

2019

SURREY LIBRARIES

young adult writing contest



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Proudly Presents

A Collection of Winning Entries
for the

**2019
young adult
writing contest**

Short Stories, Poetry, Comics, Random

Foreword

As we celebrate our 32nd year, Surrey Libraries proudly presents the winning entries for the 2019 Young Adult Writing Contest – an annual competition highlighting the talents of young adult writers aged 12 - 18. We received over 300 submissions for the categories of Short Story, Poetry, Comics, and our newest category, the Random category.

We are so pleased that the Young Adult Writing contest continues to receive so much support each year from the community.

Thank you to our parents and teachers who offer their support and guidance to young writers.

Thank you to our sponsors. Their generosity has greatly contributed to the success of the contest and allowed it to grow over the years into the wonderful event it is today.

Thank you to our judges, many of whom volunteer every year (some for over a decade!). We appreciate them taking the time to read and carefully consider the entries.

Thank you to the staff of Surrey Libraries. Your hard work behind the scenes is greatly appreciated.

The winners of the contest were recognized in October at an Awards Gala at the Surrey City Hall council chambers. We were privileged to have Saira Kanwal, graduate of the Creative Writing Program at Kwantlen Polytechnic University, as our keynote speaker.

To all the young writers who submitted their writing to the contest this year – you are all winners. May you continue to share with us the diversity of your experiences.

We are inspired by your creativity, fearlessness and wisdom. You made us laugh, cry and think. You showed us your vulnerability, your strength and your bravery. The future of writing is in good hands. We wish you all the best in your artistic endeavours.

We hope you enjoy this collection.



Kelly E. Lau
Teen Services Librarian

Acknowledgments

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And our fabulous contest judges:
kc dyer, Stephanie Fenton, Denise Jaden, Mia Jensen, Kyle McKillop, Francis Munroe, Bonnie Nish, Sylvia Taylor, Lisa Voisin, Alan Woo, Ellen Wu and Jennifer Zilm

Thank you for enriching the literary culture for youth in Surrey.

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Junior Short Story

If You Think Your Dog's a Handful...

My little sister has been begging for a pony since... well, since forever. Ponies are the subject of countless arguments, meltdowns, and tantrums. It's almost Christmas and it's been getting way worse lately.

"I want a pony!"

"Emma, for the last time, you cannot have a pony. Where would we put it?" says my mom.

"In the backyard. Please, please, please, pretty please with sugar on top, please, please can I have a pony? Please—"

"No."

"But I want a pony!"

"Yes, and I want a unicorn," I say.

"And while you're at it, get me a dragon," says my dad. My mom sighs.

"Write a letter to Santa, dear," she says. Emma scurries off in search of paper and a pencil.

Later, Emma proudly shows me her letter, ready to be sent off.

I skim the letter, noting the P.S. at the end. It clearly states that my dad and I would like a dragon and a unicorn, respectively. I smile at the cute drawings at the bottom, showing Emma and a hot pink pony.

A week later, on Christmas morning, I wake up to Emma jumping on my bed, clearly overexcited over something.

"I got a pony! I got a pony! I got a pony! I got a—"

"Okay, okay, yes. Now get off my bed." I know mom was planning on giving her a stuffed pony, but she can't be that excited over that, can she?

All the squealing woke our parents, so we all head down, tired and sleepy eyed.

She leads us, not to the Christmas tree, but outside, towards the backyard. I'm hoping she's not expecting to find a pony, but well... yup, one pony, made to order. As we watch, suddenly wide awake, it tosses its red mane and snorts fire. Yup. You read that right. It tossed its red mane and snorted fire.

I'm not quite sure what to make of it and I can tell my parents are feeling the same way. I pinch myself, only to feel sharp pain. Definitely not a dream. My sister runs up and hugs the pony, dispelling any notion of a hologram. If this is a prank, it's a really good one. I'm starting to run out of rational explanations, when I notice the two other creatures in the backyard.

A unicorn, its mane also red and its horn the same colour stands in the shadows. Beside it, is the most amazing thing I have ever seen. It looks like a dragon, but it's the size of a dog and it's acting like one.

The unicorn trots closer, bowing its head. I notice a letter around its neck and yank it off. I open it and read it aloud:

Dear Emma,

Your letter amused me quite a bit, so I decided to answer your request. I sent you my best pony, and for your sister, my best unicorn. They are very friendly. For your father, I thought he might find a full-grown dragon problematic, so I sent a smaller version. He is also very friendly. All three creatures breathe fire, so be careful.

Best wishes,

Satan

PS. Sorry the pony isn't pink. It's the best I could do.

"Satan?" asks my mom.

"She misspelled Santa," says my dad, eyeing the creatures carefully.

"Isn't Satan supposed to be evil?" I ask.

"He sent three fire-breathing creatures to my house! That's about as evil as it gets!" yells mom.

Meanwhile, Emma is dancing around, singing at the top of her lungs:

"Pony, pony, pony, I got a pony!"

"No. No, no, no, no, absolutely not, we are not keeping these creatures," cries mom.

"Sorry mom, but this time, it seems we don't have a choice. What are we going to do, mail

If You Think Your Dog's a Handful... by Sofia Lemay

them back?" I ask. She glares at me, but she knows I'm right. There's no way out of this one.

"At least we live in the woods, so no one will see them," says my dad.

"Um, that's just a bigger problem," I say, "they snort fire, 'member? It would be kinda bad if they burned down the woods.

"Maybe if we drop them in the fireplace, they'll go back to where they belong?" suggests mom.

"No!" cries Emma, ferociously hugging her pony.

Mom sighs, knowing she's lost this battle.

"Okay, but only until I figure out what to do with them."

"Yay!" yells Emma, leading her pony into the house.

"Oh no, young lady. That beast is staying outside."

"But mom..."

"No buts."

I can tell Emma isn't happy about it, but I guess she knows she's stretching the limits as it is. She huffs, but obeys. My mother mumbles something about coffee and heads inside.

"So, Em, what are you going to call it?" asks my dad.

"Pinky!" squeals my sister.

"But it's not pink," I remark.

"Who cares?" she says, sticking her tongue out at me. I roll my eyes at her.

"Mine will be called Fido," says my dad. The miniature dragon bounds closer, wagging its tail.

"Who's a good dragon? Yes, you're a good dragon," coos my dad. Mom appears in the doorway.

"Really Carlos? I expected better from you. Now come have coffee." Dad winks at us and disappears inside.

If You Think Your Dog's a Handful... by Sofia Lemay

I glance at my unicorn and decide to call it Marigold. A fitting name for such a majestic creature.

Emma and I spend the whole day outside, riding through the woods and eating marshmallows roasted by our new four-legged friends.

I can tell my mother still isn't happy about it, but what a better way to spend Christmas than with a fire-breathing unicorn, a miniature dragon and a fire-breathing pony?

When night comes, Emma begs mom to sleep with her pony, but obviously the answer is negative. I know my sister will ask again tomorrow night and every night after that, until she gets what she wants.

I am woken by my sister shaking me desperately and shouting,

"Andrea! Andrea! Andrea, wake up!" A quick glance at my clock tells me it's barely two o'clock.

"Go away," I mumble.

"Andrea, people broke into the house and Fido's biting them and there's people in black and there's fire and mom's gonna be mad and they were trying to take our stuff and there's a broken window and—"

By this time, I'm already halfway out the door. I instruct Emma to wake up our parents, but I suspect the crashes and yelps coming from downstairs may have taken care of that. I rush down the stairs, my heart beating in my chest. The sight of the scene happening in the living room makes me stop in my tracks.

The Christmas tree is on its side, the window is smashed, and two masked men in black are standing on the coffee table, looking completely terrified of Pinky and Marigold, both of which are doing their *I can snort fire* thing, looking quite terrifying indeed. Fido's jaws are clamped around one of the men's legs and his tail is wagging. He looks like he's enjoying himself quite a bit. One of the men spots me and cries out,

"Please, we'll do anything! Just please call off your creatures! Please!"

Emma comes running down the stairs, mom and dad in tow. Mom is on the phone with what appears to be the police department.

If You Think Your Dog's a Handful... by Sofia Lemay

Dad and I quickly herd Pinky and Marigold back outside. Emma feeds them burnt hay, which they seem to love, for some reason. It takes every bone from last night's steak to coax Fido off the man's leg, but in the end, he's in the backyard before the police arrive. Good thing. He would have generated a whole lot of questions we barely know the answer to.

Turns out the two men were trying to rob us, but in the end they got frightened out of it. The policemen were quite confused when they explained about a dragon and a fire-breathing pony and unicorn, but in the end, it was decided the men had gone insane for unknown reasons.

It was near four o'clock when the police left, so we were exhausted, and to make matters worse, our living room was a complete mess. Even so, we could count on Emma to be cheerful and full of energy. Does she ever get tired?

"Pinky, Marigold and Fido saved the day!" she cried, jumping around like the Easter bunny on coffee.

"She's right, you know," said dad, with a significant glance at mom.

"Can we please keep them now?" begged Emma, making puppy dog eyes. My dad and I made puppy dog eyes too. My mom laughed.

"Under these circumstances, I can't say no."

Most normal people have pets like cats and dogs. We have a miniature dragon, a pony and a unicorn, all fire breathers. Bring Your Pet to School Day could get interesting.

Junior Short Story: Second Prize

by Alyana Amadeo

The Girl in the Mirror

January 27th, 1945

I gaze into the floor length mirror leaning against a wall, but the reflection I see is a disgusting mess. She was nobody I recognized. The girl who glared back was nothing but a cold, dead, limp husk of what had once been a lively, buoyant person. I've seen a diluted version of her numerous times before: in metal tools, water, steel poles, really just anything reflective in the camp. But it's only now it fully registered, here in this room with dozens of others who are coming to the same conclusions as me, that I'd never see the girl from only a mere year ago ever again. Deep bags have formed underneath my eyes from all the restless nights, thoughts consumed with escapism. Dawn of night, telling myself empty words of hope, forcing myself to believe my own spoon-fed lies.

I reminisce on the long, black hair I used to have, usually kept in tight, elegant braids. As I stare into the mirror, I glide my hand over what little hair I have left, the short stubby strands of hair poking against my palm. I lift my oversized, striped shirt to reveal my torso. I delicately trace the tips of my fingers over my ribs. I graze them down on one side, the bones prominent enough to create valleys of skin wedged between each bone. My hands are grimy, dirt buried in even with my short nails. My eyes are heavy and dark, absorbed with lifelessness. Glimmering eyes brimmed with youthfulness and hope, to be nothing but memories. My face is patchy and dry, coarse like running your hands through gravel or the trunk of a tree. Full, round cheeks became hollow, sunken to their core like a shipwreck forever drowning at the bottom of an ocean. I've become more bone than flesh.

But the girl staring into my eyes isn't me. I refuse to take her as my reality. The girl who's numbered like a barcode, the ink of the tattoo forever seeped into her skin – a constant, inescapable reminder of being prisoner at Auschwitz. Being nothing but a set of numbers to work until death takes the last people she could latch onto and call home, leaving her alive and alone, cursed with the memories forever engraved.

