CREATIVE WRITING ANTHOLOGY 2024 Somerset County
Creative Writing Anthology

The Somerset County Creative Writing Anthology is a component of the annual Somerset County Teen Arts Festival. Although the 2020 Festival was cancelled due to concerns regard COVID-19, the Creative Writing component was completed and is presented here.

The Somerset County Teen Arts Creative Writing component is typically a complement to the County school district’s 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 prepare what we hoped would be another great festival. We know their dedication to the arts will make the 2021 Teen Arts Festival the best yet!

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Manville High School
12th Grade
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The Lady Killer

It was an unusually cool October night in the mountains. Two more black haired and pale skinned girls had gone missing in just one week. Their families had been bereaving the loss of the girls and begging for help from the police station. Everyone was aware, even in their own houses. That night, a group of hikers had gone out to the mountains to scare themselves as a Halloween tradition. Little did they know they would get the scare of a lifetime.

“It’s been nine days. I’m starting to lose hope.” The chief mumbled in a grim voice.

“Don’t! We’ll find Melissa soon. We can talk to her friends from the pizza parlor again. Maybe they know something more. It has been almost a week since we last talked to them.” Jason reassured him as they drove around town.

It was pitch black outside besides a few street lights illuminating the streets on every other block. Both men were alert as they passed every alleyway, nothing but bad had been happening in the area. Girls were disappearing left, right, and center but there was no evidence to show who was behind it!

“Hopefully since we nominated that Ted kid that works for the suicide hotline as the chief of crime advisory, things will get a little more under control. Kid seems smart enough.” Jason said, trying to lighten the mood.

“Yeah, he seems smarter than John was. I’m glad we all picked him. Well, that’s every block. Let’s head back to the station.” The chief concluded.

As soon as they got back to the station to go back home, they instantly had to head back out. Hikers had reported seeing not just one but two frozen dead bodies in the mountains. The chief immediately froze in his place but snapped back quickly. The drive to the mountains was silent. As soon as they made it, they ran out to where the hikers said they were.

“Oh my god…” The chief mumbled, awestruck.

There, before their eyes, was his beloved daughter Melissa. She was pale and cut up badly. Her body was rock hard and there was no pulse. Next to her was her friend from school, Laura, who was in a similar
The ambulance rushed to the site only to take the bodies and put a black sheet over them. Jason had a feeling the chief wouldn’t be back at work for a while.

When Jason had gone home, his wife Julie was asleep and so was his two kids. The only person missing was his dad who was visiting for a while. Jason loved his dad, but he was always annoyed by him. His dad hunted out of season and always had guns on him, even near the kids. He could also be very hot headed at times, but he was mostly fine. By the time Jason woke up for work the next morning, his dad was sleeping in the guest room.

By the next day, the news had gone wild about the discovery as the police constantly worked on the investigation. It was silent in the building besides for a few officers talking to Ted. It was grim as ever.

“Well, I’m not really supposed to be here now so I should probably go.” He said quietly as he walked out.

Ted was a pretty good guy. He worked hard and was extremely charismatic. He was the type of guy who could walk into a hard-core jail and still make friends with everyone there. Most of the girls in town had a crush on him, but he only seemed to like a few of them back. The day went on slow as ever and seemed to drain all the energy out of everyone.

After four days of investigation, there was no evidence other than the dead bodies. Yet another girl had gone missing, but there was no sign of her anywhere. The night she had gone missing people reported hearing four gunshots in a row from the woods.

“Well, it’s likely that girl who went missing yesterday got taken by the same guy who took the other 5 girls. After all, that would be the 6th girl in the area with black hair, pale skin, and light brown eyes that went missing.” Jason concluded.

“That’s for sure. But now we have to try and find the guy with no evidence at all.” Ted sighed.

Ted had been hanging around the station, even when he wasn’t supposed to. He was always helpful and didn’t cause any issues, so no one minded. Most of the officers, including Jason, were friends with Ted at this point. Ted had even gone to Jason’s house and had dinner with his wife and kids. He almost instantly seemed like family.
When Jason went to go get lunch, Ted insisted on tagging along. Since they didn’t have much time, Jason decided to just go home and eat something really quickly. As soon as he opened the door, Julie ran up to him.

“Your dad never came home! He’s not in the guest bedroom and all of his guns are gone! Wasn’t there that crime? The girls that keep on going missing?” She asked frantically.

“I’m sure he’s fine and he’ll come back. But why would the crimes have anything to do with him?” Jason questioned.

