

Somerset County 2023



Creative Writing Anthology

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

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

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

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

All students, artists, and school liaisons have our heartfelt thanks for their work in helping us produce our 2023 Teen Arts Festival!

Cover Artwork:

Sylvia Wiggins, age 17

Bound Brook High School

Grade 12

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ALEXANDER BATCHO INTERMEDIATE SCHOOL

Love at first sight
Just a saying
Right?
Not until I met the right one
Right as in The One
My sight was at love
Love saw me
and now, I'm free

Cherish Hunter, age 14
Alexander Batcho Intermediate School
Somerset County
Grade 8

The mind is tired, drained, and ready to quit
but she has promises to keep,
until then, she shall not sleep.
She lies in bed with thoughts that weep.

Kasey Lella, age 14
Alexander Batcho Intermediate School
Somerset County
Grade 8

I remember the warmth on my back from the summer sun
I remember swimming in the creek with water so cold my heart leapt from my chest
I remember fishing and the excitement when my bobber sunk
And how good it felt to let the fish swim to freedom
I remember playing with family on days that had no end
I remember night games with the entire neighborhood
I remember no locked doors on friends' houses as "my house is your house"
Even though I am older now and the days are shorter
I remember the laughter and joy of carefree days.
But my favorite memories are yet to come

Elexis Ramirez, age 13
Alexander Batcho Intermediate School
Somerset County
Grade 8

I've been lonely for a lot of my life
I try and try again to make relationships work
but I'm always lonely by the end
I tried being happy with myself
but the voices inside my head are screaming every night
They scream for attention
for my person to love me
Be happy with yourself
is what I tell them
but my mind won't believe it
So in the end
I sit with myself
always knowing the *but*
Yet my soul still calls him to notice me

Serenity Thomas, age 14
Alexander Batcho Intermediate School
Somerset County
Grade 8

Bound Brook High School

Shower Thoughts

All my thoughts are fleeting,
My scalp is slowly bleeding.
The water is so hot it will burn.
I sit and hope there's
something I'll learn.
I think I like the pain,
It all goes down the shower drain
along with my hair
all the responsibilities I bear.
Sometimes I stare into the distance,
My mind slowly fades and so does my existence.
I ponder if all I've ever been is a burden and a task.
I wonder maybe they'd love me ,
maybe help if I dared to ask.
I creep up to my room
careful not to make a sound
Careful not to awake those around.
I walk silently on eggshells,
I'm very careful to avoid their screams and yells.

Sophia Greene, age 17
Bound Brook High School
Somerset County
Grade 12

Ghost of You

Why do you choose to walk this path
The choices you make invoke god's wrath
Rage and sorrow fill my heart
I cannot stand to watch you rip yourself apart
You take the pills and you snort your coke
I try to scream and stop you but on my words i choke
You use and use until your stash is depleted
Then you scream how you need it
You put on your jacket and go to leave
I lay in bed and my soul will start to grieve
The ghost of you it haunts my dream
Late at night I think I hear you scream
You're alive, yet your mind is dead.
All of your thoughts fled from your head.
You died on my bathroom floor
You're not the woman who comes through the door
You're a zombie, a ghoul
You lack feelings, you're cruel.
The woman who use to softly brush my hair
The mom who took me to the fair
The lady who use to sing me to sleep
Though now all you do is make me weep.
Mother, please won't you return
Mother, please I'm full of concern
Come back to your body, back to life
Please don't go the reaper and his scythe
Won't you get clean?
Won't you see me through the cloudy screen
I know it may blind you
But I'm your daughter; it's sad I had to remind you.
You look like a stranger, a completely different person

Sophia Greene, age 17
Bound Brook High School
Somerset County
Grade 12

Honey

Your words are sweet like honey but soon they'll rot my teeth
I'd like to believe your words but I know what lies underneath
Under all those pretty lies lays a ruthless truth
One I've already learned in my youth
So if you would, if you could
Please keep those words under your hood
Store them away and save them for someone who cares
Not saying I don't its just too much to bare
I've fallen for words before
They just end up making me sore
So now i carefully walk on pins and needles
Because I have seen one too many evils
Sweet like honey but rotten like mold
Your words may be bold
Though they lack meaning and action
They're just a flashy attraction
I've fallen for words before and I won't again
Falling for lies, it has to end.
These words may taste sweet on my tongue
But I have to learn to resist while I'm young

Sophia Greene, age 17
Bound Brook High School
Somerset County
Grade 12

Get You

“every time i look into your eyes”
a tidal wave of adoration erupts,
sunburned by your gaze as if I’m flushed,
you herald the features of a drawing,
those faint remnants of a palette and paintbrush,
as if you're surfaced in golden dust,
a soul doubling as the holy grail,
you are the beautiful stranger,
in the form of a living, breathing fairytale.

Naxhiely Poot-Guerrero, age 18

Bound Brook High School

Somerset County

Grade 12



Artwork:

Sanara Hormaza, age 14

Manville High School

Grade 9

Why I Can't Speak

My vision is a tunnel that eats the eyes of those
That surrender to watch me.
They are my language,
Well, all the things I have to say don't come out of my mouth.
I don't expel the words,
Because maybe
No inhabitant will want to listen to them
And that's why I lock myself in my own body,
Like something ensnared.
I am prey to my own language,
Because the most important things
Are what I silence.
Deity or error? I don't know.
My voice is hollow, it always fails and it is very slow.
I have silenced so much the things that matter to me,
Because I can't find any other way out than silence.
Sometimes I think,
That the voice is not given to me
And that cowardice enters my body every time I see you pass by
And I feel tiny to tell
Everything I feel
Out of fear.
Fear that what I manifest will not be taken.
Fear that my words are not wine for your palate.
Fear of being sour, too acidic or too sweet.
My conviction is this.
As much as I want, I can't.
As much as my body tries, it won't let me.
Something so close, but also so far away from me,
I couldn't reach it due to my fear that it would stop.
The voice - I would say,
She's my worst enemy.

Naxhiely Poot-Guerrero, age 18
Bound Brook High School
Somerset County
Grade 12

Home

No matter where you are,
you're always with me.
I won't let you forget us,
Though the times are few and far between.
You always wait for me to open the door,
but what matters is if you let it be.
I wouldn't call it wasting time,
if I was wasting it on you.
Even though this hurts right now,
you always told me, "this will pass too".
You showed me the silver linings,
because you were golden.
So I had to pour my heart into these words,
because it was too much to hold in.
What do I say to the person
Who taught me everything?
No matter where I live,
where you are is my home.
I have to make sure I see you again,
I cant talk over the phone
I need the body language, the eye contact,
and the subtle touches.
You brought color into my world
without paint or brushes.
I'll take my time with you
no matter what the rush is.
So this is "talk to you later"
I will never say goodbye.
And every night it brings me peace
that we look at the same sky.

Jordan Stockwell, age 18
Bound Brook High School
Somerset County
Grade 12

Ten

- 1, I'm trying to convince my shadow I'm someone worth following
- 2, its like every time I get into a relationship, they don't know they're about to have a threesome
- 3, of us, me, you, and her, my anxiety, me and her have conversations like, "I think I'm gonna go talk to that person" so she laughs and says "mmmmm, no"
- 4, she helps me overthink too "do I need this, but I want it, are they bothered by me, do I look nice, walk away, go back, walk away go back, walk away!"

Breathe

- 5, I miss your 5 fingers traveling my Earth
- 6, times she forgave me for everything and told me its a forever thing
- 7, minutes isn't enough time with you
- 8, the three of you ate and drank every ounce of care in the world from me

To the stranger now holding my girl's hand, oh,

- 9, if I see you I might punch you in your throat
- 10, sometimes when I'm emotional I forget how to count
- 10,
- 10,
- 10,
- 10, people told me turn around, you'll never love me
- 10,
- 10, reasons I don't know what I'm doing
- 10,
- 10,
- 10, times I told you id never forget your love

And I just counted 10, 10 times.

Jordan Stockwell, age 18
Bound Brook High School
Somerset County
Grade 12

PARA LLEVAR(porfa)

“Conclusion I’ve been dry
I recognize it, But
I cannot force me out
To give you love enough
To keep you calm
I’m sorry is on
My top one text I send
When I mess up your days”

Already

“Can’t stop losing my bedtime
Still have this tear in my eye
And I wonder why
If I left this done
All my feelings gone
Bro, I just move on
And this anxious run
Through my head and bonds
Insecurities”

Quen Brian Marcillo Villagomez, age 17
Bound Brook High School
Somerset County
Grade 11

Confusing Intro

“Sometimes I think
That I shouldn’t write for people
Every time those songs
Get in the middle of the space
Nobody can hear, nobody can feel
What I used to feel, what I used to
That’s the point”

Basic Song

“Shhh... I
Didn’t even want to lose
You but
Couldn’t wait become
The loop
On your mind
Saying that I was yours”

Quen Brian Marcillo Villagomez, age 17
Bound Brook High School
Somerset County
Grade 11

Branchburg Central Middle School

Death Wish

It's my sister's birthday. Hooray! Or not. Birthdays aren't my forte. I hate celebrating other people. Why do they deserve it? Even with Santa, why bring anything at all to bad kids?! Everyone, everything is irrational! Kids should get what they deserve.

I certainly did get my wish.

"Emile! Can you help hang up the banner?" I heard my mom cry.

"Yes, mom." I grudgingly answered back, pausing my game of Street Brawls.

I could hear my now 7-year-old sister, Ella, running around the living room like she was 3 years old. Sometimes I wish she would just disappear. I looked away and pretended I didn't know her, proceeding to the backyard where the banner was. The banner in question is an old painter's tarp that my dad used to use with the words 'HAPPY BIRTHDAY ELLA!' written in cursive. I climbed up a ladder and continued to nail the banner to two flimsy poles framing the door to and from the backyard. As I banged on the nails with a hammer, I let my grip slip and the hammer hit my foot. I yelped back in pain.

"AGH! Gosh dangit!" I screamed.

"Emile!" yelled my mother, who had heard my screams from the kitchen," The other children just got here, watch your language!"

"Why should I?! I don't even want these stupid kids here!" I yelled back.

"Young man, you go to your room right now!" My mother, who had, by then, came out to yell at me, whispered angrily.

"But--"

"NOW!!" Screeched my mother.

I ran past her, into the house, possibly knocking down a kid or two, up the stairs, and slammed the door as I stomped into my room.

Ugh! Stupid family and stupid kids. Why do they always have to ruin my day?

"Why is the world so unfair to the people who deserve to live great lives?!" I say to myself, holding up a photo of my dad, "Why'd you have to leave?"

As I started to hold the photo tighter and tighter, the glass broke and the picture fell out, revealing a dark red, velvety bag. I picked it up and felt it. The contents felt like sand. Attached to the bag was a label reading ‘Dear son, I knew that you’d find this someday, do what you wish with it, but no matter what, always, ALWAYS follow the instructions.’ I couldn’t believe it, was this from dad? The label seemed like it was hundreds, no, thousands of years old. The paper was crinkled and yellow. Parts of it were burned. I decided to open up the bag, revealing fine grains of sand-like dust as well as another piece of paper, this one seemed fairly new. It read, ‘THE INSTRUCTIONS’ along with a few pictures of what to do and how to set the dust. At the end of the small paper, it read ‘Be cautious, with this dust, you may just get your wish...’

By now I had finished setting up all that I needed to do, using a marker to draw what the paper had called, the circle of hope. I had burned 4 pieces of wrinkled paper halfway and ripped up the other half, just as the instructions told me to do. Then I wrote my wish on all of those pieces I ripped. After that, I sprinkled the “wish dust” onto each paper. I set each of the papers on the ground and waited.

“Oh come on! After all of that work?!” I yelled all of a sudden, I heard the crashing of glass and the room turned dark. A music box started to play. Starting off slowly, each time I tried to find the source of the music I heard a scream. Each time I heard a scream, the music intensified, only making me more curious. I kept on running toward where the sound was coming from, and I smelled ashes from a fire mixed with blood. I couldn’t stop, it was like my feet were moving by themselves. All of a sudden I tripped on something. I looked down, slowly recovering from my trance.

The music played faster now and so did my heart, it felt like a racecar. All of a sudden, it became brighter in the spot I was in. I recognized the body.

“Mom?”

I looked around; spotlights started to come around me, revealing a new body. My sister and other kids. It was like I could see everybody who was dead all at once. The music played quicker now. Suddenly I saw one thing that I couldn’t understand.

A man with red hair, just like me. Freckles, just like me. Everything else, from head to toe, was just like mom had described him, except for his eyes. Both of them were empty sockets. I was crying like crazy by now, not sure whether this was a dream or not.

“Dad? Is that you?”

I checked for a heartbeat. Of course, there wasn’t. I wondered why he was here, among others. All of them were dead, I knew that. But why? The music stopped.

