the pay cheque of a first-grade teacher,
of how life could be tragic or sad,
how she could ever be anything less than perfect.

She often plugged her mouth with a chubby thumb
to keep the fluttering sparrows inside her heart,
and everything else out.

She chased deer barefoot
and dirty-faced
through her moss-covered mind full of wild raspberries
and dog-toothed violets,
hoped that if she could run far enough
and lose herself deep enough in the gold-spattered woods,
maybe she could find a way
to stay there.

II

With tree-bark hair of brown and gold
and nut-brown skin almost the same shade as her father's,
her dreams lived in the knots in her hair
that her mother could never quite work out.
She spent hours jumping off rocks
with a broom between her legs, knowing that one day she could finally fly.
She knew
that amidst the heady sun
and over-saturated colours of her life,
she was destined for something more.
She had to be,
because the paper-thin spectres of regret and self-hatred
could not keep her solidly on the ground
until the daisies in her heart
writhed to reach the sunlight
through six feet of heavy soil above her.

With one last glance,
breathing shallowly so as not to let ash settle in her lungs,
she flees deeper amidst the weeping-willow woods
with stinging nettles for grass,

for everything beyond the forest is long dead,

and fire often follows
little girls
out of the city and into the forest.

* * * * *

Lydia Trithart
Grade 11
Thomas A. Stewart Secondary School

The Hunt

by Jennifer Wingfield

There is a cat sitting on the garden wall,
watching a bird strut
its way across a branch.
The bird doesn't see the cat.
It doesn't know that
anything is coming
to cause its eventual demise

But that big, fat, cat
that lives in a palace of a house,
it sees the little bird,
that little bird that just needs to bring home the worms
to its little birdlings and its little wife.

The cat would like a snack
to keep up with all of its fat,
to continue to show that it is in charge
of the neighborhood
and everything else it surveys.
It crouches, ready to pounce.
The bird notices a shift in the air
and looks out of the corner of its eye.
Cheeky little thing,
sees the cat and devises a plan
legs tensed, ready to fly.
Cat doesn't notice this change,
sees only a bird pecking the ground.
It pounces and is very shocked
to find that nothing has landed in its claws.
The little bird flies away laughing
singing a song to the cat:
"If you really wanted to catch me,"
it sings,
"you would need to do better
than *that*!"

* * * * *

Jennifer Wingfield
Grade 12
Crestwood Secondary School

A 3 a.m. Escape

by Courtney Cathcart

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.

* * * * *

Courtney Cathcart
Grade 12
Crestwood Secondary School

Symphony

by Emma Abraham

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.

* * * * *

Emma Abraham
Grade 11
Crestwood Secondary School

Hidden Treasures

by Lucy Thompson

The roar of waves – or engines kicking – perilous but familiar,
then this piano starts singing into the horn of a ship passing on
the rough water of the harbor,
and suddenly it's a damn choir on a Sunday morning,
but it's Wednesday, the air is no longer air, and the cobblestones are
caked with mud and snow. Paper boots trample the decaying
produce of the glowering merchants in their impoverished stalls,
amid the calm is the reliable tick and click, whine and grind
from the clock gears. It is followed by the drowned bell of the morning.

So the smog disperses in patches, as if smacked
by the fists of the creaky, dead willow tree up yonder.
Displeased old grandmothers
with their hunched backs, their small wire baskets bent out of shape,
and their endearing babushkas that dance in the prowling wind
– they walk as a siege of cranes. The other grey citizens
watch, entranced by the synchronized movement
of the new day – they are well-oiled machines ready for work.

These velveteen elders are like obvious matryoshkas
that hide precious jewels and gems, yet perch on dusty shelves
and watch through blackened windows.
Stop your bartering and send the day to bed;
look away as they whip the ingrates, the slackers, and the stone-faced merchants
in the darkening of day. The piano quiets,
the street silences, but the song does not:
it is the air now, infecting and spreading deep into the port city;
it is the reliable grind and click that winds down to the solemn end.
It is the charismatic babushkas and their aged faces.

* * * * *

Lucy Thompson
Grade 12
Thomas A. Stewart Secondary School

Don't Forget

by Cydney Cantello

A shadow against beige walls,
Mister Jeremiah timorously swept
Trash-strewn floors
Around ivory children.

When I walked through the halls,
I clutched tightly to my sister,
Kept our heads down
Under blue-eyed stares.

After school we would climb the bluff
And pluck the colourless daisies by their roots
Until all that remained
Was black dirt.

* * * * *

Cydney Cantello
Grade 11
Crestwood Secondary School

Rock Bottom

by Alisha Solomons

Lying on my kitchen floor.
Sober and conscious.
Thinking of nothing.
Numb.

Panicking, hyperventilating.
Grasping at plain grout.
Does vomit clean up easily?
Phone, ringing, pleading, *begging…*
White noise.
Scarred arms snap like twigs, plunge into bile.
Reel back. Pray for it to stop.
Talk to me.

Eyes sewn shut. Count sheep.
Stomach acid blends with alcohol.
Hollow as a knot in a tree.
Thirty-two ibuprofen capsules.
Kidney failure.
Hours to kill.
Scratch faded scars.

Sing the song that keeps you alive.
Catch your reflection off the refrigerator.
Minutes pass, or hours.
Mop up dry bile.
Note missed calls.
Rise.
Smile, you won.
You're going to be okay.

* * * * *

Alisha Solomons
Grade 11
Crestwood Secondary School

Homesick

by Alivia Buchan

Your fingertips find the brittle orange flower petals, charred from decay
but still rigidly displayed, and I guide your hand away from sensing my senseless act
of destruction. Their stems still stand proud, the petals resilient, in a white porcelain vase.

