

young voices 2015

magazine of teen writing and visual art





Light the Way

Elina Nie, age 12

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Welcome to Young Voices 2015

Where have all the young Toronto poets, artists, essayists, gone, since 1965, year after year, for now 50 years? Well, they have come to this blueprint magazine, this weather-forecast magazine, revealing what's inspiring or bothering young creative minds.

Just think: The young voices presented here in 2015 are part of an echo chamber of forever-young voices going all the way back to Beatlemania, the arrival of the "Three Wise Men" in Ottawa, and the first unfurling of Canada's Maple Leaf flag.

It's noteworthy that youth remain very critical of the world their elders have created. Karen Dunbar was in Grade 10 in 1970 when she wrote her poem about youth on "vacation," playing, just before they are told to pick up their guns and return to war. She likely had the Vietnam War in mind.

Fast forward to Domenic Calla and Adrian Benvenuto and their 1991 poem about a Middle East conflict, namely, the Persian Gulf War. The poems are a generation apart and name different wars, but their sentiments are similar.

Themes of alienation and yearning resound through the years. See Chanel Fyffe (2008). But some poems are playful. See Rick I Green (1971). Toronto's young writers and artists will continue to praise beauty and critique wrongs, starting right here, in 2015, and continuing right on to 2065 and beyond. Write on!

George Elliott Clarke
Poet Laureate of Toronto (2012-15)



Check out 50 Years Young, a Young Voices retrospective (1965-2015), starting on page 55.

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FRONT COVER ART

Pride

Novaya Politra, age 14



CONTENTS

Poetry

Fated Death , Tameka Briggs, age 17	5
In the Mind of a Victim , Fatou B. Balde, age 16	6
atmospheres , Sivan Piatigorsky-Roth, age 15	6
Warden and Ellesmere , Candace Cam, age 13	10
The Ancient Eye , Gabby Marcuzzi Herie, age 18	10
The Girl Who Held the Moon , Huda Zavery, age 15	11
Holding Sway , Gwenyn Huang, age 17	11
The Sharpener , Dyllan Scott, age 12	11
untitled , Phoebe Habkirk, age 13	13
cake , Sophie Hollis, age 13	13
Constantinople , Madeline Ralevski, age 17	24
Season of the Crow , Marc Schwentek, age 17	24
Face of the Unknown Soldier , Annalise Hordij, age 12	24
Growing In , Sabina Beleuz Neagu, age 16	24
Joy , Czarain Laqui, age 14	30
The Birth Defect that Made Me Afraid to Love , Anonymous, age 15	30
How to betray a poem , Wareeshah Khan, age 13	30
Compass , Daniel Macdonald, age 19	35
untitled , Cathy Zhang, age 13	35
How the Mirrors Ages , Fardowsa Ahmed, age 18	35
Nature's Song , Rebecca Antonacci, age 17	35
the escapist , Yanelle Bardhan-Mendonca, age 14	37
ABC's of Anorexic Agony , Rose Gold, age 16	37
Torn Paper World , Aiman Ali, age 18	41
Dad Did Not Fix , Lily Boyd Bell, age 14	41
Monster , Sonia Lachman, age 18	45
Ophelia's Reflection on the Reign of Taylor Swift , Melanie Katz, age 16	47
Blacker than Black , Georgia Maxwell, age 16	47
The Universe Painted on a Canvas , Zarah Shinwari, age 14	47
Fire , Tiffany Manios, age 19	48
She Wrote , Natalee Veisi, age 13	48
A Hangover – Now in Technicolor , Faith Paré, age 16	53
Furry Fiestas , Rain Edwards, age 15	53
Fashion Magazine , Gunlar Qaisar, age 16	53

Prose

A Rant , Carrie Noble, age 18	3
Gasoline , Mishal Saeed, age 14	5
The Weaver , Edmee Nataprawira, age 19	6
When the time is right , Aneeqa Tashin, age 14	8-9
Love Notes , Alicia Baron, age 15	13
Average Poodle Muffins , Vaishnavy Puvipalan, age 15	16-17
Everything is Possible , Alisa Lin, age 14	17
Waiting , Kelly Lucas, age 15	19
the world does not revolve around us , Olivia Li, age 14	19
The Voyage , Keisha Emery, age 12	20
The Ill-tempered Cellphone and his Mistress , Tiffany Leung, age 17	23
Perspective , Hana Sharifi, age 13	23
Sweet Sails of Nothing , Lucy Houghton, age 12	27
The Key , Anna Nabutovsky, age 15	28
The Cacti Feast , Rhiana Safieh, age 14	28
Numbers Never Lie , Gabrielle Nigro, age 17	31
Go to Hell , Clare Doherty, age 14	32
Sea Turtles , Shameeza Gafoor, age 16	32
Among Giants , Hannibal dePencier, age 15	36
Im mortal , Maggie (Jiaxin) Han, age 16	39
The Culpability Calculation Formula , Bruce He, age 14	42

On Theatre, Honesty and Reality , Max Ackerman, age 16	44
Too Late , Eva O'Connell, age 13	44
The Year in Paragraph Form , Andalai Ali, age 17	45
Beyond Safety , Mina Ivosev, age 17	50
Keep Out , Kali Williams, age 14	51
Cafe Novo 3 pm , Oona Ostrowski, age 18	54

Art/Photos

Pride , Novaya Politra, age 14	cover
Light the Way , Elina Nie, age 12	inside front cover
Me Melted by Rain , Chun Shen, age 15	4
Pug Life , Shrabanti Biswas, age 14	7
Do Not Go Gently , Micaela Cosens, age 15	9
Forgotten Luxuries , Minna Buan, age 14	12
Pop! , Arash Ghafoori, age 17	14
Scream , Laura Makaltses, age 18	15
Drowned Secret , Andria Henry, age 16	18
Strange, but Beautiful , Soham Parikh, age 12	19
Interstellar , Brenden Skripak, age 12	21
Be Positive , Caitlyn Liu, age 15	22
Fall Again , Mohini Mahabir, age 16	25
David Bowie , Mark North, age 16	26
Wonderland at Night , Amy Lee, age 19	29
Human Nature , Jasmine Zhang, age 14	33
Way up high in the sky... , Angela Huang, age 12	34
Without Wings , Rania Phillips, age 14	38
One Step Closer , Areesha Sabir, age 17	40
Ethereal , Kevin Wang, age 15	43
Unstructured , Showmiya Sivaruban, age 17	46
Splash , Emily Joyce, age 17	49
Live Life , Matthew Jeon, age 16	52
Cells , Aisha Ali, age 19	inside back cover
Hypnotized , Rabaya Khan, age 15	back cover



young voices retrospective

(1965-2015) 55-69

2016 Submission Guidelines 70

2016 Submission Form 71

A Rant

How unfair is it that I hate going out at night by myself, walking to the subway alone, or wearing my school uniform in public because I am afraid of the comments I'll get. I shouldn't have to feel scared. I shouldn't have to feel guilty. And I shouldn't have to feel unsafe. Male co-workers of mine don't understand why I like to wait for them to walk a block to the subway, or to Rexall, or to anywhere for that matter. They don't have to worry about that. As a girl, I do. And I have to worry more and more. The more I develop, and grow, the more I get followed and honked at. It scares me, and it makes me angry. I just want to scream when it happens. I'm a seventeen-year-old girl, I'm still just a baby. I'm not a slab of meat. I'm a human and I want to be treated like one. When I was in elementary school, my mom and my teachers would tell me to be careful in public, to not talk to strangers, and that if someone ever tried to grab me that I had to tell someone right away. I always thought that would never happen to me. But it did. As I was riding the subway home from school in September of grade eleven, a man sitting in the next seat grabbed me. I shot up really fast from my seat to stand by the door, shocked and crying, as I had felt betrayed. My head was spinning and I was furious, but I didn't speak up. I didn't know what to say. The worst part was that the subway was packed. Not one person helped me. When I got off at Kipling, I ran to my mom's car in tears. We immediately went to the police. They questioned me. They asked about the man, the passengers, but to my surprise, they also asked me what I was wearing. I responded by saying I was wearing my school uniform, which was a short skirt, my bare legs, and a shirt that somewhat showed my very little cleavage. But I was in tears as soon as they asked this. I was so offended. What was I wearing? Why would it matter? It didn't matter! I was minding my own business, going home from school. I didn't do anything wrong. I'm allowed to wear whatever I want. It didn't justify anything. I didn't deserve that. I'll never deserve that. No one deserves to be harassed. No one.

Carrie Noble, age 18

Me Melted by Rain



Chun Shen, age 15

Fated Death

We cannot, not accept the fact that we are all going to die
from the moment we took our first breath we have already begun to die
slowly – like cancer
fighting and surviving to live, fearing when we would take that last breath and be reborn again
the universe will continue to rotate as we slowly diminish from existence
taking every moment and momentarily reminiscing
about the good and bad times that happened in our life
finally answering the why's and how's that we were unable to figure out
letting our eyes catch one more glimpse of our played out dream
and finally letting go
letting the last few seconds of our life flash – in between a blink and a breath.

Tameka Briggs, age 17

Gasoline

You're awoken by the acrid scent of something burning, streams of smoke wafting up your nostrils and jolting you upright. You cough, your wild eyes searching for the source, adjusting to the darkness in moments.

You're on your front lawn, the summer air humid against your skin. Your back aches from lying on the hard ground, confusion clouding your vision. Last you remember you were in bed, having fallen asleep to your little sister snoring in the next room.

You inhale the scent again, causing your brain to snap into action. You're on your feet quickly, the glow of oranges and yellows illuminating your mismatched pajamas.

Cellphone. Call 911.

You recall your mother and father not being home as you search for your phone, which you realize too late you don't have. The only one in the house is your little sister, the thought of her turning to ash causing your stomach to sink.

You need to save her.

Running toward the front door, you're about to heave it open when a voice stops you.

You turn around. Your neighbour – a middle-aged woman in a bathrobe and slippers – is out of breath as she tells you to stand back, tells you she's called 911.

"My sister," you say through clenched teeth. "I can't just leave my sister."

You try opening the door again, realizing it's locked. You empty your pockets, searching through the lint and dust because you know you have the key, can recall using it and tucking it away. Groaning in frustration and anger, you continue pounding. Tears stinging your eyes, you try helplessly to get through the door.

A sob escaping your lips, you're suddenly pulled away from the door by two firefighters, your neighbour wrapping an arm around you as tears blur your vision. You're screeching now, begging anyone who'll listen – the wind, the trees, god – that your sister comes out alive, that this is all a horrible nightmare.

Minutes tick by. You grow frantic, negotiating – if she comes out alive you'll be a better person, you'll do all your chores, you'll never talk back, you'll do whatever it takes – until a firefighter walks toward you slowly, her head bowed in pity.

"No!" you wail, clinging to your neighbour as she's the only thing holding you upright. You pray her death was painless, that she was asleep and couldn't feel her soul slipping away.

You don't realize you're in a heap on the cement, can't feel the cool gravel beneath you or the reassuring hand rubbing against your back. Trying in vain to wipe the tears from your face, you pause suddenly.

You sniff your hands again, certain what you're thinking isn't true, that your mind is playing tricks on you. You recognize the strong scent immediately, trying not to puke or pass out or both.

Gasoline. Your hands smell of gasoline.

Mishal Saeed, age 14

The Weaver

Give me yards of your heartstrings – you little dreamer. Let them come into the house in tangles of blue and red and gold, that I may carefully unwind them. I will lay them bare across our living room floor. I will jeté with their ends around my wrists. I will pirouette them through themselves until they are undone.

They will be tired then. Dancing is like crying; it is good exercise. Let me gather them into spools and cradle them in my arms. I will carry them for you like teacups, like trinkets, like morning lullabies. I will bring them to my studio, and in the hushed light I will guide them through the shuttle of my loom.

They will form their own blanket.

You little dreamer – let me wrap this blanket around your shoulders. What good does it do to keep such beauty folded in a chest of drawers? Let me drape it over your sleeves, so that years from now, when it is your turn to gather someone else's threads into spools and cradle them in your arms, you will know that you can keep them (at least for a moment) warm and away from the too-cold fingers of this world.

For now, sleep swathed in its softness.

Your dreams will pattern your blanket like constellations of stars.

Edmee Nataprawira, age 19

In the Mind of a Victim

He's a nice man
So I guess he didn't do it
Excuse me for accusing a man
For a crime that he did commit
And she's a poor woman
So I guess she is forgiven
A clear state of mind
Is a gift I wish I was given
I was told to talk
To share the demons that kept me awake
But I'd rather be mute
Then hear them say it's my mistake
Or hear the repetitive:
"It's the clothes you were wearing"
But off come the clothes
And my skin is the only thing I feel like shredding
Or I'm told that I drank too much
And fell in the grasp of my aggressor
How can this cause me so much pain
When I was too drunk to remember
Sometimes we act like it never happened
No one to hurt, no one is blamed
But the one who scarred me will never
Look in the mirror and feel this shame
And it doesn't matter who I am
Male, female, a child or in my prime
And it doesn't matter how it happened
Because I did not ask for this crime
But I've been told too many times
That this is something I did permit
I'm just another victim
And I guess I deserved it

Fatou B. Balde, age 16

atmospheres

If all the world and night were blue
With twinkling stars, long overdue
Their deaths, like broken shards of glass
In gold, in silver, and in brass would
Cast their dusty fragments free
To fall on earth, the land, the sea.

I cannot sleep

For in your eyes
I find the stars take new disguise
And falling bits of dust and space
Find themselves a holy place
Wherein they dance, and airy light
They find a purpose in the night.

I won't rest
I know it wrong
To play a melancholy song
In hopes that I might catch a glance
Of starlight in the window's glass
And on your shining, gentle face,
If you appeared in such a place,
I'd see the lofty, cloudless skies
And find the stars wrote in your eyes.

Sivan Piatigorsky-Roth, age 15

Pug Life



Shrabanti Biswas, age 14

When the time is right

She liked her coffee black, no sugar.

We drove for five hours through small towns with no bathrooms in the stores. Teenage girls sat on benches, all hoop earrings and gentle rolls of fat protruding from underneath crop tops. Men in cowboy hats carried briefcases, smoking cigarettes and staring at women's legs as they strolled by. I could get used to the chatters, squeaks, squalls, bitter laughter, whistles, calls that sounded like souls ascending to heaven. The air was thick with the smell of moist grass, car exhaust and Flamin' Hot Cheetos drizzled with nacho cheese. I even bought a bag for myself. Henry was singing along with the rock station, a gentle choir tenor mingling with crackling static.

She had night-black hair falling to her waist and high cheekbones, slender hands that held me when I would cry.

Our red pickup truck pulled up in front of a house. It resembled a barn and looked like all the other houses on the street, except that it was stark white. A red mailbox grew crookedly from the ground beside a dead flower bed. The house was nothing extraordinary, yet tears streamed down my father's face. There was an awkward silence.

I felt like cotton candy: sugar and air. Squeeze me and I turn into a small sickly damp wad of pink.

"Alright then," Henry plowed through the silence, carrying the box of greasy Chinese takeout into the house.

Sometimes I watched her sit on the porch and read, the glow of the golden sun illuminating her face, skin that browns but never burns, inherited from her Mexican abuela.

Skin that I inherited.

I stand next to the apple tree in our backyard. A thread of images blur my mind. I can almost feel her now, slightly rustling like sparrow wings, everything darkening her brain.

Henry appears next to me, his wet hair wavy from the shower, his plaid shirt smelling of fresh laundry. He reaches for me, gathers me into his arms. My father left yesterday. It was too much for him. Henry holds out a Polaroid, declares he found it in the bathroom.

"You look like her, you know." He smiles.

We smoke cigarettes, the smell making me sleepy. We sleep in my father's bed, wrapped up inside the thick quilt smelling faintly of mothballs. Henry brushes away loose strands of my hair, kisses my forehead.

He doesn't know.

I can still breathe.

Some mornings, she would wake up so furious, she'd walk around the house pulling off tablecloths and unmaking beds, throwing everything in the washing machine. She would spend the next few hours vividly vacuuming the house. Other mornings, she gardened. She would let me crack eggs for quesadillas, she'd paint the pots she created, teach me songs from her childhood.

In photographs, she was pleasant, she was laughing, loving, lovely. Beautiful. She would wear pink dresses with tulle skirts, red lipstick, leave her hair down. She'd wear dirty overalls, old shirts and workboots, beaming as she planted gladiolas.

In my favourite photograph, she's standing in front of the house, a suitcase in one hand, woolen sweater tucked into a floral skirt. She is smiling but looking elsewhere. Her expression is timeless: all love, happiness, full of dreams.

I keep this one beside the bed.

I know she had hallucinations, waking up in the middle of the night screaming, clawing away at invisible monsters. At times, she would stare at me with such a blank look on her face that it would almost make me not recognize her. Doctors gave her pills, which she proceeded to flush down the toilet the moment she got home.

She was broken up in parts, fragments. It wasn't an illness. She said it was complicated.

I catch certain memories and try to hold them still behind my eyes.

But they won't stay long enough. No, they keep moving, shuffling, a flitting smile and they're gone. Their features are blurring, and curl and bend, as if they've been set on fire. They are burning, flying away from my outstretched fingers. Blackness eats them.

I hear her sometimes, whispering that it's not a choice. My palms are sweatier than sinners in church. Darkness slowly begins to grow inside of me.

I'm blaming myself because it's my fault, because I've forgotten too much.

She suffered from schizophrenia, a disease I could not yet pronounce when I'd dropped my crayons after hearing my brother's tortured shriek, tripped down the stairs, to run into our backyard and find her body hanging from our apple tree. That long black hair she sometimes let me brush blew gently with the dry wind. I didn't want to look, instead buried myself in my brother's sweater.

The walls assault me with their whiteness.

I run hot water in the bathtub, pulling off my many rings and earrings, unfurling my messy hair. Fog steams the mirror, erasing pallid skin and swollen eyes and mascara streaks. I step in. I soak. The water scalds me, cooking my flesh to a burning red. She tried it here once, opening the cooked flesh, letting the warm water run to blood.

I could do it too. Right here, right now. There would be no bleach required to get blood out of the sheets.

I didn't go to her funeral.

Henry finds out.

He has read my diary, holding it out like discarded paper. Read about the prescribed pills, the blood, the darkness. All mine. His expression is one I can't read quite clearly. I can't tell if he is upset, bewildered, angry or maybe just all of them.

"You should've told me," he insists.

I look away. "You would've left."

"I wouldn't have."

"Yes, you would've. It happened to her."

"So what?"

"It's not a choice."

His fingers are in my hair. "It's always a choice."

"I don't want my story to end like hers."

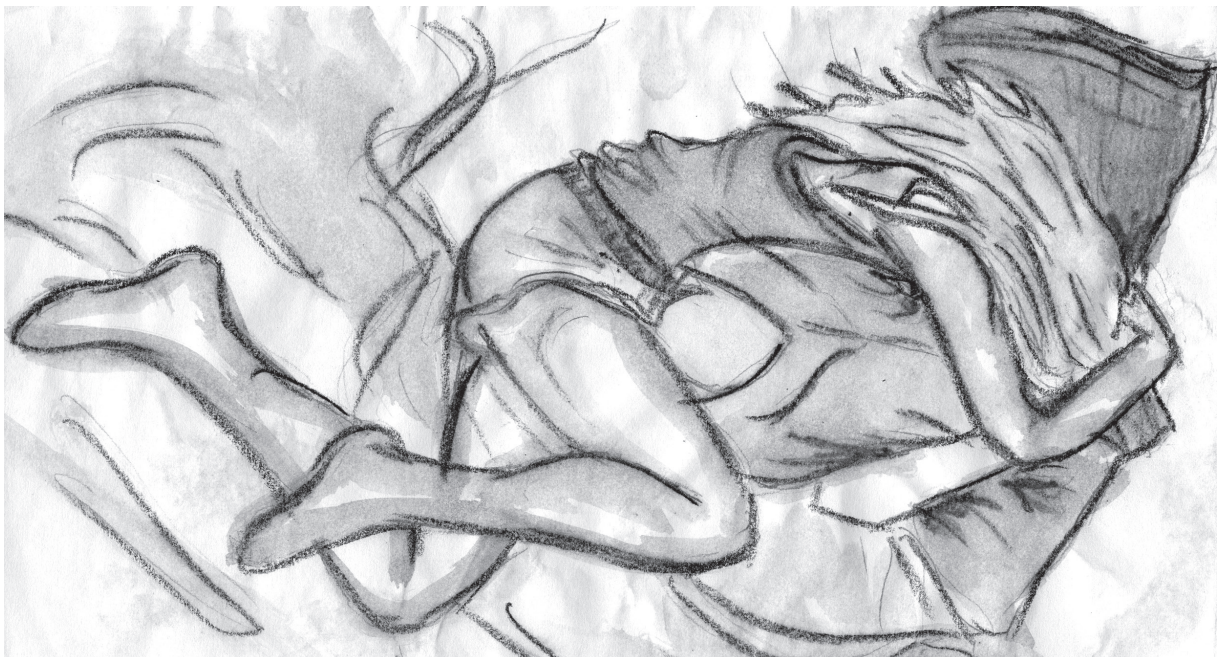
"And it won't. How do I make you believe that?"

"I don't know."

She was my mother.