The girl who saw her mother getting taken somewhere with dozens of others to a place she didn't know of. The girl who desperately wished she had known at the time that the last piece of hope she clung to was being sent to the gas chamber. The girl who understood not

The Girl in the Mirror by Alyana Amadeo

to grow too close with those around her, because she learned the hard way that the pain of watching them get taken to their death, grow sick with hunger or disease wasn't worth it. The girl who grew numb at the sight of death, having run out of tears to cry anymore. But I'm alive and free. Am I supposed to be happy?

February 23rd, 1945

The day we had been liberated from the camp felt beyond unreal. The day had begun like normal, before we began to grasp the guards were gone. At every watchtower, there were no men, not a single one in sight. It was only us. Equal amounts of chaos and confusion spread out, but everyone had the same question in their mind. But soon, Soviets on horseback congregated around the fenced-in camp. A man hopped off his horse, broke the locks that trapped us in, freeing us from the electric fence. He told us medical aid and food were coming, but the only thing we heard was *You're free*.

I'm so fortunate to have another relative survive. I hadn't known until very recently, but my aunt, Chaya, was at another camp. She's very much alive and very much determined to rebuild her life. Being only sixteen, she invited me to live with her. It's still hard to get used to the emptiness of her house. After being in the overcrowded environment of Auschwitz for a year, it's odd. No matter how long it's been, I don't think I can eat dinner without thinking about Mama, Hannah, Adam and Papa. Still I wonder why am I alive? Who decided I deserved to live? I don't know if I'll ever come to terms with how life worked out. I think about the times I felt like I was on the verge of death, working while famished and starving. Sleeping in those little squished bunks we were forced to call "beds", always with one too many people. Waking up to find the person pressed against me limp and lifeless, and the cruel routine of it all. I quickly learn my thoughts in silence can be louder than any noise. I want to bury Auschwitz and all the memories with it. The girl in the mirror was only sixteen, but she had seen and felt so many things she'll never recover from. Why do I have to be her?

September 21st, 1947

It's happened again. I'm sitting up in bed, out of breath, lungs desperately reaching for more oxygen. My eyes darted around the room in a panic, nails clawing at my bedsheets. Screams are stuck in the back of my throat, the air is so thick and dense. My breathing

The Girl in the Mirror by Alyana Amadeo

steadies as I take in the ivory walls of my room, shelves of my books, my little wooden desk and lamp, my closet, and window along with its peach curtains. I'm okay. I'm safe. I'm home.

It's been over two years and the world goes on turning. I still live with my aunt, I'm getting an education, and she's working. But even still, there are nights like tonight, and that I wake up screaming, terrorized nightmares and memories flooding out like poison in the air, choking me and taking away all my oxygen until I know I'm safe, with my aunt, in my bed on a mattress and sheets.

Other nights they're painful. Memories of curling into Mama those first few nights at the camp, a comforting hand of light in a dreary place of misery and agony. Her soft, reassuring voice rings in my ears even as I'm panting, sitting up in bed. No matter how much time passes, how many years go by, the emptiness surging in me as I recognize Mama and Papa can never return, will always eat at me.

May 13th, 1954

Sobs get caught in my throat and I can feel my shoulders trembling. Before I can help it, tears spill out. I cry into my satin-gloved hands and I feel Liam's embrace around me. He doesn't say anything and I'm thankful for that. He doesn't tell me meaningless words for all I want is to just mourn. A few feet away from me Chaya lays in her casket, her hair done up and in a nice dress. She looks beautiful.

With Chaya gone, all of my immediate family are dead. I thank Chaya mentally for taking me in and giving me love when I needed her most. If nothing else, I'm thankful she got to meet Ruth, Liam's and my daughter.

It's at 11 pm, wrapped up in Liam's embrace with Ruth in her crib beside us, that I finally realize all of my immediate family aren't dead. I smile at the realization and go to sleep in peace for the first time in a long time.

The Girl in the Mirror by Alyana Amadeo

April 7th, 2001

The years feel like they've flown by. I've grown quite old, but I'm happy.

Happy with a lover, happy with a family and happy with a life. But still, no matter how much time passes, Auschwitz and all the concentration camps were something I could never bury or forget, no matter how much my sixteen-year-old self had wished. But it's not something I should forget nor something anyone should forget. I've moved on from it, and I am so grateful and happy with where I am. But the numbers inked onto my skin are a reminder to never forget it did happen and I've come to accept that.

It's Passover and I'm surrounded by my whole family. I smile seeing all my beautiful grandchildren, my wonderful lover, and the children he and I raised together. As I go to sit down at the dinner table, I see a tall mirror against a wall, and I stop.

I look into the mirror and the reflection I see is no one but myself. I see a beautiful survivor.

The Bird Missing Its Wings

The picture frame plummeted, like the wine glass he'd broken the other day. The sound of its collision with the hardwood floor shrieked in his ears.

His red-faced mother shrieked at him, just the way the picture frame had. The faces of three people stared up at him, accusing despite the bright smiles adorning their faces.

Zion couldn't bear to look at his mother. Not when her younger face, preserved so perfectly, looked so kindly at him. It was a stark contrast to this older jaded version of her, who was red faced from all the alcohol she'd taken in, from all the yelling.

She sat slumped in their beaten up couch, the sharp stench of alcohol was all encompassing and his mother was willingly drowning herself in it.

Her voice was raw. "This is *my* house! I work my goddamn ass off to keep it *every fucking god forsaken day!*"

Zion had only told her that she'd spilled wine in the kitchen again. He should have checked to see if she was sober before talking to her.

"Why don't *you* clean it up? Do something useful for once!"

He was already doing the laundry, cleaning the dust and mold off the window sills, doing the dishes when they appeared, though it wasn't often – what was one wine stain to add to that?

"Sorry mom. I'll do that."

She ignored him, took another swig out of the glass bottle in her hand, and it was like he wasn't her son at all. The thought that maybe *she* thought that made the skin of his face itch and feel like it wasn't quite his.

Quietly, he shuffled off and into the kitchen, getting to work where the wine stain puddle was.

Zion knew what Ashley thought about all this.

She thought it was all a pointless farce. *She* thought he was being desperate. *She* thought he needed to stop putting up with everything, put an end to it.

Ashley thought he was being an idiot. Ashley thought he was an idiot.

The Bird Missing Its Wings by Adella Teja

He wasn't though.

He wasn't.

"Let it go," she said, voice uncharacteristically soft. "She's gone, Zion. Why won't you listen?"

His nails dug into the meat of his palm, crescent moons engraving themselves into his skin.

Why won't you listen, Ashley?

"You don't know that," he said through clenched teeth.

"I do know that."

God, did he want to scream.

"She's my mom, not yours. How are you so sure?"

"Look me in the eyes, Zion," her eyes were steel filled, "and tell me *she* thinks she's your mom still. Tell me she thinks so too."

His face didn't feel quite like it was his. Zion wished the feeling wasn't so familiar.

The steel fell from Ashley's eyes in the form of tears, leaving her bare. Now her eyes only seemed to show sorrow.

The fear-filled kind.

"I-I'm scared for you Zion," her voice was watery and trembling. It struck fear in his own heart.

His feet became seven tons heavier, he didn't dare try to move.

"Aren't – aren't you *tired*? Of... of this? You *have* to let go, Zion. Y-you *need* to. You... you can't wait forever. Don't tell m-me that."

But I've been waiting for so long. I can't stop now.

Her head plunked against his chest, he could feel his shirt dampening. Hands grasped at the fabric of his jacket.

He found the strength to lift his arms after a moment, to run his hands down the back of her head. A sob came from her lips and patiently – patiently, Zion continued to smooth the unruly tangles in her hair.

"St-stop it," she cried, voice even thicker than before. "Sto... stop b-being so pa-patient..."

He couldn't.

She breathed shuddering breaths.

"Zion, t-tell me you'll let her go."

He couldn't.

"Zion..."

He couldn't.

"Zion... you can't just let this continue to h-happen. Wh-what if it... what if it kills y-you? She'll kill you."

She pressed a finger to one of the bruises littering his shoulders, Zion struggled not to flinch backwards. Ashley only seemed to sob even harder.

He sucked in a breath.

"Sometimes, she does talk to me – when she's sober, she doesn't yell, Ashley. It's been five years of this, I can take more. She'll get better, you'll see."

Zion couldn't see her face, but he could imagine the expression she must've been wearing. Sad, worn, and tired.

While she tried to calm the stutters in her voice, she couldn't hide how it wavered, voice stretched thin. "Five years of this, and it's only... only 'sometimes.' When she's sober. S-so what if you can take more? You... you shouldn't, Zion. If she never gets better, you'll be wasting years, decades of your life. Aren't you... tired?"

The fingers digging into the fabric of his jacket shook almost imperceptibly.

"You go to school with new bruises all the time. They hurt. You can't lie about that."

Ashley's hands loosened up.

"It sucks, watching you get beat."

"I know."

"Promise me you'll stop putting up with it, Zion."

"I can't."

***The Bird Missing Its Wings* by Adella Teja**

She looked up, finally. Her eyes were puffy and red. Guilt sat on his lungs, heavy as he watched more tears roll down her cheeks.

Ashley pushed herself away and he let his arms fall to his sides.

She stood a meter away and looked at him, sadness reflected so plainly in her wet eyes – and then she looked away, from the sleeves and fabric hiding his purpled bruises.

Her mouth opened and it looked like she wanted to say more but the words just wouldn't come.

So instead she turned away, eyes on the ground.

"I'll – I'll see you tomorrow, Zion."

"Yeah."

Zion watched her swipe her arm over her eyes once more before leaving.

That night, when he got home, his shirt was damp, and his mother was drowning once again.

The next day, Zion was bearing another bruise, fresh and coloured a light purple.

"Morning, Ashley."

"Hi, Zion. Did... you think about what I said yesterday?"

Her eyes were no longer puffy and red, it was almost like she'd never cried at all.

"Yeah, I did."

She looked at him searchingly, but didn't verbally ask for more.

"Let's go to class."

"Mom..."

When she came home that day, she was sober.

She merely gave him a side glance, it was the only acknowledgment he got, but Zion couldn't help the desperate hope that bubbled inside. She'd responded to him calling her 'mom' so she must've thought of herself as his mother, right?

Right?

"How was your day?"

She scowled and looked away.

"Don't fucking remind me. It was horrible."

"Oh. Sorry."

She stalked off miserably and dropped her bag by the couch, not giving him a second glance as she passed by.

Zion didn't see her for the rest of that day.

"Hey, Zion"

"Hey, Ashley."

The morning wind was cold, the sky was a dreary grey. The wind combed through Ashley's hair, reminiscent of what he'd done two days ago.

"Have you thought about what I said?"

"Yeah. I have."

"... And?"

"What... what choices do I even have, Ashley?"

Zion couldn't read her expression, couldn't tell what she was thinking as she rested her chin in the palms of her hands.

"My mom won't go to therapy. It's too expensive, she can't afford it. I don't know if she'd want to either."

Quietly, they sat in the dewy grass.

***The Bird Missing Its Wings* by Adella Teja**

“I still can’t look at her like she’s anything but my mom, you know.”

“Even though it’s been five years?” Her voice was soft, the way it had been for days now.

