

FIRST-PRIZE WINNER

Crutches

The sound of the truck's horn was deafening as it flipped over in the middle of the highway. A car tried to veer away, but instead it slid into an oncoming car. The shattering of glass and screeching tires was all that could be heard. The child in the back seat looked down at a bloody limb where a lower leg used to be. He screamed at the sight and the unbearable pain, then . . . silence.

I woke up yelling and disoriented in an unfamiliar room. All I could think of was the horrible dream and the pain in my leg. When I tried to get up, I realized it wasn't a dream at all. Where the foot that could kick a goal from the eighteen-yard line once was, now lay a bandaged stump.

The details of the accident came flooding back, along with the tears. I knew my parents and little brother were gone forever. I didn't know how I could go on.

"I know you must be devastated about your family," a doctor in a crisp white coat explained. "You were in a coma for seven days. I am sorry we couldn't save your leg. The damage was too extensive. Your rehabilitation won't be easy. You will have to learn to lean on someone you can relate to. I know just the person."

" . . . And these will be your new legs on the field," said Fillipe.

Fillipe was my physiotherapist. He was a large, quiet man with a foreign accent who also has a passion for soccer. We became friends instantly. He handed me a new pair of blue and white crutches.

"These ones have more bounce and strength," Fillipe explained. "Let me show you." He laughed as I hesitated. He took out his own pair of brightly painted crutches. "The colours are from my home country . . . the flag of South Africa." He moved down the field with little effort, handling the ball the entire way. Near the twenty-yard line, he planted his crutches and took a shot with his foot. It went in just below the crossbar.

"Wow! That was amazing!" Fillipe came over to me and sat down. "I want to tell you about my life now."

Fillipe told me he grew up in South Africa with his parents and four brothers. He, too, had a great loss in his life. His family was killed when he was a teenage boy. He didn't think he could go on. That was when he moved to England to pursue a new life.

For the first time in months, I smiled. Fillipe passed the ball to me. I stumbled, but quickly regained my balance and headed towards the net and took a shot. I missed. It didn't matter. I had a feeling growing inside me that had been missing since the accident. It was hope. With the help of my new friend and my crutches, maybe there could be a new life ahead of me too!

Blake Carter (Grade Seven)
East Selkirk Middle School
East Selkirk, Manitoba



FIRST-PRIZE WINNER

This Is Now

A young girl runs away, trying to keep her little brother safe while keeping up with the pack. Gunshots, screams, and smoke fill the air as a rage of war erupts. The girl cries, unheard as the crowds override her voice. Earsplitting explosions are heard in the sky, barely louder than the pounding footsteps down below.

It's 11:41PM. A woman sits at her desk, hard at work, trying to finish the assignments given her. Unable to think straight, she wonders how her family must be feeling at this moment. Anger fuels her emotions. Trying to shut out any other thoughts, she immerses herself in work again.

Move on.

The exploding noises thicken. The girl refuses to dismiss the strenuous task her deceased parents gave to her. The sun scorches the sand as wind ripples through her torn clothes. Crashing, firing, and bursts of light continue. The girl is accustomed to these disasters. She slows down to catch a breath and gazes into the bright blue sky, sunshine barely spilling through the clouds and puffs of smoke. What could have been a beautiful scene was tainted by war. She smiles into the air. Nothing could bring her down.

Happiness is not what happens around us, but what we make of it.

The woman wishes she could be free. Perfecting her work and impressing her manager was high on her list of priorities. She never spent much time with her family—the only source of salvation. The woman spends her life grieving the past and the future without truly living in the present. She is frustrated; anger slowly taking over her mind. Hate is a powerful thing. Her office is a mess, with cups, papers, pens scattered randomly across her desk.

A soft voice cries out to her. The loving, peaceful side was awakening. It was about time.

Crowded together in the refugee camp, the girl's younger brother begins crying. She tells him they'll be staying there with other people as a game. The goal of the game is to survive. The boy stops crying. They play tag and laugh, drowning in the innocence and joy of childhood. There are no tears behind their eyes. Life is too short to concentrate on the negative things. They stand on a magnificent cliff top, bathing in the warm orange sunshine. Their minds are free from any worries, regrets, and fear. They become lost in the moment, caught in a fragment of time.

Despite everything, it was still a beautiful day.

It becomes clear. The woman drops her pen and bursts through the doors. A rush of winter wind passes by her face. She watches the snowflakes slowly falling from the dark, grey sky. Running with no destination, she sees the bright lights flashing in the city, fire dancing in her eyes. She gazes at the cars whipping by. She observes the lively festival nearby. This is your only chance to live.

Your time is now. Yesterday never existed and tomorrow is a new beginning.

Katherine Jin (Grade Eight)
Homelands Senior Public School
Mississauga, Ontario

FIRST-PRIZE WINNER

The Long-faced Ones

The little long-faced one led me through the dark night forest. Its long shadows draping us as thickly as our furs. The winter snow crunched under our feet. I'd met the little one a scant twelve nights ago. Our people had been fishing on the biggest river, when their entire tribe had come wandering by. Our chief had engaged them in trade, for everyone knew that the furs and the tools of the long-faced were the best there were. So they camped on the other side of the big river for three nights, trading. Then, on the fourth day, I went out fishing alone.

