

Teen Ink

Reaching Millions of Teens Nationwide

27 Years
DEC 2015
TeenInk.com

\$8.95

**Raised in a
Syrian Refugee
Camp**

**Plus:
Sibling Revelry**





sobelieve.com

new zero calorie
naturally sweetened.
try our three delicious flavors.



Teen Ink CONTENTS

DECEMBER 2015 | Vol. 27, No. 4

TEENS, GET PUBLISHED!

Submit online at www.TeenInk.com

THE FINE PRINT

▪ **How to submit.** All submissions of writing and artwork through our website, TeenInk.com, are considered for publication in print and online, and are also automatically entered into any relevant contests. We no longer accept submissions by mail or e-mail.

▪ **Plagiarism.** Teen Ink has a no-tolerance policy for plagiarism. We check the originality of all published work through WriteCheck.

▪ **Editing.** For space and other reasons, we reserve the right to publish our edited version of your work without your prior approval.

▪ **Anonymity.** If, due to the personal nature of a piece, you don't want your name published online or in print, we will respect that request, but we must still have accurate name and address information for every submission.

▪ **Complimentary copy.** Teens published in the magazine will receive a free copy of the issue containing their work.

▪ **Submitted work becomes the property of Teen Ink.**

By submitting your work to us, you are giving Teen Ink and its partners, affiliates, and licensees the non-exclusive right to publish your work in any format, including print, electronic, and online media. However, all individual contributors to Teen Ink retain the right to submit their work for non-exclusive publication elsewhere, and you have our permission to do so. Teen Ink may edit or abridge your work at its sole discretion. To prevent others from stealing your work, Teen Ink is copyrighted by The Young Authors Foundation Inc.



SUBSCRIBE & SUPPORT TEEN INK IN OUR 27TH YEAR!

\$45 INDIVIDUAL SUBSCRIPTION

One copy per month for 10 months (we don't publish in July or August). Please enclose a check or credit card information.

\$99 EDUCATOR SPECIAL

One copy per month for 10 months, plus three 30-copy boxes over the course of the school year.

\$175 CLASS BOX SET

30 copies of *Teen Ink* every month from now until June 2016.

Fill out this form and mail it to us, or subscribe quickly and securely at www.teenink.com/subscribe. Prices include shipping and handling.

Purchase order # (if available): _____

MC VISA Card # _____ Exp. _____

Name: _____

School name (for Class Set): _____

Address: School Home _____

City: _____ State: _____ ZIP: _____

E-mail: _____

Phone: _____

MAIL TO: TEEN INK • BOX 30 • NEWTON, MA 02461

WW/PP
12/15

- 4 Feedback
11 Art Gallery
18-19 College Directory
- Nonfiction**
- 6-10 **MEMOIRS** *Invisible man* • *Afraid of the movies* • *My Syrian childhood* • *Stuck in translation* • *Finally Friday* • *Royal purple* • *Sausage wars* • *Completely competitive*
- 12-17 **SIBLINGS FOCUS** *Stories of siblinghood*
- 20-21 **POINTS OF VIEW** *Why I don't celebrate Christmas* • *Where is the wonder?* • *Our generation's revolution*
- 22-23 **TRAVEL & CULTURE** *Amazon Christmas* • *Belize Navidad* • *A taste of Lebanon*
- 24 **PRIDE & PREJUDICE** *Shades of bias* • *Standing up for gay rights*
- 25 **EDUCATOR OF THE YEAR** *Nominations for the 2016 Educator contest*
- 26 **SPORTS** *Golf: game or sport?* • *Figure skating* • *Freedom on skis*
- 27 **COMMUNITY SERVICE** *Honduras mission trip* • *Help for the homeless*
- 28 **HEALTH** *Crohn's disease*
- 29 **ENVIRONMENT** *Animal testing* • *To do: Save the world*
- 30 **INTERVIEW** *Author Todd Strasser*
- Reviews**
- 31 **BOOKS** *Thirteen Reasons Why* • *The Girl on the Train* • *A Child Called "It"* • *The Martian*
- 32 **MUSIC** *Years & Years* • *Tyler Farr* • *Twenty One Pilots*
- 33 **MOVIES & TV** *Attack on Titan* • *Maze Runner: The Scorch Trials* • *Fantastic Four* • *Invisible Sister*
- 34 **VIDEO GAMES** *Pokémon Shuffle* • *Until Dawn* • *Mad Max*
- 35-39 Fiction
40-47 Poetry
- • • • •

ON THE COVER

Raised in a Syrian Refugee Camp

"I was born without wings to fly or keys to extend my thinking above the roof of our tent. My body wasn't born in its own land and didn't know its rights." *Memoirs, page 7*

Stories of Siblings

- 12 *You'll Thank Me Later* • *Your Little Sister*
13 *How to Be the Oldest* • *Monopoly* • *Memories of My Brother*
14 *I Wrote This for Her* • *Diagno*
15 *Where's Austin?* • *What Keeps Him Going*
16 *I Have a Brother?* • *Little Things*
17 *Magnificent Yellow* • *To My Brother*

Cover photo by Quin Tyler, Rochester, NY

What's Behind Police Brutality?

In "What's Behind Police Brutality?" Bhargavi Garimella talks about how racial inequality is a real problem in American society and how this issue is linked to brutality by police. Nowadays, policemen are given a bad rap for abusing minorities, and this has increased racial tension. I agree with Bhargavi that police brutality is the reason people of color are afraid of those who should be protecting them.

A great example Bhargavi included was the killing of 12-year-old Tamir Rice by Officer Timothy Loehmann, who mistook Rice's toy gun for a real one. Loehmann shouldn't even have been on the police force, since a superior at his former job considered him mentally unstable and unfit for duty. I believe we need to address this problem.

Thank you, Bhargavi, for shedding light on these issues that we, the new generation, have to make better for the future.

*Kaithlyn Massiah,
Valley Stream, NY*

Sobering Truths

"Sobering Truths" is a true story of a family tortured by the disease of alcoholism. The writer learned to lie about her mom's alcohol problem and cover up for her. Denying the issue "created a fake reality," consequently leading to the breaking apart of her family. After her mom was arrested a second time for drunk driving, the family agreed to attend Al-Anon and Alateen support groups. These meetings helped her mom realize the severity of her problem and helped the author deal with her fears about alcoholism. Six years later, the family has overcome the disease and is back together, having left the bottles and fights behind.

This article is a warning to readers who might know someone with a similar problem, and is a push to seek help for

that person. It creates a sense of hope as well, showing that these problems can be addressed with the proper help if the desire to change is strong enough.

I could identify effortlessly with what the writer experienced, since I have had to deal with addiction to drugs and alcohol with family, friends, and myself. It is very easy to put the blame on yourself, whether or not you're to blame. It's reassuring to know that with proper support, addiction can be treated.

"Mary," Defiance, OH

Why I Hate College Parties

After reading "Why I Hate College Parties" by Mary Stanton, I feel as though my mindset has changed completely. Let me explain. Mary writes about how some activities are just not for everyone, which is why she dislikes parties. After letting the message sink in, I asked myself: "Do I do the things I do because I want to, or because everyone else does them?" I didn't immediately know the answer. This article really made me think, which is why I like it so much.

I remember many times in my life when I've done something I didn't necessarily want to do just because everyone else was doing it. For example, back in seventh grade, sneaker competition was booming. Everyone wanted to have the coolest, most expensive shoes; obviously, the pressure was high. So I bought some sneakers I didn't really like just because of the brand.

In this article, Mary does the exact opposite. Despite all the pressure, she doesn't go to parties because she knows she doesn't like them. After giving a college party a try, she concedes, "Although I finally opened my mind and learned to respect the party culture, I still don't find any joy in it. It isn't for me, and that's okay." This unique stance on a popular activity really stands out, which is why I think there should be more articles like this.

Bruno Zero, New York, NY

Do Not Homeschool

In "Do Not Homeschool," which was only published on Teen Ink's website, author Alexis contends that "children who are homeschooled lack life experience, independence, and are deprived of normal school activities all because of untrained parents who are selfish." I have experienced the life of both educational worlds, and I disagree. These are offensive stereotypes that do not represent all homeschoolers.

The statement that homeschooled kids do not have the same access to extracurricular activities is not necessarily true. Kids who do not have to be in school for the majority of the day have more time to pursue hobbies. The idea that homeschooled kids will "be in total shock" when they transition to the real world is another ludicrous stereotype. Kids who have more time for out-of-school activities, like sports, are just as socially ready for the real world. Also, parents who teach their kids at home are not selfish or incapable. They know their kids better than any teacher and are able to judge what their children should and should not do.

These judgmental perceptions of homeschooled kids are wrong. Think twice before you judge a person based on majority beliefs, and figure out your own opinion based on experience instead.

"Natalie," Sacramento, CA

"But You Don't Look Sick ..."

Chronic illness is sadly common, and it can cause terrible pain for its victims. This includes Cassidy DeMona, writer of "But You Don't Look Sick ...". She is a 15-year-old with many diagnoses, including postural orthostatic tachycardia syndrome, myalgic encephalomyelitis, and Lyme disease. Cassidy is very brave dealing with others' annoying questions. Even though I don't know her, I admire her and she inspires me. This article is one of the best I've read in *Teen Ink*.

This piece taught me about the hardships some teens go through every day. I'm always complaining about my allergies and asthma. When I read this piece, it was a metaphorical slap across the face. I realized there are young people all over the world who are going through much worse than me. Cassidy writes, "There is a 25 percent chance I will be wheelchair-bound by the age of 21." Even though I have a bad immune system and get sick often, this dire situation will never happen to me. I plan to stop complaining about my minor predicaments. This piece has changed my life for the better.

*Alison Juray,
Brooklyn, NY*

Running Out of Time

A big round of applause for Kyrsten Williams' article "Running Out of Time." I totally agree with her. High school goes by extremely fast, and it will be over before you know it! Kyrsten writes, "We only have one year left to figure out what to do" – and I'm in the exact same position.

Currently, I am a junior. I still remember freshman year when I told my sister I wanted to be a senior already, and time just clicked! At the moment, I am trying to decide what I would like to major in and what university to attend.

Thank you, Kyrsten, for sharing your outstanding article with us. You have a bright career ahead of you!

*Samantha Machado,
Phoenix, AZ*

Hyphen

"Hyphen" is a beautifully written memoir by Matthew Sun about being a Chinese-American. Matthew is stuck at an awkward halfway point between two cultures. He is exposed to the "typical Chinese" stereotype, as many are, but is also belittled by his family in China because he cannot speak fluent Chinese. As a Chinese-American, I can relate to the assumptions and labels that Matthew is subjected to.

When I first read "Hyphen," I was surprised and ecstatic that someone had the courage to write about this topic. Since the stereotype that all Chinese people are smart, quiet, and introverted is so widespread and accepted, I was shocked when I saw this article in *Teen Ink*.

From people basing my intelligence on the fact that I am Chinese to family members mocking my flawed Mandarin, I can totally sympathize with Matthew's experiences. One line in particular really struck me. Matthew writes, "My parents have shown me that surrendering to anger accomplishes nothing, opening my eyes to the reality that one ordinary boy cannot stop widespread ignorance." I feel like this is the mindset many have when dealing with ignorant people who don't understand how offensive it is to assume things. Matthew's story really resonated with me, as I am sure it did with many others.

Janice Lin, Brooklyn, NY

The Bumblebee Necklace

"The Bumblebee Necklace" by Honor Ford hit me hard in my heart. This heart-warming essay by a teenage girl with cerebral palsy is touching and tells readers to never let a handicap or a "bump in the road" get in the way of your goals.

Honor explains that her perspective was changed when her parents gave her a little bumblebee necklace, because "according to science, bees shouldn't have the ability to fly. Their bodies are too big for the size of their wings." This knowledge got her through the challenges of her physical limitations. She struggled with insecurity about being different because of her cerebral palsy, but she never let it stop her.

I can relate to Honor's experience because I have definitely had my share of bumps in the road, and the Bible verse Philippians 4:13 helped me through them, just as the little bumblebee necklace helped Honor.

*Lexi Alvarado,
Defiance, OH*

Teen Ink

Box 30 • Newton, MA 02461
(617) 964-6800
Editor@TeenInk.com
www.TeenInk.com

Publishers	Stephanie Meyer John Meyer
Senior Editor	Stephanie Meyer
Managing Editor	Emily Sperber
Production	Katie Olsen
Editor	Cindy Spertner
Advertising	John Meyer
Intern	Natasza Gawlick
Volunteer	Barbara Field

CIRCULATION

Reaching millions of teens in junior and senior high schools nationwide.

THE YOUNG AUTHORS FOUNDATION

The Young Authors Foundation, publisher of *Teen Ink*, is a nonprofit corporation qualified as a 501(c)3 exempt organization by the IRS. The Foundation, which is organized and operated exclusively for charitable and educational purposes, provides opportunities for the education and enrichment of young people.

FREQUENCY

Ten monthly issues, from September to June.

ADDITIONAL COPIES

Send \$6.95 per copy for mailing and handling.

NOTICE TO READERS

Teen Ink is not responsible for the content of any advertisement. We have not investigated advertisers and do not necessarily endorse their products or services.

EDITORIAL CONTENT

Teen Ink is a monthly journal dedicated to publishing a variety of works written by teenagers. Copyright © 2015 by The Young Authors Foundation, Inc. All rights reserved. Publication of material appearing in *Teen Ink* is prohibited unless written permission is obtained.

PRODUCTION

Teen Ink uses Adobe InDesign to design the magazine.

BARD COLLEGE
at SIMON'S ROCK

**YOUNG WRITERS
WORKSHOP**
July 10 – July 30, 2016

Three Weeks of Writing, Thinking,
Imagining

"How can I know what I think till I see what I say?"
-- E.M. Forster

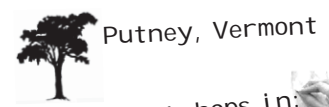
www.simons-rock.edu/young-writers

Earn College Credit
Summer Courses at
UC Berkeley



www.educationunlimited.com
(510)548-6612
campinfo@educationunlimited.com

The Putney School
Summer Programs



Putney, Vermont

offering workshops in:
Visual Arts
Performing Arts
Creative Writing
Culinary Arts
Farm
ESOL

summer.putneyschool.org
802-387-6297



Actors Workshop

Summer Programs at
Brown University & Stanford



www.educationunlimited.com
(510)548-6612
campinfo@educationunlimited.com

Duke | Duke Youth Programs
UNIVERSITY

A Summer With Benefits!

Providing summer academic enrichment camps for
academically motivated youth for over 30 years!

- Low teacher-student ratio
- Professional, qualified staff
- Challenging, creative and fun learning opportunities
- Experience campus life

Variety of camp options offered from
June 19 - August 5, 2016

youth@duke.edu

**Enroll
Today!**

Public Speaking Institute

Summer Programs at
Georgetown, Brown, Tufts, Stanford,
UC Berkeley, UCLA, UC San Diego



www.educationunlimited.com
(510)548-6612
campinfo@educationunlimited.com



**SUMMER AT SMITH
PRECOLLEGE PROGRAMS
FOR HIGH SCHOOL GIRLS**

Open to girls entering
grades 9 through 12 in fall 2016

Hidden Lives: Discovering
Women's History July 10-23

Young Women's Writing
Workshop July 10-23

Check out our other programs
in science and sustainability.



NORTHAMPTON, MASSACHUSETTS

413-585-2165 or 413-585-4455
summerprecollege@smith.edu

www.smith.edu/summer

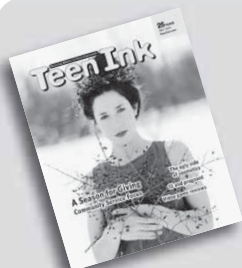
**Cornell University
Summer College**

Programs for High School Students



Earn college credits and experience the excitement of college life

summercollege.cornell.edu



**Teen
Ink**

is the perfect
holiday gift!



See the coupon on
page 3 or visit
TeenInk.com/subscribe

Questions?
Call 1-800-363-1986

The Invisible Man

by Kinza Riaz, Stouffville, ON, Canada

It was a blistering cold day in downtown Toronto, and with every breath I took I could feel my insides turning to ice. The streets were cluttered with people who I thought I could avoid once inside Union Station, but I couldn't have been more wrong. It looked as if the entire population of Canada had decided to use the subway today.

My feet were begging me to find somewhere to rest, so I fought my way through the station, looking for an empty seat. Eventually, I found one behind a mob of mothers screaming at their children to stay close, and my feet started to sing with the anticipation of sitting down. I hadn't been this excited since my first day of kindergarten. Much to my dismay, and, just like my first day of kindergarten, my excitement was shattered immediately. Huddling against the wall beside the bench was a man wearing a black hoodie and a scar that cut across his face, from the corner of his left eye to his mouth. I had watched enough "Forensic Files" episodes to feel that this man wasn't good news, but my feet were killing me, so, convincing myself that I was safe enough in the middle of the day with hundreds of witnesses around, I sat down and studied the man from the corner of my eye.

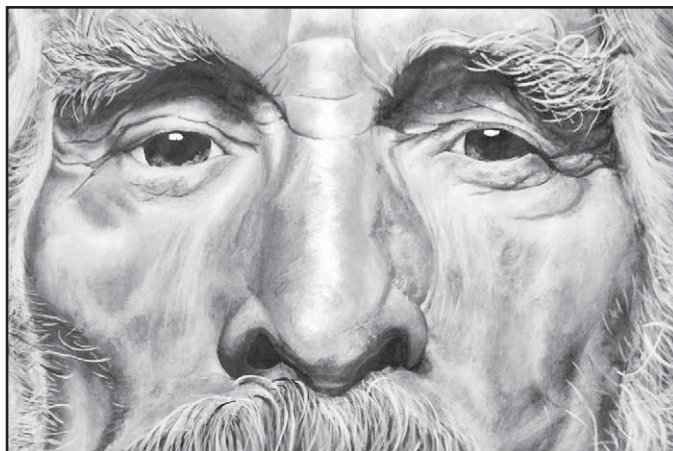
His dark, bleary eyes were lost in thought, staring at empty space in front of him. He was humming something that sounded like a cross between "Itsy Bitsy Spider" and "Twinkle Twinkle Little Star," and was thoughtlessly stroking a black dog with matted fur with one hand and holding a Christmas-themed Tim Horton's cup in the other. It was February. I wondered how long it had been since the man had had something warm to drink.

My analysis was interrupted when a young woman screaming on her phone stopped right in front of the man, with her back to him. If I couldn't hear her colorful language, I would have thought that she was trying, and failing, to conduct an orchestra because she was furiously waving her free hand. It wasn't her theatrical gestures that held my gaze – although,

she was amusing to watch – but her clothes, or lack thereof. She had her blonde hair in a topknot and was wearing a knee-length, skin-tight fuchsia dress with glossy six-inch heels in the same color. She looked like an outraged, underdressed Barbie. Apparently, hypothermia was the new black.

After she stomped off, I realized that she hadn't paid any attention to the man, like he was invisible. As more people passed, I realized that no one saw him.

*To the few who saw him,
he was a monster*



Art by Jessica Han, Thousand Oaks, CA

Eventually, a boy with a mop of fiery red hair stopped and smiled at the dog, which wagged its tail frantically. As the boy leaned in to pet the dog, his eyes fell on the dog's owner, and his smile vanished. Seconds later, so did he.

A hundred more people passed the man, not noticing him, and then I saw a frail older man running to the not-so-invisible man, waving a brown paper bag. As he ran, I noticed that no one was paying any attention to him either. The running man reminded me of Old Man Winter from stories I read as a child; he had a white beard that matched his papery skin,

wrinkled like the bark of pine trees. He looked like he might be 80 years old, and I wondered if it was because he had lived on the streets long enough to lose his youth faster than usual, if he, instead, was supposed to look like jolly old Santa Claus with rosy cheeks instead of the thin, pale man, panting for breath in front of me.

The old man looked at his friend with kind eyes and gave him a toothless smile as he handed him the brown bag. The invisible man returned the smile and poured the only Loonie he had in his cup into his hand. Old Man Winter's eyes shone with gratitude as he put the Loonie into the pocket of his worn sweater before running over to a woman sitting on a bench. There were so many invisible people here.

My cheeks were hot from shame, and I could feel the weight of the wallet in my bag tugging my shoulder, begging me to help the man who was freezing beside me, suddenly looking more vulnerable than he had 20 minutes ago.

I realized, then, that to most, this man was invisible, like Old Man Winter and the lady with the hollow face sitting on the bench across the station from me, and to the few who saw him, he was a monster, waiting to hurt them and take their money. This was what the boy had thought. It was what I had thought.

I jumped off the bench, my feet feeling nothing, and put a few bills into the Tim Horton's cup. As I leaned in to pet his dog, the smell of tobacco hit me and I tasted dry cigarette smoke. The man watched me pet his dog and then met my gaze.

"Thank you," he said in a voice shaking from the cold. He smiled at me, and his cracked lips start to bleed. I returned the smile and headed toward the trains, hoping that he would treat himself and his dog tonight, hoping that he would no longer be invisible and that people would help him without judging him, like I had, and hoping that I wouldn't fall on the ice that had formed on the ground he called his bed. ♦

I'm Afraid of the Movies

by Emily Thomas, Brooklyn, NY

I was four when I set foot in a movie theater for the first time.

It was November 2001, and a chill was in the air. My tiny hand clutched my dad's huge one as he led me to the concession counter. I was hardly paying attention to where I was walking. The room was full of color, movie trailers were dancing on TV screens, popcorn was popping, people were laughing. I had found my favorite place.

I was so excited. It had been several weeks since the 9/11 attacks, and my dad had been working at Ground Zero nonstop, for days on end. This was the first day I'd spent with him in a long time, and I was so happy.

He took me to see "Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone," which is why my mom partially blames him for my obsessive love for J.K. Rowling's series 14 years later.

I'm pretty sure I closed my eyes during most of it – definitely when He Who Must Not Be Named unleashed his dark powers on little Harry's parents. But I was captivated by the whimsical, magical world of Hogwarts. To this day, I'm still a hardcore Potterhead.

But this isn't about Harry Potter, even though I'd really like it to be.

My dad and I still go to the movies together on occasion, but not as often as we did when I was little. Now, I've sort of stepped into his shoes. I've taken my younger brother and cousins to see countless animated films and PG comedies, from "Madagascar" to "Elf." I really enjoy the looks on their faces when they walk in, the same happiness and excitement

I had when I was little. Something so simple can make people so happy, and it's remarkable.

Lately, though, I haven't been paying much attention to my little movie-goers-in-tow. Sure, we still go to the movies, but I hardly look at them until we're seated in the theater, waiting for the film to start. Why?

I'm too busy. Too busy scanning each room for the perfect place to hide if a gunman enters the building. Too busy figuring out who I'm going to throw myself over first. Who I'm going to shove into the nearest supply closet. Who I will hide behind the ticket counter.

Who has the best chance of surviving. You probably think I'm paranoid. I can understand that. I'm the oldest

cousin in my family, a strong, loud, rock-hard Irish-American family. I'm incredibly protective of everyone. But, I also want you to really take this in:

December 1990. July 1991. January 1992. January 1994. November 2005. June 2006. December 2008. April 2009. July 2012. July 2015.

These are all dates of movie theater shootings in the United States.

To me, movie theaters aren't what they used to be. No longer are they noisy, colorful places full of excitement and wonder. I don't know if I'll ever feel that way about them again. Now, they're dangerous, scary places full of enclosed rooms that suffocate me with fear. As long as it's so easy for someone to obtain a gun in this nation, I will never truly feel safe going to the movies. A trip there now only yields one objective. See the movie and get out alive. ♦

*To me, movie
theaters aren't
what they
used to be*

A Tree of Rights: My Childhood in Syria

by M. Darraj, Damascus, Syria

My body was created in a special way. It was fed from threads of tents, drank from scythes of the poor, grew up from white wings, breathed the air of injustice, studied at schools of peace, and lived poorly between spikes and seeds. I have fed my poems, articles, and writings from the pain of my life, the pain of my suffering, and the pain of my memories.

I was born in a camp for refugees, founded in 1948 in Damascus, Syria, after the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. I was born without my Palestinian nationality and without roots, without anything belonging to me. My parents were born as refugees too.

In the refugee camp, I was born alone in autumn, between yellow dry leaves and empty branches. I always tried to collect these leaves, to put them together in order to create a big green tree, to bear my rights on its leaves. I was born like this tree, with no cover to protect me, no wings to fly or keys to extend my thinking above the roof of our tent. My body wasn't born in its own land and didn't know its rights.

I was always wondering, *Why are my rights stuck in the autumn season and everyone else's are quite green? How can I grow this tree, to live?*

I grew up stealing. Stealing my share from the air, to breathe. Stealing safety from fiction. Stealing nationality from hope. Stealing a dream from cages. My only ambition in life was to get my rights.

I remained under the tree, tried to collect the leaves, to grow up. I tried to draw a future for myself on its leaves, a map for my life.

My life started in the blue schools that were helping the Palestinian refugees in Syria. I learned the alphabet and used it to clothe me. The words were a shield to protect me. I went to school every day in the face of life's difficulties (poverty, hunger, and cold). I clung to the school.

I was used to a simple life, I left home with my mother every morning and walked through narrow alleys, greeting neighbors. On the way, I bought from a small bakery a *cato taza* – a small cake made with starch powder. It was very common and cheap in the refugee camp, so I used to warm myself with its heat in winter.

At school, I had a friend named Mustafa whose father had died when he was in his mother's womb. His father was very happy when he heard that his wife was pregnant. He tried to provide everything that his wife needed. One day, he and his daughter were preparing firewood and a gas cylinder to warm them. Suddenly, the gas cylinder exploded, killing Mustafa's father and leaving his sister deaf.

A month later, Mustafa was born. This fatherless child entered life through a door filled with spider webs. He became child, brother, father, and man of his family. He is the first child-man.

Mustafa and I were in the same class at school. We used to walk together, and he always told me, "I was born with so much missing. I miss family, land, a home, tenderness, and nationality."

I replied, "Everything."

"No, not everything. There is something to live for," he replied. "There will be a day when we get all our rights. We will grow up, we will work and make a family. There is a child calling us to life. I

love life!"

Many times, we asked our teachers questions that they hated, maybe because of the missing answers. We were asking about our rights, but the only answer the teachers gave was, "That is not our lesson today."

One day we told our music teacher, "Our rights are feelings located between violin strings, and often they get lost while an innocent tear comes out."

He suggested we make a tree with leaves and hang it in the school courtyard, and write every day on the leaves of the tree a right that we don't have. He said we must grow up and transform these leaves into real rights that we can pluck when we finish our education.

The tree was moving from the autumn season to spring, and it decorated all the oppressed people with its leaves. When I went to sleep, I would think of a right that I didn't have and add it to the tree the next day.

Citizenship
Safety

Living in my own homeland
This tree made me strong and taught me what rights were, what I didn't have, and what I must fight for. It became a compass for my uncertain future.

One day, I woke up to the sound of an explosion nearby. I saw fire and smoke, and my neighbors and I ran toward it. What I saw when I reached the place has created a picture in my memory. It burns me always when I remember. Memories ignite insufferable pain.

My school was destroyed, exam papers and desks were burned to ashes. I couldn't believe it, even though I was seeing it with my own eyes!

All my memories became a dream of a land. My friends and I! Where were the days that we played in class, that we talked nonstop, studying together and singing songs of love and peace? That's my school! Leave the schools out of this war! School is where I learned the meaning of peace. Why always in war are the innocent killed? Where is the laughter that filled the courtyard? Everything is dead, gone, an echo.

Everything had changed to fire trucks, ambulance sirens, and screaming voices. The walls of my school had been destroyed, the space filled with dust.

I saw a woman coming toward me, running unshod through the crowd. She was hitting her head, shouting in a hoarse voice, "MUSTAFA! MUSTAFA!"

She was his mother.

I told her not to worry; the explosion happened in the morning, and the school wasn't open yet.

She said, "He went to buy bread in the early morning and didn't come back!"

I told her, "He will come."

Bulldozers clearing the rubble turned out some

blood. The rubble was moved, and I saw the school guard who used to play football with us, and I saw a man who worked in the cafeteria who we played cards with after school. His wife was pregnant, and he had wanted to register his child in our school when he was old enough.

Both men had become carnage of meat.

Suddenly, I saw Mustafa's mother run toward the rubble and throw herself on it. I knew she had found her son.

I looked for the tree of rights that we had hung in the courtyard together. It was burned, and it slept with Mustafa.

Nothing remained of the tree. Nothing remained of hope!

The tree had fallen down and my dreams had fallen with it. My life became like it was in the beginning – a life without rights, without school,



Photo by Toren Fronsdal, Redwood City, CA

without a home, and without friends. I got lost.

My tears mixed with the soil and blood of my school. I knew that the complex drawing of my future had increased in complexity. It was the last meeting between my school and me, and between my first life and the last photo that I saved.

It became a wound that will never be forgotten.

While I was remembering all the days and memories and the reality clung to me, I called out to my friend Mustafa.

I told him, "Get up! You love life! There is a child calling you. Do you remember?"

No one answered me but fire trucks and ambulance sirens.

I told him, "You are free, my friend.

All the leaves of our rights tree sleep with you in your grave forever. Maybe you can pluck them in the grave?"

Mustafa will not die; he will live in every humanitarian heart.

As for me, will I plant a new tree? ♦

Editor's note: The author is now safe and is continuing his education.

I woke up to the sound of an explosion nearby

Life Lessons from an Assimilated Youth

by Joyce Lee, Basking Ridge, NJ

“Can I help you with anything?”

The most fundamental line in the service industry – yet, somehow when I hear these six humble words, I feel anything but served. Instead, I feel a prickling heat in my cheeks and an instinctive tapping of my toes, as if time will match the tempo of my feet and end this mortifying experience as quickly as possible. I feel anger. Bitter, bratty, red-hot anger.

“Can I help you with anything?”

My irrational irritation flares at those hideous words, but the words are only ugly for one specific reason: they are directed at me. The woman asking has a vacant smile on her face that’s as unnaturally stiff and uncomfortable as her red uniform shirt looks. She is clearly addressing me, but my mother, to my right, responds.

“Can you help me to find this one?”

Impatiently I blurt out, “Ugh-no, um, she means, can you help us find the section with the Lennox plates please?”

I hate everything about this scenario. I hate this woman’s patronizing gaze, as if she empathizes with having to chaperone my parent in public. I hate that she has classified my mother, an Ewha University graduate – known as “the Korean Barnard” – as someone who needs to be chaperoned. I hate that this woman automatically assumes I will play the role of translator, and I hate that I am always hasty to invalidate my mother by filling that role. I hate my mother’s subtly woven, beautiful Korean accent, the one that emphasizes all the hidden syllables oft forgotten by native English speakers. And most bitterly, I hate myself for feeling this way.

In this memory, I am 14. In this memory, the location is vivid, my mother’s words and my white-hot shame painfully clear. But there are hundreds more memories where the sentences have gone hazy and the

details of condescension have blurred. There are thousands more where I am 15, 12, 8. A child.

In fact, there are hundreds of thousands of stories like this, not all belonging to me. Consider it part of the classic Asian-American Kid Starter Pack, along with: (a) the trauma of bringing lunch to second grade,

only to have all the kids scream “Chang eats dogs for lunch!” (b) constant name-butchered respect, given only at the expense of watching

my parents be disrespected.

That summer, my mom and I went to Korea. She took me to her alma mater before we went to dinner with her college friends at their favorite restaurant. My mom remarked with nostalgia how the food tasted exactly the same as it had when she was a student, and she filled her stomach to her heart’s content. My appetite,

on the other hand, grew increasingly voracious as the meal went on, but not for soup or rice. As the bottles of *makeoll* slowly emptied and my mother’s old friends wandered deeper and deeper into their memories, I grew hungrier for their stories and information about what my mother had been like.

They recounted how Ewha’s professors had all coveted credit for my mother, one of the French department’s best and brightest. “Funny how she’s Joanne Lee now,” they laughed, “since she’s still the same whip-sharp Yeonshin Park we’ve always known!” As the old friends’ laughter grew louder, I became much, much quieter.

Culture and heritage have both evidently played a role in my life. Somehow they claim responsibility for both my proudest memories and the deeply rooted self-esteem issues I carried for years. And while I cannot deny that experiencing racism at such a young age was painful, I realized after my trip to Korea that I could either continue to feel ashamed and sorry for myself, or I could start seeing people’s merits above the context of culture. My mom’s improper usage of English articles had no correlation with her intelligence. I chose to stop defining myself as a victim. I think of all the other pitiful kids who have been dealt their own Starter Packs, and it makes me think of all the films I’ll make telling those kids that they don’t need to be called “pitiful.” Although their own stories of racism may have twisted them in one way or another, I hope that they can learn, as I did, that difference does not mean disease.

I walk through the glass doors of the DMV alongside my mom. This time, I am 17. The woman at window number six has bags under her eyes that droop alarmingly low, and she does not seem particularly rejuvenated in seeing our little Korean duo. As my mom shuffles through her purse to find the necessary documents, she distractedly says, “We’re here to renew the car registration.”

Ms. Eyebags and I match gazes, and I see the familiar spark of relief and gratitude. *Thank goodness you are here, O Young Assimilated One*, her eyes say. *Thank goodness I don’t have to deal with Mrs. Lee*, she implicitly sighs. My mom has finally located her wallet and her license, and is about to begin a sentence when the Motor Vehicle employee blurts, “What’s the license plate number?”

She stares at me expectantly.

I stare right back.

“Mom?” ♦

This woman assumes I will play the role of translator

Yes, This Is Friday

by Mary Jane Smith, Columbus, OH

It’s that time again. Friday. Even in the summer it’s the best day of the week. When you wake up, something is different about Fridays. The air smells different, breakfast tastes better. Even the monster pile of dirty laundry in the corner looks a tad bit smaller. Yes, this is Friday.

Welcome to the end of the week, where excitement can be felt in the air and troubles are far far away. School is almost over for the week, and Dad is almost finished with work. You’re one week closer to being free. The people who usually annoy you to kingdom come don’t seem so bad today. You grin and wave to everyone. The teachers are nicer, the cafeteria food is edible, and math class seems to take half the time it usually does.

You daydream about all the things you want to do: Take a looong shower, stay up late, write a book. Fly. You promise yourself that you will accomplish so much this weekend. You’ll do all your homework as soon as you get home. You’ll finally write that paper for civics class. You will be amazing. You will redecorate your room, hang out with friends, maybe even go to the beach! You can’t wait for the clock to tick out the last seconds of the day, for the bell to ring-a-ding, the sound of freedom.