“They started a little after he started staying with us! And he’s only ever been going out a night when the girls disappear! Plus, you said that last night late at night in the woods people heard four gunshots and then no one could find her!” She continued to panic.

“Listen, calm down. It’ll be fine. He wouldn’t do that.” He reassured her even though he wasn’t completely sure himself.

Julie calmed down and nodded. Jason went to the kitchen and grabbed some food to eat back at the station. They rushed to get back to the station.

“She was really worried about that, wasn’t she?” Ted began. “I wonder why?”

“Who knows. She likes to worry about lots of things. I’m sure she was freaking out about a criminal being near our boys.” Jason laughed.

Back at the station, nothing new had happened. After three weeks, there was still no evidence and still no sight of Jason’s dad. Jason figured he got bored, packed up, and headed out. He did that often. Girls had stopped disappearing in their town, but now they were disappearing in others. Ted ended up moving a few towns over but still visited Jason and the station. Ted got along really well with the boys and they loved him. One day, he called Jason out of the blue when he was supposed to be coming over to visit.

“What’s up?” Jason asked.


“Oh lord. What did you do now?” Jason sighed.

“Apparently I was speeding and I got pulled over. He won’t let me go because he thinks I’m trying to do something wrong. I’m not sure what though. He won’t tell me exactly and just keeps on saying that I
know what I did.” Ted explained.

“Alrighty. Where are you? I’ll go over and try to clear things up.” Jason offered.

As it turns out, Ted was just down the road within walking distance. The cop had him in handcuffs as Jason showed up.

“Hey! What happened here?” Jason yelled out at the cop.

“Oh, you’re an officer too right? I’ve seen you around the station when I went to go help with the case of the girls.” The officer remembered.

“Yeah. Just go with them Ted. They’ll realize that they’re wrong. I can’t do much now but by the time you get to the station I’ll be there too.” Jason concluded.

When they got to the station, the officer finally explained.

“I pulled him over for speeding. He didn’t give any real excuse so I had him get out of the car and I looked inside. Since we had a small idea of what the girls with beat with, I could tell that he had most of that stuff. It only made sense that he killed them.” The officer spoke quickly.

“Well did you think to ask where he was going? Or why he had that stuff? I know for a fact he was on his way for dinner at my house.” Jason said angrily.

“I did but he didn’t say anything.” He continued.

“Well then, Ted. I don’t think I can help you much. All the evidence seems to add up, but I’m still positive that you didn’t do it. Just wait it out and it’ll be fine” Jason reassured him.

Little did Jason know, that was far from the truth. After a few court trials, Ted confessed. He not only confessed to killing the missing girls in the state, but the girls from other states too.

That was the last time Jason ever looked at Ted. He couldn’t stand to see him. He couldn’t believe he trusted him or that he didn’t pick up on it. He couldn’t believe that he confessed just like that. Ted was just too nice and charming, he should’ve seen it. Jason couldn’t stop wondering why he couldn’t see past his mask and pick up on the dark evil inside of him. The old Ted was long gone in Jason’s eyes. The Ted who was like family to Jason was gone forever. Ted went from being a great guy to a blood thirsty criminal. His wife’s biggest fear had come true, they had let a monster near their kids. Eventually, he got a sentence. He was given the death penalty. Twice.
When Jason got the paper the next day, the head line was, "Murder Ted Bundy is Caught after Killing at least 30 Women--but many Suspect that he Killed more than 100".

On his death date, people sat outside the jail. People were cheering as he was put into the electric chair. Reporters crowded the area. Bundy’s last words were, “I’d like you to give my love to my family and friends.”

Alaina Fendt, 14
Alexander Batcho Intermediate School
Somerset County
8th Grade

Artwork:
Aayley Guzman, 18
Bound Brook High School
12th Grade
A Dream

A dream
it’s the one that makes you feel hope
The one you love and cherish
Until the next one
A dream is unlike any other thing
Unlike a nightmare that haunts your mind
One you forever remember until your last breath
A dream is a field of dandelions in a spring wind
A dream is love at it fullest and joy at its most
A dream you should remember but you forget
A dream is an escape that you pay no mind
A dream is so powerful but meaningless to the one
Who blinded herself from this wordless midnight sun

Middle School and High School

Middle school and high school
The constant thinking of what to do
Thinking of how to fit in while everyone telling you just be you
It’s not that simple or easy as you say
Because we are all pawns in little games
All the laughter and the love spreading like the flu
Until heartbreak makes its way, but it’s all deja vu
Because it’s something we all have been through
Parents screaming and grades slipping
X to the y snipping us apart
As we put a cast on our hearts
Tears on the floor like a work of art
Since there is no end just a start
But the teacher is teaching another chart
Telling us that we’re not smart
Adding more pain to our bleeding hearts