I cracked much of the thin ice with a stone, then waited patiently with my spear. Suddenly, a new cracking sound came from behind me. I turned quickly, fearing it might be some terrible cave bear coming to eat me. But it was only a little girl long-faced one, walking on the ice. The ice. . . .

I dove forward, and was nearly too late. The little one was soaked through, with cracked bits of ice bobbing around her. I had never run so fast, knowing that if I did not get her to a warm fire soon she would surely die of winter's chill. But she lived, and now she guides me through the dark night forest, towards the sounds of what can only be the long-faced ones' camp. We are almost there.

As I step through the last of the trees, a thousand strange sights assault my eyes. A clearing spreads out beneath the shadow of a rocky hill. Several fires illuminate the forms of many long-faced ones. The smell of sizzling meat reaches my nose. We enter the crowd and they swarm around me. I cannot understand a word of their language but their odd flat faces are smiling, I can feel their kindness. One in particular stands before me. The little one has leapt into her arms, and her smile is wider than all the others. When I come near she hugs me, as if I am her family. They are thanking me, I realize, for saving their little one.

They lead me past the cooking fires into a cave in the rocky hill. Another fire lights the darkness in there. We circle it, and they begin to sing. The music is different from ours. More wild and joyful. Yet deeply intricate and delicate too. The sounds are sharper as well. Their drums and flutes so neatly made, they do not seem a natural thing at all. Curious, I look around, and then upward. My gasp is lost in the beautiful music.

A flat portion of the cavern's ceiling has been decorated with little pictures. I see huntsmen and deer. A strange man dances with a long-nosed tusked beast. Other pictures in the vibrant colours swirl before me. But they are all meaningless. I turn back to the music. Away from these daytime stars.

Neanderthals.

Kevin Milde (Grade Nine)
L.V. Rogers Secondary School
Nelson, British Columbia



FIRST-PRIZE WINNER

Good Night, Alex

He stepped out of the rig truck into the chilling February air. He grabbed his coat from the passenger seat and yanked it on quickly, then slammed the truck door hard. Her eyes followed him as he walked across the dimly lit sidewalk towards the door of the diner and pulled it open with his sleeve-covered hand.

“Who is that?” Dilian asked the waitress bringing Dilian her meal.

He wiped his work boots on the mat and walked past her booth towards the back of the restaurant. Dilian watched him, until their eyes met. Then, as quickly as it happened, she looked away. He was handsome, a lot younger than most of the rig workers around, but his face was the only thing that gave it away. He was about six-foot tall with uncombed brown hair. He had broad shoulders and a light athletic build. His overalls were two sizes too big and looked sloppy. He had a gruff persona to him and something about it was alluring. She glanced back quickly to see he had sat down with four other riggers.

“That’s Alex Millin,” the waitress replied. “He works with J&R Drilling. Apparently he’s like sixteen, dropped out of school ’cause he got some girl pregnant. Dumb kid, if you ask me.”

Dilian didn’t say much, but just looked over again. He sat there with the men, most of them much older. The four others talked loudly and joked around, but Alex sat there, almost isolated from the others. Dilian glanced over at him a few times while she ate, usually to find him picking at his half-eaten hamburger or playing with his empty coke bottle. There was something about Alex that made her wonder what was behind those dark brown eyes.

It was nearing eight o’clock when Dilian got home. She said good night to her parents and started down the stairs to her room. Three stairs from the bottom, she heard her cell phone ringing in her bedroom. She ran to answer the call, and noted it came from a blocked number.

“Hello,” Dilian said into the phone.

A steady quiet voice came to the receiver, “I heard what that waitress said today. I know what everyone thinks.”

For a moment, Dilian was confused.

The voice continued, “You make choices in life you may or may not like, but at the end of the day you gotta be able to look in the mirror and know you’re trying your hardest.”

It was then Dilian knew exactly who it was.

“I’m scared, I’m tired, I feel alone, and sometimes I don’t know if I can go on, but when I look into the eyes of my little girl, I forget about the things people say to bring me down. She’s my life now and I will do everything in my power to give her what I never had.”

The line went dead. Dilian just sat there. Then she whispered into the receiver, “Good night, Alex.”

Kaitlyn Fraser (Grade Ten)

Souris School
Souris, Manitoba

FIRST-PRIZE WINNER

Sky Girl

I remember the taste of the lime Jell-O as if it were yesterday. The nauseatingly fresh smell of Lysol hung in the air as always. There was nothing child friendly there, and everywhere I looked, I saw empty eyes, no smiles but the ones plastered to each nurse's face, leftovers from the days of hope. Those plastic smiles were too crusted now to even bother wiping off.

Every night I prayed for an answer to a question. "Where are you? When children cry and families mourn and promises don't last, where are you?" *Surely He couldn't have been with me*, I thought. No one could have looked down on my world and remained silent. He didn't exist. Surely not.