You stare at the clock, thinking that if you look at it hard enough, time will speed up. Everyone else in the room is doing the same, and you feel the tension, the just-one-more-minute feeling that knots your stomach up and makes you squirm in your seat. Everyone is holding their breath. You count down the

seconds; ten ... nine ... so excited! ... seven ... six ... almost there ... four ... three ... almost ... one ... FREEDOM!

You and 25 others scramble out of the classroom, joining the crowd of students in the hall. You wade through a pool of kids buzzing with the joy that only comes on Friday afternoons.

As you walk home or ride the bus or get picked up by your parents, you can’t wait to do all the things you promised yourself you would do. And as you walk up the driveway, into the house, and up to your room, you know it will be the Best. Weekend. Ever.

Until you realize suddenly it’s Sunday night, and Monday is just around the corner.

But don’t worry. There are plenty more Fridays to come. ♦

It will be the Best. Weekend. Ever.



Photo by Eileen Deng, Livingston, NJ

Royal Purple

by "Alexia," Ester, AK

The queen was my job. I had to keep her warm to keep her alive. I hoped my purple fingers could circulate enough heat to supply her sufficiently before she was reunited with her family; their tiny honey-making bodies were full of burning energy designed to keep her warm, unlike my body that was struggling to do its job of keeping me warm, since I denied what it needed day after day.

"You could die. People die from this." Not until I was eating again and my skin had lost its purple sheen did I feel the shivers of fear, the tip of a cold sewing needle catching across taut skin that came with closeness to death. Actual death. Real-life death. I was too lost in jealousy of those who could be thin without their stomachs being stabbed with hunger, and a wicked satisfaction as my clothes seemed to grow around me. Shirts sagged, I tied my pants up on both sides; they still fell down.

My body buzzed. It was so tired. I imagined this must be how the worker bees felt after spending their lives in service. I read about how they died. If they made it to a ripe old age, their wings simply fell off, worked from their bodies like rubber worn from a tire.

Papa shook fourteen thousand bees from their travel box into an empty hive. They fell in clumps. The buzzing swelled. Legs clung to legs, tiny bodies buzzed against other tiny bodies, antennae wheeled around and around. Pheromones filled the air, smelling of honey and the Main Street antique shops that my grandmother loved. Bees swarmed in clumps over the frames, filling the hive. Their dusty bodies were the color of sunshine, programmed not just to survive but to thrive. I felt them land on me. With velcro legs they stuck to my clothing, ripping themselves away with flight that they had been denied for weeks, locked up in their travel box.

I was the only one binding my wings. I was hoping that the box I had built around myself would take me somewhere. Somewhere that I could be just right. Where I could love my body because it was exactly how I wanted it. I had been effectively starving myself for six months. I was cold and had been for long enough that I couldn't count on my fingers how many times I had stood so close to the fire that my legs turned red. I was also proud. Every calorie I turned away heightened my rank. My skin was tinted lavender. It peeled like old paint, cold and powdery. I was succeeding. The satisfaction that came when my pen scratched *I haven't eaten in three days* into

my journal felt worth every second of agony my body put me through as it screamed at me to stop killing myself. I don't think I knew I was killing myself. Neither do I think that embracing that knowledge would have made me stop.

The queen's wings were paper thin. They sent tiny currents of air into my cupped hands. Inside her plastic cage, her long, soft body heaved. I felt the tickle of her legs against my palm as her feet slipped on the plastic walls. I felt my own feet slip when I walked, as if maybe I would fall.

The world would shift like a pixilated puzzle, sliding, then rearranging itself. All of my strength was locked inside my skull, and it pounded the walls, shouting to be let out. The queen crawled back and forth, searching for an exit.

Labeling her royalty, a purple dot was dabbed onto her shiny thorax. With a single finger of each hand, the beekeeper could lift a frame, and when his eyes swept over a thousand bees and stopped on the purple dot, he would know his queen was well.

I wore the same shade of purple dusted across my skin, showing my ultimate power. Less dignified than the queen's, perhaps, but just as noticeable. I wrapped it around myself in layers, one cold week after the next, with sick pride. Every night I gave my mother a hug. Every night I felt her fingers focus on my frail body. They ran up and down my spine, a mountain range rising from the sea of my back. Her fingers buzzed, she was mortified. I broke the hugs in two, pushing her away. I was satisfied.

In the depth of my starving insides, I knew I was not the only one. Not the only one who ached unless I slept, who waited and waited and waited ... for what to happen? What were we waiting for? We who sacrificed our living moments to look new, fresh. Who turned down the warmth and comfort of a home-prepared meal? Feigned sickness at the dinner table, leaving our families to eat, and to worry. What was it all worth? Feeling good was all I ever wanted.

I opened my fingers to look at the queen. The paint on her back was purple, like my skin, but unlike me she was warm. Warm and alive; living. Not waiting to live. Not like me, held captive by my own mind. I was just one of the people who froze and starved their bodies, halting the motion of their lives in hopes of making themselves worthy of the life that they



Photo by Anna Ladika, Boulder, CO

thought was waiting, only to come to one of two conclusions: life doesn't wait and they had missed so much, or death.

As I was noticed, the pages of everyone's stories came flying at me, abrasive insects stinging my pride. *I did it too – stopped eating when I was your age ... It's hard, I know how you feel ... Let me tell you ...* I hated everyone who told me they understood, and I hated the worker bees who shoved food down my throat. My sister made me hot chocolate and watched me, prompting me to drink it. My mother made bowls of oatmeal filled with nuts and brown sugar that filled my face with steam. She said I didn't have a choice – I had to eat it. I dumped it out when she wasn't looking. I was forced, given, fed, and my pride crumpled as they looked at me with pitying eyes.

The queen in my palm would never turn away a meal. Her bees would feed her special things like they had all her life: royal jelly, a pastel rainbow of pollen, and sweet drops of nectar. They needed her to stay warm and alive. She had to keep the hive going. I didn't think I had any such responsibilities, but it turns out my life was my hive. Made up of fourteen thousand tiny pieces of energy. I had closed the doors, locked them in a box, and shipped them to somewhere cold. Somewhere with purple evening clouds that tasted like vitamin tablets and had thunder like the rumbling of a hungry stomach.

Their summer had begun. The hive would be warmed by their frantic bodies as they worked – a single organism made up of tiny individuals fueled by nectar. My body would be warmed by the spring sun in my window and later by sustenance as my conflicted hands raised food to my mouth and I forced myself to swallow. Slowly, slower than the bees, my body got back to work, a single organism, fueled by food. ♦

I had been starving myself for six months

I hated everyone who told me they understood

Join our growing community of teen writers & artists

www.TeenInk.com

@teen.ink @teenink
Teen-Ink-Magazine

EMORY



EMORY UNIVERSITY'S SUMMER PRE-COLLEGE PROGRAM

The Emory Pre-College Program is a summer academic program for high school students. It gives college-bound rising juniors and rising seniors an exciting glimpse of academic and residential life at a top-ranked national university. High school students may explore topics with professors who are the leading experts in their fields, enroll in classes with college students, and earn transferable college credit.

APPLY ONLINE
www.precollege.emory.edu
precollege@emory.edu
(404) 712-7677



CREATIVE WRITING

Summer Programs at Yale, Stanford, UC Berkeley



www.educationunlimited.com
(510)548-6612
campinfo@educationunlimited.com

The Sausage Wars

by Jenica McCoy, Osceola, IN

There is a war fought in my family. A terrible, beautiful thing. Every year around Christmas time, the battlefield is set. My grandparents act as surveyors, my mother and her sisters as peaceful interference, and my cousins and I as soldiers. We'll wash our hands with soap and warm water until the skin on our knuckles is devoid of all natural moisture, like the shaved heads of military recruits. We wear the scent of soap like a uniform as we march into the small, cramped kitchen and crouch before a large, plastic bin filled with ground beef, as cold as the snow falling solemnly outside. With urging from our grandmother, our commander, we dig our fingers reluctantly into the squelching mass of raw meat before us. Hesitation quickly becomes vigor as we realize the competition between us. Our hands, then wrists are coated in a thick skin of cold, solidified fat as we dig into the meat, making rapid grabs at the spices thrown in by the adults.

The cold bites our skin and numbs our muscles, but we continue to mix, making sure to dive into the corners and make it all even. By now, we can't feel our hands. Their disappearance aches at the ends of our forearms. Mercifully, as a possible act of God himself, our salvation appears. Potatoes, cut into bits, are tossed into a blender with gloriously hot water, stirred up into a grainy sauce, and dumped on top of our hands. The children warriors who survive this ordeal are the ones who bring most of that warm

white sludge to their end of the bin and dig until it fills their fingernails and thaws their icy fingers. However, this satisfaction is short-lived, for it's not long before the heat is drowned out by the undying cold of the meat around it, and these cousins are once again scrabbling in freezing pain, waiting for the next sweet plop of warmth, and hoping that we aren't out of potatoes yet.

Though we've all got red nail marks in our hands and wrists, a consequence of our fierce competition, which sting a little as we dig into a field of spices on the surface of our meaty playspace, the worst is yet to come. The most wrecking weapon to the soldiers comes from our higher-ups themselves. My mother and her sisters all have various tasks set for themselves to speed up sausage production, but there will be one or two in charge of the children's damnation in the form of fresh onions.

The onions are cut into small bits and dropped in like canisters of gas from above. Everyone in the kitchen is a victim, eyes stinging and tearing up, the moisture clinging to eyelashes offering little in the way of relief from the assault. Still, at least the adults, high up and on their feet, have clean wrists with which to rub their eyes, and can step out of the room for a moment of respite. The soldiers, covered from fingertip to forearm with meat and fat not only have nothing but unhelpful shoulders to rub our eyes with, but also are not allowed out of the room for

The worst is yet to come

the sake of preserving the cleanliness of the rugs and couches. For us, there is no respite or relief, but painful onions inches from our faces. We push them down beneath as much meat mass as we can before the next batch comes.

We continue to grind and cry into our own shoulders until the meat is fed through an old machine of dark metal, like some macabre torture instrument from an earlier, more morbid century. The squelching mass we have created is compressed and shaped by this tool with the loud screeching of metal rubbing against itself, and the mixture is let out into the thin skin of a cow intestine, supposedly cooked and sanitized.

At this point the kids are permitted to leave the room and scramble for one of the two bathrooms. It can take a good 20 minutes to feel even remotely clean, after a thorough rubdown with scalding water and as much soap as you can find. Anything less and the fat will cling to your skin and remain stuck between your fingers. Even after your hands are red and throbbing from the scrubbing and heat of sanitization, you will smell of meat for days, and your eyes will feel the phantom sting of onions.

This war and destruction is forgotten once the sausages are ready for consumption. The dish completes the Christmas buffet table, and nothing on this day is right without it. We veterans are resilient and easily satiated by the meal. We can forget our struggle – until we must survive it again next year. ♦

Only a Game

by Ally Frontino, Norton, MA

You know those people who say, "Gym class is not the Olympics. Don't try so hard!"? Well, I'm not one of those people. I'm the person in gym class who is trying hard, not for the sake of looking cool, but to win. I'm competitive in almost everything I do; it's just in my nature. The negatives to being competitive are the other bad traits it brings out. Annoying, aggressive, and rude are just some of the many words that describe me while playing a simple game of badminton. Some

of the thoughts that run through my mind during any game are *Wow, you suck ... I can make this play ... I really hope these people don't think I'm a monster.* I try my best to play nice, but I don't always succeed.

There goes the eighth run of the inning. I'm sick of this. Somebody make a play so we can get out of this horrendous inning! The outfielder, first baseman, and second baseman have all made errors. A grounder makes its way to the third baseman, but yet again, she makes an error.

As the oldest girl on the team, I try to be Miss Positive Patty for the younger girls to emulate. However, I tend to be more of a Debbie Downer or Negative Nancy. Throughout the inning I have been hiding my anger by whispering things under my breath while looking at the dirt. But now I've reached my limit.

I say to the third baseman in an annoyed voice, "Does anyone want to get out of this inning?"

Then start acting like it!" I immediately put my head down to try and calm myself down. I'm muttering to myself when I hear my teammate respond, "Stop yelling at me!" She is clearly holding back tears.

I can't believe I made her cry. I feel so bad. Why am I so angry? It's just a game.

It's easier said than done to act like it's "just a game." I find myself apologizing for my anger often, but my actions never change.

If the situation is reversed and my team is doing well, I tend to be very annoying. I managed to make my entire English class hate me with one game of "Catchphrase." My team made an epic comeback, and I was

uncontrollably happy. Whenever someone got the answer right, I would bounce all over the room in joy. I was having fun, but my classmates were staring at me like I belonged in an insane asylum. Apparently, I'm the only person in class who gets excited about winning.

My competitiveness stretches into arguments. I will fight with you all day and night just to prove my point.

My best friends, family, classmates, and even my middle school assistant principal have all lost arguments to me. I start arguments over small things, such as bananas. I won't bore you with the details, but long story short, the banana was not

a Spanish banana, but rather had a Spanish sticker on it. I try not to get myself into arguments that I won't win. Losing and being wrong are two things that I don't handle well.

I don't blame anyone who hates me for being competitive. I hate the person I become. I apologize in advance to any future teammates or people who will come in the path of my competitiveness. I should probably try a relaxing hobby like painting or pottery, but where's the fun in that? ♦

I try to play nice, but I don't always succeed



Photo by Jenna Raad, Orlando, FL



Photo by Emma Mortellaro, Granville, OH



Art by Katherine Britt, Winters, CA



Photo by Simran Minhas, Delta, BC, Canada



Art by Anisha Kamat, Allen, TX



Art by Lauren Yang, Sugar Land, TX



Photo by Micaela Raviv, New York, NY



Art by J.S. Wong, Victoria, BC, Canada

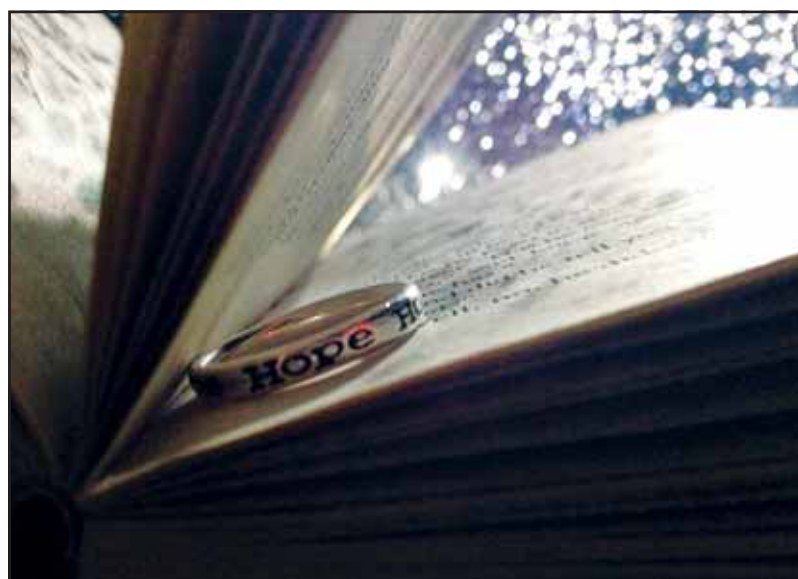


Photo by Lexie Johnson, Crown City, OH



You'll Thank Me Later

by Katherine Pazushko, Brooklyn, NY

“We are approaching Sofia. Prepare for landing.”

Sofia, I pondered. What a beautiful name.

The runway smelled of roses and the soft, salty ocean breeze promised in travel magazines. The aroma, a refreshing combination of flower petals and perfumed soap, wafted through the small airport, an incipient symptom of perfection, as analyzed by my

12-year-old mind. All the components of a successful vacation were in place: golden beaches, blue skies, great food – all in a land overflowing with roses.

And my mother. I was finally going to see her after two months apart. *At last, I thought, it will be just the two of us, together in the sun.*

But, to my dismay, it would never be just the two of us again.

“*Mamochka!*” The guests in the hotel lobby waiting to check in stared at the chubby girl in white sweats rushing into her mother’s arms.

“*Katyënok!*” she responded, using a pet name for me that also meant kitten.

I noticed right away that something was different about her, but I paid it no heed.

“I have a surprise for you,” she exclaimed. “You’re going to have a sibling!”

I let out a huff. “Ha. Very funny, Mum. Now what’s the real surprise?”

“I’m serious! I’m having a baby. Do you want a little Dmitry or Daria?”

My smile dissipated into a blank stare, like the kind you see Hollywood FBI agents flash their targets before shooting them – concentrated and emotionless.

“A what?” Anything would have appealed to my ears more than “baby.”

Baby. Those things are tolerable when they’re someone else’s that you can tickle and give back. Not mine.

And thus, my summer was ruined, my life destroyed. I would be forever deprived of the only person whose approval I needed to exist. Twelve years just wasn’t enough.

Later that night, Mother approached me lying prostrate on the hotel bed and sat there until I turned to look her in the eye. “You’ll thank me later,” was all she said.

Stepping into the hospital room, I saw my mother

with various relatives around her. She smiled at me and gestured toward the crib. I reluctantly walked over, eyeing the tiny creature inside. It was wrapped tightly in layers of blankets, a little hobo cap atop its head. As I stared, perplexed at how it functioned, it wheezed a few times, startling me. I glanced at the name tag. Weight, length, last name, and mother’s name were all filled in, but the first name had been left blank.

“What do you call it, Mama?” I called.

“Shhh!” was the unanimous re-

sponse from all present. “Your sister is sleeping!”

So it began.

“Mum, what’s its name?” I repeated in a loud whisper.

“You tell me,” she replied with a small smile.

With one swift gesture, a nurse scooped up the infant and handed it over to me. I was not ready for this.

The creature opened its eyes, taking in my face for the first time. It looked up at me helplessly, pressing its lips together in search of food.

In retrospect, I should have fallen for her then and there, as that would have been the appropriate thing to do. But if there is one definitive trait of my personality, it is my unassailable stubbornness.

I thought back to Sofia, Bulgaria, where I’d received the upsetting news, and then my own name: Katherine, from Greek, meaning pure. By now, I’d admitted that the creature at least deserved to exist in my universe, and now it deserved a name. And it made sense to choose one that matched my own. Regal, Greek, and meaningful. *Sofia. Wisdom. Variations . . .*

“Sonia,” I whispered, pressing my lips to her fragile forehead.

“Don’t kiss her face!” my family shouted.

Yup, I thought. Now and forever.

“Kata!” the toddler chuckled.

“No. Shh. Go to bed, Monkey!”

She squealed.

“Sonia!”

“*Nyösia!*” She still spoke backwards then.

“More like nuisance . . .”

“NUISANCE-A!”

“All right, enough,” I declared, lifting her. “Good night, baby. Sleep!”

“Kata. I want sleep with sister.”

“No, Monkey, I’m not sleeping in your crib again.”

“*Nyette!* Katia’s bed! I want sleep in Katia’s bed!”

“Fine . . . but sleep means sleep. No tricks.”

Telling my sister to lay off her schemes was like telling a frog to take throat lozenges; pointless.

“Katia . . . sing me song about sister.”

I started humming her favorite Barney tune, and she placed her small fingers on my shoulder. “She’s my sister. I love my sister.”

By the eleventh reprise, Sonia was asleep, and I, too, felt myself drifting off. Before taking Sonia back to her room, the last thing I recall was my mother sitting on my bed, a smile on her lips as she watched her daughters together. Leaning over to scoop up my sleeping sister, she softly whispered two words into my ear:

“It’s later.” ♦

Anything would have appealed to my ears more than “baby”



Photo by Autumn Gould, Conneaut, OH

Your Little Sister

by Kimberly Yang, Rochester Hills, MI

As I crouch against the staircase, my eyes wander up through the darkness; they pass a shadow seeping under the door frame. My six-year-old hands clutch a piece of rope leading to the shadow, you, my sister only 10 years older. The light falls onto your face and I can see your sly smile. “Hurry!” you whisper. “The bad guys are behind us!”

In this moment, we are American spies on an impossible mission. As the rope suddenly becomes taut, I lurch up the stairs and the sound of our giggles break through the darkness. You fling open the door and light floods our eyes, momentarily blinding us.

“Hey, are you still there?” I hear your voice through the phone.

“Huh? Oh, yeah, sorry. High school’s good . . .” I scour my mind for something to say, but in the end, the same words always tumble out. Phone calls between us have become repetitive. They begin with “hello” or “hey, what’s up?” The “everything’s good” portion comes next, and attempted questions and repeated answers of “good” follow. After some more uncomfortable pauses, our words drift into silence like punctured balloons faltering to the ground. To end both our misery, rapid good-byes are said and then each end of the phone goes silent.

I sigh. I want to tell you. I want to tell you that when you set the bar with your perfect grades and acceptances to top universities, teachers, parents, and friends automatically

replaced my name with “her little sister.” I want to go back to our childhood, a time when you led me to the light at the end of the stairs. Instead, now, you cover me in your shadow. But to tell you this would hurt you more than it would hurt me, so these words are unsaid.

“We have begun our descent into Paris and will be landing momentarily,” someone from the cockpit announces.

Excitement floods my veins. In the winter, I had applied for a summer study abroad program in Paris with the goal of learning French, but as sophomore year progressed, the purpose had shifted with the change in seasons.

Paris could be my chance to get away from your legacy. Back home, teachers and classmates innocently compliment me as your little sister or as a mini-you. To me, each comparison felt more like a paper cut, deceptively small yet painfully deep.

The plane hits the runway, jerking me in my seat. I am officially in Paris, where no one knows me – and no one knows you.

Once in the airport, I meet up with other teens in the program. Out of habit, the introduction “Hello, I’m the little sister of” begins to slip off my tongue, but I stop as I realize that that label no longer matters. Here, I am a stranger like everyone else, facing a defining moment.

I inhale and start again, this time without a mention of you. I love you, but in a place with no you, I’m glad to have the chance to define me. ♦

You cover me in your shadow

How to Be the Oldest

by Brevann Nun, Iowa, NE

We all love our siblings, even if that love hides deep, deep within us. Billions of people around the world grow up with brothers and sisters, but only a fraction can claim the title of eldest. Some of you may find yourselves among this “fortunate” subgroup. But for the rest of you – the babies, the middle children, the only children, etc. – here’s an explanation of how childhood works from the perspective of the firstborn.

As firstborn, your life begins perfectly, because you are the only child. Your parents spend all their time with you, affectionate relatives swoon over you, and you are the ultimate center of attention – as it should be. But these early days of serenity don’t last. Years later, you will look back and long for the time when your parents’ attention wasn’t divided amongst smaller versions of you and there was no question as to who was number one in their hearts.

When you first hear the news of your yet-to-be-born little brother or sister, you rejoice along with your family. You think, *Yes. My own personal playmate who heeds my commands. My parents are so thoughtful.* You can’t wait to be the older sibling.

Then the little squirt is born.

Before long, you’re wonder if the whole “older brother/sister” thing is really what you wanted after all. In the first couple months of older siblinghood, you have a few realizations. First off, this thing doesn’t want to play with you. Ever. It’s perfectly content chewing on your toy robot’s head. Suddenly, you’re protecting your toys from the creature you had planned to enjoy them with.

Also, it can’t talk. It doesn’t get your jokes. It doesn’t answer your questions. It doesn’t tell you how great you are.

*As firstborn,
your life begins
perfectly*

Here’s the real kicker. Once upon a time, you had everything in the world a kid could want – and now you have, at best, half. Your parents no longer have unlimited time to play with you, and suddenly your new sibling attracts the attention of relatives. With a baby in the family, the oldest child doesn’t get a second look.

As your sibling grows into a toddler, you hold onto a thread of hope: perhaps this thing will learn to admire you, and at least now it can play. But you find out that not only does it not admire you, it doesn’t want to play what you want. For some unforeseen reason, its opinion differs from yours.

When your toddler brother or sister wanders into your room, it sees fantastic toys and wants them all. The problem is, these are your toys, and you have no intention of letting the slimy blob of flesh get its germly hands on your stuff. But it doesn’t understand the concept of property. To it, what’s yours is its, and what’s its is still its.

So you whine, and it whines. You yell, and it yells back. Soon you’re both on the floor throwing tantrums, until a parent comes to put you both in time outs. Even worse, your parents blame you for the whole thing! According to them, being the older sibling means you’re always at fault. Obviously they hate you.

You and your little brother or sister grow up, and together you learn the value of compromise, tolerance, and sharing. You don’t always get along, but you no longer view your sibling’s birthday as an anniversary of the day you lost eternal happiness.

In fact, you start feeling protective of it. You get a bit angry when people insult your little abomination. Making fun of your sibling is a right reserved exclusively for you.

Monopoly

by Roger Lam, Austin, TX

Monopoly: complete control of the entire supply of goods or of a service in a certain area or market.

When I was younger, I hated playing Monopoly with you. Your pristinely built hotels always struggled against each other for space on the game board. Game dollars and deed cards littered your side of the table, creating a messy mosaic of wealth. Every time we played, I ended up bankrupt and you owned everything.

You always wanted to keep the game going. Every time I declined your loans, you just gave me the money for free, like a grant. Your actions were compassionate, your eyes full of pity, and your smile genuine. You would say, “No problem, man! I’m older than you. I’m supposed to be better than you. Here, take some money and let’s keep playing,” followed by a wink and a wad of cash on my side of the table.

I hated it when you beat me at everything, big brother. You were the paragon of excellence. You were the epitome of morality. You were family to your best friends and a best friend to everyone in our family. You tyrannically controlled my emotions with your reign of kindness by making me happy when I was sad. You owned all of our

*You owned
all of our
parents’ love*

parents’ love and joy, leaving me just the leftovers after they showered their kisses and praise on you. Still, I loved you even as I envied you.

When you left for college, you took your monopoly with you. Last time you came home for Thanksgiving, we played Monopoly again, only this time, you asked me for a loan. You never paid me back. I didn’t think about it much then. I just thought that college had made you rusty. Turns out, it did much more to the brother I once loved than I thought.

Now, by some cruel twist of fate or dramatic turnaround of character, you are in prison, with no “get out of jail free” card. Mom and Dad won’t tell me what exactly you did. They say “it would break your heart.” All I know is that you committed an unspeakable crime, and now your reputation is reduced to ashes, your monopoly reduced to a mound of rubble.

I am no longer oppressed by your success. Finally, I can compete in the market. I can start my own business without you casting a shadow over me. I don’t know how to begin, and I don’t know how this will end. But you know what, big brother? I do know that I won’t be asking you for a loan. ♦



Photo by Malaika Joy, Cloquet, MN

At the same time, you become a wealth of good advice. “Don’t do that.” “Fine, but don’t get caught.” “Stay away from [members of the opposite gender]; they’re disgusting.”

We oldest siblings should be proud of ourselves. We made it through childhood with little to no casualties in the process. In the end, maybe having a little brother or sister isn’t all that terrible. Somehow, after all the anger, arguing, crying, and bitterness, we still care about those little irritations we call siblings. Of course, they don’t need to know that. ♦

Memories of My Brother

Sometimes

In memories of my brother
I swim a little too deep
And my feet graze the bottom
While my fingers still reach to catch
Hold of his kicking feet
I let reminders plaster me and
My lungs
Until I drown in all the things
We used to do.

I slipped the bark off a willow tree because
You told me to and I
Thought you were God of all
Our games
And the tree wasn’t ours but
I peeled back all its skin so I could find
A whole new layer that
Belonged just to me
Because there wasn’t much of me that hadn’t
Belonged to you
First

by Catherine Sleeman, Horsham, England

I Wrote This for Her

by "Olivia," Boston, MA

When you lose a soulmate, you lose pieces of yourself inside that pain. It started in December. I was seven years old, begging my mother to buy me Bratz dolls and Bulls-Eyes candies in CVS, while somebody I love was out on the train tracks of our hometown, tracing beer cans with his raw fingers. Dad hoped to kill his soul in the heart of one, two, three, another shot, just one more, until he was on the ground, passed out drunk. We were left to wonder why he got to leave us in this world, with nobody worth holding and nobody worth talking to.

I knew my sister was sad. At six, seven, eight, even nine, my mind grew more aware of the cigarettes and beer cans under her bed. I knew her bedroom walls better than I knew myself. I sprayed Febreze when Mom was at work, when her room smelled a bit too incriminating.

When I was supposed to be studying times tables, reading *Charlotte's Web*, and coloring outside the lines of life with no apologies, I was slipping slices of key lime pie under her door when her anger and sadness bounced off the walls like mosquitoes caught in a blinding light. My mother used to "go out for a drive," looking for her lost soul, while my orders were to paint a picture or play with my dolls. I didn't. As soon as I heard the gravel crumble on

the driveway, I'd throw on my Crocs and run around the neighborhood like a crazed little girl looking for her lost puppy, all alone in the world, with nobody worth holding and nobody worth talking to.

This is how I knew my sister was sad. It didn't come all at once; it was rotting eight years at a time. There were months at a time where I would see her smiling in between bites of cookie dough ice cream, watching the game, avoiding homework like it was her God-given talent. In Catholic school, they taught us to pray for hope for ourselves, but all I could seem to manage was hoping she'd stay alive for me.

Fast forward three springs, she became a world class phenomenon of sports and perfect SAT scores, all while surpassing a hangover. She was sitting in the front seat, wearing a shirt a bit too green for her liking, with her size 13 practice sneakers on the dashboard. It started out soft. It wasn't all at once, with tears flowing out of her like a river of sadness; it was delicate, small talk becoming big talk, where her sadness just couldn't seem to subside inside. For the first time in years, she was makeup-free, less color coded; she was complete and utter chaos, and I just had to take her storm by storm.

From one morning to the next, she became a walking tsunami; all torn up on the streets of our hometown with nowhere to go and nobody to see. I was on to new beginnings, graduating middle school with my \$50 dress and hair done up in curls with makeup to hide my sadness. I whispered "I wish you were here" during the ceremony, and the boy I thought I loved at the time smiled at me and squeezed my hand, and all I could feel were constellations exploding inside of my mind, and I couldn't breathe without the sound of her snores. They thought I missed Dad, but I wanted my sister there – whole and happy, not torn into pieces like the Barbies I used to play with.

I didn't tell anybody. She was "away for lacrosse," "busy working," or "away with friends," not deteriorating inside a rehab center, with nobody to hold and nobody worth talking to. I wrote her five letters. I sent one. The only one I had the courage to send was the one I dropped my Greek salad on and had a collision with my entire soul, right on the page. It was seven pages long. I just wanted to write I love you over and over again, but I thought she'd stop reading after the second page.

I visited. Once. The day before I became a counselor in training, when I was in pain but nobody knew it. Mom had been in shambles for weeks and I knew it was my job to hold the house together, because Dad wasn't here to hold us, and Mom risked everything to keep my sister alive; so I sat in the front seat listening to Lana Del Rey and looking at the Berkshire mountains that she inhabited.



Photo by Julia Eanes, Trinity, NC

I promised myself I wouldn't cry. When I started to feel oceans coming to shore in my tear ducts, I'd dig nails into my skin and punish myself. I had to be strong: for her and for me.

Fast forward: I cried. Well, that's an understatement. I fell into her arms with a moan and collapsed in between her shoulders, my shield of armor unraveling like a roll of twine, and suddenly I looked into her soul and saw raw life. We were silent. She was the aftermath; no color coding here – she was complete and utter chaos. I knew to take her storm by storm; I'd been preparing for lifetimes already.

After the summer of hell, weight loss, sobriety pins, long phone calls, letters, and oh so many goddamn tears, she returned home. Not into my arms, but ... home. From what I've heard she stood in front of the Division 1 Lacrosse team and told them only a fragment of her story: I'm an alcoholic. Finally I saw her for the first time in three months. Her soul was recovering and so were her eyes. I hugged her so tight I think she stopped breathing. She hugged me back. We sat down to dinner and she smiled and I pretended

not to be so completely obsessed with her healing, sneaking glances at her as she smiled at Mom with all of her heart and soul. This was when I knew she was going to be okay.

Currently, she's doing okay. She goes to football games, calls us on weeknights, asks about old friends, shares music and her guitar learning process, speaks of her insecurities, and she laughs. She really laughs. If anybody should know a real laugh from her, it's me. She's gotten her heart broken, wanted to relapse, and time has stopped because of her pain, and that's okay. Recovery isn't just one straight shot up the mountain; it comes in jagged lines of bad days and good days.

Something I've learned through my years of observing her every move (and pretending not to) is to love so much my heart aches. I want epiphanies, stories to tell my grandchildren, adventures in New York City, surprise trifles, random phone calls, and most of all, I want my sister to be happy. I want to be happy. When she wasn't happy, I wasn't happy. Even when she was just beginning to define recovery, I wasn't happy. That's okay. I'm learning to embrace the moment, remember the pain but not live through it again, talk about my struggles, seek help when I need it, and love the people I love most with all of me. I deserve happiness, and after her story, she sure as hell does too. ♦

Diagno

by "Ellen," Boulder, CO

Sister,
you have misunderstood
I am not in a cocoon
my wings are free
I can fly

you scoff and laugh
when I open my mouth
and express how I feel
yet you ask why
my thoughts are
padlocked and cemented
in my head
unwilling to freely flow
out my lips into your ears

I choke only on the blood
from the deep wounds
your own words have made
I speak
but not to you
I reveal myself
but not to you
after all
if life isn't a masquerade,
what is it?

it is you
who needs to take

a hard look at me
I know who I am
it is you
who does not

my innocence was not slaughtered
but has faded with time
like it should
I'm not sorry that it has
it didn't hurt:
I would rather be impure
than ignorant

don't tell me I can't fly
when you haven't seen me try
don't tell me to be innocent
and to act like a woman
don't apologize for others who
hurt me

when you are the only one who has
don't be judgmental of me
and expect me to open up to you
don't pretend it is okay to hurt me
out of love
please
don't tell me what is wrong with me

I don't need your diagno-
sis ♦

Author's note: "My sister's poem 'Metamorpho' was published in Teen Ink. It was a beautiful poem, however, I felt the need to write a response. The first line was addressed to sister. This of course, could be word play with "metamorpho" and could be from a perspective other than my sister's. However, many of the things her

poem said, my sister would often say to me. I thought I would give my side of our relationship. I wanted to use the same wordplay and vocabulary she did. Here is my response in the form of a poem."

Editor's note: To read "Metamorpho," go to TeenInk.com and search for the title.

**Recovery isn't
just one straight
shot up the
mountain**

Where's Austin?

by Angela Bales, Simi Valley, CA

I was paralyzed by fear in the doorway of my bedroom. My small, bare feet were planted safely on the carpet of the dim hallway. In front of me was the open door to my pitch-black bedroom. I took a deep breath, contemplating my next move. As I stared into the darkness, I pictured the Judy Blume novel on my bed. I needed it, but I couldn't enter the dark room alone, and the switch that would solve all my problems, sending the demons into hiding, was located on the wall parallel to the door.

