



**Somerset County**



# 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 2024 Somerset County Teen Arts Festival!

**Cover Artwork:**

Oskar Maslowski, age 13

Branchburg Central Middle School

Somerset County

Grade 8

# SCHOOLS & STUDENTS

## ALEXANDER BATCHO INTERMEDIATE SCHOOL

**Teacher: Jessica Donnataria**

Summer Luna.....	6
------------------	---

## BOUND BROOK HIGH SCHOOL

**Teacher: Elizabeth Levering**

Farouk Abdelmonem.....	10
Kayrine Calderone.....	10
William Convery.....	11
Jennifer Diaz.....	11
Isaac Solis Mora.....	12
Sammilia Afaribea Morgan.....	13
Gabriela Silva.....	14
Emery Vallejo.....	14

## BRANCBURG CENTRAL MIDDLE SCHOOL

**Teacher: Suzanne Updegrove**

Charlotte Meyer.....	16
Lucas Nguyen.....	18

## HILLSBOROUGH MIDDLE SCHOOL

**Teachers: Cristina Acosta, Ozzie Daneshpour, Ian Evans, Meredith Hart, Patrick Heck, Scott Hebenstreit, Jennifer Laster, Rebecca McManus, Shelley Rubin, Kirsten Sandor**

Adeife Adejuwon.....	21
Azalea Ali.....	25
Sragvi Basireddy.....	29
Elodee Calvi.....	30
Samatha Carey.....	32
Jasmine Cheng.....	35
Emma Gatza.....	38
Netanya Gupta.....	39
Esha Hasrajani.....	42

Tanvi Jadhav .....	43
Delaney Kiernan.....	44
Emily Kim.....	47
Avril LaBar .....	50
Anusuya Mukherjee.....	52
Isabella Natale.....	54
Anastasia Orlik .....	55
Alexandra Palmer .....	58
Saanvi Samant.....	61
Sharlyn Sanjiv .....	62
Savitha Sriram.....	63

**North Plainfield High School**

**Teacher: Sarah Van Vliet**

Christopher Espinoza.....	66
---------------------------	----

**Artwork**

Oskar Maslowski .....	Cover Art Contest Winner
Nidia Martinez .....	9
Angie Aiello .....	15
Elizabeth Dahl .....	20
Denys Lelyanov .....	28
Amina Ahmad .....	37
Elizabeth March .....	46
Isabel Piotrowski .....	51
Marissa Hays .....	57
Vanessa Nguyen .....	67

# **ALEXANDER BATCHO INTERMEDIATE SCHOOL**

## **Planet of Two**

Rain from the earth,  
Like teardrops from my eyes  
Destroying me like I'm not worth  
Like my core is what you despise.  
Trees cut down and chopped  
Like chunks out of my hair  
I stop, my feet are locked,  
And your eyes look up to stare.  
Fire rages in my face,  
Like magma in a cave  
It only lasted a second in haste,  
Before it rippled away.  
My embarrassment turned to rage  
Like fire deep within my soul  
Yet sadness crushed me like a cage  
And my magma turned to coal.  
Trapped and bubbled with fears,  
Fear, like the graveyard beyond  
I wonder how within the years  
I can reach to mend our broken bond.  
Rain from the earth,  
Like teardrops from my eyes  
Our planet was meant to smoothly surf,  
But it was all a masked disguise.

Summer Luna, age 13  
Alexander Batcho Intermediate School  
Somerset County  
Grade 8

## **Release Me From Remorse**

Grief and utter despair  
I long for a quiet release,  
You may beat me to my near death,  
But to you I will never retreat.  
Fear, I have felt that plenty,  
My body shaking like plates,  
Blood was not enough for you  
So I hid emotion for my own grace.  
I wait and I wait  
With my memory clicked and saved  
I'm losing time and all my hope,  
Though I will not return enslaved.

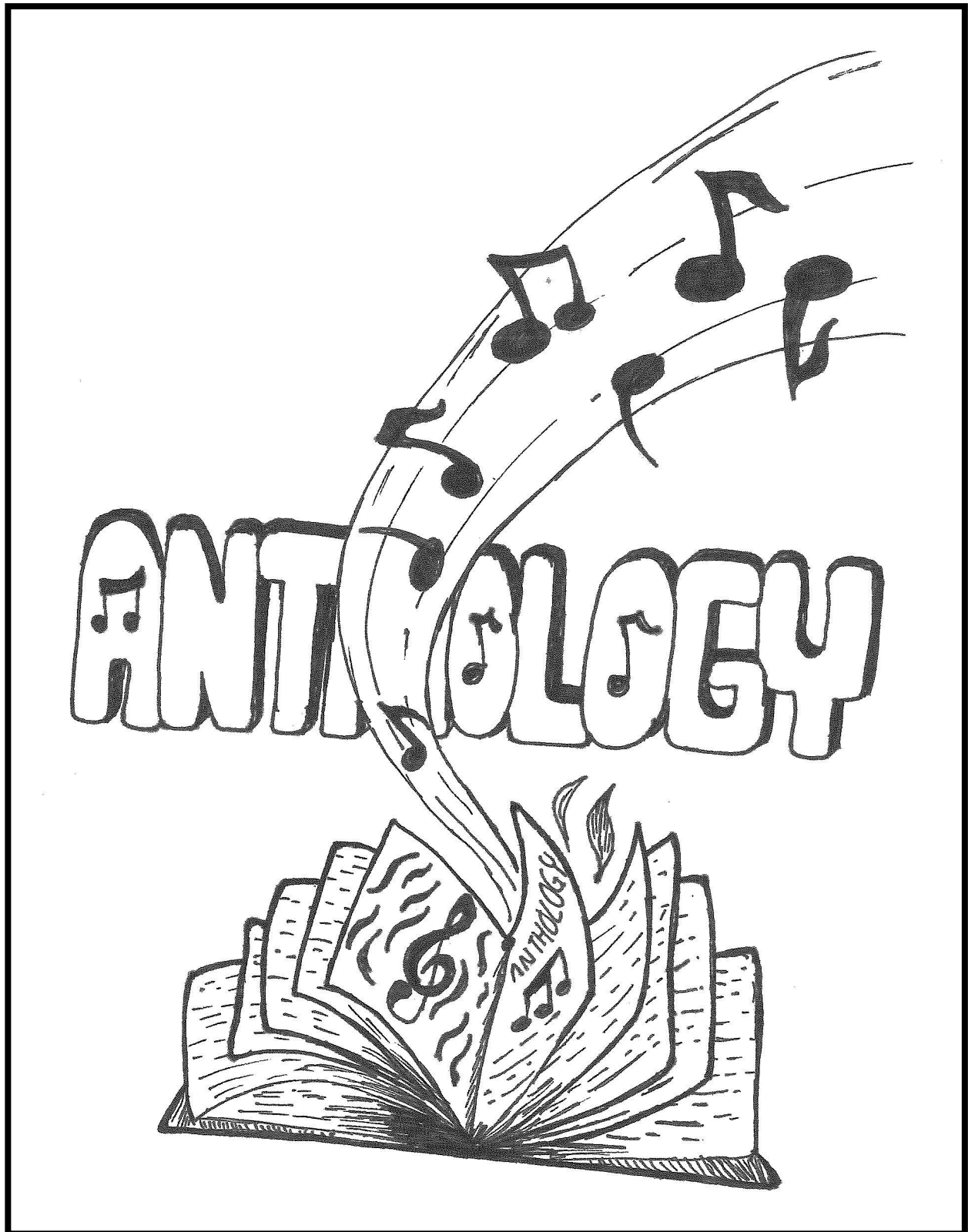
Summer Luna, age 13  
Alexander Batcho Intermediate School  
Somerset County  
Grade 8

## Sound-Full Sorrows

I weep, I cry,  
We live through life,  
As we sing through sound-full sorrows.  
Hello to trees, hello to snow,  
I see you learn, I watch you grow  
I wish you luck in watching me  
Sing through sound-full sorrows.  
Watch me leap  
Watch me fall  
Watch me weep through it all  
Yet no one understands the mind  
Of a singing, soundless, sorrow.  
Sing with me, little birds  
Make music ring into the herds  
Of birds in nests and nests in trees  
Of those in a soundless sorrow.  
Cover up the bad mistakes you make,  
Start over in a better place  
And sing again to those who'll hear  
Your painless, sound-full sorrow.

Summer Luna, age 13  
Alexander Batcho Intermediate School  
Somerset County  
Grade 8





**Artwork:**

Nidia Martinez, age 19

Bound Brook High School

Somerset County

Grade 12

# **Bound Brook High School**

## **Spark**

The spark that my life needs is missing. I know it's in there somewhere, but I was discouraged from the start. They would tell me that I would be nothing when I grow up. I would get pushed down, and when I tried to get back up, an invisible hand pushed me right back down. I am constantly seeking help but I can't find any and when I do, they would just reject me. It's like the world hates me and wants me gone. Will I find the spark? I have to.

Farouk Abdelmonem, age 17  
Bound Brook High School  
Somerset County  
Grade 11

## **Frozen**

"Four more miles to the North, and then we can set up camp," said Rylie in the front of the group facing up at the sky trying to estimate when the sun would set. We've been walking for who knows how long. My legs feel like jelly while everyone else seems immune to this. When all of a sudden shots pierce the deafening silence. Birds started to take action as they flew away in a frenzy. I was frozen in my spot. Not being able to move a single finger. Salty tears start running down my chubby cheeks.

Kayrine Calderone, age 17  
Bound Brook High School  
Somerset County  
Grade 12

## **Disappeared**

Two days, four hours, and twelve minutes left on the timer. And yet, what I needed next just vanished. I looked everywhere, absolutely everywhere. Yet nothing. My hope is beginning to dissipate. What will I do without it, what CAN I do without it? My life is dependent on it. Sweat began swiftly seeping down my forehead, down to my cheeks, like a canoe going down a rapid river. My nervousness is increasing, my palms are swimming in a pond. Could I find it in time? I have to.

William Convery, age 17  
Bound Brook High School  
Somerset County  
Grade 12

## **The House**

In the quiet town of Bound Brook, a chilling presence lurked in the shadows. As the moon cast an eerie glow, strange occurrences began unfolding. Residents whispered of an abandoned haunted house. Jenn, an adventurous soul, couldn't resist. She ventured inside, heart pounding. Creaking floorboards echoed through empty halls, and whispers echoed in her ears. Ghostly figures materialized, sending shivers down her spine. Panic consumed her as she desperately searched for an escape. The house seemed to have a sinister grip, trapping her within its walls. Will Jenn survive the nightmare ordeal, or become another victim of the haunted house's curse?