The record player to the right spins The Andrews Sisters (always),
a tribute to an era I used to wish I'd lived through. The expanse of my ignorance
poisons the innocence of a room that was once fit for a child.

Look up, and your eyes will find a bottle scraped clean from the inside out,
to hold delicately dead roses dripping deep crimson.
Walk around my room and the body count might alarm you.

My bookshelf houses secrets and stories, stories of secrets,
a stack of my dad's old Pink Floyd CDs, and an orchid I killed
in a matter of weeks – less than a season to shrivel her softness.

Almost impressive, then.

Turn right and you'll face Pandora's box, which can melt my bones into liquid lead,
but which seems docile when your hair falls delicately against the golden sheets,
only ever heavy over me.

Get to know where in the floor the hardwood creaks, make music of it with me;
we can dance with the dried flowers, bring life back to this slaughterhouse,
extract those abandoned before running as far away as we can.

Wake up the window, shake out the rug dusted with ash of incense and urns,
rip open the door, tie up the sheets, make rope of the threaded gold.
We escape at midnight, laughing maniacally as we chase after the dawn

with brittle orange flower petals that tear from our heels like a fire beneath our feet.
Keep moving, it urges, relentless, even when the flames prickle our ankles
and the smell of the burn rises to meet our senses paralyzed with dread.

Dance with me.
I've opened my skull and showed you my sin, tapped each wall with your ear
pressed firmly against it, listening. Now let the rods fall out from your spine
and let blood-red wine fade with the ache of having nowhere to go.

Hypnotize me.

Tell me everything you've ever loved, everyone you've ever sawn in half
and I'll watch the death rise in your eyes; I'll devour it
to remind me of where I come from.

* * * * *

Alivia Buchan
Grade 12
Thomas A. Stewart Secondary School

My Love is a Preheated Oven

by Sadie Jacobs

I thought my love was a rose, bright and vibrant, lush and full,
yet, so full of thorns, forming tiny, puncturing pinpricks,
its life withered and wilted, as my love became the howling wind.

Whirling and swirling, twisting, it became the twister
annihilating all piece by piece, laying down the heavy crimson petals,
darkening the sun like belligerent arrows, stripping my world of light.

He was the warm but blinding sun: his crushing smile and piercing eyes,
his black, slicked-back hair and uneasy touch, his charming surface,
and compelling control, his hidden toxicity (an air to err). I should have known.

He was the star, the shining light at the end of the narrow tunnel that no one
told me was the cowcatcher thundering towards me, his guards piercing,
scarring my flesh, sending me into this black hole that swallowed me,

Relentlessly tormenting me, stretching my heart to its breaking point,
this stressed muscle slowly calms as I hold his love, cold and still-beating,
the roast pan waiting, my knife bloodied on the counter.

* * * * *

Sadie Jacobs
Grade 12
Thomas A. Stewart Secondary School

Desktop

by Robert Beda

It's covered,
Unexcavated.
The detritus of my life
Clutters it.

This battleground that's interred stayed
For my most recent
Of half-decades,
But has never been unearthed, or
Been too far away.

Here I work and take my leisure.
Here I ignore, bear burdens, take breathers
Or sometimes try to make it draw nearer,
But never go far enough.

Hanging in suspense,
Like fate upon a dial.
Will the convoy make it through?
What about operator Giles?

Infinite stories, perpetually intersected
Tied, hang-dried, dissected
But buried and forgotten
Underneath a thousand passions.

Infinite real possibilities rationed
Lie improbably disturbed
In this deeper, forgotten, physical recess
Of something that feels interior.

* * * * *

Robert Beda
Grade 12
Adam Scott Collegiate Vocational Institute

Hourglass

by Lauren Moher

I was once a dreamer, stumbling through barren desert dust
without hope of ever laying eyes
on the rose I sought:
petals glistening with the diamonds of dawn, with the sweetest
fragrance of that blood-red blossom,
a perfect fantasy slipping faster from my grasp than the stars that evade the rising sun.

Once I dreamt,
clawing hand over hand through the rolling, shifting sea of arid sand
to catch the fading ghost of my future,
but it was only as I fell through all my lost time
that I understood my own folly,
releasing at last my stranglehold on the seed,
that simple, overlooked answer
that I had for so long
clung to.
For the rose grows not where it's sought, but where
it's planted.

Now I dream anew,
and the sand is steadily washed away by fertile rain
to reveal the vivid shoots of green below,
growing steadily from the seeds I've sown,
one bloom after another,
all because of that one perfect rose.

I pause…
and finally let go of the breath I've held
as the midnight hour draws to a close,
taking with it the fading ghost of hardships past.

* * * * *

Lauren Moher
Grade 12
Thomas A. Stewart Secondary School

Wolseley Pattern

by Mary Davies

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.

* * * * *

Mary Davies
Grade 12
Thomas A. Stewart Secondary School

Track 17

by Liv Brown

Photo Courtesy: 2019 Liv Brown

When I walk here, the tips of my shoes get caught in the divots of the walkway. Caught and stuck, at risk of falling if my other shoe finds its way into a gap as well. But, I'm free to stop, step back and right myself, free to turn around or move forward.

Free.

> I can't know the faces of those whose names are stuck here like a sticky note on the surface of the fridge: name them now as an afterthought before the inevitable swell of time forces the hands of the present to forget. Do the children who play here know that they play on the only graves these people will ever know? Or, do the business men and women who walk to work pointedly look away from the track to avoid the heaviness emerging from the engravings.

