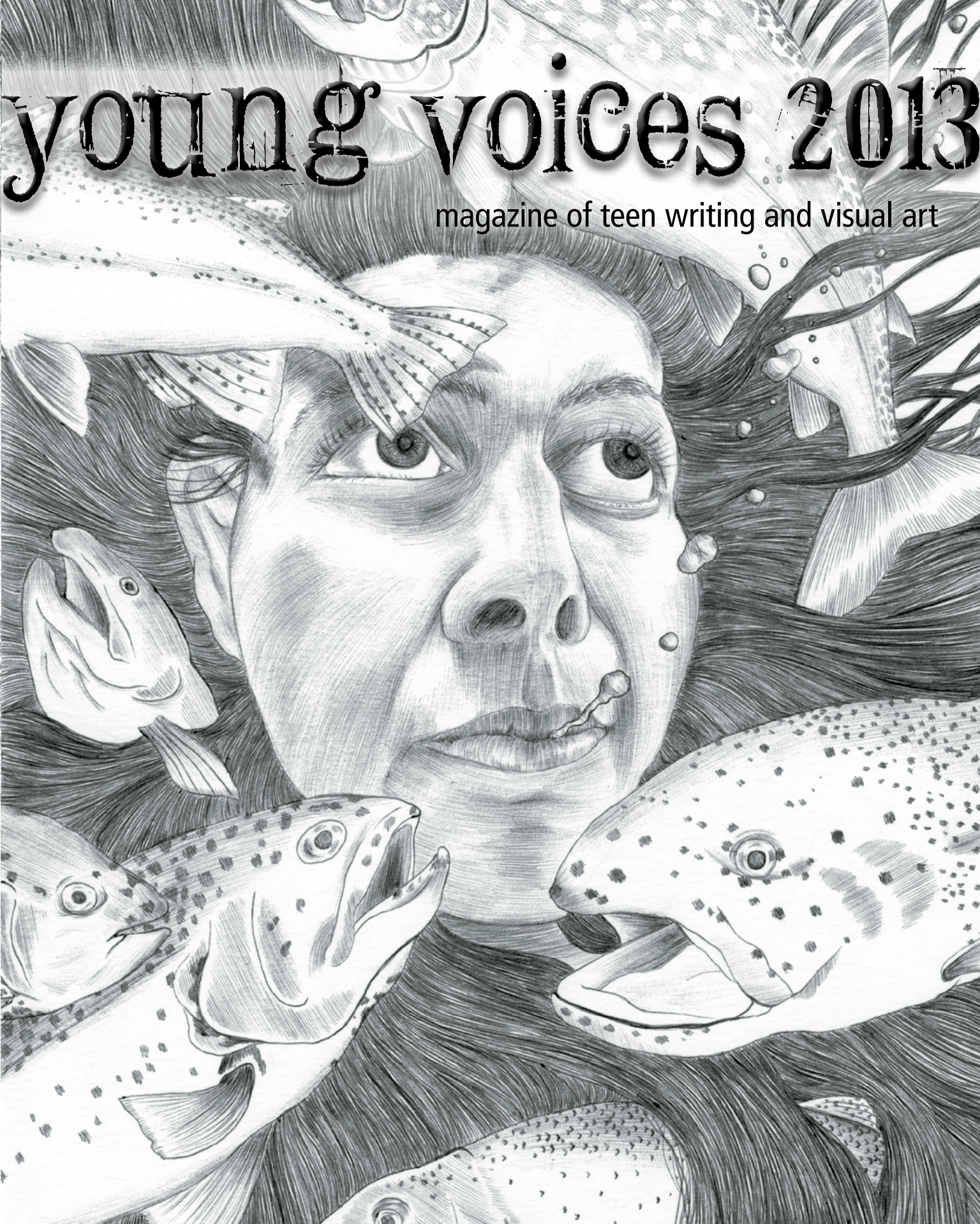


young voices 2013

magazine of teen writing and visual art





1901

Selena Salam, age 14

CONTENTS

Poetry

Only Seventeen , Nuard Tadevosyan, age 18	1
A Restless Mind , Shakir Lakhani, age 15	3
The Poetic Feet , Sarah Parry, age 17	4
Why I Didn't Write My Poem , Sam Easterbrook, age 12	4
The Duel of the Devotees , Edward Martins-Berki, age 19	7
Children of Caine , Rachel Mortaley, age 19	7
Untitled , Alanna Veiga, age 14	8
Dinner Time , Harry O'Malley, age 13	9
Time to Think , Claire Young, age 15	12
Lost Hue , Victor Ostrovsky, age 18	12
Procrastination , Nicole Ooi, age 13	12
Brave , Helen Toner, age 16	12
Outside, Inside , Amna Majeed, age 14	20
Sometimes we don't notice that we are breathing, but at this moment you've noticed you've stopped , Keegan Gardner-Elmer, age 16	21
The Mother of Invention , Terese Mason, age 17	23
Swan Songs , Gwenyn Huang, age 15	23
Kids , Fatou B. Balde, age 14	23
Twisted , Helen Su, age 16	26
Perfect , Jian Yu (Michelle) Wang, age 13	26
The Circus , Broughan March, age 13	26
Human , Allannah Lennox, age 17	27
The Poet in March , Imogen Joy Bobert-Hahn, age 17	27
The Cabin in the Sea , William Parks, age 17	33
Eiffel Tower Escape , Rosie Long Decter, age 17	33
Love Triangle , Mik Tampold, age 16	34
The Most Simple of Laws , Julia DaSilva, age 14	38
A Soldier's Viewpoint , Yifan Li, age 15	38
Some Call it Murder... , Claudia Luk Ok Choo, age 19	38
Steady , Rachel Mandel, age 16	40
Lay Me Down To Sleep , Nicole Loucas, age 18	40
Stronger , Denada Alushaj, age 15	40
counting into nothing , Sirana Huang, age 14	46

Prose

How to Walk in Early March , Edmee Nataprawira, age 18	1
Honeysuckle , Fawn Parker, age 18	3
\$10.25 , Sara Vladusic, age 18	4
The Blue Umbrella , Sophia Belyk, age 13	7
The Walking Fred , Joshua Ravenhill, age 16	8
Chicken Legs , Mishal Saeed, age 12	9
Helvetica , Dunja Tomic, age 13	11
It Came From Behind the Shelves , Amy Schacherl, age 18	14
Narrator , Sophia Netterfield, age 16	15
The Journey , Lin Ying Lin, age 19	17
The Vibrant City , Hafsa Ali, age 17	18
Just My Train of Thought , Ferd Marie Policarpio, age 14	20
Hidden in the Shadows of My Haven , Iltifat Chaudhry, age 14	24
To Say Goodbye , Claire Velikonja, age 13	27

I think I'm the most boring person I know , Katarina Maksimovic, age 16	29
The Babbling Brook , Shanna Markee, age 16	29
To Write or Not to Write? , Greta Whipple, age 16	30
Untold , Laila Zaman, age 17	30
Picture Perfect – Not , Mariya-Kvitlana Tsap, age 15	33
The Earl of Classics , Josiah Cohen, age 14	34
Babak's Story , Sivan B. Piatigorsky-Roth, age 13	37
Merchant's Clouds , Celia Ramsay-Crocitto, age 15	41
Untitled , Ifrah Saeed, age 18	42
Four Seasons , Jaclyn Yan, age 14	45
Heat Zone , Nicole Yip, age 18	47
The Talking Downstairs , Sophie Fraser, age 15	48
Parallel Universes and Batman's Girlfriend , Isabel Armiento, age 14	51
Ice Cream , Julia Li, age 16	52
Serendipity , Shalom Del Mundo, age 15	55
Fragment , Naima Karczmar, age 17	56

Art/Photos

Strange New World , Wenting Li, age 18	cover
1901 , Selena Salam, age 14	inside front cover
Reality Dream , Emily Yin, age 14	2
Time Control , Linda Li, age 16	5
Sticks and Stones , Alana Park, age 15	6
Up, Up, and Away , Nicole Johnston, age 15	10
Headache , Harun Younussi, age 15	13
Left Behind , Caleb Tseng-Tham, age 13	16
Nothing But Life , Olive Garcia, age 16	19
The Shadows Under Water , Noshen Nooren Atashe, age 14	22
Stuck In Between , Chloe Macdonald, age 14	25
Freedom , Sharleen Fisher, age 17	28
Italian Redhorse , Sarvesh Sharma, age 15	31
The Wake of Spring , Jane Li, age 13	32
Encounter , Rosa Kang, age 17	35
Bite Me , Claire Merner, age 14	36
Cancer is a word, not a sentence , Ferd Marie Policarpio, age 14	39
Chaotic Thoughts , Robin Reyes, age 19	43
Man on the Moon , Ozar Bashir, age 12	44
A Suffering Bear , Maria Yang, age 12	49
Tree vs. Person , Ryan Sovran, age 15	50
Gift of Time , Dana Kokoska, age 15	53
Listen , Lucy Lee, age 15	54
Where there is mankind and machinery, there will always be nature , Qi Jia (Nini) Chen, age 12	57
Perception , Thea Armstrong, age 12	inside back cover
Conquerer's Cry , Vivian Tong, age 18	back cover
2014 Submission Guidelines	59
2014 Submission Form	61

Welcome to Young Voices 2013

The unique writings and visual creations that you find in this magazine were selected from a large number of submissions. The writers and artists featured in these pages all live or go to school in Toronto. From the Rouge River in the East, to the Etobicoke Creek in the West, from Ward's Island in the South to Steeles Avenue in the North, *Young Voices* showcases the voices of Toronto's youngest creative types. Within these pages there are things that you might identify with, places that you might know and/or experiences you might have shared. However it is also very likely that you will find something new—for *Young Voices* often enables the writers and artists of tomorrow an opportunity to publish their creations. It is an important first opportunity for young artists and writers to get published.

Whether you are from Toronto or not or whether you are a teen or not, we hope that you will get inspired by what you see and read in the pages that follow. And if you are a Toronto teen who has something to say, we look forward to receiving your submission for the 2014 *Young Voices*.

The writing and artwork in *Young Voices* is selected by editorial teams consisting of teens working with Toronto-based writer/artist mentors; a big thanks to all of them!

The *Young Voices* 2013 editorial board:

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Special thanks to Sara Vladusic for her help translating French submissions.

FRONT COVER ART

Strange New World

Wenting Li, age 18



How to Walk in Early March

Wear your rain boots in the evening, one part because of the slush and ninety-nine parts because she said at 2 p.m. this afternoon that they make you look like April weather when you wear them with your yellow floral skirt. At quarter past eight, it may be too cold to wrap April light around your waist without also wearing three layers of tights to keep the evening wind off of your thighs and out of your bones as you walk with her to the bookstore café on the northwest corner of Borden and College. Leave the skirt draped on your chair, but console yourself with your boots. Wear them with your trousers in eager anticipation of warm puddles and spring. Her boots are heavy (she works on a farm back home, to pay for her tuition) and might as well be all-season, but she tells you that when she wears them in winter, it's always in anticipation of the upcoming summer. Between the two of you, you wear the peak months of the next half-year on your feet.

Choose to go through King's College Circle, not around it. It's a shortcut, and besides, to take the sidewalks would be to cheat both your April boots and her August ones of a fresh layer of almost-frozen mud. You can't refuse them the pleasure of squelching through the field at this time of year when the light from the sidewalk lampposts is thin, shivering, and insipid. In March the shadows, like the mud, are so much richer than the light. Dance in them! Skip through them singing, or else laugh at some joyfully witty comment or joke that may leave your mouth or may leave hers. You enjoy each other's company too much to stay silent when the other voices a smile. Happiness is infectious, yours and hers.

In your inebriating joy, remember to look at her. It's just the two of you tonight. No one can tell you that you can't enjoy her smile, her chilled flush cheeks, and her gorgeous tousled hair. No one should tell you that you shouldn't find her stunning, that it's wrong to want to breathe in her compassion and breathe out your fear. If your heels trip over your toes or if she slips on a patch of mud that's particularly icy and you find yourselves holding each other's hands to keep yourselves from falling, remember that your feet are spring and summer and your hands are worthy of each other, regardless of anything they say.

Edmee Nataprawira, age 18

Only Seventeen

catch me while I'm seventeen
when still I thrill with love and the taste of wine.
I lie bruised
against a summer sky,
cradled in its palm,
covered in powder, clinging with sweat

love me while I'm fresh;
caught in the caress of a limitless world,
I bleed flowers that blossom in sleep.
me and my
look-don't-touch smile,
(only in your dreams you fool)

hold me just at seventeen,
while my white wings whirl and cut
against your arms.
I crave warmth,
tucked into the crease of a dress,
but also cuts and scrapes

and all the angels up in heaven
couldn't keep me from running wild
at seventeen

Nuard Tadevosyan, age 18

Reality Dream



Emily Yin, age 14

A Restless Mind

Again I wake
halfway through the night
as one who first notices the music
on the final rise of the last resolve.

So I walked
swimming in a flow of existence,
being tossed and caught
and so to be tossed again,
down alleyways of my own bent psyche.

And to the bus stop,
where a man with a cigarette
told me Nirvana is a trailer park.

Past the boy selling rosaries
and the yard with the pink flamingo,
down highways dripping with mercury,
through cities where the mannequins walk.

Then to the floor,
when the feathers twist my spine,
that in this blue nocturnal
I may blink awake again.

Shakir Lakhani, age 15

Honeysuckle

She perches on the edge of her chair, one bare leg crossed over the other. A thinning blue towel drapes over her torso. Her hair is wet and matted against the freckled skin of her back. Birthmarked constellations on worn canvas. She leans forward with one elbow on the vanity, breath fogging the mirror. She smudges peaked black lines across her eyelids. Her lips are parted in a downward crescent.

"I can see her when you turn that way," he says. "You look like Mom." The mattress slopes, distorting the cherry-blossomed quilt under his weight.

She rubs a curled knuckle under each eye. Her gaze remains on her untouchable twin. Purple half moons swell beneath her lashes. Thin lips — her father's. She runs her fingertips over a row of lipstick tubes. Her nails are short. Remnants of polish are tucked away in the corners. Honeysuckle, she had called the colour. She smoothes a pink tube over her lips. From where he sits, it looks more like an eraser, revealing the brightness hidden beneath a pale wrinkled surface.

"I don't like it when you talk like that." She presses her lips together. The colour spreads.

"I know," he says. "Sorry."

He lies back on the bed. He can hear the click of the lipstick cap. She searches for something. Jars and brushes clack against each other. All of these things hold pieces of their mother in little compartments. Threaded through the teeth of a comb, the woman who lived within these colours and scents. Shrinking and forgetting but still painting a picture of beauty on her face each day.

She took something when she left. She took the colourful parts of her children and tucked them into the folds of the dress they buried her in.

"I just see her sometimes." His voice is low.

Her cheek creases for a moment, above the corner of her mouth. She fluffs a pink-tipped brush across her face. Her eyes shift to his still body in the mirror. He watches the ceiling. A moon of orange light circles the scalloped ceiling lamp.

She rubs a fist against her nose and sniffs. Bites at her lip, tasting the waxy bitterness of her lipstick. He cracks a knuckle. Waiting.

She sighs. Waits for him to speak. His chest rises slowly in the mirror, falling beneath his shirt. She wipes a moistened cloth over her face, staining it with shades of pink and black. Thick maternal femininity in messy streaks. Her skin is bare once again. Small watery eyes floating in pools of smeared grey. The chemical scent of the cloth stings her breath. She twists her hair into a knot on top of her head and steps into the bathroom with her arms wrapped tightly around her. A drop of water from her hairline traces the edge of her face like the touch of an understanding hand.

He sits up at the click of the bathroom door. He half expects to find a woman's image reflected in the vanity mirror, despite the empty seat. The streaked cloth lies crumpled on the table. He picks it up and feels the dampness in his hand. So easy it seems to hide memory in objects. He folds the cloth and presses it into his left breast pocket.

"Ready?" She stands in the doorway. She is her child self; pale-faced and eyes wide enough to swallow each of his thoughts.

"If you are."

Fawn Parker, age 18

The Poetic Feet

The poet's feet are marked with time,
for with age comes wisdom and well-placed caesuras,
And no one questions vintage verse;
they say that the old know much more than us.

Rivulets, wrinkles, and hard lines
etched by hardship and pessimism,
The hardened soles cracked in defeat,
each dent another sacrifice given.

The knobby bones and near-limpid skin
recall plague, famine, war, and death,
And the toes are blackened by dour nights
when winter breathed its callous breath.

The poets sit in nursing homes, feet bound in cotton, hands too frail to write.
And me, I sit in Starbucks; my hands and feet are lily-white.

Sarah Parry, age 17

\$10.25

It's almost funny how little I care compared to how much you think I do. The
gulf between the two is so wide I'm surprised you have yet to fall in.

You can stand there, spine rigid with righteousness, vitriol spilling from
your lips. Tar oozing between white teeth, an ugly stream from your mouth.

Does it make you feel better? To let it all out at me, to try and bowl
me over with your suddenly unrepressed emotion? Does it make you feel
powerful? Go ahead, shout your invectives at me, your vicious, vicious
words. Better me than someone who cares.

I can always tell when you fall over one side of the blade's edge, when the
tension starts leaking from your shoulders. Eyes dull, knees bend, posture
relaxes.

The fight is gone.

All that frantic, desperate energy you possessed disappears, leaving a
tired emptiness.

It always happens sooner or later.

I just have to be sure to repeat the words, as long as it may take for you to
heed them.

"I'm sorry ma'am, but company policy states you cannot return shoes once
they've been worn outside. Do you want to speak to my manager?"

Whether you do or not is of no consequence to me.

The greatest luxury of minimum wage is that it isn't enough to make me
care.

Sara Vladusic, age 18

Why I Didn't Write My Poem

I didn't write a poem
Please don't be so mad
If you let me make it up
It can't turn out that bad

I didn't write a poem
I didn't really try
Because the poems that I write
Make me want to cry

I didn't write a poem
I really thought I would
But I didn't manage to
And I know I should

I didn't write a poem
I'm sure I had a reason
But its best-by date was yesterday
Does that really count as treason?

