

JOSHUA WEINZWEIG
REVIEW
OF WRITING



Joshua Weinzwieg was born in Toronto in 1973 and enrolled at Pickering College in Grade Eight. He spent the next five years as a student at PC. At first he didn't like it here, but—after a time—he began to thrive. He made many friends and soon excelled at his schoolwork. He was Chair of his House, made the Headmaster's List on several occasions, and learned to love Chaucer and Shakespeare. Josh cultivated a love of language, composing short stories and poems that leapt out of his rich imagination.

As ever, Pickering College would like to thank Daniel Weinzwieg for his generous support, without whom the Joshua Weinzwieg Creative Writing Program would not be possible.

THE JOSHUA WEINZWEIG MEMORIAL LITERARY AWARDS
&
THE REVIEW OF WRITING

Students whose work is published in the *Pickering College Review of Writing* are eligible to win the Joshua Weinzwieg Literary Awards. At the end of each school year, the English Department selects three winners from each grade: one for distinction in prose fiction; one for distinction in poetry; and one for its creative literary merit, regardless of genre. Notably, the winner in each category is acknowledged in this publication, receives a certificate of acknowledgement, and is rewarded a small, cash prize.

The process: all students submit writing to their English classroom teacher who considers its literary merit and degree of creative and critical thinking. After considering the quality of the submission, the English classroom teacher may forward it to the Director of the Joshua Weinzwieg Creative Writing Program. The key objective is to provide a forum for Middle and Senior School Pickering College students to publish their writing. Editors try to establish a fair balance between providing opportunity to young writers and a reasonably high degree of quality for readers.

At Commencement, one Graduate is chosen to receive the Joshua Weinzwieg Memorial Literary Award. This student has demonstrated the highest quality of creative writing among his or her peer group, distinguishing him or herself through his or her dedication to the craft of writing and artful use of language.

The winner of the Joshua Weinzwieg Memorial Literary Award for 2019-2020 is Hillary Krofchak. Hillary had seven pieces published in the *Review of Writing* in the past four years. Two of those have won JW contest awards, and one earned a second-place finish in the external INCITE writing competition. Hillary's prose brims with palpable images, fresh, realistic dialogue and clever rhetoric. Her work exhibits a clear sense of intention; she experiments with insightful themes, yet presents them in a way that flows easily for the reader—and that is no mean feat.

Hillary possess the quality that torments all great writers: she is never completely satisfied with her early drafts, yet she's willing to completely reform a piece time and again until she realizes its true potential. Three of her pieces have been featured to kick off this year's edition, and will help give you a sense of her range as a writer: her comedic satire "A Teenager's Guide to Working at Wonderland"; her flash-fiction, political allegory "Colourful Birds"; and an excerpt from her biography "Model of a Modern Major General."

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Hillary Krofchak, 2019-2020 winner of the Joshua Weinzwieg Memorial Literary Award

"A Teenager's Guide To Working at Wonderland"	6
<i>Winner of the Joshua Weinzwieg Literary Merit Award, Grade 12</i>	
"Colourful Birds"	8
"Model of a Modern Major General"	10
 Allen Ai "Saplings"	 12
Sasha Au Yong "Five Dollar Scratcher"	14
<i>Winner of the Joshua Weinzwieg Flash Fiction Contest, Grade 11</i>	
Emre Basaran "Earth-Rise"	16
<i>Winner of the Joshua Weinzwieg Flash Fiction Contest, Grade 12</i>	
Phillip Carson "What Were You Supposed to Get Again"	18
David Courtis "Witness My Estranged Heart"	19
Tom Dang "A Mother's Tomato Soup"	20
Jacob DiCarlo "The Whirled, Like Us"	22
Jaden Duyn "Don't Do Stuff. It's Healthy."	23
Doga Erdemisik "She is My Son"	25
Jenna Farmer "The Princesses and The Knights Who Save Them"	28
Harrison Frank "When I Surrendered"	30
<i>Winner of the Joshua Weinzwieg Short Story Contest, Middle School</i>	
Emily Gregatto "Gremlins"	32
Kyu Hun Lee "Journey"	34
Alyssa Lucchese "The Lens of a Canine"	35
<i>Winner of the Joshua Weinzwieg Short Story Contest, Grade 10</i>	
Coco Lyu "Streets of Wutong"	38
Ella MacAlpine "The Illustrator"	39
<i>Winner of the Joshua Weinzwieg Literary Merit Award, Grade 9</i>	
Kaitlyn Maddox "Negative Space"	40
<i>First-Place Winner of the INCITE Student Writing Contest, Grade 11 and 12 Category</i>	
Alan Mao "Piccadilly Night"	43

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Michaela Morra “In Plain Sight”	45
Michaela Morra “The Path All Travel”	48
<i>Winner of the Joshua Weinzwieg Literary Merit Award, Grade 10</i>	
Ellie Musgrave “Better Living Through Social Isolation”	49
Huy Nguyen “Mental”	51
<i>Winner of the Joshua Weinzwieg Poetry Contest, Grade 11</i>	
Khoa Nguyen “The Medley”	52
Sarah Osinga “Frozen Hold”	53
Cora Pataran “After Effects”	54
Gabrielle Robinson “My Birthmark”	56
<i>Speech Delivered at Pickering College’s TedX Conference, Feb 12, 2020</i>	
Jonny Russell “Summer on the North Courts”	58
<i>Winner of the Joshua Weinzwieg Poetry Contest, Grade 12</i>	
Georgia Saarimaki “My World”	59
<i>Winner of the Joshua Weinzwieg Literary Merit Award, Grade 12</i>	
Rayi Singh “The Aisle Unturned”	60
<i>Longlisted for the Canadian Federation of University Women’s Writing Competition</i>	
Emily Strong-Randall “Learning How To Scribble”	62
<i>Longlisted for the Canadian Federation of University Women’s Writing Competition</i>	
Shyam Subramanyam “Cellphones”	63
<i>Winner of the Joshua Weinzwieg Poetry Contest, Grade 9</i>	
Thera Sze “The Silver Ring”	64
Kathy Wang “Memories in Watercolour”	65
<i>Winner of the Joshua Weinzwieg Literary Merit Award, Grade 11</i>	
Sara Weitzes “What Happened on the Island”	66
<i>Winner of the Joshua Weinzwieg Short Story Contest, Grade 9</i>	
Jake Wu “We Have Long to Love”	69
<i>Winner of the Joshua Weinzwieg Poetry Contest, Grade 10</i>	
Victoria Zalewski “Chrysanthemums”	70
Victoria Zalewski “Newspaper Clippings”	72
<i>Published in the 2020 InCITE Anthology for Student Writing</i>	
Judy Zhu “Grandson”	73

A TEENAGER'S GUIDE TO WORKING AT WONDERLAND WHAT IT TAKES TO SURVIVE THE SUMMER

by Hillary Krofchak, Grade 12

Are you a teenager looking for financial freedom and independence? Then you're probably also looking for your first job. As a young person, with no work experience to put on your résumé, you might find yourself hard-pressed for a second interview. The solution? Apply to Canada's Wonderland! They are literally always hiring¹. If you're like me, the first day at a new job is intensely nerve-wracking and stressful, so, as a Wonderland Associate, I can help guide you through that particular battlefield. What can you do to make a good first impression, and how can you push through the tough times to make it to the end of the season for that end-of-contract bonus? Don't fret! For I have compiled a list of tips to surviving the summer at Canada's Wonderland that can ease your mind and build your confidence.

1. Learn the Lingo:

Words at Canada's Wonderland are very important—there is a specific way that you should speak. The people visiting the park are called *Guests*, not customers, because they are not buying a product but rather an *experience*. You are not an employee but a *cast member*, as you play an important role in enhancing and cultivating the theatrics of the Wonderland Stage. Never say “you're welcome” or “no problem”—as this, of course, implies there was a problem—rather, always reply with “my pleasure.” This begins to feel robotic, but that might be for the best, because you either won't get thanked very often or fellow teenagers will say it abundantly just to hear “my pleasure” over and over like toddlers in staples pressing the “That Was Easy” button². This is more than just company policy. No, my friend, if you don't use these terms and phrases you will be socially ostracized. (Also, no matter how annoying they get, do not swear at *Guests*; this does not positively enhance their experience.)

2. Don't Make an Impression:

Just like any other job, the best way to make it out of Wonderland alive is to blend in. The uniform helps with this—you really do just fade into the background of the park. Anything that makes you different or stands out is like painting a giant bullseye on your back. You want to do your job well, and the best way to do that is to avoid *Guest* interaction as much as possible.

3. Take it Personally:

When a *Guest* calls you numerous expletives and derogatory names, you need to take it to heart. Otherwise, how are you supposed to learn from your mistakes, you dumb b*&%h? The *Guest* is doing you a favour by being completely honest with you, and the only way you can truly make it up to them is to accept your mistakes and personal shortcomings. For instance, I once *negatively impacted* a *Guest's* experience by telling her that her son needed to wear a life jacket. She made sure to alert me to her displeasure, and the guilt I feel to this day is overwhelming.

1. Don't think about why for too long.

2. And over and over and over and over and over, etc.

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4. Take Care of Yourself:

You need to be the best ~~employee~~ *cast member* you can be—for the *Guests*—and the best way to do that is to make sure you're taking care of yourself. Make sure you get lots of sleep³, drink lots of water⁴ (the summer can get very hot so this one is especially important), use the bathroom when you need to⁵, put on lots of sunscreen⁶, and make sure you stay energized by having a snack when needed⁷! Make sure to pack a lunch (the employee discount only applies at two *Pizza Pizzas* and the rest of the food there is so expensive you're just giving them back your paycheck).

5. Help People:

This one especially applies to the lifeguards at Wonderland. If you see someone in need, go help them! While pain, sweat and tears are part of the Wonderland Experience™, death is not—so it's important to pay attention and jump into action when needed.

6. Cleanliness:

Cleanliness is one of the four cornerstones, so they will expect you to clean even if it's not in your original job description. Some of the things I've been told to clean include: firework shrapnel, feces (unknown source—although one time it was just a peach pit that someone had mistaken for feces), used tampon (unknown source), animal bones (unknown source, not chicken...) and public life jackets, to name a few⁸. Just be prepared with your own set of gloves. You have been warned.

7. Work Hard and Play Hard (Elsewhere):

One of the perks of being a Wonderland slave cast member is that you get to have fun (not on paid time). They give you free tickets to the park, but they know this is a joke, because after working six days a week, you won't want to go back there ever again. The best thing you can do, for your own sanity and your wallet, is to sell the tickets online. Find somewhere else to enjoy your time off, like not Wonderland, or just your bed at home—because nothing is better than sleep, and why did you want a job again?

There are my tips for surviving your summer at Wonderland. If you have any questions, I'm sorry. I'm not going to answer any. If Wonderland needs to contact me for legal reasons, then please contact my lawyer⁹.

3. Not on paid time

4. Not on paid time and not too much because then you'll have to go to the bathroom

5. Not on paid time

6. Not on paid time

7. NOT ON PAID TIME!

8. I worked in the water park and these were all in the pool... maybe people shouldn't swim there...

9. I don't have one. Please don't sue me I don't have any money :(

COLOURFUL BIRDS

by Hillary Krofchak, Grade 12

That summer, the zoo had been under new management for the first time in 20 years—some boomers just don't retire. The new manager was named Don, short for Donald. The zoo was home to many creatures like lions, snakes and wolves, as most successful zoos are. It also had an extensive greenhouse-like aviary with birds from exotic places. Some of the birds didn't get along very well, so the handlers would often separate them into different sections of the enclosure. When some of the more colourful birds would get too aggressive, they'd be moved to a private cage—"private," in this context, meant cramped, small, solitary. For Don, asking when it went wrong was almost too broad of a question. The situation presented several points in which it continuously got worse.

One such point was in late August. A few rowdy teens came in and were fooling around, and, in front of a crowd of verbal birds, they said a word that here we cannot repeat. Let's just say the word was profane. In this moment, only one bird heard the word. One that liked attention very much, and was rewarded with such attention—negative and positive—when she said the ugly word. This particular African Grey named Echo enjoyed playing with her handlers, and Marta.

Marta did not encourage this behaviour, but she knew the bird was just trying to amuse herself in the sparse cage. Marta was an immigrant who started working at the zoo last year. She cleaned bird poop and recycled plastic bottles. Her favourite part of the zoo was the aviary, where the birds were free to fly. It upset her when Echo's rebellious nature got her in trouble.

One such instance of Echo's trouble-making was when a parent with her young child heard the parrot swearing and immediately complained to the zoo's customer service desk.

"I expect this place to be family friendly! What tricks are you teaching those birds!?" she screamed, towing an unfazed seven-year-old behind her. After that, Echo was moved to one of the private cages.

Like a wet fire, the word spread slowly but surely. In a week, all of the birds were chirping the word. This was not good for Don, but great for a laugh. Teens were reblogging, retweeting and sharing the situation online. With a reputation for being educational, this was not the kind of thing parents had in mind. The more birds said the word, the more got placed in solitary confinement, on Don's orders. But anyone who knows anything about birds could tell you that this was also not a good idea, as birds are known to die in such conditions.

The cages were very different from the aviary. They were a much smaller prison. The invisible glass borders of the aviary gave the illusion of freedom, whereas the belowground crates made the reality clearer. The concrete of the crates kept the birds cold and isolated from their family groups. But they didn't stop the chirping.

"You would be much happier out there," Marta would tell Echo, as if the bird was somehow culpable. As if it was better out there in an aviary that was now empty except for the few broken, dull and bloody feathers on the gravel floor.

Don was starting to feel desperate. He consulted with foreign experts on the matter.

COLOURFUL BIRDS

by Hillary Krofchak, Grade 12

“The introduction of human words changes the natural speech patterns of the birds and, well, once the natural order has been disrupted, it’s impossible to go back,” one British expert said.

An empty aviary doesn’t attract many guests, and no money means no funding. More and more birds were dying of stress and lack of nutrition. Marta tried to reason with Don, but he would say it was not her job to give him advice. She turned to the patrons of the zoo, but past the initial hilarity of the situation, most people did not care. Marta’s insistence and unauthorized public relations eventually got her fired.

With no advocate and no change, all the birds slowly died off. When Echo died, it didn’t bother Don. In fact, he was relieved the situation was over. The way he saw it, there were more, better-behaved birds in the world to replace the uncooperative ones.



artwork by Stephanie Chang, Grade 12

MODEL OF A MODERN MAJOR GENERAL

Biography Excerpt by Hillary Krofchak, Grade 12

Victor Alleslev was born on February 27th, 1909, in a small town in Denmark for which his family is named: Allerslev, Denmark. From a very young age, he was civic-minded. A Patriotic streak ran through him from a young age and was something he would carry his entire life. His father was a school teacher and main elder of the local church. During the Spanish flu pandemic, Victor was a boy scout, and he went door-to-door in his little uniform giving his neighbours food and supplies. When he looked back later on, Victor couldn't believe his parents had encouraged such a dangerous activity.

When he was 18, he was forced to leave Veterinarian College on doctor's orders. While in his boarding house, he would forget to eat—so he was told to take a year off, to not worry about his studies and instead worry about himself. While on sabbatical, his friend Pete came to him with an ad. *Canadian Pacific* was promising to bring people to Canada to find work.

Pete said something along the lines of, "If you have to take a year off, then why don't you come to Canada and have some fun?" Having started college at 16, Victor wasn't really the type to stay still, so he embarked on this adventure with his friend.

Once landed in Canada, in the year 1928—either in Quebec City or Halifax (this apparently doesn't matter)—he hopped on a train and ended up in Camrose, Alberta, where he found a job on a farm. What was supposed to be a year became three. Victor would go on to work in Vancouver, saving money so he could go to school in B.C., once again to study veterinary medicine. He slowly but surely became enamoured with the expansive country, all the fresh air. He loved animals, and working on multiple farms with horses and dogs was his slice of paradise.

Victor's brother, who was a year older, came to visit the country his brother wouldn't quit raving about. A week before he was set to go home to Denmark, an accident in a Powell River logging camp took his life. How do you write home to your mother to tell her that her eldest son is dead? Somehow he managed. His mother's reply?

"I have lost one son to Canada, I will not lose another."

Victor went home and time went on. He'd been absent from college too long to resume his vet degree, and he refused to do over the first two years of the six-year degree. So, like his father, he became a teacher. In 1935 he met his wife Grethe, they were married in 1936 and had their first child Ian in 1937. It wasn't much later that the war broke out, and his home was occupied by the Germans.

Like I said before, Victor was always very civic-minded, and he was not about to stand by and do nothing. He was a very firm believer in the sovereignty of a nation. While some of his fellow Danes were not ready for resistance, because they had managed to keep their own Danish Government, Victor would do everything he could to end the occupation.

