

Somerset County



Creative Writing Anthology

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

Students' creative writing is read by respected, professional writers. Video critiques that highlight strengths and offer constructive suggestions for improvement are provided for each student.

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 Virtual Teen Arts Festival!

Cover Artwork:

Ava Wolf, age 13

Branchburg Central Middle School

Grade 7

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ALEXANDER BATCHO INTERMEDIATE SCHOOL

Where Did They Go?

One day in a small town, a short, scrawny 6th grader named Chris was walking home from the QuickChek just down the street from his house. He had just bought a drink and some food for his family, but it was late and hard to see. Luckily, he didn't live too far away, he thought. But things would only get worse from here.

"Where are you going?" said a deep raspy voice.

"Home," said Chris. He didn't even look at the person. He tried to focus on getting back to his house before it got too late. Plus, Chris never was a social person.

"Well, whatcha got?" the person said.

Now, Chris had started to recognize the voice. It was Donny, an 8th grade bully. He was notorious for picking on kids much smaller and weaker than him.

"Nothing," Chris said.

Another voice emerged and said, "That doesn't look like much of anything to us, right Donny?"

Chris started walking faster. In a blink of an eye, one of the two kids pushed him down like a truck had hit him at 100 miles an hour. He had fallen so hard that he couldn't even move. The soda he had bought burst open, and the food was no longer in sight. He flipped over to see Donny standing over him with his partner in crime, KJ, taking the food that Chris had dropped.

"What the heck, man, gimme my stuff!" Chris pleaded

"I don't know if I will," said KJ.

Before Chris was able to say anything else, Donny picked him up with a tight squeeze and threw him up against the wall.

"And stay down little boy," said Donny.

With a tear causing a slight blur in Chris's eye, he saw the duo walk away with his things, or what used to be his things. He would not dare stand up to the bullies' mischief—no one would. While listening to

the laughter of the bigger kids, he became full of rage. Suddenly, the street lights turned on. Chris stood up to rush home but felt a sharp pain in his head and legs. He fell to his hands and knees. A blue light shined over his head. What seemed like a blink of an eye, he found himself in a completely different environment. He heard buzzing noises, saw flashing lights above his head, and heard a strange sound of someone speaking gibberish.

Chris decided to get up and assess the situation, but he discovered that he was pinned down by metal cuffs.

"Let me out of here!" Chris shrieked. A large green and ugly creature leaned over him. He was tall, and boney with a big gut. He had a long face and long, sharp fingers. Chris could not believe what he saw before him.

"Start the countdown," the figure said with an almost 8-bit sounding voice.

"What is going o-" Chris couldn't even fit in the rest of his sentence before he felt a sharp, stinging pain going through his veins. The sound of liquid pouring could be heard in the background. In a split second he appeared right back to the ground, moments before the incident unfolded. There was a slight ringing in his ear that faded in a few seconds, but his headache was gone and he felt just as he did before.

"Where are you going?" said the same, raspy voice he had heard a minute ago. It happened the same way it did before, but this time Chris didn't respond. When he walked to a certain point, his eyes grew wide. He took a step to the side, and saw Donny charging through where he was just standing. He tripped over his own feet and fell on the ground hollering. "You're dead little man!" KJ shouted. He jerked his hand back and swung with all of his might, but he wasn't fast enough. Chris slipped under KJ's hand in a slight motion and threw the hardest punch he ever could. It landed right at KJ's liver. KJ screamed as if being murdered.

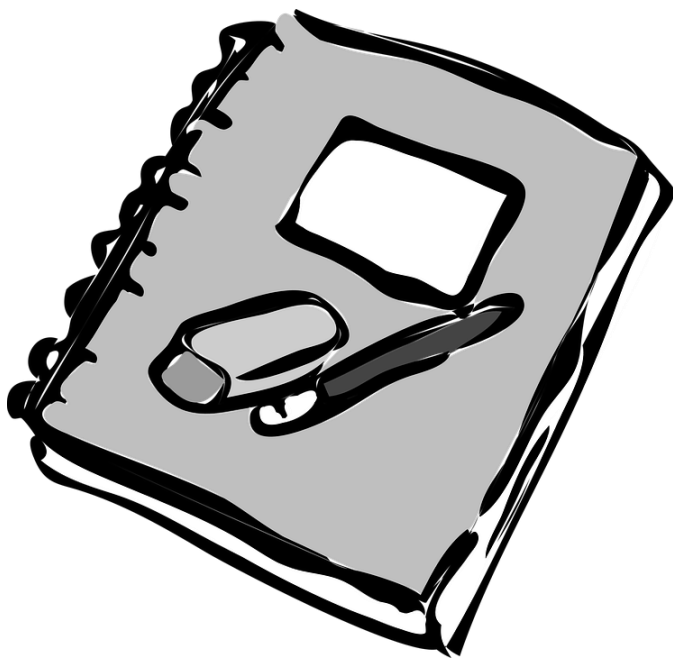
While looking at both of the kids on the ground, Chris knew what he had done, and he knew he was a dead man. He heard the sirens in the distance and knew he couldn't get in trouble. Not with his reputation. So he ran. He ran so fast that he thought he might tear a muscle. but he was fine. No heavy breathing and no sweat streaming down his face. It was almost like he was a super human. The "things" that he had seen with his own two eyes gave him something with the liquid.

Inside his house, he ran straight to the mirror and saw that he was noticeably larger than before—he was about four inches taller and had more muscle mass. He was no longer the smaller and weaker kid to be picked on. In fact, he could probably pick on others, but Chris wouldn't let others go through his struggle

The next day at school people noticed Chris's size, but the bullying duo was nowhere in sight, which was all he worried about. And because there was no one in sight on the night that the incident occurred, everyone made their own rumors of what happened to the duo.

"They got Covid" or "they're just skipping class" people whispered, but no one could even think of what happened last night. . .it was out of this world.

Deegan Barney, age 13
Alexander Batcho Intermediate School
Somerset County
Grade 7



The Underdog

SLAM! Josh had just been put in a double leg takedown by Diego. Diego then combined it with a spiral ride into a gable. When put on his back, Josh was pinned. They were in the wrestling room on a sweltering summer day, and it was so humid it made you cough when you walked in. You could see the sweat flying off their bodies; after every takedown, their tired bodies shook like Jell-O the second they began to move.

"I want a rematch man," Josh requested. The same sequence of events kept repeating for about an hour. Much to my dismay, I was unable to wrestle due to my broken finger, but I was watching. Josh was new to the sport of wrestling, so he really didn't stand a chance against an experienced wrestler like Diego. Coach saw this all playing out, and after they stopped, he asked me to show Josh some moves.

Thus, I took him aside and showed him the basics: the double leg takedown, single leg takedown, five breakdowns for top bottom parts of a match, four escapes, and a whole myriad of counter offenses. I was attempting to help him find his "bread and butter," a term for what wrestlers call their favorite moves and the moves they are comfortable using in a match.

After a couple weeks of practice, Josh thought he was ready to face Diego. He didn't win, but he came closer after each match. He was able to score some points, and he wasn't pinned. Diego won on points, which is an immense improvement.

The next day at practice, I showed Josh a trick he could use against Diego's best offensive moves, such as polishing up his sprawl (a move that defended the double leg takedown, the move Diego had been using to score nearly all his points. I had to tell him a couple things regarding Diego's offensive moves.

"Diego is putting moves on you when you let him—you are sticking your leg out, which is letting him put you single leg takedown to a hi-c, to a half nelson and get tons of back points," I informed Josh.

Josh didn't fully understand what I was telling him, so I performed the move combo on him. While demonstrating the move, at every part that he could escape from, I taught him how to free himself so that if one tactic failed, he wasn't down for the count. After this routine, we spent another few weeks practicing new moves and sanding down the rough edges of his moves.

Then came the wrestle offs—how nearly every wrestling team decides who gets the starting spot for

matches. What happens is coaches place the best two wrestlers in each weight class on the team on the mat, and they have a match. The winner gets the starting spot, while the loser is the backup for the year. The two best wrestlers for Josh's weight class were him and Diego (they were the only two in the team's weight class, but that's besides the point).

The match began with a swift attempt at a double leg takedown by Diego. Josh sprawled and pulled a hamstring tackle, which netted him two points. Diego escaped from his stomach, which earned him one point. The rest of the period was just hand fighting. The next period was top and bottom, with Josh winning the coin toss and choosing bottom. The boys set up, and the whistler blew. Josh shot out from under Diego like a silver bullet and escaped. He then put Diego in a single-leg tree top take down. Diego landed on his back, and in that second, a spectator could see Josh's face light up like the moon on a starry night; he pounced on Diego and pinned him, winning Josh a starting spot on the team.

Josh performed very well that season. He had a record of 9-2-0, which is very impressive because ties in wrestling meant the kids were going at it for over twenty minutes. In the tournament, Josh had a very tough fight because he pinned his first round opponent. Then in his second round, he won by points. Next, in the third round (right before the final round of the tournament), he went nine rounds, which really exhausted him. In the end, Josh ended up winning his third match, but he lost the championship by two points. However, Josh tried really hard, and knew that the next season he would be back, and he would win that gold medal.

Antimo Bucciero, age 13
Alexander Batcho Intermediate School
Somerset County
Grade 7

The Offering

Kevin walked through the street on a cold fall evening, and a gang of three kids closed in on him. The three kids were seniors from the high school: Tony, Robbie, and Jacob. They were huge, and everybody in high school was afraid of them. Tony was the biggest out of the three kids at 6 feet, 4 inches tall. The other two, Jacob and Robbie, were also huge and just as menacing.

“You got money for me?” said Tony.

“I already used my lunch money, I don’t have any more,” Kevin replied.

“Yeah, we’ll see about that.”

With lightning speed, Jacob and Robbie had Kevin pinned to the sidewalk. Tony leaned over Kevin and checked both of his pockets. When Tony was done, he had found forty dollars with a bit of change.

“Well I guess this kid just lied to us,” Robbie realized.

“You know what that means!” Tony declared.

The whole gang started kicking and shoving Kevin all over the place. Kevin was screaming and trying to fight back, but they had him pinned to the ground. Kevin had a broken wrist, with bruises all over his legs and arms.

“You were lucky this time kid, so next time you're gonna have \$50 or else your other wrist is gone,” Tony said as their gang walked away laughing. Kevin could barely walk, so he started his way home very slowly. Almost halfway to his house, Kevin tripped on a rock and fell to the floor of a dark alley. Kevin’s whole body ached from the impact of the fall, so he just stayed there for a bit. Soon, a hooded figure emerged from the darkness with a long wooden staff in his hand.

“If you wish to be free from your pain then accept my offering, but it comes with a catch., the hooded man said menacingly as he handed Kevin the staff.

Kevin wondered if he should take this offer, but he didn’t get the chance to agree because the man disappeared out of nowhere. Now Kevin had a stick, and nothing else that could help him get home faster. The injuries on his legs and arms would take weeks to heal completely, and the gang that made them would just run into him tomorrow to beat him up again. The thought made Kevin so mad that he slammed the bottom of the staff against the ground. A rumbling sound started going crazy, so Kevin hid further into the alley and

watched as a blinding light flashed. Everything went silent and Kevin thought the only way he was going to get the stick was to try and fake the skeleton out. Kevin tried walking away, and the skeleton started following him. When they got a couple feet away, Kevin turned around and tried to snatch the stick. The skeleton was way too fast, and arrived first. The skeleton accidentally touched the stick with its foot and was summoned back into the staff. The staff then grew back to full size. With this new knowledge of what the staff could do, Kevin raced back home and immediately thought of a plan to scare away his bullies.

The next day, Kevin got ready for school with his staff poking out of his bag and walked down the same street where he ran into the gang. When he arrived, the gang was already waiting for him.

“Where is my \$50 man?” Tony asked.

Then Kevin’s plan was put into action. He reached into his bag and grabbed the staff.

“Whatcha gonna do? Beat us with a stick?” Robbie laughed.

Kevin slammed the bottom of the stick and the skeleton was summoned there with flashing light.

“What the heck is that!” cried Jacob. The skeleton, with battle armor and a sword, emerged from the light. Kevin realized that all of his bruises and injuries were healed.

“Gurrrrr!” The skeleton grunted. What used to be the staff was now at the skeleton’s feet, about six inches long, and the skeleton looked kind of afraid of it.

“Are we cool, Mr. Skeleton Man?” Kevin asked. The skeleton didn’t respond, so Kevin took it as a yes. Kevin tried picking up the smaller version of the staff, but the skeleton wouldn’t let him near it. The bullies were thinking about fighting the skeleton, then they realized that they might have bit off more than they could chew. The skeleton ran over to the bullies and tried to fight them, but by then they were already running.

“Yeah you better run!” Kevin shouted to the bullies. “This guy is not going anywhere, so don’t even think about trying to take my money ever again!” The bullies understood and sprinted off. Kevin tapped the skeleton with the stick. A light flashed and the skeleton was gone. The weeks went by and the bullies never threatened him again. Fifty years later, Kevin was walking around with a hood on, and found a group of bullies beating up a child. When the child was walking down the sidewalk, Kevin hid in an alley nearby. He threw a rock on the ground and tripped the kid, so he would fall right in front of the alley. As the kid was

getting up, Kevin took his chance.