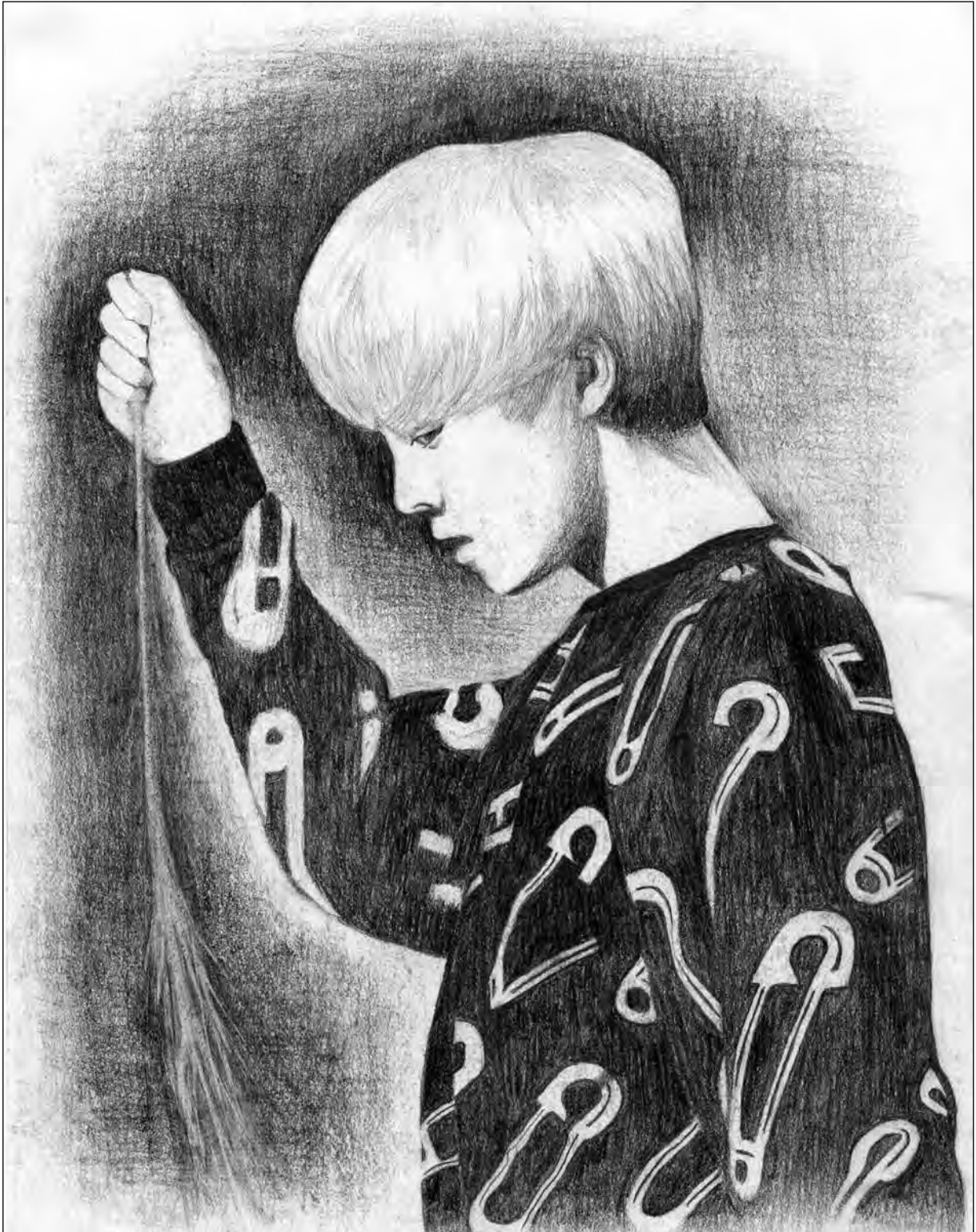
I didn't write my poem
Aliens didn't invade
Godzilla didn't attack me
This will probably affect my grade

I didn't write a poem
Please don't send me away
I might just get it finished
If you give me one more day

I didn't write a poem
I made it up on the spot
You may just think I'm kidding
But honestly I'm not

Sam Easterbrook, age 12

Time Control



Linda Li, age 16

The Blue Umbrella

I stepped outside of the school building at 3:20 to find it raining. Not just raining, absolutely pouring. Unfortunately I didn't have my jacket, and my phone had just died, so I wasn't calling for a ride.

It was raining too hard to walk, so I hovered under a tree where I could stay dry and wait it out. That's when I spotted the umbrella. It was light blue, speckled with clouds, and was lying abandoned on the ground. Probably broken, I thought.

A woman and her child soon joined me under the tree, soaking wet.

"Look, an umbrella!" The little boy tugged on his mother's arm and pointed at the umbrella I'd seen earlier.

"No, that umbrella's been broken and thrown away. No one wants it. We'll just wait."

The rain continued to pour and soon another parent and child joined us under the tree.

"Daddy, can we take that umbrella?"

"No," the father responded firmly. "It's broken."

The rain didn't seem to be letting up, and I was running late. So I dashed out from under the tree, grabbed the umbrella and opened it with a flourish. I held it over my head and inspected it for any tears, but there were none. The umbrella was perfectly fine.

The parents under the tree shot me dirty looks but I didn't care, I hardly even noticed.

And I walked home under my own light blue sky.

Sophia Belyk, age 13

The Duel of the Devotees

Under the veil of evening,
Two gentlemen stood at back.
Slowly, they started stepping,
Thousand paces till attack.

Close friends, they loved each other,
Practically they were kin.
Yet, both had loved another,
It was her heart one would win.

Halfway crossed infinity,
A lit fuse began to burn.
Both men of integrity,
And still, one had plan to turn.

Violently, one twist'd his head,
And quickly shot himself dead.

Edward Martins-Berki, age 19

Children of Caine

There's something behind your smile
With a sickness in it that will defile
Anything you touch turns to dust
Nothing can be saved from your lust
This desire to destroy with your taint
You'd love for everyone to think you a saint.

Hear the Ferryman sing his song,
Carrying souls of the morally wrong,
To a place that holds no sympathy for you.

Bleed them dry of all innocence
Get everything you can in diligence
Make sure there's nothing left to ravage
Forsaking them, you're a natural-born savage
A damned, petulant courier of heartache
Dance with death for old time's sake.

Hear the Ferryman sing his song,
Carrying souls of the morally wrong,
To a place that holds no sympathy for you.

Give no warning when you take your prey
Souls scared of God's wrath will bow and pray
Those defiant take their stand against fate
Never to bow down to tyranny, full of hate
Fuelling a fire that refuses the rain
Joining the damned, the children of Caine.

Rachel Mortaley, age 19

The Walking Fred

I feel dirt. Really dark, soft, wet soil, in between my fingers. Freezing cold dirt, all over the ground and me. Opening my eyes, and it's so dark, I don't know if I've opened my eyes or not. *Where are Michael and Evan?* Beginning to shift upright sends a wave of pain through my neck. *Well, I won't do that again.* Getting my bearings suggests I'm in trouble. But this wouldn't be the first time — I've been through trouble before, shoplifting, breaking a leg. Another stunt gone wrong. Evan was supposed to drive his car into the tower of crates, and Michael would film it for YouTube while I safely fell onto the big mattresses. I thought that tower of crates would work. Man, does my neck hurt. We're always doing this kind of stuff. Never thought I'd find myself here though. But first I must get out of this hole and give those a-holes a piece of my mind.

Getting onto my knees carefully, and onto my feet, I find out the hole is only three feet at the most compared to my height of five-ten. Lifting myself over the edge causes even more pain again. After resting for a few minutes, I get up, determined to find Evan and Michael and give them a quick beating. *Why did they leave me here?* Shuffling down the dark street, I find Hawthorn Avenue. With only the streetlights to guide me, I see Michael's house with a flashing police car in front. *What now? Did somebody get hurt?* Better not get involved, don't want to be in the news again. Heading home towards Maple Street I stop. My first thought isn't a soft bed after sleeping in a hole. It's my mother. What am I going to do when she finds out I've

been out all night. Will she take away my phone and computer privileges, or worse, my freedom? Maybe she won't know — it's two o'clock in the morning, she'll be sleeping. I continue on my way towards home, rubbing my neck.

Getting closer to my house I see the familiar red and blue flashing lights in my mom's driveway. There's a police officer interviewing my mother on the front step. Of course, I think the worst. *Did my mother wake up and find me out of the house? Did she get the police involved?* So I sneak back around the house in the dark. Through the back gate, into the backyard and inside. Being as quiet as I can, avoiding detection, I go up the stairs and into my room. My footsteps don't make a sound. *Why is there a police officer at my house?* I've never followed the rules, but I didn't do anything wrong this time. I stand by my window, right over the front yard, so I can eavesdrop on their conversation.

"...was found tonight. Another of those stupid stunts. Both of his friends panicked and threw Fred into a nearby ditch. They were so scared they left him. He died instantly from a broken neck and fractured skull. I'm sorry," said the officer, as my mom burst into a dreadful sob and collapsed. I gasp, *Who's dead?* I woke up in a ditch, but that couldn't be me — no way — I'm right here. Still, I go into the bathroom and fumble for the light switch. Look into the mirror and silently scream.

Joshua Ravenhill, age 16

Untitled

What if one day, everything changed? If all you thought was safe and secure, really was not? If it all fell to pieces, the shell of your reality, the fragile walls of your world. If you pushed against them and found that they were shattering all around you; fragments of your beliefs, falling

If you tested the well-worn floors beneath you, the ones you walk over day by day and found yourself tumbling through

If you squeezed the stone of your foundation and found it crumbling between your fingertips

It begs the question, should we remain docile and obedient? Never to pressure the truth into the light, but to keep it concealed by thinly veiled deceit. Are our lives truly happy in trusting in what is false?

Alanna Veiga, age 14

Chicken Legs

I found chicken legs extremely attractive, is all; I didn't mean for it to get out of hand. The only way I thought I could get the perfect chicken legs that even my track coach would call sexy was to be the chicken.

Our track meet was soon, and I wanted to be able to wear my short shorts, modestly bragging about my legs. I found a barn nearby, and decided to pay them a visit at night, when the farmer was out sleeping. The only way I could get the legs, was to be the chicken.

Creeping into the dark barn, I looked at all the chickens sleeping peacefully in their nests, dimly illuminated by the moonlight. They looked so calm, so delicious. Tiptoeing closer to the feathery creatures, I carefully grabbed one.

"Squawk!" its eyes popped open as it looked around the dark room, frightened. I stifled my laughter; it wouldn't be scared for long.

I smiled manically, looking around for a wooden stick, or something of that sort. Finally, my gaze landed on a hammer in the corner. Walking towards it, I grabbed it with one hand, gripping the chicken's neck with the other. Quickly, I smashed the hammer over its head. Its eyes widened, a squawk escaping its beak before its eyes closed, forever.

Dropping the limp body, I crouched down beside it. Hungrily, I grabbed its wing, ripping it apart from its body. Bones popped, skin ripped. Instead of disgusting me though, it fuelled my hunger. Scarlet blood dripped to the floor, causing patterns to flood my vision. They looked so pretty.

Bringing the raw wing to my mouth, I enthusiastically tore a piece out of it. Happily, I continued munching on it, bones cracking between my teeth. Blood dripped down the sides of my mouth, and I hungrily licked it off, savouring the taste.

Ripping the leg off next, I started with the foot. Munching on the chewy skin, I eagerly tore the raw thigh apart, blood dribbling down my chin and onto my shirt.

I continued eating the chicken raw, especially enjoying the heart which contained the most blood, the most flavours.

Finally, all that was left was a few unwanted bones and a whole lot of blood. I cupped the liquid in my hands, watching it fall through my fingers. Angrily, I began licking it off the floor, spitting feathers and hay out of my mouth. As I swallowed the last drop of blood off the floor, I admired what I had done.

I had wanted to be the chicken, and now I was. That would show my track members, teasing me about how I would never get my perfect chicken legs, and how the dream was far-fetched and not likely to come true.

I smirked. I was living the dream.

Mishal Saeed, age 12

Dinner Time

I am in my house on a hot summer day

I am in my house on a hot summer day

I get called for dinner

I get called for dinner

I pretend I did not hear

I rush to the table to eat

Eventually I get up and get my food

My father sends me outside to find my food

I'm having a big juicy steak, a baked potato and a cold coke

I return with a mango, some guava leaves and a bucket of dirty water

The steak is so good, its tender flavours fill my mouth

We almost never have meat

It takes me just under an hour to finish my meal

It takes me about fifteen minutes to eat

Tomorrow, I will eat again

Tomorrow, I hope I will eat again

I thank my mom and go back to my video games

I thank my father and go tend to the goat

My mom forgot to buy my favourite ice cream

I give thanks for nature's food

The fridge is empty

The land is full if you know where to look

I have lots but I still want more

I have nothing but it is enough

Harry O'Malley, age 13

Up, Up, and Away



Nicole Johnston, age 15

Helvetica

"Helvetica! Come downstairs! We have guests!"

Helvetica looked in the mirror. She touched her pointy nose, willing it to straighten. Her chocolate-coloured eyes in the mirror stared back at her and willed a new nose to pop up on her face. Nothing happened and she heaved a sigh and answered her mother.

"I'll be right down!" she hollered from upstairs.

"Helvetica, we have guests!" she repeated, particularity stressing the word "guests", and there was a sharp, firmness in her voice. Not wanting to anger her, Helvetica turned the light in the bathroom off, and headed downstairs. Knowing who it would be, Helvetica walked down the stairs as slowly as she could manage. She heard talking, and an over-excited voice greeting everyone.

"Oh, here she is!" Her mother yanked her sleeve. "Say hi to Auntie Georgia and Arial!" She glared at Helvetica. "Be nice," she whispered as she took Arial's coat. "Why don't you girls go upstairs and 'hang out'?"

"That would be great, Cambria. Good for the girls to bond!" Georgia said as she patted Arial on the shoulder, prompting Arial to smile back sweetly.

Helvetica rolled her eyes, and motioned half-heartedly for Arial to follow her. The pair walked up the stairs, and turned the corner into Helvetica's room.

"Oh, you like him?" Arial said, pointing to one of Helvetica's posters, in the stuck-up nasally voice that Helvetica oh, so hated.

"Yeah, I guess." Helvetica shrugged, swallowing her hatred of the other girl. A Tahoma poster hung on the wall.

"That's so... last year. Do you even follow trends?" Arial said. "And what's up with your outfit? That's so... over." Helvetica shrugged, picked up the nearest book, and flipped to the first page. *What you think about yourself is much more important than what others think of you.* This was the first line, and upon seeing it, Helvetica put the book down. There was no time for hippie-talk. She scanned the room for her iPod.

The evening progressed like this, Arial either texted someone on her smart phone, or pointed something out of Helvetica's that she found odd, or didn't like. Helvetica just shrugged and replied monosyllabically.

As Arial's family was leaving, Helvetica breathed a sigh of relief. She knew that at least a couple of months would pass before they encountered each other again.

However, alone in her bedroom, Helvetica found it impossible to fall asleep; she was unnerved by Arial's crude comments. Did people really think this of her? Was she really such an outsider, so different from everyone else?

So, motivated to find who she really was, Helvetica booted up her old laptop and opened her favourite search engine. She typed in "Helvetica" and tentatively hit the enter button. Close to seventy million results popped up. She went through the links, and was more and more excited with each page she opened.

The first one identified the differences between her and Arial. Whereas Helvetica made decisions quickly, and successfully, Arial was more one to have trouble with this.

She grabbed the nearest notebook, and jotted down facts she liked. The first point said "Helvetica=horizontal/vertical, Arial=diagonal."

Another page said that Helvetica was well-defined and independent. Arial was more codependent and looked upon others for what to wear, and how to act. "Helvetica's G has a well-defined spur; Arial's does not."

Next, she typed her name into an online dictionary. "Neutral and has great clarity, no intrinsic meaning in its form, and could be used on a wide variety of signage." Helvetica's mouth hung open. She couldn't believe that others thought of her this way.

Fuelled by pride, Helvetica opened her email. One new message glowed "unread" from an unknown sender: FontShop Germany. Unsettled, and having a feeling that she had become a victim of spam, she began to move the message to the trash folder. However, curiosity got the best of her and she opened the message. It took a while for the message to load, but when it did, a surprise nearly knocked the socks off of Helvetica. "Congratulations!" it read. Helvetica's eyes widened with each line she read. When she finished, she couldn't believe what had happened and read the email again. And again.

She called her mom up, and they both read it together. And again. Dumbfounded, and clearly stating the obvious, her mother exclaimed: "Helvetica! You did it! You won!" It was true. Helvetica had won the number one spot on FontShop Germany's Best Fonts of All Time list. Helvetica grinned from ear to ear.

Finally satisfied and happy with herself (and after several kisses from her mother and father), Helvetica went to bed.

In the morning, Helvetica checked the email again; just to be sure nothing had been a dream. She beamed, seeing that it was, in fact, not a figment of her imagination. She clicked the hyperlink provided to the official Best Fonts of All Time list. She punched the air, happy to see that Arial's name wasn't on it.

Helvetica got up and looked into the mirror. She really did love her double-stacked A's and sans serifs. She thought of the quote she had read the previous day. *What you think about yourself is much more important than what others think of you.* "Yeah," Helvetica thought, "but you sometimes need someone else to give you that push." She smiled a huge smile that went all the way into her Z and hopped down the stairs to eat breakfast.

Dunja Tomic, age 13

Time to Think

At this moment it is 3:03,
but where will this moment be
when the clock reads 3:04?
Only in my memory, reality no more.

Each second exists for the blink of an eye,
and after right then it passes on by.
The whole world exists, but only right then.
Each second is everything, and everything is now, not back when.

Imperceptibly quick, time rushes on.
It is the chess player, we are its pawn.
Its purpose never clear, here only to disappear,
never to be understood — it is a concept I fear.

Claire Young, age 15

Lost Hue

Finally, our fears are manifest.
The garish street we thought so pretty
Streaked with grey in the summer's rain
I felt its spirit fall to rest
On rigid shoulders of the apathetic
The bored, the vain
We cross from end to end together
Our arms were never folded tighter
It could be that a change is coming
We see the signs on billboard ads
They tell us it's a brave new future
Dare they say "revolution"?
We'd be the first to know
To pick it up, to bear its fruit
To don its unforgiving uniform
A wave of colour that I see in shades of grey
But if it weren't for my colour-blindness
I would not know when to complain.

Victor Ostrovsky, age 18

Procrastination

Clicking away time,
Procrastination begins,
Homework waits for me.

Scroll through my news feed,
Another Farmville request,
Who else is online?

Same thing every day,
My untouched homework still waits,
Guess I'll check twitter.

Nicole Ooi, age 13

Brave

Giggling,
Laughing,
And slightly embarrassed
Of our bravery
In dumping an unwanted latte's
Contents
All over the pavement.

Silent,
Somber,
And slightly regretful
Of our bravery
In filling the opposition's
Chests
Up with bullets.

We were once
Inexperienced,
Untried,
And knowing little of bravery.
But now,
Wouldn't you say,
That we know
Even less?

Helen Toner, age 16

Headache



Harun Younussi, age 15

It Came From Behind the Shelves

The first thing I have to say about the Bookworm is that you're not going to believe me. Usually I so much as mention that Shakespeare lives in the library's basement and eats brains and people look at me like I'm nuts.

The second thing I have to tell you is that this story is totally, indisputably true.