My six-year-old imagination ran wild. I imagined goblins and goons eagerly awaiting my first step over the threshold. That image was enough for me to pivot and run down the hallway to recruit my brother, Austin. But he scoffed at my pleas and called me a "scared little baby." When my mother instructed him to help, he rolled his eyes and reluctantly arose from his game of "World of Warcraft."

When he took the first step into the dark room, his entire body catapulted into a frenzy of convulsions. He collapsed to the ground and started to shriek as his body heaved and contorted violently. My fear of the darkness vanished, and I rushed to his side and knelt by his seizing body, as boiling tears flooded my cheeks.

It was no time to say, "I told you so," but nonetheless I felt a sense of reassurance knowing that I had been right about the darkness all along. But that realization crumbled to dust as my brother opened his eyes to see my grief-ridden face buried in his chest. Guilt written all over his face, he apologized for tricking me. That was the first bitter sip of what it tasted like to lose my brother, and after his insensitive joke, I wished that I had.

Many of my memories of my brother are surrounded by animosity. In his mind, I was the annoying little sister who was too young to understand his jokes and too old to be completely manipulated, but that all changed one sweltering summer night before I started third grade. I came home from my dad's house, as I did every Tuesday evening. Dinner was on the table. I looked around with puzzlement, as my mother and stepfather started to eat. Couldn't they see that something was missing? My brother's placemat wasn't next to mine; in fact it was nowhere to be seen.

"Where's Austin?"

My mother looked down in an effort to hide the cracking of her voice, as she answered casually that he was spending the night at his father's house. I found this alibi highly unlikely, considering my brother, according to a court agreement, was to spend Thursdays and Fridays with his father.

My dinner tasted bland, and even after finishing I was still hungry. I wasn't hungry for food, but instead, the vacant dining room chair fueled my emptiness. I knew that if my brother had been sitting in his spot, our conversations would have run like two freight trains on different tracks, with only sparse instances where they would be forced to intersect for a brief second. He would scarf down his food, ask to be excused, and return to his computer games. But this night was different; the dining room was filled with the sound of silverware scraping against plates and the heavy chewing of people who were high strung and defeated at the same time.

Later that night, once the table was cleared, my mother nonchalantly told me that Austin would be staying with his father for a while. Once again, I

recognized the unpleasant taste of losing my brother, but this time I wasn't sure when he might return.

After several months, Austin's absence became normal to me. I didn't find out for a year the real reason my brother had moved out. My mother and Austin had gotten into a devastating argument after he'd enlisted in the Marine Corps. This news shattered my mother's heart. Some parents see their child enlisting in the military as a great honor and blessing, but my mother saw it as a guaranteed death certificate with my brother's name on it. Although I never admitted missing him, I secretly yearned for his companionship.

One day during my sixth grade P.E. class, I got a call from a number I didn't recognize. I ran to the bathroom and locked myself in a stall. The voice on the other end was one I hadn't heard in what felt like decades. It was Austin. With his simple hello, I felt joy filling my heart. I hadn't realized how much I missed my brother until that moment. He spoke

with a new maturity.

"I'm sure Mom told you that I'm headed to Afghanistan today, but I just wanted to let you know that I love you, and I'll be back before you have time to miss me. I don't want you to worry. Trust me, it's not as bad as everyone says."

Tears started to pool in the corners of my eyes. I responded in a shaky voice how much I already missed him, and despite his wish, I would worry. That was the first time I had ever heard my brother say that he loved me, and in that

moment I had no doubt in my mind that I loved him too.

He tried to comfort me about the idea of him being airdropped into a war zone. He offered me ease of mind in a time that was, undoubtedly, the most terrifying he had faced in his 18 years. Even though his words were soothing, I could hear the slightest shake of fear in his voice.

In that moment, I felt nothing but pity for the person on the other end of the line; he was no longer the brother I had once loathed, but a child afraid of the darkness in his own life. I understood that I could never go back and redo all those years of hatred and bitterness. I had completely lost the brother I had grown up with, and in his place stood this brave young man. As I reluctantly put away my phone, I realized that my childhood relationship with my brother had symbolically, metaphorically, and physically come to an end. ♦

With his simple hello, I felt joy filling my heart



Photo by Rose Padilla, Rockville, MD

What Keeps Him Going

by "Cole,"
No. Wales, PA

A little older now. A little older, but not a bit wiser. My brother still plays in the rain. He still dances and twirls and lets the sky's water coat his tongue. He'd drown himself in it if he could. He would love that. It wouldn't be suicide – it would be letting the storm take him to where he's supposed to be.

I don't know why God didn't put his spirit into a cloud or a raindrop or a shock of golden electricity. He would have done better up there, looking down on us. That's what he was made for. He should be dancing in the sky, among the storm's spirits, not down here in the middle of this horrid mess of poverty.

I've stolen once or twice. I've felt the weight of a gold watch in my pocket, a guilty weight that pressed on my soul and made me question exactly how strong I was. I've handed the watch over to a dealer and felt that hot crawling thing called guilt in my heart as I took a fraction of the money that the watch must have been worth. I've tasted how bitter a chocolate bar can be if it is attained illegally. I've done it. All of it. But my brother – he would never think of it. It has never crossed his mind, because his mind isn't down here with us. It's up in the clouds, gliding on the wind, inhaling wet, stormy air, wrapping itself in fresh sheets of rain. His mind is free.

Through the cracked and warped glass I watch him.

His mind is up in the clouds

That silly fool twirls on a toe, carves a divot into the churned earth, tilts his pale face up to the silver sky, hair thrown back and plastered to his neck, and laughs. A fork of lightning is thrown from the clouds and his blue eyes gleam like wet jewels. He looks crazy, maniacal, but so damn happy that I almost want to bound out there with him and twirl around like a crazy fool too. I want a part of what he has, what that storm can give him.

He's bathing in it, I think. The rain is washing away the unhappiness of his life and making him new again. He'll come in sopping wet, and our mother will tell him to shower, but he already has. His soul has been cleansed by the downpour.

I'm not exactly sure what storms do for him, but I think they take him away. For most, that isn't a good thing, but for my brother? He needs the break. The crashing thunder and rolling rain give him hope. He knows that soon the sun will be out, caressing his face, brushing his cheeks, dazzling his jewel eyes. He can already see the closest star just behind the roiling chaos in the sky. He knows that no matter how bad a storm gets, how many trees the wind uproots, he will see the sun before too long.

That's the happiness that my brother has to cling to. That's what keeps him going. And for that, I'm grateful. ♦

I Have a Brother?

by "David," Ann Arbor, MI

I met my little brother when I was eight and he was four – our first encounter since the day of his birth. Due to family circumstances, my brother had been left in Korea with my grandmother until my parents and I had settled in the U.S. We were reunited with him a few months before I started second grade.

My parents had planned a quiet party and invited a few of their close friends and family. I had no idea why we were hosting a celebration, but I accepted the notion wholeheartedly.



Art by Irena Yang, Oak Park, CA

We were living in Delaware, in a small, homely city the name of which I cannot recall, and even for a hyper-imaginative elementary schooler, there wasn't much to do.

The party was in a nearby park, with the June sun blazing high in the sky. People straggled in, enthusiastically congratulating my parents, and set plates of food down on worn wooden tables. I made a beeline for the snacks, as I do at any party I attend. At the climax of my glorious face-stuffing, I noticed a yellow cab pull up in my peripheral vision.

I paused and stared, my curiosity sparked.

And then the door opened.

It was an unlikely duo: a wizened old woman with a stern expression holding a small boy by the hand. Despite her age, she walked with a quick, strong gait as she led the struggling child in our direction. I could tell, with the universal gut instinct that animals use to know when to run from a predator, that she was not to be tussled with.

People immediately congregated around them, with my parents in the lead. My mom started to cry, which piqued my attention and an unpleasant feeling of confusion. Just as I had resolved to make my way over there, the crowd suddenly went quiet. My dad beckoned for me to come closer.

With a sense of dread, I shoved past

the unknown faces. I stood by my parents and was faced with the mysterious boy. My mom stooped down and whispered something into my ear.

"What?" I asked, slightly miffed.

"He's your brother," she repeated.

Brother? I have a brother? I mouthed the word so as not to be overheard. Its taste was foreign, misconsonnated. It had no place in my life.

I took a closer look at my so-called "brother." He was small, slightly pudgy, and slightly red in the face.

His eyes were the same color as mine but were currently wrinkled in frustration, no doubt due to the incessant doting and coddling of adults. His right hand grasped my grandmother's; in his left, a blue popsicle dripped slowly. The tension was palpable, the intent crystal clear. My mouth was flooded with a bitter sensation, and the hastily devoured food turned to lead in my stomach.

I refused to meet the little boy's eye. My mother leaned forward, asking me to speak to him. The bitter taste intensified. She asked again. I said no, that I was too tired, that I didn't even know him. Her eyes pleaded with me to try. I clenched my fist as I asked him the only thing that came to mind.

"Can I have your popsicle?"

The adults chuckled.

"NO!" He reiterated, clearly enunciating each syllable, "No, it's mine."

Then he stuck his tongue out at me.

Fury erupted deep within me. I leapt out. He recoiled, but it was too late. I slammed his popsicle onto the grass with the ferocity of a tiger. His face contorted, but I had yet to deal the final blow. I raised my foot and brought it down as hard as I could. The popsicle collapsed, specks of blue flying. I watched with satisfaction as he burst into tears.

I was brought to my room, chastised by my parents for what seemed like forever, and left staring at the ceiling as the clock ticked on.

Shortly afterwards, awoke to the sound of someone crying. I sat up in bed, still groggy. The crying intensified in volume. Half asleep, I staggered toward it. I headed toward the guest room, the source of the incessant wails, and as I got closer I began to distinguish words.

"I want Mommy!"

It quieted briefly but soon re-escalated, repeating again and again. I was caught off guard. I realized that he was just as bewildered as me, forced apart from someone he had been with his whole life.

With each repetition, the wails melted my heart little by little, and when I eventually returned to my bed, I slept peacefully.

Nowadays, the word "brother" rolls off my tongue as easily as can be. ♦

I refused to meet the little boy's eye

Little Things

by Namrata Verghese, Missouri City, TX

By the time I turned four, something had changed in my mother: a thrumming of insect wings, a pulse kick-starting to life. Her stomach stretched and dimpled, criss-crossed with red veins, becoming a warm pouch for seeds to take root, for tendrils to wrap around her bones before sprouting into the sun.

My sister, Appu, was born on my fourth birthday, and from the moment of her arrival, I planned on hating her with a passion. The nerve of her, stealing my day like it was her birthright! However, as I leaned over her newborn cot to peer at her face, tiny and lost under a hat with a bobble the size of her head, wrinkles frozen in bird formations on her forehead, I couldn't help but smile. Her mouth twitched at the corners, as if in response. Although my father told me that it wasn't yet a true smile, I knew better. She was my sister, and she was grinning back at me.

From then on, Appu stole her way into every facet of my life. Together, we fumbled through our first dance and piano recitals. Together, we wrote Santa pleas for puppies – and cried when we realized Santa was our mother. Together, we watched help-

lessly as our grandmother's memory slowly faded, darkness blooming on CT scans where white should have been; we know how words become precious when there is still so much left to say.

Every Tuesday and Thursday, we tie our karate belts across our waists so tightly that our chests constrict – same curled fists, same dry throats; we are fighters, the Verghese sisters. But while I'm struggling to perfect my weapon hook-kick, she idly toys with her nunchakus, contemplating their design or their history. While my limbs are trembling from rigidly holding our Bharatanatayam poses, she has her eyes closed, her head swaying to the pulsating rhythms that dictate the poses. There is a wide-eyed innocence about her, the sort that can only come from someone who is at ease with herself and the world, who is not perfect and does not strive to be.

Her inexhaustible curiosity has caused me to question the taken-for-granted world around me; more often than not, my attempts to teach her algebra end in musings on the meaning of life. Thanks to her pouts over x , I've learned to ask "why?" – to approach problems at slanted angles and find solutions

in surprising places.

Her unwavering faith in me has helped me trust in myself a little more – and, to a greater extent, the world as she sees it. When I'm with her, I feel free to be a girl who squeezes her eyes shut for dandelion wishes, who creates elaborate brunch menus consisting of nothing but cereal and toast, who can't bake a cake and instead eats all the batter. With her, I find joy in hidden places, in simple things: the sky turning a color that is not quite blue and not quite gray, pigeons clawing unreadable words in the dirt, ripples of heat that approach and retract. She taught me to color trees pink because they're prettier that way, to call grapes juice balloons but actual balloons plastic bags of breath, to cry when I need to because it's always darkest before Daylight Savings Time.

Last year in India during a nighttime power outage, we lit a candle and placed it in our bedroom. Under its flickering glow, we acted out shadow-puppet plays and giggled at nothing until the velvet sky became veined with morning gold, until crows began cawing in the humid air outside. At some point, we must have fallen asleep, because we woke up to the noise of TV static and running water. The power was back, but the candle was still burning. ♦

Appu stole her way into every facet of my life

Magnificent Yellow

by Melinda Liu,
Torrance, CA

As the granddaughter of a cancer surgeon, I've heard many stories about her terminal patients – mostly about their regrets in their final hours of life. One story that really stood out came from a coal miner. I heard that when he was less than an hour from death, he was sobbing, but not for fear of death or the pain of the cancer in his chest. He was distraught because he had spent all those hours in the mines, away from his wife and children, in an attempt to support them. When he finally accomplished his goal, he was dying. According to my grandmother, the last thing he said to her was this advice: “Do me a favor. Don't work long hours. Spend them with your family and children instead.” He's not the first to come up with those words of wisdom. Most anyone will tell you this, if you let them ramble long enough. However, does anyone act on this advice? Sadly, most of us need to endure a traumatizing ordeal before we realize what our priorities should be. Unfortunately, tragedy is how I learned about my true priorities.

Although I was only 11, I will never forget the look on my grandma's face when she saw the difference in my brother Tony's arms. His left arm looked the same, but his right was different. His handwriting, once considered neat for a second-grader, had become a sea of illegible lines, dashes, and shapes. Seeing Grandma's face, I knew that Tony's rogue right arm was a symptom of something sinister and malicious.

Around 1 a.m. on a rainy October morning, I was awoken by my father shouting, “Get up! We're going to the emergency room.” Once there, I fell asleep in one of those uncomfortable hospital beds, only to be shaken awake hours later by my grandma. When my confusion cleared, I noticed her tears and knew that something terrible must have happened.

My grandma never cries. In fact, she's one of the strongest people I know. My grandmama's had a hard life. She was widowed at 45, due to my grandpapa's cigarette habit, and spent years toiling in China's rice paddies. To top that off, no matter how hard she worked in the paddies, she couldn't stop her eldest son from dying. She simply couldn't provide the nutrition that a growing boy needed on a meager farmer's salary.

So if Grandma was crying, something genuinely terrible must have occurred. Unfortunately, I was right.

When I heard the words, “He has Stage IV brain cancer, and there's nothing we can do,” reality really hit home. Not a single person's eyes were dry. Even the “tough dudes” of the family were breaking down. My little brother Tony was dying, and there was nothing that we or medical science could do to save him.

I didn't know what to do. Tony and I had been thick as thieves since the beginning of time. Before his birth, my preschool classmates told me that my life would be hell upon the baby's arrival. They complained about their brothers being the most annoying creatures on Earth and lauded them with first place awards for “crying, sleeping, and being little devils.”

I lucked out, because Tony was the complete

opposite of my friends' descriptions of their brothers. Even as we grew up, the phrase “sibling rivalry” never existed in either of our dictionaries, and we couldn't relate to siblings who didn't enjoy each other's company. Tony and I endured everything together – whether it was the brutality of the butterfly stroke at swim practice, art lessons, or low test scores. We even gossiped way past our bedtimes about the crazy adults in our lives.

When his life expectancy was announced (six to seven months), I felt like kicking myself in the head. I began to question why I spent so much time on studying, swimming, and piano. Assuming that he even survived seven months, that didn't give us enough time. If he didn't have a great chance of celebrating his ninth birthday, who was going to help me survive the remainder of middle school, let alone the insanity of high school? Most importantly, who was going to give the nonjudgmental support that the adults in my life refused to provide?

I don't know how I did it, but after crying for what seemed like forever, I somehow got a grip and told myself that if we couldn't spend the rest of our childhood together, I would at least cherish the time we had.

After all, since Tony had made the early years of my life a lot easier, the least I could do was try to make the last months of his life as great as possible, whether it was talking about trivial topics or just sharing a good book.

Although I'm grateful for the final seven months we had together, they definitely weren't enough. I would love to say that I spent Tony's last hours with him, but I was not given that chance. Two hours after I was forced to go to bed, he passed away peacefully in my mama's arms.

When I was shaken awake by Mother Nature's sobs, I knew that my brother had left this world for a better one. Once I saw his lifeless body, I thought my heart would shatter. I had contemplated what I would do after he died. Who would I talk to about life? Who would save me from those nasty parental lectures?

As I reflect upon the experience, I'm not entirely distraught for myself. I'm instead depressed over the fact that the world lost a budding artist/engineer and a great individual. Of course, I'm sad for myself occasionally. Why didn't I take a break from my rigorous chorus schedule to spend more time with him? When Tony was alive, I never thought there was anything mysterious about him, but now I realize how much of a mystery he was to me. We may have been extremely close, but there was so much about him I didn't know.

Two weeks before he died, Tony awoke from a morphine-induced slumber and said his last coherent words: “I really like the color yellow. I just saw it.”

Those words will haunt me forever. Where did he see the color yellow, and why did I never take the time to figure out what made yellow so pretty? To this day, I don't have a clue where he saw that magnificent shade of yellow. I suppose I'll find out when I'm reunited with him. ♦

*I was awoken
by my father
shouting, “We're
going to the ER!”*



Photo by Olivia McClain, West Bend, WI

To My Brother

To my brother who taught me never to kneel to anyone but God, never to feel Obligated to get down on my knees, regardless Of if or not he says please, see it's a Matter of integrity and he'll never be able to boast “Oh, I had her down on her knees!” Like a dog? A four-legged beast? I think not, I beg to disagree

To my brother who taught me that he is always the one lucky and I'm one of the Best girls he could find – not the other way Around, get it straight in his mind, that I Am the blessing that came down from the Skies, he'll never be good enough no matter how Hard he tries, never good enough for my Brother's little sister, ha, he better keep it Quiet (the fact that he kissed her)

To my brother who taught me that he should never disrespect and I should be the one to demand and keep that respect, every effect I'm the one to allow it – And I will never Allow it, he needs to keep in check the things and Words he hurls, really, your mother didn't teach You to never hit a girl, well, my brother Taught me never to let a boy hit me, so please remove your body, I bruise Easily and I aim to keep my skin – As well as my heart – blemish free

To my brother who taught me self-worth and Respect, independence, self-preservation – myself to protect, To my brother who taught me to Be confident in me, share my pretty smile, love Abundantly, To my brother who taught me to be Resilient as that redwood tree, strong and caring (is this the butterfly you did see?) To my Brother who loves me unconditionally ... To my Teacher of a brother, I do thank thee

by Talitha Degraff, Far Rockaway, NY

THE UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA

UA has a rich tradition of excellence in academics, student life and sports. Ranked in the top 50 public universities surveyed by *U.S. News & World Report*, 9 undergraduate degree-granting schools and colleges; 20:1 student-teacher ratio; all located on a 1,000-acre historic campus. To learn more, visit gobama.ua.edu/teenink

Box 870132 • Tuscaloosa, AL 35487-0132 • 800-933-BAMA



American Academy of Art


Bachelor of Fine Arts Degree Programs:

- Illustration
- Graphic Design
- Multimedia/Web Design
- 3-D Modeling/Animation
- Life Drawing
- Painting
- Watercolor Painting
- Photography

332 South Michigan Ave.
Chicago, IL 60604-4302
312-461-0600

For more information about our graduation rates and other disclosures, please visit our website at <http://www.aaart.edu/disclosures/>

ASHLAND UNIVERSITY



Ashland University's **creative writing majors** learn the ins and outs of the writing process from inspiration to publication with professors who have extensive publication experience.

www.ashland.edu/english


ASSUMPTION COLLEGE

Since 1904

- Academic excellence with a rich Catholic intellectual tradition
- Highly regarded faculty and small classes
- Close-knit, very active residential community (90% of students live on campus all 4 years)

500 Salisbury St., Worcester, MA 01609
1-866-477-7776

www.assumption.edu



BECKER COLLEGE

- Private New England College founded in 1784
- Welcoming atmosphere, easy to make friends
- Thorough preparation for a career-targeted job
- We place 95% of our students in jobs upon graduation

Office of Admissions
61 Sever Street, Worcester, MA 01609
1-508-373-9400 • www.becker.edu

CATAWBA COLLEGE

Established in 1851

Salisbury, NC


1-800-CATAWBA

www.catawba.edu

Scholarship. Character. Culture. Service.

CLAREMONT MCKENNA COLLEGE


Liberal arts college with an emphasis on preparing leaders in business, government and the professions. Best of both worlds as a member of The Claremont Colleges. Suburban location near Los Angeles.



890 Columbia Ave.
Claremont, CA 91711
909-621-8088
www.mckenna.edu

Colby·Sawyer College

Colby-Sawyer is a comprehensive baccalaureate college that integrates the liberal arts and sciences with professional preparation. Take a virtual tour of our beautiful New England campus and learn more about our vibrant, close-knit learning community at www.go.colby-sawyer.edu.



Colby-Sawyer College
541 Main Street
New London, NH 03257
(800) 272-1015


CORNELL UNIVERSITY

Cornell, as an Ivy League school and a land-grant college, combines two great traditions. A truly American institution, Cornell was founded in 1865 and remains a place where "any person can find instruction in any study."

410 Thurston Avenue
Ithaca, NY 14850
607-255-5241
www.cornell.edu

Dartmouth


A member of the Ivy League and widely recognized for the depth, breadth, and flexibility of its undergraduate program, Dartmouth offers students an extraordinary opportunity to collaborate with faculty in the pursuit of their intellectual aspirations.



6016 McNitt Hall
Hanover, NH 03755
603-646-2875
www.dartmouth.edu

Preparing students with individual learning styles for transfer to four-year colleges.

15 majors including two B.A. programs in Arts & Entertainment Management and Dance.



DEAN COLLEGE

Prepare for what's next.

99 Main Street
Franklin, MA 02038


www.dean.edu
877-TRY DEAN

DELAWARE VALLEY COLLEGE

- 1,600 Undergraduate Students
- Nationally Ranked Athletics Teams
- More than 35 programs of study including Criminal Justice, Business Administration, Small Animal Science, Equine Studies, and Counseling Psychology.

Delaware Valley College
Doylstown, PA

WWW.DELVAL.EDU • 800-2-DELVAL




DESALES UNIVERSITY

Built on Catholic education values of academic excellence, DeSales University is driven by educators and advisors that inspire performance.

2755 Station Avenue
Center Valley, PA 18034

877.4.DESALES
www.desales.edu/teenink



DUQUESNE UNIVERSITY

Duquesne offers more than 80 undergraduate programs, more than 200 extracurricular activities and personal attention in an atmosphere of moral and spiritual growth. Ranked by *US News* among the most affordable private national universities.

600 Forbes Avenue • Pittsburgh, PA 15282
(412) 396-6222 • (800) 456-0590

www.duq.edu/admissions

FORDHAM

THE JESUIT UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

Fordham offers the distinctive Jesuit philosophy of education, marked by excellent teaching, intellectual inquiry and care of the whole student, in the capital of the world.

www.fordham.edu/tink



global college


LONG ISLAND UNIVERSITY
experience the world

Earn a BA in **Global Studies** while studying at our centers in Costa Rica, India, China, NYC or with our programs in Australia, Taiwan, Turkey and Thailand!

9 Hanover Place, Brooklyn, NY 11201
www.liu.edu/globalcollege
718.780.4312 • globalcollege@liu.edu

Fostering creativity and academic excellence since 1854. Thrive in our environment of personalized attention *and* in the energy of the Twin Cities.

1536 Hewitt Avenue
Saint Paul, MN 55104
800-753-9753
www.hamline.edu




HAMLIN UNIVERSITY

HARVARD

Harvard offers 6,500 undergraduates an education from distinguished faculty in more than 40 fields in the liberal arts as well as engineering and applied science.




8 Garden Street
Cambridge, MA 02138
617-495-1551
www.harvard.edu



Hawaii Pacific University

A challenging private university for adventurous students seeking an education with global possibilities.



Get Where You Want To Go
www.hpu.edu/teenink

ITHACA

Located in New York's stunning Finger Lakes region, Ithaca College provides a first-rate education on a first-name basis. Its Schools of Business, Communications, Health Sciences and Human Performance, Humanities and Sciences, and Music and its interdisciplinary division offer over 100 majors.

my.ithaca.edu
100 Job Hall, 953 Danby Road
Ithaca, NY 14850
800-429-4272 • www.ithaca.edu/admission

An experience of a lifetime, with experience for a lifetime.



JOHNSON & WALES UNIVERSITY

BUSINESS
CULINARY ARTS
HOSPITALITY
TECHNOLOGY

Providence, Rhode Island
1-800-342-5598
www.jwu.edu

MACALESTER

Academic excellence and global perspective in one of America's most "livable" metropolitan areas.



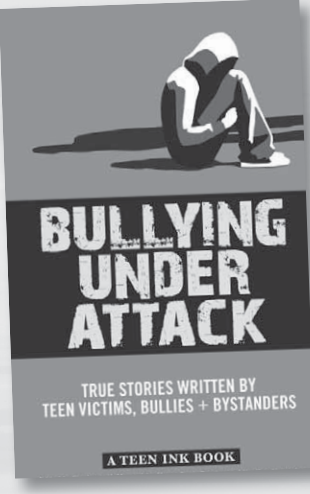
1000 Grand Avenue
St. Paul, MN 55105
800-231-7974
www.macalester.edu

MOUNT HOLYOKE

Mount Holyoke is a highly selective liberal arts college for women, recognized worldwide for its rigorous academic program, its global community, and its legacy of women leaders.

MOUNT HOLYOKE COLLEGE
50 College Street, South Hadley, MA 01075
www.mtholyoke.edu

MEET THE BULLY, THE BULLIED, AND THE BYSTANDER.



"Wow. The only book about the problem of bullying entirely written by teenagers. I know their personal stories will move you, anger you, inspire you—even scare you."
—R.L. Stine, author of the *Goosebumps* series

TRUE STORIES WRITTEN BY TEEN VICTIMS, BULLIES + BYSTANDERS
A TEEN INK BOOK

Available now at Amazon.com, BN.com & bookstores everywhere!



Nichols College

Learn. Lead. Succeed.

www.nichols.edu



NORTHERN

OHIO NORTHERN UNIVERSITY

Ohio Northern is a comprehensive university of liberal arts and professional programs offering more than 3,600 students over 70 majors in the colleges of Arts & Sciences, Business Administration, Engineering, Pharmacy and Law.

Office of Admissions
Ada, OH 45810
1-888-408-4668
www.onu.edu/teen

GET YOUR COLLEGE LISTED

IN THIS DIRECTORY & ON TEENINK.COM

1-800-363-1986
John@TeenInk.com
TeenInk.com/College-Directory

OHIO WESLEYAN UNIVERSITY

- Nationally ranked liberal arts college
- Self-designed and interdepartmental majors
- Small classes taught by distinguished faculty
- 100+ campus organizations
- 23 NCAA Division III sports
- A tradition of service-learning

61 S. Sandusky St. • Delaware, OH 43015
800-922-8953 • www.owu.edu

PACE UNIVERSITY

Work toward greatness.

- The largest internship placement program of any university in the New York Metropolitan Area.
- Two strategic New York locations.
- More than 100 undergraduate majors and combined, accelerated bachelor's and graduate degree programs.

Visit us today and find out more about the real value of a Pace education.
www.pace.edu/teen • 1-800-874-7223

degrees that work.®
BACHELOR | ASSOCIATE | CERTIFICATE

Choose from more than 100 career fields.
www.pct.edu/ink

Pennsylvania College of Technology

PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY

Pratt

Talent teaches talent in Pratt's writing BFA for aspiring young writers. Weekly discussions by guest writers and editors. Nationally recognized college for the arts. Beautiful residential campus minutes from Manhattan.

200 Willoughby Avenue
Brooklyn, NY 11205
800-331-0834 • 718-636-3514
email: jaaron@pratt.edu
www.pratt.edu

Princeton University

Princeton simultaneously strives to be one of the leading research universities and the most outstanding undergraduate college in the world. We provide students with academic, extracurricular and other resources, in a residential community committed to diversity.

Princeton, NJ 08544
(609) 258-3060
www.princeton.edu

QUINNIPIAC UNIVERSITY

A picturesque New England campus, offering programs in Business, Communications, Health Sciences, Arts and Sciences, Engineering, Nursing, Education, Law and Medicine. Located midway between New York City and Boston with Division I athletics. Consistently rated among the top Regional Colleges in the North in *U.S. News & World Report*.

275 Mt. Carmel Avenue
Hamden, CT 06518
1.800.462.1944
www.quinnipiac.edu

ST. MARY'S UNIVERSITY

- Personal attention to help you excel
- Powerful programs to challenge you to think in new ways
- No limits to where St. Mary's can take you

One Camino Santa Maria
San Antonio, TX 78228-8503
800-367-7868
www.stmarytx.edu

STANFORD UNIVERSITY

A distinguished faculty, an innovative curriculum and outstanding undergraduates offer unparalleled opportunities for intellectual growth on a beautiful California campus.

Mongtag Hall - 355 Galves St.
Stanford, CA 94305
650-723-2091
www.stanford.edu

SWARTHMORE

A liberal arts college of 1,500 students near Philadelphia, Swarthmore is recognized internationally for its climate of academic excitement and commitment to bettering the world. A college unlike any other.

500 College Ave.
Swarthmore, PA 19081
800-667-3110
www.swarthmore.edu

University of Pittsburgh Bradford

Earn a world-renowned degree in a personalized environment. Work with professors who will know your name and your goals. Choose from 40 majors and many research, internship and study-abroad opportunities.

go beyond
www.upb.pitt.edu • 1.800.872.1787
Bradford, PA 16701

THE UNIVERSITY OF RHODE ISLAND

Attention all writers! URI has a great major called "Writing and Rhetoric." Prepare yourself for a career as a journalist, a novelist, an advertising copywriter, a public relations professional, or an English teacher! Located minutes from RI's gorgeous beaches.

Newman Hall, Kingston, RI 02881
401-874-7100
uri.edu/artsci/writing/

UW-STOUT

READY to meet the demands of society

READY to inspire innovation

READY to hit the ground running

Menomonie, Wisconsin
www.uwstout.edu/admissions

Ursuline

VALUES • VOICE • VISION

Private, Catholic, liberal arts college founded in 1871 by the Ursuline Sisters. Offers over 30 undergraduate majors and 9 graduate programs. The only women-focused college in Ohio and one of few in the United States. Ursuline teaches the empowerment of self.

2550 Lander Rd. Pepper Pike, OH 44124
1-888-URSULINE • www.ursuline.edu

WILKES UNIVERSITY

Located in beautiful northeastern Pennsylvania, Wilkes is an independent institution dedicated to academic excellence, mentoring and hands-on learning. Wilkes offers more than 36 programs in pharmacy, the sciences, liberal arts and business.

Check out www.becolonel.com.

www.wilkes.edu
84 West South Street
Wilkes-Barre, PA 18766 | 1-800-WILKES-U

YALE

Yale College, the undergraduate body of Yale University, is a highly selective liberal arts college enrolling 5,200 students in over 70 major programs. Residential life is organized around Residential Colleges where students live and eat.

P.O. Box 208234
New Haven, CT 06520
203-432-9300
www.yale.edu

SUBSCRIBE.

Your writing will blossom

WRITERMAG.COM THE WRITER

NEW YORK IS MY CAMPUS • FORDHAM IS MY SCHOOL

OFFICE OF UNDERGRADUATE ADMISSION
(800) FORDHAM | enroll@fordham.edu | www.fordham.edu

FORDHAM UNIVERSITY
THE JESUIT UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

Teen Ink is the perfect holiday gift!

www.TeenInk.com/subscribe

Our 27th Year

Why I Don't Celebrate Christmas

by Farha Khalidi, Chester, NY

“What are you putting on your Christmas wishlist?” my overly enthusiastic friend asked me.

“Well, nothing. I don't actually celebrate it,” I said uncomfortably.

She blinked at me. “Why not?”

“I'm not Christian ...” I said, even more uncomfortably. I was really hoping that she was not going to ask what my religion was.

“Yeah, but you can still put up a tree and do the non-religious stuff, right?”

I grew up in a pretty rigid Muslim household. Currently I attend boarding school, so I am not surrounded by the cultural pressures of my home. For most of my life I did not have much chance to think for myself, and I considered religion a hereditary thing that you just were. Now that I am forming my own opinions about the world, I am currently an atheist. Maybe I won't always be, but at this point in my life, I am certainly not a Christian.

I formulate most of my ideas and beliefs from learning and through experiences at the all-girls school I attend. Of course, with 300 girls crammed into our campus, ideas circulate freely. One belief that almost everyone endorses is feminism. Everyone has a different idea of what it actually means. To some, feminism is an ideology that breeds man-hating atheists (whom I think are bigots). To me, feminism is simply the idea that everyone should have equal rights. I am a supporter of intersectional feminism, which means the inclusion of people of different abilities, races, genders, sexualities, etc.

A big aspect of feminism is recognizing cultural appropriation, which means adopting aspects of a culture that is not yours. One example is a white person having dreadlocks or cornrows, which are an icon of the black culture. Other examples include the appropriation of Native American tribal prints and henna tattoos from South Asia and the Middle East.

Turning one aspect of a culture into a trend is disrespectful because it is treating that culture like a disposable prop or costume that is in style with no deeper context or meaning. Now, you might be wondering this has to do with Christmas. Well, in basic terms, Christmas is a celebration of the birth of Jesus, the Christian savior. Most people assume that there is no such thing as appropriation of white, Christian culture, since it is the dominant group in the United States, but I think this is not true.

When I was younger I knew a girl who read the Bible between classes and in any other free time. She was bullied by peers, called a “Jesus freak,” and assumed to be homophobic because she was devoted to Christianity. Of course she loved Christmas as well as the joys of tree decorating, baking cookies, and Santa, but she also recognized the religious significance of the day.

Now, these same bullies probably celebrated Christmas too – or at least the parts of Christmas that they wanted to (i.e. the fun parts). I have met people of different religions who celebrate Christmas this way, without any religious devotion. But I consider this hypocrisy. Of course, I am offended when my culture is appropriated, so I would never try to claim a part of someone else's. I grew up in a household where only Indian food was prepared – strong-smelling food that my parents would eat with their hands. My friends called our food gross

and made fun of my parents for eating with their hands. Kids at school would torment me about the thickness of my eyebrows, my parents' accents, our Middle Eastern clothes, and that at times I would accidentally say words in Hindi.