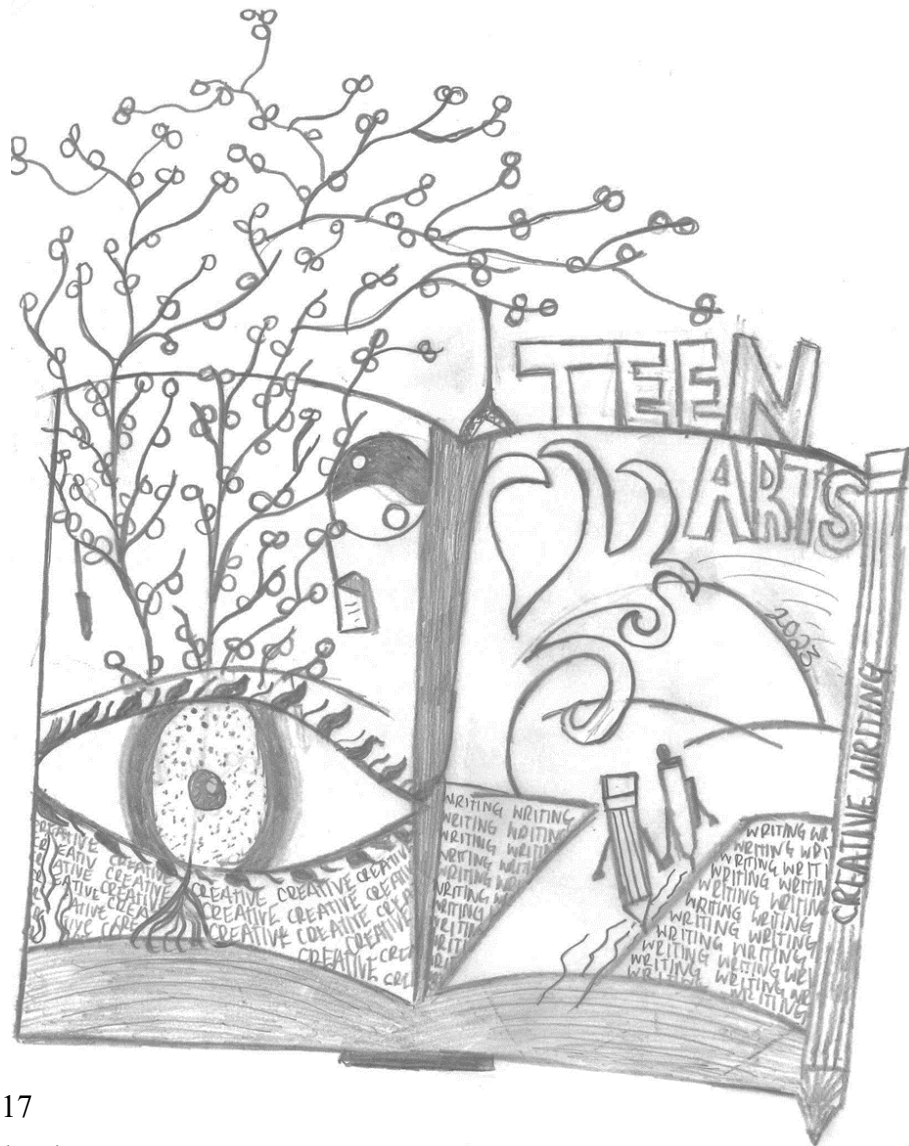
“What did I do to deserve this?” I whispered silently to myself.

I could hear it again. The music box, I mean. I could see it now too. There was a ballerina. It was old and tarnished. Trapped forever in its endless dance. I continued to cry.

“Don’t worry.” Whispered a small voice. The ballerina had left its place in the box. ”You’ll see them again soon.”

The world went dark. Like I fell asleep. The only thing that was different was that I didn’t wake up.

MJ Ahn, age 12
Branchburg Central Middle School
Somerset County
Grade 6



Artwork:

Gabrielle Rivero, age 17
Bound Brook High School
Grade 11

The Price We Pay

The wind whipped past my face, alive yet harmless. A voice shook me from my thoughts.

“The last of the three battalions arrived.” I could make out his figure in my peripheral vision. Atticus Witlock’s gaze was on the field. A shock of blonde hair framed his blue eyes.

“Good.” My voice sounded rougher than usual, due to the lack of water. I was comforted by his presence. It had been the one thing that had remained consistent throughout my life.

He cleared his throat, visibly uncomfortable, “We could always step down-”

“No.” My response was sharp enough to quiet him, despite him being older. Whitlock had brought this topic up quite a few times already. It was wearing down on me. I had made my decision already—this is what I wanted to do. I was young and ambitious, but not stupid. We have won four battles so far. Anyone who dared suggest my country was weak was a fool.

“I once again ask you to contemplate your decision. Your army is battered and hungry. We will not win this fight,” he said, his voice formal with forced politeness.

“We have all we need. Loss is unlikely, General Whitlock,” I replied curtly.

My father had never believed in me. He never saw me in the same way after my mother had tried to poison him, in a feeble attempt at taking his crown. Despite it being years ago, he had decided that I was not worthy of the throne, giving it to my younger brother instead when he died. My younger brother was an impudent child, drunk with the idea of being called king.

Whitlock stared at me, his expression pained, “Xena, do not do this to your men--”

“Our battles have barely damaged us,” I replied dismissively. “This is for the blooming prosperity of the country-”

“The country is in *shambles*,” he snapped, “you can barely control the rebellion that is forming in the *capital* itself. Do not bite off more than you can chew-”

“Do *not* talk to me like that,” I said. My voice was quiet, but the sharp tone made him avert his gaze. I didn’t like ordering him around. He was the only person that I could actually talk to, and having understood my struggles, I trusted him more than anyone else.

Witlock’s voice was low, almost soft when he spoke again, “Please reconsider. I have known your men for years. They are good people. I do not want more bloodshed.” His blue eyes were trained on me. “I know

this isn't you. Please don't let greed get in the way of your sight."

He was doubting me. He had seen me injured, beaten, even *weak*, but he had never doubted me. He knew better than to do that like my family had, especially my brother. How else would they all be dead now?

"No," I repeated. "This is final."

His face fell, his expression darkening. It took a moment before he straightened up. He offered me a weak smile. "I understand, Xena. The journey was long. May I offer you a drink?"

"Of course," I said, giving him a nod. No matter how much we argued, I still cared.

He'll see, He'll see that I was right. I was confident in this. I straightened my back as he led me toward his tent, which was close to the rest of the soldiers. When he pushed the flaps aside, I could make out a lousy sleeping bag along with a makeshift table made from a crate. A teapot was already set up there. Two cups were already set up. I guess he had been expecting company. It reminded me of the mornings we shared years ago and how we used to talk.

"I made it this morning," he explained, "Too many nerves. I wanted to do something with my hands." The sweet scent of citrus, honey, and an extremely strong cinnamon flavor filled the air. He poured me a cup, pushing it over. "If this is our last time together, let us be at ease."

I took a sip, watching him. The cinnamon was a bit too overpowering, washing out all the other flavors. He gave me a tight smile. His voice was strained, "You've changed so much."

"I prefer to say that I was forced to adapt to what life had thrown at me," I replied.

His face darkened, "That is a weak way to justify the slaughtering of your own men."

I scowled. "What are you saying? I thought I had made it clear that my decision was final." My mind was clear and I felt awake, but my words came out slurred and rushed.

He shook his head once again, standing up. Everything looked oddly blurry now, though I could still hear him. "Xena." My name was a faint whisper. "I had no other choice. I have to save my men and the country." He set down his untouched tea. "I'm sorry." Each syllable was contorted with pain, maybe regret. The weight in my body increased as my limbs weakened.

"What have you done?" I asked. I tried to stand, but I almost tumbled over. I dropped the cup I was still holding in disbelief as it dawned on me what he did. He poisoned me.

"I will make sure you have a proper funeral," he whispered. Despite my foggy vision, I could see the

tears rolling down his face. “They’ll think it was an accident.”

“Whitlock,” I said, feeling my panic rise, “Atticus, *please--*”

“I regret not offering the support I could’ve given that might’ve stopped you from becoming this ruthless and ambitious. I regret not guiding you. I regret many things, but not this.” he whispered. “Now this is the price we both need to pay.” He had turned and left. In those moments I lost *everything* I worked for. I had lost it all.

I died a lonely death. My body grew cold. I still wanted to live, to prove that I could make the world bend to my will. A small part of me knew even that wouldn’t have been enough, but it didn’t matter. I was dead now. No matter how much I wished, no one could escape death .

Jacqueline Chen, age 13
Green Brook Middle School
Somerset County
Grade 8



Artwork:

Giavana Caraccioli, age 19

Bound Brook High School

Grade 12

Locked In (Based on a True Story)

It all started with a game of chopsticks.

I'm Charlotte Melier. I didn't have many fears. But then the day came. In the middle of 5th period math, a lockdown was called. *Lockdown. Lockdown. Locks, lights, out of sight. Lockdown*, the speakers called in a robotic male voice. I didn't think it was a big deal. We had drills every month in Branchburg Central Middle School. We had about two drills every month, so this was almost normal. We all thought this one was too.

My class and I instantly got up out of our squeaky chairs, and hustled to the corner. We squished together, making sure not to cross the thin neon yellow tape stuck to the floor in a neat line. We did this in an orderly fashion, as we had done this many times before.

During the first 5 minutes of the supposed drill, everyone was completely fine. Some of my peers even played rock-paper-scissors and chopsticks. I was recently losing a game of chopsticks with my good friend Riana. These were all subtle hand games, so we were mostly quiet. This was for the exception of some boys silently chatting in the corner.

Drills usually took about 5 minutes. I watched the clock on the far wall of the classroom. The minutes ticked by. *5. 10. 15.* Why hadn't they called off the lockdown? I was starting to have some concerns.

Suddenly, my math teacher Mrs. Mealeny whispered aloud to the class. "Alright, listen. This MAY not be a drill," she then returned to texting on her phone with the other teachers.

The whole class instantly went silent. This wasn't a short drill. This was a real lockdown. I didn't know if I was going to live or die. I immediately broke down into silent tears. I had read news stories about lockdowns that had happened in the U.S. because of a gunman that had entered school grounds. Some students hadn't lived to tell the tale. I thought that I would be the next name that would come up in the next article.

The silence was too loud. My friends were comforting me as best they could, but I was too scared to calm down. I didn't think I could stand the thought of my life ending right now.

My mind started to think about things I had never thought of before. I had a family at home. What would my younger sister do without me? I never got to grow up. I never got to have my first kiss, get a job, or determine the meaning of life. Most importantly, I never got to change the world. I thought of trying to grab a piece of paper, to write my last words, but then decided it was too dangerous. I then thought of others. My best friends were in this room with me. If we got killed here, they wouldn't get to live their lives either. Heaven

didn't sound so amazing anymore.

After about thirty minutes of panic from everyone, we heard hard banging on the locked wooden classroom door. Everyone froze.

“Is anyone in there?!” a gruff voice yelled.

I then threw myself around another one of my brave friends, Allya, trying to shield her with myself. If a gunman was going to break down that door, I wanted to save my friends from the shots. Others first.

The door was thrown open. The first thing we saw was a big gun. My life flashed before my eyes, and I hugged Allya as tight as I could. If this was it, I was going to try and make it worth it. But, I was prepared to fight with anything I could.

A police officer then barged into the room. Half of my peers immediately started weeping, because of the scare, and partially out of relief. The police were here. They were here to save us from any danger.

“Is everyone all right? Have you seen anything suspicious?” he asked in a dead serious tone.

We all answered “Yes, and No,” Some of us thanked him. He was our superhero.

After he left, Allya and I hugged tightly, for we feared the worst. I looked at my other classmates. Everyone at least looked shaken. We were in a near death situation, and we couldn't do anything except sit.

Ten minutes later, I thought I would go mentally insane. The thought that death was so near was going to overtake me. I wanted to scream. I had a surge of nausea. My fear might come out another way. Right when I thought I wasn't going to survive until morning, the loudspeaker crackled with soft static. Our principal came on.

“This is Mr. Barson. It is currently 12:57 pm on December 15th. This concludes the lockdown,”

We waited for three tense seconds. Our vice principal came on.

“This is Mrs. Sansta. It is currently 12:57 pm on December 15th. This concludes the lockdown,”

I cried even more with relief. We survived. I could now live my life. ALL of my life. I shakily stood up. It was over.

We later learned that someone had accidentally triggered the lockdown. I was angry, but relieved that there was no real threat. We were all safe. That day forward, I still thought about it, how I feared for my life. I also thought about how kids just like me were experiencing something very similar. I decided to do my best to make sure they were all safe from any actual threats that might enter their schools.

Five months later, I entered a writing competition and wrote about my story. I hoped it would get the message across, that these kids shouldn't have to go through what I did. Years later, I dedicated my life to saving kids all over the globe from gunmen that might enter their schools because, everyone should get a chance to change the world.

Charlotte Meyer, age 12
Branchburg Central Middle School
Somerset County
Grade 6



Artwork:

Adriana Widomski, age 14
Branchburg Central Middle School
Grade 8

A Single Utter

“Cordelia,” The woman breathed, flicking her wispy, moon-white hair out of her eyes, “what a pretty name. Now, can you tell me what exactly went on, Cordelia?” She leaned forward, her tactical shirt creasing like the man’s shirt did when he-

No. Stop it.

“Oh, come on Cordelia.” The officer, the *enemy*, murmured softly. “You don’t have to hide your thoughts from me, of all people.”

I gritted my teeth, forcing myself to meet the penetrating, soul-hunting gaze scouring into me.

I didn’t do anything. I forced myself to think happy thoughts.

My mother when she smiled.

My mother’s glazed eyes when she dropped dead on-

Tears clouded my vision and I hastily wiped them away before the *enemy* could see.

“Oh, sweet Cordelia,” She mumbled, leaning closer. I smelled her surprisingly sweet hazelnut breath as she breathed out. Tensing up, I slowly shifted backward, but it only resulted in her tilting even closer.

“Cordelia, you know you can-”

“Officer Evans, what do you think you’re doing?”

“Did you hear ... her mother ... Dad killed ... Cordelia ... Officer-”

Ringgg!

“Lia? Helloooo!”

Despite my efforts, I can’t seem to get rid of the annoying ringing in my head. It sounded as if someone was ringing a bell right next to my ear.

“Lia? Cordelia? Are you possessed or something?”

Now that I think about last night, the officer doesn’t seem so scary anymore. Her once hideous moon-white hair just seems like normal old lady hair. What happened? Maybe it was-

“CORDELIA RILEY!”

“Huh- what?” I stammer, rubbing my eyes. I glance around at the empty hallway. *Wait, wasn’t the hallway just filled with kids talking about my-*

“Lia. We need to get to class girl,” Cameron, my best friend, has his hands on his hips and looks as if

he's going to strangle me. Cam's face softens as I blink emptily at him, not quite understanding what just went on. "Hey, Lia, I understand if you want to skip. Sorry for going all crazy on you." Cam scratches his neck, a flush creeping up. "I know your mom just died and you're stressed and I guess I just- Well you know I-" At my raised eyebrows, he pauses. "Sorry, I'm rambling. I'm not very good at this type of stuff." His hazelnut-green eyes dart to my face, and then back down.

"It's okay Cam, let's just head to class." I sling a hand over his shoulder and plaster a smile on my face. If Cam can tell my smile is forced, he doesn't say anything.

As we walk into class, everyone stares at me as if I have a hippopotamus-sized zit on my face and the whispers drift toward me, again.

"Cordelia... Mrs. Riley ... Dead... Reward..."

Come one! You can do this! You're almost to your desk!

"... she... it... why..."

No, I can't do it! Gasping, I turn and barrel through the plain beige door, barely registering Mr. Liu calling my name. I run and sprint and cry and dash for what seems like ages before ramming into a door. Leaning against a stained sink, I stick my head under the faucet, feeling the cool water run over my tear-streaked face.

Lia, mi vida.