I guess I have to tell you that I love reading. I mean, we've been in a steady relationship for practically forever. And it's hard to avoid reading at home. Dad's read every Victorian novel ever written, and Mom practically worships science fiction. My older brother, Jeff — well, Mom says that he's a "regrettably normal sixteen-year-old boy." The most Jeff's ever read is a girl's phone number.

Really you could say that I use the library for the same reason that the Inuit use refrigerators. I don't even know where half of the books at home came from, only that I've read them all. We have fiction, non-fiction, reference, poetry, encyclopedias — close to an entire library scattered haphazardly over the floor and crawling up the walls. There is no resemblance to the Dewey Decimal System unless our apartment is its raised-by-wolves, long-lost brother.

Dear Dewey. To create a system that didn't involve wading and sifting through seas of books. What a chap.

The library is like a second home to me. I have such a passion for the library that reading sometimes gets jealous. It's regular for me to spend hours every weekend at the library in my natural habitat, sunk within a pile of well-read novels. I like the old ones best. You can almost hear them whispering their stories through the great stacks, pages shushing like leaves in a quiet wind.

At least, I thought it was the books.

I came one day to a place in the library I'd never been before — a door, made of rusted metal and gnarled wood, marked "Shakespeare, 1000". Quietly ignoring a sign announcing KEEP OUT in ominously glistening paint, I emulated any protagonist and investigated. The hinges were rusty, and they screamed like a tempest as they scraped at the ground.

Concrete stairs led down into gloomy darkness. The smart thing to do here would have been to obey the sign and run away with my tail between my legs. But the hero of the story never turns back, right? Dies, maybe, but never turns back.

If the stairs were scary, the thing at the bottom was terrifying.

I wasn't sure what exactly it was, but it was foul, crooked, and greasy. It hunched over a computer monitor, typing fervently, and the light turned its skin a scaly grey. It was surrounded by staggering mountains of rags, bones, and dictionaries. I thought it was asleep at first but then I heard it mutter something that sounded like "asparagus" and a rapid chatter of typing, and then the thing shoved a piece of paper into its mouth.

I stared, open-mouthed. And I thought if you had fines they just put you in a dungeon.

Things got weirder. "Brendan," I heard it whisper clearly, except its mouth was occupied.

"'Brendan'?"

"'Brendan', from Irish Gaelic 'Breandan.' 'A brave bold man,'" it muttered, still typing. It turned around. "'even in his youth.' Ten years old, to be exact."

I'm short, okay. It happens. "Twelve. Who are you?"

The Bookworm raised his eyebrows in ironic mockery. "Do you not recognize me? Has history ceased to shout my name among the literati?" It sighed. "I am the very same that took those words from the whispering abyss and twined them into those stories and personas you know so well."

"So you're a weird — a writer?"

"Not merely a writer! A poet, an artist, a Bard!"

It clicked. "You're... Shakespeare? What's Shakespeare doing in the library?"

"The fines of one patron were too great to pay with ordinary coin."

"So what are you doing down here?" I gestured vaguely to a heap of bones.

"Words, man! To bring to the crass and uncultured abecedarian, without amphiboly or catachresis or anacoluthia, the sheer enjoyment of the obtuse, and to continue the coinage of marvellous maxims such as the 'eyeball' that you so enjoyed. To allow the world to marvel in my genius!"

"Via the Internet?"

"The Internet has been particularly receptive to my boundless talent. They absolutely adored the 'lol.'"

"And Facebook?"

It snorted derisively. "Absolutely not."

"You know, Shakespeare, you're not a bad guy. A bit weird, but not bad." I relaxed. "And here I was thinking you were going to eat my toes or something."

"Your toes?" It stood, a strange gleam in its eyes. "Your brain has a much better texture."

I wouldn't be able to fight it off if it were blindfolded. "A game! Riddles!" (It worked for Bilbo.) "Give me a chance to keep my brain."

"A game of wit and literary fame," Shakespeare agreed. "In which of my plays do the horses eat each other?"

"Macbeth."

The Bookworm clapped its hands together with delight. "Ah, you have read my works! Pray, what is your riddle?"

"Okay... what's Jeff's favourite story?"

"One of mine, indubitably."

My heart leapt. "Final answer? Wrong. Jeff doesn't like reading."

"Doesn't — doesn't like reading?" Shakespeare spluttered.

"Who cannot enjoy the sibilants and tones, the tragedies and majesties and intrigue stitched together by words? Who can ignore the stories that live on through reading!" It climbed atop a mountain of bones, paper stirring in the sheer force of the indignity. "Despicable."

I backed up the stairs two at a time as the sound of rustling paper grew. "The words are real!" Shakespeare shouted.

"They have power and dignity and life!" The dictionaries tore themselves apart, pages swirling into an inferno. It engulfed the Bookworm entirely, and then with a sad final whisper of "asparagus" settled down as if it had never happened.

There's a lesson here. If you ever come across zombie Shakespeare, keep your words handy.

Amy Schacherl, age 18

Narrator

"This is ridiculous. Where is he?"

"Really. He should have been here an hour ago."

"Hey! Excuse me. Sir?"

"I can't hear you. You'll have to come closer, Miss."

"That's better. How can I help you, Miss?"

"I'm looking for the Narrator. Have you seen him by any chance?"

"Narrator?"

"Well, have you seen anyone at all?"

"No."

"So, how long are you going to wait for this Narrator fellow?"

"Until the story starts."

"Story?"

"Yeah, I'm the main character."

"So, Miss Main Character, who else is in this story?"

"I don't know."

"What kind of story is this?"

"I don't know."

"Hey, Miss Main Character! How long are you going to wait here? It's almost closing time."

"I can't leave until the Narrator shows up."

"Then, how about dinner with me?"

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"The story hasn't started yet."

"Come out to dinner with me."

"No."

"What if this story is Romance, and I'm your love interest?"

"Then the Narrator will make me go out to dinner with you."

"Miss Main Character, it's closing time. You have to leave now."

"I guess the story will just have to wait."

"How do you know this story hasn't started yet?"

"Nothing's happened."

"Dinner?"

"No."

"The weather sure is nice."

"Are you following me?"

"Possibly."

"Go home."

"Stop following me."

"Not until you agree to dinner."

"But the Narrator —"

"— will make you suffer. Think about it. Do the main characters in books ever have it easy?"

"Dinner?"

"..."

"I know this great restaurant not too far from here."

"Fine."

"Cool place."

"That's why we're here."

"So, now what?"

"We eat."

"Then what?"

"We forget about this story, and the Narrator. I show you around the city, and the rest is up to you, Miss Main Character."

Sophia Netterfield, age 16

Left Behind



Caleb Tseng-Tham, age 13

The Journey

Thursday, I stand beside the stop, waiting impatiently for the streetcar.

It is the end of summer but the air is still sweltering and the sky is as clear as sapphire. The heat grows fast from the ground like invisible ivy stretching and twining round my legs. I look around and find my brother is talking to his friend on the phone while his face is illuminated by the sunlight and unknown pleasure. I feel a little jealous, which is absurd. When I check the time, two young girls walk daintily toward here with ice cream in their hands, melting crazily. Their laughter is extraordinarily adorable but soon covered by the traffic noises.

Waiting always drives me hopeless, as if the whole world has shrunk into this endless path and I would never get to my destination. I sigh silently. The changeable weather always makes me become more sentimental.

Finally, the streetcar comes. My brother and I step on and take the seats in the front. I peer through the window and my mind begins to wander. I have lived in Toronto for one year, yet I remember every detail of when I first arrived. Everything was so different and strange as if I had stepped into someone else's dream. I was brought up by my grandparents and lived in a small village where everyone knows everyone and houses are distributed freely like stars. At that time my world was so small that I walked everywhere, spoke dialect in a childish tone, and met people's genuine smiles every day, which gave me a sense of security. Although I tried to face the challenge and to adjust to new life in Toronto, I couldn't remove my soul that has been shaped by my homeland. There is no doubt that cities are civilized and organized and everywhere in the world is embracing urbanism and modernism. Since the Industrial Revolution, skyscrapers, shopping malls, factories and highways have been built, which not only changed the landscape, but also dramatically altered the human society and culture. However, I don't like cities, or more accurately, I am afraid of cities. They are like giant and complex mechanical traps that keep putting pressure and isolation upon people's shoulders. The bonds between people are getting weaker and the society lacks "Ren Qing Wei," which means human sympathy and compassion in Chinese. I am not trying to be cynical, but really, I cannot repress my fear and dislike about cities.

Now I am sitting here with the sunlight dancing on my palm. The streetcar moves and keeps throwing the familiar sights backwards. I have been taken far away from the start. Suddenly I feel cold and restless, as if I would never be able to trace back or clutch any valuable memories. Again, I sigh.

My brother eventually puts his phone into his pocket and looks at me suspiciously. I pretend to be indifferent and complain about the weather. He says nothing. At the time the streetcar stops so more people get on. It becomes very crowded. There comes an old Chinese woman carrying heavy grocery bags, standing solemnly without any animation on her wrinkled face. She looks fragile and tough at the same time. However, when the streetcar starts, she tries to keep balance clumsily. I want to stand up and give my seat to her, but she is too far and other people block my way. More importantly, I am too shy to shout out. Coward. I tell myself.

As I feel more restless, to my surprise, a woman who has brown hair stands up and gives her seat to the old woman, although she is old too. The old woman hesitates for a few seconds, as if she is not sure whether it is polite, but with the help of the brown-haired woman, she finally sits down with a grateful smile. The brown-haired woman leans on the other side with emotional detachment. Meanwhile the streetcar remains silent because they don't speak any words. Even if they did, they wouldn't understand each other since obviously they are from different countries and speak different languages, but I am deeply touched by this fleeting moment. What has just happened is not dramatic or exciting, but it tells me that people in this city are not as cold as I thought and my stereotypes should be thrown away. People help each other no matter where they come from because of universal love, which might not be spoken loudly.

Do I love living in Toronto? I don't know. Cities draw invisible lines between people. Especially in Toronto, a city where various ethnic groups exist, it is more difficult to break down the invisible walls of self-protection. Postmodernism states that it is impossible to make objective judgment or comparison about the world, so what I can do is to believe in hope and humanity and to appreciate its uniqueness. Therefore, whether it is cities or villages, as long as people live together, we are a family and continue our journey with both weaknesses and boldness.

Lin Ying Lin, age 19

The Vibrant City

There was once a city so ruinously sad that it had forgotten its name. The inhabitants themselves lived sad, isolated lives. Long ago, a deadly plague wiped the city of all the children, and along with it, the happiness and colour. We couldn't see the bright red of an apple, nor the green leaves of the tree upon which they had grown. Then, She came.

The sky was an unusually light shade of grey that early morning when we rose, not to our alarm clocks, but to the sound of a symphony playing. Annoyed to have been awakened two hours too soon, I slipped on my robe, hobbled down the stairs, yanked open my door, and marched towards the raucous sound. The disturbance had awakened the entire city, and they too were making their way towards it, fretting about the noise. We stopped at the middle of the town and peering through the man in front of me, I saw a little girl bent over, humming a soft tune. There was something different about her, but I couldn't quite explain. She had something, something I hadn't seen in a very long time, that made her seem brighter. Then, I heard it whispered through the crowd. Colour.

"Who are you?" one of the citizens demanded, a slight quiver of untrusting fear in his voice. "What are you doing here?"

The girl turned around, and smiled, a missing tooth visible. "Chakaluka, and I'm planting a flower."

"Where are you from?"

Chakaluka didn't answer. She simply stood and skipped off, singing to herself. We parted, allowing her to pass. I stared in amazement at the ground her shoes had just left, which, for a fraction of a second, had colour as well. I blinked, sure my eyes were playing tricks, but from the whispers and mutters of those around me, I knew they had seen it too.

For weeks, we didn't see her, and her flower didn't seem to grow. We forgot about her, returning to the regular, miserable routine. As I was walking along the grey sidewalk, I noticed an old man who had fallen. No one stopped to help him up, it was not our way. Instead, the crowd walked around him, as if he were an invisible barrier. Suddenly, Chakaluka was at his side, trying to help him up. Too weak to do it alone, I watched in amazement as my neighbour, I didn't know her name, stopped to help. I too found myself walking over to join. Together, the three of us carried the man to his house. Another person, whose name I never knew, opened the door, and we carried him to his bed. I looked at Chakaluka, and suddenly, I knew the colour of her hair. "Red," I said out loud, filled with the same awe as a child who had just seen a magic trick. She merely smiled, and winked before skipping off. I was smiling too.

It was incredible how the city slowly changed under her influence. One day, she handed out flyers to everyone, inviting us all to see a talent show. Curious and eager to learn more about her, we all attended. To our astonishment, she was not the performer, but the MC, calling upon us to showcase ourselves. The mayor was called on to do bird calls. The banker counted five million pennies in under a minute. The shopkeeper did double dutch. They were small talents, but with each act, we learned more about each other than we had ever known.

Another day, when Mrs. Tyler fell ill, we all signed the card Chakaluka made for her. Once we all sat down in the field and had a picnic that each of us contributed to. The food was warm and delicious, bringing back memories of the ones we used to have. She taught us songs, and instead of working, one day we played charades. For Raj's birthday, as I went to give him his gift, I found that the rest of the town had done the very same thing. She was changing us back to what we used to be.

With each day that passed, we learned to love and care and we learned the colours. Slowly, the sun went from white to yellow, the same yellow of Chakaluka's shirt. The grass started to have a tinge of green that would one day match the green in her eyes. The flower was growing too, though no one seemed to water it, nor had it rained since it had been planted. It was Nina, my neighbour, who brought something to my attention; something worrisome.

"Doesn't she look faded?" Nina asked me. She was talking about Chakaluka. It was true. Once, she was more vibrant than us but now we outshone her. I worried, thinking she was sick with the same plague that took the lives of our children.

Days later, when the pink of her lips was barely noticeable, I approached her. "You're fading."

I wanted her to tell me I was wrong. To my dismay, she neither confirmed nor denied my statement. However, the look in her eye was enough for me to realize she had been expecting it. "My flower has almost finished growing," she said before turning to leave. "Chakaluka means vibrant energy."

I watched her closely. As the colour of the world became more pronounced, her own colour became less. Eventually, she was completely gone, nowhere to be seen skipping again. That day, the flower stopped growing, its petals the colours of the rainbow.

That was all twenty years ago, and now that once sad city is the most joyous of all. Children fill the streets once more. The flower Chakaluka planted remains; untouched, unchanged. As I hear my son sing the same song I once heard her hum it dawns on me that she did not fade. She was absorbed into us. After she left, we named our city Madeenaluka: The Vibrant City.

Hafsah Ali, age 17

Nothing But Life



Olive Garcia, age 16

Just My Train of Thought

I've always found taking the train quite fascinating. As everyone is absentmindedly minding their own business, it's the perfect opportunity to observe people. As creepy as it sounds, it's very interesting as to what you may find. The most captivating experiences would always be the simple incidents that evolve into stories so very much filled with the depth and meaning that lies behind them, thus making me question a lot of things that have to do with myself and the world.

Like last week, I noticed this lady silently crying as she read from the old, torn pages of her book. It brought me to think, was she crying out of pure and honest joy? Or was the novel so sad that it brought countless tears to her eyes? It made me wonder why people do not read like that anymore. Why don't people immerse themselves into such literature, to the extent that they're living the lives of these characters and feeling the emotions so deeply that they feel connected and so very much attached? I know that there are many people that disagree with me but if so, then under what rock are they hiding and why won't they reveal themselves to me so that I can meet them? Seeing the woman reminded me of my much loved paperbacks at home...

Another day, I was looking out the glass pane of the window when I heard the most beautiful tune from an old man who was whistling. As I looked around, I couldn't help but notice that everyone around him was looking at him in irritation. He seemed unfazed by this, just nonchalantly reading his newspaper. I was left intrigued. How could people find such lovely music so annoying? I mean, seriously, compared to the horrifying and meaningless music kids listen to nowadays, a simple beautiful melody is very rare to find. This old man had me mesmerized with his sweet, soft tones of tranquil song throughout the duration of the ride until he got off the train. I was slightly bothered by the looks of the people silently muttering, "Oh thank goodness," and sighing with relief. I ended up daydreaming and conjuring up the lovely music into my head and wordlessly repeating it over and over again...

This morning I was left with yet another view on the train; a little girl was sitting with her mother and she just wouldn't stop crying. Her mother kept trying to make her stop but it just made her cry even more. I glanced over at the little girl and it seemed like she wasn't stopping anytime soon; but as I looked over again, this charming little boy approached her and handed her a lollipop. The mother seemed quite relieved as her daughter immediately stopped crying. This left me to ponder; why can't grownup problems be as simple as that? Why can't our problems be solved with a simple treat in order for it to go away, or better yet, just help us to find happiness? Maybe we ought to learn a lot from the little boy... If everyone took the time to show at least one act of kindness each day, our world would probably be a better place. As I was getting off the train, I built up the courage to smile at a complete random stranger. I figured that it doesn't hurt to try to be kind. The fact that the stranger smiled back was all it took to make my day...

I'm on the train right now. I've been momentarily looking around for another story waiting to be acknowledged by me when I finally spot a scene begging to be scrutinized. Out of curiosity, I examine the prospect as these people carry on with their ordinary lives. I let myself get caught up in my thoughts, watching as a tidbit of another person's life unravels before my eyes. As the person abruptly gets up, I am left puzzled as I snap back into the reality of my own life. I laugh at myself in amusement as I have just realized that I've missed my stop. It's funny how I get so carried away by the lives of others and my own reflection of their lives that I seem to have forgotten my own story, but then again, I suppose that it simply is just my train of thought to blame...

Ferd Marie Policarpio, age 14

Outside, Inside

Outside

Black, gravel, uneven paths
Turbulent waves and mud laden caves
Grey clouds looming
Waiting to shower
The roar of the wind
And its majestic power
Deafening sounds
And sand in mounds
They say people lose their way
Near the magnificent bay
But what would I know?

Inside

White, pure, clean
Soft pillows and the certain sheen
Calm, quiet, the occasional noise
The beeping of monitors
And the nurse's poise
Here I brood
In the prolonged hours of the day
My only companion, solitude
The only thing that is more
Is certainly
My
Certain
Agony

Amna Majeed, age 14

Sometimes we don't notice that we are breathing, but at this moment you've noticed you've stopped

Your first thought is that this may be your end.
You squeeze your eyes shut, accepting death.

But you have no eyes.
You find yourself blind in an unknown area.
You expect darkness to fill your vision, but it cannot exist without light.
And all light here is shaded.
And all shade here is lit.
Visually, you experience nothing.

After realizing this you become more aware.
Now you see that you hear nothing as well.
You feel nothing, not even a breeze.
You are neither warm, nor cold.

It would be unpleasant if you were not so confused.
Then again what is there to be confused about?

