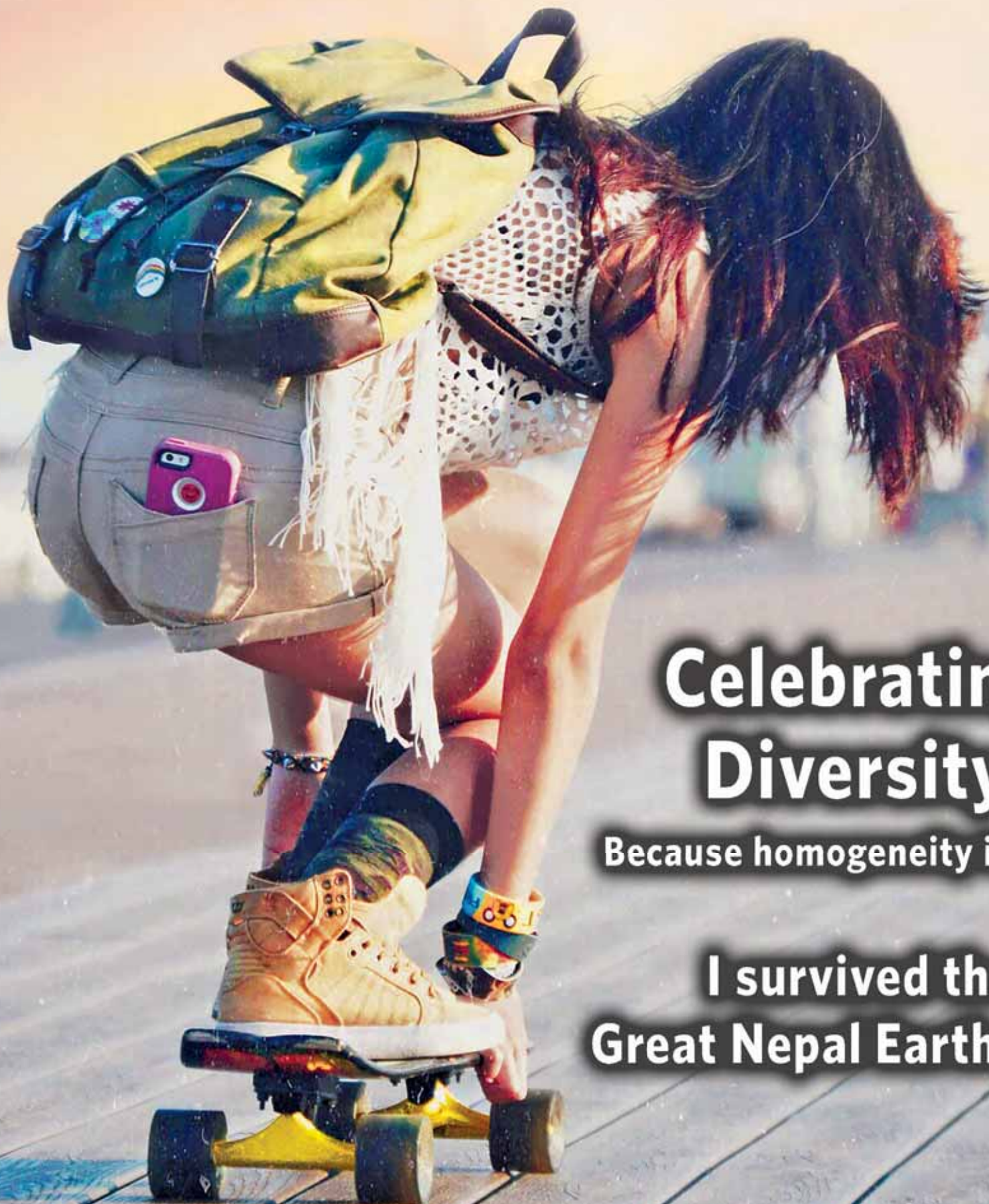


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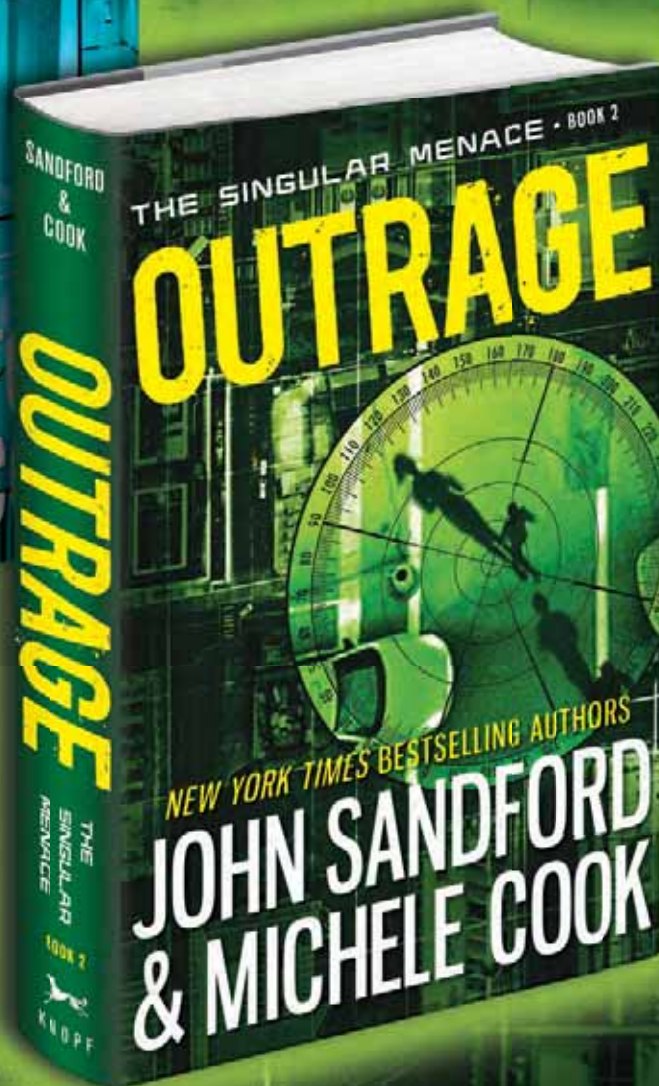
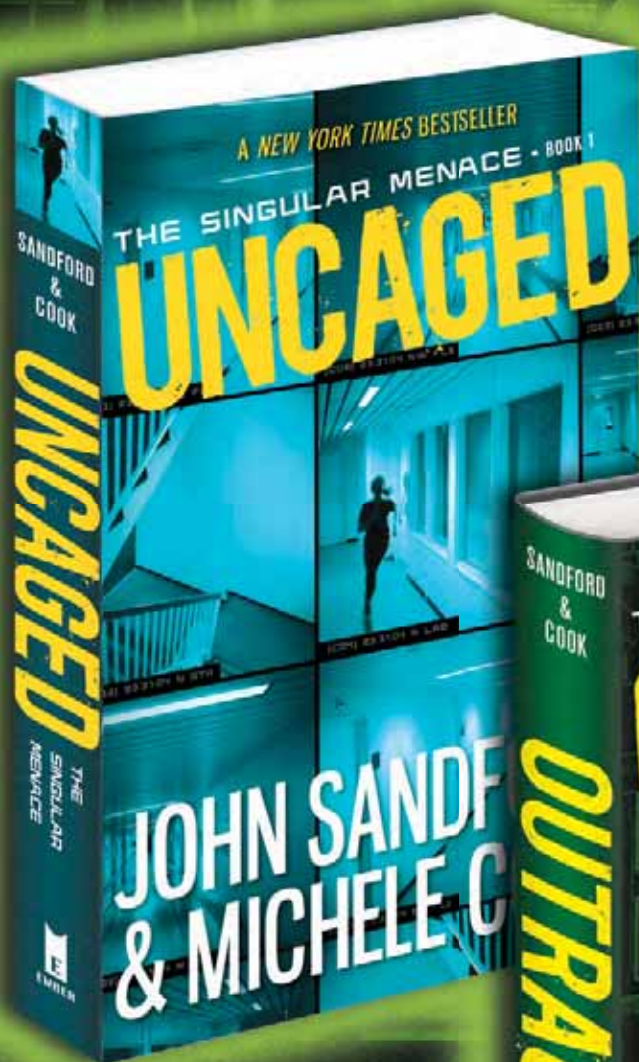
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Because homogeneity is boring

I survived the
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Teen Ink CONTENTS

SEPTEMBER 2015 | Vol. 27, No. 1

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WW/PP
9/15

- 4 Feedback
- 18-19 College Directory
- 21 Art Gallery

Nonfiction

- 6-9 **MEMOIRS** *Earthquake aftermath in Nepal* • *I am a beauty queen* • *Band audition jitters* • *My addiction and recovery story* • *Senior regrets* • *Rebuilding myself* • *Epiphanies of the celestial*
- 10-16 **DIVERSITY** *Because homogeneity is boring*
- 17 **HEALTH** *Dyslexia* • *Scoliosis*
- 20 **SCHOOL** *Substitute survival guide* • *My school's cyberwar* • *Joe from Idaho*
- 22 **COMMUNITY SERVICE** *Collecting cans for cancer* • *Mission trip to Haiti*
- 23 **SPORTS** *Cross-country* • *Hazing*
- 24-25 **POINTS OF VIEW** *When Dad goes to prison* • *Leaflets* • *The revolution will not be televised* • *Different, not special* • *I hate school*
- 26 **ENVIRONMENT** *Going online vs. going outside* • *Instructions*
- 27 **INTERVIEW** *Author Michele Cook*
- 28-29 **TRAVEL & CULTURE** *Japanese Americans' painful history* • *NYC road trip* • *Daughter of a diplomat* • *Indian American identity*

Reviews

- 30 **VIDEO GAMES** *Assassin's Creed Unity* • *Garry's Mod* • *Destiny*
- 31 **MOVIES** *Jurassic World* • *The Hobbit* • *Avengers: Age of Ultron*
- 32 **MUSIC** *Banks* • *Drake* • *Walk the Moon*
- 33 **BOOKS** *Columbine* • *Dandelion Wine* • *Leverage* • *Go Set a Watchman*

- 34-39 Fiction
- 40-46 Poetry



ON THE COVER

Celebrating Diversity

Plus-size pride • *Introverted, not antisocial* • *The boy who was a princess* • *Let's talk about mental illness* • *Stand up, black girls* • *What OCD is really like* • *The upsides to Down syndrome* • *Hiding from homophobia* • *The kind of girl I want to be* • *Loving every body* • *ESL* • *Owning my atheism*
• *Speak up* • *Superfans* • *Know-it-alls*

pages 10-16

Earthquake!

"The only thought in my mind is to run from the house as soon as the trembling stops. I realize I am uttering prayers. I do not yet realize that the worst part of an earthquake is not the tremors, but the resulting terror of the survivors." "Agitated Earth," page 6

Cover photo by Stephanie Shen, Lake Hiawatha, NJ

FEEDBACK

To submit your feedback or find the articles mentioned here, go to TeenInk.com

Thank You

It took me a while to find Teen Ink – I was looking to publish written work in an online space that was fun, public, safe, appropriate, and a good environment for teens, and I found it. Now I visit TeenInk.com almost every day to comment, chat, and read pieces written by teens like me. Teen Ink, thank you! I love your website and magazine!

Kaylie Montgomery, Durham, NH

Changing School Start Times

I strongly believe in the compelling ideas expressed by Julia Osterhouse in her article “Changing School Start Times.” It is true that teenagers tend to stay up late, as I myself have done; however, it’s great to know that my excuse – “It’s physically impossible to fall asleep early” – is backed by scientific research. As I read her piece, I could relate to the exhausting demands of the “average of 3.1 hours of homework per night,” since I am an AP student. When my school has a late start, I am always energized and feel like I can absorb more knowledge.

Thank you, Julia, for portraying the struggle of many teens to an audience that can hopefully make a change.

Hector Baeza, Phoenix, AZ

Just Like You

“Just Like You” by Lorena Hoggard struck a chord in me. I used to think that there was no problem with people accepting those with autism. I have multiple autistic friends and a brother with Asperger’s syndrome. This article opened my eyes to how blind I was being to the suffering of those closest to me.

So thank you for publishing “Just Like You.” From now on I will definitely be less oblivious, and I will stand for what’s right.

Nathan DeCock, Morrisville, NY

Dear Readers,

Welcome to Teen Ink! Whether you’ve just found us or have been published already, are an experienced writer or are just looking for something to read, whether you’re 13 or 18, male or female — this is your magazine. Every essay, every story, every piece of art has been created by a teenager. We have no staff writers or assigned stories. Teen Ink depends entirely on submissions by teens like you, so we hope you’ll send us your work. (See previous page for details.)

In addition to this magazine, Teen Ink is an online community for creative teens to submit work and get feedback, talk with other teens, and find inspiration. Our site is the largest of its kind online, and it’s growing bigger every day. Check it out at TeenInk.com.

We hope you enjoy what you read in this magazine. And we really want to know what you think. Send us your feedback by submitting it through our website, and you might find your name on this page next month!

The Teen Ink Staff

this teacher is a significant person in my life, I happily obliged. My teacher’s invitation resulted in an article of mine being published on a website that I had spent bundles of free time exploring. I had previously considered having an article published as a success worthy of I-can-officially-die-happy status, and with my first publication came a sense of personal satisfaction.

When someone mentions the phrase “important people,” my brain immediately presents me with the smiling images of my favorite teachers. Teachers are the driving force behind the educational foundation of one’s life; they are the alternate parents, the supportive figures, and the inspirational voices. Teachers are some of the most overworked, most underappreciated, and generally most magnificent people in life. No adjectives can properly suffice.

This letter is my attempt to give back to the individuals who gave me the opportunity to write this letter. This is a shout-out to those who made my school years memorable, a way to give thanks in the form of a magazine written by students.

Teachers are some of my favorite people on this planet, and with this letter to the editor, I want to encourage everyone to recognize the excellent teachers in their life. Maybe your first *Teen Ink* magazine was given to you by a teacher, or you wrote your first article because of a teacher’s faith in you. This is the least that we students, as the collective group of their successes, can do to repay their effort.

Sincerely,

An Immeasurably Grateful Student

Veronica Zelitchenko, Los Angeles, CA

A Tribute to Teachers

My very first *Teen Ink* was handed to me by my seventh-grade English teacher. It was something to read after we’d finished our sentence structure test, and so we passed the time by diving into the magazine’s autobiographies, fictional stories, and romantic poems. But now, I see it as an opportunity to give back and present my teachers with

the infinite thanks and endless gratitude they deserve. Along with the magazine full of stories to read for the remaining 17 minutes of class came an opportunity that I now recognize as perfect.

The first article I wrote for *Teen Ink* was the result of my ninth-grade English teacher’s encouragement to base a written piece on our research papers about climate change and its effects on the environment. Because

CORRECTION

The illustration on the cover of the March 2015 issue was incorrectly credited. The real artist of the amazing fusion of “Frozen”’s Anna and Elsa is Cassandra of Sterling, VA. We regret the error.

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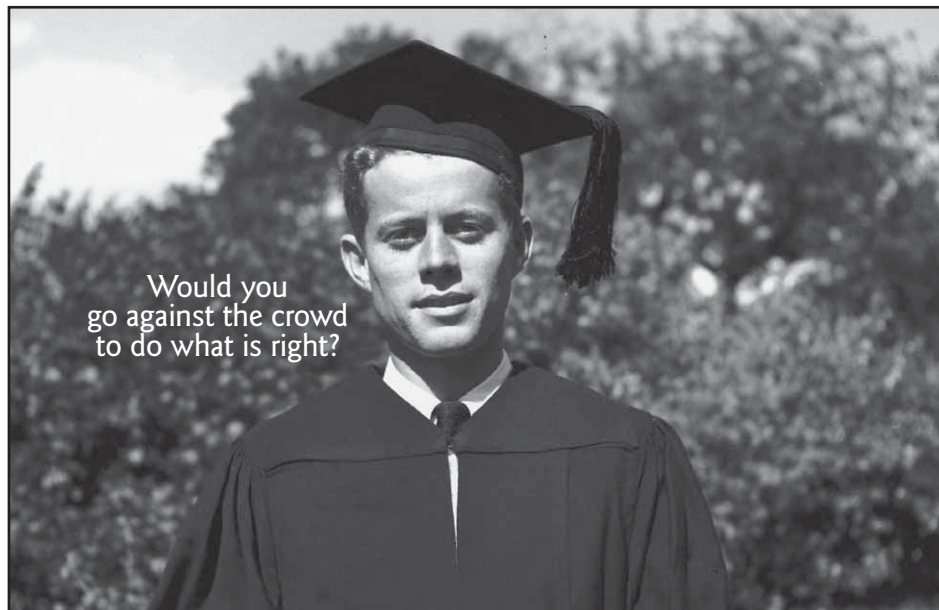


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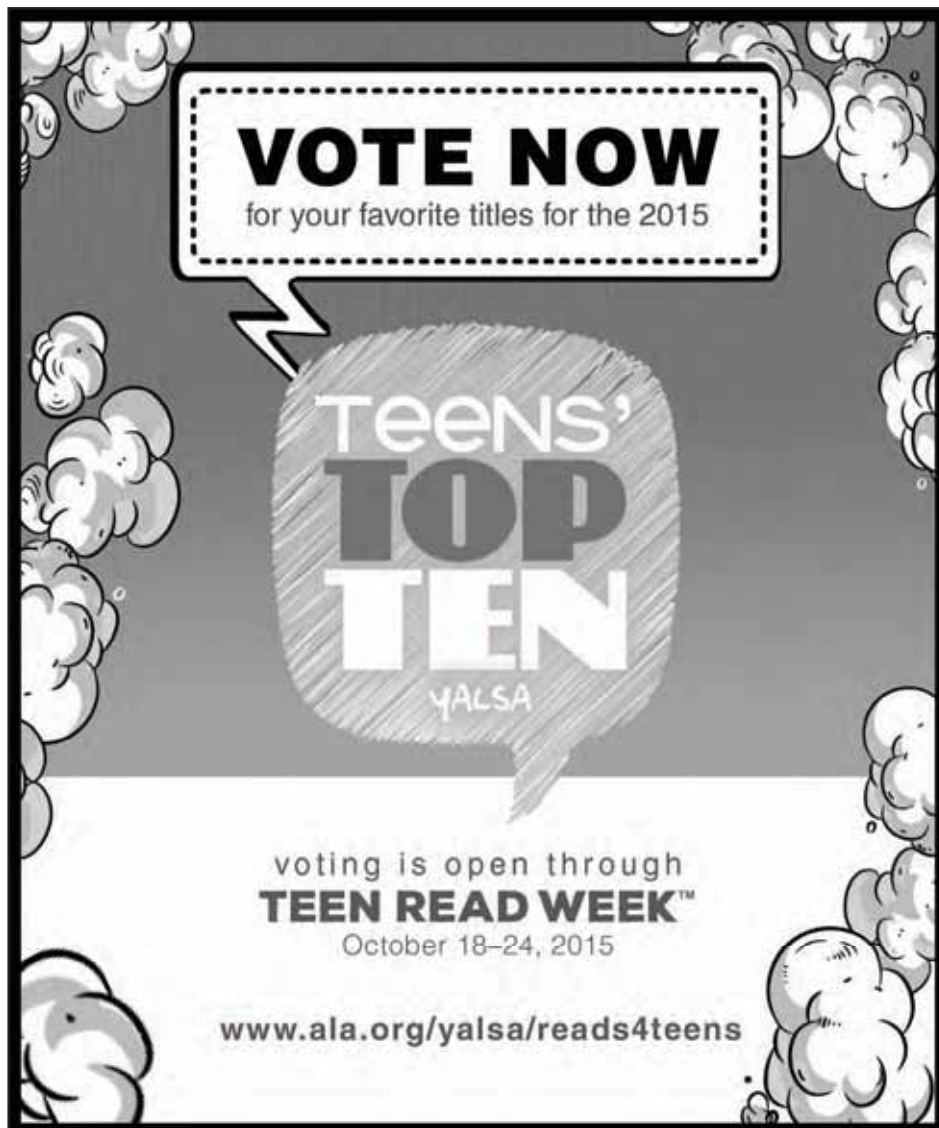
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Agitated Earth

by Ujjwal Khanal, Kathmandu, Nepal

Though lots of LED lamps hang from the bamboo pillars, this little dome that I am to call my home tonight is anything but bright. Full of scared faces and muted sobs, the air inside is in a dangerous state of quiet unrest, and the howling storm outside is not helping. The electricity has been out since the first shockwave hit, and now our cell phone batteries are dying. We listen to the radio, which, I can sense, will be our only link to the world outside Nepal in the days to come.

"The first tremor hit at 11:56 a.m., my dear listeners, and lasted fifty seconds. The seven-point-nine shock is believed to have claimed hundreds of lives across Nepal already, and the toll has been escalating rapidly. The real question"

Mamu suddenly lowers the volume, allowing only a fraction of the flamboyant voice of the announcer to reach my ears.

"Go to sleep, Babu," she says. "We'll need all the rest that we can get."

I close my eyes, hoping in vain to catch some sleep, not yet aware that this painful gesture will only force me to re-live this day's nerve-wracking events all over again.

Suddenly, I am once again in my room, preparing for my oh-so-important exams next week. Never really aware of earthquakes, I must have ignored the first small tremors. However, buried in the realms of "Auxin Proportions in Tissue-Culture," I came to understand the urgency of the situation after my bed started colliding with my feet. For a moment I thought my knees had gone weak, but when my heavy bookshelves started moving violently, I could no longer deny this appalling disaster that would, in just 50 seconds, change the face of my entire nation.

The next few moments I remember only in glimpses, though each is imprinted indelibly in my mind. The first is of the house swaying back and forth, challenging the rigidity of the concrete pillars that form its foundation. In the next, I see my books pouring from the shelf all over the carpet. Then the closet opens, releasing its contents all over the books, and its doors move with such terrifying violence that I wonder if I will live to see the end of this disaster.

The shaking stops for a fraction of a second, but before I can even take a step, the tremor returns with new strength, and I must grab onto the pillar to remain standing. The only thought in my mind is to run from the house as soon as the trembling stops. I realize I am uttering prayers.

After a petrifying eternity, the agitated earth finally calms. I rush down the stairs, run over the debris



Photo by Prawesh Adhikari, Kathmandu, Nepal

The earthquake has rattled my insides

of the collapsed compound walls, and finally emerge in the open road, my heart almost popping out of my chest.

Relieved, I do not yet realize that the worst part of an earthquake is not the tremors, but the resulting terror of the survivors.

I open my eyes, now determined to accept sleeplessness. I look around this blessed bamboo structure, initially designed as a greenhouse for growing mushrooms. For the people of my neighborhood, it provides a perfect open-air emergency shelter. All of them, tonight,

are sleepless. Some, although informed about the safety of our shelter, are resting with their shoes on in case a quick escape is called for. Fear still flows rapidly in their veins.

"We are living under a bomb," I remember a geologist saying on a talk show once, "and it is only a matter of time before it explodes, destroying all that comes in its way, like it has done so many times in the past." We had predicted it, we had pictured it a thousand times in our heads, and we all knew what to do, but yet, surprisingly, none of us were aware of the trauma an experience like this can cause.

"We have been informed, dear listeners, that the iconic tower of Dharahara in central Kathmandu has collapsed, and it is believed that at least a hundred and fifty people were inside the white landmark when the quake struck. The debris"

A chill runs down my body as I hear this. The tower has always been the identity of my city, and its loss feels like the death of someone close to my heart. Its fall has destroyed myriad memories made around its winding stairs, along with the lives of scores of my fellow Nepalese. These are losses too large to repair or heal. I feel like shedding tears in tribute, but I quickly compose myself, reserving these precious drops for the plight that I know the radio is about to reveal.

"Damage has been reported in various heritages across Kathmandu. None of the three palace squares stand, and hundreds of ancient temples and monuments have been converted to rubble. The loss – wait, was that a shock?"

Another big aftershock jolts the land beneath us, yet I am now indifferent to it. The let-it-do-what-it-can attitude has already seeped into my psyche. I focus on the radio announcer.

"Dasa-Avatar temple has fallen! The pagoda of Kasthamandap has been damaged. The state of the Manakamana temple, located close to the epicenter, is not known yet. And let's see what we have here"

His voice seems to grow merrier as he speaks, almost as though he's been waiting for a moment like this. The thought disgusts me, but I continue listening.

"Temple of Shiva-Parvati, fallen! Vatsala Durga Temple, fallen! The Taleju Temple is partially collapsed. Janaki Temple, partially collapsed. The Spring-city Palace will need repairs. Even the Stone Temple of Krishna, my listeners, is damaged."

Gone. Kathmandu is gone. In 50 seconds, 500 years of glory have been reduced to dust and stone, and the identity of this city is gone – lost in nature's



Photo by Aatikah Adam, Leicester, England

vile, vile game.

"Ninety-five percent of villages in Sindhupalchowk District have been flattened, my listeners, and it is estimated that thousands more have died. Avalanches have been reported on several mountains, including Everest, and have blocked access to most villages"

As tough as I've tried to be, I do not think I can hold it in anymore. The quake has rattled my insides, and my faith in the goodness of the universe is crumbling from within. The chaos caused by the *what* is now replaced by a far more damaging question: *Why?* Nobody deserves a wound this big.

"Temples around Swayambhunath are also reported to have collapsed. But, my dearest listeners, the millennia-old Stupa at the center of the landmark, with golden eyes on its walls overlooking our city, has not sustained any damage at all. Yes, my listeners, the eyes of the Buddha stand!"

I breathe in, slowly, and open my eyes. The words of the great being who first graced this land with his footsteps now sound with resounding echoes in my mind. I realize that focusing on frustration only deteriorates my already burdened mind, and this knowledge blows away the debris of my anger to nothingness. Even destruction can be defied with an eye willing to see brightness.

I look around, and instead of seeing the fear on their faces, I now see the people nearby – who previously appeared indifferent to anything but themselves and their mundane lives – supporting, holding each other.

Gone. Kathmandu is gone.

Sita Auntie and Mr. Thapa, who have not spoken since their lawsuit last year, huddle around the same fire. The new lady next door who everybody thought to be too serious is cracking jokes, inducing giggles from half-reluctant women. The crowd around the old man, who's describing a magnitude 8.3 quake that struck Nepal in 1934, does not seem quite as depressed any more. Paths that would never have touched have now crossed, and people are planting flowers in the traffic rotaries.

"Our friend India, dear listeners, has rushed to help and is already assisting the Army in relief works. International aid is arriving from around the world, and the public themselves are expected to participate. The toll, experts say, is not going to be as large as initially predicted, if all goes right. We're shaken, my dearest listeners, not stirred!"

"Hey, bhai!" Pratiksha didi, one of my "sisters" from the locality, waves at me, holding two pens and some paper she somehow managed to bring outside. "Wanna play tic-tac-toe?"

I breathe out.

"Yes, actually. Best of three?" ♦

Not Just a Pretty Face

by Cassidy Emerson, Russell Springs, KY

My eyes glimmer with the latest layer of eyeliner, and my cheeks are rosy pink. I smile at my reflection, perfecting my vibrant red lips. I slip into my sequined dress, fasten my high heels, and approach the line of girls, all anxious for their turn. The small staircase up to the stage nears as the number of girls before me decreases. A few minutes filled with nervousness pass quickly, and the time is finally mine. My

feet strike the carpeted stage, and the spotlight shines brightly in my eyes. At last, my hard work and preparation begin to fulfill their purpose: a purpose that goes deeper than teased hair and a made-up face, beyond the crowns and sashes won, and is something I carry with me long after I exit the stage. This has shaped me into the young woman I am today, and it will be a part of me always.

Beauty Queen is a title that I've always considered to be embedded in my DNA. My mother and my aunts fashioned their lives around pageantry, and before I even took my first step, I became a victim of big bows and frilly diapers as a competitor in toddler pageants. I eventually made the transition from "diaper diva" and made my own decision to continue in the world of pageantry.

As I grew up, pageants grew with me. I participated in and watched beauty pageants every chance I could, and each time I found a small part of myself that I was unfamiliar with. Whether I was watching Miss Universe on TV or walking the stage myself,

I felt hunger for knowledge, motivation to better myself, and determination to succeed in the hobby that I loved.

Whether it involves the decision about who deserves the crown, gluing on false eyelashes, or putting lipstick on a preschooler, pageantry is often the object of harsh comments and strong opinions. It draws controversy. Some see it as an activity that drives participants toward a single standard of beauty: perfect hair, a sparkling smile, bright eyes, and a skinny figure. Consequently, beauty pageants are often blamed for society's delusive portrayal of true beauty and rumored to cause detrimental impacts on young women's perceptions of self-worth.

While many are blinded by the teased hair, fake tans, and whitened smiles, they fail to see the positive impact the competition can have on young women. Pageantry is more than just a walk on the runway. It involves interviewing, fitness, evening gowns, and occasionally talent. Hard physical, mental, and emotional work and practice are essential for success.

As I continued my pageant career, my life became consumed with preparation. I practiced a routine every day: walking around my house in high heels, studying interview questions for

hours, exercising day and night, following a healthy diet, and practicing piano. It was tough competition, and second place was something I feared. Crowns meant more to me than just a title. In my eyes, they were symbols of accomplishment, and I would do whatever was necessary to achieve them. I knew that anything was possible if I set my mind, body, and soul to it.

Wearing fancy dresses and walking the runway opens your eyes to what pageants actually involve. In the mind of a pageant girl, society's critiques of the hobby become mute as you realize there is much more to your presence on the stage than just a pretty face. At a very young age, I was introduced to discipline, patience, and self-confidence. I was given the opportunity to stand before an audience, and that instilled in me dignity and a sense of accomplishment. Through pageantry I have learned many lessons that will take me far past the runway. I have met many of my closest friends and made unforgettable memories.

It was because of beauty that I chose to live in the world of pageantry. However, I believe that I owe my success not to my appearance, but to my hard work and dedication. Beauty will only get you so far; intelligence, personality, and determination can take you anywhere. ♦



Photo by Shalom Gohlson, Woodburn, OR

Pageantry is more than just a walk on the runway

The Audition

by Mia Nixon, Audubon, NJ

Kids. Hundreds of kids my age were in the room, and all were playing their instruments as loudly as they could. My dad and I wandered, searching for space at a table. Toward the back, we found a spot beside cluttered instrument cases, jackets, and music sheets. My dad told me to take it; he would wait at the side of the room.

I said hello to the other students at the table. As I set up my clarinet, the girl next to me began to flawlessly practice scales on her flute. She was followed by a trumpet player performing his solo. *Don't let them intimidate you, I thought. You've worked hard for this.*

My clarinet was tuned, my reed was broken in, I had all my sheet music – I was ready for this audition. I practiced all eight of my scales and then reviewed my solo.

A few minutes later a girl sat down and buried her head in her hands. When she lifted her face, it was beet red and tears were streaming down her cheeks. I asked if she had just auditioned. She explained that there hadn't even been an announcement for auditions to begin yet. The girl was so nervous about performing she had had a panic attack. I wasn't sure how to comfort her, so I simply said not to worry and that I was sure she would do fine. Her fear made the butterflies in my stomach swirl even faster.

Then I saw a mother with a serious expression speaking sternly to her daughter. "You have to make it into this band," she said. "Your father and I did not spend all this money for you not to make it in All South Jersey."

Don't let them intimidate you

Finally, at 9:30 a.m., the announcer called for the clarinetists to audition. I grabbed my clarinet and sheet music and headed to the hallway.

"Down the hall is clarinet sight reading," a guide instructed. "Your scales and solos are next to each other, on the left."

Scales, then solo, and sight reading last – that was the order I had wanted for my audition. I followed the guide's directions and went into the room for scales. A few clarinetists were already there. We whispered as we waited for our turns.

"How long have you been playing?" a boy asked us. Someone said since she was three.

"Is this your first year trying out?" I asked.

All of them had made it into All South Jersey Band the previous year. This psyched me out even more. Everyone seemed so experienced, and I was the rookie who had never had a band audition this intense.

Then I was next. The more time passed, the more nervous I became. I thought back to the advice my band conductor had given me during practice. "Relax, don't squeak, and pretend nobody is watching. But most of all, remember: before you begin to play, take a deep breath." Every time I practiced my scales with him, he always led with, "One, two, three, begin"

A woman opened the door and motioned for me to enter. Three judges were sitting at a table with their backs to me. The woman told me to sit in a chair and flip one of the three cards on the music stand. I picked the card on



Photo by Artemis Montes, Madera, CA

the right. It read B flat, A, D, and chromatic. The woman then announced to the judges, "Number 14 playing scales B flat, A, and D."

Remembering what my band teacher said, I took a deep breath and relaxed. This was it. It was all or nothing. I could ace this audition and make it into the band, but if I messed up one note, all could be lost. Slowly, I lifted the clarinet to my mouth and breathed in.

I imagined my band teacher saying, "One, two, three, begin" ♦

Author's note: "This piece was inspired by my first audition for All South Jersey Band. Unfortunately, I didn't make it in that time. But the second year I did."

Escape from a Dreamy Haze

by "Katie," Devils Lake, ND

Life isn't easy, and everyone has to discover their own ways to cope with the obstacles life throws at them. Maybe you take comfort in money and shiny objects, or thinking about people who remind you that it could be worse. Some coping methods are healthy and don't cause harm to anyone. But some people find ways that aren't healthy and that end up being addictive. That's what happened to me. I picked the wrong way for dealing with problems in my life, and it became a downward spiral, causing more problems than just the ones I was trying to escape.