Victor was a member of the Danish Resistance. The war wasn't something he liked to talk about. Maybe it was because it was a troubled memory he couldn't talk about, or maybe it was because he had been sworn to secrecy. There is one story, however—one where his wife and son were around—that I managed to hear.

MODEL OF A MODERN MAJOR GENERAL

Biography Excerpt by Hillary Krofchak, Grade 12

Victor was often very careful with the contraband he kept at home. He had a few documents in his office and an emergency radio stashed in Ian's toy box. One night, the Germans came to the house to find information. Someone else in the resistance had written Victor's name somewhere and now the Nazis smelled blood. They tore through the house, ripping up kitchen cabinets and drawers. They ransacked the bedrooms—luckily, they didn't dig too long in the toy box. When they got to the office, they were so busy emptying out the drawers onto the desk that they didn't notice they were burying the documents they were looking for.

By some miracle, Victor hadn't been caught; nevertheless, the Nazis' visit had its desired emotional effect. Grethe was shaken. She said after that she couldn't sleep, she was always worried the Nazis would realize their mistake and come back. But where could they go? They couldn't leave the country, and Victor didn't want to. Not yet.

"Why didn't they help us?" Victor's son, Ian (my grandfather) might have asked. "Why didn't Denmark help us?"

"Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country. We don't wait for them to help us when they're the ones who need our help." Victor had replied.

When the war finally ended, Denmark was free. Ian's younger sister, Lis, was born in 1945, and in 1949 Victor, Grethe, Lis and Ian all moved to Canada. The only person alive who could possibly answer *why* they moved was four years old at the time. Perhaps Grethe was too shaken and couldn't handle staying in that house any longer—even years later, she would wake from nightmares in which they had been caught. Perhaps Victor would not stay in a country that could be occupied again, and while Denmark would always be his home, he simply couldn't risk it. Perhaps Victor missed Canada so much, having fallen in love with the north in his youth, and was finally ready to return. Maybe it was all of these reasons, maybe only two. Either way, they came to Canada.



Victor Alleslev is the second from the right, wearing a Danish Resistance armband in front of a Nazi plane. This photo was taken at the end of the war.

SAPLINGS

by Allen Ai, Grade 12

Mould grew on the wrinkled dried skin—the rotten, dark flesh damaged and exposed. Deformed. It lost its vigorous appearance when it was fully-grown. Its shiny, glassy skin gone—absent along with its healthy look. Once up high in the tree absorbing nutrients, sunlight fosters it and rainfall cultivates it. Now, the rotten apple falls in the shadows from the trees above, sitting in mud and clouded by weeds. Decomposing, slowly losing all it once had. A single rotten apple in the middle of the field among hundreds of other apple trees.

The fading fire illuminated his worn face—dry and crinkled like tree skin. Silver hair like dead weeds scattered the top of his head. He sat in his old squeaking rocking chair, staring far into the distance of the nearby wooden wall. He was a farmer, he still is. He started farming long before those roaring machines cultivated the lands and sprayed pesticides. He doesn't need those—too expensive for his tiny apple orchard and too complex for a man of his age. The farm is enough for him. Food, warmth, and newspaper, he has what he needs. His children called once in a while and said they will come and see him when they are free—one of his favourite lies to hear. They all have work to do in the busy city, rushing between apartments and tall gray office buildings.

When they first went to the city, they would call each day, come back and sleep through every weekend. He would talk about his knowledge of the apple trees.

“...seeds are protected by the flesh, taking nutrition for its germination, their roots slowly reaching deep under the earth beyond the fertilized soil...”

His children would pretend to be intrigued, and ask questions to continue the story. “How fast do they grow?”

“In the blink of an eye—surpassing the wet and dry mud, above the weeds.”

The conversation would continue like this for those weekends when they came back, making the father still as a teaching father, and the children still as the learning children.

Yet, time passed as their roots strengthened in the city soil. Fewer calls were heard and fewer faces were seen. They no longer needed the protection of the rotten skin or the nutrition of the decayed flesh, when time slowly scoured off and lightened their past memories. *When the apple offers all its nutrition, the old farmer thought, is it more wrong to let the seed stay by the decayed flesh, or grow its roots beyond the fertilized soil and reach further underground?*

Mold grew on the wrinkled, dried skin that became damaged and exposed. Its seeds' roots slowly reach deep under the earth, seeking water and reinforcing its ground. Months passed, and from the fertilized soil, a sapling began to rise, penetrating the wet and dry mud, above the weeds. Years passed, and a healthy apple tree grew among the other apple trees. Its branches spread far and wide, with healthy apples hanging from them.

SAPLINGS

by Allen Ai, Grade 12

Wrinkles on his face, sitting in his rocking chair, with little people who call him grandpa running around the room, chasing each other with newspaper airplanes. Their sons and daughters sit beside him, slowly telling jokes and memories of old times. He gazed off towards a nearby wall, as the fire faded and the room turned cold.

And the rotten apple becomes one with the soil, forgotten under the tree stump of the great tall apple tree.



artwork by Sasha Au Yong, Grade 11

FIVE-DOLLAR SCRATCHER

by Sasha Au Yong, Grade 11

The man was tired. He'd been walking aimlessly for about an hour, twice around the deserted park and down two city blocks, each similarly grey and boring. The occasional passing car would stir up the partially static air, ruffling the loose brown hairs poking out from his black toque. White salt was already on the ground, crunching under the man's feet as he trudged forward. Even though he was constantly on the move, he shivered from the slight cold of fall that hinted at winter's approach. He hated the cold. It was his greatest enemy. It was always there to taunt him when he felt the constant burden of poverty.

The blinking lights of a giant green-and-gold billboard caught the man's eye.

Turn your life around for just five dollars! Play the new instant lucky scratcher now! it said. Its letters seemed to shout directly at each passerby. The man was oblivious to every single ad that had forced itself on him—until now. How could he ignore a billboard that looked like an alien ship had just landed in the middle of the street?

The street was not particularly dirty, a few cigarette butts and plastic bags littered here and there. Even though the autumn air was crisp with a few cold gusts of wind, the smell of fryer oil and smoke lingered. The street was neither old nor new. It had a few restaurants—mostly fast food—a hair salon, a bank, a café and a convenience store. Apart from the sound of distant highway traffic and the footsteps of people off in a hurry, there wasn't much noise. It emitted a dull hum, as if to assert that it was still alive.

The man was cold now. The wind had found its way inside the jacket pockets where his hands were hiding. A slight numbness crept through his toes.

"Maybe I'll stand inside for a bit, pretend to shop around so they don't think much of me," the man thought as he quickened his pace. Stopping in front of a Tim Hortons window, the man sighed. Even though he was only thirty-four, hard lines were already etched on his gaunt face, his eyes vacant and hollow. He was hungry. He was always hungry. But today, the cold had been a distraction. He'd already eaten a sandwich, and he didn't feel like wasting the remainder of today's money on food.

"Wait. Wait, maybe I could..." he wondered, hands feeling the change in his pocket.

"Maybe today I'll get lucky, but no... I shouldn't. Should I? I have the money..." the man muttered to himself, causing a couple of strangers to look at him disdainfully and quicken their pace. Still feeling the cold, the man started walking towards the small convenience store, as if his feet had minds of their own.

"I'll just look around and get out of the cold. It doesn't mean I'll buy anything," he thought to himself, all while rattling the coins in his pocket.

A wave of warm heater air washed over the man as he opened the door, bells tinkling. As the man walked around the tiny store, the back of his neck felt the eyes of the cashier.

"Well, this is awkward," the man thought. He knew this feeling all too well, the feeling that he didn't belong.

"I have to get something so that I can stay here longer without being asked to leave."

FIVE-DOLLAR SCRATCHER

by Sasha Au Yong, Grade 11

He walked to the register, leaned slightly on the counter and scanned the sheets of lottery scratchers.

From one dollar to fifty, there were so many to choose from.

"One five-dollar scratcher please," he said, eagerly pointing at a gold-and-green scratch ticket. The cashier looked him up and down as she pulled out the sheet of scratcher tickets. Five dollars in change was all he had at the moment—but soon, he would have more.

"I want the third one from the top. I want the winning ticket," he said, handing the grubby loonies and toonie to the cashier. She quickly dropped them into the register, then wiped her hands.

"Oh man, oh man, this is it!" he said, carefully scratching the card to reveal the scanning code. He didn't want to wait to scratch and match the numbers—the rush of adrenaline told him he had to know now.

"You scan it and tell me how much I got," he said, handing the scratch ticket back to the cashier. With bated breath, the man waited.

"You won five dollars," the cashier said, handing the man back his grimy coins.

"Oh, good, good, I've broken even!" he exclaimed, the glimmer back in his eye. He looked like a crazed hyena now. The cashier heaved a sigh, looked at him in annoyance. Maybe it was the hope to win again, or maybe the man wanted to stay in the warm store a bit longer. But something made him hand his winnings back to the annoyed cashier, the money he could have taken and bought ten ramen dinners.

"Aw, what the heck. Gimme another one. I'll win big for sure this time."

EARTH-RISE

by Emre Basaran, Grade 12

The sky. All the stars whose names he once memorized—back when he was an avid student of astronomy. All the wandering lights the ancients once marvelled at, and all the heavenly bodies Newton once tried to tame with his equations. Once, he was their master—effortlessly bending their nature to his will with his adept mind. Now, he was their hostage—a prisoner whose time to hang from the noose had drawn near. His execution, however, would not have curious onlookers, nor an executioner who might one day ask his forgiveness. No, his jailers had denied him such a dignified death. He would die in silence, with no one to rejoice or grieve his departure. No one to check his pulse to pronounce him dead, and no one to parade in the tainted streets to celebrate the cessation of his existence. Instead, his execution would occur in seclusion, instigated by the emotionless sky and the ash-covered dungeon that once adorned his boyhood dreams.

The cold. The merciless, heartless cold. The cosmic jailers would not grant him a peaceful death; he was to be first tortured—every ounce of life violently squeezed out of the very fabric of his being—before his soul be granted permission to leave his anguished, broken body. His heart was defiant—valiantly pumping blood to his throbbing fingertips—but his mind had surrendered. There was no hope for his salvation. All that was left in his power was to savour what had enticed him to sign his name on his spacesuit all those years ago—to shake hands with the President and step into the now-wrecked capsule that had brought him to his demise. Not even the most audacious of men had dared come close to the dreary, barren world where his life would come to an abrupt end, yet he had aspired to become the first man to set foot upon its bleak soil. He had chosen to offer himself to the will of the skies, and they had accepted his sacrifice. The time had come for what they had deemed was worth his life.

Slowly, the Earth began its ascent above the lunar horizon. First, the light scattered in its atmosphere, shyly peeking over the skyline, hurting his bloodshot eyes as the luminescence flooded his vision. Later, the true might of the planet began to emerge, establishing its dominance in the sky and dwarfing anything else he had ever laid eyes on. He found himself inexplicably surprised by how much he could see. From the warm Canary Islands off the Spanish coast to the chilling waters of Hudson Bay in Canada—the towering mountains of Chile and the comically flat plains of Florida. All could be seen at once.

The realization astonished him: the dust-laden valleys and hills that would soon be his grave have been quietly scrutinizing mankind from their place in the sky since the dawn of time. They had witnessed the first ever Olympic Games in Greece—the success of the First Crusade, and the abysmal failure of the Fourth. They were there when Charles the Great was the king upon the throne, when Shakespeare charmed the royal court with his plays, and when Abraham Lincoln put the Emancipation Proclamation into force. It was an obvious truth—a straightforward tautology—but it still was a warming thought.

Back home, he recalled, discord pervaded all facets of life. Happiness and terror existed in balance; for every comedy there was a tragedy. The streets were loud, the homes were crowded, and the roads were busy. Here, he admitted, it was quiet—peaceful. The deadly

EARTH-RISE

by Emre Basaran, Grade 12

forests where predators of all kinds rambled about shone a lively lush green, while the oceans where heartless storms constantly searched for ships to ravage solemnly glimmered an earnest deep blue. Many had seen a sunrise before, but he was the first of his kind to behold an Earth-rise. It looked just as spectacular as he had envisioned.

Impulsively, he checked his oxygen gauge; he had enough for about five more minutes. It made him smile; Mother Earth had arrived just in time to soothe her son on his deathbed so that he may rest in peace. Silently and calmly, he resumed his gaze on his home planet. And when it was finally above the horizon, he closed his eyes.



artwork by Tom Dang, Grade 11

WHAT WERE YOU SUPPOSED TO GET AGAIN?

by Phillip Carson, Grade 11

The bitter cold snaps in the howling wind. Glistening snow piles up on the side of the road, almost all turned to ice by now. Few walk the streets—only by absolute necessity would someone choose to venture outdoors on a day like this. But days like this are becoming more and more plentiful as the years breeze by.

You have to bundle up your scarf a little tighter, and dare not take your hands out of your wool jacket pockets for risk of frostbite. Yet, even trudging through the cold, you find peace, skipping all of the cracks in the sidewalk, just like when you were a kid. After all, no one outdoors means no one to watch out for. No one to confront, nor be confronted by. But at the same time, the frigid wind is so strong that it nudges your glasses slightly off your face.

How could this be tranquil? Maybe it just feels that way because everything is relative, isn't it? Back at home, "peace" has practically been ripped out of the dictionary, gone from existence. She can seem so controlling, yet flexible at the same time. Sweet on the surface, but she always seems to get her way. After all, only the tip of the iceberg pokes above the water's surface.

Perhaps it's not usually loud or chaotic back home, but it sure doesn't feel like peace. "Do you have time to grab the groceries on your way home from work today?" she often asks. Even if you're too busy, it doesn't seem to matter to her. Maybe you've never told her that you had too many papers to mark that day. But her tone suggests more of a command than a question. Maybe she doesn't mean it like that, but that's how it seems. Is it just easier to go along with it? That way, at least, there's peace. Serenity, no commotion, just like the delicate snowflakes descending from the sky in their own separate ways.

You've thought of going your own separate way, yourself. It eats you up inside; the mortgage is almost paid off and he's already two, so there's no point in backing out now. You're smarter than that. You've already got a good life. But is it the one you want? Do you even have a choice? Perhaps not, it might be too late for that. Right. "Just go along with it," you mutter to yourself. The game of life has rules, and you don't feel like breaking them.

And now, you stand in front of the grocery store. What were you supposed to get again?

WITNESS MY ESTRANGED HEART

by David Courtis, Grade 12

A thought as estranged as the midnight sun,
I'm never prepared for these nights,
Where raging blossoms bloom as restless as day
And where naively clouded sights, sleepless, degrade.

Oh beast that writhes the mind awaken!
Never prepared, and needn't prepare again.
Forsaken tendrils that tremble upon flawed thoughts taken,
Leave paths that none shall understand.

A curse to beat and breathe and die,
Twisted pearls that shine to shackled souls collide
Plucked, upon the broken grasp of moonly lies
Forever, 'til time abides.

Yet may no one pluck from the midnight sun
Where forsaken roots cry, they shun!
As bright as this pearl shines,
It shines for none.

A MOTHER'S TOMATO SOUP

by Tom Dang, Grade 11

She felt the summer breeze in a field of purple lavenders. Far off in the distance, soldiers came back to their old mothers. The sun bleached their uniforms as the men walked home through the cornfields. There was a lone sense of peace in the most distant of places.

Estelle sat quietly in the nook of a brightly rusted tractor is. A moment before, she was diligently reading her bright red book. Now, she looked up to the sky. *Tomato soup*, she thought, *there's nothing better than a mother's warm tomato soup*. And then she ran home, off of her grandma's tractor, to the sound of her three spotted puppies. To the smell of tomato soup.

Her father was the First Lieutenant in command of the French army when he met her mother. They soon settled down in the middle of an old countryside. Estelle never got to see her father. The Great War swept him away and left her mother with the greatest gift he ever gave her, Estelle. But Estelle loved her mother, and her two grandmas, and the rusted tractor, and her three dogs. She loved it all. But most of all, she loved her mommy's tomato soup.

There were days when the kids would knock on her door to play, kids whose fathers went off to a strange purpose unknown. When their fathers returned, their excitement echoed through the golden fields. But the echoes eventually stopped. Estelle had always been the one without a father. She envied those kids whose dads wore medallions heavy enough to drag down their own heads. Yet, she never cried. Her mother had worn more soup-stained sunflower aprons in her life than their fathers ever carried medallions on those meaningless trips, she thought. Where the boys bragged about how they had always wanted to carry a sword into battle with their dads, she bragged about her mother's warm soup. Then she would run off to her mother's kitchen with her little friends and they would all have supper together. The kids never denied that her mother's soup was the best, none would argue whose mother had more aprons. Love begins small, and for her, it began at tomato soup.