The thin white paper tucked under a stone says his name was Peter and he was twelve. I avoid the stories of twelve-year-old boys because all they do is force me to confront a world where my own twelve-year-old brother could be ripped away. Here, in this place, there is a sting of missing potential and a hollowness that only comes from loss. It's taken almost a year to realize that the surge of emotion does not come from a place of anger, but from grief. Grief of unknown faces of unknown boys who merge into one long scream that seems to echo faintly at these places, or whisper in the Void.

> Now deserving of a capital, it is this Void we are here to individually deepen and perhaps never fill.

* * * * *

Liv Brown
Grade 12
St. Peter Catholic Secondary School

Magic

by Thushika Thusiyanthan

The stars aren't like magic.
They are magic.
As you lay your head upon the grass
And gaze up at the night sky,
Hold your breath
And close your eyes,
Quietly whisper your wish among them.
Later that night when the stars start to shine
Brighter than they ever have before,
The magic will mix with the wind
And slowly but surely will make its way within you.
Its essence will overcome and drown you.
You'll have magic running through your veins,
Your bones will be overgrown with moss and lungs filled with rainwater.
You will become magic.
Stars aren't like magic.
My darling, they are magic.

* * * * *

Thushika Thusiyanthan
Grade 12
Clarke High School

Command & Conquer

by Michael Jad Cheaito

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.

* * * * *

Michael Jad Cheaito
Grade: 12
Lakefield College School

rumours fly

by Abigail Auger

stalking euphoria sweeps under
a draped velvet trance.

iridescent tales
slither through my mind,
words of enemies, no
whispers.
whispers of enemies, no
friends.
no
both.

haunting life
out of it too,
after it too.

an order of glitches
why won't it stop?
don't want it to.

* * * * *

Abigail Auger
Grade 12
St. Peter Catholic Secondary School

Between Moments / In Bloom

by Kellan MacKenzie

There are times when the scrambled clamour subsides,

Slowly saunters,

In time with a heartbeat I cannot place.

Between moments, I take a breath,

Static air clings to my skin,

Melts into my limbs.

Gently, the hollow of a tree,

The sound of sunlight saturates the space around me.

My ribs could be branches now

Sweeping the sky.

And I feel it!

The air is ecstatic,

Clings to my breath in crystals

Still in soft mornings,

Shifts to restless rages of wilderness,

A vivid heartbeat I cannot place.

Look! See how

The trees sink into the sky

And columns of clouds kiss the fields hello.

The stars blaze forever

Only for themselves,

For every time my feet meet the shore, there's another wisp of grass

And the riverbank wishes water along

To places vast and verdant,

A heartbeat, far beneath the surface.

One day, I will understand

That nature carries a space between the seconds,

A carefully crafted web of inhalations

Adrift between this moment and the next

Between us and the earth,

That pulses and thrums with vitality

Alive, Alive, Alive!

And always living.

And one day, I will be in bloom,

Sun streaks will whisper against my eyelids,

‘Dance softly, and the world spins with you.’

The humdrum inside my head will still.

Already I’m shedding it!

Piece by piece,

And underneath

Is a skin that feels mine.

* * * * *

Kellan MacKenzie
Grade 11
St. Peter Catholic Secondary School

heart rot

by Kellan MacKenzie

The first cold day of fall hits
like a week-old bruise
and my legs quiver on the walk home.

The light in your window is on, shuttering
like leaves trembling in the wind,
feet thundering down the stairs, cups clacking in the kitchen.

And I want to slip out of this skin,
be absorbed into the air, nowhere everywhere.

I could tell you
how wolves attack each other, snapping and scathing,
flaking fragments like ash,
vicious
to keep the other strong.

Downstairs, you're hunched,
sobs silently swell,
  your breathing straggles up the stairs

And the kettle's cold anyway so I sit cemented,
mold in my lungs.

Still, on the walk home with my legs like water, like feathers beneath me,
the light flickers for a flash
as your eyes meet mine out the window.

* * * * *

Kellan MacKenzie
Grade 12
St. Peter Catholic Secondary School

hierarchy of existence

by Alexis De Roose

if a Place is gone
    does that mean that it never existed
if no one ever sees your smile
    does that mean that you never had one
if you never had a smile
    i never had a Place to begin with
all i had were memories
    and with my body they shall be burned
then a memory is all i will be

but with a smile perhaps i will be
    a Place.

* * * * *

Alexis De Roose
Grade 12
Crestwood Secondary School

Rooms I Refuse to Shrink In

by Lily-May Borges

My grandmother crossed the factory
for a bathroom built like an afterthought,
boots striking concrete floors made for men who never had to ask
where they were allowed to exist.

She was one of four women.

Once, a man put his hands on her shoulders
to turn her towards work that was never hers to begin with.
She turned away from the machine and the man, and never returned,
Grease under her fingernails, anger folded neatly beneath her tongue.

Years later, she would change her religion for marriage
the way women change their names – quietly.

She learned endurance like a prayer.
How to feed everyone else first.
How to survive.

But I was born hungry.
Hungry for rooms where my voice will not soften itself
into something easier to swallow.
Hungry for language sharp enough to split silence open.
I want courtrooms.

I want to stand in places
where men have spent centuries
mistaking loudness for authority
and answer them without lowering my eyes.

I want to take up space
the way fire does – completely.

The women before me
survived by making themselves smaller.

I carry their endurance
inside me like an inheritance.

But alongside it, something else has been growing.
An appetite.
A voice.