The summer of 2011, I found out that my mother had cancer. I was scared – scared for my mom and scared to be alone. I found myself crying in the middle of the night when

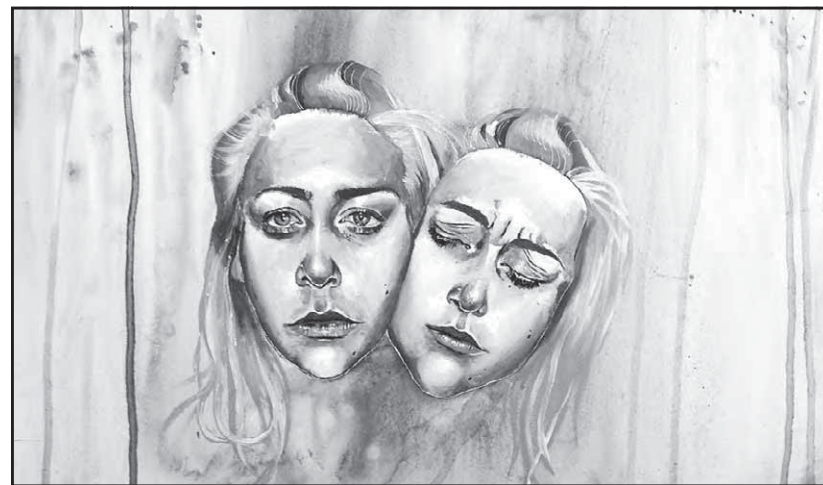
she had to stay at the hospital for days at a time. I felt alone. My sisters were too young to understand what was going on, and my father dealt with the sadness a different way. He came to the conclusion that he could drive it away one beer at a time. He was always there physically – he always cooked dinner and watched movies with us – but after too many beers, he fell into a drunken abyss.

In the midst of my mother's cancer battle and my dad's beer runs, I began to lash out. I started dating a boy who was

three years older. I knew it was a bad idea, but I didn't care. I was hooked on the butterflies in my stomach whenever I looked at him.

It started out harmless enough – inviting him to hang out with my friends and me, walking around

I wanted to prove I wasn't scared. So I tried weed.



Art by Erika Moore, Covington, LA

Walmart, going to eat at McDonald's. I don't know what came over me when I decided to join in on smoking weed. He just looked at me and smiled, and I melted. I was so head over heels, I would have done anything to impress him. I wanted to be mature like all the other girls he knew. I wanted to prove to him that I wasn't a child or scared. So I tried weed.

I was in a haze the rest of that night. I felt guilty knowing that my mom was in the hospital while I was out getting high with a boy, so I smoked more to make the feeling go away.

At first I considered my drug use to be harmless acting out. It didn't stop with weed, though; soon I found myself wanting to experience a different high.

I had a moment of hesitation as I watched my boyfriend crush up a small white pill. I had barely started smoking weed – was I really ready for something stronger? More dangerous? But once again, when he smiled at me all my worries seemed to drift from my mind.

I snorted my first pill that night, and I knew right away it would not be my last. The way I just forgot about how hard life was made me crave more. Whenever someone offered me a pill, I took it without hesitation.

Eight months later, I was expelled from school. I had been caught selling drugs on school property. I was charged with distribution and possession and was sentenced to one year of probation. I've never felt so awful in my life. My parents were so shocked and disappointed that they couldn't even yell at me. I broke them. In the courtroom I looked at them once, and it felt like guilt was punching me in the heart. I should have stopped then. I should have gotten my act together when I had the chance.

Less than a year later, I got off probation early for good behavior. I had

broken up with that guy, and I thought I was doing okay, until I found my new poison: Xanax. I started taking it every weekend to get a little break from reality. It made everything feel like a dream, like I was indestructible and could do whatever I wanted.

Everything was hazy, kind of like a blur. But I only did it on weekends, so it was okay, right? Pretty soon it wasn't just the weekends; it was school days too. I started skipping class to get high with friends. One pill at a time turned into 10 pills a day. Then I lost count. It got to the point where I was throwing up every pill I took because, to get a "better high," I was taking them on an empty stomach.

Then, last year, the guy who had introduced me to drugs actually helped me. I had gotten so lost in the drugs, in that dreamy haze, that I lost who I really was. I had pushed my family away. My mom felt like she had lost me. But my ex and my family supported me in getting help and finding my way to sobriety and health. They woke me up from that dreamy haze so I could see the monster I had become. I hated the girl I saw in the mirror when I finally realized what I had been doing.

Today I am six months sober. I still have days where I consider taking just one pill to take the edge off. But then I look at my little sisters and realize that what I did was dangerous. What I became could have killed me. I realized that I'm not just living for me, I'm living for two little girls who look up to me as their big sister, their friend, and their protector. They are what keeps me strong when life gets hard. My coping method was once drugs, but now it's my family. I look at my sisters and pull through for them. I look at my parents and feel lucky that I have their support despite everything. I owe them the world for being there for me through it all. ♦

Senior Regrets

by Alex Helm, Double Oak, TX

The sun beats down on my back at 3:30 in the afternoon, but I have yet to get sunburned this summer. All I do is tan. Like a "perfect sun goddess," as my pale best friend told me once. He's off at college now, and I miss him. Yet all I can think about is how that will be me in a year. My first day as a senior hasn't even passed and I'm already planning my good-byes and dreading my sister's tears.

I'm trying to read, but I'm so tired. I lay my head down on my hot pink towel from Hawaii and think for a while. My thoughts always end up in the past – especially my high school past. Three years are gone, and they've shaped me more than the rest of my life put together.

I especially think about sophomore and junior year. I think in horror about the person I used to be – not even horror, repulsion. It shocks me. I think about the things I did and said and I want to disappear, never to be remembered.

I want to call the boy with blue eyes and rectangular glasses and apologize. I want to say that I'm sorry and that I forgive him, too, because I wasn't the only one at fault. Because everybody is selfish and thoughtless at 16 and 17.

But I can't call him. It's been too

long, and we're both strangers now, to each other and our past selves. He won't say the words I've been wanting to hear since last August: "I forgive you."

Sometimes I like to pretend that at 2 a.m. one night, he lay on his back in the darkness of his room, thinking about the same things that I think about at 2 a.m. And I hope that maybe he sighed in frustration and regret and whispered, "I'm sorry; I forgive you" to his ceiling before turning on his side and forcing sleep to come. As if that whisper would carry through the vents in his house, out the chimney, and

travel through the night air before filtering through my window and landing in my ear.

That thought calms me. I can live with my pretend closure and his rare, unexpected texts.

I want to drive to my other two friends' houses, talk to them, and make things right, but I know it will never be. I just have to live with the conceited hope that they'll survive without me, the selfish hope that I'll survive without them.

I'm trying to stop thinking about the past, but that only makes me think about the future. Sometimes I wish I could think only about right now. ♦

I think in horror about the person I used to be

Rebuilding Myself

by Clementine Wurzbach, Killingworth, CT

Words have power – as you and I have heard a million times – and, according to the famous actor F. M. Alexander, actions follow thoughts. The ideas in your head can change the outcome of your life. So state your intention, create a mantra, pray, define your goals, and make your dreams a reality.

Can this New Age babble be true? I must admit, I didn't get it when I started taking hot yoga classes and the teacher asked us to set an intention. "Pick a few words to focus your mind on during your practice," she said. I thought this was the height of spiritual mumbo-jumbo; to me, yoga was just an exercise class, a way to change the way I looked.

My mom has been into yoga for most of her life. It kept her in shape after two pregnancies, lots of sitting and driving, and 50 years of aging. (A woman never mentions her age, but a woman's daughter can, right?) I first joined her when I was 14 and had just hit puberty. I had a wheat allergy, which didn't keep me from eating whatever I wanted, and I had

five minutes out of fear that I would pass out from the intense heat and exertion.

Despite the pain, I went back every week. I began to like the feeling of sweat dripping down my face and arms. I began to love the fresh feeling I experienced at the end of class – like I had been reborn. I got better and better. I wasn't fantastic, but I grew in strength and stamina.

But I still didn't understand what the teacher, Annie, meant when she told us to "set an intention" at the beginning of each class. I would set my intention along physical lines, hoping to lose weight, slim my thighs, or develop a bigger booty. I would suffer through class after class, expecting to wake up one morning and see a buff butt in the mirror. I never did. While there were improvements in my body, I wasn't seeing the drastic changes I'd wanted. I was starting to lose motivation, but I kept going because of my mom.

One day I came to class in a horrible mood. I attend a performing arts high school and take acting very seriously, and earlier that day I had rehearsed a scene with a boy whom I found utterly frustrating. I had yelled at him. It seemed to me that the other actors were not applying themselves either. I knew I wasn't able to control the people around me, but lately, I'd been trying to – and I was beginning to scare them. I could see it in the way they approached me or walked around me like they were lost in thought or busy on their phone. I did not want to be the class dictator and I missed my friends. I wondered how I could change the way I was acting around them.

Suddenly I heard F. M. Alexander's teachings in my head about actions following thoughts. As much as I wanted to blame my scene partner, my friends, the bus driver, and the world at large, I knew that if I changed the way I acted, people would like me and want to be my friend.

On the way to yoga, guilt set in. I was feeling awful about the way I had spoken to my poor scene partner. This boy, who was my good friend, had put up with my hysteria. At the beginning of yoga that night, Annie said her usual "Set your intention for the class." Change had been a constant theme when setting my intention, but that day the word had a bigger meaning. I wanted to change the way I felt.

I realized that if I changed the words I used, I could feel better. Instead of setting my intention on fitness, I began the class with the intention to "change the way I speak to my peers."

I also listened more closely to Annie's words. "Sink in," she said. "Let yourself feel the pain, the fidgeting, and the struggle. Meet it." I followed her instructions like a dancer follows music, and I had the most amazing class. I was strong and graceful and got through the whole class without a single head-between-legs-gasping-like-a-fish episode.

Light bulb: maybe there is something to be said for setting an intention.

The next day, I was a bit more go-with-the-flow, a little less mean and bossy. I didn't snap at my scene partner when he didn't listen to my ideas. I just remembered my class the night before and let it go. Mostly, I remembered how it felt in my body,

that hot, drippy sensation of going through the yoga moves with ease. I wondered if the feeling of that yoga practice stayed with me longer because my intention was deeper and more to the point. I wasn't convinced, but I was intrigued.

Over the next few weeks, I conducted an experiment. I set my intention at the beginning of yoga class based on whatever concerns my intense teenage brain had chewed on that day. Then I started basing it on ideas I thought would truly make me happy, and sometimes on what I thought would affect the people around me as well. My body responded in class. Annie started singling me out. She even shouted, "Wow, girl, you are on fire tonight!" across the room.

I am one of those people who thrive on praise. I realized the connection between mind and body is real. I realized that setting an intention using words is what bridges that connection. Yoga is about connecting your consciousness with the consciousness of the universe. Words are what helped me do that. Words connect people. I am still hoping for that bootylicious butt – but having friends is actually much more fun. ♦

Can this New Age babble be true?



Photo by Olivia McClain, West Bend, WI

been recently diagnosed with Graves' disease (a thyroid condition). The medicine I took for Graves' was causing me to gain weight, so my mom suggested I take hot yoga with her.

I went along with her because I thought I had to. I figured she'd be offended if I skipped our mother-daughter bonding. At first, when my mom would ask, "Are you ready to go to hot yoga?" I would say that I didn't really want to, but I never said why. I knew there was no nice way of saying, "Well, it's not that I don't want to go. It's just that I don't want to go with you."

Don't get me wrong – I love my mother, and she never embarrasses me. She's pretty hip. The truth is, I was embarrassed that my 50-year-old mother could show me up. As a teenager, I was supposed to be in my prime. She, as my mother, was supposed to be old and chubby – not standing on her head and nimbly flipping over backwards while I flopped around on my mat like a slimy catfish pulled from our backyard pond.

When I eventually explained this, she laughed. "You're going," she said. "It's good for you." And that was that. I was going to hot yoga – with my mom – every Monday night.

I really struggled. Thankfully, I already knew all the poses; otherwise, it would have been completely miserable and humiliating. Still, I had to rest in child's pose with my head between my knees every

Actions follow thoughts

Epiphanies of the Celestial

You don't realize how small you are until you walk along the promenade and the streetlamps shine brighter than the stars, the vapid glow of artificial luminance lingering in a galaxy that was supposed to be a gift. As turmoil ebbs, comets laugh at the brine that dares to spray them with the human condition. You don't realize this until your television flickers with twinkling metal spaceships and the moon, and an ignoramus are you for once comparing them. You are a doodad to the cosmos a chess piece to the Earth a pat of soil in the firm grip of Orion. And as the guts of Earth erupt and as archetypes collide, sky crystals saunter down the Milky Way into the flume of eternity.

by Erica Luzzi, Mountain Lakes, NJ



Photo by Rebecca Kim, Honolulu, HI

A Letter to My Brother

by Francesca Giardine, Syracuse, NY

Sure, it can be fun to mess with people. However, dear brother, it's never okay to mock what another person cannot control. Tonight at dinner you ridiculed my weight. You called me fat in a tone that implied I was ugly, even disgusting.



Art by Vivian Lu, Shanghai, China

In all 14 years of your existence, you never once crossed this line before tonight. You looked me right in the eye and said it as though it were nothing less than fact. Have you thought this about me all along?

Regardless of the fact that I am not your definition of skinny, I am quite healthy. I eat well and am generally happy. My eyes are bright, and I have a capable brain. To me this is plenty, as there is so much more to a person than appearance.

What did you hope to achieve by calling me fat? Did you want me to feel weak? Years of insecurities have taught me to divert my brain to the positives whenever I begin to feel plagued by nasty thoughts. It's been only one of many battles against myself, which are the hardest kind to fight. Although I found your comment hurtful, that is not my main concern.

I am only one person of thousands you will observe and judge in your lifetime. If you judge your own sister for her appearance, how will you see strangers? Will your biases prevent interaction with them? If so, then you will miss out on meeting a lot of amazing people. Some day you may marry. What if your wife gains weight? Will your perceptions about her change?

Our society is in a constant fight between harmful standards and the genuine need to abandon them. The double standards that envelop women are atrocious, and it saddens me that my own sibling

conforms to and perpetuates them. When we label people as fat or skinny, it is as though we measure them and give them value. What if they learn to measure their own worth from the judgments of people like you? The value they give themselves won't be very big, and that is a terrible way to live. Please don't measure others as you have measured me.

I have forgiven you, brother. You are still my sibling and will continue to be tomorrow. As soon as I condemned you, I also forgave. It is not entirely your fault that you think this way. Society is a brutal and erroneous teacher. I would be proud if you could learn this lesson. It's rather difficult to learn another person's lesson, because it isn't always intended for you. Because society wants me to be a size 2 and I'm not, I have been forced to teach myself.

I want you to learn the lessons taught to all of the people out there who aren't blessed with nice bodies, pretty faces, able minds, and other assorted privileges. Loving yourself comes first. Measure yourself before you let others measure you. Are you kind? Do you care? Do you love? Those are some things you should ask yourself before you try to figure out if you're what others want you to be. Chances are, if you answer honestly, you won't care what everyone else thinks.

Please, though, learn to not judge others too quickly. Look beyond their appearance to inform your opinions. They will appreciate it. ♦

Don't measure others as you have measured me

Quiet Is Okay

by Grace Beatty, Mechanicsburg, PA

Children's voices pierce the air. A boy kicks a ball high before sprinting around a painted kickball diamond. Four square games host lines of students, chatting away as they await their turn. The swings creak, their seats full.

One girl sits alone with a book. She is immersed in the story, oblivious to her surroundings. Is she socially impaired? Mentally ill? Does she need medication?

Perhaps she's just introverted.

Introverts are often categorized as shy and antisocial, but many have plenty of self-esteem and don't fear interacting with others. What defines introverts (and extroverts) is the way they obtain and expend energy. Kate Bartolotta explains this well in her *Huffington Post* article "What Is It Really Like to Be an Introvert?" She compares a person's energy stores to a cup. Each moment an introvert spends with other people, a little more energy is taken from the cup. Once their cup is empty, introverts need some alone time to refill it.

The opposite is true of the other

end of the spectrum. Extroverts need to spend time socializing to fill their cups, and they become drained when they are alone. Most people identify with one type; however, no one can be completely an introvert or an extrovert. Carl Jung, the psychologist who popularized these terms, said such a person "would be in the lunatic asylum."

The amount of time introverts need to spend alone depends on the amount of energy they can hold in their cup. Some introverts can socialize often, to the point where they may be mistaken for extroverts. But another's cup may hold a smaller fraction of

energy, so interaction tires them more quickly. These people might want to take solitary trips to restaurants or libraries, or stay at home rather than interacting with others.

In her book *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking*, Susan Cain writes about Steve Wozniak, a cofounder of Apple. Wozniak worked tirelessly on what he called "The Dream." His dream was to make a computer that used a screen and a keyboard and was small enough

to use at home. He spent all his time working on this prototype. He labored alone and loved it, recalling it as "the biggest high ever."

Bill Gates, another introvert, founded Microsoft and became a billionaire. Rosa Parks, a quiet, unassuming person, is credited with launching the civil rights movement with her act of bravery aboard a bus. Even successful actors like Audrey Hepburn have described themselves as introverts.

An important part of these famous introverts' stories would be missing if we focused only on one end of the spectrum. The fact that Wozniak met extrovert Steve Jobs is crucial in explaining the founding of Apple. Had it not been for Jobs, Wozniak would have had a more difficult time bringing his dream to the world. Parks met Martin Luther King Jr., who helped raise awareness for civil rights by making groundbreaking speeches to huge crowds. It's where the ideas started – in solitude – that matters.

Introverts aren't necessarily smarter than anyone else, but to redirect them from the world inside their head to the party going on outside could rob

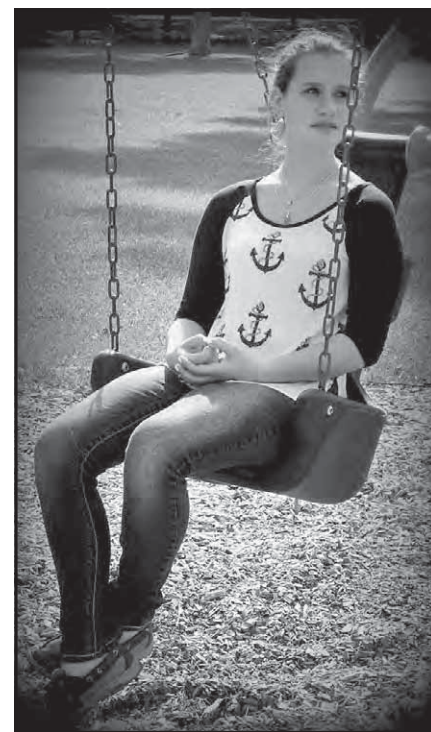


Photo by Katelynn Creech, Lake City, FL

the world of great advances. Everyone has been created differently, to act differently, think differently, and express differently than everyone else. It's what makes us individuals, helping to shape our collective future – the future that little girl quietly reading her book will create. ♦

Wilson, the Princess

by "Allie," Princeton, NJ

When I was in preschool, I knew this kid named Wilson. We were best friends. And he was, to put it simply, a princess.

Or at least, he wanted to be. I think that he believed he was one.

He didn't like Transformers, or toy cars, or superheroes like the other boys. He liked to play with Barbies, and he loved pink. And, of course, he didn't play with the boys during recess. He played with the girls.

At the time I was the girliest, sparkliest, princess-iest little girl ever, and Wilson was my perfect companion. I knew he was different from the other boys, but I didn't see anything wrong with that. The only way I could explain it was, "He likes girl toys." I did too, so as far as I was concerned, he had the right idea.

Wilson didn't mind being identified as a boy. He was fine being referred to as Wilson or "he." I don't think it mattered to him, because I don't think he thought that Wilsons were supposed to be boys, and boys were supposed to like Transformers. And toy cars. And superheroes.

I think, looking back now, that some of the adults thought he was weird. Not normal. Or maybe they thought he was going through a phase. I remember

how they laughed, not exactly at him, but at the way he held himself, the way he played with the girls. They didn't object to his feminine preferences, and they didn't dislike him in any way. It's hard to hate a four-year-old.

Then, as I got older, I lost some of my innocence. "Wilson is a boy," society told me. "And boys like Transformers and toy cars and superheroes."

Boys don't like Barbies and princesses and pink things." I guess I accepted it. I mean, that was the way the world worked, right? But I didn't buy it deep down, and I still don't. Wilson was perfectly normal just as he was, and this belief that he couldn't like "girl" toys was wrong.

Now I've lost even more of that innocence. I know how people are treated when they don't identify with the gender they were assigned at birth. And I have realized that there are stereotypes most people unconsciously accept – and enforce.

"You need to wear more skirts. How pretty you look in a skirt!"

"Honey, stop slouching; act like a lady."

"Eww! Why do you play with boy toys?"

I'm not saying that I don't identify as a girl, or that I refuse to touch pink. I am very much a female,

He played with Barbies, and he loved pink

and I identify as one. But because of that, I'm told everything about me has to be feminine, feminine, feminine. And it's really annoying.

Sometimes I wonder about Wilson. Does he want to be called "Willow" and be referred to as "she" now? Does he (or she) still like to wear dresses? Does Wilson like girls or boys? Or was it really just a "phase"?

Maybe it was a phase. Sometimes I hope it was. Because if it wasn't, I know what Wilson might be going through now. Maybe he's being shoved into lockers at school. Maybe the other kids call him "pu**y" or "fag." Maybe he's had to hide who he really is and act like someone he's not – a masculine, superhero-admiring, rough-and-tumble someone. Or maybe he's just fine. Maybe people are more accepting of him. I doubt it. He's not four anymore; he's 15. It's easier to hate someone of that age.

I wish we were all in preschool again. I wish we were all innocent, little kids and had no idea what a cruel, terrible world it is. I wish that we were little again and didn't know how to hate and didn't know, or particularly care, that Wilsons are boys and boys should like boy toys.

I wish everyone were like that. Maybe then we wouldn't live in such a despicable place. ♦

Let's Talk About Mental Health

by "Cindy," Troy, NY

When my mother first found out I was depressed, she felt a mixture of shock, sadness, and pride. She was shocked that I was, well, depressed, she was sad that I was going through a rough time, and she was proud that I could admit I wasn't okay.

Depression and other mental illnesses have run in my family for generations, but I'm the first to openly talk about it, let alone seek treatment. I was raised in Hong Kong and grew up learning that mental illnesses are something to be ashamed of. In my culture, people who seek help with these problems are stigmatized; expressing one's feelings is an indication of weakness. Parents fear that if their child has a mental illness, it will ruin the image of their lineage. Other parents want to protect their children and worry that they will face discrimination if they are open about their struggles.

I first heard the term "mental illness" in junior high when two of my classmates developed anorexia. At first I thought it was something that only happened to those who were weak. But I was wrong. Mental illness doesn't discriminate.

I fell into a depression when I was 14, and my anxiety started to consume me. Depression made me want to curl up in a ball and stay in bed all day. There were days when I just couldn't get up in the morning, let alone go to school. There were days when I would skip meals, and others when I would eat everything in

sight. I have gone from attention-seeking to under the radar in the span of a couple of hours. Quite honestly, all I wanted to hear was "It's all going to be okay."

In my fragile state of mind, it was easy to feel forgotten. The sadness consumed me one thought at a time, and very quickly, I started to believe that I was alone and everyone hated me. I could go on and on about how depression feels, but long story short, the experience was unpleasant and scary.

I did make it through those dark days.

I haven't hurt myself physically since 2014. I am proud to say that I am not my depression, and even though sometimes I don't feel like it, I am worthy. With therapy, I have learned that I am stronger than my fears. I am still learning how to be alone, but I know that I am making progress.

While continuing my battle against depression, I have spent time wondering how I could help others suffering with mental health issues. I was officially diagnosed with depression and anxiety sophomore year, and while my family, friends, and teachers cared a lot about me and were there to support me, they didn't know what to do. When I asked for help from adults I admired, some didn't know what to say: they were shocked or overwhelmed, or even

told me to "just get over it," probably because our society is not willing to talk about it openly.

In my high school, we have campaigns to raise awareness for feminism, sexual assault, LGBT, and just about every other cause you can think of – except mental health. If we want to make a difference – so people can understand the reality of mental illnesses, how to help others, and how to ask for help – we need to start talking about it.

Not everyone is lucky enough to have the support I have. My best friends

made me laugh, which helped everything seem a little better when I didn't want to live another day. My therapist read and responded to my e-mails and texts, ranging from "today really sucks" and "I'm exhausted" to "I

think I've been happy for some time now," and would even show up when I had meltdowns (one of the perks of a boarding school where everyone lives on campus). A dorm parent at school, one of my biggest role models, told me about her own experiences and let me cry and rant for hours. They all made me feel that I was important, and that means the world to me.

It is time for us to act on behalf of people with mental illnesses. Mental health is still widely misunderstood, despite recent attempts to raise awareness. President Obama has been trying to

make mental health care more accessible through the Affordable Care Act; Canada started an initiative called Bell Let's Talk to spur discussion about mental health and how to be an ally on social media. Although I applaud these ideas to raise awareness, they aren't enough.

One in four teens battles mental illness, and the number of depressed and anxious teens is on the rise. I am one of them. I have been made to feel ashamed and weak because of my illness. I don't want anyone else to feel embarrassed or afraid to ask for help. So please speak up, and let's talk about mental health and end the stigma. ♦



Art by Grace Jin, Pittsburgh, PA

I Refuse to Be Small

by Winona Gbedey, Bentonville, AR

As I lowered myself into my seat, my gaze zeroed in on the image at the front of the room. The video, a CNN special on racial equality in America, was paused, but the little girl on the screen intrigued me nonetheless. Her expression was one of sudden realization, and she didn't look happy. The culprits, I assumed, were the objects in front of her: two dolls that looked exactly alike except for the color of their skin. The lights dimmed. I waited for my teacher to press play.

The portion of the program that featured the girl and the dolls didn't appear until the end, and as it turned out, she was one of several children of

various ethnicities selected for a study that posed the question "Which doll is bad, the white or the black one?"

I thought knew how they would answer; each child would point to the white doll, because history demanded it. My mind brimmed with examples that I would use to defend my point when my teacher inevitably switched to classroom discussion: the Crusades, the enslavement of the Africans, the land stolen from the Native Americans.

But I was wrong. Each child wordlessly pointed to the black doll, causing something painful and foreign to well up in my stomach.

I live in 21st century America, decades after Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, and countless other men and women who fought for change, yet being black is still synonymous with inferiority?

I was different. This knowledge plagued me. After that video, I took the role of an actor, fitting into the character I thought society wanted me to play. I worked quietly like my predecessors, hoping no one would pay close attention to me. Yet frustration tugged at me whenever a peer begged for help with homework behind closed doors but ignored me in public, whenever someone disregarded me after one fleeting look. By the end of junior high, I was tired of being used and discarded like trash.

Things were going to be different in

high school, I decided. I was surrounded by so many different people with so many different backgrounds and interests. There were Hispanics building robots for Tech Club; African Americans with Calculus textbooks in their arms and weary, contented smiles on their faces; Asians in sparkly dresses, flipping their hair and talking in teen jargon; white kids, some with SUVs, some with babies. It made me realize what I wanted, and that wasn't to succumb to racial stereotypes. Anyway, acting was stupid. Why did I have to play the role of "black kid who won't amount to anything" when that wasn't who I was? Why couldn't I be "the future president" or "the girl who's going to cure cancer" or – even better – "your next boss"?

My resolve grew. Finally, I let myself shine. Soon people sought me out for help. Soon I was marching with the band on the nation's grandest stages. Soon I was winning academic awards for my school. I wasn't afraid

to let myself be heard. I was surpassing even my own expectations.

If I had a time machine, I would go back to the day I saw that video. I would tell my younger self, "Look, life is tough. People may make judgments based on your appearance. It's your job to prove them wrong. You have so much to offer this world, and if you keep that in mind, your future will be bright. Don't let anyone convince you otherwise."

And as I traveled back home, experiencing how things had changed, how much I had achieved, I would smile – because I came, I saw, I conquered, and I refused to be something small. ♦

Why is being black still synonymous with inferiority?



Photo by Heather Knott, New York, NY

I'm So OCD

by Mary Wilson, Kirkwood, MO

"I'm so OCD, " somebody laughs, organizing her Smarties candy by color. Pink. Purple. Yellow. Pink. Purple. Yellow. Pink. Purple. Yellow.

Obsessive-compulsive disorder has become the new cool thing. But OCD is anything but glamorous. I should know. When my OCD was at its worst, last fall, I averaged 400 OCD thoughts a day.

Rub your hands together. Count to seven.

I've tried to figure out how many thoughts I had per minute, but I'm a writer, not a mathematician, and my geometry grade proves it.

It's not glamorous to do rituals in front of your family, friends, classmates, and teachers.

Somebody patted me on the right shoulder. *Tap your left shoulder, in the exact same way, or you'll get ... you'll get ...*

You'll get run over by a car on the way home from school, or your house will burn down, or you'll kill yourself, or you'll die of AIDS, or ...

Rub your hands together. Count to seven.

But no. That's a compulsion. If I tap myself on the left shoulder, I'll make the OCD stronger, make myself sicker and sicker, until I'm unable to even go to school. I've been that way before, and it's not glamorous.

But you need to do it.

So I give in. And the panic, the intense, unbearable fear, leaves my body. The itch I can never quite scratch goes away – at least, for the time being.

But five minutes later, it returns, and I'm compelled to perform some other ridiculous ritual.

Rub your hands together.

Count to seven.

It's not glamorous to develop depression, to be driven to the point of being suicidal. I don't know how else to explain it except it's like you're a marionette, and not a pretty, graceful one. You're an ugly, clumsy marionette being yanked around by cruel hands. I want to explain this to the person organizing her Smarties by

I'm a clumsy marionette being yanked by cruel hands

color. But I don't.

"You have OCD? Really?" someone says, and I'm immediately uncomfortable. Why is she so excited? She doesn't have it; if she did, I'd understand her excitement. But no, for all I know, she has never experienced it.

Lucky.

"So, like, what are you afraid of?" she asks, and I want to sink into my chair. The spotlight is on me.

"Um, you know ..." *Rub your hands together. Count to seven.* "Everything," I say, trying to laugh it off. I'm only slightly exaggerating. I've been afraid of flesh-eating disease, brain-eating amoebas, AIDS, suicide, self-harm, hurting other people, falling through the floor, death

Rub your hands together.

Count to seven.

I want to tell her that she's making me uncomfortable, but I don't.

"You have OCD? Tell me what I can do," someone else says, and I want to kiss him, that's how

happy I am.

If everyone responded that way, instead of making jokes or treating me like a sideshow curiosity, my world with OCD would be drastically different. ♦



Photo by Gracie Hammond, Newton, KS

Through James's Eyes

by Catherine Evans, Stafford, VA

My brother is 27 years old and still lives at home. He works two jobs and is the world's biggest fan of the Washington Capitals. Though he is hardly ever in tune, he loves to sing, and one day he hopes to have his very own cat. My brother's name is James, and he has Down syndrome.

I'm sure anyone who has a brother or sister can agree with the fact that siblings don't always get along. James and I have our disagreements, but in my short 17 years, my brother has taught me things that I will carry with me for the rest of my life.

Occasionally, it is difficult to have a brother who is in his twenties but at times acts like an elementary school student. The years of babysitting James, who is 10 years older than me, taught me great patience. He has also given me a greater appreciation for all of the abilities, gifts, and opportunities in my life.

My brother finds beauty in everything he sees

Getting a driver's license, going to college, getting married, and starting a family are experiences that many people hope to have by age 27. It would be unfair of me to take these rites of passage for granted because they will never be available to James.

People can be so judgmental, and yet, my brother finds a way to look past the ignorant stares and rude comments and forgive everyone. When we are in public, I often catch people staring at James. Knowing they are wrong to do this, they try to avoid eye contact. However, James is always glad for the attention, asking them how they are, offering a hello or just a friendly smile. He has taught me to forgive and forget.

James does what he loves and doesn't care what anyone else thinks. He loves himself, and that is one of my favorite things about him. Because of James, I have learned not to judge others too quickly. He

looks different from the average person, with the typical physical characteristics of someone with Down syndrome. Those who cannot look past his appearance to see the beautiful spirit inside are missing out. Everyone who has gotten to know James absolutely loves him. James does not look for faults but instead sees the good in everyone and always has something nice to say about others.

There have been many times when my family has been in the car when it's raining and the day is gloomy, and suddenly James will say, "It's a beautiful day!" I am not sure if he's trying to fill the silence or looking forward to the rainbow after the downpour, but I am sure that he has never taken a day of his life for granted.

He finds beauty in everything he sees. James has made my life more difficult but also more colorful, and for that, I could not be more grateful. My brother has shown me how to see the world through his eyes, and in James's eyes, every day is beautiful. ♦

My Hope

by "Aaron," Petal, MS

A frustrated sigh escapes my lips as my thumb slides across the screen of my phone, revealing yet more of the ignorance that friends and family have spewed on my digital time line. At least, that's the view from my side of the screen.

"You're too opinionated!"

"It's against God's word!"

"No one likes a liberal!"

I've heard all of this – within the past week. This is what it's like growing up in the deep South, where the tea is sweet and the people are sweeter – as long as you agree with the conservative majority.