I’ve tried too hard
Because every grown-up discards us
Spending time in the churchyard
Not stopping us from silently putting our guard up
So I cry but not alone
Instead with my head buried in my friend’s collarbone
Because school is not all that bad

As long as I have my best friends by my side
Making me smile wide
Because as much as you don’t understand mom and dad
They understand so much it makes me sad
So I’ll survive as will they
Because our love will never sway
**Imminent Parallel**

I don't remember much after everything that happened but from what I do, I was in misery. The constant yelling coming from all my friends; the ringing in my ear reminded me of the tales that my mother would tell me of sirens calling to sailors with their beautiful melody, except this noise made me want to run away. It happened over and over with no escape at all. The yelling, the ringing, even the cries of others is all I could hear, and after that loud echo that came, a new one would arise. I was in a never circle, a broken record in constant agonizing repetition. Trying desperately to run and silence them. But as one would end, another would befall pulling and trapping me into the darkness of it all.

**Damien**

I woke up with sweat dripping from my head as heat engulfed me in the strangest way possible. At last, that dream was over, and I could rest peacefully with my wife in my arms. My beautiful wife is the one I haven't seen in almost a year after I left. My dearest Isabella, with her gorgeous blue eyes and kind gentle smile that makes my heart flutter with every word she says. There is no one like my love. As I look around, I feel a certain type of emptiness in my room. It was weird in here; it looked untouched and vacant. I pull the cover off of me and head downstairs. I see broken bottles on the floor, and boxes over boxes of leftover food but no sign of life. I head back upstairs and see the door on the right is closed which angers me. My son sleeps there, but I have told him many times to keep it open in case of an emergency, especially when I'm back. I open the door, and nobody is in there either. I call their names, but all I hear is my echo. Everything is so dark and cold almost as if somebody died here.

**Gabe**

Once again, I'm at the same corner at the same time doing the same thing. After everything that happened, I gave up. Mom wasn't around, and dad wasn't here to stop it, so I did it. I did what one of my junky friends told me to do to forget everything, and it worked. That is until instead of worrying about dad, I started wondering when I could get more. I became addicted, and it's slowly killing me. I already spent half of the
money dad left me on this addiction, but I can't stop. It consumes me and brings me back to it again. But so what, mom doesn't care; she's too busy getting over dad. More like too busy finding a man for a night.

I see the man I was waiting for approach; and soon, forty dollars turns into 6 pills for the week. Soon or later, I know that if I don't stop, this will become my future and past.

I walk remembering every crack on the sidewalk and every broken branch on my way home due to the countless times I've walked these streets. I walk into my house. Ironically, it is the perfect white house with a white picket fence and a beautiful porch that makes our annoying neighbors jealous. Dad always wanted the best for mom, so he got her this house—funny how it's now used. No longer is it a home where the smell of cookies would swirl around you as you stepped in the door, but a home full of bottles and the stench of sorrow looming around you. Such a perfect family we are, right? I step in and am surprised by what I see.

Damien

I start to get worried and scared for the safety of my family. Where could they be this late at night, why is the door locked, what happened to the place? All these questions and thoughts going through my head and no answers were given. Suddenly, I feel a cold breeze behind me. I see my wife walk in but she seems different. She looks older and no longer holds the same look in her eyes as before; she looks miserable and even drunk. She wobbles her way to the couch throwing her purse on the floor and lies down. I walk to her and ask, “what happened?” But what surprised me was that a man walked into the house. He sat on the couch, as well, next to my wife. I yelled at the stranger to get out and leave my wife alone. They acted like they didn't hear me, and soon, my son walked in only to start screaming and yelling. It was all a blur, and soon the room fell silent.

Isabella

I am done with life. It's so stupid; one minute you're happy, the next thing you know, you get a call from the army. I don't even remember much about it. I remember the phone call and the funeral. It was a lovely funeral, full of unknown people with pretend sorrow and grief. But who cares, it's all the same, right? You either live or die; it's all life in the end. I call over the man to pour me another drink. I know I should
stop. But isn't this better than remembering and feeling? Feelings are too much work and too much pain; so why do it? Why risk it? When I could easily ignore it for the rest of my life. It's so much better and so much easier, as long as I have a bottle. Who cares anyway? Not my husband, for sure, or my son. I wonder where my son is, probably trying to get far away from me for sure. The kid probably hates me. If he didn’t, I would surely be surprised.

