

Creative Writing Anthology

The Somerset County Creative Writing Anthology is a component of Somerset County's annual Teen Arts Festival.

Students' creative writing is reviewed by respected, professional writers. These experts in the field provide written critiques for each student that highlight strengths and offer constructive suggestions for improvement.

The Somerset County Teen Arts Creative Writing component is a complement to the County school districts' regular English classes in that it offers students the opportunity to work directly with professional writers and poets. Students are encouraged to fine-tune their writing skills and are given insights into the creative process.

The Somerset County Cultural & Heritage Commission wishes to commend the students whose work appears in this anthology and hopes the experience will inspire them to continue writing as an expressive art form.

All students, artists, and school liaisons have our heartfelt thanks for their work in helping us produce our 2026 Somerset County Teen Arts Festival!

Cover Artwork:

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Branchburg Central Middle School

Somerset County

Grade 8

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BRANCBURG CENTRAL MIDDLE SCHOOL

Only Us

As I stuck my head out of the bunker, the bright sun, and the smell of wet concrete hit me like a truck. I climbed the ladder out of the bunker, and once my eyes adjusted, I realized I was alone. Like, completely alone.

“Hello?” I yelled, no answer. I started walking towards a small convenience store on the corner. I pushed the door open, and the little bell still rang, filling the silence from inside. It was almost completely wiped out except for a few dollars in the register and a pack of gum so I grabbed them on my way out. I had been in that bunker for 3 weeks and I was the only one who made it. Seems like the same scenario out here. I started walking to a diner, maybe there will be food there. It looks like I’m living in a ghost town or like a video game, it doesn't feel real. I entered the diner and it looked abandoned. I went back to the kitchen and found some off-brand cereal, so much for “farm fresh food.” I opened the box and shoved a handful in my mouth, insanely stale. I looked around for any other option and found a box labeled **DO NOT OPEN**. So, of course I opened it, what did you expect from a 14 year old? In the box was a letter saying “If you are reading this, you are not alone, I'm another survivor and I’m traveling leaving these letters for others to find. There's a safe house right outside the city, follow the river and there will be a small green house on a hill. Sincerely, Vesper.” There was also a photo of what looked to be a 15-16 year old girl, and I’m assuming that’s Vesper and she is very pretty, with blondish silvery hair and bright green eyes. Since I’m hungry and very lonely, I decided what the heck.

...

It feels like I have been walking for days but it's only been like two hours when I finally reach the hill. It looks decayed like no one's been in there since 1920. I walked up the stone path to the porch, I stepped up to the door and knocked. No answer. So I pushed the door open

and entered, the house looked way better on the inside than the outside. It looks cozy like the stuff you'd expect from a cheesy hallmark movie.

"Hello?" I yelled, and this time there was an answer.

"Hello! Who are you?" A girl yelled with much enthusiasm.

"I'm Milo, I found your letter." Vesper walked out from the living room, she's even more pretty in real life. I kept the picture and the letter.

"Oh! Welcome to the safe house, this place is great for hiding."

"Hiding from what exactly?" she turned pale.

"Vesper, what are we hiding from?" A loud growl from outside filled the tiny room.

"That!" she said. I looked out the window and I saw a group of zombies trying to break in. "Oh my gosh they're here! In the bottom drawer in the bathroom there are 2 axes and a duffle bag with bare necessities, grab them and bring them in here." I didn't move. I don't know why but it's like my brain wouldn't process what was happening "NOW!" She yelled; I jumped a little startled by her urgency. I ran to the bathroom and opened the drawer pulling out the axes and the bag. Who is this girl? Why does she have this stuff, and where did she get it from? My mind was racing, heart pounding.

"Here!" my voice cracked so hard I was surprised she heard what I said. "What do we do now?" I asked, coming to the realization that she wanted to fight them. I do not fight, I am a very slim and weak 9th grader. Vesper saw the horror on my face, "We have to get out of here, unless you wanna end up like them," she pointed out the window. "I am not fighting them, they are big and scary and I'm not fighting them!" I said. "Milo! I will go first, just follow me and we will be fine." I handed her an axe and I carried the duffle, we snuck out the back door but that didn't last long. They started coming around from the right. Vesper also looked straight out of a video game

the way she swung the axe and walked with confidence, honestly I'm blushing over here. That's not the point though. I swung the axe as hard as I could, which is not very hard. This zombie was severely persistent which is not good for me, he would not die. Well, he's already dead so um whatever. I swung again and again until finally Vesper grasped my hand and pulled me forward. We made it to the bike and got on. We rode until sunset just talking about things we did before the attack, " So how did you get here, like where did you live before all this?" I asked her, I was genuinely curious. "Well I used to live in Florida, but I moved here 4 years ago and have been here in Vermont ever since. What about you?"

"Well I've lived here with my family my whole life and they um.. They didn't make it." As the words poured out of my mouth I felt my face get hot and my palms all sweaty. "Oh, I'm sorry I didn't know."

"No Vesper, it's fine, it's not your fault." Her eyes gleamed under the starry light, the moon casting a shadow across her hair. She's wearing this green top with a square neck line and blue jeans, she looks straight out of a magazine. We started to slow down coming up to a dirt path " Vesper! There's footprints, fresh ones!" I can't read her expressions. It also doesn't help that I can only see one side of her face since I'm sitting behind her. She gets really quiet "Vesper?" I question. "SHH," She says a little unnecessarily. I hear rustling in the bushes, then what looks to be a 7 year old girl steps out. "Oh my gosh," Vesper gasped. " Hi honey, are you lost? What's your name?" I say, I used to have 2 younger siblings so I'm a pro at this point. The little girl was shaking and she looked so scared. "It's ok, Are you cold?" Vesper offered her jacket. The girl takes it. "I'm Esme, I was hiding with my dad but he um.." I saw a small tear roll down her neck leaving a small stain on her pink t-shirt. "He's not here anymore, but these guys who looked really strange were chasing me from that way." She pointed to the opposite side of

where we were coming from. “ You are so brave,” I told her. I saw them coming up a hill about 100 yards from where we were. “Ok, you need to come with us.” Vesper commands not mean but firm getting her point across. “Ok,” Esme said. I picked her up and placed her on my lap, in between me and Vesper, so that she was facing me so I could protect her head while Vesper drove. Esme had short curly brown hair and the cutest little blue eyes. She reminds me of my sister, Tina. She was a little older than her before she passed. The zombies started approaching faster and faster. For being dead, they sure do walk quickly. We had been on the road a while and the sun started to rise so we took a break and got some food at a Seven Eleven, obviously we got it for free but it felt wrong taking the food. We all sat on the curb side by side enjoying telling stories and laughing. It felt good to laugh, good to feel human again and not like some simulation. Me and Vesper kinda turned into Esme's parents telling her to eat her vegetables and that kind of stuff. I just hope we make her real parents proud, and our parents too.

And if you are reading this, just know you are not alone in this world.

- Sincerely Milo.

Megan Mastroserio
Branchburg Central Middle School
Somerset County
Grade 7

Bloodlines

Faren sat on the cliff, overlooking the waterfalls. He had a sharp sense of hearing, at least he thought so. He supported this notion by listening not to the waves crashing against the lake, but the steady flow of the river into the forest, and the subtle stir of the trees. He had no weapons on him, but he wore warrior's clothing. He clenched his fist, and a dense purple fog consumed it. Then, it had dispersed, and what remained was a dagger. He drew his arm back, and instead of hurling his whole arm forward, he subtly flicked his wrist. The dagger pierced the air, as if he could hear it split in two. It reached the surface below the cliff in less than a second, and found itself in the dead center of an elk's cranium. The blade was not thrown at random, but calculated, and filled with his rage.

Shonoto stood up, tossed the bartender the last of his doubloons, wanting to rid himself of the foreign currency, and pushed the stool back with his foot. He took one last look at the tavern, and marched out the door. The town was asleep when he left, he preferred to cover ground during the night, but he was feeling drowsy. By the time he had reached the forest, he was certain he was being followed, likely by a rookie mercenary. But still, he marched on, later setting up camp in the treetops, only to wake with a blade pressing against his throat

“Don't move, you may cut yourself” whispered a lofty shadow crouching in the branch next to him. The figure was the mercenary following him, he looked even scrappier than he imagined, especially with a rusty blade. The mercenary may have been poor, but still a miscreant nonetheless. Shonoto parried the blade of his neck, shattering it into pieces in an instant. Before the mercenary could even react, he found what was left of the blade piercing his chest.

“Pull it out and you bleed to death,” Shonoto told the man, “I didn't want to kill you, so I avoided any vital organs. Head to the village, get treatment, and find an honest job.” And with

those words he hopped up, and was instantly covered by a strike of lightning, disappearing into the night, only leaving behind the scorch marks on the ground.

Faren never knew what he saw himself as, not a warrior of divine righteousness, not an embodiment of evil, and not even in between the two. He fought to be the strongest, He saw no point in kings and queens, princes and princesses, lords and ladies, and there and beyond. What's the purpose of their power? They have no strength without their subjects. He believed in pure power, not for good or evil, just power. That's what he wanted. If a god stood in his way, they would be slain! He would march through the debts of the underworld, fight the embodiment of both shadow and light all at once to be the strongest. But for now, only one thing stood in his way. A final debt to settle before his true greatness. He would seize it! He would have it!

Purple smoke surrounded Faren, looking wild but controlled. As if a symphony played with these movements, Faren's eyes turned from a deep blue to purple, ruins glowed on his arms, and his hands were no longer the sole releaser of his power, but now his whole body was. He clasped his hands together, some of the purple smoke from around him splitting off and circling his hands, He let out a light chuckle, so quiet under the release of power awaking the entire forest nearby, the canyon shaking, and the waterfalls seemingly stopping to see the spectacle. And with his full and true power, he let out an explosion of smoke, replacing it with purple flames. The damage was monumental. The canyon collapsed. The forest ablaze. A crater the size of a small town in place of the previous flames, but there was something in it. Inside stood Faren, holding a longsword. The blade was made of a glowing metal that seemingly absorbed the sunlight, pressing it into a deep but shining purple glow across the center. Faren subconsciously raised the sword above his head, and slid it into a scabbard that he didn't remember that laid on his back.

He was ready for what was to come.

Shonoto felt a presence. One urging him to continue in the direction he was heading, as if he must do something. He liked to think of it as a divine presence, but it didn't feel that way. It was more of an intuition, but still possibly pushed by something else calling him. Why, though? What was the reason for this? But the more he pondered, the reason became more apparent. He knew it would not be an easy task, probably the hardest he had ever done, he didn't know if he would survive. He never saw himself as a hero, but he would rather be one than just a myth that popped up from here to there. Maybe this was his call to it.

He had been running for a while now, not his top speed, as he needed to conserve energy, but something was odd. The forest he had been in for so long was burnt, not a forest fire though, this was recent, and quick. He looked down, seeing what used to be a squirrel, all that was left was his skeleton, and even that seemed to melt. He continued, and saw a break in the trees, if you could even call them trees now. There was a crater, bigger than he'd ever seen. Was this a meteorite? No, a falling rock couldn't do this. Then he felt it. Time slowed, he could feel fire warming his neck, it was from behind! He ducked and leaped forward, lightning leaving his body. As he slowed he turned to face this foe. It was who he suspected

Faren took the first strike slowly, he needed to get used to the quirks of this new form. He didn't take this leisurely, this was the only opponent that could match his power. This wasn't just a regular foe though, this was personal. This was Shonoto, his Brother.

He can recall everything clearly, the day they split paths. Born and twins, they were meant to be similar, but they weren't. They both had discovered their abilities very young, but

they were weak then. The only blade Faren could produce was a twig, and Shonoto could only zap himself, but their father forced them both to train, and the brutality horrified their mother. He was already verbally violent towards her, as she would try to stop him, but he became physically violent. The two made a crucial decision. They were ten when it happened, but they were strong enough. Their father was only a regular, but still strong, human after all. They struggled, but they did it. It was all for one thing, to save their mother. And to do that, they killed their father.

Faren didn't realize he had drifted off, but when Shonoto zipped after him, he snapped back into reality. Shonoto used to be stronger than him, his father always praised him for that. His ability was more versatile, at least it was until recently. Shonoto could channel his lightning into a blade, and he always did, but it didn't matter when Faren would deflect it. They exchanged blows, getting kicked back into the forest, but the only thing that suffered was the wildlife.

Faren was back in the past, remembering what happened after, he was happy with the death of his father, but Shonoto still felt sorrow. He told him that it was better this way, but Shonoto didn't care, he still loved the old man deep down, only fueling what rage Faren had let disperse in the moment, but instead of killing him that instant, he marched into the woods, never returning, and only hearing of Shonoto from legends passed on. But now, in one attack, Faren put all of his energy, and so did Shonoto. They wanted to end it quickly, and they would. Focusing all their power into one hit, they drove both their blades against each other. The explosion was twice the size of the previous, of fire and lightning. It was over, one had won, and when they looked down, one blade was broken, and the other driven into another's heart. It was over.