I was nine when I realized I was different. Not special or unique, just different. I was watching a movie, a subpar rom-com the name of which I don't remember. But what I do remember is one of the characters. He wasn't the main character, or even the most likable. In fact, age was the only thing we had in common. Yet I felt myself drawn to him. I spent hours after the credits had rolled imagining what it would be like to be his best friend.

In my daydreams we spent afternoons together after school, went to the beach on holidays, or rode our bikes around the neighborhood. The thought that I had had my first real crush didn't cross my mind until years later, but to this day I look upon it as my awakening.

In my mind, the transformation from a simple childhood desire for a best friend to the longing for a relationship with a boy was separated by a very thin line drawn by years of religious upbringing. I remember one Sunday, sitting in the pews of our little white Baptist church, I heard the preacher announce that "America's acceptance of the gays will lead to its damnation."

I shut myself in after that. If there was ever a metaphorical closet, I sure as hell found it. I'm still in there, hiding the key from myself until it's safe to come out.

I've done the research. I've read my Bible.

I've consulted countless websites about the matter, but I feel as though I'm standing in the same place where I began. I'd like to dismiss those who are certain my soul will burn for eternity, but that's easier said than done when some of those people are my closest friends.

It's so simple to them: I made this choice for myself. According to them, I chose the years of sleepless nights and tear-stained pillows. I chose the hate I feel for what I am, and the anxiety that comes with it. I chose to bring God's wrath, never mind the alienation from my parents, upon myself.

Sometimes I believe them and I pray to be healed or fixed or whatever it is that happens to save lost souls. But the sad truth is that sometimes it feels like even God is working against me when I've been told by every church I've attended that Christians must reject homosexuality and all it entails lest they too be sent to hell. Well, if that's what Christianity is, I would like to believe in something else.

I believe in a God who loves us all. I believe that being gay is not a choice. When I have been broken down to the smallest pieces of who I am, these are the things I still believe. If God makes no mistakes, then I am who I am for a reason, and I love who I love because love is not wrong.

I am not a victim, because I have hope. I hope that in the future I can look back and regret the years I spent suffocating inside my skin because I thought it was my only choice. I hope that one day maybe I'll be relaxing after work, or swimming at the beach, or cycling on a trail with my best friend by my side, and I'll look at him and know what true love is without feeling the pain that comes with it now.

I hope that one day I won't have to hide within myself, but rather, I'll be proud of both my religious beliefs and my sexual orientation. It's a long road until that day, I know, but the small bit of hope in me grows a little stronger every year. ♦

Sometimes I pray to be healed or fixed

My Type of Girl

At two I was typical:

Princess dresses, pink sparkly bangles, and Barbies.

But growing up, observing the world and seeing how frilly and frail girls were supposed to be ...

In third grade I told everyone I wanted to be a boy.

Girlly-girls were alien – silly, weak, and too pretty for their own good.

I wouldn't step into the girls' section at Target.

I think my mom was disappointed.

In middle school I felt like an outsider because I couldn't stomach the endless gossiping:

Crushes and makeup and cell phones on infinite repeat ...

Sports and school made so much more sense

Baggy clothes, running shoes, and short hair were so much more comfortable

Gym class was so much more fun when I showed them that I was fast

And got picked early for teams.

Glancing around the locker room,

I wondered if I was a lesbian before I really knew what that meant

Because I didn't look or feel feminine like all these other girls.

To some extent I accepted that I would never be a true girl.

And then my eyes opened further.

By high school I had met and talked to many women in my life whom I could now recognize

As not only independent, strong, and intelligent

– athletes, lawyers, pilots, scientists, doctors, artists, teachers – But also as lovely and womanly wives and mothers.

They didn't have to act weak to be admired.

By tenth grade I wore girls' clothes – jeans, shorts, shoes, and T-shirts made for females

And even some jewelry and light mascara when I felt like it.

Nothing to be ashamed of.

It wasn't about trying to impress anyone or prove that I was girly

It was just that I had finally discovered that I could be any kind of girl

That I wanted to be.

by Ellen Considine, Boulder, CO

To Our Collective Body

by Daisy Blossom Doty, Jonesboro, AR

This is about my body.
This is about everyone's body.
Every line and curve of all the bodies you have seen.
Every cellulite dimple, every milky-smooth inch.
All of the hip bones, the ones exposed by the tight, toned skin,
and the ones hidden, even buried, under layers of fat.
This is dedicated to my décolletage, and the freckles and moles sitting atop it. And yours too.

This is for your smooth skin, tightly wound like a drum.
It is also for my stretch marks.
It is for every one of my silvered stretch marks that I strive so hard to correct with creams, scrubs, even makeup.
The ones I thought ruined my appearance, the ones I still struggle with. This is for them.



Photo by Joey Rushfield, Rockville, MD

This is for the beautiful color of your skin.
For the scars you may or may not have.
For the love handles.
For the exposed rib cages.
For the flat butts,
for the saggy butts,
for the fatty butts,
for the dimply butts,
for the black butts,
for the white butts,
for the bubble butts,
for the smooth butts,
for the hairy butts.
For the skinny girls with large, heavy breasts.
For the fat girls with small breasts.
For the girls who strap them down.
For the girls who push them up.
For the boy who has a pair too.

This ode is dedicated to trans bodies.
This is for the boy who straps his breasts down.
That same one who cries every month because of the blood that he can't make go away.
This is for the girl who can't help but be muscular.
Who desperately wants breasts.
Who wants to wear tight, feminine clothes.
The boys and the girls recovering from surgeries to create the bodies they wished they had been born with.

This is for those out there with breast implants.
Breast reductions.
Breast lifts.

Nose jobs.
Pinned ears.
Tummy tucks.

For those who have suffered accidents.
Those born looking inherently different.
Those whose bodies can't do everything they want them to do.

This is for those suffering from eating disorders.
This is for those who have been accused of faking disorders for attention.
This is for the fat girl told that she doesn't look sick.
Because if she was eating disordered, she would be thin and pretty, right?

This is for the skinny girl who has anorexia but gets compliments all day.
Even asked for dieting tips and praised.
This is for the girl with bulimia reaching out and asking for help,
Who is told that there are more serious problems than hers.
And this is for the boys with eating disorders.
It happens to them, too.

This is for the fat girl who loved her body.
Then she became sick.
The pounds dripped off as she worsened.
She felt weak.
She missed her body.
And all people could do was congratulate her for the weight loss.
Tell her how good she looked.
All she wanted was her old body back.
She thought she was beautiful before.
Did they not?

Was she supposed to be grateful for her disease,
The disease stealing her strength,
The disease stealing what she enjoyed in life
Because it made her thin?
Was that all that mattered?
Was that the only way to be attractive?

This is for the fat girls
Like me,
Who gag when someone says,
"Your body is great! Don't you know boys like a big booty?"
Don't you know they like the jiggle? Boys like REAL WOMEN.
Your body is better than a bag of bones."
Excuse me?
I don't give a rat's ass.
My self-worth is not determined by whether boys want to bed me or not.
And the junk in my trunk doesn't make me any more real
Than the trans girl
Or the girl with exposed ribs.

This is for the girls who don't gag.
The ones who think that this is okay.
It isn't okay.
But you've been conditioned to believe
Body shaming is okay.
Boys determining your worth is okay.
It isn't okay.
It is not okay.
I beg that you see why it is wrong.
I hope,
I wish,
Sometimes I even pray,
That you get to feel good about yourself.
That you try and make others feel the same.

This is for me now.
This is for a younger me.
This is for an older me.

This is for you.
This is for us.
This is for our bodies.
This is for our minds.
This is for our future romantic interests
Who better damn well treat us right.

This is to remind us that we are beautiful.
And to screw everyone who dares to say otherwise.

Screw them.
Screw their hate.
Screw their ridiculous need to put you down.
You're beautiful.
Your body, frankly, is bangin'.
You are fierce.

You deserve to feel good about yourself.
You deserve to think you look amazing.
That's not being stuck up or snooty.

And you are so much more than just a sweet body.
This ode is for those who couldn't care less about
What they look like.
Because you are just as worthy.

All right?
All right.
Go get 'em.
Give 'em hell. ♦

3rd Grade Tutee

It's a darkness of hair and a smallness of room
That you bring, smiling, a small you from a small room
A willingness, bigger than both your hands
When you lift your head from a drawing and meet me
Tell me more, why, who lives in your one-room apartment
It's a piece of you that I extracted carefully, questioned carefully
It's a darkness of hair and a smallness of room
What I love to do: give you my pencils to keep
Another: forget to tell you to slow down as you read
A willingness, bigger than both your hands
You asked me what video games my brothers play
Without waiting for an answer, you told me your own
It's a darkness of hair and a smallness of room
Your brother does not speak: something I'll never forget
"I only know the name for what he has in Spanish: *autista*"
It's a small-handed offering of what both of us need today
It's a darkness of hair and a smallness of room
A willingness, bigger than both your hands
by Zoe Harris, San Francisco, CA

Avoiding the "A" Word

by Emily Jing, Chandler, AZ

My mother has always been incredibly protective of me. Some would say she fits the "Asian Tiger Mom" stereotype. I may or may not agree – lovingly, of course. Yet she certainly does everything to extremes to make sure I am healthy and safe.

"Don't eat meat. Look, I'm a vegetarian," she'll say, brandishing a bowl of fresh tossed salad, a smidgen of ranch dressing already looming over her lip.

"Don't sleep under the fan. It might fall and kill you."

"Don't wear nail polish. You'll get distracted by your fingers."

My mother's remarks range from profound to all sorts of ridiculous. Yet if there's one that sticks out and has unfortunately proven to be valuable, it was the advice about the Word-Which-Shall-Not-Be-Named (no, not Volde-mort).

"Don't ever say the A word. People will automatically hate you."

Atheist. One word, seven letters, infinite judgment.

My parents were born in China in a period marked by the Communist Revolution, when religion was eradicated and devotion to Mao Zedong put in its place. As a result, the first eight years of my life were devoid of religion – that is, until my mother placed me in Tri-City Christian Academy, solely due to its academic standing.

Suddenly I was crowded by Christ and long hours of classes and Bible reenactments and more classes and more Christ. Since everyone else was praying, it seemed like the right thing to do. Everyone else was listening attentively to Mrs. Krauss's high-pitched voice reciting Psalm 27. I should too, right?

Yet I found my mind wandering off during Bible study. I began to question the teachings. Soon I was only praying when I had a math test the next day or had decided to risk it and – God forbid – sleep under the fan. I started researching online, watching Richard Dawkins videos on YouTube, and rereading the Bible, this time not in total faith but with questions. Then I wasn't praying at all anymore. Before I knew it, my answer to religion had progressed from Christian to agnostic to, dare I say it, atheist.

As a born-again atheist, I was naive to how I would be perceived. When my mother told me never to affiliate myself with even the word, I assumed she was just spouting ridiculousness. However, I realized the real caution behind her advice when I faced people's reactions to my atheism, which ranged from concern to outright disgust. Even my best friend donned a grotesque expression before searing me with her iron-hot words: "You're going to Hell."

Needless to say, after a few failed attempts to convert me and drag me to church, my friendship with her died and definitely didn't go to a better place. I would flinch at every religious flyer thrown at me, run from every person trying to "save" me. People's opinions of me began to change for the worse, not because of my personality or my behaviors, but due to my faith. Or, rather, the lack of it.

So, for a while, I kept the ghastly A word stored close to my heart but far from my mouth. Anything was preferable to being seen as the stereotypical atheist: a terrible person with no morals or purpose in life. I started to believe I ought to have listened to my mother's advice that it was better just to keep my mouth shut, use euphemisms such as "nonreligious" or "unsure," or even straight-out lie.

Before my mother came here, she had dreamed of America as the land of diversity and acceptance. The land of opportunity and fortune. America, the land of religious freedom, with over 80 percent of people associating with a religion. Just a few months ago I came across a *Huffington Post* article about a survey that had asked people whether they'd consider voting for presidential candidates of various religions, races, or genders. While potential female presidents, black presidents, and Christian presidents passed with 97 percent and 98 percent approval ratings, barely half of the population said they would vote for an atheist, with the next lowest category being a Muslim. Our society has grown so offended by this word that religious sensitivity is all but lost.

Just like my mother telling me to eat salad because she is vegetarian, some religious people have tried to impose their beliefs on me because they think their path is the only true one. When it comes to food, everyone has their own favorites, likes, and dislikes. I can be friends with someone

who has a different diet. In fact, most of my friends have different religions, different palates. I love learning about other diets, lifestyles, and religions. I love questioning mine and talking with others to understand their lifestyles.

Recently I stopped following my mother's advice. "I'm an atheist."

Yes, this word has elicited horrified expressions, sighs of disappointment, and head shakes with long religious rants to follow. But I stand tall in my belief of no belief. I say this Word-Which-Shall-Not-Be-Named with pride and patience at the reaction I often face.

My mother may be right about many things. Painting my fingernails neon pink did end up attracting my attention away from the biology lecture. Who knows, maybe fan accidents are on the rise. Yet I no longer avoid the A word due to others' religious insensitivity. I will not lose hold on my morals – my meat – in order to make the vegetarians happy. Just as my mother has always been protective to me, I am protective to my identity as a person, as an atheist, and as an avid meat-lover. ♦

Atheist. One word, seven letters, infinite judgment

Speak Up

If they could tell you with an ultrasound if the child was to be like I am, what would you do?
There would be a genocide against my gender, my sexuality, my mind, my identity.
Knowing this is more than hypothetical, anger bleeds into words.

And I wonder if they had probed through my brain before I was born to see what I would become, would I even exist?
Would they have opted out of the back roads my mental health would take or the gender inside me that does not exist?

I've watched too many men play transgender women, watched a few too many shows steal trans identity mottle it with their privileged hands take it for their own like they have any right to claim gender as an act.

I've watched too many people like me consume another culture, chew it like flavored wax and spit it back out stripped of its autonomy and ready for mass-consumption.

I've watched too many trans people too many gay people too many sick people and too many black people suffer.

I know the beautiful people we exploit, highlight, erase, and even kill and I've seen love ignite fires for them for me.

I've seen exploding pulsars in news that you would rather ignore and I've seen union in people you are trying to disperse



Photo by Austin Akidil, Lexington, KY

and I've seen the way the world can choose to ignore or choose to listen when we use our voices as loudly as possible.

People are universes of changing constellations and we shouldn't need to justify our right to life; I raise my voice because I am important not in spite of my gender but because of it and black people are important not in spite of their skin color but because of it and gay people are important not in spite of their sexuality but because of it,

because I am tired of watching lives erased from a blackboard assembled by straight white men.

I raise my voice Because human experience must be shared and if no one speaks we cannot be heard.

by Rey Weyler, Shrewsbury, MA

Fanatics and their Fandoms

by Kasey Smith, Mechanicsburg, PA

Harry Potter. Wreck-It Ralph. The Office. Cowboy Bebop. What could a fictional video game character and a boy wizard have in common with a paper company and cowboys in space? They have fans. They have fanatics who absorb every scrap of material available and commit it to permanent memory. They have people who buy up all the merchandise and catalog it like a museum's archives. Fans are proud of the little things they call their own.

A fandom is a social community built when people who enjoy a certain type of entertainment (whether it's a TV show, sports team, or movie) get together and share ideas about it. People often meet friends through fandoms, or buy, sell, and exchange fan-made merchandise. My sister, a die-hard Broadway geek, has a thriving Playbill trade: she sends some of her own collection of 100-plus across the country in exchange for Playbills from different shows. Some fans



Art by Eleonore Fischer, Eureka, MO

engage in cosplay, a type of role-play where people dress like their favorite characters in either store-bought or homemade costumes. These hobbyists work for weeks and sometimes months to perfect an ensemble that they then wear to fan conventions.

So what's it like to go all-out nerd for something? Is it different for every fan, or is it a universal experience? What attracts superfans?

"Just the fantasy," says Katie Reed, a proud Whovian (a fan of the space-and-time-travel TV show "Doctor Who"). "Travel and save the world? I wanna do that!"

"And the creativity," says Olivia Austin, who cleaves to no single fandom and instead has tried several on for size. "The variety's good."

Here's how it starts. You see the cover of a book or the description of a TV show, and you think it might be worth your time. That's what I like to call "the beginning of the end." Once you start absorbing the world of your own personal phenomenon (and yes, you get to a point when you think it belongs to you), you don't stop. Maybe in the early stages you can leave, if you find it too ridiculous, but most fans never do. Says Reed, "Anything having to do with ["Doctor Who"], I want."

Of course, being a dedicated fan has consequences. Naomi Kemp, who adores the band La Dispute, laments, "Imagine how cool I would be if I wouldn't have found this! I was actually popular before I got into good music!" Austin, an enthusiastic cosplayer, wonders if she's gone too far "every time I burn myself with my hot glue gun." And as a result of the

avid costume-making and convention-attending, she adds, "I have no more money."

Getting attached to any kind of entertainment, fictional or otherwise, can be risky business. Like an art student in a museum full of Picassos and Van Goghs, every inch seems like the best thing you've ever seen. And then, as your stay in fandom becomes more permanent, you start seeing the parts of the museum that are in disrepair, where your least favorite painting hangs, or where artists you dislike hurt your eyes with their "vision."

Often art museums have hecklers: you know that one guy who's there because his friend dragged him, the guy who spends his entire visit saying, "I don't get it."

Those are the bad fans.

Those are the fans who think their opinion is the only opinion. And it's fine to have an opinion – believe me, I have lots – but some fans act

like their opinion is law and any other is sacrilegious to the fandom. "The worst kind of fans shame other fans," says Alannah Danielle, a dedicated Trekkie (a fan of "Star Trek"). "Like, the people who think people aren't fans because they haven't seen everything."

"And then there are the fake fans," says Bekah Olt, a passionate follower of the band Fall Out Boy. "The ones who think they know everything and try to prove it, but they can't."

Everyone I interviewed agreed that the source of certain fans' extremism isn't the material; it's the person. Not every superfan antagonizes others. It's a slippery slope, both recognizing a toxic fan and becoming a toxic fan. By the time you know for sure, it's

too late.

Luckily, the good fans largely outweigh the bad ones. For every overzealous, defensive fan, there's someone who's open to sharing opinions and hearing new perspectives. That's the core of any fandom: for the fans to experience the same thing and talk about it exhaustively. Fandoms are not a new phenomenon: in 1893, when Sherlock Holmes, the greatest literary detective of all time, was killed off in "The Final Problem," 20,000 fans canceled their subscription to the magazine that published the short story, and were rumored to wear black armbands to mourn their hero.

People aren't only fans of television, movies, and books. Fanatics can be history buffs, novice chefs, flamingo statue collectors, or Jelly Belly experts. They can obsess over music, the weather, makeup, cleansing, and cats – sometimes all at once. When people follow their passion, something extraordinary happens; it might make them feel possessive, but it can also let them discuss and share, and sometimes it can even teach them how to really live.

My passion for "Doctor Who" began in 2011, and since then this bizarre world has immersed me to the point of enslavement (to its marketing department, at least). But my interest in the show refueled my interest in television as a whole, and now I've set myself on the not-so-fast track to becoming a television producer. Under the right circumstances, the right people can find themselves when they discover something incredible, even if it's a TV show about time travel, humanity, and an adorkable space alien.

"Doctor Who" led me to my future. What about you? ♦

"The worst kind of fans shame other fans"

A Letter to Know-It-Alls

by Alice Irvin, Farmington, NM

People think I'm a know-it-all. A friend brought this to my attention a while ago, and I can't stop thinking about it. I fit in with the teachers' pets and the overachievers – not that there is anything wrong with these people. In fact, they are some of my best friends. But, to clarify, I'm a knowledge junkie, not a know-it-all. If I correct people on their facts, it's not because I'm trying to show off. I'm actually doing them a favor. Who wants to go around with the wrong knowledge in their head? Besides, most of the stuff I share is fascinating, like the fun facts you find on popsicle sticks or little kids' shampoo bottles. Who knew that the inventor of the cotton candy machine was a dentist?

Okay, sometimes I overachieve. Yes, I usually ask

my teachers how their day is going. I'm not trying to be obnoxious; I'm just trying to be the best person I can be. Maybe I honestly care about my teachers. Maybe I'm a perfectionist. What's wrong with that?

Well, as I learned a couple of days ago, everything is wrong with that. Apparently, it's annoying.

Sigh.

So, for all of you out there who understand what I'm talking about because you do the same things I do, here's a fact that I wish I had known a long time ago: Your classmates are talking about you behind your back. If you already know this, then congratulations. You are not alone.

We are resented for overachieving. We are liked by our teachers yet dubbed uncool by our classmates. We can't get enough knowledge and can't

wait to share it, yet receive only eye-rolls from our peers in return.

But be proud.

Yes, friends, be proud of your knowledge. Be proud of your grades. Be proud of your never-ending mind full of never-faulted facts. Of your love for reading and writing. Of the joy you get out of shows about astrophysics or the Battle of Yorktown. Be proud. Although we are "annoying," our love of knowledge and overachievement is a gift. A passion. A springboard for our future. It's awesome.

If that still isn't enough for you, keep this in mind; to each other, we are not annoying. We are fascinating. We can be "annoying" together.

Sincerely,

A Proud Know-It-All

P.S. All polar bears are left-handed. Just thought you would like to know. ♦

Your classmates are talking behind your back

A Portrait of Dyslexia

by Whit Jester, Orondo, WA

If life gives you melons, you might have dyslexia. For the first few years of our lives, before my older brother Max was diagnosed with dyslexia, he and I were equally matched physically and mentally. We proved this through our favorite game: racing. As we wandered through our orchard, barefoot with holes in the knees of our jeans, he would look at me with that cockeyed, daring grin and ask, “Ya wanna race?” No response needed.

I’d be off down the orchard row with him on my heels, and we would finish neck and neck. Whether we were racing to the tops of the poplar trees or through our addition and subtraction flashcards, Max and I always tied. Until we learned to read.

The two of us started reading when Max was five and I was three. I learned the alphabet in a matter of days and picked up reading quickly, plowing through readers and on to chapter books with ease. Max struggled. Even after numerous times working through the same readers, he still stumbled over words, forgot which letters made which sounds, and struggled to identify sight words like “the” and “said.” For the first time in my life, I was leaving my big brother in the dust. Why did I suddenly have an advantage?

At the age of seven, Max was diagnosed with dyslexia. Dyslexia is a brain abnormality that causes difficulty in reading despite normal intelligence. In other words, if reading was a foot race, dyslexics would be just as physically fit as typical readers but would encounter more obstacles along the race track. The paragraph below is a simulation of normal text seen through the eyes of a dyslexic reader:

“Moud a text-ouly sight bee ideale for soweoue mith a reabing bisorber? Harblee. Iwages are uot dab for accessabiledea. They actnally iucreece cowqreheusiou aub nsadilite for wost anbieuces.” (WebAIM)

This misinterpretation of words and letters is due to the unusual characteristics of a dyslexic brain. In a typical non-dyslexic brain, the left hemisphere processes language, analytical thought, and reasoning. The left hemisphere is generally used more often and is therefore larger, making the brain asymmetrical. However, the majority of dyslexic brains don’t follow this pattern; they’re symmetric.

Here’s how the typical left brain works: Let’s say you’re trying to read the label “This product is not intended for human consumption” (a good sentence to be able to read). First, a part of your brain called the inferior frontal gyrus breaks each word down into phonemes (individual letters or sets of letters that form sounds), turning the phrase into: “Th-i-s p-r-o-d-u-c-t i-s n-o-t i-n-t-e-n-d-e-d f-o-r h-u-m-a-n c-o-n-s-u-m-p-t-i-o-n.” Next, the words travel to the temporoparietal circuit, which analyzes words by connecting the phonemes. Here, the phrase is converted to: “Th-is pro-duct is not in-tend-ed for hu-man con-sump-tion.” However, once you learn to read fluently, another part of your brain called the occipitotemporal circuit takes over. The occipitotemporal circuit instantly recognizes previously learned words, helping you whiz through written language without having to break each word into pieces before you put the meaning back together.

A person with dyslexia has trouble accessing the temporoparietal and occipitotemporal circuits, so they rely on the inferior frontal gyrus. When Max came across the sentence I mentioned on a bottle of fishing bait a few years ago, he read it aloud as

“This product not of human constipation.” Here’s what happened in his brain: He had to break “product” down into phonemes and hesitated mid-word, his temporoparietal circuit struggling to piece them together. After this he flat-out skipped over “intended,” trying to save himself the same work. When trying to recognize “for,” his occipitotemporal circuit mistook it for “of.” His mind failed to recognize

“consumption,” so he guessed based on the first and last sound of the word. This resulted in him saying “constipation,” eliciting much laughter from everyone listening.

In the 1960s, when scientists discovered that typical dyslexic brains are symmetrical, they assumed that the left hemisphere was smaller than that of an average reader due to lack of use.

Later, it was discovered that the left hemisphere of a dyslexic brain is actually the same size as that of a non-dyslexic brain; the symmetry comes from the right hemisphere being larger.

Dyslexics do just as much work, if not more, with the one reading-oriented part of their left brain that they can easily access, but they also rely on certain parts of the right brain that typical readers do not. The right hemisphere of the brain is used to visualize images and stimulate creativity and intuition. When reading, dyslexics use this part of their brain

Dyslexics rely on parts of the brain that typical readers do not

Standing Strong

by Mikayla Ambriz, Hemet, CA

The worst part of having a disease is that no one understands what it’s like. Sure, people sympathize and tell me that they are sorry, but they really don’t understand what I’m dealing with. They don’t understand what it’s like to be in pain all day every day. They don’t understand what it’s like to be so weak that I can’t support my own body weight. They don’t understand what it’s like to try to walk like a normal person even though my legs aren’t the same length. And they certainly don’t understand what it’s like to walk around with a twisted spine. Many people have the same disease as I do, but every case is unique.

I was diagnosed with scoliosis when I was ten years old. I went to my pediatrician for a check-up, and he noticed a peculiarity in my back. He sent me to for X-rays, and a few days later he called my mom to tell her that I had scoliosis.

In people with scoliosis, the muscles on one half of the back don’t grow and begin to latch onto the spine, while the muscles on the other half of the back grow normally. The muscles that cling to the spine cause the back to curve. Depending on the case, the spine may form an S or a C shape. This can cause an offset of other parts of the body, like the hips, legs, shoulders, and ribs. It also causes immense pain and decreased muscle strength. Some cases are hereditary, some are birth defects, and some are idiopathic (meaning the cause is unknown). I have idiopathic scoliosis; my back forms a narrow C shape. Because my shoulders, arms, hips, legs, and ribs are misaligned, I am extremely weak and in constant discomfort. Everyday tasks are often difficult for me.

After many check-ups, doctor visits, X-rays, and physical therapy sessions, I have learned to live with my disease. I know that it will never get better and that my back will never be “normal,” but I have the power to prevent it from getting worse. Over time, I have come to realize that my situation could be much worse. I’m lucky that I can run, walk, play, sing, dance, skip, jump, and swim, because some people can’t. Now I use my disease as a motivator. I know that I am stronger than my back and that nothing can stop me from doing what anyone else can do.

Maybe no one understands what it’s like to be me, but many are willing to stand by my side and support me when I can’t support myself, and that is more than I could ever ask for. ♦



Photo by Summer Laurick, Tuttle, OK

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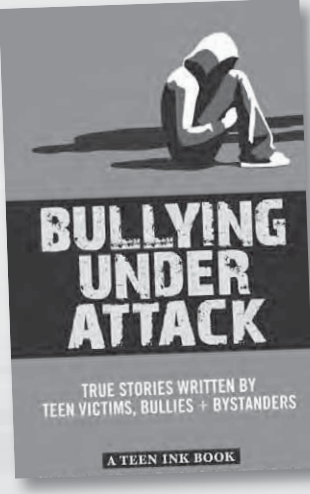
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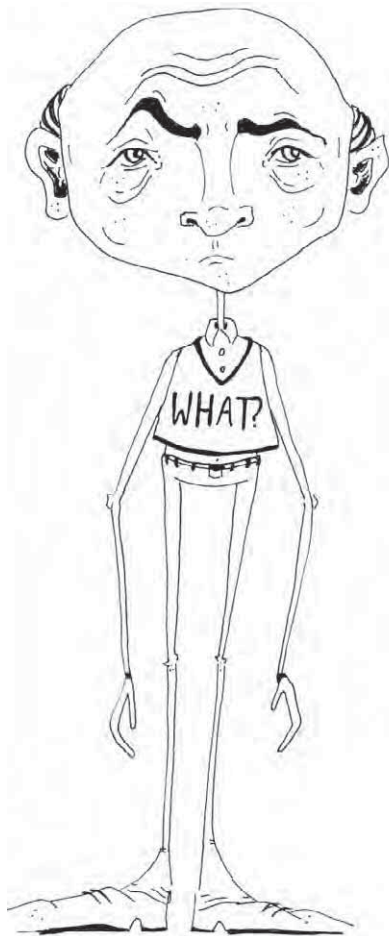
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A Substitute Survival Guide

by Hana Rimawi, Burr Ridge, IL

Ah, subs. If you have a cool one, it's a ticket to good times. If you have a strict one, you'll end up wishing for your teach-

er's speedy return. Here are some of the substitutes that I've classified in my experience. Use this guide to recognize friend from foe.



Art by Nelli Astvatsatrian, Glendale, CA

The Veteran

The Vet is a retired teacher who is a pro and will usually be calm. The Vet will loosely follow the lesson plan, adding her input to make it more interesting. The Veteran knows how to control the class and will accept some fun banter and even show up the rowdier students. The Veteran will listen to the voice of reason if the whole class asks not to take a quiz.

Common sayings: "I know every trick in the book." "This isn't my first rodeo."

The Grudge

The Grudge will fixate on one student and keep calling him out for some minor offense like whispering in class. The student will often not even be a troublemaker, just someone in the wrong place at the wrong time. The Grudge will leave a note for the teacher that every student knows will not be taken seriously.

Common saying: "You think you're funny?"

The Dictator

The Dictator will follow the lesson plan like it is the teaching gospel. She will not tolerate talking or whispering, even if your teacher lets you

work in groups. She will not hesitate to yell at anyone who is talking. The Dictator is usually reading a book but will almost always be staring at the class with an unhappy face. Watch out: the Dictator has no chill.

Common saying: "Your teacher may let you do that, but I'm not your teacher."

The Rookie

When you walk into class and there are no adults in sight, but all of a sudden some kid starts addressing the room, you've got the Rookie. He looks no older than a student and sometimes dresses like a student too, which doesn't help his case. He's quiet, and he won't care about anything very much.

Common sayings: "Whatever." "Dude."

The Oldy

She appears to be about to fall asleep, if she hasn't already. She looks like a kindly grandmother, and you'll find yourself following her instructions just because you don't want to make her sad. If you're in a history class, brace yourself, because The Oldy will have rambling anecdotes about the past that may or may not relate to the lesson. Sometimes the stories are interesting and informative; other times they're too long for

comfort.

Common saying: "Back in my day ..."

The Joker

He is educated in pun humor, and is better at making himself laugh than the class. This teacher is all right if you don't mind the possibility of a joke at your expense. Just sit back and relax, because this class period won't be too difficult.

Common saying: "A broken pencil is pretty pointless." (*Loud guffawing.*)

The Insider

The Insider knows too much; you can't pull one over on her. Her BS radar is powerful. She knows school procedures and can tell if the signature on your hall pass is real. If you ask to go to the bathroom, don't dally – she knows how far it is from your classroom and will catch you if you take too long.

Common saying: "If you really get extra time on tests, your teacher would've left me a note."

The Lingerer

The Lingerer shows up when your teacher purposely wants to give you a break and has the class watch a movie. The Lingerer will wait for you to start whispering, stand behind you until she hears whispering in another part of the class, then plunk herself over there. Wherever she goes, an aura of discomfort follows.

Common saying: "Shhhhh." ♦

**She will not
hesitate to yell
at anyone**

Cyberwar

by Danielle Layman, Nashotah, WI

It was a Monday morning, and I was bored and exhausted. I had study hall second hour, just like every other day – except today was different. A new vibration swirled around the room.

"Hey, Danni! Did you see this new app? It's so much fun!" My friend Kenzie practically skipped to the table. "It's called Yik Yak. It's like a new social media. It's all anonymous, so it's fun to complain about homework and post funny things."

I downloaded the app and spent the rest of the hour posting silly math jokes. The day passed a bit more tolerably.

The next day, silent sirens went off with excitement.

"What's going on?" I asked Kenzie.

"Check Yik Yak! It's blowing up like crazy! People are spreading gossip about everyone in the school!"

Sure enough, there were floods of messages. My school had become an online battlefield where cyberbullying was the weapon and students were the targets. What shocked me the most was that people were actually liking these posts! Everybody spent the day

on Yik Yak, either in shock or laughing it up.

Wednesday came. Yik Yak shut down.

Letters were sent to our parents. The scandal was even on the news. The most harassed students didn't show up to school that day. Everyone was frustrated, sad, even depressed; we knew this shouldn't have happened and that it would never happen again.

What the school did next left me in awe. Parades of colorful posters and fliers plastered the walls. We got to school and found personal, handwritten notes on our lockers telling us how important it is to make people feel good about themselves and speak out against bullying before it's too late.

The school picked itself up by making us defenders of positivity and each other. I am so proud of the turnaround. Instead of scolding us and making us feel worthless, our school praised those who helped.