Maybe she was just tired of being the unyielding pillar Zion knew.

“Yeah.”

Ashley looked at him, sadness in her eyes, and lips, and face. “Aren’t you tired of constantly getting beaten?”

Zion looked back at her, felt the grass underneath his fingertips.

“Yeah, maybe sometimes.”

Tears gathered in her eyes again, welling and falling. She sobbed, cried, wept for him. For the family that was stolen from him and for the childhood he was missing.

She mourned for his lost mother, and for him, the bird whose wings were clipped.

Submerged

Voluntary apnea. Drowning and thrashing in agonizing pain, yet no matter how much you want to, you won't let yourself inhale until right before you lose consciousness. The lack of oxygen and the blackness that crowds the sides of your vision while you slowly edge towards your breaking point and wonder if it might be better to let go.

I'm going to die

I'm going t

I'm goi

I'm

...“I'm going to be late!” Ryland opened his eyes to his twin sister, Cassie, standing over him with an irate expression. She strode over to his curtains, pulled them open, then made her way back to his bed and began to shake him. “Yes! I'm awake,” he pleaded, and shoved her hands away. “And, you can just walk to school, you know.” Cassie had gotten her car privileges taken away, which meant Ryland was the designated driver. Which he was fine with, because he didn't usually have plans, and wasn't planning to go to prom tonight either. “You better be down in ten minutes,” Cassie warned, ignoring his comment and leaving. Looking at the clock, Ryland used five of his ten minutes to write in his dream journal. He had kept one since he was young, soon after he realized that his dreams were different than most people's. While approximately 20% of people on Earth experienced lucid dreams once a month, he had them every night. It fascinated everyone but his mother, who was terrified and tired of his vivid nightmares waking him up every night. “They aren't real,” she assured him. But they felt so real, too real, and writing them down helped a lot. Rushed by the ticking clock, he strayed from his usual detailed entries and jotted down the events of the dream in point form, then stuffed the journal back into his drawer and forgot all about the crazy nightmare.

2019-06-07: I WAS FORCED INTO AN UNCOMFORTABLE SITUATION

Ryland descended the stairs, coming face-to-face with Cassie, who looked even more distraught than she did when she was waking him up. “You will never believe what just happened,” she cried. Without a word from Ryland, she continued. “Morgan just called me

Submerged by Carmen Campbell

and she told me that her prom date bailed last minute! Got food poisoning or something. How could he do that to her?!”

“Well, I don’t really think he did it on purpose...” Cassie cut him off. “So, I told her you would step in and be her date tonight. Don’t worry, she has the tickets and everything.” “What? No, no way.” “Come on. I do tons of favours for you and she’s my best friend. Plus, I know you’ve had a pathetic crush on her since freshman year.” He began to protest, but there was no use. Cassie never lost an argument and he was going to prom.

I KNEW IT WAS A BAD IDEA

The day went by faster than Ryland would have liked and soon enough, Morgan was ringing the doorbell. Prom. Why did he agree to this? He reluctantly opened the door to her.

“Hey, Morgan.”

Of course, she was stunning. She wore an inky magenta dress and her gold hair was in perfect curls. Ryland felt out of place, standing there awkwardly. “Um,” he said, “I just need to use the washroom real quick.” He sauntered to the washroom panicking, his heart drumming loudly in his ears as he closed the door and stared into the mirror. The suit suddenly felt tighter and damper, like it was sticking to his skin.

“You okay in there? Cassie and I are ready to leave.” It was Morgan. Ryland took a deep breath, then went out to the car where Morgan stood with Cassie and her date. “Okay, let’s do this.”

I WAS AT A BIG PARTY

Prom was loud and awful, just as Ryland had assumed it would be. He was never one to go to social events. That was more his sister’s thing. Not that he didn’t have friends! He did, but none of them were very interested in partying either. Ryland told Morgan that it was fine for her to go hang out with other people, and no, he wouldn’t be lonely. He exited and began walking towards the beach. Their town was boring and small, but it sure had nice beaches. Ryland walked along the shoreline, kicked the sand, and looked up at the stars. There was something nagging him and a disturbing feeling growing in his stomach. He couldn’t understand exactly what was wrong, but something about the whole day felt off. It was nice and quiet for a while, but then he heard footsteps behind him.

“Hey, loser, wait up.” Cassie and Morgan ran up to him with a group of people behind them. “Some idiot had the idea to go swimming, but I didn’t think I’d find you out here,” Cassie exclaimed. “We’re all headed to the pier, want to come?” Though Ryland had just abandoned Morgan moments before, he realized that this could be the perfect time to make a move on her.

PEOPLE WERE SWIMMING AND HAVING FUN

They reached the pier and soon enough, everyone was taking off their clothes and shoes and jumping off the pier into the dark water below. Ryland approached Morgan. “Morgan, hey.” She turned to him with a smile. “What’s up?”

“Nothing,” he replied. “It’s just that, I’m sorry I’ve been such a terrible date. Not that this is a date. Or, whatever. I feel bad for leaving you like that.”

She laughed. “It’s fine, really. I’ve been on worse dates. Once, a guy’s long distance girlfriend showed up unannounced while we were on a date! And no, I didn’t know about her.”

“You’re right, that’s 100% worse.” A date. She said it was a date. He felt like nothing could ruin this day, except for the weird feeling he had in his gut. Everything that was happening now, it was almost like he had lived parts of it before. It was confusing, but not new to him. Ryland had experienced this before, sometimes feeling like he’d seen certain people or witnessed certain things before even though he hadn’t. “Morgan, I’m having odd deja-vu right now,” Ryland said slowly. “What do you mean?” Before he could have a chance to answer, Cassie called Morgan over. They both sat on the railing taking off their high heels and laughing. They must be going in the water with everyone else, Ryland thought. It was fun while it lasted. Ryland turned around and began walking back down the pier, when he heard a scream and a splash.

SOMEONE FELL INTO THE WATER

“Help, someone help!” It was Cassie screaming. But where was Morgan? Ryland ran over to Cassie as she started telling him what happened. “Morgan fell in, in her dress. Should I call someone? She hasn’t resurfaced. Oh my god, where is she?!” In that moment, everyone else fell away, and it was just Ryland and Morgan and the ocean. He needed to do something.

Submerged by Carmen Campbell

I JUMPED INTO THE WATER AFTER THEM

Ryland dove into the icy water and the sudden impact knocked his senses loose. It was so cold and he couldn't see anything, except... a sliver of magenta in the blackness of the water. Morgan. Ryland began swimming as fast as he could, losing breath every second. By the time he got to Morgan, he was feeling dizzy. She was floating there, unconscious, wrapped up and entangled in her dress. With all his strength, he wrapped his arms around her and began kicking towards the surface. He finally got there and gasped for air as people reached down hurriedly to pull her up. People were shouting and Cassie looked extremely relieved.

I SAVED THEM

Ryland slowly pulled himself up, grabbing the slippery rail, when suddenly he lost his footing. It seemed to happen in slow motion, yet all too fast. The crushing gut feeling overtook his whole body as he plunged back into the gloomy depths and his head smashed against one of the wooden poles holding up the pier. The pain was fleeting, before it was numbed by the frigid water. Almost immediately, Ryland's vision blurred and the air left his lungs in a quick exhale, and he began thrashing frantically.

This happened before

Did it?

It couldn't have

Don't breathe

Hold on

BUT I COULDN'T SAVE MYSELF

Senior Short Story

Senior Short Story: First Prize

by Linda Bian

Exposure

"It's all about the light," he told me, in the dusty quiet of a library, and motioned for me to turn my head. "There's a ray—can you see? Down from the window up there. It's in your hair. Hold still."

I couldn't see his face behind the camera, only my own reflection in the lens. Click, went the shutter, click, click.

"That should be enough." He lowered the camera. "I'll have them developed by the end of the week."

"All the other photographers use digital cameras," I said, and it came out like a question. I suppose I'd wondered how he had the patience for film, when he seemed to have so little for anything else.

Then that light came into his eyes, the debate-student fever, and he stood up straighter. "This was my grandfather's camera," he explained, holding out the heirloom. "He used to take photos of the most fascinating things, did you know? Snowflakes and railways and snails. This camera has stories."

He was saying that, I supposed, because we both wrote for the school paper. I nodded.

He leaned forward, voice dropping to a whisper.

"Back then," he said, "they had a saying: the camera never lies. 'Course, that's not true anymore." His face was half-cast in harsh light, half in stark shadow, eyes wide open. "But don't we all wish it was?"

Not everyone, I thought, and something stirred in my ribcage, a foreboding. But I nodded.

"You can't publish that."

Our designer spoke the words flatly, arms crossed, while he bounced on his feet, gripping his camera, fresh from the high of investigation. An unstoppable force met an immovable wall.

Our columnist leaned over. "Publish what?"

The designer turned the computer screen, presenting the headline in bold black type: ***Four Protesters Killed in Police Crackdown.***

“Huh,” said the columnist or maybe it was ah. “There’s something I haven’t seen before.”

“It’s not going to fly,” growled the designer. “If we’re lucky, we lose this edition. If we’re not…”

“You could rework it,” mused the columnist. “Make it an opinion piece, be vague, play at heartstrings. Commemorating those lost to the violence—”

“No.” Our investigator stood his ground. In the pale blue glow of the computer screen, he looked as though he hadn’t slept in a week, camera heavy around his neck as an albatross. “This is what I wrote. This is the truth and I have the photos to prove it. Students deserve to—”

“Don’t tell me you were there,” cried the designer, throwing up his hands.

“It’s not your decision anyways,” the investigator told him and looked to me. “What do you think, chief?” He placed his hands on the table. Haloed in windowlight, he blazed, dark shadows beneath bright eyes. “We can publish the stories that no one else will. This is how everything that ever is anything, begins.”

The worst part was that I could see the future he described. Underground, in darkrooms and behind closed curtains, a torch upraised, the camera-flash of blinding light. It could be us, and perhaps we’d be remembered.

But it would be a brave thing and I was wiser than I was brave.

I shook my head.

The door slammed behind our investigator as he strode from the meeting.

“He’s going to get himself killed,” the designer groaned and when he stood to close the curtains, he left that word echoing behind him, glowing in bold black type: **Killed.**

“He never misses a meeting,” our columnist said the next month, half an hour after we’d convened, and then our designer, ashen-faced, held up his phone, screen glowing:

Protests planned at city square.

That same afternoon.

“I can drive,” I said, and that was all it took.

The last time I saw him, he was climbing.

We were all there below, hand-in-hand in the streets too packed to put a car through, but

Exposure by Linda Bian

when I saw him I wrenched my hand away to point. He was scaling the pedestal of a statue, the way I'd seen him ascend debate stages, deliberate, *unstoppable*.

He pulled himself onto the plinth, clinging to the dress of a bronze titan, and now he towered above us all, too. His camera gleamed on his chest like a medal. The light was in his hair.

I want to believe that in the end, he saw us, and that was why he turned his head, the light shifting over his face. But I couldn't see his eyes at all. Only the glare of the sun.

He opened his mouth, though it was far too loud to speak, and I have to believe that if he'd formed words, we would've heard them. Everyone would've.