One day I will open my mouth without apology,
and fill every room they told us to cross quietly.

* * * * *

Lily-May Borges
Grade 11
St. Peter Catholic Secondary School

Young Writers Contest

Lakefield Literary Festival

Winning Entries – Junior Poetry
(Grades 9, 10)

The Saint of Glass, or a Metaphor Confounded

by Vanessa Kraus

Over coffee and rolls this morning,
we play the metaphor game again.
You ask me what I think I am.
I say I am a window trapped in a corner, plain and forever observing,
with people looking right through me.
My eyes see, but hands though I have, they do not touch,
and a mouth that does not open or speak.
You smile, and say that I am a stained-glass window,
both the benevolent saint and the dragon. You say
that I hold back the wind and rain;
they fall as nothing on my back, and I keep you safe.
Most of all, you say, the sun shines through me,
and the room lights up with my brilliant colours,
and you feel the warmth, and it is ten times more beautiful.
Damn you, I say, but you hear the smile in my voice.
Your turn. How about this, you say.
I am a stone saint in the corner of a cathedral…
a stone saint with edges made soft by pilgrim's hands, I say.
A St. Mark, or better yet, a Raphael with gentle hands, and a heart of gold
worth ten thousand stained-glass windows.

* * * * *

Vanessa Kraus
Grade 10
St. Peter's Secondary School

The Race

by Tonya-Leah Watts

(In memory of my uncle Terry Shawn Cordell Rogers, Niigaanzid Biziikii Anini)

Set your rhythm, set your pace.
Winning is only part of the race.
I stretched out my legs and wiggled my toes,
We all lined up in one long row.
It always gets silent at the starting line.
I hear her heartbeat, she hears mine.
The sound of that beat starts to fill my head,
And then I remember what my coach said:
Set your rhythm, set your pace.
Winning is only part of the race.
Judging glances from side to side,
Hair pulled back, shoes tightly tied.
Each runner is smart, she knows her own lane,
And my coach's words run through my head again.
Set your rhythm, set your pace.
Winning is only part of the race.
Our breathing falters, the gun is raised.
Our bodies are frozen, our eyes are glazed.
Then I melt into my gait, in a moment's time,
And I can't stop thinking of my coach's rhyme:
Set your rhythm, set your pace.
Winning is only part of the race.
Beneath my shoes, I feel acorns crack.
Wet mud or dry sand covers most of the track.
I round the next corner, and low and behold,
The steepest hill ever, standing proud and bold.
My shoulders get heavy, it's too hard, it's too high!
Yet in the back of my head I still hear that cry:
Set your rhythm, set your pace!
Winning is only part of the race.
My swift light footsteps turn into heavy stomps,
I maneuver as if I'm wading through a swamp.
Then finally, finally I reach its peak,
Painful but joyful tears roll down my cheek.
My chest is heavy, my lungs are sore,
Yet again that phrase comes around once more:
Set your rhythm, set your pace!
Winning is only part of the race.
As I descend down the hill, I breathe a huge sigh,
I sense in the air that my end is close by.
Although I cannot see very clear,
As bright as the day, I finally hear:
"When you set your rhythm, and you set your pace,
You'll always win no matter what you place!"

* * * * *

Tonya-Leah Watts
Grade 9
Peterborough Collegiate Vocational School

Sister

by Lydia Mills

(For H. M.)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * * * *

Lydia Mills
Grade 10
Adam Scott Collegiate Vocational Institute

Silence

by Geetanjali Narine

Sometimes the noise
Is better
Than the silence.

When the silence falls,
Death looms over
Forever barring us
From sanctuary.

The voices scream
Like gun shots,
But at least we know
Who's been hit.

There may be bloodshed
And wounds
That seem too deep to heal.

For our sanity
These gashes tell us
Who caused the agony.

When the silence drops,
It pierces through,
Spearing hope.

This,
This plague
Brings no warning.

It moves
As a shadow
Chasing light away
Back into the brittle battle.

Silence may sound better
But,
Without the gun shots
You'll never know
If the war is over.

* * * * *

Geetanjali Narine
Grade 9
Lakefield College School

The River

by Megan McShane

How many days have I spent here?

How many hours have I sat with you?

Your presence washes over me like the river you are.

Refreshing.

Peaceful.

Serene.

You are my sister, my brother, my friend.

The sibling I never had.

You have raised me so well.

Where did I go wrong?

How could you let it happen?

Why did you not build a dam to stop me from going down the wrong fork of life's river?

How many days have I spent here?

How many hours have I sat with you?

Your presence washes over me like the river you are.

Loud.

Boisterous.

Disturbed.

You are my sister, my brother, my friend.

The sibling I never had.

So many hours I have spent beside you.

Poisoning your atmosphere with my depression.

My struggles of growing up.

My choices of wrong along the river of life.

The smoke I have smoked.

The cigarettes I have tossed on your bank.

Poisoning it all.

The freshness.

The peace.

The serenity.

Yet I continued staining you.

My sins ever flowing.

The cigarettes.

The alcohol.

The drugs.

Molesting your riverbanks with my evil.

My faults.

My wrongdoings.

How many lovers have I brought to you?

Asking for your help so they would fall for me.

My lust and my longing being put before you.

Corrupting your shores.

Killing your peace.

Destroying your tranquility.

The many days I have spent here.

The many hours I have sat with you.

Your presence washes over me like the river you are.

Such guilt.

Such regret.

Such sorrow.

You are my sister, my brother, my friend.

The sibling I never had.

I ask for your forgiveness.

Though I know our relationship will never be quite the same.