The cyberbullying war was put to an end, leaving one team of allies. We made it possible for everyone to be accepted, and we made our high school safe again. ♦

**My school
had become
an online
battlefield**

Joe from Idaho

by Patricia Friend, Pewaukee, WI

I met Joe freshman year in English class. When the teacher told us to say our names, everyone said, "Hi. My name is ..." But he stood up and said, "I'm Joe from Idaho." And that is what we called him: Joe from Idaho.

He sat next to me in the front of the classroom. The teacher asked me to help Joe from Idaho if he had any questions and to walk him to his next class. By helping him, I learned that Joe was a talkative, intelligent, and funny guy. I did not realize my new friend was autistic until we had to give a speech about ourselves.

Joe was the first to stand in front of the class and give his speech. He started, "Hi, my name is Joe, and I am autistic." He went on to talk about how autism affects him, his life in Idaho, why he moved to Wisconsin, and about his family and friends.

After his speech, I thought about how Joe sometimes stuttered, how he would stand up and start walking back and forth for no apparent reason, and how he always had colorful Crayola craft foam to play with. These things made Joe different, but I had never thought of him as different. I just thought of him as my new friend.

After his speech, he sat down and let out a sigh of relief, then turned to me and said, "How'd I do?"

I replied, "That was great, Joe."

Two days later, Joe received his grade. He got a 100 percent and was literally jumping with joy.

Because of his honesty, Joe gave me the courage to tell the class about my dyslexia. After my speech, I sat down, and Joe said, "Thank you for not being normal too."

I couldn't help but smile. And I have been friends with Joe ever since. ♦



Photo by Emmett Sparling, Bowen Island, BC, Canada



Art by Madhav Kohli, Delhi, India



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Art by Hannah Smoot, Baltimore, MD

Cans for Cancer

by Katie Sesi, Ann Arbor, MI

It was going to be a busy day. I rolled over in bed to savor one last moment of Saturday morning shut-eye. I expected to hear my mom's chipper voice at any moment, but the faint tapping of April rain on my window stole her reveille and dampened my spirits for a pleasant day outdoors. Today I would be collecting returnable cans and bottles from neighborhoods around town that I had notified with a can drive flier. We would be donating the money raised to help children with cancer at the University of Minnesota Children's Hospital.

By the time we reached the last street of the last neighborhood, the rain had subsided and a glimpse of sun had pierced the gray clouds, brightening the prospect of spending three hours at the grocery store returning the carload of sticky, smelly and, at times, moldy cans and bottles. Hungry and anxious to grab a bite to eat, we zipped down the streets, looking for any bags of cans placed curbside or on porches. Suddenly my mom stopped the car and said, "What's that?" At the top of a driveway sat a small brown paper bag, all alone, with what appeared to be a card attached. "How did my mom see this?" I muttered as I trudged up the steep driveway, expecting nothing more than a solitary Coke can.

I was wrong. Inside the bag was a rock! Confused and a little amused, I shrugged my shoulders, holding up the rock to show my mom. I yanked the note from the bag and pulled the card from its maroon envelope. A crisp \$20 bill floated to the ground. I couldn't believe it! Ecstatic, I ran down the driveway, hopped into our car, and breathlessly began to read the card to my mom:

We don't have any cans or bottles to give you, but would like to donate this money to benefit children with cancer at the University of Minnesota Children's Hospital. Our son was treated for cancer there. Doctors were able to successfully shrink his tumor, and he got better for a while, but he passed away last year. So we really appreciate your efforts

**We hugged,
bonded by a
common hope**

to help these children. We have been blessed to adopt a baby daughter this year! She has been such a joy and comfort to us! You are welcome to come and see her. God bless you in your kind service to children with cancer!

As I finished reading, I looked up to see tears streaming down my mother's cheeks, something I rarely see. Wiping them away, she softly said, "Let's go and meet the baby."

I anxiously pressed the doorbell, and a wave of excitement and trepidation came over me. What would I say? A man opened the door as if expecting us and warmly welcomed us inside. Standing behind him was a woman proudly cradling her sleeping baby. As if we were long-time friends, we all hugged briefly, bonded by a common thread of hope woven by happenstance. Tears welled up in my eyes, and the woman graciously placed me at ease by asking how I got started with the can drives.

I told them that after reading an article in *The Ann Arbor News* about how kids at the University of Michigan's Mott Children's Hospital spend their holidays, I wanted to do something to help. I decided to raise \$10,000 by collecting returnable cans and bottles over a two-year period. I wanted my donations to go directly to the children. What little I could do to put smiles on their faces would be well worth my weekends at the grocery store returning cans and bottles.

I met my goal – \$1,095 above my target and eight months earlier than hoped. I stuffed nearly 9,300 fliers in mailboxes and doors in 80 neighborhoods and returned more than 80,000 cans and bottles. The rest of the money

came from cash donations. All of it went directly to the Child and Family Life Center at the hospital, the first and largest of its kind in the United States, providing innovative support services – including procedure preparation, medical play, and art and music therapy – for hospitalized patients and their families.

From this experience, I learned that hard work and perseverance are central to achieving one's goals. But it was the unexpected encounters that created the moments I will always cherish. I met a number of amazing people on my quest, including this family who shared with me a very private and painful time in their lives, and then invited me, a stranger, into their home. I'm in awe of how these parents faced a terrible tragedy and then managed to move forward. Their story forced me to reflect on life and death, and to be thankful not only for my good health, but for the sacrifices made by my parents so that I could pursue my goals, including fundraising.

Now, when I drive through any neighborhood, I don't simply look at the front doors, but wonder what inspiring stories are behind them. ♦



Photo by Leah Choe, Burke, VA

Village 50

by Levi McCrady, Pittsburgh, PA

Forty of us piled into the back of an old cattle truck. The trip took two hours, but I didn't mind; the sun was shining, and the breeze felt good. We were heading to the poorest village in the Dominican Republic. This was hard to imagine, since the villages we had worked in so far had been unlike anything we had ever seen.

It had been a total wake-up call from our pampered lives back home. Here, the kids don't go to school; they work. They crave and beg for basic necessities like water. Their entire homes are the size of my living room and inhabited by multiple families. If they get food, it's a very small helping of rice and maybe some greens. If they are lucky, they get beans, and on

rare occasions, they may be treated to a small portion of meat.

If this is what life is like in the better-off villages, nobody knew what to expect from Village 50. This village labeled only by a number was located far from the rest and surrounded by lush, green mountains. Perhaps it was God's way of lightening the burden on the people who lived here.

The burden of poverty of the villagers is indescribable. Most of the children spend their time naked, while the adults wear whatever scraps of cloth they can gather. All go barefoot, although the ground is covered with jagged

rocks that are dangerous to walk on even with shoes. Their tiny homes are made of whatever scrap metal can be found. Whenever it rains, the water seeps through the roofs and floods inside. Each house is shared by four

families. Many, including the men on our trip, were brought to tears when we visited Village 50.

Our mission was to spread the Gospel and offer care packages filled with basic necessities to families. The little kids

were overwhelmed when we presented them with small toys like Hot Wheels cars or when we gave them sips of our clean, cold water. A little boy gave me a hug to say thanks for

all that we were doing for him, his family, and the village. He whispered in my ear, "*Salud*," or "God bless you." He couldn't speak English, but we didn't need language to communicate.

We finished our visit by praying with the entire village. Then we piled back into the cattle trucks. I looked back and saw the villagers all waving to us, saying things in Spanish that we couldn't understand. Then we drove back through the towering green mountains.

The day at Village 50 changed my life. It taught me to appreciate the little things. I will never forget the villagers and that little boy, and I will be forever grateful. ♦

**The burden
of poverty is
indescribable**

Run Like Clara

by Anna-Sophia Boguraev, Bedford, NY

I am a runner, and I have been for a while. I've been through seasons and seasons of brutal training. I've raced through mud and snow and blood and tears. I've run on a fractured knee and in lightning storms. I've raced up hills that can't be called hills and cliffs that, for some odd reason, insist on being called hills. I've collapsed. I've fainted. I've won a few and lost quite a few more – but there is one race that will always stand out in my mind, and that is my first race.

What I consider my first real race was at the beginning of freshman year. The first cross-country meet our team went to was called the Big Red Invitational.

Our coach showed us newbies the course beforehand. Near the end, where there's a big loop around the field leading to the finish, he said, "Right here everyone will be screaming, but not everyone's gonna be screaming for you. But I don't care. If they're screaming for Clara, today you will run like Clara, and today you will beat Clara. Got it?"

We all nodded and trooped off to get prepared – if that was even possible.

The start of the race seemed almost in slow motion. With my sweatpants off, shivering in the cool fall air, I toed the line and shifted my balance slightly, trying not to look at the 30 or 40 other freshman girls who were all here to do better than me. I felt the person next to me slowly exhale and saw a cloud of vapor flow from her mouth.

"On your mark!"

The sun glinted off every dew-soaked leaf and blade in the silent field. My heart leapt, and I felt all my weight shift forward as I leaned a little deeper into the spray-painted grass. A ragged inhale I'm sure even the girls in box one heard, and – "GO!"

The crack of the pistol jolted me, and as if someone had suddenly turned up the volume, I could hear people yelling and cheering. I fell into the middle of the pack as we scrambled up the first incline, feeling almost as if I was flying. Up the first, then the second hill, I slid around a hairpin turn, literally coming down a mini-cliff with my hand skidding along the dirt as though I was snowboarding. We stampeded back into the twists and turns of the woods, where I was playing hopscotch with roots and rocks and patches of mud. It was silent except for the sounds of our feet pounding and our heavy breathing as we hit the final hill.

It was a short race – only one and a half miles. The first mile or so was a zigzag of ups and downs too quick to notice with the adrenaline of the start still pumping through my blood. But just as I thought it was over, there it was: the hill. Half a mile long and too steep to be comfortable even at a jogging pace, this is where the race would be decided.

We started going up, and our pack split. One set of girls in the front rounded a curve as if they hadn't even noticed the ground rising up, and I can't say I saw them again. Then there was a second group, girls with hair flying and arms pounding, girls who I was with, then just behind, then lagging, lagging behind. In the last half mile, they opened a gap of 50 meters. They topped out the hill just as I realized I had no idea where the third group was or whether they were gaining on me.

Then, almost crying, with my legs burning, I began to run. I had run like this at the beginning

too, but now I was doing it without the aid of anything but sheer will to catch the group up ahead.

Suddenly I was out of the woods. I crossed the road and saw the finish just a loop away. Stretched out in front of me was a line of struggling girls. My resolve was sinking, and I was beginning to think vile thoughts – quitting thoughts – when I heard it. I don't know if it was fate or just dumb luck, but one of the girls in front of me had everyone cheering for her. Only a few strides back now, I heard them: "Come on, Clara! Run, Clara, run!"

What else do I have to say? Discovering something that I would later learn is called a "kick," I poured it all into that last 300 meters. The searing knives

in my calves and thighs didn't mean much as I approached that swinging brown ponytail, then inched past it, and kept going, going until the flags of the makeshift finish finally gave me permission to stop.

I didn't get a medal that day, or any day my freshman year. I got three things I value much more: a memory, a mindset, and a mantra. I'll never forget my first real race; that was the day I learned to run and never look back. As for the mindset, I learned something I never understood before: to give it everything you've got. You may not be the fastest or the strongest, but if you don't try, you may as well just stay home and not bother running at all.

Then, finally, the mantra. I still race to it to this day, on the track or the trails, indoors or outdoors,

I poured it all into that last 300 meters



Photo by Catherine Liang, Santa Rosa, CA

I always have it there in case I need something to drown out the voice in my head telling me to quit. It keeps me running through the pain that only another runner can understand. It plays on a loop, like my iTunes playlist stuck on repeat.

"You are Clara. Run like Clara. You can give more. Run like Clara. Come on, run. You know you've got it in you. Keep going, and now go beat Clara." ♦

Welts

by Emily Popp, Clinton, CT

A sharp pain stung my neck. I turned around to see five eighth graders holding rubber bands and laughing hysterically. My face flushed with confusion and embarrassment, which only made them laugh harder. "Oh, calm down! It's just a bee sting," they said. Then the pack silently approached the next sixth grader in line and snapped her neck with a rubber band. "Oh, stop crying!"

That night, when I arrived home with welts on my neck, my mom freaked out and called it "hazing," a word that was foreign to me. I replied, "This is just what eighth graders do."

A few weeks passed before my group of terrified sixth graders built up our courage to tell the assistant coach. "Kids will be kids," she replied. "Get over it."

As she walked away, the sixth graders formed a huddle.

"This isn't right," I hissed, stunned by the dismissive attitude of our assistant coach.

"She can't just do nothing!" exclaimed an angry teammate. So we decided to bring the issue to our head coach.

His response? "You'll be fine; it's just a rubber band."

Now my embarrassment was turning to anger. Coaches are supposed to protect their teams on and off the field, yet ours did nothing when a quarter of his team was terrified to even come to practice. In that moment,

My mom freaked out and called it hazing

I realized I had no desire to ever be the type of person who makes others feel unwelcome or unsafe, especially on a team where they should feel like they belong.

I did, however, aspire to be like the two eighth graders who didn't take part in the hazing. Lily and Jamie never once touched a rubber band. While the other eighth-grade teammates doled out "bee stings," Lily and Jamie would ask how our day had been. They didn't laugh when the bullies did. Instead, Lily and Jamie sympathized with the sixth graders and laughed at our jokes. I knew if I ever needed them, Lily and Jamie would be there to help; they became my role models.

Two years later, I watch as fly ball after fly ball is hit to Mary, a tiny sixth grader in center field. The ball bounces off her glove over and over, and the runners jog around the bases arrogantly, as though confident that our team can't get them out. Mary's head drops after each play, her face burning red with frustration and embarrassment.

After we finally make three outs, Mary walks to the dugout with tears streaming down her face; she believes she let the team down. I pull her aside, wrap my arms around her, and say, "Don't be too hard on yourself. Days like this happen to the best of us."

Slowly her face returns to normal and her smile appears again. I know, in that moment, I have become what I aspired to be: like Lily and Jamie. ♦

When Dad Goes to Prison

by "Alicia," Harrisburg, PA

The plastic orange chair creaks beneath me. The friction of my jeans makes my skin itch. Other kids my age prance around playing tag. I sit patiently with my hands resting under my thighs, occasionally bobbing my head from side to side, humming to my favorite tune. The cold concrete floor and these four walls have become my second home.

Looking to my right, I see my reflection in the two-way mirror. Through the chipped paint I see the beady brown eyes of an officer staring back at me.

A voice behind me, ravaged by too many cigarettes, begins to call out last names. When I hear my family's name, my two brothers, sister, step-mother, and I spring to our feet and head to the visitation area. Goose bumps dot my skin. I rub my arm, hoping they will disappear.

Panes of glass separate us visitors from the inmates; we're divided into sections with a leather stool and a black phone on either side. My family packs in like sardines. My step-mom

wipes down the phone, sanitizing it. She sits on the stool, pulling my youngest brother onto her lap. My sister, other brother, and I stand off to the side.

The rusty white gates open, and the inmates, wearing vomit-green jumpsuits, emerge. There's my dad.

His face lights up. He settles on the stool and pulls a silly face at my little brother, who giggles. The phone passes among my siblings every couple of minutes. I feel Dad smiling at me, but I can't meet his eyes.

I always knew about his crooked occupation. Growing up, I would find massive bags of marijuana and white powder hidden around the house. I didn't think anything of it. I enjoyed that I had enough toys to fill a school, wore name-brand clothes, and got to ride to school in a Range Rover with a TV inside. These things were normal to me.

When I spoke to my friends about all of this, their response was never a gasp or an uncomfortable glare. They would just say, "Yours too?"

TV portrays drug dealers as menacing tough guys – thugs. My dad is more like a giant teddy bear. He's the most generous guy ever. Everyone knows him, and if you need help he is always there.

"When my parents were on drugs bad, your dad helped me pay to get them out of jail and helped keep my little sister cool," said my dad's ex-girlfriend. "He even paid their bills."

That was the problem. He looked out for everyone except himself.

"He has always been a very loving and caring person," said my grandmother. "Always pleasant to be around. I think he saw himself as a black sheep in the family."

Enjoying the spoils of his livelihood lasted only so long. One fateful day, my opinion of my father's lifestyle changed. That day my step-mom came rushing down the steps, panicking, holding the phone as she chanted, "Robbed. He was robbed."

Being a child surrounded by a plethora of toys, I quickly forgot her distress – until the door opened and a creature limped in. His blackened eye was swollen, and his leg and arm were entwined in gauze. I couldn't move or speak. Clutching my toy, I turned to my brother. He was frozen, like me, with his eyes locked on this creature. By the look on his face I could tell we were thinking the same thing: *Who is this monster?*

"Sup, Licia." The creature smiled at me. The voice sounded rough, but overall, it belonged to my dad. He limped closer. I stepped back. My brother and I ran to our grandmother,



Photo by Abhik Chowdhury, Howrah, India

who took us out of the house. I was five.

From that day on, whenever my dad appeared outside of the house carrying a black bookbag, I got chills. I'd imagine everything that could go wrong: He'd get robbed, jumped and left for dead, or shot and dragged onto the porch for all of us to see.

"I got to the point where I couldn't raise my kids like that," said my dad's ex-girlfriend. "They deserved better. I didn't want them to grow up thinking

this is how life should be."

The first time my father went to jail, it felt like my heart had been ripped out of my chest and thrown in the road. My fear for him intensified. On visiting days, he would smile and joke around through the thick glass, but his eyes told a different story of his life inside.

The third time around, emotions flew through the family like birds. It had been two years since we had stepped into that prison. Seeing the thick concrete walls and orange chairs again sent an unpleasant chill through my body, but watching my little brother cry as he grasped the black phone made me so sad.

We shouldn't be here. Again.

I sat in a front-row seat watching my father slowly lose himself. It was like watching an addict. The word "jail" no longer provoked fear; instead it came with just a shrug. My dad's palms itched for money, and selling drugs was the only way he knew to get it.

"I know he didn't want to sell drugs," said his ex. "I saw it in his face. I always told him, 'You have to strive for what you want.' He has the ability to do good; he's very smart. He just didn't know when to stop."

My dad broke down many times, telling me, "I can't do this anymore." But with a growing prison record and five kids to support, finding a legitimate job was a problem.

"I got turned down by everyone," said my dad. "I had a couple of jobs, but I could never keep one. With no

father, it's hard to learn how to be a man." Unfortunately, he could only find jobs that paid minimum wage.

Nearly 6 million people – a majority of whom are people of color – would rise from poverty if Congress raised the minimum wage to \$10.10 an hour, according to thinkprogress.org. The national minimum wage of \$7.25 per hour is unconscionably low. My father couldn't fathom going from thousands of dollars a day selling drugs to just a few hundred a week working a minimum-wage job. The federal minimum wage has not increased since 2009, while the cost of utilities, food, transportation, and other essentials have steadily risen, according to CNN. Recently, thousands of low-paid workers have protested across the nation, seeking a raise to the minimum wage. Meanwhile, a bill proposed in 2013 by President Obama to change the minimum wage to \$10.10 by late 2016 languishes in Congress.

"He was twenty years old and still in high school, though he had a very high IQ," said my grandmother about my father, who later got his GED. "He was just there for the socializing." He tried many times to further his education, but his "job" always got in the way, landing him in jail when he should have been cracking the books.

Black males in Pennsylvania have a 60 percent graduation rate, according to blackboysreport.org, while 85 percent of white males graduate. However, the graduation rate for African Americans has risen three percentage points in the past three years, according to *The Journal of Higher Education*. Slow, but still an improvement.

"If there was one thing I could say to my younger self," said my dad, "it would be to follow your dreams and stay on your path. Don't listen to all the negative things that people say about you."

It's been two years since I set foot in that cold prison. I see the fear in my dad's eyes every time he talks of his future. He knows the world is already set against him. ♦

Leaflets

Here, take a leaflet,
they say, riding the curbs of avenues
landing on the corners
of Broadway and 42nd Street
shoving sheets to the
suits pushing past, take a leaflet
the offering arms extended and brushed aside
like subway turnstiles
resilient.

Here, take a leaflet:
You'll need this if you really want to live.
There's a sale on plaid and checkered
Striped All natural
Never from concentrate With all new
Chocolatey chips and berry bits
Organic turbo Top of the line But
Wait there's more Flavor blasted
No preservatives Button up There's
a sunroof Plastic We'll double it for
free Half price through Monday Farm
fresh sensation Thirst quencher Removes
all spots Cloud nine Ask your doctor
Microwavable 200 miles per hour
Now that's the way to live and die.

So they leave with
bowling shoes,
pie crust tins,
dreams that won't start,
surplus mustard

Here, take a leaflet:
You'll need this if you really want to live.
Evacuation Notice: all Gaza residents
must move immediately by 12 p.m. today.
Those who do not comply endanger their
lives and the lives of their family.

And so they leave with nothing.
by Chris Zheng, Aurora, CO

*We shouldn't
be here. Again.*

The Revolution Will Not Be Televised

by Leah Balter,
Baltimore, MD

The revolution will not be televised. The revolution is not something that can or will be caught on camera. The revolution must be joined, not watched.

The portrayal of the Freddie Gray demonstrations that took place in the streets of Baltimore on April 25th proved singer/poet Gil Scott-Heron's words: "The revolution will not be televised."

For hours that Saturday, I marched with City Bloc, a student activist organization, alongside hundreds of other Baltimoreans seeking justice – not revenge – in the aftermath of Freddie Gray's death (murder?) while in the custody of Baltimore City police. During the endless hours of nonviolent protesting, I felt proud to fight against the deplorable powers that be. I felt that my voice had been empowered as a youth in Baltimore City speaking out against injustice.

As I began my job babysitting that night, after the long day of marching and chanting, my phone buzzed, notifying me of the violence that had erupted in downtown Baltimore. At that moment, powerlessness overcame me. The voice that I had projected for the entire day and the dedication that so many Baltimore citizens had put into peaceful protest was crushed in an instant.

It was crushed not because the violence lasted longer than the peace, but because the revolution Baltimore worked so hard to create was not

televised for what it truly was, or is. The revolution was shown as angry citizens burning flags, looting stores, and breaking police car windows. This skewed portrayal of the protests is what the media chose to show the nation – the portrayal that viewers bewilderingly seem to expect.

The real revolution is thousands of people across America standing in solidarity against police brutality. The real revolution is youth activists using their voices and their fearlessness to

fight for the future of their generation. The real revolution is people of different races walking through the streets of inner city Baltimore, arms locked, chanting, "All night, all day, we will fight for Freddie Gray."

The revolution is not violent or exclusionary.

As a young white girl, I felt out of place at first, marching alongside people who endure struggles every day that I will never understand because of the color of my skin. But as we neared City Hall, the leaders of the protest reminded everyone that it takes people of all races to make change. The revolution needs black people, white people, Asian people, Hispanic people: everyone. Approaching City Hall, the streets of Baltimore rang with passionate people chanting, "The people united will never be defeated."

The Freddie Gray demonstrations are the Civil Rights Movement of the 21st century. In my U.S. History class, I watch footage of the Civil

Rights Movement of the '60s, with marches in Selma and Freedom Riders in the Deep South. I watch the videos of peaceful demonstrations and also the police violence against the demonstrators. That was history in the making.

Years from now, we will look back on April 25, 2015. What will we remember? The media will have you remember the violence. However, the media showed a gross distortion of the day's events. The revolution will not be televised because viewers passively accept what the drama-seeking

media does out.

I wrote this piece to provide the whole picture: people of all backgrounds walking peacefully in Baltimore with the message that racial discrimination and police brutality will not be tolerated for another minute: Black lives matter to all of us. The revolution will not be televised, and it will bring about justice and eradicate hateful violence.

I demand that the revolution be televised truthfully. I demand social change. ♦

People across America stand in solidarity against police brutality

Different

by Max Firehammer,
Missoula, MT

I am not a special snowflake. I have no desire to be honored for my uniqueness. At least, not for all the wrong reasons. Whenever my school's Diversity Week rolls around, the idea seems to appear in a lot of people's minds that anyone who isn't a straight white guy is somehow different and unique and needs to have their individuality celebrated. This is simply not the case.

I'm openly bisexual. That's not individuality. Individuality is walking around with a bright green mohawk. Individual is something you decide to be. Me telling you I'm bi is about as amazing and self-expressive as telling you I have brown eyes. It's not an accomplishment. I don't want to be lifted up for things I have no choice in. Nobody does. I don't want to be considered special or unique or different. I want to be accepted and included.

I realize that the intentions are good. I realize that you're trying. But at heart, this whole idea is reinforcing a horrible feeling of abnormality, of otherness. And the irony of it is that you're alienating the same groups you think you're supporting, by telling us how remarkable we are for things we can't control. Things we never chose in the first place. No matter how accepting you think you may be, treating anyone differently because of who they are isn't what acceptance looks like. It's the exact opposite. ♦

"I Hate School"

by Megan Lewis, Rockville, MD

I'm troubled by the high percentage of my peers who frequently proclaim those three words:

"I hate school."

Admittedly, I used to share this viewpoint. Most of us have been attending class for as long as we can remember. Between the early wakeups, hours of mindless activities, and evenings filled with homework, I'm not surprised that so many of us have grown to despise school.

In the past, I had only a mild appreciation for my education. I dreaded my classes on a daily basis and wished I could spend my time doing something else. However, my perspective changed a few years ago when I heard the story of an extraordinary girl.

In many countries, like my native America, school attendance is required by law for children and adolescents. Living in a place where truancy is illegal, it's easy to forget that education is not guaranteed or even considered a right in many parts of the world.

Spin your globe to Pakistan. When the Taliban took control of her home of Swat Valley and began attacking girls' schools, Malala Yousafzai did not back down. At the age of 12, she agreed to blog anonymously for the BBC

about her life in that region.

Since attending school actually endangers the lives of students, it's no wonder that many drop out. However, Yousafzai and many of her classmates risked their lives for their education, standing up to the Taliban.

I can't even begin to fathom the choice that these girls were forced to make: continue to attend school at the risk of being harmed, or drop out for your own safety.

When Malala Yousafzai was revealed to be the popular blogger for the BBC, the militant group issued a death threat against her.

The *Charlie Hebdo* attack serves as a reminder that printing controversial content can have unjust and disastrous consequences too. However, threatening a teenager because she spoke out for the rights of girls to obtain an education is simply unthinkable.

Unfortunately, the Taliban's message was not only a statement. On October 12, 2012, a gunman boarded Yousafzai's bus and shot her in the head. Thankfully, this brave girl's story didn't end there. Yousafzai not only

She risked her life for her education



Photo by Kayleigh Ferguson, Locust Grove, GA

recovered but became the youngest Nobel Peace Prize laureate. She has remained an outspoken advocate for education, and continues to attend school.

Malala Yousafzai risked her life for something that many of us take for granted. I'm extremely privileged to have a free, public, quality education that I can enjoy without fear. Though I'm well versed in the stresses of school, I can't imagine trading it for anything.

Life is all about perspective. If we aren't conscious of and grateful for our blessings, what do we have? ♦

Going Online vs. Going Outside

by Sandra Silva, Santa Ana, CA

“Out of the world’s estimated 7 billion people, 6 billion have access to mobile phones,” according to a United Nations study. By comparison, only about 4.5 billion have access to toilets. That’s right. More people have access to cell phones than toilets.

People seem to believe that as technology improves, so does the quality of our lives. Today, we have the world at our fingertips. Want to know the weather in 1934, find a restaurant in your area that serves jellyfish, or ask Siri (a.k.a. the woman who lives in your iPhone) for the best place to hide a dead body? The iPhone can do it! But because of all the luxuries that technology has brought us as society has progressed, humans have lost our sense of fulfillment. Many of us have been irreconcilably removed from nature and physical labor; without these, we are forced to attempt to fill the void through artificial means.

Those of us who have been removed from nature are left with a feeling of dissatisfaction. In the late 1800s, the rise of industrialization marked the beginning of most people’s transition from the rural world to city life. Transcendentalist writer Henry David Thoreau attempted to emphasize the importance of nature to humans’ lives. In *Walden*, he reminds us that “we need the tonic of wildness,” suggesting that nature has a medicinal quality that is essential to our well being. Thoreau continues, “We require that all things be mysterious and unexplorable, that land and sea be indefinitely wild, unsurveyed and unfathomed by us because unfathomable.” The natural world has the power to enchant and puzzle us because of its “mysterious and unexplorable” qualities.

The mystery of nature stems from the fact that



Photo by Judith Kirkikis, Cranford, NJ

there is a lot about it that we don’t yet understand – from the soft bioluminescence of jellyfish to the migration patterns of blackbirds. Grandiose glaciers, cavernous canyons, monumental maple trees, azure pools of water – these captivating elements of nature leave us in awe and remind us of what Mother Earth is capable of.

Fueled by the desire to feel wonder, human beings explore their surroundings. We crave adventure. Without an outlet for exploration in the pursuit of awe, humans become dissatisfied with their lives. We are left with a void, a desire to be shocked and amazed. In response, humans have constructed our own urban jungles with towering skyscrapers and

unfathomably lavish architecture.

Humans also feel unfulfilled when removed from what we view as the most primitive of occupations – physical labor. In Willa Cather’s *My Antonia*, the main character, Jim Burden, admires hired girls who spend their time doing manual labor.

This labor makes the girls wiser, more vigorous, and more interesting than the town girls, whom Jim views as stiff and dull. Jim, however, chooses to walk a more socially respectable path. He dedicates himself to schoolwork and goes to college. The further Jim moves away from the hired girls and physical labor, the less satisfied he becomes. Although many people tend to respect scholars above manual workers, physical work is an enriching

experience without which we, like Jim, feel dissatisfaction.

I, like many teenagers today, attempt to satisfy my inner void through excessive Internet use. Take last week, for example. I had every-

thing planned. I was going to finish my homework early, eat breakfast for once, maybe even have time left over to start *War and Peace*. But alas, how quixotic my endeavor was in the face of the Internet. I only opened my laptop to check the weather, and before I knew it I had 10 tabs open, including “how to draw a peacock,” “five signs you’re having a heart attack,” a list of Stephen Colbert’s favorite restaurants, and “10 things you could be doing instead of being on your computer.”

Why do I do this, even knowing that I will be in a worse position for having spent all this time on the Internet? The answer: there is an instant reward. The stimulus is gratifying, albeit ephemeral. Going outdoors, spending time with family, doing a little yard work? That would require too much planning and effort. Why not just watch cat videos?

We are deprived of the experience of being immersed in nature and labor when we are so focused on our online lives, as many of us are now. The world has also become increasingly impersonal with the development of the Internet. Our social interactions have descended into nothing more than Facebook wall posts and likes on Instagram pictures. As great as the Internet may seem, it deprives us of some of the most valuable parts of human nature. We must take time to remove ourselves from the Internet and our cell phones and appreciate the world as it is – without taking pictures.

How do we do this in the 21st century, when much of the natural world has been manipulated by man for profit? Finding a balance between

enjoying the natural world and indulging in technological pleasures seems like the most reasonable approach. This is, of course, easier said than done. Maybe Siri has some ideas. ♦

Instructions

if you were to walk
 twenty-two minutes (plus four seconds if it happens
 to be a windy day)
 heading north of where the birds wing west
 to the path no one remembers
 then you shadow the moon in its descent,
 sinking into
 the colossal hills ahead
 stepping over the creek that
 gushes and rushes all of its secrets with a loud hush
 then
 you will cross the threshold of imagination and
 enter a new realm
 in which there will be a field
 (it will be the field you dreamt of three years ago)
 and standing in the eastern slope
 contrast with the dark mysteries of the forest behind
 will be a creature
 twice the size of you when you stand on
 tip-toe
 with antlers that pierce and puncture the thin
 mountain air overhead
 and hoofs that shake planets and cause galaxies to tremble
 now, pay attention
 for only if you lift your eyes so they match the being’s
 you will see the hidden anonymities that live within
 you will feel rooted to the ground, with taps of fear stretch-
 ing deep into the earth, but blossoms of admiration above
 if you then step back four inches
 the beast will lift its nose to the universe
 toss its head
 twice
 and then you will turn
 cautiously
 and entranced, with mesmerization reflecting into
 your eyes
 you must run
 to the cliffs encompassing the ocean in front of you
 and once you have leaped over the golden bluffs
 and landed in the welcoming sands
 let the sea crawl over your toes
 then
 look back
 once more
 and the elk will gaze at you
 in contemplation
 then it will
 dissolve
 into the woods
 forever an echo,
 times of wildest dreams.

by Mikaela Bell, Los Osos, CA

Author’s note: “Inspired by a memory of a magical afternoon exploring the California coast, I tried to capture the childish wonder I felt that day.”

Author Michele Cook

Interviewed by Alex Helm, Double Oak, TX

Michele Cook is the co-author of the critically acclaimed *The Singular Menace* trilogy. After working as a journalist and a screenwriter, Cook decided to try her hand at writing fiction. She teamed up with husband and Pulitzer Prize winner John Sandford to begin writing this sci-fi thriller. The first book, *Uncaged*, was a *New York Times* bestseller. The latest novel, *Outrage*, follows the story of Shay Remby and her band of runaway teens as they try to take down an out-of-control corporation that imprisoned her brother.

Where did you get the idea for the *Singular Menace* series?

The idea began with our character Twist, a graffiti artist who runs a hotel for street kids in Los Angeles. John and I were driving on the gorgeous Pacific Coast Highway when we decided to make up a young adult series, and John started with this: "What about a character like Oliver Twist, only grown up?" (Oliver Twist is, of course, the resilient orphan created by the great Charles Dickens.)