You experience nothing.
There is nothing more simplistic.
You cannot describe it for there is nothing to describe.
You feel no pain or pleasure.
You reach out to touch any surface you can find for some confirmation of reality.
But you have no arms, no hands, and no body.
You find that it is impossible to prove you exist.
You are nobody.

But if that is true, why do I refer to you as an individual?
This nothingness is of my creation.
Yet fictional nothingness is nothingness nonetheless.
Nothing can exist in nothing, yet I speak as though you experience it.

This is a description of the indescribable.
A story of experiencing the unexperienceable.
A paradox-ridden wonderland of impossibilities.

And yet, you have an identity, even if I don't know it.
Even in this fictional nothingness you exist.
And if you exist, there is no longer nothing.

Then the universe realizes its faults and you're back home, awake.
You remember what you consider to be nothing.
But not the eternal nothingness you were in, you simply do not remember what happened, or rather, what didn't.
But your mind knows what ceased to occur, just as it knows you are curious.
One day you will find my nothing, and if you return you may not come back, or there may be nothing to come back to at all.

So your mind gives you glimpses.
Sometimes you were falling, other times flying.
You don't remember how you got there or what you fell or flew off of.
You remember nothing but dissention and ascension, with neither a start nor an end in sight.

Sometimes we call them dreams, other times nightmares.
Because you can never know, you were there and back.
Outside the confines of our world and beyond the infinity of space.
Nothing.

Keegan Gardner-Elmer, age 16

The Shadows Under Water



Noshen Nooren Atashe, age 14

The Mother of Invention

Necessity planted the seed in the womb of my mind,
And it became pregnant,
And minutes later, I gave birth to a bright, beautiful, bouncing
Idea.
I was proud of my new creation.
I bragged about it to my family and friends,
And they all came round to hear me explain it.
They oohed and aahed at the originality, the logic, the implementation,
The possibilities...
Then I took it home and began to work.
There were times when it didn't want to cooperate with me,
When I'd wake up in the middle of the night to its screams for attention,
When I'd have to drop everything and tend to it.
But still I loved my darling idea:
My body and blood;
My sweat and tears.
Some told me: "You're too young! It's never going to work! Let someone else do it!"
But still I persisted.
I watched my idea take its first few steps,
Watched it make new friends.
When others teased it and made it feel unwelcome,
I stood by its side and defended it,
Kept it safe from the horrors of the world,
And from thieves as dangerous as ignorance.
I nurtured it, developed it,
And years later,
When it was all grown up,
And too wonderful to keep to myself,
I let it go,
And watched it change the world.

Terese Mason, age 17

Swan Songs

A moment of silence taken
By the sheer force of colliding steel.
Sirens screaming bloody murder
Delayed reactions kicking in.

An alarming cadence of heightened emotions,
Dauntlessly accompanied
By a spur of the moment balancing act.

A lone breath suspended and dashed to
pieces.
Racing pulses stand on edge, looking down.
Delayed reactions,
Not kicking in.

Gwynn Huang, age 15

Kids

Kids should play hide-and-peek
Not hide from a loaded gun
Kids shouldn't be screaming
And fear being done

Kids should be smiling
And not mourning their friend
Kids who are only seven
Shouldn't be close to the end

Kids in december
Should be playing in the snow
How twenty bullets sound
Is something they shouldn't know

Kids should be sleeping
In their warm and comfy bed
Kids should not be awake
With a monster in their head

Kids' innocent eyes
Should be filled with joy
They shouldn't be closed
Because of one's twisted ploy

Kids shouldn't be dead
And parents shouldn't be broken
And poems sad like this
Shouldn't have to be written

Fatou B. Balde, age 14

Hidden in the Shadows of My Haven

A shiver. It's what you get, what you feel, when you're cold. When you're excited. When you're scared. I don't know which one of those three it was for me, but it was a shiver nonetheless.

We were watching a movie. "We" meant Tasha, Charlotte, Heather, Megan and I, packed together on a black leather sofa along the back wall of my white, red and black bedroom. It was 12 a.m. on a Friday night, my parents were out of town and it was just us girls, with the red-white flower designs on the curtains wrinkling from the slight breeze that escaped the cover of the shutters. A total cliché moment in the horror movies. I couldn't say I was all that scared... or maybe I was, but my excitement for this night was covering my fear, even as my heart thumped against my chest as the movie began.

'Hidden in the Shadows of My Haven' was what the movie was called, written in bold, blood-red letters, the bottom dipped with bright orange, as if the words were on fire. I didn't think it sounded or looked all that scary. The rest of the girls had insisted we watch it, because none of us had seen it before. Apparently. I figured we'd laugh more than we'd scream during the movie.

I wish we had.

Or well... more like I wish I had.

The movie began with a girl hanging out with four of her friends and watching a movie together with them, much like my friends and I were. As the movie progressed, strange occurrences were taking place in their girls' night out as the movie in the film kept going.

Little fires would erupt around the room, footsteps and hushed whispers could be heard over the sounds of the film, and shadows could be seen outside the windows as the lights flickered on and off.

Soon, these strange occurrences advanced, happening all at the same time until the fire closed in on a circle around the girls.

None of them reacted but one.

The girl, much like me, who hosted the party, watched the movie with a horrific expression on her face, a pillow covering her mouth to muffle her screams whilst the rest of them smiled. Wickedly. Evilily. Fires dancing in their fiendish eyes.

All of them stood and surrounded the sofa on which the terrified girl sat, her eyes huge in fear, dread, terror.

The camera angled up towards the four girls, making them large and looming down upon the frightened girl, hungry expressions upon their faces.

Not a word had been spoken throughout the movie, only sounds had been heard. But right there, at the climax of the movie, were the only two words spoken during the entire movie: "Good night," spoken in a chorus, by all four, what could not be described as girls anymore, but instead, demons.

And they moved in on the camera, which then zoomed out on the scene of the demons ripping the girl to shreds.

The camera then zoomed in on the screen of the film played in the movie, which could now be seen: it was showing the same thing as the camera was; the poor girl being devoured.

Only then did I notice the flicker of flames surrounding the sofa. Only then did I notice the sound of footsteps in the distance, the sound of hushed whispers around me. Only then did I notice Tasha, Charlotte, Heather and Megan surrounding the couch, their expressions equally as hungry as the ones of the demons in the movie.

Leaning back into the sofa and craning my neck, only then did I see the blurred outlines of dark figures outside my room, in front of the window.

I looked in my hands, seeing that I had a pillow in my hands and pushed into my mouth, to stifle the screams I did not realize I was making.

The words crossed my mind before they were spoken: "Good night," came the chorus, and in came their smiles, their faces... all around me, above me, to my right... to my left... everywhere... someone help me... please, no...

A policeman walked into the room, four scared looking girls behind him, their fists inside their mouths, trying to get over the body of their brutally murdered friend, and examined the crime scene.

All he saw was a room, blackened from smoke of the fire, everything inside burned... except for the T.V., which had somehow remained undamaged.

Squinting, he moved forward towards the T.V. and realized it was playing a movie... but it seemed to be stuck... on a girl... being torn apart by demons.

He tried to rewind the movie, but it didn't work.

Pressing the buttons, none of them worked.

He looked at the screen again and was shocked to see the girl, trembling and pointing to something out of the view of the camera.

Something... behind him?

The policeman slowly turned around, his eyes wide, mouth open, as the four girls surrounded him and chorused, "Good night."

Iltifat Chaudhry, age 14

Stuck In Between



Chloe Macdonald, age 14

Twisted

Dazzling morning sun beams showered her,
soaked all the way to her bones
A tiny burrowed curled up seed,
covered deep in muddy blankets of snow
The tender tiny glistening green sprout,
burst eagerly from the soft flaky soil
She unfolded her leaves towards the periwinkle heavens,
and fearlessly bared her soul
As she grew, bulbs of hope blossomed into flowers,
and floating soft petals covered the earth with laughter
But a drastic change in the weather brutally snapped her steady branches,
they pierced the ground as she fell
Harsh turbulent winds carved deep scars in every direction,
accompanied by cracks of thunder and flashes of lightning
The rain seeped through cracks of her awry tree trunk,
the pressure was just too strong
Once given the simple task of growing up,
suddenly she didn't know what to become
Her branches were mangled and she towered over,
the littered, patchy ground
Ultimately, the clouds parted ways, and the sun seeped through,
colours illuminating what she had become
She had been twisted, spurned, and knocked down
but she was still going strong

Helen Su, age 16

The Circus

The Circus is where the crazies go,
Where the clowns come marching row on row.
Inside the big red tent is where it all starts,
Where the colours all form into luminous parts.
The whip cracks;
The lion roars;
Peanuts scattered all over the floors
Like shells on the ground in all the great wars.
The workers groan;
They heave and ho.
The ushers tell you where to go.
A man with three fingers
And only one toe!
Oh my, oh my, oh no!
I would really like to go
Where the gymnasts swing
And the dolphins sing
Where the elephant stomps
And the tiger romps
Inside the big red tent.
After it all, with a smile on your face,
Away you will be sent.
We hope you come back
To another show
Because we're the best act
In the world you know!

Broughan March, age 13

Perfect

We were created for each other
People have known our relationship for thousands of years
When you wrap around me we fit perfectly together
In the end no matter what has happened to us
We always separate in time
When I got snapped into pieces
When you got cracks from old age
I was always there for you and you did the same
I guess that's why we're perfect for each other
I got tangled
You stayed strong
You never got tangled
We swam in our world
We ignored the rest
As time passed it got harder
People filled the crowds, they filled the world
I felt small and weak, so did you
That's why we're the perfect two
Together we are
Chopsticks and noodles.

Jian Yu (Michelle) Wang, age 13

To Say Goodbye

It was Johnny's birthday. I woke smiling, my window open a crack as warm air blew in and birds chirped outside. *It was Johnny's birthday.* I hurried to the bathroom, washing my face and combing my hair as quickly as I could. *It was Johnny's birthday.* My face warmed at the thought of him. The way he only kissed me for a few seconds in front of my parents, how he would count the freckles on my cheeks when he thought I couldn't notice, the way his eyes flashed when someone made fun of me at school. *It was Johnny's birthday.* I picked up my new yellow dress. It was so flouncy and bubbly. Johnny had always loved when I wore yellow. My smile slipped for a second. Johnny had loved that, hadn't he? I shook my head, shaking away those thoughts. I pulled the dress over my head, admiring the way that it settled on my hips. I ran down the stairs, tripping as I tried to put on sandals at the same time.

My mother came out of the kitchen, eyes sad and teary, hands clutching a mug of tea. "Are you okay sweetie?" she asked, her voice trembling sympathetically. "With all that happened with Johnny..." My smile slipped again and my eyes watered. If only people would stop saying that! It wasn't their place to make such statements! *It was Johnny's birthday.* I nodded, making the effort to keep a cheery smile on my face as I rushed outside, slipping on my jean jacket as I went. Johnny had always loved it on me, running his hands up and down my arms as he kissed me. A tear slipped from my eyes. I wiped it away, hating myself for that tear. *It was Johnny's birthday.* I kept my smile on as I walked outside.

It was a perfect May day, birds chirping and the sun blazing as lazy breezes crept through the suburbs. Just the kind of day where Johnny and I would go for a ride on his motorcycle. He had loved that thing, with its red shiny surface and flickering flames running down the side. No matter how many times I told him to stop, he would never give it up. I shook my head, not wanting to remember that motorcycle. *It was Johnny's birthday.* I slipped into the park, excitement electrifying my whole body. It was where Johnny and I said we were going to meet on this special, special day. I walked over to our oak tree, the site of a million kisses and moments. Underneath it was a plaque, the old, stuffy memorial kind.

It said:

Johnny Baker
1995-2011
Let us never forget.

That little tear slipped from my eye again. I couldn't stop it. All the smiles, the grins, that stupid yellow dress. My heart ached as I whispered my last words to Johnny, the words that I hadn't been able to tell him that horrible night: "Happy Birthday Johnny."

Claire Velikonja, age 13

Human

I'm perfectly whole
With minimal perfection
And defective parts

Allanah Lennox, age 17

The Poet in March

I often flip through these pages
and realize
How many can take photographs with their words
and poetry with their camera
How many can focus meaning with their prose
and minds with their lens
How many can write
write
write a skeleton of humanity
and frame each bone to look beautiful

They're all flawless poets.
and here I am,
so perfectly
pretending to be one of them

Imogen Joy Bobert-Hahn, age 17

Freedom



Sharleen Fisher, age 17

I think I'm the most boring person I know

I think I'm the most boring person I know.
I wouldn't be caught dead on the Dos Equis commercial.
"I don't always drink beer, but when I do,
I cringe and swallow it like pills
Because it tastes like piss."
(Maybe that's why I'm no fun at parties.)
Alcohol is gross and I can't dance and I've got nothing to talk
about.
(Nothing interesting, at least.)
I could mention how I discovered a great book of poetry
Or how I found a picture in my Latin textbook
That looks just like my mom's uncle.
But these people don't care.
(I wouldn't either, if I were them.)
I'm an introvert, doomed to be friends
With extroverts, because all the introverts
Are at home where I can't meet them.
(And to be honest, I'd rather be home as well.)
I remember when I went to a terrible party
At a skating rink in the dead of summer
The year before high school
(My extrovert friends forced me to go, of course.)
I remember all the dumb people
Clearly faking drunk since there was a single beer
At this lame middle school party.
I remember how I said hello
And avoided conversation because
I didn't want to hear about their dumb lives
And they didn't want to hear about mine.

I remember leaving the party early
To catch a show I hadn't seen in years,
Because the television never expected me
To say anything interesting.
It simply spoke, and I listened
Because I cared about the lives of these fictional figures;
They were meant to be interesting and they always will be.
I'm always in, listening
To other stories, or
Out meeting people I'll eventually hate
Because their appeal will fade.
(It always does.)
Maybe that's why I've got four friends at most,
And their stories too have lost their appeal.
How they stayed friends with a boring sack of shit like me,
I'll never know.
(Maybe I had appeal before too, but it faded.)
(Do my friends even like me anymore?)
I don't think forcing a hermit to make friends is worth the
torture,
Because I still have the same friends I had in elementary,
And I hate people more than ever.
I get to meet a wide assortment of people,
Enjoy the stories they tell and the jokes they crack.
I have to wait until they ask about me
(As polite people often do)
And when I bore them (and myself) to death,
They never make conversation with me again.
(And I resent them for that.)

Katarina Maksimovic, age 16

The Babbling Brook

The babbling brook that no one sees
Lies hidden by the dwarfing trees
Not many walk the weathered trail
Far from the world where the air is stale
All travellers stop to sit on the rocks
With the hidden brook they share their thoughts
And later when they leave to sleep
The babbling brook starts to weep
For all who leave without a care
Forget the troubles they stopped to share
Always will they fester and lie
For poor babbling brook can never die

Shanna Markee, age 16

To Write or Not to Write?

Oxford Dictionaries define literacy as “the ability to read and write.” These skills are taught to students from the start of kindergarten. Why then, is the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT) imposed upon students in grade 10, almost a decade after they begin their academic careers?

The OSSLT is put in place by the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) to ensure that students meet the provincial standard in reading comprehension. EQAO’s website states that extra preparation for the test is not necessary since covering all curriculum material in class will serve as preparation for the test. This fact can argue the redundancy of the OSSLT; if it is truly put in place to ensure that students meet the “provincial standard” in learning, why are students who achieve a seventy percent or higher in English made to take it? They have already proven that they are up to the provincial standard; two tests are not needed to determine the same thing. One should not pass English but fail the OSSLT if they are both supposedly based on the same thing. How could one even make it to grade 10 English and somehow identify as “illiterate”? What of students who pass their exams at the end of the year but are then told that they failed the literacy test? They had to have understood their exam questions to pass, so how can they not be deemed literate?

In addition, it is far from likely that students who achieved Level 3 (the provincial standard) or higher on their EQAO tests in grade 6 lost their literacy skills between then and the OSSLT.

Surely an illiterate student would have been identified by a teacher or parent between kindergarten and grade 10.

One of the benefits of tests is being able to learn from your mistakes. Why, then, are copies of students’ tests not returned with their results? Without proof, how can one even be sure that their results are accurate? It cannot be out of concern for next year’s writers; copies of the previous year’s test are put on EQAO’s website to serve as study material, so there is no danger of unfair advantages for certain students.

If it is truly designed to test people’s literacy skills, the OSSLT should be for students scoring below seventy percent in English (that is to say, below the supposed provincial standard) or students who are enrolled as English as a Second Language (ESL). This should not be argued as discriminatory; those who have already proved their reading comprehension to be sufficient should not be subjected to the test.

EQAO’s website states that its tests cost \$4 million a year, a number that could be reduced by testing only those who have not proven themselves to be up to the provincial standard. When there are concerns such as supporting special education students, suffering arts programs, and problems with course options, the province should be taking note of where it can redirect its funds. Spending it unnecessarily is borderline insulting to areas that could make good use of more funding.

The EQAO does indeed have some questions to answer.

Greta Whipple, age 16

Untold

His hem was torn, mud and dirt caked dry on the once crisp white shirt, now a canvas witness to the mockery of an unforgiving society. Huddled in a corner with the comfort of two cardboard flaps to wrap around for warmth, the man watched the traffic pass by on busy Bay Street. His eyes were glazed over, yet prominent in his hungry face, reflecting the big city lights. People passed by wielding their suitcases full of business degrees, office jobs, weekly checks and monthly raises, health and prosperity — the placidly ignorant model citizens of a not so perfect society.

He closed his eyes and shut his ears to the hustle and bustle. Slowly he began to fall, fall, fall into the dark abyss of his mind, memories blurring out present for the past... “I’m pleased to present the valedictorian for the class of 1989–1990, John Alexander.” He felt it in his bones, in his muscles, in his thoughts and emotions: the electrifying energy of adolescence, the promise of a bright future. He heard his voice soar through that room, in the ears of all the students, teachers, family, and friends whispering his promises to live up to all their expectations.

Then he set off to conquer life with a suitcase. You might expect a suitcase full of dreams. But no, John set off with a suitcase full of promises. Promises kept and broken, promises sealed with salty tears and sweet kisses. “Dad, I promise I’ll become a big engineer.” “Baby, I promise we’ll get married in two years, just let me get that job.” “I promise I’ll work overtime for the next four days, no siree, you won’t be disappointed.” “I promise I’ll pay the rent next month, twice the rent just to make up for it.”

One promise after another, drink after drink, cigarette after cigarette, one more, baby, please, I just want to make you happy — you have my word on it. And soon John faded away from consumption, leaving only a seemingly insignificant speck on the corner of Bay Street. A lonely man who now wonders if it was his fault at all. His fault that he couldn’t keep all their promises. Or their fault that they wanted him to live up to a made-up standard of excellence. He wonders...