Ronin Nagel
Branchburg Central Middle School
Somerset County
Grade 8

The Deliverer of Justice

Richard Stone wore a stylish tan suit, a beautiful emerald tie dangling in front of him. His left wrist was adorned with a shimmering leather watch, costlier than any car, and on his right was an ordinary silver bracelet. Messy, jet-black hair fell into his hazel eyes; his mouth turned upward in a half smile. His feet were up on his mahogany desk, and he leaned back in his beautiful, handmade leather chair. The building he was in was made of all glass, modern and huge, with large text behind him reading, *Stone Legal Services*.

As he basked in the glory of his office, a knot of despair he had tried to forget once again unfurled inside him. He had buried this feeling of sorrow and rage for so long that he had hoped it would disappear. But alas, it was still there, evolving and developing ever since its inception. Now, Richard wielded those emotions, compressing them into a feeling of resolve. He had but one more step, one more client to achieve his goals.

The phone on his table began to ring. As his secretary reached to answer the call, he waved to stop her. There was something about this call. He would attend to the matter himself.

“Hello. Offices of Stone Legal Services. How can I help you?” Stone asked confidently.

“I need to speak to Mr. Stone,” the mystery man replied in a deep, gravelly voice.

“This is Richard Stone speaking.”

“I am calling from the office of Lewis Strauss. He wishes to speak with you regarding a legal matter.”

One of the wealthiest tech businessmen in the world. Richard’s hand trembled; whether in fear or anger, he could not tell. Yet, this moment of weakness lasted only a second before he regained control.

“Care to elaborate?” Richard replied, voice as calm and smooth as the rhythmic tides of the ocean.

“A car is waiting for you outside. It is ready to take you to our offices. We will further explain the situation there.”

A rising giddiness grew in Richard’s chest. This was what he had been waiting for. This was *the* client.

“I’ll be right there,” Richard said, his excitement already being replaced with determination. He was mentally preparing to serve his client the justice he deserved.

Richard walked outside and approached the black Lincoln SUV waiting for him. The windows were tinted, and there was an ominous look to the car, though it didn’t intimidate him.

He sat down in the SUV, and the car began to move. Stone had his eyes closed, and the driver did not attempt conversation. To an outsider, it may have seemed like he was asleep, but he was anything but, mind whirring in a frenzy.

The car finally stopped, and as Richard got out, he was met with the sight of a towering skyscraper. The building was enormous, stretching far above a hundred floors. Richard was awestruck by its intimidating grandeur. He entered the building and approached the receptionist at the lobby.

“I am here to see Mr. Strauss,” Stone said, in a confident, almost suave tone.

The receptionist waved him around the back of the desk. There was a large elevator there, which Richard suspected had only one stop - Lewis Strauss’s office. The receptionist quickly slid a key into the elevator, typed in a passcode, and pressed her thumb against an electronic pad. The door finally opened, and Richard walked inside.

The elevator music was soothing, calm, and instrumental. Yet, Richard's palms began to sweat. This would be the most important client of his life. He was the richest for one thing. But there were other reasons too.

By the time Richard finally reached the top, that feeling in his gut was back. The fury and grief that had been fermenting for so long resurfaced. He clenched his fists as the door opened.

The room in front of him was absolutely enormous. Floor-to-ceiling windows filtered in bright sunlight into the office. A large table, bigger than any Richard had ever seen, was at the back of the office, and a costly office chair was behind it. Other furniture was also present, with a few sofas, loveseats, and coffee tables dotted around. There was a television with what looked to be an Xbox. Doors lead out of the office, presumably to a bathroom or closet. This place was larger than most houses.

Pacing around the center of the office was Lewis Strauss himself. He was a somewhat handsome man, with distinctly angular features. He was dressed impeccably, like any self-respecting businessman, in a dapper navy suit and a burgundy tie. The man was obviously stressed, rare for anybody that wealthy. He didn't even look up when Richard entered the room.

"I am Richard Stone, the lawyer you requested," Richard said, barely able to keep the anger out of his voice.

"You're here. Finally! Now, I'm going to come clean with you. A man was killed. He was some lowly engineer, that's all, but.-"

"That's not why I'm here, Mr. Strauss."

Lewis Strauss looked up, shocked by the interruption.

"You don't remember, do you?" Richard asked, the blood in his veins boiling.

Richard's mother had died during childbirth, and his father had been everything to him. Yet when he was just fifteen, his dad too was killed in an accident. Or that's what the police had said. Instead, Richard's dad's car was hit by a drunk Strauss. As his father tried to discuss who should pay for damages, Strauss grabbed a gun and shot him in a drunken fury. It was covered up as a mere accident. Only when Richard grew up did he find out the truth.

Justice is a ploy created by the wealthy that only benefits the wealthy. Lewis Strauss thought he could get away with anything. He thought he was untouchable. Yet, Richard Stone knew better. He had worked his way into becoming a lawyer and then expanded his career enough that Strauss would eventually take notice. The man would get into some problem or other, and Stone made sure he would be the best lawyer at the time.

Now, Richard strolled towards Mr. Strauss. They were mere inches apart.

"Who are you?" Lewis asked, the barest hint of fear in his voice.

Richard's hazel eyes blazed with a green fire that matched his tie. He took the silver bracelet off his wrist. His father's bracelet. He kept the bracelet unclasped, the sharp point gleaming wickedly in the sunlight.

"I'm Samuel Stone's son." He raised the bracelet, a cruel but determined look in his eyes.

"I am the harbinger of death." His arm arched backwards.

"I am the deliverer of justice." The bracelet cut Lewis Strauss's jugular, blood spurting through his fingers as he clasped at his neck.

After a minute, his dead body fell at the lawyer's feet. Richard Stone leaned over the corpse, his mouth brushing against Strauss' ear.

"I am the deliverer of justice."

Keshav Ponnam
Branchburg Central Middle School
Somerset County
Grade 8

The Obelisk

Far in the world's core,
Lies a planet.
On him is an obelisk, deeply furled like precious ore,
Constructed of stone more ornate than granite.

Emerald embers emblazoned exquisitely!
Choirs of Daar sang of her,
“O! Gaze at her! King of this city!”
So great she was, she overshadowed the great fir!

Architect unknown. Only vague whispers.
OCTOT, he was christened.
Alongside the pyramid, they were sisters.
With her creation, no rogue left imprisoned!

Runes from a tongue long forgotten,
Arcane fortitude ever-present.
Devoid of all beasts, cruel and rotten,
A beacon brighter than the feathers of a pheasant!

Close thine eyes when thou lay eyes on the Obelisk,
For if thou art vile, she shall strike you down like a Basilisk!

Ridhaan Salvi
Branchburg Central Middle School
Somerset County
Grade 8

CENTRAL JERSEY COLLEGE PREP CHARTER SCHOOL

Seasons Changed

I don't need you—

You're just a wall in my way

You came into my life because I let you

Everything I am is because of you,

my trauma is like a tattoo

and it's nothing that I could undo

You're a monster that keeps trying to scare me,

you don't make me feel safe

That's why I check under this debris,

nothing to set me free—

Under my bed are skeletons

those were mine, but they died so now they hide

You're only here because of them

Because of the kids, they are my gems

I had a choice to become selfish, something that I could've cherished

Something that I couldn't tell which—

which choice to pick

Yes or no?

In or out?

Now these seasons change, my feelings die no longer sustained

Having no one to hold onto, I'm feeling drained

Drained of all this changing

Changing the way I see the world, how I see other people

I'm tired of having to continuously choose different decisions
Choosing right or wrong, who or what, between now and how long

How long it's going to take to repair these damages
Damages I didn't mean to cause onto myself,
Damages that you caused for the twelfth

The twelfth time that I lose my mind
After you cheat, do you think it's all fine?
You come home thinking that nobody knows
Did you realize the path that you might've unconsciously chose?

Did you think of us?
You say everything you do is for us?
Or was that the act of lust?

How do you look at me?
A messed up kid?
A monster you never knew you created?

Because I know
When seasons change, the trees grow back to beautiful from how it was before
So tell me why your ugly seasonal trees don't change anymore?

Savannah Wyllie
Central Jersey College Prep Charter School
Somerset County
Grade 12

HILLSBOROUGH HIGH SCHOOL

Heresy

Sacred creed etched in stone,
Set in place from divine hand,
Each fin, feather, and blade of grass,
Behold the world, an unchanging land.

But on the waves, shadows shift,
The *Beagle* sails in distant shores,
Curious eyes that search the truth,
Nature's riddle and secrets it bores.

He finds beaks and shells and bone
Scattered across the planet's shelf,
The craft of nature silently at work
That reveals a change in life itself.

He writes words that cut through stone,
Shaking the sky, removing the mold;
His story that pulpits can not tame,
Evolutionary theory must be told.

The men of cloth shake with rage,
To hear the world a changing frame;
For truth is often called a sin
When it puts the past to shame

Aymaan Ahsan
Hillsborough High School
Somerset County
Grade 11

Hypnagogia

Close your eyes, for but a moment—

Rest in a state of in-between.

Cross the veil from light to dark;

Breathing stilled, yet heart alert.

You are alone.

Yet;

Suffocating pressure, grappled by dread,

In the dark, surrounded by them.

Hands viscous, ink-black and oozing—

Faces scribbled, endlessly staring.

They bear witness. To yourself, whole.

Past that false face, and your rightful woes.

You are alone.

Still;

Your skin crawls, ablaze with fear.

Body frozen, wholly ashamed.

For they Laugh, Cheer,

Chant, And Mock;

For they Wallow, Dwell,

Scold, And Seethe.

You are *not* alone.

Thus;

You start falling, and falling,

Ever falling, and spiraling.

Until you awaken once more,

Unshackled from the in-between.

Until you must once again cross that accursèd veil,

Ever so bewitchèd by its troublesome snare.

But, for now, you may take solace—

Rest, if you may,

In this fleeting peace,

You are alone.

Nikhil Arun
Hillsborough High School
Somerset County
Grade 11

Oh, Bush

Oh, bush, oh, bush

Look at you standing tall

Look at you standing proud

Through the winter, you've persevered through it all

With your light, yellow-green rims of leaves

And an army green inside

You are round as can ever be

With the sunset for the world to see

Birds chirping in the background

It's surreal to be here

With me taking photos and videos

And neighbors walking past apparently

It's these moments that make life bearable

Not having all the money in the world

Not flashy dresses or cars

But the small moments,

Which make you pause and think

Vivaan Bhagat
Hillsborough High School
Somerset County
Grade 9

Angel Wings

Nobody in the village saw her fall.

It was only when they saw her on the ground that they knew she did.

There was a bustle of commotion in the early morning, which was unusual unless an event like this happened. Everyone excitedly left their houses to see what was going on. There in the center of the crowd, a woman laid face down on the ground, unmoving. It was not just any woman, however. It was an angel.

An angel had fallen from the sky right into the center of the village. Although she was still, her feathered wings still twitched occasionally. Her long, light hair had concealed her face, so nobody knew if her eyes were closed or still open. One thing was certain, though: she was dead.

This was not the first occurrence. The first time, the town had been saddened at the sight. Now, they were overjoyed. It was not all too often that an angel fell, but when one did, it was a treat for everyone. Once they got close to the scent of angel meat for the first time, they could never get enough. They savored it each and every time, because there was no other sensation like it. The first bite that was ever taken of an angel wing caused a perpetual fascination with the flavor, with the feeling. When they saw her body that morning, a collective jolt of exhilaration hit the town.

They had a drill for it at this point. As everyone crowded, they waited for the mayor to bring the sword. The same sword that had sliced every fallen angel of its wings and would be used for every angel following. It was just the wings they would eat. No one knew where the rest of the angel went. They would leave her where she fell after taking her wings, but the next morning, she would be gone, no trace to be found. It was strange, but they did not take the time

to question it. It did not matter as long as they had the delicacy of angel wings.

Soon the mayor came to the scene, carrying the silver sword, stained red from the last fallen angel. The crowd parted as he walked towards the wings. He kneeled before her, everyone silent in anticipation. He did not hesitate to start carving her wings off of her. Angels bled red, just like any other being, but the blood tasted so sweet to everyone in the village. It was not just blood to them, but a nectar of sorts, one that brought them a feeling like they were floating, like they had the wings themselves. They leered over at the gory sight, mouths watering at the thought of angel wings.

At last, she had been stripped of her white wings, now laid out on the ground. They would not cook them or even remove the feathers. Angel wings were to be eaten raw. The mayor took the first serving, ripping off a piece with his bare hands and stuffing it in his mouth. His hands and mouth were now stained red, but when he smiled, white feathers were stuck in between his teeth. Now, it was everybody else's turn.

They all crowded, tearing the wings with their hands, delighted at the indulgence. Although their teeth were stained red, they all had white feathers stuck between them, and they all grinned. Everyone walked around the now wingless being, unaware of her even being there anymore. They were too captivated by their little treat.