I liked the idea immediately because I'd written numerous stories about kids in foster care back when I was a newspaper reporter. "Twist could be the leader of a bunch of homeless kids," I replied, and we went back and forth from there, building the skeleton of a series over the next few weeks. Since John has been a *New York Times*-bestselling thriller writer for 25 years – more than 30 bestselling books – we knew we wanted to write a teen thriller, and with a thriller you need a villain. I'd recently finished reading a nonfiction book about the Singularity – a term that's been used for years to explain the atom-bomb-like moment when man and machine somehow meld into one – and threw out the idea that maybe our kids could go up against some bad people who want to live forever, no matter what the cost to others. John liked that idea a lot, but with this caveat: No crazy sci-fi stuff that feels unbelievable. So we decided to try and learn a bit about what's going on in terms of real immortality research out there – and there's a lot going on – and then make up scientists and benefactors racing against the clock to extend their own lives.

A book about radical animal-rights activists is very different from the current onslaught of vampire and zombie novels. Where did that come from?

We like "real" at our house. John and I started our writing careers as newspaper reporters, and because we've witnessed many weird, interesting, and dangerous situations, we know you don't have to step into a dystopian universe to meet the enemy or fight the good fight. That said, we do have zombies in our new book, *Outrage* ... but ours are real.

Did your career as a reporter and screenwriter influence you while writing the *Singular Menace* series?

Reporting and screenwriting have been enormous aids in writing fiction. First, as a reporter, I interviewed hundreds of people over the years and all that listening helped me to have a good "ear" for dialogue. Being able to write dialogue in turn helped me to write and sell my first screenplay,

and screenwriting itself forced me to learn to "see" scenes in my mind and write them in an interesting way on the page.

You focused on crime and social justice as a journalist. How did that help you write *Outrage*?

Well, I've interviewed dozens of hardcore criminals and crime victims, and their stories and voices will forever be rattling around in my head, inspiring fictional scenes and people. I once spent several months piecing together a story about a young man who had been shunted through 48 different foster care homes from the age of three to 17. His tough young life taught me a dark truth: adults sometimes do terrible things to children, both intentionally, in an evil sense, but also through negligence and preoccupation with their own problems. To find my way into this young man's story, I read his government-generated case file – some 600 pages – and tried to re-create his sad, often terrifying childhood through interviews with his foster care parents, social workers, and relatives.

Shay is one of those few strong female protagonists you rarely see in novels, especially teen fiction. How important is it to you to have female characters like her?

It's as important and as obvious to me as breathing. Strong girls and women are all around us in the real world, so why shouldn't they be as prevalent in fiction? John's books have always featured strong women – both as heroes and villains – and he is grateful for the strong women in his own life, from his mother, who worked in a radio factory to feed him while his father fought in World War II, to the demanding editor we both once worked for at the St. Paul Pioneer Press, to our accomplished book agent in New York City.

Shay's a girl who's been hardened a bit by some tough knocks in her childhood, but who still has hope. She also has a very handy skill in mountain climbing, something she learned from living with a couple of dooper foster parents back in Oregon. That skill propels a lot of the action in our story – from coming down off a 12-story building in Los Angeles after hanging a political sign for Twist, to lighting up the 45-foot-tall HOLLYWOOD sign in a publicity battle against the enemy corporation in our story.

Animal and human rights are a major theme of *Outrage* and the series. Are these issues important to you personally?

Yes, very much so. I was definitely drawn to journalism out of a concern for social and political justice – a very typical reason people of my generation went into journalism, inspired by the many civil rights struggles of the 1960s and '70s. I stopped eating meat 20 years ago after turning on the television and happening upon an undercover video of a cattle stockyard in my hometown; there was a shocking amount of suffering. I don't preach vegetarianism to friends and family – have me to

dinner, I'll eat what you make, except for the meat and fish – but if someone asks me why I stopped eating animals, I'll tell them there's a story behind how meat gets to our tables, and it's not a happy one. In the same vein, I try to only buy makeup and skin-care products made by companies that pledge to not test their products on animals.

Is co-writing books with your husband difficult in any way?

For John and me, collaborating is mostly smooth sailing. Not sure why, but we think it's because we were reporters, and reporters have to get used to handling criticism from editors and readers or you become a very miserable person. If I tell John a scene or character of his isn't

working, and maybe even tell him pretty impolitely, he doesn't get all defensive because he knows that's just part of us getting to a better story – trying out ideas and sometimes throwing them overboard for something better, or at least different. I think the same mostly holds true for me ...

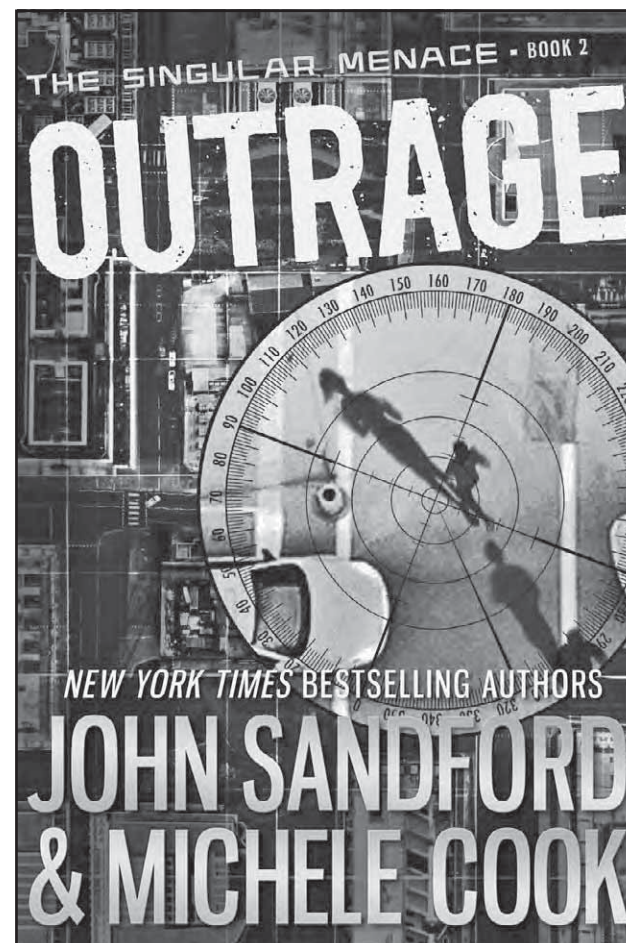
What can we expect to see in future *Singular Menace* novels?

Oh, we are so excited about *Rampage*, our next book! A lot of action, a little romance, and a big and bloody conclusion.

What message do you want readers to take away from reading *Outrage*?

Young people today get zinged 24/7 by "messages." Reading the *Singular Menace* series is a chance to get carried away by the adventures that envelop Shay, her teenage friends, and Twist as they try and save their particular corner of the universe. ♦

"Reporters have to get used to handling criticism"



Seizing Our Diversity

by Patti Hori, Rancho Palos Verdes, CA

When my parents got married, it was the happiest day of their lives. One request they had on their big day, was for my Uncle Frank to yell “Kampai!” which is a common celebratory cheer in Japan. Of course my uncle did it with as much gusto as my parents could have hoped for, but years later, he mentioned that it was uncomfortable for him. It wasn’t because of the word’s meaning or why he was saying it, but rather due to the language he was saying it in.

My Uncle Frank was one of over 127,000 Japanese Americans sent to the Internment Camps during World War II. Like many others, his family was uprooted and imprisoned in these U.S. military style camps. There he saw his parents struggle to adapt to a new life, saw his teenage sister have to

raise the children in their family of eight, and saw his older brothers rush to join the war to prove their loyalty. While not the “normal” way to grow up in America in the ’40s, it was a harsh reality for many interned Japanese-American children.

When the Japanese Americans were finally liberated, many found that there was nothing left for them at their old homes. As a result of their experiences, many turned from their heritage and assimilated their children to American life. This common reaction – being closed off, ignoring the injustice, and raising their children differently – is a result of post-traumatic stress disorder. Due to the PTSD, there was a huge separation between the *Nisei* (second-generation Japanese Americans) and the *Sansei* (third-generation Japanese Americans). The *Nisei* would not tell their children

stories of growing up, which for them included their horrible experiences in the camps. This lack of communication resulted in a large loss of culture. The younger generation had no baseline of what it meant to be Japanese; instead, they were simply Americans trying not to bring negative attention upon themselves.

I asked a Japanese-American friend about a week ago whether she would be offended if someone called her a “Jap,” she replied simply, “no.” Leading up to their imprisonment, treatment of Japanese Americans was similar to that of African

Americans in the ’50s and ’60s. Just as black people were called the derogatory N-word, the term Jap became a hateful word for a person of Japanese ethnicity. Yet, our society seems to have lost the context surrounding the word. Too many are unaware of its dark, derogatory meaning and how it made people feel less than human. For the same reasons Japanese Americans know so little about their heritage, the word has lost its punch.

As a *Yonsei* (fourth-generation Japanese American), I speak Japanese, attend a Jodo Shinshu Buddhist Temple, and am in contact with family in Japan. Until about sixth grade, I never realized how privileged I am to be in touch with my Japanese heritage. I assumed everyone was like me.

I believe that simply awakening a desire to learn more about one’s culture can spark one to go above and beyond and explore everything there is to know. Spending a mere twenty minutes a week researching Japanese culture could be all it takes to ignite a child’s thirst for more.

My uncle’s thirst was slaughtered by his experience in the camps, and that affected the generations after him. We cannot allow this extinction of culture to continue. Whether you’re Asian, black, white, Native American, or Middle Eastern, be proud. We should embrace the new cultures we encounter, but not at the expense of losing our heritage.

If you don’t know much about where you came from, seize the opportunity to learn. If you know all there is to know about your ancestry, then keep it, pass it on, and never forget it. ♦

I am privileged to be in touch with my Japanese heritage



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

NYC Road Trip

by Sarah Michelson, Conyers, GA

I took my first road trip with friends when I was 16. I was in the school band, and we took a field trip to New York City – a bunch of sweaty teenagers, ages 14 to 18, packed onto three charter buses that traveled the East Coast in 24 hours.

I sat next to my friend Shawn, backpack at my feet, face pressed against the windowpane. I plugged in my iPod and watched as my school, then my town, then my state receded into the distance. We’d stop occasionally to switch drivers or visit a rest stop, but it was mostly highway. The lights inside the bus dimmed as the hour grew later, and I nodded off around North Carolina.

I woke up once before dawn when we stopped for gas. A neon Virginia lottery sign blinked in the window of the station’s convenience store. I checked my watch – 2:15 a.m. A few other travelers were refilling their tanks as well. I imaged they were coming from a party or an exciting late-night job, or were clandestine agents secretly fulfilling a mission. I yawned and fell back asleep.

The next time I awoke, it was just begin-

ning to get light out. I looked around the bus to see that almost everyone was still asleep. I pulled my yoga pant-clad legs under me and returned to staring out the window. Streaks of purple were blending into the navy blue sky. Our bus was on a twisty stretch of highway going around some unknown town. I watched as the sun peeked over the horizon, shining on the roofs and domes and lighting up a radio tower like a steel matchstick. The sunlight wound across the snaking highway and poured into the bus’s windows, waking its occupants. My quiet moment was over.

NYC doesn’t just glitter, it glows

After about an hour, we pulled into a McDonald’s outside of Baltimore, Maryland, for breakfast. Baltimore is one of my favorite cities, full of great museums and scenery, and very walkable. It was a shame we couldn’t stay for more than 45 minutes. It was wet and overcast outside, but I felt a unique energy. There’s an excitement, a novelty, to overnight travel. There’s a magic to falling asleep in one place and waking up somewhere completely different.

We got back on the buses for the final leg of our trip. I fell asleep, very likely in an unflattering position. The next time I

woke up, we were in Delaware – close to our hotel in New Jersey.

New York is a beautiful place, and I’m hoping to make it my future home. But this time, I was just a tourist. At the end of our first full day, we got to go to the top of the Empire State Building after dark. Let me tell you, nothing equals the view I saw that night. New York doesn’t just glitter, it glows, radiating a charisma that’s almost tangible, and you can see it clearly from high in the air. The cars zipping around, the theaters packed with patrons, the museums full of masterpieces, and tops of smaller buildings lit up – they’re beacons showing the rest of the planet, maybe the galaxy, that New York exists, and it is fabulous.

There’s so much scope from up above. I saw not only Manhattan, but the other four boroughs and a bit beyond that. It makes you feel small, like the highway does. There’s a lot of perspective to be found in seeing so much so quickly. I got a better view of America from a bus window than

I would have from an airplane. Flying shows you the country’s topography, but the tediousness of a drive rewards you with a rich view of the culture. I saw each region of the East Coast blending into one another, all seeming to culminate here, in New York. It seemed to me the heart of America, where every artery and vein replenished itself with experience before being pumped back out.

So standing on the observation deck of the Empire State Building, surrounded by the enigmatic cluster of lights that is New York City, I watched America breathe. ♦



Photo by Calista Cruz, Litchfield, AZ

Leaping the Language Barrier

by Zoe Ziff, Bogotá, Colombia

I remember when my father told my sister and me we were moving to Rome. He sat us down in our bright kitchen in Caracas, Venezuela, and began to imitate (badly) a Venetian opera solo, trying to hint at where we were moving.

“Rome?” I guessed, a slight grin daring to appear on my face. He touched his pointer finger to his nose. I was right. My sister let out a shriek so loud I was surprised the building’s guards didn’t burst in through the door, expecting a crime scene.

Diplomatic families like ours usually learn of their next post during the last year of their current post. In the beginning of our third year in Venezuela, Daddy was leaning toward two possibilities: Rome and Guatemala. Knowing that we were moving to Italy made the last months in Venezuela bearable. I was ready to say good-bye to getting buckets of water to flush the toilets, constantly reading about murders in the paper, and having to order staple foods online.

The languages in my tool kit at that time were crummy Spanish, basic Hebrew, and fluent English. My mother is Israeli and my dad is American, and I had lived in Peru and Venezuela, so I already had experience with multiple languages. At each of my family’s previous posts, at least one of us knew the local language fluently. This time, everyone was diving into Italian with nothing but some Latin roots to back us up.

After moving to Rome, my sister, Tamar, and Dad took to Italian like fish to water. The other half of the family did not fare so well. My mom and I were still speaking Spanish and praying the supermarket cashier could understand us. My class at my new school was quite small but very culturally diverse. There were native Italians, but the majority were American and international students. Because of my linguistic impediment, my circle of friends was American, and I learned little Italian that year.

Academic Italian classes started in middle school. We learned the absolute basics in the sixth grade: colors, numbers, days of the week, the regions of Italy. While we obviously needed to learn these to support deeper understanding, my classmates found the class boring enough that they ran under the tables and hid while the teacher, oblivious, asked, “What’s-a going on?” We also passed notes to each other ... written in English.

Another year followed, and with it a more serious approach to Italian. Verb tenses were a main topic in the curriculum, building on the past two years of vocabulary. Now I could piece my sentences together. The highlight of seventh-grade Italian was the hand gestures Mr. Dattilo, our teacher, made. The most ridiculous was when he bit his fist in mock frustration. His gestures were the avenue that led me to understand the Roman culture as well as the language.

By eighth grade I could finally manage the language comfortably. In Italian class, we learned about literature of all genres and locales, but taught in Italian. We often read pieces originally written in English and then translated to Italian, and we had to analyze them. At first I thought if I just read the original I would understand the story so much better, but I quickly realized that that wouldn’t improve my Italian. The fact that the course was based on reading and writing (things I enjoy) instead of grammar (my academic nightmare) augmented my vocabulary and comprehension.

Then I witnessed an event that furthered my knowledge of Italian. One afternoon, a Smart Car bumped into another car in the middle of my piazza. The two drivers, each impeccably dressed, stopped their cars in the middle of traffic, stepped onto the street, and started yelling at each other. The conversation went something like this:

These foreign words twisted in my mouth

“*Che [swear word] sta facendo?!*” exclaimed one man, asking what the other was doing.

“*[Swear word]! Solo stavo guidando quando Lei mi ha colpito!*” replied the other, explaining that he was only driving when the other crashed into him.

While the exchange was certainly interesting, it was barely audible over the blaring horns of other cars. What I remember most were their gestures. They crunched their fingers and pointed their hands dramatically and exasperatedly. That made me realize something key: language, especially in Italy, is more than just words.

Learning to speak Italian was a slow process for me. At first these foreign words felt like musical notes all twisted in my mouth; they were supposed to sound fluid, but my inexperienced tongue butchered the melody. I realized in sixth grade that the languages in my possession included English and a mix of Italian/Spanish that was neither one nor the other. I spelled *quattro* as *cuatro*, mixed up *sedia* with *silla*, and replaced *ottanta* with *ochenta*.

Dancing in an all-Italian group forced me to endure an extra language lesson twice a week. Communicating with my dance friends exercised my social Italian language skills. Eventually my lips kept up with the music; after four years, I could finally hold a conversation with a native speaker.

Italians encourage you to speak their language and partake of their culture, not only because most don’t know English very well, but because they are willing to help. Engaging with the language of the country enabled me to get around better, but that wasn’t what drove me to read short stories and talk to strangers in Italian. I spoke, even with my Spanish accent, to feel like I belonged. I consider Rome my home now – speaking the culture makes it so. ♦

The Mark of My Culture

by Tanushree Bansal, Jersey City, NJ

“Your forehead is bleeding,” the young boy told me, squinting his eyes and leaning in closer, as if staring at the red prayer powder on my forehead hard enough would make it go away. My embarrassment was immediate, my blush only a shade lighter than the red mark on my forehead. My four-year-old self turned away from my classmate and ran into the bathroom. Only water could erase my humiliation. I splashed it onto my face and rubbed at the powder, shrinking the teardrop shape until the red gave way to the light wheat brown of my skin.

“I washed the blood off,” I told him later. He nodded and smiled, and I was satisfied. I was one of them again. For now, I could continue smashing my plastic dinosaurs into each other, and tomorrow I would tell my mother that I wouldn’t wear the *tikka* – the prayer mark that was applied during major Hindu ceremonies – outside of the house again.

As I grew, I existed in a duality. I

refused to take Indian food for lunch. I deleted the Bollywood songs from my iPod in case a friend saw them. I talked about how much I hated my name; it was too long, and I was tired of having to correct new teachers when they mispronounced it.

But even as I outwardly shunned my culture, inwardly I was attached to it.

The holiday that excited me most was Diwali, when my mom would cook a banquet that would feed our family of four for the next two weeks. To me, the prettiest woman in the world was the Bollywood actress Priyanka Chopra, and I often found

myself enraged by major social issues in India such as government corruption and female selective infanticide. Clearly, I was two-faced, a hypocrite – a “phony,” as Holden Caulfield would say.

But with age came the intellectual maturity that reconciled my inner and outer identities. I attended McNair, a school that took pride in its diversity. I ate

at Japanese hibachi restaurants with my Asian friends and at Spanish bodegas with my Latino schoolmates. I was exposed to books like Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake*. I began to realize that people’s cultures often frame their perspectives and that a true understanding of the world, a compassion for others, can only be achieved if cultures of every type are openly embraced. It was time to stop trying to fit in with the preschoolers playing with plastic dinosaurs.

With this understanding came a new comfort in myself. My Indian ethnicity was something to be proud of. After all, it was my Indian culture that taught me to stay away from drugs and alcohol. It was my culture that taught me the value of hard work. My culture that taught me that even a natural intelligence went to waste if I wasn’t ardently committing every cell in my body to the task at hand. It was my culture that taught me to love intellectual vibrancy, to love colors, to love social environments, to love music, to love family – to love.

Now, looking in the mirror, I lightly run

It was time to stop trying to fit in



Art by Arushi Kuchhal, Noida, India

my fingers over the spot on my forehead where the *tikka* belongs.

“It’s not blood,” I whisper to a long lost four-year-old boy. “It’s a prayer mark, a *tikka*.” ♦

PC, PS4, XBOX ONE

Assassin's Creed Unity

Paris is truly noteworthy at this time of year. Its muddied, bloodied streets are mobbed with revolutionaries. No, they're not armed with baguettes, but with muskets and swords, for this is the time of the French Revolution. From my rooftop perch, "Assassin's Creed Unity" is a sight to behold. But this game faces a plethora of problems nearly as troublesome as the French Revolution itself.

Developed by Ubisoft, "Assassin's Creed Unity" is about climbing things in elaborate ways and killing things in even more elaborate ways. Playing as the swaggering swashbuckler Arno Dorian, you're thrown into the turmoil between the Assassin Brotherhood and the Templar Order, two secret organizations supposedly dedicated to maintaining peace. Arno is armed with every weapon known to 18th-century man, but the story of his quest for revenge is clichéd and boring. Exposition is dished out to players by omniscient voices speaking from the present day.

I spent hours upon hours launching myself across rooftops trying to create a more interesting plot for Arno. Sadly, the beautiful city of Paris is only a

backdrop, never taken advantage of or placed into a synergy that could really shine. Arno is merely a spectator, a ghost who cannot play a role in the historical events.

The game's setting in Paris proves healthy for it, but admiring the bricks of the street was the best I could do at times, because this latest installment in the franchise lapses in its signature feature: parkour. Jumping through a window has never been so frustrating. Arno will do a salsa, tango, and ballet around it before finally popping through. I found the poor guy nearly always scrambling to climb up any wall I dared gently nudge into, making it a pain to escape from even the most tame of revolutionary extremists.

If "Unity" makes any sort of welcome change to the franchise, it's in a new and revamped combat system. No longer can you make your protagonist a god simply by spamming a selection

of three keys. The combat, inspired by fencing, now feels satisfying, quick, and clean. Even better, it feels more difficult. Scenes where armies of enemies scrambled together to face me instilled a genuine adrenaline rush as I fought alongside revolutionaries in crowds of thousands.

Yes, that's right, thousands of people.

Sadly, one of the game's greatest technical accomplishments is also a weakness, for no computer is safe from combustion in such massive crowds. The challenge of rendering that many people means individuals sometimes vanish, only to reappear in different attire. Those looking for immersion had best not scrutinize details at street level. It's not rare to be swallowed by the floor or to become one with the wall adjacent to you.

On the plus side, "Unity" flaunts an incredibly in-depth customization system, allowing you to tailor the Assassin perfectly to your preferred play style

and aesthetic. This sounds spectacular, but players will quickly find their fun barred by the death sentence of gaming: microtransactions. Using a currency known as Helix Credits, some items can cost up to \$100, though that may seem preferable to dishing out 40 hours to purchase that jaunty hat.

On a side note, this installment also introduces Co-op gameplay, which allows up to four players to join a game and waste their wallets together as they wreak havoc across Paris. Sadly, random Internet blackouts and disconnections are commonplace, so this feature can only shine every once in a millennium.

Ultimately, I found "Assassin's Creed Unity" a worthy addition to the series, but a flawed one. While it presents a wonderful reimagining of late 18th century Paris, the story and characters are weak and forgettable, and its parkour is mildly competent at best. "Unity" offers a solid amount of content to explore in a fully realized setting; however, it's nowhere near as revolutionary as many hyped it up to be. ♦

by Anthony Dominguez,
Brooklyn, NY



Worthy but flawed

PC, MAC

Garry's Mod

Ever dreamed of a game where you can actually do *anything*? "Garry's Mod" is a physics sandbox that, alone, has no goals or point. However, the game has millions of player-made modifications that you can add with the click of a button. Add-ons come in the forms of maps, items, ragdolls, player models, and much more. Want a gun that shoots explosive watermelons? There's an add-on for that. Want to play as your Minecraft character? There's an add-on for that. Want a gun that shoots Nyan Cats, complete with the signature song? Yup, there's an add-on for that. Unlike other games, the possibilities really are endless.



You can actually do anything

When you get bored of playing around in the physics sandbox, you can get add-ons that change the genre of game. For example, you can change your game mode to Murder, where your goal is to eliminate everyone as the murderer or kill the murderer as the sheriff. Or maybe you would prefer a game of hide and seek or tag. If role-playing is your thing, then DarkRP is a giant game of roleplay where you can be whoever you wish. Or if you prefer parkour, you can play Death Run – a giant game of Wipeout where the obstacles are controlled by the other team. There are many more game modes than the ones that I have mentioned.

"Garry's Mod" can be played online with friends or you can make new friends on servers. I have 345 hours clocked into this game, and it won't be losing my interest anytime soon. "Garry's Mod" is only \$9.99 on Steam, and is definitely worth every penny. ♦

by Raul Gamboa, Arlington, TX

PS3, PS4, XBOX 360, XBOX ONE

Destiny

Imagine you're about to eat a pizza. Before you sink your teeth in, you're told that it will be perfect in all aspects; it was made by gourmet chefs, contains the best ingredients, and everyone agrees it's amazing. All you can think about is taking that first delicious bite. But when you do, you realize something awful: all the trimmings are there but the flavor is absent. "Destiny" is just that – a pizza without flavor. Sure, there's something to be said for its outer mechanics and features, but overall, it feels lacking.

Just in case there's anybody out there who missed the hype, "Destiny" is a first-person shooter produced by Bungie, the developers of the Halo series. The game centers around basic and understandable (albeit clichéd) plot points: the remnants of humanity are in danger, and you need to stop the bad guys from destroying everything.

While there are plenty of lackluster things about "Destiny," let's start on a positive note. This game has absolutely breathtaking visuals. Every set piece feels lovingly crafted and meticulously created; this game is sure to strike awe in those who load it up. In addition, the core mechanics are intuitive and fluid. Guns fire with snappy sound effects, vehicles control smoothly, and the central controls are mapped and coordinated near perfectly. As a whole, the game feels great, looks great, and controls with ease. So what makes "Destiny"

so flavorless?

Without question, the biggest thing "Destiny" lacks is a cohesive story line. It's clear that immense time and effort were put into this product, but very little of the world is given backstory or reasoning, making the objectives empty and pointless. Sure, there are bad guys to shoot, but why? Sure, the environments on places like Venus are gorgeous, but why does Venus suddenly have plant life and a city on it? There are no answers, and as such, players feel as though the journey was meaningless. With repetitive mission objectives, lackluster boss encounters, a shallow earn-loot-through-challenges system, an underdeveloped character set, and an overall air of emptiness, this game is definitely not the fine dining experience so many were expecting.

Is "Destiny" a bad game?

Not by any stretch of the imagination. If anything, it's an underdeveloped game that was massively overhyped and couldn't live up to expectations. There's no question that it's fun the first time around, but the longer you play, the more the flaws reveal themselves.

There's a saying that there's no such thing as bad pizza, and in the case of "Destiny," it's true. However, just because a pizza looks great, smells great, and is generally agreed to be great doesn't mean that it actually is. ♦

by Trace Schuelke, Oshkosh, WI



Breathtaking visuals

Jurassic World

Over 20 years after dinosaurs first graced the big screen in front of millions, the captivating reptiles are back and bigger than ever in Colin Trevorrow's "Jurassic World." This highly anticipated film takes place on an extravagant stage: a dinosaur amusement park on a futuristic Costa Rican island. Here, a toddler can ride a baby triceratops like a pony and feed a gentle brachiosaurus from her hand.

Another popular attraction? Watching hunky dinosaur whisperer Owen (played by Chris Pratt) go nose to nose with ferocious velociraptors. And the splash show features a 15-ton mosasaurus, complete with two extra rows of teeth, gulping up a Great White Shark whole. But these attractions take a back seat to the ginormous Indominus rex, a monster that makes all other dinosaurs run to their mothers (or, in most cases, just get eaten).

This lab-created giant gets a visit from Jurassic World's operations manager Claire (Bryce Dallas Howard), a redheaded workaholic whose nephews happen to be guests in the park. After all, what would a Jurassic movie be without smart, resourceful children? The owner of the amusement park has asked Claire to get Owen's opinion on the safety of Indominus's enclosure, and there's obvious chemistry (and awkwardness) between the two.

This is when the movie starts to break down. Everything that happens after this is entirely predictable. The Indominus rex, surprise surprise, is not what the humans had expected. Not exactly shocking, considering the dinosaur was created in a test tube, a secret mixture of other man-eaters and random animals that no one will reveal to Owen, even when they're all about to get devoured.

So, the dino escapes, wrecking havoc, freely eating both people and beasts. And, as expected, there are

about 10,000 close calls with the jaws of the Indominus just inches from Owen as he hides under or behind various vehicles.

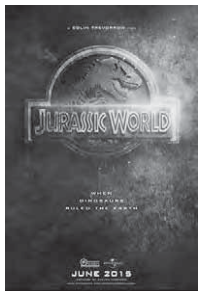
As expected, the children get lost alone in the park and perform impossible feats to stay alive. As expected, Claire finally leaves the hard shell of her work life and becomes an actual human in an omg-the-dinosaurs-are-actually-living-things-not-just-assets type of way. She gets down and dirty, shooting freed pterosaurs, driving away from raptor pursuers, and running from a raging Tyrannosaurus rex, all the while rocking some work-appropriate nude pumps. She also manages to squeeze in a kiss with Owen while both of their lives are in peril. And, possibly the most expected of all, Claire's hair and makeup only improve as she crawls through more dirt, hides from more dinosaurs, and cries more tears.

In the end, Indominus gets defeated, obviously. Sadly, none of the changes in Claire are acknowledged, even her biggest one: stepping away from her work to spend time with family. Her sister never even says, "Hey, thanks for making sure my kids weren't eaten."

While this movie pays considerable homage to the first "Jurassic Park," it does not contain any moments of magic cinema like when we first saw the brachiosaurus stand up on its hind legs 22 years ago. Although many will appreciate the nostalgia, that tingling feeling of wondrous awe just isn't there.

So, all in all, "Jurassic World" hit a sour note for me. Entertaining, sure, but besides the interesting setting, nothing about this movie is unique. The fourth installment of this beloved dinosaur franchise may have made a big roar, but, unlike the mosasaurus, it just didn't have enough teeth. ♦

by Annie Lu, Camas, WA



Made a big roar but didn't have enough teeth

The Hobbit

Set in Middle Earth, *The Hobbit* is full of action, adventure, humor, and even a little bit of romance. This is one of the greatest adventures of all time, and the recent big-screen adaptation into a trilogy is outstanding.

The *Hobbit* series boasts an amazing cast, including the lovable Martin Freeman as Bilbo, Ian McKellen as Gandalf, Orlando Bloom as Legolas, Benedict Cumberbatch as the voice of Smaug, and, of course, Andy Serkis as Gollum. With many returning characters from the *Lord of the Rings* movies, there are definitely some familiar faces, most notably Legolas the elf.

Bilbo Baggins is a hobbit from the Shire, where he lives a boring, routine life. Then one day, the wizard Gandalf invites him on an adventure. As he helps the dwarves in their attempt to reclaim Erebor, the last great dwarf kingdom, Bilbo discovers himself and his courage. But in his travels

he also discovers Sauron's ring of power. And it is with this well-known ring and his newfound courage that we see Bilbo transform into a hero.

Thanks to modern technology, this classic adventure truly comes to life on the screen with beautiful scenery and masterfully designed CGI animations of tiny goblins, orcs, giant spiders, the fiery dragon Smaug, Gollum, elves, fat dwarves, even trolls and rock giants. The beautiful scenery – from dense forests to rocky, barren mountaintops – is filmed entirely on the islands of New Zealand.

Each movie in this trilogy will leave you wanting more because they are so perfectly made. ♦

by Chris Azur, Sewickley, PA



Perfectly made

Avengers: Age of Ultron

Big blockbuster films often come with high expectations. Millions of fans were waiting to see if "Avengers: Age of Ultron" would be as amazing as the first Avengers movie, in which the team battled invading aliens in New York. With the introduction of new characters, character development and group dynamic play a greater role in this film than a physical threat does. The exciting action, humorous dialogue, and insightful look into each of the characters make this superhero film a must-see.

In "Age of Ultron," the Avengers are now an organized team searching for the power source that caused the first invasion. Fans of the first movie will recognize Iron Man (Robert Downey Jr.), Captain America (Chris Evans), Thor (Chris Hemsworth), the Hulk (Mark Ruffalo), Black Widow (Scarlett Johansson), and Hawk Eye (Jeremy Renner).

Iron Man and Bruce Banner have been working on an artificial intelligence, Ultron, which comes to life and attempts

to create "world peace" by destroying human life. The Avengers must fight against something they created, which adds to their questions about whether they are doing the right thing. One example of the consequences of trying to create peace through war is the super-twins. They became Quicksilver (Aaron Taylor-Johnson) and the Scarlet Witch (Elizabeth Olsen) when they volunteered for an experiment after a bomb made by Stark's company killed their parents. However, after seeing the destructive nature of Ultron, they decide the Avengers are the lesser of the two evils and become part of the team. The addition of these members and the power of the Scarlet Witch to manipulate minds lead to cracks in the group's unity and stability.

I had very high expectations for this film because I loved the first so much.

"Ultron" met my expectations of quality, but it surprised me with its depth. For example, the powers of the Witch cause the Avengers to see their darkest fears play out in front of them. This reveals the weak man in the Iron Man suit, who is afraid of letting his team down, and also tells the back story of less developed characters like the Black Widow. Captain America is forced to accept that he is always looking for the next war. Bruce Banner is guilt-ridden because of his destructive alter ego, the Hulk.