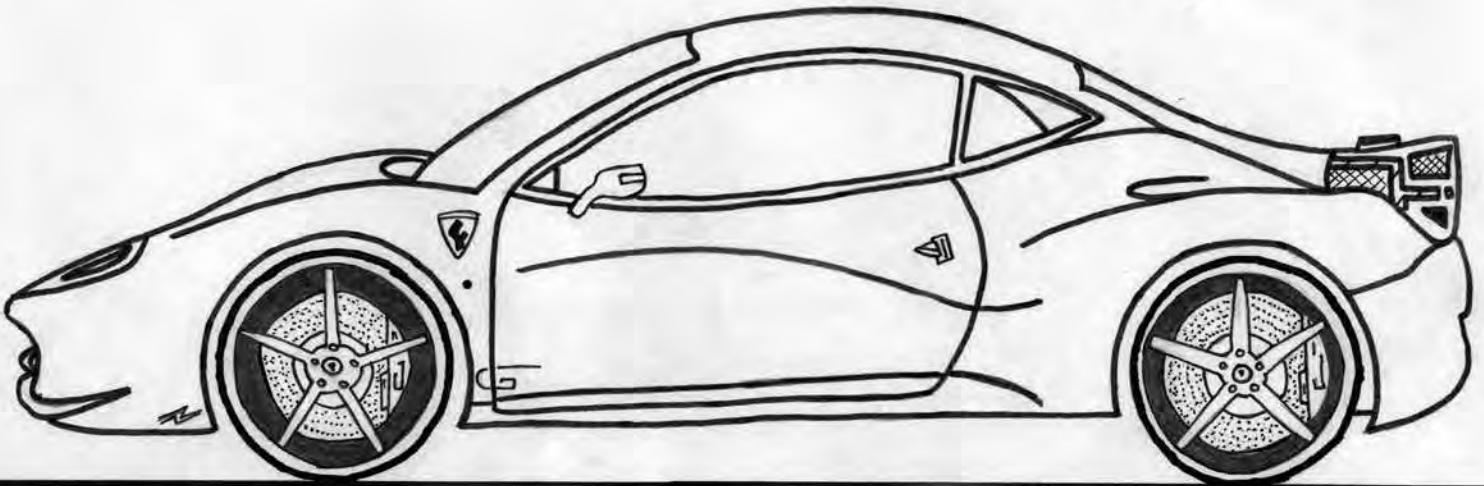
Laila Zaman, age 17

Italian Redhorse

SARVESH SHARMA

562 behold
the
power

FERRARI 458
ITALIA



Sarvesh Sharma, age 15

The Wake of Spring



Jane Li, age 13

The Cabin in the Sea

I wish to live alone and happy,
in a small blue town devoid of people.
I will live close to the trembling sound of the sea in my old and sweet cabin,
with my wooden boat and my books and my burnt cooking,
a hermit in paradise.

I will be there with the clouds,
upon a bright canvas that reminds me so much of your eyes.
I will be there with the waves at my fingertips.
My pipe, my tea, the stone path leading to a dirt road,
leading to the sun embracing the earth in its welcoming glow,
two lovers joined only at dawn and dusk.

I will live here, quiet, content,
concerning myself with what my next meal will be,
what will I read next, what will I paint next?
What will I do, all on my own?
I have all the time I could have, that I do not want.
I am happy here, missing nothing,
but I miss you.
Your hair, your laugh, the stars caught in your eyes.
I cannot compare the sky, the waves or the forest to these.

William Parks, age 17

Eiffel Tower Escape

She journals Paris glowing with the rain,
In streetlight mist and horizon hues.
La Seine then paints itself in baby blues
Across her empty pages, inks that stain
The lonely mind, imprint on top of pain.

Cafés and sugar crepes to warm wet shoes,
With no umbrella, nothing left to lose —
Except herself, absorbed by windowpanes.

Parfois, the fabled pen has too much might,
And drags daydreamers off in sleep too sound.
She slumbers days, to see Paris by night,
To disappear in love poems profound:
A rich language for poor and clouded sight,
A city of words long lost, and fantasies found.

Rosie Long Decter, age 17

Picture Perfect—Not

This tale will explain the need for portraits during the time of kings and queens. We are all taken back to the time when kings ruled the plentiful lands and waters, queens defined fine luxury and grace, while peasants were the unwanted breed of humankind supporting their rigid masters. However, do not be fooled, for this enchanting and happy time was filled with dark, promiscuous, and sinister secrets, which were locked up in far chambers to remove the threat at hand.

One of the secrets hidden away concerned marriage between the royal bloods whereas the wedding vows became medicine for the corrupted leaders who opted to befriend their deepest enemies. This eternal bond was already decided decades before the birth of the fellow prince or princess. Unfortunately, love was a make believe fairytale and faithfulness was a silly matter.

However, how can you marry someone you have never seen, you cannot hope for good looks. The solution was to produce an image of that person and send it to their future spouse for

approval. These portraits were equivalent to the photoshopped magazine covers today and were done masterfully. They hid all the imperfections with bold strokes of the gently constructed paintbrushes and with a tidbit of vibrant colour. These images outlined the greatest features of that person to give them an overall seductive appearance.

Believe it or not, here is an example of a portrait gone wrong. After having a good look at Bloor Joseph, we see that the artist has clearly gone beyond his expertise and produced a very realistic portrait of a man in action. Surely, women will be attracted to this very “harmonious” and “fun having” figure. Who knew that looks could be so misleading?



Mariya-Kvitlana Tsap, age 15

The Earl of Classics

Author's note: the Earl of Classics uses book titles correctly, while SuperComicBook uses them incorrectly.

[My note] (Earl of Classic's note)

Once upon a time, in a world filled with sci-fi and computer animations, a super-book named SuperComicBook reigned supreme with his friend, Graphic N. Ovel III. Then there was me. The Earl of Classics. A man trying to write [the book] "Wrongs," in a technologically filled world. Ah, me. This world was located at 252 Finch Avenue [my old school]. The library of that world had gone dormant, drowned in the many *Gordon Kormans* and *Percy Jacksons* of a new world, one that I would have called a *Brave New World*: but hither and thither were here, there, and "I'll just download it onto my iPod." So I, the Earl of Classics, said to myself: "I must *Journey to the Center of the Earth*, and deal SuperComicBook and his laminated friend a blow so fluid and deadly that they will be *Gone with the Wind*. I must steal their thunder, yet not become *The Lightning Thief* [one volume of the Percy Jackson series]. For earls are not the common pickpocket, and we know how, with sophistication, *To Kill a Mockingbird*. So one dusk before 8th grade, I, the Earl of Classics, had *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

"Oveler, *Twist* my comedic blurb," said SuperComicBook. "I have *Great Expectations* of you. I fear the Earl of Classics draws close to our *Magic Treehouse*." "Don't worry," said Ovel, "we'll *Catch him in the Wry*."

And so *The Odyssey* began. I crossed my threshold, and the beginning of school assessment tests started. Since I knew that SuperComicBook was aspiring to be the *Once and Future King*, I had to chase after him *As a Driven Leaf*. I was helped on my path by *The Lord of the Flies*, who had time to kill before his *Appointment with Death* and knew that there was *Evil Under the Sun*.

And so *The Odyssey* began. I, the Earl of Classics, set out along with *The Great Brain* of mine to eliminate *Pride and Prejudice*. The year was not 1984.

"*Candid* job, *Annie Kareniner, Candid*," said SuperComicBook. "I am all for *War Against Peace*," he said. "O, Earl of Classics, Earl of Classics, where are you Earl of Classics?"

I, the Earl of Classics, arrived at *Uncle Tom's Cabin* wherein lay not *The Last of the Mohicans*, but SuperComicBook. Gadsby (*The Lord of the Flies'* name) was by my sid. [I do not include the "e" because it is not used in that book!] We entered. *The Call of the Wild* pierced our ears. I fired good old sarcastic wit at Ovel. But it deflected off his laminate ability! Uh-oh! If SuperComicBook could fire a publishing ultimatum, we were done for! He raised his hand to give us a *Lost Horizon* and send us *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*. It was a great *American Tragedy* in the making. I was to be an *Invisible Man*! He fired. Time slowed. *A Wonderful Life* passed in front of my eyes. While this site blocked my eyes, his projectile bounced off *The Red Badge of Courage* that was upon my chest. The projectile sailed through the air and sliced Ovel in half! Coloured paper seeped through his clothes, and Graphic N. Ovel III was no more one of the major literary styles. I thrust a pun through SuperComicBook and *Les Misérables* we were no more.

And so another *Odyssey* began: that of the *Abelard Dream*. With comic books and graphic novels eliminated, pure, innocent children were consigned to utilize their iPods strictly for music and games. No potion needed. Like a fairy tale. And so I departed that world, free to pursue another world, one of earls and dukes like me. All generated perfectly, so that no pixel was out of place. Ah, me.

No comic books/graphic novels/computers/books were harmed in the making of this story.

Josiah Cohen, age 14

Love Triangle

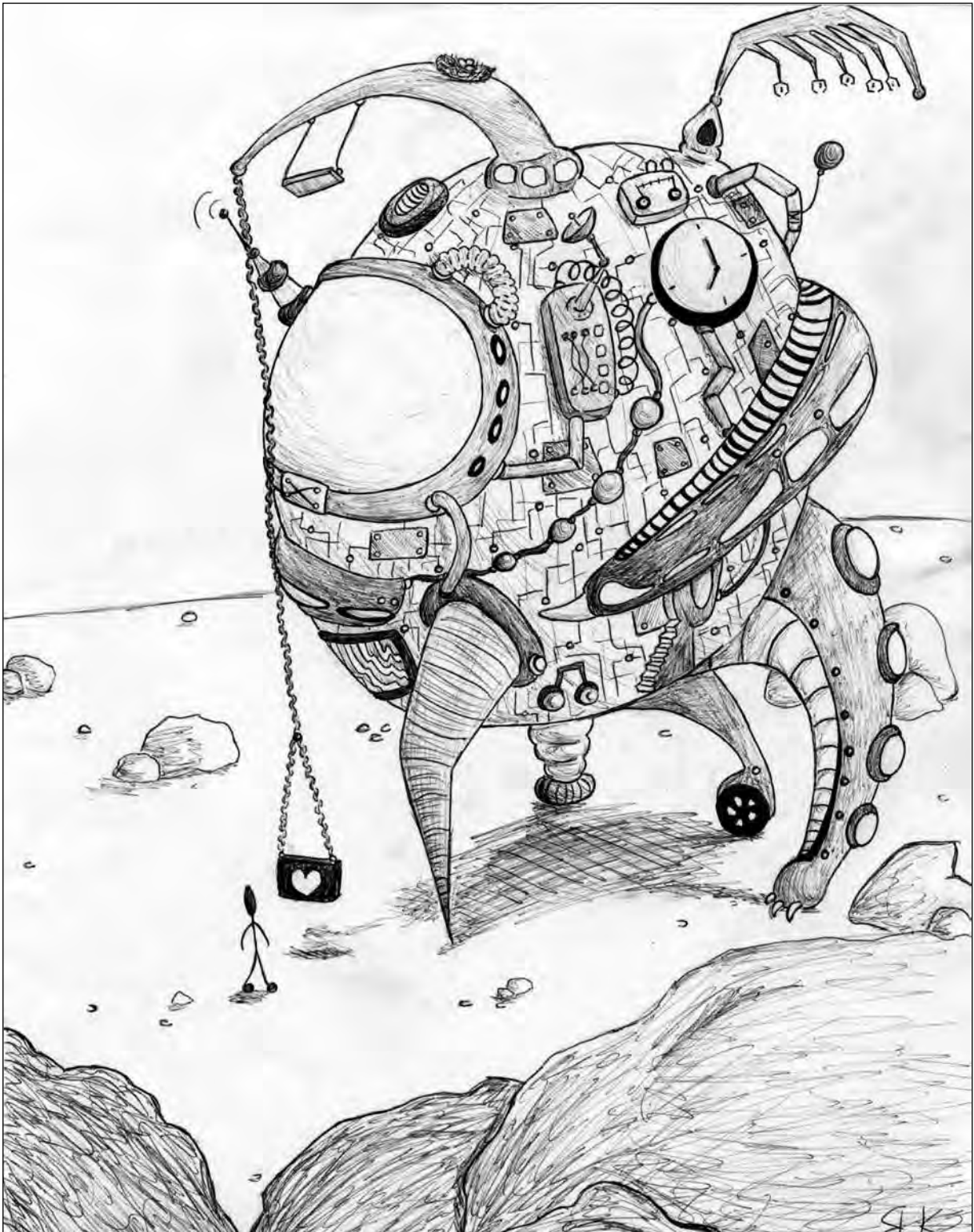
I'm prone to phoning at obtuse hours
And it's never acute when I do it
But when i-so-sce-les falling
All I could think of was your auburn hair

Scalene back my imagination
I find with indignation
That you don't answer your phone
You're not there

Your love for me is not like mine, never equilateral
So I might as well return to my Indian summer
I'm going back to the right angel tomorrow

Mik Tampold, age 16

Encounter



Rosa Kang , age 17

Bite Me



Claire Merner, age 14

Babak's Story

On the Sunday evening Babak turns 250, the woods are warm and alive. Through the trees and bushes the humid mid-summer air is still soft and warm. Even the two streams that form a little wedge of land are bubbling with lukewarm water, a rare occurrence. On this little triangle of dirt and moss sit two trees. Beneath the first tree and at the end of a long tunnel, sits a small underground home, nestled between the second tree's roots. This is Babak's home. His name means "little father" in Persian. It's sunset and Babak is still in his bathtub. Avery and Oskar are still sleeping and Hilda is in the kitchen boiling the linden-blossom tea. It's the only time of day she has to herself and Babak knows she cherishes it. Still though, he has to get up eventually. It's harvest time and the herb garden needs water, so Babak heaves himself out of the tub and goes to dress. He walks into the large room and kisses his wife's cheek. Hilda picks up the tea from the large, hand-painted stove and sets it on the table. She pours him a cup and wishes him a happy birthday. Babak is too lost in thought to answer. Hilda crosses the main room and pets the pet mice, waking them from their sleep before opening the sleeping alcove to rouse Oskar and Avery, the twins. The twins clamber out, fighting and yelling, but stop long enough to kiss their father and wish him a happy birthday. Avery even gives her father a small woven grass pot. They all eat their fill of songbird eggs, various mushrooms, porridge, cornmeal bread, ant eggs and spice cake. While Hilda clears the table and the children play with the pet mice, Babak smokes his pipe. He sighs. "Today," he thinks, "I'm not going to go to the sawmill, but instead I shall visit my birthday tree." As Babak leaves the house, Hilda hands him his lunch sack, a small hollow acorn of grass-seed biscuits and kisses him goodbye. Babak pats the watch-cricket goodbye and clambers through the dark tunnel away from his cozy little family and into the harsh outdoors.

Upon leaving his home, Babak realizes it's not yet fully dark. Thankfully, Babak spots a rabbit and they wait in quiet peace until the sun falls and darkness settles. The gnome tradition is not to celebrate birthdays, but, once a year on Midsummer Eve, to add a runic mark to their birthday tree. Babak is aware of this. He also knows his birthday usually takes place around that time. Today is the day before Midsummer Eve. It is Babak's actual birthday. Tomorrow the whole family will travel to their birthday trees and add another mark. Babak knows, as well that Hilda doesn't appreciate his rebellion of gnome tradition. Every year when Babak celebrates his birthday she sighs and

says, "Babak, gnomes don't celebrate birthdays. Be more like me and Fernando." Fernando is Babak's brother. He is a very traditional gnome, as is Hilda, and they both celebrate their birthdays the usual gnome way. They put aside a few weeks for quiet, boring parties and they contemplate their growing age. Babak finds this intolerable, though he would never admit it to Hilda. Babak knows he is aging, and he knows he ages one year every year since the day of his birth. Why not celebrate that day? Today doesn't feel much like a celebration. His kids will soon be thirty-seven and Babak feels old in comparison.

Babak steps over some roots and moss and finds himself staring at his birthday tree. "Good grief Babak," he finds himself thinking. His tree is tall now, much bigger, and now another gnome is using it as well. Babak sighs again. He adds a mark and sits at the roots of his tree. "What have you done with your life, Babak?" he thinks to himself. The answer is not satisfying. Babak had, of course, done the usual gnome stuff. Born to an aging mother and father, he and his twin had grown up playing marbles and dragonfly and, of course, bickering and wrestling. He had lessons from his father, like every gnome son does, and set off to build his own home and to find a wife at seventy-five. Babak had put much care into his dwelling, selecting the perfect trees in a safe and stunning area of the woods and had spent years building, measuring, laying down planks of wood, so much so that he could live peacefully with Hilda in old age. Of course Babak was proud. All young gnomes are when they finish their home and get their father's praise. And when Babak met Hilda and Fernando met Gloria, they both celebrated together. Hilda had been perfect, charming, and yet shy, with a wide, round body and a soft felt cap. After their moonlit wedding they'd marked the date on the tree and went off on a beautiful honeymoon. Then they'd had Avery and Oskar. The rest of his life had been spent working at the sawmill, in the herb garden, glassblowing, gathering, healing, all work.

Of course, Babak loved this. Gnomes enjoy a life of work and family and get great pleasure out of what it brings. But still, Babak was weary. He felt dull. Gnomes never got much fame. There was the king and queen, and then the rare gnome got recognition for escaping a troll or even a snotgurgle. Babak certainly did not want to encounter a snotgurgle, but wouldn't it be nice to be known. Babak thought about this, smoked his pipe and ate his lunch.

Sivan B. Piatigorsky-Roth, age 13

The Most Simple of Laws

When the streets seem to shift in fear and unease,
And the land seems near to boiling over with rage
And fury pours from each window and door,
A wall will appear at the start of a war
Like a wild animal loosed from its cage.

It is made from bricks and tall metal pikes
With pots and pans sticking out from each side;
From tables and chairs and stout wooden beams;
With malicious intent it seethes and it gleams,
Based upon fear and coated with pride.

People mill 'round it, their cries rent the air
Each to their side, not crossing the wall:
One side to protect it, and cover behind,
Each side with guns, to make the other blind
One side to destroy it and cause it to fall.

In the dimly lit chaos it towers with menace,
Watching with hunger those ready to die.
It rumbles when they say that freedom's their cause
For nothing can change the most simple of laws;
And still the wall stands, protecting a lie.

Kill or be killed, they yell to the wind;
We will be victors and we will be free.
They do not know that the last thing to stand
Will be what they've built on the blood-covered land
And the last one to stand makes the final decree.

And the bloodshed continues, each side too afraid
To climb over the wall and finish the fight.
Till they find out that only in death are they free,
And no one, but no one, is able to flee,
And still the wall stands, grinning into the night.