* * * * *

Megan McShane
Grade 9
Lakefield College School

Olympus

by Camryn Neilson

She is a housewife.
She spends her days at home
Whiling away the hours,
Cooking,
Cleaning,
Making things perfect for her beloved husband.
He doesn't know that she knows,
That she can smell their perfume,
See the lipstick he wasn't careful enough to hide.
He isn't aware she spends her off-hours
Stalking them,
Plotting what she would do if she met them.

She is a porcelain doll.
Night after night she stands
And the men who pass by ask how much to buy her.
The price is named and they take her home.
She lost her innocence young,
Found her calling in the night.
And yet as the men who bought her take her back,
She longs to believe in love again.
Like the kind she once had with her warrior,
The kind that gave her hope, even as they said goodbye,
That she would see him again,
The kind that can be crushed with a simple letter
That jaded her and turned her to marble.
Perfect,
Beautiful,
Brought to life for a night before turning to stone once again.

He is in the business.
He sells joy
In whatever form they prefer.
He waits in darkened streets
And they come to him.
They always do.
"Take this," he say,
"It'll give you wings."
And the young boy so desperately wants to fly
So much so that he doesn't see
He's melting.

She works in an office.
Sharp eyes hidden behind spectacles,
She watches her co-workers from behind the glass.
They spread lies about her,
How she got to her position.
They taunt and jest at her fear.

They don’t know her past,
What became of a girl
Overrun by spiders
And how that image is ingrained
And has made her afraid.
They can’t see she’s brilliant
That as she sits at her keyboard she’s plotting too,
Planning her moves,
A master of strategy.

He believes.
In his mind’s eye he sees them,
His wife and daughter
Tending to the flowers in the garden.
He doesn’t realize
That his beautiful little girl was never born
And his wife,
The light of his life,
Is buried in that garden
And the flowers grow from her.

She is a child.
Innocent to the world around her,
She spends her days running barefoot in the world,
Racing the deer and challenging the bears.
She returns home covered in mud,
Her clothing ripped and her skin torn,
And she smiles.
And at night she sits and stares,
Dreaming of being the moon,
Pale,
Strong,
Turning heads like the tides.

Seeing all that happens
When the world is covered by shadow,
And a brave little boy,
All chipped teeth and grasping hands,
Eyes as bright as stars,
Pulling her to new adventures,
A brave little boy,
Who went swimming and never came home.
But when the sun comes up, she hides away
And thinks of her brother,
Hailed for being warm and light.
Everything good in the world comes from him.
As much as she loved her little brother,
The words carve into her,
Making her smaller and smaller,
For without her he would not be.
But they claim the moon cannot be seen without the sun.

He is a performer.

Night after night
He takes to the stage,
Crooning softly,
Soaking the attention of his adoring fans,
A star blazing bright
At the end of the night.
He is never alone
Because the moments of passion
Help blur the memories
Of that flower of a boy
Gone too soon.

He is a family man,
But it seems his family is falling apart.
His once loving wife
Is now cruel and manipulative.
His children have all gone away to do what they will,
No matter his words and warnings.
And when it all gets to be too much to bear,
He seeks out comfort in the arms of others.
They're blissfully ignorant of his pain;
They simply take his love.
But when he's with them,
He thinks of his wife
And wishes she could be just as unknowing
So that she'd no longer have to be in pain.

Apart they are just themselves
With their thoughts and emotions,
Alliances, and rivalries.
At their prime they were loved and feared,
Worshipped as deities.
But when the world moves on
And they are forgotten,
They are nothing more than people.

* * * * *

Camryn Neilson
Grade 10
Kenner Collegiate Vocational Institute

Young and Beautiful

by Olivia Gao

One more minute,
Just one more minute,

I am addicted to the smell of the spring willows
And the warmth of your hands on my hair.
The old tree in front of the house blooms again,
Although memories cannot win the race against flowing time

One more second,
Maybe just one more second,

I begin to miss the times when we quarrel.
Sometimes it is difficult to get along.
We think a lot but say very little.

I should have said a thousand more "I love-you's,"
A thousand fewer "I don't-like's"
Before it was time to leave.
I used to ask for everything
And did not cherish every moment we had.
At the last second I understood how much you have done
To try to make me positive and strong.
Was I too late?

You pretended to be relaxed and easy,
Kept smiling and told me that I should get going,
But I know our eyes were wet after I turned with my valise.

The dream is to sail higher and further.
The sky's too far and wide,
But with your courage and faith, I can go anywhere.
Will you be proud of me?
Are you still worrying about everything?

Time, can you please go more slowly?
Please give her more time to feel young,
Please allow her to keep being stunning and bright.
I am willing to give up everything
To rinse off the marks of time on her face,
To keep my mother young and beautiful.

* * * * *

Olivia Gao
Grade 10
Lakefield College School

Mrs. Dean's Dream

by Emma Fransky

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…

* * * * *

Emma Fransky
Grade 10
Crestwood Secondary School

The Dangers of Capitalism

by Sneha Wadhwani

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.

* * * * *

Sneha Wadhwani
Grade 10
Kenner Collegiate Vocational Institute

That Boy, That Chaos

by Matilda Debues

Chaos.
A city plunged into darkness,
Gunshots.

Silence.
8,949 km away
That boy smiles,
Greets me with a wave.
That boy, charming,
Kind and happy,
Everyone his friend.

Silence.
Everyone seems to know that boy
And that chaos.
That boy doesn't talk
About that chaos,
It's always with him though.
That boy, no worries.

Silence.
That chaos horrible,
Dark and evil,
An embodiment of tragedy.
That chaos wrecks
What beauty there was
Leaving only turmoil.