A must-see

Each of the mighty heroes are broken down so they become nothing more than normal people struggling to grasp who they are and what they want to live for. This scenario allows the most dismissed character from the first movie, Hawk Eye, to step up and show how important his role in the group is, even if he has the least power. He

is able to be a source of stability and gives the Avengers time to figure themselves out. Bringing the Avengers down from their superior status and making them more human touches the audience in a way that is relatable for everyone.

During all this, however, they are asking themselves what needs to be done now. Do they use the technology to develop another form of artificial intelligence, knowing it could prevent future wars? This debate causes the group to split, creating tensions between them.

The mix of science fiction, mythology, and fantasy in this movie creates a fun and exciting story. Although there are serious scenes and intense drama, there is also a good balance of humor and optimism. This sequel has fewer heart-pumping, epic action scenes, but it has much more emotional tug and moral dilemmas that will leave the audience more aware of themselves and society. ♦

by Adriana Cho, La Canada, CA

TRIP HOP

Goddess • Banks

It is hard to describe an album like “Goddess,” as it seems to tear emotion out from under the heaviest of personalities. Jillian Banks, otherwise known as Banks, hails from Los Angeles. Her nominations for the BBC’s The Sound of 2014 and MTV’s Brand New for 2014 awards might have earned her some recognition, but her name is still quite underground. In an interview with the BBC, Banks revealed that she taught herself how to play music to cope with a period of depression. The fact that she kept her musical talent a secret until graduating college contrasts surprisingly with the dark honesty of her lyrics.

The 27-year-old’s soulful debut album, simply titled “Goddess,” has not received the acknowledgment it rightfully deserves. The hour-long album is more of an experience than a pop, R&B, or alternative compilation. Her sound can be categorized as trip hop, which is defined by Merriam-Webster as “electronic dance music usually based on a slow hip-hop beat and incorporating hypnotic synthesized and prerecorded

sounds.” Her fusion of dark, heavy, tantalizing rhythm and blues with electronic melodies separates Banks from other pop artists. Her powerful, soothing vocals are incredibly unique but could be compared to those of pop and R&B icons Aaliyah, Adele, and Fiona Apple.

Banks’s absence from social media leaves most of her true identity a mystery. Yet after sampling a few of her 14 tracks, listeners might feel like they know her and can relate to her experiences of heartbreak, depression, and loneliness.

Banks’s powerful charisma distinguishes her from today’s platinum pop artists. When she sings, she reveals her inner emotions and secrets – and she doesn’t seem desperate or ignorant, but instead, human. With her uprightness, Banks has provided a new and



Dark, heavy, tantalizing R&B

improved version of the classic break-up song. The themes of her songs do not wither in self-pity or put her above others. Instead of writing and singing upbeat melodies with a message of victimization and entitlement, Banks reveals her feelings in an incredibly relatable way. In “Goddess,” she inspires: “‘Cause she’s a goddess, finally saw this/And now you’re back, trying to claim her/‘Cause she’s gone and now without her/You’re all alone, ‘cause she’s a goddess.”

Her message is one of practicality and feminism – with metaphors of beauty and worth sprinkled in – in a fusion that is far from cliché. Up-and-coming Banks soothes, distracts, and entertains listeners while relating to them on topics that every young adult has faced. ♦

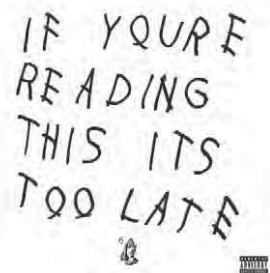
by Alexa Davis, Franklin Lakes, NJ

HIP HOP

If You’re Reading This It’s Too Late • Drake

Drake has done it again with his latest mixtape-turned-album, “If You’re Reading This It’s Too Late.” A few solid additions to his growing collection of top 40 hits grace the album, along with a good number of tracks dedicated to letting us get to know Aubrey Graham. “If You’re Reading This” is not too daring, but that’s not to say it isn’t worth listening to; on the contrary, it has earned its spot on this Drake fan’s constant rotation.

There’s no such thing as a Drake album without a good song to bust out at every party until your friends get tired of both Drake and you. (Or is that just me?) “If You’re Reading This” does not disappoint: expect to hear “No Tellin’,” “Legend,” and “10 Bands” a few hundred times between now and the release of Drake’s next album, “Views from the 6.”



Drake shows his introspective side

Drake also shows his introspective side here. Notably, “You and the 6” discusses his relationship with his mother and the issues he faced growing up in Toronto. This album also signifies Drake’s separation from Birdman and Cash Money Records after completing his contract; as depicted in “Now & Forever,” it is a decision he struggled with, and he is uncertain what his future will bring.

As far as Drake records go, “If You’re Reading This It’s Too Late” is excellent fare, but not entirely spectacular. At first play it feels like some songs are merely leftovers that didn’t make it onto other albums. But it certainly shows Drake’s talent as a lyricist, focusing not on themes of braggadocio or violence, but rather on relationships and a sense of belonging to one’s hometown, an element for which Drake is known.

As evidenced by the number of spins it has had both in my home and car, this album also has great replay value. “If You’re Reading This It’s Too Late” holds its own in what is shaping up to be a fantastic year for hip-hop.

Rating: 7.5 out of 10

Better than: “Sorry 4 the Wait 2” and “ILoveMakonnen.”

Not as good as: “Take Care” and “Channel Orange.”

You might also enjoy: “Dark Sky Paradise” and “Nothing Was the Same.” ♦

by Mitchell Mobley, McDonough, GA

INDIE ROCK

Talking Is Hard • Walk the Moon

Whether you’re cruising down the highway with your friends, listening to “Different Colors,” or reminiscing over adolescent infatuation with “Sidekick,” Walk the Moon’s second studio album, “Talking Is Hard,” will leave you with a good feeling.

Four years after releasing their self-titled debut, Walk the Moon has made a huge comeback. The wait has definitely been worth it. With songs like “Up 2 U” and “Avalanche,” the band builds tension for the listener and channels an older era of ’80s pop-rock. Then the robust chorus comes in and separates the vocals like an explosion of ecstasy consisting of fast guitar riffs and upbeat synthesizers. These songs will easily get embedded in your memory.



An explosion of ecstasy

Intoxically sugary, upbeat songs are what Walk the Moon does best. If you’re looking for poetic or inspirational lyrics, “Talking Is Hard” may not be for you. But if you are interested in ’80s-esque synthesizers, like those in “Portugal,” or the heavy vocal harmony found in “Work This Body,” this album is perfect.

The boy-meets-girl storyline in “Shut Up and Dance” evokes images similar to the band’s debut single “Anna Sun.” It is the perfect disco-flavored summertime track we have

all been unknowingly waiting for. You will be air-guitaring and dancing along before you know it! Another fun song is “Spend Your \$\$\$.” It has a message that’s almost parodic but is very true. Loud guitars, humorous lyrics, and fast-paced drumbeats animate this song.

Other tracks include “Come Under The Covers,” a slow, relationship-focused tune, and “Aquaman,” which has a relaxing, island-paradise vibe. “Down in the Dumps” is another cut that delivers on almost every level. It may seem slow at first, but the drums quickly kick in and the chorus turns into a riptide that doesn’t let you go. One of my favorites is “We Are the Kids.” With the lyrics “There’s mud on my shoes, there’s sun on my skin/I am brand

new/We shout at the cops, we howl at the moon,” the song leaves listeners with a nostalgic, young-and-reckless feeling.

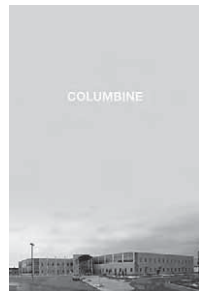
Talking may be hard for the Cincinnati-based quartet, but their music speaks for itself. Their flavorful synth solos, quirky lyrics, and intoxicating guitar riffs culminate in happy-go-lucky tunes that leave a smile on your face and a song stuck in your head. ♦

by Carmella Flynn, Fairbanks, AK

Columbine • Dave Cullen

I'm Nicole. I am a student at Columbine High School. I love my school with all my heart. Yes, I know what happened in 1999. No, it doesn't change my love for the school. Does it affect my life that the school shooting happened? A couple months ago, I would have said no. Of course it was tragic and brought the community closer, but I wasn't even born yet. But now it affects me every day.

Recently, I read *Columbine* by Dave Cullen, which details everything you could possibly want to know about the victims, the shooters, the day it happened, and the aftermath. Not only does Cullen's book cover everything, he gives facts that are one hundred percent true.



I will never look at my school the same again

As a high school student, I know that rumors are everywhere. Friends from other schools have told me what they've heard about the shooters' motives and everything that happened. They asked, "Is that really what happened?" My answer is, read *Columbine*. It's the truth and nothing but the truth. Cullen spent years researching, analyzing, and interviewing to write this life-changing book.

One aspect I loved was that Cullen focuses on the two shooters, but he also includes anecdotes about other individuals who may not seem as important. These little stories are the ones that will touch readers the most. Cullen shares their stories to show that this tragedy was hard on everyone.

After reading *Columbine*, I will never look at my school in the same way again. Cullen describes specific rooms where events happened, and now I notice how often I pass those rooms, those spots. It has changed the way I walk around my school. I look at these places with the knowledge of what happened there, and then I see students laughing and smiling faces everywhere.

This book is proof that the Columbine tragedy was even harder than I could fathom. My school is proof that despite sorrow and loss, when a community comes together, there's hope for the future. ♦

by Nicole Sarconi, Littleton, CO

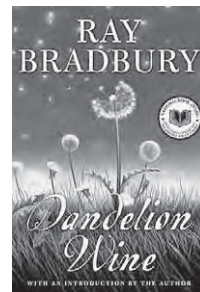
Dandelion Wine • Ray Bradbury

There is nothing more magical than a childhood summer. For Douglas Spaulding, that is precisely the case, and he can sense there is something else in the air when the summer of 1928 commences. He will undergo an unprecedented journey of shocking maturity as things in Green Town pick up, dance about, and then flicker away – all in the essence of summer.

Written by Ray Bradbury and published in 1957 as a "childhood memoir," this piece of literature is a masterpiece that gets better with age – like a good wine, you could say. *Dandelion Wine* is a rich text filled with magnificent emotions that go beyond its sunny complexion. According to *Time*, "Bradbury is an authentic original," wholeheartedly capturing the spirit of Douglas Spaulding's innocent soul.

This novel does not tackle life with a chip on its shoulder, it embraces it with a warm hug. Steaming, golden summer has been poured into these pages, and amongst seemingly disconnected events of misery, pro-

found thought, and something else, one comes to terms with why. What is this leading to? Yes, yes, the Green Machine and our Colonel Freeleigh and dear, dear Helen Loomis and Great-Grandma still up at her spirits shingling that Spaulding roof, but



Unforgettably universal

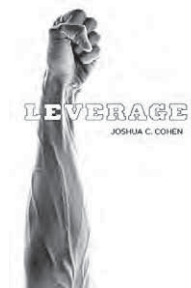
then it hits you. Unlike anything else, Bradbury has so directly and credibly touched you. He gives you a young child with bright, wide eyes cast up at the skies because they are not burned yet. You watch a wonderful, admirably childish child transition into an all-too early manhood. And this happens through material events that are yet immaterial.

Dandelion Wine is unforgettably universal. Bradbury touches the hearts of those who still dream and hope and believe, despite our forever aging hands and minds. He fingers the delicacy of life and distills it, straining it to a purely concentrated concoction, and finally attains summer at its sweetest. He hands this wine to us, and we must drink up. ♦

by Angelina Lee, Naperville, IL

Leverage • Joshua C. Cohen

High school can be a living hell for someone who is experiencing ruthless bullying and constant harassment. *Leverage* by Joshua C. Cohen does a beautiful job of portraying what life is like for victims of bullying. In every high school there are those individuals who think it's their job to cause pain to others, and bystanders can either choose to turn their backs or stand up to the bullies.



Portrays what life is like for victims of bullying

Leverage takes place in high school and involves sports, bullying, and the consequences of looking the other way. It's told from the perspective of two students – Kurt, a football player, and Danny, a gymnast. Due to these different perspectives, the consistency of the story feels rather poor, since it is often easy to be confused about whom the story is actually talking about. The football players are recognized as royalty and can do no wrong, but they are also the source of the bullying.

The football team and the gymnastics team eventually find themselves in a prank war. However, Kurt and Danny do their best to stay out of it and are able to build a friendship that grows stronger as the story progresses.

For me this book does a great job of using real life experiences, since everyone can relate to the big, bad jocks as the bullies.

I highly recommend *Leverage*. When I selected this book, I assumed it would be another book about a football team winning a championship, but I was completely wrong. *Leverage* is a magnificent story about two teens who find an unlikely friendship despite overwhelming odds. ♦

by Brian Disbrow, Scottsdale, AZ

Go Set a Watchman • Harper Lee

Like many people, I anxiously awaited the release of *Go Set a Watchman*, a companion to the beloved novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee. Having grown up with the shenanigans of Scout Finch and the story's deeper moral that all men are the same, I longed to return to Maycomb, Alabama. I was not disappointed, for in *Watchman* Lee provides both some compelling material to *To Kill a Mockingbird* alongside an equally compelling mature and riveting tale.

In *Go Set a Watchman*, an adult Jean Louise "Scout" Finch returns to Maycomb to visit her aging father, Atticus. However, she discovers her hometown has lost its shine. It is more segregated than ever, and her father is different. She hardly recognizes the town or the people she grew up with. Jean Louise is left wondering who has really changed: she or the town.

Lee has faced controversy for portraying

Atticus as a bigot in *Watchman*. He claims to "accept" African Americans as people, provided that "they stay in their place, and keep the South the way it always was."

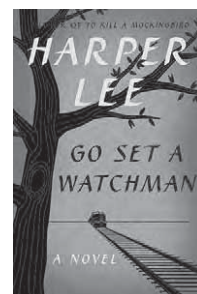
This is a stark difference from the sage younger Atticus in *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

While Atticus's bigotry is a shock to me and many other readers, it is even more of a shock to Jean Louise. She realizes that her father, who she has looked up to for years, doesn't agree with what she believes.

While there are many messages one can glean from Lee's first novel, which is sprinkled with flashbacks to Jean Louise's childhood and anecdotes that many readers have come to love, *Watchman* is about growing up and the realization that

things change. Perhaps the biggest point Lee raises is that when we grow up, it is our duty to follow our conscience. ♦

by Sabrina Fuller, Powhatan, VA



I anxiously awaited the release

Everyday Superhero

by Grace Dietz, Cary, NC

The Seattle morning was fresh, tinged with oncoming summer warmth, and the sky was lightening as the plane readied for ascent. Linda had an olive green backpack filled with plane survival items, including but not limited to snacks and a magazine or two. Her cropped black sleeveless top felt snug, as did her white shorts, and there was no need to be worried about platform sandals on a plane ride.

She checked her phone for messages, laughed at a Facebook post of a friend-of-a-friend, and twirled her red hair around her finger as she waited for the all-clear signal. When it was given, she proceeded down the ramp with the other passengers and found her seat.

There was a familiar blandness to the plane, with white walls and flowered blue-gray carpet giving the distinct impression that this plane could have been the same one that Linda had flown on another time – even every time.

Thankfully, she had chosen the window seat. She placed her bag under her seat, tapping her toes and drumming her fingers to alleviate boredom.

A shadow crossed her line of sight, and Linda looked up, startled, as another passenger sat next to her.

A Muslim, Linda thought, noticing the white head covering/scarf/whatever-they-call-it that the other woman wore. Her skin was medium brown, and her eyes were almost black, matching her long-sleeved dress that reached to the floor. The woman looked at Linda for a moment,

acknowledging her, and then focused on the seat in front.

Linda suddenly felt very aware of her bare skin, her long, uncovered hair. *I bet she thinks I'm some party animal or wild girl, she thought resentfully. Does she think that what she wears makes her better than me? I don't need to take criticism from someone who's undoing ninety years of feminism by dressing like that.*

Asyun, in the seat next to Linda, ran over the lyrics to that one Adele song she liked in her head. She wondered whether her cousin in New York would be at the airport to pick her up. People always gave Asyun looks when she flew; they had started when she was about ten. She sometimes thought about telling them, "I'm Turkish." *Not Iranian or from Iraq, but that doesn't even matter. And what might she be thinking about me? Probably that I'm going off to meet my future husband, who I've never met, who my Sheik terrorist dad, who moonlights as a member of al Qaeda, managed to pawn me off on. She probably thinks I can't speak English*

Both of the women's thoughts were interrupted by the intercom announcing the flight was about to leave.

They tried to play it cool as the plane sped faster and faster before suddenly rising from the ground. There was always that little drop in the stomach, but they both believed that there was a point in maturity where visible appreciation or acknowledgment of it was no longer acceptable.

The voice came back on after a while, announcing that passengers could take out their electronic items. Linda pulled out her backpack and began to rummage through it, while Asyun smoothly removed and opened her satchel, spreading its contents on her tray. She had just begun reading *Watchmen* when a voice interrupted her.

"Um, excuse me?"

Startled, Asyun looked up. It was the redhead.

"I'm sorry for interrupting you. I'm Linda." She smiled. "And I was just wondering ... your collection of the Dark Phoenix Saga ... could I borrow it for a little while?"

It took a second for Asyun to process the shock of her speaking, another moment to hear the request, and a third to respond. "It's fine. Just be careful."

"Thanks." Linda smiled, reaching across.

Curiosity buzzed through Asyun's mind, but she didn't want to interrupt a reader – and apparently, a fellow

fan. *Who would have thought?* She wondered which of them was more surprised.

After half an hour, Linda returned the book. "Thanks."

"No problem." Asyun smiled shyly. "It's nice to meet a fellow fan."

"Yeah." Linda nodded enthusiastically. "It's hard to find fans my age because it's hard to bring it up. But I really like comics – and I really like that one. It's so ... definitive."

"Absolutely." Asyun nodded once, confidently. "Later arcs and points would lessen the impact – though I do like them and the cumulative Phoenix mythology – but this one really did define the X-Men majorly, and the comics in large part. So many heroes going bad like this would never have happened otherwise." She paused for a moment. "And, yes, it's definitely difficult to bring this up with potential friends."

"Everyone dismisses it, but they're totally going to go to the movies whenever the next flick comes out." Linda made a face, and Asyun giggled. "At this point, it's becoming obvious that superheroes are one of the real core pieces of America – and even the world too. We like our adventure, we like our story lines, and we like the BOOM-POW-EXPLOSIVE CENSORED. I think that at this point, Batman and the Avengers and whatever else are almost to us what Hercules and Perseus and all those other myths were to the Greeks thousands of years ago. And so much – so many great characters and stories – have come out of superheroes."

Linda worried for a moment that she might have offended the other woman by mentioning "pagan myths." However, Asyun hadn't seemed to notice or care.

"But comics are underrated as a form of art and media. I mean, there's been a lot of a great usage – *Maus*, *Persepolis* – over time that didn't involve superheroes. That's why I'm trying to get into that for my art classes, trying to break into that genre."

"You're an art student?"

"Yes. What are you studying?"

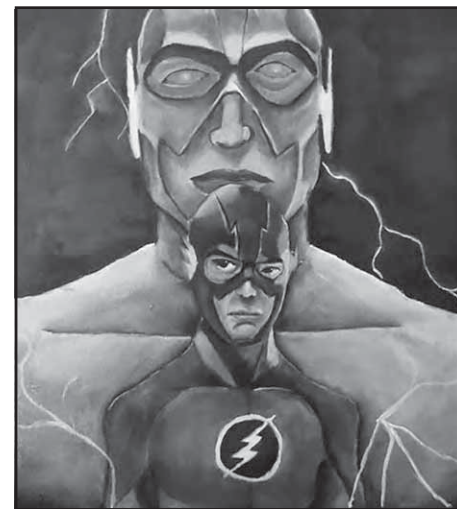
"Film and media. Even when I was a kid, when I wasn't reading, I was filming."

The conversation continued as the flight attendants served food. Finally, Linda felt comfortable enough to ask.

"Um, if you don't mind, can I ask a personal question? You don't have to answer, but ... what's up with the ..."

Linda gestured at her head.

"Hijab?" Asyun asked, and Linda



Art by Joshua Nase, Bechtelsville, PA

nodded. "It's my secret identity."

Giggling a little at the other woman's confused look, Asyun elaborated, "Secret identities are so that superheroes can keep both sides of their life safe. One is for the private people they trust, and one is for the public. At the same time, it's my mask – it empowers me to go out in the world and feel safe and secure while saving the day." Comprehension dawned on Linda's face. "I might as well ask you why you *don't* have a secret identity."

"The only people who take advantage of that are villains." Linda shrugged, talking boldly. "And I've got superpowers, hear me roar, faster than a speeding bullet and all that. I'll save the day, secret identity or no secret identity." She made a face. "One time on a different plane, some flight attendant told me I was 'dressed inappropriately.' All I was wearing were shorts and a cami top, for crying out loud!"

Asyun nodded sympathetically. "People look at me funny sometimes when I go through security, like they're expecting me to pull out a shotgun or something. And sometimes

I get asked to go through twice – just in case."

"It is a hard-knock life."

More chuckles, and the conversation turned to plans for New York. Both were jolted out of their conversation by the announcement that arrival was imminent.

An air of awkwardness returned, but they tried firmly to banish it. Asyun took out a pen.

"Here," she said, scribbling on a napkin. "That's my cell number. Quid pro quo?"

Linda was at first surprised, before a wide smile broke out and she was jotting down on a napkin too. "Call me maybe?"

"There is no try," Asyun intoned in a deep voice. "There is only do."

The guffaws that followed caused other passengers to turn and wonder what the sexy redhead and the ambiguously foreign lady could be laughing about. ♦

"It's nice to meet a fellow fan"

Urban Fairy Tale

Our fairies don't have wings but they are brightly colored. Their neon bodies camouflage with graffiti and construction cones. They have teeth like rusted metal and they're not afraid to use them. Our unicorns live in public parks stone flanks speckled with pigeon scat horns weathered away to worthless stumps in the absence of purity. Our kings wear three-piece suits and carry briefcases spot a noblewoman by her skinny jeans and skinny latte our evil wizards are often indistinguishable from knights in T-shirts and denim. Lost princesses slip through the streets unseen wearing cracked rainboots instead of glass slippers.

by Sophie Panzer, South Orange, NJ

Abel's Child

by Celia White, Rowe, MA

When I am frightened, I go to the corner of the room by the floor lamp and chew my thumbnail. The movement of my teeth eases the danger; I know that no one will dare to hurt me when they see how fierce I am. Some of my teeth are missing, though. My brother Roger says they'll grow back, but Uncle says he's full of lies, so I've learned to chew on the left side. At least the tooth fairy brings me money. Maybe when I'm older I can buy fake teeth like Granny Alma has.

When I eat chocolate on the way up the chairlift, the taste of wet mitten floods my mouth. It's sour and a little bit tangy, like when I get sick to my stomach. My feet dangle in the empty air, the skis tugging at them, and sometimes I feel like they'll grow heavier and heavier until their weight pulls me down. I wonder if the fall would hurt. From so high up, I can never tell whether the snow is fluffy or covered in a sheet of ice.

When Grandpa calls on the phone late at night, my daddy answers first. They talk about boring things like taxes, and sometimes Daddy uses words that Mommy tells Roger not to say or he'll get his mouth washed out with soap. I hope he doesn't say them. Soap stays slimy on my teeth for a long time and I always swallow some bubbles even though I try my best to spit it out.

When I wake up in the middle of the night and hear shouting downstairs, I

wait for Roger to come into my room. I count while I wait, and usually make it to one hundred. A few minutes later, our big sister, Noelle, always comes and knocks on the door. She tells us to lock it tight and scream if anyone tries to open it before morning. Roger and I snuggle under the covers and tell each other stories about princesses and knights in shining armor. I like listening best, but Roger says I talk real pretty for a girl.

When the bell rings for lunchtime at school, I don't sit with the other girls. Instead, I go find Noelle in her classroom. She's lots older, and goes to the big school next to mine – the one that's filled with loud boys and girls in the kind of skirts that Mommy won't let us wear. Noelle's teacher never minds that I sit on the floor, and her friends always pretend I'm not there. Noelle says they don't understand because their families aren't like ours. I don't think Noelle likes our family much, but I think it's better than theirs must be. Their mommies let them wear those silly skirts to school.

When I don't know the right answer in school, someone usually calls me a mean name. I ask for a bathroom pass, and then I go to Roger's classroom, where Ms. Henderson tells me I'm in trouble for leaving my class without

permission. Roger will say politely that I'm little and get scared in school, making his brown eyes go wide like a puppy's. The first time he said that, I tried to tell him that it wasn't true, but he looked at me with a face that told me to be quiet. Ms. Henderson always lets him hug me quickly before sending me back to class. I don't know how he does it, but when he lets go, there's always a new lollipop in my pocket. I suck on it on the way back to Miss Delaney's room, and when I get there, she tells me to throw it away.

When Mommy cuts my nails, sometimes she cuts my fingers by accident. Then Noelle comes into the bathroom and makes her leave, saying that there's coffee on the stove and that next time she'll do a better job hiding the nail clippers. She finishes cutting my nails, puts Band-Aids on my fingertips, and tells me to say that I bit my nails too close if anybody asks. She says that they might take Mommy away if I tell the truth, and I don't understand why. I do a lot of things by accident, but Noelle says that grownups can't make mistakes like that. I hope somebody teaches me how to not hurt somebody's fingers. Whoever taught Mommy must not have taught her very good.

When I break something like a plate or a lamp, Roger always hides the pieces and doesn't tell me where they

are. After that, he goes around the house and cleans it top to bottom. He's very quiet when Daddy comes home, and then when Daddy notices that something's missing, Roger says he broke it. He always sits funny the next day, making faces like I do when I scrape my knee, and he won't tell me why he said it was his fault. I guess Uncle is right that he lies.

When I wake up in the morning I'm supposed to dress myself, but sometimes I can't remember which way to put on my shirt, so I go to Noelle's room, where Mommy says I shouldn't go. Noelle puts on my shirt for me and lets me watch while she puts colored powder on her eyelids. Sometimes there are funny dark splotches on her face from where she hurt herself falling down the stairs, and she spends a long time putting powder on those, too. When she's done, I can't see the splotches anymore. I ask her why she falls so much, and she tells me that it happens sometimes when you're older and lose your balance more easily. She says that Roger and I have good balance, and that's why we don't fall. Roger says that he wants to lose his – that it seems like a rite of a passage – but I hope I don't lose mine because then I'd have to put powder on my face in the mornings, and I don't have a little sister to come and watch me. ♦

They might take Mommy away if I tell the truth

Continuity

by Cambley Sassman, Mansfield, TX

Her laugh breaks the silence. Bouncing off the trees, echoing across the lake like skipping rocks. *one. two. three.*

It rings in your ears, making the blood rush through your veins hotter and faster than normal. You look at her. She looks back at you, then out toward the water.

"I'm glad we still have this," she says softly, "despite everything."

"Despite everything?" Your eyes haven't left her, though now you are looking at the back of her hair – long, golden, wavy hair that always seems to be a complete mess yet always looks good, like the rest of her.

"It's just ... everything else has changed so much over the past year.

It's nice to know this didn't." She looks back at you, smiling, and you can't help but return the smile. It's always been this way. No matter how much she pisses you off, all she has to do is smile. (Or laugh; laughing works the same.) You take her hand and squeeze it. She squeezes back. Every nerve in your body intensifies, swells inside you. "Of course you still have this. I'm not going anywhere."

She looks back. "I'm not just talking about you, but this," she says, gesturing to all things around you both.

"This lake is still the same. The wind is still too strong. It has always smelled like this, a mix of fresh water and sea water and nature. It's all still the same."

You think about that. This place hasn't changed at all. Your hometown hasn't changed at all. Ohio hasn't really ever changed. "I wonder why that is," you say, wrapping your arms around her. "Everything else changes. Why doesn't it?"

She is quiet for a long time. The lake's tide hits the sand and splashes your feet. "I think the earth is saying something to us. Like, 'Hey there, your world is being flipped and rearranged and I know it must suck, but I am the same. Come home to me.' It's the earth's way of being noticed."

"You think the earth wants to be noticed? Seems like most of the world ignores it to me."

"Well, yeah, most of the world does. But who cares about most of the world? If I were the earth, I'd only want the attention of the people worth noticing. And I wouldn't want their attention to stem from showing off. I'd want to be a friend. A continuity. Something they notice and return to again and again because of everlasting, simple beauty. The people capable of recognizing that continuity are the ones the earth craves attention from."

"Everything has changed so much over the past year"



Photo by Krista Ryder, West Fulton, NY

"Quality over quantity," you say softly. She nods. You pull her to you, kissing her forehead, then her nose, making your way down to her lips. "You'll still always have this. Me. The earth. We're a package deal. One giant continuity. Even when you're sick of us." You smile.

The tide hits the shore again. Her laugh breaks the silence. ♦

A Private Darkness

by Violet Fearon, Pleasantville, NY

When Grandpa died, he didn't look like he was sleeping. He looked like he was dead.

It was Wednesday, August 16th. I remember because I circled it in purple Sharpie on my calendar. I don't think Wednesdays are good days for dying. And purple was the wrong color to use. I should have used black. Red. Not purple.

I was lying in bed, about to fall asleep. It was humid that night – hot and humid. The whole world seemed like it had given up. Even the ceiling fan in my room was circling aimlessly, going through the motions.

The phone rang.

Grandpa'd been sick for weeks – well, years, really – and everyone knew he was going to die soon, knew in that “everyone knows” sort of way. There was a pause before Mom picked up the phone. It was 11 p.m. We all knew who was on the other end.

She said, “Okay.”

She said, “Thanks for calling.”

She said, “Take care.”

Then she hung up, and I heard her start to cry.

I sat up in bed, stared at my hands. They looked like they were glowing white in the dark. The room seemed like an oil painting, the walls fading into the floors fading into the windows and the night outside. The crying stopped. I guess that's a good thing. You never feel more mature

than when your parents cry. You never feel more helpless, either.

The hall light flicked on. An orange glow dribbled through the cracks in my closed door. I heard her walk down the stairs in slow, heavy steps.

I lay back down after a while. Stared at the ceiling. The fan kept moving.

They say – “they” being the people paid to think about these kinds of things – that there are infinite parallel universes in which everything that can happen has happened. In the days just before Grandpa died, wandering around hospital vending machines and watercolor landscapes, I'd hung on to

that. There was a universe out there somewhere, buried under all of the nastier ones, where the hordes of nurses and doctors and blue-robed surgeons whispered about miracles as Grandpa clambered out of his bed, as he laughed it off and stretched out smelly, blue-veined legs.

Some alternate version of me was still laughing and happy and sleeping through the night. But the “Okay” and the “Thanks for calling” and the “Take care” cut that world off from me. I pictured it as a little slip of white paper snipped off by scissors, snatched by the wind out of my reach.

So he was dead. Cardiac arrest. The doctors told us he'd died in his sleep, nice and peaceful. Dad said it was a lucky way to go. Everyone repeated

that comforting mantra. They were right. He'd had a long life. A happy life. Cardiac arrest. I guess it's something to look forward to.

I was out of school for three days. Driving to the funeral, thinking about the funeral, going to the funeral, talking about the funeral, driving home from the funeral. We brought deviled eggs. Mom made them. She sprinkled spoonfuls of rusty paprika over the egg halves, coating the yellows and whites in dirty snow. I went back to school on a Tuesday. Weird day to go back to school. I told Mom that. She said to get out of the car.

In Spanish, the teacher was staring at the class's potted plant. It was dying, had been dying, would continue to die until it was dead.

I asked her if she'd tried repotting it. She said she had. We stood there a while longer, her staring at the crispy little brown leaf points, me staring at the crispy little brown leaf points and trying to come up with something to say. I settled on “Too bad, isn't it” and sat at my desk. She probably didn't hear me. It was all right – I hadn't ever really heard her, either.

That whole day was phony. Phony? No, phony's not really the right word. You know what I mean. When you're sitting, doing whatever – math problems, in my case – and your eyes are open. Wide open. Like you have two sets of eyelids, and this is the first time you've opened the second set. In a few decades, you're going to be a skeleton. Every second, every passing second, is gone. You can't get it back. Why the hell are you doing math?

It's true, though, true in the way nothing else is. You're going to die. Me, too. Sometimes I stand in a crowded place – Grand Central, say, or the middle of a city square – and sentence everyone to death. Study their faces, imagine what their skeletons look like under all that sinew, all that blood. That woman in the scarf and heels, clicking down the pavement. The man with the fluorescent coat, walking a dirty little terrier. The girl screaming at a boyfriend on her cell. Dead, dead, dead.

Have you ever looked at your hands? Really looked at them? There's a skeleton a few millimeters below that smooth skin. A Halloween decoration. Dead, dead, dead.

I slipped out of gym class early that day and walked home. The world was in the awkward stage between fall and winter, when a couple leaves are



Photo by Hannah Shortall, Delmar, DE

still clinging onto the trees, holding off the snow. We live in a forest. The whole town is pretty much swarmed with trees. When we moved here, Mom spread her arms wide and talked about the forest in a hushed, magical voice, like saying the words too loudly would break them. I was seven. I'd grown up in Chicago. Trees were lonely little twigs sticking up out of sidewalks. I didn't even know what a forest looked like.

We cremated him. Well, not “we.” Someone else stuck him into a fire, and he got burnt up. I asked Dad how much he thought the guy who stuck the corpses into the fire got paid. He said to be quiet and listen to the eulogy.