Years passed. There were more days of running off to the kitchen than she could ever remember. Days and days of her nagging her mom to let her cook. Eventually she learned the recipe by heart. Estelle became her own cook with recipes she made herself—and be they too salty or too much vinegar—her mother loved them nonetheless. To her, Estelle's soup was the best she had ever tasted. It warmed her heart and was made from her child's love, and that was all that mattered to her.

Years after the Great War had ended, France found itself in economic distress. Not that it ever mattered to Estelle, but strange men started visiting her mother, day after day. She hated when her mother cried. Though Estelle could never bear the sound of her weeping, these tears were not about her father, and her mother kept refusing to tell her the truth. Estelle knew her mother best, especially when she was lying, but she kept her concerns to herself.

The day eventually came when her mother left before dawn, but not without leaving a warm pot of tomato soup in the kitchen. Estelle cried for days before running off to her tractor to read her books.

Days turned to months turned to years. Estelle had already moved on with her life when she would discover the truth. It was in her mother's will for her to open, once she began

A MOTHER'S TOMATO SOUP

by Tom Dang, Grade 11

to care for her own daughter: Years ago, when the country was in distress and the army in the midst of warfare, a shortage of nurses swept her mother away. She was drafted for her own experienced past.

At the end of the will was her mother's wishes, and picture of a bowl of soup. It was her last gift. Estelle cried, she loved her mother more than anything she could have loved. She loved her soup, she loved her apron, she loved everything about her. Yet now, she bore the same responsibilities. As much as her mother had loved her, she shall do the same. Even in the middle of the hustling downtown of Paris, she still cooks the same soup for her daughter. A mother's tomato soup.



artwork by Sophia Dudurych, Grade 12

THE WHIRLED, LIKE US

Elizabethan Sonnet by Jacob DiCarlo, Grade 11

I watch the fall. My mind a blur, although
I can't quite know why Mother Earth does think
I bit the fruit as if it's toxic, so
I see the world before me as I blink,
Transforming into ferrets bustling and
Conforming into clones. Who stresses of
Performing when they're all robots unmanned?
Informing me? An Atlas routing love?
The world ain't quite an angel, yet nor I.
The whirled, like us, do not align with you.
The curled hand faced toward. See torture die,
The pearled see not the truth, as if a zoo.
The doors fuse as Goliaths dance with youth.
These chores lose meaning as I see the truth.

DON'T DO STUFF. IT'S HEALTHY.

by Jaden Duyn, Grade 12

Have you ever done something so important that it changed your life forever? I haven't.

Hi, I'm Jaden, and I don't do much at all. Let me correct myself—I don't do much that I don't enjoy doing. My mom likes to call it "laziness" or a "lack of dedication," but I prefer to call it "preserving my own happiness."

The past few months—being winter and all—I've gone on many health and fitness journeys. I do this thing where I work out every day, eat healthy and drink TONS of water. *Healthline.com* says it's supposed to help decrease stress and therefore improve my overall health. I, however, disagree with the results of their many "professionally conducted" studies. In my personal experience, these journeys typically last three to four days—if I have enough motivation. These three to four days are typically the worst days I have all week. Who am I to tell myself I shouldn't eat the stuffed cheese pasta and garlic breadsticks on a Wednesday lunch at school? This spectacular food is being prepared just for me, and food waste is bad. Who is *healthline.com* to tell me I shouldn't eat as much as I can? Well, *healthline.com* also states that eating too many carbs can lead to increased cholesterol levels or even diabetes. I don't have diabetes, and I'm sure my cholesterol levels are fine. Take it from me, *healthline.com* is an unreliable source.

To test my hypothesis, I recently joined LA Fitness. I say "recently" because, if I joined two weeks ago, I'd have gone about twice a week. In truth, I joined four months ago, and I have since made it there approximately once a month. Firstly, both of the "closest" gyms are a 10-minute drive from my house. Not only is this a waste of my parents' gas, but it can also be dangerous for a new driver (like myself) to drive this extreme length at night, which seems to be the only time I am free to go to the gym. The doors tend to be really heavy for somebody with chicken arms (like myself), so I'm already tired as soon as I make it in. LA Fitness seems to be crowded with bodybuilders, fitness models and people who actually understand how to use the equipment. I am none of these things, and, although the middle-aged men who follow you around and try to show you how to use the equipment seem nice, I want absolutely nothing to do with them or their equipment.

I had a traumatizing experience the other month (the one time I went to the gym in February). I was working *really* hard on an oddly shaped machine when a man walked up to me and said: "That machine is for your arms, not legs." How rude! Thanks man. Who asked for your opinion?

One time I even tried *juicing*. If you don't know, juicing is when you take a perfectly good fruit or vegetable and you smush it and drink the juice. Disgusting. I learned that I don't like cucumber juice, celery juice, carrot juice, kale juice, beet juice, lemon juice, pepper juice, spinach juice, zucchini juice or ginger. That last one didn't even last a day, obviously. I realized I was much happier an hour prior—when I didn't have a horrible concoction in my mouth—so I decided to make the educated decision to stay happy. To this day, I have never had one of those vegetables or their juices again. Overall, I think deciding not to continue juicing was one

DON'T DO STUFF. IT'S HEALTHY.

by Jaden Duyn, Grade 12

of the best decisions I've ever made.

The only thing that I've ever had some success with was intermittent fasting. My dad does this—he doesn't eat from 6:00 p.m. until 11:00 a.m. the next day. It's supposed to boost your metabolism and, apparently, that's a good thing. I am successfully intermittently fasting during social-distancing by sleeping in until 3:00 p.m. every day. I wake up, eat a huge meal, and go back to bed. It amazes me that something so simple can be good for me. I think my dad will be proud of me when I tell him—you know, once he gets back from his busy nine-hour shift.

As you can see, I am an expert at not doing things (that I don't like to do). Some may say this quality might cause me some trouble in life, but, to be honest, all it's caused me so far is happiness. As I'm writing this, I might say to myself, "Wow, I just finished that cookie in under a minute, and it was the best decision I've ever made." And upon further reflection, it was. Life is too short to do things you don't want to do. Preserve your happiness and don't let anybody tell you it's "unhealthy" or call you "lazy"—tell them you're doing what is best for your mental health.

On that note, I think I'll help myself to a second cookie.

SHE IS MY SON

by Doga Erdemisik, Grade 11

"It's a girl," the doula muttered dully.

The phrase echoed in the bare room, forcing my five sisters and father into grief and silence. I reached over and clutched my sister's bony hand, worried about the doom our family will face without a boy heir.

"Why does Allah punish us?" my dad whispered. The strong man I knew now covered his face in his hands. Then he hastily stood up and stumbled out of the small room. None of us knew where he was going, and none of us cared. His absence drew attention to my mother's faint sniffles in the next room where she gave birth. I told my five sisters to start preparing dinner and went to check up on my mother. I cracked open her door and saw her holding my new sister. She was the least joyful. She had once again failed to bring a boy into this family. Upon seeing me, she quickly attempted to wipe her tears. Witnessing her like this made me want to break down in tears, but instead I stood strong and hugged my mother.

"It will be okay," I told her. It was the least I could do.

That night, my father came home late from work. Just like my mother, his face mourned and his shoulders slumped. He headed straight to their bedroom as soon as he arrived. I recall standing in the corner silently, watching my dad slightly shake my mom awake. Her eyes were puffy and had dark circles around them. She doubtlessly had no idea what was going on. My dad escorted me and my mom to the kitchen and sat in front of us. After looking around and taking in the sight of the barely-lit room, my father directed his gaze on me. I squirmed under the pressure of his hard stare and patiently waited for his explanation.

He cracked a reassuring smile and told me and my mother that I was going to continue my life as a boy. "Since this household failed to conceive a male heir, you are still my son, Aazar," my dad softly explained. At that moment, I remember feeling a wave of relief. I knew that I would become a girl if I had a brother, and I resented that idea. Even though my parents were grief-stricken, I cracked a huge smile and hurried to hug my elderly father. From the moment I was born, my parents raised me as a baby boy, not a girl. I went to school, played sports, cut my hair short and helped out my dad in his job. In my childish mind, being a girl was boring. Even though I was born a girl, I was truly a boy.

My sister's birth became a faint memory from my childhood. Five years passed since the day I officially became the son of the house. I was now a fine sixteen-year-old teenage boy named "Aazar." I pictured myself as no one but him. As time passed, my responsibilities as a man doubled. I worked with my dad every day to support the family. At work, I made fifty bricks each day, earning just over two dollars. This labour-intensive job left me exhausted. My friends and I no longer had time to hang out like we used to, we were just too busy. The days when I went to school and played soccer were long gone, replaced by the responsibilities of a man. The pressure of being a Bacha Posh became heavier also. It was harder than ever to conceal my feminine features and make my body seem more refined and masculine.

To be honest, I often wondered how my life would have been if I were raised as a girl.

SHE IS MY SON

by Doga Erdemisik, Grade 11

It's true that I was able to do many things as a man that my sisters were never allowed to do in our conservative Afghan society. Still, I couldn't stop myself from fantasizing about a different life. Would it be so bad to let my hair grow out a little? Maybe wear a few specks of makeup to enhance my feminine side?

I was soon thrust back to reality by my father's calling voice. "Aazar, come over here and help!" he shouted over from the work area. I hurried over to his side and scooped out a generous amount of grey clay, placing it into the brick mould.

The sun scorched my skin from working outdoors from dawn to sundown. "All for my family," I reminded myself. I had to bear this work for them. After some hours and fifty bricks, it was time to head back home. My dad already left the yard; he was a fast worker. As a family, we lived in a small village called Kabul. The place my dad and I work is on the outskirts of the town, meaning that there is a fair amount of distance to walk before reaching my home. I kicked a small rock on the sandy road, just to make the trip a tad more exciting. Without a clock in sight, it was impossible to predict the time. The only thing left for me was to walk faster. It was dark outside when I caught the sight of our house—an old, shabby place barely holding on. "Better than nothing," my mother always said. I opened our pathetic excuse of a door with a screeching sound and took off my sandals: no shoes or dust allowed in the house.

The house felt even more ugly and lonely without the noises of my little sisters. Nevertheless, I headed to the small bathroom to clean myself up and change my attire. I wetted a piece of cloth and harshly wiped the sand and dirt off my skin. I was so dirty all the time that I almost forgot the colour of my face and hands. When done, I reached up and took fresh clothes from the drawer and noticed their condition. Clean but extremely old, my shirt had some holes in the hem. Absently, I put them on—but at that moment, my sister's dress caught my eye. It was an ugly, brown piece of clothing, but still an indication that she is a girl. I dragged myself out from the room—I had plenty of time to stare at my sister's clothes. I stopped by the kitchen and grabbed myself a piece of stale bread from the counter. It was all we could afford. I casually chewed on the stale bread and entered the bedroom I shared with five of my sisters. With quiet, steady steps, I finally grabbed a pillow and got comfortable on the mattress laid across the cold floor.

It was, surprisingly, not a rough night. I had the company of my baby sisters—uncommon luxury for me. I had a slight stomach pain, but I reasoned that it was only because my mattress was worn out that I felt the hardness of the floor. Suddenly, I remembered that today was Sunday, my only day off. I planned to play soccer with my group of friends outside; hence, I had no time to spare. I stood up straight and walked to the bathroom to clean myself up and change my pyjamas. I was fixing my hair when I noticed some pimples on my golden skin. It was a weird occasion, since I rarely had any skin problems. I shrugged it off and went to the soccer field, excited to finally relieve some stress.

When I reached the field and greeted my childhood buddies, I was itching to play. We kicked the ball around until sundown. Soccer never felt better.

SHE IS MY SON

by Doga Erdemisik, Grade 11

When everyone was packing up, my close friend Jamal approached me. “Hey Aazal, why do you have a red stain on your pants?” he asked.

The reality suddenly hit me. *Oh no, they’re going to find out*, I thought. I pushed Jamal out of my way and ran as fast as I could on the sand-covered hot road to reach home.

I opened the metal door of the house with a loud bang and saw my parents. Relief flooded over me, I was glad that they were here. I instantly told them everything, tears brimming in my eyes. I was devastated, yet, thankfully, both my dad and mom reassured me.

After some moral support, we heard a knocking on our door. I was startled, we weren’t expecting anyone. My mom threw a menacing stare at my dad and opened the metal door only to reveal my friend, Jamal. He looked shaky and suspicious. “You’re a girl,” he stated, now sure of himself. I was speechless. I didn’t know how to reply. It felt like as if I lost my voice. *What if word spreads?* I thought. I worried about my family. We would lose our jobs and my family would be humiliated. We couldn’t afford to lose our income. My mom was already crying, the background accompaniment of her faint sniffles failed to calm my nerves. I stood next to my elderly father, hoping he could save me from this. And he did.

My father stepped up in front of my mother and me like a protective wall and gave Jamal a threatening stare. He was confident, had no fear. Then, he opened his wrinkled mouth and uttered the words I longed to hear my entire life: “She is my son.”

THE PRINCESSES AND THE KNIGHTS WHO SAVE THEM

by Jenna Farmer, Grade 12

"When did it all go wrong?" Edith asked herself, holding her head in her hands, tangling her fingers in her hair. She wished her mind could turn off. Maybe the pressure of her palms could stop the never-ending swirling—it was making her dizzy. She finally had enough and catapulted face-down onto her bed, her hand falling off the side to rest against her comforter.

Margo—who had been silently listening to her sister's low, subtle weeping—pushed her small fingers into the crack of the door. This way, she figured, her sister would think that the door fell open on its own. So when Edith's temper inevitably changed from sadness to anger, maybe the crash would fall less onto Margo and more onto the wooden door. "Stupid door!" she'd scream, maybe. Margo peeked through the small crack she had created and looked at the parts of her sister she could see through the opening—the single loopy curl of Edith's perfectly-styled hair peeking through the jersey and the sparkly nail polish she'd watched her apply (and begged to have herself). On Edith's hand, however, she saw something else that puzzled her.

"Mascara?" Margo wondered to herself, seeing the black smudge on her sister's palm. She almost giggled at this realization. Did her sister forget that mascara went on your eyelashes and not your hand? How silly! Margo went to see if her sister had at least put mascara on in the correct place as well, but Edith's face was dug so deep into the pillow she couldn't tell. Could Edi even breathe, she wondered?

Her questions were suddenly answered when she met her sister's gaze. Edith's nautically-blue eyes were framed by smudges of black and grey—like a racoon—and her cheeks were blotchy red. She didn't look nearly as beautiful as she had when she was excitedly getting ready earlier that evening, or when she said goodbye to their parents. She had stood in the doorway and said, "Back at eleven," her smile so bright it threatened to blind. Margo had watched her sister practically sprint to the pickup truck stopped on the street, leaping into the passenger's seat before it sped away. Margo wanted to ride in a pickup truck. It seemed like fun. So how was it that she was now staring at this ruined version of her sister?

Margo got up to leave, to avoid her sister's wrath. Edith hated spying because "Privacy is my right, you brat!" she'd say.

"Wait... come back."

Margo was shocked at these words. She stopped and turned back around, pointing to herself and looking all around to see who her sister could be talking to.

"Me?" she asked.

"Yes. You. Come here. I'm going to paint your nails sparkly like mine. That's what you want, right?"

Margo was taken aback by her sister's sudden interest in spending time with her, but she wasn't going to question it. She ran and plopped down on the floor beside Edith, who shuffled off the mattress to meet her.

"You know those stories Mom reads you?" Edith said, grabbing the iridescent bottle from the small box under her bed.

THE PRINCESSES AND THE KNIGHTS WHO SAVE THEM

by Jenna Farmer, Grade 12

"Which ones?" Margo asked.

"The ones with the princesses and the knights who save them. You know—the fairy tale ones," Edith elaborated.

"Yeah, I love those ones. Maybe with sparkly nails I can be like those princesses," Margo gushed, admiring the first coat on her pinky finger. Edith froze.

Edith wanted to tell her little sister a different story from the thousands wrapped in pink with sparkles and big cursive titles. She wanted to tell her the truth. Edith thought about how she would start this story. The line "Once upon way too many times" came to her mind. She would then go on, explaining what happened after the happily-ever-afters of most fairy tales. When the princess is already saved from the burning heat of the dragon's flame and whisked away by her saviour. She would write about how the knight would lock the doors of his shiny carriage and whisper the nicest words in the princess's ear. He'd tell her how happy he was that he'd gotten to save her and how he was even happier to be alone with her now. Maybe she'd work up the courage to ask about the locked doors and he'd tell her.

"To keep any lurking dragons out of course, your highness." He'd say it in a way in which she'd believe him and she'd stay. On the next page, she'd write about how he asked the princess for a reward. The princess would tell him how she had lost everything when the dragon took her and had nothing to give. Even her silk handkerchief was ruined, the edges singed.