Silence.
That boy tells a man about his past.
That man, ignorant.
That boy, face stern.
This girl sees that sorrow;
He holds it with him.
That boy stays strong.

Silence.
That chaos ruins everything:
Homes, families, futures, all.
Tears like a tornado.
That chaos is never talked about,
At least not here,
Only in Paris, London, New York, Berlin.

Silence.

That chaos cacophonous,
That chaos kills,
That chaos devastates.

Silence.
That chaos rules every day,
That chaos louder every day,
That chaos massacres every day.

Silence.
That boy smiles.
That boy is the happiest one I know.
He can make a whole room laugh.
That boy, so smart,
That boy, bright future,
That boy. I'm sorry.

Silence.
That boy here,
That boy safe,
That boy walks.

Silence.
That boy smiles every day,
That boy talks every day,
That boy lives every day.

Silence.
That boy, that chaos,
Paths always crossing,
Intertwining, overlapping.
That boy free from that chaos,
That chaos haunts him still.

* * * * *

Matilda Debues
Grade 10
Thomas A. Stewart Secondary School

Influence

by Liv Brown

I stand amongst the crashing waves, swaying slightly under the setting sun.
The water is cool, still a winter ocean, and icy water washes up and down my ankles.
Muddy, rough, grainy sand races to swallow my feet
before I uproot them from the ground.
He is in motion.
He is always in motion.
Almost never do I see my younger brother still; it's just not in his nature.
Curiosity overtakes him, and he begins to wade out into the ocean,
despite being still in his clothes and having been warned not to go in.
His hands brush mine as he nudges over half a white sand dollar with his foot;
we have been on the hunt for a full, perfect sand dollar for years now,
ever since our mom mentioned she wished for one.

He urges me forward into the waves with a "Come look at this,"
and I still marvel at his wanting to include me in anything and everything he does.
He craves my opinion, though sometimes I am harsh with the power he gives me
and choose not to listen to the things he tells me.
I love him unconditionally though, and he knows this well.
There is determination and a hint of well-placed fear in his eyes as he tugs me into waist-deep water.
There's salt on my lips, and he laughs lightly
when I chase him into the sun that almost touches the ocean,
water splashing and spraying everywhere.
When he can no longer touch the shell-filled ocean floor, he tells me,
believing I can keep him safe from the creatures of the deep; and I believe I can.

He is a strong, confident boy with impressions of a society that will not play nice with him,
and I know that, unlike protecting him from the stinging sea water in his eyes,
I cannot protect him from the choices he will make and the life he has planned.
He knows what is out there;
His borderline obsession with Nat Geo Wild and Animal Planet tells him how to handle certain situations in the ocean with a calm stance.
He absorbs these facts like a sponge soaking up water,
rattling off tidbits of knowledge with or without being asked.
He knows we do not grow up in a world that encourages behaviours outside of the template we are persuaded to fit in.
Yet, he is such a supporter of diversity, it is encouraging;
I will do right by him so he can do right by others.

He educates his class sometimes, sharing information and interpretation of the wide world about which my family loves to teach;

So when I see him stop and turn back to our parents on the beach,

I know it is time to head back to shore.

He will run up the sand to regale our parents with a stunning play-by-play of everything he thinks he has seen in the ocean,

barely pausing for a breath before bursting back into the shallow waters

to continue his search for the perfect sand dollar.

In this moment I know, without a shadow of a doubt, that I am the best version of myself here.

A chill sets in as the sun finally pulls itself under the ocean and the water darkens.

His lips are blue and goosebumps form across his arms as we wash off the buckets and spades we brought to build sand castles.

The whistling wind catches my attention and with a glance up at the star-filled sky, we turn to home.

* * * * *

Liv Brown
Grade 9
St. Peter Catholic Secondary School

Ladylike

by Maya Raval

hey princess, where's your lullaby,
why's your momma not singing to you,
what did you do this time?

did you speak too loud,
try to yell over the crowd,
saying girls can fight too, just like boys can feel blue,
why would you abandon your dancing curlicues?

i dressed you in pink,
soft pastel lavender,
a fragile white and polka-dot grey,
not this screaming crimson with too much to say.

watch your words, dear,
there are children here,
get your lips away from hers,
smile though your heart is bruised.

you don't get to yell or fight,
you don't have a solid bite,
you can't show your blood and scars,
the world will crumble what you are

hey princess, be my candlestick,
let me set your mind on fire,
no one loves your soul, your dreams,
they only want what glitters and gleams

you don't deserve that lullaby,
you ruined girl,
you touched the sky.

* * * * *

Maya Raval
Grade 10
Kenner Collegiate Vocational Institute

I AM BLACK

by Lowell Smith

I don't like chicken,
I am black.
I don't wear chains,
I am black.
I don't like rap music,
I am black.
My father didn't leave me,
I am black.
My mother is white,
I am black…

My ancestors were slaves,
We are black.
My father is discriminated against at work,
We are black.
My sister is bullied,
We are black.
My aunt is denied basic rights,
We are black.
My cousin is betrayed,
We are black.
My grandma doesn't trust the church,
We are black.
My father pretends it's nothing,
We are black.
My aunt walks to work,
We are black…

My sister is my best friend,
We are black.
My grandma trusts God,
We are black.
My cousin remains optimistic,
We are black.

We are strong,
WE ARE BLACK!