Aneeqa Tahsin, age 14

Do Not Go Gently



Micaela Consens, age 15

Warden and Ellesmere

pulling myself up onto a tower of bricks
i wince at the coarseness of the cement
my feet dangle and suddenly i feel young again
as i look up at the cloudless grey sky
and feel snowflakes fall on my face
loud guffaws and angry cursing come from the billiard behind me
today i feel no urge to be like them, no desire to be older
and i wonder
how life would be for a girl who never grew up.

a sea of drab colours washes by me
i trudge through the mountains of snow on the pavement shore,
listening to the waves of revving engines
coughing as cars spew out clouds of grey exhaust
i look up when i approach a bridge of concrete
to see a family of pigeons nesting in the rafters
and i wonder
how life would be for a girl who could fly.

under a bridge i stand
my head tilted back to where i just came from
i watch pedestrians weave around each other
zigzagging just to avoid their lives crisscrossing
swimming side by side through tides of traffic
silent, pretending the other is not there
and i wonder
how life would be for a girl who could swim.

(what a pitiful thing to be, i muse,
until i realize that you do not need to be able to swim
to ignore each other
it is in the human condition to live on parallel paths
unless fate decides you should cross with another
sometimes the intersection is permanent –
a fixed point in time –
so i wonder
if warden and ellesmere had been one of those.)

waiting for the traffic light to turn red
it suddenly hits me how easy it would be to end it all in a split second
to count to three and take a step
to be taken in an instant to somewhere else
the stoplight turns red and i lose my thought
and as i stroll past waiting cars,
i wonder
how life would be for a girl who actually wanted to take that step.

above, rusted telephone wires run for miles and miles
messengers unnoticed, lines slashing the sky
i round the corner to a picturesque street
as i head down, the echoes of warden slowly
fade
away.

(suddenly, there is no distraction to mask my uncertainty.)

watch me drown in my helpless thoughts
everything is quiet except the voices in my head
and the snow crunching beneath my feet
watch me ponder what could have been or what can now be
lost opportunities, endless possibilities,
unsolved mysteries, far-fetched theories.

(i do not know what will become of me.)

i must age
i cannot fly
i cannot swim
but i do not want to die.

after all, the world is mostly water and we're all trying to float
i was dealt a good hand, but sometimes i forget
and so for every small thing that goes wrong
i tend to place the blame on the cards, the dealer or the deck
but in the end, none of it matters
because it's up to no one but me to play the game
~~and then i wonder~~ and then i know
that life will be just fine for the girl i am.

Candace Cam, age 13

The Ancient Eye

Far below the hazy light
Of the oleander sunset
That hovers over the water
And sparkles on the smooth, jade leaves,
Something glints
Like a sunken star.

Far beneath the earth,
Buried deep in tides and lost twilights,
It gleams.

Deep in the water,
The marigold sunlight fades
And turns bruised purple
Then tattoo-ink black.

Beneath the current,
The world is still,
But from below,
An ancient eye blinks,
Meteor-shower gold in the darkness.

Gabby Marcuzzi Herie, age 18

The Girl Who Held the Moon

When she returns from the hospital
With a passive look on her face
And her lip clenched between her teeth
I don't ask her if it's bad news
I just pull her into a tight hug

She doesn't spend her last few days
Skydiving or robbing a bank
Partying or confessing love
Instead, she brings me to the rooftop
In the midst of a humid summer night
The moon hangs over our heads
It is cradled by a constellation of stars
And sleeps with an eye open, watches over us
"Before I'm gone," she whispers, "I want to bring you the moon"
She's bringing her fingers up to it now
And pretends to hold it between her fingertips

And she is breathing in the thick, stale smell
Of cigars and dirt
She is letting the scent cling to her shirt, like a needy child
Until she knows it will not let go
And I ask her why
She tells me that it does not smell of perfume or roses
But it smells of memories and nostalgia
It smells of ginger tea and midnight tree climbs
It smells of home
A scent no department store
Can sum up in a cheap, glass bottle

She falls in and out of consciousness throughout the night
Eyes lighting up and fading out like lightning bugs
Her hair is wilting away, a perishing rose
And I want to gather each petal in my arms
And piece them back together
Before they turn to dust

Time goes by
She is tinier every time I see her
She looks like she has aged ten years in ten days
And as tears brim to the surface of her eyes
Like the taut bones of her cheeks
She keeps talking about the future
See, she loves to speak of the future
Of where she will live when she is married
And what kinds of flowers she will plant in her garden
And though she is a pile of distressed tears and tired limbs right now
She does not let that stop her from dreaming
She still tells me about the future like it's a matter of fact
She tells me about how we will travel to New York and LA together
And how one day her child will have her eyes and her husband's smile
See, she is down to earth
Yet her feet never quite touch the ground

And I tell her about the future, too
Even when I notice that her eyes have fallen shut
And the shuddering of her slim, tree branch arms has stopped
I keep talking
I pretend she is awake for just a little longer
The girl who held the moon

Huda Zavery, age 15

Holding Sway

Falling in and out of sleep
Like the moon pulls the waves
And the waves rock the boats.

My days drip into nights
Like the floors meet the walls
And the walls hold the light.

My whisper to a scream
Like the river feeds the sea
And the sea beats the cliff.

Feeling sane and then I'm mad
Like the leaves are the freed
And the freed know they're sad.

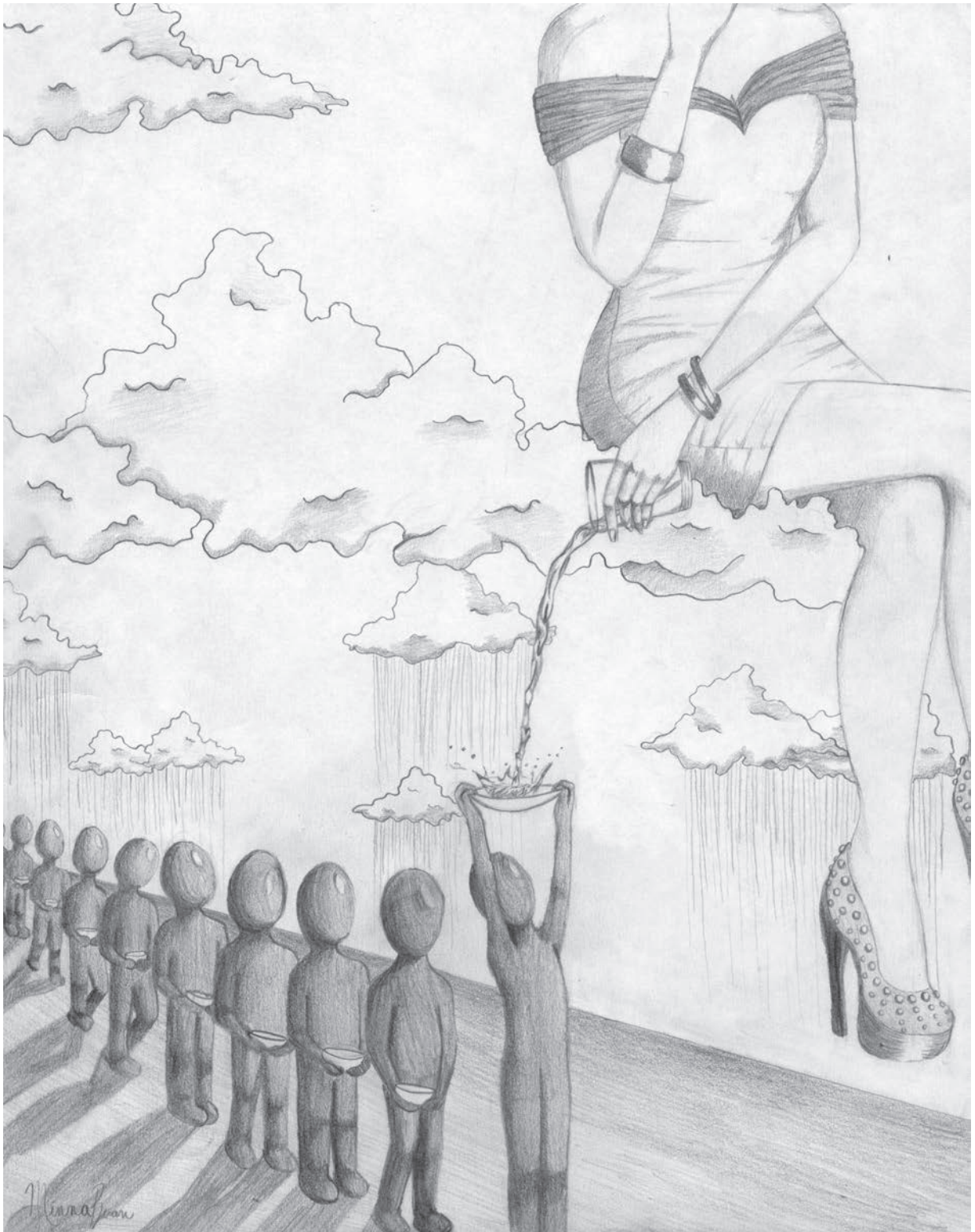
Gwenyn Huang, age 17

The Sharpener

A sharpener is a pencil's bully.
With a vengeance and a wrath
It shreds its victims up.
Then lets them breathe again.
The pencils have lost a part of them
That will never grow again.
So next time you need to sharpen your pencil
You should really think again

Dyllan Scott, age 12

Forgotten Luxuries



Minna Buan, age 14

Love Notes

He woke up to an ache in his bones. One quick glance at his side table showed a sticky note attached to the floral lampshade. It read, "Take your medications, love," and his mouth turned up in a slight smile. He didn't know who placed this reminder, but he could feel the love in the beautifully drawn letters.

He sat up on the edge of his too large bed and put on the slippers he had found next to it. Carefully, he raised himself up and slowly headed to the bathroom. He looked in the cabinet and found his sectioned pillbox, not seeing the note on the mirror. With a quick look at the calendar and a gulp of water, he swallowed the contents of Saturday and returned the box to its rightful place, closing the cabinet door behind him.

He looked up from the sink after washing his hands, baffled by how withered they appeared. His eyes reached the mirror and he blinked back tears. The face of the old man blinked back at him, and he refused to believe, until he saw the little yellow paper. It was another note, one that read, "You aged so handsomely, my dear," and with each word he read, he could see the reflection's eyes light up even more.

He shuffled into the kitchen, and his sight fell onto the refrigerator, where there was a small collection of aging photographs. His heart leapt as he took one of the pictures in his hands, and it skipped a beat when he gazed at it. Captured on a piece of paper that could never do her justice was the most stunning woman the man had ever seen. She wore a polka-dotted sundress and a wide-brimmed hat, and while he couldn't see the colours of her clothes, he could tell they were bright, just like her smile. He turned the photo over, hoping for a name to put to the face he was enamoured with, but all he found was a date written in the same immaculate handwriting as the notes, the same writing he had so desperately fallen in love with.

The man posted the photo back onto its proper place in the collection before turning to the cupboards, where he spotted a slip of paper. He crossed over to the note, eager to read it and yet still savouring the excitement of the unexpected. He reached for the note with a shaking hand, and held it to his chest for just a moment before reading it. "Don't forget your morning coffee, darling, you'll be grumpy all day without it!" He chuckled deeply and let out a small smile.

His day passed with barely contained excitement as he searched for note after note. They all were meant to remind him to care for himself. "Eat something, sweetheart," and, "Why don't you take a walk, love?" He followed through with every request, his heart overflowing with love toward his mysterious pen pal. Near the end of the day, the man entered his bedroom, thoroughly exhausted from all the excitement of the day, and put on his nightclothes. He shrugged his hands into his pockets as he stared longingly at his bed, still unmade from that morning. His fingers brushed a sharp point where they were resting and he yelled out in surprise before running a finger along its edge. With a huff of amusement, he carefully pulled the folded sheet from his pocket and read, "Go to bed my love, I'll be home soon."

As he prepared for bed that night, the man had visions of his beautiful stranger joining him, curling up next to him and talking to him with a soft, melodic voice. She told her lover what she had been doing all day, and as she spoke, his memories of a past life resurfaced with every little sigh and giggle she made. He fell asleep wishing to feel the dip in the bed as his lady joined him, eager to see him after being apart from him all day, and yet willing to let him rest. He never saw the note stuck to the bottom of his slipper, the one written in chicken-scratch letters, ink blurred by droplets of wetness, the note that simply read, "She's not coming back."

Alicia Baron, age 15

untitled

I am the girl on the bus with the loud headphones
I am the girl you forgot to invite
I'm the fading sunset you tried to take a picture of
That was stolen away by the night
I am your accidental confidant
That you wish for now and then
I am a girl who wishes for lungs instead of paper and some pens
I am the soul behind an endless smile held up by tape and glue
I'm the girl at the back of the line for your love
with a never-ending queue

Phoebe Habkirk, age 13

cake

Life is a piece of cake
Simple in the eating
Complex in the savouring of each bite

Life is a piece of cake
Unjust in the size we each receive
But fair in that each slice must finally be consumed

Life is a piece of cake.
What's yours taste like?

Sophie Hollis, age 13

Pop!



Arash Ghafoori, age 17

Scream



Laura Makaltses, age 18

Average Poodle Muffins

He was very tired. He hadn't slept last night. He wished he could have told you it was because he was busy pondering the mechanics of something quantum. But he couldn't, he didn't know what quantum meant.

No, he didn't sleep because he was sketching. He'd never been an excellent artist, but every professional had to start somewhere. Talent could only get you so far.

At 3 a.m., the drawing was breathtaking. A rose, drawn purely from memory, from a No. 4 pencil. There was a romantic quality about it, the shading fell on the right creases and every petal was proportionate, all from dollar store stationery. He was a rags-to-riches artist in the making. He'd be a starving artist on the streets until a wealthy art collector paid a hefty price for his sketch.

At 7 o'clock, the rose lost most of its beauty. The stem was crooked, the thorns resembled a teenager's prickly moustache. Perhaps it was the lighting.

He decided to show it to his mother anyway. "That's nice. Why don't you put it on the fridge?"

He was not four years old, he knew an empty compliment when he heard one. He crumpled the drawing in his fist and threw it away. His pet poodle ate it.

At 8:40, it was school time. School was dull. He scored a seventy-two percent on his trigonometry test. What did it matter? Employers didn't care about triangles anyway. Actually, he wouldn't have an employer. He'd be a self-employed entrepreneur.

He got his poem back, marked with a Level 4 – and a request from his English teacher to stay away from the thesaurus, and praise for "satirically capturing a pretentious mindset." He was being judged by the same standard as his classmates by teachers who promoted individuality. Oh, the irony, the hypocrisy. School was a waste of his abilities.

It was 11:30. Lunchtime meant Chess Club. He loved chess. It was as though for forty minutes he became a general, ruthlessly slaughtering the faceless opposing army. It was too cliché to favour the queen. He favoured the pawn. To him, it symbolized a brave blank canvas, an underestimated soldier that took the first step, and should it make it to the other side, would rightfully earn a higher rank.

He'd won three games in a row. Actually, the last game his opponent had resigned to "eat lunch." But of course, that's what a loser would say to save herself from shame.

His last game would be against someone on the basketball team. He had been a part of the basketball team for a week; it didn't interest him like many of the other insipid extracurriculars his school had to offer. Intelligence was his forte. His opponent might be skilful on the court but was no match against his intellect and strategy. Most athletes weren't.

The game progressed slowly but concluded with his opponent winning. Which would happen, naturally, since he had the advantage of playing white. Chess was boring.

Next period began at 12:40. The Food and Nutrition course was an impossible ruin. At his school, it meant finding a recipe on the internet, replicating it into something preferably edible. He selected a simple carrot muffin recipe. It was very minimalist.

After they were finished baking, he decided to ice them. He would give his muffins to the girl with nice shoulders who sat in front of him. Pink frosting? No. Surely, that would be suggesting something sexist. Red: the colour was bold, empowering, and unisex.

He iced little swirls over a muffin; it began to resemble a little red poodle. He took three chocolate chips to form eyes and a nose. He rubbed his eyes and yawned, decorating put a strain on his energy. He buried his head in his arms.

The girl with the nice shoulders came up to him and picked up a muffin. "This looks positively delectable! I'd almost regret eating it. Because it looks so delicious."

He remained modest. "Oh, this? Just something I put together in a few minutes. Nothing much. Go on, have a bite."

She picked off a piece and popped it into her mouth. Her eyes rolled back into her head. "Mmmmm. Amazing!"

His teacher walked over, "What's the noise? What's this?" She too took a bit of the muffin.

"In all my years of teaching this class I've never had a student put together something worth the hour and a half they spend in this kitchen! Do you mind if I take a batch to the staff room?"

He nodded, "Certainly."

A tiny bald man came through the door. "I smelled something wonderful in here, and I wanted to see what it was."

The muffin barely grazed the man's lips when he exclaimed, "Fantastic!"

The rest of the class lunged for the remaining batch. Funny, he didn't remember icing the others. He must be a very efficient baker.

The tiny bald man finished his muffin, licked crumbs off his fingers, and said, "You know young man, I was considering opening a bakery downtown. You've cemented that decision for me. How would you like a job baking these poodle muffins for six figures?"

He was dumbfounded. The entire class erupted into applause.

The girl with the nice shoulders was blushing furiously. "I'm aware this isn't conventional, me being a female and all, but would you like to get a coffee sometime?"

He sputtered, "Y-yes. I'd like that."
His teacher said, "I work part-time at a bank. I'd be happy to arrange for a scholarship to culinary school."
Not believing his luck, he cautiously took a bite of his renowned muffin. It was as good as everyone said. He continued biting.
He woke up.
He was gnawing at his arm.
The girl with the nice shoulders came up to him and picked up a muffin. "Uh, Jasper? The nose is off centre."

Vaishnavy Puvipalan, age 15

Everything is Possible

Rhett sat down on the cold sidewalk and admired his masterpiece. The transparent liquid sat in the broken mug in front of him. Rhett looked up, spotting a passerby.

"Yo!"

No response.

"Yoo hoo! I'm talkin' to you, big fella!" Rhett grinned.

The man paused and looked at Rhett, who started laughing. They must have looked ridiculous in that moment – the man with his neatly gelled and combed-over hair and glasses, all dressed up in a huge black overcoat with a heavy looking briefcase, versus Rhett himself, a homeless man with a tattered blanket covering his layers of coats and dark coloured skin – not from the natural pigmentation, but rather, from the collected dirt.

"Yes, you," Rhett confirmed, as though the man had asked. "C'mere, my friend. I've got somethin' very special to show ya."

The man frowned, indecisive, before stepping nearer to Rhett and peering at him strangely.

"You are a very lucky man," Rhett said with a grin. "I have here something that will solve all your problems."

The man scoffed. "You wouldn't know what problems I have. Look at you! Uneducated, scum of the streets. It's people like you that bring our society down. Get a job, you lazy bum."

"Oh, I know exactly what problems you have," Rhett said easily. He picked up the mug and let the transparent liquid slosh around. "Your problems centre around a girl, don't they?"

"That's none of your business," the man snapped. His sharp and defensive tone told Rhett he was correct.

"What's in this mug will solve all those problems," Rhett said simply. "This is a love potion, a hundred percent effective."

"Yeah, right," the man barked. "Real funny, fella."

"Take it," Rhett said. "Try it on her. Then come back and tell me it doesn't work." He grinned.

"I'm not that gullible," said the man. "No one is."

"Are you worried that there's going to be a cost?" Rhett said. "If so, don't worry about it. There's no cost. Helping you will please me greatly."

"That can't be a love potion," the man said, frowning. "That's ludicrous."

"Ah, don't knock it till you've tried it, my friend," said Rhett. "Absolutely free. You take a sip, she takes a sip. Boom! Science."

"Hah! Yeah, right. Science." The man rolled his eyes. "You're crazy."

"I highly advise you give it a try," Rhett said. "It's gonna change your day – heck, it'll change your life! I guarantee it."

"How can I trust that you won't poison me?" the man asked suspiciously.

"Why would I poison you?" Rhett said. "You're just a random man on the street. I'm tellin' ya, man. If you don't take this, you'll regret it. Future science, my friend. Everything is possible. Love potions, time travelling – you wouldn't believe it!"

The man sighed. "I'll take it if you stop bothering me, okay?"

"Absolutely. I understand, sir." Rhett's hands trembled as he placed the broken mug into the hands of the man. "Pleasure doing business with you, Rhett."

The man just shook his head in disgust, walking away and muttering, "How did he know my name?"

Rhett smiled, at peace. He turned, facing the wall, and stepped through it – a portal back to his own world, where he was greeted by his wife, the love of his life, the one he had been so close to losing.