Jennifer Diaz, age 17  
Bound Brook High School  
Somerset County  
Grade 11

## **Tangled in the Shadow's Embrace**

My closet door slid open with a creak, making me jump. I pretended his distraction had worked and that I didn't see him crouched in the corner of my room. Shadows clung to him like a shroud, his malicious specter. "You're good at this," he spoke, sending a shiver down my spine. Sweat beaded on my forehead. "Too good," I stammered, struggling to keep my composure. I turned, my fingers brushing the cold metal surface of the knife veiled in my pocket, a desperate safeguard. The room pulsed with an eerie tension, a macabre dance of predator and prey.

Isaac Solis Mora, age 18  
Bound Brook High School  
Somerset County  
Grade 12

## Parades and Shenanigans

Every story has a setting,  
Whether once upon a time,  
Or,  
The flowers were withered,  
Setting.

Life is a story,  
With the introduction,  
Plot twist,  
Conflict,  
and  
Whatever, it has a setting.

It could be a vase of roses,  
Festive family parties,  
Bad weather,  
Pandemic,  
or fire drill,  
Setting.

There is a setting to every story and,  
You choose the setting of your story,  
Don't let'em choose,  
You are the author,  
Choose yours,  
And write that book because,  
I am waiting to read it.

Sammilia Afaribea Morgan, age 18  
Bound Brook High School  
Somerset County  
Grade 12

## **Run**

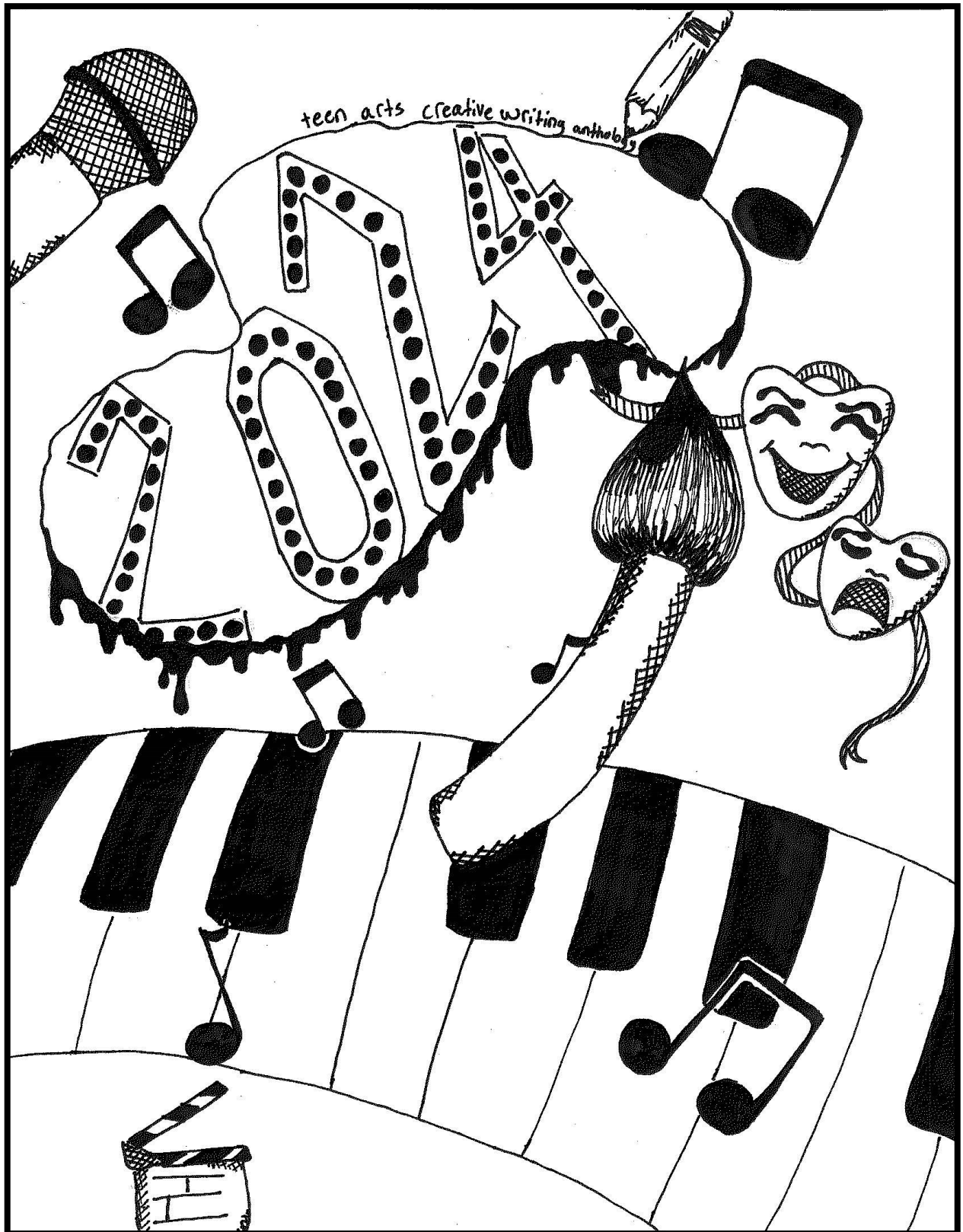
The sirens wailed through town. I did it. I escaped. The surgery was scheduled for 12:05pm, and I miraculously slipped out the doors at 11:55am. The uniformed men were on my tail, but I could just start to see territory lines. I would be free from the computers that controlled my mind, free from the fake reality I was living in. “Samantha, don’t make us do this!” I was running for my life, heart beating against my chest so hard I could hear the echo of my heartbeat. All of a sudden, a robot gripped my arm. Failure.

Gabriela Silva, age 17  
Bound Brook High School  
Somerset County  
Grade 12

## **The Hunted**

We were close, all that separated me and that *thing* was the rotted plywood that made up the locker door. My heart-beat rose into my ears as all other noises became muted, I could feel the cold dead air suffocate me as I watched *it* calmly survey the room for me. I covered my mouth to hush my shallow breaths, panic filled my body as my lungs screamed for oxygen. The thin shards of light that broke through the small cracks in the wood enhanced the claustrophobia of my wooden tomb. *It* came closer and then there was a scream.

Emery Vallejo, age 18  
Bound Brook High School  
Somerset County  
Grade 12



**Artwork:**

Angie Aiello, age 13

Branchburg Central Middle School

Somerset County

Grade 8

# Branchburg Central Middle School

## Threads of Confidence

Confidence is a funny thing. It comes when you don't need it, but it never comes when you need it. Everyone wants it, but only rarely does someone have it. When you don't have it, you struggle to fight to get it. When you do have it, it takes courage to keep it.

On January 16th, my 7th grade year at my local middle school, I woke up bright and early. As I rustled around in the lavender comforter of my queen sized bed, a smile spread on my round face. Last December I went to a spunky thrift store with my aunt and older cousin. I had found two pieces of clothing that I really loved there, one being a short, tight dress. It was classy, kind of like a longer, tighter version of a polo shirt. It was a dark hazel brown, with pale pink flower outlines specked all over it. The dress had a column of small buttons going down the middle of it, giving it small ruffles. Waking up this morning, I was so excited to wear it to school that day. I had been waiting for the right moment to wear it, and I felt really pretty and *confident* in that dress.

I walked into the sleek hallways of my school, rocking my new dress with brown leggings, a pink headband, and my favorite sparkly combat boots. My backpack strap was rubbing against my shoulder as I walked, the weight of my binders and textbooks weighing it down. I practically floated over to my friends locker, before heading to my own.

“Hey!” I exclaimed.

“Hey Charlotte!” Ali, my best friend, turned to face me, “I love your dress so much! It's so pretty!”

My *confidence* skyrocketed. I turned into the long back hallway of my school, lined with sleek, blue lockers, each with their own black combination lock, donned with white numbers and dashes. I walked up to the sepia tan colored wood door, just as my teacher opened it, and invited me inside. Weaving my way between the rows of desks, I went to put down my stuff at the far side of the classroom. I leaned my fabric tote bag against the hard metal legs of my desk. Other students, including two of my other friends, had come in after me. I went over to them and started up a striking conversation about last night's math homework.



Seconds later, Ava and her friend walked in, claiming their seats, standing by their two desks at the front. Ava had never been nice to me, and had been a bully to me since second grade. Her friend, Ella, used to be one of my good friends. Eventually, Ella became friends with Ava, and we drifted apart. I missed her, but we didn't really like each other anymore. Ava had always been mean to everyone, but she targeted me most.

I looked back to my friends, and heard Ava's irritating voice.

"What is that dress?" she smirked, "It's terrible," A pang of embarrassment and hurt washed over me, and I felt it wash the *confidence* away. Suddenly, I wished I never wore that dress to school.

I swiveled my body around, so my eyes, starting to tear up, met hers. My thoughts spiraled for something to say back. In those few seconds, my brain went a million miles per hour. I didn't want to *not* say anything, so I just looked her dead in the eyes, and replied with a sarcastic, "Thanks,"

"Jeez, Charlotte, I wasn't even talking about you," she responded, defensively. I quickly ended the conversation with my friends, and swiftly strided back to my desk. I threw on my emerald green hoodie I had brought, zipping it up to hide the dress. The cold metal linked together, making a soft clicking sound. I didn't take that hoodie off all day. My *confidence* was gone.

Seven long hours later, I got home and told my mom what had happened.

"You're giving her the power by covering up your dress. Don't give her the power, take your power back, and own that dress," she stated. I gave some thought to those words.

Weeks later, I got up and slipped on that dark hazel brown dress with the pale pink flower outlines speckled all over it. The dress with a column of small buttons going down the middle of it, making small ruffles. I looked in my mirror, and smiled with *confidence*. Later that day, I was called to take my club pictures. These club pictures were put in the yearbook, where everybody would see for years. And let me tell you, I had *confidence* in every single one of them.