The knight would then say: "I'm not like the dragon. I'll take only what you have left to give."

Though he'd disguise it as kindness, anyone reading could see what that really meant. If he took what she had left, she'd be left with nothing.

She gave it, though, because he was so kind for saving her and telling her all the whispered admirations. He was her saviour, no one else showed up to the battle. That is how the princess would excuse the empty feeling she had when she arrived home to an empty castle, now colourless, void of beautiful tapestries. The knight already moved on to his next noble quest. The princess would convince herself she was okay with it, a fair trade—salvation for the last scraps of her soul. If this salvation was a tragedy, then it was so only because she didn't have enough to give him.

Edith thought about what illustrations she'd commission for her book, titled "*The Hard Truth*"—all in pink, sparkly letters of course. She definitely would want a professional to do it, to perfectly utilize the black watercolours for around the princess's eyes. Finally, Edith thought about how she would end it. And those all-consuming five words came back to her mind: "When did it all go wrong?" With those five words, Edith was brought back to reality and looked down to see that she was done with Margo's nails.

"There you go, all done." Edith paused, admiring her handiwork. She put the polish down and looked up at her ecstatic little sister. "You look just like those princesses," she said.

WHEN I SURRENDERED

by Harrison Frank, Grade 8

It hasn't been the same. They haven't been the same. They act differently, talk differently, they even feel things differently. Our house was full of love and laughter—we even had that cheesy *live, laugh, love* sign at our front door. We used to play games together, too. Every night a different game, although it didn't much matter what game we played because Jacob always won.

Jacob was my son. He is my son. We used to play cards together every day when I got home from work. He would run up to me and say, "Daddy it's time for Go Fish!" and he would yank my arm until I was forced onto the couch by Sarah, my daughter, who used to play with us too, until she became "too mature for cards."

Once she hit 13, Sarah didn't spend much time with anyone that wasn't on her phone. She would lock herself in her room for hours until it was time for dinner. Thinking about it now, it probably wasn't the best idea to give her a room with a bathroom attached to it.

As for Jacob, we still played cards. Not as often, and I knew he didn't really want to, but we sat on the couch and played cards until the words "Go Fish" held no meaning.

Emotionally, the house was grey and almost lifeless, but it all changed when quarantine hit. Everything started up again. Sarah came out of her room, Jacob wanted to play cards, and, for once, we actually sat down to enjoy a meal together.

"How was the walk to school today?" I remember my wife, Linda, joking as she passed the green beans to Jacob. We were sitting around the dining room table enjoying the newest installment of *Master Chef Linda*. Tonight's segment was Beef Wellington with green beans and mashed potatoes.

"Ugh, it was awful," Sarah responded, clearly avoiding the tiny bits of food she had served herself. "I had to walk all the way downstairs, through the kitchen to the basement. I honestly didn't know if I would make it."

Jacob laughed. "I understand your pain."

"Okay, how was your first day of new school?" my wife corrected. We had all agreed to call the kids' online learning "new school" because Linda thought it sounded less sad, even though Jacob had strongly argued that it wasn't any less sad.

"It was fine," Jacob declared, spitting chunks of beef out of his mouth. "I had Language Arts and that was pretty fun 'cause, you know, it's my favourite subject."

That was the first of many nights we spent together as a family over the next month. Everything was superb. Linda and I kept our jobs through the closing of all the businesses, and the kids were as happy as ever. Every night we did something different. One night I was even able to convince them to watch an entire horror movie. What can I say? Life was bliss...until it wasn't.

Sarah's Grade 12 graduation is today, though it almost didn't happen. It was set to be moved to the fall, but the vaccine restarted everything. Everyone's going to be able to celebrate all her hard work except for me. I'm going to miss it all.

About a month ago, I went out to get some flowers that Sarah "needed" for her room.

WHEN I SURRENDERED

by Harrison Frank, Grade 8

She said it was “too dead in there,” and even though I put up a good debate, she claimed that some flowers would benefit her greatly. So I went to the Garden Centre, but I realized I had forgotten my mask, which was very unlike me. I figured it would be okay and I would just try to stay away from other people, which I did—but clearly not well enough, because after 12 days, I was diagnosed with COVID-19. I’m not even sure saying *diagnosed* is right... but anyway, that’s what happened.

After two long weeks of hard work in the hospital fighting the war of man versus virus, I lost. I hate to admit it, but I didn’t go down fighting. I was dying, for God’s sake, and I couldn’t bear to let my family see me with all those tubes everywhere. So I waved that white flag and surrendered. Two days before the fully-functioning, disease-curing vaccine was invented. Two days before I could have been saved. And my family’s life has never been the same.



artwork by Kyu Hun Lee, Grade 12

GREMLINS

by Emily Gregatto, Grade 12

You, me,
And the gremlins always attached to us.

My gremlin tells me how my being is not good enough:
How you will leave me,
How I do not deserve love,
That my body is better off in the sickly green walls,
surrounded by the smell of death and disinfectant.

Your gremlin confuses you,
Sometimes it thrusts you into mania,
Hypersexual,
Feeling full of life.
Feeling like you could do anything.
When you fall into this state, it makes you feel like maybe,
Just maybe
Your gremlin vanished, that everything is fine, that it will be okay

But then...
You plummet.
You start feeling what I feel
The gross, sick and twisted little creature,
Sneering, "I got control now, you can't get rid of me, no one can."
Laughing in your ear,
Telling you, "You won't be loved."
Forcing you in your bed, the sheets plastered to your body,

Sad.

Alone.

Afraid.

For a while, our gremlins controlled us.

Tore us apart.

Disconnected us.

We stood alone.

GREMLINS

by Emily Gregatto, Grade 12

I struggled during that time,
I made decisions I regret.
I lashed out, I hurt myself, I hurt others.

Ironically, I ended back
In those sickly green walls that smell like death and disinfectant
I thought my gremlin won me over.

I was wrong.

My visit was short,
But, sitting in that chair, surrounded by beeping,
Coughing, and sheets,
I thought really hard.
I forgave myself,
And I forgave you.

I pondered the people who I
Wanted to keep in my life.
You were the first one who cleared my
Muddled mind—
I could not lose you
Almost losing myself made me realize who
I Love
Who I will forgive and let back into
My life.

We reconnected,
We healed.
We silence our gremlins.
We were able to learn tricks to shove Them
Back down,
Yelling at Them, "You are not me. You do
Not control me."

We broke down those sickly green walls that reek of death and
Disinfectant.

JOURNEY

Petrarchan Sonnet by Kyu Hun Lee, Grade

Of many things I have experienced—
The visages of castles worn and torn,
Old great beasts of stone, quiet and forlorn.
And my adventure has long since commenced,

Many countries I have experienced.
The deafening sound of a tour's bullhorn,
lines of green and yellow, the fields of corn,
The words of many languages pronounced...

And yet, I saw things I could not ignore:
A starving man, next to a bakery;
Hate in both foreigner and native alike;
The greedy and grouped cities an eyesore;
The oceans full of tourists and debris.
Is this truly a world that I should like?

THE LENS OF A CANINE

by Alyssa Lucchese, Grade 10

And there I appeared. My whereabouts, might you ask or wonder? Not a clue. Out of thin air, I suppose. The fuzzy, pleasant, and undoubtedly furry-fresh scents in my surroundings immediately blanketed me with a warm and cozy feeling. A sense of comfort, safety, security.

Where am I, what am I, who am I, and, most importantly, why does the smell of freshly baked sausages make me weak at the paws? These swirling thoughts and questions burdened my little mind. After struggling to make sense of the world I'd been brought into, and as I open my brown, beady eyes (as the humans seem to like to call them), I caught the earliest glimpse of Luna, my mother.

A stunning, fully-grown golden retriever, as Luna herself liked to say. Mom likes to believe that my dad, Tucker, a proud, sensible, and fully-grown black poodle simply ran off into the streets and into the woods to retrieve more beef leftovers and other edible scraps of food for our family. This seemingly occurred three years ago. We all know the real reason why he fled our family. He felt that he was incapable of caring for puppies of his own. Puppies like me.

You may wonder how a puppy such as myself turned out, in terms of my physical appearance? Although my mother is a golden retriever and my father is a standard black poodle, I pretty much entirely resemble my father's image. Humans might assume that I'm strictly a black miniature poodle. Nevertheless, my doggy type is a Golden doodle, you see? A golden retriever mixed with a poodle.

Anyway, it must've slipped my mind to tell you, human reader, my name. Of course, my name wasn't discovered until two towering humans swept me up in a small, brown cardboard box and took me away, permanently. Yes, for good. Little did I know that these two humans, Calli and Mike, would flip my world upside down.

What in the world of puppies is going on? Where am I? Why am I trapped in this brown, peculiar-looking box? I thought to myself when it happened. My ears flattened, yet they also twitched and perked towards the faint sounds that I could make out. I tucked my tail in between my hind legs, itched myself constantly between the curls of my black fur, licked my lips, and froze in fear. I'm a puppy, what do you expect? Soon after, a large gust of wind caused the lid of the brown box to fling open, causing the hairs all over my body to stand up, cooling me in just a matter of time. Time, huh? That's a peculiar word. I wonder where I picked it up from... or what it even means... regardless, I couldn't quite figure out what was happening at that moment, so I chose to keep my head down low, where no human could see me, curled up in a tight little ball.

"Oh Mike, he's adorable! I already love him, and his cute little curls, too," Calli said. One of my eyebrows raised immediately after this human spoke... was she talking about me? I didn't see any other puppy around. I decided to slowly lift up my head, still remaining curled up in a ball, to see what all the commotion was about.

"I agree with you on that, Calli, but don't you think we were a bit hasty to select a puppy back at the shelter, or even in general? I'm not sure we're capable of taking care of this dog, especially with my allergies and all," Mike said.

THE LENS OF A CANINE

by Alyssa Lucchese, Grade 10

What allergies? Are you allergic to me? I thought. Wait, no! Please give me a chance, I smell food! Is that the delightful scent of bacon?

"Please Mike, I'm begging you. I really and truly believe that you'll move beyond your allergies. Besides, I've already thought of the perfect name for our puppy. Ozzy, don't you think? It most definitely agrees with his poodle-like appearance, with his black and powerful, yet cute and gentle curls and all," Calli said.

"Hold the phone... how in the world did you come up with that?" Mike asked.

"Well you know, the only other Ozzy we've ever known in our lives! Mike, come on, you should know this!" Calli said.

"Ozzy Osbourne, of course! Can't argue with that, Honey... he's a keeper! Oh, I just can't help myself. Look at those adorable, radiant black eyes," Mike said.

Hmm... Ozzy, Ozzy, Ozzy..., I thought, I like that!

Ozzy. I was named after some supposedly famous human, who, they say, sang until his "lungs couldn't take it anymore." I've heard that's the expression used to describe Ozzy Osbourne's passion and commitment to singing, or so I've heard. Hopefully his lungs didn't actually give out on him.

It's been a little while now since Calli and Mike, my owners, introduced me to their home and their lives. Such peculiar names for humans, don't you agree? Every day we eat, play, go for walks so I can go while exploring other territories of land unknown to me. Lastly, sleep. I don't know about Calli and Mike, but sleeping is my least favourite part of the day. What's the point? I enjoy being constantly playful and active, not wasting time doing absolutely nothing! But sometimes they spoil me so much with treats and walks, I can't help myself. I feel like a prince!

But other times, they try to do weird things with me, including "paw," "sit," "bark," "lie down," and "roll over," whatever that means. Something I'm completely, unquestionably, most certainly more-than-okay-with are the treats I'm given when I perform these weird actions. Apparently, they're called "tricks." but I still quite haven't gotten the hang of them. I *have* gotten used to "bark!" I think I do it too often, though, because whenever I seem to bark loudly, Mike has to close my mouth with his hand and wildly move his finger around in my face! Man, I wish he'd stop that. It doesn't exactly make me feel like a prince, now does it?

Oh, here comes the famous belly rub!

"Who's a good boy? Who's a good boy? Yeah, that's a good boy!" Mike exclaimed.

What did I do to deserve this luxury?

Soon enough, the warm feeling that enveloped my body each and every time Mike or Calli took me for a walk vanished. It seemed to be growing colder and more frigid outside with every passing day, because they've started to wrap me up in these endless layers of some sort of thick material. It became quite claustrophobic for me, might I add. I guess it was to keep me warm, because it seemed to work well.

I'm growing older now, and I can't help it, according to Calli, because that's what

THE LENS OF A CANINE

by Alyssa Lucchese, Grade 10

she always tells me. Seasons are coming and going, and there is nothing we can do about it. I mean, what is the point of my life anyway? I sleep, eat, play, *go*, repeat.

Now, at four years old, Calli and Mike have started leaving me. But the odd thing is, they come back at the end of each and every day. What does this mean? Why do they have to leave me? How do they think this makes *me* feel?

“Please Ozzy, I know you’ll miss me and I’ll miss you, too. But I have to go to work, as does Mike. Unfortunately, tables can’t clean themselves! It’s just for the day, and then I’ll be back tonight. I love you, my boy!” Calli said.

No, please! You don’t understand my pain! Stay, stay, stay... and that was that. She left me, paws pressed on the doorstep, waiting impatiently for her to return.

And it’s stayed like this for a long time. Every day, any day. Long days, short nights. I despise being alone all the time, but I guess it isn’t the end of the world, since Mike and Calli still come home and spend time with me at night. Yet, even like this, is this my life? Is this how it’s going to be? What is the reason I was born? Isn’t there more that I’ve yet to find and do?

Though it still is tough to deal with Calli and Mike leaving all the time, I think I’m beginning to realize my potential. My intentions. My goal in life with the time I have to spend alone. Rather than constantly worrying about where my life will lead me and questioning the things I can’t change, why can’t I embrace, support, and care for Calli and Mike the way I’ve always done—in both happy times and sad ones—what I’ve dreamed of fulfilling... because that is my reason. To live my life as a companion for those I love. To make every moment worth living and waiting for. And to just *be* there. Why not?

But I’m not done understanding myself. I’ve yet to figure out my endless possibilities and intentions, in this life or the next. And yes, I do have multiple lives. Maybe you’ll see.

STREETS OF WUTONG

by Coco Lyu, Grade 11

Tian has seen the cat several times in his neighbourhood. The orange cat, without warning, leaps from the sky and rolls at his feet—its thin, pointed tail flicking past his ankles. He knows this is Ding's cat. He tries to take the cat from his feet, but it's too powerful and flexible, its heavy body jumping up and down. Whenever Tian drives the cat away, it comes back, as if it's glued to his body.

The leaves of the Chinese parasol trees begin to fall this time of year. In his childish memory, these Wutong trees guarded the streets to his house.

The daylight began to shorten. By the time Tian arrives at his grandma's house, the sky has blackened. He has lived with his mother and grandma since his parents' divorce. Mom is usually busy at work. And the only one left in the house now is grandma, who has Alzheimer's Disease.

He takes out the key from his backpack, hoping he won't be blocked by the chain inside the door this time.

"Get out of my house! How dare you open this door?" Grandma screams, but the neighbours all seem familiar with the scene. No one comes out to check.

"Sorry, I'll leave," Tian says, putting his bag back on and gently closing the door.

Tian wanders around the block. He arrives at Ding's place, subconsciously.

As Ding opens the door to find the cat, he sees Tian's thin figure, his slim arms and legs, his vaguely boyish look. He's still carrying his schoolbag, Ding notices, and he's been twisting the key string around his neck with his fingers several times.

The boy is intimidated, deciding whether to go or stay. Ding yells to relieve the boy from his siege and pulls him into the courtyard.

Ding pats him on the shoulder and bends down. "Have you eaten yet?" he asks.

Tian hesitates, but finally nods. "Yes," he says.

The evening lights illuminate the alley, the fragrance of dinner dishes floating in from the surrounding families. It's the most mundane time of day.

However, the little boy stands outside someone else's yard. "Can I see the cat?" Tian asks.

Ding knows Tian. He knows how hard it is to get him to ask for anything. He just told Ding he wants to see the cat, which means he has no place to go.

The residential buildings in Wutong have just been reconstructed with new paint. They look neat and beautiful at first glance, which makes several old houses in the neighbourhood look even more shabby, especially Ding's. Residents of Wutong have been neighbours for decades and know each other well. The seniors don't have much entertainment, so they gather together to chat and play chess, telling family stories. Ding doesn't like to gossip, but he indulges his chess game. While others were talking, he heard the entire development of Tian's grandma's illness.

After that, Ding often gave the order to the heavy orange cat, and it would lie on the wall until Tian passed by. He trained the cat to jump off from the wall gently and steadily, and later to look pale and tremble at the boy's feet.