"Mom?" My gaze ran over busted stalls, chipped paint, and rust-stained sinks, but my mom was nowhere to be found. "Mom?" I repeated, my gaze falling to the mirror. Tear-streaked hollow green eyes stared back at me, and as I tilted my head, the strange dusky black-haired girl mimicked me.

Liaaa. Cordeliaaaa. Be brave.

"Mommy?" I whimpered, my gaze blurring. I gripped the sink, my bitten nails digging into the cool metal.

'Speak your mind, even if you're voice shakes.' Remember when I told you that? Well now's the time, *mi vida. Let the world know. Show them...*

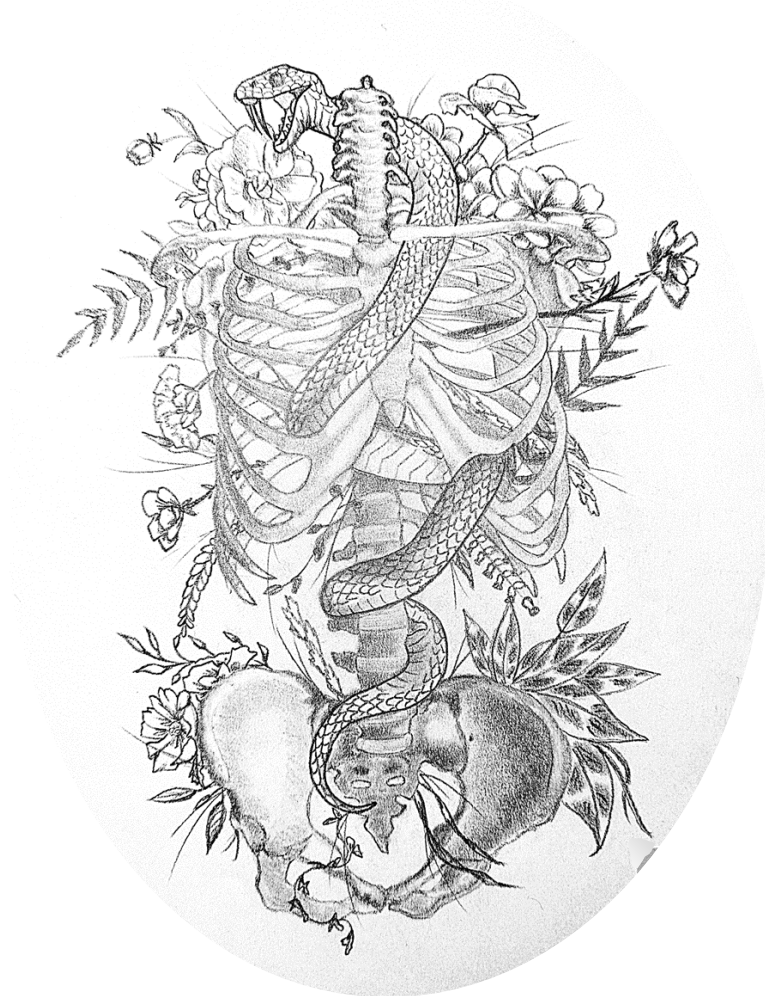
"Mommy? Is it really you?" Minutes passed, but no reply came. Wiping my face, I turned back to the mirror, slipped a hair tie into my hair, and walked out of the bathroom.

"Cordelia Riley? What are you doing here in the middle of the day?" A middle-aged man asked, his

eyebrows raising. He glances down at my hands, which are death gripped on a notebook, takes in my sleep-deprived eyes, and gives me a rather worried look. Steeling myself, I look him dead in the eye and take a deep breath.

“I would like to speak with Officer Evans.”

Kaitlyn Parker, age 14
Branchburg Central Middle School
Somerset County
Grade 8



Artwork:

Ariadne Bolanos, age 16
Manville High School
Grade 11

In the Garden

Akina stared at the fire heating the boiling water, missing the feeling of its heat. Her hands, skin cracked and dry, lingered at the edge of the fire pit. Even with the fire in front of her, no heat came from its glowing flames.

She pushed her hands closer, closer, closer. Only when the flames licked her skin did she pull away. Nothing.

There was not a single burn. No pain, nothing. There was always nothing.

The urge to throw the teapot resting on the fire surged through her, but she remained still. Hurling the broken pot at the hazy red sky would not solve her problems. Nothing would help. Nothing would change if she did. There is always nothing.

Something wailed from beyond one of the large hedge walls that trapped her in this hellscape. Not beastly, but not human. Perhaps a lost soul. One too far lost that she had failed to aid. Akina shifted in her spot. The grass felt dry under her legs. Night was approaching. When the dark fully consumed the maze-like garden, the foliage would wither away to dry vegetation. Not even a rainstorm could restore them. If it rained.

Nothing to help.

Akina stared at the teapot. Small curls of steam spilled from the tip, floating upwards into the wispy fog. Beyond that lay nothing. No stars. No sun. Light came from somewhere, but from nowhere she could see.

Nothing to guide with.

The woman yearned to simply float away like steam. To float away from the mental prison she was stuck in. Away from the moss that lined her lungs, away from the vines that wrapped around her neck. To float away from the flowers that pushed through her skin, away from the coils of weeds tangled in her hair. The garden owned her as much as it owned those before her.

Nothing to see.

The whispers of people who were claimed by the endless maze of hedge walls and wildflowers swirled around her every hour of every day. Apparitions of those lost in the leaves sat in the corners of her vision.

The ghost of *him* played tricks on her more than others. He always lingered somewhere near, somewhere far. Somewhere she could never go. He liked to tease her. Giving her false hope that beyond all the nothingness was a way home.

But there was nothing. There will always be nothing. No way home. No way to escape.

Nothing to leave.

Isabella Suarez, age 13
Branchburg Central Middle School
Somerset County
Grade 8

The Center School

Shining on Stage

I haven't always felt like I fit in; because I have Autism. I acted differently than other children. My emotions were hard to control, and that led me to develop a reputation at my elementary school as the kid who always got in trouble. However, when I transferred to a new school in fourth grade, where they specialized in teaching kids with disabilities, I could already tell things were going to get better for me. In the first year alone, I made more friends than I ever had before, and many of them are still my friends to this day. Then, in sixth grade, I joined the Drama Club, where they put on a musical every Spring.

That year, the students were going to perform *The Wizard of Oz*. At auditions, I got to meet a number of high school students who were also a part of the Drama Club. I saw how passionate they were about performing, and I was inspired to be the same. However, I also felt it would be hard to live up to their talents, and when it came time for my audition, I got nervous and cried. I was placed in the ensemble, which I didn't think was much of an accomplishment. Though, I warmed up to the roles I had in the ensemble rather quickly. In the show, I would play a Munchkin, a Guard for the Wicked Witch, and a citizen of the Emerald City. In the end, I was proud of myself for being a part of the performance. I ended up having more lines than I anticipated. It was a great first experience as part of the club.

The next year's play was *Peter Pan*. The school introduced a new theater teacher to replace the one we had. I wasn't sure how to feel about this change at first; I had finally bonded with the former teacher by the time she left. However, over the years, the new theater teacher would become my favorite friend at school. She saw my potential ever since she arrived. For this play, I was cast as a Lost Boy. I also received my first named role- Tiger Lily. I got to sing a solo, too! I was somewhat insecure with how I sounded when singing it, but I pushed through. This play was fun, mainly because the dynamics between the other actors' characters were hilarious.

The third year in Drama Club had *Aladdin* as the school play. Funny enough, I contributed to this play being chosen! The teacher and I were browsing lists of junior musicals, and we saw *Aladdin* on the list. I wondered how we would pull off the magic carpet ride if we chose this play. Just then, outside the room, a janitor walked by while wheeling a platform cart. That's when the teacher determined we would in fact be performing *Aladdin* that year! In this adaptation of the Disney musical, *Aladdin* did not have his monkey sidekick; Rather,

he had three human friends, and I played the cowardly one. Between me, the actor playing Aladdin, and the two actors playing the other friends, our chemistry on stage was perfect, and we had a blast! Overall, this show is my second favorite as of now, because the show had so much charm and pizzazz!

Then, we decided on performing *The Lion King*. For once, I wanted to audition for a villain, Scar. During my audition, I sang his song, and gave it my all. I'm pretty sure this was the first audition where I didn't cry. I could tell I was a lot more confident now than the first year I auditioned for a school play. And when the cast list was posted, I was so excited that I got the role of Scar! All my hard work paid off! I practiced extensively for this performance, putting my heart into every rehearsal. Unfortunately, two months before we were set to perform, the Covid-19 Pandemic began. I was concerned that we would never get to see the play come to fruition. And in a way, I was right. The teacher decided we would film a pre-recorded set of videos where actors were alone on the set. The videos were spliced together to look like we were all on stage together. We only recorded a few scenes, and luckily, my song was kept in. That's when I truly shined in the role.

2022's Spring musical was *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*. And now, being one of the high school acting veterans, I actually found it easy to secure the title role of the candy-making master himself! The show was spectacular as usual, and it's my favorite play I've been in! Also this year, I found out that a new student in the elementary, who was casted as Mike Teevee in the play, was actually a second cousin of mine! We began to grow a bond at rehearsals, and especially now, I am so proud of him. Acting must run in the family!

We're making great progress in this school year's production- *Into the Woods*. I got one of the three main roles, specifically *The Baker's Wife*. I feel like I've already figured out the intricacies of the character I'm portraying. That's one of the gifts of having done Theater Arts for so many years. I can't wait to see everything culminate in April!

The Center School's Drama Club helped me gain a sense of belonging, both with my peers and my teachers. I went from a new kid at school, with no friends or sense of direction, to a creatively thriving role model to the younger students. I've gained so much knowledge, created so many memories, and formed an unbreakable bond with the theater teacher. I couldn't be more grateful that she saw so much potential in me. I will cherish the memories I've made at school for the rest of my life.

Gabrielle Derewsky, age 18
The Center School
Somerset County
Grade 12

Is a Dog the Pet for You?

Some people agree that dogs are not the best pet to have for several reasons. First, dogs are naturally unkempt. Dogs drool and shed their fur. Dogs play by chasing each other and rolling in the grass or snow leaving them dirty. Second, they are smelly because dogs are sloppy eaters. Some owners infrequently wash them allowing food and other debris to settle in their beards or folds of skin. Next, they destroy whatever is in their path. For example, dogs shred paper or clothing. Another reason that a dog is not a good pet is because they are very possessive. Dogs think that everything and everyone is theirs. They take toys or household items, like towels or your clothes, to their favorite spot. Additionally, dogs make noise. They bark at objects such as bikes and trucks. Some dogs get startled and bark at random things for no reason.

Dogs are expensive to maintain. Training is necessary or the dog becomes out of control in the home or outdoors. Dogs also require daily care and attention. They constantly need love and affection. They are dependent on their owners for their food, exercise and overall care, such as professional grooming. Dogs require by law routine vaccinations. For example, rabies vaccinations are mandated by law to also get an annual dog license. Other medications for environmental issues like ticks and parasites are necessary. The preventatives keep dogs healthy from Lyme Disease and Heartworm. Responsible owners are encouraged to spay and neuter their dogs for the animal's health and to avoid overpopulation. Even if an owner purchases Pet Insurance to help defer high expenses, there are co-pays for the owner.

Furthermore, many dogs need a yard with fencing to give them play space and freedom to roam safely. This impacts the type of home that their owners have. Some dogs are not compatible with living in small areas. Therefore, dogs are not the pet for everyone.

Benjamin Hoppes, age 18
The Center School
Somerset County
Grade 12

The PsychoPack

Imagine being trapped in a village with old pieces of rusty metal as a fence to protect you from unknown Beings. These Beings constantly fire arrows at you when you go deep in the woods that are outside of the fence. Well, this is what teenagers have to deal with in their village..

Charlie is the leader of the village surrounded by fences. He is the oldest of all of the kids. Charlie is protective and intelligent. He also has a person that he depends on as his second in command, Ark.

Ark is trustworthy and the village medic. He is depended upon by Charlie because he is responsible and organized and is good in a crisis. Also, Ark is kind and friendly. He does not like violence. But, if someone gets shot by an arrow, he will immediately save the person.

Also living in the village is Keira, a sassy and independent person. Charlie is always very protective of her. Even though she is the only girl, Keira still finds a way to fit in and she would never change a thing about her life.

Minho is Keira's best friend. He is also feisty like Keira. He is a fast-thinker and is very loyal to his friends. He contributes to the village by exploring and hunting the woods for food with Keira.

These characters are able to resolve any problems that they have. After three years of living peacefully in the village, a boy runs in. He had been saved by one of the village boys outside of the fence. He was running from the arrow shooters. The boy claims that he doesn't remember where he came from. Everyone finds it strange that the boy didn't come from a glass cage like they all did. It turns out that the Beings only want the boy. The Beings sent a note to Charlie asking for the boy and in return they would leave the group alone.

Will Charlie give up the boy? Who is this boy? What are the Beings? Will this new boy disrupt the peace? Do you have the guts or stomach to be a part of this adventure? Read for all of the details in my soon to be completed book, The PsychoPack.

Keira Piccoli, age 13
The Center School
Somerset County
Grade 8

The Good and Grim of Growing

An unknown author once said, “The hardest part about growing up is letting go of what you were used to, and moving on with something you’re not.” Growing up is so difficult because of the countless changes and challenges people go through while making the transition from childhood to adulthood mentally and physically. The article “Growing Up: Key Moments”, by Jessica McBirney and the story “Safety of Numbers” by Luchy Tan both convey how people grow. “Growing up: Key Moments” especially shows how people grow and change from difficult experiences and gain things like responsibility and maturity. “Safety of Numbers” features a kid that wants to be more free in her life and a mom paranoid from past traumatic experiences. Overall, growing up happens to everyone because of different challenges, experiences, and circumstances, as a result, people mature, gain responsibility, and gain independence all at different rates.

In “Growing Up: Key Moments” the author greatly shows how experiences shape people. The author states, “Sometimes, though, we experience particular events that feel important-like we’ve been given a sudden boost on the path to maturity. We eventually look back on these events as significant ‘growing up moments,’ the kind of moments that we all share, when we learn more about ourselves, our family and friends, as well as the world around us.” and gives many examples of this throughout the article like learning santa isn’t real and friendships fading away. This shows that major moments play a huge role in growing up and shaping us to who we will become. The author’s quote also illustrates how we gain maturity through experiences and greatly expands on the point with the examples of first time being the responsible one in the room, and making decisions. I like the idea that making decisions helps maturity and responsibility, even small ones like when you get to be an adult you have to decide how to manage your money, what to eat, and schedule all types of appointments rather than relying on others to do those things for you.