The only comfort for me was the collection of blue birds at my feet. My sister knew what it was like here, how much I wished I were back in the valley with her. She knew how much I wanted out, to wake to hear the birds again. So, without fail, she folded. Every day of my sentence here she sat by me and folded a bird. Cobalt, navy, indigo, azure. It didn't matter if one wing was bent or the scribbles of directions were still visible on one's stomach. To me they were my outside world, a small assortment of nature, huddling by my toes. They stayed when God had flown away.

Operation day arrived. I drifted again into a coma of indifference. I wasn't prepared when Smiley slapped me in the face with my odds. "It's not unheard of. . . ." 99.9% of patients don't make it. "We are hopeful. . . ." "We can't promise anything. . . ." "Miracles happen. . . ." Good Lord.

I blocked him out. My sister was nodding and squeezing my hand. She, too, still clung to hope. Turning off the rest of the world, I gazed at my birds. The shades of blue swam together and cooled my burning eyes. They cooed softly, *Don't Cry, sweet girl. Don't waste your tears. Fly with us.*

And so we did. Up and away from the pastel prison, we soared. They lifted me out of my sunken skin and gave me strength I hadn't felt in years. I heard them sing. I no longer wondered where He was. I didn't disturb him with a silent prayer. I drank in every second of my flight of fancy and never once looked back. In the distance I could hear a man's voice. "Clear!" The birds carried me onwards. Was someone calling for me? *Don't cry, sister. Don't waste your tears.*

Today I sit with the birds. They sing to me every morning after nights that never end. I have long forgotten the weight of my sick body. I look down on my world. I hear when children cry, and *I* send down my birds. Cobalt, navy, indigo, azure. I send them down and they sing to the souls who pray.

I do not remain silent.

Kelsea Gust (Grade Eleven)

Rosemère High School

Rosemère, Québec



FIRST-PRIZE WINNER

A Traitor's Embrace

I balanced myself using a plastic, red chair. Its slats allowed the frigid wind to creep in between my snow pants and winter jacket. Teetering on my ice skates, my fingers clamped onto this one piece of stability, my stretched finger-mittens gaping, allowing winter's frosty breath to wriggle its way up my arm.

I admired my siblings' sleek twists and turns as they darted around one another. Their bodies bending and bowing to avoid collision, carving elegant designs on the surface of the cloudy ice. Skating in circles around me, pushing long snow shovels, my three siblings cleared the snow-covered creek, careful to dodge the rushes that sporadically peeped above the surface.

My fingers unravelled their fierce grip on the chair and I cautiously edged away from my certainty. After a few strokes, my awkward feet began to wobble. My arms flapped out from my sides as I tried to steady myself.

She rescued me just as I ploughed into a patch of reeds. Taking my hand, she guided me away from our cleared rink, tugging me so that I glided easily over the ice. Careless and free, we dared the snow-burdened creek ahead.

The sky had melted into the earth; the horizon camouflaged by the white snow. I stuck out my eager little tongue to catch the drifting snowflakes. The cold air tickled my wagging tongue and I tossed my mother a goofy smile. Her laughing eyes traced my face, locking the picture away.

My mother's legs pumped faster and harder. She pulled me along at an alarming pace and my scarf weaved into my hair as the wind whipped it past my round cheeks. I had to concentrate to keep one deviant foot from veering away.

She sped towards the bridge, standing stark and alone against the blurred horizon. Her warm smile reassured me of my safety. Nearing the bridge, she slowed as the rushes thickened and the frozen creek narrowed.

I chose a tumbling snowflake to nab with my tongue when my feet faltered. I heard a muffled cracking beneath my feet. Suddenly, my battered skates were beneath the ice. The shocking cold water bolted up my snow pants, numbing my legs. I sank lower, the ice above my waist now. My mother shrieked and yanked me out. She dragged me far from the tear in the ice, cradling me in her arms. Her panicking eyes scanned my drenched legs. Dragging me to my feet, she raced back towards our house.

My teeth clattered uncontrollably. Stinging toes and an aching arm couldn't distract my anxious mind. My security had been shattered. I held back tears, afraid my eyeballs would freeze. I couldn't look at her.

My mother pulled off my skates, her strong arms enfolding my feeble limbs, her protection a little tardy. Through mounds of snow, she carried me up the slope to our house. As we ascended, I looked back at my abandoned plastic chair. It still stood on the ice. Waiting patiently.

Rheanna Buursma (Grade Twelve)
Grimsby Secondary School
Grimsby, Ontario

SECOND-PRIZE WINNER

The Blazing Colt

From the day I was born, everyone in the herd said I was a beautiful colt. My coat shone like copper in the golden sun. I was sure-footed and graceful.

I was young and fragile, however, so I spooked at little. My blood ran strong in my veins, pure fiery mustang. My blaze stood out against my chestnut coat like the full moon on a black night. A single sock, white as snow, ran along my left hoof. My looks were as beautiful as I was gentle. All this I got from my dam, who was quite like me.

Now horses need not have names for we know who we are by our spirit and smell. So I could tell my dam from the other wild horses. I ran by her side, nursed hourly, and slept quietly by her warm, soft barrel. Our snouts met at night before bed. Oh how I wished this would go on forever! But I changed from colt to yearling, being more brave and daring each and every day. Yet every night I would nuzzle by her side. Hearing her breath calmed me down.