Charlotte Meyer, age 13  
Branchburg Central Middle School  
Somerset County  
Grade 7

## Hallucination

It was a gorgeous, almost perfect spring day. Birds were singing a complex, interwoven song. Flowers bloomed profusely in the morning air. A great blue sky lovingly embraced the lush earth. On this wonderful day, I was inside. Specifically, I was inside playing League of Legends in my mom's damp, dark, secluded, and repulsive basement. I was hunched over a small monitor. My fingers danced across my keyboard to maneuver a small character on the screen. I barked orders into my headphones for my friends. I watched the screen and saw their response; nothing. At the time, I didn't know why they were just messing around; they were the people that *told* me that there was a cash prize if we won this, which we could all use to restock our chip and soda stashes. Anyways, I reached over to withdraw a red nacho from a similarly colored bag. After chomping down on the chip and taking a swig of water, I refocused my attention back on the screen.

I was greeted by a death recap; a sort of game-over or 'you died' screen. My friends ambled across the screen. I closed my eyes for a second and took a deep breath before ripping my headphones off and tossing them into a distant corner. When I refocused my attention on my monitor, my friends were being overrun by the enemy team. When everyone fell and the game was lost, I had a headache.

The headache exacted acute, excruciating pain onto my skull, while also striking at the least expected and most inconvenient time. I tried to ignore the headache. When that amplified the pain, I dropped down to the floor. I started rolling around into whatever was in front of me in a desperate attempt to suppress the pain. My eyes were shut, so I cannot tell you what I saw. I can tell you that shreds of plastic punctured my leg, and I was bombarded with electric shocks. When the headache finally ceased, I jumped back up to my feet and surveyed the damage.

A cascade of glass and plastic streamed down a ruined desk. A shattered monitor was barely able to flicker to life. My friends were somehow yelling at me for destroying the computer. Lastly, a forgotten picture of a family lay in pieces. It took a second to register what had happened. I closed my eyes and thought about what I would do next. I asked my friends what I should do. My friends told me, with stern voices, to use the wreckage. However, sitting on a pile of mangled glass was a bad idea. It would hurt. Paying for a new computer was another option, but I had zero dollars to my name. I would have to earn my computer. I browsed my memory for job openings. My last memory of the outside world was 13 years ago. The same

figure from the forgotten picture was driving me around. Through the window of the car, I saw a sign for a job opening at a McDonalds, presumably the local franchise. Employment at McDonalds seemed to be the simplest and easiest way to earn money. Before I went, I salvaged a graphics card and a flashlight from my desk. I started by squeezing through a door on the far side of the basement. I had to use my shoulder to open the door, which threw me off balance when the door gave way. I plummeted face-first onto the grass, and rolled down a gently sloping hill.

For an unknown reason, I slowly entered an odd state. My friends' voices distorted before fading away. A complex collage of simple shapes floated beneath my closed eyes. The vortex, somehow, seemed familiar, giving me a sense of Déjà vu. A sense of peace and tranquility overcame me. I was, somehow, being enlightened by the outside world.

Later, I was thrust out of my hallucinations. An endless darkness loomed over my lawn. I wandered through the darkness. A brick wall emerged to oppose me. I whispered to myself before walking back. I felt strange, the hallucination had somehow altered my mind. I pondered this effect. I shoved my hands into my pockets and withdrew a flashlight that I had conveniently picked up. The flashlight pierced the darkness. I was not outside on a dark night. I was in a dark bunker. Deactivated lights hung from the low ceiling. Concrete slabs stretched towards solid walls. Behind me, everything was mostly the same, except for a mysterious man standing in the hall, slowly approaching. I immediately stepped back. The man kept walking towards me, completely devoid of any feeling. I waved my hand, no response. I leaped forward, no response. I said a forced hello to him. The man immediately snapped back to reality to warmly greet me with a "Howdy!" I recognized his voice, it was the voice of an online friend. My friend continued talking about how he found me on the grass, and that he took me back to his place. An identical voice from behind me told me how what they were doing wouldn't hurt.

I swiveled around, clutching my flashlight, to see an exact copy of my friend. He once again greeted me, and repeated what he had just said before. The clone started flickering, as if he was a hologram, and a couple of immaterial tendrils reached towards me. A jolly voice was now talking to me from my head. My hand went rigid for a split second, holding down the button on the back of the flashlight. The light grew, and the voices ceased. A pile of burning cinders swapped places with my "friend". Five more copies immediately

emerged from the shadows, all growing tendrils. I rummaged through my pockets to find my last thing, the graphics card. I held it up and tossed it at the material voices. The tendrils and voices grew and flickered more, until I appeared before a computer.

Lucas Nguyen, age 12  
Branchburg Central Middle School  
Somerset County  
Grade 7



**Artwork:**

Elizabeth Dahl, age 13  
Branchburg Central Middle School  
Somerset County  
Grade 7

# Hillsborough Middle School

## Hand-Me-Downs

You wear me one day,  
and you wear me the next,  
Each time with a different set  
of pants.

With a mix of blue,  
or whatever trends  
you find cool.

Washed because of the food stains  
you got on me from pizza night,  
or the fact you got dirty after a fight.

As the years go by you have  
no need for me,  
New clothes enter the ring,  
each beating me.

You kept getting bigger,  
I can't grow too.

Soon I was put away in a box with  
others like me, there for a time...  
With nothing but darkness,  
trying to comfort me.

Until darkness disappeared  
and a new face came to show.  
They wore me just like you used to,  
Different colors each day.

I can still see you from afar,  
No pink unicorns,  
No rainbows,  
Or anything that you  
used to wear.

All different,  
No similarity.  
Now I'm with someone else,  
Someone different,  
Still spending amazing  
memories of time.

A couple rips there,  
A little stain here,  
Now in a trash can,  
Ready to disappear.

I loved the time we spent,  
not just with you but with your family,  
This may be the end of my experience,  
but something else will  
still make you happy.

Adeife Adejuwon, age 13  
Hillsborough Middle School  
Somerset County  
Grade 7

## For My Sister

Look at us now...we're not kids anymore,

Tell me, where has the time gone by?

We're both just a *little bit* older.

Still, I remember the good old days,

When you teased and tormented me.

I was the innocent victim.

Who you badgered relentlessly.

Perhaps I might be stretching the truth,

But with all the kidding aside,

When I look at my sister now,

I feel nothing but love and pride.

And though our lives are busy today,

And we don't have much time to spend,

I thought you should know that you're cherished,

As a sister, but also a friend,

I love you.

Adeife Adejuwon, age 13  
Hillsborough Middle School  
Somerset County  
Grade 7

**Worried from *A Night to Remember* by Walter Lord**

Rostron reassured.

“It’s all right;”

The new course was set

Four hours...

Too long...

Beware,

Precaution,

Trouble ahead.

Pass,

Shuffle about.

Faster and faster

Blackout.

Adeife Adejuwon, age 13  
Hillsborough Middle School  
Somerset County  
Grade 7



## **Trees Contribute to Nature**

Rustling, calming trees  
In the winds' bittersweet scent  
Nature in our eyes

## **Flowers in Sync**

Prepossessed,  
Flower petals, delicate  
As white snow falling,  
  
Laughing along with,  
Departing in sync as, the  
sparkling sun rises

## **Fieldy Memories**

Grass is our kind friend  
The connection, memories  
Enlightening our lives

Azalea Ali, age 13  
Hillsborough Middle School  
Somerset County  
Grade 7

## Memories

I came into my aunt's house  
Unaware that I was making memories  
Until I became older  
Understanding how life works.

As time passed, I was included in the chattering  
About what we're up to.  
I appreciated every word I heard and spoke  
Until we had to eat.

Tables were moving, little cousins were running around the house  
Chicken, rice, and fries were cooking, the lovely smell of delicious food  
During the celebration of Eid  
Sitting on a chair, feeling the smooth table

As I munched on the seasoned chicken  
To sitting on the comfortable sofa  
Creating memories.  
I'd never considered it before.

Azalea Ali, age 13  
Hillsborough Middle School  
Somerset County  
Grade 7

## **Just Because I'm Unique Doesn't Equal Negativity**

Just because I am unique

Doesn't mean I'm unintelligent,

Doesn't mean I'm low on academic intelligence,

Doesn't mean I'm mentally unstable

I am a very intelligent individual who doesn't agree with those statements.

Just because I am unique

Doesn't mean I'm sassy,

Doesn't mean I'm as bossy as ever,

Doesn't mean I want to take control over everything

I am a helpful person who does the exact opposite.

Just because I am unique

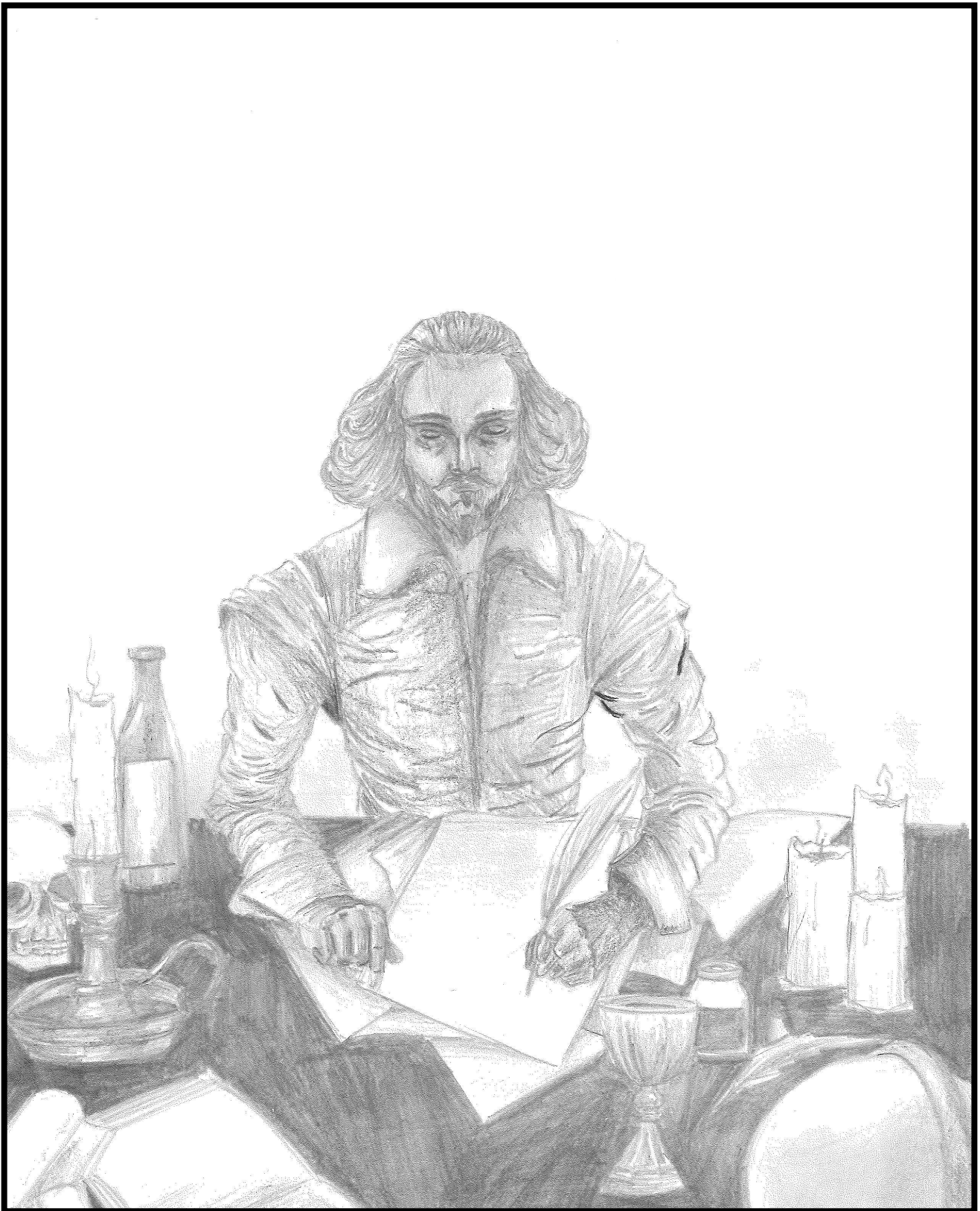
Doesn't mean I'm an upsetting person,

Doesn't mean I dislike everyone

Doesn't mean I'm inferior

I am an individual who has feelings and is caring.