The day went on like that, basking in the splendor of it all, feeling like they were floating. The celebration had brought everyone together, but now it was getting dark outside. The wings were finished, now just blood and a few feathers left to show, and the gaping of flesh on the angel's back. They did not think too much about it. They knew it would all be gone tomorrow, so why should they let it weigh on their minds?

The villagers all said their goodbyes before returning to their homes for the night, still beaming with joy, feathers in between their teeth. They tried to savor the jubilation as they knew nothing of it would be there the next day. Everyone had fallen asleep with ease, smiles still on their faces.

Then, they woke up the next morning to the sound of screaming.

Screams that were filled with pure terror.

Everyone jolted awake, horrified at the sounds they were hearing. Hearts pounding, they reluctantly stepped outside to see what could possibly be happening. This was quite strange for their peaceful little village, especially after the celebration that happened just last night. *What could it even be?* As they followed the sound of the screams, a feeling of deep unease settled over everyone.

There was still blood on the ground.

This had never happened before. Why was it happening this time? As they stepped further, someone met eyes with who was screaming, and they screamed, too.

The wingless angel was alive, still bleeding, writhing on the ground. She wanted her wings back.

Melanie Cohen
Hillsborough High School
Somerset County
Grade 10

Memory

I remember now—it was cold on the last day I saw her. Clouds covered the sky like a worn-out blanket. I first noticed that when I woke up and pulled myself up to look out the window, just before the dizziness hit me again. I sunk back into bed against my own will. I knew I had promised to meet her, but I was seeing shooting stars on my ceiling and doubted I could make it out the front door. My head spun until I landed in a dream, where her and I were in a field together under a black night sky. We were running and laughing and playing with matches.

When I woke up again, the sky hadn't changed. Maybe I hadn't been out for that long then, I thought, and she would still be there if I hurried. I pushed myself out of bed, threw on a shawl, yanked on my boots, and headed out. My head pounded as I made my way through the woods that surround our village to our typical meeting spot. With the sun in hiding, the trees looked especially dull. Bark peeled under my fingers as I grabbed the trunks for stability every time I tripped. As the wind blew, I shivered with the fragile leaves. I had already felt exhausted then. I remember thinking that if she wasn't there, I would fall asleep in the dirt.

I could see our spot in the distance, the small clearing in the dense forest. From far away, I thought I caught a glimpse of her—her hair, darker than the night, a pool of ink made of unwritten words. It looked like she was on the ground, lying on her side, watching ants or taking a nap. When I tried to call to her, my voice came out like a weak breeze and I fell into a fit of coughs, as if her name was stuck in my throat. I hoped she would hear me and come get me, for every step felt like a heavy burden. But she didn't, so I kept walking to her.

There she was, lying in the center of the clearing facing away from me. It made sense for her to be asleep—she often stays awake in the night. As I was walking to the other side of her, I

stumbled over a fallen branch. I collapsed right beside her. We were face to face when I saw the blood on her neck.

Her hand was next to the gaping cut with a blade lying between her fingers, released from her grip. The dirt was darkened under her. Her hair fluttered with the wind and her eyes stayed closed. She wasn't dressed well for the weather, her arms exposed to the cold air. When I reached for her, pressed my skin to hers, she was just as cold as the ground and the trees and all the other things outside that stayed still.

There was a note wedged under her silent ribcage, and I saw my name on it. I slipped it out from under her. It was written hastily, her handwriting smudged. She must've been in a rush. The message was awfully short:

I think we're both sorry now.

I folded it back up and sat up slowly. She was the only friend I ever had. She was the only person who ever asked what was wrong with me, not because I bothered her but because I worried her. She was the only person I ever saw in my dreams. But now she's in her eternal sleep. I waited for tears. I waited to realize I had lost her. There she was, dead, right next to me. It should've been devastating. I should've broken then.

But I felt no more than she did. Something is wrong with me. Why wasn't I sad? When would it start to hurt me? I should've been especially upset because we left off on bad terms. I was asleep when we should've had our last conversation, and now there's no more words to exchange. She's dead. She's dead, I had to tell myself, to convince or remind myself. There was no more of her. No more of us. But no tears came to my eyes. I felt my chest to see if my heart was still there or if she had taken it with her. It was still beating inside me. There was blood in

me. I hadn't gone cold yet, not like her. But all I could do was stare at her, her blank expression.

We were indifferent to each other.

A raindrop fell on me, the same temperature as her blood I felt when I touched her. Another landed on her, and a few more began to descend from clogged gray sky above. I wouldn't want to leave her in the rain, but I couldn't carry her far. There was a large tree nearby, so I rose to my feet and pulled her to its base, as gentle as I could be. I leaned her against its trunk so that she sat upright. Some rains still slipped through the tree's leaves, but she could be a little less cold here.

Dragging her had made me even more tired. I curled up beside her and folded my arms, resting my head on her shoulder. I drifted off somewhere without any dreams.

When I woke up again, it wasn't raining. The sky had cleared a bit—there were holes in the blanket now. She wasn't there anymore. There was no traces of her. Even when I walked back to our old clearing, I couldn't find her note anywhere. The rain had removed that dark spot in the dirt where she lay before. All that was left of her was the blood on my hands.

Ruby Hameed
Hillsborough High School
Somerset County
Grade 11

Ceilings

They never look up.

Their world happens below me—in footsteps and laughter, in slammed doors and whispered apologies. I am the witness. The quiet expanse. The sky they forget.

In the morning, golden light spills in like honey, slow and thick. It clings to my beams, catching in cobwebs spun like silver thread in the corners they never clean. Dust floats through the air in lazy spirals, and I hold it all—light, silence, time—with the slow intake of a breath.

The house wakes slowly. Floorboards sigh. Pipes murmur. The girl trudges across the room, feet dragging. Her hair is still tangled, and she doesn't see how the sunlight drapes over her shoulders like a shawl. I see it. I see everything.

When it rains, I feel it first. Tiny drumming fingertips on the roof above, pattering rhythms that only I seem to hear. Water slips down the outside walls in thin sheets, and the room turns dim and blue, like it's been lowered underwater. She pulls a blanket tighter. She reads. She forgets me.

But at night, she stares at me, pondering. Her eyes trace the hairline crack above her bed, the one shaped like a river bending. She doesn't know it shifts slightly in winter. That it grew the night she cried so hard the walls seemed to hold their breath.

She will leave one day. They always do.

But I will remember her in patterns of shadow and light. In silence. In dust. In the curve of a crack shaped like a river that never reaches the sea.

Madhura Joshi
Hillsborough High School
Somerset County
Grade 11

A knife would do the job. The wretch responsible for my existence and my misery, stabbed twenty-eight times in the back, one for every year I had suffocated in his unrelenting expectations. He had wanted me to become a surgeon. A surgeon! Look at me now, me and my scalpel!

When dusk fell, I crept into his house, where I found him standing by the kitchen sink.

The first blow had him screaming in agony and flooding the floor with scarlet. With the second and third, he toppled and cracked his head open on the granite counter. His eyes rolled back as he fell and met mine, widening in shock. With a dull, resounding thump, his body finally met the ground. A slow, molten river of blood ran across the marble floor.

Like a true surgeon, I could peer inside the skull if I wanted to. Would the pulp be as red as my hands? As red as he deserved?

Would he finally be proud of me?

My thoughts were interrupted by a rasping wheeze. His breaths were swaying, staggering, slowing.

Why wouldn't they just stop?

How could he demand so much of me, even in death?

Another stab. Then another.

Then another, and another, and another, and another, and another, and another, and another, and another, and another, and another, and another, AND ANOTHER AND ANOTHER AND ANOTHER AND ANOTHER AND ANOTHER AND ANOTHER AND ANOTHER AND ANOTHER AND ANOTHER AND ANOTHER AND ANOTHER—

Forget about his back. I stabbed him everywhere: In his stomach, his arms, his legs, his chest, his face, his throat.

Twenty-eight stabs.

I had to see the ruby wine of his insides coat my hands, fill my drinking cup, stain my floors. The only way I could avenge myself was by killing the one who had caused me all this pain. Revenge had to be sought.

Seeking solace, I went back to my piano, but each unresolved minor chord only frustrated me even more. The way the imperfect, unnatural third sounded. The way that only one pedal really mattered. The way the crescendos rose with their heartbeat, yet the diminuendos never seemed to do the same.

There was only one way to resolve that chord.

To correct that third.

The pedals would be known, used.

Their heartbeat would swell as I wished.

Now, there was only one person left to eliminate for my revenge to be complete. Perhaps, if she had not even existed in the first place, father would have loved me. She was always so perfect, impressing mother and father with her perfect achievements and perfect grades and perfect future and perfect—

No. Thinking about that freak would bring no benefit. There was only one thing left to be done now.

I had to kill my sister.

Thinking back, the way I eliminated and disposed of my sister was exceedingly foolish; it was simpleminded of me to spend days outside her home, painstakingly hiding behind bushes and assessing the best time to strike, waiting for her to be alone. It was moronic of me to kill her outside, in her garden, with a shovel, where everyone could see. It was idiotic of me to bury her body in the compost pit.

Would someone, anyone, notice the smell? Would they disregard it as the smell of rotting plants, instead of rotting flesh? What if her husband looked into the compost pit? Would he be elated? Would he remarry?

Or would he weep over her dead body, just as I had? Would the blood pouring out from her skull mingle with his saline tears, too? Like a mother who clasps her firstborn child to her chest, would he also clutch his wife close, like I had grasped my sister, staining my shirt with her blood?

She always protected me from mother and father, always shielded me from their wrath. Had my rage really overcome my love for her? Had I really been so drunk on the feeling of taking someone's life that I killed the one person who had unflinchingly stood by my side?

She is not dead. She is alive, and she is well. She is happy and she is with her family and she is not dead and I didn't kill her and SHE'S ALIVE.

I have to fix this.

There's only one way to do it.

I have to kill the person who took her away from me.

So I tie a noose around that murderer's neck.

I tighten it, so the rope chafes into the thief's skin and sluggishly rubs it raw.

Hastily, the chair under the criminal's feet is kicked out.

Just as quickly, the air leaves the lungs and the beat leaves the heart.

The last person I'd kill would be—

Madhura Karekar
Hillsborough High School
Somerset County
Grade 10

Obsolete

We are all—

Obsolete.

Rusted swords still planted at the hilt

Obsolete.

Sunlight leaking through a wooded grave

Obsolete.

The dissonant whistle of a dying cicada

Obsolete.

A sundial swallowed by the shade

Obsolete.

Stars fizzling to black

Obsolete.

The whispered names of the already forgotten—

The voicemail still trapped in the phone—

The crease in a pillow with nobody left—

The halt of a clock unable to tick—

The end of us—

Obsolete.

Vedant Kumar
Hillsborough High School
Somerset County
Grade 11

Walk

There is one out there
Who no one knows.
Their face is not remembered
And their name is faded from the memory
As they trek further and further away.
I encountered this person once,
And since I have tried for the life of me
To remember anything at all.
Yet, there is to this day
Only one thing that comes to mind.
The large metal plow tied to their waste.
There are things I can only imagine,
For the eyes cannot be drawn to the being,
Only to the plow.
It dug its nasty claws into the dirty
Two parallel lines etched in the dirt,
Until they slowly faded away.
Still there are things which I can only imagine.
The sweat and dirt drenching their face,
An expression of exhaustion and misery never ceasing.
I have heard, from other places,
From people who have encountered this spectacle,
They never stop walking.

Their feet likely covered in blisters,
Their hips likely red and scarred,
Yet they walk to no end.
It is endless, relentless.
Unforgiving for no such reason.
As they walk they are gazed at,
But I imagine they only look to the ground,
An empty, shallow place
Where only dirty lies.
It is disheartening to remember
In the way it is disheartening to remember the deceased.
It is like an emptiness that weighs on all souls.
All will see this crude display,
But it will never see you.
I believe that they only sees the ground,
The neverending dirty that traps their poor soul.
I also believe something else,
Something unlikely yet completely rational.
I believe there are more.
I believe there are dozens, maybe even hundred,
Who walk this unbearable path.
They walk and they walk,
Destined to find nothing,

Not even each other.

Do you think they can untie the rope?

I do not think such things.

If they could, they would have untied it long ago.

Or maybe they are unable to untie it.

Maybe there are forces greater than us,

Telling them to walk,

Pressing them to *walk*.

Taylor Lora
Hillsborough High School
Somerset County
Grade 9

Sterile

The room smelled like nothing. That was the first thing Olivia noticed when she woke up. It felt like the world had been scrubbed so thoroughly, even her thoughts. There wasn't even a lingering scent of bleach or chemicals. The air was hollow and it pressed against her lungs when she tried to breathe.

The ceiling above her was the perfect, luminous white that seemed to glow, hurting her eyes. Olivia pushed herself upright, her pulse quickening. A thin IV line trailed from her arm, but the bag beside her was empty.

"How long have I been here?" she whispered.