Within the story “Safety of Numbers” by Lucy Tan the narrator’s mothers is a great example of how circumstances and experiences can shape you as a person. The mother is very paranoid and overprotective of her daughter, self and family, but later in the story it is explained why she is like this. The mother grew up in China and had a terrible experience causing her paranoia and safety tendencies. While the narrator was talking to her mother, the mother says “My father caught me. I was on my way to Tiananmen Square for a protest. He locked the window from the outside and pushed two cabinets up against the door to keep me in. By the time he let me out, four of my best friends were dead.” This supports the idea that circumstances and experiences

shape people. The experience of her friends dying at something that was supposed to be safe while her dad saved her is the reason for her being so protective of her daughter and herself.

Those are a few of the reasons why I feel growing up happens from challenges, experiences, and circumstances that then give people things like maturity, independence, and responsibility. Experiences shape us into who we are and how we see the world, and gain many different things contingent on the experience. Challenges also help us become more resilient and mature. Lately, circumstances can help or not in gaining things like maturity, independence, as well as responsibility all at different levels and rates depending on the circumstances. Growing up is so important so we are able to take care of ourselves and understand how to make ourselves and others happy because as we age we are expected to be able to do those things.

Sawyer Ruiu, age 15
The Center School
Somerset County
Grade 10



Artwork:

Christopher Gualtieri, age 17
Manville High School
Grade 12

Beowulf vs. Elsa

What it means to be a hero is not particularly about strength or cleverness, but the bravery and determination that revolves around the hero. *Beowulf* is a mysterious poem which was written by an unknown source; although some people have theorized that *Beowulf* was written by multiple sources, the origin behind *Beowulf* is still a mystery today. The movie that *Beowulf* will throughout this essay will be compared and contrasted to is none other than the hit Disney movie *Frozen* (2013). Specifically, the spectacular character and the Queen of Arendella Elsa will be compared and contrasted to *Beowulf* to really find out the big question; How do both differ and how are both characters similar in some ways? Both Beowulf and Elsa can be compared and contrasted in many different ways, which include both characters values, characteristics, and both of their inner demons/monsters. These types of qualities and values really help mold the character you see before yourself and makes them more human.

To begin with, we will be talking about both characters' characteristics because characteristics basically make up the character itself and show their values. To start off with Beowulf, his values represent somebody who is a strong, good leader who is not afraid to take any risks through the whole story. However, his characteristics also include some that are not necessarily aligned with good. Beowulf is also very prideful and wants to take credit for every single fight that happened in the passage and wants the fame/glory of defeating Grendel. For example, the text says, "I've never known fear, as a youth I fought/ In endless battles. I am old, now,/But I will fight again, seek fame still,/If the dragon hiding in his tower dares/To face me" (622-626). Compared to Elsa, Beowulf is outgoing and scared to take risks and wants to be very independent and self-sufficient. This quote from the text exactly states that Beowulf is prideful and wants to take all the glory for himself. On the other hand, Elsa is a very reserved, shy, and fearful person, she is scared to show people who she really is and her parents insinuate in her head that she's not normal and make her think that she should just shut everyone around her out of her life. It takes courage and the whole movie to make her realize what is normal! Everyone is different and makes mistakes and that is only human. To summarize, in the sense and category of characteristics, Beowulf and Elsa are very different but still do share some key characteristics.

Next, we will be looking at both Elsa and Beowulf's values as people and what they embody and stand for. First, let us take a look at the list of values that Beowulf has and stands for as a person. Even when Beowulf is cocky and wants all the glory, he still has the decency to acknowledge his fellow warriors in battle. He also thinks it is important to honor our ancestors and the ones that came before him and is very religious in a sense. Elsa is very relatable to Beowulf in the sense that her family is her world; she acts as like the underlying

protector of her family when she tries to protect Anna for not seeing Hans' true colors. Elsa is also a very independent, strong woman who does not need a man in her life to take care of her. That is one of the reasons why, in my opinion, Elsa is such an amazing character. Her song "Let It Go" basically features the topic of her just wanting to be free to be herself and shows individuality and that she is tired of being afraid of what people think of her as a person. To sum it all up, Beowulf and Elsa in this category regarding values, both of them actually do share a couple of key main values as people.

Additionally, of the most important parts of a character and their emotions, are both Elsa and Beowulf's demons and enemies. To start off with Beowulf, in terms of inner demons he does not have a whole lot of them because he is a pretty confident person and character. But if we are talking about enemies, he has a whole lot of them. His main enemy throughout three quarters of the passage is the menacing monster Grendel, who was notoriously known for ruthlessly destroying everything in his path. After Beowulf bravely ends Grendel's life, a new and arguably more dangerous creature stands in his path, a fire breathing dragon. Beowulf actually fought very hard and was very, very brave throughout the entire fight, but in the end the fire breathing dragon and Beowulf both succumbed to their injuries from the battle. In comparison, Elsa had a ton more inner demons and fears that controlled her life for a very long time. Her biggest demon was of course her fear; Elsa was taught from an early age to suppress showing who she was and her feelings. She was also told to suppress her power which was basically her identity and who she was. Even though she had a ton of personal demons, her main underlying enemy was Hans. Elsa knew right from the getgo that Hans was up to no good and tried to warn her sister, but she was pushed away and almost killed by him. So, to sum everything up Elsa and Beowulf do not share a ton of demons in common, some of them are similar in comparison.

In conclusion, Elsa and Beowulf are two totally different but not completely different characters who both have common good intentions even though it does not exactly seem like it. Overall, Elsa is more favorable as a character because I really do love what she is about and her values as a person. Beowulf, even though he is not my favorite character ever, he still has pretty good values and morals and cares a lot about his people and country. It was a lot of fun also to learn about Beowulf and I actually did learn a little more about Elsa through this essay and the research. The real lesson is that even though it seems like someone is a bad person and has bad values, you should sometimes look deeper and you might find their good qualities.

Alex Stolz, age 16
The Center School
Somerset County
Grade 11

Hillsborough Middle School

Our New Normal

I woke up to a regular day. I peeled myself out from my warm bed and came out looking like a skinny little 9-year-old zombie in Christmas pajamas. I shivered at the slight chill in the air as I stepped over the labyrinth of stuff in my room, making my way to the hallway. It was a normal Saturday. At least, it seemed normal.

There was the normal hum of the Keurig and the smell of coffee wafting up the stairs. The normal creak in the hallway as my bare feet hit the polished wood panels. I saw my normal puffy tired face staring back at me in the mirror after I brushed my teeth. I knew something was up though when my mom seemed distant as I walked into the living room. I grabbed my container of rainbow loom bands and started working on a few new bracelets for my third-grade bracelet business. I didn't sell them, of course, I just gave them out to anyone who wanted them, and called it a "business." As I started to get to work, my mom sat on the couch watching the Today show.

Suddenly the sound of the morning news came to a stop. Confused, I looked up at the TV to see the volume muted. Now I knew my mom needed to talk to me about something. Was I in trouble? I had no clue. So I just kept rainbow-loomed until, "Hey, Isabella?"

"Yeah?" I looked up and saw her tired, worried face.

"So it's nothing to worry about but, you know how I had that doctor's appointment yesterday, right?"

My heart dropped to my stomach. I knew from the look on her face that something was wrong.

"Yeah," I said with angst.

The silence after I spoke and before she did seemed to last a lifetime. The calm before a storm. The rumble before the avalanche. Waiting for the other shoe to drop.

"Well, the doctor said I had breast cancer. It is caught early though, so don't worry, okay?"

"Okay" I went back to making bracelets.

From the outside, I might have looked fine. Gratiified even. But if you took a step inside my brain, you would see a warzone. Every colorful little rubber band I clenched between my fingers started to shake. They

weren't shaking though, I was. Panicking. Spiraling. Down. Down. Down. I lost it. But I didn't. I just sat there pretending I was okay.

The rest of the day was tough. The school was fine. It took my mind off of it. Whatever "it" was. Everyone was asking how I was. I was always good. But I wasn't. I wasn't.

Later on that day, my dad brought over my brother for my mom to explain the news to him. I listened from upstairs. Overhearing all the details she forgot to tell me. Because I was too young to understand. Though I understood everything loud and clear from my bedroom. I heard my brother crying. I didn't think he'd care. But I do know that he saw our grandparents die from lung cancer, something I was just too little to remember. It was my dad's weekend so I stayed with him after the fact. My brother was seething. At the moment, I didn't know why. Now I know it is because he couldn't blame anyone for my mom having cancer. If we shouldn't hold in our emotions, then where do we put them? For Jack, of course, it went to everyone else. It doesn't matter if they were at fault.

He started yelling at me, "Why couldn't you care?! You literally don't care that our mom has cancer. She could die and you wouldn't care."

I just sat there. I didn't need to prove to him that I cared. I know I did. It turns out that he is the same person who didn't speak to my mom for six months. Those same six months of treatment. Chemo. Surgery. I was the one who knitted her hats to cover up her thinning hair. I was the one who was her "little nurse" checking up on her every hour. I was the one who made her tea every night. I was the one who started having to make dinner for myself because she wasn't able to. I was the one who cared. Not him. My mom has recovered from cancer, but not the fractured relationship between mother and son. That is something he should care about

The following months that my mom was under treatment were difficult. I hated seeing her suffer. Even though our life was weird at that time, my mom tried to make it seem as normal as possible. We still went to Hershey Park for a weekend like we do every year. My mom had to travel on a scooter because she didn't have enough energy to walk for that long. That may sound bad, but honestly, it was great! She didn't have to push herself and walk too much, and we got to cut the line! Because she was now temporarily disabled, we got to go in front of the longest lines. We went on rides over and over again with all of our friends and it was a blast. Another silver lining of this whole situation was my mom staying home from work. Again, this doesn't

sound great, and it wasn't- for her students. But for me, it was amazing. I had my mom all to myself all day. She got to stand with me at the bus stop, and she greeted me when I got home. Another silver lining was that the cancer center where my mom got radiation had the BEST hot chocolate. I would knit hats in the waiting room, sipping hot chocolate like a little old lady. So yeah. Cancer is bad. Really bad actually. But it doesn't mean that the world is bad because there are always positives to unfortunate circumstances.

It was six months after my mom got diagnosed, and it was finally her last day of radiation. I was now in fourth grade and 10 years old standing with my mom to wait for the bus. The morning was dewey from the rainstorm the night before and cars hissed by causing little puddles of water to be disturbed. The small ray of the sun made the driveway glisten and sent a shock of warmth through my body on that cold, crisp autumn morning. I reached out for my mom's hand and squeezed it. She squeezed it back. A drop of water fell to the ground, except it wasn't raining. I looked up at my mom's crying face and wrapped my arms around her. The warmth of her body was like hot soup going down my throat. Her skin felt soft and smooth. Her hair, well, wasn't there. She was, and that's all I cared about. Tears fell from my eyes like an endless stream. All those pent-up emotions suddenly burst out of my body like a shaken soda. I took a step back and looked at my mom's flowery blouse that now had my tears and snot all over it. We chuckled at that and for once, she didn't ask what was wrong, or why I was crying. I didn't ask her either. There was just a mutual understanding between us. It is going to be okay. *It is going to be okay.*

Isabella Auzinger, age 14
Hillsborough Middle School
Somerset County
Grade 8

The Stolen Power: Part 1

A woman with her daughter Layla strolled. A little girl saw a kitten who was almost dead.

“Mom! Mom! Look, there is a kitty!” The girl ran to the cat and carried it to her mom.

“Can we take her home, please?”

The woman looked at her daughter and sighed, “Oh dear.”

But the girl continued, “Please! Please! Please!”

“Okay, we will take her home, but you will care about her,” said mom.

“Sure!” and a little girl with a happy face went home.

Six years later Layla was sitting on a couch in her room and reading a book. Suddenly the door opened and Mom came to her room.

“Hello,” she said, “Mrs. Kerry and her family would like to visit us, so.”

Layla’s face changed. “No way,” Layla said, “I’m not going to babysit with Beatrix!”

“Stop hating her! She did nothing to you. At least she has magic. Anyway, clean up your room right now,” Mom said and came out of her daughter’s room.

Layla was mad at Mom because she was always working. Layla didn’t mind her mother’s work but she lacked attention. “Urgh, she knows I don’t have magic power.”

A wet nose touched her arm, and a fluffy cat rubbed against her owner. “Oh, It’s you Oreo,” she sighed, “only you can understand my feelings. I need to clean up.” Layla started cleaning up and finished after three hours. She was really tired, so she fell asleep.

“Wake up sleepy kitty, you need to entertain me!” somebody called Layla.

Layla got up and stared at Beatrix, “You came into my room?”

“And what?” Beatrix asked.

“Last time you were here, you said it’s an awful and musty place and you would never come in.”

“Do you think I did it for you? Of course not, my father asked me to tell you to play with me. Now I’m leaving.” Beatrix slammed the door and with tears ran to her father.

“Oh no... here we go again, she’s going to tell lies to her dad. I need to follow her.” Layla thought.

“Dad! Dad! Layla doesn’t want to play with me! Can I play with her cat” Beatrix asked in a sweet voice.

“Sure, I think Oreo won't mind,” father replied.

“Yay!” Beatrix ran to Oreo and took the cat in her arms. But the cat didn't like it. Oreo bit the girl and grabbed the necklace around her neck. Beatrix started crying and her father calmed her down. Layla tried to get out an amulet. But the cat scratched her arm and ran away through the window.

“Wait! Oh no.. I need to hurry up!” Layla ran out of the house and took only her bag. She ran to the side where the cat went, to the side of the woods. It was dark already, and Layla was running only following the sound. Suddenly, she fell and passed out.

The rays of the sun passed through the foliage of the trees, which woke up Layla. “What happened? My head hurts. Where am I?” she began to remember what happened yesterday.

“Oreo! I need to find him.” Layla stood up and looked around. Something small hidden behind the tree. “Hm? Oreo it's you?” she looked under the tree but there was nobody, “Maybe it seemed-” But as she was about to go, something jumped into the bushes with a loud sound. “No, now I heard that! Oreo come here, I'm sorry about yesterday but you didn't have to scratch Beatrix,” Layla shouted.

She parted the bushes and saw for a short time something small and green, with a yellow flower on the top. It quickly disappeared. “What was that?!” Layla thought. She was scared.