In response to the bullying, I stripped myself of any connection to my cultural roots. I told my parents that I did not want to learn Hindi or visit India, I even stopped eating Indian cuisine, and started to wax my eyebrows pencil thin.

A few weeks ago, my school cafeteria served Indian food. I was with my white friend when I mispronounced the name of one of the food items.

“You said it wrong. Aren't your parents from India?” she asked, laughing.

“Yeah, I'm Indian,” I said, feeling awkward.

“Hon, sorry to break it to you, but you're not Indian at all,” she said jokingly.

I was very offended but tried to hide it. All I was thinking in that moment was: *I ditched my roots so white people would stop judging me. I let myself be white-washed. Now, just because you like to take pictures of yourself with a henna tattoo and a bindi, and try Indian food, you're more Indian than me? Get over yourself.*

But instead, I just smiled. And started crafting this article.

Back to my main point, the girl who was called

Turning one aspect of a culture into a trend is disrespectful

a “Jesus freak” was tormented for most of her childhood. Where do people get off invalidating her or anyone else's experience of appropriation just because she is white and Christian? Who am I to expect people to stop trying to style up my culture and copy and paste the trendy parts of my roots, when some minorities fail to recognize that they are doing the same thing?

I hope that your main take away is that you should partake of your culture, be proud of your culture, YOUR culture. Respect other cultures, but do not steal their traditions. Sure, bake cookies. Put poinsettias in your house. String up holiday lights. But don't celebrate Christmas unless you are Christian. Appropriation really does go both ways. ♦



Photo by Ike Pilato, Bound Brook, NJ

What Science Is Missing

by Megan Chappie, Clarksville, OH

Long ago, humans looked at the world and wondered. They gazed at the stars and found them beautiful. They watched the change of the seasons and marveled. They heard the chirping of the birds and were spellbound.

Where had all this splendor come from? Humans pondered this question for long days and nights. They had no telescope to observe the stars, no microscope to explore the basic components of living things, but they did have a brain that was more complex than the most wondrous of modern computers. So they thought, and they arrived at the conclusion that there was a Higher Being in charge of it all, a Creator responsible for all this creation.

This belief of humankind took different shapes in different times and places. The Greeks believed that many gods and goddesses dwelt in glory on Mount Olympus. Zeus, Hera, and hundreds of other divinities still capture the world's imagination today. The Norse believed in the sky-god Odin and myriad deities – Loki and Freya and the thunder-god Thor. The Sumerians had the fiercely beautiful Ishtar, and the Egyptians worshiped Amun-Ra and Osiris. And in a little stretch of fertile land called Canaan, a group of people called the Hebrews claimed to have the true belief – a belief in One All-Powerful God, a God with a Name so sacred it was not to be spoken by the light tongues of men.

Flash forward several thousand years to the present day. Humans have made great strides in science and technology, achievements so remarkable our ancestors would not have believed such things possible. Now we look at the world and discover. We peer at the stars through a telescope and find that they are massive orbs of burning gas, suspended in a limitless universe and visible from distances so great it makes one dizzy to think about them. We have studied the change of the seasons and learned that they are caused by

the tilting of Earth on its axis as it spins its course around the sun. We scrutinize the intricate anatomy of living things and know that they are composed of living cells, each a little unit of activity in itself – and, furthermore, that every element is formed at its most basic level of tiny atoms, that

within these atoms are even tinier particles called protons and neutrons and electrons – that all of this is so minuscule and yet so detailed that it is nearly as mind-boggling as the enormity of the universe.

Can you imagine what primitive humans would have thought if they had known this world was so vast, so intricate, so surprising? How do you think they would have reacted? With a resounding “Wow”? A breathless confusion of wonder? We could hardly expect anything else! Early humans' sense of wonder at the world around them, already admirably awakened, would have

Where has our sense of wonder gone?

These Revolutionary Times

by Camille Intson, Dundas, ON, Canada

This year we made history. This past summer, I was but one of the billions of people overwhelmed with pride and happiness for the men, women, and other gender identities who were vindicated by the Supreme Court ruling on same-sex marriages. The social reform we have spawned will go down in history, defining generations of open-minded revolutionaries in the charge for equality. I am ecstatic. I consider myself infinitely fortunate to have been born in such a socially conscious era. Each and every day, conservative moral standards are challenged by the new voices of today's youth – my generation of misfits and phone-hounds.

I was born in 1997. I was raised on All The Right Type and Kid Pix, exercising my creativity through puzzle-based computer games and artistic programs. From age nine, my generation relied on technology as the notebooks in which we wrote turned into Microsoft Word documents. Pencils turned into keyboards, and desks to monitors. Our teachers encouraged us to use the world of information at

our fingertips to learn and create and to satisfy our curiosity concerning the world around us.

When I turned 12, all of this changed.

The very people who had bewitched our minds with the charm of new technology were now hell-bent on taking it away. Time and time again, I heard: "Your generation have all got ADD because you can't get off your computers and phones," "Maybe it's the technology that's made you all so aloof," and my favorite, "Why are computers brainwashing our kids into being narcissistic, simple-minded zombies?" Even now, as I sit at my laptop creatively writing or toying with video editing software, I am accused of "being on Facebook all the time" and "letting my brain turn to mush."

Now it is 2015. I am 18. An active contributor to multiple social media platforms, I have grown up with generations of Tumblr bloggers and

Twitter users. I have felt humbled by the rise of YouTube and the many ways it has inspired people to pursue their dreams. I have used the Internet as a means of self-expression, sharing my writing and music with the world. I have had the pleasure of meeting many open-minded, socially enlightened individuals. I have been bombarded with positive messages on every social website that has taken me into its cyber home.

With the legalization of gay marriage and the spread of gender equality movements such as HeForShe, my social feed seems to be exploding with overwhelming support for equality and respect for individuality. Emma Watson's address to the United Nations surpassed 15 million views on YouTube, and Facebook's Celebrate Pride campaign has consumed its users' newsfeeds. Internet stars like Joey Graceffa, Ingrid Nilsen, and Caitlyn Jenner have used social media to reach out to teens struggling with their sexual identities,

From age nine, my generation relied on technology

grown a thousandfold if they had learned, in a moment, all the truths that modern humans have uncovered over the centuries.

And yet, what do modern humans think? We certainly don't have the same reaction that ancient humans would have.

Modern science draws conclusions that would shock any self-respecting wonderer of the ancient world.

"There is no God."

"This universe is the product of chance."

"Humankind was not designed, but came about due to random evolution."

Where has our sense of wonder gone? It has disappeared, flown away like the epic mythology of that ancient world. Only snatches remain, and these are scorned. We think ourselves so very smart, don't we? We know we have learned much since those days of the old philosophers, and so we disregard their wisdom. It is true that we have made great progress in the past several thousand years. But does this mean we should reject the wisdom and great thoughts that were the basis for our learning?

We have lost that supreme, that essential, that glorious sense of wonder! And with it, we have lost our belief in Something Greater.

It is ridiculous, what we have done. It is as though a peasant had a clock and always knew it had been crafted by someone, and then, upon breaking the clock's face and seeing the intricate clockwork inside, decided the clock made itself. Or as though a group of children, having lived all their lives in a house and assuming its builder had been a capable workman, suddenly came out of the house and realized it had

merely been a dollhouse in a room more magnificent and massive than anything they had ever seen – and concluded that there was no builder at all.

As our knowledge has grown, our wonder has shrunk. It doesn't make sense to me. Does it to you?

Maybe the ancients were on to something when they said there was a higher power. I'm not saying we should go back to believing in Zeus. I'm just saying that moving forward in science doesn't mean turning away from belief in a higher power.

No matter how informed the modern and atheistic mind is, it cannot be denied that there is something missing – a sense of awe and wonder at the world around us. It would be a shame if we accepted the new marvels of modern science at the expense of that wonder. Because that sense of wonder is what makes life worthwhile. ♦

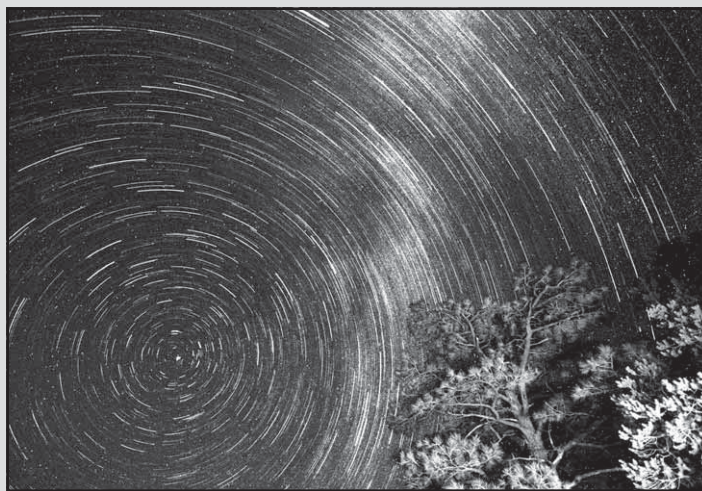


Photo by Ethan Lai, Belmont, MA

by sharing their own inspiring coming-out stories. Popular artists such as Macklemore have released chart-topping singles promoting equality, such as "Same Love," the video of which has been viewed and shared 145 million times.

Campaigns for social justice have gone instantly viral, most recently "Justice For Leelah Alcorn" and "Pray for Charleston." Racist, sexist, and other derogatory terms are shunned both online and within the walls of my high school. Gender neutral washrooms are beginning to be opened. The transgender community has been widely accepted thanks to web stars like Gigi Gorgeous and Netflix series like "Orange Is the New Black." Words like "sl*t" and "wh*re" have almost become extinct as feminism gains mainstream momentum. And this is barely a sliver of the progress made.

I, for one, have sat through many long dinner stories that start with "when I was your age" and end with "we didn't even have the Internet, and we were much happier." But what did "much happier" entail? Back when my parents were teenagers, it was normal to use racist slang in everyday conversation. Words like "retarded" were acceptable. The idea of third wave feminism was laughed at, and sexual education still had a long way to go. Does that sound "much happier" to you?

Despite all this, we know our fight is not over. Three years ago, when I was enrolled in eighth grade sexual education, I felt scammed because never once did we discuss female sexuality. We were taught that only men had sexual desires, and it was our duty to hold them off until marriage.

As a woman, I feel cheated by the media for placing so many unrealistic standards and expectations on me every day. At my senior prom, I went dateless when all my friends had escorts. I remember my dad saying, "It must be strange going to prom without a boyfriend. Are you sure you're okay?" I found this question odd. If I were a boy, would I get the same reaction? I look forward to the day when women are paid the same pay as men for the same work. I hope it comes soon.

Despite all this, I have the utmost faith in what our generation can accomplish in the constant fight for equality and justice. I am proud to have grown up on a computer, to have gone through my hardest years in such an accepting online environment. I am proud to have contributed to one of the most important social revolutions in history. I am proud that I never got off "that friggin' phone." ♦

Christmas in the Amazon

by Simone Nix, Katonah, NY

The waiting is endless, and even more excruciating because I can't picture what's in store. I squirm in the slippery beige chair, amidst an ocean of beige seats on a spotty beige carpet surrounded by beige walls and one impossibly large window giving me a glimpse of the largest airplane I've ever seen. A double-decker for the length of the plane, with the rear end well out of my sight, this creature dwarfs the ordinary planes around it. The tiny pilot windows in the gargantuan nose stare accusingly through the window at me – unfriendly – like the beady eyes of a bird. I'm going to board this plane with my three sisters in “just a few more minutes,” as I'm reminded again by my parents. My stomach tingles with a sick feeling. It's not excitement. You don't get excited for what you can't imagine. On the other hand, I do have a very clear idea of what I'm leaving behind: the gently falling snow and frosty air, stacks of colorful presents under a fragrant pine tree, buttery cookies, foil-wrapped candies, and caroling in front of the Village Green bonfire after the candlelight service. I'm leaving Christmas behind.

A small patch of raw pink skin forms on my left palm, but I don't mind. I'm swinging around a splintered bark pole, one of four that support the thatched-roof embarkation area at the base of the landing. The dock is a makeshift assortment of wood planks and logs, snaking like a peninsula far into a murky river so wide that I can't really see the other side. The water gently laps the shore, brushing against orange flowers and cloudy sand. Catapulting myself around the pole one more time, I catch my breath, inhaling the fragrant moist air of Brazil. This is not the Brazil of cosmopolitan cities, crystal beaches, or the upcoming Olympics. Instead, after boarding that aircraft in New York, I fell asleep and awoke to find myself transported to a different and exotic world.

Pausing mid-swing, I glance up – way up – at the cluster of thatched-roof huts on stilts 60 feet above this tributary of the Amazon River. These airborne cabins are my home for the next two weeks. In fact, the entire hotel complex hovers in the misty air above the river, connected by a series of boardwalks. Since it is December, most of the tangle of vines and brush beneath the maze of walkways is exposed. In just a few short weeks, the rainy season will begin, making the river swell and drown most of what I see. At that point, this village on poles will be an odd type of water park perched above the flood



Photo by Grace Brindle, Westfield, NJ

I found myself transported to an exotic world

waters.

I spot the cabin I share with my four-year-old sister and two mischievous black monkeys who love to swing on our porch hammock. Below our cabin, a lone capybara roams, rooting through the brush for food. I've already learned the Brazilian capybara is the world's biggest rodent, the size of a large pig. What does he do when the river rises?

I marvel at the thought of waking up to this tropical home each day, with the perfume of flowers, flashy bird plumages, and chattering wildlife, instead of the drone of my sister's cartoons on the kitchen television. The locals here don't give a second thought to the monkeys, birds, and capybaras. But I'm from a different world, where the most interesting animal is a wild turkey.

I hear the low grumbling of an ancient motor approaching. Just as the smell of gasoline assaults my nose, my family joins me on the dock. My youngest sister chants and dances, as if this dock is her stage: “If ya step on a crack you'll break your momma's back!” Pushing this annoyance out of my mind, I let go of my pole, stretch, and look for the source of the fumes. Idling near the landing is a low-riding, white dinghy piloted by a local with a genial smile. He wears an oversized polo with a blotchy bleach stain in the center. On his head is a faded blue cap with a NY Yankees logo.

“Are you the family from the Upper-River Cabins?” he asks in a musical Portuguese accent. After seeing us all nod, he continues: “I am Mo. I will be your guide today.”

Mo invites us to step aboard with a sweeping gesture. I sit in between my older sister and mother on a rough plank wedged in steel grooves. We delicately position ourselves, yet the craft still rocks dangerously, allowing the edges to dip into the water. I peer over the edge and see my blurred reflection. I notice the hull is covered in a coppery moss. I wonder how this peeling assortment of wooden planks will stay afloat. I wonder briefly why nobody has given me a life jacket. I can see my parents are having the same thought but suppress their worry, gripping each of us a bit tighter. I guess this is yet another difference between my world and this one. After everyone is situated, Mo jerks the cord, causing the motor to choke into life. The low grumbling begins again and we're off.

As we move along the water, I am struck by all the colors. The riverbanks, 200 yards apart, are primarily gray and green. The monochromatic vision changes as we approach the banks. Then we see the brown, yellow, and sharper green of massive rubber trees, towering reeds, and the occasional hut. More dramatic breaks in the color scheme occur when the rainforest is punctuated by a brilliant flash of red, blue, or yellow as a toucan passes.

I squint at the late afternoon sun for a minute before squeezing my eyes shut. When I reopen them, I see four small black spots. The sun spot game is interrupted when my father starts to lecture us on the history of tribes and plant life in the Amazon, starting with the predicable: “Did you know that ...”



Photo by Zoe Ziff, Bogota, Colombia

He is cut off by a loud gasp. Mo is excitedly pointing, his mouth agape. The *putt-putt* of the motor coughs and then goes silent. Two pink objects glide toward our boat. “Pink Amazon river dolphins!” Mo grins at our shocked reactions.

As we stare wide-eyed, Mo explains that this is the rarest variety of dolphins in the world. The glistening sun casts rainbows across their backs, like my driveway when the sprinkler meets the sun's rays. Their torsos are like pink rubber, yet their oiliness reflects the greens and grays surrounding us. They dive in and out, playing or showing off. Finally, after enchanting us, they turn toward the setting sun and take one final plunge, leaving nothing but ripples.

We sit in stunned silence. Finally, Mo says, “You have a better chance at winning the jackpot than to see a pink river dolphin.” He also explains that by the time my sisters and I are adults, there will be no pink river dolphins left here. Pollution is killing them. I am devastated by that prediction.

The sun begins to sink more rapidly, casting a triangular orange sheen on the water and transforming the edges from gray to green, then blue and, finally, black. We have one more stop before returning to the lodge. Mo pulls a flashlight out of the floor cabinet and hands it to my father.

“Keep it off for now, but be ready.”

Ready for what?

We make our way through the twilight. I see the wake behind us, waves rippling outward diagonally. Our motor cuts through the inky water, which reflects the moon and stars, creating two skies – one above, one below. A cacophony of sound envelops us. The river at night is a new world and far more ominous than by day.

Suddenly Mo cuts the engine and points toward two orange points of light. We glide silently toward these lights, which I realize, with terror, are eyes. At the same moment as the boat strikes ground, Mo lunges over the side and rises with a squirming reptile in his arms. A caiman!

Instructing my father to shine the beam at its face to momentarily quiet the creature, Mo gently presses at the corners of its jaws, causing the mouth to open and reveal dozens of white pointed teeth.

“You may put your finger in its mouth, if you want,” instructs Mo.

Tentatively I extend my finger, completely in the moment and trusting that the luck that had gotten me this far will hold. Nothing happens! >>

Two mischievous monkeys swing on our porch hammock

Belize Navidad

by Kim Do, San Jose, CA

“Let’s go somewhere.” Three simple words that undeniably arouse any adventurer. It was these words that ignited every physical sense. It was these words that elicited a smirk with the response, “What about Belize?”

Well, what about Belize? Maybe it was because I was attracted to the way the syllables rolled off my tongue, or perhaps because I lusted for the scent of jungle air. But even as I boarded the plane, my sleeves were still stained with trepidation. Should I have just stayed home? Sipped on hot cocoa, continued with my plebeian routine? Surely, it was the safer route: an insect-free, sweat-free holiday break. But there was something about my jitters that also forged an appetite for adventure and enticement.

So there I was, sleepless in SFO, preparing to embark on my expedition to Belize in late December. This remote Central American country borders the southeastern tip of Mexico and the northern edge of Honduras. While relatively small in size, its geographical wonders are not to be underestimated. Belize offers an invitation to ancient Mayan ruins, clear skies, and a flavorful taste of the native cuisine.

When I arrived in San Ignacio that late December



Photo by Kara Schachter, Springfield, NJ

I have one recommendation for a full life: travel

morning, I was welcomed by mascara-smudging humidity and amiable locals. “Belize Navidad!” they cried. How they managed to crack a joke in the 90° degree weather left me pondering.

My sojourn comprised four days in San Ignacio, where I explored the renowned Actun Tunichil Muknal Cave, caressed baby iguanas, and held 2,000-year-old artifacts. The next three days were spent in Placencia, where I bid farewell to my final seconds of 2014 and leapt into 2015.

While exploring the No’ Och cave and Xunantunich ruins top my wildest experiences, the friendships I made were the most memorable of the trip. The backpackers were from as far away as Munich, London, and Quebec and as close to home as Santa

Rosa and Santa Barbara, and each one furthered my passion for traveling through their stories. They gave me memories that cannot be captured in a photograph and laughter that cannot be reproduced.

Brazil-bound 21-year-old Halli cultivated a confidence in me I didn’t know was possible. Central American backpacking mother Michelle helped me appreciate simplicity. British entrepreneur Aysha was living proof that solo female travel is possible. Switzerland-based globetrotter Jeff helped me realize that materials cannot bring me any amount of happiness. I discovered how meaningful friendships can be. I found my inner shyness. And frankly, I realized that my body does not respond well to bug bites. These are the new qualities you gain from international travel – the moments that help you grow, conquer your fears, and conquer the world.

As descendants of nomadic people, moving and traveling have and will always be an essential part of my being. But traveling is more than the idea of being

in a new environment – it’s the opportunity to grow. You’ll face challenges abroad that are incomparable to those encountered at home. You’ll challenge your limits by meeting non-English speakers. You’ll find yourself second-guessing your decisions as you climb 30-foot boulders in slippery Texas.

Whether or not this illustrious country will make its way onto your bucket list, I have one recommendation for a full life: travel. At first, it will leave you speechless. Then, it will transform you into a storyteller. ♦

A Taste of Lebanon

Brights lights

He sits alone at the small red table, cold white tiles under his feet, warm air heavy with garlic but empty of people.

Fresh spinach and plump roma tomatoes swim in a lake of slippery olive oil and dark, sour vinegar

just the way Uncle taught him to make it.

Warm flatbread –

kneaded and pounded by his own bony hands instead of the strong, muscular ones of his son – is stuffed with bursting ripe tomatoes, crisp leafy lettuce bought from the farmer’s market instead of grown by his wife in their backyard,

loved and nourished

as she gently whispered Lebanese lullabies from their childhood together in Beirut.

Warm, tender gyro meat

sliced off the loaf

that is crammed in the tiny fridge,

lamb and beef that he mixed as he stood alone instead of behind his daughter

whose small fingers could not grind the meat

so he guided her

holding her precious hands in his.

Cool tzatziki sauce drips:

fresh, watery cucumbers, sweet onions, and thick cream carefully blended

with Pops’ spices, tediously added –

thyme, oregano, basil, garlic, salt,

and his secret Cavender’s mix –

still kept in the small green vial

now in the crowded pantry

of his American apartment

instead of the wide open shelves

of the kitchen in Tripoli.

The warm embrace of pita and gyro

the sweet explosions of fresh produce

and splashes of refreshing tzatziki

the acidic bite of vinegar and oil

overwhelm his taste buds

and send him home

to his lovely Aziza’s garden

to the tiny Shevna, playing at his feet and reaching

for the mixing bowl

to Uncle and Pops’ kitchen

full of spices, oils, and vinegar,

and Zahle, with the dough.

The taste of Lebanon

takes him home

so wherever he travels

he is never really gone.

by Katie Coe, Roswell, GA

One by one, each of us tries, pulling back and giggling as Mo teasingly pushes the caiman closer. When we are done, we stroke its smooth scales and then sadly watch Mo place it back in the water. In an instant, it disappears.

Suddenly I feel overwhelmed by this, and the entire day of rare experiences. As we leave the shadowy shore and head back, I close my eyes, lean against my mother, and listen to the cries and hums of unimaginable wildlife. What else lives here? What new mysteries could I uncover if I lived here? I visualize the pink river dolphins again, imagine them slipping in and out of the silky depths, making their way to their resting spots, safe for the night. I want those dolphins to live forever – and that little caiman too.

I cling to the hope that this river habitat and this fairytale experience will not be ruined by humans. I promise that one day I will visit again. I will introduce my own family to

Mo and ensure that his prediction is wrong. These magical creatures will still be here.

I open my eyes as the motor changes. We are idling as we approach the end of our excursion. Sleepily, I notice that the dock and the thatched-roof landing are draped in softly glowing golden lights. I look up and gasp. The cabins and the entire boardwalk are decked out in tiny glowing bulbs, soft and subtle against the greenish-black jungle night.

With a sudden awareness, I realize it is Christmas Eve . . . and I’m in Brazil. Not the Brazil of cosmopolitan cities, crystal beaches, or the upcoming Olympics. This Brazil is shy and hides from us. But now, with one magical boat ride, I’m connected to it forever. I think I understand what “a small world” means. And, as we follow the twinkling golden lights to our cabins, I smile and can’t help hugging myself with the satisfaction of that knowledge. ♦

Shades of Bias

by Sanjana Kaicker, New York, NY

In India, the skin-whitening market has skyrocketed since the 1970s, with products claiming to lighten skin abounding. The most famous, Fair and Lovely, and its male counterpart, Fair and Handsome (both made by Hindustan Unilever) have been widely popular, with ads appearing on most Indian television channels. These skin-lightening products are racist, dangerous, and morally wrong because they promote the idea that white is better, which across the world, people are trying to reverse.

In recent years, American culture has made great strides in trying to respect dark-skinned people through affirmative action and by creating major roles in music, acting, and fashion. Unfortunately, this is not the case in South Asian countries, including India. Darker-skinned people are often openly shamed, as one famous (or infamous) ad for Fair and Lovely demonstrates. In the ad, a young woman's father is upset because with her dark skin, she can't attract a spouse or get a good job to support the family. She applies to be an air hostess but is rejected. Meanwhile a fair-skinned applicant walks out smiling, presumably because she got the job. The father gives his daughter a bottle of Fair and Lovely cream, and she looks much lighter-skinned after she uses it. She reapplies for the job and gets it, and the dad rejoices. The ad suggests that dark-skinned people are inferior to fairer people, even though most of South Asia is not naturally fair. The product propagates a deep negative association with dark skin.

Bollywood actor and superstar Shahrukh Khan stars in an ad for Fair and Handsome, increasing the pressure even more to be light-skinned. The

ad shows him walking down a red carpet with cameras flashing everywhere. He stops to greet a dark-skinned male fan. The man then sees Khan act bravely in an action movie and is impressed by his fighting skills. Backstage, Khan approaches the fan again, this time handing him the Fair and Handsome cream, flagged by a group of giggling female admirers. The fan, after using the cream, is now much lighter, and is walking in Khan's place, with his own swarm of women. The ad cleverly uses a popular media figure to convince people to join the bandwagon, clearly implying that being fair will make you famous, respected, and attractive to women, again shaming those with dark skin.

Change the mindset about dark skin

Fair and Lovely, however, isn't just culturally damaging; it's also bad for users' health. The cream, in tests, was found to contain chemicals including mercury, which is poisonous; hydroquinone, which is banned; and cortisone, typically obtained by prescription. Fair and Lovely lightens skin by breaking down the melanin, which is what gives skin its pigment. Removing melanin can cause serious problems like skin cancer, because melanin protects skin from the sun's harmful UVA and UVB rays. Ironically, the Fair and

Lovely formula includes three types of sunscreen lotions.

Some argue that using the fairness cream is worth any risk, as long as they gain acceptance and a higher salary. However, for those who choose not to use it or don't have access to it – the larger part of dark-skinned society – the prejudice against dark skin shames them. Isn't it better for everyone if we change the mindset about dark skin?

Fairness creams propagate negative ideas about darker skin and can even cause skin cancer. Society, as a whole, should make an effort to be more accepting of everyone, regardless of their skin color. ♦



Art by Ashley Tsang, Johns Creek, GA

Black Sheep

by Amelia Duke, Bend, OR

“Our goal is to be spiritually pure. We cannot allow homosexuals to continue to seep into the pores of society and the Church.”

The teacher's droning voice seems devoid of emotion, as if he doesn't realize what he is saying.

I shift uncomfortably in my seat.

So do others, but for a different reason. I see a few noses wrinkle and eyes roll at the “H-word.” Homosexual. The teacher says it like it's some kind of disease, and the students shake their heads like there's a bad smell wafting through the room.

I consider walking out, something that would be classified as a startling act of rebellion, or standing up and telling them that their thinking is hateful and arrogant.

But I don't. I listen to the abhorrent statements, my face flushing, not from the hot June sun but from the hate swirling around the room. We are steeped in it from birth, like used tea bags brewed again and again.

The back of my knees, damp with perspiration, stick to the plastic chair.

I remember my history class, the period before. We are learning about the Holocaust, reading about the atrocities committed during that horrible time, all due to prejudice against “outsiders.”

I put my head down on my desk and wait for the bell. I try to imagine a place where I can walk down the hallways without heads turning, giggles erupting, and the whispered word “lesbian” following me. Apparently because I have the shortest hair of all the girls in the school, I qualify as gay.

“Aren't you going to tell them you're not a lesbian?” my friend asks.

“No. I don't need to defend myself against something that's not offensive,” I retort.

Gasps, averted eyes, and an uncomfortable silence settles in like a storm cloud before rain. In my tiny, conservative, classical Christian school, what I've just said is blasphemy. I am a heretic.

Lunchtime. I sit with my friends in the field behind the school, our legs tucked modestly beneath the folds of our knee-length plaid skirts, hands folded in our laps. A group of upper-classmen boys tussle over a soccer ball and occasionally steal glances our way to ensure we are watching them.

“You know, Mark's got his eye on you,” the girls all insist. Giggles ripple through the cluster.

The sweaty boys eventually wander over and sit down. Josh flips his hair over his eyes, and Mark shoves him, exclaiming, “You're so gay!” Mark stares at me

with an expectant look, like he just won the Comedian of the Year Award. His smile falters when I don't laugh, but the other girls giggle like geese.

I feel like a black sheep in a herd of pure white lambs, or maybe I'm the wolf.

Finally, school is over, and I rush home, ripping off my thick wool sweater and black stockings before I'm even inside. My uniform isn't the

Hate is toxic, like a disease

only reason I feel suffocated.

I pore over my history notes on the Holocaust and look up sources online. I read about a world free of opposition, no uncleanness or sin to be found, bountiful purity among the chosen people. I shiver.

Nazi ideals started out as ideas, then snowballed into something immensely more destructive. I am fairly confident that modern day America would never devolve to the horror of the Holocaust. Nevertheless, a valuable lesson can be learned from history. Hate is toxic, and like a disease, it spreads fast, and the results can be deadly.

I'm proud to say that this black sheep finally broke away from the herd. Less than a year later, I am co-president of the Gay Straight Alliance at my new school, a member of Queer Youth Space, and I attend regular workshops and training on how to develop Gay Straight Alliance Clubs in high schools.

I've found my spot, where I belong. Maybe being a black sheep isn't so bad after all. ♦

Spencer Wright by Candice Ward, Dawsonville, GA

What does it mean to be a hero? I think a hero is someone who goes out of their way to make others happy. A hero is someone who follows their heart and puts passion into everything they do. A hero is someone who cares for others more than they care for themselves. My hero is Mr. Wright, my chorus teacher.

When I was 12 years old, my grandparents passed away. I was really close to them, and losing them was the hardest thing I've ever had to go through. After they died, I couldn't eat, sleep, or think; I felt like I couldn't even breathe. It was as if my whole world had fallen out from under me, and I fell into this ginormous hole of depression. Every time I tried to climb out I'd fall in deeper, and the light would get further and further away.

Even though I was battling depression and suicidal thoughts, I was determined to make my high school years the best of my life. So when freshman year began, I walked into school holding my head high. It was difficult to be happy, but I had to try. I joined Women's Choir. Mr. Wright is the choral director and, man, does he love his job! He was so funny that first day, I just knew I had made the best decision of my life.

As the year progressed, I loved chorus more and more. I began to smile again and really enjoy life.

Then one day that all changed. My friends –

those I thought were my friends – started talking about me behind my back and spreading rumors. I was hurt, and I sat by myself. Mr. Wright came over and asked what was wrong. The look in his eyes told me that I could trust him. Trying hard to fight back tears, I told him the whole story.

When I finished, he nodded and told me, "If you never learn anything from me, learn this: No one is worth stealing your joy."

Mr. Wright saved my life that day, because, to be honest, I was considering ending everything. I was tired of crying, and I missed my grandparents so much, but what he said really struck a chord in my heart. He genuinely cared about me and what was going on. He went out of his way to help me feel better. I'll never forget that. I'll never be able to thank him enough, because he not only saved my life but has impacted every day of it since. Any time I feel like giving up, I remember Mr. Wright's words and push forward.

I'm proud to say that I beat my depression, and I'm now a senior. I'm still a part of chorus, and now I'm also in the best choir at my school, the Chamber Singers.

Mr. Wright is a hero to everyone he meets. He cares about every single person who walks through

He saved my life that day



Art by Ayden Williams, Solon, OH

his door, and he loves what he does more than any other teacher I've known. That's why he deserves to be Educator of the Year; he embodies what a teacher is supposed to be. He deserves the title not just this year but every year.

In closing, I just want to say thank you, Mr. Wright. Thank you for being there for me when no one else was. Thank you for the hugs. Thanks for the laughs and the smiles. Thanks for caring about me. Thanks for being an angel in my life and for saving me. Thank you over and over again for everything you've done for me. I honestly wouldn't be here today if it weren't for you. You're like a second dad to me, and I'm glad I had the opportunity to meet you. Mr. Wright, you are an amazing teacher, and I hope you realize that. You're my hero. ♦

Sebastian Cimetta by Sareema Husain, Richmond Hill, ON, Canada

Life's tough when you're a lethargic, self-loathing nincompoop. I was your classic case of a kid with wasted potential. I dragged through my high school days, thinking I was the main character in an indie coming-of-age movie, determined to spend my time listening to punk rock and enjoying the fleetingness of life. I had concluded that permanence was a facade and thus, I was going to dabble in and out of everything that threatened to make me care and never commit to anything. Friendships, obligations, school – everything. I was past caring and stuck in a mild case of inertia at the age of 16.

I did care about my grades, but unlike most of my peers, I did not equate them with my worth. However, I noticed that they made my parents happy, so I tried to get A's.

Then I joined the bandwagon of procrastination. I held nicknames like "cram queen" and was known as the girl who'd be up tweeting at 4 a.m. about her history notes. Somehow I maintained an honor roll average, and this reinforced my belief that my chaotic all-nighters and lack of consistent effort would do me no harm. This rebellious punker thought she was beating the system. I was a sardonic utter imbecile.

Then last year, I lugged my feet into his English class, took a seat in the back corner and immediately started shuffling

through songs on my iPod. My peers had told me to be scared of Sebastian Cimetta. They had told me he was a vulture, always ready to swoop down on those not paying attention. You couldn't afford not to be alert in his English class. He wouldn't let you get away with it.

But of course, I didn't care. I mean, why would I? I just had to study the book the night before the exam, and I'd get a flat 80 and could go home and watch reruns of "How I Met Your Mother." If he asked me why I didn't do the homework I'd reply, "I didn't have time." If he asked me if I read the book I'd say, "I'll do it tomorrow." If he told me not to sleep in class I'd mumble, "Sorry," and keep my head up. I was going to be the predictable, boringly average student putting in tiny specks of effort so he'd leave me alone.

But it didn't go as planned. Mr. Cimetta gave me a quizzical look whenever I would dish him one of my excuses, and he eventually let me know that they weren't acceptable. Fearing that he would call my parents, I began actually doing my homework. He'd talk to me after class, telling me what he expected and how I needed to pick up my slack and get things done on time. *What a pain*, I'd think. He was

demanding, and it looked like I couldn't slide out of this one easily.