Julia DaSilva, age 14

A Soldier's Viewpoint

We began to fall in the frozen field
Doves were seen but we could not hear the birds
Soldiers were dying but we would not yield
Men were killed for but a few empty words

Freedom and Liberty had no meaning
Upon the bare wasteland that was our grave
We fought while our sleeping sons were dreaming
They say that we who still have life are brave

The dead we will forever remember
The question of why we fight falls on me
No answer spoken on this cold December
The dead men don't care whether they are free

The clouds revealed a beautiful red dawn
And yet, taking no notice, we still fight on.

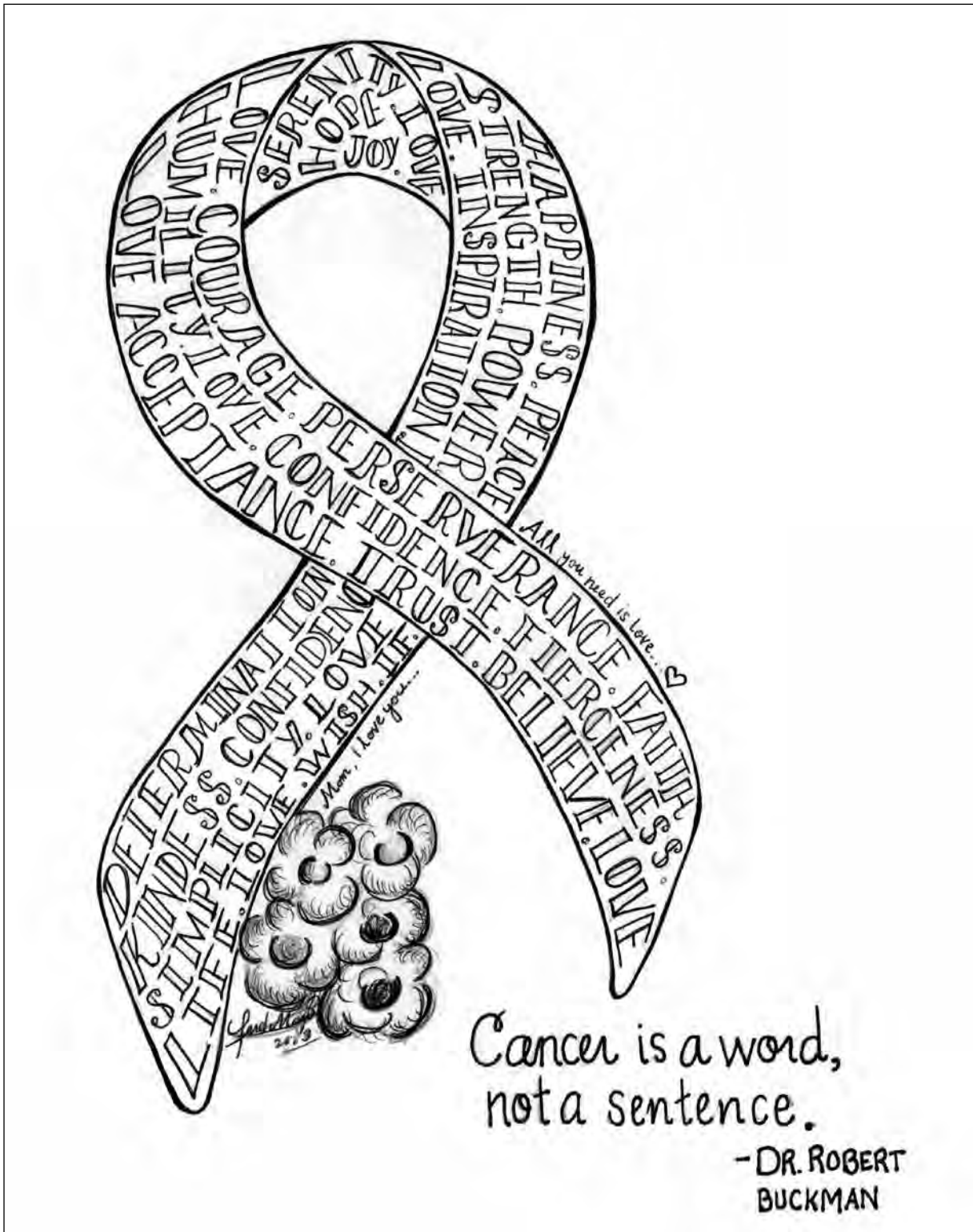
Yifan Li, age 15

Some Call it Murder...

Scattered,
Across the naked fields,
But only below the surface.
Hidden below the corruption.
I was not cut.
I was not sliced.
I was butchered.
Murdered, but not killed.
A callous man.
The tragedy is yet to be solved,
For my soul quivers among the earth.
I hear their voices.
I feel their stomps, their panicked shuffles.
They refuse to abandon my memory.
The longer they take to recover my body, the lower I sink.
Welcomed by the shoulders of death.
I cannot hide from being hidden.
A plea,
Barely escapes my mouth.
He has succeeded.

Claudia Luk Ok Choo, age 19

Cancer is a word, not a sentence



Ferd Marie Policarpio, age 14

Steady

Hands on
Am I ready?
Let's go
Cause we are steady.

Hands are clenched
Feet go slow
But I am safe
With you I know.

I start with care
Then get the feel
We're balancing now
Unwavering wheel.

We're soaring on
We're flying fast
But then I'm shocked
As I look past.

You're way behind
I'm way ahead
I start to fall
I feel like lead.

Then right before
I hit the ground
You pull me up
Arms wrap around.

Betrayed and angry
"You let go" I say
But then I realize
What's happened today.

I did it just now
All by myself
I rode my bike fine
Without any help.

A nervous squeal
Escapes my lips
You calm me down
With a kiss.

You always know
What's best, what's right
"I love you dad"
And we hug tight.

Rachel Mandel, age 16

Lay Me Down To Sleep

As I stand here in my cradle
Wov'n with broken branches and beams
I feel my mother's warmth
Powerful, endless, vast yet plain
I feel her warmth
Because I cannot see

Smoke, billowing,
Powerful, endless, vast yet plain
My pained eyes try to see
Through this thick unwavering mist
To those who would close them for me

My ears, as well, I would close if I could
'gainst jeers, the crackling of burning wood
The thoughts of those I fought to protect
Echoing in my perfect ears

The embrace becomes more painful still
Burns, burns...
Choking me, consuming me
Never understanding
I am but a woman
And it was His will

So as they lay me down to sleep
I pray the Lord my soul will take
I know I die, I will not wake
My soul, I feel, the Lord does take
Joan, the warrior, my Lord does take

Nicole Loucas, age 18

Stronger

When I walk to my class,
When I drag through the halls,
When I stroll through the yard,
When I cry in the stalls,
When they shove me around,
When I bleed on the ground,
When they spit on my face,
When my mind runs a race,
When their words pierce my heart,
When my soul rips apart,
When I try to fight back,
When my sight goes pitch black,
When I close my eye,
When I wish I could die,
When I never feel right,
When it's too dark for light,
When life's drifting by,
When I always deny,
When I only see mist,
When it's hard to persist,
When I fuel the fire,
When I fill their desire,
When I die just to live,
When I never forgive,
When I want to feel free,
When I need to accept me,
When I hear my voice,
When it gives me a choice,
When there's strength deep within,
When a new page will begin,
When they couldn't see,
When they're done torturing me,
When I hold on longer,
It only makes me stronger.

Denada Alushaj, age 15

Merchant's Clouds

Dear Toph,

How is Mom, and school? In your last letter, you mentioned how you wished that you could be fighting this war with me. I don't share your view.

In early September of last year, I met a merchant. He was selling paintings, his own, but looking at the way he was dressed and how many paintings were scattered around him, I'd wager he didn't make much from them. While his back was turned to a current project, I looked at them, but I couldn't fully tell if they were abstract or not. It was too hard to tell, because the paintings hung in an imbalance between accuracy and inaccuracy. In one there was a mix of clashing colours that didn't look well together, but splashed onto the canvas in a way that looked vaguely like a tree sitting by a river. In another, there was a clear painting of a road with people, except the road was an ugly shade of purple and the people were a disgusting shade of green, and there was a slight fuzz to the lines, as if all of it was simply a hallucination. The label for the paintings dangled between dreams and realities. I felt a nauseating wave of uncertainty wash over me when analyzing them, because I could not understand if this was a distorted reality, or a dream with familiar qualities to it. I simply walked away at first, for I had been running an errand for our mother, but on my way back I ran into him again. I don't know why I stopped to look a second time, but I did. He saw me, and his weathered, haggard, and tanned face lit up. He had to be mid-thirties, give or take.

"Change your mind?" he asked in a sandpaper voice that scraped across my skin, raising goosebumps as outward evidence of my unease. I hadn't known he'd seen me before.

I didn't answer, but I peered at the painting he was working on before, for he had stepped away from it by then.

There was what looked like clouds, the same softness, familiar and real, but they were black and grey, and there were hints of red in them, lurking behind them, struggling to break through. The clouds themselves were soft, yes, but they swirled in a way that gave off a feeling of malice. There was a blank spot underneath, and the wet paint dripped onto the unfinished part of the painting.

"What's that one?" I asked, pointing at it. I couldn't help it, really.

"It's war," he said simply. And I thought that he was ridiculous, wrong. War is not a swirling red storm hidden beneath a sweep of darkness. War is a mass of rolling hills and brave comrades, romantic letters home and memories made. A way of respect. Honour. Glory. Then I thought, maybe, it was war, and he was just adding artificial qualities to it, like in all of the other paintings.

Having been in the trenches for months, I now know that none of that is true, and that the lowly merchant has never been more right.

I am surrounded by mud. No one here smiles. I can only smell smoke and rotting flesh. I use the sounds of gunfire to lull me to sleep, because that's all I have. There is barely enough food to eat, and no one seems to have any hope of going home. Things here are almost blacker than the merchant's clouds.

And, under all of it, brews red. I get so angry over this war and everything I've seen that red flashes across my vision. I imagine the bloodshed and senseless killing that is all this war is good for, and sink into piles upon piles of red spilled on the battleground. And I see it in other men, too. Their words are red. Their eyes are red. They're angry, the seeing-red kind of angry, which I think when harnessed we can use to go home, to stand up against those in charge and end this, but the black clouds of depression and fear and responsibility cover our red. The only bit of hope I cling to is the fact that the red is even there. Showing itself, but just barely, a pretense of a promise of chaos. I want to stop this war and I hope that the red inferno against the cruelty is powerful enough to rip the darkness apart.

I was going to ask if you could somehow find the merchant, and tell me what was in the unfinished part of his painting, but I no longer want to know. I want that blank space to allow my imagination to have the vibrant red fade into the pink of dawn — of a war ended — of new beginnings. Whether a vision like that is a dream or reality, I don't know. Anyway. Give Mom my best. I love you.

Con

Celia Ramsay-Crocitto, age 15

Untitled

No one's ever hiring, I thought as I sipped the scalding hot chocolate in my cold hands. Last year, I'd finally graduated and become a hygienist but even now in February I couldn't find a single opening. I laid the newspaper on our dining room table and took another sip. Truthfully, I was looking for a part-time job. I wanted to leave this place.

"Miina! Where are you?" Mama called from upstairs.

"I'm in the dining room!" I yelled back and quickly hid the papers.

She bounded in looking chipper as ever, with the phone pressed to her chest.

"Oh, Miina, you wouldn't believe it!" She sat down beside me. "I was just speaking to your Aunty Rani. You remember Ali, right?"

How could I forget my own cousin?

"Of course, how is the shorty?" The last time I'd seen him, he was in middle school and as tall as Mama at four foot, eight inches. He was only two years younger than me, but so serious. He was the younger brother I wished I had.

"Miina, he's already eighteen. Enough with the childish names!" she admonished. "Besides, he got accepted into that engineering program."

"Another one, huh?" His two older sisters are doctors and his brother's a mechanical engineer.

Mama filled up with pride at her nephew. "His parents are so proud of him." Her chest quickly deflated. "I don't know why you didn't become a doctor." *Here it goes...*

"Mama, stop. We've been over this. You know I can't —"

The phone rang.

"That must be Rani. She was going to call again." She handed the phone to me.

"What? What am I supposed to do?" I pushed it back.

"Just answer!" She had a strange look in her eyes and left the room.

I put the phone to my ear, "...Hello?"

"Miina? Is that you?"

I didn't recognize that strange deep voice.

"Miina, it's me. Ali."

This wasn't Ali, at least not that twelve-year-old boy I knew, but I kicked myself back to reality and answered, "Oh, hey Shorty! Um... congrats on the acceptance. Looks like you're following your family footsteps."

"They didn't tell you, did they?" Ali seemed really uncomfortable. I swear I could hear the sweat rolling down his neck and not because it was hot there.

"Mama just told me you got accepted, which is great... fantastic... totally awesome... what more can I say —"

"That's not it!" There was haggard breathing on the other end. "You know we'll be seeing each other next year."

"You're coming to Canada?"

"No... you're coming here..." There was a pause. "For our wedding."

The phone dropped from my hands, hands that were clenching air, air that wasn't entering my lungs, lungs that refused to breathe.

Mama peeked through the door and must have said something, but all I could hear was this incessant buzzing. She picked up the phone, spoke for a bit and then hugged me, smiling and saying over and over the only words I could understand, "I'm so happy."

"Why's everyone shouting so early in the morning?" My younger sister Zalaf walked in to see me in this state.

"Our Miina's getting married!" Mama rushed to hug Zalaf.

"Really, oh my god! Who is it?" Zalaf turned excitedly to me. I forced air in, and choked, "Ali."

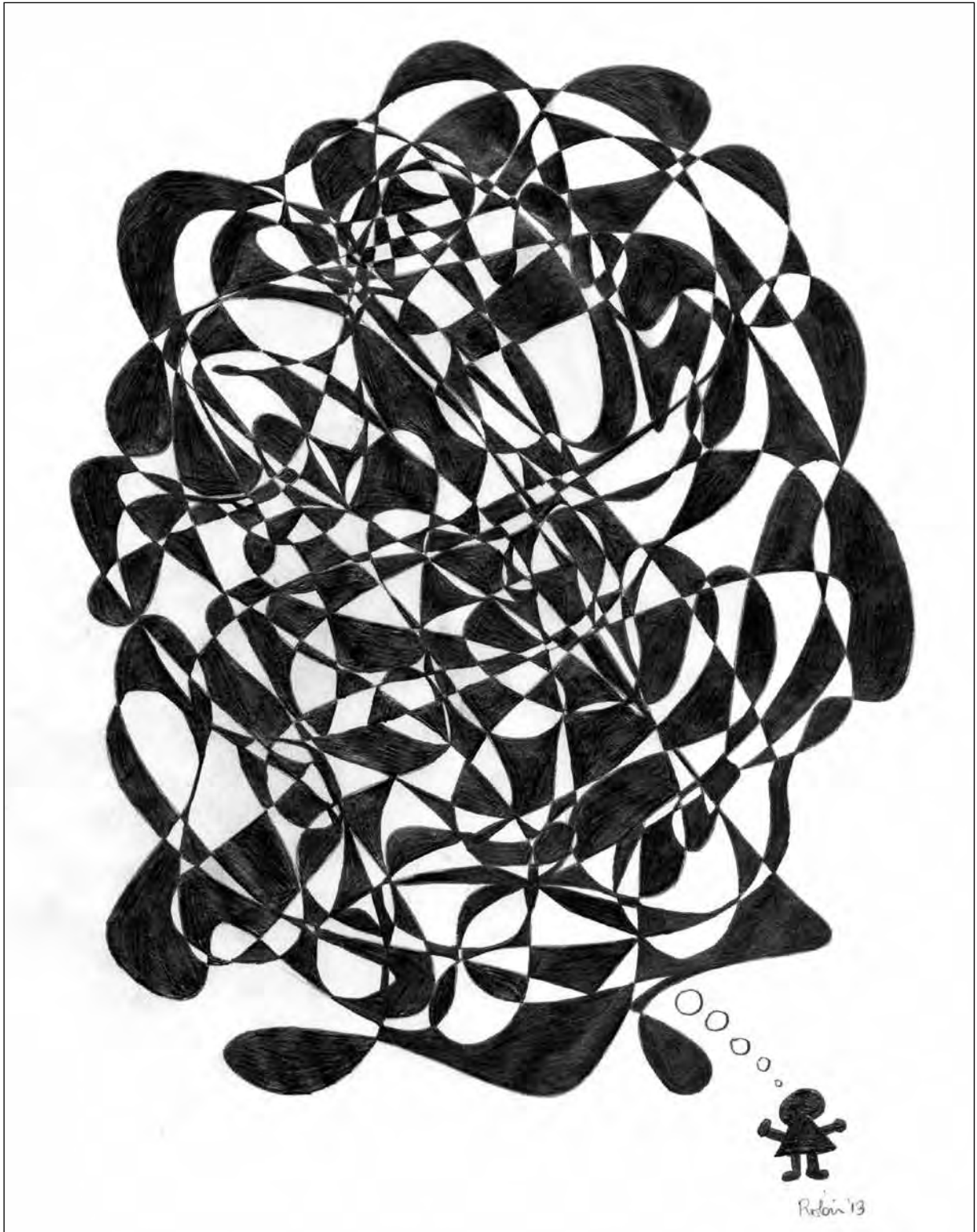
Her face changed to one of childish disgust. "Eww, our cousin Shorty!" She turned to Mama, "When I get married I can marry whoever I want right?"

Mama smiled at her and placated her eight-year-old heart, "Of course. You can choose whoever you want."

That's what she'd told me too.