But there was nothing but the roar of a crowd, and then, a sound a thousand times more terrible than the click of a camera.

They say I ran into the crowd. I don't remember much of it. I was searching for him, I think, or his camera. I never found either of them.

A shaft of light split the pitch black, widening until it blew out all the photos taped to the darkroom walls, and then narrowed to a sliver again. Steps shuffled over linoleum. A hand landed on my shoulder.

"We have to finish it," I said with photos in my hands and I said it like a prayer.

There was no reply.

"We were there." I twisted around and found only shadows. "We have to do something. We owe—"

"You sound just like him," came the designer's voice, quiet.

"This is what he'd want."

I heard someone sigh. The columnist, I think.

"Well," she said, "everyone loves a martyr."

More footsteps. For a moment the designer stood, silhouetted, in the needle of light between door and frame, before he shut that door completely, plunging us all into darkness.

I heard him breathe. In. Out.

"If we're going to do this," he said, finally, "we might as well do it right."

I dragged my finger down the glass. Clearing a trail of dust.

"The camera never lies," I whispered. He looked back at me, awkward in school uniform, a portrait the size of my thumbprint. He'd never changed.

Heels clacked on tiled floors. The columnist joined me, scarf wrapped around the lower half of her face. She wasn't a writer anymore, I'd heard—she'd gone into politics. I didn't see any photographers, except the one behind the glass, but perhaps that was why the scarf.

"Look at that," she murmured. "Isn't that what every revolutionary wants? Their face in a museum."

"He deserved more." I lowered my hand, wrapping my arms around myself. "They all did."

"We gave them all we could." The columnist shrugged and waved her hand at the wall of thumbprint portraits behind glass, all those names. "Flashes are bright, you know, but afterimages fade. People don't remember nearly as well as books and photos."

"Anyways, he didn't do it to be gawked at by strangers." The designer appeared on my other side, examining the layout with a critical eye. "We were there and now we're here. That's plenty."

"Commemorating those lost," mused the columnist, as if she was quoting someone.

Yet when I looked at the glass from the wrong angle, all I could see was my own reflection. Here we stood, in light and shadow and full colour, and he was there, decades beyond our reach. Could this be justice?

It's all about the light, said the boy with the camera. *Click, bang.* I closed my eyes to the pitch black darkroom, clandestine meetings and anonymous words.

Could we have been braver?

When I opened my eyes, he looked back at me. That boy who had been brave.

"Is that how all your stories developed, too?" I whispered. "Before they came to light? Darkness and patience?"

Exposure by Linda Bian

Below his portrait, bold, black type spelt out name, date of death, and a single word:

Photographer.

That's how everything that ever is anything, begins.

I exhaled.

In the end, I didn't know if this dusty greyscale legacy was just, and I didn't know if we'd done all we could to make it so. Even now, I didn't know if any single choice I'd made could've spelt salvation or disaster. Those unanswered questions hung around my neck like a millstone. And they always would.

But we who had been there, were now here.

And so was he, I believed, in a way.

From light. To darkness. And light again. From closed curtains to a wall of ghosts in a museum, and a world where this could exist.

That's plenty.

Because, in the end, wasn't this all he'd wanted? What we'd all wanted.

For the world after our stories to be brighter than the world before.

Senior Short Story: Second Prize

by Yue Chen

How a First-Grader Became a Grim Reaper

Our first-grader, Owen Wilder Lake (September 22, 2003 - November 24, 2010), was very alive in the morning and very late for school. His mom was also late for work and dumped him onto the shotgun seat in a mismatched parade of primary colours: blue coat, red scarf, and canary yellow rain boots.

“Don’t forget to buckle up.” Her breath was vodka beneath Dollarama’s citrus mouthwash. She attacked the gas pedal. Beat-up shops and bare-boned trees sped by the window. Owen wondered if they could overtake winter too, escaping the chunky rain clouds and the dreadful sky that was like the bottom of an ancient ashtray.

Yellow light. Accelerate instead of brakes. A red pickup out of nowhere.

CRASHBANGWHAMSMACKBANGGGG—

Seatbelts didn’t save Owen. Smoke and screeches and shattered glass struck him as he flew and crashed upon the pavement. Then, he couldn’t place the feeling. It was a lack of feelings.

Someone pulled him off the ground by the scarf. It was a boy his age, donning a black suit and sunglasses too big for his face while wielding a pink pomegranate popsicle. Owen was dazed. “Who are you?”

“You may call me Kristopher, with a K.” Kristopher Kimberley Jr. (March 14, 1966 - June 22, 1974) spoke like a Brit, which Owen considered as an exotic breed of Americans. “Let m—”

“I’m Owen. Why do you have a popsicle?”

“Whatever you die with will follow you six feet under.” He scorned at Owen. “Like terrible fashion choices. Now, read this...”

Kristopher patted a shiny badge on his chest where two sickles crossed to form an X.

“The G-R-I-M... ” Owen’s brows knotted. “R-E-A-P...”

Kristopher reckoned children were more educated in the 21st Century. “THE GRIM REAPERS. Express Soul Collection and Delivery Across Earth, Heaven & Hell. For import, export, or domestic needs, fresh or ancient, sinner or saint.”

How a First-Grader Became a Grim Reaper by Yue Chen

“You’re the Grim Reaper?”

“Not The Reaper, a reaper.” One must be the like of Jesus Christ for the Boss to show up, or at least Mother Teresa. “Senior Reaper of the Accidental Death Department, to be precise.”

Owen nodded.

Kristopher waited for a wow, awesome, or at least an okay, but it never came. “Um... We have wicked teleportation powers and we escort the dead. Isn’t that something?”

The job also included employee recruitment, as ‘understaffed’ was quite an understatement for the GR. Everyone would take the sweet, sweet afterlife over an eternal front-view seat of corpses in their natural habitat. Kristopher couldn’t read the terms of agreement back when he signed up.

Owen crossed his bony arms. “I’m not dead.”

“You are abso-bloody-lootely dead.” Kristopher pulled him to the side of the car.

Owen stared at his body between mangles of steel, oozing red liquid. He reached for his unconscious mom, but his hands passed through everything.

“I can’t die! I still have to go to Mars and make friends with aliens and climb the Himalayas and learn Kung-Fu with ninja monks and invent a robot that does my homework and fall in love...” Owen was out of breath, then realized he didn’t need to breathe. Even seven centuries couldn’t contain his dreams and ambitions, never mind seven years.

Kristopher frowned at his run-on sentence outburst. “Love is overrated. And the Himalayas are only piles of dull rocks—”

Sirens and hysterical flashing lights arrived, along with walkie talkies. Arrived on scene... accident down on Fraser crossing 96...

Kristopher grumbled. “Them calling it ‘accident’ makes me mad. Most are just rubbish adults making rubbish choices.”

Owen watched uniformed men and women strap Mom to a stretcher, face bloodied and leg bent awkwardly, while he was bagged. Poor child. Hit him hard. Dead on impact. Dead. Dead. Mom said dead people look asleep, but he didn’t. He just looked... dead.

“Not my fault that adults are making rubbish choices.” He muttered.

How a First-Grader Became a Grim Reaper by Yue Chen

“Right, but we are dead anyway.” Kristopher gloomed at his popsicle. “I died from an accident too, you know. Was crossing the parking lot from the ice cream truck when a nasty blue Toyota Corona reversed without checking for children behind their back wheels.”

“...Hmm.” They zipped up the bag. It fitted alright. Owen supposed that his body found a new home. “So, we go to heaven now.”

“I mean...” Kristopher suddenly took a profound interest in the sky and extended his arms upwards. “Why rush? Let’s enjoy this beautiful Vancouver weather.”

It began to pour.

Owen frowned at the raindrops as they ignored the presence of his body, ricocheting off the ground then cutting through him again. “Let’s just go. Quick. I want to see Fred.”

“Who?”

“Fred. My friend. My goldfish.”

“You will never find him in the infinite dead pet accumulation! Heaven’s overcrowded. Most spaces are occupied by those bastard angels, sipping their bourbons and kombucha and organic avocado smoothies on a broken conscience and tanning beds.”

Owen’s features scrunched up at ‘avocado’. Kristopher picked up the hostility. “Don’t want to go?”

He nodded.

“Well, I doubt that you have infernal materials unless you are conveniently Satan’s secret spawn. Looks like you are stuck.” Kristopher smugly conjured up a sleek pen and a seemingly-unending vellum scroll. “But lucky for you, I can offer you a job. Don’t read, just sign, then you get to hang around the ground level, here, on Earth.”

“I never had a job.”

“The only job requirement is being deceased and you qualify perfectly. Did I mention no bedtime and no bossy moms?”

Owen started to walk in the general direction of where he sensed the Himalayas. “I don’t want a job.”

Kristopher popped up right in front of him. “But... but then you will be disembodied for

How a First-Grader Became a Grim Reaper by Yue Chen

decades and turn into a poltergeist!”

Owen circled around him. ‘Poltergeist’ sounded cooler than ‘Reaper’.

Kristopher got desperate. “How about your signature for my popsicle!”

Owen slowed.

“It’s magical. It regenerates.”

Without another word, Owen scribbled down his name, which was followed by a sacred popsicle hand-over. The deal was sealed. (Kristopher sullenly tried to comfort himself; he may get a promotion out of this, and he was quite sick of popsicles after three or so decades anyways.)

And that, ladies and gentlemen and those in between, was how Owen Wilder Lake, a first-grader, became a Grim Reaper.

Senior Short Story: Third Prize

by Alyra Ryan

An Old Friend

When the Grim Reaper showed up at my door I was shocked; shocked but not surprised. We had been playing this game for years, me and him. Decades go by where I wonder what happened and why we haven't crossed paths, but then the newspaper shows pictures of a war and I sigh, nodding. I know then that he is too busy to worry about one wandering soul.

"Hello, would you like to come in?" I opened the door, gesturing into my apartment. "A cup of tea perhaps?"

He smiled and nods. "That would be nice, thank you." His voice has a timbre to it that makes most afraid, but I knew he wasn't here to hurt me.

He followed me into my kitchen and watched with an intent gaze as I set the kettle to boil and pull two cups from the cupboard. Neither of us speak, but it wasn't an uncomfortable silence, more of a companionable one.

As I placed sugar cubes into the cups, I remembered a dinner party I went to at the White House. I sat next to Jackie Kennedy. We talked about gardening more than politics, although I suppose she was tired of talking politics.

"This isn't a purely social visit." I don't phrase it as a question, I already knew the answer. I poured the boiling water into the teacups and hand one to him.

He took it from me, sipping it gingerly. "We've been avoiding this for a long time, you know that."

"Do you remember the first time you came for me?" I wanted him to remember. "That was three hundred and four years ago."

He smiled into his tea cup. "You were more stubborn back then, you were a fighter."

"I was dying of smallpox." I laughed, at least I could laugh about it, even though I could still feel the hay floor against my feet and the mud packed wall swirling around me as disease worked its way through my body.

He placed a hand gently on my arm, snapping me out of the past. "It's been a long time, Leah."

"I have lived through hundreds of wars, been a midwife, a lawyer, a doctor and a confidante." I lifted my head with narrowed eyes. "Do you believe in permanence?"