Suddenly this weird creature appeared behind another tree and another gradually moved away. Layla was very surprised but decided to follow him. The surroundings began to change, and the trees no longer looked their usual gray and gloomy. They became more tropical and greener. Layla was so engrossed in chasing the strange thing that she didn't notice how she got into the place that it didn't look like London at all. She looked behind the last tree on the cliff, there was no green fluff. She looked around and gasped. An incredible landscape opened before her. A waterfall came through a giant tree, and water was shining on the sun. She was surrounded by a tropical forest, it seemed as if she was walking in a fairy tale. Layla couldn't even say anything, she fell into a trance and didn't hear anybody approach her.

“Hi!” came a squeaky voice from somewhere behind.

“Huh?! It's you! You can talk?! Do not touch me!” Layla started to panic.

“Don't worry, we will not touch you,” some more of these creatures came from the woods.

“Huh? It's your clones? Why do you look so similar? And, who are you?!” Layla was in shock.

“Wanderers called us different names, but our creator called us Maras, my name is Vanara. We won't

hurt you -- our creator wants to see you.”

“She wants to see me? Why?”

“She needs your help.”

Maras went to the side of normal sized woods. Layla followed them. They walked a short distance and strange monsters got in their way.

“Hide, quick,” Vanara said and jumped into the bushes. And Layla hid behind the tree. “Here. Take this,” Vanara handed over the book, “Berrogeita zortzi orrialdeak naturaren begia ireki,” Vanara said.

Book opened and began to emit light.

“Wow...” Layla was stunned, “What did you say?”

“Look at them right now,” Vanara pointed at the monsters.

Translucent green chains bound the monsters and made them numb. Maras came out of hiding places. They continued going as if nothing had happened and past the monsters. Layla closed the book and put it in her bag.

“Did they die? And who are they?” Layla asked and approached uncertainly to the bound creatures.

Vanara turned around to her and said, “No, we don’t have enough power to kill them. After our creator was gone, they started appearing everywhere like parasites. We think it’s like the sickness of nature.”

Maras and Layla kept going for about an hour and stopped near a mountain.

“We are here” Vanara raised the ivy and they came into the cave.

Kate Babak, age 13
Hillsborough Middle School
Somerset County
Grade 7

Goodbye

Sunlight flooded the house, though no one was very cheerful that morning. The good weather was insulting, refusing to be dreary like the rest of us. We moved wordlessly around the house, speaking in low, solemn voices when necessary. We didn't have much to do, even if we wanted to do anything. Nobody felt like playing games, and there was no cleaning to be done. The carpet was spotless. The pillows were arranged on the couch. The table was cleared and the fridge was empty. The car was packed full of suitcases. Nothing littered the floor save for some empty boxes, folded and lying abandoned, where they would sit undisturbed for the next month. Everything seemed too artificial. Too fake. And the house was quiet. Too quiet.

No children were screaming, laughing, playing, toys scattered across the ground. There was no crinkle of plastic bags from the kitchen, no gentle rustle of pages being turned from a cozy nook on the couch—just silence. It was unnerving.

I was leaving. The thought had never really sunk in before now. My life was changing, faster than I might be ready for it. For the first time, I didn't want to leave for vacation. Because it wasn't just leaving for that.

Every two years, my family went to a reunion at my grandparent's cabin out west. But this time was different. Each time after the trip was done, we would come back to our empty house, waiting for our return. But this time, we wouldn't. We were moving. We had planned up until the end of the summer, but though unspoken among us, no one knew what would happen after that. All we knew was it would be a change.

The thing I hated most.

I just sat on my bed trying to comprehend everything that was happening. Or maybe even not. Maybe wishing and wishing that the future I had been dreading for days and weeks and months and years would never come to pass. Until it was today. Wishing and wanting for things to stay the same. I sat there not wanting to grow up. Not wanting anything to change. But most of all, I wasn't quite sure how I was supposed to feel. What to say. What to do. What to think.

Who to be.

"Get yourself together," I muttered under my breath. But it was no use. I felt like crying. "Why can't I let go?" I asked the empty room, "Feeling bad for myself doesn't change anything!"

"Time to go!" Dad called from downstairs.

I sighed in frustration. I wanted to let go, but at the same time, I didn't. Almost couldn't.

I stood up in my room. I bit my lower lip, bracing myself. I looked around, waiting for some dam to burst or for revelation to come, but it didn't. Waiting for myself to feel better but I didn't. But some voice in the back of my head saying, *You already know*. And I did. I knew it was hard. And that I didn't want to leave. I didn't want to grow up. But it didn't matter. Time flowed. People changed. Families left. Some things were out of my control. And I thought about my family. This was the first house my parents had bought. The first home my little brother and sister ever had. It was hard for them too. It was hard for us all.

Things were changing, and there was nothing I could do about it. At that moment, I learned I had to accept that. Sometimes you have to leave to start something new, just take a jump and trust you'll land on your feet on the other side. Even if it's one of the hardest things you've ever done.

So I took a deep breath and away.

I walked down the stairs one at a time. I saw my life here, the past seven and a half years, flash before my eyes in no particular order at all. Time seemed to stop for a moment, just me and my memories.

Staying up past bedtime, watching movies. Stupid arguments never really brought us anywhere. Playing with Barbie dolls on my bedroom floor with my big sister. Making perfumes out of pine needles and water. Waking up at the crack of dawn on Christmas morning. Pretending to be asleep late at night. Buying a new couch. Scaring each other at night in the dark. Staying up until midnight on New Year's Eve. Talking for hours in the darkness. Making paper flowers. Painting our room. Playing with baby siblings. Songs. Toys. Bedtimes. Opinions. Dreams. Tick. Tick. Tick.

I walked out the door and away from the life I had known.

The engine started. We backed out of our parking spot. The windows opened, filling the car with the wind. I stuck my head out, looking back. Red brick house. One cracked window. An overgrown tropical bush. Flowerpots lining the walkway. A small hole me and my sister had dug when we were little. I would never forget that place. And that I knew for sure, even if I didn't know what my future held. We turned off our street, and it was gone.

Calissa Churchill, age 13
Hillsborough Middle School
Somerset County
Grade 7

Five Bugs

“Once upon a time, five kids became bugs. One, the hard-working mite, an ant. Another, swarming midge, a fly. Yet another, the wood eating creepy crawly, a termite. The last two became the see-through insect, the isopod. The wingless bug, a flightless fly,” the mysterious storyteller said with a mischievous grin covered in purple and a white tie. The streets of New York City were loud. The wind howling through the small room of a tent that the story teller is in. Although the zipper door was closed.

“Hm, good story old man, sort of creepy though, there are five people here, not including you. Actually, five kids are here” Jessie said. It was true. There were five kids. Spencer, Justin, Jessie, Jack and Noah. As the man sat on a bamboo stool, the atmosphere grew dense, a draft came into the room.

“Man, I sure hope that doesn't happen to us. That would suck! But like that would happen” Justin said with a grin. “Well, we'll better get going, now that you-” but he couldn't finish his sentence.

Then the mysterious man said, “I'm not done with my story, you have to listen.” The man took a deep breath. “As the kids talked to each other, the air around them felt dense, the air got colder, and before they knew it, it was nightfall. Eight thirty-one at night, three hours, twenty-nine minutes, and forty-three seconds to midnight. The five kids were starving at that point, they had not eaten anything yet. So, they all decided to go to the local Wawa-” the man got cut off by Jessie.

“Shoot Wawa sounds good, everyone wanna go? I'm buying.” Everyone agreed and left to go to Wawa.

The man looked at them. With fury and pity in his eyes, he ran outside the tent, quickly unzipping the door and screamed. “WAIT, WAIT, COME BACK, YOU DESPERATELY NEED TO HEAR THE END” the man's voice echoed out into the night, not even an echo came from his voice.

Jack looked at his watch. 8:31. “Man, we haven't eaten anything all day and it's already 8:31 at night” Jack looked at his watch and whispered. “Eight thirty-one at night, three hours, twenty-nine minutes, and forty-three seconds to midnight, which is when I have to come back.” Now Jack was talking a bit louder. “Uh, guys?” Jack told the four other friends about what time it is.

“Oh well. Must be a coincidence” Justin said.

“Let's just get some hotdogs, should be fine” Noah told Jack. Jack looked back at the tent, then at his watch, the second hand wasn't moving.

Jack said with a sigh of relief “Oh my watch is broken.” Jack looked back at the tent. Darkness shrouded the tent. The darkness crept out of the tent, creeping over to the kids. Jack's ears rang, his eyes narrowed, his limbs felt weak. He fell to his knees. Then, the ringing turned into a low pop.

“Jack?” a familiar voice said.

“Jack, you there? Can you hear me?” another familiar voice said. “JACK!”

Jack woke up in a cold sweat but, it wasn't sweat, it was freezing rain. “AAH!” Jack screamed, in a very, very high-pitched voice, “WHAT HAPPENED ME?” He looked around, and saw the same thing happening outside to Justin. Jack attempted to run to Justin, but it was to no avail. It would take too long. Then Jack remembered the story. “A fly” a head said in his voice. “That's it, I'm a fly!” Jack attempted to fly and get used to his body, but he had to stay a centimeter off the ground. Or else there will be serious injuries.

“Where did Jack go? Did he run off into the Wawa without us?” Justin talked to himself for a bit, then Justin had the same fate as Jack. Jack flew over Justin, he looked like a fly, but without wings.

“Justin, Justin the story. IT WAS REAL, WAKE UP JUSTIN, C'MON WE NEED TO GO.” Jack grabbed Justin, picked him up, and flew through the rain, attempting to dodge the rain droplets. Jack then brought Justin to Spencer and went down on his hair, since it was warm. Spencer grabbed a hotdog. The warmth of the hotdog made Spencer's cold hands feel like they were in gloves. The shining ketchup pouring out of the bottle made the temperature of the hotdog go down by 4 degrees, down to a perfect 85 degrees. The glistening mustard leaped out of the bottle and down onto the hotdog, going on top of the ketchup. Spencer took a bite out of the perfect hotdog, Spencer ate the hotdog like he hasn't eaten in years. “It's only a matter of time till Spencer falls victim to the story” Jack said in his head to himself quietly. Then he heard rustling, and then a soft thud in the forest of hair. Jack looked around to find out what was happening.

“Where . . ? am I?” Justin said, while looking around his surroundings. “Are we in a jungle?” Justin asked.

“No, we're in Spencer's hair” Jack answered, “we have to wait for something to happen, when Spencer turns. I have a feeling he will become an ant. He's a hard worker.” After Jack and Justin saw Noah and Spencer swap to bugs, Jack picked them up and brought them to the employee room and put them in the dirty carpet. It was more than a forest. It was a mountain range of crumbs and soda cans.

“Man, it happened to us. Darn that sucks. I don't want to spend the rest of my life as a wood eating

creepy crawly” Noah said with a sigh and a look of regret.

“Heeey, where's Jessie?” Spencer asked, looking around. It was like a forest on the employee carpet in Wawa, and with the crumbs and chips it wasn't helping with sight.

“Right here bud” Jessie answered Spencer, with a mocking voice.

“Oh wow you're an isopod, fitting aint it?” Spencer said in a taunting voice, while walking closer, looking grateful.

“Oh be quiet Spencer, you're an ant, you can't be talking” Jessie returned the taunt edging closer as well.

Spencer got annoyed at that. “At least I can carry up to 50 times my weight, what do you do? Be translucent and eat food for a living?” Spencer said, then Spencer pushed Jessie, and Spencer and Jessie got into a fight. Spencer and Jessie are notorious for fighting over things

“Alright let's just do our work, I talked to some other termites and they directed us to some colonies needing help” Noah explained while stopping the fight.

“When did you . . . never mind” Jack said confused.

Spencer went to collect food for multiple ant colonies. Jessie went to eat food and give food to a king. Noah ate through porches for the termite king for food. Jack and Justin worked together to gather food. After all the five kids did a lot of work, their insect leaders told them to go and meet up at the tent where the storyteller was. Since the leaders knew what was going on.

“After the five kids put in their work, they met up, and became human again” the mysterious man said. “Once the five kids worked day and night till they couldn't walk. The colony leaders sent them to a tent. A tent in the middle of a city. Through trial and error, they made it through. Many trials and many hardships the kids have endured. Then when the subtle orange light of daybreak touches the kids. They wake up, like it was all a dream. Though still weary, their beds feel softer than the beds have ever been. The warm blanket and the fluffy pillows. But nobody but the kids believe them” the man told them with a grin. Then the kids stepped outside and the sunlight hit them. They woke up in their bed, just like the story. They became human again, engulfed by the warmth of the blanket. They didn't want to move, but they had to get up. To tell the tale of the “dream”. They then met up and talked for a bit.

“That sure was an adventure” Noah exclaimed.

“At least we're not bugs” Spencer said. “Though I am still scarred. Ya know, ant conflict” Spencer said with a stutter while looking down on the ground.

“Yeah, that could be scarring” Jack replied. The five friends were talking until a white van pulled up. They thought it was a kidnapper and ran until they heard the sirens. Apparently they had been missing for 5 days and then just “showing up” wasn’t believable. The kids had to tell the story.

Spencer Farrell, age 13
Hillsborough Middle School
Somerset County
Grade 7



Artwork:

Trisha Iyer, age 13
Branchburg Central Middle School
Grade 7

Escape Room - A Horror Story Part 1

“Every day that family causes disturbance in this community,” Gretchen Baker complained loudly, “Someone NEEDS to call an assembly with them about their nasty children!”

Seven other heads nodded and mumbled “Amen!” and “You said it.” Gretchen smiled, pleased with her audience. The weekly Jessica Lane Women’s Club was meeting in Gretchen’s living room. Peeling, cat vomit colored wallpaper from the 50’s wrapped around the walls like a grotesque Christmas present. An enormous fire radiated the room, causing an uncomfortable warmth. Eight, haughty middle-aged women sat, complaining, drinking tea, nodding their heads, and repeating the process all over again.

“Oh, but Gretchen, you’re not *their* neighbor. I wake up at exactly 12:28 AM every Sunday because those wretched girls are always climbing out their bedroom window and running off!!” complained Agatha Cicidel, another sad, grumpy neighbor.

Again, seven heads nodded while sipping tea, some grumbling, some as quiet as a mouse. And so, the Jessica Lane Women’s Club sat in Gretchen Baker’s uncomfortable living room, nodding their heads simultaneously, like they did every Friday of every week of every month, in the same room in the same town, nothing changing.