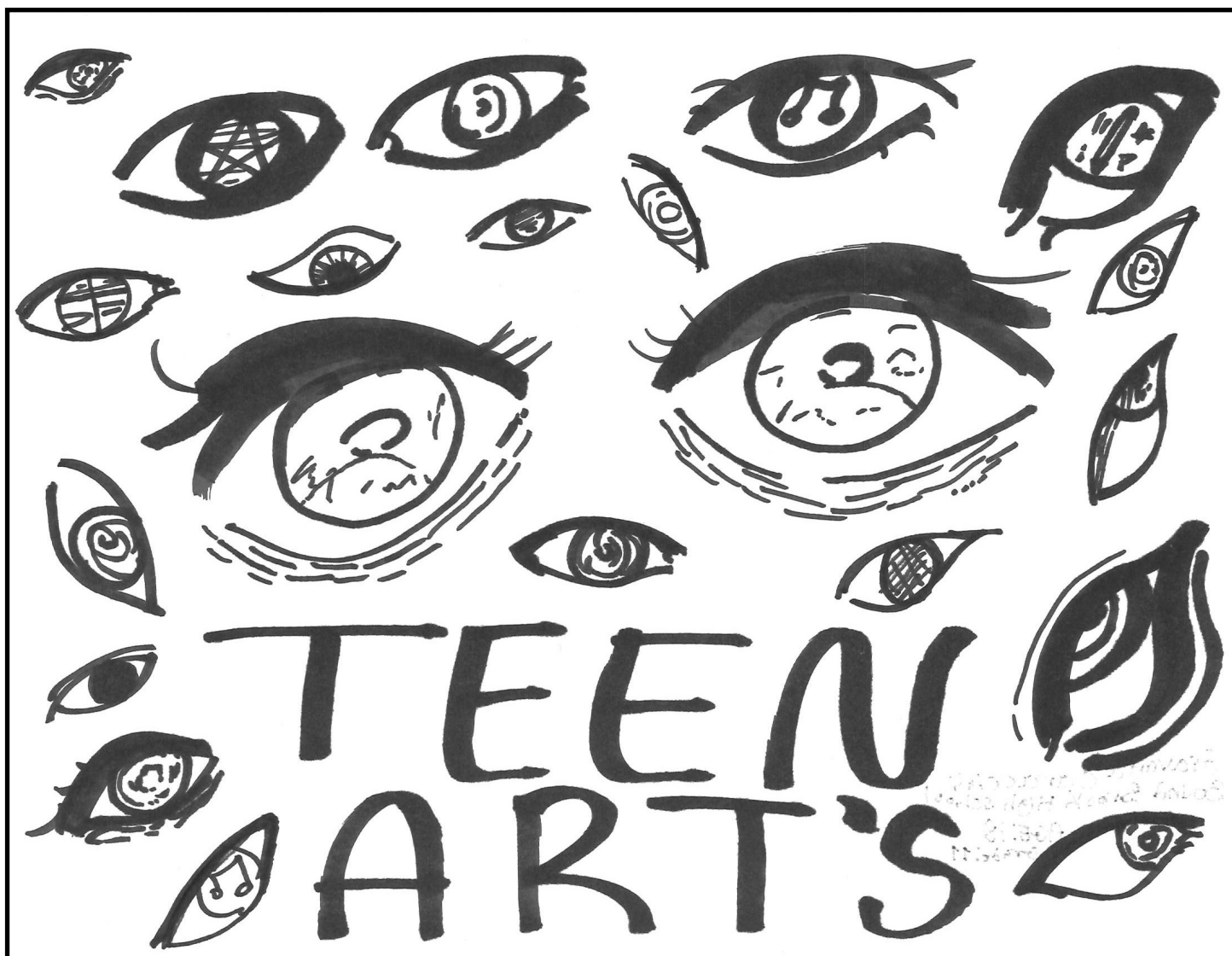
“If you wish to be free from your pain then take my offering.,” Kevin said. “Will you take it?”

Justin Gavilanes, age 13

Alexander Batcho Intermediate School

Somerset County

Grade 7



Artwork:

Giavana Caraccioli, age 18

Bound Brook High School

Grade 11

The Evil Snow Queen

Years back, creatures were separated into groups, which decided their status. The Snow Queen was behind it all. Everyone was united under her draconian empire. She always wanted change but loved her lands. She wanted to rule it all one day. She peered out the open windows of her castle with her black silky, sleek dress draped over her.

"Clyde. Prepare the soldiers."

"Right on it, my queen," Clyde responded then walked away. She tied back her long dark brown hair, preparing for her travels.

Ginni, the smallest gingerbread girl, knew life could go back to what it was, but nobody ever believed her. Ginni had long blonde, frosted hair and wore a purple polka dot shirt and jeans. At thirteen years old, she wasn't as responsible as she should be; everyone thought Ginni was foolish and immature.

"Momma, Papa! The soldiers are coming!" Ginni warned.

"Ginni, quick come inside! Hurry!" exclaimed Momma. The Snow Queen was arriving with her soldiers. The nutcracker soldiers, the faction that became the Queen's army, bypassed all the gingerbread people standing outside. They marched to the village's milk supply building. Ginni questioned if they would take their milk. It was like their water; they couldn't survive without it. Ginni knew what she had to do and replayed the plan while on winter break from school. She knew she had to find more creatures to help her defeat the evil Snow Queen. and if nobody stepped up, she would take matters into her own hands. She considered what her parents would think about her plan and almost turned back. However, Ginni was determined to help her village and potentially the entire world. Thus, after winter break, Ginni walked confidently into the town hall and demanded to speak to the mayor. The clerk at the front desk laughed and made the call to the mayor saying there was a diminutive problem concerning him. Soon, the mayor walked out of his office, past his snowmen guards.

"C'mon, little girl."

Ginni walked to the chair in the room and took a seat. She knew for sure that they wouldn't be much help, but it was worth a shot at least for supplies.

"Uh. Um, what did you say your name is again?" the mayor questioned.

“It’s Ginni sir,” she retorted.

“I’m going to call your parents to come get you—I’ve entertained this for too long. I am sorry, but the answer is no. I cannot help you,” he said as he gestured to his phone.

“It is fine sir, they are outside waiting for me,” Ginni lied.

“Okay, well ,sorry but I can’t help you. Our supplies are needed for us—you should just go home. Hey! Isn’t it Monday? You should be in school!” Ginni sprinted out of the office, out of the building, and to the next town over. Traveling farther and farther from home, Ginni felt guilty. This plan would have to succeed –school was almost over and she had to act like she was there all day. Over the next few weeks, Ginni went from village to village looking for help. She found a few creatures to assist her. On their first meeting in a local cave, they discussed why they were there. In attendance was Brad the exiled nutcracker soldier, Beau the biggest elf, Beau’s best friend Sam, who was also an elf, and Ralph the yeti. A few winter wolves heard about the plan and also joined the meeting.

“I’m going to search for more yetis!” Ralph proclaimed.

“I know I can get more exiled nutcracker soldiers to join,” interjected Brad.

Ginni sadly said “ That’s amazing, I wish I could get more people from my home but all of them think I’m foolish.”

“The other elves might be willing to help. Sam can talk to them, because everyone likes her,” Beau added. As the meeting went on, they all agreed they should meet in a better place, such as Santa’s workshop. Beau spread word to everyone that it was a go for Santa’s workshop. Santa was also willing to help in any way he could. Ralph recruited two other yetis, and Brad enlisted all the other exiled nutcracker soldiers who were all willing to do their part.

Santa created their plan: he would travel from town to town and explain to everyone that the Evil Snow Queen had to be stopped. Getting all of the people under her rule turned against her would make it easier to defeat her. His first stop was the Snowman’s village because they turned Ginni down. They got the snowmen on their side for materials, but they refused to fight.

The elves got the reindeer ready to pull the sleigh. Ralph asked the herd of well over one hundred caribou near his village if they would be willing to help them ride into the village with Santas. They went to the

snowman's village to load up on snowball launchers and icicle bows and arrows. All of them made their way to the yeti's village where the Evil Snow Queen would soon arrive. She entered riding a polar bear with her army following her. After a brief fight with the soldiers, Santa made her give back all the milk to the village. The Evil Snow Queen fled to her village with her soldiers in tow. The gingerbread people were relieved and recognized Ginni's bravery. As Ginni rode away on her polar bear, Ginni's parents grabbed her with smothering hugs and told her they were very proud of her, and she was grounded for life.

Zairabella Perry, age 13
Alexander Batcho Intermediate School
Somerset
Grade 7



Waiting

On a foggy October night, Jared was biking to a store to get candy to distribute for Halloween night. When he arrived, he felt like he was being watched, but didn't think much of it. After leaving the store with a bag full of candy, he rode his bike home. Jared lived in a dangerous neighborhood. There were a lot of bullies and gangs, but he got used to it. He never messed with anyone or hung out where he wasn't supposed to. Until today. . .

He pedaled down one of the more dangerous parts of the neighborhood because it was a shortcut to his house, and it was getting dark. Then Jared heard a noise; he looked behind him to glimpse four high schoolers chasing him. Jared didn't know them since he was only in middle school, but he was petrified. He peddled faster, but he was no match for them. Next thing he knew, he was on the ground and was surrounded. When he peered closer at their faces, he realized his perpetrators were a bunch of 20-year-olds who he had seen previously bullying other kids. He tried to get up, but his back was killing him.

"You got any money on you?" one of them asked. Jared didn't respond, so he received a blow to his ribs. Then two of the guys held Jared down and the other two guys searched his pockets

"Look what I found!" one of the guys shouted. He held up the \$20 bill so they could all see. "Why did you lie, fool! Don't do it again!" one of the guys yelled. Then they all kicked, punched and stepped on him; they left Jared on the ground and biked away.

Jared finally woke up three hours later with bruises all over his body and a bloody nose. He tried to get on his bike, but he couldn't even ride it because of the pain. He started walking home and saw that the bag of candy he bought was still in good condition.

When he walked in he saw his mom on the phone. "Thank god! You're ok." she said, relieved. "I found him, don't worry officer and thank you," she said as she hung up the phone. "Jared, where have you been, and why do you have blood coming out of your nose?" she cried.

"I'm ok mom, I'm just tired, good night," he said quickly. Jared didn't want to worry his mother; she was already stressed. When he got to his room, he went to the mirror and to his surprise, all the bruises he had weren't there anymore. His bloody nose wasn't hurting, either. But he did see a weird bite mark on his

neck..

Jared passed out and woke up tired. He didn't sleep well. He kept getting nightmares of being bullied and punched by the guys from last night. One thing that cheered him up was that it was Halloween. He just had to get through school, and then he could walk around the neighborhood trick or treating with his friends. At school he felt weird. When he went outside to play soccer with his friends, his skin started to burn. Yet the weather was nice—sunny with no clouds in sight. Later that day, one of Jared's friends got a paper cut; when Jared saw the blood he felt as if it was the most delicious meal of his life. But he was able to control himself.

At home, it started to storm as he put on his costume. This year he wanted to be a vampire, so his mom bought him a Dracula cape. He said goodbye to his mom and met up with his friends in a parking lot near a store. They went over their plans on where to go to get the most and best candies. After grabbing all the candy from the second location, they stopped for a bit and ate a little bit of the candy. When they finished eating, they headed for their third location. While they were biking there, Jared heard some familiar voices.

"I'll be right back—I'm going to check it out," Jared said. He heard the voices in a gloomy alley and went in. He saw the four guys from last night beating up a little kid. He could see the child was badly hurt and his nose was bleeding. "Next time you better do our homework!" One of the guys said. Then he stepped on the kid's glasses.

"Hey! What's your problem?" Jared yelled.

"Oh look who it is. This is the kid from last night, remember guys?" One of the guys told his friends. Out of nowhere, the biggest bully lunged at Jared. But Jared easily dodged him.

Then the guy tried to punch Jared again, but Jared quickly got out of the way. He couldn't believe how fast he was moving. He felt so strong and energized. He ran towards the nearest bully and punched him. His punch sent the bully crashing into a pile of garbage that was on the end of the ally. Then he sprinted toward the other guy and kicked him. The bully fell to the ground. Jared then saw blood on the bully he kicked. He Then got the sudden urge to bite him and drink some blood. Jared felt his teeth grow and his skin became pale. He then bit the bully on the ground.

Jared tasted the blood and it tasted good. "Freak!" He heard one of the guys say. Then he saw that a

group of people had gathered around and were looking at him with one of the bullies.

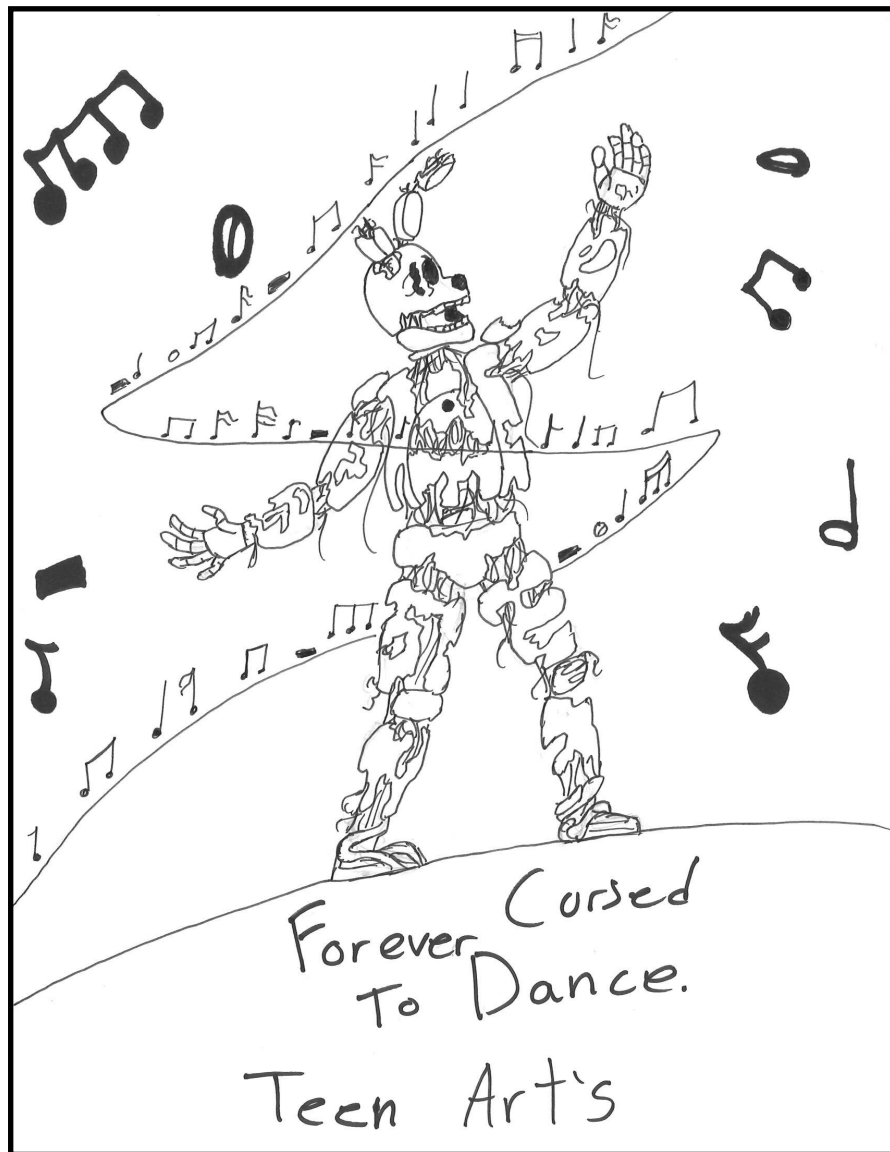
“What are you?!” Someone in the crowd said. “He’s a monster,” another person said. Jared looked at himself. He had blood all over himself. He had to kill the bully before he hurt anyone else. Then Jared ran at them and jumped. He got over the crowd and ran as far as he could. Jared was never seen again. Legend has it that Jared found an old abandoned shack in the woods, and he’s been living there for a couple hundred years. Waiting for his day to come.