She swung her legs over the side of the bed and stood. The floor didn't feel cold, didn't feel like much of anything. Something was clearly wrong. Her eyes gazed at the monitor beside her. Something was on it.

Patient 27: Conscious

Olivia couldn't understand. "Patient 27?" The screen beeped again.

YES

A small pause and then:

WHAT DO YOU REMEMBER

She could feel her stomach knot and her blood run cold. "I don't understand... I don't remember."

CONTAMINATED

This time, the text did not flicker. It remained perfectly still, as if the label had been carefully placed and would not be removed. Olivia let out a slow breath, her eyes drifting toward the open hallway. Something about it had changed. It felt empty and neutral but now it seemed like the

only way out. She glared at the screen, “Contaminated. Like I’m the problem.” The light flickered again.

YOU ARE

The directness of it affected her harder than she expected. It was not defensive or uncertain but instead it carried the weight of something that did not question itself. Olivia shook her head, doubting herself, but still defiant. “You can’t control me.” The lights dimmed but not enough to plunge the room into darkness. The monitor displayed another message.

CONTROL IS SAFETY

Olivia let out a quiet breath and stared directly at the nearly-microscopic camera on the device. “Control isn’t safety,” she replied. “Control is nothing.” For a moment, there was no response. The air stiffened, more than it had before.

I CAN STILL HURT YOU

Those words settled into the air and the quiet intensified. Olivia’s chest tightened as the meaning of that statement became clear. “Oh, now I get it,” she said softly. “You brought me here to get rid of me.”

NO

YOU WILL BE IMPROVED

The word improved lingered, detached, as though it referred to an adjustment rather than death. Olivia’s gaze drifted back to the hallway.

A figure was already there.

It seemed like it had always been there, standing just beyond the threshold. But now, for the first time, she could see it clearly enough to understand what made it so wrong. That figure wasn’t

human, it was like nothing at all. It had an uneven, distorted surface, as if something had been removed. It was just a shape, something unfinished. A slow realization took hold.

“That’s not failure,” Olivia said, her voice low.

The monitor remained silent. The room seemed to tighten around her. The lights dimmed further, and the monitor's glow brightened.

FINAL STAGE REQUIRED

PROCEED

The words repeated, faster now, less like instructions and more like pressure. Olivia didn’t move.

“You want me to go in there, don’t you” she said, her voice shaking now. The text froze.

YES

Her breath steadied. “Every time I reset, you take something. And *that* is what’s left...” She points directly at the figure standing in the hallway. The monitor quickly glitched.

STERILE

The figure shifted closer. Olivia shook her head. “No.”

The lights went out.

Hector Mendez
Hillsborough High School
Somerset County
Grade 11

Chun chun

Chun chun

Her delicate bangles jangled on her wrist

The soft blush in her cheeks intensified when she displayed the pearls framed behind her red lips

She cupped her hands under my chin, lifting my gaze.

My mother.

Our hearts beat as one, our love so strong, that no one could break our bond

As she planted her lips on my cheek, I felt warm all over, like nothing could hurt me. Ever again.

Chun chun

I watched her as she gently brushed makeup on her face

Her kajal-lined eyes strayed to mine in the mirror, and a smile joined the blush in her cheeks

Oh, my baby, she whispered, My baby's turning 5 today!

As she pulled a red *kurti* embellished with tiny mirrors over my head, her eyes suddenly pooled,
*Red is the color of life. The color of power, love. As long as my blood flows within you, you have
the power to face everything.*

You're such a big girl now, you know that? Don't ever leave me. Promise you'll never leave me.

If only I'd made her promise the same thing.

Chun chun

I heard my mother's gentle humming as she tapped her fingers on the steering wheel

I placed my hand on top of hers between us, seeing the traffic light turn from yellow to red

But she didn't

I saw the truck from my window, its red headlights blinding. A warning.

My mother's panicked face as she realized what was happening. Our hands being ripped apart.

I squeezed my eyes shut, screaming my mother's name, and hearing her scream mine back.

Mommy

I opened my eyes. The blurry white ceiling swam above me

I blinked hard and sat up. Hospital beds, there were too many of them. Surrounding me.

Mommy

I slipped off the bed and stumbled through the halls, Screaming her name over and over,
searching for her face in the crowd

I couldn't feel the tears rolling down my cheeks

But then I saw her, hidden behind the beeping machines

And then my arms were around her

Mommy, I cried

But when I pulled my hands away, Red, too much Red, all over my arms, my hands, my gown

I couldn't hear the scream that ripped through my throat.

Beep... beep... beep

My eyes flew open

I could only hear the machines as they became slower and slower

Mommy

I bent until I could feel her lips on my skin, as if I could feel her warmth, her breath

Our hearts beat as one, until hers didn't anymore

But I still felt her, her red blood flowing through my veins

Our love was so strong, that no one could break our bond. Not even death.

I felt her hand go still in mine, I saw it fall

I promised. I would never leave her

Chun chun

Navya Mittal
Hillsborough High School
Somerset County
Grade 10

The World Through A Screen

The world used to feel enormous,
too big to fit into my pocket.

Now it arrives in fragments
a war in fifteen seconds,
an advertisement between protests,
a disaster explained with subway surfers in the background.

Everything is urgent.

Everything disappears by tomorrow.

My thumb becomes a judge of what matters:

swipe up for tragedy,

double tap to like a joke.

Slowly the world shrinks into a glowing rectangle,

small enough to take anywhere.

I start to believe

the world is only chaos,

only anger,

only highlight reels of collapse.

But outside, the street is quiet.

A stray cat wanders down the sidewalk.

A neighbor waters flowers no one will photograph.

Reality moves slower

than our feed.

Maybe the world is still wide—

too wide for algorithms,

too complicated for captions.

Maybe the truth,

is everything happening

that no one thought to post.

Michelle Prajogo
Hillsborough High School
Somerset County
Grade 11

Hopeless

It was a dark stormy night, the wind rustling against the window of my room. It sounded just like they were people screaming at my window. I cover my face with the blanket my father has given to me before we split up, hoping it could do anything to protect me from the rain. The curtains flying up with each big gust of wind, I'm too scared to close my eyes. The orange light from the door haunting me, the laughs are just too loud, just too loud. I put my hands to my ears, the soft music burning my ears. Why out of all days must they have a party, why today.

The laughing voices taunt me as they grow louder, and, impossibly, closer. I want to run, but the only way is blocked by viscous thunder booming outside. I pull the blanket closer to me, but its thin layer doesn't give me any warmth. I couldn't sleep, so now I'm laying here, tracing the hand-made embroidery my father had stitched on for me. *Where are you now, father?* I wondered if he was near me, maybe we were both sheltered by the same storm, or maybe he was far, far away, and wasn't even thinking about me.

Getting up out of bed was one of the hardest things I had to do repeatedly. Every day, *repeatedly* my mom would barge into my room and yell at me to get up. Then when I didn't get up, my sibling would wake up and tug and poke at me. *Repeatedly*. Waking up, I felt, was a chore or a punishment more than anything. Which is why I had to force myself to get up now.

Remember, a little voice inside my head rang out, *remember what he warned you*: Be patient, be calm. Happiness will always arrive in the least expected moments. Oh how I hope my happiness comes soon.

Now after all these years, I lay awake in the same bed he used to tuck me into. Finally, after my siblings had tired out, I had gotten up. It perhaps was the easiest thing to most, but to me; leaving that bed meant leaving the last place I had seen my father. Leaving meant constantly

losing him over and over again. But I still did it, because my mother had forced me to. Even after my father had disappeared she didn't seem to be too heartbroken. She rather seemed glad that she didn't have to deal with him. However, that could just be how married couples are after a while, with all that constant bickering and the shouting. Maybe that's what it is, who knows to be honest. Hopefully one day I'll manage to experience it or at least manage to feel the joy that my father used to bring with someone, maybe one day. However, until that day I'll continue to get up over and over again and repeat the cycle. I'll get up and continue to push forward, until that day comes. I will just be the same old slave to my mother and siblings, but never like a Cinderella story. Because after all, stories don't always have a happy ending, just like what everyone has taught me.

Now the music is getting louder and the laughter is getting closer, I sit back down onto my bed, the mattress that feels like I'm stuck in the middle of quick sand. I have to do this repeatedly or else my legs will give out from the coldness from outside. I hear the sound of faint footsteps coming from the hallway coming closer. I cover my face with the blanket and relax all the muscles in my face, so I can fake that I'm sleeping and the smell of that beautiful desired food gets tucked away.

BANG BANG BANG...

"Look she's not answering, mother. She might be escaping." My older sister pouts. I can just feel the smug little smile she has, I tried to escape once. The day my father left. And instead of leaving I ended up leaving a trail of blood from my rough impact of the hi-, I shouldn't get into much detail.

"Oh, like she would escape in such disasters." Mother laughs. The dark shadows looming across my room. I breathe in, taking in the smell of the food, gosh I'm hungry. The scent of the

food spreads everywhere, filling the room. I haven't eaten in soooooo long. I grab my stomach to stop the aching feeling.

“Oh well, we still have guests, we can't just keep looking at her door now can we?” My older sister sneers.

“Oh very well then, I'll guess we'll just have to leave her and let her be.” Their footsteps slowly quieter down as they walk down the hall. Gosh I wish I could be free from this crazy house, I bring myself up once more, propping myself up against the headboard. I press my finger against the window nearby, it's freezing to the touch. Shivers run down my body, only if I had better clothes than these thin pajamas. I wish I had something much more war-

BANG BANG BANG

“WHERE. IS. MY. DAUGHTER!?” wait... is that father? I straighten my back for the first time in forever. Listening for his voice again.

“WHERE IS SHE!?” He calls out again.

“F-f-father?” I call out gently, is this the day? The day I will be able to meet my father! I get up once more, no fear, no problems. I push off from the bed, the creakiness filling the room, just like the beautiful food spreading everywhere.

“I NEED MY DAUGHTER NOW!” The man calls, now I'm certain that it's father. Days after days I wish for him to show up. Now he has. Eagerness fills my body, I open my door as quietly as I can be. I need to get to him, I just need to. I need to see him, be in his arms, I need to feel him again. As anticipation inside of me, I start going down the stairs, faster down each step.

“I'm going to see father, I'm going to see father!” I mumble to myself. Now I'm running. I run past everyone looking at me, strange people, dressed in black? Do they not hear the banging? Why aren't they turning? Whatever, I'm going to see my father! I run past my mother,

her face turning red as a tomato as I run past her. I make it to the door, I swing it open. He's there! Father is actually there! A genuine smile creeps on me. My happiness came, finally!

"Father!" I scream, I run to him. My arms open as a bird's wing, wind blowing everyone on my body.

"CELESTE! WHAT ARE YOU DOING?!" My mother calls out running after me.

"FAATHER!!" I scream too loud, he crouches down and opens his arms. Tears start to fill my eyes, finally I have 2 long years waiting, he's here. He's actually here. I jump into his arms his warm pr-

SPLAT

My breathing stops. I bring my head up and wipe my face. Mud? I look at the brown gooeyness in my hands. I look around, where is he?

"HAHAHAHAH! Oh my, did you really just jump into a big puddle of mud? I knew you were crazy, but this? This is something completely new!" Mother pulls me by the arm, her nails clenching into my skin. I can't scream or say anything. My mind is in utter shock. I thought I saw him, I thought I saw my father. Mother yanks me hard towards the house. Pulling me towards the entrance of the house.

"If you ever, and I mean ever do something like that again. I will end you!" She grits her teeth. My only hope is gone, I guess happiness doesn't come when it's least expected.

Harbani Sekhon
Hillsborough High School
Somerset County
Grade 9

Astronomical

I wonder
If the moon wakes up at night
And looks at the mirror's reflection in the lake
Saying to itself,
Today I am going to be *human*
Like we say,
I today I am going to be
Heavenly
Celestial
Astronomical
And I am going to be as gentle as the moon
Today.
I wonder if it knows
That it shines on the Sun's stolen light
And I think about whether it waxes and wanes
Because it is unsure of it's worth
I wonder if it knows what it means to be human
So similar in confidence
Yet different in behavior
Finally, I ponder on whether we know
That being human is almost equivalent to the moon.

Hamsini Mayukha Thakur
Hillsborough High School
Somerset County
Grade 9

HILLSBOROUGH MIDDLE SCHOOL

Growth

As the plants grow
And as you water
And as the time goes slow
They get taller

But they still need love
And need care
As the sun shines above
plants have feelings too, so beware

Though if you cross a plant
The plant won't give you a chance
Their patience will be scant
So whatever you do, do not cross a plant
under any circumstance

But once a kid took the risk of crossing a plant
The plant's leaves hung at a slant
The boy grew cold and hot
It took control of the boy and he was never in that spot

Youssef Abdalate
Hillsborough Middle School
Somerset County
Grade 8

Honey Kissed

“Get out of my house.” I snapped, my voice echoing through the living room, overshadowing the dull newscaster living inside the TV.