* * * * *

Lowell Smith
Grade 9
Kenner Collegiate Vocational Institute

Rekindling the Light

by Carrie Caruana

There once was a land full of laughter and pride,
No one was unhappy or wept.
People loved, people lived.
Those people had more than they could ever need.
They had friends, family, peace,
And smiles that grew every day.
When it was time for bed, they dreamt good dreams, bathed in light,
A light, much brighter than the sun.
A light so bright that people almost took it for granted,
Until…it suddenly burned out.

Those people woke up to darkness, to hatred.
No one knew what to do – they imitated others,
They saw people changing, hurting, grieving for the light they had lost.
And over time, everyone burnt out.
Those people lost the one thing that was most important.
Hope.
Everyone lost hope – except for one.

This boy did not worry that the world around him was dark.
He still loved, he still cared.
He was the sliver of light in the darkness.
He did what he could, travelling the land, helping others regain their light.
Some were too far gone.
They welcomed the darkness, making a new way of life in blackness.
But this boy helped wherever he could,
Telling everyone that he lit the dark to help others.

Fireworks erupted, the light was returning!
With every light that was rekindled,
The thing that they needed,
The thing they had lost.
Hope was returning.
Every day the light grew until hope finally came back.
There was peace, there was laughter.
Those people could finally smile again.

People still speak of the boy who kept hope alive.
They say he had magic, they say he went through time and back.
But none of those things are true.
He could have been me, he could have been you.
No one is too big or too small to do something so great.
In a world of darkness, keep spreading the light!

* * * * *

Carrie Caruana
Grade 9
Crestwood Secondary School

The Old Man

by Alisa Lu

The old man,
Crawling at a dirty corner,
In the coldest winter,
Freezing, starving.
He is trembling,
Lonely, despairing,
Losing courage.

The old man,
Does he know where his home is?
Does he know who his family is?
The answer doesn’t show,
Submerging in the wind,
Circling with snowflakes.

The old man
Is ignored,
Compared
To people who are loved.
He has nothing in common,
With people in the wonderful world.
He is treated with inequality
Because he doesn't have the possibility,
Of finding a home.

The old man
Knows the existence of people like him,
Suffering from the same harsh living conditions,
But nobody is thinking of helping them
And putting thoughts into action.
Because responsibility is a heavy rock,
Escaping is the best solution.

The old man,
His eyes are closed,
His hair is covered with snow,
His emotions are calmed down,
He finds himself in a sweet place,
Where humans care for each other,
Where rights are valued,
Where weak people are cherished.

The old man
Died.
No one notices an active life
Disappearing in the darkest night.
Powerful citizens are sharing the fireplace,
As they hold their blankets tighter,
Their ignorance of homeless people,
Makes their hearts colder.

* * * * *

Alisa Lu
Grade 10
Lakefield College School

Burning In My Veins

by Aisling Wieler

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.

* * * * *

Aisling Wieler
Grade 10
Adam Scott Collegiate Vocational Institute

Final Dance

by Hailey Cavanagh

Once I had roots holding me up,
My mind was a glorious storm of wonder.
At the wind, I would dance,
Colours would fly, songs would be painted against the canvas called the sky.
Fear was buried deep in the ground, nestled where it could not be found.

And then I encounter a mighty beast:
Man.
He is vicious, his mind lost to greed and envy.
Hate blooms where flowers once faced the sun.
He sees only opportunity for his growth,
Wanting flows through his veins, blocking colour and dance and song from his eyes.
He craves.
He desires.
He wants,
And he destroys.

His axe burns through me,
Breaks me from my roots.
My arms hit the ground, colour smears across the earth.
The wind breathes across my face, and I let my leaves slip through my fingers.
They wisp through the air,
Creating what will be my final dance.

I am made into man's greed.
Man's envy.
I am pressed, cut, torn.
I am nothing but what used to be.
I am small, the decor of a pocket.
I am passed on, and on, and on,
Until I slip…

And suddenly the wind claims me.
My worth grows until,
I am not a number, but a colour once again.

And I do my final dance.

* * * * *

Hailey Cavanagh
Grade 9
St. Peter Catholic Secondary School

An Open Letter Explaining Why I Can't Stand Being Around You

by Izzy Lloyd

You suffer from insanity

Your thoughts are a calamity

The downfall of humanity

Will be because of you.

And because of your laxity

As well as your audacity

And your lack of capacity

There's nothing you can do.

You overlook reality

You are such a banality

And your sense of morality

Is hopelessly askew.

I could go on eternally

Instead I'll do the courtesy

Of ending this respectfully,

Another point of view.

* * * * *

Izzy Lloyd
Grade 9
Thomas A. Stewart Secondary School

The Window Seat

by Eunsae Lee

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.

* * * * *

Eunsae Lee
Grade 9
St. Peter Catholic Secondary School

Old Joy

by Kellan MacKenzie

Today I feel the years soaking into my bones.
Yesterday, when we ate fruit from the neighbours' tree,
Time caught up to me.

Clocks ticking
When I knock on your door, and no one is home,
Who is there when your heavy head slips sideways
Knocking on the floor?

Ambrosia, Old Joy.
Borrow my breath
Should you need it later
for the winter months.

Cavity, wasted day,
Ice cubes melting in my rib cage,
Dripping over my organs,
Pooling in my stomach.

Ladybug, recycled joke,
I forgot to open the window,
I forgot.

The birds break from the bush.

Chase them! Catch them!

Collect fallen feathers to hang above my head

Arranged in a macabre mobile of quills,

Oddly intimate.

The absence

is

Staggering,

Humbling,

And the constellations on the ceiling

echo us,

Twisting around and around,

Relying on another's scorching gravity for stability.