“Tanvi, Ameena, HURRY UP!” Michelea screamed as hazy mist coated the air around the Central Jersey Psych Ward. A group of girls dressed in black huddled up as they attempted their greatest exploration quest ever, the abandoned hospital. Two of the five were cowering in the back, trailing behind the others.

“No, I don’t think we will,” I pouted, “I don’t even want to be here.” Michelea looked back and sighed. Tanvi and Ameena, still cowering slightly, stuck their tongues out in a childish manner.

“Leave them alone,” Maya, a rarely smiling yet sweet girl advised, “Besides, we’re already here.” The girls looked to the right, and there it stood, the abandoned psych ward on Surrey Lane. Only true daredevils ever went inside. Once, Billy McManus claimed he had gone in there, AND had seen a ghost. Everyone knew he was lying of course, Billy McManus is such a loser. But, even if he WAS a loser, Billy McManus was still supposedly doing cooler things than the girls were.

“Ever since that STUPID Women’s Club came to the house, we haven’t sneaked out,” Ameena complained a week before the quest, “Face it guys, we’re LAME!!” Ameena scared the girls with the prospect of *lameness*, and sure enough here they were, all staring wide eyed at the haunting hospital. Tanvi gulped

loudly, being dramatic as always. The silence and fear was so tangible you could cut it with a knife. Fortunately, one girl ended the awkwardness.

“Come on guys,” Emily urged, “Let's go in and STOP acting like babies.” Emily was the bravest out of all of us. She was super pretty too, with blonde hair and blue eyes. She has an “I don't care” attitude, but we all knew she secretly did. Me and Maya sighed loudly and followed Michelea, Emily, and Ameena into the dark, damp building.

The abandoned hospital on Surrey Lane was a daunting sight to see from the outside. It towered over you, with broken windows and dilapidated features. It was the perfect place for something horrible to happen, like a kidnapping or a murder. Maya made sure to remind everyone of this fact as they were walking around on the inside. “Oh my GOD Maya, shut up!” Ameena squealed as her eyes darted around the flies buzzing around us.

“Y'know, if we are trying to find evidence that we were here, we should probably split up,” Emily advised.

“WHAT? Absolutely NOT!!!” screams of protest yelled in the night.

“Wait,” Michelea rationed, “She might be right, and let's be honest, there's nothing in here that's gonna hurt us.” We all slowly agreed, but me and Ameena REFUSED to separate from each other. We headed upstairs. Slivers of moonlight traced our backs as we ascended up the stairs and into the attic. Ameena pulled the string that unhooked the ladder and a mountain of dust cascaded around us. Coughing, we climbed up the rickety old ladder and into the eerie looking attic. The struggle to find the light was the scariest, for going deeper into the dark, dank attic was like falling out of an airplane without a parachute. It's likely going to end with death. Finally, Ameena pulled a light switch and we continued our exploration. Old patient files, pictures, dolls, and boxes and boxes of untouched artifacts surrounded us. With a grin, I picked up a picture of an asylum patient with weird hair and blue eyes. “Billy MacManus” was all I thought when I saw that old black and white frame. It was the perfect proof. I was about to tell Ameena that we should leave when we heard an ear-piercing scream coming from downstairs. My pupils dilated as I turned to look at Ameena. Maya! We dashed down the stairs and followed the wails and cries of Maya until we reached a slightly open door. Scratches decorated the walls, and a chain was tacked in the middle of the door. Thrusting the door wide open, we ran downstairs to find Maya and the rest of the girls frozen in shock.

“WHAT THE H-” Ameena started.

“Shhhhh!” Maya whispered, eyes wide and sweat beading on her forehead. I followed her gaze and saw the most horrific site I’ve ever seen. Blood was splattered all over the walls, pictures and inaudible writings staining the concrete. Human heads were pickled and then stuck onto wooden stakes that were sloppily stuck around the room. Salt circles scarred the floor, previous inmates writing “HELP ME” and “SAVE YOUR-SELF” with knives. In the middle of the room, there was a circle of mirrors. The worst part was that the entire room was dusty and dirty, untouched for years, except for the circle of mirrors. Emily was already looking at the walls, trying to decipher the language. Ameena had not advanced from the staircase, and was starting to look green. Maya and Michelea didn’t look healthy either. There was something about the room that screamed “come closer”. I didn’t want to come closer, I wanted to run. I wanted to crawl into my parents’ bed and tell them what had happened. I blame myself for not listening to my gut sooner.

“We need to go...” I started trying to climb up the stairs with Ameena.

“NO,” Emily barked. She yelled in a cruel way, and we were all stunned. She seemed to have surprised herself because she quieted down and said “I mean, we didn’t come all the way here just to run away. We should at least stay for a bit.” She was not convincing anyone, and we all huddled near the stairs and watched her inspect a nearby head. Suddenly, she shifted her eyes and looked at the circle of mirrors.

My heart pounded rapidly in my chest, “DON’T DO IT,” I thought, “PLEASE DON’T.” It was useless to hope, she already headed towards the mirrors.

“Guys, come on,” Emily laughed, “This is actually really cool.” We all peeled off the staircase and joined her inside the mirrors. Honestly, it *was* really cool. Each mirror reflected a different color, and we had a lot of fun gazing at ourselves. Maya even took a selfie. We were having a great time when CRASH. We swiveled our heads to Emily, who had mistakenly broken one of the mirrors. “Oops...” Emily sheepishly chuckled. She bent down to pick up the glass. “EMILY, DON’T!!” Ameena yelled. BAM! Another loud jolt and a sound of air and Emily was gone.

Tanvi Jadhav, age 13
Hillsborough Middle School
Somerset County
Grade 7

The Precarious Slope

Making my way towards the window, I drew in a breath of fresh air and outstretched my arms, embracing the beautiful afternoon I would experience an entire week before I had school again. I quickly peered through the window, letting exciting emotions boiling inside me explode when I saw a foot of snow covering the ground. It had snowed once again! At that moment, my brother burst through the door. He was very similar to me in appearance. His glasses were like mine, he was tall and thin, he had a long neck, but there was one difference: he was three grades above me.

Regardless of him however, I yelled, “There’s a foot of snow outside!” before letting him rub his eyes. For proof, as he evidently didn’t believe me, he carefully and quietly made his way towards me, his eyes blinded by the white magnificence through the window.

“Wow!” my brother, Siddharth, started, “We should tell everybody to come to the hill today! We can make a ramp with this much snow! Right Vedant? Let’s go right now!”

“Yeah, definitely! I can’t believe we didn’t even know it was snowing. Let’s go to the hill!” The hill we were talking about was the backyard of our friend Arush’s neighbor. Being very smooth, curvy, sloped, and lively, it was easily the most beautiful area in the neighborhood. During the summer, it was a colorful and vibrant place for plants to grow and vivid greens to rest, but in the winter, it was a different story: it became a steep, daring hill challenged by only the daredevils of our community.

We were about to exit the room, when- “Boys, come down!” our mother and father abruptly shouted. “Arush and Karthik asked if you guys would like to play outside. They’re already at the hill,” my mom informed as we dangerously hopped off the fifth stair step, and she didn’t *ask* as the following answer was expected.

“Yeah sure!” my brother and I said simultaneously. *That’s funny. That was our plan to begin with*, I thought to myself.

Once I was changed and suited with thermals and regular clothes, jackets, snow pants, gloves, boots, removal of glasses, sled, we were out through the already ajar garage. Before us was a silent wonderland of beautiful snow, perfectly white, smooth, and compact, to the point where we didn’t want to ruin its magnificence. My brother and I slowly trudged through the snow, the scarlet and yellow sled in our hands. And after what seemed like a mile away, we saw tiny black smudges against the white canvas of snow. Our friends.

“Sid! Vedant!” one of our friends started from afar, “you made it!” My brother and I quickened our pace now, bolting through the snow.

“You’ve already started a ramp?” my brother inquired, taking measured breaths in between words, “I thought you were gonna wait.”

“Can’t wait too long,” one of our friends, Karthik, began. He was a portly fourth-grader, with thick and combed hair, a thick jacket, and without glasses. Karthik, my brother, and I were the best of friends, and sometimes we’d stay at his house longer than our own!

“Yeah, but we haven’t done too much,” our other friend, Arush, abruptly chimed in, “you can still help.” Arush was the same age as my brother, Siddharth, so naturally they were great friends. He had an oval head, with curly hair that shot up for half an inch, remnants of a mustache starting to grow in, and a smirk plastered on his face.

“Well... let’s start. Get more compact snow,” I suggested, joining the conversation. Immediately, Arush and Karthik resumed their packing of smooth snow against the half-built ramp. My brother followed. We continued on with the construction of the ramp carefully crafting the slope and edges. And after an hour of hard work we had a supposedly fully functional ramp.

“So...” began Arush, “who wants to test it first?”

I was intrigued, ready, prepared to test it out first. “Me!” I screamed, rushing to grab the sled, “Sid and I will test it!” My brother, expectedly, looked confused. I didn’t necessarily consult him before saying that.

“Okay, sure I guess,” he said, staring straight at my eyes. *Testing time*, I thought to myself happily. We lugged the sled up the hill. Dropping the sled against the now messy snow, my brother commanded me to sit in the back. I complied, watching my brother as he held the string meant for snowboarding. We let our legs escape the confines of the sled, pushing the snow which propelled us forwards. Down, down, down, and then the sled came to a disappointing halt.

“Aw, come on,” I dejectedly said, “let’s try again I guess.”

“Okay fine,” came the voice of my brother. We repeated the process of lifting the sled up and sitting on it, but now we propelled ourselves much more with our legs. This time, we started down the hill at a great speed. The wind was violently pelting us. *This is-* I thought, surprised that even my mind was silenced by the offending wind, *so fun! We’re going so fast! I can’t wait to get to the ramp!* But I *could* wait. And I could hardly af-

ford to look as we approached the ramp. The indication that told me we had safely taken off from the ramp was the sudden change in elevation: 5 feet, 7 feet, 10 feet. I was so blinded by the thrill and exhilaration of that moment, that I was oblivious to the fact that wind was pushing against the tail of the sled. It angled the tail steeply, ejecting my brother and I off the sled. I clawed desperately at any sort of grip I could find, but it was too late. My legs clashed against the top of the ramp, resulting in the upper half of my body to flop against the ice. A crimson pool formed around my mouth, the steel-hard circle of protruding ice causing my teeth to chatter dangerously. My brother was plunged into the snow in front of me, rising upwards carefully before turning to the ramp-and me. His face turned pale, like mine, and his laughing was extinguished, turning to frightened expressions and screams. My friends caught up with me at that point, and they hefted me upward with their hands.

“What...” I started soullessly, “am I...”

“You’re fine,” Arush grunted, panting as he took a break from dragging me.

“What did I hit?” I managed to say through a bloody and sticky mouth, “that was supposed to be more fun. We were supposed to play for two more hours and then have hot chocolate and then have a good dinner and...” Hot tears started streaming down my eyes, mixing with the blood to create discolored red droplets. *Winter break was supposed to be fun*, I thought, hiccupping between tears, *by the time the injury goes away it’ll be schooltime again!* Heavier droplets fell, until there weren’t any droplets to fall anymore. All I saw were blurred images of my friends carrying me as we headed to the deck in our backyard. They lifted me up the flight of wooden stairs with much difficulty, and we soon reached the mesh screen door. They set me down, and I was able to hold my balance, twitching nervously. My eyelids were painted a dark red, impairing my vision, and I was barely able to comprehend my mother’s worried face. She quickly noticed my face and opened the door, dropping her cell phone which was put to a clattering stop on the floor.

“What happened?” my mom panicked, dragging my bloody body inside. My dad came rushing down to the commotion, and he quickly made his way towards me.

“I’ll go wash his face,” my dad informed, motioning for me to follow him. I walked to the bathroom, snow from my boots ruining the family room carpet. My dad put a hand filled with water to my face, repeating this until I didn’t look like a wreck. My teeth were intact, luckily, so I sighed with a gruesome thought out of my head.

“Is he okay?” my brother questioned, walking towards us.

“Yeah he’s fine. Just a little cut.”

A little cut? I thought to myself, looking at a cleaned laceration through the mirror. “Yep,” I replied instinctively, exiting the bathroom with a damp towel wrapped around my forehead.

“Just sit down and watch TV,” my dad told me as I entered the family room.

“See you!” we yelled simultaneously. This day could’ve gone so much better if this didn’t happen, I thought to myself. If only I didn’t try such a foolishly reckless thing. Escaping out of my droning thoughts, I turned on the television, beginning to watch my favorite show which had a new episode just released. My brother, who was somehow physically unfazed by this whole incident, watched with me, and the whole time I vowed in my head to never again try a ramp. But I was a boy.

Vedant Kumar, age 14
Hillsborough Middle School
Somerset County
Grade 8

Woodstock 99

On day one
Starts peaceful
Friends getting together
Not expecting to be fearful
Very warm outside
Trying to keep cool
Staying in the shade
Wanting to be in a pool

On day two
The music starts
Everyone is pumped
Excited to see their favorite bands
Starts with Quill
Everyone raised their hands
Dancing, jumping, rolling around
People started to like the sound

On day three
All hell breaks loose
Prices to high
Makes people crazy
Like an angry goose
People get mad
Start tearing stuff down
Heat stroke, starvation, and dehydration
Everyone is tired
“Treat us like animals then we will act like animals”

End of day three
After Korn played
Everyone is shocked
Scared, fearful
People are flocked together
Around the fire
Everything is lit
And everything is dire

After the events
Everyone is shocked
Woodstock burnt down
Well what did they expect
All their demands and requests were drowned

Avril LaBar, age 13
Hillsborough Middle School
Somerset County
Grade 7

Soccer

Below the sky
On the pitch
Beside my friends
Along the line
Toward the ball
Around the enemy
Off your foot
Past the goalie
In the net
Near my dance

Princess Peach

In the night
Around the wood
Past the gates
Above the lava
Across the bridge
Into the castle
Down the halls
Up the stairs
Through the door
To the princess

Brandon Lopez, age 13
Hillsborough Middle School
Somerset County
Grade 7

The Ugliest Animal in the World

Why is your crown filled with frown?
What you are rated can be debated
For, the ugliest animal can't be you

Don't we all deflate at death?
Yet now you are a pink fugghou; mushy
Like lifeless limp putty lying in my hands

Why don't you turn your lifelong frown upside down?
Dead: your beauty is translucent, like little white lies
Witty and wondrous for the ones with wide eyes

What about the life you have lived?
In it, you resembled the average fish

Yet your head was bigger than most
Yet your optic holes were bigger than most
Yet your mouth was bigger than most

Why are big things petrifying?
They boast: the biggest stars, shine brighter
Like you little blob; your rike above the fishdom

Surely, this proves your entitlement
For, now you are no longer the ugliest
Instead, your beauty reigns supreme

Fatima Noor, age 13
Hillsborough Middle School
Somerset County
Grade 8

Major Dental Work

“Another one!” exclaimed Commissioner Shah. “How many more dead bodies are we going to find?” Commissioner Shah is a rough man as many constables would say. The commissioner and his highly trained team had found several people chopped up and in suitcases all around the state. Many people had been suspected, old criminals, with many other people, but yet the commissioner has yet to find any actual evidence of the crimes other than the bodies. More evidence needed to be seen to make a final decision. One thing so far that had been seen was that most of the victims are seen to be charity workers, not all, but some. The commissioner had seen many cases in his entire life but nothing as mysterious as this.