And for a very long time, it's the only place where Tian can go—in the city of parasols, in the city of Nanjing.

THE ILLUSTRATOR

A Narrative Poem by Ella MacAlpine, Grade 9

Her mind was a painter
Her brain, a songwriter
That painted
That danced
That sang
That created crisp and clear pictures
Ever vibrant,
Ever lively.

One day, she let someone paint a picture for her.
It wasn't the colours she expected.
They took a self-portrait
And transformed it into self-hatred.
They painted over her with glue and stuck labels on,
They put strings around arms that were held open.
They pigmented her skin until the unkind words settled in like ink on a paper that was once an escape
And suddenly,
She was painting herself.

A painting she once thought was beautiful the way it was
Had warped
Into one big mistake.
Some called her wise.
But she knew that they'd never understand why
They'd never understand how every day this poet had to paint herself a smile to hide behind
To hide all the flaws that had been painted so clearly for her so many times
That she accepted in silent tears.

Until one day,
Her own silent, clandestine tears
Washed away her cheery facade,
Washed through the weaponized words a little,
And for the first time in what felt like an eternity,
She could breathe a little.
She could breathe,
So she cried.
She cried out into the lonely darkness she knew so well after being abandoned there for so long.
The singer without a voice didn't think she deserved what she found;
Another painter reaching out his hand.

THE ILLUSTRATOR

A Narrative Poem by Ella MacAlpine, Grade 9

She was scared.
Her mind told her that it was just another trick, another method of manipulation to add to the list
of things she never learned from.
But that stupid, naive, brave heart of hers,
Made her take it;
Let her take it.

Suddenly,
A warm embrace melted away the coldness she thought she had gotten used to in an instant.
The lies that had been painted on her skin melted away,
The lies she told herself melted away,
Her paper-thin illusion of a smile
Melted away.

The painter looked her in the eyes and told her,
“Your skin may be stained, but you must remember the beauty that lies at your fingertips.”
Their fingers interlocked, his open hand returning her paintbrush.
Together, they created a clear canvas to paint on.
Together, they painted a hue of colour neither had seen in ages; maybe from a lack of it, maybe
from colourblindness.
Together, they painted love.
Together, they found the voice that let them sing.
Together, they learned the true meaning
Of what beauty is.

NEGATIVE SPACE

by Kaitlyn Maddox, Grade 12

In the human body, there is a space to the left of the ribcage where a heart should be. There was no fanfare when I discovered the little woman who occupies that space in my chest instead.

(I took a photography course at a summer camp a few months before she arrived. They taught us about the idea of negative space—the blank area around the parts of the picture you’re supposed to actually focus on. All my pictures seemed to turn out blurry.)

I was twelve, and when you’re twelve there is nothing more important than being the same as everyone else. You’re suddenly blessed with the knowledge that you’re a being with thoughts and feelings that only you might have. When you’re twelve this is awful news. Nobody could know about the little woman.

(A few months into our time together, I dreamt that I was on an all-American road trip to Las Vegas with a girl in the other eighth-grade class. There was a lightness inside me as if my chest was full of helium, silence in the way that a full arena can sound like the ocean through layers of concrete. The little woman wasn’t there.)

The woman who lives inside my chest gets unbearably sad sometimes. It’s not her fault; it seems that there are just days she wakes up radiating gloom like a space heater in a crawlspace, filling up my entire chest with a suffocating warmth. There are times when I’m cold, when her sadness becomes an incredibly comfortable place to rest; the little woman is a very courteous host who never tells me if I’ve overstayed my welcome. I’ll find myself resting there in the comfort of her sadness for ages, lounging until I feel numb. If I’m not careful, I won’t even notice it when the heat she puts off becomes suffocating.

(I tried to tell my mother about the little woman once, and she took me to a doctor. The doctor told me that everyone gets sad sometimes. I tried to explain it wasn’t me who was sad, it was the thing in my chest, but he didn’t understand.)

There are other days, far removed from the sad days, where she insists on checking all the locks twice and analyzing every inch of space we take up together. In loud, crowded rooms she loses all semblance of reality and gets so worked up that it gives us both tunnel vision, and she makes me want to go shake in a corner with no regard for how the time passes.

(My older sister started to take medication for anxiety when she was in university. I tried to ask her about the little woman and she looked at me like I was crazy.)

It’s worth mentioning that she helps some days as well: she helps me get out of bed and makes me wash my face when I’m exhausted by the things she does. She makes me listen to pop songs, and she makes me dance. She likes dancing.

(I started thinking constantly about how I could get her to leave. My friend from my eighth-grade dream got really into film photography, and she seemed to want to take pictures of everything but me. Amongst other things, I blamed that on the little woman: she made me blurry.)

I go to Paris on a school trip a few months after I turn sixteen, and I let the woman who lives inside my chest decide where we visit. This is a blessing due to my indecisiveness; this

NEGATIVE SPACE

by Kaitlyn Maddox, Grade 12

is a curse because I'm on a set itinerary, and I'm never supposed to be without at least two of my classmates—a formality the woman who lives inside my chest never personally agreed to and thus, does not respect.

(She loved *Little Women*. I don't know how she knew this: I hadn't read the book at the time, which I used to assume meant she hadn't either. She said I'm an Amy: caught in a shadow; attention-seeking; ambitious. I took a quiz online that told me I'm a Jo: a storyteller; an unconventional thinker; ambitious.)

I get sick and the pharmacist down the street from Notre Dame sells me double strength paracetamol. I walk through the Palace of Versailles with a head cold. The paintings on the ceilings move when I look at them. I don't see myself when I look in the mirrors.

(I told her a story once; how my mother used to visit France on business, and would come back home with new charms for bracelets she'd gotten for me and my sister. I tried to, but I couldn't seem to find the time to go to the store and pick something to bring back for my mother.

The little woman wanted me to. It was hard to see her as wrong.)

I'm put in the same tour group as my friend the photographer at the Louvre. She takes fourteen photos of the Mona Lisa from the same terrible angle in the crowd. She asks me to move out of her shot so she doesn't waste any film.

(It wasn't a big deal to me at the time, but the little woman thought it was cruel.) And the little woman starts to put off heat, and pace in circles, and mutter incessantly. She tells me it's my fault, though she doesn't say why. I stand and stare forward in front of *Liberty Leading the People* and try my hardest not to shake or cry.

(I used to think that if I could get the little woman to leave, the area she took up inside me would all become negative space, and I'd come into focus.)

I manage to calm down by breaking away from the tour and pacing purposefully around the museum alone with my head down like I'm participating in a competitive walkathon. I barely speak for the rest of the day. I'm exhausted. I get the sense the little woman is as well.

(I didn't come into focus, not straight away. It would take years for that.)

I buy a disposable camera in the gift shop while I wait for my group to leave so I can climb up the Eiffel Tower by myself and avoid some of the noise. The little woman jumps off when we get to the top.

(She still visits sometimes; there's still no fanfare.)

I get my pictures developed a few weeks after returning from Europe. None of them turn out blurry.

PICCADILLY NIGHT

by Alan Mao, Grade 12

The sharp tap of the silver-tipped cane echoed off the cobblestone street. It was a dark night. The old household guard remained the sole dictator of the night, still ardently patrolling Piccadilly Circus. Posters filled the circus with dazzling image of Britain's soon-to-be new king. "God Save the King" and "For King and Country" painted the old Victorian walls with spectacular colours—yet, also among the monarchist posters was an isolated print of Oliver Cromwell shining brighter than ever.

The air was stiff. The night was unusually hot, even for summer. The occasional gust of wind filled with industrial smog blew softly on the guard's worn, wrinkled face. Even in such an uncomfortable time, pride still filled the guard's heart when he turned to face the British Post Office located at the entrance of Regent Street. The stone lion statue on its entrance stood proudly against the devastation of time, always there to help relieve his discomfort. As Big Ben's bells bonged melodically in the distance, signalling the entry of nocturnal midnight, the taps of the silver-tipped cane projected themselves closer to the guard.

As the guard turned around to face the Shaftesbury Memorial Fountain, he saw a stout man walking towards him through the fog. Under the flickering street light, the shadow of the man waxed and waned like the stock exchange charts the guard had once seen. He continued to patrol the circus. The man walked directly towards him. The guard turned and faced the burly man, who now became a lot more visible under the dim copper street light. Wearing a modest top hat—paired with an extravagant blazer and flamboyant pants whilst holding a seemingly freshly made silver-tipped cane—the man stood no more than three feet away from the guard. Not expecting such a sudden approach, the guard slightly flinched; yet a few short moments later, he recovered and kindly addressed the man.

"Greetings, my good sir. Big Ben has bonged. It is time for you to head home and get a good sleep." The man, however, remained in his position, and took off his modest felt hat.

The guard, realizing the man had no intention of moving, continued with his polite suggestions. "Tomorrow will be a day that will be enshrined in history: the coronation of our new king. Go home, I do not dare be the one to impede your chances of seeing the new king."

The man, clearly younger than him—perhaps only 30 years of age—remained on the spot but extended his hand, looking for a handshake with the aging guard. The moment the guard gave his warm response, the man finally greeted him.

"Greetings, good sir, my name is Maxim, Maxim Metford, like the rifle. Care to smoke?"

The man reached inside the breast pocket of his blazer. Finding the small golden case with the clear engraving of "Made in Cape." He took it out. Under the dim light, he opened the case and picked out one of his many carefully wrapped cigarettes. He then offered it to the guard. After a short hesitation, the guard took the man's offer.

"Thank you," responded the guard.

"My pleasure." The man then took a closer inspection of the guard's grizzled, scarred face.

PICCADILLY NIGHT

by Alan Mao, Grade 12

"Afghan? Ashanti?"

"No, the Zulus."

"Unit?"

"1st Column."

The man then sighed and said, "I am guessing you were in Isandlwana, then."

"Yes," the guard replied. "How I loved the days before that battle..."

The man remained silent, and so the guard continued.

"I remember that day. In the savannah of Natal almost 25 years ago. Singing *Rule Britannia* with my comrades as we marched to what we thought was an assured victory..." the guard trailed off.

"It was a deep tragedy, my good sir."

"At least we later ascended to victory."

"Yes, my good sir, victory...but a crimson-stained one."

"It was a worthy sacrifice. For our gracious Queen. As Britons, we have the duty to serve."

"Poor Victoria. I do offer condolences..." the man paused for a brief moment before continuing, "yet, I often wonder what we have gained—except for the poorly constructed medal of honour."

"I, too, served for Queen and country in the far-east of Cathay. And for the Queen, my hand is now stained with the blood of the east," The man continued.

"All the glory, all the honour..."

"We own land from the peacock throne to Cathay to the Coast the New World. Yet... we are still the same."

As the last bit of the man's cigarette quenched to the butt, he slowly raised his head, and gazed upon the Prussian-blue canvas.

"Well, my good sir, you are right. The King's coronation is tomorrow. It will be a revolutionary time of the century. I should return to my home now, so as to not miss the changing times."

"I bid you farewell."

"Goodbye."

As the two parted ways, the grizzled old guard continued his duty, while the man—along with his silver-tipped cane—retreated into the shadow of night.

"It will be an exciting time tomorrow."

"It will be an exciting time tomorrow," the guard repeated softly to himself, over and over again.

"A new king, a new era..."

The guard continued his duty, scanning the night draped over Piccadilly Circus. Yet, something changed. The once-proud stone lion statue now gazed upon the guard with nothing but an empty void.

IN PLAIN SIGHT

By Michaela Morra, Grade 10

"Okay guys, what's the plan?" Lisa asked for the tenth time. "Come on, make a decision!"

Her increasing irritation made an impact; like startled gophers, two heads quickly darted up from their phones. Lisa is a control freak whose happy place is the epitome of optimal order, organization, and preparedness. World issues would disappear if she was appointed CEO of the universe, or so she believes. How she survives hanging with Chloe and Portia, who have the complete opposite personalities, is truly an epic mystery.

"What were the options again?" Portia cautiously questioned, knowing full well the 'look' that was coming her way. The 'look' referred to Lisa's ice-cold 'are-you-kidding-me?' glare. It's always followed by a long, awkward silence as she attempts to calm herself. She inevitably fails, letting loose a wave of insults. *Wait for it*—her body contortions in plain sight—*she is about to blow her stack.*

Red-faced, Lisa slammed her Starbucks on the table. "You guys are complete morons! You're killing me, I'm done! Really, this time, I'm done! I wanted to leave by seven. Hello! It's eight!"

"Chill, Lisa, it's Friday night. There's lots of time," drawled Chloe, refocusing on her phone. Lisa looked like she was going to turn a different, searing shade of red with bulging eyes to boot.

Portia quickly intervened. "K, let's do that escape room thing. Chloe, get off your phone for a sec. Chloe!"

"Sorry, Lisa. Is the room still available?"

Silence.

"I'll call and make the arrangements," Portia uttered with a forced, cheerful tone. Normal facial colour returning and, yes, Lisa is back, responding, "Let's leave now. I'll drive. Chloe you can follow on foot."

They'd talked about an escape room for weeks. Portia was hesitant, worried about being in a confined space, whereas Chloe just wanted to get it over with so that Lisa would stop harping on about it.

For Lisa, it was personal. It was an opportunity to increase her ability to effectively work with others. Letting go of control and trusting the expertise of others was her goal for 2020. Lisa recognized she was actually fortunate to have Portia and Chloe as friends. Few would put up with her obsessive need to call the shots and to always be right. Thank goodness for Type A individuals who efficiently steer the ship in a fog of chaos. It was hard for Lisa to let go of her superior attitude. She firmly believed that the world's problems could be solved with the right leaders at the helm. Practical leaders are able to navigate from point A to point B, using logic and common sense. Nevertheless, the escape room would force Lisa to work cooperatively, to decipher clues and solve puzzles in order to escape. Taking the subordinate position would be her greatest challenge.

"United Nations Lockdown is the only room available for 8:45. I'm signing us in," reported Portia.

"United Nations, you sure? Nine players are needed, and we're only three?" asked Lisa.

"United Nations, eeewww, I thought we were doing something scary, something fun,"

IN PLAIN SIGHT

By Michaela Morra, Grade 10

whined Chloe.

"Chloe, you're lucky to be in the car, so zip it." snapped Lisa. The parking lot was packed; luckily Lisa was able to grab the last spot by the side doors. She was skeptical about their ability to successfully escape this room with only three—correction—two players. Chloe was clearly not motivated.

"Wait, what, we have to work with six strangers? Why can't we do this on our own? Portia, you didn't read the criteria. How many times do I have to tell you to read carefully before you click yes?" Lisa stammered quietly, trying to maintain her composure in front of the host.

But there was no time to debate the issue. All nine players were ushered into a small, dark, musty-smelling room. The objective of this game was to save the United Nations in sixty minutes from being dismantled by enemy forces. Failure would result in worldwide anarchy. The group's mission was to uncover secret weapons hidden in the lower chamber of the building. Together, they needed to move from the main lobby to the upper chamber and find the hidden passage to the lower chamber. Once there, they had to use the secret weapons to protect the United Nations and its mission to maintain international peace and security.

Time check: 60 minutes. Start.

Surprisingly, Chloe and Portia took a keen interest, easily working with the others. Three of the 'others' were teenagers, looking about 16 or 17 years old. The rest were adults. It was clear to Lisa that, in overhearing their comparisons to other venues, they were escape room addicts.

Like hordes of spiders, their hands crawled along the walls, calling out to each other about arrows etched into the crown moulding of the room. Alone, Lisa focused on the artwork by the main door. Suddenly, Portia and one of the teens screamed out with glee. They used the pattern of arrows to form a simple equation, resulting in what appeared to be a number lock combination. One of the other teens suggested forming groups of three and focusing on sections of the room to find a lockbox. Lisa felt uncomfortable working with strangers, but even more alarming was her feeling of complete ineffectiveness. She was not in charge and not the one finding solutions. She glanced over at Portia and Chloe. They were frantically checking all the nooks and crannies in their assigned section of the room, giggling and yelling out updates to the other groups.

Time check: 37 minutes remaining.

Okay, Lisa thought, I get it. You have to work as a team. Come out of your comfort zone. She collaborated with her group and suggested working the area by examining what was in plain sight, to stop focusing on something hidden. Bingo! A floor tile had a clock image with inset hands. They set the hands using the combination numbers and a secret door opened, leading to a tiny passageway. *Hidden in plain sight.* Lisa made a mental note of this strategy. They inched through, one by one, landing in the upper chamber. It was a large, brightly lit room containing three antique wooden desks and bookshelves lining the walls all the way up to the ceiling. The same groups of three attacked the desks, looking for clues to find the hidden passage to the lower chamber. One of the adults suggested calling out items found in the

IN PLAIN SIGHT

By Michaela Morra, Grade 10

desks, as they may make sense when combined. This took a lot of time.