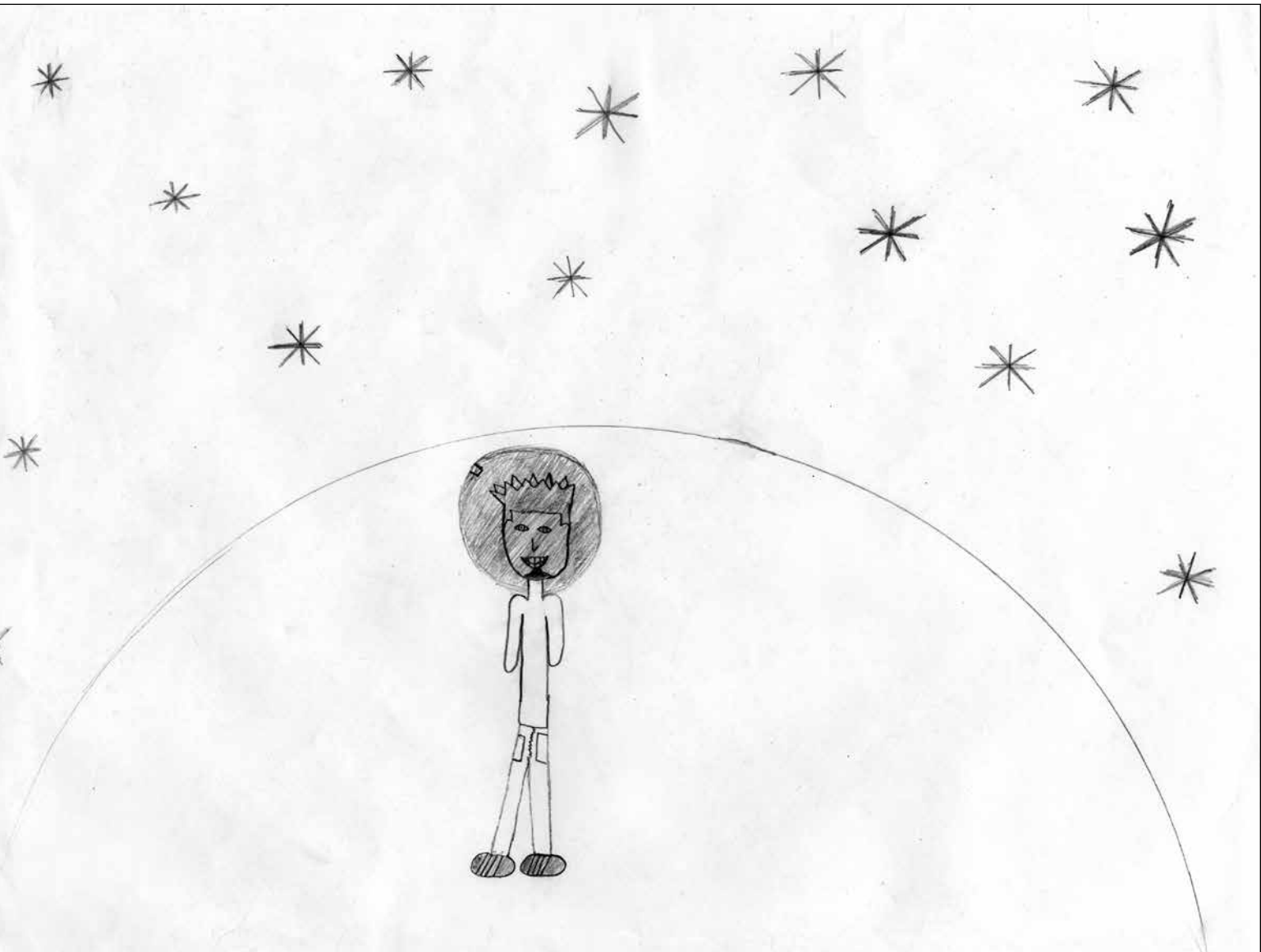
Ifrah Saeed, age 18

Chaotic Thoughts



Robin Reyes, age 19

Man on the Moon



Ozar Bashir, age 12

Four Seasons

For today's lesson, I would like to teach you a few of the basic techniques used to conduct an orchestra. These techniques will be demonstrated using Antonio Vivaldi's Four Seasons. Let's begin with Spring. This movement is done in four-four time, which is shown in a gesture of your index finger moving down, right, left, and up. This is kept at a constant speed with your right hand. Also, to help us to see Vivaldi's composition more clearly, I will now introduce the instruments, and what image he is trying to convey to us in his piece of music. Up roar the violins and the violas! Springtime is a spark to the senses, a flame to the soul, and a time of joviality and mirth. Filling the air with melodious incantations, birds commence in happy song. A low murmur rises and recedes as a zephyr passes by in gentle gusts and as leaves tumble to the earth immersed in their playful folly. Small tender hands gingerly fondle amongst the trees, and out emerges a young boy with a pale complexion turned red with excitement. Now, the basso continuo, which consists of cellos and double basses, joins in. To signal their entrance, we execute a quick gesture with our left hand, nearly forming a figure in the air similar to that of the letter K. A silence engulfs the land. Inklings of a storm come into view in these few petrified moments as light is consumed by darkness. Those small opaque white hands fall limp and rest idly by the young boy's side. After minutes of stillness, the sky begins to clear and the birds continue with their song. Over many days and nights, summer arrives in a flurry of energy.

Summer is conducted in three-eight time which can be shown with your right index finger by beginning with a loop to the left and moving it in a triangular formation in the air to the right, up, and down again. This movement begins on a soft high-pitched note played by the violins. In summer, a feeling of warmth and enthusiasm grows as the cuckoo calls and the finch birds trill blithely. The boy frolics over hills, over prairies, over marigolds and over briars to where he is met by a swarm of flies. The cellos and contrabass join in. To cue the cellos and contrabass, we use our left hand and strike it energetically in front of us in a straight line like the capital letter I. A chase begins as the swarm advances menacingly towards the boy who flees in the direction he came. Anticipating his fate, he falls to the earth succumbing to the swarm, while bathing his tired lanky limbs in the intense heat. However, the flies speed past him and disappear into the distance.

At last it is Autumn! The sweet redolence of lavender and delphinium gives scent to the mixture of pine and decaying foliage in the dense cold air. The violins and cellos continue in four-four time. The gentle trickle of water, the eerie sigh of the swaying trees, the harvests, the rejoicing, and other forms of revelry alike drone into the night sky. The boy romps, absorbed in his contentedness. This movement is ended with a gesture like the letter D. It silences the orchestra gradually and lengthens the last note played by the violins and the cellos.

For Winter, I will take you back to the December of 1905 to another day when I had conducted Vivaldi's Four Seasons. There, in the upper balcony, sits the little boy who watches with gleeful joy. I can't help feeling a sense of suspicion as I am blinded by a flurry of white mink and deprived of the boy's presence. Then, the violins commence as usual in four-four time. A gesture like the letter N is used with the left hand to join two notes to create a legato between them. After a while we silence the violins using a gesture almost creating the letter A in the air as the cellos continue playing the piece of music. At last, for the final gesture I will teach you, form the letter P in the air to signal the playing of both the violins and the cellos together.

When the lights, the music, and the performance all come together, the only thing a conductor can do is watch in wonder as the night is rewarded by applause. The boy had disappeared from the balcony seat that night, and enough had occurred that day to leave behind an enigma. The door to the Metropolitan Opera House had closed just in time for me to catch a glimpse of a coat and a child's hand.

I was almost certain that it was the little boy, and in instances like this, when all things come together, one can only try to understand. The boy's mother, a nice looking woman by the name of Mrs. Mary Wilkes, had inquired about him those fifty long years ago, and I have dreaded the day since. Surely it was a mink coat that I had seen, and surely Mrs. Wilkes had no money of any kind to pay for such a thing.

So, now that we know all our basic conducting gestures needed to conduct a piece of music, it is most important to review. Our gestures were: K, I, D, N, A, and P.

Jaelyn Yan, age 14

counting into nothing

There are 365.26 days in a year.
(366 in every four years to
eliminate that 0.26;
not perfectly, but it is close enough.)
So, let's just say 365,
since that's normally the case.

365 days and 365 nights.
365 times the sun rises and sets,
to be replaced by the one-faced moon.
275 times we actually see
the stars in the occupied
yet hollow sky.
In a vast blanket of billions,
each is heavy from carrying the hope of each of the billions of
people.
So much reliability
placed upon it, that
at the end of the day, the ones who can
only hope without doing anything to
obtain or even
keep what they most desire
could easily be led into a dense cloud
of
nothing,
filled only with the emptiness
regret has to offer.
And only then,
we begin to see what
we've been blinded from seeing
before.

There are 90 starless nights
from the
365
that are dedicated
to grey clouds and snow,
to the forever dull presence.
But I guess it really depends on your
hemisphere;
depends on where you are,
on where you lay down
to search and
reach to them with your eyes.

Those
90 nights
were where I laid
in a vast nightmare of
dreamlessness,
waiting for something.
A "maybe" perhaps?

I wasn't really sure.

There are only 8,760 hours.

That's how many
in each year. Each and
every one of those hours
is one of the 24 of each day
of the 365 days of every
single
year.
In those 8,760 hours, I was
oblivious of how precious
they were;
counting
down
ever since the books in my hands
slipped and tumbled
onto your feet, catching you off guard
and forcing our eyes to meet.
But the ponderous thoughts of
the 90 nights
kept me in a deep trance,
until
in just the first second span of the 1 hour and
48 minutes,
realization hit
8,758.19 hours too late in that
very year,
because
I honestly thought that
there was going to be more
than enough time;
more than enough years containing
more than just 8,758.19 hours embodying
274.92 starry nights
and
90 grey skies
to be with you.

Sirana Huang, age 14

Heat Zone

It was the summer that did it for him, not the smell of sweat in the subway and buses during rush hour, nor the absence of merciless winds and the icy chill capable of giving frostbite. It was the summer; the idea of it turned into reality. The barely acceptable coolness settling at night was nothing in comparison to humid and unforgiving musty weather. Scorching hot temperatures and a relentless sun came and went with alarming frequency, like the wrath of an angry and slighted deity. Never quite enough water when he needed it, or too much of it when he felt it roll down his spine. It was the summer of this place that made him want to come back home; it was the foreignness.

Maybe he had been wrong to come.

It had been a start in childhood, unable to discern the possibilities of his future from the realities. No child wanted to be what their parents told him to be. Disobedience wasn't what he'd had in mind, only independence. A chance to go on his own path and figure out what it was that he was meant to be. Then be the happiest he could ever be for the rest of his life. Not a dream — he wouldn't call it one. But a hope, a fervent desire that was halfway realized now, with emotional complications that his younger self could never have come to realize.

His parents had been less than enthused with the news that he was moving here, but at least they hadn't argued with him. While he grew up, they were just angry at everything. They were angry about the world as it was now — at the government, at everything.

"They don't understand," they'd said, "those people who don't even live here. We share what we have. It doesn't belong to anyone."

His sister hadn't fit in at all. Her world, she'd told him when he was younger, was farther than their little circle of acquaintances and visiting town once in a while. She'd argued constantly with their parents about the fact that they didn't understand and couldn't possibly understand.

"Traditions," they said.

"Respecting your ancestors and those who came before," they said.

"Terribly boring, terribly routine," his sister said, and then she'd hired someone to fly her south, farther than any one of them could have reached her or expected her to go.

And years later, he'd made the decision to follow in her footsteps.

"You'll hate the food," his mother said when he told her.

"You'll hate the people," his father said when he consulted him.

"You'll hate the traffic," his sister said when she found out what he was doing, and seemed to find it as equally hilarious as she was proud of him. "You're so going to get screwed by the traffic. It's nasty."

Ironically, none of them had been right. It wasn't the food, the people, or the traffic. It was the heat.

But perhaps, he thought, this was what they really had meant. Not the physicality of experiencing it, but what he was feeling now. The estrangement of trying to start over in a place where you clearly didn't belong, alienation while you struggled to learn their language, the light years that education was from what you'd known back at home. The suffocation you felt in a place that had a much higher ratio of people to square kilometres of territory was a never-ending mess of being a stranger in a stranger's land.

He hadn't been siding with the loss of the culture, the history or the way of life of his people when he'd decided to come here. If someone wanted to continue the traditions, let them. It just wasn't going to be him. And now he wondered if he should have regretted thinking that.

It was the summer that did it for him, fog rolling up and across an orange sky where he saw it through a gritty and dusty apartment window. It was the lavish heat, the slow lope that a man took to reach out to his window.

His girlfriend came in around noon when she'd finished classes, settling down her backpack and offering him a half-liquid ice cream sundae to finish.

"Sorry," she said, licking her fingers clean. "Kind of melted on the way back."

He didn't feel like finishing it, but he put it in the fridge anyway even with the electricity out.

His place was a small two-bedroom apartment, rent dirt cheap, a ways from the campus. Barely a home and yet it was one, with a second-hand couch, fridge, table, and mattress. On the topmost level of a bookshelf that had been left for trash, he'd settled a soapstone lamp his father made as a child. On the wall, old posters he used to have in his old room. On the floor, textbooks, assignments, and unopened boxes. Home.

They lay side by side on the bed. She looked like a stranger here, spread amongst the things of his past and present, an anomaly sighted in the distance. Even her touch was impossibly warm, reaching along the curve of his ear before she settled it at the base of his neck.

"You're difficult to read," she told him.

He closed his eyes, allowed her fingers to pet at his pulse, and tried to cool down.

Nicole Yip, age 18

The Talking Downstairs

The talking downstairs puts her to sleep at night. Listening to the whispers exchanging words, she is at peace as the world slowly shuts down around her. She gazes up at the ceiling and drifts off to another land. When the sunlight streams in the following morning, the whispering is still there. This time it has a quiet tone because of the time of morning, when the world is still half asleep. The volume is peaceful but slowly gets louder as she stumbles down the stairs into the light-filled living room. She enters into her favourite part of Sunday mornings, those conversations that would start the last day of the weekend. Sometimes before her careful descent, she sits upstairs on the top step and strains herself to listen in on the conversations of the voices down below. She never thinks it to be eavesdropping; she had been curious from the day she was born. She loves being the third voice to enter into those Sunday morning conversations and would wait for the perfect moment. For the most part, she is the loudest, at first entrancing the others in stories about life and nature and what it means to be a kid. There are so many new things happening around her that she has to share with her loved ones. The others listen intently and as her breakfast stories wrap up, dishes are done and the day begins. For the rest of the day, the voices remain at their usual level, but sometimes they would get louder.

She hid that one June day when the voices turned to screams. There was shouting back and forth, but she remained on her top step, listening carefully between tears. There was nothing that frightened her more than shouting. Sitting at the top of the stairs that night had a different feeling. Gone was the excitement of making an entrance, replaced by fear of confrontation and conflict that was happening at the bottom of the twisted steps. But within minutes, the voices were together again downstairs, settled onto the living room couch. What had happened a few minutes before was forgotten.

A few years passed, with the same routines every Sunday morning, seeming like they would always stay the same. But life was changing. Her routines were suddenly gone, changed only a few years after they had begun. She had never thought of the inevitable end of these simple mornings, because she was too young to think that far ahead. Instead of three voices every Sunday morning, there would be two, or four or six, rushing around in the chaotic household.

After she had adjusted to this chaos, her life changed again. Rather drastically. One evening, when the sun had set in the west and the light drained from the living room as it did every day, there were many voices downstairs. They came together to create white noise that she could hear in between thoughts as she sat on her top step. It was overwhelming to hear that many voices all at once, together, downstairs. She could hear worried tones and felt the tension behind the words. She'd had enough of this but there was no way to escape. She retreated to the furthest corners of her room, but the voices followed her like the buzzing of mosquitoes. When they peaked in volume, she shut them out and life fell silent for a while. But she still spent many days perched on the top step, listening for a voice of days gone by to return. Even when the voices downstairs died out, the buzzing in her head kept her up at night and distant in the day. Irritating and ubiquitous, the buzzing continued for months.

There will never be another voice to replace the one lost. Maybe one day there will be three voices again, but never the same three. She hoped falling asleep every night that one day she would be one of the voices downstairs, with a little one perched on the step listening in, creating their own Sunday morning memories. That thought gave her peace and helped her fall asleep. The buzzing has gone down since then, but there will always be a distant hum in her ears, of time lost. Sunday mornings are different for her now, but she will always remember the feeling of the carpet beneath her feet, the green tint of the living room walls and the warm smiles greeting her as she made her sleepy entrance.

Sophie Fraser, age 15

A Suffering Bear



Maria Yang, age 12

.....
Tree vs. Person



Ryan Sovran, age 15

Parallel Universes and Batman's Girlfriend

The boy played with his shirt in boredom as he sat in the uncomfortable chair in the near-empty bar.

He sipped a glass of iced tea with vigour only tedium could engender.

He glanced around: only a miserable looking man at the bar, a dejected man of about thirty chugging some sort of alcohol with a blank look of utter despair, and a love-struck couple in the corner quietly kissing so sweetly it was barely sickening; the woman was a lawyer (you could tell by her briefcase) and the man was dressed as Batman, tall and dark and caped.

But really, nothing interesting.

In an alternate universe, the boy thought, I am flying around the world like the real Batman because I devoted my life to the delicate art of anthropological aerodynamics.

The boy grinned. In another universe, the sad drunk man is cheerfully asking for my autograph because in this other world, I'm remarkably famous.

This is how the boy thought all the time. He couldn't ever see what was so interesting about the world he was in, so he simply imagined what was going on in all the parallel universes, all the interesting worlds.

And right there, in my favourite parallel universe, I just spontaneously combusted. The boy loved this universe in particular because everything was so spontaneous.

Adults told him he was being silly, silly, silly, with his silly imagination. Or, the more cynical ones told him he was selfish, taking the beautiful world for granted. At school, everybody thought he was telling a fantastical story, but no, he told them, it's real. This is all really happening somewhere out there.

They laughed at him.

Somewhere all my schoolmates crowned a version of me the King of the Schoolyard, and the Defender of all its Glory. In another world, my school doesn't exist because it was overridden by fascist crocodiles that, for reasons unknown to mankind, turned it into a bowling alley. The boy couldn't decide in which world he was luckier.

Only a few people understood him. They agreed the things which happened in parallel universes surely were far more interesting than what was going on here. "But I simply cannot think that way, imagining different words all the time," they would say. "But kid, if I could, I would."

"The question isn't can you think like that," the boy would explain. "Everyone can. The question is: will you or won't you?"

No one ever answered him, probably because they were not listening, but had they been listening they probably would have smiled tiredly and said, "Sure thing, kiddo," only to have forgotten entirely about this encounter by the time dinner came along.

Now, the boy was no fool. He knew that in some universes life was even duller than it was here.

Somewhere, I spent my whole day observing patterns on a brick wall.

Though he couldn't even imagine how awful that universe must be. Probably even worse than the universe in which he accidentally just ingested a llama.

Yet every day, the boy found himself wondering why he was stuck in this monotonous universe when other versions of him ended up in universes far more diverse and exciting. *In some universe somewhere, I am composing a classical concerto on my very own invention, the foot piano. Why can't that be me in this universe? Why can't I be the bold entrepreneur who began a business in crocodilian commerce for a change? Or a chef who masters the art of sautéing flamingoes? Instead I'm stuck in this hellhole of a bar, sipping some meaningless drink, thinking ceaselessly about universes that only I really believe in.*

The boy checked his watch. 6:10. Probably time to go home. Not that his mother would care much. She would assume he was out wasting his life, which was true, as everybody is always wasting their life if you want to look at it that way.

He didn't want to go home.

In an alternate universe I do want to go home because my home is a maze of enormous circus tents guarded by helical oak trees.

If only.

So he delayed it a little bit.

"What do you do?" he asked the man, chugging the drink, who only looked a little bit alarmed that a young boy was attempting to engage him in conversation. He also looked rather bitter, as if maybe he loathed children a little bit, or at least loathed their optimism.

"Um, I'm an accountant, I suppose," he muttered, sounding hopelessly distraught, and oddly unsure. The boy immediately liked him. The boy followed the accountant's distressed gaze until he found that the accountant was staring at the couple in the corner.

The woman took it upon herself to answer the boy's question as well. "I'm a lover," she twinkled prettily, and her and Batman laughed and laughed.