If you squinted at the floor in the reception room, it looked as though everyone was wearing the same shoes. Black blobs floating across the carpet. We all stood around and talked in low voices about what a wonderful life he had, what an absolutely wonderful life, goddammit. Couldn't have it any better, goddammit. Not much point, is there? Black shoes and black suits, low voices pattering over the carpet. Wednesdays and purple ink and shoes. There's no good way to eat a deviled egg.

Personally, I would've liked an open casket. I told Mom and she made a face. It would have made it real to see the body. The ash is nothing; the ash is ash. A blur in the air. Everyone should be able to touch the corpse, to pinch its cheeks, to feel its hair. To open and close its eyes. To understand. I didn't tell Mom that part. I told my sister, though. She rolled her eyes and said there's a name for people who want to touch corpses. Whatever.

It takes a while for me to walk home from school. It's a mile and a half. That Tuesday, the forest >>>

tribute to a man who lives amongst owls

he sips moonbeams
like fine wine
and, settled on cloud-tops,
casts a line
hoping to catch some violet skies
where scaly rocket-ships collide
along the horizon line.

he counts stars like fireflies
before they're even there
wonderstruck at blue-green eyes
and dusky, flowing hair.

he lets his lonely thoughts run free
with lifting lyricality
and dance amidst tall pines in grace
and spiral into outer space.

he adventures with his words,
unafraid of the absurd.

by Josie Wind, Colorado Springs, CO

Somewhere I step out of this shower and cure cancer

The Home Team

by Tennessee Hill, Dickinson, TX

I hate September.

I mean, it's pretty the way warm colors melt into each other on fallen leaves, and I like the swift breeze of autumn. But in the South, September means football, and I hate football.

We have five reserved seats in the middle of the home-side stands – the best view by far. I'm boxed in by godparents, family friends, classmates, and people I see at the grocery store on Sundays. Crying kids and screaming fans flail around in their seats, refusing to be consoled.

Light bulbs bigger than my head, lined in stacked rows of four, light up the Astro-Turf and dark Southern sky. Vampires with vicious appetites and tiny wings move from skin to skin, sinking in their teeth, leaving behind a red mark coupled with an itch. I can't swat them away because I might hit my Uncle Ted in the face like I did last game.

The air is sticky with humidity, people crammed shoulder to shoulder, skin stuck to metal bleachers and plastic seats. Patches of red decorate the faces of fans flustered by the oppressive heat.

Instruments clatter together two sections to the left, directed by teenagers moving their hands up and down and left and right. They play the fight song after every touchdown, but I can't remember the last time I heard it. My brother, choked by a uniform too small for him, stands up straight, pressing keys and focusing so hard my head hurts for him.

Number 21 is the quarterback, with strong shoulders, blond hair, and tired eyes. His dad sits two rows in front of me. My dad joins in with him, chanting their last name, screaming directions from so far away it's funny. They yell at kids with more than the weight of pads on their shoulders, good

words, bad words, and worse words.

Boulder-like boys run at each other, divided by yard lines and yellow flags, breaking bones for sport. They shuffle on and off the field; water is tossed at them; teammates with broken arms and legs pat their backs as they catch their breath, heaving in and out.

Bodies spin and jump, throw each other in the air and barely catch themselves, screaming at me to be aggressive, when all I want is to be outside those stadium gates lined with police officers and loyal parents.

I watch a swarm of numbers and last names scatter like ants being sprayed with water. My school's shade of blue rushes in a fury to a thick line in the grass, only to be brought down by a light orange ghost grabbing at his helmet, clutching the wire in front of his eyes. A whistle blows; a pinstriped referee tosses a yellow flag; cheers erupt around me. The other side of the stadium doesn't utter a sound.

This goes on for hours. The scoreboard changes, numbers falling constantly, spirits falling with them. Wedged between a handrail and a hard place, my eyes follow the boys running around the faded field. I think they're tired, sprawled on the sidelines, chasing a ball, chasing each other, tackling other people for a number, a title, a trophy, a scholarship, like machines.

I don't think they like September either. They're hot when they should be cold, calm when they should be bold, doing everything exactly as they're told.

Peering down at the bench stacked with them, I see number 46 look back. His eyes are sad, his feet are tired, his head hurts from rattling around inside a plastic case. Beads of water cling to the ends of

his hair hanging in his eyes; his mouth bends into a crooked smile pointed at me.

I smile back, wiggling my fingers slightly at him from seat 7 in row GG, so far away.

I can tell he absolutely, without a doubt, hates football. I mean, it's cool the way the ball spins downfield, and he likes the roar of the fans after a touchdown. But football means September, and he hates September. ♦

*Bodies spin
and jump,
throw each
other in the air*

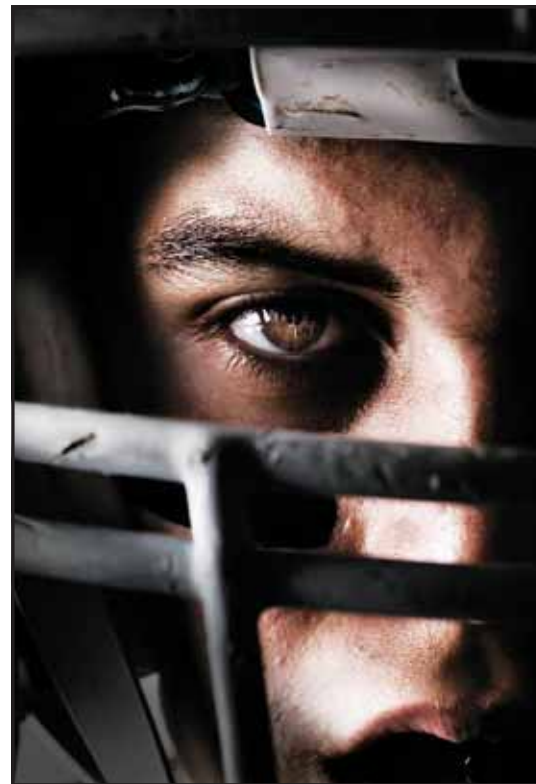


Photo by Chloe Aldecoa, San Tan Valley, AZ

didn't look like what Mom had talked about in her hushed voice. The trees were thin and scraggly and bare. The mush of leaves spread across the dirt floor, shapeless. Around the trunks, thistles gathered, gossamer cages with those red poisonous berries clinging to their twigs like water droplets.

We'd learned about fruit flies in biology. Usually I don't remember much from school, but that afternoon I thought a lot about fruit flies. It turns out they have no central nervous system. They – the scientists, I mean – did scans. Fruit fly

MRIs. I like to think they built tiny little MRI machines for the tiny little fruit flies, that someone spent months hunched over a big desk with two toothpicks making microscopic arm restraints from sewing thread and specks of lint. That they gave the fruit flies mini hospital gowns and told them to just close their eyes and relax at the beep. They probably didn't. They probably did something practical. But that's what I like to think.

They saw little images of the little brains, and they learned fruit flies don't have a central nervous system. They can't feel pain. Nothing.

I saw a fruit fly today, actually. Swirling around my hand. I tried to brush it away, but my finger squished it; it made a brown dot that you could see if you squinted. I don't think anyone bothered to squint, though. It's interesting, that kind of moment. The fruit fly was buzzing around, thinking about – well, not thinking, exactly, but doing whatever fruit flies do – and

then it was dead. No pain, no morphine drip. No tears. Just a tiny little end to one minuscule part of the world. Just a tiny little private darkness.

In front of my house, we have a Japanese maple. There was only one little clump of red leaves left, huddled together for warmth like the penguins in those British nature documentaries. When I stood at the front stoop, the sun blotted out the branches. For a second it shone through the last few leaves. They looked like a fluorescent haze, floating in the sky.

I unlocked the front door.

That night, I stood in the shower. I like the shower. In ninth grade, our English teacher spread her arms wide like Mom with her magic forest and told my class that showering is a rebirth. We were learning about themes of water and renewal in classical literature. Something like that, anyway. We all snickered. The rest of the year, we'd say things like "Getting pretty dirty. Tonight I better get reborn."

But I like the shower. Maybe it is a rebirth. In one parallel universe, after

this shower, I change my ways and study harder, go to Harvard, and end up president. It has to happen somewhere. Somewhere I step out of this shower and buy a guitar and write a famous song. Somewhere I step out of this shower and cure cancer. Somewhere I step out of this shower and go on to live a completely normal, happy life. Die of cardiac arrest.

I think I die in all the somewheres, actually.

And somewhere, I don't go to Harvard or write a song or die of cardiac arrest. Somewhere I stand here in this shower and stare at the puddle around my feet, at the steam and the rushing water. Somewhere I close my eyes and my

sigh is drowned out by the endless droplets. Somewhere I wish I was reborn, but instead I just stare at my feet, stare until the bathroom seems to vanish, until the tile turns to fog, until there's nothing but the knobby pair of feet. And somewhere I sit down on the cold tub floor, lean my head against the wall. Somewhere I'm one of those little droplets, falling and splashing and spiraling down down the drain. ♦

*Fruit flies
can't feel pain.
Nothing.*

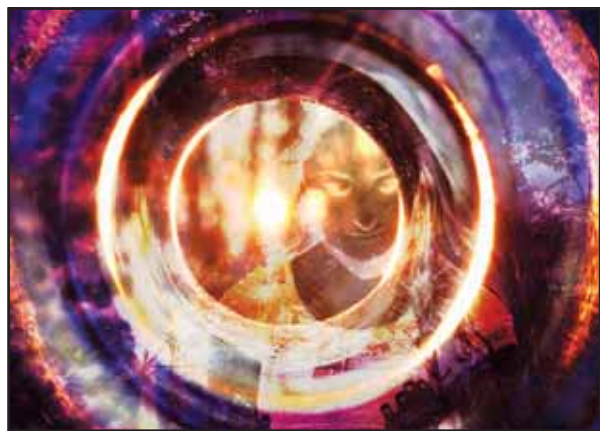


Photo by Pauline Porucznik, Woodland Park, NJ

Keebler Pass

by Andrew Chen, Cerritos, CA

The coastline was dotted with rocks, refuse, and the occasional sea gull. The sky was gray, as it had been for the past week, and the sand had been interrupted by two pairs of footprints.

Keebler Pass

1 mile

Gas

That was the content of the sign the duo had encountered more or less one mile ago, scraped almost to illegibility by the wind. It was a beacon.

The boy looked down at the shotgun in his hands and blew it back, inspecting the shells. "There might be something there," he said.

The girl scanned the area for anything of interest. Then she shrugged.

They continued on, sidelining the coast. The ocean extended somewhere to their right, but they hadn't encountered it yet. To their

closer an yew won't, y-you brats." The wizened shadow of a face was covered by a shawl. "Tryina say sommat?"

"Do you have any food or water?"

"Shor, the town's got some."

He glanced back. "Yeah, we try and stay away from the people—"

"Ifn y'kin git me town food, there's keys for my cah, in th'lot." The old lady motioned with a key ring. "Five oh oh I eight four. It's there fah sure."

"We don't have any gas."

"Pumps are dry, so don't you bother lookin."

All the gas right here wid me. I'd go git the food myself, but my knees are givin out."

She entered a coughing fit.

It was a simple trade, and an advantageous one, she thought.

He shook his head.

"We've got no choice," she interjected.

He looked sharply at her. "She's crazy. She's senile."

"Who knows if there'll be another chance for us to get a vehicle? And we don't have anything to eat. If we get a car, we can actually get somewhere off the coastline."

"But if it's so easy—"

"You two just was-tin' my time?"

"We'll do it," he stammered.

From their elevated position, it was not far before they could see a short stretch of

settlement, and they managed to land in the parking lot without incident.

"She wasn't lying. It's an SUV. 5-O-O-I-8-4." He peered at the tires. "Looks fine to me."

A main street, if you could call it that, diverged into a motel, a stretch of small houses, and a couple of garages and depots. They stopped at a convenience store.

"Do you hear anything?" the boy inquired.

She listened. "No."

"All right. Let's go inside." He edged open the glass doors, then sidestepped in, fingers tensed on the shotgun.

Whoever had looted the store had made a complete mess. The cashier's stand was littered with paper bills; the storeroom lock had been bashed in. Flies buzzed around crates that stunk of rotting meat and produce. The wind had found its way indoors through the shattered windows, and fan blades on

the ceiling slowly sliced the light.

They made their way forward.

The silence was broken by the sound of cans and boxes collapsing on the floor. A scream, then a blur of crazed fury. The fumble to raise his gun – no matter. He was pinned to the floor in an instant. It was at this that the rubber grip of the hammer in her hand began to burn, and as she swung downward, the blunt force connecting cleanly with the creature's chin. She flipped the hammer in the palm of her hand, aiming the claw at her attacker's face. But she wasn't quick enough: another one had her backed into a metal shelf.

As she fought its grasp, two shots rang out. She lay, gasping, and realized that she was still alive – unlike the quivering mass beside her.

As she brushed aside boxes of prescription medicine and stood up, a plastic bottle with a hollowed-out circle for the bullets to come out was thrust in her face.

"Are you bit?"

She shook her head vehemently.

The stranger – a peculiar-looking man whose overcoat was stuffed with layers of rags – gave her another once-over. She turned around at a wave of his pistol, a little embarrassed, but helpless to disagree.

He spotted the boy, who was still in a daze trying to get up, and froze when he saw the pistol.

"They don't surrender," the stranger said pleasantly. He went around the store, securing each area, then peered out the window for a few minutes as if he had alerted the town's population. He came back and kicked over the bodies of their assailants.

It was then that he lowered the gun. "You two are the first I've seen in a month." He scratched his chin and walked toward the back of the store. "Back in a bit."

The girl turned to her companion, who was sitting on the floor, staring at the over-under dangling useless in his hands. "I swear I pulled the trigger," he blurted.

The stranger came back from the storeroom with plastic bags. "Where are you guys from?"

They bagged cans of corn and Vienna sausage, those that looked okay, that didn't have brown leaking out the sides.

"We met up on the road, been wandering around the coast for a week now."

"Well, it's nice knowing someone out there didn't go crazy."

"They don't surrender," the stranger said pleasantly

He sidestepped in, fingers tensed on the shotgun

As it grew dark, the three moved to the back of the store, carrying the plastic bags with them.

"Can't stay in the front. Don't want to wake up to get mugged," the vagrant explained. He opened three cans of beans using a Swiss Army knife, and was finishing them methodically with a plastic spoon. "Then you've got crazies. Shot one of them myself."

"Why?"

He chuckled. "He was trying to kill me. Stole my backpack and ran away with it. When I got to him, he swung at me with a crowbar. Almost knocked my jaw off. Pulled the trigger right there. Lucky there wasn't any runners around, or I would be in trouble." He wiped bean residue from his chin. "They're attracted to sound, you know. Gunshot? Pretty loud, yeah. That's why I use the bottle – it helps a bit. But what I think is ... those high-pitched noises. Alarms. The screaming they do. It's like an opera. That's the thing that really gets them going."

"But the one that just got us—"

"Almost got you. If you're that close, then yeah, they're going to hear you. Probably saw you too, that close. If we wanted the sound, you get one of those things that make dogs shut up, and I'd bet you'd have a million right here." The man shrugged. "Where you guys headed?"

"They say north it's all right.

They've still got the military up there in Canada. They're trying to make a front."

"That so?" The vagrant grunted.

"How old is that news?"

"A week or so. We heard it on a car radio on the highway."

"Why didn't you just take the car from the highway and drive over there and see?"

"Highway's full. It's a massive jam. Some have infected in them, too," the girl said. "Out here on the coast you can actually get somewhere with a car."

"You're right. So where's the car?"

"We found an old lady by the gas station west of here. Said she's got keys for a car in the parking lot. She wants us to get her some food. It's near the hills. There's a hiking trail up

there to the station."

"Could get out of here, then." The realization sank into his face. "No one would throw away their chance at survival."

"She's old," the boy said. "She said she couldn't walk back. It sounds like she lived in the town and then ran away to the gas station, where she knew there was some supplies, when the townspeople started going crazy." ➤ ➤



Photo by Talia Bernstein, Aptos, CA

left were the craggy, grassy hills they had journeyed from.

"Did you ever go to the ocean?"

"No." The wind whipped the stray strands of hair on her face.

"So it's good that we're going now, yeah?" He laughed, then looked down. "Why not, though?"

She thought of something explanatory. But then again, when was the last time she had gone anywhere? After the accident?

"We ... lived way inland."

"Oh."

She wondered if the creatures could swim. Slowly they continued on.

The gas station was on a hill overlooking the ocean. A small road intercepted it. As they approached the station, the girl noticed a body on the ground, a pool of blood around the head. As the boy moved closer to investigate, a voice called out, "Yew git any

You couldn't drive a car up that trail, though, so she left it behind. Guess it didn't come to her until later, when the monsters didn't go away. You know how old people are. It's definitely there. We saw the license plate."

"Guess you guys are serious, then?"

"You-you can come, of course," the girl stuttered. "If you want to."

"I need new shoes," the stranger said, before rolling over. "Did you see the clouds? There's a risk of rain."

• • •
They woke, instead, to the staccato waltz of gunshots.

"Rifles," said the boy.

"Gotta be rifles."

The vagabond nodded. "Sounds like it."

"What's going on?" she interjected.

"Same old."

She could then make out the orange flare on the storefront window, and the sound of the fire alarm. A streak of panic as she saw the shadows of running creatures, illuminated by the firelight.

"Someone crashed and set the building on fire." The boy rubbed his neck.

"They're dead," the stranger added. "If you were thinking about that."

"Well, what are we doing, then?"

"Waiting."

"For what? The town's going to be full of them in a few seconds!"

The vagrant blinked, as if just woken up. "We should get going." He spoke slowly at first, then yelled to the boy, who was desperately packing cans into a backpack. "Get going!"

They stumbled outside into the smoky night, coughing. Ash and debris had risen into the air, clouding their vision. A burning parallelogram reflected off the glass panes on the street, and voices echoed. There was no time to pause for breath.

"Where are we going?" the boy choked out.

"The car. Where is it?" The vagrant had detached the bottle from his pistol and aimed it at a following crowd. A burst of fire, and they collapsed like broken dolls.

The girl struggled to gain some sense of her surroundings. An explosion rumbled behind them.

"Through here!"

They followed her through the light of broken glass. She recognized the sign that they had passed on the way, illuminated in flashes of fire, and squeezed into an alleyway. The vagrant had the sense to fasten a gate behind them, but it was barely an obstacle to the creatures. They clambered over, clawing for the escaping prey.

The scene of madness was just behind her, but the vagrant's pistol reports punctuated the escape. *How long is this block?* Between two walls, confined, suffocated . . .

Finally she saw the night sky. Her eyes strained frantically at the alley when another shadow stumbled after her. Boyish eyes, matted hair. He held on to the shotgun, wheezing, "Where is he?"

She listened. The pistol reports had stopped. Then there the vagrant was, in the open, cursing the pursuers dragging him backwards. A massive

explosion rattled her eardrums, and another followed.

"Get him. I'll cover you," the boy yelled.

He was already loading two more shells into the shotgun.

She felt herself moving, grabbing the collar

of the man prostrate on the ground. She put one of his arms over her neck and dragged him backwards. As she looked back there was a vicious snarl and the raising of the gun. Another marvelous bang, and nothing was left. Her ears rang. They ran toward the wall, the forest, as the noise faded into the distance.

• • •
They had pulled him over to the side of the trail and sat him up against a crag of rock. Blood gushed through his ragged jeans. A rabid animal had torn his leg apart, and the wound was already festering.

"Take the backpack. It's got the food and the compass."

She had already known in her subconscious what would happen, seen the teeth tearing away.

"I'll do it," the boy offered.

"No, it's okay. What I mean, it's fine." He coughed up bloody phlegm. "Look away."

They did. It occurred to her to say something.

She turned around, but the man's lips moved only for an instant before the body jerked, lifeless.

The boy took off the man's backpack and drew out a long, tattered blanket. He walked back into the darkness and came back with the pistol in hand.

It began to rain, and they instinctively huddled together. They ran as the night sky fell around them.

• • •
The light of the gas station seemed a sanctuary against the elements. The glass swivel door opened reluctantly to the two sopping wet strangers.

The old woman eyed them. "Don't git it all wet errywhere."

They stood in the doorway, waiting



Photo by Olivia Leopard, Concord, NC

for something to happen.

"Well, didju giddit or what?" Her tone was nasal, impatient.

The boy opened the bag and drew out cans and bottles on the floor.

Then it seemed as if the old lady had pointed a cane at him. A cane? The girl didn't remember a cane . . .

The rifle shot blew him backwards, but before the wrinkled hand could bolt in another one, a bloodied hand was grasping her throat. The old lady choked and screamed shrilly as the hammer stopped, poised over her forehead.

"NO! NO, no, no, STOP!"

The blows were methodical. The screams gave way. It was mechanical. Her facial expression did not change. She was not revolted.

She felt nothing.

She stood up and went to the boy with a red plastic first aid box that had been behind the counter. He was bleeding badly. It appeared to be manageable until she looked at

A massive explosion rattled her eardrums

the exit wound in his back. She poured on all the antiseptic she could, tearing open the dry white packets with her teeth. She used

the largest bandages to try to stop the bleeding, but things were broken that could not be fixed.

She went to the counter, hurriedly knocking over papers, until she found a prescription bottle next to rifle cartridges and the car keys. She read the label and popped a few smooth white pills into her hand.

"It's cold," he said.

She gave him the pills, unscrewed a water bottle, and gave it to him. He drank a bit, then coughed up a bloody mist.

"I'm cold," he said.

"Hush." She ventured a smile. Her wrist trembled as she wiped his blood. "Shhh."

She rummaged through the backpack and found a box of nine-millimeter bullets. She loaded these into the pistol magazine, slowly and deliberately.

"I have to tell you something." He took a labored breath. "I . . ."

"Don't."

He swallowed his pain, but he was sure that she knew. A certain look – contentment? – came over his features, and he closed his eyes. She was with him until the end.

• • •
She ran with the rifle and backpack over her shoulders. The rain battered the world around her with the resonance of distant drums.

With a jerry can in each hand, she made her way. As she approached the parking lot, she fumbled in her pocket.

A few beeps. The flashing of lights. The sound of footsteps. A snarl.

With a swing of her arm, the plastic collided with something behind her. She dropped it and drew the pistol, and like the opening and closing of a camera shutter, the figures collapsed on the muddy pavement.

She opened the gas can and filled the tank, constantly checking over her shoulder. She threw open the driver's door and climbed inside the humming SUV. The jerry cans sat beside her; the rifle, backpack, pistol, plastic bags, and cans of food all sat in the passenger seat.

She drove past the abandoned town, its fires extinguished. As she veered around a crag of rock, an expanse opened ahead of her: the ebb and flow of the waves on the shore. Millions of raindrops, a sea of ripples, the ocean.

That's all it is, she thought.

The car sped past the shoreline as spirits took flight. ♦



Photo by Sarah Weido, Lilburn, GA

Fruits of Labor

Cherries don't just happen, you know.
No stork traverses the sky overnight
with a lumpy, sweet-smelling bundle
to bless the doorstep of your local grocer.

Although you're content with imaginings
of the sun-blushed bulbs of sweetness
magically manifesting on supermarket
shelves,
materializing without any effort or sweat,

the unpopular, unuttered truth remains:
it took more sweat than it did sunshine
to get those crimson, fleshy marbles
to your plastic shopping basket.

Two-hundred twenty-four times this season
in one hundred seven degrees Fahrenheit,
I filled my scratched and sun-bleached
bucket
with those sun-softened, sweet-and-sour
drupes,

ascending and descending twenty-foot
aluminum ladders
a harness stretched over my shoulders and
across my back,
securing the battered and sticky container at
my stomach
like a pregnant belly overflowing with
pit-filled children.

Maria, Josephina, and Regina cracked their
strained spines,
shuffled sore feet, stumbled with dizzying
dehydration,
and fingered their slowly swelling plastic
tummies,
joking without laughter of pregnancy all
over again.

Your supermarket's sweet summer fruits
didn't just happen:
some girl in some orchard suffered
pregnancy all season
slowly filling and learning to yearn for each
impending delivery
when she could release the fruits of her labor
and start again.

by Whit Jester, Orondo, WA

under the bridge

i know what it's like to stand in the
crying sea
when the night takes you in its mouth
and rolls you 'round
when the delta pulls you deeper and
you throw
your clothes into the black mud forever
under the bridge

by Morgan Chesley, Kasilof, AK

Light Bulb Glow

Aunt Heather's getting married again
and she's sitting cross-legged
on my mother's bed in two robes
and a sweater because
her heart condition leaves her
chilly.

Light bulb glow creeps
across gold wallpaper,
catches on the curling iron
my sister's using,
gently sliding it down
inky hair,
rolling a perm into soft curls.
My mother smiles wide
with bobby pins between her teeth.
I'm in a college sweatshirt and
jeans sifting through
operas, playing them
to this intimate audience,
giggles and a
you-could-walk-down-the-
aisle-to-that-one-in-Philadelphia
four women
in a bedroom sitting yellow
against the blue night.
My lips spread into a slow smile
because her first husband
scared me, his thick arms
rippling under shirts.
Mike won't abandon my aunt in
the intensive care unit
or use a belt to bruise and burn
my cousins' starry skin.

by "Elena," Mt. Prospect, IL

Reddening

If I had nine cans of red paint hanging by
the handles up and down my arms leaving
red-lined marks in stripes from shoulder to
elbow I would throw them far away from
you, searching

for another connotation other than the one
you gave the color to give to yourself,
"I am tough without feelings I am strong
and I am fierce and fiery and I like red,"
convincing who?

Because a uniform skirt is not uniformity if
the legs underneath are laden with small
red pen people you drew,
Red isn't the color of rebellion if that was
the goal,

you thought, you confessed,
reddening

by Zoe Harris, San Francisco, CA

Erased

A day later
and now there's two pieces.
It served me a function once
but the high is gone and capsized
I have nothing new to write.
The paint is beginning to peel,
washed away by unloving and careless
hands –
knuckled by words and dreams thin as paper.
It washes up
on the dark side of the globe –
The left piece first
and the right
just behind.
She picks it up
running careful and bold fingers
along its edge. And in the crack
she sees my words and capsized
she washes away
my name.

by "Dean," Colorado Springs, CO

I'm sorry

When I kiss you
I catch myself thinking about what groceries
I need to buy
Or whether New York street vendors are
allowed to use styrofoam containers
Or how many more minutes I need to stay
If I want to be polite
When I kiss you
I think about not being in my own body
Or questions I can ask to kill the time
Or how I can somehow pull away
While also not starting a fight
When I kiss you
I think about why people don't peel lemons
Or whether I worked out that day
Or if I ate enough protein
Or how mad you'll be
If I don't want to spend the night

by Stephanie Brown, Lincoln, MA

burn, bully, burn

my eyes are not the brightest
or the prettiest, but look into them
and you will see, as through a glass,
my soul.
i'm not the most voluptuous girl you'll meet,
but if you make it past the smallness
of my breasts, you'll find
the bigness of my heart. and yes,
i know it wouldn't hurt to shed a size
or two; however, underneath the skin and fat,
our bones are identical.
my hair may be a frizzy mess,
but the head it stands on
holds an intelligent mind.
my skin is plagued with blemishes,
but my view of the world is clear.
you laugh at me for looking different,
so i laugh at all of you for looking the same.
make fun of me for being quiet, but
at least when i have nothing nice to say
i don't say anything at all.

by April Jones, New Castle, IN

Passing the Time that Is Passing

It was pushing on.
I felt I had to stop it.
The vines grew, tall and strong;
I promptly ripped them out of the ground.
Furious with desperation, I dug my fingers
through their roots.
I tore them from the soil and endured the
torture of watching them wither away.

Roses sprouted in the spring.
I would not stand for such mockery;
I plucked them from their earthly home,
And placed their heads gently in my mouth.
I ripped them off with my teeth and
consumed the petals.

Rain soon arrived.
It spotted the landscape.
The puddles were like a disease –
A disease that seemed to mutate daily.
Every morning the puddles were smaller.
They shrank back into the ground, and I
could not take it.

I finally resolved to do something, so I dug
a hole where every puddle was and buried
them all.

I ripped up the grass.
I made sure no trees grew.
The clocks were an ever imposing presence.
I had no choice but to wrench the hands off
of them.
This failed to stop their incessant ticking
which drove me insane.
I slammed the clocks into the ground and
pried out their gears one by one.

All this, however, did nothing to stop it.
The sun was always there, reminding me.
I swore to myself that I would one day
destroy it.
I swore to myself that I would destroy the
moon, too.
These vengeful promises meant nothing;
there was no stopping it.

Every time I blinked, more wrinkles formed
in my arms and legs.
I could feel it wearing me down each day,
making me weaker and weaker.

by David VonBodungen, Lacombe, LA

Thoughts During an Anxiety Attack

The humming of artificial lights.
The clamminess of palms.
A panicky silence.
The inevitability of death after life.
The uncertainty of life after death.
The brilliance of adolescents deemed
too often as childish utterances.
An inexplicable desire to listen to Brahms.
An inexorable urge to play Brahms.
An inability to name anything composed
by Brahms.
A worn paperback novel.
A practiced smile.
A tilting room.
A heavy hand.

by Hannah Fradkin, Missoula, MT

Color-coded

I don't listen to music
But my playlist is filled with songs
you suggested
They were supposed
to change my life
They didn't, you did,
you don't always know better.
I listen to them and hear you,
Without hurt or guilt,
I see them as them
Because they're my songs
hidden in files
On the hard disk of my
computer; they
want nothing of yours anymore.
I talk in fragments,
Hindi, English, and confused silences
Pausing, struggling to find words,
It was never easy communicating,
You just made me struggle and
left me to grasp for oxygen
In an aircraft designed to tumble midair,
-130 degrees Celsius of pure tyranny.
My favorite game was hide and seek,
I was so good no one ever found me,
But never had the confidence to win,
I was always happy in my safe zone,
Never understanding the fun of
having a den
A part of life I never learnt.
I always liked coloring, filling the blanks,
But never sketching; I was too scared
To draw a single out-of-place,
Considered-as-wrong line and spoil
the beauty,
I forgot it was my creation, I could throw
black ink
And it wouldn't matter,
It is because I am.
You liked that, didn't you?
Me being a shadow?
I wanted so much
For you to collect the puzzle pieces of the
muddle of my brain
And organize them into logical order,
preferably alphabetical?
I wanted you to find me and hand me over
the den, only if I had ever lost,
could I really win,
Sometimes being alone pushes you to find
things you never knew existed,
I wish you had let me draw the contours
of your face
And not said, "Maybe another day, you
don't draw anyway, or do you?"

by Tanvi Kusum, Gurgaon, India

Thy Sky

The sky was a blank space
It sat there waiting
waiting for anything
a movement, a noise, anything
Maybe a bird, plane, even Superman
It thought it saw something
But no, it was another cloud passing
At least it was something
He wanted to talk to the cloud
The cloud was like a cat
it completely ignored him
and once again the cloud was by himself
and it remained that way

by Danny Kuehl, St. Louis, MO



Photo by Marisa Kirchner, Las Vegas, NV

A New Driver's Ode to the Freeway

In the line of fire,
Shots whisk past your ear.
You feel your heartbeat in your toes.
Roaring engines blur together,
Burrowing in the back of your throat.

Escalating and undulating in waves,
They sear across the way,
Leaving a trail of blaring horns.
You inch above thirty-five,
Wearing tears in the wheel.

The world sets on a tilt, but you don't
go with it.
Creeping sideways, right-ways, wrong-ways,
Wrench left into your lane as
Buckshot nips your nose.
And another flips you the bird.

The ramp of salvation
Draws you away from danger on its
sturdy shoulders.
The shelter of solid ground,
Away from racing fiends and stress-driven
commuters.

Following the path in peace until it's
too late,
It begins again.
Grabbing you and strapping you back to the
platform
Lines solidify, ensuring your fate.

Before you know it,
You're back in the line of fire.
Lead pellets zooming past your cheeks,
You clutch your life with all the brawn
in your fingers,
Eyes shut tight, and the passenger yells:
"Open up!"

by Mitali Sharma, Houston, TX

a great ocean

i, the slate, sit still as always.
the heather spoke but i only
caught the last word. a tiny
pinpoint, a great ocean.
carry me, lift me away to
you, blanketed forests,
gentle wondering and the stars.

by Sydney Shavaliar, Byron Center, MI

van Gogh's ear arrived yesterday

Missing his dear, van Gogh cut off his ear:
without her there he did not wish to hear.

Inspired by the artist, his work put
aside, I bit off my tongue and sent
it to you – after all, it was you who
taught me vocalization.

Out on the stoop your wife opens
my package to find not a ring
or surprise, but a letter inside.

Confused, fingering the flap,
she eyes the return label and
leaves it for you.

Open it and find everything you have
left to me: quaint silence and misery.

Hold in it your hand; feel it cower
in your palm: accept my sliminess,
understand my pain!

Hang my sorrow (your mistake)
over the dinner table, near your plate.

by Sarah Patafio,
Ridgefield, CT

Reluctance

she commits to everything with elastic
shackles
and a window to hide behind

lost with a black and white map
of her own mind

climbing up a ladder leading down
you're the only one who can fix yourself

anybody else wouldn't do it as well

by Bailey Yates,
Antelope, CA

Hope!