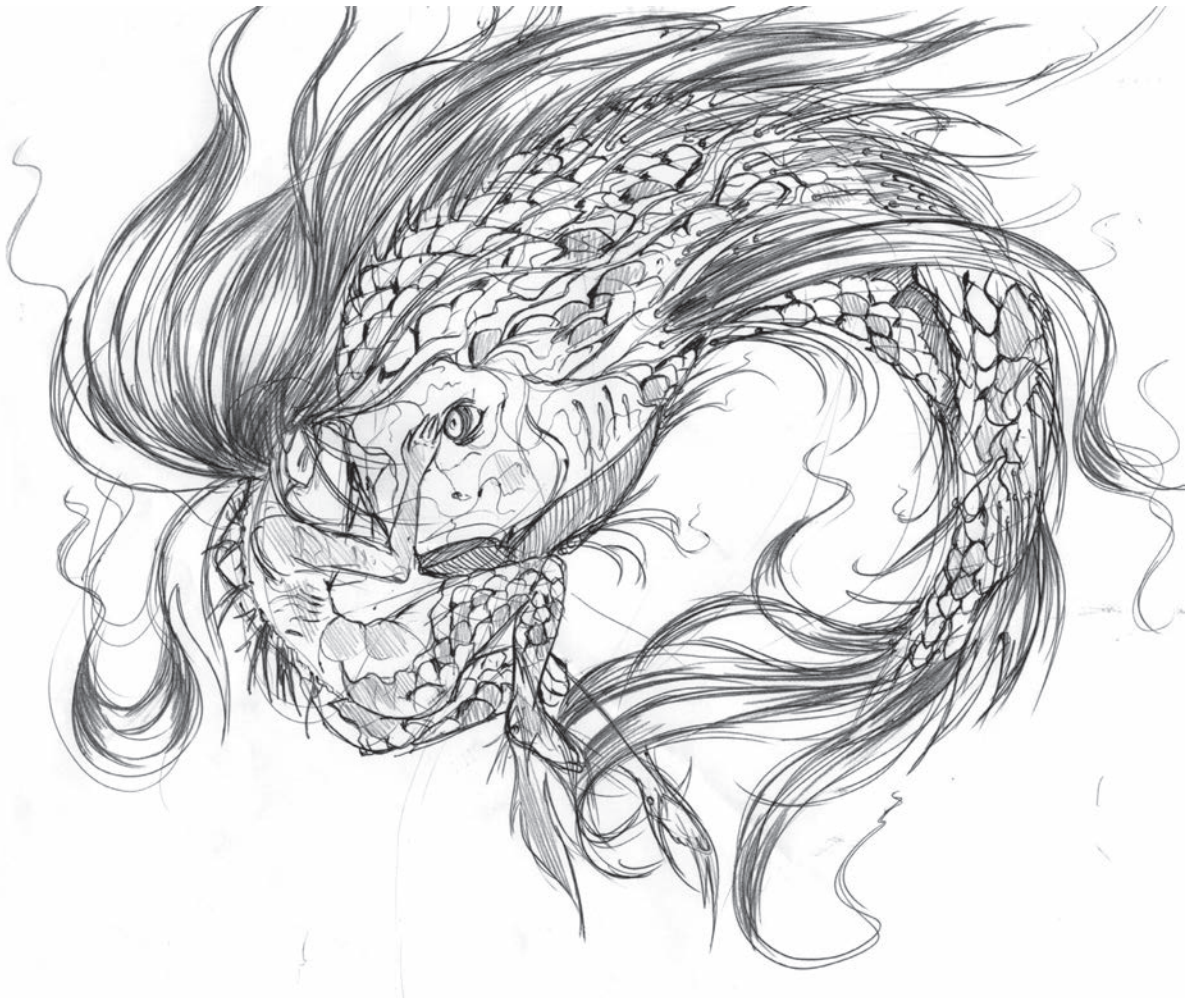
"What took you so long?" she asked.

Rhett grinned. "I just had to do a personal favour for someone from the twenty-first century." He kissed her. "I love you."

"Love you too, Rhett."

Alisa Lin, age 14

Drowned Secret



Andria Henry, age 16

Waiting

I am waiting, waiting for the perfect moment. It's all part of my master plan, my magnificent scheme for world domination. I am waiting for Life to give me lemons. Once that happens, tradition dictates that I must make lemonade. But instead I shall make sardine, pickle and peanut butter sandwiches, which I will sell for \$7.89 in the financial district of my town, while dressed in full 18th century costume, complete with towering wig and whalebone corset. This of course will greatly confuse Life as well as any spectators and bystanders. Soon the world will explode into a large triangular prism of confusion. At which point I shall invade with my army of wolf-unicorn hybrids, vampire fairy lawyers and robotic mermaids who have a strange obsession with Jackie Chan and Freddie Mercury. I shall return order to the world by reshaping it back to a sphere before sculpting it into a cube and introducing many policies and laws like a free-cotton-candy-for-all distribution system; a ban on cherry tomatoes; voting rights for sea horses; and so on. The humans of this rock shall be so overjoyed that they will gladly name me Empress of Earth. I shall have a long and glorious reign. Then I shall pass on my legacy to my heir: a marshmallow-loving shoe salesman named Sirius who lives in his Renault Espace F1 1994 minivan with his wife Jackie, a steampunk circus ringmaster, and their monkey, Dominic, who works as a part-time mechanic/ventriloquist and keeps a vast collection of rainbow coloured wigs. That is my grand plan. All I have to do now is wait.

Kelly Lucas, age 15

the world does not revolve around us

sometimes we are all so caught up in life – in our own little dramas and thoughts – that we forget that other people exist, that other people have their own worries and loves and dreams and doubts. it's easy for us to see a person on the street and think that they don't matter, that they are small and insignificant. but that's not true at all, is it? that person on the street has their own life, their own story, but all we think about, selfishly, is the impact others have on us. we often forget that others are the star of their own movie, just as we are of ours, and the role that we play in their stories is in reality so infinitesimal. the truth is, we will never know anyone's life as well as we know our own. it's the mysteries that are the most intriguing, though – to wonder about the secrets that will never be whispered into your ear, the wishes that people make to themselves at the darkest hour of night. those are the things we can only dream of knowing. it's the unknown that really makes us think, that makes us realize that we might be the centre of our own world, but we aren't the centre of it all. and it's insanely beautiful, despite everything, because we're all so complex beyond words, and it's impossible to fathom how the universe could have ever created something so crazy and reckless and strange and wonderful.

Olivia Li, age 14

Strange, but Beautiful



Soham Parikh, age 12

The Voyage

The sounds of creaking and splashing surrounded Audrey as her eyes shot open. She crept down the brass ladder trying not to wake the sleeping Navin who occupied the bed below. She reached for a drawer and pulled out a wristwatch checking the time. Audrey sensed movement behind her and turned to see Navin sitting on his bed.

"Hey," he said with a yawn.

"Hey," Audrey replied, throwing him the watch so he could see the time.

"Breakfast in five minutes," Navin stated.

Audrey didn't bother to get dressed since she slept in her clothes. "I'm going for a walk, see you at breakfast."

Before Navin could reply, Audrey climbed up the creaky wooden stairs and onto the deck of the vessel. Mist hit her face as she leaned against the railing, staring at the rushing water below. In that moment, she thought she saw a figure across the water in the corner of her eye, but before Audrey could figure out what it was, she heard Captain Hembrooke yelling for breakfast, interrupting her thoughts and starting her day.

Across from her sat a demanding Navin, to her left a reluctant captain. They went back and forth arguing about where they were going. Audrey couldn't help but feel trapped in the middle.

"Can't you tell us where we're going?" Navin yelled, chewed-up toast and coffee flying from his mouth.

"I told you. To find treasure. If you're confused, just ask your *friend*." The captain seemed to be annoyed even though Navin was asking reasonable questions.

Navin mumbled. Audrey could see that he was trying to keep his mouth shut. Navin knew Audrey didn't want to be brought into the conversation, but Audrey couldn't help but wonder why the captain was being so suspicious.

"Why can't you just tell us where we're going?" Audrey said, stepping into the discussion.

"Because if I do—" the captain was cut off by a huge crash and shaking from the right side of the ship that knocked Audrey out of her seat. She caught Hembrooke's last words before he motioned for her to follow, sending her into panic. "We're being boarded!"

They crouched by the door of the kitchen, listening to the commotion coming from above. It was clear by the fact that even Captain Hembrooke was shaking in his boots that the boarders above them weren't just treasure seeking pirates. Intentions were clear — it was time to kill or be killed. The thoughts running through Audrey scared her and she snapped back to reality.

"Follow me quickly," said the captain with a raspy yet quickened tone. Even Navin stayed quiet as they made their way along the bottom of the ship. Audrey turned, tailing the captain as close as she could get without tripping herself.

As they entered a small storage room, the shouts from upstairs grew louder. The captain opened a large wooden chest, the contents of which only confirmed Audrey's suspicions. Knives of all shapes and sizes rested in the box. The captain reached in and pulled out a large sword and passed it to Audrey without a second glance. Audrey inhaled deeply as the captain grabbed two more knives and passed one to Navin. The footsteps from above were growing louder, which meant the attackers were nearing the stairs to the lower deck. Audrey's hand started sweating as she tried to get her grasp back on the sword. Footsteps surrounded them. Audrey caught Navin's eye; it was focused and concentrated, ready to fight, to protect.

The first one came faster than Audrey expected, skipping the kitchen and running into the storage room, blade in hand. But the captain was ready. As soon as the attacker's foot passed through the door, Hembrooke shoved his blade deep through the attacker's thigh. Audrey noticed the captain didn't turn the blade, preserving the man's life. Navin turned away but Audrey was ready. She had to be.

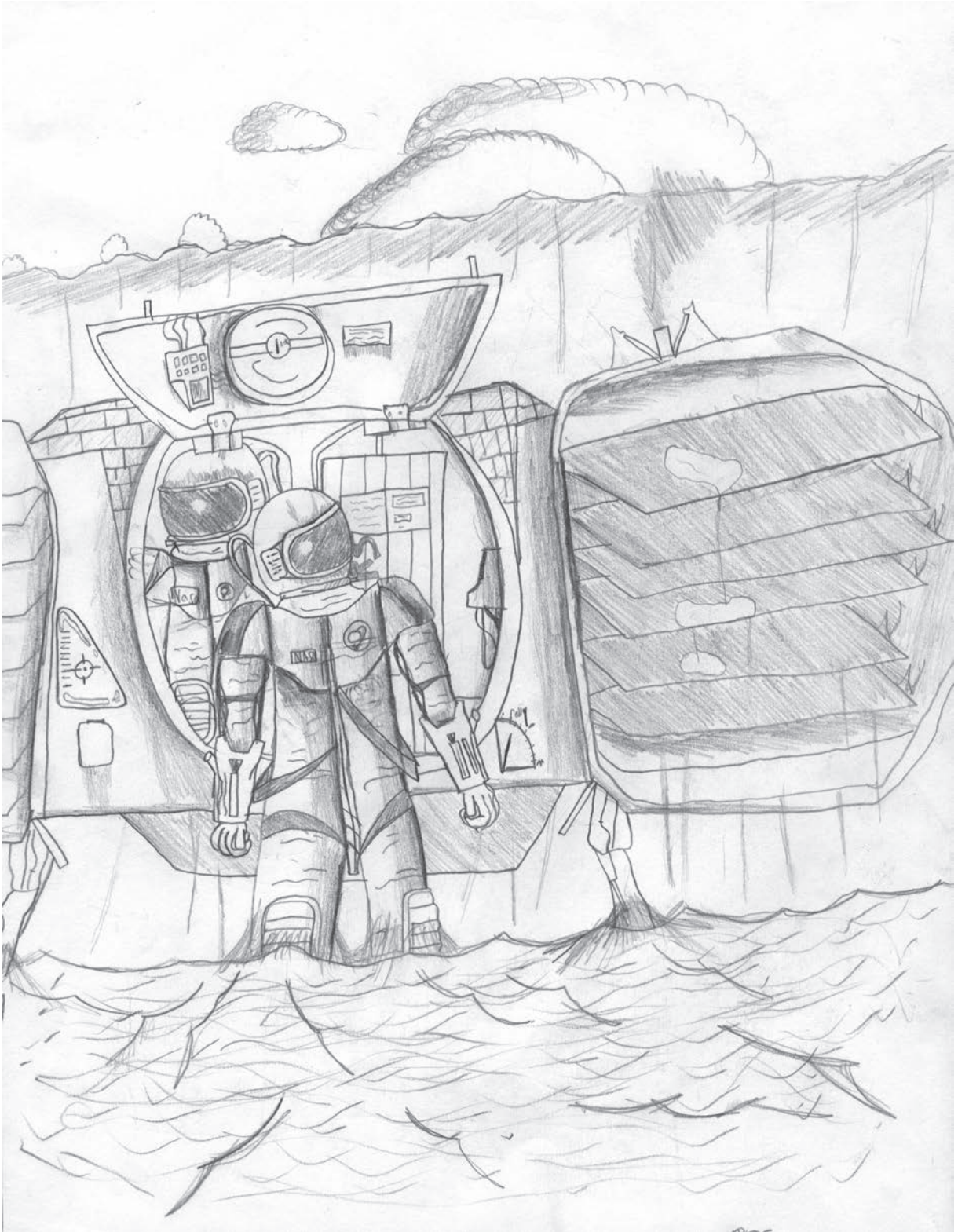
"Audrey!" Hembrooke yelled. "You and Navin go to the right and pick them off. Don't kill unless you have to." Audrey and Navin synced a nod before running out. There was no turning back. Sword raised, Audrey charged out of the room toward a man with black hair and grey eyes. He was running quickly, his face twisted. Audrey forced herself to run faster. Catching a look of surprise on his face, Audrey took the opportunity. She slid under the man's raised arm scraping her wrist and bruising her knee. The attacker was stunned and stumbled, his back turned to Audrey. She ran up behind him, trying not to trip on the loose planks of wood in the deck, and slashed his leg with her sword, rendering him unable to fight. Audrey walked over and picked up the man's sword, staring at the symbol emblazoned onto it. The government crest! Audrey dropped the sword and saw Captain Hembrooke and Navin standing over wounded bodies. She looked at Captain Hembrooke, wanting answers, and Hembrooke stared back ready to give them to her.

They sat on the main deck sipping tea, the images of the day fresh in Audrey's mind. Captain Hembrooke was steering the wheel of the ship as she tried to comprehend what he had just told her. Audrey's father left her in the town of Silverport. He said he would be working for six months and then be back. That was two years ago. Audrey was long past the forgiving point, but listening to the captain tell her that her father now worked for the corrupted government was shocking. It was shocking because Audrey believed him.

Apparently Captain Hembrooke was part of a rebel group trying to overthrow the government. The government was planning something evil. They needed Audrey to be a part of this. Audrey stood up as she remembered the crest on the attacker's sword. She leaned against the railing looking ahead. She didn't know if this was for Captain Hembrooke or for personal reasons, but her next words were, "Hembrooke, take us to the rebel base."

Keisha Emery, age 12

Interstellar



Brenden Skripac, age 12

Be Positive



Caitlyn Liu, age 15

The Ill-tempered Cellphone and his Mistress

To say that the cellphone was pissed would be an understatement. He was absolutely, positively boiling, his entire body so riled up that he was sure his circuits would override at any moment. To think he had earned yet another scratch. Better add this new injury to the plethora of other battle scars that covered his entire back, all due to this monster's carelessness.

He grumbled under his breath while his owner let out an exasperated sigh. "Stop being such a drama queen," she said with a roll of her eyes. The teen tossed her dark braid over her shoulder and propped a hand on her hip. "So I dropped you once. Big deal."

"Once?" His frustration spiked, and a loud screeching noise poured from his speakers, filling the room with a banshee's scream. "More like eight times in the past month!"

The girl winced and dropped him, clasping her hands over her ears until the piercing noise subsided.

Glaring at him, she hissed, "Oh, how mature, throwing a tantrum just because I dropped you a few times."

His furious breaths fogged up his screen just like the time when his owner had 'accidentally' sprayed her body mist all over him. "Take me seriously, dang it!"

The girl threw her head back and laughed, a tinkling sound that disguised her true evil nature. "How can I when you're wearing bunny ears?"

The poor phone recoiled from her statement, his background going pixel-y and turning a light shade of pink. However, at the sight of his owner's laughing reaction, his apps vibrated uncontrollably. "You were the one who put this on me!"

"I thought it suited you." She sauntered over to her faux-leather purse and fished out another iPhone case – a pink, polka-dotted piece of plastic with a bow on top.

"Want this one instead?" she asked with a straight face.

His search screen dropped open. He paused before quickly closing it up. "Phones will fly before I wear this... this thing."

"Well, you don't have a choice." Her lips curled into a humourless smile as she punctuated each word, sadism dripping off her tongue. "You're my phone, and" – she pointed at the receipt crumpled next to her wastebasket – "I own you."

Momentary anger flared up in the pit of his memory chip, but then an idea formed. A devilish one. She needed to pay. She needed to realize how important he was to her, and he'd teach her the hard way.

The cellphone's body shook with laughter that he desperately tried to contain. "Oh?" he asked dryly, his screen dimming. "Well then, I can obviously see how much I'm valued here."

His screen flickered twice, and the girl uncrossed her arms, panic overtaking her smug expression. She took a step forward and stretched an arm out towards the small object lying on her bed. "Wait. What are you...?"

"We're done."

His screen flickered once more before going dark.

The next morning, the small phone flitted back on ever so quietly. He chuckled at his ingenious plan.

Oh, he'd gotten her good. He'd bet his buttons that his owner was currently mourning over his 'permanent' absence. No doubt she'd learned her lesson – luxurious pampering, here he came!

He flashed his camera on to scan the dark room but stopped, confusion sweeping over him. Where was he? Instead of being held in his mourning owner's hand, he was surrounded by piles of crumpled paper and dried up contacts. Wha—?

He froze, paralyzed, upon seeing the new object his owner clutched dearly in her sleep.

"Hi," said the Samsung Galaxy 5 with a smile. "I'm Laura's new phone. And you are...?"

Tiffany Leung, age 17

Perspective

I'm almost there! Almost to the summit of Mount Everest! I think I have around twenty metres to go. The air is getting very thin, my lungs heaving with every breath. My throat is as dry as sandpaper. I am so high up; it really does not feel real. I have to really struggle through these last hoists... Yikes! I almost slipped! But I can't look back now... I have come so far. This is the moment of my life. Only a few more pushes now... Yes! Yes! I made it! To the top of the tallest mountain in the entire world! This is amazing! This is incredible! I can see the whole world spread out before my eyes...

"Tommy, get down from that rock! It's time to go home!"

Hana Sharifi, age 13

Constantinople

You press your lips into my skin and mumble,
A liturgy of blessed words,
They are Old Church Slavonic in my ears,
And I, a desolate sinner, listen in desperation to be saved

Your fingers trace my roughened edges,
Transporting me to other times,
In your bright eyes, I see golden rooftops,
Of Byzantine monasteries glistening in the light

I am your queen and you are my king,
Our bed is the wall of Constantinople,
Glory of the South

Yet in forbidden passion,
We have forgotten,
The inevitability of our abolition to the crescent moon and star,
Approaching from the distance in crimson rain bleeding from the sky,
Poisoning the sun with darkness,
Casting shadows on the fortress of our kingdom,
Death to our empire has come

Your eyes become empty vessels,
Pupils of hardened coal,
Before me stand a thousand Ottomans tearing at the
 foundation of our wall,
You leave me in ruins,
The ghost of the once magnificent European South.

Madeline Ralevski, age 17

Face of the Unknown Soldier

100 years ago was World War I
For our country's freedom much blood was shed
Families lost their fathers, husbands, sons
Known and unknown soldiers injured or dead

100 years later soldiers guard still
The sacred Tomb of the Unknown Soldier
Unthinkable such evil would but kill
An unarmed soldier, his life now over

Corporal Cirillo was sacrificed
Family lost a husband, son, father
Sorrowing are his mother, son, and wife
Country honours him a fallen brother

A brave face for unknown soldiers who died
Who finally can be identified

Annalise Hordij, age 12

Season of the Crow

The ground on which I lay is cold and damp
My whole body is hollow in its presence and might
Wet ears are tight-pressed and all is still,
 but the calm giant has no heart
I lay blindly and wait for death, like it has come so many times before
But something differs
Frozen grass, brushed by morning dew, tangles between my toes
It scratches my shirtless back
The tardy taste of dirt consumes me,
 the gleam of lost sun pins me down
'Neath the flowers I am motionless;
Their smell, their essence, their bed and mine
Seeking life so graciously, so delicately
It comes forth all around me, roaring, engulfing like the drowning sea
Forever gently the coo of mourning doves entrances
Like the piper, they promise to lead me
I follow, for I am blind; it is all I have ever been
The cold unbearable, yet the glare of golden light overwhelming
Thus I rise, reborn
The birds disperse with the snap of a humble twig
Downy clouds make way 'til crimson sky is clear
For I am dust and they the wind

Marc Schwentek, age 17

Growing In

I.
She woke up this morning
Alone, as always,
And muttered, "Sorry,"
To the pillows, the blankets, the fitted sheets –
"Sorry for rolling around in relentless regret,
For the closed doors and polished shoes,
For the lead-footed burden of something
 that could have been someone,
For sprinkling the bed sheets with sesame seeds
 and the poignant crumbs of broken dreams.
Sorry," she said,
"For growing in instead of growing –

II.
Out
She goes.
And guiltily stumbling down the sidewalk she
Regrets caging herself in a bedroom of incoherent apologies.

Sabina Beleuz Neagu, age 16

Fall Again



Mohini Mahabir, age 16

David Bowie



Mark North, age 16

Sweet Sails of Nothing

May 2, 1497

My father has made a decision for me to take a long voyage with John Cabot to explore the new lands. You can never oppose my father's command or he'll hit you. The reason for my father's sudden need for my hands to work and earn is because of my mother's illness. We are a very poor and large family. My mother doesn't have the energy to work, so I must.