Time check: 10 minutes remaining.

It dawned on Lisa that her Type A personality was not working well at solving this world crisis. Cooperation was getting the job done. She did not have all the answers, and it actually felt kind of good. Less pressure. She really was her own worst enemy. But what she could add, she would. "Guys, we may be making it too complicated, look for something in plain sight, it's how we found the clock tile."

"Ya baby!" exclaimed Chloe—yes, Chloe, of all people. "The desk legs are placed in tracks. Let's try moving them along the tracks, looks like they run to the centre of the room." The screeching violated their eardrums, then a locking sound echoed around the room. *Voilà*, the hidden passage appeared.

Time check: 3 minutes.

A narrow, spiral staircase led to a tiny, empty room.

"Where are the weapons? There's nothing here."

"Did we do something wrong?"

They all separated, scanning the room, feeling the walls, floors...

Time check: 1 minute.

Lisa was lost in her thoughts, *hidden in plain sight*. "The weapons are here—in plain sight, we're just not seeing them," murmured Lisa. *Not seeing them. Think, Lisa!*

"Quick, everyone close and open your eyes, don't think about it, just start yelling out what you see," urged Lisa.

Time check: 35 seconds.

"Walls!"

"Ceiling!"

"Light fixture!"

Time check: 9 seconds.

"There's nothing in here, just us."

"That's it. Us, guys, us. We're the secret weapons!" exclaimed Portia.

Cheering, they all agreed that they were the 'secret weapons.' Positive, like-minded, committed individuals working together for the benefit of all could successfully protect the United Nations' mission from attack. People fulfilled a mission, not a brick-and-mortar building. Correct answer, with seconds to spare.

Lisa took it all in, talk about a sign for her and a lesson well learned. She took it further; if the secret weapon was cooperation, then perhaps the true enemy was thinking that one powerful person could do it all alone. The universe doesn't need a CEO or even a few grand leaders to solve problems; it needs a community flowing with equality and stewardship. The secret weapons. Fancy that, hidden in plain sight. *Time to open our eyes, guys*, thought Lisa, as she shut the car door.

"Don't laugh guys, but I think I just solved the world's problems. Starbucks, anyone?"

THE PATH ALL TRAVEL

Response Poem to Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken" by Michaela Morra, Grade 10

You, wanderer, who enter our wood,
Two choices lie before you.
Both of us offer all that is good—
All you wish for or ever could—
Listen to your friends true.

Lend me your ear, the West winds speak,
Your life's adventure awaits this day.
The river's siren song draws you to the peak—
Diamonds and rubies like stars you will seek—
Come this way, come this way.

Lend me your ear, the Eastern spirit beckons,
Rest your unsettled soul and lie your worries away.
A shroud of rose petals softens your path in seconds—
The raven's song, your cares it lessens—
Come this way, come this way.

Our paths branch off to different realms,
The inevitable ending, etched in stone.
The banshee's cry steers the helms—
Fate cuts our thread, our life underwhelms—
Time cuts down, until we are nothing but bone.

BETTER LIVING THROUGH SOCIAL ISOLATION

by Ellie Musgrave, Grade 12

Covid-19 has plagued the world, forcing the population to go into quarantine in hopes of minimizing the spread—triggering a worldwide panic to stock up houses fit for hibernation or a zombie apocalypse. Toilet paper is rare these days. As a Gen Z, I'm now forced to spend time with myself for hours on end. As a result, I've discovered things about myself that I really didn't want to know. Personally, I think the world's population is in need of some comic relief. The news should use this headline to demonstrate just that: "Millennials and Gen Zs tackle the challenge of Covid-19 quarantines—stretching to a new level of boredom." As such, I've chosen to take this time to focus on my more positive accomplishments. Here is a short list of things I've done over the *excruciatingly* long break: I've become an artist, painting ten works of art (going on eleven); I've become quite adept at playing the ukulele, learning around seven new songs; and I've read about twenty different books. I think it's safe to say I'm a triple threat of some sort. Covid-19 has got me (and the entire population of millennials and Gen Zs) to go out of my mind in isolation—for better or for worse.

Frankly, I think if you give me a couple more weeks of solitude, I'm going to be as good as Vincent Van Gogh or Leonardo Da Vinci—not to toot my own horn or anything. To give you more insight into my level of skill, the subjects I have painted include a butterfly, some daisies and a rubber ducky. When each painting is done, I chase my parents down to boastfully show them the masterpiece I have dutifully spent an hour or two creating so they can give me an *I-wish-I-never-had-another-child-but-I'm-going-to-act-proud* smile. My trips to Michaels have become limited due to pandemic mass panic, but a dedicated artist like myself doesn't let anything get in the way of true potential. The last trip (or, shall I say "quest?"—there is danger involved in the task) was spent buying more canvases and a paintbrush for the intricate details needed in outlining the butterfly. That being said, my painting has not restricted itself to *just* canvases—several calculators and a ukulele have been held victim to my brush.

I've also thought about becoming TikTok famous with my aforementioned artistic skills. This thrilling series would be called: "Day [insert number of days] of quarantine, painting things in my room until I get grounded... wait." I thought it was genius and bound to get me more followers than Charli D'Amelio (a famous TikTokker, or so I've heard). Sure, we're encouraged to practice good hygiene—and don't get me wrong, I am—but I'm still finding paint everywhere. My mom is concerned.

On to more pressing matters, like my upcoming stardom as a ukulele player. My parents, who are holed up with me during quarantine, have been getting pretty annoyed with my constant playing of *Riptide* whenever I was waiting for the paint to dry during my art—and that was often. So, I took it upon myself to learn new songs, such as *I Don't Know My Name* by the one and only Grace VanderWaal, *I'm Yours* by Jason Mraz, *Hey There Delilah* by Plain White T's, and more! The trick to playing the ukulele isn't playing the chords—though the E major does make me want to cry occasionally—it's the difficulty of the strumming patterns. Each song typically has a unique strumming, like *Riptide* which is down down up down up (DD UDU). But once the strumming pattern is mastered, there are no limits. With my trusty concert ukulele,

BETTER LIVING THROUGH SOCIAL ISOLATION

by Ellie Musgrave, Grade 12

and a voice of some sort, fame is in sight. I wonder if Grace VanderWaal will do a duet with me?

When stuck in quarantine, adventures are hard to come by, unless you have books—and trust me, I have plenty. I've been on exactly thirteen adventures, ranging from such serious issues as discovering yourself and finding your voice in abusive situations to taking over a corrupt government in a dystopian world with supernatural powers. I've always wished I could dive into the stories I read. I'd imagine being a pubescent teenager fighting bad guys with elemental powers. Part of me had always hoped I'd get struck by lightning and be the fastest person on earth, or, when I was thirteen, I'd be claimed by my Greek-godly parents (unfortunately, my mom and dad are both my real parents). Needless to say, the possibilities are endless when books are involved. Let's just say that I'd hit up Chapters during "The Purge."

In retrospect, I've accomplished more over the painfully long break than I've ever done in my entire lifetime. Though my parents might be sick of me constantly annoying them every which way, I think being socially isolated actually has more positives than negatives. Maybe I still would have become a young Picasso or a famous ukulele player without being sequestered in my house, but probably not. Instead, I think it's safe to say the quarantine has helped me uncover some underlying talents worth pursuing. #thankscorona.

MENTAL

A Crown of Elizabethan Sonnets by Huy Nguyen, Grade 11

A person's their former self's empty husk
 Left broken in pieces due to failings.
 Melancholy presents itself at dusk;
 A warden 'gainst emptiness, its being.
 Regret exists, as their faithful ally's
 Always there to motivate them forward.
 Anxiety's one on which they rely,
 Making them stop and think 'fore going onward.
 Inadequacy's who they confide in,
 A constant reminder to keep progressing—
 All of them, all friends that can repent sin—
 All will support them 'til doubt is pressing,
 'Til reality knocks body and limb.
 Is such light in the tunnel ever dim?

Is such light in the tunnel ever dim?
 When fatalism shrouds everything, when it
 Echoes through their minds, soothing like a hymn,
 Whispering to them that it's the destined way,
 The path that won't require help from others.
 They won't be dependant, be a burden.
 They won't suffer alone any further.
 They will befriend things that manifest in
 Their minds, where they will flourish forever.
 Why express it if they know their failure?
 Why tell? In hope of finding a lever
 To expose them to a world of grandeur?
 They won't rest, they won't sleep, they won't die now.
 They are there to support them 'til—who knows?

They are there to support them 'til Who knows.
 Inside their id, a need to express forms. Even
 when nothing but the silence blows,
 The stillness will herald the coming storm
 That will be intense, but will soon abate.
 It will be the anathema 'gainst them.
 It will liberate them from darkest fates
 That are thrust on those too trustful of them.
 The light after will be a revelation,
 They all are Succubus in mortals' skin;
 Intemperance will end in damnation.
 Grasp them, cleanse them, unleash them from within.
 That storm is the guide, go through it at dusk.
 A person's their former self's empty husk.

THE MEDLEY

by Khoa Nguyen, Grade 12

The needle hits. The two souls settle.
 They don't belong here, nor share a song.
 The needle glides, elegant and with care,
 Singing a melody as minds collide
 Outside.

Moments ago they were roses,
 One red of passion and one snowy might.
 Both beauties, each eye opposes,
 Now their thorns play vinyl, yet vinyl demise.

The needle scratches, and the blind men shrug,
 Their sight matter as much as the lives
 That they're clenching.
 Only their hearts warm themselves to the melody.

Then the needle rises, they see each other,
 Guns in hand, yet they never play elegies
 In their ballads. They push each other
 Away like magnets, pole to pole.

And the needle lands—
 The two minds go blind and feel the rumbles of their own lament.
 And the bomb lands. And they smile.

A Note from the Author...

The anaphora "The Medley" takes place amidst a fictional war, revolving around two soldiers from opposite sides who were trapped together. Knowing that a bomb will be dropped soon, the two settled their differences and listened to a song together on a turntable. The whole poem is structured around the movements of the turntable needle. As the piece of music progresses, the words related to music describe the environment, juxtaposing it against the war outside. The first nine lines introduce readers to the two men who could not fight in the war, and hence "don't belong here." As they are from different cultures, they do not "share a song." The next two lines work as a contrast between the peaceful environment inside—similar to the needle's gliding motion, "elegant and with care"—and the war outside between opposing "minds." "Outside" is left in its own line to highlight this stark difference. Their opposition is then described using an allusion to the War of the Roses. With this image, the rose's "thorns" then "play vinyl," a metaphor for their now-peaceful environment, but "vinyl demise" foreshadows their end later on. This part of the poem also contains "each eye opposes," which introduces the reader to one of the main metaphors: throughout the poem, the soldiers are often described as "blind" and would sometimes "see each other." The "sight" of these soldiers is a symbolic of seeing each other's differences—which, in this case, "matter as much as the life they're clenching." This situational irony underscores the fact that the soldiers' lives are expendable in the eyes of their superior officers. In this particular circumstance, they choose to settle their differences and accept each other as fellow human beings. This, in fact, explains the title, "The Medley"—meaning a piece of music that is a combination of two or more pieces of music—highlighting the triumph of human compassion over the philosophical differences of their cultures.

FROZEN HOLD

by Sarah Osinga, Grade 12

Blanketed souls that beneath lie cold
As frozen tears of the angels fall—
Warmth is stifled quick in frozen hold.

Joy due to a relentless snow mold,
Unlit candles beside the frost wall.
Blanketed souls that beneath lie cold.

“Mom I think we can stay home,” I told,
But she can’t stop without adverse call.
Warmth is stifled quick in frozen hold.

Leaving the heart of home to grow old,
Mom-of-the-year thinks she need do all.
Blanketed souls that beneath lie cold.

Moving quick to an icy strong hold,
Snowbanks become like a prison hall.
Warmth is stifled quick in frozen hold.

Rolling like a story left untold,
Spoken next in one last crisis call,
Blanketed souls that beneath lie cold,
Warmth is stifled quick in frozen hold.

AFTER EFFECTS

by Cora Pataran, Grade 8

It'd been a while since they came up with a vaccine for COVID-19. But that doesn't mean the pandemic didn't have lasting effects.

People are scared. They don't go out. The parks are almost empty. Masks are still being worn. I still remember when we weren't allowed out of the house for two weeks straight. The riots happened, the Pride Parade was cancelled, people barely went out at Halloween.

It's February now. Valentine's Day is just around the corner. I can't even go see my boyfriend because he's not allowed out of his house. I was going to give him one single rose over dinner and ask him to marry me. Now, I'm not sure if I'll be able to see his face in person for another year.

I'm scared to visit my parents because the virus is still out there. People have refused the vaccine. It hasn't disappeared entirely, and I doubt it ever will.

My coworker died from COVID-19, and I didn't go to the funeral because they didn't have one. Jessica said she wanted her funeral to be pleasant. She wanted a gathering of friends and family to celebrate her life, not grieve the loss of it. Instead, she got buried six feet under without a ceremony. I visit her grave every week with a new bouquet of flowers, trying to make up for it.

Jessica is just one of the hundred of thousands of people that died. Some people won't even be remembered...

My fingers stop, hovering over my keyboard. I've never been one to write, and to write about this... it's difficult. I remember it all so vividly. It was like living a nightmare. I want to forget about it, but the signs that it happened are everywhere.

People thought it was over around July, then the second wave came in August. It was terrible. Even more lives were lost because people refused to wear masks, sanitize their hands, do anything that protected them from the virus. It's just starting to cool down now, over a year since the first case.

I close my laptop, frustrated. I can worry about that later. Besides, I have a meeting to get ready for. Pushing myself off the couch, I wander my apartment. It isn't big, but it's big enough. I open the freezer door in my kitchen and pull out a frozen pizza. Peeling the plastic off and placing it on the pizza stone, I slide it into the oven. Kicking the door closed with my foot, I walk to my bedroom.

I stand in front of my closet, looking at the contents. I sigh and pull out a shirt. It's his favourite, anyway.

"I can't remember the last time I saw you in pink."

"Well, that wasn't the welcome I was expecting."

"Sorry," I said, "I just can't believe that I haven't seen you since last year. You look so different."

AFTER EFFECTS

by Cora Pataran, Grade 8

Charlie tugs at his pink hair. "I thought it was time for a change." He pauses, looking at me through the screen. "Is that your rubber ducky shirt?"

I look down at my blue button up, yellow rubber duckies dotting the fabric. I had a yellow tie over top. I nod and he smiles. "You remembered."

"Of course I did, what kind of a boyfriend would I be if I didn't remember your favourite shirt?"

A loud beeping cuts off his response. I turn back to the camera, "I'll be back in a minute." Charlie nods, settling back in his seat.

Pulling the pizza out of the oven, I hear Charlie's accented voice call out to me.

"Devon! Come back!"

Rolling my eyes, I hastily throw pizza onto a plate and go back to the living room. "What's wrong?"

"I was lonely."

I laugh and sit down, asking him if he has his dinner. He shows me a pizza box with a few slices missing.

"So, how's the writing coming?"

I groan and lean back. "It's a nightmare. I don't want to think about what happened last year. I want to put it behind me, but I keep getting reminded that it's still out there. I can't even see you in person!"

Charlie looks down in thought. "I know, but you know what? As long as we do our part, it'll get better. You have to remember that it won't ever go away. It'll always exist, like the flu. The most we can do is protect ourselves and loved ones. We always thought our society was a temple," he paused looking at me, "but even a temple can crumble."

MY BIRTHMARK

by Gabrielle Robinson

A couple years ago, I was walking out of my class when I ran into my teacher. He stopped me and said, "Gabby are you okay?"

I was very confused. As far as I knew, I was fine. "Yes, why?" I replied.

He then said, "It looks like you've got a black eye."

I remember that encounter like it happened yesterday. I can still play the series of events in my head each day. The truth is, my teacher meant no ill will when he asked me if I had gotten punched in the face. He was genuinely concerned, and he had no clue that it was my birthmark he was referring to. Not a black eye.

My birthmark has always been a source of insecurity for me. Growing up, I was a very introverted child. In my early pre-teen years, and to this day, I felt most comfortable dressing in darker clothes so as to not draw any attention to myself. As I grew older, I began to use makeup as a way to make myself feel more confident—and it worked for a while, until it suddenly became a mask for me to hide beneath. I felt most comfortable when I was with family, but when I went out and was around unfamiliar faces, that's when I became insecure. I believe my birthmark has always been a source of my social anxiety. The thought of everyone looking at me and probably wondering what was on my face was not just a thought anymore. It had become an obsession. I became so self-absorbed, in the sense that I could never truly enjoy myself, and I often times deprived myself of opportunities for fear of having to meet new faces. My birthmark had become a constant reminder of who I could never be: "a beautiful girl."