The yearlings and I ran races around and around. I was the fastest, not bragging, of course. My legs were long and muscular, my gait was quick, efficient, and easy. This made me hard to keep up with for I could go like this for hours. This I got from my sire.

He was strong, lean, and muscular. He could canter circles around any horse. I never really knew my sire, nor did I ever see him. He had so many offspring, he never knew of me. He always held his head high and proud. So did I, for my mom told me to. For it shows pride, and pride shows dignity.

One night, I peered up at the sky to see stars—thousands of stars. I looked to my mother and asked about the stars shining so brightly in the sky. She simply looked at me and replied, “My son, the stars are our future. They tell us things.” I looked confused. She knew the look on my face. “They tell us plenty of things, like love, luck, and life. Now, my son, promise me that if I ever leave, for good or bad, I will be in the stars. So you may ask questions and the stars will give you answers.”

I looked at her. “But, Mother, why would you ever leave me?”

“Well, son, all things end for a reason.”

After that, things were quiet and still, and fireflies fluttered in the air.

Kalai Schneider (Grade Seven)

Mount Prevost Middle School

Duncan, British Columbia



SECOND-PRIZE WINNER

The Deceiver's Reality

The seemingly endless tunnel was dreadfully dark. Cassandra stood before the entrance smugly, viewing it, considering it, grinning to herself. She had discovered the passageway to the realm of darkness, and although she wasn't entirely sure what that meant, she knew that there was no harm in finding out.

Climbing through the dimly lit entrance, Cassandra, the endless deceiver, didn't look back. Her past was not of major significance. Her future was the focus.

The tunnel was fairly large and damp, basically the type of place where you might expect to see rats scuttling about, like a sewer. Cassandra had never been in a sewer, and she didn't care to be either. After all, she could easily imagine what they would be like.

The girl had never liked filth. She was an adventurer, however, who delighted in precarious situations that very often tested her wit. This passageway qualified for exactly that description.

As Cassandra gingerly ventured into the labyrinth, trying desperately to remember from which way she had come, she began to notice tiny figures clinging to the ceiling. Bats! Cassandra hated bats, even more than she hated grimy corridors. Not because they were so peculiar, but because they were associated with vampires. Although Cassandra kept it to herself, she had no doubts that vampires were the most bloodcurdling fiends one could encounter.

A queasy sensation began to form in the pit of her stomach when suddenly—very suddenly—a long-fingered hand clenched her shoulder solidly. Too terrified to scream, Cassandra, the rule-breaker, spun around.

“Cassandra, you're so annoying! Stop daydreaming and focus on what is real!” It was Brian, an auburn-haired boy in her class at school.

In the background she could see their classroom. There were world maps, human body charts, and lesson reminders stapled to the walls. Cassandra scowled in humiliation at being in a totally average place for a student to be. Turning her back on the boy, Cassandra realized the tunnel had been replaced by a closet, which stored an abundance of art supplies. There were no bats.

Rounding back on her peer, Cassandra quoted Pablo Picasso defiantly. “Anything that can be imagined is real,” she said.

Carolyn Harris (Grade Eight)
Broadview Avenue Public School
Ottawa, Ontario



SECOND-PRIZE WINNER

No Other Day

In the early morning, she crept outside without making a single sound. Not even a hawk flying above could hear her. She could not hear anything either—not a bird, nor a cricket, nor anything moving in the grass. There was total silence.

She was wearing her favourite dress; it was sky-blue, mid-calf long, swished every time she walked, and had a big dark-blue ribbon that tied around to make a perfect bow.

She smoothly walked to the field. It was full of flowers, the pretty little pink ones to be exact. There were so many, they were like blades of grass. On every flower petal there lay a drop of cool dew.

She stood there, just standing to watch the sun rise. She began to walk across the field, letting the cool drops of dew touch her petite feet. Then the wind picked up. Her auburn hair was in a high ponytail with loose curls. The wind felt amazing; it was not warm but not cold. It was so peaceful. She let her hair down and it blew in the wind while her dress was flowing like waves of the ocean. She kept walking, and walking, and walking some more. She loved the dew on her feet, the pink flowers, the most beautiful sunrise, and the wind. It was all so calming.

Before she left, she picked one of the pretty pink flowers and stuck it in her now-messy, windblown, auburn hair. She crept back to her house, again without hearing anything or without anything hearing her. She would never forget this day. Not ever in her lifetime could she forget a day like this. No day could ever compare. But before she stepped inside, she swung her head back and looked at the sun, now fully risen, and smiled.

She just smiled. . . .

Jordan Nicol (Grade Nine)

Elton Collegiate
Forrest, Manitoba



SECOND-PRIZE WINNER

Your Own Worst Enemy

The sound of squeaking rodents, entwined with deep rough coughing emanated throughout the cramped old prison cell. The cough was coming from a prisoner in a cell down the hall. It grew louder and coarser, then came to an abrupt halt.

Another prisoner, whose slumber was interrupted by this ordeal, knew exactly what had occurred. He comprehended this detainee had just become another statistic of the prison's suspiciously large number of natural deaths. In the matter of a few days, many prisoners in his section died naturally, just in time for the arrival of a large transfer of new inmates from another prison. The jail was already far past its maximum capacity, and nobody knew where they would be placed.