I have packed some tools, clothes, and paper that may come to some use. All of my things are in a bundle made of fabric secured with string. I gave my farewells to my father and mother, brothers and sisters. Excitement rushes through my veins as I take my first steps out of this crooked, wooden house that has been my home for seventeen years.

I walk to the dock and see the large ship near. The crew is slowly filing inside. I jog until I reach the boat, and there stands a man in a blue coat and feathered hat. He looks at me in the eye and asks, "You going onboard, boy?"

"Yes," I grumble. He nods and points toward the boat's entrance. I walk up and hear his laughter behind me.

May 16, 1497

Two weeks ago, I didn't know what kind of joy I would find: exploring new secrets of this ship or seeking new lands. That was two weeks ago. The only joy on this ship is sleep when the sky falls dark and the shadows come alive. My head goes clear as if it were the dark sky. But there's always a catch. The sleeping area for the crew is packed. One hundred people sleep, but I never do.

My head feels heavy and my body itches. A crew member I have become fond of, Ryan, tells me my eyes are red and swollen. He looks no different.

The biggest dream I had imagined when coming here was of John Cabot being a boss and friend. I dreamt his presence to be sympathetic and reasonable. He is not any of those things. The crew members rarely see him, and when we do, he stumbles out of his cabin looking weak, unstable, and ill. But, one thing I've learned over these last two weeks is never to be fooled by appearances.

Cabot will yell and scream at anyone not up to his standards. When he pushes his way through the crew, I hear them whispering in pain and see their eyes narrowing. One day, while I am fixing a rope that has snapped in the wind, Cabot approaches me. I look up and see a smirk draw across his face.

"Well, boy, why are you aboard this ship, hmm?" he asks, while tapping an empty bottle with his index finger.

"I wanted something to do," I lie. I lie because I do not want Cabot to laugh or mock my reasons for being here.

He leans close to me, and I can smell his awful breath.

"You liar!" he says angrily, although his words are wrapped up in a hushed whisper. He straightens his back and slowly begins to walk away, still tapping the empty bottle with his finger. Then he turns around and yells, "Be careful, boy! We are still on water, not land!" Then he turns his back and pushes his way through the crew again.

June 23, 1497

Long days, restless nights, and nothing to look at but the sky. If only I could search the thrilling heights of the sky instead of glaring up at it wondering what will become of me.

Tears clean my eyes at night. Ryan tells me I should rest and betray Cabot's rules. Ryan says I need to rest and that I look ill and restless. Whenever he tells me these things, I feel like he is only describing himself.

I have grown used to my heavy head and itching body. That is what normal is, I suppose. But today I don't feel the same as yesterday, so during our midday meal, instead of going to the eating area, I lead myself to the sleeping area. I'm not hungry. Just hot and tired. I lie down, close my eyes. And soon, the movement of the water stops, and the stomping of marching feet replace the sound of waves against the boat.

Ryan storms into the sleeping area and finds me. He is wearing a wide smile across his face. "We found land!" he yells and his eyes lock into mine.

Great excitement fills my body, heart, and bones. I jump up and rush out the door. I rush to the deck and hurry to get off the boat. Then, I am immediately stopped by Cabot.

"Boy, you're staying on the boat. I'll take my men. We will search the land. You...make yourself useful around here!" He wobbles away.

My eyes burn. I clench my fists. Cabot has made us his slaves with no reward. I've been on this ship long enough that mother has likely died and being here is worthless.

I don't dream, but perhaps they are dreams. All my mind is now rope. Ropes in different shapes. Ropes of different sizes. They are twisted in knots and coils. That's all I may think of now.

Lucy Haughton, age 12

The Key

A man finds himself in a dark windowless room, which seems to extend on indefinitely. He knows nothing about this room, except that it has one door, only one. The door, however, is locked, so his first instinct is to try and open it. When this fails, he pushes against it, yanks at its handle, kicks it, punches it, thrashes his body against it until he stands bloody and covered in bruises. The door is covered in a sticky layer of blood but will not move. Finally, he realizes that this tactic has failed. Exasperated, he sits down and begins to rework his plan. He realizes that he must dedicate his entire existence to finding the key to this door. Meanwhile, on the opposite side of this eternal landscape a woman has just found herself in this room. After realizing the door is locked, she succumbs to madness and convinces herself that she has already found the key and seen what is behind that door. She then scurries off to show everyone her new-found 'key.' In another isolated corner of this eternal landscape a man decides that since the door is closed, and he cannot open it, there must be no key. He decides that as such, all those who believe a key can be found are deluded and he devotes his existence to disproving their theories about this key. Everyone who ever finds themselves in this room sees the door, no one is ever able to unlock it, yet every single person begins by trying to open the door and coming up with some sort of theory about it. As time goes by, some people search for this magical key, some claim they have found it and gesture madly at the blank space shouting, "Here it is, can't you see?" Others divide themselves into groups and begin to fight. Some groups gesture at thin air shouting that their keys are better. The two things that every single person in this windowless, pointless, godawful room share are that they all become preoccupied with this key (whether proving that it exists or that it doesn't), and that none of them ever find it. As the room begins to smell of blood, as the black wallpaper begins to peel, as space becomes scarce, all everyone can think about is the key. One day the door disappears. It is gone, it is gone for their own good, so they can fix the problems in their room instead of worrying about a key they will never find. For a moment they stand silent. Finally, one man picks up some red paint, he traces the outline of a door on the wall. Everyone observes him in silence. Then one by one, like a herd of cattle, they all proceed to bang themselves against the new door, and go off in search of a key.

Anna Nabutovsky, age 15

The Cacti Feast

Elegant jugs brimming with water line the table. Their ceramic figures curve and wave arching into graceful spouts that bow to their guests. The air is rich with the warming smells of earth and soil; smiling to myself, I can almost feel the sun's rays grazing my eyelids. Beaming down at my dining companions, I pull out the chair at the head of the table. Its heavy wooden legs scrape at the floor and a cringe-worthy screech escapes. Muttering apologies, I slide into my seat and let my hands fall into my lap and they bounce atop my leg, teeming with nervous energy and anticipation of the feast. My preparation for this day had been extensive. Mop in hand, I'd lathered the floors in buckets of water, soap, and spray, till my shoes became skates and I glided across the gleaming wood and around the long rectangular table in clouds of artificial lemon. I'd set a clean white tablecloth with delicate lace atop the table with the water. I'd polished the seats with a steady hand, grasped the smooth pots of the little plants and placed each esteemed guest upon their pedestal with care. And now, gazing up and down the length of the table, I can almost feel them staring back at me, without the eyes of course... I envision understanding within their sturdy upright postures and strength in their solid composure. I lift myself from my seat, echoes rippling from the fall of my feet as they slap against the hard wooden floor. Shuffling around the table, I bend over my cacti guests and with swift gentle gestures, pour a few drops of water onto each of their soil beds. Smiling at each of them as I make my way around, I like to make sure my guests feel welcomed. They, naturally, remain unmoving. Passing around, I can fully take in the extent of variety. Greens in all shades and all tones, and spikes in all numbers and sizes. Prickly and stubborn, or with arms outstretched to hug and comfort. As my circuit around the table comes to a close, my eyes lock on the table's overlooked centerpiece. A potted plant, but unlike the cacti, a flower, added as an afterthought. Green leaves protrude from the bustle of pink flowers pushing their way out from beneath. Their form etched and carved by age till the ends become crinkled, rough and brown, crackling and rustling as the wind brings them together. These moments, when they sway and lean, and melody hums from something incapable of sound, an orchestra of petals and leaves and branches, for a moment, fills the silence. Now with my attention brought to the silence, I'm nothing less than absorbed. Is it a lonely silence... the kind that fuels a desire for music, or chatter, or laughter? Or is it a peaceful silence... one that dissolves meditatively in total peace and harmony? It must be. For as another gust drifts through the open window, a tremor starts up throughout the cacti as they shake and dance under the force of the breeze. Heads thrown back and arms bouncing. I can hear the soft blowing of the wind through their bristles and tickling their small green bodies. I can almost hear a canon of chuckles, like laughter erupting throughout a room. A joyous smile breaks out across my face and I toss my head back, my mouth flying open and shattering the silence with laughter that bounces back and forth throughout the entire room and encircles us all. It's indubitable; there is no better way to dine, than with cacti.

Rhiana Safieh, age 14

Wonderland at Night



Amy Lee, age 19

Joy

From the very start,
From our very first breath,
The warmth of the sun,
Seemed to seep into her chest.

The beginnings of life
She held in her body
And in this moment
She felt truly happy.

As she cradled us close,
Watching our first unsteady steps,
As she listened to our babbles
Become more than just laughs.

Through our rights and our wrongs,
She held us with love
In her arms like the wings
Of an angel from above.

She started to wonder
As the years began to pass,
When did her once tiny joy
Become a full grown man?

The warmth in her chest
Was repaid with cold eyes,
In a cold, empty room
As time kept flying by.

Soon she grew old and
As she held onto stray beams of light,
Her sun came back
Her joy, her pride.

In those last fleeting moments
We begged her to stay
Just like she did
When we flew away.

She watched us cry,
She gave us a kiss,
And right before she died
She whispered us this,

"From the very start,
From your very first breath,
The warmth of the sun
Seemed to seep into my chest.

"You, my son,
Are what gives me my joy
So my child, don't cry,
For every day you gave me more."

Then as she passed,
With her baby by her side,
She wiped away our tears
And with a smile said...

"Goodbye..."

Czarain Laqui, age 14

The Birth Defect that Made Me Afraid to Love

In my spare time I design ways to make people fall in love with anyone but me. It's hard business, a nine-to-five job, but better than having to deal with unwanted feelings. The scar from my mother's Caesarean section still stretches across half her belly like a crescent moon, and sometimes I wonder if that's why my father left her: because she had already been cut open before he'd even had a chance to do it himself.

In my apartment I stack slips of paper with men's phone numbers into piles that I later crisp into ash with my lighter. All the other tenants in the building think I have Friday night bonfires where I cook hot dogs and hamburgers over the grill.

They don't realize that the smell of smoke comes from some version of unrequited love. My rejection letters to jilted men always end with the words don't call me again.

Maybe all of this somehow relates back to my childhood, when the boy across the block knocked down a wasp nest with his baseball bat, like the nest was a pinata, setting the wasps upon me, stinging me so many times I grew to associate love with hurt. But whatever it is, my psychology professor suggests that maybe somehow I was turned upside down in the womb, my tiny fists flailing like compass needles, until my feet, instead of my head, pointed to my mother's heart so I grew up unable to listen to anyone else's heartbeat without wanting to kick it into silence.

Anonymous, age 15

How to betray a poem

Crumple it up.
Kick it away.
Leave it alone
for the rest of the day.
Make it feel lonely.
Throw it in fire.
Don't have sympathy.
It might be a liar.
Throw it in trash.
Make it leave town.
Make a decision.
It will make you feel down.
Now when it's gone
You want it back.
So find a new one
In a paper stack.

Wareeshah Khan, age 13

Numbers Never Lie

Picture this – you wake up after a long night at the office and you’re starving. The first thought that comes to your mind is to grab some breakfast, until you remember that you can only consume 900 calories today. You turn on your phone and a picture of a Victoria’s Secret model fills the screen. “Eat clean,” you tell yourself. “Nothing tastes as good as skinny feels.” Although, the more you keep repeating these words, the more you begin to crave a Krispy Kreme doughnut with a Caramel Frappuccino from Starbucks. Resisting temptation, you reach into the fridge for an Activia 40-calorie yogurt and an apple. It surely isn’t as tasty as a doughnut, but it’ll be worth it during bathing suit season. You type both foods into the calorie counter app: 134 calories down and 766 left.

After breakfast, it’s time to get dressed. You look least forward to this part of the day because it makes you feel even crappier than you already did. Everything you own makes you look boxy or draws attention to your massive hips, leaving you with a total of two choices that make you look socially acceptable. It’s probably safest if you wear a pair of leggings with a sweater to hide your back fat and considerable bloating. It isn’t the cutest outfit in the world, but it’ll do. You can’t make it obvious that you’ve gained five pounds in the past two weeks. On your way out, you grab a granola bar for the road. This is going to kill your carb intake for the day. As you punch the nutritional facts into the calorie counter, your new total appears on the screen: 259 calories down and 641 left. If you think about it, that’s roughly 300 calories left to splurge on each of lunch and dinner. You can do this!

Work isn’t the worst part of the day, though it surely isn’t the best either. Walking into the building, you feel as if you are under a microscope because people’s eyes seem to trace your every move. The only time anyone ever dares to look away is to make some joke to his or her friend or whisper about you. You can’t help but wonder if they were laughing at your clothes, makeup or weight; not that one would make you feel better over the other. On the plus side, constantly being in and out of meetings stops you from binge eating. During your morning break, just before your next meeting, you pull out an apple and quickly snack on it. Thank goodness fruit is somewhat tasty and manages to satisfy your sweet tooth. Pulling out the calorie counter app, your total so far reads: 302 calories down and 598 left. For lunch, you eat eight large strawberries and a bowl of salad, no dressing of course because those are empty calories. You can feel people’s eyes locked on you as you chew on the bitter salad leaves. This embarrasses you and causes you to throw out your lunch before you finish it.

On your way home, you pull up the calorie counter app to check how many calories you have consumed so far: 455 calories down and 445 left. Maybe this means that you can eat more than an avocado and some celery stalks for dinner tonight. Your afternoon snack consists of a low calorie fruit cup, which still leaves you hungry. Ever since you started this diet, you have been craving something sweet. Looking through the cabinet, you see a fresh box of chocolate eclairs with your name on it. “Don’t do it,” you tell yourself, but you grab one anyway. It is so delicious that you reach for a second one as a reward for sticking to your diet the past week. The minute you start chewing the second one, you regret it. You spit the eclair out of your mouth and immediately change into shorts, an old T-shirt and a pair of Nikes.

Before doing anything else, you click open the calorie counter app to check what your calorie intake is at after those eclairs: 1,032 calories down, zero left. That number haunts you as you walk out of the house. 1,032 – that is 132 calories over what you should have consumed. Without hesitation, you start running. Thinking about the vicious stares, the eclairs you just consumed and the bathing suits you have sitting in your closet, you begin to run faster. You are tired of being fat. Tired of looking in the mirror and no longer feeling beautiful. What ever happened to the girl who didn’t care about her weight and was comfortable in her own skin?

Finally, you begin to head home. Dinner is not an option considering you just wasted the rest of your daily calorie intake on junk food. After brushing your teeth, you step on the scale to remind yourself how ruthless you were today. 107 pounds – that’s nine pounds heavier than you should be. You open the calorie counter app one last time before climbing into bed. Without hesitation, you change your maximum daily calorie intake to 750: zero calories down, 750 left.

Gabrielle Nigro, age 17

Go to Hel

"So do you want the corpse stripped?"

"Of course. She was the one who signed the contract. She wanted to be able to help us as much as possible."

The man swipes away stubborn tears, checking the time anxiously on his pocket watch. It would be so easy to strike him down, to strip his body and ravenously gorge on his organs.

But she can't; it would break the contract and she'd burst into flames, crumpling like a log burned for hours into a ghost of ash on the floor.

She slips into the woman's skin with practiced ease, wincing at the flies biting her skin. Her nails scabble for purchase and lock onto her bone. Blood dousing everything, splattering her dead body with a red so vivid she feels likely to vomit. Skin tears away from bone, until everything but her skull is covered in skin. She feels like screaming, but resists the urge.

The woman's bones are wet and white, feeling like ocean water underneath her touch. Next are organs. She roots around her intestines, ripping out her spleen, small intestine, large intestine, appendix, stomach, and various others, which hit the pavement with wet squelches, sounding like a pedestrian orchestra. Her bones are stained a nice magenta from all the blood the organs have splashed around as they've been torn off. She opens her mouth, gasping at the shade.

Muscles. She rips her hamstrings, trapezium, and finally biceps from herself like a dog would meat from a bone. Her fingers scabble across her scalp, finding purchase. Her fingertips peel the brilliant orange hair and dandruff away from her skull, an off-white, sort of like weathered paper. She emits a brief scream, and knows that her phalanges are turning crimson.

Her bones feel grainy and her skull pops out of the skin with a highly satisfying pop. It feels smooth and bulbous, probably because the woman thinks so profoundly of herself. She picks up a knife and severs the optic nerves until the knife screams across her palm.

The task finally complete, Hel slips out of the woman's corpse and carefully situates the tissues inside their designated containers, and smiles down on her work. After so many strippings, it has become a rather soothing practice. Well, as soothing a practice as the personification of decay could have.

"How much will this get us?"

"About two million."

"Good. Thank you, Ms..."

"Never mind my name. Here," Hel says, handing him a fat wad of bills.

The man walks away and Hel smiles. She is going to eat for the first time in a long while, and she will eat well.

Clare Doherty, age 14

Sea Turtles

Sea turtles – solitary and soothing – remind me of priests. Their life is devoted to god. Their deep wrinkles and slow movements appear elderly; their deep wrinkles are oaths to experience and wisdom. Nonetheless, they are thoughtful creatures, their eyebrows are forever furrowed, accompanied by a frown that is enduringly etched on their lips. Sea turtles live cloistered lives, wandering the waters alone, but when their solitude is threatened, they withdraw their limbs into the comforts of their shrine. The cracks and cuts of their imperfect skin are like pieces of shard glass contorted into a stained glass window. The cracks leak virtue, which runs through their veins, weighing them down, forcing their delayed movements, so that they can see the beauty in everything. As they mindlessly float with their limbs splayed, they leave their fate in the hands of a greater power. Although they live in the dark amongst the creases and crevices of their profound temples, they are guided by their intuitive feeling of god; nevertheless, in times of doubt they surface and raise their heads back in prayer while their lungs fill with air, life. Their life is devoted to god. Their rhythmic movements are a sequence of prayers and the seagulls compose the gospel choir shadowed by the slow melodic cadence of the waves. The water is their temple. Yet, as they blindly travel the dark waters with a body made for the sea, their breath is held. Their life is devoted to god.

Shameeza Gafoor, age 16

Human Nature



Jasmine Zhang, age 14

Way up high in the sky...



Angela Huang, age 12

Compass

She walks an unfamiliar road
with barely enough to eat,
and stills her muscles long enough
to lay them down to sleep.
But when her compass arrow shifts,
she follows with her heart.
And every day, left unfulfilled,
seeks refuge in the dark.
North, it says, for settled breaths,
or east for focused soul.
Or maybe west, for daily bread,
or south, for feeling whole.

The arrow flies as the crow sleeps,
and follow with, she must.
But when her tread finds final steps
will her heart blend with the dust?
Here today, gone tomorrow,
eternally the norm,
until she finds some subtle twist,
an oriented form.

To be still, her only wish
her compass still defies.
But still she walks, a constant shift,
the way the arrow flies.

Daniel MacDonald, age 19

untitled

I wonder,
when we walk,
you always two feet ahead,
me smiling at your back,
if you notice the girl
hidden in the corners,
in the glances and laughs.
if you realize how
your eyes are whirlpools
and your smile a hurricane,
your being a literal disaster.
yet no one has seen anything
more beautiful, more perfect
than a cloth sewed of mistakes.
if you're running too fast
to understand how you
paint the ground with followers
and kidnap and hold hostage
too many beings, too many lives,
and the cage they are kept in
is dripping with dried tears.
and then you take a final step.
the distance between
us is my answer.

Cathy Zhang, age 13

How the Mirror Ages

Whispering softly,
The leaves dangle against my cheek,
And I
Turn to gaze upon –
The ocean blue, a mirage in the horizon
With moonbeams swirling stardust against –
The fading crescent shadow,
Stilled against its backdrop
Reflection paused in calm distortion.

Fragments of laughter linger in the breeze,
But they are stale and chipped;
already
gone
in the blues of tomorrow.

Fardowsa Ahmed, age 18

Nature's Song

Your voice sounds like nature.
The bugs of nature that is.
You are like a mosquito buzzing around my head.
However, mosquitoes can be swatted. You cannot.
I try to keep my face pleasant while you buzz in my face.
My twitching eye says otherwise.
You are like a flower.
Except, you contain pollen and I am allergic to pollen.
Your mind is similar to that of a log.
Both hollow and very empty.
You're like the sun because, whether I like it or not, you will be there.
Although I wish so hard for those rainy days.
I guess your type of nature is not for everyone.
Myself included.

Rebecca Antonacci, age 17

Among Giants

The days blend together. The paddle hits the water and forty kilometres becomes thirty, thirty becomes twenty, twenty becomes ten, and ten leads to tomorrow. I wake up to the cold with a root as a pillow, the tentacle of an aged beast, a great pine filtering beams of light through its needles to dot the fly of our tent, marking the break of dawn. The birds do not sing. I lie still for a moment enjoying the rarity of complete silence. We crawl out of the tent dragging our packed gear behind us and dismantle our temporary home. A thin mist lingers among the pines rising from the black water, ascending into the hills. With our packs in a pile on the flattened grass where our tent had been, I sit down with my back to a tree, too tired to consider my next responsibility. I watch the daily array of slugs, which have congregated on any gear left outside. Little creatures conjured by the dawn. A tiny brown orange being has found itself on the blade of my unsheathed knife. A particularly small slug among droplets of water from the dew, rests on the cold slab of steel. I imagine the slug must be petrified by the action around him, the giants lumbering above his world. He is just as likely oblivious, maybe even serene. I slide him off the blade, wondering what he's thinking as he falls to the ground.