The boy liked how she said that: "I'm a lover." As if it was the most important thing in her life, and she had completely forgotten that she was a lawyer even though her briefcase was sitting beside her, reminding her.

The boy itched for something important to say too. He could make people laugh, he realized, and proclaimed giddily, "I'm a joker!"

The lonely-looking accountant muttered, "Then get the hell back to Gotham city and kill Batman before I do."

The boy was young, but he understood the longing in the man's tone. He was in love with Batman's girlfriend. And how could anyone possibly hope to compete with Batman?

So the boy taught the man how to forget. The man had sounded so unsure, and the boy could make him sure of one thing: there was more to life than everything in this universe.

He began his lesson by saying, "In another universe, you are flying around the world like the real Batman, and you have the girl of your dreams."

The accountant was hooked. He thought the boy was absolutely brilliant.

Thus, the boy taught the bitter accountant to once more think like a child.

Isabel Armiento, age 14

Ice Cream

At the ice cream parlour, it's just Mama and me. Customers come and customers go, but Mama and I stay. They bring in dust from the road, sunshine from the sky — from God Mama would say — and news from the city. We sweep out the dust, let in more sunshine, and listen to their news. In return, we serve them the best ice cream in town and give them the choice to make their own on Sundays.

Ring!

A young businessman strides into the shop, newspaper under arm, suit newly ironed.

"Hi, what would you like?" I ask. It's a usual Sunday afternoon.

"Well what do you have?"

"It's a Sunday, you could make it yourself."

After considering a little, he says, "Then I would like a bowl with all vanilla and chocolate sauce."

I follow his order, then hand it over to him with a smile; Mama says that's good service. "That'd be ninety-nine cents."

"Mighty expensive ice cream," he says, handing me a folded dollar bill.

"Mighty good ice cream and the only parlour in town," I reply, putting away the money.

He flashes me a smile then sits down to read the Sunday news and enjoy his dairy.

Mama walks in and shakes her head. She disapproves of the vanilla and chocolate mix. To her, it'd make more sense if they just stayed apart.

"Looks weird when it melts. 'Sides, vanilla's sweet and soft, and chocolate's a tad bitter and real rich," she said once, when I asked.

Mama's right about that. But that doesn't mean we can't sell them mixed. The combination has been slowly gaining favour and I'm not altogether sure if it isn't because of the contrast. Besides, it's just ice cream — what could possibly be improper about that?

Most days, the bell on the door is constantly ringing, but other days I'd think I hung the open/closed sign the wrong way. It's on days like these that I invent new recipes. The old recipes are classics — and I know that better than anyone — but new ones should always be made. Everyone knows a couple would get bored of each other if it was always the same old routine, so I assume it would be the same for ice cream.

I'm putting a finished batch out for display when Mama walks in from the back and sees what I'm making. She isn't too happy.

"What on Earth are you doing?!"

I look at her, and hold up a biscuit. "I'm making these ice cream biscuits." I show her how it's done, real easy if you ask me: half mixed vanilla and chocolate ice cream between soft, airy biscuits. "It's all the rage in the town across the border."

"You don't mix 'em," she says.

"Why not?"

"If a customer wants chocolate and vanilla side by side, you let 'em. But you don't go consciously mixin' them together. It ain't proper."

Of course, Mama's right. The biscuits didn't sell very well. I'm not sure if it's because a sudden bout of rain broke out and lasted a week, or if they really were as bad as Mama said they were. But I shouldn't have had high expectations. Not everything sells in town.

Maybe it's true; chocolate and vanilla don't mix. I tried them once, and the taste was real weird. Sweet, but weird, and that made me not want to try again. There are reasons the young man working out back never speaks to me anymore. Not even chocolate and vanilla could escape judgment, and they're just ice cream.

Julia Li, age 16

Gift of Time



Dana Kokoska, age 15

Listen



Lucy Lee, age 15

Serendipity

Thick hair, ugly habits and low grades. Yes, I am the black sheep in the family. Always compared to the herd of sheep. Endless fuss over me, it's like a leaking faucet made with no handle. There's no point in stopping the leak. It just makes me weak. Every word of complaint was a bullet to me. Every gesture and expression of disappointment was a falling bomb to me. I try to lighten the burden from everyone but instead I add weight to them. I remember when I was immature and I couldn't let go of situations. I remember when I neglected my responsibilities for my privileges. I remember when I argued with people out of pure instinct. I remember my childish actions and my childish decisions that led to situations I regret. I remember seeing my mom cry, and I just had to have bad grades at that time. I'm no one's cup of tea. In fact, I'm everyone's glass of non-sweetened lemon juice. I'm always close to giving up on myself. So, I pray for the better. Plan for the better. Hope for the better. Wish for the better. Wait for the better. Long story short, I follow my own footsteps. I am my own person. I am a born rebel who brings nothing but dishonour to my family. Some say I have writing skills and I tend to be witty. I guess that's the only weapon to bring back my dignity and honour. Right now my life might be a jar without cookies, but someday soon it will be a cookie-filled jar and maybe, just maybe... kids just might look up to me.

Being the black sheep is a hassle. I get, out of nowhere, headaches and heartaches. I get, out of nowhere, compliments and recognition. I remember back then when some boys from my old school would call me names and some girls from my old school would talk about me. A boy would kick my chair and a boy would be sweet to me. A girl would act friendly then she would be friendly to others by me being the topic. I find it funny how they compliment me and do another. It was bitter entertainment. Some days my parents would raise their voice to me, some days they would praise me. Some days I would feel victory, some days I would feel defeat. But is there a winner who never lost? My life is misleading. People do more receiving and deceiving rather than giving. It's tiring. A lot of things in my life were repetitive. Eat, sleep and education. Same dish, different day. Different school, same system. Society has always been divided rather than united. If you don't like the same

band as everyone, you can't be friends with certain people. If you don't own the right brands and if you don't have the right face they neglect you. They wouldn't even bother getting to know you. It sickens me because it polluted my mind into thinking that I'm not good enough, that I'm not qualified for society. Another repetitive thing is, I meet new people, I get to know them, I spend time with them, I love them, they get tired of me and sooner or later the drifting arrives. So, long story short. I've lost a couple of so-called 'best friends'. I got sent to the principal's office for people that never got my back. I got framed. Thinking back, I could've stood up for myself. I should've fought for me. But I couldn't. I didn't. Thinking back, I've lost most of me. But how do you find yourself if you don't lose yourself? Everything was a blur. I don't even remember half the things that happened. I don't remember half the things I said and did. I can only be certain about one thing. My mind remains stained from bad memories.

A couple of months flew by, new school, new friends, new teachers and new perspectives. I experienced new things. I learned a lot. I engaged myself with good vibes and good people. I listened to new types of music and found myself drowning in the beauty of songs previously left unheard. I challenged myself to new things. I ate spicy food. I drank one litre of chocolate milk. I ate more than I could contain. I attempted to do splits. I talked to strangers, and smiled more. I exercised and read books. I danced to my heart's content. I expressed me to my heart's content. I shared my ideas more. I became open-minded. I met new people. I had ongoing conversations with them. I felt fresh. I felt alive again. And in the midst of winter, I have found summer within. A treasure that I never knew I keep. A serendipity. It was comforting to be back on track. It was fun to be myself again. Simply, comfort at its finest. I found perfect in comfort, I found comfort perfect. All the pain that faded me away from reality had vanished. Now, I plan to retrace myself back like a drawing left untraced. I will seize the waves that crash against me and walk upon them like Jesus. I plan to inspire rather than perspire over irrelevant insights. I will let my motivation and my wits take me over. To be fuelled with passion. For my passion is my work of art. For my future is a painting yet to be my masterpiece.

Shalom Del Mundo, age 15

Fragment

She stands, rubbing her eye with one hand, the left one, and feels an uncomfortable twinge of pain from the wrist. Absently, she flips on the stove, following a routine she's practiced for four years as she examines the long bloody gash that runs diagonally across the belly of her forearm. She sighs and shrugs before running the old, metal teakettle under cold water and placing it over the flame. Her white cotton robe rubs comfortably against her freshly shaven legs, a feeling that she has loved since the first time she held one of those disposable plastic razors. While she waits for the kettle to boil she runs last night's dishes under hot water and stacks them in the dishwasher, tucking the plates into the bottom row of shelving and admiring the way they fit so perfectly into the metal teeth. The silverware goes head down into the small plastic mesh cart, the bowls go on the top shelf, and she closes the machine, feeling the satisfying click of the mechanism as the door snaps into place. She reaches into the sink and rinses out a dishcloth, wringing it thoroughly before she begins to wipe down the counters. She is practical and efficient as she works her way around the small kitchen. She finds the process meditative, watching her hands move and allowing them to lull her into a stupor. She moves slowly, being sure to clear every shabby square of counter space. She clicks her tongue on the back of her teeth, a sound of disapproval as she notices the areas of the floor where the old linoleum is wearing thin. There is no money in her salary to replace them, and she contemplates blocking the holes with cork and gorilla glue.

The teakettle whistles shrilly.

After wringing out the dishcloth and hanging it on a hook just under the sink, she reaches into the cabinet, hand closing around the chipped handle of a mug sporting the words "World's Greatest Mom". The declarative sentence fragment is followed by an exclamation point, something she has always found obnoxious and unnecessary. Looking at the mug, she supposes the owner may indeed have been a wonderful mother; she has never bothered to find out. She reaches for the tin of tea, inside which she stores dusty bags of all of her favourite herbal brews. Extracting a dusty bag of Earl Grey, she reaches over to the back of the counter and pulls the sugar bowl towards her. The bag goes into the cup before the boiling water is poured over it, releasing a cloud from the depths of the chipped white mug.

The steam inflates the bag of tea before the water soaks it; it is buoyant for a moment before the weight of the water is too much and it sinks below the rim. She allows it to steep for thirty seconds before adding the sugar and another twenty before removing the bag and dropping it into the garbage pail underneath the sink. Then the phone rings, shrilly. She feels a momentary flash of irritation before it is quelled by curiosity.

Slowly, she places the mug on the table and reaches for the yellowing plastic of the telephone.

"You haven't been to see me lately."

"How did you get this number?"

"You gave it to me."

"No I didn't."

There is a moment of sleepy, crackling silence.

"Sure you did. You worked for us, remember?"

She takes a deep diaphragm breath and reaches for the dishcloth.

"I didn't give you my home number."

"You should have."

"Yes. Well."

Another silence. She runs the cloth along the small rivulets of blood that have congealed on her arm. It takes sixty-eight seconds to get the orangey red stain off of her skin. Sixty-eight seconds of not-quite-peaceful quiet.

"What do you want?"

"I want you to come and see me."

"No thank you."

She does not quite know why she has not hung up the phone by now. It is likely a guilty conscience. There is more prickly silence, during which she wipes the little rust spots that have fallen onto the stove and the table. The voice on the other end of the line is almost musical, though tight with suppressed rage. It senses her guilt.

"You owe me."

"That may be true."

"I can't... this is too much for me to put up with."

"Your sentence structure is abysmal."

"What?"

"Not incorrect, per se, just a little awkward."

"You always did do that. Pick at things like that. It drove Molly crazy."

"The feeling was mutual. But I suppose you know that already."

There is a gasp followed closely by the sound of stifled sobs. The line goes dead. She sighs and drops the telephone back into its cradle. Her tea is cold by now; she pours it down the drain and turns the stove back up before going to examine her calendar. She can perhaps fit a visit in between her shift at the library and her doctor's appointment, but it will have to be a quick one. She uncaps a red felt-tipped marker and writes in the last-minute event, lips pressed thin with frustration. She does not like to change her schedule. The kettle is screaming at her, and she decides to forgo makeup in favour of tea so that she can still leave at the right time.

Naima Karczmar, age 17

Where there is mankind and machinery,
there will always be nature



Qi Jia (Nini) Chen, age 12

young voices 2014

magazine of teen writing and visual art

Call for submissions

GUIDELINES

Express yourself!

1. **Write what you want to write!** It can be a poem, story, essay... whatever you like.
2. Submit only your own **original work**.
3. **Submissions are not returned**, so keep a copy of your work.
4. Toronto Public Library has one-time print and electronic rights to all work, as well as the right to excerpt from the work for purposes of promotion.
5. Written submissions will be selected from each of the following age categories:
12–14; 15–16; 17–19.
6. Artwork will not be categorized by age for the purposes of choosing what to publish.

NOTE Related work (ie. artwork submitted in conjunction with writing) may not be considered together.

WHO CAN ENTER

Teens, 12–19 years who live or go to school in the City of Toronto.

WHAT CAN BE ENTERED

You can enter two pieces each year:

- One piece of writing per person
- One visual piece per person, either a piece of artwork OR a photograph

Written Work: poems, stories, rants, reviews...

- 1,000 words maximum
- Typed entries preferred, but not required

Artwork:

- 8 ½" x 11" preferred
- Black and white artwork only
- Hand drawn artwork only (i.e. no digitally created artwork)

Photography:

- 4" x 6" minimum; high resolution (300 dpi) for electronic submissions
- Black and white photographs only

HOW TO ENTER

In a Toronto Public Library branch

- FULLY complete the submission form
- Attach the form to your work
- Drop your work off at any Toronto Public Library branch
- For artwork submissions dropped off at library branches, originals are preferred, but if you submit a copy **you will be required to submit the original should your work be selected for publication**

Online submissions

Written

- Submit written work online using the submission form at torontopubliclibrary.ca/youngvoices
- FULLY complete the online submission form **including your address and postal code**

Artwork

- Submit black and white artwork via email to Ken Sparling, ksparring@torontopubliclibrary.ca
- In the body of the email, please supply your name, age, address with postal code, and phone number
- **You will be required to submit the original artwork should your work be selected for publication**

Photographs

- Submit high resolution black and white photographs, minimum 4" x 6", 300 dpi, via email to Ken Sparling, ksparring@torontopubliclibrary.ca
- In the body of the email, please supply your name, age, address with postal code, and phone number

SELECTION TIMELINES

Submission deadline:

Saturday, April 5, 2014

- Editorial teams meet to make selections during spring 2014
- Contributors selected to be published will be contacted during June 2014
- Only those with work to be published will be contacted
- *Young Voices* magazine is published once every year in October
- Questions? Contact Ken Sparling ksparring@torontopubliclibrary.ca



YOUNG VOICES 2014 Submission Form

Please fill out this form fully and attach it to your submission.

Submissions with incomplete forms may not be considered for publication.

Submission Deadline: Saturday, April 5, 2014

Last name _____ First name(s) _____

Address _____ Postal code _____

Email _____ Phone number _____

Age _____ Male Female Today's date _____

Title of your submission _____

Genre of submission:

Poem Fiction Rant Review Art Photograph

Other (please specify what type of work you are submitting) _____

Name of library branch where you submitted _____

I heard about *Young Voices*:

At the library At the mall At school At a shelter Online

Other (please say where) _____

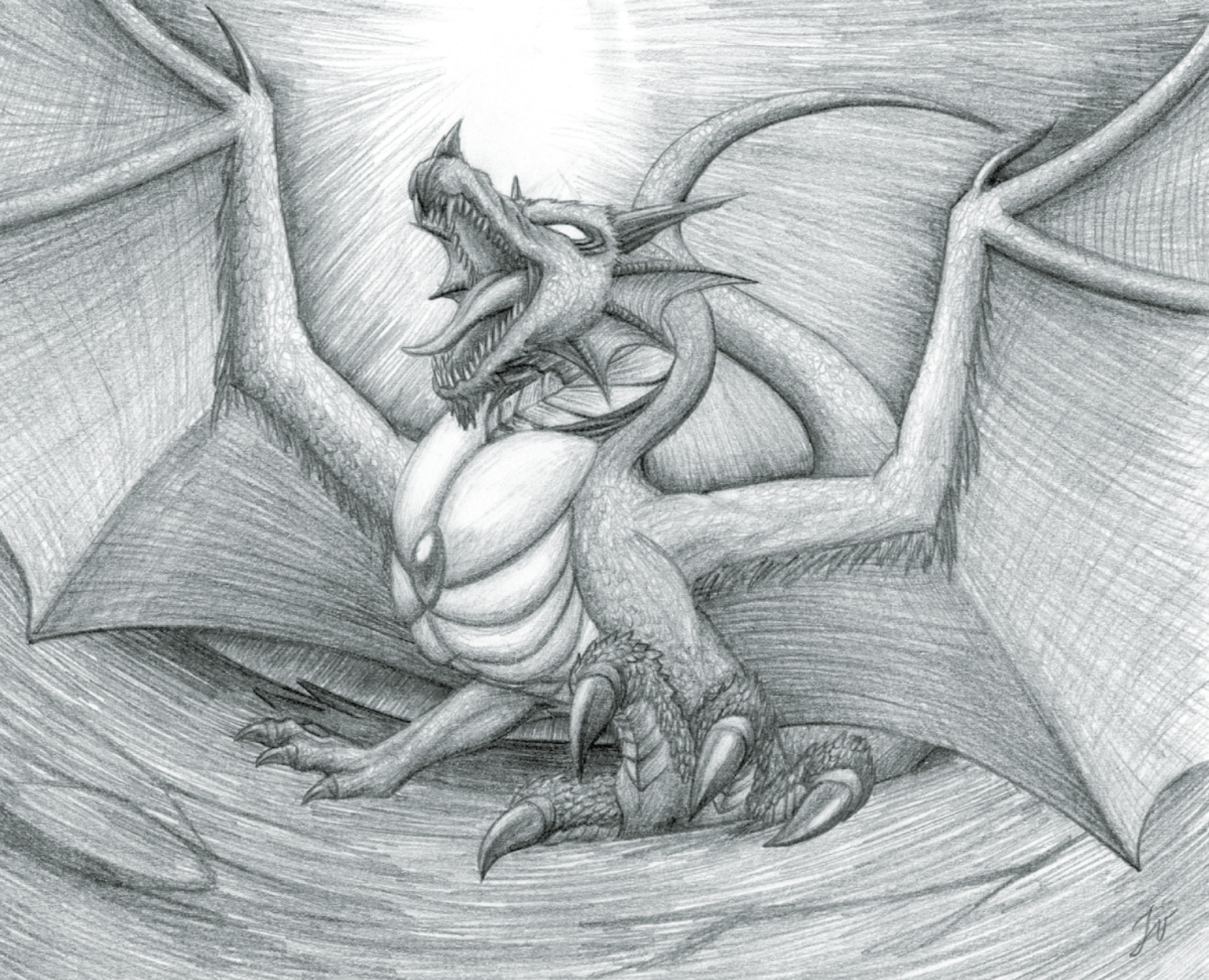
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Perception

Thea Armstrong, age 12



Conquerer's Cry

Vivian Tong, age 18

The Young Voices program, including the publication of the *Young Voices* magazine, is supported through the generosity of the Daniels brothers in honour of their mother, Norine Rose, through the Toronto Public Library Foundation.

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