At the site of the new crime scene, postmortem inspector, Pranet Godavarty, an established person, was taking down notes. “Well Mr. Godavarty it seems that this murder is just as gruesome as the last one?” asked the commissioner.

“There are several abrasions on the victim's skin this could be a sign of torture,” said Pranet. “There are many things to take into account but the biggest thing is they all have recent dental work such as braces and or retainers,” Pranet also told the commissioner

“Then our targets are dentists – to see if they have done any dental work to these patients,” Shah said.

“Well that's right,” Pranet replied.

“Also something interesting, all of the bodies have been found with a colored piece of metal that seems to mark the victims,” Pranet exclaimed.

“That is something to remember then,” Shah responded.

The commissioner got his constables to work getting on a high watch of the case. The commissioner ordered a wide search around the state for dentists who had these patients.

Doctor Surendra was an established dentist with a well-known practice and many people were murdered. The commissioner had his suspicions but were they true?

As the investigation into the murders continued, the commissioner and his team were able to connect the dots and gather more evidence against Dr. Surendra. They found that he had a history of violence and had been involved in illegal activities in the past.

The commissioner decided to go himself to the practice. There he was stabbed in the back which resulted in him running back and then coming back to fight Doctor Surendra. The doctor was put in handcuffs to

avoid him escaping. Surendra was charged with his crimes and was put in jail.

During the trial, the prosecution presented the evidence against Dr. Surendra, including the dental work that was found on the victims and the colored pieces that were used to mark them. The defense tried to argue that the evidence was circumstantial, but the jury ultimately found Dr. Surendra guilty.

In the aftermath of the trial, Commissioner Shah reflected on the case. He realized that sometimes the most unexpected suspects can be the ones responsible for the most heinous crimes. He also recognized the importance of paying attention to even the smallest details, as they can sometimes be the key to solving a case.

One day, a few months after the trial had ended, Commissioner Shah was walking through the city when he heard a familiar voice. It was Pranet, the postmortem inspector who had worked on the case with him.

"Commissioner Shah!" Pranet exclaimed. "It's good to see you. How have you been?"

"I've been well," the commissioner replied. "How about you?"

"I've been busy," Pranet said. "Working on some new cases. But I wanted to talk to you about something."

"What is it?"

"I've been doing some research on dental forensics," Pranet said, "and I think there's a lot of potential there. We could use dental records to identify victims and even suspects."

"That's an interesting idea," the commissioner said. "Have you talked to anyone about it?"

"I haven't yet," Pranet said. "I wanted to get your thoughts on it first."

"Well, I think it's definitely worth exploring," the commissioner said. "We should set up a meeting with some experts in the field and see what they think."

Over the next few months, Commissioner Shah and Pranet worked together to develop a plan for incorporating dental forensics into their investigations. They consulted with dental experts and trained their team in the latest techniques.

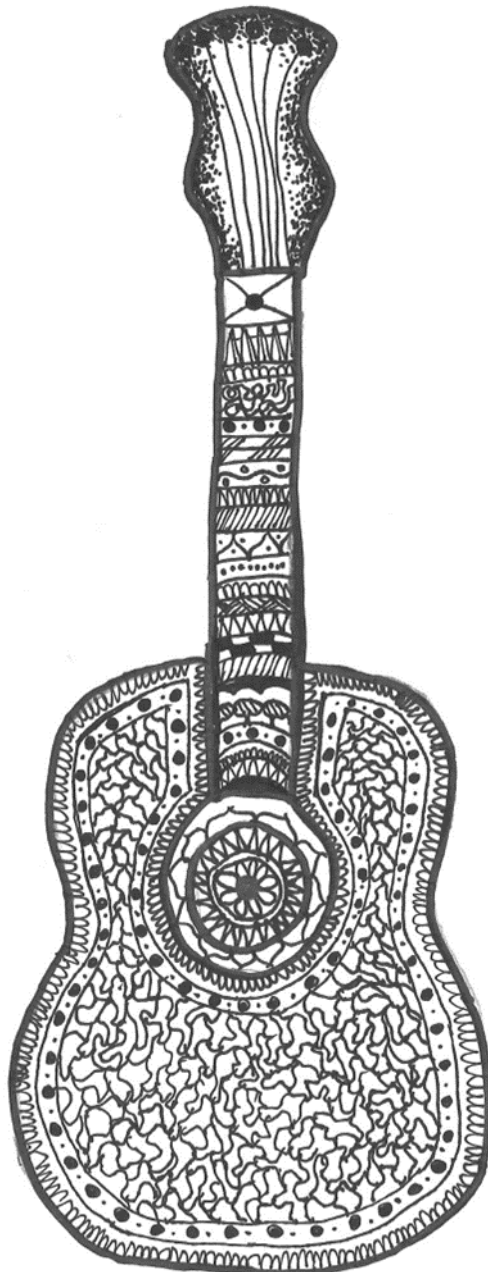
And it paid off. They were able to solve several cases that had previously been unsolvable, using dental records to identify victims and suspects. The commissioner was proud of the work they had done, and he knew that they were making a difference in their community.

As he looked back on the Major Dental Work case, he realized that it had been a turning point for him.

It had taught him to be more vigilant, to pay attention to the details, and to never underestimate the power of science and technology in solving crimes.

In the end, Commissioner Shah was grateful for the experience, as it had made him a better investigator and had given him a renewed sense of purpose in his work. And he knew that he would continue to strive for justice, no matter how difficult the cases might be.

Aarav Pidparthy, age 14
Hillsborough Middle School
Somerset County
Grade 8



Artwork:

Isabella Prozor, age 15
Bound Brook High School
Grade 10

The Old Glasses

“Whoa!” Luke found an old pair of glasses in his backpack, they were black and dirty. Luke cleaned the glasses with his hands. He took off his glasses and put on the old pair. He really liked them, so he decided he would wear the old glasses to school.

When he sat down to eat breakfast he saw his least favorite thing to eat. “Ugh, I want to eat a better breakfast,” he said to himself. After a few seconds the glasses started to switch colors, the entire house shook and Luke got scared. “Weird,” he thought. When Luke looked at his breakfast he saw that it was now his favorite cereal. “WHAT, HOW?” He then realized that these glasses will make his wish come true.

When Luke got to school he couldn’t wait to tell everyone about his new glasses that are magical.

“Hey Zach, look at these new glasses,” Luke said excitedly. He couldn’t wait for Zach’s response.

“What, you must be embarrassed to wear those!” yelled Zach.

“But these are magical,” explained Luke.

“I don’t care,” said Zach rudely.

Luke was really upset that Zach didn't care about his glasses. He found his desk in his classroom and sat down quietly.

“I wish people would talk to me nicely,” said Luke sadly. He put his arms on his desk and closed his eyes. The school shook like there was an earthquake.

“Is Luke here?” asked the teacher.

“Yeah I'm here,” replied Luke.

“You did an amazing job on your homework by the way,” complimented the teacher.

“Thank you,” replied Luke. A second later everyone started to compliment Luke.

“YOU DRESS NICELY!” yelled a kid across the classroom. Luke had no idea what was going on and why everyone was being nice to him.

“Thank you” replied Luke. After class he went to his locker. Zach had the locker next to him.

“Sorry about earlier, your glasses are so cool,” said Zach.

Luke now realized that his wish had come true because of the glasses. Since Zach was finally talking to Luke, he decided to tell him about the glasses.

“This morning I wished for my favorite breakfast and I got it,” said Luke.

“NO WAY, DO MAGIC RIGHT NOW!” said Zach excitedly.

“I wish for this locker to be red” wished Luke. The glasses changed colors, the building shook and the locker turned red.

“NO WAY!” screamed Zach. Luke couldn’t believe the look on Zach’s face, he never saw Zach this excited before.

Later during the ninth period, Luke was ready for social studies. “Is that the kid with the magical glasses?” whispered a classmate. Luke found his desk in the classroom while everyone stared at him.

“Why are they staring at me?” Luke thought.

“Hey, I told everyone about your magical glasses, you're now famous,” said Zach with a confident voice. Luke looked nervous like a chimpanzee, Zach didn’t know that Luke hated attention.

“Hey, can I have your glasses for a minute?” asked a kid.

“No way, can you grant one of my wishes please?” said one of his classmates. Luke hated everyone staring at him and he wanted them to stop. To escape he went to get something from his locker.

“Hello, can I have one of my wishes granted please?” asked Jake, one of Luke’s classmates.

“Please leave me alone” begged Luke.

When Luke got home he was thinking about what happened at school and how it stressed him out. He didn’t like anybody staring at him for the whole period. It was all because of the glasses. After Luke did his homework he went to bed.

“Tomorrow, I'm going to destroy these glasses” Luke whispered to himself.

The next morning he put on his own glasses. He looked at the old pair and thought to himself “I don't need these glasses.” He took the glasses and snapped them in half with no regret. When he got to school, everyone was confused why he didn’t wear the old pair of glasses. He then told everyone that he destroyed them.

“BOO!” yelled Zach.

Everyone went back to not talking to him, then he realized that people only used him for his glasses. He felt really happy that he destroyed them.

Neeraj Pipuri, age 13
Hillsborough Middle School
Somerset County
Grade 7

The Day the Sun Stopped Rising

It is said, if the sun disappeared, we would not know for 8 minutes. But in those same moments the Earth would draw out of course and be flung into the depths of space. Life would cripple and die off. Earth would remain in the dark forever. Her cheek rests against the leather cushioning of the red Volvo, leaning peacefully against the rim of the car. Curly blonde hair blows astray in the wind's soft caresses as we speed through the rolling hills, her expression set in a peaceful smile as she sleeps. That was my daughter, Mira, and she was the sun of my life. It did not take me 8 minutes to realize when she disappeared.

Two years prior

Overlaid atop a backdrop of blossoming peach hues, streaks of pastel blues, and bright oranges blend together in a balmy ombre of color. The warmth of the sun's rays wash our bodies in a soft golden color as it peeks through the puffing clouds above, and falls onto our skin. From the rearview mirror, I catch a fleeting glimpse of Mira. She's a swirl of color in a world of grays. She's the miracle I never knew I needed. As if reminding us of the approaching evening, the sky slowly deepens in color until its navy blue hues blanket the Earth. Around us, the shrill chirps and clicks of cicadas overwhelm the night's stillness and the forest becomes awake and buzzing with animals of the night. The two fluorescent beams of light from the headlights penetrate the fog. Just to the right of the steering wheel, the small screen displaying the GPS lights up and beeps in response to the car's location. *Just in time.*

Cool, fresh air seems to settle on us as I kill the engine and emerge from the Volvo to open the backseat. Mira sleeps curled up in the back and her face is settled into an adorable pout. A soft smile takes over my features as I scoop her up, one hand supporting her scrawny body, and the other holding the car keys. As her face remains buried in the crook of my neck, I feel the chill of the night settle into the air- creeping through my skin and fixing itself into the very marrow of my bones. The motel did not instill confidence in me. The chipped glass front lay littered with scratches and spiderweb cracks. Derelict and dilapidated, the only sign of life lay in the hanging red and blue neon sign that spelled the word "OPEN" in a large, stilted font. The door was left slightly ajar as I pushed it open. It was clear that any varnishing that had once decorated the place were either ravaged by vermin or rampaged by the grasp of time. Yet, despite my growing unease, I walked up to the front desk and pressed the silver bell. A resounding ding answered, and a small whimper

erupted from beneath the wooden table. A heaving gasp followed by a frenzied shout and repeated phrases were what continued to be heard from underneath. Setting Mira down, I walked around the table to find the source.

The figure rocked back and forth on the floor, and I could see it was crying heaving sobs. A flood of tears streamed down their cheeks, and their backs heaved uncontrollably. Again a wave of unease rolled down my body, I continued to ignore its warnings. With shaking hands, I placed a comforting hand on the figure's shoulder. They froze for a moment and turned to face me. Only then could I see it was a woman. Her dark red lips trembled uncontrollably but it was not sadness, nor panic I saw in those silvery blue eyes. It was a look of sheer terror. It was the type of uncensored, pure fear that would burn into your memory for decades. The type of fear that would wake you up in the middle of the night. The type of fear that no man, woman, or child should ever have to experience. From the corner of my vision, I found myself in realization. The drawers had come loose and hung from their slots, ransacked clean. This was a robbery. I stared at it for a moment longer and felt the warm tip of a gun pressed against my temple. Mira. Bile rose up through my throat and I felt the walls rapidly caving in. The edges of my vision grew frayed with black and gray and the only voices I heard were muffled by the overwhelming pound of blood coursing through my ears. A fish-eyed lens tunneled my vision as my hand groped through the air, hoping again and again for Mira's small hand to be gripped around mine. *Nothing*. Looking over to my left, I watched in fear as Mira crept from behind the counter and squealed with delight. Her joy was not reciprocated and in a spur of naivety, she waddled over to me- innocently unaware of the situation. Beads of sweat formed on my forehead as I tried frantically to wave her away. It was too late. The bullet came before her scream did. Dark rosettes of blood bloomed near her chest and stained her pastel yellow shirt a deep red. Her eyes lost their shine and turned glassy like a doll's. The blood pooled near my feet, trickling through the small indents of the flooring and I bent down, touching it, feeling its sickly stickiness on my fingers. *Was this real? Is she..?* Rabid shrieks escaped from my mouth. Somewhere, a gut-wrenching sob echoed throughout the lobby and I vaguely remember wondering who it came from. *Was it my scream? Did it matter?* Hot, wet tears pooled in my eyes, but I refused to let them fall. I would stay strong. Maybe not for me, but at least for Mira. A man's hand clutched the collar of my shirt and twisted it so I would be forced to look into their eyes. Chestnut-brown irises met icy cerulean ones and I felt his eyes boring through me; I looked straight back, no longer afraid. Her murderers would suffer tenfold. No, a thousand times

over. My vision crept up and I no longer saw the world in color. Earth was not a world I wanted to live in if my daughter wouldn't be in it. Because, in my eyes, the day my Mira died, was the day the sun stopped rising.