"Start loading boats!" Scott calls from the rocks where he's been making breakfast. My mind snaps away from the slug and back into real speed. The next twenty minutes are executed with a practiced precision, a familiar routine. I slide the boats into the water resting each bow on the beach. While I do this, the others are hauling the packs toward the boats and loading them in one by one. Some packs can be placed, while the other heavier food packs are dropped with a thud, rattling the frame of the canoe. After this is done we eat a breakfast of granola with powdered milk and we're off. It's 6:25, day eight of twenty-two. We had camped at the mouth of a small river which we paddled down, draining into the giant that is Temiskaming. Lake Temiskaming is about three kilometres wide, but runs on as if forever, giving it the feel of an enormous river. On either bank are huge rolling hills and cliffs covered with pines. The water is dark, black even. The day is threatening: the water, the mist, the hills looming around us, and the storm clouds stalking behind us. My paddle disturbs the water and I wonder what swims its depths watching the bellies of our red boats as they glide across the surface. I feel like I am being watched by the dark spaces in the forest, a feeling surely intensified by the immensity of our isolation. Our only visible company is a few black crows who have found their home on a dead tree leaning off of a nearby precipice.

We continue to paddle down the lake. Hours pass but I'm not sure how many. Time does not pass so perceptibly. For a long time the boats and our paddles are the only things that break the stillness of the water, but the storm clouds made no idle threats. The sky begins to fall. Raindrops slam into the water and the whole lake is rippled. Lightning cracks merely a kilometre from our band of boats, which now seem infinitesimal and powerless against the forces around us. The land does not welcome us but I welcome the storm. We paddle towards shore, our boats filling with water. Despite the rain and thunder there is still no wind, an equally eerie and convenient phenomenon. We come to shore amongst giant boulders, sentinels of the shore, rising from the black water. And then we wait. We wait, cold and dripping, for the sky to allow us passage. Thunder booms, lightning cracks, rain falls, and we wait. I watch the stirring of the clouds, the breaking of the once glass lake. I watch the rain drip from my shrivelled hands, rushing by blisters and callouses, as water does the rocks in a river.

Soon the storm slows, then stops. The clouds go on unceremoniously to the east, lashing our path in momentary aggression and then returning to the august calm, insouciant of our passing. We are slugs, beings among drops of water from the rain. Creatures conjured by the dawn.

Hannibal dePencier, age 15

the escapist

What Happened Here, on a globe of dirt and water, on dusty ground below moons,
on dry grass softening the stones in my back,
on nights where red doesn't mean stop and scars below the skin feel like prose,
under a pounding weight
with arms tense beside my shoulders,
with sounds breathless from you,
while i can feel and see the torn leggings like torn legs,
where it's tears and cries in frozen thoughts,
how you bathed in alcohol and i was your unwilling towel,
while remembering makes everything hurt,
and i can't speak your name because it's painted onto the outsides of my eyelids, but

What Happened There, it can't matter
because i've escaped the hellhole town in arizona
and run to goddamned texas
with its cowboy boots and songs about truckin' and sex
but all i can hear is the echo of brass knuckles on my skull
headaches pounding with thoughts of your voice
and i can taste the metal of the bars you stand behind
but see
the brick walls of this townhouse don't shout safety
because nothing does
especially not the scent of grass and earth and blood and sweat
still rippling
and What Happened There is everything i am but i am everything without it

Yanelle Bardhan-Mendonca, age 14

ABCs of Anorexic Agony

A new day commences, and I ask,
Before I am no longer me,
Can I open my eyes, and at last,
Do I now have the courage to fly free?

Everyone else is too weak.
Fear fills your mind, fills your heart.
Give me a year, a month or a week,
Hurry, stop me, I am about to start.

I truly am in control,
Just watch me, and you will see.
Killing myself? It's worth it to be invisible.
Let me live on air; become what I want to be.

Maybe I'm disordered and crazy,
No one can deny that is true.
Or maybe everyone else is just lazy,
Perhaps, then I'm better than you.

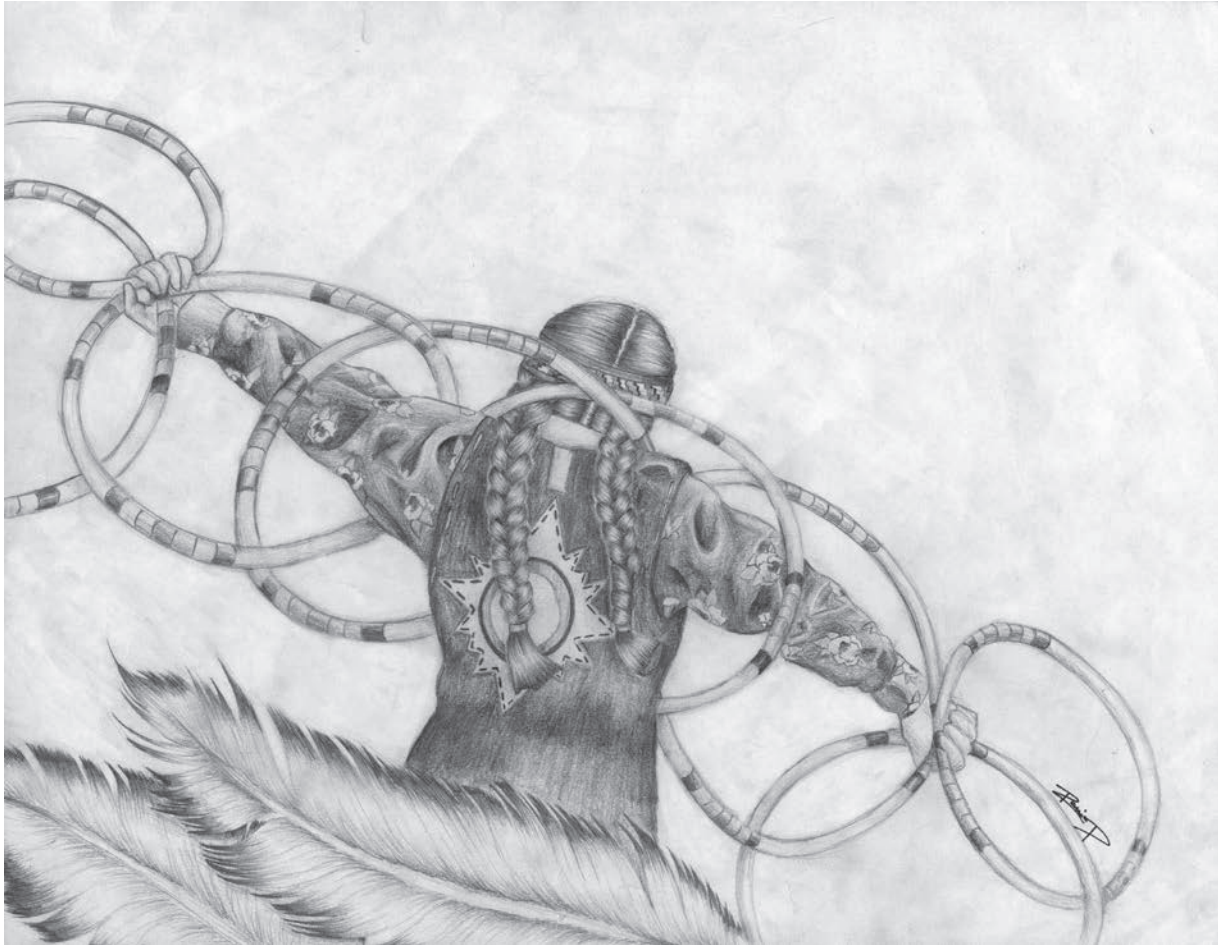
Quiet your words of pleading, don't cry,
Realize I am never backing down,
Slowly I'm becoming IT, as time passes by.
Today my feet will finally touch the ground.

Understand why I am not crying,
Very quickly I am becoming the best.
Why do you treat me like I'm dying,
X-rays, EKGs, blood tests?

You'll never know if I'm really lying,
ZERO's the obsession that gives me no rest.

Rose Gold, age 16

Without Wings



Rania Phillips, age 14

Im mortal

We can take this really fast or slow
But we can't know with certainty where we will go...

Ha. Ha. Ha. You've gotta be kidding me.
We know exactly where we will go.
We can't choose to take it fast or slow.

How could I enjoy the present when my time is running out?

We are all herded toward that direction. No time for second thoughts, no time to signal for help, no time for wailing about the unfairness of it all. We are aware of it.

Every mud print we squeeze with our soaked shoes, every puff of moist breath we let go in this bitter cold air, every ticking second shoves us closer to the inevitable end.

Death is both an old friend and fiend that we must eventually face. There is really nothing glorious about our coming affair with him. When we are inches away from him on this one-way trip, can our romanticized 'life fulfillments' stand against his contemptuous smirk? When Joseph Stalin died of a heart attack in 1953, did he stress about the coming de-Stalinization, led by his successor, Nikita Khrushchev?

When Nikola Tesla died alone in the New Yorker Hotel, did he worry about the world's loss of a brilliant mind?

Perhaps Stalin and Tesla did worry about these things, perhaps not. Even if they did, what would have changed? Even if I hear the laughter of my slaughterer, I must still stiffen my neck and croak a battle cry.

How I wish to have a peek at the grim reaper's schedule! I will still be stuck in this misery, but at least I can attempt to embrace the deadline. We desire, expect, demand, and require things from this life we borrowed, not knowing when it will be snatched from us. Why do we bother to earn titles, wealth, social status, and emotional approval – all this junk that we cannot haul to our graves? We disguise the nooses we tighten around our necks. A bow tie? Oh it's for decorative purposes. A medal? It's the recognition of my achievements. A pearl necklace? It's a token of love from my valentine. Maybe we put nooses around our necks to enforce the notion of control, to proclaim our autonomy to end our lives. Perhaps, to die a 'dignified' death, like stubborn kids trotting toward the tank line all in the name of chivalry.

Many of us like to keep time on our wrists, to keep ourselves on schedule and to be aware of the time left. Yet we can't keep the time left of our lives, which should be the grandest scheme of all times. How much time is there left before our biological clock stops? Ugh! The woe of silence. When the rattling of the clock stops, we switch it. However when the pumping of blood stops, can we afford to switch it? Tell me, when is my deadline?

Why am I encouraged to *carpe diem*, when I can clearly hear my F(r)riend snickering at my foolish attempts? If life is intrinsically meaningless, "let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die." In my desperate searches for help, I met existentialist Camel. Camel is helplessly optimistic. As humans we crave knowledge about the world, Camel said. Yet our universe seems to be unreasonably silent, Camel said. So it is impossible for us to find the intrinsic meaning of life, Camel said. Then we should define the meaning of our own lives and live them, Camel told me... But Camel, my crazy comrade, we are like children who receive an unknown box. Why do you assume the box is empty just because you aren't aware of its contents? Why would you give all your hoofs to fill it to the brim?

... Sorry Camel, I should just let you go on. At least the burdens satisfy you.

However, if the meaning of life is truly absent, all our attempts to bring meaning to it would be artificial. Sure, after our endless toil, the box may be full. But what if our Job is to leave the box alone, instead of trying fanatically to solve a problem that doesn't exist in the first place?

Maybe that's why the end comes so peacefully. We no longer have to struggle and fight to find meanings in this void existence. We no longer have to satisfy our hunger and thirst for light in this seemingly never-ending tunnel. We no longer have to hustle and sweat to fill the bottomless hole of our wretched cry for more.

Death, old sport, I'm home.

Maggie (Jiaxin) Han, age 16

One Step Closer



Areesha Sabir, age 17

Torn Paper World

Who am I in this Paper World,
Of newspaper buildings and cardboard houses,
Being unfolded and refolded
By the undefeatable soul stealing ghost.
Each fold is a windstorm, ripping my paper limbs,
Which can't be taped.

Fearless and unwavering, I walk through
The unfolding grey meadows of faceless demons,
With grounds of rotting paper limbs,
On which black flowers grow and burn like cigarettes.

My cancer lungs scream for oxygen
In the dense, smoky air,
As I climb the burning tower of hope.
I cannot defy the ghost,
As he sets its paper walls ablaze.
And with its stairs disintegrating,
It turns to ash and leaves me with a gift,
The last of its flames.

They smoulder and flicker like candles within me,
Burning a hole through my chest and eating my heart,
As they lick the walls of my soul,
Until I am charcoal black, powdery remains.

My dusty ashes swirl upwards with the wind,
As it sweeps in like a saviour to take me away.
"There is no tower to climb," it whispers.

There is no tower to climb.
No paper cuts that can be hugged with band-aids.
This is not a hole in my favourite shirt,
That can be stitched,
Or a virus that I can vomit.

This is holding a pen with broken fingers,
Walking on pavement scattered with shards of glass,
Barefoot, in the dark.
This is standing before the murderous ghost,
And saying, "I dare you to try."
That bastard.

This is me waiting for my ashes to reunite,
For my blood cells to remultiply,
For my muscles and tissues to recombine,
For layers of skin to reform,
And finally close the gaping hole in my chest,
That was left open,
Like an eerie cave for demons to crawl into.

Torturous screams echo off the walls
Of the cave,
As holes burn through every corner
Of the Paper World, in which I see

That I am not a dirty floor that can be swept,
And I did not lose a pen that can be replaced.

Who am I in this Paper World?

A Paper Doll, with torn paper limbs,
With a hole for a heart.
Princess of the Paper Castle,
With spotless floors and mountains of pens.
Heir to the mighty Paper King,
Who lost his battle with the ghost.
He, who left behind holes,
In his Paper World, his Paper Castle,
And in his Paper Doll.

That can never be filled.

Aiman Ali, age 18

Dad Did Not Fix

he shoves what remains of their story
into cardboard boxes
that are stacked
all
the
way
to
the
ceiling

he scratches out her belief in
"till death do us part"
with a hasty scrawl across a government document
that she almost doesn't sign

he runs over her image of a
happily ever after
with the wheels of a borrowed van that leave tracks in the
brown
sugar
snow

he leaves behind
nothing
but the old plastic bin bearing the words
DAD
TO
FIX
(where the
burnt out
christmas lights
lie in tangles)
and my mother's
broken heart

Lily Boyd Bell, age 14

The Culpability Calculation Formula

"In the depths of my farm, a crime was being committed. It happened three days ago, when I noticed some trespassers loitering on my land. They were on the fields farthest from my house, so it was hard to see what was happening clearly with my poor eyesight; even so, I could make out that they were digging a pit of some sort. One of them was carrying a large brown bag, which he threw into the pit; the others proceeded to bury it.

"Naturally, being suspicious, I decided to investigate. As soon as those trespassers left, I went to that portion of the field with a spade and at once began to uncover that bag. It was a large backpack of sorts. Being, of course, curious about the contents of the bag, I unzipped it and rummaged through its contents. In it were large quantities of a white powder, some vials of a clear liquid, and a squirrel corpse – obviously tortured – with a note attached to it full of expletives. Who were these people – gangsters? Or perhaps psychopaths? My property was being used as a criminal dumping-ground! I had to inform the authorities.

"I suppose I was careless, for I left the bag full of drugs unzipped, in front of the pit, instead of reburying it. It was getting dark when I got back, and as I was going to call the police, a flicker of light from the field caught my attention. Gazing out at the field with binoculars, I discovered a figure with a flashlight scurrying through the field. He picked up the bag, but then inexplicably dropped it.

"They knew it. They were going to arrange my demise. They were crazed killers for sure – why would they butcher a squirrel?

"So in a state of panic, I called the authorities, but they only laughed at me: 'What, you think that drug dealers are in your backyard? And that squirrel! That's the fifth time already – you're obviously hallucinating!' Those ingrates! I was alone – there would be no help.

"The next day, as I was silently tending my peas, I heard shouts from the back field. In self-protection, I had gotten the old Lee-Enfield rifle from the attic, and stored it in the trunk of my motorized wagon, which I now drove to the place of disturbance. There, I found two gangsters, sporting black gloves, beating another person with their fists while shouting.

"When they saw me, one of them – the one clutching the bag of drugs in his hand – whipped out a knife, dropped the bag, and started to advance on me brandishing the blade, saying, 'You'll never tell them this – I'll guarantee that.'

"I pulled out my rifle, and fired at him in self-defence. He fell. His partner leapt up and charged. I fired, and he dropped too. Their victim shrieked and limped away.

"This, detective, is what happened. I'm no murderer."

"Unfortunately sir," replied the police detective, "I cannot help but question the truth of your story. For one thing – how do I know for a fact that your story is true? You could have killed the two and framed them. We don't know where the person you alleged they beat up is. What's more, only your fingerprints are on the bag of illicit substances; of course you claim they had gloves, but I still find it a weak explanation, as none of the victims you shot had any gloves upon their persons when we found them. A –"

"I have the gloves right here with –"

"All that is certain is that you have caused the most damage to the now dead victims. I have no choice but to arrest you."

"But I gave the station a phone call beforehand didn't I? You knew everything that was going to happen. It was your inaction that was to blame! I had to defend myself because none of you came to help!"

"We have no record of your phone call. The constable will escort you to the detention cell now."

"That's a lie! It's a conspiracy, isn't it? You're in league with those gangsters, you and the entire station! You're trying to frame me! You ignored my phone call on purpose."

"There's no conspiracy. That's just a silly notion."

Bruce He, age 14

Ethereal



Kevin Wang, age 15

On Theatre, Honesty and Reality

I have always been fascinated by the theatre because I believe that, ironically, you learn the most about someone when he or she is being someone else. Although the characters an actor presents may have been played many times by other actors, each actor's interpretation is different. It is in this great, ironic honesty that the beauty of theatre lives. When an actor takes on the part of Hamlet, for example, he knows all of the characteristics Shakespeare gave him in the script: his issues, his complexes, his language; but what each particular actor demonstrates is what he feels about Hamlet's situation and what he wants the audience to think of Hamlet and his choices. Theatre gives us the opportunity, as actors, to see and become who or what we want to be, but also to show our audiences what they can be. We are given the outlines of characters, the shells of great heroes, but that's all they are: outlines. It's the actor's job to fill that in. What we make of the outlines, and what the audience sees, is us, more than it is any character. That is why acting is so often confused with pretending. We are not pretending, as actors, nor are we lying, we are showing.

I love the way that, as actors, we have the opportunity to uplift and inspire people we don't even know. I was in a production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* last year and at one performance, I kept noticing two young boys in the front row of the audience. I'll always remember how their faces lit up with laughter during the Pyramus and Thisby scene (I was Thisby). As I have grown and entered the final years of high school, I have become much more aware of the difficult realities of life. Where once I just lived in the present moment and enjoyed (or hated) experiences as they presented themselves, now my friends and I are much more worried about the future, trying to figure out how to manage the almost suffocating pressure to "apply ourselves," to compete for positions in the best universities and the best jobs, to figure out how to make choices in a world which so often seems to prioritize material markers of success over intellectual ones. This is a world in which universities fight over who gets what students, in which the material takes priority over the intellectual, and the future takes priority over the present. This is a high paced yet exceedingly lonely world. People no longer exist solely in the present but race toward the future. However, in this world, theatre gives us an opportunity to be really and truly present, to escape into other worlds and to see into other people's lives and experiences. The theatre gives us a chance to broaden our minds by watching the trials of our heroes, to escape the pressure of today's chaotic, fast-paced, materialistic world into a world with rules and logic and structure that our 'real' world lacks. When we are placed in the audience, or on stage, we can escape into other worlds, see into other people's lives, and exist, even if just for a few hours, in the present moment. And when I am on the stage, the theatre gives me the power to improve on myself, to sing and dance free of judgment, and sometimes just to laugh.

Theatre is a refuge for me, a place where I can break free from my own everyday life, and create a new persona for myself, even if only for a few hours. When I was younger, I was inspired by many great actors for all of these reasons. What I want more than anything as I become an adult is to inspire the same kind of love for the theatre in others, because in pretending, we find the one true way to cultivate a better reality.

Max Ackerman, age 16

Too Late

The darkness was consuming. It swallowed every part of me. My small hands were clenched into shaky fists. My breath was uneven, as I waited to see what would happen. The cool hardwood was chilling, but I was sweaty and feverish with hysteria. My shiny pink shoes reflected the light coming from the wooden slats of the closet door. My distress was consuming me as I anticipated the fated sound.

And then I heard it.

The stomping of boots against the floor, shaking it. The ragged, drunk wheezing, that I could hear even from inside my hiding spot. I could hear the grunts as he stumbled across the floor, approaching my room. I was terrified. My breath heightened. The blood started flowing fast, my heart rushing to supply blood to my brain. I could feel myself going dizzy with fear. All I could hear was the sound of terror. Terror. Terror. I wanted to cry, but he couldn't know where I was. Now he was yelling. He was yelling my name. His voice filled my head. Madeline. Madeline. MADELINE. MADELINE. MADELINE WHERE ARE YOU. I heard him stomp into my room, madly looking for me, but I didn't want to be found. If I was found, there would be no one to help me. No one to save me from a person I was supposed to trust the most. He rampaged through my room, tearing apart my belongings, maddened, and searching for me. I heard something smash. I suffocated my pleas with my hand. I could feel the tears pricking my eyes, sewing rivers across my cheeks. My nails bit into my legs, leaving little pinpricks of blood, resting on my skin, small baubles of crimson. I could feel my mind, overwhelmed by fear, creeping into the darkest recesses of my brain. I was in an almost fantastical trance of distress.