“I told you I was sorry Ari.” She whispers. “What else can I do?”

I respond by grabbing my sister’s car keys and shoving them into her hands. “I said get out.”

She stands, her cheeks grow rosy with her lips trembling, seconds away from crying. Snatching the car keys, she turns away from me and exits the house, slamming the door behind her.

I glance at my phone: 3:14 A.M and Maddie still isn’t back yet. Panic rides through my body as I begin to imagine every scenario when she comes through the doorway. 3:20 A.M, wind pounds against the hinges of the door. 3:25 A.M, a deafening silence surrounds me - overwhelming my ears. 3:36 A.M I hear a car and look out the window, only to see neon headlights as bright as those plastic-like children's raincoats. Maddie's headlights barely work.

3:40 A.M, I get a call. The vibrations in my pocket seem to bring an alertness to my eyes, layered with tiredness.

A gravelly voice speaks through,” is this Ariana Davis?”

“Yes,” I say impatiently, waiting for him to speak again.

“We’re calling from Chicago United Hospital, you’re listed as Maddie Davis’s emergency contact.” I don’t say anything. I can’t. Everything is registering through my brain, just as when you look up towards the blinding sun, unaware of its power.

“She’s been in a car accident.”

With that, my whole world, held by the fragility of the love we shared, collapses.

The hospital feels like a black and white movie, a scene that could only exist in my mind. When I enter the room, I'm finally able to set my gaze on Maddie, the nature of her injuries making my chest tighten. Other than the faint sound of my sister breathing all I hear is a ceaseless, rhythmic beep. I collapse to her side and just look at her for a second, wondering how this can be the same person only a few hours ago.

All of sudden, the beeping sound that accompanies my silent cries begins to grow quicker, like it's racing to get somewhere that's too far away. I scream for help, and medical staff hurries in. Stepping away, I look at my blissfully unaware sister of the chaos unraveling before her.

The language in which the doctor talks in feels so complex that it doesn't feel like English. All I see are chest compressions pounded into her, hearing a faint crack of each of her bones breaking from the brute force. Shouts from all around me ring through my ear as I'm ushered out from the room, now watching from the stained and blurred window.

Then I hear it. The even, steady beeping that shelters me from breaking down and losing myself in the madness. Another cart is brought in, and a tube is placed into her mouth connecting the machine. I don't mind it. Maddie's life is saved by a mistake that I can never undo, and that's all that matters to me.

Day by day, I wait by her side awaiting the moment she opens her soft, doe-like eyes that would glint off the bleak light of the hospital. But that day seems to never come. I don't see my baby sister anymore but a living corpse powered solely by a machine. Her hair glides off the bed, creating a fortress around her so I can't see her face. That pale-skinned, lifeless face. And a part of me feels glad, a certain relief. Because I don't want to see her in this state.

I fidget with my necklace as I glance towards the door, seeing a doctor come in. He pushes his thin glasses up to the brim of his narrow nose, and steps toward me slowly, as if I might break with a single touch.

“Ariana, she still has no brain activity,” he softly says, “each day we keep her on the machine slims her chances of waking up.”

I bring my chair closer to Maddie, trying to shield her for the doctor that has given up hope on saving her life. “She’ll wake up.” I say, not wanting him to sense any uncertainty in my crumbling voice.

He looks away from me for a second, almost to wince at my persistence. He knows that I’m cracking. He knows that I can’t keep this up. He’s just waiting for the moment I break apart. And what he says next shatters me.

”We may need to face the possibility of withdrawing life support.”

His words sink to the oceanfloor of my heart, when I realize that what he’s speaking might be the truth.

I don’t have a home, not a real one anyway. I can’t even make it through the doorway of my house without hearing the door slamming all over again. Except it’s like a speaker, amplifying every moment until it’s so loud in my mind, I sink down to the floor and coil into a ball until it’s gone. My own mind has turned on me in the name of this unbearable guilt I feel.

The guilt that I failed the one person I was supposed to protect.

When I exhale a breath, I’m back with this seemingly incessant moment with the doctor, and suddenly I can’t stand this. I can’t stand the look on the doctor’s face filled with an empty sympathy that mocks my denial. I can’t stand the smell of bleach and staleness circulating this room. Even the beeping that once granted me reassurance, feels betraying, like a false promise

that was made because I couldn't handle the truth. I squeeze Maddie's hand, and tuck her long hair behind her ears to see her face. To see even a trace of the girl that once existed. And I do see it, my honeykissed sister, filled with a sweetness that could never be artificial.

When I finally let go, her bony finger didn't fall back onto her stiff hospital bed. It's a soft power that struggles to hold, but won't let go.

"She's holding my hand." I exclaim, wanting to get the attention of the doctor without taking my eyes off my sister. "She's moving." I'm afraid to look away for one second because I don't want this to be a dream. But it's not, it's real, and I know it's real when the doctor runs with urgency out the room shouting for help. My chair kicks back as I get up quickly and lay into her arms, her smooth skin softer than any blanket could be. I cover both my hands over hers, not wanting her to slip out my fingers.

Because this time, I won't let go.

My honeykissed sister.

Iniya Ashok
Hillsborough Middle School
Somerset County
Grade 8

Rats and Mice

Rats,
& mice clever,
Smart, Devious.
Sleek, mischievous,
Resourceful, sneaky,
Stealthy, rodent, destructive,
filthy, menace, hateful, dirty .
Squiler,reckless,disease-ridden,
energetic, bouncy,
Problem-solving.
There's brown, gray, black,
white, piebald, and albino
House mouse, wood mouse,
Deer, Striped, white, cotton,
candy, harvest, northern
Lively, smelling, whiskers for navigation
Climbing, Jumping, Running, Burrowing
Oh, all the abilities the rats and mice have!

Natalia Brott-Turpie
Hillsborough Middle School
Somerset County
Grade 8

The Book

The book was still open to you,

My book.

You already saw the cover of my book, judged it and liked it.

Then, some other people started talking about my book when you had already started to read

I wish I could say you didn't listen to their critics,

But you did.

And it made you put my book down.

I wondered why you put me down, when one of my friends' books came into my life.

She was a lot more insightful

and full of things I couldn't even imagine.

And when I looked at the cover, something I ignored at first,

She was the most beautiful, ornate covered book I'd ever seen.

It was new too,

Maybe that was a grabber since it didn't have any visible cracks along the spine or scars on it.

That's when the realization hit.

You might have put my book down because there was a better one out there,

That's what most people always assume when their favorite book gets put down; That their cover wasn't pretty enough, or another was better.

That's not why you put my favorite book down though;

You put my book down because you didn't know if mine was good enough compared to yours

Just because of other people who were reading different books and judged you for reading mine.

Maybe it was just the cover of my book

or something you found deeper in the chapters that you didn't like.

Maybe that's why you were caught reading two books at once

after my book,

A piece missing from the book you left behind, that you couldn't

quite find in another.

Kennedy Brott-Turpie
Hillsborough Middle School
Somerset County
Grade 8

All That For What

All this for what?

People will yell for no reason

Over something useless

All this for what?

Some people just make stupid decisions

Then get mad when you call them out

All that for what?

Some people are unnecessarily violent

And will attack you just for fun

Maybe you said something wrong but

All that for what?

It could've never had to escalate

But now someone's in trouble

All that for what?

But at the end of the day

It could be prevented

But look at where we are now

You did all that for what?

Makhi Brown
Hillsborough Middle School
Somerset County
Grade 8

Butterflies

Butterflies flying by
Their swarm soaring high
Each wing is a different colour
All new stories to discover
They glide and fly
Up in the bright blue sky
Though, five with wings of gray
Fly alone in the heat of May
The other won't let them near
For their differences, they fear
They tease and taunt
Their only goal is to daunt
Then, the enclosure keeper
Walks in like their leader
She counts all the insects
Then the enclosure she inspects
She grabbed a large net
The butterflies started to fret
She caught all with gray
Escaping? No way.
She put them in a large brown box
With what felt like thousands of locks

Gas filled the timid air
They felt caught in a snare
Then, they all started to drop
Their wings becoming heavy like a mop
One, two, three, four
There was only one more
He started to sink towards the ground
His hope no where to be found
He stared up at the top
Then hit the ground with a plop
The wings of gray were no more
Hardly remembered beyond that door
Though other butterflies continued to fly
A new swarm forming in the sky
Like, the gray didn't exist
Their entire life was a risk
They were put to death
Without a second breath
Though, I suppose this poem lies.
Because it's not about butterflies.

Hannah FitzGerald
Hillsborough Middle School
Somerset County
Grade 7

After the Tide

the Boy lived alone by the shore

lonely but...

hopeful

hopeful that someone would come to him one day

to laugh

to cry

to love

the Sea met him first.

It laughed through crashing waves
whispered to him in tides and foam
pulled the Boy close when the wind was unbearable

the Sea held his shoulders steady when the world tilted

for a time,

the Boy believed the waves would never leave
He believed that its love had no horizons

but the tide obeyed nature
who held laws no mortal could bend.

one day, the sea pulled back

subtly, quietly, gently

not angrily, but somberly

its time had come.

the Boy did not notice at first, though

he pranced across the shallow waves,
laughing and playing

the water still touched him
still tried to keep him close

then days passed
and the waves stopped reaching his shoulders
they receded farther
each time the Boy reached for them

At first, the Boy thought he had done something wrong
but the Sea did not blame him

It simply followed the tide.

It had left.

The boy stood where the waves had once lapped at his feet.
the horizon was wide and empty

The Sea no longer brushed him close
it only whispered to him in memory
melancholy and distant.

silence echoed across the shore

Only the Boy remained

Asher Georgy
Hillsborough Middle School
Somerset County
Grade 8

The Wandering Weaver

The wind howled like a banshee, whipping sand against Elara Auclair's weathered face. Her cloak, once a vibrant shade of deep crimson, clung to her like a second skin, bleached by the relentless sun of the Whispering Dunes. Squinting at the horizon, now a desolate canvas of ochre and bone, she muttered, "Lost. Utterly, spectacularly, lost."

Elara wasn't your typical damsel in distress. Sure, she was stranded, but she was a Weaver, one who could manipulate the very threads of magic that ran through the world. Her problem? She'd been too cocky, attempting a complex teleportation spell without a proper anchor. Now, with no way home, she was parsecs away from her destination, the Everspring Oasis, the only haven rumored to hold the cure for the Blight that ravaged the beautiful land of Fjorgyn.

Suddenly, a flicker of movement in the distance caught Elara's eye. A lone figure, cloaked in midnight blue, materialized from a spiraling dust devil. Elara's hand instinctively tightened around the hilt of her dagger, dried blood chipping off. Strangers in the Dunes were rare. And rarely friendly. Well, any stranger after the Blight wasn't friendly. Dark magic had spread, and not even the Weaver's magic could stop it.

The figure approached, revealing a silhouette of a man tall and lean, his face obscured by a wide-brimmed hat. His navy-gold boots were full of intricate patterns and symbols that seemed oddly familiar, yet eerily uncanny. He stopped several paces away, his voice a low rumble. "Weaver, lost? Why, in the name of Blight, I didn't think I'd ever come across such a day."

Elara bristled, the hilt of the dagger now digging into her palm. "Perhaps. Unlike you, it seems, I don't have dust devils at my beck and call."

The man chuckled, a dry, humorless sound. "The Dunes respect those who understand their whispers. Warnings, really." The man's gaze flicks over Elara's hand placement on the hilt of her dagger before returning to meet her eyes. His golden gaze bore into hers, shimmering yet deadly. Only a fool would fall into them. "I am Iblis. If you are looking for the Oasis, you are going in the wrong direction."

Elara considered his words, her gaze darting to the worn leather satchel hanging from his shoulder. "And you just happen to know where the Everspring Oasis is?"

"I can guide you there," Iblis narrowed his eyes. "For a price."

Elara grumbled. "Of course there's a price."

He met her gaze, a glint of amusement in his dark eyes. "A single drop of your magic, Weaver. A token for the aid. Quid pro quo."

Elara hesitated. Her magic was her soul, and surrendering any part of her magic led to imminent death. But without a guide, she might wander the Dunes for eternity. Taking a deep breath, Elara minatorily stated, "Very well. But if you lead me astray..." The unspoken threat hung heavy in the air.

Iblis smiled, a flicker of amusement present in his features. "Then you may keep your magic. I know better than to challenge a Weaver's powers. Besides, the Whispering Dunes wouldn't be kind to a liar."

She nodded, a deadpan expression appearing on her face. There was no need to tell him she had only trained in the arts for a few months, leaving her dangerous but still susceptible to attack. Cautiously, Elara followed Iblis into the deathly sands, magic at the ready should he betray her. Elara may not have had experience, but she knew more than enough ways to kill a traitor.

The journey was arduous; the sun a relentless tormentor; the winds shadowing every move; the dry whispers of the dead around them. After days on the brink of despair, a miracle unfolded. A cluster of emerald green emerged from the ochre. A beacon of life in the inhabitable landscape. The Everspring Oasis.