We forgot

Even the old fables, scrawled in the stars,

Fade with time.

* * * * *

Kellan MacKenzie
Grade 10
St. Peter Catholic Secondary School

"Groceries."

by Karina Conolly

Milk.

Bread.

Honey.

Jam.

And I take your face between my hands.

Eyes.

Cheeks.

Ears.

Jaw.

And I cradle your cosmos of a palm.

Fingers.

Tendons.

Skin and

Bones.

From where you sit, you're an Al Purdy poem:

all metaphors and

all chunks of home.

Milk

Bread

Honey

Jam

I hold your face between my hands.

Green

Glitter

Pink and

Gold.

I read you and say, “you’re an Al Purdy Poem.”

You look down,

you read, while

my palms go numb –

“Milk.

Bread.

Honey.

Jam.”

I hold your face between my hands.

* * * * *

Karina Conolly
Grade 10
Thomas A. Stewart Secondary School

Still Together

by Naomi D'Souza

Across the field I go,

Jogging a little at first, then picking up pace,

My legs pounding, a rhythm resounding

Sadness dropping

Below, far below

the fierce roaring in my ears.

When I am in this space,

Lonely shadows and lonelier fears

Are thrown behind in the race.

Even the sharpest objects now blur,

Painful edges softening as they occur.

Stings now gone by in a blast,

All of them flashing by

While hues of colour ripple past.

A blood-red comet in the sky,

A wisp of summer breeze,

Sparkling rivers of frozen music,

I fly through all of these

And more. There are memories too

Of my sister and me,

Memories like pearls on a necklace.

What do you do when the necklace breaks

And they slip away? When a loved one fades away?

All the times we'd run this field,

We'd run it together.

Now I run alone like music, like music at its most

As rippling shades of sunset drape the rippling coast.

All I know is that nothing can happen to me

Until the music stops.

Dear sister, won't you run with me again?

My thoughts are whirling, the wind is humming,

And I'm still running

Although cold moonlight is starting to cry.

Why did she leave me? Why?

And yet a spear of amethyst,

A single spear of palest, palest amethyst

Remains glowing in the sky.

Hope begins to soar, to fly

And it will never die.

Hold on, she told me that fatal day, hold on.

Across a field of glittering stars

We'll laugh again, love again, run again,

Still together.

* * * * *

Naomi D'Souza
Grade 10
Our Lady of the Wayside Catholic School

The Dream that was Yesterday
(Reflections of a Seasoned Soldier)

by Rachel Pei

Last light lingers on the age-worn porch,
full of warmth from times of old
with a blossoming not known for ages,
filling worlds of what was before.

And underneath closed eyelids comes a breath,
just a breath.
And a thousand thoughts of yesterday
come back to me again.

Yesterday
was once today, once a waiting dream,
a wisp of something pure and sweet.
Days long gone, though passing by
the soft dirt road we used to tread
takes me back for a ride.
Old tinkling bells and silver shells
stay, laughing among the reeds.
All of this,
within a boyhood dream.

Yesterday,
drenched deep in darkness,
floods me with anguish once more.
Deafening shots and cries of torment
drown the harsh commander's tone.
Friend and foe both in this nightmare,
amid the thickness of the fumes.
Men, once with hope of glory,
now in an abyss of living tombs.

Yesterday,
with all its horrors,
brings me back and back again.
Fear still not satiated
haunts the mind until the end.
It gropes in the dormant hours,
knocking on the same old door.
Last of all to live and fight,
I live to tell of the dream that was yesterday.

* * * * *

Rachel Pei
Grade 10
Our Lady of the Wayside Catholic School

Mother Earth

by Susie Wang

My body is nature
wild and untamed,
each pain a tree,
each scar a root,
anchoring me to the earth.
Mother says we come from the earth,
we will return to the earth.
I say I have the whole world within me.
My spine is a river,
winding its way
through the landscape of my body.
It bends and twists,
a crooked path
that no one can follow.
It carves my body,
narrowed in its own beauty.
The growth hormones,
a storm of needles,
pierce the soil of my skin,
leaving behind craters
that bloom with flowers of different colours.
They say it's rain for my roots,
but my body trembles,
a sapling caught in a tempest,
reaching for the sun.

The brace,
a thicket of thorns,
wraps around my ribs,
a fortress of plastic and Velcro.
It digs into my bark,
leaving marks that tell the story
of a forest under siege,
but even thorns
can teach resilience.
My eyesight,
a fog rolling in,
blurs the edges of the world,
turning trees into shadows,
shadows into ghosts.
Glasses become my lanterns,
but they can't chase away
the headaches that gather
like storm clouds in my mind.
My teeth,
a rocky outcrop,
ache with the pressure of braces,
metal wires pulling them
into perfect alignment.
The orthodontist says
it will be worth it,
but all I feel is the grind,
the slow erosion of patience.
And yet,
amidst the pain,
there is life.
My body is a forest,
not of perfection,
but of survival.
Each tree, each river, each ache,

Breathes its story
tells my story –
my story.
I am bent,
but not broken.
I am scarred,
but not defeated.
I am born from nature.
and I am learning
to love my wildness within.

* * * * *

Susie Wang
Grade 10
Lakefield College School

The Barn in the Snow

by Fisher Kernohan

The snow lies soft and still
Under a sky so bright yet chill.
Some logs are stacked in perfect rows,
Half hidden in the fallen snow.

A lonely barn off to the side,
Doors fully open and dark inside.
The trees are tall, embracing the air.
Quiet kids stand watching there.

* * * * *

Fisher Kernohan
Grade 9
Lakefield College School