An Old Friend by Alyra Ryan

He stood up, crossing his arms as if he wanted to appear more casual, as if that wasn't the last conversation I'd ever have. "I believe that the effect you had on the world is massive and that no one will be likely to forget you in death. You have had more opportunity than most."

"That's not what I was asking." I stared into my cup, watching the escaped leaves swirl at the bottom of the china. "And you know it."

Those cups were a gift from Audrey, Christmas 1946. I was her midwife in the beginning, and her friend at the end. I missed her, movies just aren't the same nowadays.

He placed his empty cup in the sink. "Leah, you don't have much time left, minutes possibly. All I can tell you is this: you lived your life as though it would end at any minute, and that is the most beautiful thing I can imagine."

I felt a tear slip down my cheek. "How is that beautiful?"

He took my hands in his own, gently trying to give me comfort. "Because most people waste it, they cannot understand their importance and they wither away meaningless. You realized how important you were, how important you wanted to be, and you grew stronger."

"You say that as if the key to happiness is narcissism." I could not meet his gaze.

He shook his head and gave me a sad smile. "No, but it's only human to want to leave a mark on the world. To be remembered when you are gone."

"It isn't as if I'll cease to exist, there has to be more after death?" That was a genuine question I had for him and I hoped he had an answer.

"You'll have to let me know." He traced the handle of the tea cup. "In truth, I have no idea what happens. I am the messenger, nothing more."

I stood up and washed our cups, enjoying the feeling of hot water against my cold hands. I could feel his stare on my back, but I didn't turn around, even when the cups are both washed and dried.

"I'm ready to find out."

With this simple sentence it felt like a weight had been lifted off my chest and I could breathe again. I had been avoiding this moment for my whole life. In reality I had just been scared; scared of death and terrified of what happens afterwards.

He wrapped his arms around me and I leaned into his chest. It was simple and complicated all at the same time. I felt everything and nothing.

I had been alive for three hundred and ten years. It seems like a waste to give up now. But I had been hiding from Death for so long that now he embraced me like an old friend. I felt safe in his embrace. Even as my life slowly dripped away, I wasn't worried.

It didn't matter how many centuries I had lived through, how many wars or plagues. How many babies I delivered, patients saved or innocent people I sent free. What mattered were the moments in between, in the dark of midnight, the early dawn of morning and the dusk at nightfall. What mattered were the moments I smiled and laughed; cried and sobbed.

"It was a spectacular life, Leah." He whispered, showing me the best moments.

I leaned into him and watched the scenes surround me, as we leave the mortal plane.

"It was indeed."

I smiled and closed my eyes, feeling tears on my cheeks, and then, it's so much more.

Senior Short Story: Honourable Mention

by Meshal Asghar

Free

A fiery sensation spreads throughout my chest, my lungs encapsulated in water. The heat is intense, yet my body continues to shiver no matter how many blankets are draped over my dampened form. I hear the sirens wailing, people yelling urgently, the sound of my mother's agony ringing through my ears. She scans the crowd frantically as though searching for my shallow breathing. I look into her tear-stained eyes, but she just peers through me.

I direct my attention toward the sky, not being able to feel the rain. I guess I've made it to the other side. I glance down at the pathetic sixteen-year old girl, all too familiar, yet unrecognizable. I've never looked so small, so fragile. "We're losing her!" yells one of the paramedics. They don't understand that even if they are able to breathe life back into me, it will be pointless.

They grab the AED and deliver a shock. Nothing. My chest stops rising and a breeze of peacefulness overcomes me. I close my eyes, the corners of my lips tingle, and a smile breaks out across my face; a ghost of the face below. I see the terror on my family's faces; I knew this would hurt them, but I had to.

I spoke too soon. The paramedics deliver another shock and suddenly a whoosh of air enters my burning lungs, and I gasp, taking in a fresh dose of that damned oxygen. My body convulses as I start choking up water. Fury ignites me at the sight and I want to push the paramedics away. But they continue to stabilize those pathetic breaths.

My body is heaved into the ambulance and with one final glance toward my family, I step into the back and follow my body as I hover between life and death, just as the doors are closing behind me.

I watch as the doctors poke needles into my body, encumbered on the hospital bed by the wires. I remember the words that the doctors said: "We're sorry to say, but your daughter has fallen into a coma." These words hit me the same way the water felt against my body when I jumped. Never did I think that my attempt at being free would enslave me within my own skin.

I remember when I was leaving home that day, so intent on ending my life. I was tired

of watching my parents struggle, tired of knowing that the cost of my treatment was exacerbating my parents' financial crisis. They never made it obvious, but I knew. They struggled trying to provide me with a life that was unachievable. It was certain that I would never recover from my illness and I would always be a burden on them. I wanted to make the situation easier for them, and easier it would be without a disease-ridden child.

I count my breaths, watching my chest rise and fall, not knowing which one will be the last. Once declared stable by the doctors, my mother came bursting through the doors, her puffy eyes sending shivers down my spine. She rushed to my side and grabbed a hold of my hand. Behind her scurried in my little sister, then my father.

My mother wiped away her silent tears and started to caress my face; the utterance of her comforting words having a strange effect on me. My dad consoled my mom by rubbing her shoulder, but the grim expression on his face said otherwise. My sister held my mom's hand as if holding on to dear life. It bothers me that my sister has to see me in this state. She shouldn't have to deal with suicide at such a young age, except she is, because of me.

I kneel to her height and look straight into her innocent yet terrified eyes. She stares right through me, looking past the remaining life left in me. I look up at my dad and notice his wet cheeks; a sight that I've never seen before. And suddenly, I feel a pang in my chest, a realization. I knew that my actions would cause my parents sorrow, but I never thought that this is how it would feel. I never perceived life as a gift, until now.

It is an aching pain, a dull sensation in the pit of my stomach. I stare at my parents and notice how torn they look. How they are struggling to grasp this reality, the reality that no parent ever wants to endure. Their child confined between life and death. But I put them in this reality. I caused this for them. And now that they are here by my side holding my hand, the love in their eyes for me trickling down their faces, I can't help but think what if.

What if there was a miracle and my illness was cured?

What if my parents' financial situation had gotten better?

What if there was more to life than what I had experienced?

My stomach drops at these thoughts as a realization dawns upon me. I don't want to die. I want to live. Not exist, but live. Instantaneously, with every breath that I was taking came power and strength.

Free by Meshal Asghar

I
Want
To
Live.

My monitors started to beep and the doctors rushed inside. They ushered my panicking parents and sister outside as they worked on bringing my breath back to normal. I watched myself gasp, fighting for every breath that I took. These breaths that I used to take for granted, that used to come so easy to me, is what I stupidly took away from myself. The feeling of guilt was overbearing and I can feel my life being sucked away from me. I chose to do this to myself and now I have no choice. I heard a final “clear,” and with my ending came a new beginning.

Junior Poetry

The Calm Before The Storm

The mauve skies shimmer above the dreamer's head
Dark clouds blanket the horizon
Her mauve skies shine through with love

An electric energy fills the air
Wild, careless and free
"Nothing could ever hurt me!"
She's standing as tall as a tree

The breeze peacefully flows through her hair
Wind chimes ring softly
As a soft gust carefully weaves through the branches of the trees

The shift slips past her perspective and gets to work
The world as she knows it rapidly changing with each second that ticks by
The first few raindrops fall before the downpour

The storm barges in with a rage that is unmatched
The raindrops hit the ground like bullets
Her walls are crashing down

The chaotic cacophony
Thunder roars overhead
Like a disorderly orchestra of crashing symbols
The overwhelming sounds of the earth bring tears to her eyes
As she looks up at the intimidatingly vast mauve skies

The pressure of the rain has finally brought her to her knees
She lies there and lets her world flood
As the rain begins knocking down the trees
The water rises around her

The Calm Before The Storm by Tehya Benedict

Seeping into the cracks and crevices of her being
The rhythm of the chaotic waves lulls her into a deep sleep
She wakes to find that she's done it
With her head above water
She picks herself up and prepares to brave another

Even though she'll never be ready
Just like you and I
All we can do is wait for the warning sign that is
The menacing mauve sky

Worldly Matters

As the rain pittered and pattered
He asked himself if he really mattered
And as the rain splashed and popped
He realized he was nothing but a dot
Compared to the grand lakes and brilliant seas
He was just a little smudge which no one would see
And compared to a fast forest or mountain range
He was but a bug who couldn't amount to any change
And as the thunder roared and lightning cracked
He realized he'd never make an impact
Not on this earth and not on Mars
Not on the moons, and not on the stars
And as the rain dripped and dropped
Valueless and insignificant, he got off at his stop
He waved the bus driver goodbye
Sporting a fake smile
As he knocked on his door, which soon swung agape
His mother hugged him with a grin on her face
"I made your favourite food" she began to say
She squeezed him once more, asking about his day
Despite being tired from hours of working
She made sure her son's day was perfect
She slaved herself every day so he could kick back
She burned herself out so that he could relax
He finally saw it, he finally noticed
It was alright that he was nothing compared to the trees, seas, or oceans
It wasn't important that to the world he didn't matter
Because to his mother, he mattered the world

Junior Poetry: Third Prize

by Ashley Junyu Wang

The Beyond

An open field
The baby grasses sweeping in silent file,
Subject to the ever-growing winds.
Faintness was of the essence,
For, suspended in a dream,
Lines blurred between reality
And fate.

We stand in the middle,
Surrounded by a world beyond our control,
Though, through that uncertainty,
We find our own control.
What is write
What is knot.
“Exactly” is what’s written.
With our flawless lines
But maybe we should be
Flawed
sometimes

By hands, by mind, by nature,
The world is made.
Its body, living, real,
We, it’s consciousness.
Not just the flesh and bones that bind us to this,
Ruin of what is the become
No.
We are the become.

And in the field
We still stand
Not just by flesh and bone
No.
We are the beyond

Junior Poetry: Honourable Mention

by Alyana Amadeo

My Friend Strength

This is my friend 'Strength'
Strength and I know each other very well
Just like me, Strength is determined and passionate
He gives me a sense of security

During lunch we secretly snicker
Silly Alex is crying again
I know Strength will make sure I am not like that
Nothing like that
He'll help me be better

As the years go by I start to notice strength giving me less and less personal space
Before I know it he slithers his slimy and possessive arms over my eyes
His raspy but commanding and powerful words dominate above all other noise
He stifles all noise from my mouth

But Alex pries strength off me
Tells me promising words brimmed with genuine concern
My words of desperate agreement to communicate nearly spills out
Before bile rises up my throat as I feel strength creep behind me

He coils himself around me like a snake marking its territory
He claws my mouth shut
Agile hands working to keep it forced down like a permanent muzzle for misbehaved pet
It's alright, I'm alright
Strength knows what's best for me

yet now why am i here
a l o n e
hiding in shame
enveloped in the familiar but distant darkness of my own bedroom
my breath ragged and erratic
cheeks tainted a deep unmistakable pink
fists balled with knuckles that have turned ghostly white
throat aching and sore from all the relentless screaming
every single word and plea i've held back finally vomiting out uncontrollably

the next day Alex is holding Strength's hand
it's only then I realize
Alex too has always been great friends with strength
perhaps
i don't really know who strength is at all

Senior Poetry

Senior Poetry: First Prize

by Shaheen Virk

Thuja Plicata

Bestowed humble giant
Liminality and convergence
Are simply
 your bread and butter
Harbinger of the pacific oscillations
Thuja Plicata (Western Red Cedar)
The loggers
 know of your worth
The men in the glass cases
 do not
You too will be swept by the horseman:
 he prefers to be called Inferno
But today you stay standing
 healing.