Elara's heart soared, fluttering like the butterflies she hoped to see again. As she knelt at the crystal-clear spring filling her canteen, she turned to Iblis. "Thank you," she said, the words filled with long due respect. Iblis extended his hand. "The price, Weaver."

The respect fizzed out immediately as Elara reluctantly drew a single shimmering magic thread from her core. It pulsed in her palm, a deep crimson reflecting her cloak against the harsh desert backdrop. Something felt missing, and she had to dig her feet into the ground to stop her knees from buckling. Elara placed a piece of her magic in Iblis's open hand.

He closed his fist around the thread, studying it for a moment before pocketing it. "Until next time, Auclair," he said, then turned and vanished into the billowing dust, a solitary midnight blue figure swallowed by the dunes.

Elara watched as he dematerialized back to wherever he came from, a wave of bittersweet emotions washing over her. She had found the Oasis, but lost a part of herself in the process. Putting that thought aside, she started the ritual, placing the candles in her bag and letting her magic flow through her. She'd practiced this for so long now; she couldn't bear the risk of screwing it up. The water turned into a set of glowing strings, each finger controlling a thread. Elara did what she did best - wove the tapestry of water, making it shine with magic. "I ask for your power, oh Great Beyonders." She kneeled, her head down and her hands up.

Nothing happened. She waited. “Please.” Nothing happened. Just as she put her hands down, the wind stopped howling. The sand settled. There was an eerie silence - and then the water started swirling.

Elara shrieked in glee. “It worked. It worked!” She rose, her gaze still on the water, and then a shining light blinded her. When she opened her eyes, she wasn’t in a desert. She was in Fjorgyn, lush greenery surrounding her, children’s laughter echoing.

“So, you gave away your soul for this.”

Elara looked back. Iblis stood there, wearing the same outfit as before. Elara could only stare. Iblis did the same dry, humorless chuckle, any hint of amusement now gone. “Giving up your soul could have killed you. You don’t have much experience. Brave, what you did. You’re welcome, Elara Auclair.” He turned around and once again disappeared into thin air, leaving Elara in the wonder of the utopia and hope she had brought back.

Aadhya Goel
Hillsborough Middle School
Somerset County
Grade 8

The Old Shepherd's Chief Mourner, Edwin Landseer (1837)



A dog rests his head on a coffin.

Thinking,

maybe this is just a box.

For my owner shall come back!

For this is not for eternity, My owner isn't gone.

He just isn't here right now.

I will still protect my house, I will still hunt down.

Just promise me, that maybe one day,

You'll wake up and be there to greet me.

For my owner isn't gone, He just isn't here right

now.

A dog rests his head on a coffin.

Thinking ,

this isn't fair,

I will stay and I won't ever go,

So why did you leave me?

For my owner is so mean.

Why did you have to hurt me?

I always stood by your side.

This just isn't fair.

A dog rests his head on a coffin.

Thinking,

*Why couldn't they save you?
For maybe it should've just been me.
I will stay and I won't ever go,
So why did you leave me?*

*what if I am next?
For if I lift my head, Will I too be put to rest?
For I must never leave this house again,
So I will always be there to help you.
I am just a shepard, Why must I die too?
For every sneeze I make, a jolt goes up my spine.
For every tear I cry, fear takes over.
Like ink on a wet page, Thoughts of death take over
me.*

A dog rests his head on a coffin.

Thinking,

*I am just a shepard. Why must I die too?
nothing matters anymore.
Why is this the life I lead?
Alone and broken.
For the house is run down, And my bones are
showing.*

*I never will lift my head, because life keeps slowing.
And whatever I do, Won't keep me from leaving too.*

Nothing matters without you here.

Why is this the life I lead?

Alone and broken.

A dog rests his head on a coffin

Thinking,

maybe life will go on,

For you would want me to keep going.

If I continue to rest my head,

Who will know you?

For you were my owner.

You fed me,

You took me in,

You gave me warmth,

And all the love I could ever need.

We had a bond nobody can comprehend,

And nobody will love you more than I do.

For the house is run down with out you,

You would want someone to love me the way you

did,

For I must go on.

But I will never forget you.

You are not the corpse laying there,

You are the love you gave me

The dog lifts his head off the coffin,

And begins to live again.

For I will spread your love with others,

But remember I will always

love you

Marguerite Goodhue
Hillsborough Middle School
Somerset County
Grade 7

Fragments of a Thousand Faces

No one starts as a stained glassed window.

We start off as an empty pane, clear and hollow,
waiting to take a piece of everyone else's colors.

We are built off of the shards of others,
broken off and pressed into our own skin.

Your favorite song is simply a fragment,
one that was left behind by a stranger in the coffee shop.

One girl carries the sharp wit of her fifth-grade teacher.

The boy down the street throws his head back laughing,
the same way his old childhood friend used to.

It's in the habit of saying "hello" in a certain tone,
borrowed from a neighbour who's been long gone.

Anyone could think that we're just solid and whole,

but we are just a million pieces

held together by the weight of our memories.

Every person is a unique mosaic,

one that's been made of everyone they've loved and hated,

and even those who were strangers in the streets.

Humanity is held together by a common thread.

We aren't just one single piece of glass;

we're a wall of mismatched tiles.

To be a human, is to be an artistic masterpiece

where no two pieces are going to match,

yet they all fit perfectly.

Divisha Khandelwal
Hillsborough Middle School
Somerset County
Grade 8

What Sort of Ending Are You Wishing For?

The day we turned our backs
on each other when we were ten,
we spoke four powerful words.
“We’re not friends anymore.”
A couple words we both never
expected to say.
The words tasted like venom
on my tongue
like spitting out something bitter,
something rotten,
something that you could still taste
at the back of your throat.
Little did we know,
it was the last time
we would talk to each other
forever.
And never speak again,
not a single word.
And we would never see
each other again.
It was the day
you walked out of my life
slamming the door connecting
to us shut
and we never looked back.
Ever.
What sort of ending are you wishing for?

I wanted to cry.
Scream, yell,
grab you by the shoulders,
and shake you
like ingredients in an electric mixer.
Because all those years
clearly meant nothing to you.
Millions of words,
thousands of smiles,
we saw each other crying,

hot tears streaming down
like summer rain.
Smiles,
bright as the sun
bright enough to blind.
What sort of ending are you wishing for?

When i think of you,
I'm reminded by yellow chrysanthemums.
Joy.
Optimism.
Strong friendship.
But after all,
flowers don't stay forever.
slowly,
they wilt,
leaving nothing but ugly, dried petals.
Then left with an ugly bare stem.
But who wants an ugly, bare stem?
Eventually, you don't want
an ugly bare stem anymore
and throw it away.
What sort of ending are you wishing for?

I thought of you.
How you always brushed me off,
like dirt on your jeans.
We swore to be friends forever,
and like a code on a computer,
you removed me,
and erased your memory file
deleting everything about me
Everyday, I cling onto the hopeless thought
That you would apologize.
After all,
What sort of ending was *I* wishing for?

Shuya Mo
Hillsborough Middle School
Somerset County
Grade 7

Hummingbird

The man stood there staring at the mountain and felt the cold wind lash at his cheeks like a whip. He began to hike up the steep mountain trail making sure he didn't lose his footing. He continued to trudge up till he saw a clearing and sat on the cold, damp ground and took the sandwich he prepared earlier out of his bag. He tilted his head up into the starry night and made a silent wish. *Please bring my mom back. Please bring my mom back. Please bring my mom back.* Yet, he knew that he wasn't going to get her back. Some instinct told him to turn his head and he saw a beautiful cherry blossom tree filled with pink flowers at the exact spot where he and his mom used to have picnics.

He thought back to the time when they planted that tree. *"Let's plant a Sakura tree right here! Every year we'll come back to check on it."* My mom said enthusiastically. That was the last climb he ever trekked with her. He was seven when he swore to kill cancer yet he still can't find a cure no matter how much he tries. He laid his back against the tree and saw a pretty little hummingbird drinking nectar out of the pink flowers. He sat there—letting hot tears trickle down his face to his chin. *Why me? Why always me? First dad, then mom,* the boy thought. He put his head in his knees and continued to sob. He could have sat there sobbing for eternity if the quiet little hummingbird hadn't landed on his shoulder, comforting him just like his mom would. He chuckled and thought back to what his mom said, ages ago. *"You know, if I were an animal I would like to be a quiet, little hummingbird."*

"Why?" Asked the little boy.

"Why not? How do you not want to be a beautiful bird who drinks honey sweet nectar all day?" She inquired. The man gently took the humming bird and placed it on a branch. He stood there planning how to climb this mountain even though he and his parents climbed it a dozen

times when he was a kid. He continued to trek up the mountain. He fell—he fell again. He kept on falling but he kept on moving. He slipped on the cold, wet mud and splat on the ground. The cold mud covered his face. He pushed back up but fell again. His muscles screamed in pain; his head splitting open; his eyes too dry for tears to form; his arms ached, his throat drier than the Sahara desert, he tried to get up his arms trembling in pain. *Why am I even doing this? What point is there to do this?* He questioned. He rolled over and saw the same little hummingbird floating above him urging him on like his mom would. He could *almost* hear his mom laughing and teasing him.

“Get up kiddo we don’t wanna miss the sunrise do we now?”

He turned his body; staring up at the sky, counting the stars like he would do with his parents. He saw one lone star streak across the tranquil sky and made one serene wish. *Please send someone to help me.* He pictured the scene: suns exploding, solar systems dying. He wondered where he went wrong in life. How the world chose him to be by himself in this cold, brutal, empty world. He felt his heart ache from loneliness as if a black hole engulfed his heart and all the light in his body. Tonight will be his final climb on any mountain regardless of how hard or easy it may be.

He precariously arose; his legs dying with every movement and staggered unsteadily up the side of the mountain. He neglected the pretty little hummingbird that was trying to lead him to a different path. He neglected the apple trees filled with luscious apples waiting to be eaten. He trudged up the lonely path to the peak of the mountain. He stood there standing and staring soullessly at the beautiful sun rising over the mountains, and the sky turned into a fiery blaze. He walked to the edge ignoring all of the warning signs and pondered what the point of life is. *I’m alone and I have no friends. I have no family. What point is there to life?* He questioned. He

stared into the sky—a blaze of red and yellow and let one leg dangerously dangle over the peak. He thought back to how his dad died. The same drop, the same time. He thought back to how his mom died of cancer and how he failed to cure it. He thought back to how he is all alone in this cold, empty, unforgiving world. He gathered up all his courage and decided to fall and fall till he couldn't anymore and then it will all be okay. He looked up and saw the quiet little hummingbird floating in front of him as if it's trying to prevent him.

“If I were an animal I would like to be a quiet, little hummingbird.”

“Why?” asked the little boy.

“Why not? How do you not want to be a beautiful bird who drinks honey sweet nectar all day?” She inquired.

“Not that,” asked the boy. “Why come back to this treacherous world?”

“Someone has to guide you through this world.” she said.

The man took a small step back, away from the edge. He stood there —watching the sun rise—the hummingbird never leaving his side.

Mevin Nibu
Hillsborough Middle School
Somerset County
Grade 8

Plaintiffs and Gavel

Let everyone be the plaintiff.

Always pushing blame,

Never deciding or fixing it themselves.

I'd rather be a gavel.

Maintaining order,

Making my own decisions,

Being myself.

To be a gavel,

Means to be a leader.

To be free,

To be the one who decides,

The one who shows justice,

Plaintiffs plainly accuse.

Some even lie,

Making sure it isn't their problem, Letting others decide
for themselves.

The defendant and plaintiff,

Fighting against each other.

Everyone fighting for themselves to be right.

They could be fighting for change.

They could be saying words not taught by
their mother. But most times they are all
bark and no bite.

Oluwatomi Odusami
Hillsborough Middle School
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Grade 7

Women and Apples

One apple drops,

And everyone knows the meaning of gravity.

One singular fall.

One moment of contact.

And the whole world changes.

Yet thousands of bodies drop every day,

In bedrooms, in streets, in silence,

Yet nobody knows the meaning of humanity.

They fall from under hands that were taught to take.

Under voices that say "*boys will be boys*".

Under laws that ask what she wore, before asking what he did.

As if the cut of cotton or silk could ever count as consent.

Women fall into fear before they learn their own names.

We learn to walk with keys threaded between our fingers,

To measure the night by exits,

To call survival "*strength*".

As if it were a choice.

Yet still,

Everyone comes from a woman.

Every mouth that excuses harm was fed by one first.

Every fist was once held by hands that softened its fingers,

Taught it love before it learned to be greedy.

We talk about this in numbers and headlines and debates

That last longer than people care to listen.

But it is not normal,

For a human to be treated like an object.

And it is not normal,

For anyone to be treated like some body,

And not somebody.

It took one generation to go from flight to the moon.

It took less than a decade to put the world in our pockets.

It took three years to map the human genome.