As he nervously brooded over if he would be next to perish, a prolonged twinge of pain overtook him. Tears gathered in his eyes as he acutely pondered, *Is this what death feels like?*

After the pain ceased, he realized that his physical agony was caused by the wound on the back of his head. The blood-crusting wound is what he blamed for having no recollection of events prior to his incarceration. He assumed the injury was caused by a blow to the head he received during his arrest, or while trying to escape it.

As he sat in his dark, dingy cell, he heard whispers flooding the hall. As he arduously focused on the vague sounds, they began evolving into an audible conversation. It was a discussion between two guards over a prison official and a politician who were arrested on charges of corruption. The esteemed officials had allegedly received bribes from various sources to accept unbelievably large prisoner transfers from other jails.

They had reportedly curbed the prison's population by poisoning the prisoner's food.

The clacking sound of footsteps drawing closer and closer to his cell caused him to retract from his profound rumination. As the guard walked past, he sprung up and grabbed hold of the rusted metal bars.

"I have to ask you something!" he screamed after the guard.

"What?" asked the guard in an irritated tone, as he turned back towards the cell.

"Are those people you were talking about being held in this prison?" he asked.

"One of them," answered the guard in a monotonous voice as he turned away.

"Where is he being held? I must know!" the prisoner shouted.

"I am not at liberty to divulge such information," the guard said.

The prisoner began coughing, then shouted even louder, "Please! It's my dying wish!"

"Fine, he is in this section," the guard said.

This new development caused the prisoner's face to light up.

"What does that monster look like?" he asked the guard, who was again nearing his cell.

"You really don't remember, do you?" asked the guard sarcastically. The prisoner portrayed a perplexed expression as he waited for the guard to further explain. "Look in the mirror," the guard finally stated.

Brandon Silver (Grade Ten)
Hebrew Academy
Montréal, Québec

SECOND-PRIZE WINNER

Hope for the Future

He stood up on the barrier; waving the flag more virulently, swaying it in the wind back and forth. Behind him the crowd stood and cheered for him, he felt powerful now, felt like he could make a difference for all the lives he wanted to save. He leapt off the barrier and began yelling down at the people to march with him onto the hill; he raised their spirits and encouraged them to resist the complacent government. They followed.

The crowd grew with each passing minute; every soul that felt mistreated marched from the rotten streets of the city towards them. The man in the suit thought to himself, *Damn them, why can't they see my hands are tied?* He stormed to his desk and picked up the phone.

"If they breach the gates, do it," he growled down the mouth piece. There was a murmur of approval from the man at the other end of the line. The man in the suit lurched back to the window to see the mob approaching; he sneered.

The man with the flag continued to cheer. He could see that they were winning; more and more citizens were joining in the good fight to stop this corruption from destroying everyone's lives. He marched proudly, the flag raised high. Around him, others began to sing *Ode to Joy*; their voices raised high in tune. All around, the people were happy to be a part of forcing their flatulent government to do something they wanted.

The man with the flag reached the gates. The security guard looked at him and smirked, then he looked behind him at the cheering crowd. Suddenly, all humour was removed from his lips. He fled as the flag bearer marched over the gate and opened it for the rest to follow.

He strode on, triumph in his heart. He smiled and began to hum, "Land of hope and Glory," as he strode right through to the main plaza of the crystalline building that curved away. He saw the line of flags that represented the so-called United Nations. Throwing a rude gesture with his fingers at the flags, he proceeded to burst his vocal cords into song bellowing, "Land of Hope and Glor—r—ry."

As he marched on, the crowd behind him saw, and stopped singing. Their faces turned white. They remained at the gate, but most held their breath for the next three minutes.

He realized he could no longer hear singing. He glanced over his shoulder and saw everyone standing, staring at him. Silence hung in the air. He began to encourage them on, when he heard the first click. He turned to face the men in black, holding what he knew they would.

With a defiant shout, he marched on, waving his flag and cheering.

The guns fired.

The flag fell, its twin globes united by infinity folded on the dust, now turning crimson. . . . The shots fired again.

David White (Grade Eleven)
Ridgeway-Crystal Beach High School
Ridgeway, Ontario

SECOND-PRIZE WINNER

Frozen

Faster and faster I ran, never looking back, never thinking back.

I opened my mind to the howling wind and the snow that shocked my bare feet, allowing the cold emptiness to fill my mind with swirls of thoughtlessness. The flurries of snowflakes hit my face and melted instantly, trickling down my cheeks like tears, then running down the neck of my pyjamas.

The unbarred chill of winter bit my fingers and pricked the soles of my feet. The branches of the nearby forest were dark against the diffused glow from the blizzard. Their bare fingers reached up into the sky, looking like a set of broken piano keys, black and white against the horizon. No more music would ever be made from that piano in the sky. My fingers were too numb to play it.

Every inch of my skin was burning from the cold as I entered the edges of the forest. Despite the branches strewn across the wood's floor, I kept running. My skin had now ceased to feel, so the snatching branches cutting my face and piercing my feet seemed distant.