Then he found me.

Eva O'Connell, age 13

The Year in Paragraph Form

Early one morning, the whole world feels a little more magical. A cosmic baker has heaped icing sugar onto everything, spritzed the air until it smells intoxicatingly fresh, clean as mint and glittering periwinkle. The novelty is wonderful, so wonderful that the ever-increasing cold doesn't seem so bad. A Styrofoam crunch and childhood, long gone as it may be, floods through the gates of memory.

A late afternoon thaw, an overnight freeze, and the news anchor warns of driving conditions. He fails to mention walking, though. A slapstick fall is less amusing when backs get broken.

What once might have been snowdrifts the size of Antarctica have shrunk to heaps of slush and feathery, dirt-coloured ice. Garbage we thought was gone is back with a vengeance. The air grows wetter, feeling softer to the lungs.

Snowdrops, the first of the battalion, peak out from the carpet of wet, rotten leaves. Every day after this, new flowers bring new colours, new smells, fresh and vibrant, appearing one after another, a succession quick enough to be disorienting. It might rain, but hey, at least it's not snowing.

The gentle blue smell of lilac drifts by like a long-forgotten dream. Green spills from gardens and parks and onto the street, dripping off the trees and seeping through the sidewalk. It'll take the eyes some time to adjust to this new colour palette.

Around mid-afternoon, everything will begin to slow down. There is already a heaviness in the air that foretells of smog warnings and lemonade growing lukewarm far too quickly. From time to time, whiffs of garbage and urine drift by, and AC becomes a café's best advertisement.

A cool breeze cuts through the dry heat, bringing respite to some. The grass and leaves, while still verdant, are beginning to take on a browning tint. One morning, there will be a crisp, smoky smell that wasn't there before, and the chill will hang in the air.

There might be a certain melancholy in the crunch of red and yellow leaves. The trees, it would seem, put forth a final fireworks display before taking the back seat to icy winds and snow. Images of sweaters and pumpkins offset an all-encompassing sense of mortality, as plants wilt and wither.

There's no going back now. The air is nosebleed dry, and every leaf, save for a few skeletal hangers-on, have fallen. Hats and scarves make their appearance at the bleakest time of the year.

"It's snowing!" a second grader shouts, and the whole class presses up against the window, much to the teacher's chagrin. The bell rings, and out they flood, images of snowmen and forts playing in their minds, only to discover the same brambly landscape they saw this morning. They'll have to wait a few more weeks.

Andalah Ali, age 17

Monster

You smile at me from across the room, but it's sinister, mocking me with dark mirth.

I look into your cold eyes and see nothing but emptiness, a spark igniting them only when you open your twisted mouth to spew insults at me.

It's loud, your voice and it echoes in my head violently as I gasp and brace myself from falling.

I look up and you're closer now, grinning at me with razor sharp teeth. You raise a hand and run your nails delicately along my cheek, leaving angry lines in their wake, a grim reminder of your power over me.

I can feel them clearly and they hurt but I cannot focus when you stare at me with such amusement on your mutilated face.

It's sickening.

"Just give up, you know you can't defeat me," you say, your scratchy voice low but terrifyingly familiar.

I shake my head, standing my ground and I hear you laugh at my stubbornness.

Suddenly, you're everywhere, menacing laughs and harsh words of contempt bouncing off the walls and creeping into my mind.

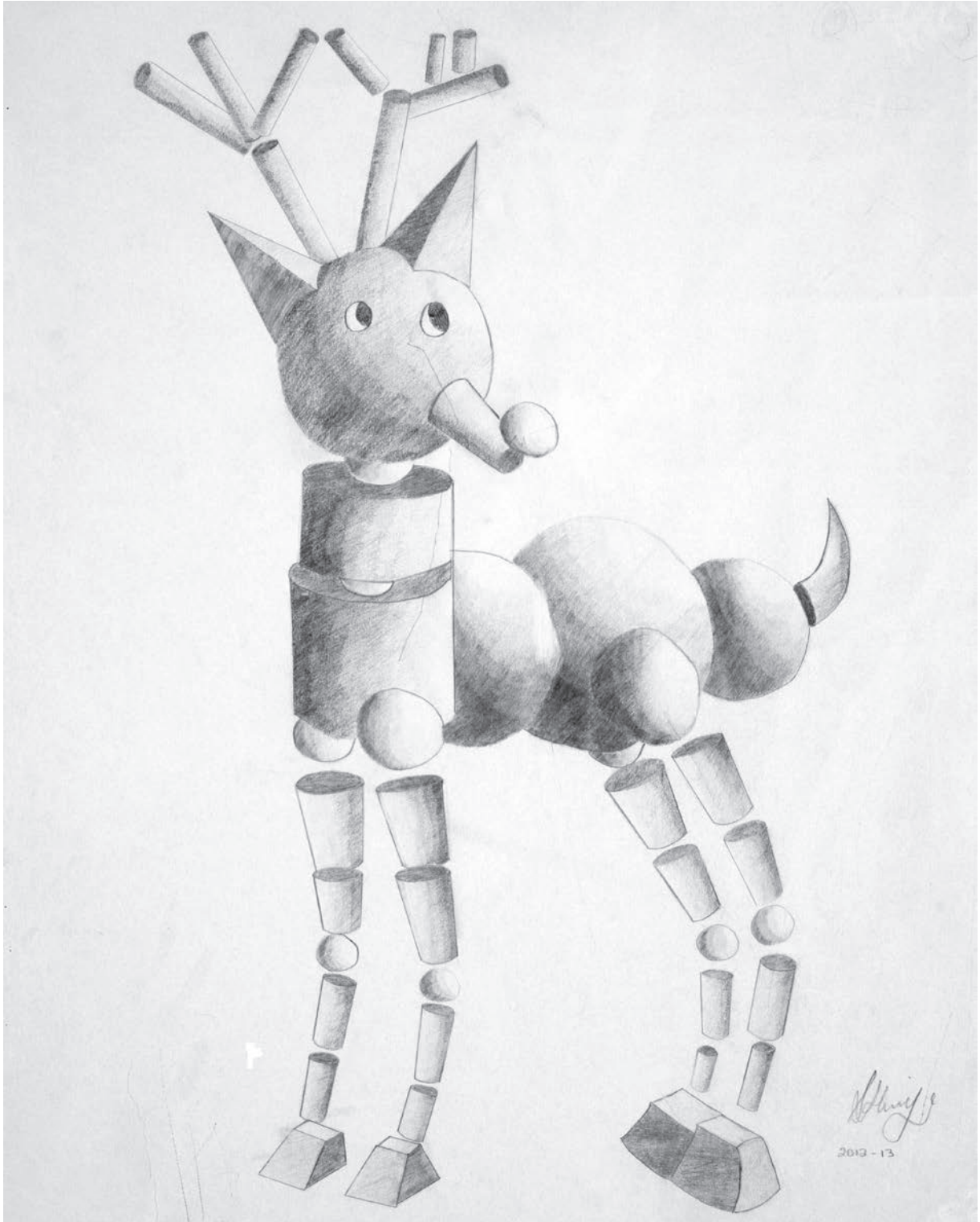
I hold my head and scream but it just fuels you as you continue to taunt me with venom-coated words that are all too true.

"Stop... s-stop, stop, stop, stop!" I shriek and lash out, raising my fist to hit you but my knuckles touch cold glass that breaks under my strength.

I look up and see myself staring back from the mirror I've just broken.

Sonia Lachman, age 18

Unstructured



Showmiya Sivaruban, age 17

Ophelia's Reflection on the Reign of Taylor Swift

A queen of heartache and goodbyes, naive and broken.
She does not let this define, restrain or cripple her,
But uses these memories like rusty old tokens
To trade in for lyrics and melodies that maintain her
Sanity, dignity, integrity: these I covet.
Once in my possession, now lost in my mind's abyss.
I'll be singing her songs until the moment I plummet
Down into the silent waters where I won't be missed.
A queen of backlash and criticism, mocked and despised.
She does not let this consume, defeat or degrade her,
But bandages these stab wounds with words that disguise
The blood in a myriad of verses that obtain her
Respect, admiration, idolization: I crave these, yet
Even before I went mad, they were maddening to attain.
I'll be singing her songs until the moment I plummet
Down into the silent waters where I'll say my last refrain.
A queen of knavish fools and tyrannical kings, overruled.
She tries not to let them blindsided, backstab or drown her,
But once he leaves she feels violated and ridiculed
Until she plays a chord and writes a song that regains her
Self-esteem, openness, hopefulness: he stole all to admit
He never loved me and sent me to a nunnery to pray.
I'll be singing her songs until the moment I plummet
Down into the silent waters where my sins will wash away.
I was never a queen, except in my mind's eye, I confess.
With blind foresight I let him use, dupe and betray me,
But in hindsight, I know he was my greatest happiness
And the reason I fell so far down and so ungracefully
Fast, regrettable, forgettable: the anthem of my life
Drums on as my funeral procession walks by you.
I was singing her songs until the moment despair was rife
Now there's silence in the waters where I drowned in rue.
She dealt her cards and played the queen; I was only played the fool.
Love was all I had to live for and the game was all too cruel.

Melanie Katz, age 16

Blacker than Black

Today's one of these days I never told you about
Where my chest rips in half and the breaths won't come out

Today's one of these ever frequent episodes
When wherever I look, the world begins to implode

Funny story; the universe will implode one of these days
I read it in an article, but of course it failed to say

What's going to happen to the heaven and hell
To the afterlife we thought we knew so well

So here I am, calling bullshit on all that
I'm preparing myself for the blacker than black

Sorry God I wish our relationship could have lasted for longer
But how much can you really expect from someone we all call "Father"?

So maybe that's why I'm having one of these days
and no you can't help what on earth could you say?

I guess I'm just alone – it gets hard simply waiting for the black
Actually, it would make it easier if you could just text me back

But you're not going to – just like this universe business I know the truth
I'm done expecting anything more than nothing from you

But you were the last destination, the final stop
The light that pushed away the black whenever we talked

And now it's so dark
I think I might be all alone

If I could just bring the light in by myself
Maybe I could find my phone

Georgia Maxwell, age 16

The Universe Painted on a Canvas

Each planet squirted on an artist tray,
a kaleidoscope of vibrant pigments.
Shifting and churning like the Milky Way;
waiting to smear the sky: leaving imprints.

Angled toward the North Star, the paintbrush
of the future-past stains the empty space.
Stippling the sky with celestial blush,
a forever-continuing staircase.

Hatching the deceased away into a hole,
leaving only an explosion of allure.
Rippling collisions at regional poles
leaving wonders for humans to endure.

And yet, millions of centuries gone;
paintbrush held, the universe persists on.

Zarah Shinwari, age 14

Fire

Fire
Once burst
From your beating heart
Quenched the thirst
That your teeth had
Kept clenched
Fire
Once came
Out your burning eyes
It told you stories
Told you lies
Fire
Once flew
Across the midnight sky
Its beauty struck you by
Surprise
As you watch each flame
Falter then rise
Fire
Once filled
Your soul with pride
Swayed you side to side
As you drifted away
In the security
Of another day
To come your way
But where is the fire today?
The pulse of creation
The ignition
The religion
The decision
To glow
To shine
Above and beyond
Yourself
To be a part
Of something larger
Larger than the whole
Of our own little worlds
To soar
Among the heavens
As we once were
Something pure
Like before
We did not choose to soar
We were born flying
Anyone who says
Any less
Is lying
There was no limit
Until limits we did make
There was nothing we could not take
Until we became afraid
No one was ever alone
Until our lives grew
Separate and cold
No one was under control
Until someone strived for power
And now here we are
In our final hour
I ask again
Where has gone
Our fire?

Tiffiney Manios, age 19

She Wrote

In the words of Ernest Hemingway,
"There is nothing to writing.
All you do is sit down at a typewriter
and bleed."

And bleed, she did.
As the pungent liquid
seeped out of her ailing veins,
she became irrepressible,
poised,
empowered.

With her head in the clouds,
but her gravity centred,
she radiated with certainty
in a world full of doubt.

In a world full of can'ts, don'ts, and won'ts,
a world that constantly told her "no"
when the only response she ever ached for was "yes"—
she wrote.

Equipped with a boundless lexicon
inked on her flesh and bones,
she soared to heights far beyond a mere mortal's reach...
where contempt and all things dissonant
ceased to exist.

This became her escape,
her euphoria,
her drug.

Spiralling in the abyss
of what she believed to be her own creation,
she felt naught but an invigorating rhapsody.

Her words gently chorused the melody
of an ever-so-faint symphony,
and if you were lucky,
you'd be one of the very few souls
able to hear
its music.

Natalee Veisi, age 13

Splash



Emily Joyce, age 17

Beyond Safety

Where I lie, it is bright. Men walk by, sometimes women too. The women point a lot more. The glass in front of me is smudged with the grease of a hundred fingerprints. "That one," they'll say, and a pair of carefully manicured hands will reach behind the glass. Sometimes, they point at me. They pull me out of my velvet box and bring me close to their faces, and then far away. Light flickers on their lips as they smile, shake their heads, and the manicured hands put me back into my bedding, back into safety. The boxes around me snap closed with a loud 'thok', and hard black shells hide the soft white interiors within them. Another finger jabs the glass in front of me, and large, blue eyes peer through at me. The manicured hands bring me up to the strange, smiling face, and then 'thok'.

Her. She's the one with soft skin and round lips whom he calls "honey." I think it's because her voice is sweet and smooth. She brushes her hair back behind her ears a lot. It's windy today, and the sea is a deep blue. Her hair won't stay behind her ears and it keeps curling around her face and blowing into her eyes. She says, what a beautiful shade of blue the sea is. He tosses some water at her, and her laugh is a million different colours.

I don't like the attention. She holds me out for everyone to see so that they all exclaim and reach to grab her finger, where I sit. Greasy hands pull me toward anonymous faces, so close I can see my shine glinting in their dull eyes. They talk all at once. These are the times I miss the quiet, and my velvet box. A woman she calls Mother reaches out to touch me across the table. Her hands are pale and bare.

It's nicer at night, when she reads, or in the morning, when I feel her clutch the warm mug and I feel warm too. She has wrinkles around her eyes and a loud laugh. She and the smiling man laugh together often, and sometimes I feel like I belong with them. I feel many days pass by, and I forget about the box and the manicured hands.

I am on the summit, surrounded by glossy paper and cushions. Her hand leaves one of the glossy magazines, and runs over her belly slowly. She speaks of wallpaper and the colour blue. He nods slowly, stirring the drink in his mug carefully while looking at her tummy.

She talks about fathers and houses with carpeted stairways, her eyes as glossy as the magazines she reads. I don't know what she means, but her voice is still soft and her laughs are sweet. I slide off the mountain and rest on his hand. He looks at her, and his eyes are glossy too.

She's crying very softly. Her sobs shake the empty room, and I'm surprised at how easy it is to be loud when you're alone. She stands by the window, clutching her tummy, waiting for the headlights. Every morning I wonder if this will be the last time he'll leave the mug half full on the counter, and drive away forever, to smile with someone else. Every night I wonder if this will be the time she'll wait for him by the door instead, and throw the half-full mug across his broken face in hopes of mustering up any real passion, even if it were just anger. Instead, by the time he has made it upstairs, she's already pretending to be asleep.

He tried keeping the room locked. He thought he could segregate the room, and the rest of their lives would gradually grow around it. But she found the key anyway. She used to cry but then she just stared. She screamed when the men in white told her. She screamed a horrible scream, one that was crippled by grief and pain. She was screaming when she went home, empty-handed. He didn't cry or scream. He just stopped smiling.

She screamed when he threw everything away; the stuffed giraffe, the blue high chair, even the rug. It was fast and sudden. At first he'd leave it all at the curb. But then he just threw it out the window. This was the only time I heard him scream too, but it wasn't out of the same grief that she felt. He screamed alone in the room, which was empty save for that blue wallpaper. She's empty now too. I feel it. I now know that voices can't be sweet once they've become ragged with misery.

Somewhere in the distance I can hear Mother call her, but the winds carry away her words. In front of us sleeps the sea, which breathes with each collapsing wave. This is a grey world we have turned our backs on and I don't want to face it again. Our surroundings are devoid of colour, lacking any familiar shape, and we are left in a dimensionless world, flat like the print magazines she used to read. I want to tell her to never turn the page again, and to let us stay here in our paper planet of safety. But she wades further into the cold waters, and she brings me up close to her face, so that I see the light glint off her cheeks. And then she is gone.

Where I lie, it is dark. It is not a world intercepted with bright headlights and broken furniture. Change does not visit here. Only the odd wanderer will keep me company for a few moments. With large, gaping eyes he comes to see what sleeps in the sand, and I'm sure if he had fingers to point, he would point them. But I don't worry: he is no smiling man. At last, I am safe. Around here, it's just blue. It's just me.

Mina Ivosev, age 17

Keep Out

A rustling of leaves jolts me out of my subconscious.

There they are... I'm finally going to see one.

Excitement overwhelms me, suddenly replaced with a sickening sensation of guilt and fear as my gaze shifts to the sign. The words haunt me; I remember what happened to Jessie.

Don't be a coward. You've waited practically your whole life for this. Besides, you're just going to have a look. No harm done. Just one look at the things that killed my Jessie... or whatever they did to her.

The giant palms flutter aimlessly above my head, moving without a sound along the night sky. I almost fall back asleep, when something in the bushes catches my eye. Those bright orange specks of light are watching me again, quiet as the night itself, hypnotizing me with their daunting illumination. I flinch, a shiver running through me. I want to run, hide, be safe in my Jessie's arms, but I know it's too late for that. I've crossed their border. There's no going back now.

I suddenly think of Jessie, the last words she ever said to me.

*It's okay, Jasper. I'm just going to have a look. I'll be fine. Trust me.
I love you.*

Her fiery red eyes stared amorously into my darks blue ones. Her lips crushed against mine, unknowingly for the last time. She looked at me once again, never again. And with a flip of her jet black blanket of hair, she wandered off into the darkness, never to be seen again.

I flinch, sobbing at this all-too-vivid memory.

Stop it. Stop it! Jessie wouldn't want you crying like a baby... she'd have told you to be a man, to face the unknown undaunted.

But those eyes. All of a sudden they look much too familiar. Their magnetism allures me, reeling me in like a fish. I'm hooked. I creep up to have a closer look and –

I fall. Stupid. Stupid, stupid! I gasp, but not at my idiocy. I feel myself pulling, being pulled into the night. I am attacked by branches and leaves, after which... nothing.

I look up to find myself in a small, desolate clearing, just big enough for me. And then I see them. Each tiny ball of fur packed so tightly that they form a tornado of softness around me. Out of the surrounding mound, I catch furry bodies, agile tails – and a pair of those same orange eyes that brought me here in the first place. Up close they look almost... red. And then it hits me, mentally and physically.

Surprisingly, I feel small next to them. For me. I look around and realize with a start – I'm... shrinking! What's going on?

My now glowing eyes flicker as the beings, who seemed so small a moment ago, abruptly grow bigger and bigger. My gaze shifts to the gloomy essence once sitting on my chest, now staring me face to face. What I don't realize is how much has changed. Until I notice I'm standing. The fiery red eyes burn into mine, staring me down.

Suddenly, I know. What that is. My fingernails begin to curve into sharp claws. Who she was. Tufts of fur now cover my entire body, now the size of a piggy bank. What I'm becoming. Blond, almost triangular ears grow out the top of my head, whiskers spoke through my cheeks as my nose shrinks into a rosy circle.

And now I know especially what that sign really meant...

...Keep Out.

Kali Williams, age 14

Live Life



Matthew Jeon, age 16

A Hangover – Now in Technicolor

Even the eyes of champagne-fuelled storms slip into calms. Cyclones & whirlwinds drink themselves into reluctant comedown like afterbirth, like denouement, like countless names everyone forgot to be polite about & notice reeling across the screen at the end of a motion picture.

At the crack of dawn, you can run your fingers along time's crevices, the wrinkles & crow's feet of cities that never sleep – awake, but always hungover. You can taste the vomit-tinged vodka on strangers' tongues, pretend you like the idea of tasting with their lips; follow shattered disco ball facets – the celadon tile beneath them glittering like the Emerald City of Oz in a light that's right but rare – toward the balcony.

Here, you are an extra turned title role, understudy now protagonist – peeled your identity off at the front door, shoved it between goose-down parkas & peacoats. Someone should've called you Dorothy, but Doc Martens are a sorry substitute for slippers of ruby red. A click of the heels couldn't save you from passive aggressive pleasantries with a couple of wicked witches of the west coast. Didn't make the ex you drunk-dialled desire a heart. Didn't make dumbed-down partygoers wish for brains. Didn't make you to come across courage under bedsheets or over the rainbow.

Never helped you find your kind of Kansas.