Azalea Ali, age 13  
Hillsborough Middle School  
Somerset County  
Grade 7



**Artwork:**

Denys Lelyanov, age 18

Bound Brook High School

Somerset County

Grade 12

## In Flames

In the midst of a dreary, dark night,  
A wisp of light seizes my attention.  
I freeze in immobilizing fright,  
Only to unearth sentiments of elation.

No critter budes from their position, not even a mouse;  
Yet that is what enthralls me the most  
For the fiery flames envelop the timber like they would of a ligneous house,  
Gyrating and drifting across the air, bearing an uncanny resemblance to a ghost.

In awe and wonder, I stare  
The sublime warmth enrapturing my soul,  
With an abundance of light to spare,  
Like a prisoner finally attaining parole.

Some may visualize a raging blaze,  
Cataclysmically devouring its surroundings with a sea of flame.  
With the fire emits a stifling, smoggy haze,  
An arsonist lunatic's ignorance to blame.

Yet, soothing my strained intellect,  
This inferno is cleansing.  
The pleasure embodied by the flames was perfect,  
The quintessence of a new beginning.

Sragvi Basireddy, age 14  
Hillsborough Middle School  
Somerset County  
Grade 8

## Down the Driveway

Today was the day, my cousin was visiting for the weekend! I was beyond excited when I saw their silver minivan pull up in the driveway.

The door opened as I saw Michael hop out of the car, swing his spider-man duffle bag over his shoulder and run up to the front door where I was waiting. John, my other cousin, followed behind him.

Now we were only 7 at the time, so we didn't really have a sense of what "manners" were.

"Julia!" Michael ran up to me, dropped his bag on the tile for and gave me a bear hug.

"Hey..." John greeted, he was the shy one.

"Can we go play outside, pleaseeee?" Michael asked.

"Eager to play I see. Sure, that would be fun!"

We all ran outside, and opened the garage.

"Ohhh what's this?" John asked, pointing at a toy we had.

"That's a little car," I exclaimed.

"Well not a real one, but you can control it." Michael jumped up and down, and with no hesitation, he picked up the firetruck red car and brought it out to the driveway.

"Push me, push me!" Michael complained.

"Alright, but only if I get to sit in the front first!" I didn't even wait for an answer. I hopped on the front of the car, blocking Michael's view.

"Aww man, does that mean I have to push you guys?" John said, disappointed.

"Yup!" Michael smiled. "Fineeee."

He first pushed us both down the driveway, and to the end of our street, where the hill started where the road would go down.

"Ok, I think we should go back now" John said.

“Nooo! I wanna go down!” I knew Michael was always picky. Suddenly, John tripped on his shoelace, losing grip of the ground.

Without holding back, all three of us slid down the steep road. John was nearly holding on for Pete’s sake! It looked like he was about to fall off. All three of us let out a huge scream.

“Ahhhhh!”

We slid at the end of the hill, making it to solid ground. I let out a sigh of relief. We were safe.

Elodee Calvi, age 13  
Hillsborough Middle School  
Somerset County  
Grade 7

## Waves

Depression is a wave  
It hits you suddenly  
Knocking you off your feet  
Flipping you upside down  
Soaking water into your lungs  
So you can't breathe,  
But then it retreats  
Back into the ocean  
Leaving you alone  
To pick yourself up  
To breathe again.  
To come and hit you harder  
Than Before.  
Making you forget  
What it felt like to stand  
On your feet,  
To breathe,  
Without water in your lungs.

Samatha Carey, age 13  
Hillsborough Middle School  
Somerset County  
Grade 7



## Teddy Bear

Sitting up against a wall,  
On your headboard.  
My back ripped open,  
My insides spill out.  
You left me like this,  
With one eye.  
Not being able to see clearly.  
In a corner,  
Alone.  
You left me like this,  
Lonely and broken,  
Just watching you leave me behind,

Because  
You left me like this,  
I will leave you just the same.

Samatha Carey, age 13  
Hillsborough Middle School  
Somerset County  
Grade 7

## Words

I sit,  
Eyes peeking up from the couch cushion

I see,

*Her*

*Him*

*Them.*

*I see,*

The broken glass,

The screaming,

The tears flowing

From my eyes.

My mouth covered

By my own hand,

The only sound is them.

Ripping through

Each other,

*Word by*

*Word.*

*“It is your fault”*

*“You always do this”*

*“I hate you”*

*“Good”*

Each word takes

nothing from them,

But they still take from

*Me.*

Samatha Carey, age 13  
Hillsborough Middle School  
Somerset County  
Grade 7

## The Red Box

Winds whooshing, door's creaking, mouse's squeaking, Oliver was sent by his family to find a red box. Inside the red box, there was money. Oliver's family needed money to pay rent, they were struggling with life and had no money left. Oliver Smith was 15, had dark brown hair and dark brown eyes. Oliver had two sisters named Emma and Ashley. Emma was 12 and Ashley was 18. Their father died when they were young and their mom was weak and struggling with work. Oliver was trying to find the red box. He knew the only way to get the red box was to enter a Haunted House. He was about to enter when he heard crows chirping and the trees shaking, He got scared, but he knew it was for the family.

He walked in the haunted house and saw spider webs all over the ceiling, dirty furniture, creepy statues, old lamps and bats flying around. The house was cold and dark. It almost smelled like the house was covered in garbage and rotten eggs. Oliver's sweat came dripping down his head, he opened his mouth for a cough and dust came flying all around. He slowly walked in and searched for the red box. Because the house was covered in dust for centuries, the red box became black and dusky. Suddenly he saw a black shadow run almost like it was floating, Oliver turned around but saw nothing! He tried to ignore it and kept searching for the box.

Oliver turned on his flashlight and looked around. He walked upstairs slowly. While he slowly walked up, the stairs were creaking. He heard a quiet laugh at the bedroom upstairs. Oliver looked around and ran downstairs, His eyes widened, and he raised his eyebrows. He searched around the rooms and decided he HAD to go upstairs. Oliver walked up into the master bedroom and found the red box. He quickly grabbed it but the second he touched the box, the whole house was shaking. Oliver felt a quick and strong gust of wind. The lamps on the ceiling were shaking right and left. Oliver felt his body jumping. "EARTHQUAKE" Oliver screamed.

"There is no earthquake," a low voice murmured. Oliver turned around and saw this mummy looking like person. The mummy had blood in its mouth. It had white and yellow strips on his body. A cold breeze rushed over Oliver. "HEY! That's MY box" the mummy said. Oliver's eyes spread out and he jumped and ran away. The mummy teleported to the door.

"Where do you think you're going young boy?"

“Uh uhm” Oliver whispered. Oliver was too shocked and scared to talk back.

“You want the box, right? What about this,” the mummy replied. “Let's have a battle right here at 12pm. If you win the battle I'll give you the red box, BUT if you lose. You will become my dinner.”

“I-I don't think I can do tha--“

“I guess you're not getting the box then...”

Oliver had a deep thought about these decisions. Oliver thought in his head. *“I need that box, but it's worth risking my life. Whatever I'll make up a plan later, it's for my family”* Oliver thought. “Ok, I'll do the battle” he said.

“Good, meet me at this location, see you at 12pm.”

Oliver walked home knowing he had to think of a plan before it's too late. *“Alright, its 8pm right now, I've got four hours to think of a plan.”* Oliver called everyone he could think of. He made a total of 27 phone calls. He took all the advice from the phone calls and combined everyone's ideas and tips together. Oliver decided to invite some of his friends over to help. Oliver invited two friends. Daniel and Eric.

“Here's the plan, we have to make a robot of me. We place it near the window outside the house. Then while we bang on the door we run away and use the ladder to climb up the window upstairs. The red box is upstairs in the master bedroom. We grab it and run as fast as we can. If we don't run fast enough the house will start shaking and the mummy will know. Then we have to catch the train to go back home. Is this clear?” Oliver said.