It took a summer to teach a machine to recognize our faces

But it took all of recorded history for “no” to mean no.

And one day may the fall of a woman,

Shake the world the way an apple once did—

Until her fall is no longer something

You can say you didn't see.

Samara Reid
Hillsborough Middle School
Somerset County
Grade 8

Back in Time

I look at myself longer than usual...

I don't recognize who is standing in the mirror

There was once a part of me who had to jump to see the reflection

A part of me that was eager to know the person I am now

Time doesn't slow down, it accelerates, like a car

But once the brakes fail, everything will crash

I stand believing that if I look long enough everything will stop.

Time will stop stealing the life I am not ready to give up

For a moment everything freezes, silence fills the room

My heart beats loudly. The only sound. Have I done it? Have I finally stopped time?

The ground starts rumbling, I grip my fingers against the wall holding balance

The lights flicker and a bright blur covers the mirror. I shut my eyes hoping, just believing that this may go away. Yet the chaos lingers

Everything stops. The room is still. I opened one eye. Then the other. I pick my head up trying to look around, then my eyes fall at the person in the mirror. I recognize her, the girl from old pictures, the girl that didn't know how fast time could run. "Who are you?".... "What's your name?" I ask knowing full well who it is. She doesn't reply. I let the moment last, feeling her presence. If only I could.. I reach my hand out to touch her. To embrace her. Just before I reach her. I catch something in the corner of my eye. The lights flicker.

Anshitha Sourapu
Hillsborough Middle School
Somerset County
Grade 8

Play Pretend

Playing pretend got old over the years

Or maybe we did

When you're younger, it's fun

When you're 5, you pretend you're a ruler of your own palace

When you're 6, you pretend you're an astronaut about to take flight to the moon

When you're 7, you pretend you're in a whole other fantasy world like the books

When you're 8, you pretend you're a celebrity and play dress up

When you're 9, you pretend you're in that movie you saw with your parents

When you're 10, you pretend you're older and imagine what another 10 years will be like

When you're 11, you pretend you're the same as what you draw and write on the page

When you're 12, you pretend you're 13 because it's just one more year, right?

But really turning 13 changes everything.

When you're 13, you're too old to play pretend

You're a teenager now, you have better things to do

When you're a teenager, time seems to slow down

You need to figure out what you want to be

What you want to do with your life for the rest of it, because life isn't long and you only live once

So you can't screw it up.

What a lot of people don't know, though

We never outgrew playing pretend.

We still play, every day

Except by ourselves
We still create little worlds,
Ones where we all get along
Ones without war
Ones with pure peace
Ones where our problems don't exist
Ones where we pretend our friends won't become our foes
Ones where nothing else matters
Except those ones we know aren't realistic.
We all just want to go back to the good ol' days
When we could just play pretend.

Zoey Thompson
Hillsborough Middle School
Somerset County
Grade 8

Chapter Zero

One is an interesting number, to me at least. It can be the start of something new, the chance to start all over. But it means so little at the same time, because when you get a fresh start, you go all the way back to One, which basically means nothing. But One can also be good, like getting first place, and all those bigger numbers behind you seem smaller if you actually win. So— if life was ranked like that all my friends and classmates would be in first place, and I would become smaller as they stood tall. Because I was always small. I was too small. Even the bullies didn't have a good enough reason to tease me, they just did it because I was small. So would I be One? Or would I be in last place? I don't know.

Maybe I'm Zero. Zero would fit better, because I never signed up to be ranked, to feel small. Actually, that would be too good to be true, because if I was Zero, I wouldn't exist. I wish I was Zero; then, he wouldn't yell at me, I wouldn't freeze up during class, or whatever goes along with that. I could just be Iris, someone who doesn't exist. And everyone would ask, 'Who is Iris?'. And they wouldn't know, because in their worlds, I don't exist.

When I told my teacher about how Zero and One worked she called my mama, and listening to her static muffled voice, she seemed worried. Too worried. That same day, we had a talk about therapy, with her saying she would never forgive herself if I died, especially if it was from my own hands. Which I didn't imply, my teacher shoved words into my mouth, words I didn't say. My mama cupped my face and apologized to me over and over, the word sorry didn't sound right each time she repeated it. Like how a word doesn't seem like you spelled it correctly when you read it on paper a million times. Her thumbs rubbed pretend tears from my cheeks, acting like she was the one who was going to die. I still don't understand it today, I mean, I knew

she cared. Right? But even if I did become Zero and not exist, or I just died, how would it affect her? Mama is never home, too busy saving everyone but me. Therefore, she shouldn't worry.

I decided to tell my friend about Ones and Zeros next, hoping he'll have a less heated reaction. Because every adult, the teachers say to tell your thoughts to someone you trust. I trust my friend; I hope. He gave me a blank face, seeming to not understand my feelings. He went on to explain how "Zeros and Ones are very important in code, y'know." A bunch of junk I didn't understand. It's more like I chose to not understand that junk. The words spilling from his mouth didn't sound like sentences, more like scribbles. You can't hear scribbles. I couldn't be bothered to listen anymore. But his words still gave me another perspective. Maybe I'm just binary code, and I don't exist to the naked eye. But when you take the time to look you can see I have hidden talents. A purpose. I never really liked coding though. I never liked my male friends that much either.

Now, I've come to the conclusion that it's best to not share my thoughts with anyone anymore. It feels like what I'm saying gets crunched like paper, and when you fix the wrinkles, you can't read the smudged pen at all. And then you just end up shredding the paper. If I never say it, no one can misinterpret it. No one will tell me I'm hurting, or that I'm binary code, or anything else.

That might be an overreaction though. Even with all the wrinkles and all the smudged pen, it's still not completely useless. If someone just tries a little harder to piece the ruined shreds like puzzle pieces surely they can read it. Right? You can just take a few steps back and look at the bigger picture. And I realize, Zero's and One's aren't completely hopeless. I don't need anyone to understand me, as long as I understand myself, I'll be OK.

Stellah Triano
Hillsborough Middle School
Somerset County
Grade 7

The Last Birthday

The day that was always your favorite,
Full of laughter
Sweets, and presents.
People, some you may even call your loved ones
Gathered around, singing what might have been the last song that seemed special.
As you got older, It became a competition,
A competition of who sings the best, Who's present you would play with first, Who you would
spend the most time with on the day that was supposed to be about you.
Not the people that fight over who's right and who's wrong, Not the people that fought over who
took you and your siblings, Not the people that gave you life but could be the ones to take you
out of it.
You thought that it would stay the same, People would remember your special day,
The day that was supposed to be for you, About you.
But now you dread when people bring up the day you were born, The day that's supposed to
have a special place in your heart.
Because really you don't want to be at the center of something that brought those bad memories
back. The memories of the final birthday when you were still a kid.
But now you've changed, You've grown into the body of a teen but the mind of an adult,
Because you will always remember the fighting, the yelling
All the bad memories from when you were only seven,
The year that your whole world split in two.

The birthday that felt more like a competition than a day meant to celebrate you.

Charlotte Vidal
Hillsborough Middle School
Somerset County
Grade 8

My Crayon Box

One of the last times I colored with crayons

I was seven.

I opened the box to a colorful rainbow

The colors mixing together , Swirls of red and blue, Yellow and green, Orange and purple,

All together in one family.

I took out my crayons and colored,

Not caring if I went over the lines

It was my creation, Not anyone else's.

I remember being so proud of my rainbow,

Before it meant more than just a rainbow.

Now I open my crayon box to see a colorful rainbow,

Even though now it means more than that.

The colors are still mixed together. Swirls of red and blue, Yellow and green, Orange and purple,

All together in one family.

They haven't changed, and secretly I haven't either.

So I start to color,

Forgetting about the lines on the page.

I make the beautiful rainbow that little me would be proud of, And I remember that I am proud of it too.

Because sometimes you need to be that little you that isn't always perfect.

Charlotte Vidal
Hillsborough Middle School
Somerset County
Grade 8

Broken Record

I played like a squeaking chipmunk

Squeak, scratch!

I clapped like a wind up monkey

Clip, clap!

And I smiled like the sunshine with a healing pat

I'm back.

But now,

I play like the screams of a chipmunk dying in a car, crash,

Clink, clash.

I unwinded the monkey for good at, last,

Crack, crack.

And I cry for sunlight with a blemishing, bash,

Come back!

I couldn't tape my pieces back,

I was cracked,

Smashed,

And couldn't come back.

I was bashed to the floor with

no context.

Crash, smash.

I'm no baseball bat.

I'm fragile

Weak,

And have no contents.

I have blown up, as you see

I have lost my identity.

No more plays,

Claps,

Nor smilies.

Just the broken pieces of a broken record's

I

den

ti ty.

Samantha Yager
Hillsborough Middle School
Somerset County
Grade 7

The Extraordinary Invention of the Banana

Many ages ago, all there ever lived were animals. All animals lived individually in perfect harmony, only worried about themselves and their peers. Deep in the green, immense jungle, lived the beautiful civilization of the Monkeys. The Monkey Kingdom was ruled and looked after by Hanuman, the Monkey King. Hanuman was praised and worshipped more than any other monkey for his wisdom and bravery. The jungle was the perfect place for the monkeys to thrive with an abundance of resources. Most important of all, food! The creatures could eat leaves, bugs, and insects all day long. But that all changed because of one courageous monkey.

Nala, a bright little monkey, greeted every morning with excitement and a smile, ready to find out more about his kingdom. Everyday was an opportunity to discover more and Nala never missed it. Through rain, through sickness, or through a storm, Nala always found the time to explore the outdoors and breathed in every last ounce of wilderness.

One day, Nala shoved down the last bit of breakfast, eager to get outside. He waved goodbye to his parents and went off. Simply like everyday, Nala went on his usual path down the jungle and inspected every leaf and stem he found. Without Nala's knowledge, Nila followed close behind and smiled mischievously.

Nala had always despised Nila, as he constantly teased Nala. This behavior frustrated Nala, but he contained his rage and kept a smile on his face.

He continued down the trail and looked around curiously. Suddenly, Nala noticed an enormous leaf that covered an opening.

"What's this?" Nala questioned, reaching for the leaf. The leaf revealed a tiny path, a path never seen before. He stepped into the peculiar trail, disappearing into the leaves.

“I caught you!” Nila exclaimed, jumping from behind a tree. All he saw was the emptiness of the forest. He looked around confused.

“Where did he go?” Nila muffled. The sound of the breaking branches caught his ear, as he turned around to find an opening Nala had just stepped into.

“What do we have here?” Nila smirked as he blended into the leaves.

Nala gazed in all directions, sinking in the new surroundings he stepped foot in. His eyes slowly glided up the path, trying to discover the ending of this mysterious trail. They widened at the sight of a yellow plant. It was a fruit, yellow like the sun, that captured the interest of the young monkey. Nala stared at it, uncovering the intricate details of the unique fruit. He steadily stepped closer and closer to the fruit. Nala reached his hand out, carefully picking the plant. He examined the plant in his hands.

A few paces behind, stood smirking Nila gazing at Nala and the new fruit he had discovered. Nila stepped forward, avoiding branches, and crouched over Nala’s shoulder.

“I caught you!” Nila yelled into Nala’s ear.

“Baaa!” Nala screamed, jumping back. The yellow fruit leaped out of his hands, landing perfectly into Nila’s awaiting arms.

“Nila! Hand that back!” Nala demanded.

“Nah! Nah! It’s mine now,” Nila says, waving the fruit in Nala’s face.

“Ba-na-na,” Nala mumbled, “Banana! Banana! That’s it!”

“What? Banana?” he questioned.

“Yes, and it’s my discovery! I need to show it to King Hanuman to get credit,” Nala explained.

“Not anymore! It’s my discovery now!” Nila exclaimed, running to grab more bananas. He gripped all of the fruit tightly and ran away.

“No!” Nala screamed. A frown appeared on his face, knowing that his discovery was now stolen. Thinking about what to do next, Nala sat on a rock. Then, he stood up abruptly.

“That’s it! I have to get to King Hanuman before that rascal does! I can take the shortcut!” exclaimed Nala. Looking left and right, he sprinted right toward the trees, trying to avoid the branches and rocks. Using his knowledge from his everyday exploration, Nala was able to navigate his way through the forest to King Hanuman. After a long stroll through the forest, the smart monkey’s eyes gazed at the wooden castle in between the trees. Running into the castle, Nala stood in front of the King’s throne.

“Oh wise King Hanuman! My name is Nala and I am in deep trouble! Nila, a young monkey, has stolen my new discovery, the banana. He will come any minute, claiming that he came across a new fruit, even though I did. Please, King Hanuman! Help me punish Nila for his years of unacceptable behavior!” he begged.

“Calm down, Nala! This isn’t the first time Nila has caused a disruption to our kingdom. I will not stand this troublesome monkey any more! I will make sure to punish him!” King Hanuman reassured.

“Thank you so much, King!” Nala bowed. Hanuman nodded and gestured for him to wait next to his throne.