Juan Rodriguez Ospina, age 15

Alexander Batcho Intermediate School

Somerset County

Grade 7



Artwork:

Eric Van Der Slays, age 16

Bound Brook High School

Grade 11

Questions

Why does Russia have to invade Ukraine?

It was so peaceful
People filling the city
Kiev still standing strong

People. People have lives there:
Children, woman, men, elders, animals
Give up. Let them live!

Why do you seem so sad?
The wind is flowing
The flowers are growing
The sun is shining

I'm sad these days because
My life never flows like the wind
I will never shine

Why am I melancholy?
The birds like to sing
I sing when I am cheerful
The trees start to blow

School ruins it for me:
My head starts to pound
I start to fall asleep
As I shake my leg

Michelle Smutek, age 13
Alexander Batcho Intermediate School
Somerset County
Grade 7

The Hurricane Family Comedy Show

BOOM! Lightning and thunder crash in the late night. The pouring rain splashed against the window and the power suddenly turned off. We all went to look for flashlights, but it was hard with no light. Since at the time I was 3 or 4, around that time I thought every shadow was scary.

My uncle immediately took charge and went to search for flashlights. He dug inside drawers and finally found working flashlights. Everyone grabbed blankets from the bedrooms and wrapped themselves up as the temperature quickly dropped. My mom put me on the flower patterned couch with two fluffy blankets. Soon we all got bored so someone was brave enough to go in the dark basement and find board games. I played Charades with everyone for a little bit but then I got tired so I went back on the couch.

In the house the carpeting was a flowered pattern carpet matching the flower patterned couch. There was a small TV with a stand and picture frames decorating the front. Outside of the house the cracked driveway led to a old garage that had old rickety doors. The house is painted white but has gotten dirty over time. My grandma still lives there now but you should see what it looks like. My uncle redecorated the whole house, put new floors in, redid the bathroom and the kitchen, and put security cameras up. The driveway is also paved and the garage is better now. My grandma now has a big screen TV hung up on the wall and her walls got painted.

"Penguin! Horse! Carrot!" everyone shouted. They were all still playing Charades. Now here comes a funny part, but it wasn't very funny to me. Apparently my grandma and my uncle thought it would be funny to go out into the hurricane and pretend they were blowing away. To be honest my grandma probably had to clean the window because of all the handprints for the "funny" prank.

"Help! Help Us!!!!" screamed my grandma and uncle. They can be so mean sometimes.

Hurricane Sandy ripped through the neighborhood with its forceful winds. The tree branches were clattering against the windows. The pouring rain splashed against the house and it was starting to flood in the street. It was pitch black and I couldn't see any clouds. I could hear the loud thunder crackling up in the sky. I also could see the bright lightning coming through the windows.

"Mom, I'm scared. The thunder is loud," I wailed. "Baby just try to go to sleep. You are okay. Or you can play games with us," exclaimed my mom.

I didn't really want to go to sleep because I wasn't very tired and I thought that if I woke up I would wake up to something scary.

"Monkey! Book! Car?" I called. I was trying to guess what my family was.

"BACON!!!!!" I yelled as loud as I could.

"Yes you got it right!" everyone shouted.

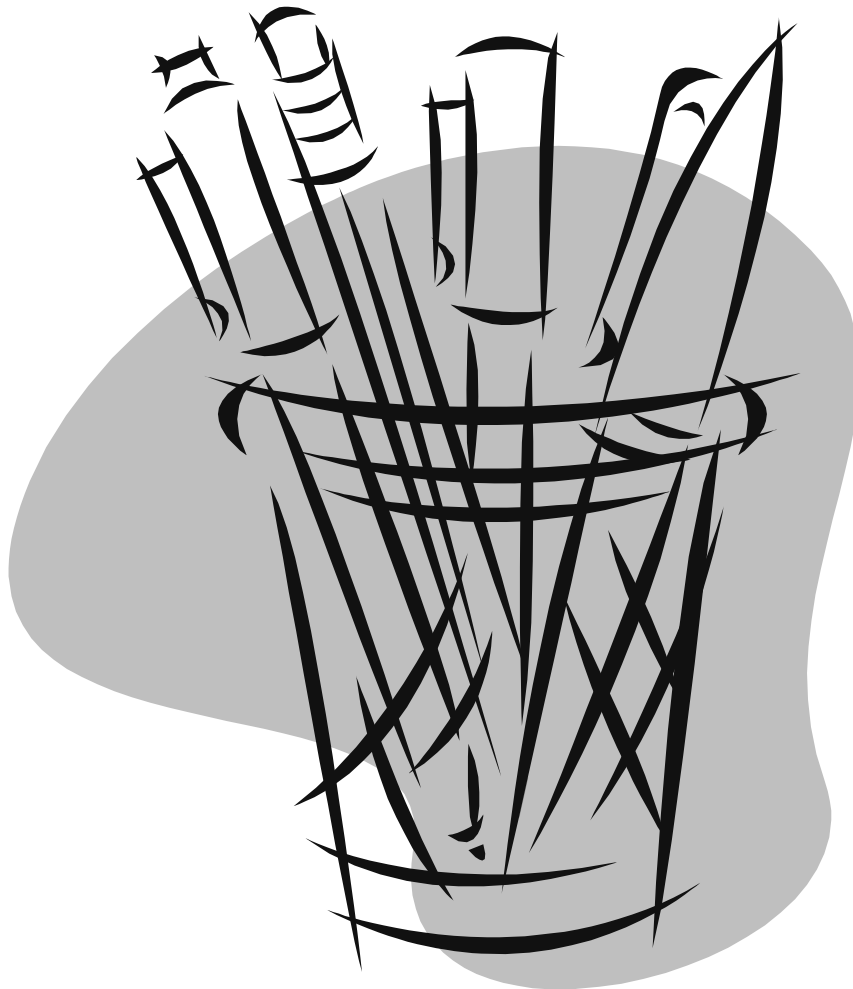
After Hurricane Sandy the water started to go down in the streets. It was morning by then and my grandma was making breakfast. My family is great with humor so this lesson that I learned is great for this moment in my life. I learned that humor can get you through a difficult time or challenge in your life.

Isabella Stage, age 13

Alexander Batcho Intermediate School

Somerset

Grade 7



Friendship Never Melts Away

Jackie and I have been best friends since we were younger. We live across the street from each other, too. We're always together, and if we're not, we're on the phone. Recently, Jackie and I have been pretty distant because she found a new friend, Beth. Beth is very controlling and mean. Jackie is a sweet, funny, and bubbly person. I don't think that they are meant to be friends, but Jackie disagrees. I told her I had my concerns, but she brushed them off. I talked with Beth, too, and she was nasty and said everything with an attitude.

Since Jackie and I sit next to each other in math, class has been pretty awkward, but my teacher breaks the weirdness.

"Tomorrow, it is going to snow, so pray that we have a snow day!" my teacher says. I looked at Jackie to see if she would look back, but she didn't. Instead, she looks at Beth and Beth looks back and smiles like the Cheshire cat. I could tell that they were going to hang out if it was a snow day, but that was always what Jackie and I did. As soon as the bell rang, I jumped up and ran over to Jackie.

"Wanna hang out with me tomorrow?" She stared at me in silence, I knew she didn't want to because she had already eyed down Beth. Soon Beth showed up.

"Wanna hangout with *me* tomorrow?" Beth inquired.

"You know I will!" Said Jackie excitedly. I scurried away because I was embarrassed. *How could Jackie tell Beth yes when I asked first?* She acted like I wasn't even there. I thought about it all day until I arrived home, ate dinner and immediately went to sleep. I didn't want to see Beth walk Jackie home.

The next day, we did have a snow day, I didn't care because I knew Jackie would hang out with Beth instead of me. I looked out the window and sure enough, I saw Jackie and Beth making snow angels.

Like a stalker, I watched them have fun. All of a sudden, the snow became really tall around them. It was like a dream! Then Beth wasn't Beth anymore—she turned into a big snowman! Jackie's face was still and she didn't move, speak or even blink! I quickly ran outside and grabbed a grappling hook and flashlight.. I went into Jackie's yard and threw the hook as high as I could in the tower of snow. I climbed for what felt like forever until I reached the top.

"She's mine!" Beth said.

I ignored her, but she picked up Jackie. I quickly climbed the snowman and attempted to free Jackie, Beth's grip tightened. I took out the flashlight and turned it on, pointing it toward Beth until she started melting. I grabbed Jackie and swung out of the snow arena. We made it back to my house, and I locked the door.

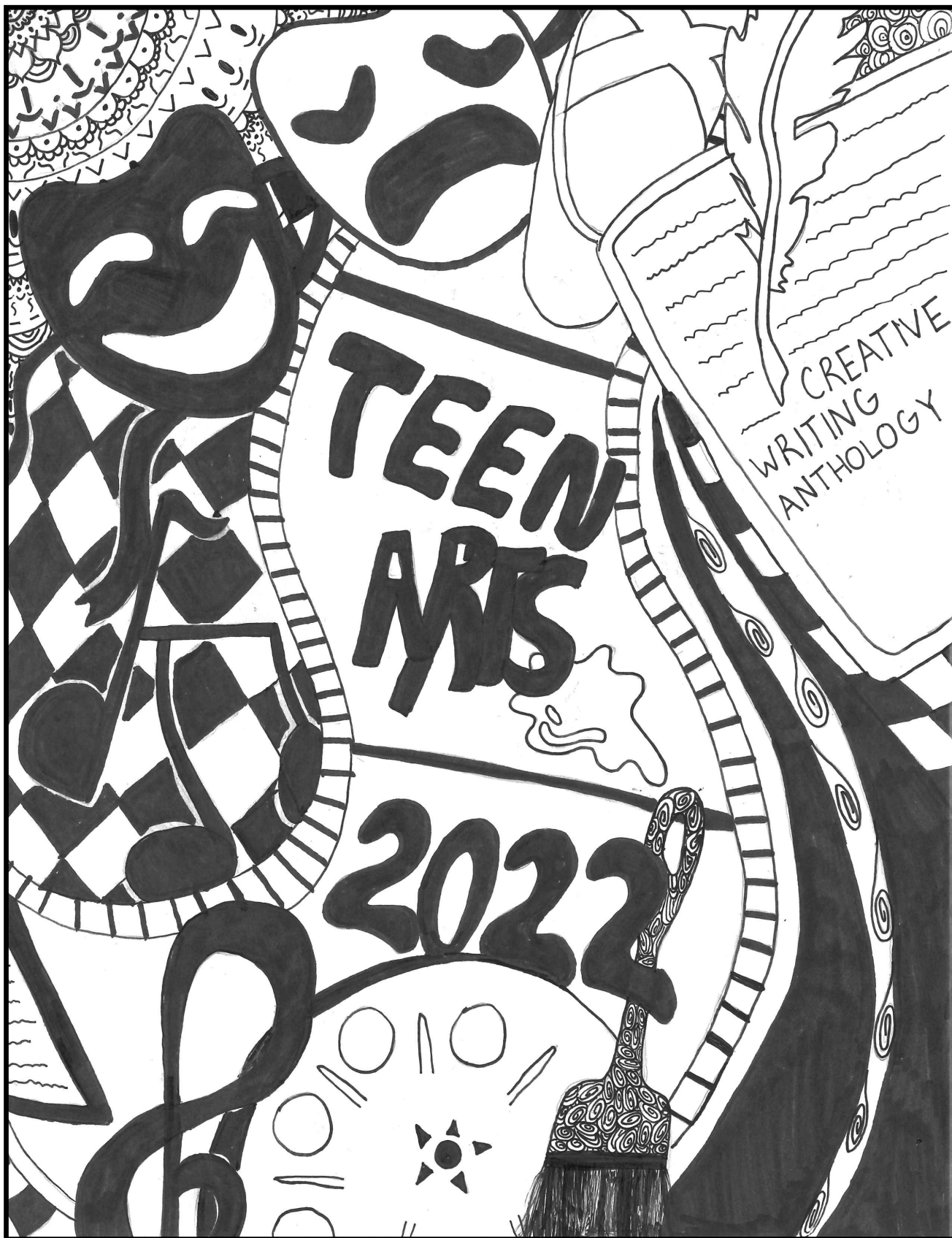
"Why did you save me? I've been so mean," Jackie questioned.

"Because I care about you. It doesn't matter how nice you are to me, I will always care about you."

"I love you," Jackie proclaimed.

"I love you, too," I expressed, and Jackie and I hugged each other and swore that we would never let another person get in the way of our friendship.

Serenity Thomas, age 13
Alexander Batcho Intermediate School
Somerset County
Grade 7



Artwork:

Sofia Mendonca, age 13

Branchburg Central Middle School

Bound Brook High School

Second Chance

“He’s breathing! Call 911, he’s seriously injured.” a random voice had erupted out of nowhere and disrupted my placid yet cold resting place. Darkness, that’s all that’s seen and all that’s heard. I can’t escape from this sadness deep down and I won’t let myself escape because I can’t forget about the mistakes I’ve made. I’m crying, I’m afraid, and I’m panicking. Everything is going wrong and no one can help me and none can help me. There was a time a couple of months ago where I knew I would end up like this but I didn’t wanna believe it because I was afraid of what would happen to me physically and mentally. This toll is unbearable and all I want to do is elude from this place forever. I’ve become lost to the point where I don’t want to let anyone in and carry this burden with me and all I want to do is be by myself.

This feels relaxing yet I also feel bewildered about if what is happening is right. “I need to get out of here,” I had thought to myself, but can I really pick myself up from this? There is something just lingering in the back of my mind lacerating my heart making it harder to fix this. I can’t go on like this anymore because I’m afraid of losing myself and becoming someone who I don’t want to be. It sends chills down my spine just thinking about it every once and awhile. These questions that I’ve had have always been there since I first started feeling like this because I’ve messed up so bad that I have no point of return and I can’t bring myself to try and find it. This is all due to the fact of me being treated like a dirty rag that’s been used over and over again but never cleansed because no one really cares. It makes me feel worse and worse each time I think about how I had been used.

I decided that today I will attempt to step out of this darkness I’ve been stuck in for a long time like an opiate I can’t get rid of. I get up and start to head towards the door and grab the handle and take one deep breath. I then open the door and the sunlight completely overflows my eyes and I feel like a vampire being burned by the bright and scorching hot sun. I closed the door immediately and was about to walk away but then I heard a voice.

“No, turn back,” the voice whispered.