Cricket-song of Youth

Do you like the wind as it brushes
Across the willows and upon your face?
There we breathe to the staccatos and tautologies that hang in the air
In fifteen years, we'll reminisce about these sweltering summers
Where we lived in a hinterland of midnight promenades.
We will call this the pinnacle of a swerving adolescence
These youthful years amid bubbling streams where we sit
Side by side
Wearing our sixteen-year-old biographies on top of
Rooftop secrets and graphic tees
And having young idealist dreams flow through
Our blaring headphones

I'm not quite sure what exactly to call this
These moments in willful uncertainty and blissful naiveté
Where we feel like the world is ours to change
That earth is but a blue marble we can roll along
With our impromptu karaoke under the open trees
And burn along to half-legal campfires
One day we will wish
What we thought then was truth.

I wish we knew then that our cricket-sung eternity
Wasn't synonymous to forever.
I wish that time stopped there and then
With us shoulder to shoulder by those willows
When our faces showed our sewn-together hearts
And we felt invincible playing hide and seek with Death.

Under the empty sky of fireflies
Illuminated by a constellation of dreams
Maybe we should stop the music
For there isn't a rewind button
So let's observe the dawning skies that sing to us,
Sitting in the memory circled by walls of oblivion
Here and now
For I know that we will miss this.

I know we will.

Senior Poetry: Third Prize

by Sally Jiao

Bleach

My mother used to warn me,
不要喝漂白剂 ,
Don't drink this bleach,
As she sprayed the product onto the little yellow spot,
Erasing it off of the pristine white countertop.

When we came to Canada,
Our family became the speck of dust,
Yellow,
Gritty,
Surrounded by a sea of white.

I grew up eating century eggs that my classmates found disgusting;
Packing forks instead of chopsticks to avoid curious glances.
I grew up hearing people mispronounce my name;
Until I gave in to choosing a simpler version of it.
I grew up peeling back layers of the dirt – but always finding yellow

I dedicated my life to scrubbing the color away with harsh chemicals;
Believing that a clean counter will have a higher price.
I let the substance seep into my scalp;
Chisel away at my identity;
Until I started calling my own birth country stupid.

I drowned myself in bleach,
And I choked.

***Bleach* by Sally Jiao**

I emerged weaker than before:
A brittle and weathered frame;
The remains of the strong foundation I was given.

As I stood there,
Tired and defeated,
I realized the flaw in my master plan.
Because you see,
There is no value in damaged marble.

Senior Poetry: Honourable Mention

by Kinga Plucinska

Thrift Store Dresses

The dress that she bought still hung
Tag still attached

The musty smell of the store was gone
Replaced by her own special blend
Of cigarette smoke and perfume
Of burnt hair and hairspray

It was black, shorter in the front than it was in the back
The bodice sparkled and was rough to the touch
Glimmering in the soft dusty light

Bought for her birthday
Her freedom year of 21

I helped pick it out
That one cloudy day
We went together
Just like we used to

But she never did wear it.
The chance never came
So it hung,
Dusty,
In the closet

Senior Poetry: Honourable Mention

by Nikita Sharma

D Cage

*It slithers into my life,
Slowly.
Surely.
It wraps its talons around my mind
Swallowing any sense in its wake*

*I move at its mercy
Think at its verdict
And do what it demands
A marionette doll with digital strings*

*It whispers sweet nothings
Eliciting thoughts of "just one more".
One more episode, one more song, one more post
Slowly and surely, burying me deeper.*

*The instinctual distress bells dull to a hum,
The sound muffling with every touch of the screen.
Each click numbs the mind
And I happily plunge into my own grave*

*Slowly but surely it consumes me
Until I am sure it is all that exists.
It eats my logic,
It erodes my brain,
But I happily allow it to fester*

*To be honest who cares?
I once read that ignorance is strength
With that logic I am the strongest
As I ignore all reason and dance in my digital cage.*

Comics







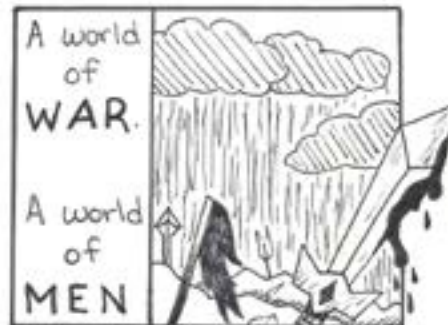












***Of Elves and Men* by Athena Little**



After all, I too am a man.



Not to mention,

your best friend.

So what does that make me?

③







Comics: Third Prize

by Cynthia Wang





Sisters by Cynthia Wang









UNTIL NOW, I DIDN'T
REALISE THAT I CAN'T
LIVE WITHOUT HER



I SLOWLY LEARNED HOW IT'S
LIKE TO TAKE CARE OF
SOMEONE, WHICH ISN'T EASY.



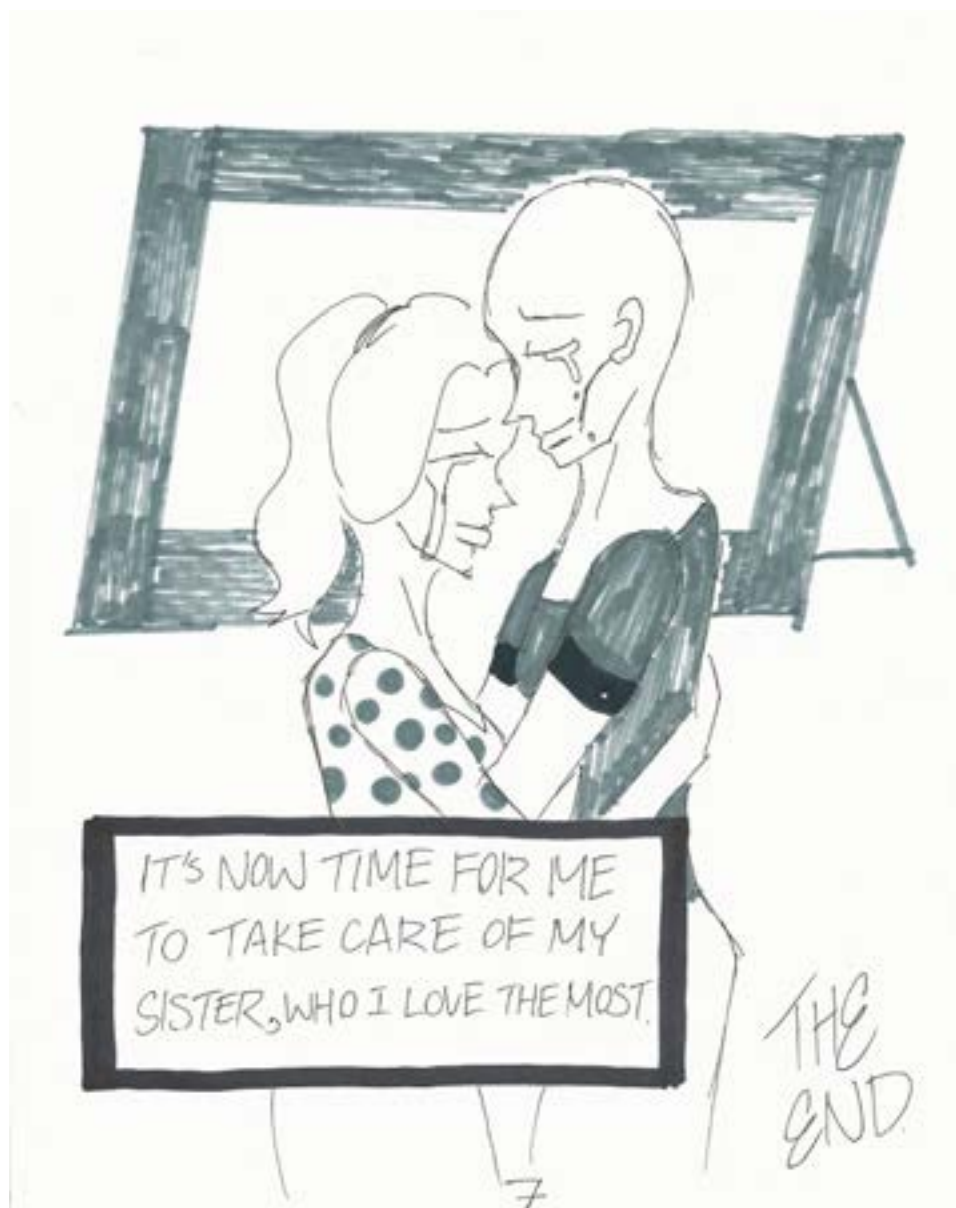
BUT THEN WE GOT CLOSER



How does
it taste?

Pretty
good!
I like
it!