I've always been interested in science, but I've never truly researched what a birthmark is, and why some people have them while others don't. The fact is that everyone is born with marks on their bodies; however, some marks are bigger than others. Birthmarks are not genetically inherited all of the time, and depending on what colour birthmark you have, there's a name for it. More red birthmarks are called *vascular birthmarks*, and they appear when blood vessels do not form properly. Darker birthmarks (like mine) are called *pigmented birthmarks*, and they occur when there is an overgrowth of cells that cause more pigmentation in a certain area. The fact of the matter is that birthmarks are a luck of the draw.

Taking a break from the scientific aspect, many people believe that a birthmark shows how someone died in a past life. People without birthmarks apparently "died a natural death in their past lives"—which, if you ask me, is kind of boring. Depending on what shape or colour or size your birthmark is, it will indicate how you died in your past life. I like to think that I got mine from a fire.

Speaking of fires, I remember being in Grade 5, and people would come up to me and say "Gabby, what happened? Did you get that from a fire?"

I would reply, "I had to go back to save the baby!"

I would laugh, because why would 10-year-old me go back into a burning house unless it was for my Percy Jackson books?

Now, I say all of this to say: birthmarks have such interesting stories and myths about

MY BIRTHMARK

by Gabrielle Robinson

them. And the truth is, anyone can get a birthmark. My question is, why do we place such importance on these marks that really are of little significance? It's like critiquing that hand or leg or eye that you were born with. We had no say in that matter, so why do we love to knit pick every little thing about our bodies?

Earlier I mentioned that my birthmark had become my obsession. Someone could be hanging off a cliff, yelling for help and I would be thinking, "but my birthmark!" It sounds ridiculous, but I had a serious problem. As teenage girls, we already have so much to mentally juggle. If we are not being objectified, we are being put into hurtful stereotypes, and if we are beautiful, we are put under a microscope and picked at by everyone. Having a blemish or a scar that you are ashamed of can make you feel like you're not beautiful, or smart, or worthy, but that is the farthest thing from the truth. On Instagram, we are surrounded by beautiful people and, at times, it can make us feel like the smallest of the small. We start to compare ourselves to everyone regardless of race, ethnicity or age. Black women want to bleach. White women want to tan. Straight hair wants curly. Curly wants straight. Tall wants short and short wants tall. We are never ever satisfied and we will never ever be satisfied if we don't take the time to start appreciating and celebrating our bodies and scars and imperfections.

It's so easy for me to come up here and say "love yourself," but it would be a lie if I preached what I still to this day cannot fully practice. There are days where I want to wallow in my room and cry about not feeling pretty enough. But how productive is this? I challenge not just girls, but guys, too, to name out on all of you fingers all the things you find beautiful about your body. Something I did when I was younger was write out all the compliments people gave me in a month and put them in a jar. These compliments don't have to be physical. One could be "you are really good at art" or "you have a pretty voice" or "you are super smart" or "you are an amazing hockey player, you could make it into the NHL." When we take attention away from superficial praise, we start to feel proud of the things that we are actually able to control. I believe that once we begin to commend ourselves for our actions, talents, and character, the more we will learn to accept ourselves.

A lot of time has passed, and my insecurities about my birthmark have come a long way. I can finally look in the mirror and say: "The only reason you are single is because you want to be single," and I think 10-year-old Gabrielle would be really proud of that. As Boonaa Mohammed said, "If the whole world was blind, how many people would you impress?"

SUMMER ON THE NORTH COURTS

by Jonny Russell, Grade 12

In the summer of '11, we used to play ball
on the courts near St. Christopher's.

Down there,
we used to bully the kids
who have pockets charged with money.

Down there,
we used to watch Andre hoop with us
until he blew his knee out.

Down there,
the reality was that everyone returned
back home to an ill grandfather.

Down there,
the cops used to dictate the box
each of us would belong to; casket or jail.

Down there,
on Sundays, the church kept
all of our knees pressed to the cold floor

Down there,
on Fridays, the church became a hub
for all drug trade.

Down there,
we waited for Owen; then we realised,
Frank's Place was cancelled.

Down there,
The Sun's beams were
Bleeding all over the sidewalks.

Down there,
At the corner of Lyford St. there was a drug addict
Who our parents used to know

Down here,
I am standing below tall trees
And the beautiful garden the church grew.

Over there,
The tombstones are standing above
A countless number of
Lifeless bodies in the ground.

Everywhere,
I realised it was all the same;
The only difference between
The church's garden and its graveyard is that
Flowers come back out of the ground.

MY WORLD

Response Poem to Georgia Douglas Johnson's "Your World" by Georgia Saarimaki, Grade 10

Your world is as big as you make it,
For I would know. I often explore.
I soar to where the sky turns to space,
Flying freely is what I most adore.

Then I began to get nervous, soaring this high.
Now flying only happens from time to time;
Instead, I sit alone in the corner of my tiny nest
As I watch leaves turn to brown from lime.

Melancholy devours me when I see others fly—
My wings are now insignificant and weak.
Never again will they be touched by the breeze—
My world has never appeared so bleak.

THE AISLE UNTURNED

by Rayi Singh, Grade 12

When did it all go wrong?

It's all I can ask myself as my eyes land on her beautiful white dress. The silhouette emphasizes her petite figure, the ballgown extravagantly elegant. She looks like a princess. But I don't care. I pause before promenading down the carpet. I don't want to do this. I don't want to marry her. I look at my mom, who's now staring at me uneasily.

Her eyes glare at me, imploring me to carry on. My legs protest. The crowd fidgets with discomfort. Distressing looks exchange between family members.

Does it trace back to when I asked her to marry me? Is that when it went all wrong? I knelt in front of her six months ago, hoping she'd say no. The ring I held out for her was the cheapest one I could find. The restaurant was lousy. It was repellant. Nothing remarkable stood out about that shoddy site. The underpaid waitresses didn't even bother clapping for us after she said yes. I wished—after studying the place and all the things I could afford—she'd say no. She'd have come to her senses, to finally discern that she deserves better.

"When do you want to get married?" I probed.

"Anytime you want," she glowed, unwilling to keep her eyes off the ring.

No, that's not *when* it exactly went wrong.

It was further back. When I first asked her out, maybe—is *that* when it went all wrong? When I first saw her, I only measured her looks to be average. Nothing special. Word got around she had feelings for me. Starving for a relationship, I asked her out immediately.

"Do you want to go out with me?"

"Yes." She replied with a breathtaking smile. The relief she felt exuberated upon her pale rose cheeks. Even then, I still didn't find her beautiful.

At that point, I wondered if any of this was normal to begin with.

When I first felt something for her, it was for her hazel eyes that glowed in the kiss of sunlight. For a second I felt like I could fall in love with her.

"I love you," I expressed. For a second I convinced myself it was true.

I drew her in, and her eyes lingered on mine.

"I love you, too," her response arrived promptly.

The closer I got to her, the more I understood how disingenuous I could be.

I hate that I can't bring myself to love her, no matter how much I try. It's not as if she's abhorrent. She doesn't care about the materialistic things I can offer her. She never once glances at another man while I'm beside her. She only wants me. She wants to share her life

THE AISLE UNTURNED

by Rayi Singh, Grade 12

with me. Isn't that what true love is?

But then, why am I still not in love with her?

Sometimes I stay up at night wondering if she will ever find the real me, sneaking behind the loathsome fables I narrate in persuasion. Then, sometimes, I hope she won't. I wouldn't know what to say to her anymore. Then I pray that someday, any day, I will finally fall in love with her and be as happy as she is.

I terminate my pause. My legs regain their tenacity, and I finally resume walking towards her again. My mom mouths a soundless "thank god," and beams at me for not embarrassing her any further. A heavy burden of shame lifts from the shoulders of my family members. My bride exhales in alleviation. She surmises that I probably stopped for some explicable reason. She never blames me, because it's never my fault. *Right?*

I instinctively take her hands in mine once I stand in front of her.

"Do you take this man to be your lawfully wedded husband?" The priest questions her.

"I do," and her beaming smile rebounds. I haven't seen it in months. Her grin takes me by surprise—how jubilant she is.

"And you, sir, do you take this woman to be your lawfully wedded wife?" He looks at me.

There is silence for a few seconds.

"Yes," I smile, returning the beaming smile exactly the way she demonstrates. I gently squeeze her hand and she melts, almost as if she's too much in love.

I wish I could say the same.

LEARNING HOW TO SCRIBBLE

by Emily Strong-Randall, Grade 12

When did it all go wrong? I had been staring at these six seemingly meaningless words at the top of my supplementary application sheet for what felt like the past month. I couldn't understand why a post-secondary institution would want to know such a thing. My mom insisted I finish before the end of the week, but my mind was blank. I didn't know what they wanted to hear, or what an appropriate response was.

Frankly, I barely knew anything at all. Sure, I could graph a polynomial function, recite all the literary elements in my sleep or even describe the theory of Darwin's finches. But to ask a seventeen-year-old when it all went wrong—now that is a nearly impossible task.

Perhaps it was when I chose to apply to this ridiculous university in the first place, but that wouldn't be a sufficient response. Maybe it was in Grade 11, when students were faced with a life-changing decision to choose courses that ultimately determine the rest of our lives (bearing in mind that we can't even drive without parental supervision yet). Even that couldn't fully explain when it all went wrong.

An optimist may argue that it's during one's Grade 8 graduation, when students are distinguished for their exquisite academic achievements at only age thirteen. But even that doesn't make sense. As thirteen-year-olds, the biggest challenge students have faced is puberty, and that is anything but academic. There must be more to the story.

Maybe it all started heading south at age eleven when school dress codes began to get enforced and students were told what they could and could not wear. Or better yet, when students get sent home from school for being shameful enough to wear shorts slightly shorter than their fingertips (clearly the enforcers don't have long wingspans). Even this, however, can't be the defining moment. Let's not forget that, at age nine, children are being taught the right and wrong way to conduct an oral presentation. As seven-years-olds, students learn the acceptable way to print the letters of the alphabet. At five, we're told how to colour within the lines.

How could I possibly choose one of the dozens of moments that have gone wrong through my life? The student that writes her supplementary on one moment gone wrong—well, that student probably hasn't lived a very exciting life. The truth is, we spend our entire lives following instructions and staying within the lines until one day—arguably one of the most important days of our lives—they ask us to change. To stop. "Be unique," they say. "Write about something we have never seen before." It's not like there aren't another three million high school graduates this year... My application is sure to be one of a kind. Now that should be my grad quote.

Despite my naïve, seventeen-year-old brain, I began writing my supplementary essay, which was actually very easy once I realized they were asking the wrong question all along.

January 28th, 2020

Tabitha Randall

Pickering College

16945 Bayview Avenue

Newmarket, ON L3Y 4X2

RE: *Not WHEN did it all go wrong, but HOW I reacted to ALL the "gone wrongs."*

To whom it may concern...

CELLPHONES

A Spoken Word Poem by Shyam Subramanyam, Grade 9

In the world of instant gratification
 Where happiness comes from a notification
 That phone in our pockets will be our damnation
 When that DING rings our ears, our interest is piqued
 A little orange man's 240 characters cause uproar in the nation
 Leaving our water unfiltered but filtering our photos
 Trying to fit in is the motto
 In the game of putting shame on others for fame
 Through the camera, Big Brother from Oceania casts a gaze into your life
 Your phone cuts your relations as if it were a knife
 We place our phone on a pedestal
 An object of innovation that made us less productive, leading to frustration
 Picking it up as we put our work down
 Surfing without a board but your fingertips
 Words don't come from the lips
 Jokes mocking others' hardships
 When did playing games on our parents' phones
 Turn into
 Online warzones
 Where the cost isn't a prepaid data plan but ignorance?
 Ignorance to the destruction of the Ozone
 Layer
 Ignorance to the last hope prayers
 Uttered by the refugees in Syria
 But I mean, ignorance is bliss, isn't it?
 It is bliss until you are the voice being ignored, the voice that hoped for an ear to turn.
 Stuck in the depth of a cavern
 It's quite ironic
 In the age of information where data is sped supersonic
 Through methods electronic
 We are the most disconnected
 A USB ejected
 Issues neglected
 Our society is infected.

THE SILVER RING

by Thera Sze, Grade 11

Today's not a good day. The sky burst into tears. The wind howls with anger. The sun plays hide-and-seek. People hide under big umbrellas to cover their sadness and grief. The only thing they want to do is to go back home and have a good sleep. What else can you do on a rainy day?

On the corner of the street, there is an old lady. She's about five feet tall with a damp, woven hat. Beside her is a cart with a big, grey bucket and a few black garbage bags on top. She picks up litter with her rubber gloves on the ground as though they were her babies.

"Bang!" She hears the race begin between the lightning and thunder, but she's not scared at all. Instead, she keeps focusing on her work. She pulls out the bin cover, takes away the full garbage bag, and puts a new one on.

"Cheers! Let's grab another drink!" A man walks around the corner, has no idea what he's saying. His body swings around with a green, glass bottle in his hand. Soon he falls down next to the garbage bin and starts to vomit. Something shiny and sparkly on his hand catches her attention. She puts down her broom and peeks. All of a sudden, her facial expression changes—from exhaustion to concern. She pats on his back slightly, trying to make him feel better. He slaps her hand away and shouts at her, right into her face. He stands up and keeps kicking the bin until it falls down. There is a dormant volcano in his body. It has been quiet all this time, and now it explodes.

After the eruption, leftover food, papers, and boxes are all over the place and soaked with dirty water. She picks them up one by one, carefully put them back into the bin. He is so tired that he lies on the floor, murmuring to himself. His cheeks are as red as apples.

After cleaning up, she puts his arms around her shoulders and pulls him aside. She slowly lays him down so that he can sleep in a comfortable position. When she takes the bottle away from his hand, she sees the shiny, sparkly thing again. It's a silver ring.

Three years ago, she lived with her husband. One day they argued over some little thing. She kicked him out and he went to drink, trying to forget. It was pouring heavily outside, same as today, but he didn't care—he was drunk as a lord. He fainted on the road, became hypothermic. No one was there to help him.

The old lady blames herself for the meaningless fight. She doesn't want others to lose their loved ones as she did. She doesn't want others to make the same mistake as she did. Mostly, she doesn't want others to feel as lonely and helpless as she is now. As she looks at the drunk man with the shiny, sparkly ring, she knows there must be someone out there who loves him.

Hours later, the man will awake, sober, his bottle gone. He will leave with the silver ring.

MEMORIES IN WATERCOLOUR

A Crown of Sonnets by Kathy Wang, Grade 11

-Blue Nun-

Over the eastern hills, the glowing moon
Rises between layers of opaque clouds,
Transgressing through the night in a loud boom.
Flowing and overlapping in dark shrouds,
The truth manifests repentance;
It shows a spattering of growing doubt.
She came, she was gone; her passing sentence,
"Peace comes from within. Don't seek it without."
Her hope encourages resurrections,
Thereby uplifting the zealous rainbow
Temple of life, breeding interconnections.
A flickering of hope crescendos;
Not to be held back by a starry rope—
His culmination of colours brings in hope.

-Herd Boy's Song-

His culmination of colours brings in hope
With altruistic displays of the sun,
The precipitous trail goes on; and one
Moss is slippery, but herd boy still gropes,
His voice tickling the major scale's sharp slope.
The herd boy's song flickers hope when it's done
While sheep climb up the hill one by one.
The vocals crept by him; but they elope
As mist fades in the soft breeze, he remains
With simplicity his own nature still.
Butterflies appear, he cannot control,
But to follow, to leap, and entertain
When sunlight hits the peak. He dashes 'til
The breathtaking sun shines right through his soul.

-Sunrain-

The breathtaking sun shines right through his soul,
As he climbs up to the top of the hill.
The sky is arctic, as if the herd boy brings a watercolour brush,
Painting through the empyrean with long, freestyle strokes.
Raindrops gather speed, pizzicato on the ground.
The sky is gold, as if the Buddhist's halo spread across the horizon;
Herd boy quickly relinquishes his shoes,
And chants in front of the statue, Tathagata.
The sky is indigo, as if the nun steps out of her temple
And throws her robe to cover the misty sky
While whispering, "When we see truly, there is nothing at all."
The decrescendo begin its melody,
While the meno mosso of the sun
dips down on the scope of earth's heaven.
The valley's display views hope yet to come,
And the mutterings of freedom are heard from beyond; she sees,
Over the eastern hills, the glowing moon.