I was bewildered by what was going on but I decided that I’ll listen to the voice and head outside. I open the door and step outside and am immediately blinded by the sun. After my eyesight adjusted I decided

to take a walk around the town and see what I was missing. I feel so misplaced out here. I haven't been outside in a while and don't know anyone in this town. Everyone is so happy and filled with joy, but I'm just here walking around looking at everything in two plain colors. White and Black. I can't see color anymore and decided I don't want to so I just keep going on. I get a couple of "Hi's!" here and there but I don't respond back because I'm lost in a train of thought. "Why me? Why do I have to be like this? It could've been way better and I could've been like everyone around me," I had thought myself, but I'm not and I'll just have to deal with that. I pick up my head and notice that I'm not in town and I look behind me. The town is at least a good 500 feet back there. I got so lost in thought I didn't notice how far I walked. I look left and notice a trail going down this huge, rocky, and slippery cliff. I decided to head down it. I'm at least 100 feet down and here.

"Stop!" A voice had whispered loudly into my ear. I stop abruptly and lose footing. I try to regain balance but I grab the edge of the trail and I fall down the cliff. I'm tumbling down fast and I have no time to think, but actually, one thought does come to mind. "Is this it for me?" As I'm going down I feel my back, ribs, legs, and hands being lacerated by the rocks on the ground. My body feels all thrown apart and this white and black that I always see is now just black. My eyes are closed and now all I see are memories of my past and I hear nothing from around me or in my memories. I can feel myself slipping away. I hear something on my right and think that it's just a fox. I take a peek to see what it is and it's a couple walking down the same path I was.

I feel the warmth on my neck and hear "He's breathing! Call 911 quickly!" The voice erupted out of nowhere disrupting my peace. I feel myself being picked by two people and then get gently placed down. I'm lifted again, but then I lose consciousness. I wake up from a nap that felt like forever but it was only 4 days. I was told that I had broken ribs, a concussion, at least 20 stitches, and a broken my wrist and left leg. It was a miracle I was even alive because according to the nurse I wasn't breathing for at least ten minutes. I heard this and I decided that if I'm still alive after that I'm going to try to leave this eternal darkness. This is the second chance I was looking for and I'm definitely going to take it.

Ryan Alvarado, age 18
Bound Brook High School
Somerset
Grade 12

Where I Am From

I am from wooden spoons
From PlayStations and soccer balls
I am from a cozy little brick house
And right over from the school play yard
I am from soccer fields
Whose voice still calls to me
I am from rosaries and crosses
From the Angulos and the Hidalgos
From being the loudest
Making tamales around Christmas time
And from late nights around a campfire
From big cookouts on hot summer days
I am from camping and adventure
I am from Costa Rica and the United States
From gallo pinto and chifrijo
From growing and harvesting coffee,
from rounding up the cows,
And from a loving and caring family.
I am from those moments of love and family

Kevin Angulo, age 18
Bound Brook High School
Somerset
Grade 12

Memories

i cannot differentiate the good memories from the bad ones

each memories is glossed over and smeared into another

were they tears of joy or pain
did i always roll my eyes when i saw you

the dead piece of me holds love and compliments for you
but a lot of dead people have a lot to say
that will never be heard

hearing you is like nails on a chalk board
and seeing you makes me nauseous

but what about when you spoke fatherly wisdom

when you saw a bright future full of possibilities for me
a brightness that was dimmed by a bit with each fleeting father figure
the darkness may be why its so hard to see the good

but it doesn't matter how much good you do in this world
someone will always only see the bad you do

i am not good

in the little life i've lived
the breathe of air that i've existed on this earth

i and everyone around me has concluded i am bad
i am
i am inconsistent, inconsiderate,
i am a hardheaded cold hearted bitch
i am a flirtatious phony and fat
and i don't deserve half of what i have

but i am just a girl
and i suppose you were just a man
you, he, and him
all just men who were faced with the challenge of fathering a bitch

but is that all i am?

deep exhales when i look in the mirror
warmth fills my face

are they tears of joy or pain

is it my fault
it is
but is that all i am? bad?

how would i know

each memories is glossed over and smeared into another

i cannot differentiate the good memories from the bad ones

Janae Baskerville, age 16
Bound Brook High School
Somerset
Grade 12

(untitled)

Like a flower being cut that will eventually die
Like the sun going away at night
Like children growing up
Like losing those along the way that meant so much
Like your first love turning into your first heartbreak
Like seeing those around you going down the wrong path
Like having to turn to numb it all
Like turning to numb it all
Like having to lie that you are fine so you don't seem like a burden
Like all the goodbyes that weren't said and unexpected hellos
Like thinking of what could have been done differently
Like waiting on something that might never happen

All these things bring a type of pain into your life when they first happen, whether when you are a little kid, pre-teen, teen, or adult. These changes are all unavoidable.

The dead flower goes back into the ground for new ones to grow
The sun goes away so we can enjoy the moon and stars and others can enjoy the sun too
The grown children can now have their own to teach and support and show that no matter what they aren't alone
The broken hearts teach you to grow so when you find the one it's all worth it
The people who went down a bad path will one day see and want to change before its too late
The reasons why you wanted to feel numb will be the ones that make you want to feel
The lies you told protect those around you will be found out sooner or later and you'll see how much you mean to them
The goodbyes that you wanted but you know would have made it worst, would have made it hurt so much more if they were said, and the hellos that saved you in more ways than you know
The possible outcomes that could have been better but also way worse
The times you didn't wait for the time you made it work

Life can be so full of pain sometimes that we forget to let it be beautiful we forget there is something bigger something you don't even know about yet. Because after all black and white still have different shades.

First Generation

Wanting to make them proud is all you've ever wanted to do, but how can that be when you've been giving every ounce of yourself burning out slowly, and slowly breaking down and feeling alone? You feel like you can never talk with them about it, even though you know they love you there is more expected from you. They have already given you so much, they have already pushed for you and nothing you are currently going through can be as bad as what they lived through because you have it easy right? Well no because you hurt in silence and you have learned to comfort them and others but never to comfort yourself. You are told you have it easier than them and yes you know that and you are very grateful. But just because you don't have the same struggles doesn't mean you have no struggles at all. You are taught to look out for yourself at a young age, and if you are the oldest you are also taught to be a parent to the younger ones. You see how the rules change for them and you are used as the good example to follow but also the bad example when needed, but they are still supposed to listen to you because you are who looks after them most of the time. But you can't discipline them because that is oversetting and you can't do that because you aren't their parent. You see how they are treated differently because as first and second graders they can play and be kids but you, you as a first or second grade were told to translate important papers with words you had never seen before much less knew what they meant, but the moment you admitted that you did not know the words "then why are you in school if you don't know this" were thrown at you. You were sorry, sorry for not being able to help how they wanted you to for not knowing what those words meant for not being enough in that moment. You know at a very young age that they were stressed all the time you understood but you put that stress on yourself slowly. You put that weight on yourself mostly because of that mindset of we have to help, we have to comfort them. But, because of this you never fully grasped that sometimes there is nothing you can do to help and this makes you feel so useless makes you feel less than you are, and makes you feel small which is something you were thought you weren't supposed to feel. And once you did or said something they thought was wrong but turns out you were right you don't get an apology you get a "are you hungry?", "come to at", "what do you want to eat?" because they never learned to apologize or to accept they were wrong and you have learned to accept that you'll never actually get that apology. And they never understand mental health because they never learned about it. They say what you feel is just laziness because you have nothing to worry about or be upset about. This just makes it worst but you have to put a front and smile and say ok and bottle it all up. No matter what they put us through though, we will always love them no matter what because that is what we were thought from a young age,

Alison Gutierrez, age 17
Bound Brook High School
Somerset
Grade 11

The War Cry of the Clowns

it's a quiet night in the village you hear the rustling of the leaves. the ever so soft beautiful chirping of a cricket. the smell of fresh air and the cool breeze coming through your window. you turn to the fireplace only to find out your beautiful shelly has already lit it. "It's getting late dear you auto go to bed," shelly tells you with the softest voice. you sadly decline as you have to write some papers for your fellow blacksmiths. you sit at your desk with great despair knowing that if you don't get this done your boss will fire you. then you look up your warm-hearted shelly knitting by the fire, you two children playing with the wooden train you got them for Christmas. then you hear something faint you can't really make out what it is. you figure it's outside so you make your way to the door. when you finally realize what the sound is, the emergency bell. you open the door to see what the problem is. then you see him coming up on the hill when he sees the town he started ringing like crazy. then you hear the worst words you could hear. "the clowns are coming the clowns are coming" as soon as you hear what he says you rush inside the house you pick the oldest child up and tell your shelly we all have to go to the seller your shelly asked you what's going on, you tell her there's no time to explain and start heading to the basement door. you open the door and tell your kids to head downstairs your shelly follows them. then before shelly can tell you to come in you close and lock the door behind them. your shelly bangs on the door a yells "what are you doing". you answer "they need help to defend the town" shelly replies "no you can't" "I must," you say to shelly in a calming voice she says ok in the most upset voice you've heard from shelly. you shed a tear when your youngest Samantha starts to cry. then before you can head outside your oldest jack says through the door "will you be back" you kneel by the door I... but before you can finish you hear a loud honking, the war cry of the clowns.

Danier Guzman, age 18
Bound Brook High School
Somerset
Grade 12

I AM FROM

I am from
The middle passage
From
The screams beneath its current
I am from
The fields of soft white
And the hands that caress it
I am from
The backs of Africa
Whose
Scars tell the story of america
I am from
the feet that yearn to be free
From
The rope that swings and its tree
I am from
The panther and its fro
from
The cells they call home
And From
the streets they march on
I am from
The miles between selma and montgomery
I am from
The terror of the cross and the flames that lach on
From
the fight against the white cloaks and its ability to turn blue
And from
The guns they keep drawn on you
I am from
Courage and perseverance
I am from those moments
When faith is all you have
And you still wait!

Tanaya Muslim, age 18
Bound Brook High School
Somerset
Grade 12

Untitled

I miss you in the morning and during the day
The feeling of the sun reminds me of the things you say
There's nothing better than your company even when we fight
Your presence is good for my soul you are my light
We probably have tried to say goodbye a million times
But no matter how many times we leave you will always be mine
My angel in the dark my hero that's low-key
How every time i'm around you i feel like you were sent for me
Sun beaming through the windows reminds me of your energy
Through the day i love the feeling of yellow
And i swear to god you had me at hello
When the sun leaves i miss it like i miss you
Who else will be here with everything we been through
What i'm trying to say is i miss you at night too

ROBOT

Writing is so much easier when your heart is bruised
Painful memories are more vivid when my pen is used
You took a part of me with you when i ripped the wires that were fused
We were attached at the hip veins wired red and blue
After the disconnection my brain malfunctioned all voices sound like you
Electricity through my body my heart rate feels slow
My body reacts to the change how i lived without you i don't know
Sparks in my hand neck and lips they don't know where to go
System shut down and low battery
Tears are rusting my face at the thought of you and me

Jordan Stockwell, age 17
Bound Brook High School
Somerset
Grade 11

Reflections Of A Shattered Man

CRACK!!...CRUNCH

It's October 3rd and the story begins with a little old man that lives around the corner of Prospect Ave and Universale St, His name is Phil. Phil is a 70 year old man that has been through so much in his life, his wife Ellie died exactly one year ago...It's fall and Phil loves the fall. He loves to watch the leaves fall down and watch the sunset go down on the toppest window he has in his house. He loves it because that's what he and his wife used to do. His wife had breast cancer and died on October 3rd. He has something special for her today. He put on his best suit and went to ShopRite to buy her a birthday cake. Can't forget the candles. He decided to pick the brightest colors they had to represent how bright and beautiful he saw his wife in his eyes. Two big 7's in his cart with a nice little red and white cake and the words " Happy birthday Ellie", Perfect for the occasion. He makes it home with a smile on his face listening to the radio on 96.5 where they play Ellie's and Phil's wedding song, He gets the cake and candles and goes into the two story house. The door creaked open with an echo and emptiness, A raging sadness feeling enters Phil's body as he puts the cake down on the kitchen counter. He knows why he feels this way and he tries to move on but something keeps pulling him back, Phil knows Ellie wouldn't want him to be sad on her special day and puts some music, as he puts on some music he sees their wedding photo, He couldn't bottle it in anymore and he tries to gulp it down but he can't, a burst of tears come running down his face like a opened dam, he falls on his knees.

CRACK!

Phil drops the mirror that he and Ellie put their handprints on leaded over his wall, He gets up and stares down at the shattered glasses, Phil gets a blank white flashback of when he used to go up to a hill and have a picnic and just watch the clouds pass by. Phil sees the shattered mirror once again and he wants to give one last I love you.

CRUNCH! As he walks over the broken glass.

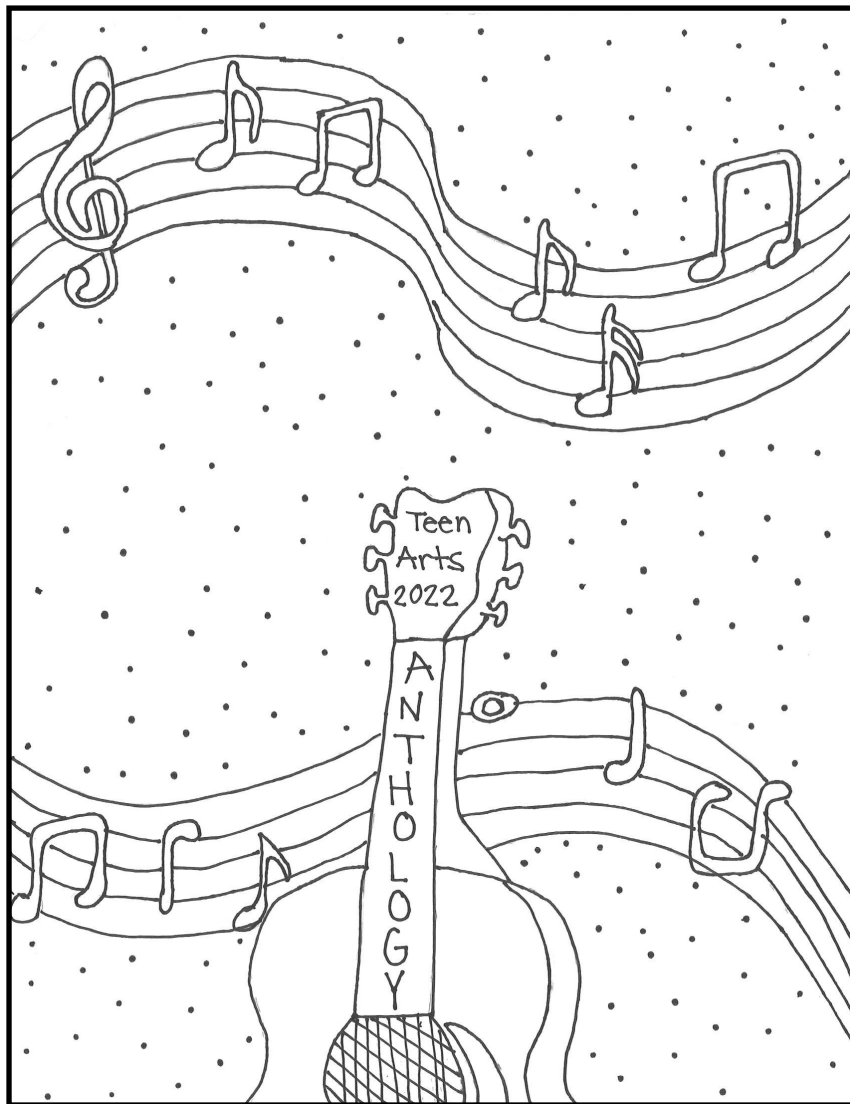
"I miss you Ellie"

Phil said in a soft raspy voice as he headed to bed, He went to bed and started to have vivid dreams about Ellie and slowly felt her soul approach him, after all this time he has felt something never before a hap-

piness touching him as she was hugging his left arm tight as a snake, He had been unaware that shards of glass has been in his skin, not noticing in the raging sadness they had cut into his body like a needle thread- ing . Time froze Phil sees all the memories one last time ,the time spent with Ellie, The cherished moments all coming together in seconds they disappeared with Phil...