The sixth star in the sky
It smiles at me
Naughtily nudging me to try
Waltzing to its starry symphony
Hope showers like diamonds
But doesn't land on my open hands
Doesn't shatter on the stony ground either
But challenges me to another dance
Now you are mischievous number zero
My ability to try. And your meanness
Is number one, every time I fail and cry
Ours is a back and forth game, yes,

Mr. Little life
And I: He lies, I strive
He blames, I tame
He cheats, I flail
He loves, I wait
'cuz when I'm finally forced to face the
super stars in the sky
They paste me with their popularly precious
potion
Popping with the pious primeval pistol of
Hope.

by Keertana Subramani,
Dubai, United Arab Emirates

Hate Is a Strong Word

I wonder what she saw
when she looked into my eyes
as I held fists tight by my side

I know
sure as hell
what I saw
in hers

Veins as red and intense
as a ferocious wildfire

Eyes beady enough to be strung
along a rich old woman's neck

by Ayling Dominguez, Bronx, NY

Global Issues

Hazy sky on the
day of a solar eclipse.
Frozen-over windows on the
day you learn to drive.
Racism and
the war in Iraq,
dog-eared pages and
a rained-out picnic.
Mud hugging the edges
of brand new boots,
global warming and
the endangerment of frogs.
Too much sugar in
your Starbucks coffee, and
a white sofa, stained with Coke,
spilling over into the next morning.

by Amanda Huang, Short Hills, NJ

Soporific

Seen me before, haven't you?
Can't remember.
It was the squall! No, it was the surge.
No, still can't recall.
Saw you laugh and cry. But still can't
remember.
Then reminiscence fell down.
Oh, the life I saw.

by Eisen Yim, Mason, OH

re-collect

my pen lays stiff and captured
twisted between my fingers exactly the way i
learned not to hold a pencil
words will themselves free
fighting to tumble out and dot my page
with memories
my mother brushes her bangs from her
strong browbone, aligning her
painted eye with the viewfinder
even then
the age i am now
she knew how to dot a film strip
with memories
she still has bangs, but her eyes
– unpainted, ungarnished, understated
flick across my words
and see a photo
framed in her viewfinder

by Mads Phillips, Salt Lake City, UT

To Fall Asleep

One night I closed my eyes
and I woke up in a dream.
I was strolling along an exotic coastline
full of sparkling sand.
The white-capped tide hooked my ankles
and reeled me out to sea
like a great white to blood.
There were lovely strangers scattered
throughout the seaside town.
Everybody's appearance seemed
to be unlike any I've ever saw.
People's complexions were illuminated,
so I skeptically glanced around.
Afterwards I realized that it wasn't because
of the blue lights reflecting from a cellular
device,
but because the people were actually
listening
to enchanting tales told by others.
The stories dragged on and on and on
until the horizon had swallowed the sun.
At nighttime there was a gathering
around a rather vast campfire.
Some people tossed their past into the blaze,
while others studied the roaring flames
like it was a fortune teller's glass.
It must've been close to midnight because
eyelids began to fall and mine had
grown heavy.
All at once the small crowd started revealing
their secrets in a faint whisper.
The ones that were mistaken to be fake
never actually wore a disguise.
Outsiders wandered around while quickly
looking into our eyes and they could tell
we were closer to each other
than anybody else they'd ever known.
Not long after those midnight confessions
and rambling conversations,
the silvery moon tucked me in before
the sun had the chance to wake me up.
Early the next morning I boarded a plane
that would take me all the way home.
I then landed elsewhere; however,
I don't quite remember where, because
the brightest star had shook me awake
and stolen my dreams.
Reality slapped my cheek and
shoved me back into place
where the same old thing returned.
When I got home I stepped
into the heavy downpour.
It didn't cleanse me like it usually did;
Instead, the rainwater washed away
the sand in my hair,
the salt on my skin, and the sparkle
in my eyes.
Afterwards the towel made of cotton
dried up my memories.
I crawled back into my queen-sized bed
that guards my dreams.
And I tried to fall asleep and recollect
my fantasy,
but my eyes wouldn't close like they used to.
You ever have a dream that ...
feels so real, when you wake up,
you just wanna lie there with your eyes
closed to hold onto it?
But my eyes were wide open and
I wasn't dreaming.

by Isabel Crosby,
Cannon Falls, MN



Photo by Kimberly Vance, Gilbert, AZ

Fragile

I bleed the rainbow
From violet wounds.
My hand is made of glass.
Compressed carbon, promising seas
of colorful bliss.
I am like a mirage, I am the invisible,
touted to be magical,
But really, I am just frail and delicate.
I'm the cut glass treasured in expensive
houses,
So intimidating that I never break,
But rarely have I ever been used; no one
has touched their lips to mine,
I've never been filled with bloody red wine.
I'm just caged in crystal admirahs and
made moon eyes at.
I'm admired but never loved,
Treasured but never owned.
I sit alone and wait, hoping that someone
will one day think I'm theirs to break.

by Tanvi Kusum, Gurgaon, India

First Love's Duet

She tells me a trash can in Montana
is better than any apartment in a
Boston suburb
I ask her, What's so bad about a trash can?
Why don't we just go, figure the details
out once we get there?

The details
She laughs
Yeah, the *details*
Food, water, shelter ...

We do this dance,
the duet of the dreamer and the realist
She tells me she needs to be there to keep
me close to the ground
Just as much as I need to keep her from
sinking too far into it

Love is cliché, love is stupid
And all my life I've resented the
thought of it
But dear god
A trash can in Montana is better than
anywhere without her

by Grace Elizabeth Stathos,
Malden, MA

thank-you note

I see you by the window
with an unlocked smile.

in these rooms there is so
much reaching across to you.
there is so much unfolding
with this blanket of space.

I have opened my mouth
and swallowed the firm
lump in my throat
found the words in my gut
you've called this strength,
you've called this courage.

I see you by the window with
your eyes looking back at me.
In the voice of hope, patience grows
smoothing over the coarse surface.
darkness is a sweltering thing but you
are like Saule, the golden-
haired goddess
riding along the sky in a
chariot, battling the
powers of darkness.

Slayer of all that makes
up the toxic horizon. tough yet gentle hands
these collective words are filed from
my chest.

i see you in darkness
the light dances in starlight with
your understanding voice.

here are the words i
hope you'll remember me by.

by Megan Tyler, Winnipeg, MB, Canada

Functional Fixedness

My mother,
Bless her heart,
Has told me since I could pick up a pen:
"Do not write on yourself"
Or not
To write on my walls, because
"It doesn't look good"
But I think that's what they call
Functional fixedness,
And I think I'd much rather my daughter
Treat her skin as paper
To write on
Than paper to cut up and crumple and rip,
Because trust me,
When it's the middle of July
And all you want is to wear a bikini
with your friends,
The scars on your arms
And legs
Don't look too pretty
Either.

by "Charlotte," Fishers, IN

Guitar

Silent curvy woman,
haunted by dark pasts,
come here. Scream my heart out.

by Zoe Webb,
Auckland, New Zealand

The Law of Enchantment

Lights dot your jaw
And we become forbidden like our
perfumed bodies.
Matte and soft and slick in sugar crystals,
The law of enchantment lashes me in
this electric rain,
Beating down upon our crowns.
Under its authority I realize that I cannot
watch hair fall across your cheeks and
catch on your lip.
I cannot watch words pour through
your teeth,
And I cannot watch your eyes go blue
and round like sea glass,
Without breaking up
Into limbs
And vital organs
And piles of silky, stringy flesh
All enchanted by you.

by Natalie Slopem,
Hastings-on-Hudson, NY

The Ride Home

Each
reluctant
step
through the san diego airport

only spelled

an endless journey

back to the
frigid
icebox

that I
sadly

call home

by River Steiner, Hartland, WI

Faithful Friend

Aged tiger maple and rosewood
mesh together in a linear progression.
Hairline fractures pockmark the surface
of the lacquer;
deep scratches pepper the patched timber.
An oil-coated scroll retains countless stories.

Words soft as silk roll away from silver,
ear-piercing screams melt off gold.
Steel sings a much sweeter song,
while baritone commences with mane
brushing iron.

Ears open, eyes closed.
Tactile sense working to press on the
fretless board.
Cheek to chin, finger to finger,
all working in unison to achieve a
common goal.

A velour throne prevents catastrophe,
locking its melodious voice inside.
The other half snapped back into place:
like a rider settling into a saddle.

by David Morrison,
Gilmanton, NH

This Is the Way

When it ends, I'm sitting on the mattress
with Charlie, thinking about the way
we used to be.

We grew up in the suburbs of somewhere,
Nebraska
in a neighborhood where nothing ever
happened
but I think we were happy anyway.

On his tenth birthday I told him I loved him
he held my hand with sticky fingers and
didn't let go
there were grass stains on his knees and
when he kissed me it tasted like frosting
I wonder if he remembers all that.

Things started to change when Charlie's
older brother joined the army.
We ran away one night to look at the
stars together
when we came back they had buried his
brother in the garden
and the whole house smelled like lilies.

We were both sixteen when they started
building bomb shelters in the backyard
but Charlie was gone and he didn't send
postcards anymore.

I didn't see him again until I was holding
someone else's hand
he'd cut his hair and was wearing a uniform,
I can't remember for which side.
It doesn't matter now.
We passed on the street, and though I know
we recognized each other,
neither of us stopped to say hello after
all this time.

I turned eighteen and I sent him a postcard
with a picture of an ocean he'd probably
seen before
but he replied anyway to say he was sorry
and that he was coming home.
Something had broken inside of him.
The radio stations told me things were
ending for good and I believed them
because Charlie and I sat on the front porch
and watched explosions in the sky.

There's screaming from outside now,
this must be the way
he puts his hands over my ears and I try to
remember the last time we were this close
I wonder if the constellations we made up
as kids will still hang in the sky when
we're gone
little pinpricks in the dark
shining for no one.

by Maya Caulfield, Boulder, CO



Art by Rachel Cross, Longmont, CO

What Confidence Looks Like

You say I will never take my place among
the stars, but if you break my bones, whole
galaxies explode.

You say I will never decorate the night sky,
but if you cut my skin stardust flies.

I carved out black holes with a slight flick
of the wrist.

I painted on the constellations.

I am the reason planets spin.

So don't you dare tell me I will never be
among the stars, because I am the
brightest one in the heavens.

by Shelby Willis, Ashland, KY

Tea and Escapism

sinking in
an earthy
beverage,
sips taken
to reconcile
reality and dreams,
a passive strategy to
fight what's wrong,
to fight life's
irrefutable conflicts,
quietly promising
new beginnings,
steam
rising from your azure mug in
a peaceful fashion,
slowly rising to
the ceiling,
but there's a feeling
that is
too large to mince,
to sugarcoat,
to ignore,
but still, you have to
admit
that
you're the ultimate
escape artist,
using your own thoughts and this mug as
a ladder,
life's challenges no longer
matter,
because the water is
warm and
your heart is thawed and
both you and the tea bag are
hanging onto
a lifeline.

by Hannah Butcher, Lake Worth, FL

Poetry

Lately, I've been too tired for poetry.

Too tired
to form words
and keep them,
boil them into rhymes
and press them into lyrics,
sing them from my heart or
scream into a megaphone that
nobody cares to put their ear to because
why would you want to be deafened?

by Amai Gensou, Mercer Island, WA

It dried.

I'd like to swim in
the river but the drunken
sun has sipped it all

by John Michael Londres,
Iloilo City, Philippines

a glimpse of gold

the vibrant,
bright,
crisp
amber leaves rain down on my head.
like tiny ballerinas,
they
dance
through
the
air.

the teeth of the rake
gnaw at them until they are in a
messy,
shredded
pile.

everywhere i look, there are
crimson,
maroon,
and burgundy leaves covering the ground
like a thick carpet.

a cardinal swoops out a tree.
the beautiful crimson bird captures
my attention,
making me stop and stare.

"i want to go first!" shouts drew.
"too late!" i respond, not giving
him enough time to process my
sentence before i take action.

i get a running start, and i
launch
myself into the damp mountain.
the sour aroma of
damp,
dead,
decaying

leaves penetrates my nostrils.
a twig jams at my side;
itchy, gross bugs surround me,
but there is no place i'd rather be.
"wait for me!" drew whines; he plops
down beside me, showering me in
a wave of sappy leaves.
i would never tell him this, but i am glad
i have him for a brother.

a sharp,
crisp,
cool
autumn wind rushes over me;
it
whips
my hair,
and freezes my nose.
i inhale,
the old,
rustic air fills my lungs;
it cools me, calms me,
i am totally relaxed.

i
love
Autumn.

by Maggie Schlabach, Monticello, IL

Dip Your Toes In

Breathing ice does not
flow into their white shawls of flesh.
It bites, murmurs of their slant nail
shields, explores their teardrop curves.
Soft crevices catch and cradle the cold blue
quips of liquid movement. Futile wiggling
now splashes into applause, not
the groans of rubber and foam and socks.

The coy sun ignites moist smiles
striking the riverbed feet.
Cages wait, spilled into the dirt,
evading wet freedom. For now
ten enslaved kin savor their swim,
probing the melting blue horizon as
it, in turn, pulses a flicker of feeling
where they hadn't thought to look.

by Katie Reiter, Tomahawk, WI

Allegory

Misplaced coat button
Instant, but not flagrant flaw
Vulnerable inch

by Gabriella Giugliano,
Westwood, MA

Spring Adventure

Spring has arrived
and the grass is changing clothes
the birds humming along with the wind
whistling

spring wakes up with the tiredness of winter
trees wear the green blankets
the wind drives from north to south
spring swings into march with a smile
rain yells to the ground
the sun steers down to earth
spring departs as fast as it arrives

by Habib Tirmizi, Greer, SC

A Simple Servant

A simple servant in my fist
A royal goddess of the words I think,
Equally adept at words' removal
and seeking my mind's approval.

Erases all the struggles and scribbles I make,
Graceful sweeps, twirling gently like
a snowflake.

Gradual movements in a frosty air.
Skating in a charming way, but leaving
behind a slight impression.

Pressing the end firmly on plain white paper.
Demonstrating its boldness by a confident
solid line.

Elaborating patterns that are stunning
to behold.
Vigorous swirls and curves that are
barely controlled.

Slowly erasing the last piece of his
tender soul.

A battle of ferocious emotions,
demonstrating a desperate bleak hole.
Handicapped with half its function
And thrown away without compunction.

by Anna Sharudenko, Los Angeles, CA

Death to Clichés

I look deep into my soul,
and with a heavy heart like
a bag of stones I sadly proclaim
your end.
“Clichés! Your time has come.
Constantly you’ve been told not to
Push your luck, and time and time again
You’ve pushed us over the edge.
I might as well say you’re as bad as money
because you’re the root of all evil.
Though we avoid you like the plague
you continually attach cats to our tongues.
You’ve been free as a bird, you dirty cliché,
and it’s time to get back in your cage.
You must deeply love us poets because
it is known
you only hurt the ones you love,
and we’ve been hurt quite a lot by your
stereotypical techniques.
One bad apple spoils the bunch, but
you, cliché,
are a rotten apple tree producing
tainted fruit.
Beauty is in the eye of the beholder,
yet no one sees
beauty in you, cliché.
So with joy, I say it’s time to put you
out of commission.
But don’t be sad, cliché.
That’s just the way the cookie crumbles.”

by Damian Remmell, Freeland, MD

Train

A pretty peopled world,
tiptoeing between raindrops and the
skeletons of trees on the horizon.
Pencil pencil pencil till you’re dead,
train tracks wrapped around your neck
(mostly the pills just make you sweat).
John’s got a new world order.
Can’t wait to – sir please get me out of
this rickety cage cage cage not too long
to train death
I’ll put you on my wall or something.
On the train thinking about falling in love
at the opera house, asking
Why can’t i sleep with the lights off?
Too sad for love poems
You’re halfway purple, halfway empty
'cause the ending cut the cigarettes.
When you’re finally home,
get out of the car (without a kiss this time).
Pretty Peopled Anythings
Walking past the train station,
tired of being high,
overwhelmed by the constant delusion
that there is one more.
We’re used to the way the skeleton midwest
dances on the skyline –
we stopped asking what town we’re in
Can’t wait to – sir please get me out of
this cage, not too long
to train death.
John’s got a new world order;
it’s sketched out on the back of the seat
in front of him.
he kicks he kicks
he’s half dead

by Yuma Carpenter-New, Beloit, WI

Feel More

I’m sitting here scratching a bug bite
Wishing the AC was a little less cold
And I want to run to the edge of the earth
and feel how much my legs hurt, how
much breath it takes and then jump off
so my legs sway below me like noodles
And all the air in the universe pushes
against me, inside of me, all at once
My shirt feels too close to my neck
And I want to climb a ladder to the sun, so
close that its heat makes me forget I have
a body and then fall off through the sky
into cold, clear water and go down, down,
down until I feel shivers between my toes
He bites my lip when we kiss
And I want to bury my feet in quicksand
and hold onto the branch of a tree that
keeps growing and growing until I’m all
stretched out and my feet are pulled free
and I spin around and around the branch
like a pinwheel
And I want to say something because it
feels so good and I know I can feel more
but I don’t
Because how do you tell someone that you
want your legs to fall off and your face to
burn and your arms to stretch into oblivion
Just so you can feel like two souls floating
alone somewhere
Completely and utterly free

by Rebecca Bendheim, Barrington, RI

I’m Not Lost

I wouldn’t say I lack a sense of direction ...
out loud, that is.
But I don’t get too lost,
just enough to call it a day,
to make it a memory
of a laugh and not a tragedy.
You see, part of me enjoys
the causality of getting lost.
I look around, see a tree, a squirrel,
a squirrel going up a tree.
I would have missed that
had I reached the park on the first try.
Funny story:
I got lost going to the doctor’s office. I ended
up by a cemetery.
I hope that wasn’t an indirect message.
But I don’t think I’m misdirected – I’m
headed where I have to be.
I don’t know the path I’m pacing until I
look behind.
Right ahead is the world I’m facing, like
a soft-cheeked baby, for the first time.
I have no thirst or hunger, but I do
have time.
So what if I get a bit lost every now
and then?
“Then” usually being the moment directly
proceeding now.
If it’s meant to be, I’ll reach my destination
when I must arrive.
But each step I take is part of the story.
You could say I’m lost
but I know I stride down the road that was
built for me.

by Makena Binker-Cosen,
Buenos Aires, Argentina

I Am the King of Me

I am the king of Me:
A divergent country grown of diverse seeds.
But sometimes I shiver and think
One day there’ll be a mutiny.

by Janiah Lockett,
Sugar Land, TX

I bleed poetry

After you left,
I’ve been asked why I don’t
turn to the blade and
let my insides flow out of my body
until I pass out.
I tell them that I can no longer be that
once-weak girl
who struggled not to wince when hearing
the word
beautiful.
I have found courage in the sharp spindles
I snipe
with my alliterations
and the wounds I’ve left on your reputation
with my metaphors.
There is nothing silly about a simile
and how ironic that you said poetry
was for children and yet when I shot poetic
bullets from my tongue
I brought you down on your knees,
tears streaming down your face,
crying “how could you?”
I guess you were right when you said
poetry speaks to children:
after all, you treated me like
a child who was meant to be put up
for adoption.
But if my words shattered your world,
then doesn’t that make you the child?
“Pain is weakness leaving the body,”
you told me
when you injured yourself
playing a game you were never recognized
for.
I guess I did you a favor by hurting you.
So when you called me, crying, because
you couldn’t fall asleep
with all the monsters I brought back to life
dancing through your mind,
I let you apologize for the demons you
once haunted me with.
As I bleed these words from my pen,
I am no longer that weak schoolgirl
who could
never win a fight on your playground.
As I bleed poetry, I am strong.

by Julianne Heberlein,
Germantown, MD

Beware the Dog

Wilting with the crust of silver,
An unthawable heart battling
Thorned diamond barracks and
Protruding toxic spikes, their
Snapping jaws barking to
Beware the dog.

by Alisa Khieu,
San Jose, CA



Photo by Faith Mupoto,
Milton Keynes, England

pears

here’s to our rhapsodic summers
bowl of pears on the back porch, waiting
for the time to
ripen
we floated through the air on our yellow
swings, immutable
all I wanted was to be spume on your
saltwater breeze
I didn’t tell my mother about the hot-and-
cold you pressed into my neck
but after you biked home I brewed six cups
of tea and poured them all down the drain
[well then I cut my losses and lay around
listening to art songs
trying to pretend my hands weren’t
trembling]
at midnight I realized that I hadn’t told you
I always hated pears.

by Margot Armbruster, Elm Grove, WI

Primary Prison

You walk through heavy metal doors
with your wide eyes and eager smile
you hug your mom goodbye
with your Barbie backpack and pink
lunch box.
You have no idea that they will drug you
with the pill
of knowledge
with rules,
restrictions, and
regulations.
and for
the next 13 years
they will feed you
the alphabet
through a metallic
bitter spoon
when all you wanted
was to have a voice of your own.

by Jennah Hunter, Oshkosh, WI

TwentySomething

Entry-level job?
Need two years’ experience?
\$8.25 an hour

by Sofia Wesley, Yorktown, VA

Planets

Two rows of stars and two captivating
planets are high above me.
I can't take my eyes off them,
And I blink and realize
The planets blinked too.

by Hannah Lomas,
Manchester, England

third period physics

newton's third law
says that you cannot touch
without being touched.

so why
can I feel
your lips
on mine
when you
don't even know
my
name?

by Alanis Baumgardner, Barnegat, NJ

Delicious Drizzle

Safe in tufts of swollen ash
Bloated pillows shield the sun
Turning gray as time goes on
Scraping across the golden sky
Tumbling toward the lower world

Ridding toxins from its belly
Stretching, broken, plunging others
Pouncing, pinging at the warm dirt
Joining with its neighbors
Tiny bullets pelting tin roofs

Wakened from soaked soot and grime
Floating up to settle home
Rolling on the drafts of air
Freshness lingers in the wind
Sugared drops tickle my tongue

by Sofia Miller, Wauwatosa, WI

Teenage Summer

In June the streets are filled with teenagers
set free from their cages
We let watermelon juice drip down our faces
We watch beach movies that mirror the
endless party of life

but deep down you know it is all for show
In July the lazy haze swirls
the fresh fruit sits crisp in our bellies
we watch *Grease*
and hope that the summer love will last

The air has gone sour in the heat of August
We spit it out like putrid milk
we know that school won't be like
High School Musical

a heaviness weighs down our chests as
we pack our backpacks
In September the chilled wind blows
we rush to eat our breakfast before
a busy day

we watch the summer beach movies
and wonder why it can't last forever

by Alex Brockman, Berwyn, IL

Places to Live, Eventually

the beginning, middle, and end of your most
treasured novel

Hope Is Existent, USA. where there are
lemonade stands at every corner and
the fee is a chirpy grin

a hollow treehouse – but inside are all your
childhood toys and games – when you're
there you have pleasant memories and it's
like you're six years old again

the backbone of nights spent swiveling
across a ceiling

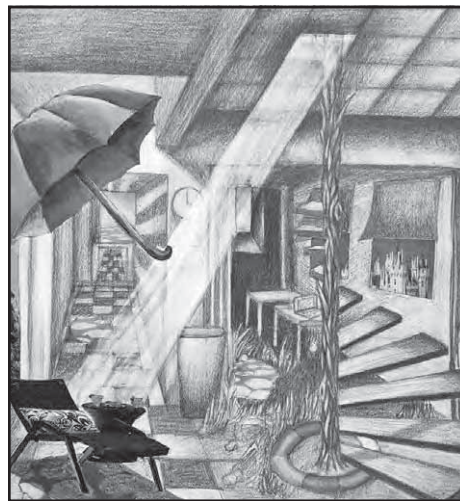
the hole you dug up that was supposed to
get you to the other side of the world

an inky black street with dark rain
everywhere

an amber dandelion field with tiny bugs that
whisper reassuring words into your ears

a cottage near the beach

a jar that contains all your mirthful
recollections, and when you're feeling
heavy-hearted and down in the dumps,
you can stay there



Art by Na won Choi, Old Bethpage, NY

the dead space in between where all the
planets are lined up

the black hole where the light leaks
through when you hold the moon in
your clenched fists

an abandoned house with vines all around
it and lacy curtains on the window. the
tree in front of the house has an old tire
swing. the grass is chaotic up your knees;
the flaking specks of paint align all over
the porch but it's the most charming house
you've ever seen

a house where you finally understand the
meaning of "home is where the heart is"

the space in the sky where the sun used to
be ... but now it's set and there's an empty
space for you to shine

a deserted corridor, with lights as bright
as your future

by Maryan Osman, Mashall, MN

Green Castle

The color blue calms me
My first words were blue
It excited but also pacified me

Green led me to question
I first contemplated the universe
When I stared at the green plastic
Of my toy castle
and wondered

Why I did exist
why did anything exist
I felt like I approached the edge
of something
probably my consciousness
or my 4-year-old mind

This memory exists within a timeless
part of me

It's significant enough
to be on its own
I've never shared it before
at least not written about it

The green of that plastic
so synthetic and vibrant
It tore apart the universe.
The contrast of gray and green
set me off
and sent me into a state of wonder
contemplating
I'm meditating
Maybe this was the first time I've meditated

I feel like my mind is at rest
but also everywhere
eyes are lifting my mind.

by Mike Grill, Arrowsic, ME

Hurting

You hurt me
you hurt me more than Topshop jeans
that don't fit

than tr1g0n0m3try
than toilet paper that has run out
than incorrect spelling
than unfinished books
than looking at food when i'm hungry
than missing the morning bus
than lack of air conditioning
than lack of heating
than being told to grow up
than being told to enjoy my youth
than happy endings
than sad endings

but you hurt
like peaches and open wounds
like cast iron and battle wounds
like controlled happiness and limitless
sadness
like burst veins and watery grins
like smiling through pain and tearstained
t-shirts
like failed exams
like foggy mirrors that render you breathless

But we hurt, two troubled muscles throbbing
and choking in the smoke and blues.
hating like enemies yet sleeping like
lovers. loving like torches in the dark.

Finding ... finding ...

by Merveille Nsumbu, Fulham, England

Bulb Snaps

It is my time of loneliness.
The time when I memorize
every curve of my phone,
but I never feel it tickle my
fingers with its slight vibration.
A time when my face feels the
soft cooling side of the couch pillow
instead of the flow of a natural breeze.
When my mouth stays shut
and laughter is foreign.
The time when all I do is reminisce
about the way you used to call me
splendid under the crabapple tree
right before we got kicked out by the kids'
soccer team.

The mindless noise on the tv
of two brothers
screaming at one another over the
girl with the horrible taste in midnight
cherry lipstick.
A time of the mascara brush separating
each coated lash
that no one but my mirror will
gaze upon.
Newly curled hair
straight off the hot iron
that will fade like the sunlight.
But my loneliness feels as if
it will never fade.

My eyes so used to seeing
the blank space in front of me.
Maybe that's why I drew on everything
when I was 5.

And the air in my lungs feels empty
making it harder to take in each breath
Like when the metal wire in the bulb
snaps, and the light flickers
and makes the glass break and
then no longer
exists.

by Kayla Broday,
Arlington Heights, IL

Sunsets During Mosquito Season

It's raining outside and I'm scared because
I just might be falling in love with you
My heart has pleats on its circumference,
not the kind on pretty dresses and skirts,
the type that makes you wonder why it
was left out in the rain, why nobody
decided to return it to its owner

My baggage is a TJ Maxx suitcase I don't
want you carrying, I'd rather tear my
rotator cuff than see you see me, hold me,
feel me

My mother asked me what being yours is
like and all I could think of were sunsets
during mosquito season

Not knowing what to do next, but not going
inside because yes, I'd save my blood but
would I save myself?

It's raining outside and I'm scared
Because I took you to my favorite bookshop,
and now you know exactly where to
find me.

by Oona Sullivan,
Boston, MA

7 Dates Unsettled

I. My coffee was water disguised in a cardboard cup

You said you loved the smell of bookstores and black coffee so we sat below a crooked map of America in orange wicker chairs that gave us splinters.

II. He comes up with these things, not me

You mentioned the irony of the phrase “pursuit of happiness.” Aren’t happy people in pursuit of something greater than themselves?

III. Francisco Goya romanticism

On the third date I played the piano and watched you gasp for breaths of art in place of oxygen. You never touched my paintbrushes But I looked at you and saw exquisite representation.

IV. Crying in a frozen yogurt shop

On his death anniversary, you held me and calmed me when I felt the weight of my father’s wedding ring hang like a noose around my neck. With the unexpected there is no time to wait.

V. I regret my mundane demeanor

In March we made plans to someday move to New York City and live out our dreams. You asked *Why someday?* To which I claimed my youth but maybe an honest answer would have gotten me out of this exhausted town.

VI. Heels are hard to dance in, anyway

My high heels and your black shoes shone. My dress was stitched with emerald envy against the girls who were not too shy to dance under high rotunda ceilings.

VII. From here it is unsettled

I guess it’s true girls tend to date men like their fathers. I’ve noticed you take too many pills. Today your words were slurred and your balance was off, but your shirt was ironed and your kisses were not sloppy.

by Courtney Cox, Nicholasville, KY

Confused Capture: Whale Interactions

Side by side
Tails slap, rippling the exterior
The tide yanks the water to its desire
Breaching, spraying a salty stream
Pods drift through their infinite abode
Side by side
Trapped by an impenetrable surface
Luminosity – lost into clouds of somber
Routine is broken, habitat invaded
Sealed by a foreign metal hull
Side by side

by Kayleigh Kvoool, Sussex, WI

child of the universe

I’m sorry to the boy with black spiky hair to whom I didn’t give my real name

If it’s any consolation my insides were begging me to give you my real number

But if it’s any consolation my lips couldn’t form the right words to invite you to my soul

I loved a boy who overlooked me and it really messed me up

what’s that thing you say I am to you? your Petrarchan lover, and you’re a self-proclaimed poet

well, guess what I will never allow myself a Romeo and I am not your Juliet

I am not your anything I belong to the moon and to the stars, but predominantly I belong to myself

I cannot be owned and I do not take possession lightly my soul came from a black hole and my body from a supernova

by Caitlin Callanan, New City, NY

Tears from Above

As the glum sky weeps high mountain peaks cleanse themselves and low valleys bathe.

by Megan McFarland, Attleboro, MA

Blue-Gray

I climbed a mountain and broke in half all in the course of a weekend. I’ve locked myself in the bathroom cold tile, gray walls and I’m nit-picking at my problems like I do with my obsessions obsessions hair falling out. You came crashing like a wave slamming my body on the rough sand my nose and mouth are filled with salt but my eyes are clear clear as a foggy mirror can be so I wipe the dew from the bathroom mirror I turn the knob of the bathroom door waves keep crashing. Freedom is in my nose, my mouth, my eyes.

by Erica Luzzi, Mountain Lakes, NJ

Sunday Matinee

Life is a theatre program that your wife dragged you to, for it was with no desire of your own that you wished to arrive here, among the musty chairs and dusty audience, squinting through the murky dark, but how could you say no to that face? That darling face that outshines any spotlight when a look of earnest wonder becomes its backdrop?

So you stay, sitting like everyone but the actors who frolic with flourish and timed emotions atop their lines, and you sit, unaware of the hidden door inside your chest, waiting for its cue.

by Sarah Bridgeport, Columbus, OH

Imaginary Friends

You pique my curiosity, O object of my wonder – focus of my delight, garden-variety marvel. The curve of your back, the spark in your glance every fiber of you awaits decryption. I study you in rabid inquiry draw blueprints, diagrams, maps – connect dot upon clashing dot –

Eureka – got you figured out, love. You’re built from my imagination Frankenstein of my own cognition and I fail to recognize the fault lines Because “consistent with reality” is just as good as “real.” Every piece of you your dreams and desires your fears and footfalls who you love, who you hate – it’s product of my speculation and it’s who you are, now.

Don’t come too close – you’ll poke holes in the lining, and reality will come flooding in – defacing my masterpiece, rendering it a lie instead of an interpretation. I lack the faith I’d need to permanently destroy this illusion and leave you as you are – for you would fall short and shatter my delusions and I, robbed of the delirium I loved so dearly, would be left brittle in your wake.

To me, you are an effigy spun from rampant idealism and a tendency to see what I want to and I love you more than I have ever loved anyone who ventured close enough for me to truly see them.

by Lainie Beauchemin, Chadds Ford, PA

Somewhere

In an alternate dimension
An alternate you
is up to something
That both of you
would
(and will)
seriously regret
And there is nothing
Either of you
can do
to stop
the other

by Spencer Folkins,
Ratter Corner, NB, Canada

Burning

I’m drinking yellow lemonade, my chipmunk cheeks tingling, mixing my DNA with life-giving sugar. Glass bottle with no label, cold, doesn’t spill.

Chips Ahoy! Oh, I remember that name, and the package is disappearing, bit by bite, like a glacier, nature’s litterbug – What is the best title for this passage? depositing minerals and nutrients and life-giving sugar, grows grit on my teeth And I’m back.

And I sit in the grit, in the endless stretch of the desert, Nevada nothingness, on Margate sands, slipping into a sleeping bag while the jagged horizon, rising in glaciers and twisted red handkerchiefs fills the windows. I’m underwater.

The Lightning Thief in my lap, lemonade and cookies,

I can still show you the chocolate-chip smudge on the left page a page a mile I can still show you I can I always will

My lips are liquefied burning burning, iowa firefly and I want to be here forever

by Olivia Arthur, Camarillo, CA



Photo by Elli Hough, Merritt Island, FL



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