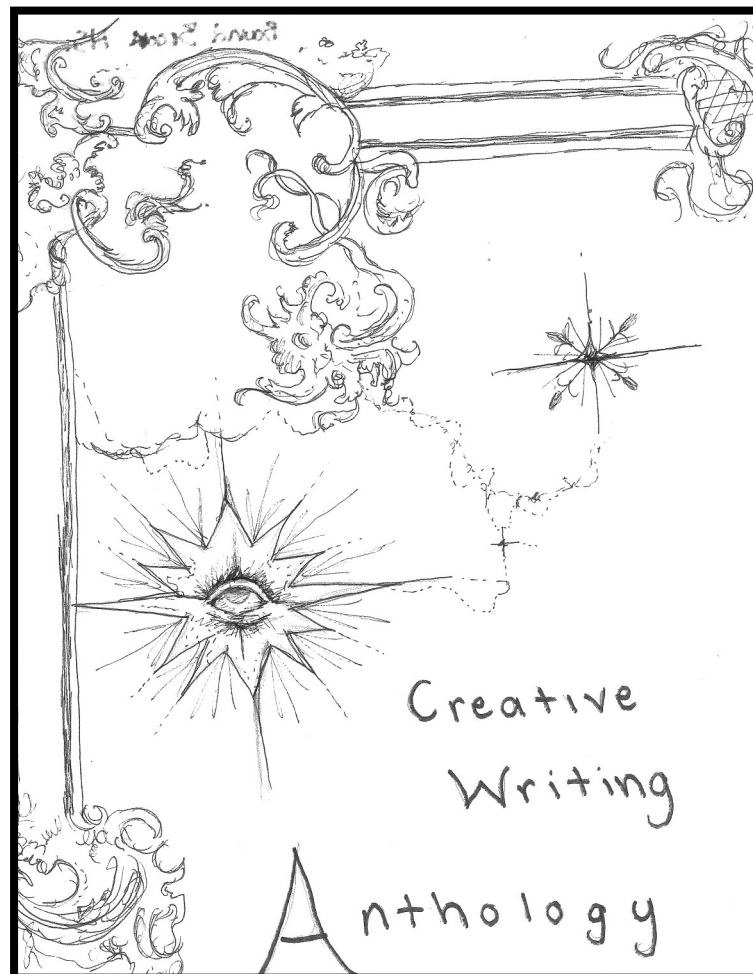
“How do we make the robot?” Oliver's friends asked.

“I'm not sure yet but we could buy a mannequin instead?” Oliver replied. “Ok, let's get to work now.”

Oliver and his friends worked for two hours to make the mannequin look just like Oliver. The mannequin had dark brown hair and dark brown eyes just like Oliver. Oliver brought extra clothing and put the clothing he was wearing on the mannequin. Soon enough the mannequin, the fake Oliver, was ready. They arrived at the Haunted House exactly at 12PM. They placed the mannequin at the front door and rang the doorbell, as soon as they rang the doorbell they ran. The grass was slimy and slippery. They sprint down the greasy grass and almost tripped. They climbed up the ladder as fast as they could and opened the window. They knew the

red box was in the master bedroom so they quietly walked to the master bedroom. Daniel found the red box and held it. He forgot to run. Suddenly the house started shaking. Daniel remembered and ran for his life. When Daniel got outside he screamed “OLIVER?? ERIC!!?” They both had gotten taken away because they were too slow. Daniel decided to open the red box. “There must be something important in this red box that Oliver is willing to risk his life for.” Daniel slowly opened the red box and saw. “Nothing?” Daniel was stunned. After that day, Oliver and Eric were never seen again.

Jasmine Cheng, age 13  
Hillsborough Middle School  
Somerset County  
Grade 7



**Artwork:**

Amina Ahmad, age 16  
Bound Brook High School  
Somerset County  
Grade 10

## A Snow Dance

It starts with a snowball, bigger and bigger.  
Add two small ones, and a carrot nose,  
Sticks for arms, buttons for eyes,  
Scarf and gloves for warmth.  
The sun starts to set, time for heading inside,  
The moon comes out, and the snow starts to shine.  
A button blinks, a carrot twitches,  
Arms start to move, and eyes open wide.  
The snowman stands up with a stretch and a yawn,  
Shakes himself off, and heads to the barn.  
Inside is full of snow people, dancing with slushies.  
Spinning like snowflakes, all through the night,  
When suddenly, the sun starts to rise.  
The party ends, they sneak back to their homes,  
But that day, the world starts to warm.  
Drip drop, a carrot falls.  
Next comes the arms, the buttons, and lastly the scarf.  
All in a heap, now half his size, the snowman looks up at  
The sky.  
He lets a small smile, escape from his lips,  
It started with a snowball, a carrot and some twigs.

Emma Gatza, age 13  
Hillsborough Middle School  
Somerset County  
Grade 7

## Ode to Books

When I open you, I travel into another world.

On my bouncy beanbag, I am

Curled up to read you.

Sometimes I have no clue

On what you might contain.

The world cannot run without you.

Mostly reading you during rain,

Descriptive and unique words you contain.

When I open you, I travel into another world.

Unique stories make me curious.

These are sometimes breath-taking,

But some are heartbreaking.

Netanya Gupta, age 13  
Hillsborough Middle School  
Somerset County  
Grade 7

## Holi

Holi is the festival of colors

The taste is like the happiness you get from April Fool's Day.

The sky above you is filled with colors you would never see.

Looking around you see rows of tables with Indian food

And color powder to put on people.

Color is like crumbs of bread but much softer

The aroma around you is sweet and spicy with a variety of foods

Some taste sweet and some taste spicy, tangy, creamy and more!

There is no place to move around!

The air is filled with the cheers of India

Splash! buckets of water fall on you

But this fills this festival with laughter

Smelling the excitement

While walking around little children?

People coming up to you to feed you sweets

This is what Holi is like!

Done exploring? Let the fun begin!

Don't get scared by the splashes of water

From the balloons that get thrown at you

The taste might be unpleasant in your mouth.

Now all the colors glow around you

Water drenches you to wash the colors away (a little)

The smell of happiness lingers around you the whole day.

This is why Holi is the time to feel loved by everyone.

Netanya Gupta, age 13  
Hillsborough Middle School  
Somerset County  
Grade 7



## Wands

Whoosh! Swish! The sound it makes,  
When you sway it to fulfill your wish,  
But only a few it takes.  
Pointed like the ends of pufferfish,  
Is a wand with its magical mythic spells.  
How they do this, none ever tells.

Remember to use it wisely,  
This light but powerful piece of wood,  
Because you will pressure it likely.  
Keep in your mind, you should!  
Having a wand is having great power,  
Being nice fulfills your desire.

Netanya Gupta, age 13  
Hillsborough Middle School  
Somerset County  
Grade 7

## My World

Book by book,  
Page by page  
I hold my breath  
Till the last sentence  
Historic and realistic,  
Mystery and fantasy  
You'll never leave me  
Or fly away from me  
You're my favorite thing in the world  
That pulls me away from reality  
To a wonderland  
So mysterious and adventurous  
I write this poem for you  
Because you take me  
To a place too good to be true  
Book by book,  
Page by page  
I hold my breath  
Till the last sentence

Esha Hasrajani, age 13  
Hillsborough Middle School  
Somerset County  
Grade 7

## Name

I've always wondered who I would be in another universe.

My mother said I could have been a Riya.

I could have been a Bhavani or a Moksha.

But I'm not any of those names.

I am Tanvi, a girl with three names.

My first name was given to me by my parents.

Tanvi.

Tanvi Ashwin Jadhav.

My parents wanted a unique name, a beautiful one.

They chose Tanvi.

Tanvi means beautiful, delicate, the "epitome of femininity".

I don't think I live up to my name.

My second name is Taanvi.

It was given to me by the people in America.

People here cannot say my name.

When they try to say it the right way, it comes out as "thun - vi".

What a harsh, disgusting name for someone who is supposed to be the epitome of femininity.

Now my name is Taanvi, with a long "a".

I don't know if I like it; I'm just comfortable with it, and I prefer most people to call me this.

My third name is Tanu.

Tanu is a rite of passage for the people in my life.

Only a few call me Tanu. Tanu is a secret, a name I do not write on paper.

Tanu is for my family.

I don't know why my parents chose Tanu.

Or Tanvi.

Or why people cannot say my real name.

I don't know a lot of things.

Tanvi Jadhav, age 14  
Hillsborough Middle School  
Somerset County  
Grade 8

## NASA

How do you do it?

Go into space?

Supernovas and black holes.

They're terrifying

but beautiful.

So lonely

so cold

so empty

so beautiful.

What's at the edge of a universe

is empty.

So lonely

so cold

so empty

so beautiful.

So pink

and blue

but black

so beautiful and ugly.

So empty

so lonely

so cold

so beautiful.

*If our sun was replaced with a black hole*

*how much longer would Earth orbit?*

8 minutes.

*How long would it take for us to get sucked in?*

Until we get 50-70 miles away.

No more than a light year.

*How long would it take for us to freeze?*

A second.

*How long will it take to die?*

Shorter.

So empty

so lonely

so cold

so beautiful.

In less than 10 years

Betelgeuse will supernova

We will be able to see it from earth

even in the day.

So empty

so lonely

so cold

so beautiful.

Like a glass cup.

So empty

so lonely

so cold

so beautiful.

Like the ocean.