The road will bring you to chain-smoking with a chick, porn star tits packed into a gown rivalling the likes of Glinda the Good Witch, who sobs as if she's trapped under a fallen house. "It's strange how grey-scale your life can be when you're bombarded by unabating Technicolor," is your cue line but in life, everyone likes to go off script.

That night, the liquor will wear off & you'll press replay: drink to forget your forgotten lives – bad sequels to a beloved movie; stumble house to house – searching for a place you won't be recast & hope some tequila tornado will whisk you away, but there's no place like home – your own.

Not another's.

Faith Paré, age 16

Furry Fiestas

Have you ever wondered what the pets do at night? Pondered and puzzled with all of your might? Have you ever awoken and found things to address, Like the fact that your tissue box is now a torn confetti-like mess? Well wonder no more, my fine human friends. I am a cat, now your wondering ends.

We, the cats, we start the party. With confetti and music, no one is tardy. The dogs wake the others, no time for sleep, With the help of the birdies and their high-pitched shriek. The fish run the waterslides, The bunnies serve cake. There's also the prankster, a slithery snake. The salamander makes bonfires, The hamsters eat s'mores. The guinea pigs play board games, keeping their scores.

Finally, we all work together to clean up the mess And as the sun rises we lay down to rest. We pretend nothing happened, Pretend we were sleeping, Until we repeat it again the next evening.

Rain Edwards, age 15

Fashion Magazine

I long to be two-dimensional and glossy, stuck in tableau, like these paper dolls.

How they smile sadly into the real world full of mirrors and pills, and how I long to be cut like them.

I have a bottle full of wishes unanswered and a stack of fashion magazines. Soon, I'll need to pop a pill Like they do in commercials with a tall, clear glass of water.

Gulnar Qaiser, age 16

Cafe Novo 3 pm

How can I be at peace when my teeth are black and my lung is collapsed? How can I; the love of my life is as empty as a cathedral.

I met her a year ago when it was starting to get warm, her hair was still yellow-blond and not white, her lips were pink, and I listened to her heart, and thought we would sit on balconies in faraway apartments speaking and loving to that rhythm,

and I thought we would live in Poland and repaint my wall and walk up to the beach wrapped in typewriters and blankets,

I had no sleeping dreams, but still,

I thought she would lace me back up where everything had been spilling out,

and that we could stare eternity in the eyes wearing sharpened smiles, two demons growing old in heaven,

and that I could create something good and she was my muse and even if we had no money and only two bowls filled halfway with 65¢ soup we would have each other,

I had no fately feelings, but still,

I thought that maybe it was the first time that time had thrown us together for the dance, and after this, we would only continue to meet again and again and again,

She said our love would last until we were both dirt and ash, and maybe after that, and it sounded true, so I wept,

I wanted to sleep forever inside of her belly, my warm loving grave, and when she would die I would die,

And I wanted us to be crucified side by side in sacrificial visions, and burnt together as witches, and be pretty unfeeling ghost-witches who breathe no more, only knock things over and laugh quietly in graveyards, kissing translucently in the dusk,

we would make appearances in each other's films and we would go on living in burning houses made of incense, walk through the forest and mountains in bathrobes preaching to no one,

and sing to each other off Kerouacian scrolls, which go on forever,

but I noticed she was an angel walking among the dead, and I was just dead, and we were not in love, just bored, and so,

I buried myself into the skull of the earth and lay there wasting by its stupid, teenage brain.

Oona Ostrowski, age 18



Writing and artwork from five
decades of Young Voices

1965-2015

untitled



Paul Smith, 1973

The Statue Speaks

I walked through a park full of statues.
And I looked at the fine chiselled eyes . . .
And I heard those heroes speaking
In the soft moaning wind of the summer.

“Act alive while you can, wild youngster.
Let happiness and joy grow within you.
Share in our dream with us
Maybe,
someday it will come true.”

I walked through a city full of statues.
And I saw the expressionless, firm grim lips —
lips that never learned to smile
And I knew then, what the statues meant...
And their dream became mind.

For once these people laughed and lived.
They ran and jumped with joy.
Now, no longer do they run, and they do not weep for joy.

They just watch unhappy statues that
shuffle through the park.

Donna Lapp, 1970

The Vacation

We sat among the flowers
Under the trees
And we were happy
Unmindful of eyes upon us.

We ran our feet through grass
And revelled in its softness;
The wind played with her hair,
Teasing it gently.

We slept as we never had before;
Quietly; deeply.
And we remembered our childhoods:
Happy and peaceful,
Like the lull before the storm.

A harsh voice interrupted our joy.
“Your time is up,” it said.
So we picked up our guns,
And went through the door,
Back to the war outside.

Karen Dunbar, 1970

Happiness

Being happy is,
Getting your work right,
Tying your shoes tight,
Making a wool doll,
Wearing a pink shawl,
Singing a nice song,
Making bells go ding-dong,
Playing a game,
Everything is the same,
Happiness is really anything.

Kathleen Taylor, 1970

Before the White Man Arrived

Who existed before we arrived?
Who roamed the land far and wide?
Who stood with Nature, and used it to live?
The native people the Indians did.

They cried in triumph, when they won a battle,
They used the buffalo, it was their cattle.
They sat around fires when the sun set,
They sang songs which told stories of their ancestors' deaths.

But when the white man came, and ruined their race,
We looked at the fields,
But not one dark face
Was in sight.

Peter Biro, 1972

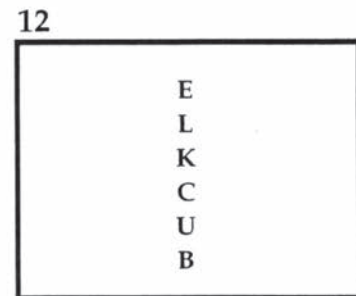
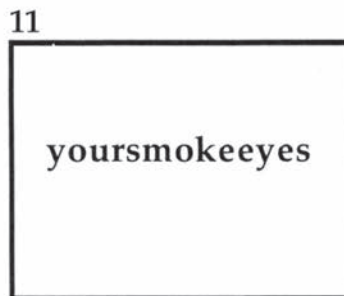
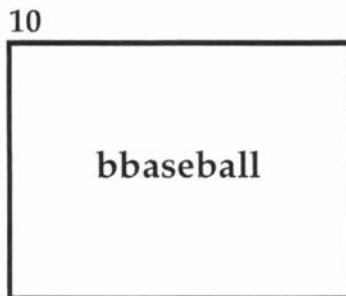
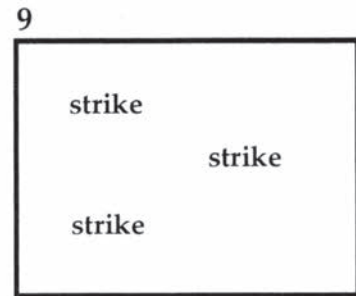
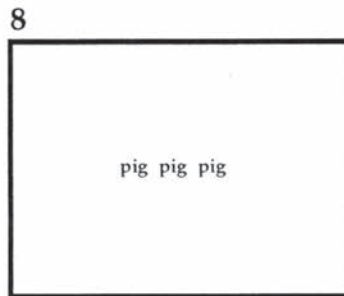
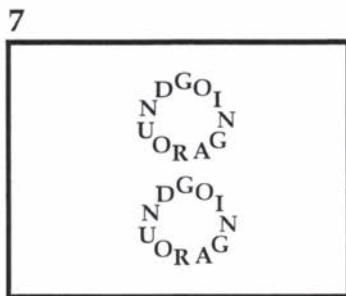
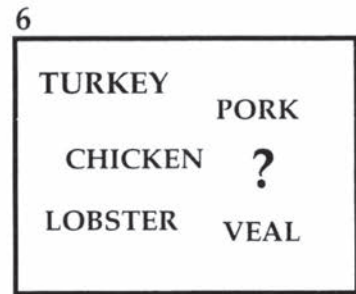
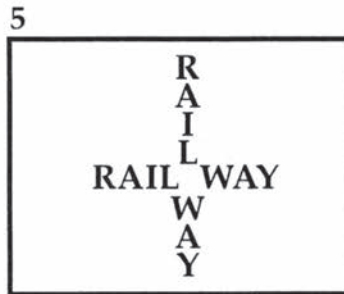
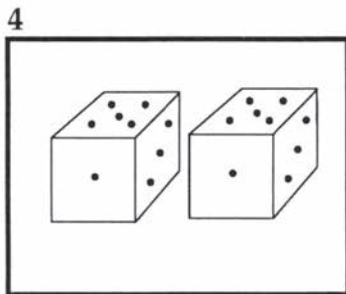
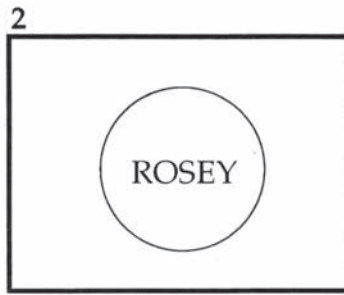
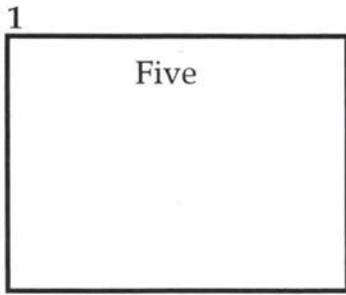
On Leaving School

On leaving school:
I've stayed my time,
I've served by term;
Now it's time to go.

Pauline Sheps, 1971



Wacky Words



Michael Ain, 1993

The Stuff of Life

The last man faced the machine's scanning screen; defiant in his proud and motionless stance. He was not frightened, for fright was a thing of the past. One was frightened by the unknown, and nothing was unknown to him; he was the last man. The machine spoke... as you see man your flight was to no avail the machine is everywhere everytime the machine is ubiquitous the machine is omnipotent just as you man are obsolete please prepare yourself for disposal...

Very softly, very carefully, and very clearly, the last man spoke.

"No."

A sequence of flashing lights shimmered across the machine's dazzling chrome-steel console. Again it spoke.

... please prepare for disposal...

Again, the last man:

"Why?"

The machine:

... you are obsolete the machine is the ultimate the machine is quicker of reflex mightier of strength gentler of sensitiveness and greater of wisdom the machine never sleeps never eats always functions forever learning forever growing everything you were the machine is but better emotion does not cloud the machine's behaviour different conflicting individualities do not disrupt the smooth running of programs there is not a thing you can do that the machine cannot do better therefore prepare yourself for disposal...

A small chuckle echoed in the glaringly lit, shadowless interview chamber.

"But you're wrong machine, you're wrong." The last man spoke as if he were correcting a child.

Two more sequences flashed across the console.

... clarify... it said.

The last man stepped up to the machine's gleaming console and drew his hand across the razor sharp edge. He held his hand, his fingers far spread and tense, in front of the screen; and as his blood slowly oozed out of his gash, and ran down his arm to splash on the spotless silver floor, the last man, in a voice of triumph, said:

"I bleed."

Rick I Green , 1971

UP and DOWN thoughts

IF YOU WILL I DON'T MAYBE QUESTIONS JUST
YOU DOWN SEE THEE KNOW I THE THE
READ AND THAT FOR WHY DO NOT ANSWERS
THIS UP I WORRY YET I KNOW !

Rick I Green , 1971



Walking Home

I had just stepped off the bus. The fumes of its diesel engine were quite overpowering. I stepped to the curb and breathed in the not so fresh air. However, the air was welcome to my lungs after being inside that congested bus for over half an hour.

I looked around. Nighttime was settling in. The street lamps were coming on.

My feet crunched in the snow. I rounded the corner and turned onto the footpath. As it was not completely dark yet, I could see the remains of abandoned snow forts that had survived the earlier snowball fights.

Straight ahead, the apartment building that I knew so well had risen to become an illuminated figure against the blackness of the nighttime sky.

Simone Nicholson, 1977

Love is

Love is something beautiful that grows inside of you. It can be given or taken. It costs nothing to give. But once you have given your love it can make someone very happy. It gives them a warm feeling inside. Love can be found anywhere, in the home, in the office and even in the darkest gloomiest places. So give someone some love as he may be able to give it and eager to receive it.

Cindy Smith, 1975

An Image of Delicacy

Somehow
Our love
Resembles
Blown glass figures
Delicate and beautiful
But not yet
Strong and sturdy.
For we are the young
Our lives have only begun,
Please
Be gentle,
Blown glass figures
As delicate and beautiful
As they may be,
Shatter
All too easily.

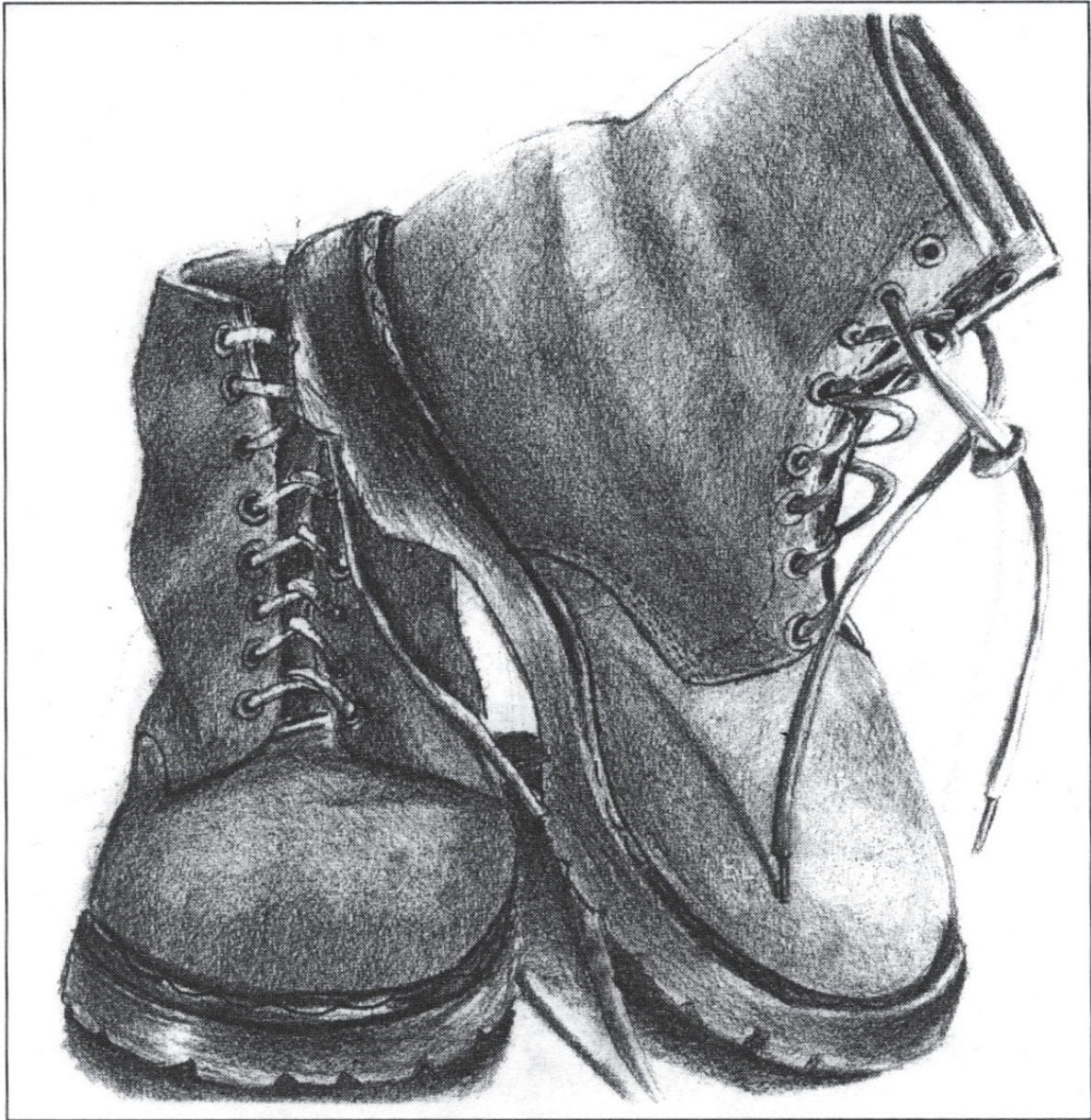
Lynn LeMaire, 1976

Ruth and Johnie

Ruth and Johnie side by side
went out for an auto ride.
They hit a bump,
Ruth hit a tree,
So he went on ruthlessly.

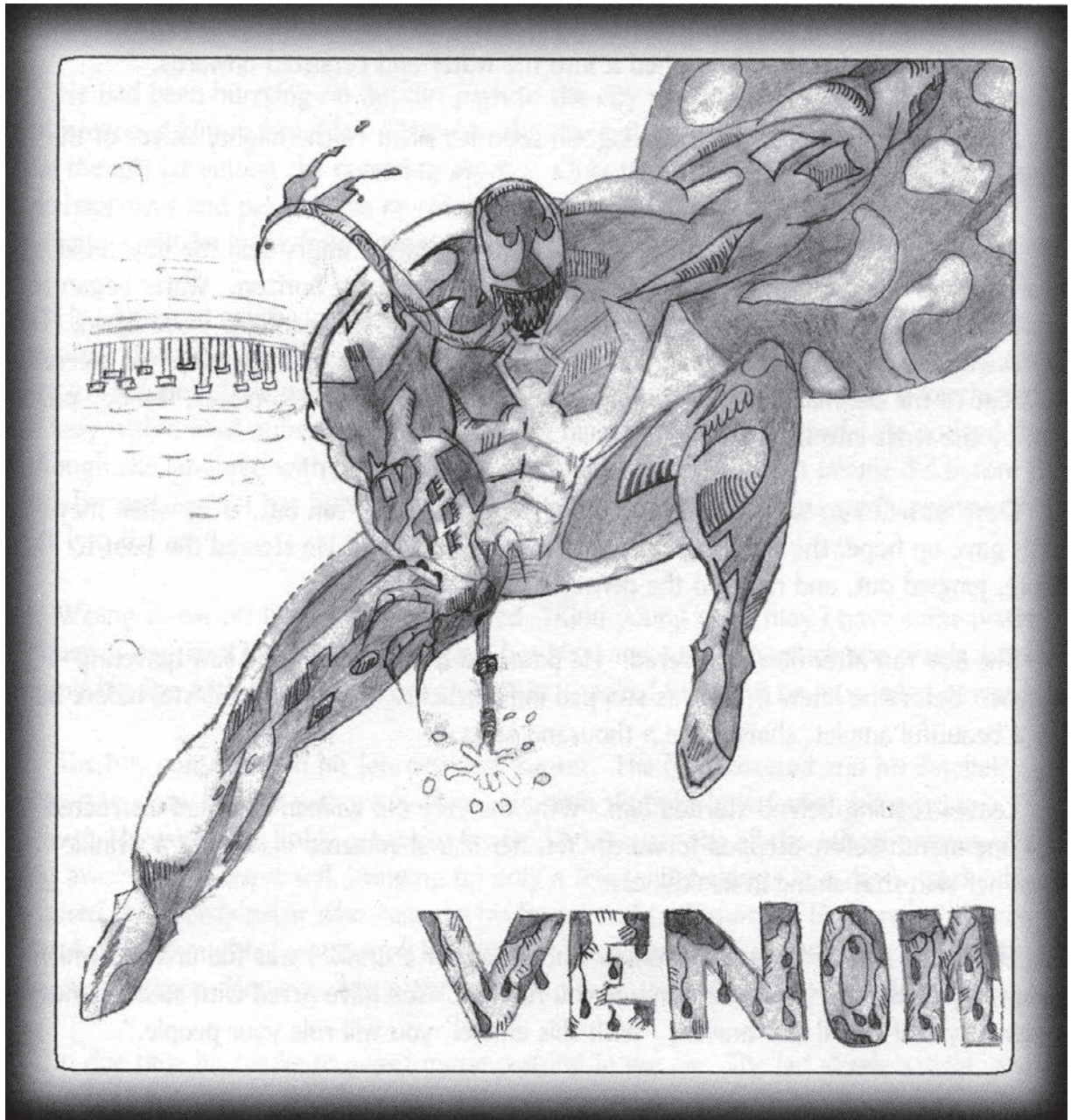
Mark Silverberg, 1977

Pencil drawing of boots



Ed Ho, 1999

Venom



Milos Vukicevic, 1996

Hell's Broken Loose

Something's happened in the Middle East,
don't think it's happy, it is not a feast.

Oil and power is what caused this greed,
peace is our want, that's our need.

Soldiers are shipped to the desert land,
knowing that they might be buried in sand.

Canada, U.S.A., British and more,
are prepared to fight in this crazed war.

Body bags are bought, for all people dread,
the sands in Iraq will be painted blood red.

War has an effect on everyone here,
It makes us depressed and filled up with fear.

Let's hope that someday there will be peace through the nations,
can't you feel people's anticipation?