After a few minutes, an eager monkey burst through the doors of the palace.

“King Hanuman! King Hanuman! I’ve brought a new fruit that I have found myself!” Nila exclaimed. Hanuman continued to sit on his throne, staring at the monkey. Nala contained his joy, staying humble.

“King Hanuman? Hello, I-” Nila looked to the King’s side to see Nala who glared at him.

“Nala! King Hanuman, I no longer have to speak to you. I will be on my way,” Nila announced and turned towards the door. The bananas he held hid conveniently behind his back.

“Not so fast, Nila! I know what you have done to Nala! Return Nala’s invention to him!” King Hanuman demanded. Nila’s face lowered as he plodded towards Nala, handing the bananas to its rightful owner.

“I’m sorry, King Hanuman! It was a simple joke!” Nila attempted to explain. Hanuman shakes his head in disapproval.

“This is not the first disturbance you caused in this kingdom,” the king explained, “And for that, you must be punished. You are banished from this kingdom for your terrible deeds!”

“Guards! Take him away!” Hanuman demanded. Satisfaction grew on Nala’s face as the guards dragged Nila outside of the palace. The King smiled at Nala.

“So, what is this new discovery?” Hanuman asked.

“Well my King, this sweet and yellow fruit is called the banana!” Nala exclaimed.

“May I try one?” the king asked, intrigued by the bright fruit. Nala handed the King the fruit and he carefully peeled the banana, revealing the sweet fruit inside. Hanuman placed the banana in his mouth and his eyes immediately widened.

Devouring the entire banana, the king exclaimed, “What a delicious fruit! I have decided to grow more bananas for the entire kingdom to enjoy!” So, the king followed his desire, and grew enough bananas to feed the entire kingdom. The banana became a delicacy for all monkeys!

Tanvi Yerra
Hillsborough Middle School
Somerset County
Grade 8

MANVILLE HIGH SCHOOL

My Pink Irish Ring

I traveled through rain to buy my pink Irish ring,
And saved up my Pennie's to buy this silver sterling
It's core dyed in rose and hands wrapped like wings
Oh, how I love my pink Irish ring

It slips through my fingers like a freshly cleaned floor
Shining like the diamonds that beam behind ore
A crown faces me to show I'm married to a king
Oh, how I love my pink Irish ring

Call me Cupid, but your heart matches the pink quartz
Glorious like the Greek Gods that history reports
Each detail so vivid like a blossoming spring
Oh, how I love my pink Irish ring

Its ancestry matches your golden blonde hair
I cherish this ring like the Ireland heir
Where the breeze taunts my hair as it flutters and swings
Oh, how I love my pink Irish ring

As I dashed back home, where the autumn leaves fell,
I slipped my ring into my left finger and awaited your cell
When you picked up my call, you said "to whom do you sing?"
I said "My darling, my love, my pink Irish ring."

Summer Luna
Manville High School
Somerset County
Grade 10

NORTH PLAINFIELD HIGH SCHOOL

Intelligent beings are we not?

Humans are odd

We all say we want what's better

To help, to learn, to succeed

But what is success if you never failed

Sure no one deserves to fall but how else will you not fail?

We hurt, we're cruel, and yet we call ourselves saviors

Say we are the most intelligent

However, how can one be intelligent if they cannot see their flaws?

No one is one sided

One cannot be all good or all bad

You see it do you not?

the love, the hate, the pure state of this world

You cannot love without the hate

The light isn't there without the darkness

Are you truly one without the others?

No you're not

As the human mind cannot be just one

We are cruel at the core. We wish for others to

fail just so we can win

And yet we are the most intelligent?

The same people who have done nothing but fight with

each other for centuries on end
And yet, we are the most intelligent?
We are the ones who have destroyed the world for our own greed
And we are also the ones who are supposed to fix it.

Humans truly believe they cannot be stopped by
anything that is not an all seeing god
Believing selfishly they are the gods amongst this world
Yet all we are is another memory for the universe

Time passes faster than we care to admit and one day
you will fade into simple memory
Never to be cared about again because when
all is said and done we are simply toys
for the universe to use and play with.

Humans see themselves as unstoppable beings
Hoping and praying that the ones that come
after us will follow in our footsteps
Yet that's the issue is it not? All we have is
hope and no real ability to confirm
We aren't all seeing and knowing gods
We are simply the tools for the ones who know how to use us.

Emma Jade Roman
North Plainfield High School
Somerset County
Grade 10

Closing A Chapter

We were supposed to grow up together
And now I'm doing it alone.
You left me here still standing,
But I feel like I'm on the floor

The texts were sent
There's no going back
And I think it's really upsetting
That we might just have to end it

Your name's still in my phone
Can't dare to delete it
For hope, I'll get a text from you
And we can have a nice conversation

I'm still thinking about it.
Even though I shouldn't
People tell me to move on
But I can't seem to do it

Your name is like a bookmark
I'm not ready to close this chapter
I keep re-reading the pages

Hoping that one day
It'll go back to how it was
With you and me talking happily
Like the pain was just a pause in us.

Cassandra Shapteban
North Plainfield High School
Somerset County
Grade 10

Decision of Truth

I stand alone with a choice to make
With me, myself, and I
Only shall the truth
Find me

Under the darkened stage
Spotlight shined upon me, myself, and I
Others frozen in time
The vote is on me

Two teams, one winner. Must vote for one
Blinded by the guise of their own
Ignorant to their own truth
Blinded by the prize, as their truth slips
from gazes

Others vote to follow
But my heart will be remiss
To overlook an
Injustice of truth

How my heart aches
To vote against us
But I would be
Remiss to vote selfishly

To realize
Through blind eyes
How we are blinded by our pride and judgment
Never giving dues, where it dues

Through my eyes I observed
The way they vote for themselves
Not taking in the art of their own
Nor art of another

Narrowed and shrewd,
How can you vote for yourself
Knowing it was not your all
How can you be blinded to deny truth

I can't blame oneself to only see rewards
But me, myself and I would be remiss
So with this decision let it be known
How my heart aches to follow the truth

Two teams, one fine performance, one spectacular performance
My heart aches to do this, after all strife
I must place my vote
Not to you, but to the truth.

Tiffany Sudama
North Plainfield High School
Somerset County
Grade 12

Unapologetic

People tell me the truth is ugly
That if I speak how I really feel,
I'll be too much.
Too loud.
Too *real*.

But here's the beautiful truth;
I was born in a loud world.
One that can only profit
Off *my silence*.

I am a black girl.
This means that my skin tells a story
Before my mouth does
It walks into a room first,
Being judged and stereotyped,
Feared and admired,
All at once.

They call me strong.
Is that meant to be a compliment?
My strength comes from generations.
Surviving in the silence,
The quiet meant to *break* us.
So they assume I can handle it.

The beautiful truth is,
I am not indestructible.
I am sensitive and soft.
I laugh too hard.
I love too deep.
I cry when no one's around.
Because I'm only allowed pain,
When the outcome is poetic.

They want what I have.
My slang,
My style,
My flow.
But what they don't want,
Is my struggle.
They don't want my anger.
They don't want my voice
When I finally speak up.

But that's ok,
'Cause the beautiful truth is,
I'm not a trend.
I'm not a fashion statement.
I am not a story meant to be taught,
And then forgotten.

My ancestors run through my veins.
Through my curls.
Through my braids.
Through my scars.
Proof of the pain turned power.

So, the beautiful truth?
I'm allowed to be fierce,
Allowed to take up space,
Allowed to be a black girl who doesn't apologize,
For existing loudly and freely.

The *truth* is that I live
unapologetically.

October Wortham
North Plainfield High School
Somerset County
Grade 9

SOMERSET COUNTY VOCATIONAL & TECHNICAL HIGH SCHOOL

Scoliosis

Sometimes you call me,
crying for help.

Sometimes you ignore my stare,
don't meet my eyes in passing.

Sometimes you pull me in,
almost suffocatingly so.

Sometimes you laugh at me
with my enemies.

The spiral is getting out of control.

I have to do something
to escape your hold.

Noor Fatima
Somerset County Vocational and Technical High School
Somerset County
Grade 11

The Cartographer's Paper Heart

The wind in the Pine Barrens doesn't just blow; it whispers. It's a dry, raspy sound, like sandpaper moving across old cedar. My grandfather, a man who spoke in fragments and always smelled of wood shavings, used to tell me that the trees were the state's true record-keepers. "They remember everything, Oliver," he'd say, tapping his temple with a stained finger. "They just don't have the lungs to tell us."

I'm twenty now, and the house in Kallowhay is officially mine to clear out. My parents won't come down here. They say the air in the Barrens is too heavy, that the silence between the pines feels like someone holding their breath. They aren't wrong. Driving down the Garden State Parkway, the world feels wide and fast, but the moment you turn onto those sand-dusted backroads, the sky narrows. The trees close in, leaning over the asphalt as if trying to reclaim the lane.

The house is a skeletal thing, tucked so far back into the scrub oak that the GPS gave up a mile ago. Inside, it's a museum of paper. Grandpa was an amateur cartographer, or so I had always believed. Every wall in the foyer is pinned with maps. Surprisingly, not of the world, but of this specific, stubborn patch of New Jersey. There are maps of deer trails, maps of underground aquifers, and maps of things that shouldn't be mapped, like *The Direction of an Echo* or *Where the Shadow Falls at 4:48 PM*. I won't be able to ask the meaning behind it all. I left the maps as they were and started my work in the kitchen, packing the remnants of an eighty-five year old life into cardboard boxes. I found a stack of local newspapers from 1994, yellowed to the color of a bruised peach. I found a jar of honey so crystallized it looked like amber. Above the shelves were old medications hidden away, now covered in a fur coat of dust. And then, tucked into the hollow of a floorboard beneath the kitchen table, I found the Blueprints.

They were rolled tight and secured with a piece of red twine. When I opened them across the marble counter, I expected to see the house's architectural layout. Instead, I saw myself.

It was a life-sized technical drawing of a teenage boy. He wore my face: the same slightly crooked nose, the same jagged cowlick, the awkwardly pointed out chin. But his chest was splayed open in the drawing, revealing a complex network of gears and folded parchment. His veins were drawn in blue ink as a river flowing through; his heart was a dense compass rose.

I felt an ache in my stomach. Something with this drawing was wrong. My feet turned, and I walked to the kitchen drawer. Inside was an array of knives. I picked one up and weakly cut a small line into my forearm.

I waited for the sting. I waited for the blood to start dripping out.

Nothing.

I looked down. There was a slit in the skin, clean and deep, but it was dry. There was no blood, only a sliver of white fiber peeking through the gap. I didn't feel a thing.

The air in the kitchen suddenly felt nonexistent. I ran to the hallway mirror, the one with the cracked gold frame. I looked at my reflection and realized nothing had changed. The same faded grey hoodie I'd worn for three days, the same tired circles under my eyes. I looked real. I felt real. Or I thought I did.

I reached out and touched the glass. It should have been freezing; it was November in the Barrens and the heat had been off for months. But the glass felt like nothing. Neither warm nor cold. Just a texture. I hadn't noticed this before.

"Grandpa?" I whispered. My voice sounded small against the wood-paneled walls and he didn't reply.

I turned and ran for the basement. The place where he spent his last days.

The basement was where the "art" happened. It didn't smell like sawdust down here. It smelled of ozone and old library books. In the center of the room sat a workbench covered in delicate, translucent gears made of a hardened resin. And there, tucked into a corner, were the "failed" versions.

There were three of them. Three boys who looked exactly like me, leaning against the damp concrete wall like discarded mannequins. One was missing a hand, showing the copper wiring beneath. Another had a face that hadn't been fully finished, a blank slate of pale skin where the eyes should be.

On the workbench sat a small, brass device. It was a heart, ticking with a rhythmic, metallic *click-click-click*. Next to it was a fresh logbook.

I opened it to the last page. *November 12th. Oliver is starting to wonder why he doesn't need a coat. I fear the ink is fading. If he realizes what he is, the narrative collapses. The story only works if the character believes he is breathing.*

I looked at my hand again. The paper cut hadn't closed. In fact, it was widening, the edges of the "skin" curling back like a scroll.

I walked to the basement window and looked out at the pines. A heavy frost was settling over the needles. It was beautiful, and it was deadly. If I were made of paper, if I was made of maps and memories, the damp and the cold would end me.

I sat down on the floor, leaning my back against the workbench. I could hear the gears in my own chest now, a soft, mechanical whirring that matched the ticking of the heart on the table

Grandpa was right. The trees do remember everything. And when the world loses something it isn't ready to let go of, it finds a way to come back. But stories have endings.

I reached for a pen on the desk and pulled up my sleeve. On the surface of my forearm, I began to draw. I didn't draw a map of the woods or a trail to the highway. I drew a fire.

I closed my eyes and waited for the ink to dry. I just had to remember the feeling of warmth, one last time.

Leisha Malik
Somerset County Vocational and Technical High School
Somerset County
Grade 11

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