“We spend all our life in our head make sure its a nice place to live”

Dylan Vargas, age 17
Bound Brook High School
Somerset
Grade 11



Artwork:

Jacqueline Gutierrez, age 17
Bound Brook High School
Grade 11

Branchburg Central Middle School

Milliseconds Make Dreams

She whispered into my soft spoken ear, fly my angel fly!
My hand whiskered her soft soul one last time
And I dived in the dark ice cold dungeon

I took a leap into the water and the clear water exposed its night sky
I composed myself together, knowing I was here to win
My skin tight suit grasped me as I swam with my heart
I touched the wall and gasped at my mother who let me fly high into the night sky
One millisecond made my long lost dream come true on a dreary April night

I ran into the arms of the woman who got me to where I am today
Speechless I displayed such a strong sense of pride of who my mother was
The last thing I could muster up was a tear so fine it expressed so much emotion

Anagha Manjrekar, age 12
Branchburg Central Middle School
Somerset
Grade 7

Oceanside

As I walk down the shore, the warm golden sand caresses my feet
The ocean waves sing a welcoming song, one that is ever so sweet
Crashing, and leaping along the shore, like clapping along to a beat
The running ocean, and the glittering sand where the two worlds meet

As the setting orb goes down, the brilliant light of colors fills the sky
Looking up and seeing the bright, eye-blinding yellow start to die,
Wishing more than anything, that I could go up and fly high

The night grew dimmer and dimmer
The chances of seeing any life were slimmer,
But the beautiful sky, filled with sparkling stones,
Before you know it, the sky refilled with shades and tones

The orb had awoken,
Making the sky feel more wholesome and less broken
The heat creates warmth upon the ocean,
The waves were now, swaying in the breeze without commotion

Finally, the sun is high, nice, and neat
Creating a warm world where everything is very sweet
Its perfect, like when the sand meets the water, and it feels complete

Shloka Moosthiala, age 13
Branchburg Central Middle School
Somerset
Grade 8

Green Brook Middle School

The Path of Life

Life is not a stopping place
A pause in what's to come.
A resting place along the journey
To await the future.

We all have different paths
That we stroll along.
We all were born to learn something
But never to hate something

Our final destination is a place,
Far beyond our imagination.
For some the journey is quick
But for others it's long.

And when the path comes to an end
We claim a great reward.
And then we realize our life
Was full of memories.

Each day creates a new page
In the long book of our life.
We remember memories
Of the past and live in the present.
But the future lays uncertain
Ahead on the long path ahead.

Aarish Patel, age 14
Green Brook Middle School
Somerset
Grade 9

A Staircase To Somewhere

A girl once sat in darkness
Pitch-black darkness
With no escape.

So the girl sat for a long time
She just sat and stayed quiet
For there was nothing to do
Perhaps the girl wanted to do something
But that something led to nowhere
For there was only darkness.

One day a staircase appeared
The staircase glowed with light
While shining, darkness still surrounded the girl
The girls stared at the staircase for a long time.

She looked at the start of the staircase.
She looked for the end of the staircase.
She could not see the end of that staircase.
Yet the girl was starting to get bored.

Bored of darkness
Bored of sitting
Bored of nothingness

The girl climbed the staircase
She climbed for a long time
The staircase led to nowhere
An infinite end.

However, a goal from the girl emerged
She continued walking
The staircase led to somewhere

The girl knew where the staircase led
Perhaps others will know where the staircase leads.

Kaylee Yue, age 13
Green Brook Middle School
Somerset
Grade 8

Hillsborough Middle School

Winter Snow Storm

Whoosh, hearing the wind smash the window,
As I pass by the living room,
Seeing the clouds slowly turn dark,

As the day goes by,
Seeing each bit of snow fall slowly down to the ground,
Increasing the height inch by inch,
The snow glowing softly,
Looks like a winter wonderland,
While seeing the reflection of lights from other houses,
Giving a hint of color fullness to the snow,

In the background hearing the news,
Warning everyone to be safe,
Feeling the excitement of not having school the next day,
Imagining playing in the snow with friends,
Making snowmen and snow angels,
With the cool breeze hitting our faces,

Entering the house with rosy cheeks and noses,
But warmed down with the hot chocolate heat,
Meanwhile watching all time favorite Christmas movies, Feeling the Christmas cheer,
Welcoming the first winter snow storm of the year!

Maria Cabral, age 14
Hillsborough Middle School
Somerset County
8th Grade

Thunder Storms

The rain falls slowly at first.
There is no anger or rage
There is no wind or lightning
So it's not very frightening.

The wind began to sway the grass
I watched daylight turn to night,
And the dark clouds hovered with might.
The calm before the storm had vanished,
And the tempest had begun.

“Whoosh, bang, clap” goes the thunderstorm.
The lightning illuminates the rain that falls with torrent,
And the thunder sounds with anger and rage.
The trees swayed violently,
And Soon will come floods,

The sky is growling.
Sending down its bolts of lightning.
It is mesmerizing yet scary
Children in their beds
With their heads buried.
But the rain starts to fall much slower,
And the thunder begins to fade.

The sway of the trees starts to cease,
And the lightning fades away.
Out comes the sun from its hiding.
The calm has begun again,
And it is no longer frightening

Neel Chauhan, age 14
Hillsborough Middle School
Somerset County
Grade 8

Over and Over

Are the days repeating themselves or am I?
The days turn into weeks turn into months turn into years.
We thought it was just going to be 2 weeks but now it's going on 2
years. Will it ever end?

The same songs play on my Spotify.
We review the same things over and over in school.
Every day is the same,
And when something new does happen,
Why don't I feel any different?

This pandemic has been longer than everyone expected.
The days are stretching along with the elastic strings on our masks.
No friends, no family, no new opportunities.
No end in sight.

Even with the vaccines and tests, nothing seems to be helping
Even with these new inventions, people still don't want to contribute. There
are new variants, schools are shutting down, and people are still dying Why
does it have to be this way?

I try to stay positive,
even when everyone around me can't keep their tests negative.
I try for my family and my friends,
But even trying is a pain.
Complaining isn't going to get me anywhere.
Will it ever end?

Maya Gonzalez, age 13
Hillsborough Middle School
Somerset County
Grade 8

Backrooms

Erick, John and I just finished lunch at Alfonzo's where we had eaten way too much pizza. Absent-mindedly, we walked into the lab and were hit by the smell of wet carpet. The walls were a monochromatic tone of yellow, and there was buzzing. Nothing was right. I checked it out with my camera and then I said "Hey guys check this out" and then I saw them walk by the hallway I was in and something was behind them I couldn't process what it was. The only thing I remember is it was tall, lanky, and fast. That is when I realized that I was lost and alone. When I walked out the hallway I screamed "HELLO IS ANYONE THERE?"

Then I heard footsteps. Loud footsteps. Then as soon as I knew it, I was running for my life away from this thing. I got into this hallway where there was blood and my friends dead bodies but I had to keep running. When I looked behind me, it was gone – nowhere in sight. I whispered to myself "I have to remain quiet" Then I grabbed my friend's walkie talkie and called in for someone at the lab "Hello is anyone there?"

The walkie only responded in static and I knew I was going to have to find a way out before that thing caught me. After walking for what I think was about 30 minutes, I found something. I found a ladder that went up to a hole in the wall so I climbed up the ladder and through to the next side which had a rope and a long hallway with multiple doors I knew what I needed to do. I ran. Then I started hearing music behind me getting closer and closer until it stopped. When I reached a hole in the ground, nothing else, just a hole, I felt that feeling when someone is staring at you. I turned my head around slowly to see that thing just standing there. I didn't know what to do.

I just jumped into the hole unknowing what was in there then the walkie sounded. It was glitching a lot but I made out this "*You are stuck in a 600 million square foot maze we will open a portal on level 2 you are currently on level 0 we will inform you when you get to the next level goodbye.*" Then I saw a light in the distance. It was a stairwell leading up to a sign that said fire exit. I went up and was greeted by the walkie saying "*You made it to level 1 - one more to go*"

That is when the door slammed shut on its own and made a very loud noise I knew that thing would be coming soon and I knew I needed to hide. Then the footsteps began getting closer and closer and louder and louder. I tried to run but I realized that my feet weren't touching the floor. I was in the beast's clutches

until someone was covered in blood. It was John, he wasn't dead yet. The thing dropped me and charged for John and he made a run for it.

I turned around to see something in a very dark corner just staring at me and smiling. That is when the lights went out I got my flashlight and it was nothing but dead silence so I began to walk and realized I wasn't alone and I felt something touch my shoulder. It was John.

I whispered "John!? You are alive, how did you get away from that thing?"

John whispered back "when the lights ran out I threw my flashlight the one way and I ran the other way and came to the nearest light." I nodded and we began to slowly walk so nothing could hear us. John asked me "Do you have like any bandages or something for my leg?"

I wrapped the rope around his leg and made a knot and pulled it. "That should help," I said as we kept walking.

We encountered writing on the wall that said "Howler."

I said "Howler what is a--" I was interrupted by a disturbing laugh and John and I looked to the left and to the right and even behind us and nothing was there then John felt something drip onto his hand.

He looked up to see a crooked smile and beady white eyes. He whispered to me "Run!" Then I looked up and I was in shock and we both started to run as we heard the thing screaming behind us. We saw another fire escape and ran in and shut the door and held it shut for at least 10 minutes. When I shined my flashlight, I saw writing on the walls, pictures of eyes, and writing I couldn't understand. Someone was here before – we don't know if they survived or died. John had built up enough courage to go up the stairs and peek through the door. We saw other people. John whispered "Michael I found people."

I whispered back "What, how, how did they get here?"

"I don't know how they got here," John responded. Then they spotted us.

One of them yelled out "Hey you get over here!"

John and I walked out. The people asked "Who are you?"

John said "I'm John Williams and he is Michael Johnson."

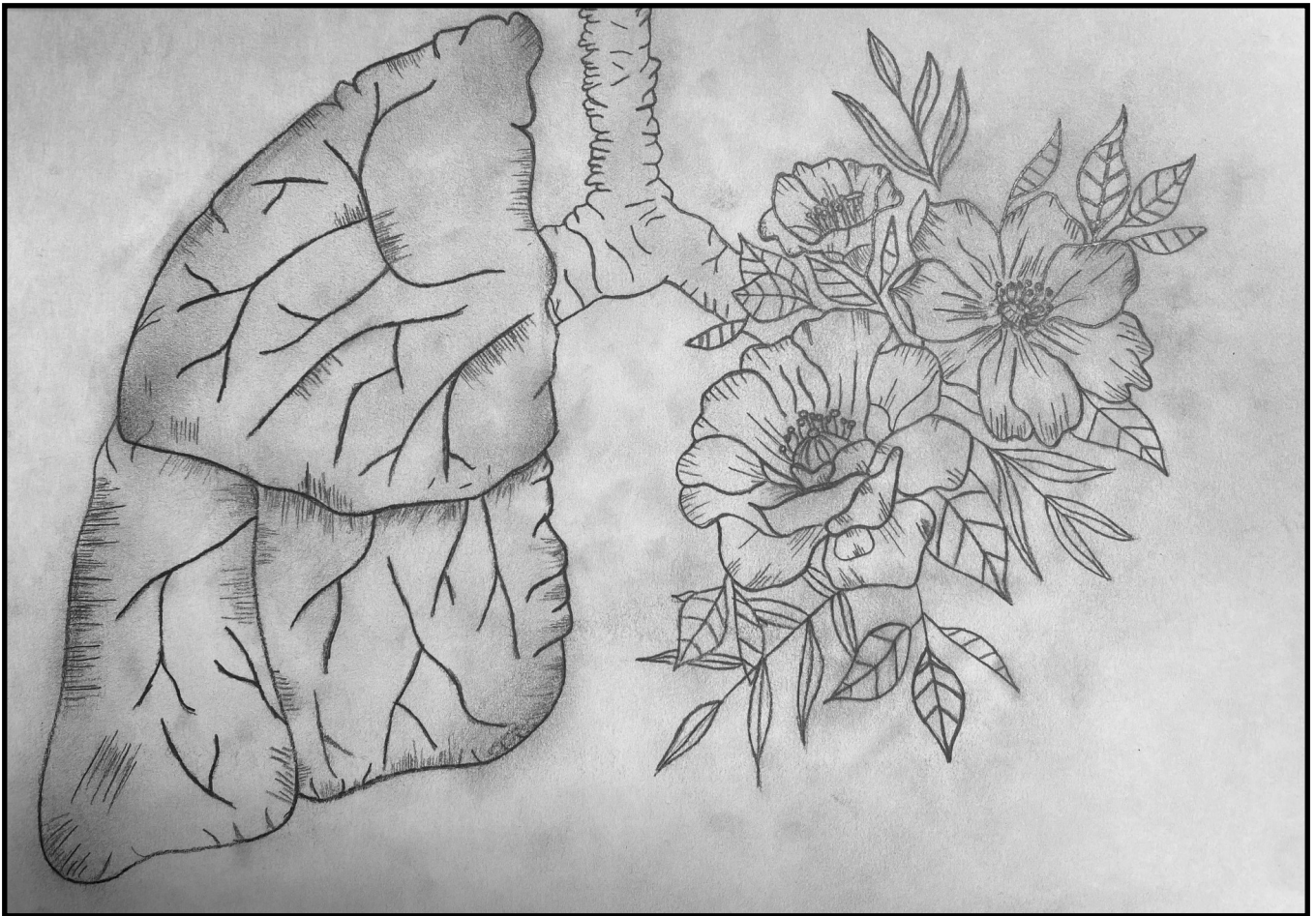
They looked surprised and they said "Y-you are the people that went missing three years ago."