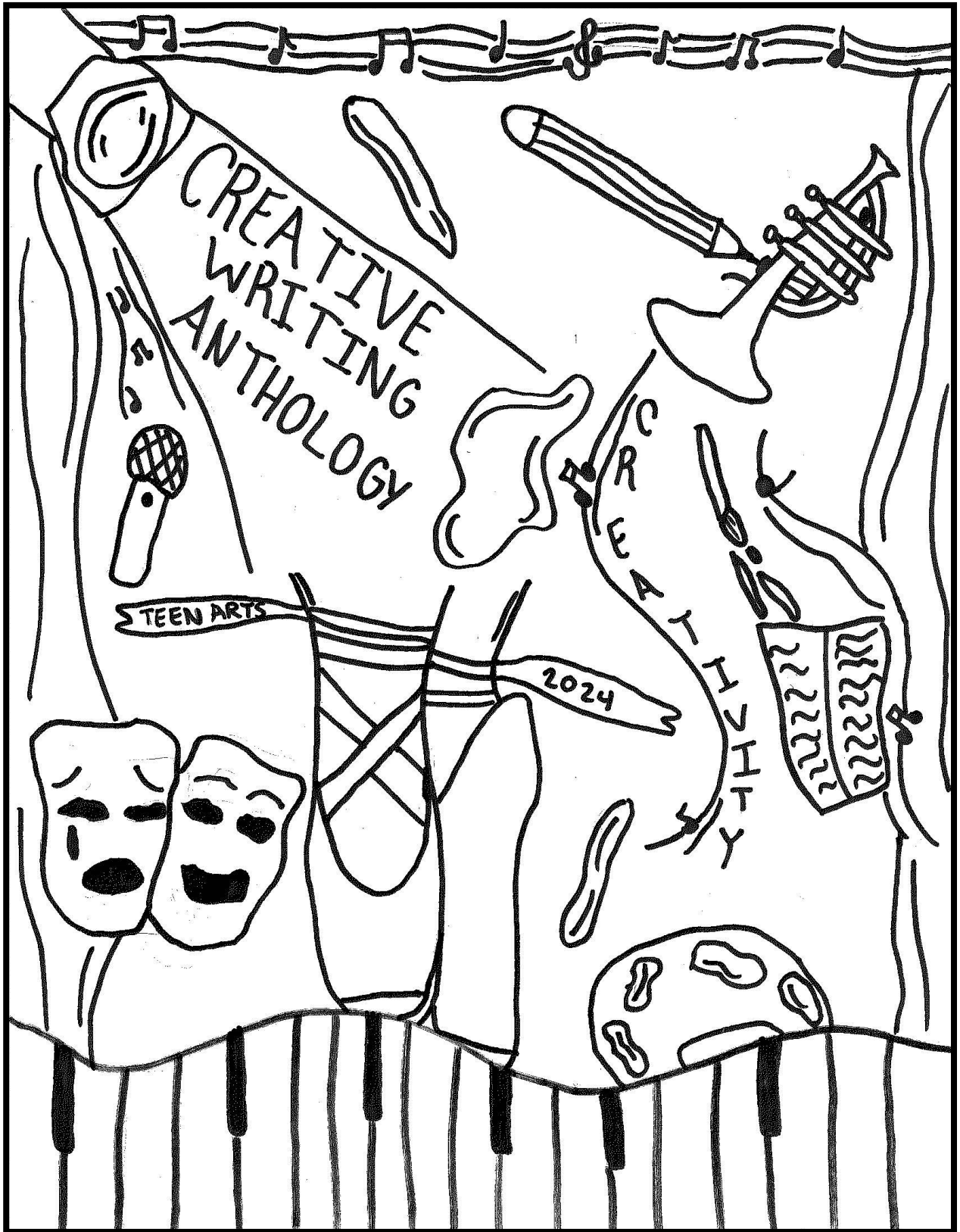
So empty

so lonely

so cold

so beautiful.

Delaney Kiernan, age 13  
Hillsborough Middle School  
Somerset County  
Grade 7



**Artwork:**

Elizabeth March, age 13

Branchburg Central Middle School

Somerset County

Grade 7

## Silence

We sat, waiting at the airport because our flight had been delayed. After an amazing week at Disney World, we were all tired, happy, and itching to go home. My mom and dad quietly mumbled to each other and my sister sat on her suitcase, sketching in a notepad. I sat down in a seat near my sister, who looked at me with a sigh.

“How long do we have to wait?” she said to our parents.

“Just a little longer.” The airport was quiet. There was the soft mumbling of people nearby, the beeping of people going through security, and the low hum of the conveyor belt going round and round.

After a while, I was getting restless and fidgety. I scanned the room with my eyes as if I was a robot. I watched as a woman and her spouse slowly moved down the escalator to the floor. Far away, I saw rows of stanchions full of tired and impatient people being weighed down by their huge backpacks. The smell of coffee wafted through the air from the nearby coffee shop in the airport. Nothing out of the ordinary. Then, it was quiet. Eerily quiet. I could almost sense the storm brewing from behind.

Suddenly, piercing through the silence was a loud boom as if the sound of thunder, but it echoed, shaking the airport and everyone in it. Almost instantly after the boom came a constant thudding sound, one after another. Before I could even realize it, I was standing up, and watching as a terrifying wave of people came running in our direction.

I remember the faces of the people running: confused, panicked, and most of all, scared.

I didn't know what was happening, and neither did anyone else. But when you see a crowd of running people. You run too.

People began to yell, screaming out “RUN!” to those who were still sitting. My mom snatched my sister, and my dad grabbed me by the arm.

Time slowed down, with people running all around us. It felt like a dramatic scene in a movie where the only people moving at real speed are the main characters.

I remember stumbling in shock and falling multiple times. Each time my dad had to pause, turn around, and practically drag me up back on my feet.

We ran, following a handful of people running into a jewelry store nearby, and we all shoved our way into a small storage closet. It was dark and gray, and many people were inside with us, but nothing like the crowd we saw. My family huddled together in a ball like penguins, and I watched the other people closely, listening to what they were saying. Some of them mumbled things like, “What’s going on?” or “Was that a gun?” People held one of two things; their phone, or their child. Some people prayed silently, and one woman called 911.

After that, my parents prayed too, and I assume my sister did as well. Meanwhile, I was just a little kid. I didn’t even know how to do multiplication. I was only thinking about one thing at that time. My suitcase. And the only reason I had been thinking about my suitcase was because my favorite stuffed animal was inside it. That was my only worry. I wasn’t praying or scared like my family. I just felt very lost and confused.

There were only about three kids besides my sister and I, but I don’t remember any of them screaming or crying, as we all were trying to stay as quiet as possible. We waited there for a long time. Everyone was unsure of what was happening, but we didn’t exactly want to find out yet. Nobody needed to talk. The silence was loud enough.

Eventually, the police arrived and we all got out of our hiding places. As we stepped out, we were all on edge and shaken up. Some of the people we were with had blank looks or were gripping each other’s arms. Instead of being scared, I was only confused. When my mom and sister cried with relief, I finally felt scared that they were so serious and terrified. Then it finally clicked, the situation was real, and I cried with them.

After that, everything was normal again. As normal as it could be, anyway. The soft murmuring of people around us, except this time, they weren’t talking about buses and plane tickets. The beeping noise, except this time, it was the sound of a beeping walkie-talkie. The low hum of the conveyor belt going round and round.

Later, we walked through the airport and finally rested. Holding my precious stuffed animal—and my sister’s hand—we sat and quietly talked. My dad explained that thankfully, it wasn’t a gun, like we had all assumed, but a camera battery had exploded. Hence the loud boom we heard that still echoed in our ears like an annoying song that’s stuck in your head. The security officers that were nearby heard this and yelled for everyone around to run and so they did. This led to the dreadful thudding noise which instead of being a gun



firing again and again like we had feared, had been the sound of airport stanchions being knocked over as people frantically fled the scene. Of course, the big crowd scared people sitting around, including me and my family, and everyone else that had been in the closet with us. According to my mom, my dad had been checking his phone every minute to check for any updates and that's how he found out what had really happened.

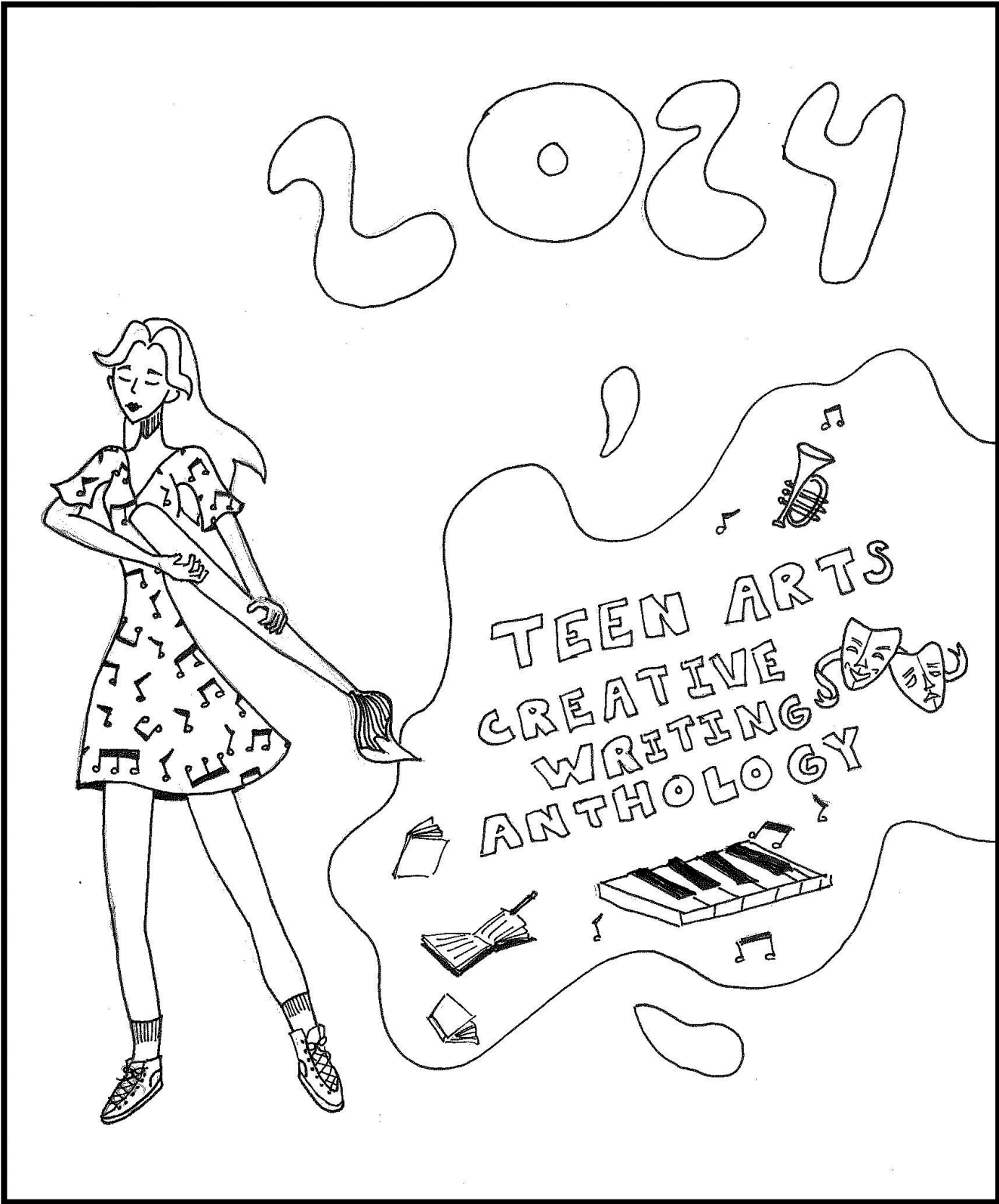
Years later, one could argue that it was a funny, and stupid, situation. Sometimes we joke about that moment ourselves. But still, I prefer to have something playing in the background. The silence is just too... empty. As if something is about to creep up behind you before you can even notice.

Emily Kim, age 13  
Hillsborough Middle School  
Somerset County  
Grade 7

## Loss

You may be gone  
But your spirit lives on  
In our hearts you thrive  
The memory of you will survive  
Oh, how I wish to see you once more  
I wish I could keep the promise I swore  
I may miss you  
But I remember your song  
Your song is your voice  
It plays all day long  
You left an imprint on so many lives  
Your sons, your daughters, and your wives  
The record of your voice will continue to spin  
As your amazing life would be considered a win  
I miss you Dad  
Oh, how I wish to see you once more  
Though I shall not leave  
Since my life still has much in store

Avril LaBar, age 13  
Hillsborough Middle School  
Somerset County  
Grade 8



**Artwork:**

Isabel Piotrowski, age 14  
Branchburg Central Middle School  
Somerset County  
Grade 8

## The “Little” Things

Has anyone ever noticed the small changes?