WHAT HAPPENED ON THE ISLAND

by Sara Wietzes, Grade 9

Drowning. I was drowning. There seemed to be an endless amount of water above me as I struggled to break the surface. I could see the sun shining down through the water and I knew that the air was near. When my head finally broke the surface, it took a few seconds for me to get my bearings. The air was humid, the water was salty and a stunning blue-green, indicating I was somewhere tropical. The only visible sign of land was a mountainous island that loomed to the east. It seemed as though there were no signs of life, but it was my best and only bet. Taking a deep breath, I began to swim towards it.

As I neared the shore, I managed to pull myself up onto a flat rock to catch my breath to see what sort of equipment I had with me. I was wearing a plain black T-shirt and beige pants, and around my waist was a clip containing a rope with a hook on the end. And a handgun.

I struggled to remember what had happened that caused me to be plunged into the sea. I wasn't sure where I was headed or why I was somewhere tropical, but I knew that I needed to scope out my surroundings and get an idea of where in the world I was.

Hopping off the rock, I landed with a thud on the beach, the sand absorbing the impact. I think I'd been in a situation like this before? My mind was scrambled. I had memories, I remembered things. But the question was if they were my own or not? Some things clicked together like pieces of a puzzle, but others seemed so out of place. I remembered the adventures I'd had, similar to this. Expeditions that were full of excitement and danger, but they seemed like something I had seen on TV, not like something I'd experienced.

I didn't have time to ponder this right now, though—I needed to get to higher ground and figure out if there was anyone else here. Preferably, I hoped to be off the beach before nightfall. I didn't want to be stuck here when the tide came in. But first, I needed a way through the thick jungle that currently had me barricaded on the beach.

I checked my pockets quickly, but there didn't seem to be anything remaining from my frantic swim to the island—if there had been anything to begin with. Noticing there were a few pouches attached to my belt, I checked them for something sharp that I could use to make my trek through the dense vegetation easier. There was nothing in the first one, but the second had more weight. Unclipping it from my belt, I opened it to find a metal piton. It was about as long as my hand, and one end had a wickedly sharp point while the other was rounded with a clip hammered through it. I let out a sigh. This wouldn't get me through the trees. Shoving the climbing pick back into the pouch, I set off at a jog along the beach to the west, where the sun was beginning to fall. With no visible break in the treeline, I figured I'd just have to push through. Finding an area that wasn't as dense as the others, I began to move aside the vines. I felt some thorns snag my arm as I pulled away. With a flash of pain, they tore at my arm, leaving some nasty red scratches. Hoping they wouldn't begin to bleed, I kept pushing through.

Eventually, the thick vegetation gave way to a wide clearing, which seemed as though it had been cleared by human hands. The sides were too well-trimmed for it to just be natural.

WHAT HAPPENED ON THE ISLAND

by Sara Wietzes, Grade 9

I took a few steps into the clearing and noticed something strange. The break in the trees appeared to be guarded by four large, stone statues. All of them were covered in moss and had seen better days. They were of what seemed to be people wielding swords. Two of them looked as though they were about to launch into battle, and the other two had their swords held in a position as though they were guarding something. But they were all so worn down you couldn't see details. Some were missing arms, and even their weapons were starting to crumble—the tip of one of their swords rested in the soft green grass at its feet.

I didn't have time to stop and admire them anymore, though. The sun was beginning to sink, and I wasn't sure how many more hours of daylight I had to get to higher ground. I thought for a moment about waiting the night out in the clearing under the stars. My whole body was tired from all of the swimming and hiking and would've very much enjoyed resting right then and there. But a memory just beyond reach told me that I should keep going. It told me that it wasn't a good idea, that something bad happened to me in a similar situation. The fear of the unknown sent a rush of adrenaline through my veins, which gave me the strength to keep moving.

As I continued through the clearing to the other side, I realized that a stone path was beginning to form. Sure, it was ruined and broken, but it was a path nonetheless, and it had to lead somewhere. There was nothing in my mind telling me it was a bad idea, so I figured I'd follow it. It guided me up a flight of broken and mossy stairs, which pointed the way over a broken stone bridge suspended over a deep crevice in the earth. I glanced over the edge in hopes of finding another way across, but noticed a deep river flowing at the bottom of the rocky pass; however, it didn't appear to lead back to the ocean. Did it flow inland? If so, there must've been a lake or puddle somewhere, something that was lower ground than where I was currently. Against my better judgement, I moved closer to the edge to try and get a glimpse of where the water led to. Before I was able to spot anything, I felt the stones of the bridge beneath me beginning to give way, and I attempted to jump back onto solid ground. But the bridge gave way, and I was plunged into the river.

With a yelp of pain, my breath was knocked from me as I hit the surface of the fast-flowing water, and I felt a wave of darkness try to consume me. I broke away from it and fought my way to the surface, my mouth full of water. I was being swept by the strong current to the mouth of a cave where the river seemed to flow. With a jolt, I realized that the only reason why the current would be moving so fast was if it led to a waterfall. Clambering to the walls of the canyon, I tried to get a grip on anything that I could use to pull myself out of the river, but the stone walls were too smooth, and my hands just scraped uselessly along the edge. Remembering the piton in one of the pouches on my belt, I quickly grabbed it and tried to embed it into the stone walls. But there was no way that it would stick in the thick stone. As the current bounced me closer to the mouth of the cave, I became more frantic. Untying the rope and hook off of my belt, I tried to look for something I could throw it onto. Nothing in sight would do. I went limp for a few seconds to try and think of what to do next.

WHAT HAPPENED ON THE ISLAND

by Sara Wietzes, Grade 9

Too late. I was swept through the mouth of the cave. The sound of roaring water filled my ears. I was right, there was a waterfall... however, I caught a glimpse of a wooden beam that was suspended between two rocks not far from the ceiling of the cave. But could I get my rope up there? I had nothing to lose. As I grew closer to the sound of the roaring waterfall, I prepared myself to throw the rope. I heard the metal end loop over itself and prepared to fall. But the rope stopped me short. I found myself suspended in midair. Lucky for me, there seemed to be a flat ledge to the right of the falls that I could swing to, and it led somewhere... I pumped my legs and swung myself over to the ledge, landing with a thud on the hard stone.

"What happened to you?!?" A voice exclaimed.

I tried to respond, but ended up doubling over in a coughing fit. My voice just didn't seem to want to work. The stranger helped me up and led me over to a rock where I could sit down.

"You don't seem too badly hurt, but you might be bruised." She leaned on the cave wall across from me. I struggled to form words.

"I-I'm okay," I mumbled, my voice returning slowly.

"So, if you don't mind me asking again, what happened?" she seemed genuinely concerned.

"I have no idea," I laughed nervously, attempting to stand up against the wall. "I just sort of woke up in the ocean. I can't remember anything".

"It happens," The stranger shrugged and smiled slightly.

"What do you mean 'It happens'?" I asked, confused as to why she was smiling.

"Sometimes when you time jump, you can find it hard to remember things."

WE HAVE LONG TO LOVE

A Response Poem to Tennessee Williams' "We Have Not Long to Love" by Jake Wu, Grade 10

We have long to love
When wrinkles take their place,
When life comes to its eve.
Still it lives, this moment's silence.
No word could be uttered,
No deed could be done,
Which can be more treasured
than this moment's fun.
Though the fairest countenance will fade,
The sweetest words cannot decay.
The only way for keeping love abide,
is to preserve every single day.
To the time in the past, never bid adieu.
Fill it with passion, for each moment's new.
We seal all our memories in a case, until
the end of time, until doomsday's due.
For all the days that we have
are carved on our hearts.
We have long to love.
A moment. A life...

CHRYSANTHEMUMS

A Narrative Poem by Victoria Zalewski, Grade 9

On a Sunday afternoon
The scent of chrysanthemums meandered through the air,
Wafting in through open windows
And weaving their existence into everyday life.

They were an overlooked presence,
Garnering notice from only the most attentive of people,
Those who would stop to bask in their gift before the smell would fade away
And forget about them altogether.

The flowers,
Five delicate plants adorned with soft petals,
Had poked through the crumbling soil
And fought to droop in the otherwise vacant garden.

As the breeze would pass through them,
Leaving the stems to dance a peculiar sway,
Their aroma would float up onto the porch,
Rustling stiff pages and the old woman's wispy hair.

Despite the white-hot day, she was draped in a shawl
Made of wool and of her own making,
From hands that were blotched and thin and tired—
Tools blunt from consistent use.

Her glossy eyes scanned over the leather-bound album,
Jumping from one photo to examine the next,
And she could hear the echoes of laughter and conversation,
And she could feel the jubilation that only came with teenage dreaming.

Attempting to draw the memories close proved difficult,
Like reaching to hold onto a waterfall after stumbling off a disintegrating edge,
The cliff's pedestal growing farther with every unheard cry,
And the pit below growing ever larger.

Maybe they were only created to be eventually forgotten,
To melt silently into the background of our lives,
And only rise to the surface while we work through a photo album—
Nostalgia a hot longing in our chests.

CHRYSANTHEMUMS

A Narrative Poem by Victoria Zalewski, Grade 9

The woman had grown accustomed to this pained loneliness.
It was a guest she knew only too well,
As not many gave notice to her wilting presence
Or to the yellow chrysanthemums planted near her feet.



artwork by Helen Liu, Grade 12

NEWSPAPER CLIPPINGS

by Victoria Zalewski, Grade 9

The best sound on earth is that of kitchen scissors cutting through newspaper. It's sharp and strangely cold—the embodiment of December air nipping at skin. I'm certain my thoughts make their way back to that sound practically every afternoon, a discovery I fail to ignore over and over. Is it strange to admire a sound? To savour it as if I was listening to a new song? Maybe. I pour my attention into not snipping any words.

It's quiet. I notice because it normally isn't. Imagining this office without the accompaniment of buzzing machines, ringing telephones and jumbled conversations taking place over desktops is practically impossible. Right now, it sounds empty and unused. Like a nursery that belongs to an outgrown child. I place my scissors on my lap and cock my head to get a better listen. A hum emanates, low and soft—maybe it belongs to the overworked lights or a generator. What I don't hear are coffee mugs placed down on wooden desks or the click of dress shoes walking briskly down a corridor. My suspicions are confirmed: the clippings are left spread out on the coffee table. They minimize my shock when I walk out and find the room deserted.

I stand in the doorway for a moment—my hand perched on the frame—and just look. The office is by no means a huge area. Multiple grey and red desks pushed together in different areas of the room, leather chairs placed awkwardly around them. The dividers were a second thought. You can tell by the way our heads peak over the top even as we sit. An areca palm with drying tips is propped up with a stake. The water cooler has paper cups strewn along its base. For a place that looks chaotic, it's strange to feel the absence of people.

My hands reach up to rub my face before I can stop them. It's a natural reaction I always have under stress or exasperation, but boy is it inconvenient right now. I cringe. I realize immediately that I've smudged my makeup. I spent the morning applying copious amounts of foundation, only to destroy it in a matter of moments. Considering the force I used to massage my face, I also know that the mark is visible. That's bad. Awful. Someone sees it, and I'll be smothered with concern and questions and prodding.

It's empty in the building, which means that, potentially, I might not be seen at all. Still, knowing that someone could is too risky. My thoughts wander back to the foundation I keep in my purse. I turn back to the lounge to grab my belongings before pushing my way into the bathroom.

It's small. Two cubicles, a mirror and one rusted faucet. The lighting is stained a dandelion yellow, but the sky will dim soon and no one will pay enough attention to notice the harsh lines. My fingers caress the bruise lightly, but even the innocuous touch makes it pulse with soreness. The unwanted mark stretches from my right cheek up above my brow bone and turns an ugly shade of purple. Even I'm taken aback by its brutality. I know that it's bound to fade, so makeup will have to be my saving grace for the time being.

It takes several coats before I can put down the tacky brush, satisfied. If I really focus, the right side of my face gleams an unnatural hue of lavender, but it's only visible from certain angles. My weight shifts from one foot over to the other. Being alone is such a strange feeling.

NEWSPAPER CLIPPINGS

by Victoria Zalewski, Grade 9

It wallows in my lower abdomen—a strange mix of butterflies and emptiness. I hold my scissors firmly.

The sound of gentle humming is replaced by brush scraping against tile. Marissa's laugh is full, her hands resting on both sides of the doorway. She gazes at me with her bright eyes.

"There you are," she begins, happiness practically oozing out of her words. I feel nauseous. "How many times has this happened this month? I'm convinced you live here or something." My anxiety dries out my mouth, and I'm embarrassed to recognize how trapped I feel. My tongue is sandpaper.

"How did you even find me here?" It's curt, I know. I didn't mean for it to sound that way, but in the struggle to keep my voice steady I grab at anything that comes to mind. My heart sinks into my shoes the moment her lips press thin.

"Cass, I was only joking. I saw your tea still on the desk and the bathroom light on. Didn't take much detective work after that. Really, what are you doing here?" Now she feels bad. Fantastic. My empty laugh bounces off the stalls.

"I'm fine, just scatterbrained," I say, my hands waving above my head. "Really, I just lost track of time. I'm actually about to leave." To show what I mean, I gesture towards my scissors and the awaiting handbag, hoping she'll take the hint to go. Instead, she clears the newspaper off the sink and props herself onto it.

"Okay," she settles with the answer, waiting for me to reveal more before she starts prodding. I clench my clammy hand around the scissors. "Job offerings?" she asks.

"Not for me," I reply. His memory intrudes my already disoriented thoughts. "Davie." Marissa leans over uncomfortably at the mention of his name. She always does. I don't think she ever liked him. From the moment they met until she watched me walk down the aisle. For the most part, she keeps it to herself, but from the way she bites her tongue I know his nickname is still in good use. David the Douchebag.

"Is everything fine?" She picks non-existent dirt out of her acrylic nails. "With him, I mean?" The panic rises in my chest again at almost double its previous weight. "Why wouldn't it be?"

"I... don't know." She has to pause for a second, consider the response. I need to dig my toenails into my socks so I don't bolt. "You just became weird all of a sudden. Different. You hardly ever talk anymore, not even to me." The humming that used to be a background noise crescendos, almost like it's trying to embody the tension of our conversation. I wish it would stop. It's giving me a migraine.

"I told you, nothing's wrong." The tone of my voice is notably persistent, viciously cold.

"No, you're not," she shoots back, her words equally competitive to my own. "I know you're not. I know so much better than you realize, and I can tell that he's the problem. You do everything for him, Cassidy. You're like his dog or something. This isn't you."

"You don't know me." My hands are trembling so much the muscles start to cramp.

NEWSPAPER CLIPPINGS

by Victoria Zalewski, Grade 9

Her glare is sharp, mean. It jumbles my thoughts, making it hard for me to think at all.

"Yes, I do." A painted fingernail jabs into my chest. "I'm not an idiot, despite what you might think. One day I'm going to come here and find out that you're gone because he's done something bad. Something disgusting." Her ugly mouth keeps talking, spewing out accusatory lies, but I'm not listening. I just focus on her ridiculously straight teeth and plant my feet into the ground. I remember those teeth. When they were crooked and my only qualms were about my social status. When she understood me. Why doesn't she get it now? She's selfish. So selfish.

I examine my hands and try to ignore her ringing voice and that yellow light searing into the nape of my neck. My knuckles are blotched with white dots. I try to pour my attention into counting them, but my hands are shaking and I lose track. My blurred reflection stares back at me from the blades of the scissors. With every moment, every word that I fail to process, that humming increases, a pounding in my head that resembles a twisted song. A hymn I can no longer block out. I just want it to stop. I want it all to stop. An anguished yell, disembodied and brimming with pain, breaks through my thoughts. It doesn't feel real. In my mind, it sounds distant—a strained echo—but I know there are no windows in our bathroom.

My shirt is damp. All my attention diverts to that instantaneously. I can feel the liquid soak through the polyester and wet my skin. I have to drag my eyes down to look closer, time trailing slowly and with no seeming end. It's such a deep red. It reminds me of a lipstick I used to wear, a colour such a rich crimson that the lightest application would leave a stain for hours. My right hand feels empty. The scissors are notably absent, the blades no longer digging into my hot palm.

GRANDSON

A Response Poem to Andrei Guriianu's "Grandfather" by Judy Zhu, Grade 10

You came to the world with my name, Andrei,
I knew there would be a you, even if I never met you.
I heard from my son, your father,
He said you would be just like me.

My dear, precious Grandson,
Be brave like warriors,
Be free like eagles upon the sky.

I imagined looking into your amber eyes,
They shined like stars which never die,
Forever and ever, we would be a family.

On Christmas Eve,
The family gathered around the lighted tree,
Candles were glowing, coloured the house warm,
Wood was blazing, kept away the storm.

We talked about the future,
Hoping you could come to us early.
I said the name "Andrei,"
But we all knew that was not me speaking of myself.

Andrei. We spoke of hope,
The one I dreamed to meet,
Who would carry the name.



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