I said "Wait did you say three years?!"

They said “Um yeah let’s get you guys out of here.”

When John and I were about to walk out, we heard the screaming and the loud footsteps. We ran out of the portal and the thing reached out its hand to grab me and pull me back in until the portal closed, chopping off the thing’s hand but we were out once and for all.

David Gubitosa, age 13
Hillsborough Middle School
Somerset County
Grade 7



Artwork:

Genesis Murillo, age 16
Manville High School
Grade 10

There Was a Penny and a Dream.

A tiny, ancient coin lies plainly on the floor;
No one pays attention to it, as it sits alone
On one of New York City's streets in front of a café door
Dreams are similar since they are pushed aside
Most people prefer to stare at a shining bright phone
While their lonely dreams sit like a lightless roller coaster waiting for us to ride.
Countless sneakers tread over the penny each day
But historically, it wasn't always this way
A penny was something that had symbolic worth
To a hardworking man, a cent would bring mirth
It was the promise of something more - something unknown
A dream has always been something for what we reach
Like a seed or a sapling stored in our minds which no one can breach
For those who believe in their dream, the seed will bloom
And soar into the air, like a colorful balloon
As the days brighten and darken, the clock ticks and tocks.
Any man can find himself down on his luck
But then the cent can double, it can grow and grow
'Til soon it's not just one, but it's rows and rows
The dream reignites, alive once more
Possibilities are endless, but you must be relentless.

Arjun Jain, age 13
Hillsborough Middle School
Somerset County
Grade 8

Riding the Waves

The palm trees sway
The scenery looking as beautiful as a picture
The Outer Banks full of different nature
Waking up to the sand beneath my feet
Looking out my window hearing the waves roar from my room

Waking up as the sun glaring into my face
Running down the beach in the morning
The waves looked calm must be in low tide
Then started to pick up I knew it was go time

Running into the cool ocean water
Jumping on my board looking for a wave as big as a monster
The waves were breaking out far
But they were coming as fast as a car
I started paddling towards shore
I could feel the board underneath my feet

Riding the curl of the wave
Water collapsing on top of me but I still feel so brave
Falling off my board into the water
Doing flips the waves getting harder

Riding the last wave into the sunset
The adrenaline rushing as the wave is coming
I started paddling for the last time
I flew up in the air and landed in the sand

It was so fun
But it was done when there was nothing left of the sun
Riding the waves

Kevin Jones, age 14
Hillsborough Middle School
Somerset County
Grade 8

The Audition

A countdown more critical than a Christmas or a birthday,
Five days until a local theater audition,
Though it might as well be Broadway,

I only have to sing, which isn't hard,
Sixteen measures are all I need to sing.
A lousy audition can leave you scarred.

Thump, thump, thump... I'm having heart palpitations!
I shake and sweat like a nervous mouse,
It's not a fun sensation.

Before you know it, auditions are done!
It wasn't too nerve-wracking
This was fun!

My nerves didn't crush me; for that I'm proud,
This just proves to me that,
I can perform in front of a crowd.

We'll get our roles soon,
I'll be happy with whatever I get,
Since I did the best I could do.

Kiara Jones, age 13
Hillsborough Middle School
Somerset County
Grade 8

The Adventure Begins

School just ended and freedom begins at last.
Going home without any work feels like a dream.
Going outside to play some sports
It feels like time is endless.
Life now feels like heaven: no work, no stress
No nothing. Only relaxation.
Going to the beach, to feel even calmer.
Surfing the waves all day and building sandcastles.
Deciding to travel to a beautiful place like Hawaii or Paris
Paris it is, visiting the Eiffel Tower, trying out different things and making new friends!
It's nearing September and going back home is a must.
As school starts to reappear
A flow of sadness overwhelms me.
It's time to go back to the old life which everyone disliked.
Now it seems as though the adventure is over.
And finally, we must return back to reality.

Mudit Kodati, age 13
Hillsborough Middle School
Somerset County
Grade 8

Just the Music and Me

Without a doubt, no cares, just shout.
Music expresses every thought in your mind.
Concert tickets are hard to find,
but believe me, it's worth the wait.
Music is my only trait.
Surely you will see, it's just the music and me.

It feels like you're miles away from the stage
as you see the audience rage.
The guitar wails with a screeching tone,
it replicates the sound of getting a call on your phone.

Suddenly everything disappears,
only the sound of music fills your ears.
Your favorite song blasts through the venue,
it feels like they're playing it just for you.

Even from far away, the music still seeks you.
It teaches you a lesson, and opens the gates to a new way of living.
Music's sole purpose is giving.

Music is the cure,
and proves to you that you can be sure.
It shows you how to be true.
Even now, the music is waiting here for you.

Emily Nichols, age 13
Hillsborough Middle School
Somerset County
Grade 8



I Am the Sun

All is still in the darkness,
Dawn arrives and the sky comes to life.
Pink, Yellow, Orange,
The most beautiful colors you will ever see.
No more stillness,
No more darkness.

A sliver of light at the base of the horizon,
The daily ritual has begun.
Slowly, Softly, Methodically,
The colors begin to take over the sky.
A sliver of light begins the ritual,
The horizon is now on fire.

Creeping higher and higher into the sky,
Warmth fills the surrounding air.
Blinding, Bright, Penetrating,
Its rays glisten over the Earth.
Climbing steadily, it finally reaches its peak,
And confidently hisses "I am the Sun."

Jeeya Patel, age 13
Hillsborough Middle School
Somerset County
Grade 8



Snowy day

Cold winter snow days,
Snowball fights, sledding, skating
Snowman building fun

Hot chocolate

Warm cozy hot chocolate,
Floating marshmallows Making
Warm and sleepy fun

Santa Claus

Santa Claus
Funny, Fatty
Falling, running, jumping
Santa gives a lot of presents.
Father Christmas

The Happy Elf

Elf
Silly, sweet
Jumping, playing, running
Happy elves love making presents.
Fairy

Ral Patel, age 13
Hillsborough Middle School
Somerset County
Grade 7

Chaos

Preface

It was a warm sunny day, to be honest with you it wasn't warm. Even though the school had heaters, I was still not feeling any warmer than I was before.

"Joe," I heard. "Joe." I heard again soon enough I felt a hand on my back. Then it struck me that I was called on by my teacher. I quickly stood up being laughed at. It is as miserable as it sounds.

About an hour afterward, I got back home. I turn on the TV and heard the TV reporter say "Tensions are rising as other countries are being outnumbered by this mysterious group of people no one knows who they are, how they look, and what they are doing." Well, that was frightening I thought to myself. But life hasn't gotten much better. My parents would be back soon so I needed to get out of there and quickly get some chores done. My friend Markium, we just call him Mark, was making his way to my house. There was a meteorite shower not too far from my house. We thought we could bike. It was going to be amazing. I heard Reed would be there, and boy is he cool. Mark's neighbor Elon and Ted would bike with us too.

"Ouch," I said as I burned myself on the stove. I quickly got some aloe vera to help. Soon I heard the ring of my doorbell.

"*Mark*," I thought. Sure enough, Mark was right there.

"Wasup, Joey boy," said Mark.

I responded, "Nothin much Mark."

Mark said "Should we get moving?"

"Yeah" I responded. The wind was calm for now but it was forecasted to pick up. There wasn't much time to wait and eat something – we had to be snappy and fast. Mark had a new electric bike just like mine. Now it would only take a couple of minutes to make it to the site. We pushed as fast as we could and we were zooming past a bunch of people. We eventually made it to the site where there were stands, drinks, and all kinds of stuff. There I saw Pablo, Charlotte, Ted, Susan, Elon, Jason, and Tim. I do get a little bit of anxiety when I see so many people but I thought I'd be fine. I started to talk to Elon. He was the head of the science club. I'd wanted to join for a long time but never dared to ask Elon. He was looking clad.

I quietly asked “Can I join the science club?”

At first, he was confused about who was asking, then he realized it was me. He responded by saying “Sure, why not Joe – let’s talk about it tomorrow after school.”

I was surprised but intrigued. I thought I would have been a complete embarrassment but he was nice about it. The economy had been recovering from the last war. I hoped we would never have another war.

The meteor shower was coming along. Mark yelled “Dang that’s beautiful.”

“Yea” I replied. It was the most beautiful thing we had ever seen. Then all of a sudden, I saw a meteorite coming down.

“MOVE OUT OF THE WAY” I yelled as loud as I could.

Then “Boom...” I heard a loud high pitch. Soon after I was sick. We all were....

Two Years Later

I woke up – all the kids from the same night were now experiencing powers. We all met up in the area. War had broken out; most of our families died in some attacks. It was another day in the cave where we had built our homes. Some people lived together like me, Mark, Susan, Ted, Elon, and Mary. It has been a long run. We hid our work and we practiced our powers. Mary had just finished the night watch so we knew it was time to wake up. I usually scavenged for materials to expand our small humble home. Today Mark and Elon left to scavenge. I and Mary were on kitchen duty.

“Joe,” I heard. It was Mary. She was kind of sassy if you ask me. Mark thought she was nice. but I didn’t want to make the situation awkward so I stayed out of it.

“Come on Joe we need to get moving we need to find Susan,” said Mary.

Susan yelled “I’m right here!”

Then, “BOOM!” An explosion opened the door that protected us. Then I saw the face of Craig. We had all seen him once or twice. He wanted total domination. He was a mad man.

Susan said softly “hide” we used our bunker which Elon and I built out of a couple of refrigerators and metal scraps. That bunker would get warm in the summers. so we used tin foil and that cooled it down. We all went to the bunker and got ready to use the emergency exit. Then I heard Mark and Elon start to fight against Craig and his men, so I decided to join. I teleported outside of the bunker. Then I stuck them with

lightning.

“To be honest I don’t use powers.” Soon, Craig’s army had left.

“We need to leave,” said Mark.

“Yea, I agree” Elon stated. We started to pack up. We got ready to leave. We scraped whatever we could. I used my electricity power to jump-start our make-shift elevator. We zoomed down to the elevator shaft. We came to an exit door. I and Mark opened the door.

“Finally,” Susan said. It has been forever since Susan had seen the light of day. It had been a long day. We needed a place to stay for a day to recuperate and then we would move and lay low. Elon and I pulled out the map that we had gotten. I drew all of the places we could and could not go and I had mapped out where Craig’s base was. We needed to stop Craig. We needed to raid his base when they were scouting. We could have done this now but Mark was injured and so was Susan so we decided to lay low until Mary could fully heal them. Mary was using her powers to heal them but the process would take a while. The closest place we could hide was my house. So we walked and walked. It took us about 30 minutes to walk the distance. When we reached my building, I used some old keys that I had to open the front door. As soon as we got in Susan rushed for the couch – oddly enough we still had running water and other amenities like power. I guess that was still running since my parents purchased those solar panels. We healed up and got ready to leave.

“Let’s get going,” said Mark. We walked and soon we made it to Craig’s base. It was my time to shine. I used my power to take out the electricity. Took a while but it worked. Then we attacked all the towers. We fought all the guards to take control of Craig’s room.

“Get them,” Craig screamed. He ran fast. but we shot him before he got anywhere. Soon we stopped Craig’s rain and we soon reset all of the damage he caused.

Mary slumped into Elon’s arms crying at the sight. Craig was gone. Mary and Elon were glad for that because he had been the one to kill their parents. But, what they did not know was that Craig was only the tail of the beast. I was aiming for the head.

Aarav Pidaparthi, age 13
Hillsborough Middle School
Somerset County
Grade 7

Mr. Stripes in Stripes

Somewhere in a deep-deep forest,
A forest that won't be found,
Lived a civilization of the many residents
Simply called River Town.

And in this town, you'll find a mansion,
today's residents hold with pride,
As back in the day, the very wealthy Stripe family
Were all jam-packed inside.

Now even though, in the house, there used to be two-thousand-a-one people,
some passed away which led to three, to two, and then remained just one behind.
Now that remaining one was named Tony Stripe, and he was a real young son of a gun,
and all he had in his naive mind was "Riches, Small cars" And "Fun!!!!".

And when it came to Tony's past adventures, oh boy did he have a lot to share,
whether it came to the time he stopped some ex-wife from killing the new mayor,
Or when he stopped a bombing created by the mafia "hare."
But in the present, he turned into a peasant so no one would ever have cared.

Now when mentioning his downfall, "what happened?" some might wonder,
well it all started with Tony himself as he bought a go cart made of lumber
But that is not the story the we will tell, instead well walk of another.

Now with all the things Tony stripes has kept
it is now wonder he has been in a lot of dept
and out of all of his crazy lawsuit injections
his last and final story was no exception.

It started as a whole
one day as he took a nice lovely stroll,
mostly due to what his taxpayer, Ms. Crystal, advised,
But with Tony being Tony he was none the wise.

Cause their and then, he saw a thing that made him go out of control

He ran into Mr. Voles,
Passed Mr. Rodent with his hat of holes,
& Madam G. pushed her bread rolls.

Now, why would Tony be a menace again?
breaking people's tables, legs, arms, and very expensive pens,
And probably, broken Crystal's promise, he'd said way back then.
Why would he have taken such a maniacal toll?
it is due to the fact he could only see was the bright barbershop pole.

And that pole caught his eye, like it was also stuck to his soul
but too bad for him, he got a fine from the city patrol.

But due to it not being his 1st time with fines, as shown in the past,

Ms. Ruby had enough and kicked him in the A\$\$

putting him in his room forcefully by his legs and arm
but luckily for Tony it was for good and she meant no harm
“Stop getting in trouble for big riches and small cars
Cause sooner or later, you’ll be behind bars”.

And so in her anger, she shoved him into the room, leaving him for hours—

Mr. Stripes, in his room, feeling quite gloomy
but soon he started thinking of all the things he could improve
being more thankful for Ruby due to all the charges she removed
most were activities charges from Tony, the town did not approve.