Disappearances of my timid yet vibrant pearl earrings,

Sudden drops of my typical energy,

Stealthy glances at my friends' exquisite smiles,

Or the sweaters in the summer?

I try to notice the small matters in others.

Did she cut her luscious blond hair?

I wonder if she got enough sleep, she doesn't look well.

They keep fidgeting with their fingers, are they nervous?

She changed her necklace, it looks gorgeous on her delicate neckline.

Becoming so immersed in their appearance that they look like the view of dawn.

Her silky, curly caramel hair.

Her curls appear more defined today, did she change a part of her routine?

Her dark chocolate eyes painted an antique library overflowing with stories.

I could read them all day and still crave for more.

Her eye bags envelop her bottom eyelid, is she getting enough sleep?

Slowly losing each one of my five senses as her beauty swallows me whole.

I wanted to observe her soul for eternity.

Her actions, habits, feelings.

She often rests her head while the teacher is ranting, I wonder why.

She was written like a poem by Shakespeare.

Looking at a person this way makes me wonder if I was ever seen this way.

Are my actions worthy of being observed by another soul?

Would anyone be able to notice my avoidance disguised as a cry for empathy?

These thoughts seemed to overtake my mind.

Was I the lonely maven who only knew how to admire others but herself?

Or was I delusional?

The desire of wanting to be observed so delicately and humanely became glued to my heart.

Watch me like a hawk.

Drown in my invisible beauty.

Paint my neglected feelings in your eyes.

The realization hit me like a boulder.

Silently, but surely.

This time I yearned to be a muse, not an artist.

Anusuya Mukherjee, age 13  
Hillsborough Middle School  
Somerset County  
Grade 8

## When Music Plays

Music gives us life in a world without sound.

Its notes fill the ears of wonder with emotion and color.

Paintbrushes of hands wave and sway to the delicate beat as it grows like a tree.

When it plays, we listen.

Tangles of its harmonies begin to emerge into the air.

They bounce into our bodies and sting our tongues.

Legs stretch, backs lengthen, and fingers reach as far as the sky can allow them to go.

When it speaks, we listen.

Clashes of its many sounds squeak in vibration.

They zap us with feelings full of sorrow.

Our torsos contract and our knees bend, bringing us lower and deeper than the stage floor.

When it cries, we listen.

Music gives us life in a world without sound.

Its notes fill the ears of wonder with emotion and color.

Sounds each so separate and special.

When it plays, we listen.

Isabella Natale, age 13  
Hillsborough Middle School  
Somerset County  
Grade 7

## The Way Home

It was a nice fall Tuesday afternoon in Hillsborough New Jersey and I walked next to the emerald green bushes with my best friend Ally. Suddenly one of the bushes moved and the whole sky seemed to go from a glittery blue to cloud swirling gray. A gust of wind blew my hair in my green eyes. Ruffling my gray sweatpants. I looked at Ally. Ally has brown hair, amber eyes and is kind of short for thirteen. We always take the same old way home. Cross the street, past three bushes, and past the Hillsborough Elementary School. After that we go to my apartment where we spend a couple hours together. Today we were by the bushes and something wasn't the same.

"Ella," Ally called. "There is something moving in the bushes!"

"I know!" I began, but I heard a soft growl and then a high-pitched bark. I snapped back to look at the bushes and saw a pair of sharp white teeth.

"RUN!" Ally screamed, taking off as fast as possible. I stood frozen in fear as the creature emerged from the bushes. My heart was pounding. This would be the end, I was going to get eaten! Finally, the creature climbed out of the bushes and ran. I only got a glimpse of him but I could tell it was a dog. Chocolate color fur that had been matted down.

"Ally," I called, "it's a dog!"

Desperately I looked at Ally straight into her amber eyes begging for help. We had spent at least ten minutes arguing. I really needed to save that dog and Ally has always been terrified. Even if Ally didn't want to save this dog I was. Slowly I crawled to a tree that the dog had taken cover. I could see the dog's little tail sticking out as I reached into my pocket where my granola bar was. *Maybe he wanted something to eat*, I thought. I broke off pieces and the smell of sweet honey and juicy blueberries. The dog peeked his nose out and I tossed pieces to the tiny timid dog. Even though he still wouldn't come closer with food he gladly ate from where he was. Unfortunately, just when he was starting to trust me a car came.

The dog burst out from behind the tree looking for anywhere to go. I chased him all the way to a dumpster and that's where I fed him some more. He was starting to trust me and let me come closer but I still couldn't touch him. Pushing negative thoughts away I just decided to do it, carefully I inched towards the dog. Quickly grabbing him by the stomach and hauling myself to my feet. The dog thrashed in my arms, trying to bite. I felt the dog's razor-sharp teeth against my skin. The dog was so tiny but suddenly a loud growling and

barking pierced my ears. He pawed at my arm and a thin trail of ruby red blood was left there. *I had to put him down.* I thought. *I needed more help.*

I left the dog and walked back to the school hoping that someone there could help me.

“Hello?” I called walking into the principal's office. The office smelled floral like roses and sweet fruit. The smell was calming me down a little.

“Can I help you?” A booming voice replied. I began to second guess myself. What *if he doesn't like dogs? Could he call animal patrol? Would the animal patrol take the dog away?* Fighting my nerves, I tiptoed my way into the office.

“Please sit down and explain why you are here,” Principal Nickel sighed. As quickly as possible I blurted out the whole story and ended with.

“So can you call animal patrol or help me?”

“I am deeply sorry,” the principal began but I didn't stick around to hear what he said next. Anytime someone starts with their sorry meant the answer was no. Instead I darted out the door to make sure the dog was okay.

When I returned to the dumpster I found the dog in the same spot I left him. Giving him space I sit with tears in my eyes, I really don't want to cry but the next thing I know my vision blurs and the colors swirled, salty raindrop tears fall. *There is nothing I can do to save this dog, all that work for nothing and my best friend left me!* I thought.

At this point my parents were probably really worried about me, but I didn't care. How could I go home like this hair all messed up, eyes all red, and not with my best friend? So, I just sat there on the hard pavement with a heavy heart.

All of the sudden I heard someone whistling. That tune! Every day I hear that tune! I swung my head around and saw Ally! Scrambling to my feet I raced over.

“Ella,” Ally sobbed with tears flowing down her face, “I am so sorry that I left you.” We hugged and I felt the scratchy wool which was used to make her sweater and I looked over to the dog but he wasn't there! I turned around bumping into something covered in mud. Taking a closer look, I realized that it was the dog! Squatting down I gently pet him and fed him some more. He gave me some sopping wet licks on the cheek as tears of happiness flowed down my face. I picked him up and walked home with so many feelings but mostly



happiness. *So if you truly believe in the change, you will never give up and keep trying till things are right.* I thought with a smile.

Anastasia Orlik, age 13  
Hillsborough Middle School  
Somerset County  
Grade 7



**Artwork:**

Marissa Hays, age 17  
Bound Brook High School  
Somerset County  
Grade 11

## Falling Apart

“How could you?” I asked in disbelief. “After everything we’ve been through, I thought you were the one person I could trust. I can’t believe you would say that about me!”

I left the room, trying to hold my tears in. September 10th, Strolley Middle School, the day *everything* went wrong. It all started the first day of 8th grade. My best friend and I came to school extra early because that was the only time we’d see each other.

“Hey Regina!” Chloe announced. Chloe was an above average height girl, straight brown hair, with bright blue eyes. I am average height, nutmeg brown eyes and charcoal curly black hair. After Chloe and I talked about what we did over the summer, we decided to see what classes we had. The only class we had was lunch (not even study hall). I was a little disappointed because Chloe’s my only friend and I don’t really like talking to other people.

“*Ring*” sounded the first bell. It was also the bell that split me and Chloe up. I went to my homeroom (which was so far away) but forgot to give Chloe her hug. When I turned around, she was gone. I figured my teacher didn’t want me to be late to homeroom so I didn’t think about it too much. When I finally reached my homeroom, I noticed some people from last year, but none of them were Chloe. I sat down at my assigned seat. Around 10-15 minutes later, my homeroom teacher Mrs. Cartner-Linsin introduced herself. She then made us introduce ourselves. I wasn’t too thrilled about that. Before I knew it, it was lunch time. I was really looking forward to telling Chloe all about my day so far.

I walked into the cafeteria and it smelled very medicinal. I saw Chloe talking with three other girls. “I really hope she didn’t make new friends already” I thought to myself.

“Can I sit here Chloe?” I exclaimed. Chloe nodded her head yes and continued eating her lemon roasted chicken and rice.

“Hello!” one of the girls at the table began, “I’m Amy. You must be Regina, Chloe talks about you a lot.” All I did was wave hello. Soon the other two girls introduced themselves. Amy, Jen, and Anna have been best friends since 1st grade. After listening to everyone talking, it was time to go to study hall. It turns out Anna was in my homeroom class, so we walked together.

In study hall there wasn’t much to do since I didn’t have any homework and Anna sat across the room from me. I took out a book called *Hope Was Here* and started reading the first 5 pages. I then got distracted

from my book. Apparently these two girls were arguing about something but in a low, whisper voice. I find this worse than yelling.

After school ended, I waited for Chloe because every Wednesday I normally go over to her house. “Hey Chloe!” I yelled. She looked at me and put up her hand to tell me to wait. When Chloe was done she walked over to me with the same three girls that sat with her at lunch following behind.

“Amy, Anna, Jen are coming over to my house as well” she began. “Is that ok with you?” I nodded my head, waiting for Chloe’s mom to come. About five minutes later, Chloe’s mom came with her minivan. I sat in my usual seat which used to be until Amy sat next to me. I wasn’t too thrilled about that. Once we arrived at Chloe’s house, we watched a movie. Before I knew it, it was time for everyone to go home.

For the past 2 weeks, Anna, Jen, and Amy were coming over to Chloe’s house every day. When I found out, that really made me upset. I tried asking my mom if I could go over to Chloe’s house more often but she kept saying no. I wanted to call Chloe and see what they were doing but I changed my mind and instead went to play outside with one of my neighbors. “Sometimes I wish I wasn’t an only child” I thought.