Never thought it would be so hard loving

All of it amounting to nothing

But you took half my heart and locked it away

Leaving me to think about you every day

Aditi Polamuri, age 13
Hillsborough Middle School
Somerset County
Grade 8

The Knight Guards

Knoir's Log #536

Another day, another crime we have to stop with the most recent case being no different from the rest. Same could be said about my day, with I having to wake up, put on head-to-toe clothing, and walk from the apartment to the rusty, abandoned, dirty, warehouse, a warehouse that once was used for shipping packages left to right, 25 hours non-stop, and now sits there abandoned. A perfect place for both me and my crew to meet up for times of investigation.

So as I went through those doors I saw the rest of the crew with Man Hooter using every blood vessel in his arm mussel to win an arm wrestling match with Steel Scales and 3rd-O still trying to get ahold of her aiming abilities, with progress being so far so mediocre. And after passing the many places and other members, I got to where the Missile Men were standing, with said Men being near, and looking at the one-way glass window, watching and listening to the conversation and events occurring inside the interrogation room.

“So, what have you guys figured out so far?”

“The whole operation is going to take place in the More Mega shopping mall” Mr. Missile was quick to answer, with him soon continuing with “as well as the fact that he had a code name, The Guinea Pig.” And as soon as I looked through the window the rest were looking at, I could see why. And so readier than ever I went in the room with the three Missile Men wishing me good luck.

As I opened the door I saw both King Shadows and Fabulous Frenzy interrogating The Guinea Pig who was essentially a man with pale skin, white pants, white socks, brown shoes, brown coat, under said coat was a brown vest, a striped buttoned shirt underneath said vest, brown hair, and a strand of white hair to go along with it. “Enough shaking, just leave him on the desk.”

Frenzy obliged, putting the small cage on the desk, with Guinea Pig being in said cage, “So you're The Guinea Pig, huh? I can tell you your codename is pretty subtle.”

With a high-pitched voice soon replying, so high it could be mistaken for a guinea pig talking, coming out of the man's mouth, “Ha-ha, very funny.”

As soon as he was done with the banter I started to do my persuasion, “So listen, if you think you will get out of that midget cage anytime soon you can forget it, heck you'll be lucky if you can even unlock the cage doo-”, but sadly at that moment his banter only recharged.

“Ooooh”

“Shiver me timbers”

“I am about to PISS my pants right now”

And at that point I just snapped, I didn’t even care if he survived.

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

September 20, 2022

There are six members in my family. My dad doesn't live with me. I have an older brother, younger sister, step dad, and mom. On a weekend with my dad, he bought a football and began teaching me and my brother how to throw it. I had so much fun playing that evening that my dad gave me the ball to keep with me when I had to go back home to my mom. I started playing everyday at the playground by my house with my brother for hours.

The weekend came and my dad asked us, "How is playing with the ball going?"

I replied, "It's going great!" My dad made a suggestion later that night and asked me if I would be interested in playing football in a team. I said, "Hell yeah!". He called my mom and asked her if she could look into it since he lived in another town. At first my mom said she wasn't sure because of my younger sister, work and she also goes to school. I was feeling bummed because I wanted to join a team and experience what it would be like being a part of a team. When I was younger I did join karate school but I was so young I can't really remember much.

My last day of 6th grade came and the following week - I was told by my mom that I would spend the next few weeks in Florida with my grandmother. I was upset because I didn't want to go but then I remembered that I had three cousins whom I hadn't seen for almost a year. My grandfather came to get us and the airplane ride was about three hours away. When I arrived my grandmother said, "Wow you have gotten so tall, you are taller than your grandfather now!" I missed my grandmother because when I was young she used to watch me all the time and make my favorite dishes. Once we arrived home I went straight to my room. I missed having my own room and privacy. The next day I started practicing with my brother in the backyard. I told my grandmother to film me and send it to my mom so she can see I am serious about playing football. Every day she would get a video of me playing with my brother. Finally, I convinced my mom! She called me and said she put me and my brother in a team. It would start the first week of August with training four times a week. I was super excited and couldn't believe it!

My first day of practice I was nervous, my hands were shaking and I didn't want to mess up. When I got on the field it was sunny and hot outside and I was more ready than ever but I was nervous because I didn't know anyone and they all knew each other and I felt left out but that wasn't going to bother me not even a bit. The first thing we did was run one lap around the field and by the end of it was tired and then next was the

stretches that I didn't know existed. This was so new to me, I observed my other teammates who seemed to know everything and I was lost. My first practice was over.

My step dad said, "Great job!"

I was so tired and sore to even walk and I believe I woke up the next day at 12:00 noon and it was not easy to do this and I still gave it my all, which was difficult because my body was not used to it. I was overweight but quickly slimmed down, all my family noticed. It got easier as the weeks went by. My first football game was intense and I was shaking. I was sweating and I was nervous.

My mom said, "You will be fine in the game today so chill out." I got less nervous and got more of my confidence back. It was very hot outside and I was playing my first game in New York. I had my cleats on, red jersey and my armor on. I had no idea how to put my armor on so I asked my coach and he helped me a lot because he knew I had no idea how to put it on. Then we were getting ready to tackle each other so they had three people hold the mat and three people tackle the mat and move it back and then they switch.

The coach said, "Good job guys."

I was worried I wasn't going to do good so mentally I said to myself "I got this!"

My teammate Mathew said, "Keep pushing, we can do this." Then as the sun was starting to go down, it got cooler to play. I began to get more used to the stretches, runs, and tackling. I was just thinking to myself if I tried the hardest how much would I accomplish. The game was over and we did not win.

The next day I did not wake up until 1:00 in the afternoon and when I woke I felt like sleeping for another 10 hours. But it looked really good outside so I went outside for a walk and it was hot, not even cold water can save you from this heat. But then I just went back inside where there was good air conditioning and it felt so nice but the one problem was I was so sweaty and it felt like I was outside for about 5 minutes. I am thankful that I went inside because when I saw myself in the mirror I was looking as red as a tomato.

My brother asked, "why are you so red?"

I said, "I was outside."

My mom said, "Why do you look like you have been slapped across both sides of your face?"

I said, "I was outside and thanks for that comment." The next day was another day of practice but this one was hotter and much more intense and the coach made us do sprints. You have to go in your stance and you have to run to the other side and there is a count like one, three, freeze. I was tired to the point when I got

home and finished taking a shower and got onto my bed. I passed out. Then the next morning I was starving so I ate so much food. There was so much food and it was gone after 30 minutes because of how hungry I was.

Isaiah Rojas, age 13
Hillsborough Middle School
Somerset County
Grade 7



Artwork:

Jade Sun Zhou, age 13
Branchburg Central Middle School
Grade 7

The Mystery Egg

Timmy, Billy, and Jeffy were best friends that lived in the mountains in the cretaceous period. They were testing a time machine June 21, 2023 when all of a sudden, their time machine malfunctioned and the boys teleported to the cretaceous period. They were trying to get back to the year 2023.

One day Billy went to the forest because the boys needed wood for the fire and the time machine. After walking for a very long time, Billy gathered a lot of firewood and logs for the machine until he found a strange looking egg in a big nest.

As Billy got closer, the egg started to glow, so Billy took the egg and started to leave when a dragon flew into the nest. Billy was terrified as the dragon saw Billy was holding her egg. Billy ran as fast as he could when the dragon shot lightning at him. He ran through the forest dodging lightning and trees until he found a lava cave and ran inside to escape the dragon.

Jeffy and Timmy are wondering why Billy wasn't back yet. "Have you seen Billy?" Jeffy said.

"No," Timmy replied as the two looked outside.

They heard screaming from Billy. "HELP!!!!!! PLEASE!!!!" The two boys ran into the forest looking for Billy and saw a dragon chasing him and ran back to the cave to get some food to distract him.

"This should work," Timmy said.

"Let's hope so," Jeffy replied.

Billy ran faster in the cave trying to evade the dragon. After he lost the dragon he found his way out of the cave but realized he was lost. Billy wandered around the forest looking for the other boys or the mountain but it was dark out now and Billy was tired. He found a tree, climbed up it and fell asleep.

Timmy and Jeffy were looking for Billy and the dragon when they found the lava cave Billy was in. They shouted his name "BILLY!!!!" no response. The dragon heard the shouts and rushed to the boys. Timmy and Jeffy saw the dragon and ran as fast as they could. Timmy threw the bait and ran into the woods.

Billy woke up to hear the dragon and his friends screaming for help and calling his name. "HELP, BILLY, where are you?"

"I'm over here!" Billy responded. Timmy and Jeffy found Billy and they all ran back to the mountain and worked on the time machine.

Three Days Later

“The time machine is ready,” Timmy said “but we don’t have anything to power it with.” Just then the egg that Billy stole hatched. It was the egg to the mother dragon that had chased them. The boys were very scared because they thought they were going to get electrocuted by the baby dragon but they didn’t. Instead the baby dragon shot lightning at the time machine and it turned on.

They thanked the baby dragon, gave it food and sent it back to its mother.

“Are you guys ready?” Jeffy asked.

“Yes,” they both Billy and Timmy replied and they jumped in the portal back to the year 2023.

Eric Tipton, age 13
Hillsborough Middle School
Somerset County
Grade 7

Endings (A Holocaust Poem)

Mechanically, he moves his feet,
Step after step, he walks in the dark,
Chains of despair lead to his defeat,
A looming heat begins to lurk.

One after the other, a wall of fire,
Blazing embers as children and elderly,
Disappear in front of those who tire,
Behold a sight, a sight melancholy.

But he is not one to be afraid.
Crying, dying hopeless mothers,
Clueless, helpless, innocents cascade,
All separated, falling in the smother.

When he approaches the deadly pit,
A pile of burning bones and hope,
He stares inside, soul full of grit,
For he knows what must be done in the smoke.

He rips off his necklace,
An old, dirty Star of David,
Once a symbol of hope, now one of disgrace,
And is consumed by the flames as he did.

He will be remembered. He will be honored.
His sacrifice will not be wasted.

Anya Verma, age 13
Hillsborough Middle School
Somerset County
Grade 8

My Cat

On my bed
Against my pillow
In my arms
Along my hands
To pet her softly
At my feet
As I walk
Around furniture
Following me
Around my house
Always loving
Among the rest of the pets
Of all the cats this one is the best.

Snow

Snow moving to ground
Snowballs fly around the sky
Oh, I love Christmas

Wonderful Winter

Snowball fight
Icy, cold
Crackling, freezing, glowing
Snow is great in the winter time.
Snowballs

Stockings

Snow-angels
Cold, icy
Freezing, crackling, falling
Snowflakes all on everyone's face
Snowflake

Ante'nea Winfrey, age 13
Hillsborough Middle School
Somerset County
Grade 7

Manville High School

I Carry

I carry my family's legacy.

The smell of empanadas, and obedience, constantly wafting through our dirty apartment walls. Bills on the table, yet expectations sky high. There was always a plan we were meant to follow. We knew we had to be successful, no matter the cost. From the moment I understood the plan I wanted to burn it to the ground, even though I know I never will. I carry my family's legacy.

I carry my family's expectations.

As a child, I would pretend I had sprouted wings and could fly away at a moment's notice. I pretended that I could fly straight to heaven and bask in the rays of God's love. I thought I could fly, and yet I knew I could never fly high enough to be within arm's reach of those expectations. I knew I was never going to be strong enough to keep my wings flapping, along with my fingers shut tight against the wriggling. Constantly wanting to fly higher, chasing - I was Icarus, and they were my own personal sun. The more I chase their love, the more I slowly melt - hating to admit that I enjoy the burn. I carry my family's expectations.

I carry my family's future.

People say, "life is like a box of chocolates, you'll never know what you'll get," and I used to believe that. I soon learned that my box of chocolates is extremely predictable, yet always ended up bitter. The first time I ever took a bite from a chocolate, I did not know until it was too late. This chocolate took the form of a girl, and she was the only chocolate that remained sweet on my tongue forever. If beauty were time, she would be eternity. I was never told that people knew I took a bite from this chocolate, but I knew they could see its remnants smeared on my face. They would try to wipe it off as harshly as they could, making sure to emphasize the "boy" in "boyfriend." These efforts were in vain, as she never even bought the same brand of chocolate as I. The second, life-changing bite was around the second week of April, 2022, giving me exactly what I feared most. Coming out as transgender was so traumatic that I genuinely do not remember much of it. I

remember the hope for sweetness, melting on my tongue. Opposite of the same melting I had gotten so used to. I remember the gagging, crying, and despair when I got the exact opposite. I carry my family's future.

I carry my family's success.

Volcanoes erupt because magma is thick, and there is nowhere for the gas to escape. When the lava does make it out, it is loud and violent; relying on pressure constantly building. I learned this on one of Disney Jr's attempts at being educational. Although I did not care then - too focused on *Doc McStuffins* - I dreamed of growing up and becoming just like her, helping the ones who needed it most: animals. That stuck until I was 11, my obsession to write quietly blossoming. I confessed my dreams of showing the world my abilities, the one superpower that allowed me to dismiss the notion of ever having wings, along with the notion of God.

Pressure... constantly... building.

Writing became my fuel, and the birth of my everlasting trust issues.

Pressure... constantly... building.

Quickly after my confession, I gave up on it.

Pressure... constantly... building.

I watched the way her face dropped. The way her eyebrows furrowed, allowing the wrinkle in between them to refamiliarize itself with the increase of my heartbeat. Loud and violently, I went back to wanting to be a Veterinarian. Lesson learned. I still avoid that wrinkle in her face. I carry my family's success.

I carry my family's love.

Through studio apartments, bedbugs, women's shelters, and walks through the bitter cold, I had two people next to me. The people who had been next to me since birth. The people who I would not exchange for the world. They are my warmth when the rest of my family is bitter cold. I was a flower struggling to bloom in rough soil, while they were my fertilizer. Sometimes I accidentally burned myself in their warmth, and sometimes it was not an accident. That is okay though, because I love them. And they love me. I carry my family's love.

Aspen Mora, age 16
Manville High School
Somerset County
Grade 10

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