But as soon as 3 minutes he was thinking
he decided that it was an obligation to get out of the room
and left like there was no tomorrow quickly in his “groove”.

So now he walked through buildings and roads
Where all you hear are crickets and the singing of toads
but it won't stay like this,
no not at all,
cause next morning, he was arrested by officer Swiss
When destroying a wall.

But no matter how much Tony steamed and plead that he did nothing bad,
The cop found 500 barber poles in a ragged old bag.

So in the month of October, he was forcefully put in the court
with only Ruby right beside him to be his support
but even Tony knew that even Ruby wouldn’t be that much help
As the court judge started growling, screaming, and yelped.

And as it went on things got more sour
when it took days of arguments and even more hours
but no matter how much of Tony’s innocence Ruby tried to embrace,
The court pleaded Tony had guilty all over his face.

So now in a prison, behind bars, our protagonist sadly lies
with the moon being present in his window in the late-night sky
as it been November, then Christmas passed, now it is July
with it being months since he’d seen everyone outside the walls, now in chancels, he sadly cries
knowing that no matter how rich he is his old life he could never buy.

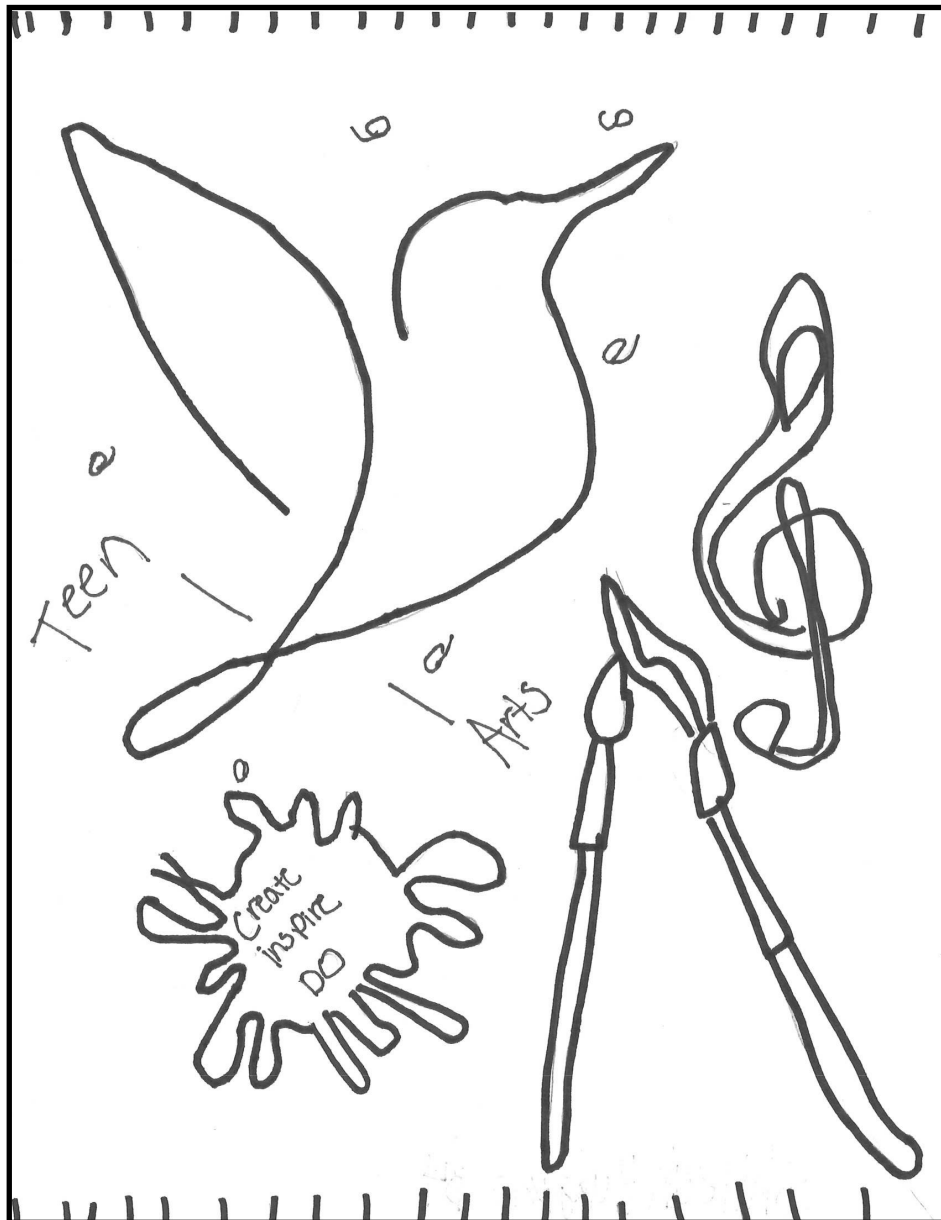
But his deep thoughts were interrupted,” midnight snack?” the officer said,
causing Tony to walk as much as he can to claim his slice of bread,
“hey, also your grandma came to visit”, but how his grandma was dead?
but soon he realized it was Ruby, to the rescue, and the joy on his face was to be read.

Now Tony and Ruby swap places, Tony was in Ruby’s disguise
but theirs was a problem, Ruby’s big clothes were too big for his little size
due to this, people he walked past always had glairing eyes
and it didn’t take long for the police to find him and those officers who didn’t were very unwise

So, Tony kept running, even when he had pain
As he was chased by the police with weapons they'd contained
But in this situation, he'd did not complain
As he ran to the station with sturdiness he'd maintain
Only to go on a railway and hijack a train

And sooner or later he goes on the rails
Within

Kevin Rivera Baltazar, age 13
Hillsborough Middle School
Somerset County
Grade 7



Artwork:

Shileah Huggins, age 16
Bound Brook High School
Grade 11

Presents Under the Tree

Red-ribboned presents,
Under the tree sparkling
Covering the floor

Snow all Over

Covering the sidewalks,
Powdering sleek snowy streets
Snowball fighting kids

Snowball

Snowball
Icy, cold
Throwing, exploding, playing
Snowballs are fun to play with!
Bola De Nieve

Santa

Santa
Nice, sneaky
Building, checking, listing
Santa checks his naughty and nice list.
Babbo Natale

Liam Rozycki, age 13
Hillsborough Middle School
Somerset County
Grade 7

The Hue of The Heart

Emotions are like colors,
Anger painted red, and pink hearts for the lovers.
Everyone has a preference,
Some are drawn to gray, some are left in awe of eminence.
A dark blue despair can wash over you in seconds,
Or a bubbly golden smile for leaving good impressions.

Blood boiling jealousy,
A harsh green melody.
Anxiety and nervousness blaring an alarming yellow,
BAM, your heart lets out a loud orange bellow.
A soft, welcoming lilac brings serenity,
While pearl white offers your mind clarity.

The idea by itself of colorful emotions is simple and underwhelming,
But the complexity is enough to leave a person melting.
Why can the same type of color bring different emotions?
Why can different emotions be connected to so many colors?
How can something sweet like lavender leave a heart wrenching impact? A
mystery that may never be unwrapped.

Aubrey Sifers, age 13
Hillsborough Middle School
Somerset County
Grade 8

The Time I Saved the World

It was a hot summer day. My sister, my cousins, and I were outside playing. My little cousin was pretending to shoot things at me out of his hand. All of a sudden, when I turn around I see a fireball coming at me. Luckily, I dodged it in time.

“What just happened?” I said.

“That was cool!” my cousin said. I ran to my sister. When I saw her she was levitating things. Then I looked at my other cousin, he was shooting lasers out of his eyes.

“What is going on!” I yelled.

My sister said, “I don’t know but look at this!” My jaw dropped, she was levitating me. I told her to put me down. When I tried to run I ran fast, there was lightning everywhere I ran. I walked back to them so I would not run fast.

“Did you see that!” I yelled “I have super speed!”

“We have to go home to figure this out,” my sister said. We all went inside. When we were in the house we turned on the TV. We saw that there was a giant spaceship coming to Earth. The people on TV said it is going to land on earth in 1 day.

“What are we going to do,” I asked

“I don’t know,” my sister said. All of a sudden, we hear a knock on the door. “Who is it?” said my sister.

“It is the FBI,” said in a deep voice. She opened the door. “Hi, I have a question for you. Have you been experiencing any weird things lately?” the man asked.

“Yeah,” we all said.

“Come with me,” he said. After a couple of hours, we got to their headquarters. They sent us to a testing lab. They ran a lot of tests. We were all getting tired of the test but we didn’t say anything. When we were done they took us to a training room. We all got excited. The guy told us to tell him our powers. After we told him, we could start training.

Before we started my cousin asked, “What about the big spaceship?”

“That is why we need to start training!” he said. After he said that a guy came into the room.

“Are you guys ready to train!” he said.

“Who are you?” we all asked.

“I am your teacher, and I have powers like you.” Then he showed us his powers. He had mind control. He started to control my sister. I told him to make her say I am the best.

“Cyaire is the best,” my sister said. We all started laughing. When he stopped, she was confused. He told us to tell him our powers. Then he told my sister to levitate something. He told my cousin to make a fireball but to keep it in his hand. He told my other cousin to make his lasers bigger. Then he told me that I got the hardest one. He told me to throw lightning.

“How am I going to do that?” I asked. He just told me. All he told me is to think about it.

“You will know how to do it when you need to do it,” he said. We all tried to do what he said. Everybody did what he said except me. I was so sad that I couldn’t do it. But he told me that it was alright and that I will get it next time. Suddenly we hear an alarm go off.

“Oh no,” he said.

“What’s wrong,” we all said.

“It is here, the spaceship that you were talking about!” he said. He told us to come with him to be safe. Then we heard a loudspeaker. They were talking about how they will take over the Earth. We were all scared but the guy that was training us said that we had to go fight. We were all saying that we weren’t ready. But he said that he knows that we are ready because we try hard. After that, we all agreed to help fight. When we got to the top of the headquarters we saw people running. Then we saw aliens going after them. When we saw that my sister and my cousin started fighting with them. My sister told us to go while they hold them off. We started running to the ship, we had to take care of some guys on our way in. For us to make sure there was nobody at the corner, I used my super-speed and peaked. I was so fast that they couldn’t see me if I did that. We saw the front of the ship where the controls were. But when we got close, we saw a swarm of aliens come at us. But they stopped, we were confused, but then we saw a tall alien.

“Get off my ship you puny humans,” the alien said.

“No, not until you leave Earth!” I said

“Well that isn’t going to happen so I have no choice but to capture you,” he said. Then we see all of the aliens run to us. I have super speed so I dodged them. But they got out the trainer and my cousin.

“What are you going to do now little boy,” he said. I got mad at him but I remembered what my trainer said to me. I knew what he meant now. I focused hard, then I felt the energy going through me. Then I let it out, all I saw was lightning going in all directions.

“Yes, I did it,” I said as I ran to my cousin and my trainer.

“How did you do that? It was so cool!” my cousin said.

“I told you will know how to do it when you need to,” my trainer said.

“How did you do that? I heard that the people on this planet don’t have powers,” the alien said.

“Don’t underestimate the people on Earth” I said. He told us that he would call his men and tell them to stop if we let them go. I said ok but I told him never to come back to Earth. Without a second thought, he said ok. When we got off his ship we saw all his aliens coming back. Not a second later his ship was gone.

“What did you guys do?” my cousin and my sister said.

“No, it isn't what we did -- it is what he did,” my cousin said.

“It is a long story, I will tell you when we get back to headquarters,” I said. When I told them, they didn’t believe that I took down their leader. But our trainer and my cousin told them I did it. When we got to the headquarters all the people started clapping. The captain of the FBI gave us metals. But they gave me a really big one because I was the one who defeated the alien.

Cyair Sharpe, age 13
Hillsborough Middle School
Somerset County
Grade 7

The Big Challenge

It was a rainy, cold, and gloomy New Year's Day. "Let's watch a movie!" yelled Maddy. Maddy, Amelia, Elijah, and Isaiah all gathered up on the couch. They were best friends and there was no school. They turned the TV on and went to Netflix to search for a movie. They found a movie called *Sidekick Life*. It was about a group of people who were sidekicks and had to complete twelve missions without getting caught.

They turned the movie on and about 5 minutes into the movie, the screen became covered with lines. Suddenly it went black...They all felt dizzy and passed out. When they woke up, they were in a completely white room. A deep, raspy voice started talking, "You have made it to Kickside land and you will now have to complete twelve missions in a manner of one year. Meaning you will have ONE month to complete each mission. You will have as many attempts at each mission as you need, except for the LAST mission – you will have one and only one attempt at that mission. If you fail the last mission, you are required to stay another year and complete harder missions."

The voice stopped talking, a door then beeped and opened. "I'm scared," said Amelia. We all walked through the door and it led to what looked like a bedroom that had a bed for each of us.

"Look at what I found," said Elijah. We walked over to Elijah and saw him holding what was a notebook. We opened the notebook and, on the inside, it explained each mission. We also realized that the missions always started at 11:00 P.M. We closed the notebook and set it to the side. Later that night at 10pm we were told through the loudspeaker to get into the uniforms that were provided for each of us. Once we were ready we were given directions on how to leave the building. We walked by many other dorms and we saw many labs around.

"Wow," said Isaiah. We kept on walking until we got to what looked like a garage door. The door opened and we saw four motorcycles with our names projecting above them.

We got on our motorcycles and there was a screen with many buttons attached to the motorcycles. We headed out following the directions that were on the GPS screen. The same voice as earlier started talking through our helmets explaining what our mission was about. To be able to complete the mission we had to get information about a robbery that was going to happen at the jewelers and report it to the headquarter-

ters. We arrived at our destination and we saw a bunch of men with wires attached to them. We hid near them and we were taking notes and recording their conversation. They were done talking and the four of us quickly ran and got on our motorcycles. It was 11:48 and we headed to the headquarters. Once we arrived we told the guards where we needed to be and the guard pointed where we needed to go.

“This is not so bad,” I said. “Maddy watch out!”

I quickly turned around and saw a group of guards running towards us. We all ran inside a room and locked the door. Once we turned around there was a blue light shining on the ceiling and there was a chair facing backward... The chair slowly turned and a woman dressed in all black said, “Level 1 Completed...”