Sisters by Cynthia Wang









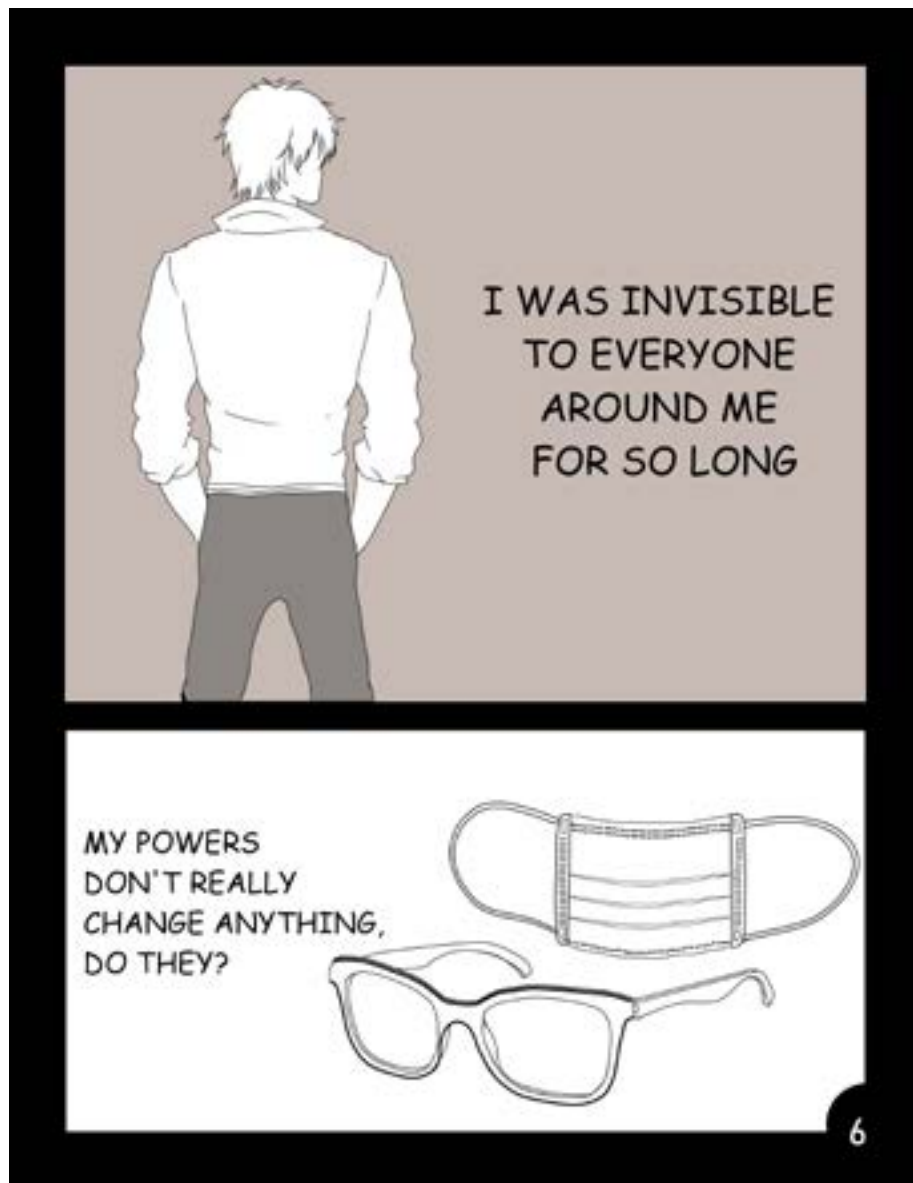
GROWING UP,
I NEVER HAD
A HERO

WHEN MOM
WAS SICK,
NO ONE
HELPED US









Random

Random: First Prize

by Sophie Lang

Screenplay For A Short Film

My Last Year on Earth

SCENE 1:

INT. LIVING ROOM - MORNING

NATHANIEL, a young man who married young and feels directionless in life, sits on a couch as his wife SYDNEY nags him. NATHANIEL is currently 'in-between jobs.'

SYDNEY

How come you never do anything around here? I work all day and get home with not one thing I asked to be done, done! Nathaniel zones out as Sydney's nagging fades to a light hum in the background. We zoom in to focus on Nathaniel's face. He isn't listening. His brain is somewhere else. He wants more out of life than this. He gets up and leaves out the front door, never to return again. Sydney yells for him in confusion.

SYDNEY

WHAT?! Where are you going Nathaniel? NATHAN!
The door slams behind him.

SCENE 2:

EXT. BUSY CITY STREET - DAY

Nathaniel walks the city streets with his hands in his pockets and his head down, bumping into pedestrians as he walks without a usual apology. Nathaniel bumps into another pedestrian and Nathaniel falls into a telephone pole littered with flyers. A **FLYER** falls off in front of Nathaniel's feet.

PEDESTRIAN

My goodness are you ok?

The man offers Nathaniel help up, but Nathaniel's attention is set on the **FLYER**. Nathaniel reads it aloud with eyes wide open.

My Last Year on Earth by Sophie Lang

NATHANIEL

'SICK OF LIFE? THEN GET AWAY, FAR AWAY. BE A TEST SUBJECT FOR NASA?! LIVE ON **TEPHRA**, OCEAN PLANET'

He grips the flyer like his life depends on it and runs to the address written upon the flyer, in a Charlie Bucket-esque fashion.

SCENE 3:

EXT. NASA HEADQUARTERS ESTABLISHING SHOT - DAY

Nathaniel sprints into the building.

Scene 4:

INT. NASA HEADQUARTERS WAITING ROOM - DAY

Nathaniel is doubled-over panting and gasping for air waiting at the receptionist's desk.

NATHANIEL

Hi! I'm *GASP* here to go away.

RECEPTIONIST

I- I-m sorry I don't underst-

Nathaniel catches his breath.

NATHANIEL

I'm here for the Tephra job interview.

JAMES MAYHEW III, a confident, sharp dressed, all-knowing NASA higher up in charge of the Tephra exploration, enters.

MAYHEW

Then you're here to see me. I'm James Mayhew III and you are? He gives Nathaniel a demeaning head to toe look.

NATHANIEL

Nathaniel! Nathaniel Jones.

MAYHEW

Well "Nathaniel!"

My Last Year on Earth by Sophie Lang

He mocks Nathaniel's excited attitude.

Come with me. You're going to need some work, some serious work.

SCENE 5:

INT. NASA LED LIT INTERVIEW ROOM - DAY

MAYHEW

Well Nathaniel, what brings you in?

NATHANIEL

Welllllll, my wife hates me I think, why do I even have a wife, I'm only 22?! And then I just feel so hopeless and lost, you know? You probably don't know, you're successful or whatever.

Anyways, ya. Ha ha.

Mayhew groans and puts his head in his hands. He collects himself.

MAYHEW

Ok... You need to be prepared to represent planet Earth to whoever you may meet when you exit our atmosphere. We are testing to see if the planet Tephra will one day be inhabitable for humans when Earth can no longer sustain us. Are you ready to leave Earth forever and take on this historic task?

Nathaniel is incredibly overwhelmed, but was born ready.

NATHANIEL

Yes.

SCENE 6:

EXT. RUNNING TRACK - DAY

Nathaniel is suited up in a NASA track suit. A classic 'Rocky' training montage ensues. Nathaniel running. Jumping, weightlifting, testing out zero gravity living and astronaut food. Each segment of the montage Nathaniel gets increasingly better and more confident in his skills and his relationship

with Mayhew. Over the past few months Nathaniel and Mayhew have become inseparable preparing Nathan for his historic trip. The day comes that Mayhew says Nathaniel is ready.

SCENE 7:

INT. NASA HEADQUARTERS - DAY

Nathaniel in his space suit, with helmet in arm, and Mayhew walk down the bleach white hallways towards the rocket ship's hangar. They look each other in the eyes and give and receive the tightest hug.

MAYHEW

You proved me wrong.

They separate from their hug and have one last stare. Nathaniel walks down to the hangar.

SCENE 8:

INT. ROCKET SHIP - DAY

Nathaniel is seated in a bright white cock pit with wires, buttons, switches and levers intertwining. He puts on his helmet.

SCENE 9:

EXT. OUTSIDE OF ROCKET SHIP - DAY

Sydney cries and screams, begging to see Nathaniel one last time. She is surrounded by a crowd of onlookers waiting to see the historic launch. She is held back by security.

SCENE 10:

INT. ROCKET SHIP - DAY

Nathaniel takes out an old photo from within his suit. A cherished photo of him and Sydney. He then takes out the flyer. He gives both a long stare and puts them back in his suit. He takes a deep breath and speaks into his microphone.

My Last Year on Earth by Sophie Lang

NATHANIEL

T MINUS 10 SECONDS.

He clicks buttons and pushes levers as we hear the flames of the rocket start up. The countdown from 10 to 1 becomes a light humming in the background as we zoom in on his face. This is what he's wanted. Lift off. The G Force pushes him back to his seat.

Cut to black.

SCENE 11:

EXT. TEPHRA, OCEAN PLANET - MORNING

Nathaniel emerges from his ship and is in awe of the vastness of this untouched planet. A short montage of Nathaniel exploring Tephra in various locations. The landscapes are foreign, untouched and most of all LONELY. Overtime, he starts to walk with his head down and hands in his pockets. He sits down on a rock. The camera zooms in on his face. He is just as lonely and directionless as he was, if not more. He wanted more out of life, but this wasn't it. He takes the flyer out of his space suit and grips it tightly.

NATHANIEL

Sick of life? Then get away, far away.

CUT TO BLACK - TITLE CARD

MY LAST YEAR ON EARTH

An Open Letter to Open Letters

Dear Potential Open Letter Writers,

From the famed J'accuse! letter and Martin Luther King's Letter from Birmingham Jail to angry messages addressed to givers of noise-making toys, it is evident that the open letter has intertwined our culture in many aspects.

Open letters are written when average people face adversity in situations they have limited influence over. Thus, many begin writing due to hopes of having their views considered and realities changed. I write an open letter now, knowing that I do not have the final say in whether you pick up your pen and start writing. Nevertheless, I would like to introduce open letters in hopes of being considered.

In the realm of open letters, there indubitably stands misconception. Open letters are not public rants, open letters are not the equivalent of the pretentious sermonizing of preachy opinions. Open letters do not exclusively consist of verbal vomit in size 12 Times New Roman font on white A4 printer paper. And perhaps the most unfortunate, open letters do not guarantee that the intended recipient will hear your voice.

Instead, open letters are a form of expression, a manifestation of thought, and a form of resounding silent protest – it's a slight hope of being heard amid the vast expanse of the turbulent oceans of vocal ideology. It's reaching past the barrier of computer screens and of our country's borders, amplifying your voice through those who believe in the same ideals. It's breaking the walls of confined silence, stepping past the hurdles of unresponsive anonymity. Then the open letter becomes the relieving proclamation against wrongdoing, and also the celebration of silent victories amid free speech.

Dare to pen an open letter. Not to rebel. Not to draw anger. Not to construct taller barriers and wider borders between the preexisting divides of mankind. Instead, write for a chance of being an audible voice rising above a symphony of whispers. Write and become the melody of reason rising above harmonies of non-harmonious dispute. So pen an open letter. Pen it even if it never leaves the workbench. Pen it even if it is to be left to yellow and

An Open Letter to Open Letters by Rena Su

wane in the untouched cellars and gather dust. Write an open letter not for the masses, but for yourself. Write as a personal victory to individuality, a whispered tune and hummed song of reason beyond turbulence.

Dare to pen an open letter.

Be it the unjust actions of an international corporate branch, be it the objectionable yelling of the local politician. Be it that specific yellow taxi cab that ignores stop signs. Be it the collective of people who distastefully season pizza with pineapple. Create an open letter whether it is to be left for your eyes only or published to the world. No matter the case, don't fear the open letter.

Sincerely,
A Writer of Open Letters

Gender Dysphoria in Youth

In recent years, there have been growing concerns surrounding that of transgender youth, whom wish to pursue gender transition. The topic is shrouded in controversy, as advocates and critics from either side of the debate grow increasingly polarized. As this phenomenon becomes more widespread, any decisions made in regards to gender transition must be made in the best interests of the child. Gender dysphoria is a medically recognized condition in both the DSM-V and the forthcoming ICD 11. It is the distress one feels when their gender identity does not match their body or physical appearance. This mismatch may cause high levels of distress and severely impact daily functioning. People with gender dysphoria, especially youth, suffer from elevated levels of depression and anxiety, along with extremely high suicide attempt rates, with some studies showing a rate of near 50% (Toomey, 2018). These statistics may be shocking, but with the appropriate treatments, transgender youth may have mental health outcomes comparable to or better than the general population. The consensus of the medical community, along with a plethora of academic studies show that social and medical gender transition results in the best mental health outcomes for youth with gender dysphoria. Youth who suffer from gender dysphoria must be given fully funded treatment that reflects the current standards of care.