Suddenly my view changed, and I heard my body hitting the frozen earth. Now I was looking up through a frame of tree branches to the stars far above. The stars seemed so far away, way up there, encased in silence and darkness. I felt my soul pulling me up to them, and suddenly the snow wetting my back seemed like it was a million miles away.

I was in three. Part of me was lying on a cold forest floor in a shrieking blizzard, pinned to the earth. Part of me was in the stars, at peace in the quiet and the stillness. The last piece of me was suspended in the middle, hanging in the air, floating in the upper branches of the trees, not quite reaching the empty, welcoming space above.

Yet my mid-self wasn't struggling to reach those stars yet. It was natural to be in the middle, to be the axis. If two of me were in the stars, it would throw off this perfect balance. Balance was what I wanted. It was what I needed. Balance was peace.

I desperately ached for peace.

Now I had found it.

Maybe if Mom and Dad found it, too, they would stop fighting. Maybe their screaming would stop, and I wouldn't have to run away from the angry curses that scare me in the night. But they'll have to search for their peace alone. The stars are calling me.

Eliane Drijber (Grade Twelve)

Cayuga Secondary School

Cayuga, Ontario



THIRD-PRIZE WINNER

Without a Trace

The lights were always on at 3652 Mokena Street. And I just happened to live in the house facing it on the other side. My name is Jeremy Alkynes. . . .

It was a dark, stormy night when the banging started. One, then two taps at my window. Just as I opened the window a third pebble hit my left eye. Covering my other eye, I looked down. There, in my backyard, were the Gorillas.

The Gorillas were three guys who practically owned the school I went to. Everyone wanted to be a Gorilla—everyone, including me.

Running downstairs in stained jeans and a baggy T-shirt, I ran outside. Then they jumped me.

“We need you to sneak into that house and find our stolen cell phones. A thug came and threw ’em through the window,” stated James. “And if you get them, we will make you one of us.”

I accepted immediately.

The next night, I snuck over to the condemned house and through the broken window. I climbed the stairs guided by only moonlight, and saw all three cell phones on a table. I grabbed them just as something hit me on the head. I had been knocked out.

When I woke, I looked around but could see nothing but white. I felt around and, suddenly, everything came into focus. I was still in a white room but there were doors everywhere. I shakily headed over to one and touched the door knob. The door disappeared instantly, with a blaring *whoosh* noise.

Just then, I was tackled from behind and slammed onto the floor. “Don’t ever do that again!” shouted a voice, shrill and high.

I turned around to see a girl I knew very well. “Katie Welles?” I asked, flustered. “I thought you moved away years ago. . . .”

Katie sighed, “I did, but the day before the move I was dared by the Gorillas to sneak in and turn off the lights in this house. I have been trapped here ever since with another kid.” I opened my mouth to speak, but she interrupted quickly. “And when he tried to go through a door, he . . . he disintegrated!” Then she fainted.

A week later, I stopped by the mirror door with no handle and could see my room! *What is the mirror doing in my room?* I thought. An idea pushed me; I backed up and ran forward, slamming into the glass door. It exploded with a rainbow of colour: red, yellow, purple . . . so many colours you couldn’t name them.

And in that instant I was back.

Katie peered at the broken mirror, wondering what had happened. She took a step and breathed the fresh air. Then she ran around the room eating everything edible she could find.

“Jeremy!” she exclaimed, hugging me. “Thank you!” There in my arms, she started crying.

Yes, I thought. *There is no place like here. . . .*

Jonathan Hunwick (Grade Seven)
Cedar Hill Middle School
Victoria, British Columbia

THIRD-PRIZE WINNER

The Realization of a Feeling

I woke up today like I have every morning for quite some time: empty-minded, empty-handed, empty-hearted. Empty. Nothing had been the same for a while now. I had been stripped suddenly of everything I believed in and hoped for. One single moment had tore up my soul and left me sitting there helplessly. After, an overwhelming feeling of sadness tingled up my spine and dispersed into a million scattered tears. The memory loomed over my guarded heart every day when I awoke, reminding me that nothing would ever be the same. Reminding me that the morning sun would never be joyous, the twittering birds would never be comforting, that I would never be who I desperately longed to become. I died that day and never came back.

It was one year ago today that I had walked into the local hospital with an unexplained feeling of loneliness. It was a feeling I couldn't explain or make any logical sense of, yet was a reality telling me who I was at that very second. It whispered empowered thoughts of justice and redemption that kept moving forward into the future and away from my shadowed past. And I kept walking, despite every instinct in my body telling me to run away, somewhere, anywhere but there. As I opened the door towards my fate, I realized why, but I still kept walking.

"You have at most one year to live," he told me, like he had no care in the world, like he was oblivious. Ease and confidence were smeared across his face. He was looking at me that entire time in apparent comfort and understanding, but how could he possibly understand? The only thing I took pride in through my truthful yet twisted life were my memories and thoughts. It was not fair that one sentence from him could take that away from me.

After a while my thoughts trailed off and he finally left me alone sitting there, my loneliness growing, my heart fading, and my mind wondering. All I could do was sit, concealed in my thoughts, and away from anything that would remind me of my driving fate.