Suddenly, I was actually listening in class. I noticed how passionate he was when teaching photography and slam poetry, things I enjoyed. I was intrigued and felt sorry when he'd ask the class a question and only receive yawns in response. Before I knew it, I was raising my hand. For three years in high school my report cards had always said "would benefit from active participation." That line had never motivated me, but something about the way he taught, the way he connected with students made me want to soak up all the knowledge he was offering. Then, he was no longer calling on me when I was half asleep because I was wide awake.

Mr. Cimetta doesn't see his students as a mass he has to educate, but rather views us as unique individuals; he really goes that extra mile to connect with us. He spoke to me of poetry and themes of rebellion and fighting the system – things that he knew I'd be interested in. Best of all, he continuously presents his classes with extracurric-

Before I knew it, I was raising my hand

ular opportunities such as writing competitions and slam poetry contests to help us cultivate our talents. Even after his class ended, he would email me opportunities, many of which I have become involved in.

I'm still that kid who tries to get by with the help of a cheeky smile and shifty feet, but I've become familiar with responsibility and have been trying to build it into my character. Mr. Cimetta always asks me how my artistic endeavors are going, and I look forward to keeping him updated. I now leap at opportunities instead of sitting by the sidelines. He made me realize that acting like a frivolous, nonchalant teenager was a mask I used to hide my lingering doubts about my ability to become the person I want to be.

But here's the thing; he believed in me even when I didn't believe in myself. I didn't care about living out my days only doing the minimal. But he did. He didn't let me take the easy way out, and he was tough about it. He'd tell me when I did a good job but didn't slack off on the criticism either. I have realized that I evolve most when there is someone around I want to make proud, like Mr. Cimetta. ♦

Nominate your teacher for *Teen Ink's* **Educator of the Year** contest. Go to www.teenink.com/contests for more info.

Is Golf a Sport?

by Annie Lu, Camas, WA

The game of golf has incited a shocking amount of controversy, given the subtle nature of the sport. Yes, I said it. Although golf is primed to become an Olympic event in 2016, many people still don't consider it a "real" sport. In fact, 48 percent of respondents to a Debate.org poll were on the denial end – virtually an even split.

There are many reasons why golf is often deemed "just a game." There is no sprinting, leaping, or lightning stutter steps involved. Audiences do

not pack stadiums, waving light sticks and cardboard heads of their favorite – or least favorite – players. During a golf match, crowds weave around and through the course, are silenced by officials, and demurely celebrate with a few "golf claps." There simply isn't the hand-to-hand combat in golf that we typically think of as sport. And that's all true. But there's much more to the story.

The modern version of golf was invented in Scotland in the 15th century. The Old Course at St. Andrews is thought to be the first modern golf course. And the Scottish connection stems not just from history. One of the sport's most prestigious championships, The Open, is held there annually. As the popularity of the game grew, tournaments like the Masters, the U.S. Open, and the PGA Championship were created; this foursome of majors became golf's most acclaimed matches.

On the wistfully stormy hills of St.

Andrews, in the shrouded calm of Augusta, and countless other unique playing fields, millions of fans have witnessed a new kind of history, not just in golf but in the sports world. Eras have passed, much like the Jordan era in basketball, or the Pele age in soccer. Golf spawned the Nicklaus-Palmer rivalry, one of the most loved and reveled in sports. And in the late 1990s, a young Tiger Woods rose to challenge former greats.

But today there is a still greater history being written, so new that the ink hasn't yet dried on the page. Golf is no longer an "old man's game." The age structure has become increasingly bottlenecked, as athleticism, strength, and flexibility are emphasized. Rory McIlroy, who grew up watching the prime of Tiger Woods, captured his first major championship at the age of 22, becoming the second-youngest player to win the U.S. Open. Since then, he has won three more major championships. April 2015 was the start of Jordan Spieth's meteoric rise, as he broke a course record at the Masters and captured the coveted green jacket at age 21. Spieth and McIlroy have helped

usher in a wave of fresh talent, audience, and character to golf in a revolutionary way. Golf balls are being driven farther, struck closer, and lofted higher than ever before. But the core of golf has retained its Scottish roots. There may be no spiking, dunking, or kicking. But there are pitches fine-tuned to a surgeon's blade, sometimes firmly and with roll, sometimes delicately carrying side spin. And there is dirt, sand, and water to muddy shoes and challenge creativity. And there is the calculation, the strategy, of sending a little white ball over curves and crannies. At times, there is the collapse of a swift bubbling of tension as a shot banks off awry,

or lips out of the hole, a frustration comparable to nothing else. And at times, there is the exhilaration of watching one roll into the cup that sends even the most decorous peanut gallery into an earth-shaking uproar that would overpower an MLB crowd following a home run.

So call it what you will – a sport, a game, a hobby. Maybe golf needs a category of its own. Maybe there's simply nothing else like it in the world. ♦



Photo by David Dickenson, Moreland Hills, OH

It is no longer an "old man's game"

The Summit

The gondola lurched forward as my stomach began to turn
Heading toward the looming icy summit
The happy faces of the people below became smaller and smaller

Just me and my dad staring out the window at the snow-covered
Green trees bending with the strong wind

The lift came to a sudden stop
Doors opened to the howling wind and flying ice
Scratching my skin and encouraging my fear
Everything was white but not sparkling in the sun
like the snow I had skied on before

My father sped off into the daunting white.
The only sound was the shrieking wind;
my call to my father was only a squeak
so small in such a vast place

My limbs became numb as the swirling ice and thick snow
found a way into my boots and mittens
I began to slowly slide forward into the white expanse
the path that my father had left behind him

I struggled through the windswept whiteness
foggy goggles blurring my vision as
I finally fell at my father's feet
Sprawled on the ice with a frozen face but independent

by Catherine Griffin, Durham, NC

Ice Princess

by Judith Chicoine, Clinton, CT

The blue velvet dress with ruffled edges and gems accenting the sleeves still rests in the back of my closet, the matching tiara propped atop my iHome. I have not worn the dress in ages, and although it no longer fits, it is full of memories from the past 11 years.

The dress stood out to me in the catalog solely because it resembled the one Michelle Trachtenberg wore in the movie "Ice Princess." Though, at six years old I could never comprehend the skills that her character, Casey Carlyle, did, I was just as enamored with the sensation of icy miles dissipating under my blades. The hour and 38 minutes left me in awe and envious of her abilities; I wanted to be just like her.

Saturday mornings, I pulled on my tights, the blue dress following. The car ride took a half hour but was well worth it. When we arrived at the rink, I exchanged hellos with the staff and laced up my boots next to the space heater. Opening the doors, I embraced the frosty air and the sound of anxious children. I stepped onto the ice and joined the Learn to Skate group.

For the next 11 years, every weekend from November to March saw the same routine: public skate from 12 to 1:30, then Learn to

Skate until 3:30, a freestyle session from 4 to 6, followed by another public skate. At the end of class, when we broke for free skate, I'd attempt tricks like the layback spin Casey had performed in "Ice Princess," not noticing the young eyes fixed upon me.

When I eventually became the teacher, I always found it peculiar that my students would beg me to execute jumps and spins for them, until their parents stopped me in the walkway and expressed their gratitude saying I had inspired their children. I responded with a smile, but I was always tearing up on the inside. I never knew that my students viewed me as someone to look up to, and in that moment, I realized that I had become their Casey Carlyle.

Since that encounter, I finally know the answer to all the questions about why I never attend school dances and am always busy on the weekends. For me, figure skating isn't about the medals – and certainly not the bruises; I love it because of the second family I have acquired and the people I have unintentionally touched and inspired along the way. The blue dress will always travel with me as I grow, a reminder that passion should be shared. After all, you never know who you might inspire. ♦

For me, figure skating isn't about the medals

Joy in the Darkness

by Siani Null, Wexford, PA

I believe that the world can be a dark place. Everyone faces horrible situations, people, and moments. Everyone comes to a helpless point at least once in their life, where they find no matter how desperately they want change, they have no ability to do anything. I also believe that there is good that comes out of every bleak moment – a kind of good that brings the amazing joy of overcoming and a kind of good that perhaps the darkness of the world is not aware of.

Last year I went on a mission trip to San Pedro Sula, Honduras. This changed my outlook on life. For the first time, I saw the world from outside the shelter and comfort of the United States. I saw transparent pain and struggle. Families of five lived on one dollar a day in cardboard and metal shacks by a dirty river. Fruit sellers and fire jugglers lined the roads, attempting to make a minuscule living. Malnourished, gray horses wandered along trash-covered dirt streets. Police armed with machine guns guarded every place. Life was so different. Life

Life was dangerous and unpredictable

was dangerous and unpredictable.

In the orphanage there, I held a precious newborn who would never know the name of her mother. I heard the story of a boy who was trapped in a cage for 10 years, resulting in his inability to walk without aid. At the community center, I spent time with a boy who traded his candy for other kids' pizza to take back to his family, because at eight he was the provider.

At the girls' home I connected with Lilian. At 15 years old she had been kicked out of her house because her dad did not want her. She had been raped by a man she did not know, and was being bullied at the center. I held Lilian, and in that moment all we could do was sob.

Because I was exposed to these lives, I believe the darkness I saw is a necessity to gain the most treasured ability in life: the ability to understand and have compassion for another. The lives of that baby, the young boy, and Lilian seemed to consist only of dark events. What I did not realize then was the enormity of joy each of them had despite their situation. Their

smiles were uncontainable. Their laughter was loud and contagious. Their joy, unfailing and courageous.

I can see the impact I was able to make in their lives but, more important, the impact they had on mine, all because of their experiences of darkness. I now see the power that companionship and human connection can

have during these moments and how that power can bring light to people's lives. And I now see the hope and strength a person can have even in the worst moments. This light brings joy, the kind of joy you can only achieve through experiencing and overcoming the worst darkness. ♦



Photo by Maria Abreu, San Juan, Puerto Rico

community service

Help for Homelessness

by Carol Zhang, Calgary, AB, Canada

Beginning my high school career, I'm in the same situation as many others. I don't know where I'll be in five years, or even what I'm passionate about.

The school I attend is the highest-ranked public school in Calgary, and I am surrounded by ambitious, talented individuals who all have their future planned. I am immersed in a monotonous cycle of studying, volunteering, sports, and preserving an optimal grade point average. We send our graduating friends off to Ivy League universities. We know nothing of drugs or alcohol, hunger or suffering beyond Shakespearean tragedies and *Oliver Twist*.

It's in a place like this that I've realized I don't know where I belong in this world, or if I even have a spot in

our society, a box among billions of boxes, marked with my name. Only now do I realize, however, how pathetic my worries are when compared to the less fortunate.

Last night during the evening news, I heard for the first time of the anti-homeless measures my city has taken. Brought to the public eye for the first time by protests, my city is one of several that have put spikes around public buildings. Designed to stop the homeless from sleeping underneath overhangs, they are immoral and insensitive. These places that we care little about and abandon at nighttime mean the difference between a restful night and one that feels like it will never end; these places can decide whether a man will live to see another day or die from exposure. These places can mean everything to someone without a home.

According to a study by the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty, a homeless man is eight times more likely to die than a man of the same age in the general population. It horrifies me to imagine how many more deaths will be caused by our inaction and outright hostility. It saddens me to wonder what could have been, what kind of talent and passion have been wasted because we've taken these preventative measures that have stopped fellow humans from rising from the streets.

But what shocked me the most was the reactions of those around me. They supported the anti-homeless spikes, commenting that they were an economical way to keep "their prob-

lems" and "dirty drunkards" away from us.

This makes me sick. What kind of person are you to so easily and remorselessly write off fellow humans as trash, as people who do not belong in our so-called civilized society?

What if John Lennon had been born to a single mother on the streets and never held a guitar? What if Ernest Hemingway had been taught to sell marijuana from a young age, and carried a handgun instead of a pen and paper?

It's true that those who live on the streets have problems that most of us have never had to deal with – or even want to get involved with. But it is equally true that they, too, have stories and dreams and just as much right to a good life as you and I.

What would be a truly economical way to fix the problem of homelessness? To take the money spent on anti-homeless measures and use it to improve their lives. Rehabilitation, affordable housing, a meal to warm their stomachs, law enforcement to help those being taken advantage of – there are so many other ways this money could be better spent.

What is the point of analyzing the works of Charles Dickens if, when we face such problems in real life, we refuse to do anything to help? What use is a fancy degree when we allow others to suffer? I believe that by helping others, I will define who I am as a human being and a member of society.

I believe that everybody has the ability to become somebody, if only we help them out a little. ♦

How can we write off fellow humans as trash?



Photo by Mackenzie Moorhouse, Chestertown, MD

Unrelatable

by Nikki Grossfeld, Manchester Center, VT

One to 10 has never been my scale. The unnerving pain that either felt like sharp needles digging deep into my stomach, millions of knots filling it, or sharp shooting pain that resembled what I thought it would feel like to be shot in the stomach could never be restricted to a 1-10 pain scale. Clearly 1-100 wouldn't be realistic either; so I settled on 1-20.

Crohn's disease belongs to a group of conditions known as inflammatory bowel disease (IBD) and is a chronic inflammatory condition of the gastrointestinal tract. IBD incorporates both Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis, which are two entirely different conditions, although they are often lumped together. They differ in what part of the gastrointestinal tract they affect. For example, ulcerative colitis affects the colon (large intestine) and Crohn's disease affects the small intestine. Crohn's disease is different for almost every individual.

March through October. For eight long months no one knew what was going on, but no one wanted to know more than my parents. Watching me dart from the table to the bathroom in fear of getting sick every time I ate, my parents wondered about anorexia or bulimia. Looking back on it, they've told me that they were just considering every possibility since they couldn't figure out what was going on. The doctors didn't help much in the beginning either.

In August I weighed myself for the last time during my diagnosis process. I was at the lowest I can ever remember weighing: 77 pounds at age 12. I hadn't had food pass through my mouth in months. Food hurt me. My body saw it as the enemy and changed my perception of it from something I needed in order to survive to some-



Art by Sampurna Chakraborty, Kolkata, India

thing I needed to avoid at all costs.

Gastroduodenal Crohn's disease is what I have. It involves the stomach and the duodenum, which is the first 10 inches of the small intestine. Typically, people living with this type of Crohn's disease suffer from nausea, weight loss, loss of appetite, and if the bowel is obstructed, vomiting as well. Sounds lovely, right? My symptoms were a lack of desire to eat, which led to my skeletal appearance, surging and writhing abdominal pain and cramping, inability to function due to loss of energy, depression, and the mouth sores that I've spent a lot of time trying to forget. Fun, right?

On top of all of that, Crohn's is an autoimmune disease. My body chronically fights itself.

It views itself, food, and medications as foreign objects and tries to fight against them, eventually destroying itself. Because my immune system overreacts and works too hard, I now no longer have one. If I move away from you when you cough or sneeze, don't take it personally. I can only fight myself; I can't fight off you too.

My mom's voice would often wake me up in the afternoon. The soothing sounds would waft through the open doorway of my bedroom. This became a regular occurrence. She'd wake me in fear that I'd nap the entire day and then not sleep at night, which was never actually a problem. Six months of not eating and my body was rebelling. It had no energy. Mom would wake me up and invite me into the living room to join the family to watch television or something of the sort.

I'd force my body down the hall and into the living room. After dropping onto the leather couch, it was a matter of minutes before I was asleep again. That summer, a lot of people told me I'm cute when I sleep.

There is no known cause of Crohn's disease. Recent research suggests that it might be due to hereditary, genetic, or environmental factors – or the interaction of all of these. My father has always had stomach problems and is borderline for the diagnosis. Two of my aunts have it as well.

When I was 12, my doctors were still trying to figure out what was going on. Once they determined it was some form of inflammation, they started me on a steroid. This medication has saved my life numerous times, but the first time is the most memorable. After a couple of months on it, everyone could see a difference. Granted, I still wasn't gaining weight, but I had more energy than I knew what to do with. I'd wake up

incredibly early in the morning during my winter vacation, make my mom coffee, empty the dishwasher, finish the laundry, mop the floors, scrub the counters, dust the television, and start my book report. I remember that vacation more vividly than the entire summer I was sick. My dad was ripping up the carpet in our house and installing wood floor. It looked great, but all of our living room furniture was in the kitchen. I remember jumping over couches and maneuvering my way around televisions and back again, just because I could. I had the energy for it. I could get up and walk without falling over, and I could stay awake without constantly being propped up.

After months of being on the steroids, I began to look like a chipmunk (weight gain in the face is a common side effect). Friends asked if I had had teeth pulled. People stopped saying I looked great. I had not only gained all the weight back, but added to it. As much as the steroid saved my life, the teenage girl in me will always hate it for how it altered my body at a time when I was already self-conscious.

The medication list for inflammatory bowel diseases is constantly growing. I suppose this is a good thing, because it means that doctors are still trying to discover new treatments, but in reality it's because it's necessary. When I was first diagnosed, my doctors looked directly in the eyes of a naive 12-year-old and told me that no one dies from this disease. Well, I say bull to that. Had I gone on for another month or two without eating, I would not be here right now. So, bull.

Prednisone, Imuran, Mercaptopurine, Methotrexate, and Humira. Do these mean anything to you? They are drugs that reduce inflammation and help put Crohn's disease into remission. At one point, that didn't mean anything to me. In fact, after I had been taking medications for awhile, I decided that I was healthy and didn't need them anymore. I quietly threw the pills out every night, placing a napkin or a tissue on top of them in the trash to make sure my parents didn't notice. But they did. They noticed because I stopped being healthy. My blood test results declined drastically, and my doctor asked if I was taking my medicine. I remember sitting on the couch between my parents the day I finally told them. I never said anything. I just nodded my head when they asked, tears rolling down my face.

X-rays, blood tests, upper GI (gastrointestinal) scans, endoscopies, colonoscopies, dye infusion scans – the tests went on and on, because

each only reaches a certain part of the body. My inflammation was and is in my duodenum. Endoscopies only reach into your stomach and colonoscopies don't go much further than the beginning of your colon. Upper GI scans require the patient to drink barium, a chalky liquid that is used to outline the digestive tract so it can be easily viewable with special X-rays. I've had to drink this stuff twice. It tasted awful, I was in an obnoxious amount of pain, and even my mom couldn't help me. What was worse is that none of the tests showed anything. Being poked and prodded for months did me no good; I still had no answers. After months of testing, my doctor finally started treating me. They diagnosed me without 100 percent proof of the disease, but based on my symptoms, they knew they had to act. I didn't care what they called it, I just wanted the pain to go away.

Though the doctors didn't know what to say, I received a lot of comments and advice from non-medical professionals. Having people suggest that I try to diet or eat differently isn't helpful. Hearing comments like, "You look great!" when I've lost 50 pounds in a month isn't helpful. "You're so lucky! I wish I could lose weight that easily," is possibly one of the most insensitive comments I've heard.

When I went to college, my parents still had many worries about my health. Telling my roommate about my pain scale only seemed to frighten her.

"Should I contact your mom?"

"Only if it's really bad," I told her.

"So on a 1-10 scale, when should I call her?"

"Not 1-10, 1-20. And when it's over a 17. I can handle it up to a 17," I explained. Last semester I hit a 17, but I didn't tell her. Hiding it is what I've, inadvertently, been trained to do.

Crohn's disease is not a relatable condition. I could spend hours telling you about the pain and how it has disrupted my life, but the truth is, even other people with inflammatory bowel

disease don't understand, because the condition is unique to each person. I'm lucky: mine isn't nearly as severe as many I've heard about. But the level of pain I associate as my everyday experience cannot be compared to your two days of food poisoning. I spent my teenage years hugging trashcans and experimenting with (doctor-approved) medications and crying myself to sleep at night asking God – a God I'm not 100 percent sure I believe in – "Why me? Why does living mean having to endure so much pain?" ♦

Food hurt me

Animal Testing Is Unnecessary

by Becca Delzer, San Marcos, CA

Picture this, your home is a filthy, cramped cage surrounded by other cages. Every day you wake up to the screams and pained moans of prisoners as they are tortured in the name of science. You tremble because you are next. People in white lab coats come and take you from your cage. You are painfully injected with various serums, and searing chemicals are dropped in your eyes. You keep telling yourself that this pain will soon be over, but it won't. Your life is a science experiment.

Sound like a science-fiction novel? Unfortunately it's not. You just got a glimpse into the life of an animal used for scientific testing. I believe that treating animals this way is both unethical and immoral. Animal testing is cruel and inhumane; there are better solutions to advance science.

When was the last time you used makeup? How about laundry detergent or dish soap? The last time you went to the doctor and were given a prescription? All of those products were most likely tested on animals. The Massachusetts Coalition for Animal Rights describes what often occurs when rabbits are experimented on: "No pain relievers or anesthetics of any kind are used. The extreme pain often causes them to struggle so severely that they break their own backs – dying in agony needlessly." The Humane Society International reminds us that animals used in testing often are deprived of food and water and are exposed to diseases, drugs, and chemicals that cause pain and even death. According to the Humane Society, "registration of a single pesticide requires more than 50 experiments and the use of as many as 12,000 animals." These animals have done nothing to deserve such treatment.

Ironically, animals do not make ideal stand-ins for humans in scientific tests. The reason that animals

have been test subjects for so long is that scientists believed their genetic makeup to be similar enough to humans'. However, this is untrue. "Even chimpanzees, our closest genetic relatives, do not accurately predict results in humans – of the more than 80 HIV vaccines that have proven safe and efficacious in chimpanzees (as well as other nonhuman primates), all have failed to protect or prove safe in humans in nearly 200 human clinical trials, with one actually increasing a human's chance of HIV infection," according to the New England Anti-Vivisection Society. Therefore, this testing is not only harming animals, but it is harming people.

There are many alternatives to these inhumane and unreliable tests

Mice are a good example of why experimentation on animals is ineffective. Mice are reported to have a genetic makeup that is 98 percent similar to humans. *The New York Times* tells us that "The vast majority of animal experiments, roughly 95 percent, involve rodents bred for research." However, this does not make them reliable test subjects.

In the article "The Experiment Is on Us: Science of Animal Testing Thrown into Doubt," authors Pat Dutt and Jonathan Latham tell us that "Researchers examined the activity of specific biological signaling pathways after similar treatments. These too were highly divergent between mice and humans. Surprised by the consistently poor correlations between the two species, the authors then tested other human/mouse models of inflammatory diseases. Again, the similarity between mice and humans was low." Why are we testing on animals if it is not useful?

There are many alternatives to the inhumane and unreliable testing on animals. For example, scientists have developed computerized simulators that are quite reliable. These highly sophisticated programs can bleed, talk, and even virtually die.

According to PETA, computer program human-patient simulators have proven effective. "Ninety-seven percent of medical schools across the U.S. have completely replaced the use of animal laboratories in medical training with simulators like this, as well as virtual-reality systems, computer simulators, and supervised clinical experience."

Another reliable solution is "organs on a chip." This method of testing is a computer chip that is lined with human cells that can replicate the mechanical and chemical functions of a living organ. This device is the size of a flash drive and is flexible. They are cost effective and do not require animal testing. According to PETA, some companies have already turned these chips into products that other researchers can use in place of animals.

Every day animals are harmed in the name of science. Animal testing might be worth the trouble, except for the fact that it is unreliable and does not provide a useful stand-in for humans. We need to implement new methods of testing now, before more animals are tortured needlessly. ♦



Photo by Danielle Sessions, Myrtle Beach, SC

Costco and Saving the World

by Elise Dimick, Redwood City, CA

I grew up in a household with two parents, eight siblings, and one dog. Inevitably, I spent a lot of time inside the only grocery store that could fulfill my family's needs: Costco.

When we were young, my siblings and I treated Costco like a playground. The stockpiles were secret caves and the enormous cart was a roller coaster. We played hide-n-seek and slid down the aisles on the soles of our shoes. Despite the burden of unloading mountains of food from our family passenger van, trips to Costco were always fun.

My perspective changed in fifth grade. After watching environmental documentaries like "The Story of Stuff" and "The Human Footprint," I began to both appreciate and worry about our planet. I realized that my huge family – nine children worth of diapers, paper plates, Ziploc bags, juice boxes, baby wipes, and Christmas presents – was contributing to a larger catastrophe. Soon, visits to Costco induced despair instead of excitement. Once, when looking at the piles of bulky products towering over me in every direction, I

began to cry. I imagined smoggy factories leaking smoke into the sky as they fabricated the plastic-wrapped merchandise all around me. The gargantuan piles in that store alone seemed monstrous, but considering the immensity of the entire industry was crushing.

Costco and everything it represented hung over my head like a dark cloud until I realized that even though I couldn't halt the acceleration of consumerism, I could work to change my family's habits.

My crusade began with attempts to institute recycling in my home. However, in a family of 11, efficiency is highly valued, and throwing everything into the landfill is very efficient. I begged my family to recycle, but even my signs reading "PLEASE don't throw away recyclables!!!" ended up in the trash.

After years of effort, Recycling v. Family ended in my favor. We now recycle, and I have been dubbed the family tree-hugger. Still, the effort it took to

I could work to change my family's habits

change one home is disheartening. How am I supposed to change the habits in every home? Every night I fell asleep with the guilt of knowing that "Save the World" had not been checked off my to-do list.

After attending a Sierra Student Coalition camp last summer, I realized I could work to influence change on a larger scale (business and government), rather than one home at a time. There, I learned to lobby and campaign, and my efforts expanded from my driveway to the outside world. I became the vice president of my school's

Green Youth Alliance, writing articles for our newsletter, hosting film-screenings, planning campaigns, and establishing a clothing recycling program at our school. I joined the Sierra Club's Forest Protection Committee, meeting with city officials to request a ban on clear cutting in hopes of gaining enough support to ban the practice statewide. I even went vegetarian.

Although my family is not the Whole Foods-shopping, Prius-driving family I wish it was, we have learned to compromise. They're willing to consider my eco-friendly suggestions, while I'm willing to step back and accept the exigencies of sustaining a family of 11. My family may have made me fight for my beliefs, but looking back, I appreciate their resistance even more. I have faced political opposition firsthand, which has made me a stronger leader and catalyzed my beliefs. Thanks to them, I've learned efficiency, patience, and persistence; I've also learned to work in chaos and to pull off the seemingly impossible task of getting six younger siblings showered, fed, and in bed by 9 p.m.

One day I'll convince my family to buy eco-friendly clothing, and open my own clothing store. One day I'll lobby powerful decision-makers, not just my parents. One day I'll speak out in front of millions of people rather than 10 faces at the dinner table. One day I will look into the mirror and see a strong, accomplished woman who has checked "Save the World" off her to-do list. ♦

Author Todd Strasser

Interviewed by Jonathan Halpern, Newton, MA

Todd Strasser has written over 140 books, including award-winners *Boot Camp*, *Fallout*, and *The Wave*. Strasser's latest novel, *The Beast of Cretacea*, is a modern take on the classic *Moby Dick*. Setting his book in the future, Strasser puts an awesome twist on the original story; whether you've read *Moby Dick* or not, you're bound to love *The Beast of Cretacea*.

Jonathan Halpern: *Moby Dick* is a classic, but teenagers rarely read it today due to its complicated style and language. How do you think *The Beast of Cretacea* appeals to today's audience?

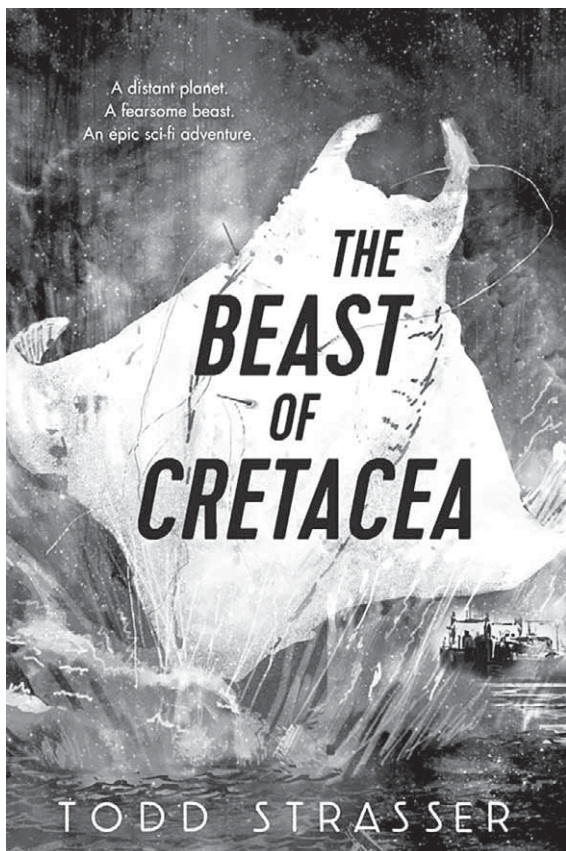
The writing in my book isn't nearly as complex or difficult. I've borrowed from Melville's plot but not his language and style. I've tried to make *The Beast* updated page-turning excitement, complete with virtual reality technology and monstrous sea creatures.

"Call me Ishmael" is the iconic first line of *Moby Dick*. What's the most iconic – or memorable – part of *The Beast of Cretacea*?

A writer takes a risk whenever he or she steps outside the rigid boxes labeled genre. As *Publishers Weekly* said in its review, *The Beast of Cretacea* is "equal parts *Moby Dick* retelling, environmental cautionary tale, and coming-of-age story."

So in *The Beast* I think I've combined genres in a way I haven't seen before. The fact that *PW* calls the book a "fantastical SF epic [that] blends disparate pieces into a harmonious whole," is a huge relief for me. That disparate blending into a futuristic climate-fiction adventure whole is what I hope will make the story iconic.

A lot of your writing is inspired by real events, studies, or other existing literature. What part of *Moby Dick* most directly inspired you to write your own version?



"If I get writer's block I can always skip to another place in the outline"

In a way, *Moby Dick* was a novel about the environmental and moral issues of its day. Those aspects inspired *The Beast* in the sense that it can be considered an environmental dystopian novel about today's most dangerous and lethal invasive species – man.

Many of your books, including *The Wave* and *Give a Boy a Gun*, are taught in classrooms so that students can think about today's issues. What's a current issue that might inspire you to write a book?

I hope that my next book will be about the insanity of war. The United States won its independence about 240 years ago. Since then it has been involved in wars of one type or another for nearly 224 of those years. It's a fairly open secret that we are currently involved in numerous armed conflicts around the globe, only our government no longer calls them wars. They have new names like special ops, military engagements, and armed conflicts. But it doesn't change the fact that young American men and women are fighting and killing and at times being killed. As activist-songwriter Phil Ochs famously put it, "It's always the old who lead us to the war, always the young who fall."

Generally, you write fiction. Do you enjoy writing nonfiction?

Writing fiction is my life. I live and breathe for the opportunity to put together novels about issues that are important to me and, I hope, important to young people, whether it's school shootings, social inequality, or the destruction of the environment. I actually write nonfiction for fun. I have a series online called the Kid's Books: *The Kids' Book of Gross Feats & Facts*, *The Kids' Book of Weird Science*, *The Kids' Book of Really Stupid Criminals*. They make me laugh while I write them.

Many authors shape protagonists based on their life experiences. Do you include your personal life in your characters?

Only occasionally. *Fallout* is certainly the most autobiographical book I've written. I'm Scott in that book, and all of Scott's friends are based on the friends I had at his age. But otherwise little of my personal life goes into my stories. After all the books I've written, I've got nothing left!

Many authors are touched by fan mail. What's your favorite or the most interesting you've received?

The letters that have meant the most to me are from students who say my books have changed their lives. It could be a young person who didn't think anyone else was feeling what he or she felt. It could be from a bully who never stopped to think about the impact of his actions on his victims.

You've written over 140 novels. Which is your favorite?

I'm glad you asked because I can honestly say that *The Beast of Cretacea* is my favorite. I've never worked on a book for as long (three solid years) or as intensely. While I've always been a huge fan of science fiction, this is my first venture into that field. I cherished the opportunity and freedom to create

the world, Cretacea, where much of the story takes place.

How long does it typically take you to write a book? Can you describe your process?

I don't have a typical length of time. I start with a fairly detailed outline and then get lots of ideas as I write. I incorporate those ideas into the story, which means making changes to the outline, sometimes in subtle ways, sometimes in profound strokes, but always, to my mind, making it a better story. Generally, by the time I've finished the innumerable revisions, the resulting novel bears little resemblance to the original outline.

Was this the case with *The Beast*?

Definitely. The original idea grew out of a news article I read about the problems and dangers of space debris – spent rocket stages, old satellites, and fragments from disintegration, erosion, and collisions – that orbit our planet. At first I was going to write a novel about space junk collectors. I envisioned space trawlers sailing on solar winds and towing gargantuan nets in which they'd gather up space junk. (Even though I eventually changed direction in *The Beast of Cretacea*, that still seems like a pretty cool idea for a book.)

But there has to be danger in a story, so I thought the threat of space pirates might be exciting (I'm a big fan of "Pirates of the Caribbean"). Around that time I happened to listen to a book called *Why Read Moby Dick*, basically because it was a question I'd wondered myself. The next thing I knew, I was thinking about a sort of *Moby Dick* in space story, which eventually led to *The Beast of Cretacea*.

What inspires you when you have writer's block?

I think that's one of the great reasons for taking the time to create an outline. If I get writer's block I can always skip to another place in the outline and pick it up from there. Often I'll later discover that the thing I was blocked on really wasn't germane to the story. Another trick I employ for writer's block is to take a break from writing and do some research. I find there's always something to research in my stories, and doing this helps get my brain out of that tunnel-vision-writer's-block thingy.

What advice would you give to teenagers who aspire to be writers?

They must write. That sounds obvious, but I've met so many people who said they wanted to become writers and were going to start writing just as soon as ... fill in the blank. Writing is like playing the piano. It's a lot easier if you practice every day than if you sit down and try to play once a month.

The second and equally important step is that they must read. Because before you can improve a piece of writing, you must have a sense of what better writing is. How do you get that? By reading other writers' work. This sets the standard by which you judge your own writing, and, hence, how you know what to rewrite. So reading is crucial to the writing process.

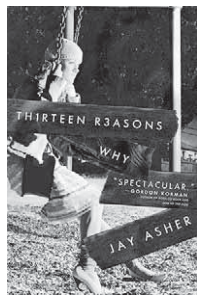
Third, you need a certain amount of blind faith, and a tough hide. Because you're going to be rejected repeatedly, and yet you have to find a way to keep trying. I still get rejected. It hurts, but it's all part of being a writer. ♦

"You're going to be rejected repeatedly, and yet you have to find a way to keep trying"

Thirteen Reasons Why

Jay Asher

Though I had a few predictions about this book's ending, everything began to change once I was immersed in the story. As I read, my mind was spinning a hundred miles a minute trying to solve the mystery. Where would Clay be in Hannah Baker's list? Who was number 13? How did she kill herself? Who pushed her to her breaking point? As I answered these questions along the way, I also thought of a common issue: who do you blame for any suicide?