Gender identity is the personal sense of one's own gender. All people have a gender identity. This usually poses little issue, as the vast majority of people are cisgender, which means their gender identity matches their body. A small portion of the population is transgender, which happens when one's physical body, or biological sex, does not match their inner sense of gender. For transgender people, this can cause a multitude of distressful feelings, which is known as the medical condition of gender dysphoria (also known as GD). The treatment for gender dysphoria is transitioning to the gender one feels matches their gender identity, a process known as gender transition. There are multiple aspects of gender transition, including social (presenting as the other gender, changing name and pronouns, etc.), and medical (puberty blockers, cross-sex hormones, and surgery). A person who pursues transition may choose to undergo some, or all of these measures. Oftentimes, access to these medical treatments are difficult, with many barriers to receiving care, despite data and evidence backing the effectiveness of gender transition.

Gender Dysphoria in Youth by Colin Dong

For transgender children and youth, adequate and timely treatment must be accessible if their best interests are at stake.

Gender identity is rigid and immutable. Attempts to change gender identity through therapy or surgery have been unsuccessful. One example of this is the widely known case of David Reimer. In the 1960s, during routine infant circumcision, his penis was unintentionally damaged beyond repair. John Money, a well-known psychologist, wanted to prove his theory that gender identity was a malleable social construct. David Reimer was forced to undergo sex reassignment surgery and had to take female hormones for his childhood and adolescence, along with therapy sessions to affirm his 'womanhood'. Despite these measures, David insisted that he was a man, and detransitioned as an adult, after learning of his past (Gaetano, 2017). The case of David Reimer shows that one's gender identity cannot be changed, no matter the measures taken in an attempt to change it. Not only for cisgender people like David Reimer, but also transgender people as well. The only meta-study conducted on the effectiveness of conversion therapy in treating gender dysphoria found only case studies of poor methodology with ambiguous results (Wright, 2018). The same study also found that the most difficulties surrounding gender transition resulted from the inability to access transition related care for youth. If conversion therapy was a practice that could cure gender dysphoria with good mental health outcomes comparable or better than that of gender transition, it would be a widespread practice. The usage of certain drugs, specifically puberty blockers in treating gender dysphoria in pubertal youth is also a practice that has been shown to be both safe and effective. Treatment of pubertal youth with GD with usage of GnRH agonists (puberty blockers) resulted in a low rate of desistance, providing evidence for the rigidity of gender identity (Mahfouda, 2017). The same study found that youth who did undergo treatment with puberty blockers had a desistance rate of 1.9%. This means that 98.1% of youth who undergo treatment for gender dysphoria do not deviate from their gender identity, which shows a very low rate of regret. The safety of such treatments has been researched for decades. Puberty blockers are completely reversible and result in no permanent effects if stopped (Tarlatzis, 2004). Transgender children allowed to transition had rates of mental health comparable with same age peers. When allowed to socially and medically transition, none experienced regret, and collectively, had rates of depression and anxiety disorders, comparable to

that of the general population (Durwood 2017). Looking at the data, it is undeniable that medical transition for transgender youth is an option to be pursued, if the best interests of the child are valued. The mental health of youth who undergo gender transition experience a drastic decrease in their rates of depression, anxiety, suicide attempt risk, and other mental illnesses such as depression or anxiety. Youth, when allowed to socially transition from the onset of puberty, coupled with usage of puberty blockers, and eventually cross-sex hormones and gender reassignment surgery have same or better levels of mental and well being, when compared with the general population (Vries, 2014). Medical transition in transgender adults result in significant improvements to mental health and suicide risk, with a meta-analysis of 28 studies finding:

“Significant decrease in suicidality post-treatment. The average reduction was from 30 percent pretreatment to 8 percent post treatment... showed that 78 percent of transgender people had improved psychological functioning after treatment (Murad, 2010).”

The extremely high reduction in suicidal tendencies in those that pursue gender transition cannot be ignored. A 22% reduction in suicide attempt rates shows that transitioning is an effective treatment. Gender transition is a medically necessary treatment for most trans people. And therefore, any medical procedures, including hormones should be covered by government provided healthcare insurance. In British Columbia, Lupron Depot, a form of GnRH agonist (puberty blocker), which has been shown to be both safe and effective in treatment for transgender youth, is not covered by government insurance, and if they are without private insurance, parents of children who are prescribed this drug would need to pay around \$1500 a month out of pocket. Universal pharmacare will be a necessity for to receiving adequate care and medication for transgender youth.

The consensus of the medical community, and experts in the field is unanimous. A multitude of studies have shown that gender identity is rigid, and that medical treatments for gender dysphoria are safe, including those used in children. The regrets of puberty blockers, cross-sex hormones, and surgeries are very low. As a medically recognized condition, treatment for gender dysphoria must be accessible and Gender transition in children is a medically necessary treatment, with its effects showing drastic improvements in mental health and quality of life. Healthcare related to gender transition in youth must be fully covered.

Gender Dysphoria in Youth by Colin Dong

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Bottled Water: The Impacts of Water Commodification

As of 2014, Nestlé Waters North America, a multi-billion dollar corporation, pays \$3.41 per million litres of water it pumps from public reservoirs in Canada; only a few dollars more than a single bottle of water may cost from a local convenience store (“How much is Nestlé paying,” n.d.). The birth of bottled water faced substantial growth in popularity in recent decades due to urbanization. With this sudden growth, legal policies cannot keep up with the change, and as a result, companies are given the opportunity to exploit water, a fundamental human right, for private profit. This exploitation poses many threats to the well-being of many communities, both environmentally and ethically, and is a topic which requires a proper agenda. The recent commodification of bottled water has become a standard practice within society; however, its environmental and ethical issues should be given greater legal consideration in the regulation of the corporations that provide it through forms of decommodification.

The rise of urbanization has caused more substantial demand for clean and convenient water. Due to this, bottled water has become integrated into the daily lives of individuals. This change contributes to the growth of its market and its acceptance in the community. In 2011, private water firms supplied water to over 900 million people, up from 50 million in 1990 (Jaffee & Soren, 2012). This 1800% increase over 20 years illustrates the rising acceptance of the idea of bottled water. This statistic is explained by the marketing of bottled water, which claims it is “premium” and cleaner than its publicly supplied alternative, tap water. Further statistics show that over 90% of Canadians prefer bottled water vs. tap water either due to sensory properties, such as taste or look, or health concerns (Doria, 2006). The cultural acceptance of water is one that is deeply rooted in society and will be difficult to reform without drastic measures.

Corporations create an ideal image of bottled water which disregards the adverse effects it has on the environment. This oversight results in consumers that are ignorant of the fact that beyond merely landfill pollution, many other environmental impacts are caused by bottled water. One significant impact of bottled water is that the production of the plastic bottles themselves consumes 47 million gallons of oil per year (“Ending Bottled Water Addiction,” 2007). This amount of oil is equivalent to 100,000 cars on the road,

Bottled Water: The Impacts of Water Commodification by Joshua Lee

or one billion pounds of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. Companies purposely omit this information from the public, because they are aware of these impacts and how this information will negatively affect public opinion on bottled water. Secondly, the allocation, production, and distribution of bottled water consume between 1,000 and 2,000 times more energy per unit volume than tap water (Jaffee & Soren, 2012). This process of distributing bottled water is simply inefficient when the infrastructure to provide water already exists. This substantial difference in energy used is unjustified by the small convenience and preference of bottled water compared to public provided taps. These circumstances exist by reason that consumers are only aware of the image of bottled water that the corporations give them. As a result, they continue to feed the corporate desire for profit, regardless of the degrading effects on the environment.

Along with the negative impacts of bottled water on the environment, the commodification of bottled water is also unethical and harms societies. One symptom of this integration is the lack of trust in public services such as tap water, caused by the dependency on the services provided by private institutions. One study showed that 15 percent of respondents felt that their home drinking water was unsafe and drink bottled water exclusively (Hu, Morton & Mahler, 2011). Considering that bottled water had only gained popularity in the past few decades, this statistic confirms a steadily growing doubt in public services. In the discussion of the effects of commodification on society, John Vail argues:

“When people opt for private services, they often prove less willing to fund public goods, the quality of public services subsequently worsens, thereby weakening the very rationale for these goods and creating a vicious spiral of decline that grievously corrodes the public’s trust of government services and damages the very possibility of cultivating a shared sense of community upon which a democratic citizenship is founded.” (Jaffee & Soren, 2012)

This statement is valid in the context of bottled water as well, as the lack of support leads to the deterioration of tap water quality, further giving an incentive for bottled water. The existing belief that tap water is unsafe is evidence of this; it must be understood as a pressing issue and addressed as such, as this loss of trust for public services damages the foundation in which democracy is formed, and affects society as a whole.

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Furthermore, the process of bottling water is unethical, as it causes a loss of access to public goods in developing countries. Accumulation by dispossession is a term used to describe the centralization of wealth within a few by stealing the public of their wealth (Jaffee & Soren, 2012). This issue shows its significance in the case of Pakistan and its water crisis. Pakistan suffers from a lack of affordable and safe drinking water, with 44 percent of the urban population having inadequate access to such water, and up to 90 percent in rural areas (Rosemann, 2015). The improper infrastructure to provide safe water forces citizens to purchase from bottling companies such as Nestlé. However, Nestlé is a business, meaning that their commercialization of water turns it into a commodity that goes into the hands of those who can afford it, not those who need it. Individuals suffering from poverty in Pakistan are driven to follow the demands of the market and will find themselves without the basic necessity of life when they are faced with the inability to comply with the market forces. The magnitude of this problem is made clear in the estimated 200,000 Pakistani children who die every year due to diarrhoeal diseases due contributed to the lack of available safe drinking water (Rosemann, 2015). As opposed to developing an infrastructure that supports citizens, bottling companies act as a separate entity, taking from the countries' resources and converting it into private wealth.

The key to solving the problems introduced by bottled water is decommodification. In fact, the UN has already declared drinking water and sanitation as a human right and called upon states and international organizations to provide the infrastructure to allow for safe and accessible water in a meeting in 2010 ("The human right to water," 2014). In reality, however, companies such as Nestlé do not comply with these conditions, as they go against their capitalist goals for profit (Barlow & Clarke, 2012). Governments must, therefore, enact legislation that recognizes water as a human right and that this right cannot be exploited for commercial profit. This can be achieved through a global legal framework which lays down water as common property for all. Though, if it were that easy, it would be accomplished by now. Because society has integrated bottled water into the culture, this problem must be tackled in the spectrum of consumers of bottled water as well. Governments must invest in the education of the environmental and ethical impacts of bottled water. Citizens must understand these effects, and establish clear parameters around water, which is a necessity for the survival of both humans and the planet.

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The commodification of bottled water is a multilayered problem that affects many aspects of society. In one aspect, the commodification of water damages the environment in both the accumulation and distribution of the product. Another aspect is the harmful effects on developing countries without access to an infrastructure providing clean water having to rely on bottled water from private companies. Thirdly, the reliance on private goods such as tap water causes less support for public infrastructure, evident in the percentage of people believing tap water is unsafe to drink. To alleviate the problems introduced by bottled water, governments must pursue forms of decommodification. Enacting global legislation to declare water as a human right and educating consumers of the adverse effects of bottled water will remedy the problems presented by bottled water. Although it will take time, the fulfillment of this criteria is the first step towards a world where water is no longer a commodity for those who can afford it, but a necessity of life to those who need it.

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