I scanned the room looking for relief from my swallowing thoughts. I noticed something so plain yet magnificent staring at me from across the room. It was my reflection in a mirror, a portrait of me that was supposed to be from my perspective, but wasn't. This person's tears were shining. Their features were softened and lit perfectly. This person was beautiful. Sitting there, looking at myself, was probably the hardest thing I have ever done. My reflection was mocking me in a way that makes one realize life is always there, getting in the way. So I stood up and walked over to the one thing that had ever brought me down. I looked at my hand and then at my reflection and I smashed it.

Dana Mitchell (Grade Eight)
Centennial Middle School
Georgetown, Ontario



THIRD-PRIZE WINNER

The Scarlet Poppy

I looked out the window of the plane. So far below lay the bleak landscape of the Canadian countryside. My chest lifted and rose slowly as I closed my eyes. It felt so odd to be coming home at last. At times during the past months, I had awaited this day with great eagerness. The violence had been too much for me. Overwhelming. Every day, shrieks of pain and fear. Bombs. Land mines. Death. Those words sent a shiver down my spine and made my stomach churn. I had gone to Afghanistan with hopes of re-building. Now, I was torn apart. I wanted to cry, but the tears would not come. I felt like a coward.

Soldiers were supposed to be brave. I had gone to Afghanistan because it was the home of my father's people. I felt a duty to help them, to bring them peace. Afghanistan had been at constant war for so many years now. That is why my father had fled, but also why I had returned. I wanted to bring hope to a country ravaged and devastated by war.

Afghanistan was a country with such a rich culture and history, thousands of years old. My mission was over, my task done. I had a strange hollow feeling in my stomach, however, and a lump in my throat. I felt like a failure. What had I done to help the people of Afghanistan? I had seen so many innocent people perish, seen enough violence to drain the hope out of even the most optimistic soul. So many Canadian soldiers had died. I heard of new ones every week. I remembered Mike. His wonderful smile, his laugh. . . . Violence had taken him. I would never see him again. I had not smiled or laughed in so many weeks. All the life had been drained from me. I had forgotten how to feel joy. I was numb.

From what seemed like a million light years away, I heard it announced over the loudspeaker that the plane was landing in Montréal. I sat up and gathered my things. I held my breath as the plane landed. I saw my father, my mother, and my younger brother waiting for me as I descended from the plane. I ran into their outstretched arms, tears streaming down my face. I was at a loss for words. I was in a daze during the car ride home. My father stopped the car in front of our house. I opened the car door and looked out into the chilly, November night. I hadn't realized I had been crying the whole way home. I then saw it on the coat of a little girl walking down the street, its scarlet colour standing out in the night, bringing the first small smile to my face in ages. The poppy.

Samantha Backman (Grade Nine)

The Study School
Montréal, Québec



THIRD-PRIZE WINNER

The Hollow Machine

Tears of shame roll down my cheeks. They are about as welcome there as I am in this place: not welcome at all. I am crouched in tall grass, dragging on a cigarette, and hiding from my men. I am broken and alone, realizing we are all fighting for something of little importance—fighting for people who believe the weapons carried are more valuable than the lives of those carrying them.

I savour the last of my cigarette and slowly return to base. Soon, I am leading my team towards our target. Crawling low through the tall grass near the town, I feel more like an animal than a man. The sun is rising, painting the sky with heavenly purples and reds. I stare at the unknowing village, feeling unbearably guilty to bring such disaster on a beautiful day like this.

In minutes, the cold empty machine within me overpowers my emotions, and gives my men their instructions. Just like that, chaos consumes everything. Shots are fired. Screams blend together to form one enormous growl of suffering. Blood is shed until it covers everything and the ground resembles a morbid tomato soup.

I try as hard as I possibly can to not participate in the bloody massacre around me. Though eventually, I have no choice but to use my training. I become the well-oiled machine I have grown to despise. I feel as if my body and mind have been hollowed out to suit their needs. Everything is a blur of dead, bloody bodies, loud gunshots, and explosions.

I barely notice when the noise subsides or realize we have completed our mission, but soon the machine in me powers down. I feel suffocated by the air around me, heavy with what lies unspoken. I look at myself, wondering who this person is who has the lives of the innocent stained in red all over him, I turn away from the celebration of the rest of my team.

Raw hate for the warrior I have become envelops me. I reach into my pocket, pulling out my only remaining piece of sanity. The paper I pull out is old and worn. The picture is faded but my memory is not. I look at a younger version of myself, arms around my wife and son, taken at Christmas three years ago. Since then, I have missed three wedding anniversaries, six birthdays, three Christmases, and who knows what else. This picture gives me clarity; reminding me of who I am and why I'm here. It is my determination, my hope, and my will to live.

Even though sometimes I wish death would take me, just because it would be easier than living in this place, I will do everything I can to live. This is not a normal situation and I will not treat it as such. I will fight, because I am not human and this is not life. I am a soldier and this is war.

Elizabeth Baldwin (Grade Ten)
St. Jean de Brebeuf Secondary School
Hamilton, Ontario



THIRD-PRIZE WINNER

A Fortress of Tears

“Doesn’t he know how stupid he looks?”

“And what’s with that book? Hello! It’s break! Doesn’t he have any friends?”