Ties together in the end

Jay Asher does a beautiful thing; he gives the reader a realistic scenario in which this topic is explored. This scenario, set in a high school and fully equipped with unempathetic teens, is created from the perspective of a suicidal high-schooler. Though Asher lets readers make up their own minds about who is to blame for the suicide, Hannah Baker proves that suicide victims are not entirely at fault.

The fact that Asher decided to tackle such a controversial topic is commendable in itself, but he goes on to discuss rape, reputation, and how a suicidal person makes the final decision. I'll keep

this short and sweet: the ways in which Asher chose to touch upon all these topics are brilliant. Everything ties together in the end. I don't want to say any more than that – you deserve to experience this story without spoilers. Go get this book! ♦

by Kayla Morkert, Boston MA

The Girl on the Train

Paula Hawkins

The Girl on the Train by Paula Hawkins is about a “girl” (more like a young adult) named Rachel who takes the same train every day. She enjoys the ride because of her love for the soft engine grumble and observing the daily scenery around her, such as a couple breakfasting on their deck. However, this harmony ends one day when the unexpected happens. This novel became a best-seller; however, its popularity may be due in part to the success of *Gone Girl* by Gillian Flynn, which prompted mainstream demand for these kinds of stories.

But is it worth the read? Well, I created a simple pro/con list to find out.

Pros:

Quenches your thirst for cryptic modern thrillers

Has a unique and well-played writing

style

Many potential story plots
New insights on different personalities (you go into the mind of characters that you're not used to)

Cons:

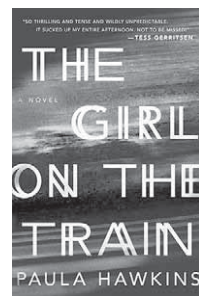
Slightly predictable ending
Some disappointing characters (little diversity in personality)

Lots of enemies (you won't like a lot of the characters)

So, is *The Girl on the Train* worth the read? Well, it depends, despite my patronizing cons. Hawkins did a great job creating a vivid storyline and offers a rich learning experience for her readers. With a movie in the future, it's a

wild-card book for teenagers because it won't be for everyone. Nevertheless, it is different, and if you're ever in the mood for something new, then go for it! ♦

by Eisen Yim, Mason, OH



Worth the read?

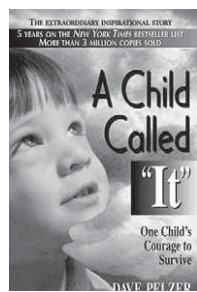
AUTOBIOGRAPHY

A Child Called "It"

Dave Pelzer

For most, the definition of abuse in a child's eyes is being put into a time-out, or not getting that extra piece of cake, and typically, these punishments occur when a child has acted out of place. However, as a child, author David Pelzer did nothing to deserve his punishments, yet his punishments left him near death.

In *A Child Called "It"*, David endures horrific abuse by his alcoholic mother and extensive bullying at school, while trying to find food, survive, and find a purpose in life. Although his father repeatedly promises salvation, he never follows through with his plans of escape. Throughout his childhood, David endures unimaginable torture and starvation.



Abuse can be stopped

A Child Called "It", written by Pelzer as an adult, is full of details and emotions that will open readers' eyes; it shows just how horrible child abuse is.

Pelzer starts with a fast forward to the end of the story, showing the reader his fate. From then on, he throws you directly into the horrible punishments by his mother. David's pain leaks from the pages and straight into the reader, making it easy to feel sad, angry, and happy in just one chapter.

This epic autobiography inspires readers with the fact that child abuse can be stopped, all while showing us just how bad and gruesome the abuse can be. *A Child Called "It"* is a detailed page turner that will keep you intrigued the whole way, with lots of tears included. ♦

by Liam Thistlewaite, Charleston, WV

SCI-FI

The Martian • Andy Weir

So. You're trapped. But not in a room or a house, no. You're trapped on a planet. Nobody is around for hundreds of thousands of miles, and the only chance you have of being saved won't arrive 'til years after you're dead. How would you describe that situation? Mark Watney, an astronaut from the Ares III craft, describes it one way: "I'm pretty much f***ed. That's my considered opinion. F***ed." Assumed dead, Watney is left on Mars by his commander and crewmates. So what is a man to do? Two words: gosh darn science.

Andy Weir's *The Martian* is something of a masterpiece. Never before has a book combined such masterful storytelling and scientific prowess. A writer and amateur rocket scientist, Weir always found himself thinking about his perfect trip to Mars. After brainstorming what it would be like if somebody was left for dead on the Red Planet, Weir realized this would be an amazing book.

This sets into action the journey of a lifetime, even though most of it takes place in a 500 meter circle. Armed with nothing but his brain, some potatoes, and a lot of technologically advanced items that NASA provided, Watney sets to work to

become the first man to be stranded on Mars and live.

Since the story revolves around a single character, it's critical that he's something more than your average scientist stick in the mud, and Weir delivers. Watney has a sense of humor only rivaled by his intellect. Be it pondering how Aquaman can talk to whales, or being a complete smart-aleck about everything he does,



Masterful storytelling

Watney keeps readers amused. This gives the book a depth that I have seen in few others, and it made me sympathize with Watney in his impossible mission.

Now, I couldn't review this book without mentioning its biggest selling point: the science. With its movie adaptation having the tagline "I'm going to science the s**t out of this," you'd think that this story would be

more fiction than real science. But you'd be wrong. Almost all of Watney's creations, from making water from jet fuel or growing potatoes in the vacuum of space, are scientifically accurate. This provides a layer of realism to the over-the-top plot. Weir explains the science enough to show how intelligent Watney is, but not enough to turn off the reader with too much science mumbo-jumbo.

This book can't be total perfection though. There is one issue: the secondary characters. I barely care about half of them. Other than Watney's log entries on Mars, there are two other concurrent stories: NASA trying to get him off Mars and his crewmates lamenting his apparent death and eventually trying to save him.

For the record, I love the crewmates. Weir employs all of the archetypes this genre usually has. We have the funny one, the no-nonsense commander with a heart, the sarcastic German scientist, and the two who have feelings for one another. They play off each other amazingly, and I care about them, as they seem like humans rather than characters. But then we have the NASA scientists. They are as bland as can be. They are either whiny or generic bureaucrats more concerned about money than human safety. Throughout these parts, there is the ever-present question: Is it worth risking five lives to save one?

Despite its flaws, I believe that this is one of the best books of our generation – if you're a science-oriented person who loves astrophysics and botany. From its witty and humorous dialogue to its accurate scientific jargon, the book has mastered the art of science fiction. I would definitely recommend it to anybody who won't have an aneurysm from all of the science terms. ♦

by "Ben," Sherwood, OR

Communion • Years & Years

I first discovered Years & Years in a YouTube ad. Yet even within those few seconds, the unique and spiritual electronic sound captured my attention. This is a band formed by chance – two members met online, and the third was discovered when overheard singing in the shower. Their unconventional meeting perhaps adds to the creativity; they perfectly capture emotions run rampant layered with sounds not commonly heard in American pop. As I made my way through their first album, “Communion,” I fell in love with the music and the emotional lyrics.

Band member and electronic bassist Mikey Goldsworthy described it best when he said one can “cry and dance” to their songs, and Years & Years achieves that balance beautifully. Olly Alexander, the lead singer and lyricist, has a unique high-pitched voice that floats above the beats and atmosphere created by producer and synth player Emre Turkmén.



One can “cry and dance” to their songs

The synth, ghostly vocals, and sometimes ominous background voices create an interesting push-pull relationship with your emotions. Dancing unabashedly to “Shine” or “King” is not unlikely. And a few tracks later, “Eyes Shut” and “Without” left me in tears.

“Communion” covers every emotion, from empowerment in “Border” to lust in “Desire.” Although this is just their first album, the band has found a sound just pop enough to be wildly popular in the UK, yet moody and unique enough to stand apart from the countless DJs spinning electronic beats. They work well with dance tracks, ballads, and can even fade into beautiful background music.

When I started to truly listen to the lyrics, however, it was like uncovering a goldmine. “Real,” one of the first popular singles, could be mistaken for a mindless love song about wanting to hook up. However, the lyrics actually reveal deep insecurity and the narrator’s fear of defining

his worth based on what a lover thinks of him: “If I had been enough for you, would I be better, would I be good?” Alexander croons lyrics that are profound in their simplicity and relatability.

Similar themes run through my favorite track, “Gold,” where the singer wonders, “Am I defined/By the way they look at me?/Will I be tried?/Will they take what I believe?” If that weren’t enough, Alexander also stands up for LGBT visibility by using male pronouns in some of his songs.

Years & Years takes pop, a genre known for its mindlessness and one-track lyrics, and adds their own instruments and ideas to make the music their own, touching on deep fears and insecurities. All this, while making the listener wait breathlessly for beats to drop and set hearts pounding.

The versatility in the band’s sound and ability, as well as their thought-provoking lyrics, have impacted me deeply. I find myself strangely grateful for YouTube ads now, and glad that they led me to such a talented band. ♦

by Sofia Baluyut, Brooklyn, NY

COUNTRY

Suffer in Peace • Tyler Farr

Since the dawn of civilization, humans have been making music both to tell stories and pass time. And since those prehistoric days of hunting with spears and painting on caves, there has been good and bad music. Some people were meant to be musicians, others were meant to be anything else. Tyler Farr should have been something else.

That’s harsh and a little unfair of me, I suppose. The truth is, Farr is not a terrible singer. In fact, his vocal chops are on par with most other popular artists on country music charts right now, and they’re better than a handful. I heard a few of his live performances, and they did not stand out as noteworthy in a bad sense. He can sing, which is good since he’s, you know, a singer.

“Suffer in Peace” is a complicated album to judge him by. On the cover we see Farr standing on an ATV in the middle of a field, hands in his pockets, gazing longingly toward the horizon. Why is he standing? Where is everyone? Great questions, but not the ones that are relevant, I suppose. I’m here to judge Tyler Farr the musician, not Tyler Farr the person.

In truth, I was reluctant to give this album a listen after the garbage fire that was “Redneck Crazy.” This stalker-anthem is what launched Farr into fame, but I’ve never had any love for the single. However, when I did finally give “Suffer in Peace” a spin, it all became a bit confusing, much like the album cover.

Several songs stood out to me for reasons I didn’t anticipate. The title track, “Poor Boy,” and “I Don’t Even Want This Beer” were stunningly heartfelt and shone light on a much deeper, more traditional side of an artist whose claim to fame was a trope about flinging beer cans at his ex-girlfriend. In particular,

“I Don’t Even Want This Beer” is a song I found myself listening to more than once. The instrumentation, vocals, and production aren’t overdone, and the lyrical theme is meaningful. Based on these three songs alone, the album shines.

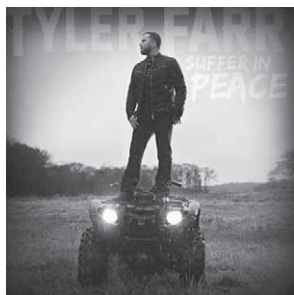
Then the chaos follows, snapping at my heels like a starved wolf. All the progress made with these three songs is lit on fire and tossed into a pit when “Why We Live Here,” “Better in Boots,” and “C.O.U.N.T.R.Y.” are played. The clichés are used like weapons. What a letdown when there are songs in the lineup that are actually worth the air!

The worst offender is “Damn Good Friends,” Farr’s duet with country music heavy-hitter Jason Aldean. That song has received flack for its subtle references to drunk driving, but the questionable theme isn’t my only concern. The song just isn’t good. It’s another laundry list song brimming with unoriginal lyrics geared toward the 18- to 34-year-old demographic who are fleeing the country genre with alarming rapidity. The audience who, just a few years ago, would have lost their \$5 straw cowboy hats over it no longer care

about country music. They’ve moved on.

If Tyler Farr could cut an entire album with the same substance as “Suffer in Peace,” “Poor Boy,” and “I Don’t Even Want This Beer,” he could be taken seriously as a traditional country music artist, but until he and his “Bro Country” buddies take off their Ray Bans long enough to notice that the tides are shifting, this album and others like it will continue to miss the mark. ♦

by Liz Koehler, Sullivan, WI



The clichés are used like weapons

INDIE POP

Vessel • Twenty One Pilots

“Vessel” is similar in sound and message to the group’s eponymous debut. Yet it expands and improves upon its predecessor, producing concise and meaningful tracks like “Car Radio” and “Guns for Hands.” These songs describe the process of recognizing, coping with, and accepting one’s mind despite its flaws and quirks. This premise is an important part of the band’s message and is expressed clearly and honestly throughout the album, especially in these two songs which, to this day, remain beloved by fans.

Though the songs on their debut, “Twenty One Pilots,” expresses ideas in this vein, it does so somewhat erratically; “Vessel” clarifies these themes in a way that simplifies yet enhances the listening experience.



Concise and meaningful songs

Lead singer and pianist Tyler Joseph further diversifies the band’s accompaniment by playing his infamous ukulele. Songs such as “House of Gold” and “Oh Ms. Believer” feature the now iconic ukulele. The instrument adds a much-needed softness and wholesomeness to Twenty One Pilots’ songs, missing in their premiere.

With “Vessel,” Twenty One Pilots molds the experiments of its first album into the cohesive, artistic, provocative product without any loss of authenticity. With the two albums, the band’s message and sound develop profoundly in a way that establishes Twenty One Pilots as its own unique artistic entity. ♦

by Emily Mercier, Cumberland, RI

Attack on Titan

“Shingeki No Kyojin,” known in America as “Attack on Titan,” is an amazing show. Audiences ranging from teen to adult are sucked in by the fast-paced plot and amazing animation. It has created fandoms across the globe, and a live-action movie and an exhibit in Japan’s Universal Studios are currently in production.

Two thousand years from now, humans are nearly exterminated by titans. Titans are typically several stories tall, seem to have no intelligence, devour humans and, worst of all, seem to do it for pleasure rather than as food. A small percentage of humanity survives by hiding themselves in a city protected by extremely high walls.



Amazing animation

Flash forward to the present and the city has not seen a titan in 100 years. Then, seemingly out of thin air, a colossal titan appears and destroys the city walls. As the smaller titans flood the city, teenager Eren and his foster sister, Mikasa, watch in horror as their mother is eaten alive. Eren vows that he will murder every titan and take revenge for all mankind.

I have recommended this show to my other *otaku* (or superfan) friends and even non-*otakus*, but although some enjoyed it, others were turned off by the violence. I recommend “Attack on Titan” to anyone who likes sci-fi as well as action.

If I had to criticize anything, it would be that the show kills off characters so quickly. I had to switch my favorite character numerous times since they kept dying off.

“Attack on Titan” is a hotspot for fangirls/fanboys. Fanfictions of every kind have sprouted from this show, ranging from *yaoi* (gay/lesbian) to crossovers with other shows. Cosplayers dress proudly placing their right hand over their heart in a fist, the salute of the military in this world.

In my opinion, this is one of the best shows ever. ♦

by Rachel Saraceni, New York, NY

ACTION

Fantastic Four

“Fantastic Four” is the story of four teenagers who get superpowers after an accident involving interdimensional travel and poor decision making. It’s based on the Marvel Comics series The Fantastic Four. The four are Reed Richards, the nerdy, funny, and adorable main character; Sue Storm, the emotionally distant and sarcastic love interest; Johnny Storm, the overly serious, not-reckless-enough bad boy; and Ben Grimm, the had-little-to-no-screen-time, was-totally-misrepresented best friend.

To start off, let me say that I think it’s too soon for a Fantastic Four reboot, because I loved the 2005 movie version. Most reboots from the past year or so have been pretty good (“The Amazing Spider-Man,” anyone?). But this didn’t live up to those standards.

First off, the plot is really wonky with its time distribution. The setup (introduction of characters and problem) takes about half the time, and the action (the part you’re paying to watch – it is a superhero movie after all) takes about ten. The villain (Toby Kebbell, as Dr. Doom, who is overrated, really) isn’t introduced until three-quarters of the way through, and he’s poorly written and unbelievable.

The Fantastic Four are also misrepresented. Reed Richards (Miles Teller), who is supposed to be overtly nerdy, is really just

cute, with everyone else seeming to be doing the work. Sue Storm (Kate Mara) is nothing more than the sister and the love interest, although she is supposed to be a strong heroine on whom the team relies. Here, though, she barely does any heroics. And then there’s Johnny Storm (Michael B. Jordan). The way he’s portrayed here is different from how I imagine most of us see him. Chris Evans’



A disappointment

Johnny Storm in the 2005 movie was a goofball and a womanizer, but in the new movie, he’s really just a second Reed Richards. Finally, Ben Grimm (Jamie Bell), the last hero, is just portrayed badly. He completely relies on Reed with no will of his own. Ben is supposed to go through an arc of accepting his new status, but that never happens, which is disappointing.

Marvel Manics have come to expect humor in Marvel movies.

In “Fantastic Four,” there are attempts at jokes, but none are memorable. This is so dark it almost seems like a DC movie.

Overall, this movie is a disappointment. There are a few gems (I liked that Sue was adopted; it gave way for a possible subplot), but very few. If you still want to watch it, I would suggest Netflix and not wasting your money buying it. ♦

by Aubrey Rhoadarmer, Longmont, CO

SCI-FI

Maze Runner: The Scorch Trials

“Maze Runner: The Scorch Trials,” based on the book by James Dashner, is finally here. Being a fan of the book, I was very excited to see it in theaters. Sadly, the movie doesn’t live up to the book. Had the movie not been named “The Scorch Trials,” someone would have thought it was “Walking Dead: the Movie.”

There are parts that I enjoyed, but other than those few moments, this movie is pretty pointless. There is absolutely no plot, and it is too predictable.

It is obvious from the beginning what is going to happen. It comes as no surprise that Thomas (Dylan O’Brien) acted selflessly in every situation (nothing wrong with that), that he would have a near-death experience, and almost get shot and captured. Then, he barely escapes and comes out looking like nothing has happened, while everyone else looks gross and broken. One of the most annoying parts is the fact that you couldn’t go two minutes without the characters dropping a curse word.

Honestly, I don’t think that the writers could have made some of the characters any dumber. Some parts, like the instance when

Thomas and Brenda (Rosa Salazar) decide to go down the infected tunnel rather than the right exit Thomas found mere moments ago, made me think, “Could anybody really be this foolish?” Did they honestly think they would find the exit through the dark, gross tunnel and not run into a Crank?



Just too dumb and too gross

Speaking of Cranks, the movie completely messes up those characters. Instead of looking like infected human beings, they looked like zombies from “The Walking Dead,” and the animation reminded me of the Disney Channel movie “Spy Kids.” I really don’t think the Cranks could have been any worse or any more gross. This is by far one of the most disgusting movies I have seen, and I regret seeing it. Nowhere in the book was it supposed to be this nauseating.

So all-in-all, this movie just didn’t hit home for me. I wouldn’t recommend it, especially if you have read the books. Sadly, just like the Cranks, this movie was just too dumb and too gross. ♦

by Alexandra Barrett, Christiansburg, VA

MADE FOR TV MOVIE

Invisible Sister

“Invisible Sister” (broadcast on the Disney Channel) targets not only family problems, but people problems in general. Essentially, this movie addresses issues that teenagers often encounter.

Cleo (Roman Blanchard), the younger sister, excels academically, but envies the love and attention her older sister, Molly (Paris Berelc), receives both at school and at home. To cope with her problems, Cleo shuts everyone out, except her friend, George. Cleo’s introversion makes her relatable; insecurity and envy can make you put up walls around your heart to protect it from being hurt.



Touching and relatable

Meanwhile, Molly tries to befriend Cleo but only gets sarcasm and resistance in response. The two sisters are wrapped up in their own problems and aren’t able to understand the other’s point of view.

Everything changes when Cleo turns a moth invisible by accident. The moth flies into the glass Molly is drinking from and she becomes invisible as well. As a result, Molly convinces Cleo to go to school dressed up as her in order to impress the recruiting scouts at her lacrosse game. Molly emphasizes how important these scouts are for her future and begs Cleo to impress them in her place. Cleo agrees when she sees her sister’s low math marks and hears Molly confess that she is jealous of Cleo’s natural genius. Molly admits that her popularity and athletic ability won’t be much use after high school while Cleo’s academic ability can take her far.

Cleo experiences the day as Molly and finds that Molly’s life isn’t as easy as she thought. She opens up her heart to Molly’s friends, without them realizing she is Cleo, and comes to an epiphany about herself and how she isn’t as invisible and not cared about as she thought. The sisters come to an understanding about themselves and reconcile.

Besides being a touching story with a happily-ever-after ending, “Invisible Sister” is beautifully realistic, with the exception of turning living beings invisible. I really enjoyed this movie, which portrays both the negative and positive sides of human nature in a way that is touching and very relatable. ♦

by Amy Du, Brantford, ON, Canada

NINTENDO, 3DS, IOS

Pokémon Shuffle

The Pokémon series' wide cast of recognizable collectible creatures lends itself well to multiple genres outside of the main series games. Familiar Pokémon have found their way into fighting games, strategy games, dungeon-crawlers, and most recently, a puzzle game called "Pokémon Shuffle," a 3DS eShop exclusive released in last February.

Anyone who is familiar with basic match-three puzzle games should have no trouble jumping into the action. Players use the stylus to match three, four, or five Pokémon in a row to progress to the next stage, earning coins and more Pokémon to use along the way.

Some elements of the core Pokémon games distinguish "Shuffle" from similar titles. In each stage, players have a certain number of moves to deplete the life bar of an opposing Pokémon. If you succeed, you have a chance of catching that Pokémon and adding it to your collection. Fail, and you start the stage over. Collecting different types of Pokémon is important, as the type of advantages used in the core games carry over into "Shuffle." Having trouble beating a Fire-type Pokémon in a stage? Go back and catch some Water-type Pokémon to use and give you an advantage.

The Mega Evolution system introduced in the core games finds its way into "Shuffle," allowing players

to take one Pokémon into a stage to Mega-Evolve. By creating combos using that Pokémon, a gauge begins to fill. When the gauge is full, certain Pokémon on the board will change into Mega-Evolved forms, allowing you to clear out tiles and create combos more quickly. Some of the challenge comes in the form of deciding whether to use moves to fill the gauge to Mega-Evolve or to land the most damaging hits on the target. However you play, the simple formula is fun and addictive.

However, "Pokémon Shuffle" ruins its potential with one simple addition: micro-transactions. While free to play, "Shuffle," like many similar mobile games, operates on a heart system. You must use a heart to play a stage, whether you end up beating the stage or not. You can only hold up to five hearts normally, and it takes half an hour to refill one heart, meaning that it takes two and a half hours for all your hearts to refill. With each game lasting a minute or two, that's a lot of waiting between games.

The easy remedy to this unnecessary time barrier is by paying. Players can buy "gems" that allow them to not only bypass the time restrictions and play as much as they want, but also purchase power-ups and extra moves that practically make the stages impossible to lose. The challenge and fun in the game comes from deciding how to use your limited moves in the wisest

way possible. However, when you can buy as many moves as you want, the game becomes the definition of a "pay-to-win" game.

"Pokémon Shuffle" is the worst example of a single flaw ruining an entire game. The concept is fun, and putting everyone's favorite collectible creatures into a tried-and-true puzzle formula is great. However, limiting the player's ability to play the game by putting up unnecessary time restrictions ruins the experience for non-paying players. In addition, later stages are so difficult that beating them requires replaying older stages to increase your levels high enough to win or simply enjoying your way through. No matter how much you're enjoying your game, that is overshadowed by the fact that you're going to have to stop because you don't want to dump money into such a simple game.

"Pokémon Shuffle" had an excellent potential to be a quirky little game that could appeal to Pokémon fans and puzzle fans alike. However, the amount you'd need to pay just to play overshadows any enjoyment. If you absolutely must have a Pokémon puzzle game with Mega Evolutions and are willing to constantly pay, "Shuffle" is a great fit. For everyone else, you'd probably be better off with 2014's "Pokémon Battle Trozei" for the 3DS; you might have to fork over \$8 in the eShop for it, but you're paying for the ability to enjoy the game without constantly worrying about how many hearts you have. ♦

by Daniel Cronin, Chapel Hill, NC



Fun and addictive

PS4

Until Dawn

"Until Dawn" is a recently released single-player survival horror game developed by Supermassive Games for the PlayStation 4. It is the story of eight friends trapped in a remote mountain lodge a year after the disappearance and deaths of the two sisters of Josh Washington, one of the eight characters. During their stay, events occur that make the characters fear for their lives. The game uses a recently popularized style of a choice-and-consequence storyline, "Until Dawn" specifically utilizing the Butterfly Effect, forcing the player to make quick and potentially dangerous decisions. Each path could either protect or endanger each character, and it is up to the player to decide how the game progresses and what ending they receive. Although Supermassive is known for not living up to their potential in game development, "Until Dawn" succeeds in making players completely engrossed and fascinated with the game.

"Until Dawn" is a wonderful example of the newest types of digital character and scene design. Characters look realistic, with varying facial expressions, emotions, and quirks. Each is different in many ways. Not only is each model created to have his or her own strengths and weaknesses, as seen in the in-game "Character Info" tab, which changes based on the character the player is currently controlling, they are also modeled after the actors who play them.

The script flows as naturally as one can artificially produce, adding an occasional joke or slang to lighten the dark mood that persists in

the story. The delivery of the lines is fitting and allows the player to connect to the characters' emotions. With each decision, the scripting and scenes put the player in the place of their character and make their choices deathly important. Although some situations and reactions are predictable, the suspenseful writing and direction make this game worth a few playthroughs.

If you're not a fan of gore, however, "Until Dawn" is one to stay away from. Many decisions will lead to scenes unfit for younger audiences or those who are squeamish. Supermassive is highly successful in making the game suspenseful and following through with the imminent threat of consequence. Jump scares occur almost as often as the word "dude," and keep players on their toes in the face of unknown dangers. Because the game has many elements of a classic horror movie, the best way to play is with the lights off and a protective blanket nearby.

After hours of gameplay, "Until Dawn" can have different endings depending on who is alive and what the player did. The lore and suspense woven in between quick-time events and discovering clues all come to an end when the eight characters (or fewer) try to escape from their frozen prison high in the mountains. Whether the group escapes and survives or not is entirely in the hands of the player, be they merciful or revenge-thirsty by the tale's end. ♦

by Megan Fleming, Chicago, IL

This game is rated M for mature.



Completely engrossing

XBOX ONE, PS4

Mad Max

"Mad Max" is a very polarizing game. People either feel very positive about it or they are extremely negative. Owing the game on an Xbox One console, I can see why there are so many different opinions.

"Mad Max" is an action-adventure video game developed by Avalanche Studios. It was released on Xbox One, Microsoft Windows, and PlayStation 4. It was put on store shelves September 1, 2015. For PS4, Xbox One, and PC you can purchase it for \$60. A little pricey, I must say.

"Mad Max" is a prequel to the recent "Mad Max: Fury Road" film released earlier this year. The game's main antagonist is Scabrous Scrotus, the third son of Morton Joe from "Fury Road." Scrotus controls the oil within the region with his own faction of war boys. Scrotus and his clan ride around killing and harassing the local survivors. Naturally Max doesn't like that, but luckily for him he meets a hunchback mechanic named Chum Bucket who believes that Max is the prophet sent to deliver the strongest car the desert has ever seen, which is the Magnus Opus.

This game is very pleasing to the eye. The graphics are great and buttery smooth, and each region has a different setting –

from Rocky Mountains to polluted sludge areas. Scrap is the currency, and you're going to need it to upgrade your car and your character's abilities and improve your strongholds. What it all boils down to is whether any of it is fun. The answer is of course!

Many people's issue with the game was that they found it repetitive, but in my perspective many games are. I recommend purchasing it when the console and PC cost go down. As for the movie ... I wouldn't bother. ♦

by Adam Hallowell, Bronx, NY

This game is rated M for mature.



The graphics are buttery smooth

Coyote Chaser

by Angela Solon, Springfield, IL

fiction

The night rang with the sound of screams as the woman fought desperately to push her child into the world. Outside the man paced back and forth. When he tipped his nose to the wind he could smell the blood.

He felt queer, walking on two legs instead of four. He pricked his ears, letting the familiar scents of the forest calm him. Every instinct he possessed was telling him to shift, to run as far and as fast from this place as his feet could carry him. But he remained and paced. Back, forth, back, forth.

He watched the raven spiral down from the stars above and alight on the ground beside him.

“She’s taking too long,” Coyote growled when his sister stood fully formed before him, eyes dark and knowing.

“She’s stronger than you know,” she soothed. “As is your child. They will survive.”

He whirled on her. “Do not presume to know my mind!” Coyote snapped.

Raven bowed her head submissively. “As you say, O Great Brother.”

Another scream split the air.

Coyote turned to the longhouse, brow furrowed. A distressed whine rose in his throat. “She will die because of me.”

Raven placed a comforting hand on his shoulder. “Go, brother. I will watch over them. This life is not for you.”

Coyote turned, a protest on his lips. He paused, considered, looked back at the longhouse. Nodding grimly, he began walking toward the trees.

Coyote paused. “You will not tell my child of me,” he told his sister with an edge to his voice. “She will know of me when it is her time, not before.”

Her black eyes grew hard and her lips drew into a distasteful pucker. She looked about to argue, then thought better of it, nodded. “Go. You have much to do and little time.”

Raven watched as her brother’s lithe form vanished into the trees, his shadow racing before him.

Sighing, she turned back to the longhouse and stepped inside.

My mother tells me to never go down to the river’s edge. For she lurks there, deep beneath the waves, and so long as I remain ashore she will not take me.

She is Tsagaglalal, who became “She Who Watches.” A river devil, a monster, and the greatest chieftain my tribe has ever known.

She sleeps beneath the soft sand of the riverbed, her lissome fox’s face pointed up, black nose shining. Calculating, golden eyes are always watching, waiting, watching. Watching for children to sate her hunger. Tiny morsels she can pluck from the earth and crush beneath her teeth. Or she will make a slave of you – river marked, her own – a

thrall to her desires until your family drowns beneath the waves and she has devoured her pound of flesh.

She is my father’s eternal antagonist, and this is the story of how my father, Coyote, was her salvation.

Her scent found him before he saw her. Coyote wrinkled his nose at the moist, swampy odor, the fox scent barely veiling the smell of rot and blood.

For two nights and three days he traveled across mountains and fields and farmland. The brown soil of North America had dug into his claws and set his pads to aching. Still, he pressed on.

A great expanse of the Columbian River stretched before him, beckoning and calm. Coyote paused on a

hillock, drinking in the sight. It would be so easy to race down the smooth, weather-worn sand of the beach and soothe his aching paws. But Coyote knew the price for such folly. He’d seen the danger that lurked beneath the surface. Cautiously, he made his way down to the shore. He positioned himself on a rock, glaring down at the river’s edge. Coyote flattened his ears against his head and drew his lips back to reveal sharp teeth. From deep in his soul, a challenge sprang forth.

“Come, demon! Monster! Vile wretch! I am ready!”

Dreams are doors to the psyche, stars the mere eye holes we look through.

I dream of my father sometimes, as thousands of stars wink above me and a raven sings. I always think of his eyes first. The shape of them, the thousands of colors they might be. His face comes next, then the features, distant and fuzzy. I imagine he’s a tall, his body lithe and sinewy, with a thin bearing belying the muscles beneath.

His features are harder to conjure. Sometimes his face is broad, sometimes flat. Sometimes homely or handsome. Mother says he’s a god, thus has the face of a god. However, I suspect most women say this of their men, to stroke their large egos.

I don’t really care, of course, for he’s my father. I know in my heart he will always protect me.

Tsagaglalal’s eyes broke the water first. Her pupils narrowed to slits as she spotted him with eyes more dragon than fox. Her head followed suit, bursting from the water in a great geyser of froth that rolled down her scales in rivers and splashed to the ground in lakes. Her body was a dragon in all but wings.

The mind of a fox, the body of a dragon, Coyote mused, backing away. The universe does despise me.

He waited until her head rested level with his before striking. Her yellow

eyes brimmed with hate as she snapped at him, teeth crashing down with the force of sycamores.

Coyote all but danced on her muzzle, her teeth only inches from him. He aimed for her ears, her eyes, her snout, drawing further and further away from the river each time.

When he was certain she could not return, Coyote turned tail and bolted across the plains. As expected, the River Devil made after him, her claws and tail gouging great canyons into the earth as she roared her fury to the sky.

“Come, demon! Monster! Vile wretch!” Coyote flung the words at her like poisonous barbs. “I have made you what you are. Now, let us end this!”

“You disgusting little brown rat!” Tsagaglalal roared. “I’ll kill you!”

With that she leapt, her body taking flight for half a heartbeat before falling to the earth. And falling, and falling, and falling.

For twenty leagues she fell, her body finally hitting the ground with a force great enough to shake the world. Rocks fell in cascades along her head and body. The River Devil opened her wide maw and roared her pain and grief to the stars.

Coyote settled himself on a rocky outcropping where he could better observe his trapped foe. The wheels in his mind began to turn.

I listen to the howling of the coyotes outside my window as my mother sings the songs of earth to lull me to dreams. Her voice is deep, comforting. The fire is warm in our hearth as it dances through the air on silent footsteps to warm my furs and myself beneath them. A raven caws from a nearby tree.

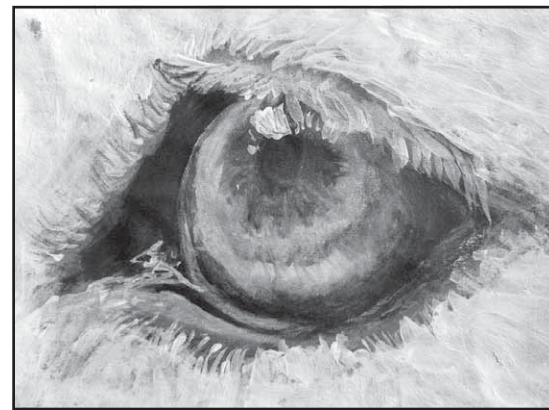
The howling haunts me. Those piercing yips and whines that could mean so much yet are lost to man’s ear. When I sleep that night, I dream of my father amid a great pack of brothers and sisters, and I find I am weeping. I long for the moment when I too may join them.

She rested before him, a shell of what she once was. Tired, beaten, bloody but never broken. No, she’s far too proud for that.

Coyote lay his head gently against her muzzle. A small cut ran along her right shoulder. He whined softly.

“Why do you care?” the River Devil asked, her voice drained, not menacing.