Domenic Calla and Adrian Benvenuto, 1991

Inequality

TAKEN CONTROL OF
THE HELPLESS ONE
ONE WITHOUT POWER
ONE OF THE WEAKER SEX
ALWAYS BOSSED AROUND
ALWAYS BEEN TOLD I'M ONLY FEMALE
CAN'T DO THIS AND CAN'T DO THAT
I DON'T BELONG HERE
THEN WHERE DO I BELONG
NOT SUPPOSED TO DO THIS NOT SUPPOSED TO DO THAT.
THAT'S A MAN'S JOB
WHAT'S A MAN'S JOB?
SEXIST

Anne Marie Harriot, 1994

Common and Worthless

Common and worthless
I remembered my creed
"a man without land is nobody"
as I tried to succeed
but memories came haunting me
as I gave up all hope
common and worthless
I learned to cope

Common and worthless
I had a true friend
whose riches I robbed
my dreams had to end
as I earnestly sobbed
for my integrity long gone
I felt common and worthless
a helpless young pawn

Shereen Chang, 1995

World View

An old man and a boy were sitting on a bench outside a hut on
the edge of the Mojave desert.

Life, said the old man, is like the desert
Dry and barren.

Life, said the young boy, is like the desert
It's a giant sandbox

Life, said the old man, is fraught with difficulties
It's a harsh existence.

Life, said the young boy, is an adventure
It's fun to live

Life, said the old man, is me against the world
I lose.

Life, said the young boy, is me and the world
We're great friends

Life, said the old man, has taken away what I love
It's not fair.

Life, said the young boy, has given me the world
Isn't it fantastic?

Life, said the old man, bitterly
Life, agreed the young boy, happily.

Margaret Nur, 1996



Day Dream



Gillian Mai, 2010

Little Girl

You deserve better than the
Half-lived life
in your
half-lived world,
little girl.
Don't live up to standard standards
You're more than mere blueprints
Your parents planned.
Get a job, but
Marry a good husband,
Have a family...
Oh, and put on a little lipstick, honey.
To hell with their conventional ways.
Do what pleases you...
Don't hide behind your power-suit Barbie facade
Get a tattoo if you want
(And you know you do)
Study art and philosophy
Whatever tickles your fancy
Try everything at least once, like shark's fin
And make sure it's the whole shark's fin.
Why settle for a peak?
When you can climb the lookout tower
To view the world from above
There is so much you don't know
So much to explore, experience and learn
Break away from the rotting shell
Your parents molded you into
Break away from the half-lived life
in your
Half-lived world,
Little girl.

Andrea Kim, 1997

Decided in the Middle

Decided to change
in the middle of the day,
not in the morning with that new hairstyle.

Decided to change
in the middle of the year,
although resolutions are due in a few months.

Decided to live
in the middle of the night,
so I slept the rest of the night away in peace.

Decided to live
in the middle of the month,
even though it's March and leaves start to turn in October.

Decided to grow
in the middle of the street,
and the traffic lights shone a bright red.

Decided to grow
in the middle of a book,
and still the story was never finished.

Decided to be
in the middle of a minute,
choosing the person who I am and not.

Decided to think
in the middle of my change,
and now I am back at the beginning.

Sabrina Wright, 1999

Mistakes

Dont u hait it
Wen people say u cant spel
Or u cant rite a word rite
And sai u dont no grammar, wel I do
So lai of us kids
Who cant spel or dont no grammar
Or cant rite.

Andre Dos Santos, 2001



Jobless

Not qualified
Not with a high school diploma
Not with three years experience as a cashier
Not with two years experience as a customer service representative
Not qualified to be hired as an employee at the store I've applied
Interview
After
Interview
Yet, no reply
Fake smiles and handshakes every time
But we'll keep in touch
But I know they are wondering why I even tried
I don't get the job
But they still got the hiring sign
I question my appearance
I question my language
I question my personality
I question everything about me
Is my uncertainty of me the reason I am not qualified.

Chanel Fyffe, 2008

Someone Else

I always wish
that I was someone else,
someone who had more.
Someone prettier,
someone more popular,
someone smarter,
someone more extroverted,
someone who many other people would like.
But then I remember
that I have people
who like me as I am,
my family
and my friends
and those people
are all
I'll ever need

Michelle Wong, 2001

My Goals in Life

People have often asked me what my goals in life are. To be honest, I haven't really mapped them out yet. There are so many possibilities in this world; it's hard to choose what I really want to be or what I want to make of my talents. Yet, I am grateful that I can still be surprised, that there are still many things in this world that I haven't heard of or learned about. Imagine if one knew so much that he or she could not be surprised or amused anymore. I wouldn't want to live in a life like that. I want to think that there are still many questions left unanswered and many discoveries left undiscovered.

Which is exactly why I want to explore my options and leave my paths open. There are many careers that I'd like to try out. They say I must settle on only one career path. People may change careers once or twice in their lifetime, but rarely do they change careers more than twice. The entire idea of it may be absurd, but I want to be the first one to accomplish that. Sure, it may seem as if I have a career in science planned ahead, being a prospective science undergraduate at a major university, but I want to be more than what people expect of me. The experiences that one gains throughout a lifetime do not just come from studying and knowledge, but rather, they come from the feelings evoked from doing what they do best.

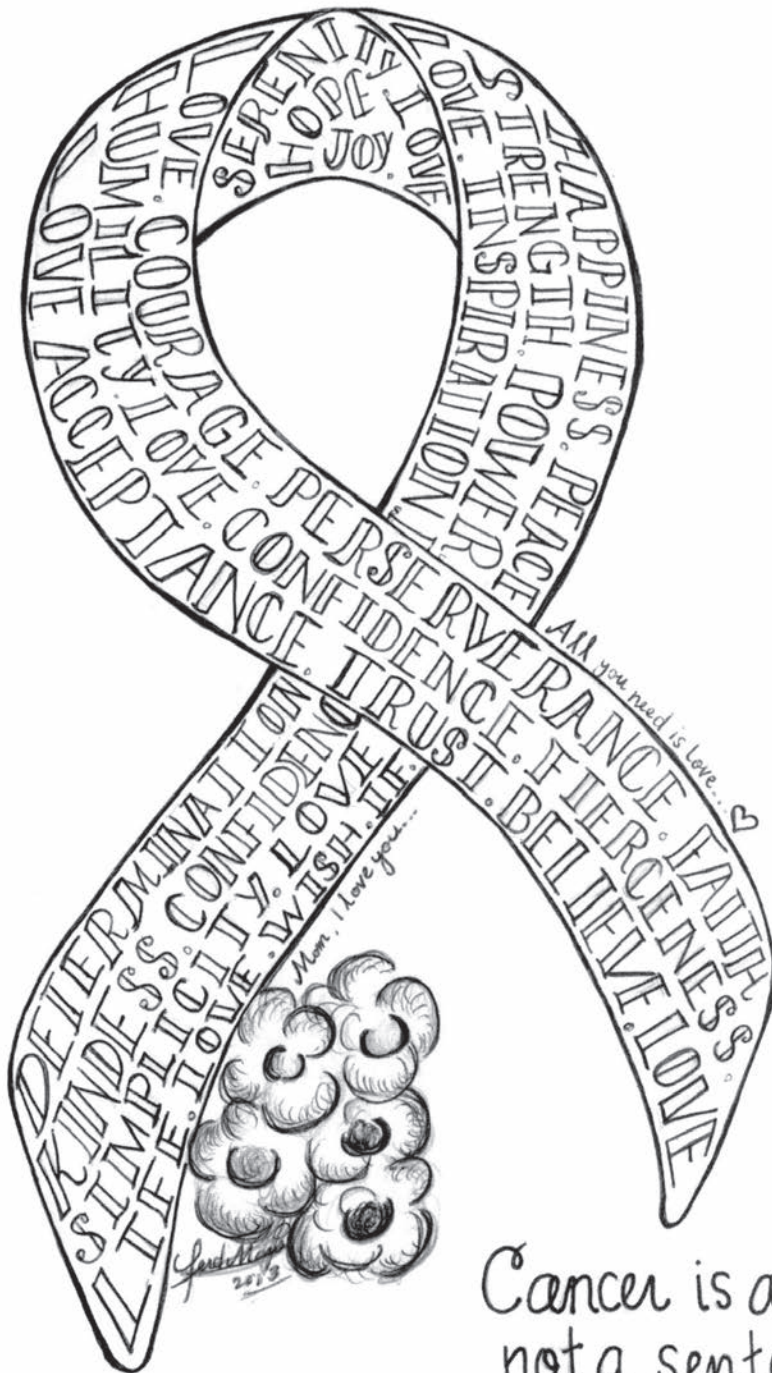
For example, how can one ever share the thrill of winning a gold medal in an Olympic track and field event? It cannot possibly be described in words alone. And how about a politician who had managed to lead a nation of peoples under his or her wing? This takes great leadership skills that can only be attained through experience. Besides that, what beats the lifelong work of a scientist, whose work never ends as there is always something waiting to be discovered? Not much. These are the reasons why I want to be a track athlete, a politician, and a scientist, all at the same time. I'm working on it. Trust me, I really am. I have taken track and public speaking courses. And I currently volunteer at a major research hospital.

And what would life be if I weren't constantly meeting people? I want to work with an international organization, such as the Red Cross. I want to see for myself what the real situation in the world is like. I'd like to help people, quell their fears, and calm their sorrows. The world is a great place to live in when you can put a smile on someone else's face. The world is a better place when one is able to reach out and help others.

So, what are my goals in life? I have many goals in life. The hard thing is not so much accomplishing those goals, but rather, which goal to choose.

Amanda Edward, 2003

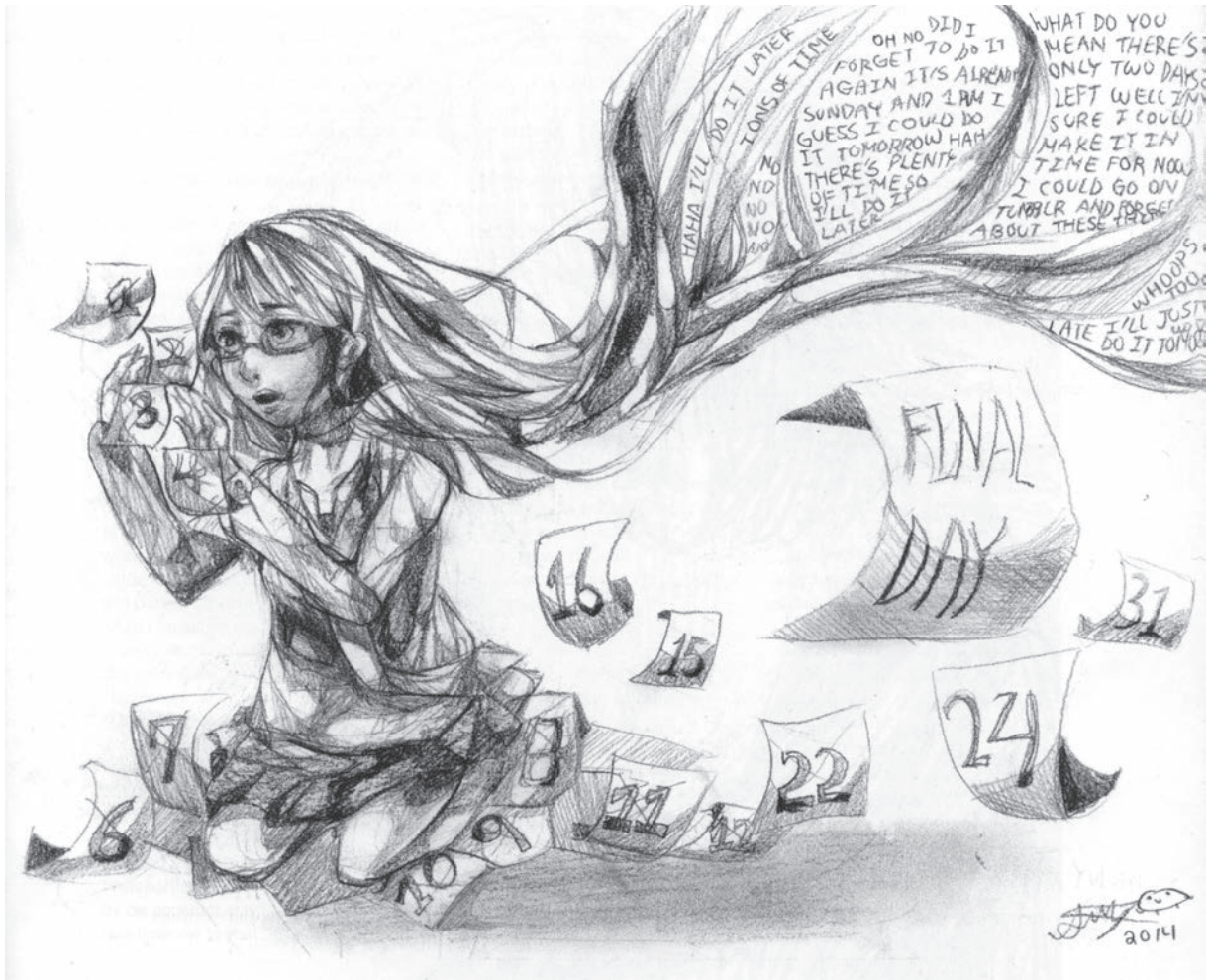
Cancer is a word, not a sentence



Cancer is a word,
not a sentence.

-DR. ROBERT
BUCKMAN

Procrastinator



Sunny Lan, 2014

I am From

I am from the delicious scents from my mother's cooking.
The memories of childhood and lifestyle from my grandma
The exciting aftermath of one's success.

I am from a house where dreams can be reality.
Dreams that have no limits as long as one's determined and motivated.
Family that is overprotective and naïve.

I am from a place that is diverse.
Girls and boys are equal.
Buildings that are forever luminous and never-ending of traffic.

I am from everything that is more than enough.
That will eventually end on its own.
I am from the future of my generation.

Shannon De Sousa, 2010

What am I?

I am not the laugh that escapes my mouth when a hand grazes my back
I am the capture of a false curve upon my lips, coerced by a flash

I am not the stark glow of the moon upon my constantly wandering mind
I am a reflection of the sun and my rare sunrise

I am not the palette of eyebags and blemishes that illustrate my face
I am a masterpiece of makeup, set as a symbol of grace

I am not the contorted figure that convulses during my sleep
I am the slender body draped across horizons and along the sea

I am not the girl whose esteem is so low it can no longer descend
I am a photo of myself with 500 likes and counting (but I can no longer pretend)

Allison Gacad, 2014



young voices 2016

magazine of teen writing and visual art

Call for submissions

Express yourself!

GUIDELINES

1. Submit art, photos, comics, stories, poems and other creative writing.
2. Toronto Public Library has one-time print and electronic rights to all work, as well as the right to excerpt from the work, both online and in print, for purposes of promotion.
3. Written submissions will be selected from each of the following age categories:
12–14; 15–16; 17–19.
4. Related pieces (i.e. artwork submitted in conjunction with writing) may not be considered together.

WHO CAN ENTER

Teens 12–19 years who live, work or go to school in Toronto.

WHAT CAN BE ENTERED

You can enter three pieces each year:

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

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:

- High resolution for electronic submissions, minimum 2400 pixels wide and maximum 3000 pixels high
- Black and white photographs only

Comics:

- 8 ½" x 11", one page maximum

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 and comics 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

- Submit written work online using the submission form at tpl.ca/youngvoices

Artwork & Comics

- **You will be required to submit your original artwork and/or comics should your work be selected for publication**

Photographs

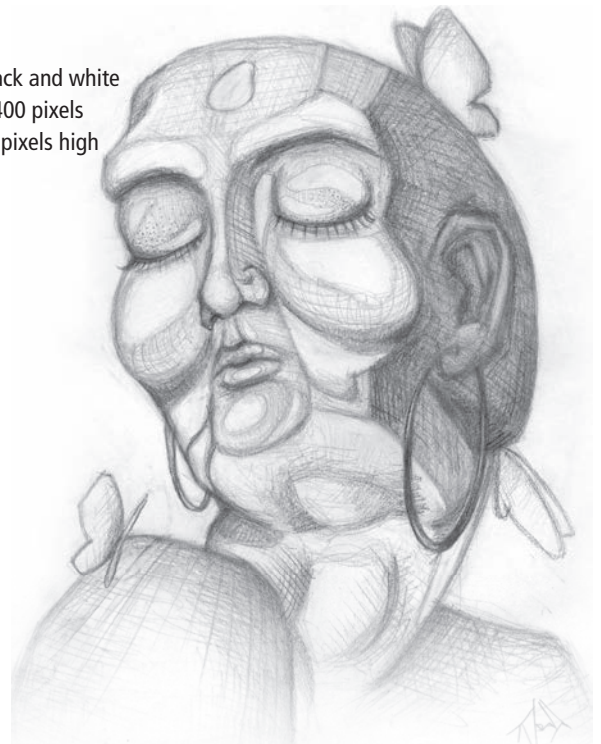
- Submit high resolution black and white photographs, minimum 2400 pixels wide and maximum 3000 pixels high

SELECTION TIMELINES

Submission deadline:

Tuesday, April 5, 2016

- Editorial teams meet to make selections during spring 2016
- Contributors selected to be published will be contacted during June 2016
- Only those with work to be published will be contacted
- *Young Voices* magazine is published once every year in October
- Questions? Contact Ken Sparling ksparling@torontopubliclibrary.ca



YOUNG VOICES 2016 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: Tuesday, April 5, 2016

Last name _____

First name(s) _____

Address _____

Postal code _____

Email _____ Phone number _____

Age _____ Male Female Other

Today's date _____

Title of your submission _____

Genre of submission:

Poem Fiction Rant Review Art Photograph Comics

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

Name of library branch where you submitted _____

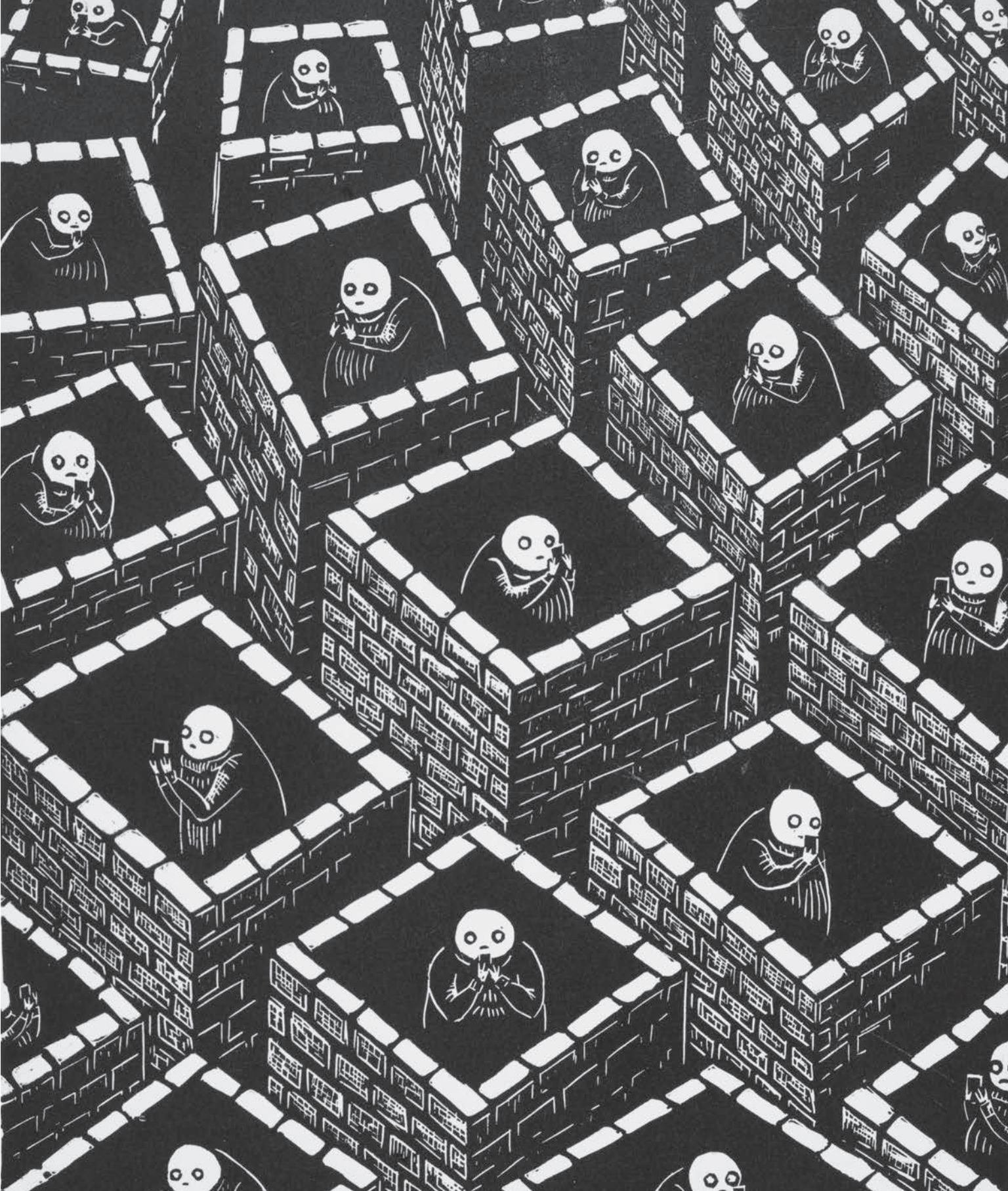
I heard about *Young Voices*:

At the library From friends At school At a shelter Online

Other (please say where) _____

tpl.ca/youngvoices





Cells

Aisha Ali, age 19



Hypnotized

Rabaya Khan, age 15

The Young Voices program, including the publication of *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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