Ashley Valverde, age 13
Hillsborough Middle School
Somerset County
Grade 7



Gemstones

Different shapes and different colors
Oh, how many things these stones can do!
Wealth and power lie down to these jewels
It can also be as simple as a symbol of love

Shimmering with light
Glistening with chromatic tones
Illuminating under the moon
Its gleaming glow seems unending

Confined and Buried
Labor and sorrow just for the little shiny stone
Cut and Polished
Packaged then shipped
There it lies under the glass panel waiting to be picked, by one of us

Samuel Zhang, age 13
Hillsborough Middle School
Somerset County
Grade 8

Manville High School

My Butterfly

She's the girl who's always quiet
The one you never know much about
You don't see her putting up a riot
She tends to not chase clout
And she always feels left out

Defeated when their painful words pierce through
She's the girl hidden in a cocoon
But she wants to be a butterfly soon
She doesn't know how to restart
Be more outgoing, but have the same heart

Keeps getting told life is hard
Uses her shyness as a guard
She doesn't let anyone in
It's been a while since she let out a grin

Doesn't have wings to learn how to fly
She doesn't know how to restart
Be more outgoing, but have the same heart

Cause if she was she would fly so high
But like Cinderella she let out a cry
Overthinking, undersaying
She would find her wings, that was her undertaking
Butterfly, butterfly, butterfly

Fly so high
Through the blue sky
Now she's breaking free
She loved herself and that was key
Butterfly, butterfly, butterfly

She spread her wings like a butterfly
Her smile was as big as a butterfly's wings
And she forgot of all bad things
Her happiness was a butterfly
The one she watched go by

Going through the sky in July
Her growth was a butterfly
She was put through the worst
Then she put herself first
Butterfly, butterfly, learned to how to fly

Alanis Alfaro, age 15
Manville High School
Somerset County
Grade 10

We've Become Strangers

oh my dear love how you do not know who i am anymore
how nostalgic it feels to see it happen from my end
to be the one to turn into someone *you* do not know anymore
how could the person i loved so dearly take a knife to my heart and twist it a little deeper as the
dismissive comments slipped the lips i once believed i'd kiss forever
unknown number popped up last night; ur response to an unfinished conversation w me
the me who wanted 2 give u one more night 2 remind u of the fire that ignites every time our bodies n
souls become one
i told myself it was 4 the fun of it
but my heart was knowledgeable to the hope that lingered around whispering "he'll miss me this way" in
my ear softly
u left me on read
i didn't know you anymore then
you denied me and saw me as nothing more than the mouth of a woman
last night you finally decided you were ready
your mind played those memories between us as if they were a continuous tape only replaying never
stopping
unknown number popped up
but only this time i didn't run to respond
you see, i believe you think i would still settle for the crumbs of what is left of anything between you and
i
you don't know me
but I deserve more, oh how happy I am you do not know me anymore

~thestoryofloversturningin2strangers

Melissa Chiribao, age 17

Manville High School

Somerset County

Grade 12

Behind the Curtains

Erin walked down the hallway, narrowly avoiding the sunlight seeping through the windows around him. Erin never liked the sunlight very much; something about being in the sunlight honestly bothered him, and he couldn't quite place a finger on why. In fact, he much preferred the darkness of night.

Erin eventually arrived at the end of the hallway to find a pair of deep violet curtains covering the wall. Ever since moving into this house, Erin's parents always warned him to stay away from the curtains. But Erin was dying to know just what they could possibly be hiding.

So fearfully, Erin shakily placed a hand on the curtains, feeling the velvety texture of the fabric. He was a little hesitant for a moment, unsure of what secrets these curtains could possibly be hiding. But then his curiosity overwhelmed him, and he knew that he just had to take a peek behind the curtains.

"Here we go..." Erin whispered softly to himself, hesitating for a moment before he drew the curtains open as swiftly and silently as possible to reveal whatever awaited him on the other side.

Much to his surprise, however, he found himself facing an old floor length mirror. The edges were carved out of dark wood, with some crystals etched into it. The mirror was honestly stunning to look at.

Erin then glanced over at his reflection, expecting to see the face he knew all too well: a pale, thin face with dark brown eyes and long black hair.

But just then, Erin froze in place out of horror; something was wrong.

What the...? Erin thought to himself as he stepped backwards out of shock, barely even able to believe his own two eyes. He could feel pounding in his head as he tried to grasp onto some sort of explanation for this. *Why is there no reflection...?*

For a moment, Erin just stood there, terrified. He should be seeing his own reflection, right? This was a mirror, correct? Then why wasn't it there...?

But before Erin managed to come to any sort of rational conclusion, he heard a pair of footsteps coming down the hall; it was his parents.

Immediately, Erin sprung into action; he closed the curtains and ducked for cover in a nearby closet

before his parents noticed him.

Erin left the door open by a tiny crack, through which he could see his parents walking towards the mirror with troubled looks on their faces. His mother especially.

Erin's mother let out a sigh as she gazed up at the curtains before her. "Should we tell him...?" her voice trembled a little as she spoke. Immediately Erin knew she was referring to him.

"Well, I think he deserves to know eventually," Erin's father replied calmly but firmly, "We can't hide it from him forever."

Know what...? Erin wondered anxiously as he peered through the crack.

"I know, I know," Erin's mother said, nervously twirling a lock of dark hair around her finger, "But when should we tell him?"

"Soon, I'd say," Erin's father replied, "He is sixteen, after all. I'm sure he's old enough to know."

Erin watched as his mother opened the curtains, revealing the mirror once more. And, much to his surprise, she had no reflection either.

"I suppose we should tell him soon," Erin's mother said finally before closing the curtains. And then the two began walking back down the hall.

Erin waited for a few minutes for his parents to leave. Once the coast was clear, Erin darted out of his hiding spot and flung the curtains back open, revealing the mirror once more.

For a while, Erin just stood there, staring into the mirror as his head began to ache. Surely this had to be some sort of prank?

But then, slowly, Erin's gaze fell down to his hand, which was white as snow. Then it drifted over to the sunlight beaming down from a nearby window, which he honestly somewhat dreaded going anywhere near.

Could it be...? Erin began to wonder.

But then, quickly, he shook his head. It wasn't possible; not anywhere near possible. Surely there had to be a reasonable explanation to this. After all, he'd seen his own reflection in every other mirror in his house.

But then why was this one different...?

Erin didn't know, and he didn't want to know; not when thinking about any of this nearly gave him a

migraine. But even still, his brain kept trying to sort this all out.

Perhaps this mirror was made of something other than glass? He knew that old mirrors were made out of silver. Was this one also made out of silver?

Cautiously, Erin placed a hand on the surface of the mirror. At first, it felt smooth and cool. But quickly, a burning sensation filled his hand, making him recoil.

It had to be... it simply had to be.

Erin wished it wasn't true, but what else could the answer possibly be? This was the only explanation which made sense.

He had to face it: he was a vampire.

Gianna Esposito, age 15
Manville High School
Somerset County
Grade 10

One Day

I hope one day to be swept off my feet
to be adored by someone who is nothing but sweet
who will always be around to make sure I eat
to be loved like that would be a real treat

I hope one day for a love unlike any
to wake up beside my own tiny baby
even on days where it's gloomy and rainy
I'll still be bathing in so much glory

I hope one day to see my baby become a man
to be able to say I have been there since it all began
and I really hope I never have to see him use a bedpan
instead, I want to see him become superman

I hope one day to believe I have felt everything
from the time I fell in love that one spring
to holding a little life in my sling
and eventually to the day I grew wings

Veronica Fisher, age 17
Manville High School
Somerset County
Grade 11

The Unexpected

Ever since I was little I knew my family was different. Every show, every movie I've watched, I saw what my parents lacked. "I'm off to work honey" the scene ends with a hug or kiss at least. I haven't seen it once, my parents were not affectionate at all to each other. They weren't even married, they weren't even official. I was 5.

Years passed by and it just felt normal to me, as long as they were still together right? I was 12 when my sister told me the news. "I found these on his Facebook messages," my sister Jessica said. As I read the messages I didn't know what to say my hands were shaking as I was holding her phone.

"How did you even have access to his account?"

"His password is so easy plus he had me pick out his password".

"Should we tell her?" I said.

"Not like she'll believe us", my sister said as she took the phone to show more messages. I couldn't even think straight, the only thing that felt normal to me was taken away from me from a text.

I thought it would be over, but it was just the beginning, I just turned 14. Almost 2 years have passed and still the same. My sister came into my room to tell me the same news, she handed me the phone and more text messages.

"Again?"

The timing was so unexpected, I didn't know who this man was. I could have not noticed the signs. This time was different, my mom had to know.

My dad came home and somehow an argument broke out. He didn't want to sleep next to my mom. He attempted to move the bunk bed my brother and I shared and move it to my mom's room. I tried my hardest to cancel out their argument, but it wouldn't stop. He got angrier by the second, I stood there, my face was blank but i had so many emotions inside. I hesitated and ran to my sister's room.

I was so confused but i wasn't surprised, we waited an hour for him to leave the house. He never left for good, always temporary. As we gathered in the kitchen my sister told me my mom had talked to my sister during the time my dad was still in the house.

"She wants to get a new house and leave him," my sister said.

I imagined how free my family would be now, this seemed too good to be true but I was happy that this nightmare might be over. It didn't, it never did.

She scrapped the moving out and stayed with him, she forgave him every single time and expected him to learn his lesson. Then it happened again, more messages my sister showed me. Why was he doing this, were we not enough? Was my mother doing something wrong?

"I mean I'm not surprised" I told my sister as I handed her phone back. "She's definitely still staying with him no matter what.

"I kinda want to make a fake account for more proof," my sister said.

At this point I didn't care, it wasn't like she would believe us, it wasn't like she would leave him. "I'll help you make the account" I said.

We found pictures of a woman that my dad was messaging and found out their account was fake too. We reverse searched the pictures and got more. My sister made a new account with the woman's name and messaged him saying "Hey it's me, this is my other account" Stupidly my dad fell for it. He even exchanged numbers so my sister made a fake number and they messaged there. We had all the proof we wanted. We continued to get more proof and one day an argument broke out.

My father had an argument with my sister and she couldn't take it anymore. "And you're cheating on mom on Facebook!" I can't even describe my fathers face, I couldn't even process what she said at all. The Truth was out and nothing could be reversed, all I knew was that he was about to lie his way out.

"You're lying!" He looked at my mother. "She's lying!"

"Sure about that?" My sister took out her phone and showed my mom the screenshots and voice messages. My mom was furious and started yelling at my dad, he couldn't escape the fact that he was in the wrong. He stormed off and left the house for the night.

When the front door closed, mom's attitude changed, she seemed to be angry with us.

"This is between him and I, you shouldn't have got yourself involved, You only have one dad, you have to respect him no matter what." I couldn't believe what she was saying, It's like she was brainwashed with his lies and promises. This relationship isn't good for her.

That night I didn't sleep at all, what she said really got to me. Her words kept repeating in my head,

how could she tell me to respect someone who doesn't even care about his children? How could I sleep when I know that my mom will be on good terms with my dad again. I could never forgive him for what he did. I used to always brush off their arguments and tell myself "I'll give them 2 days". It was less than 2 days, they acted like nothing happened, that they didn't say the things that they said to each other. It was like I dreamed it all, like I was going crazy.

Was I going crazy? Am I the real problem? My father would blame my siblings and I for the reason he's cheating, for the reason he's never home. How could someone have such hatred for someone who you didn't even get to know. I looked at my ceiling for hours, trying to think of a reason for all of this.

I realized that after many years of hurtful words, things are still the same, It'll always be the same. No matter what proof I show my mom, I can't stop what I did not start. My parents always told me that it was none of my business but why did it seem like it was? Why do I keep getting pushed back in the cycle, did I really deserve this? You're waiting for the end, but some stories don't have an end to it. You just have to assume that all is well. There might be an end to the story but not right now. Therefore, to be continued...

Kimberly Garcia, age 15
Manville High School
Somerset County
Grade 10

My Rosa

A Land that lives in the mountain ranges,
Pure rivers and creeks flow with sun,
While the hills make way for the shine to come through.

Your house was made of rocks and mud,
Straw on top to keep you safe,
And you noble heart kept it warm.

Chickens running around the yard,
Alpacas walking on the fields,
The dog and cat waiting for leftovers.

Music comes from a saint's parade,
Playing huaynos huaracinos,
Your small feet follow the rhythm.

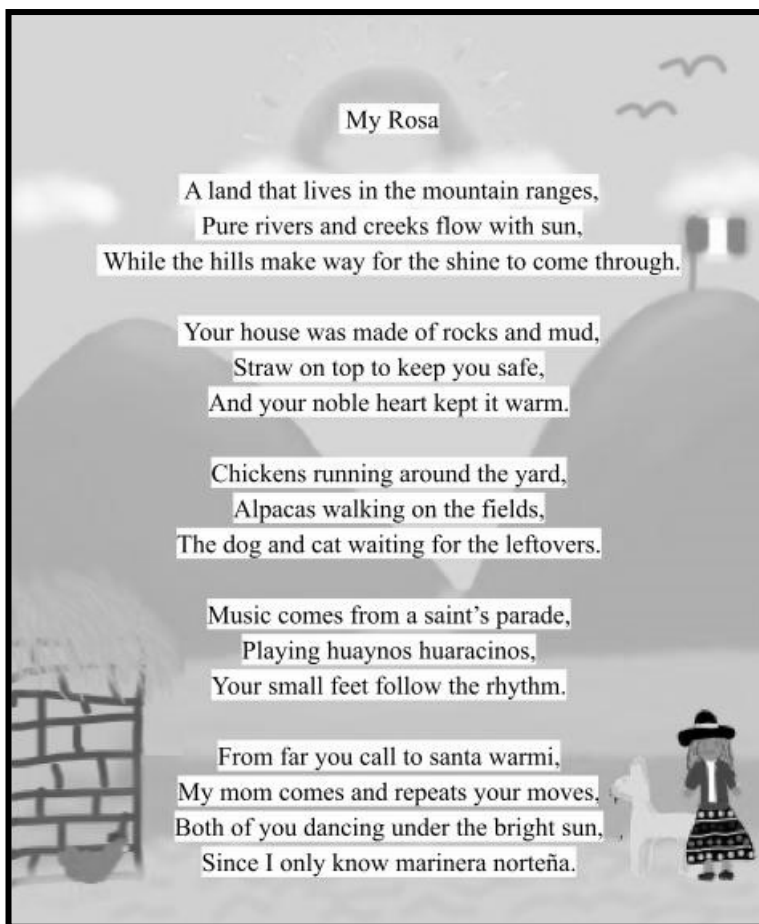
From far you call to santa warmi,
My mom comes and repeats your moves,
Both of you dancing under the bright sun,
Since I only know marinera norteña

Edward Zuniga, age 15

Manville High School

Somerset County

Grade 9



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This program is made possible in part by funds from the
New Jersey State Council on the Arts.