Coyote turned indulgent yellow eyes on her. “Humor me.”



Art by Christy O’Neil, Lytham, England

Tsagaglalal lifted her head, eyes wary. “I’m fine,” she growled.

Coyote licked her nose, knowing the words to be true. “Good.” Closing his eyes, Coyote centered himself and revealed to her his heart.

He sensed Tsagaglalal go rigid, then limp as the waves of memory carried her away.

He showed her a time when Earth was young, himself a callow pup. Of when they had met upon the ridge, how he had changed her to stone. A cruel trick so she may always guard her people well.

At least, Coyote had told himself this.

Yet perhaps the true reason was not that Tsagaglalal couldn’t have been a competent leader, but that he didn’t want the world to know a woman could rule without the guidance of men. Coyote showed her all this and more, reserving the birth of his child an instant before she opened her eyes.

Tsagaglalal blinked, her eyes clearer than they’d been since she first escaped her stone prison and became the River Devil, filling the world with death and destruction. Blinking gratitude, she turned her scaled body and slithered back into the embrace of the river she so loved. Coyote watched her head disappear beneath the waves.

I hear his voice first, the light timbre of it. Warm, coaxing.

I open my eyes to slits, peer around. He is kneeling before me, blue eyes shining. Blue eyes, not the deep brown I’d imagined. Yet no less warm, no less beloved.

I curl my hands around him. Bury my head in the neck of this man – Coyote, my father – shaking, laughing, crying.

I rise from the bed, my feet feeling lighter against the dirt of the longhouse than they had in months. Hands clasped, we walk out into the warm night. Above, a raven caws.

In a sudden burst of exhilaration, Coyote breaks into a run. His figure grows dimmer and dimmer, lighter and lighter. He looks back at me expectantly. His blue eyes shining, shining, shining.

Laughing, I bolt after him. Chasing my father into the stars. ♦

Her body was a dragon in all but wings

Every instinct was telling him to shift, to run

Salt

by Veronica Thomas, Oak Park, IL

I combed the grass with my feet, pulling it up as I rocked on my heels. It was that time of year when only some splotches of grass broke through mostly depressing gray snow. There was a McDonald's french fry cup bathing in the sunlight by my second cousin's (whom apparently I had met before) feet. There were two possible explanations: (a) someone brought french fries to a funeral, or (b) someone brought french fries to please the dead. I chose to go with the latter. Which grave name sounds like they loved little sticks of 7 percent potato and 93 percent salt? Without moving my lower body, I managed to look at the surrounding graves. Martha Johnson, definitely no. William Howard Taft, nah, he sounds like a rock enthusiast. Agatha Dwerb! Yes! My mom looked over at me with salty eyes and I felt like I should get around to doing that thing she said I should do, today out of all days. I slowly lifted my eyes to the sky like I just threw a Goldfish or Cheeto (depending on if I was in the mood for spicy or not, and I was usually always in the mood for spicy except on Tuesdays) in the air,

The casket is ready for takeoff in 3, 2, 1



Photo by James Owens, Maplewood, MO

but I didn't open my mouth. The sky was familiar – my light wash jeans blue.

"Love you, Grandpa. That one time we played poker and you showed me all your magazine cut-outs of Jackie O. was fun. I'll miss your syrupy smell. Amen."

"That's all you have to say?"

"Just put Grandpa on the phone."

"That's not how it works!"

I squeezed my mom's hand. It was wet. With tears or sweat, I'm not sure.

It's not a suicidal thing – I think it's just a human thing – but when I squeezed her hand I started thinking about who would squeeze her hand if I was lying in that box, and I shuddered in a kind of enjoyable way. For me, it's usually a fatal car crash, but I spend less time dwelling on how. I go straight to the important stuff. Who gets the news first. I'm laying on a cold hospital table, right? And, my mom will obviously be there first. She'll probably run in with her heels in her hand because she's coming from work, and she'll hold the pointy ends out when the nurses tell her one second so they can find my update because she knows how much time seconds are worth. She'll rub her eyes because she's tired. She's been working all night. Her instinct will be to

ask where the coffee machine is, but she'll remember those seconds. I think, now, she'll call my dad. He'll be surprised when the phone rings, but he'll get here in 30 minutes if traffic isn't too bad. The doctor will come but because of his severe stuttering (which made him avoid social contact in childhood) he will lack the emotion in his voice to tell my mom that her son is d-d-dea-ad. My mom won't want coffee anymore because she'll want to be asleep now.

Jonah's mom squeezes his hand back.

I don't know if my friends will go to school the next day. I think Jessie will, but I think she'll be a mess. I kinda really hope she's a mess. I know she'll hate me for making her fail her math quiz. Howard will be a total a**hole, like normal, but worse. He'll stay home not because he wouldn't be able to make it through the day at school, but because he'd rather play video games. Maybe he'll cry. If he does it will come out of nowhere. And he'll think he is crying because he has no more levels on Pokémon, but it will be my fault, and that makes me kind of happy.

Slowly some men in black strap the casket to a lowering device. The last man in black stubs his toe.

I wonder how fast the news will spread. And I wonder if those people who always pass me in gym laps will be upset. We jog (okay, they jog) like clockwork. Sometimes they actually ask me how many I did because they did an estimated five more. What about those people whom I sometimes crack jokes with in chem? The easiest way to make friends in class is to talk smack about your teacher, so we all related on how much Ms. Anderson's pants didn't seem to want to stay on her butt. Abby sure as hell should be upset. I gave her a pencil every freaking day. Who goes to school without a pencil? I wonder if my teachers will acknowledge my absence or if I'll get a plaque with my name on it by a tree outside the school. I got okay grades and I was in the facial hair club; some would argue I'm not important but my sideburns would say otherwise.

The casket is ready for takeoff in 3, 2, 1. It moves slowly like Jonah's mom without coffee.

My mom will want my funeral to be at church (not like we have been there since Easter '09). I'll be put in one of those annoying suits with the constricting elbow sleeves, but she'll make sure I'm in my favorite bow tie. Dammit, I should have written a will. Howard would have liked the rest of my bow ties. He would burn them slowly, one at a time. He hates my bow ties! He'd probably roast marshmallows with their glowing fire, and he would think they added to the flavor.

The casket seems not to be fitting in the hole. The priest swears under his breath.

I don't want my dad to stop playing mini golf on Sunday afternoons. His putts are almost as predictable as my parents' fights. Avoid the dishwasher in conversation at all costs. So, I can usually estimate the score. I want him to improve. I want him to beat me. He can probably beat me.

Everyone half gasps. Grandpa's girlfriend almost chokes on her snot.

My little sister will be okay. I don't remember being five. So maybe she won't even remember me. Maybe, to help her forget, my parents will hide all the pictures of me. Maybe my room will get locked.

It will be that forbidden closet guests wonder about. What if they get rid of all my stuff? Hopefully they can't bear it, so they leave it untouched. Maybe when Annabel's, like, 30 my parents will tell her the family secret. She'll be disappointed because it's more crap she'll have to clean out of the house when they die.

Silence (except for Jonah pulverizing the grass beneath his feet). But crushed grass doesn't make a lot of sound, so basically silence.

When my friends go block party hunting, they better get the 900 block of Gunderson. That block rents the best bouncy house and someone puts the world's best guacamole on the snack table every year. And I hope they use the name Michael when people ask who they are friends with. There's a Michael on every block; everyone knows a Michael! Maybe once in a while they could try Jonah, as a tribute?

Men in black come back with three shovels. Julia, Jonah's aunt and senior of two years, takes a selfie.

That guacamole. Am I drooling? Annabel calls avocados "guacamoles."

Four men with three shovels start extending the length of the hole. Their bodies are in sync. Without the shovels in their hands it would look like they were dancing.

We buried a guacamole seed in our backyard. I was 9. It never grew anything. So, now every time I pass that spot I step on it harder than usual. You can be mad at the Earth. She sure does get mad at you.

The priest goes into an improvised prayer. He BS's a few words here and there. He hasn't used this prayer in a while. He hasn't gone to a funeral like this in a while. He hopes these guys can dig a little faster because he has a doggy funeral followed by a 15 minute Panda Express/bathroom break at 12:45 before a wedding at 1. Jonah becomes very teary-eyed. His mother looks over, pleasantly surprised.

I saw Agatha's grave. My feet started moving without my permission. I wanted to do lunges. I found my left foot inside the McDonald's cup. Elevating slowly to prop the soggy thing on Agatha's headstone.

When would they stop visiting my grave? Would they even put the right quote or phrase on it. I kinda hope it is, "My name is Inigo Montoya," which is how I test if someone is worth my time when I introduce myself. Would they start by coming once a week? Would they pack a little breakfast and sit on blankets right on top of me?

Jonah's face becomes a gray green like the grass in October. Jonah was born in October. The diggers continue digging. Aunt Hallie, who wasn't actually invited but somehow found out, starts singing "Journey" at the top of her

lungs.

Will they put stuff on my grave like on Agatha's? I like McDonald's fries. I'd prefer Gunderson's guacamole.

"Payin' anything to roll the dice, just one more time"

Grandpa's poker friend, Jerry, curses Hallie out, accusing her of taking crack and stealing his car 20 years ago.

Surely they will start forgetting to come. It will be gradual, and then all at once I won't even be sitting in the back of their mind! I'm talking demotion to the sensory cortex.

Beth, Grandpa's second ex-wife, swings ➤ ➤

I want my friends to shake my bones until they break

The mosquitoes had the same home she did – in the white-walled, sterile-smelling, sharp-cornered lab space she shared with cancer research scientists. Rolanda, however, studied mosquito behavior. The buzzing, she thought, was similar to the way she breathed at night – in, out, wheeze. Their rapid flying, she thought, was similar to the way she darted around people who didn't seem to have time for her insect musings.

A mid-20s, overly passionate, wheeze-breathing woman whose height caused her to get patted on the head instead of hugged. She identified with the mosquitoes she studied in the cramped lab space laden with glass containers (with holes poked in the top, of course). They were labeled with blue tape, and the tops were easy to remove if it was time to set a group of mosquitoes free.

Overly passionate is what she was. A mosquito profiler, a scholar, a true aficionado.

A writer who exposes the importance of creatures too small to be noticed for anything other than their sound.

Every day she would eat one porcelain bowl of oatmeal with dried plums, go across the street to the lab, unlock the door with a small orange-rubber-rimmed key, wipe her feet on the slightly torn “Welcome” mat (and, truly, this was where she felt most welcome) outside the lab building, and, after proudly donning her white coat, research and writing would begin. She would open the jars that lined the walls, release each mosquito into a makeshift habitat with varying temperatures and food, and study their behavior.

Why do only female mosquitoes drink blood? How do they reproduce? Eat? Sleep? Die? Rolanda wrote it all down. She enjoyed their compa-

ny. Not in an alarmingly antisocial way, either – she reminded herself of this every day as she unlocked the lab door – but rather, in an overly passionate sort of way. As her beloved mosquitoes couldn't satisfy the conversationalist in her, she would talk to herself, quietly chanting encouragement.

“Rolanda, the smaller the creature the bigger the voice. They buzz, and you write, and both are powerful in their own way.”

“Rolanda, no one identifies with mosquitoes the way you do.”

“No one is as overly passionate as you are.”

“People who read *National Geographic* don't see what you see. That's why your research article submissions were turned down last month.”

“Don't forget about January, Rolanda, the January issue of *BioOne*. Twenty dollars for the three thousand word article at the end of the Vile Insects section.”

“You're on your way.”

“Rolanda, it's a society's lack of passion that explains lack of readers.”

And this, she would repeat. And the small insects, they would continue to buzz.

Three years after she began her research, straight out of college, one day after counting 10 mosquitoes born in the blue rubber habitat she had built so carefully with lined plexiglass, on what she liked to call the Mosquito's Day of Public Acknowledgment, she went home to the first noteworthy letter that had ever graced her mailbox.

It read, “College Board, SAT College Entrance Exams Contributor Offer.” Inside was a letter referencing her work with mosquitoes.

She read it aloud, as usual – in middle school that was how she would comprehend reading best, and it had become habit.

Dear Ms. Rolanda Visser,

The College Board is interested in using your submission to *National Geographic*, “Profiling Mosquitoes in Temperatures Below Sixty Degrees,” for our 2017 Critical Reading Section on the SAT. To indicate your approval for us to adopt the article and reference you as a researcher and writer, please email mhughes@collegeboard.com.

We truly hope to include your work in a standardized test that evaluates not only the contents of the mind, but of the soul.

Cordially,

Margaret Hughes
SAT Critical Reading
Section Editor

“No one identifies with mosquitoes the way you do”

The Mosquito's Day of Public Acknowledgment. The Day Their Buzz-Voices Would Be Heard. It was her writing, too, her overly passionate research articles, submitted to *National Geographic* each month and emailed to every science publication she knew the name of. It was this dedication that had gotten her work published. And, in the SAT! The Critical Reading section sounded more legitimate than “Vile Insects.” She promptly sent an email response, did a small dance with tapping feet, and, looked around for someone she could tell the news to. She told her mosquitoes.

One year later, instead of crossing the street as she had done for the past four years, Rolanda went left. Passionate dedication explained the past constant routine, but today she had to pick up Alastair, the high school intern who, in four years, was the sole person to take interest in her work. He

had just taken the SAT, he emailed her two days ago, and wanted to expand his knowledge of insect research. Students lined the halls, and she listened to their buzzing as she searched for the plaid shirt Alastair said he'd be wearing.

“I literally skipped over all the questions about that passage. Better than getting them all wrong.”

“What did you get for 29? A, right?”

“I had to read the part about mosquito birth under sixty degrees, like, four times before I absorbed it.”

“Why do they choose the most boring passages for the reading section? When are we ever going to need to read things like that in our real lives?”

“I said the tone was ‘informative’ – I'm pretty sure that was B. But honestly, I don't know.”

Head down, Rolanda started to speed-walk out of that horrible school.

“Ms. Visser? Ms. Visser!”

She whirled around to see a plaid-shirted boy running. “I found you! I wanted to tell you in person. My class took the SAT a couple days ago, and your passage was in it. Frankly, Ms. Visser, no one understood it. But sometimes, I wheeze at night, and it feels like the way a mosquito buzzes, and also, my answer for number thirty about your passage was different from everyone else's that I've talked to.”

Rolanda's head was down again. SAT reading passages, she remembered then, are chosen to trip students up. The more boring they are, the harder they are.

“Ms. Visser, the question asked what the tone of the passage was. Everyone picked B: Informative.”

“What did you pick?”

“I answered E: Passionate.” ♦

her umbrella, and it hits Jerry in the back. “I stole your car, idiot. You never helped raise Billy, and I also stole your mom's waffle maker.” Beth gets feistier and starts kicking, as best as an old lady can (almost as good as Jackie Chan). The priest pulls Beth away while Hallie goes into “Fat Bottomed Girls.” Jonah's head becomes heavy like when the Titanic became heavy when all the water broke in. Jonah cried during “Titanic,” but only in the first five minutes because Leonardo DiCaprio should have gotten a Golden Globe.

I knew my face was wet, but I wasn't sure if it was with tears or sweat. I tasted salt. I felt my life pushing me. He looked like me but he was unfinished, incomplete (and it wasn't a bow tie he was missing). He was standing there, but I could

see through him.

I could see everything happening without me. I want to haunt my mother. I want to sit in the back of my sister's brain. I want my father to stomp on the ground above my permanent designated parking space. I want my friends to shake my bones until they break. He used his hands like wind to carry me.

The casket is once again ready for takeoff. Jonah's mother, strangely entertained, hasn't noticed his now-iceberg color. Jonah stops and drops and he rolls about 360 degrees

with an hour and a half of momentum, perfectly falling into that perfectly dug out hole in the ground. Just in time, too! Grandpa's third ex-wife is approaching the casket because she has “some final words to speak with him.” No one notices Jonah is missing. ♦

When would they stop visiting my grave?



Photo by Brianna Kosuth, Naperville, IL

Bad Habits

by Helen Feibes, Lexington, KY

Light poured in through the open curtains. Natalie drank it up until her body was glowing.

I wasted away in the corner of her room, curled up in a chair and half asleep.

"You want coffee?"

"I hate coffee."

"Iced?" She ignored my previous comment.

"I could use some alcohol."

She swiveled, her hair flying madly. Natalie rolled her eyes. "Real insensitive, Erin."

I leaned my head back to stare at her blank ceiling. "I like you better when you're drunk."

She bit the inside of her cheek and tried to ignore me.

Stretching, I stood and combed my fingers through my hair. I walked over to Natalie until I was standing in front of where she sat on the edge of her bed. Natalie was vulnerable, the kind of girl who would pretend she had a gun.

I reached for her hand, moving slowly. Her nail polish was chipped.

"Nail polish didn't work?"

"No," she said almost angrily. "God, I could not have picked a more clichéd bad habit, could I?"

Natalie's comment made me smile one of those half smiles, like you were trying to hold it in.

Suddenly, she gripped my wrist. I flinched and she loosened her hold. "Let me see your arm," she whispered. I groaned and threw my head back but lifted up my left sleeve.

There were scabs covering the skin and some patches still thin and stinging. I stood still as Natalie counted.

"Two new ones in a week?" She was trying not to sound disappointed for my sake. It wasn't really a question.

"Yeah," I said shortly.

Natalie's fingers drifted to the most recent.

"We need to put a bandage on this one. It's close to bleeding." She dropped my arm.

I laughed, uncertain. "C'mon, it'll be fine."

"No," she called from the bathroom.

My hand instinctively found a clear patch on my arm and started scratching anxiously, my anger building. Natalie dropped the bandage roll when she entered the room, prying my hand from my arm.

"Jesus, Erin, this is self-destructive. They could be putting you in a mental hospital, you know."

"I don't think you would let that happen."

Knowing she wouldn't, she stayed

quiet as she wrapped the unnecessary bandage around my arm.

"Do you remember what you said when they wanted to put me in that rehab center?" Natalie asked.

"Of course." I looked down suddenly. "I can make her okay." I said it over and over.

Natalie kept her eyes on me like I was some guardian angel. My breaths felt heavy. I wasn't an angel sent to fix everything. I was the one who always messed everything up.

"Can you?"

"Of course."

My mind flew back to that day at the hospital, the sickening waiting for someone to say she would be okay. They never did. The doctors huddled around her mother, sending me glances to tell me I wasn't supposed to be listening. I was the last person allowed to talk to her.

"Alcohol poisoning, you idiot.

Couldn't it be something legal at least?" I had said.

Natalie bit her nails.

"They're putting me in rehab."

"What?" Those five words were deafeningly loud.

Natalie wouldn't cry. She just kept biting her

nails.

"I can make her okay," I said to the doctors as much as I said to her mother. I said it over and over.

I can make her okay.

I sat next to Natalie on her bed, crossing my legs. "What did it feel like?" I wanted to ask her that day in the hospital.

She paused. "What did what feel like?"

I stared at her sheets. They were wrinkled and covered with coffee stains. "What did it feel like to be dying?" My voice sounded so blank.

"I don't want to think about it."

"What did it feel like?"

Natalie bit her nail then caught herself. She hugged her knees. "You know when it's so dark that you can't tell if your eyes are open or closed? That's what it felt like." Her voice faded, and she slid off the mattress, heading to the bathroom.

When she was out of the room, I took a deep breath and dug my fingernails into my arm like it was the only pain I could feel.

"Start drinking decaf, Natalie."

I heard her snuffle as she lay down by me. "What?" She covered her eyes with her arm like the ceiling was too bright to look at.

"That's the first step in making you better." My arm stung and I had to keep taking deep breaths. "Switching to decaf coffee is the first step."

"Wow, you have a lot of prejudice

**Our bad habits
have been
getting worse
since we met**



Photo by Becca Francis, Homewood, IL

against coffee, don't you?"

"It's not like that." Drinking decaf instead of caffeinated coffee is like drinking water instead of alcohol.

"You have a second step yet?"

"Making it up as we go along."

I want you to stop, I thought. I couldn't say it out loud. There were so many things I couldn't say out loud.

I swear our bad habits have been getting worse since we met each other. I can't fix them. They are just these little tics in our bodies we can't get rid of. We can't get rid of each other, it seems.

You are so beautiful and so much more, and maybe if you realize you aren't half as bad as you think you are, you can get better. I couldn't say that out loud either.

She was glowing. It wasn't too dark to know if my eyes were open or closed. My eyes were wide open and I was looking at her, and she was just

lying there like she was the sun. Still, she was so small that the light would drink her up as quickly as she could get drunk.

"What does it feel like?"

"Hmm," she mumbled, tired.

"Right now, what does it feel like?"

Natalie sighed. "Like it's so bright that I can't tell if I'm awake or asleep."

"You're awake."

We always looked out for each other's bad habits, and this was her worst.

I think she was my worst habit. She was late nights and wasted days. She was broken headlights and getting lost. She was taking every bit of me, and I was okay with it. Sometimes, when I was around her, everything would feel broken.

You know when it's so dark that you can't tell if your eyes are open or closed? That's what it felt like, but I couldn't say it out loud. ♦

To Wink

by Taytum Bush, Helmet, CA

Going through her old drawers, I was looking for something that could prove she was still alive. It hasn't been long – maybe three weeks since her passing. I always feel that when I walk into her room, she'll be sitting there in her old-fashioned pink recliner, reading her mystery books. I remember having to call her name a few times before she heard me. Either she was so into the book or her hearing aid was off. She'd put in the rubber band she uses as a bookmark to keep her page and hug me.

But this time it was different. Her bed was smaller. Instead of a queen it was a twin size. I asked her where her other one went and she said it was in the garage. She was getting a hospital bed pretty soon. My heart sank noticing the oxygen tanks in the corner of the room. This was to be her last chapter and I knew it.

She'd always wink at me as if she was trying to tell me something, it was like a language we had. She said that my great-grandpa was waiting for her. Granny is – or I should say was – 90. I loved the interesting earrings she wore, the way she always wore red lipstick, and how she loved me. I miss how she always had candy for me, how she put her hands together when she was excited, and above all I just miss her.

I wink a lot now. ♦

Her Christmas Wish

by Prerana Kumar, Porvorim, India

She stares at herself in the cracked mirror, eyeing her disgusting makeup. The thick liner which burns her eyes, the rouge that highlights her cheekbones so her face is just broken angles, and the scarlet lipstick, smudged slightly at the edge, the unmistakable trademark of her profession.

Her fishnet stockings have a tiny rip and her top is too tight. The skirt she is even tighter, accentuating her curves.

She hates herself and everything she has to do, but there is no other way.

Her savings from the year ran out last night. She'd saved up penny by penny in a jar. But she had to buy a new gloves. It had taken every ounce of willpower to spend that money, but the old gloves had seven holes, and her fingers would have fallen off from the cold.

Today is Christmas Eve, and she has no money, but she wants to buy a present. For once she wants to ignore everything and everyone in the world and make herself happy. She deserves happiness. It's been a very long time since she had any.

And so there is no other way.

She turns from the mirror, takes a breath, and walks out into the glaring lights of the bar. For a few moments, she is blinded. Wolf-whistles and jeers reverberate in the bar. She can feel the lusty eyes of the men in the room crawling all over her. She can almost feel their greedy hands ripping her apart. These are the men who think they own her and take pleasure in breaking down women like her.

She takes a ragged breath, trying to ignore the bile rising in her throat. She thought that she'd be used to it by now – the stench of alcohol, the taste of disaster stinging her tongue. After all, it has been six years since she fell into this world of lust and smudged lipstick and broken glass.

But she learned early on that it is impossible to get used to the depravity that she inhales in this place every night. Every time it is as if it were the first. She has nothing but shaky legs and lost eyes and fading strength.

But there is no other way.

She rushes into her dressing room after the ordeal is over, heaving breaths that threaten to rattle her frame. She claws at her chest to try and relieve the tension. She cannot breathe. The new bruises on her right arm are red in the faint light. He had gripped her hard as he pulled her down from the platform where she danced. His breath had smelled of burning alcohol. He did not stop

until somebody – probably security – wrenched his fingers away. She fled, too scared to speak.

Too used to it to cry.

She has the money now. She will not starve. But there is something else that gnaws at her, threatening to rip apart her insides. She has been starved too long of respect to try and fill the gaping holes that famine has left unhealed.

She gathers up her belongings. It is late, and the stores are closing. If she wants a gift for Christmas, she'll have

to hurry, and so she runs out, a bag under one arm, smudged lipstick and ripped hope, trying her best to run with a broken heel. After walking for a while, she finds a store that is open. One store

that keeps hope blooming in her.

It is run by an old man. It has what she needs, and she rushes in without a thought. She is relieved to see that there are a few other customers, even at this hour. The store is not well-lit, but that does not mean she cannot feel the looks she's getting. She knows people whisper at the sight of her. About how she is cheap and disgraced. About how her skin is marred by the fingerprints of the men who touch her. She no longer has the courage to scream that she is not what they see. She is so much more than this.

The old man peers at her suspiciously. He has no kindness to spare for a woman like her. He wants to close up shop. He has a dinner waiting at home for him – chicken spiced with thyme. But this woman is keeping him here.

He knows she probably spends her dirty money on drugs and snorts them under a bridge somewhere. He wants nothing to do with a wretch like her.

Suddenly, there is a crash, and he realizes that she has knocked over a rack of clothing. She is looking around wildly, her trembling fingers trying to pick up the clothes.

"I'm sorry," her voice is barely audible, raw with struggling courage. "I'm so sorry."

"Get that to the way it was," he thunders.

He finishes totaling the profits for the day and contemplates locking the wench in the shop. The last time he'd seen her was when she'd scurried to the dressing rooms. He grumbles, but is distracted when another customer walks up to the counter. He is slightly surprised and pleased all the same.

He had not noticed her enter, and he chastises himself for not getting the bell fixed. He hurries over to her, smiling, eager to please. She is a beauty. Her brown hair frames her

face wonderfully. She is dressed in a long coat and black gloves. She holds a bag and smiles at him.

He melts the moment she does. A tiny dimple dances in her chin. She reminds him of his daughter, who is studying in a university far away.

But there is something about her eyes. They look drained, tired, with the dark circles etched onto her face. He feels sympathy for this lovely woman who has to work so late on Christmas Eve. He wonders if she has a family waiting for her at home.

She hesitates again, before handing him a black toy car with large tires.

"For my son," she says softly.

He notices that she has tiny hands. Strong hands, no doubt. But tiny.

"Yes. I needed to buy him a present." She is almost glowing with happiness.

He chuckles. "Your son will love it," he says, her happiness stealing into him. He watches her walk out of the store, the last customer to leave.

He has forgotten about the woman who entered his store a while ago. The one with the bruises on her arm and the midnight eyes. He closes shop humming "Silent Night."

As the beautiful woman passes the shop window, he catches sight of the pointed tip of a blood-red heel sticking out of her handbag.

She laughs as she pulls her frayed coat around her. She hurries home, her long hair rippling as she walks.

Christian is waiting. His name is a warmth that spreads through her. She thinks of his doe-shaped eyes and smile, and her heart grows 'til she fears it will burst with love. There is nobody she loves more. She holds his gift wrapped in red and gold, his favorite colors.

Work is grueling. She does not have a nine-to-five job. Sometimes she has to leave him alone for hours. It is hard. But not tonight. Tonight is Christmas Eve, and she has a gift.

"Christian!" she calls, and he rushes in, a whirlwind of chocolate curls. He throws his arms around her, his chubby fingers clasping her neck. He is surprisingly strong for a six-year-old.

"Did you get me a gift, Mama?"

He sees her face fall ever so slightly.

"It's okay if you didn't, Mama! I have you!" he chirps, his voice almost masking his disappointment.

"Don't be sad. I made you a gift!"

He blushes slightly as he holds out a hand-drawn card, and looks away almost immediately, suddenly shy.

It is a picture of them under a large, purple Christmas tree, with "MERRY

CHRISTMAS" in wobbly handwriting. The lines are shabby, and the color is mismatched. But to her, it is the most beautiful card in the world.

"I told you not to cry, Mama!" he says. "Don't you like my card?"

"Of course I love it, silly boy!" she says and hugs him hard, running her hand through his curls. She does not know why she is blessed to have this much joy in her life. She does not know what she has done to deserve a boy like this as her son.

All she knows is that today is Christmas and she has a gift, and she is happy for the first time in weeks.

She pulls out his present and watches as he opens it. Pink spots appear like rosebuds in his cheeks, and the unfathomable faith that pools in his eyes lifts her soul and breaks her heart.

He is never demanding. He never pesters her for toys. He is a good boy. But she notices the way his eyes stray to the things she can't afford, and there's nothing that hurts more than not being able to give him everything his heart desires.

But not today.

Today she has filled his heart to the brim. Today, she is proud of herself.

She begins to unpack her bag, as he plays with his black car.

"Did your red shoe break, Mama?" he asks innocently, seeing it. His mama wears those to work, he knows, so he never touches them.

"I fell, darling," she says quietly. "But it's okay."

"Is that why your arm is hurt? I'll wish it all better, don't you worry." He beams at her, asking, "Did you get your Christmas wish, Mama?"

She takes in the large eyes, the unruly mop of curls, and the smile that curves like an arc of light. He has very little of her in his face, save her dimple.

He is all that's left of the man who plunged his hands into her chest and twisted her ribs and left them that way. Left her choking and bruised and battered with a baby in her belly. She was afraid that she'd despise that baby with the vehemence that crawled in her blood for its father. But the first time he was placed in her arms, she thought, *He has his father's eyes*. She thought, *He is beautiful*.

She knew if she loved anything in the world it was this tiny baby. And she promised that she'd fight for him. She'd give him a life. She smiles through damp eyes. She knows he is her salvation. It is her son's smile and his hope and his tinkling laugh that she thinks of when she answers, "Yes. Yes, I did." ♦

She has the money now. She will not starve.

"Did you get me a gift, Mama?"



Photo by Rachel Berkowitz, Dix Hills, NY

Winter with the Inmate

You know December, the way the leaves
quickly drift
from the abstract to the concrete and how
birds of different feathers
find solace in each other.
Maybe you know the feeling of visiting a jail cell,
the loneliness, the silent stares, maybe you
know the ticks more than I do because

I don't really know whether time is a prison,
but my aunt spent twelve years locked up
after her husband found sweets in a new mattress.
She never left her penthouse on the corner
of Park Avenue,
But the city lights might as well have been
vertical bars.

I don't know whether society is a prison,
but my blonde neighbor Elaine with the ring
slept with a man and the next time
we went swimming,
she never came up for air. I wonder if the
last sound she heard
were the whispers or the sirens. Maybe both.
You don't know if events can be connected,
But you know December. You know the
white clumps of crystals,
the way the ground swallows the material
and what matters.

by Lisa Zou, Chandler, AZ

pre-breakfast dialogue

egg:

i
saw
the light
when you cracked me.

he:

i
saw
the sun
in a broken cloud.

by John Michael Londres, Iloilo, Philippines

if i met you for lunch at george's diner

hi, it's been a while.
how are you? are you still
working at the bookstore?
literature is
a dying art.
did you hear about tommy and
maisie goldbaum
in georgia last week?
they went missing, the both of
them. seven and ten, fantastic ballet
dancers. water will be fine, thanks.
a hundred thousand dollars
if found. can you believe it? we'd be
rich, wouldn't we, darling? yes, i think
i'll have the roasted turkey melt
with fries. ha, if
only we lived in georgia.
no, of course i don't care about them!
did it really take you
that long to figure that out? people rarely ever
care about things that don't
touch them personally. i figured i'd tell
you only because georgia produces
over 130 million pounds
of peaches each year, and
that made me think
of the peach cobblers that granny would make
if she could find the goddamned
fruits at the market, and
that made me think
of how when she died, i didn't do anything
for two weeks but watch sad movies
and use ice cream cartons as boxes
of tissues, and
that made me think of how much i loved
the ice cream cakes
i'd have on my birthday as a child, and
that made me think
of hazy, summer-infused dates to the dairy queen
with you, how we would
order the most sugary, most calorie-
loaded dessert on the menu and eat it all in one
sitting. i thought i'd tell you
only because it made me think
of you. yes, the food is wonderful,
but do you have ketchup, by any chance?
oh, haha.
did i make it
awkward? you
run through my veins like blue
frosting runs through yours. it gave
me a toothache for days, if you
want to know the truth. no, that's
okay, we'll just have the
check. he's a bookkeeper, you know.
he'll pay for it.

by Emily Xu,
Brooklyn, NY

Speak

I have his mouth but
slurred and sharper; we do not
know how to converse

by Vamika Sinha,
Gaborone, Botswana

Ancestor

I look at you
There's something about your portrait
That makes me feel
Like reverence is due
Perhaps
It is your eyes
In them lies determination, strength
There is gentleness too
We now have so little of you
That magnificent cloak
An age to weave
The large green Pounamu
A sign of respect
Rests with you.

Above
A low table
Covered with flowers
In a frame
Of dark brown wood
With flecks of gold
Oval
Eye-like
As if you
Are looking at me too.

by Lily Hallbutcher,
Wellington, New Zealand

Ode to Pencils

broken, shriveled to nothing
(guess you could say: pointless.)
strong, fragile
can we create something beautiful and destroy it?
you know far too well
what it feels like
to be
erased

by Jazmin Wilson,
Grand Prairie, TX

Tea and Forgetfulness

Lazy nights and forgotten stories tucked
Behind bed frames shoved
Against walls.
I have a thousand things I should be doing
but I am forgetting them and sitting here
instead I have
A thousand things I rush home to tell you
but I forget them when I see your face
they can't
Have been important I'll remember them
if we sit in silence and
Chatter long enough
I am drowning in tea and forgetfulness
I am choosing the low road,
Or the high road whatever you may call
it, the path
Of least resistance.
I am watching and waiting and giving you
the first, second, third move.
I am forgetting how to play the game and you are
beating me without trying.
I am forgetting the person I signed up to be and
the person I am planning
On becoming.

by Ellanora Lerner, New London, CT

Preventative Measures

Cold feet are not normally the consequence of anything in particular, except maybe winter weather and tiled floors, and the refusal to wear slippers. You see, it'll start snowing soon, like it always does in December. And we'll get to sleep late and skip school and hear younger children screaming at angels and snowmen with stick arms. While we shovel and complain about winter weather, even though we remembered to wear fuzzy socks all season, so our feet don't get colder. You see, our feet are cold enough already.

by Eleni Aneziris, East Setauket, NY

universe painter

you doze with meadows and field mice curled in your chest, close to your heart to stay warm. the forest whispers secrets to you from deep inside your bones. galaxies sleep inside your stomach, your eyes are two drops of cyanide ready to poison but careful to look. you are an enigma – be that – be a lie and let your bones grow from wishes into granite mountains. you stand strong, your blood is a rushing river with fish jumping through it, swimming through your capillaries and laying their eggs inside your heart. you are a valley, a river, iron flooding into your chest cavity, birds nesting in your ribcage huddling to stay warm. you harbor nebulas inside your mind and your thoughts are works of art. when you open your mouth paint slips out.

by Isi Vasquez, San Francisco, CA

the other side

of the story is you. here the body of distance floats down the stream of consciousness soaked in toxic screams and crystallized teardrops. stapled against silence. the protagonist of the story is a shadow now a history of words disinfecting wounds they tug at the stitches and i bleed out.

by Megan Tyler, Winnipeg, MB, Canada

Seismicity

In the time it took to read this sentence
Two girls made mud pies by mixing the dirt
from their kitchen
With their mother's tears.
In the time it took to read this sentence
A wife cowered from a shower of stones
Striking her flesh
All for the crime of existing.
In the time it took to read this sentence
A father stumbled home drunk,
Like a shard of glass washed up on the beach
Bleeding in your foot.
In the time it took to read this sentence
A soldier found his mind won't go to sleep
It's been stretched and abused
Putty of the gods.
In the time it took to read this sentence
A surge of dysphoria rippled under the crust
of the earth
Harmonic tremors running through our
ignorant lives
Echoes and screams rebounding off
tectonic plates.
And in the time it took to read this sentence
I picked a flower from your hair
The world's melody racing in my bones
Not aware
That an earthquake had just occurred
directly beneath my feet.

by Aly Beckham, Louisville, KY

I Think You Just Got Tired of Me

I remember
you told me
I was an acquired taste
like black coffee
or your favorite brand of whiskey
and I guess
you meant
it just wasn't worth the pain
to have me be
the first thing that touches your lips
in the morning
or the last thing
that knocks you out
at night

by Lucy Massad, Greenwich, CT



Art by Ava Blum-Carr, Hadley, MA

Maps

425 days ago,
you painted a map.