“What do you think? Look at him!”

The laughter starts, rising to a crescendo as the rest of the group joins in. I remember when that first bout of laughter had been enough to make me blush and hurry away. Now I just raise my book higher and ignore them.

“What is he even reading?”

“Oh my god, it’s a math textbook!”

“No one reads those, not even in class!”

They don’t care if I hear them. Why should they? There’s nothing I could do. Forcing my attention back to the book, I study.

“Rebecca? Where are you going?”

Someone is coming? That’s new. My eyes don’t leave the page as the girl gracefully stoops down beside me. If I ignore her maybe she’ll go away.

“Hey. You’re new, aren’t you? I’m Rebecca.”

I stay quiet, flipping the page. My eyes run down the columns of numbers, taking them in silently as she waits for my reply.

“What’s your name?”

“Mark.” Monotone and monosyllabic, that was key. If you were uninteresting enough they left you alone—for a while.

“What are you reading?”

“What does it look like?” The bitterness in my voice makes her recoil, but even that doesn’t deter her.

“Well . . . a math textbook.” Another peal of laughter reverberates through the hall. It goes on and on, overwhelming everything. Even after it stops I can hear it pounding in my head, along with years of taunts, insults, and jokes at my expense.

I’ve skipped classes I loved to get away from them. My reputation for brilliant work will always be mingled with the comment “but he’s never in class.” I ignore it all; I let it bounce off my ever-hardening armour. I retreat further into my books, into the numbers and letters that hold other worlds, and I had never cried; tears were weak, a waste of effort. I added them to the wall that was my silent defence and they strengthened it.

“I’ve never seen anyone read a text book before. Do you like math?”

The roaring in my ears, the memories of past wounds egg me on. “Look, Rebecca, you obviously couldn’t take a hint if your life depended on it. Leave me alone. Go back to your stupid friends; tell them you met the reject, and that he’s everything they think he is, but leave me the hell alone!”

She was surprised at first. Rage followed quickly, then a horrible understanding pity. She rose wordlessly.

I don’t need her pity. My eyes take in the book: left right, left right. Line by line I read until I feel her gaze release me and hear her footsteps fade.

Her friends call, “Rebecca! Come here!”

She walks past them, ignoring their demands. Left right, left right. The first tear trickles through a crack in my armour as I wish the girl I had driven away would return.

Marissa White (Grade Eleven)
George Elliot Secondary School
Lake Country, British Columbia



THIRD-PRIZE WINNER

The Horrors of Adventure

As the small tour boat drifted onto the shore, Mr. Thomas Harvey leaned excitedly against the rail, while Mrs. Suzanne Harvey, her nose held high, stood as far back from the edge as possible. This sort of transportation was most definitely beneath a family of their stature.

Unfortunately, Mr. Harvey always loved exotic adventure and these ridiculous, unpopulated islands off the east coast of Mexico could only be accessed by a filthy miniscule motorboat. Thomas, by all means, could have gone alone, but he infuriatingly insisted she come with him. As maddening as Thomas could be, Mrs. Harvey still loved the man. Reluctantly, she agreed to accompany him.

Thomas leapt onto the foreign land like an impatient child. Thankfully, her husband's embarrassing behaviour would not reach ears of any importance, as none of the socialites from Mrs. Harvey's network of wealthy acquaintances would ever be caught dead in a place like this . . . or in such dreadfully common company.

Carlos proffered a calloused hand to Mrs. Harvey to assist her down from the boat. She glanced disapprovingly at the dirt on his fingers before accepting his aid.

Once they had gathered on the white sandy shore, Carlos walked inland and motioned for everyone to follow. The beach ended abruptly with a multitude of towering trees. The smoking top of a volcano peeked out over the treetops far in the distance.

Mrs. Harvey despised the outdoors and found the towering trunks oppressive; they made her feel small and insignificant—quite a contradiction to her own views. Her Gucci heels stuck in the damp earth, and gnarled wooden limbs clawed and tore at her prim updo and Fendi suit.

Monkeys swung high in the trees, calling warnings of intruders, while songbirds and crickets chirped delighted greetings, and squirrels scampered through a green maze far overhead. The many sounds of nature intertwined through the jungle, weaving a wondrous harmony that captured aloud the exquisite beauty of Mother Nature. Mrs. Harvey found it all rather irritating.

The hum of life decreased so gradually that it was not until no sign of habitation could be heard that Carlos paused to listen; he stood very tense and alert. Suddenly, a deafening snarl tore through the silence, and a midnight streak shot across Mrs. Harvey's vision. The claws of the ebony beast ripped through Thomas's flesh with ease. For a moment, everyone froze in shock, then an earsplitting cry shot from Thomas's bloodied lips, and a gun appeared in Carlos's hands. The thunderous shot rang through the air with an unnerving finality, and the jaguar collapsed with an angry roar. Blood pooled around the horrific heap, flooding the earth in crimson.

Suzanne Harvey stared blindly at the remains of her husband, as the significance of the past five seconds sunk in. She was vaguely aware of being led back to the boat, the unfeeling vessel that pushed off from the island, taking her back to a life that would never be the same.

Melissa Jennings (Grade Twelve)
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