On Wednesday at lunch, Amy had already invited two other girls to sit at our lunch table before I got there. With Anna, Chloe, Amy, Jen, and the two other girls sit there, that’s 6 people which is the max per table. That meant I had to find another table to sit at. All the tables looked pretty full until I saw these group of girls sitting together. It looked like there was only 4 of them so I walked over to them and asked if I could sit with them. After spectating Chloe and her peers having a great time for twenty minutes, it was time for study hall. While I was reading my book, the classroom phone rang. It almost startled me. Mrs. Cartner-Linsin searched the room and she looked at me. She told me I was going home with Chloe. I smiled really brightly. I made eye contact with Anna and she rolled her eyes. I had a feeling Anna didn’t quite like me.

I had an after-school activity so I figured Chloe’s mom would pick me up separately. Once my after-school activity was done Chloe’s mom came and picked me up. None of the other girls were there so I figured they stayed at the house.

“Hey Regina! Are you excited for tomorrow?” Chloe’s mom asked.” I gave her a puzzled look. Apparently, I’m going to be staying at their house all week because my mom and dad were going away for the rest of the week. I asked what was so exciting about tomorrow, turns out all five of us girls are going to an indoor water park. I was so looking forward to tomorrow. Once we arrived at Chloe’s house, I ran straight to

Chloe's room but before I could even touch the door I heard something I really wish I hadn't. Jen asked if I was going on the trip with them. Amy commented, saying she hoped I didn't go and that even if I did, they just ditch me instead.

"She'll probably be staying in the baby pool the whole time we're there anyway" Chloe added on. At that point it seemed like everyone was laughing. While standing behind the closed door I was waiting for Chloe to defend me but she didn't. At that point I had lost it. I dropped my backpack with a loud "*THUD*" and opened the door as quickly as possible. The girls saw me and went silent.

"How could you?" I asked in disbelief. "After everything we've been through, I thought you were the one person I could trust. I can't believe you would say that about me!" I left the room, trying to hold my tears in. I didn't want to cause Chloe's mom any trouble so I went into their spare bedroom and closed the door. I was crying so much I'm surprised the feathery blanket on the bed was still in good condition.

Eventually Chloe's mom found me and we talked for a while. She told me that friendships go through ups and downs sometimes. It's okay to be upset with your best friend. Chloe overheard the whole conversation and felt bad.

"I'm sorry Regina. I'm sorry for the things that I've said and how I've treated you over the last few weeks. I just wanted to be cool but I'd rather have a cool best friend than 3 snobby friends." I smiled and we hugged it out.

"Best friends forever?" I asked Chloe.

"Best friends forever and ever!" Chole exclaimed. After that we swore to never fight again and to never let anyone come between our friendship.

I've learned that sometimes friends fight and argue about things but what keeps a friendship going are our experiences and memories. That is something worth holding on to.

Alexandra Palmer, age 13  
Hillsborough Middle School  
Somerset County  
Grade 7

## Of My Sax

Playing with grace  
Swaying along  
Foot tapping  
Fingers slapping  
The keys make a soft THUNK

But the second I blow harder  
A loud SQUEAK rings through the air  
Simply stopping the sweet sounds  
Of my sax

Heads turn at me  
Eyes burn THROUGH me  
Cheeks turn red  
Foot stops tapping  
Silence  
Dead silence

When another squeak sounds through the air  
Another player gets a stare  
It simply stops the sweet sounds  
Of their sax

But it doesn't matter

Eyes closed  
Music composed  
Get ready to play again

Let the fingers flow  
Let the worries go  
Let only the music in

Nothing will stop the sweet sounds  
Of my sax

Saanvi Samant, age 13  
Hillsborough Middle School  
Somerset County  
Grade 7

## Strange Summer Dream

Summer, so warm,  
A ring of sun  
around your sight  
A soft blur of the beach and the  
Prickly palm trees formed a  
Silhouette against the never-ending  
Pink clouds, that streak across the sky  
In shapes like apples, candy, and  
Butterflies that flutter about, trying  
To reach the  
Flowers that grow in the  
ground, but the  
Petals are in the shapes of  
Faces?  
Faces of past-summer love, the  
Doves look at you holding broken  
Pageant crowns, in their beak,  
Summer is a weird dream  
Everything starts off good  
But ends with a broken  
Wrist from biking  
And a broken heart from something  
That was not destined to last long  
Because the impossible happens  
In summer  
And the possible leaves to grow  
For Fall and Winter

Sharlyn Sanjiv, age 13  
Hillsborough Middle School  
Somerset County  
Grade 7

## You're Going To Be Okay

I wandered the streets. I had nowhere else to be. Weeks passed-- no, it was only days. I wouldn't have survived weeks without food. I curled up in the depths of an alley, grime coating me like a second layer of clothing. The hunger had faded yesterday. Or was it two days ago? I wasn't quite sure anymore.

I nearly longed for the craving for food when it had been replaced by a piercing pain that wracked my body. My vision blurred as I attempted to open my eyes and I knew the end was near. I was almost grateful.

All of a sudden, a voice cut into my thoughts.

"Hey, are you alive back there?" The voice was oddly calm. Pain raked through my skull as I attempted to push myself up. In front of me swam the hazy image of a girl with long black dreadlocks, threaded with gold. Her face seemed inordinately beautiful as if she was an angel. I'd never considered myself to be particularly religious, but this was an exception.

"Don't look at me like that," she snapped as she heaved my body up after realizing I couldn't stand. "I'm not an angel." *Had I said that out loud?* I couldn't be sure.

"I'm Sola. You're going to be okay," she whispered, her voice softening for the first time as my body finally gave out and I let myself be consumed by the darkness.

I woke up in a grave. No, it wasn't a grave. It was a hospital—a makeshift one, I guessed, based on the lack of advanced medical technology. I closed my eyes for an instant before forcing myself to my feet. I hobbled down the hall, clutching bedposts to stay upright.

I gritted my teeth and took my first step without aid. I immediately tripped on my foot and would have smashed into the ground if not for the pair of arms that reached out to catch me.

"Woah there. Usually, it takes a few minutes before girls start swooning and fainting on me." He gave me a charming grin.

I swore and shoved him away from me, falling to my knees on the ground. I blinked the black spots out of my vision and carefully rose to my feet, my breath coming in short gasps.

His brow creased as he looked me over, "Are you from the hospital wing?"

"No," I lied.

"You are a positively terrible liar, but I will give you the benefit of doubt as you are injured and a lady," he grinned, bowing slightly. I rolled my eyes. "I'm Amar, what's your name?" Amar had wavy brown

curls, messed up artfully and chocolate brown skin. His wiry, tall frame caused him to loom above me. He walked with a purposeful gait as if he knew where he belonged. I wished I had that sort of certainty.

“Lynn,” I replied. “What is this place?”

He thrust his hands apart dramatically, “A place for the lost souls, abandoned by society.” With a smirk, he added, “It’s like an orphanage, except with better clothes.” His clothes *were* nice. With my training, I could immediately pick out the loose-fitting emerald button down as a silk.

“We’ve all got our tragic backstories,” he said flippantly. His tone contradicted the intense scan of his eyes, as he attempted to figure out my past. I was surprised to find myself slightly self-conscious.

“Is there a Sola here?” I asked, suddenly remembering the girl who’d saved me.

“Solanine? Yeah, I’m taking you to her right now. Time for you to meet our angsty orphan gang.”

The angsty orphan gang in question wasn’t much of a gang at all. In fact, there were only four people including Amar. I recognized Sola immediately and couldn’t bring myself to meet her eyes. Instead, I scanned the two unfamiliar faces.

The shorter one of the two, the girl, had long blonde hair pulled back into a loose ponytail. Strands hung in front of her pale eyes that scanned me unflinchingly. I could clearly see the muscles rippling under her plain linen set. Her mouth was in a steely position.

The other boy had sharp, angular features with black curtain bangs. He stood slightly taller than the blonde girl, but shorter than Sola and Amar. He gave me a cautious smile.

“Auri and Ryou.” Sola established, inclining her head towards the two.

“This is Lynn,” Amar introduced.

Time went quickly after that. They became my family, more than anyone had ever been for me. Before I had even realized, a year had passed.

I was walking down the same street where I had once crouched, awaiting death. I pictured Amar, Sola, Auri, and Ryou. I would go through it all again if it meant I would meet them. It startled me how close we’d become.

As I walked past an ally, I heard the tiniest whimper. Immediately, I turned to see a huddled girl in the corner.

Without saying a word, I walked over to the girl and pulled her to her feet, supporting her just as



someone had for me. She opened her eyes briefly and a flash of panic entered them. I felt it in my soul. I remembered being that terrified that anyone could harm you.

So, I spoke the words that had once saved me: “I’m Lynn. You’re going to be okay.”

Savitha Sriram, age 13  
Hillsborough Middle School  
Somerset County  
Grade 7

# **North Plainfield High School**

## **Love's In Need Of Love, All The Time!**

The bathwater is warm, hot enough to be comfortable in but not hot enough to burn skin. Ripples flow across the tub, bouncing off the bodies inside. They lay inside together, one laying on the other, back on their stomach, head on their chest just below their collarbone. The soap in the water smoothens their skin. Orange light reflects off the white marble of the tub, the clear softness of the water, intricateness of bubbles, accompanied by light, relaxed breathing. Both of their hair is wet, basking in the light above the water.

She, gentle as can be, raises her hand into the air, reaching towards the bottle of shampoo on a little fold-up table next to the tub. After a few pumps, she mixes the shampoo into her hands, rubbing the liquid between her fingers, letting it fall onto the damp curls below her chin. Each finger slides between sections of hair, resting and moving gently on his scalp. Bubbles appear almost endlessly, flowing slowly into the water, levitating into other bodies between water and air. It's almost silent, only breathing and the massaging of soap in thick patches of hair are capable of being heard.

As if invisible, a drop of salt-infused emotion runs from his waterline, to his cheek, down to his chin, absorbing into his skin. He moves his legs, pushing himself up against her, leaning further back into her collarbone. She moves up, grabbing for the shower head, turning the water on and covering his eyes, as she intricately washes every bit of soap from his head, leaving it flat against his skin. She puts it back into position, wrapping her arms around his chest, pulling him closer and leaning her chin onto his head. They close their eyes, the light only shining brighter.

Christopher Espinoza, age 14  
North Plainfield High School  
Somerset County  
Grade 9



**Artwork:**

Vanessa Nguyen, age 12

Branchburg Central Middle School

Somerset County

Grade 12





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