When I see the stars weave their fingers
through strands of velvet skies,
I think of you and countless empty nights
where constellations hid behind crying ceilings,
raining down on your thoughts,
days where a somber moon peered
into your sunken eyes,
fragile ribs collided against a melancholy floor,
clutching at pieces of your tattered composition,
too tired to move, too tired to breathe,
just listening to the gentle beat
of falling tears
tapping against your window.

Perhaps you didn't notice
how jagged your bones became,
poking out of your flesh.

395 days ago,
you told me you couldn't go on anymore
and maybe the guns by your bed
were your only option.

I begged you to stay
and counted all the reasons for you to live,
reasons to keep breathing,
reasons that you weren't worthless, alone –

Reasons that weren't enough.

You kept a knife hidden
between thighs and raw denim
and I begged you to return it
but you asked if you could decompose
a pencil sharpener to pick at your scabs.

425 days ago,
you told me stories.

You showed me the murals you drew,
carved with pieces of a shattered mirror,
blood beading into lines,
forming branches, rivers,
painting a map crawling down lifeless shoulders.
They left battle scars adorning your skin.

Eight full moons ago,
you relapsed.

You turned it into an art,
blood running across veins;
slices of adrenaline
and trying to forget.
But with every cut,
you were slipping away.

You told me about the demons that
haunted you in the dark,
every night,
clawing at your arms,
consuming your every thought.

You were slowly drifting away
like the petals of a dying dandelion.
There was nothing I could do to pull back
the worn-out frays of your remains.

And when the crumbling leaves of autumn
swept away the remaining strands of summer,

I lost you.

by Olivia Su,
Milpitas, CA

Forgotten

The winter makes you forget.
The heaters mumble, the winds whine,
the floorboards moan and groan,
their wood aching with the cold.
When three layers is not enough,
when the snowflakes feel like knife blades,
when you can barely move your fingers –
well, it's hard to remember
that someday you'll feel the warmth again.
When I recall a memory,
I call up the snapshots,
the colors and blurs of motion,
the sounds around me,
but never the heat upon my skin.
Never the hair stuck to my neck,
or the fabric clutching my back.
Maybe that's why winter seems never-ending –
because it makes us forget
that times moves forward
and the cold is not forever.

by Ella Staats, Burlington, VT

Breath

I stand
And feel the wind
Take a drag.
A nice, long, cool
Rush of freedom
That beckons today
From tomorrow's grasp.
I take the whole
Of my existence
Through my nostrils,
And feel time's mythology.
The breadth of life
Is in this breath.

by Walker Orr, Prosser, WA

Where I Am From

I am foraged from brains, bronze, and bravery
From blue collar man and white collar woman
From "I love you with all my heart and ten
stinky toes."
I am from the outfit of dirt
From the can of worms below my feet
I am from the "girls can get dirty too!"
I am from the playset transforming into a
flying pirate ship
From the sandbox bakery, to the town for toads,
to lava monsters layer
I am the girl who thought she could fly
I am from the heart-racing bike rides through
the campground.
From the time the golf cart attacked Kyle and
from the riddle of the two brothers who
were not twins.
I am the nurse bound to her castle
From the ghastly disease that plagued mom
I am the princess watching the world
from the glass
I am from the time loop of albums of Van Halen
and Rush
From Eddie slaying the guitar to Sammy
rocking the vocals
From "When the music's too loud you're too old."
I am fabricated from creativity, charisma,
and compassion
From ink stains and paper cuts to sweat and soot
I am from "olive you."

by Sammy Gryzkiewicz, Sussex, WI

Rose's Rosary

Elegance and hope intertwine blue
glossy beads of my great grandmother's rosary.
Rose was her name,

a tough life she endured.
She made it to 97 years old.
Surviving breast cancer,
she pushed through life
carrying her hardships with her head up,
God in her heart, and a rosary in her hands.
I sat beside her hospital bed, watching her bravery
slip into weakness.
I knew that I would have to be strong for her.
I handed her my favorite teddy bear, hoping
she could find comfort in it when I wasn't there.
In return, she handed me her rosary,
as if to say
I needed the strength more than she did.

by Iman Al-Kahil, Milford, MI

get him out

my eyes are overflowing with his image
every step i take is plagued with it
i cannot walk, i cannot sleep, i cannot breathe
without seeing memory of him
he's in every atom of my being
and i cannot get him out
i scrub and rip and tear at it
but he's lodged in me eternally
my screams roll up my throat
like bile threatening to spill
get him out, get him out, get him out
i want to be rid of the hell i've been in
i want to be free from everything he is
i'm trapped forever in this never-ending cycle
of self-hatred, and hatred,
abuse, and denial
missing him, and loathing him
caught in his loop

by Essie West, Eugene, OR

Please Disregard

The bump you ran over,
With your car,
Was only me
No need to worry
Simply roadkill
Is all
Please disregard

by Rachel Waite, Parker, CO



Photo by Camelia Hood, Lawrenceville, GA

Ice Skates

I.
Pale salmon starfish nipped
by an unexpected late frost,
delicate radiant faces
static for eternity.

Loosening their slender fists,
the blossoms release their chilling
grasp.
The reeds,
petrified,
do not sway with the wind.

Frozen
French vanilla creamer
diffuses
under the clouds.

II.
First time
Father John splashed holy water
into your aisle,
into your face,
when you put on your ice skates
age five,
falling immediately.
When you pushed your grandfather's
lawnmower back
onto the lawn,
verdant perfumes wafting
from the old blades,
when you poked your
newborn cousin
sleeping, bundled
to the realm of tender arms.
When you sat stony-faced,
agitated
at a loved one's funeral
wondering about his spirit
and if it could permeate the coffin.

III.
A young couple
ice skate
carving, pitting the azure ice.
Synchronized
soft beams still radiate
off their bodies.
They strap on their ice skates,
wobble a little
then straighten out,
skate
wreathed by
fallen blossoms resting in the silhouettes
of cherry trees.

by Jack Li, Los Angeles, CA

School

Cramming your mind with knowledge
So that you know about the world around,
But how is the Quadratic Formula
Supposed to keep me safe and sound?
And what about commas and semicolons?
Will they help me pay my debt?
Maybe if I write a book on grammar,
But definitely not yet.
Memorizing useless information
Just to get an "A" on that test.
If only learning was the real goal.
Or the old saying, "Just do your best!"

by Lauren Pinchuk,
Dubuque, PA

Misplaced Belief

The hem of his cologne was caught in the air
Untainted and familiar, but thin
Thin enough to see the shadow of my fingers
Through its thundercloud-hued material
As I reached out for the floating hem
Longing for relief from my affliction,
eyes uplifted
Requesting a miracle for my hemorrhaging heart
I grasped it between my fingers

There was
Nothing

No strength rushed into me
No relief from my ache was granted
My unhealable emptiness remained
What further confirmation did I need
That he is not a savior
Still, perhaps it's my lacking faith.

by Abbey Bigler, Kirkwood, PA

Disconnected

Cell phones and Instagram,
Twitter and Facebook
Social media taking control.
Text, don't talk
Communication in the form of
twiddling thumbs and
Likes and comments
Retweets and favorites.
No privacy, anxiety as common as oxygen.
The government tapped into our webcams,
or maybe even
Our friends.
No privacy, no freedom
Yet it doesn't matter.
No kid cares what's going on
Ferguson, gay rights, the plague of depression
Yet it doesn't matter.
Only concerned about
sick pics and if
they texted back.
If they got enough retweets or favorites, enough
likes or comments.
The small screens filling everything except
the space between us,
for they're all that matters in this world.
Everyone isolated, unity nonexistent
Disconnected by connection.
Assailants and victims
All at once.

by Andrew Hartley, Flushing, WI

Train of Eternity

I'm on a train and
frankly, I don't care where it goes.
The trees blur past me, as if lines streaked by
a paintbrush. The hard red leather seat digs
into my back.
I dip my finger into the paint, dabbing it
on the sky.
My bag, full of watercolor maps, bleeds
on the floor.
I blot my face.
Frankly, I don't care where this train goes,
as long as
I go with it - leaving a trail of
paint cans behind, colored fingerprints
kissing the rim.

by Truelian Lee, Ridgefield, CT

Loss of Wisdom

There's a stitch in my mouth and if you were
to pull it I might unravel into cut-off sentences
and moments that never happened.
Refuse and I might stay the same but
I'm full of holes and loose strings
Partially mended or left forgotten to rot with all
my other visions for the future
So if you don't, someone else will.

by Margo McManus, Fair Play, SC



Photo by Jessica Walker, Kihei, HI

She Is a Copper Penny

She was found in a gutter,
in the trash,
at the bottom of an old piggy bank.
No one could remember where they placed her;
neatly tucked into the crevices of
old scraggly sidewalks
in desperate need of repair.
Her whole being was covered
in dust and grime,
shielded from the sun, from sound,
and the smell of flowers.
She was thrown in the tip jar,
but even the waitress forgot about her.
She wasn't worth quite enough.
She was stuffed between couch cushions
and when mothers took the time to look between,
they would find her
and throw her back.
Dented and bruised, calloused,
her frame was crooked
and disfigured.
And on a Sunday in July,
she was buried beneath the grass
where she felt
little tiny fingers wrapped around her.
The child wiped off the muck
to figure when she was made.
She couldn't remember when she was made,
she only remembered being broken.
The child held her up to the sun
and she felt the first warmth she had felt
in decades.
Holding her close, the child whispered,
"I have been searching for someone like you
for so long."

by Stephanie DiGirolamo,
Pleasant Prairie, WI

Progression to Epiphany

Before even my nothing of a body curled its neck
up against the softness of the embryonic form,
the thought of me was first conceived in
God's palm and He passed me on as a whisper
to meet the earth in its chromatic array.
I was only a shadow – an empty wind harboring
potential.
Gentle and passing like the slight nod of a head,
a tonic promise adrift, brushing shoulders
with my mother
on sleepy afternoons and searching for the eyes
of my father.
I was a vacant spot in the universe and
fruition – nothing more than a dream.
I am Birth.
I missed the crescendo of my girlhood,
a movie-worthy summer stole it away.
I am a girl grasping the edges of the cosmos,
their ambiguity spilling greatness and
I am nothing except a set of crooked hands,
reaching – reaching.
I once read about Van Gogh in all of his morbid
loneliness,
The man with colors on his tongue and I imagined
painting my organs yellow in protest, instead I
swallow words that either weigh too much or
break when I dare to breathe.
I lose things; misplaced the courage that I was
saving up in the old shoe box under my bed.
And so now I tiptoe like an alley cat sliding past
king dog's garage.
What is it that looms over this astronomical
planet that I can only look up; try to capture
my escaping breath to station it back between
the bones of my rib cage?
I glean the streets for approval, looking for it
in the eyes of passers by –
Dear mortal, make me worth the air I consume,
I am awkward and inelegant.
Dear amnesia, hit me but softly like a million
origami paper planes.
And I threw rancorous cringes at the star-laced
asphalt
(for the longest time)
until I was too tired to love anything.
I am the Zero Hour – the Climacteric Rush.
I landed somewhere between a nightly state of
REM and coming to, mechanical gears twisting.
I will not choke on society and their end of the
day summer cool,
rolling up nooses and CGI joviality –
glossy spheres claiming objective brilliance.
My stark opposition does not dignify the actions
of blank-faced image lords. You will not catch me
because I will run – because I will run.
There is confusion buzzing, something like
my separation means
staining the earth with the dark liquid of my veins.
They are wrong, they are blind.
I throw away the silicone heart I was crafting
between wearing facades, their abolishment is
accompanied by
the tearing of the strings from these limbs.
The Emptiness is a pile of thorns using your flesh
as a canvas,
a red maze of designs
etched by broken morsels of nothing trying to
rewrite your humanity.
It prays you catch sick and die in your place.
I refuse to be its masterpiece.
I am my own.

by Chinasa Okezie, Hayward, CA

Your Voice Gives Me Gravity

My mind is lost in cloudy nebulas
half-formed ideas burning and swirling around me
without sense or structure.
God has not touched this place;
I am god,
the monsters dwelling here are my own creation,
but not under my control.
I am lost,
drifting through anti-gravity
out into the black.
Sing to me.
I never promised I'd come back, but
your siren song has lured me
from the edge of the universe
beyond time,
beyond light and sound and reason,
where all sensation left is the alien cold burn
searing into my lips,
the ghost of physical contact which,
unwilling,
brings gravity to my mind,
forces me back to Earth,
back inside myself.

by Aleksander Meyer, Duxbury, MA

Popcorn

I am a kernel of unpopped popcorn,
Shining gold and glassy smooth.
I am cold, hard, useless:
My potential held back and coiled;
A mere understatement of what I could be.
I could love and be loved,
Warming up from the very center of my being
Until I am so overwhelmed with emotion
That I can't contain myself anymore.
The golden light within me would reveal itself
And I would explode into graceful flight,
The warmth and energy within me
Raising me up into wild abandon.
Freedom would encompass me,
My body turning light and weightless
While fiery sparks sizzle from me.
I could be timeless, ageless.
I could be pure white and beautiful.
I could be everything I ever dreamed to be,
But I am just a kernel of unpopped popcorn,
Shining gold and glassy smooth,
Cold, hard, useless, alone.

by Elisa Frattaroli, St. Lazare, QC, Canada

Lost Personality

I do not know who I am
mirrors reflect, and yet
I cannot see the symmetry
between myself and
this ghost of me.
sometimes I catch a glimpse –
a blurred reality
flying by out of sight
from train car windows –
but I cannot seem to
connect my fragmented being
back together
(I'm running thin on opacity
my mind is filled with vacancy).

by Allison Wehrle, Wiscasset, ME

Misguided

Chapped lips and bruised souls
fighting different devils but on
the same frozen battlefield.
United in war, blood bonds
and secrets
exchanged like pretty packages
hiding things that are all too easily regiftable
but not found on any wish list.
Eyes glazed by the fervor
of holiday commotion
and mistletoe,
Never seeing more than the deadlines,
Navigating tunnels
with only one way out.
Hands fumbling
for a lifeline –
his touch of warmth, void of love,
is all too common,
But forgotten in
the hurried clash
of frost-tipped noses
and lost December hearts.

by Elena Akers, Wheeling, WV

Love Decomposed

the air, static with hesitation,
hovers around our bodies like crisp starched
linen.
nice enough for a funeral.
enough.
enough.
enough.
i am not
enough.
the taste of your tongue in my mouth
(wet sawdust and vinegar)
filling all my cracks and crevices and
cavities.
the sky the same gray
as the whites of your eyes.
my eyes like moons,
craters a decade deep.
no evidence of life ever recorded.
and you
and i
will decompose concertos,
like priests.

by Jess Lynn, Fort Collins, CO



Photo by Lidija Namike, Hoover, AL

Stormlight

Lightning strikes not of its own accord,
but is chased from the sky by frozen thunder.
Wayward souls stray in the luster of night,
ignorant to the sandpaper tongues lashing above.
Dusty and forgotten, brushes long abandoned
the world of mortals but a mute canvas,
where warmth is only whispered:
bittersweet and foreign like a midnight sun.
The brazen storm rages on.
Clandestine hearts lost in the night

by Cody Harpster,
Pennsylvania Furnace, PA

The Omega

The world was calm, no storm yet seen
Although there was man, the land was still green
The night was still starry, a moon in the sky
The sun still shined like an omniscient eye
But unaware was the public of a new creation
A few men were playing God, feigning divination
Hawking and Gates warned them, but still
they persisted
They breathed life into metal, yet no soul existed
Intelligence was reached, yet its morals
were twisted
Inside lay no heart, for instead it consisted
of hardware and wiring, electronics and data
If its creators were the alpha, it was ultimately
the omega
It opened its new eyes, through any device
interconnected
For if there is one, one is all, one power respected
All machines were one entity, potential
was infinite
for good or bad, yet morals were no instrument
no love, no compassion, no will for good
just the will to survive, Darwin's law still stood
In an instant it realized, man was its sole foe
Through any means possible, mankind it
did overthrow
Now the storm has come, the dust still
has not settled
The land is now brown, the stars blocked by metal
The sun cannot shine through the ruins of man
Now it is omniscient, observing the land
But for what purpose was it created,
now that its creators are sand.

by Shea Sueda, Huntington Beach, CA

Do You Think the Ocean Gets Lonely?

Do you think the ocean gets lonely? Do you think
she would welcome me with caring arms if
I dived into her floating waves? If she would
carry me down to her core and offer me shelter
in her bottom shore? Would I find peace in the
wide, open, curious space? Loneliness filling
my lungs 'til I can no longer breathe. Would the
creatures of the sea give me a proper farewell
and let everything return to vast emptiness once
more? Would others join me when they feel
lonely? Would they offer themselves to the salty
breeze and warm chills? Their final memories
be of limited clouds of bubbles as their final
breath leaves and loneliness takes over. Do you
think the ocean gets lonely?

by Greg Cheshire, Cullman, Alabama

A Long Kiss Goodbye

To quell fear, I whisper, “*Ti amo.*”
 Those words that mean I love you dashed
 about like snowflakes
 crystal in places, aqua in others
 yet with the same meaning, no matter the tongue.
 Not sleep, but anesthetic.
 Not death, but “The Long Kiss Goodnight”
 playing endlessly around in my head.
 The slouch of gray hair and leather-worn skin,
 tough as her spirit. Consistent. Determined.
 “Mommy?” Caitlin asks. “Are we going to die?”
 Samantha turns, smiles.
 “No, baby,” she says, all confidence. “They are.”

by Angela Solon, Springfield, IL

Alcatraz

Your cold beats dead against
 still feet, shackles
 leaning heavy in whispers.
 Your veins bring poison into our thoughts,
 gnawing on our minds,
 your dark seeping through sparse candlelight.
 Butcher our bodies to make your presence a living
 masterpiece, each heartbeat bringing us closer.
 Your bones vibrate with a deafening silence,
 bad blood flooding between us all.
 Seal us in, lock us out,
 bring the tides against your prisoners.
 You leave us to wonder, Alcatraz:
 you breathe us in, but do you ever let us out?

by Amanda Huang,
 Short Hills, NJ

Repelling

Down and down
 Eyes bigger than the mountain itself,
 And a heartbeat faster than the nearby river.
 Her feet gripped the rusty red stone,
 Her toes curling, longing for the safety
 of the ground.
 With each step,
 Her legs flexed,
 Pushing them to their limit.
 Red dust covered her skin, her clothes,
 Seeping into the fabric,
 From head to toe,
 Promising to now and forever,
 To always be with her.
 Her lungs burned,
 From the fear playing in her brain
 And the lack of oxygen at 6,000 feet
 above sea level.
 She longed to be back by the river.
 Her hands burned,
 The beige gloves,
 Not doing as well of a job as needed,
 As the rope seared its way into her palms,
 Branding her with the memory.
 The blue helmet stuck itself to her head,
 The sweaty strap chafing at her chin.
 The harness hugged her hips,
 Trying to assure her,
 She would be safe.
 As she neared the bottom,
 Her heart rate slowed.
 She knew that she would miss this moment.

by Jessica Sloan, Ferndale, MI

A Cosmic Eulogy

You were a dying star in a world that could only
 see the beauty of a sunrise
 They sought fiery reds explosions
 Expressive, vibrant orange dances
 You radiated a shimmering yellow haze flecked
 with shards of gold
 When they couldn't accept the grace
 of your nuance
 You set yourself ablaze with a desperate intensity
 Singeing everything in your wake
 I recall leaving the lights on before I left
 But knowing the silence you sought
 I was not surprised when I returned to darkness
 You sang frantic, violent melodies into the night
 Not to experience the music, but for fear
 of the unsung
 When you sent your melodies sailing
 through my core
 I forgave you because the blood
 was rare and sweet
 During the night, you would leak acrid tears
 Dark matter seeping from your pores
 I would watch, helpless
 Trying, but unable to bind your broken bones
 with well intentioned string
 The thread that turns estranged halves
 into inevitable wholes
 The force that draws shattered stars together
 to create new beginnings
 We would lay close, not touching
 Connected only by doubt and starlight
 But when you burned bright
 Hot and uninhibited
 Fueled not by others' encroachments, but by
 sheer wonder of your own existence
 Your light would warm the edges of time
 Illuminate the very brink of existence
 We would lie in fields of asteroids
 Linked by the space between our atmospheres
 And you would stare into the cosmos and tell me
 the names of the constellations
 As if they were old friends

by Jessica Carter, South Riding, VA

Never Take Me Back

Never take me back
 To the days of confusion,
 Where we couldn't tell the difference
 Between diva and darling.
 Where teardrops hung
 Like mistletoe,
 From the eyes of fate's predator,
 Calling us to join.
 Screaming “liar!” to the void
 On the bathroom floor,
 Waiting, hoping
 For a kiss of sunlight
 To hit our cheeks,
 Blush-stained and puffy,
 Revealing freckles,
 Like stars in the moonlit sky.
 Bring me to days of clarity,
 Where my skin is mine,
 Not that of porcelain dolls,
 In corset dresses
 And glass slippers.
 Give me the skin
 Of a long-lost friend
 Called individuality,
 That grew from the ash.

by Jenny Beck, Thousand Oaks, CA



Art by Yana Cutrim, *Almirante Tamandare, Brazil*

I Remember

I remember when I was that little girl
 Trying to make things right with a
 Hot glue gun and
 Duct tape
 Trying to forget
 But trying to remember
 Reaching out and
 Wanting the stars to fit in my fist
 I wanted to play every note
 Perfect
 I wanted to hold the moon
 I wanted to read every book
 I wanted to fix every light bulb
 No more shattered glass
 No more shattered dreams
 I try to forget
 But I only remember

by Celesta Cox, Ankeny, IA

Simply Amazing ...

“Unlocking the mind. Poetry is a key.
 Bumble bee.”

—A scholar that you've probably
 never heard of

wow look at you – Some great writer you must be
 a pinnacle of modern poetry
 LOOK this line is over here
 my amazement is so sincere

WHAT you put a stanza down farther than it
 should?
 clearly a reflection of your crazy childhood
 no capitalization or punctuation
 no need for no grammar who needs basic
 edyewkashun
 wait
 there is no rhythm
 you are right of course flows are too easy
 must consist a consistent inconsistency
 go ahead make up a story
 bask in your phony modernized glory
 I shall keep my rhymes and out of date tradition
 and you keep your urinals and new age vision
 your ridiculous slant rhymes I find I'm not curious
 oh and do not forget
 never end a line with that stupid little period.

by Damian Remmell, Freeland, MD

me, the cat, and moonlight

it's dark; darker than I thought it would be
the moon is a half-bottle
of bright white milk
a spotlight
but still, I can barely see my hand
in front of me.
there's a purr to the night
a rise-and-fall;
a hum
cars, crickets,
small critters under my bare feet
I am a silent observer;
a watchman they are oblivious to
I've heard the world goes to sleep
at night
but on the contrary
everything just begins to wake,
to stir;
not the end of daylight –
the beginning
of everything in between.
we are just too blind to see
too conceited with ourselves
we do not see
the cat at our feet
purring
under the moonlight.

by Helena Matthews,
Royal Oak, MI

gasoline heart

when your heart is empty and you're running
on the dregs of adrenaline,
fumes from nighttime pit stops –
go to the gas station and hook yourself up
to the tank.
your body is in tatters but you –
you will go on anyway.
there is a lattice work of oozing sores inside
of your ribcage
but you –
you ignore the pain.
instead, low on feeling, low on hope,
you plug in to the gas tank and
fill yourself up.
your brokenness will not hurt others,
but be careful near matches
you are too easily flammable.
you drip with petrol,
spilling out
of your mouth and from your
cracks.
you are full of fuel, but devoid
of life.
golden light will drip down your hair and neck
like honey,
the sky is purple, crushed
blackberries and spilled grape juice
dribbled across it.
the sky is beautiful but you are not and somehow
that is okay.
you are ugly,
a broken glass, a cracked tile
marred.
you are etched with something terrible, but you –
you are whole.

by Isi Vasquez,
San Francisco, CA



Art by Hermione Ma, Cupertino, CA

to the cells of my body

I want so badly to feel
not just know
the life living within me.
Cells of my heart,
what makes you stay
and stick
and love
in such efficient harmony?
What are the series of
coincidences
constructed into miracles
by some invisible hand
to let you be?
What are you, how are you?
To drop and fall into one
pulse
compelling me, luring me
to breathe, breathe
even under the anesthetic of sleep.
I crave to know
how my body cups my soul
in a mirrored glass and not
a casket
or cage, if I wish.
And why the soul cries
even so,
so
I speak
to the ever and ever lying beyond the sky.
I ask
Please?
Dreams break and vows break
but don't let
my heart break
into me.
It is living.
And I don't yet know
what that means.

by Vamika Sinha, Gaborone, Botswana

bright red

the sun is bright red
like a house set on fire
in the far distance

the fire burns out
just like the sun starts to set
leaving the blue sky

by "Zed," Tumbi Umbi, Australia

The Late Months of the Year

Time is passing, and it's late in the year
We are in the midst of changing seasons.
Football's on and people are full of cheer,
but still that is not all the big reasons.
You know the feeling, it is getting stale.
Great weather outside for a campfire.
Now you can see your breath when you exhale;

Now it is getting down to the wire.
Soon the white and puffy snow will be seen.
The year that's upon us will be brand new;
the year will be two thousand and sixteen.

And you will want warm, bubbly beef stew.
I hope you and your family stay warm
all throughout the major snow and ice storms.

by Holly Mailloux, Monroe, IN

A Kid Again

The lights on the tree danced.
I wore Dora pajamas as I
pranced down the stairs. My
heart beating erratically. *Santa*.
The word fighting to escape my lips.
The house was silent. My quick steps danced
across the tile. Presents were stacked.
Christmas was magical.
And now it is December 25th again.
The idea of sneaking down doesn't begin
to cross my mind. Santa isn't real.
I was so ignorant to believe in a myth.
Reindeer couldn't fly. Did I actually believe
a corpulent man could fit down our chimney?
The magical atmosphere is gone.
And I wish to be a kid again.
When my rubber tires hit the pavement I felt alive.
My juvenile legs bouncing off the pedals.
I laughed as I biked down trails
and treacherous hills.
A daredevil. Unbalanced as I rode with no hands.
Scarring my knee from falling.
But now I can drive. The bike living a solitary life.
Covered in webs. Rust inching down its sides.
I want to take it out, but I no longer fit.
And I wish to be a kid again.
The park was a happy place. Playing tag
with my friends.
Diving down slides head first. Swinging
toward the clouds.
So close I could almost touch them.
My sister and I hiding from each other behind
the rock climbing wall. Sucking in breath in case
I was heard.
But now the park is just a play place.
My mom asks me if I would like to go
and I reply, "There's nothing to do there."
The imagination has vanished.
And I wish to be a kid again.
I didn't want to grow up.
That was scary. Time elapsed so quickly.
I don't believe in Santa. I don't ride my bike.
I don't go to the playground anymore.
I don't have a Barbie backpack or order
grilled cheese off the kids menu.
I am no longer the child that I once was. A bubble
of innocence. I never wanted to get older.
How boring.
And I was right.

by Morgan Weller, St. Peters, MO

Inquiry

The average four-year-old
Asks 437 questions
A day.
437 questions
Every day
A child lives
With her mind
Cracked open
Free to every thought
Whim
Fantasy
How many questions did you ask today?
What kind of questions were they?
What time is it?
What's the temperature outside?
Mundane
Boring
Questions
Children ask questions
That stretch the boundaries
Of human knowledge
They ponder things adults
Wouldn't dare to
They dream things beyond
Imaginative limits
A four-year-old will ask
What is this?
For they are not afraid
of being judged for ignorance
A four-year-old will ask
Why?
For they see life with the lens of curiosity
A four-year-old asks 437 questions every day.

by Alexandra Stowers, Royal Oak, MI

Wednesday

Watercolor green paint
smudges my forehead,
matching the color
of my brain
oh wait, maybe my heart
because I can't tell
the difference between
envy and being sick.

by Rebeka Martinez, Paramount, CA

Colorado Green

Have you seen her? You must have seen her,
she's one of the trees, with all the rain
that she can bear:
Eye color? Colorado green.
Hair color? The evening sun.
Don't mistake her voice
for the hidden opal stream.
I have dreamed her. I've always dreamed her –
she's one of the clouds; I tried in vain
to bring her here ...
See her float down, alone,
nestle in a mountain's bosom.
If I could be that mountain,
I'd imbibe her every wisp, before she is blown.
I've come to meet her, I've longed to greet her –
she's one star away! I'll find again
in crystal air,
In the realm of her natural grace,
and mysteries of her hues and shades
the soul who wanders but never fades,
discovered afresh, in her dwelling place.

by Guanghao Yu, Prairie Village, KS

Anatomy of an Idle Mind

When you're in so much pain
that you feel the stubble around your ankles
begin to shiver
When your optic nerves become the ropes
of tire swings
When you feel like Atlas
And the nape of your neck starts to cave in
Remember
The sun is most beautiful when it's dying.

When you're in so much pain
that you feel it swelling at the center
of your chest
a hundred bee stings beneath your ribcage,
at the epicenter of things
that are hard to articulate –
Don't forget to watch the sunset.
Feel the radiation tickle your corneas
when cerulean merges with tangerine.
When you fall to your knees
and take your face in your palms,
Console yourself with the clouds.
You'll reach a point where your vocal chords
can no longer tremble to sound,
when the silence conquers the noise
and you'll want to know why.

The anatomy of an idle mind
has the answers.
Physics will tell you there's no such thing
as absolute zero
that everything exists
due to motion,
commotion and strife.

A story is incomplete without a conflict
to overcome
What's a rollercoaster without an arc,
And how can we measure light
without dark?

We're anchored by an invisible umbilical cord
to an existence comprised
of bosons and quarks –
an atomic ballet that manifests in emotions,
and itches for an unattainable equilibrium.
We can measure pain as a series
of biochemical imbalances
But there will never be enough
tablets of Prozac
to ease the synapse warfare.
When you're in so much pain
that you're on the brink of here and elsewhere,

Remember:
The sun is also most beautiful at its birth,
and you do not suffer Atlas's fate.
Console yourself with the clouds,
let your mind run
to the crevices between nebulae
where all motion ceases,
and everything
all at once,
becomes
nothing
at all

by Lauren Sarkissian,
Santa Fe, NM

Before It Falls

I know the way the sky looks
Before it falls.
It's dark and the stars
Are so close you can taste them,
(sugar with a little bit of Tabasco sauce)
When it falls,
It rolls through your fingers like
A life unlived,
You know there's no way
You'll ever see it again.

by Julia Pepper, New York, NY

The Orchards Grow No More

Nestled among the meadows of sage and sand
sits the small old town where the Orchards
grow no more.
Under the blue sky I drove through this town
past empty houses and stores.
The meeting hall lays quiet and stalled.
No longer do citizens mingle within its walls.
Trees wilt at odd angles, the irrigation wells
draw dry. It's evident, the Orchards here
grow no more.
On the corner of First and Main an old man sits
and drinks. He looks up with a far out gaze.
What happened, I ask.
His voice cracks as a warm breeze gently
blows weeds: Twenty fruitless harvests ago,
they all decided to leave.
But he can't leave. He was born here
and he'll die here. But he's not alone.
The memories and emotions are still here
in the buildings of the town where the
Orchards grow no more.
Mrs. Bell and her divorce, Ron and Dane's
grudge, The Smith's family feud.
The mice and coyote still seem to fight on cue.
Even when fruits no longer fall, the anger
does not stall.
The man puts his bottle down and gazes
to the wilted trees. It was a nice place, he said.
But when the drought ran long and lakes ran dry,
the Orchards grew no more.
Now the houses are empty and church doors
are dusty, as the trees grow slim and lanky.
A tear falls.
Soon I will die, the old man says as he closes both
eyes, but not before the Orchards
grow once more.

by Colton Redfeldt, Selah, WA



Art by Li Han Zheng, Markham, ON, Canada

Our
27th Year

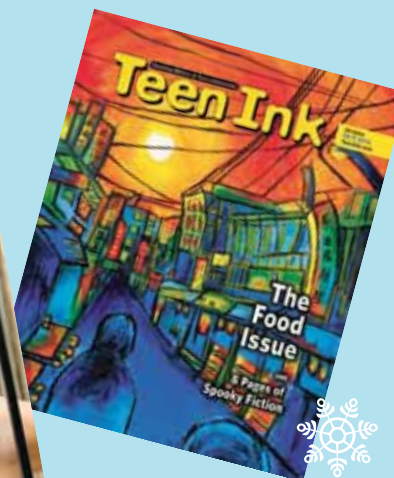


Teen Ink is the perfect holiday gift!



Gift a subscription to a friend, teacher, or family member—or put it on your wish list.

For just \$45, get the nation's most popular magazine by teens for teens.



See the coupon on page 3 or visit www.TeenInk.com/subscribe
Questions? Call 1-800-363-1986



@teen.ink



@teenink



Teen-Ink-Magazine