I see a man across the room eyeing me, so I make my way towards him. I stumble and almost fall getting over to where he is. He is just as unbalanced as I am. Next thing I know, I am in my house trying to get to the couch without falling. The man walks in after me and lays on the couch next to me. He moves to grab me, but as soon as he tries to make a move, my son enters the house. He starts screaming and yelling and making a commotion. My head, dizzy and disoriented, doesn't listen to anything he says. But suddenly, the room goes silent.

_Damien_

I screamed and ran towards the body. Almost as in slow motion, everything stopped.

One, two, three, four.

Everyone one silent and only the sound of it falling. I couldn't believe my eyes. How could this happen and why? What have I ever done wrong for this type of punishment? My heart pounded inside my chest so loudly and hard; I was sure it would explode. In the room were my wife, my son, a stranger, and me. Only one was on the floor and the others stood there in shock. Tears streaming down my cheek as I went to pick her up, but when I tried, I couldn't. It was as though every time I tried to touch her, the body would dissolve. I couldn't take it; I was losing it. Every bone in my body told me to run, but my beating heart could only register the pain.

One, two, three, four.

Another body dropped, but as I looked up from the ground, I saw her. My beautiful Isabelle. I ran to her stepping over the other body, my son had dropped. I ran and ran in a never-ending rhythm of 2 steps then 4 steps.
As he ran from the house, my son was now long gone. I kept on going and going until I took her arm.

I smiled and kissed her.

_isabella_

My husband! How could he be alive? He was killed in the war, yet I could see him. How could this happen? Unless it was my death; but I didn't care. His lips were on mine showing me all his love. After a year without him, I truly did miss him dearly.

Suddenly, I felt there was a bright light and wind. Without warning, I was in another room all made of glass. I looked around me, and all I could see was white—white stretched out. But what I saw below made my heart break. Thousands of bodies and tons of blood showing the sadness of war. In the middle of it all, I saw my husband fight for his life, as all I could do was cry. I saw his pain and all the hurt he felt. I saw his final moments over and over again, and that's when I knew I was stuck with here. I was stuck in a horrible limbo.

Arlette Figueroa-Holguin, 14
Alexander Batcho Intermediate School
Somerset County
8th Grade
The Numbness of My Hands

the numbness of my hands spread to my fingertips.
somehow, that spread to my heart.
my fingers brush against my lips.
gee, i’m falling apart.

i am different and numb.
i wonder why i act so tough.
i hear those girls whispering about me in the halls,
then i have to pretend i’m all buff.
i see the way they stare at me.
i want them to see.
i am different and numb.

i pretend i’m the same person i was last year.
i feel like i can be if i believe.
i touch my face, knowing i’m not myself.
god, i just want to leave.
i worry that others can see i’ve changed.
i cry knowing my insides are now rearranged.
i am different and numb.

i understand that on the inside,
i’m a good person.
i say that i actually have feelings.
i dream that it will be true.
i try my hardest to feel things.
i hope you can’t see through.
i am different and numb.

i lie and say i care, but honestly,
nothing’s there.
i wish i could go numb.
please beware
because i don’t know how to feel.
what is it you want from me.
i am different and numb.

the numbness of my hands spread to my fingertips.
somehow, that spread to my heart.
my fingers brush against my lips.
gee, i’m falling apart.
The Girl Who Loves You

i am the girl who loves you.
i wonder why so many girls hate themselves.
i hear you talk bad about yourselves.
i see the destruction that hate does to all of us.
i want you gorgeous girls to stop the fuss.
i am the girl who loves you.

i want those girls to know they shouldn’t trust a mirror.
it seems they forgot they’re made out of such beauty.
please don’t listen,
just look a little clearer.
now remember your worth, cutie.
i am the girl who loves you.

i pretend i don’t hear you all hate.
i feel you should stop comparing yourselves.
you’re not defined by your plate.
i worry that maybe you girls don’t see what i see.
i wish you knew,
but you disagree.
i am the girl who loves you.

i understand some girls just don’t like themselves.
i say that girls should always love themselves.
we are all beautiful in our own way.
snap out of your daze.
you’re beautiful inside and out.
i am the girl who loves you.
The Feelings I Hide

i feel sick.
not the type where i want to hurl
but where my mind is racing with my heart.
my soul is in a twirl.
who am i supposed to be?
a pretty princess in pink?
one who wears dresses and makeup?
always smiling with manners.
i’m stuck in a prison
and i can’t get free.

it hurts to laugh.
i can’t even force it.
not a laugh
not a smile
not even a slight bit of happiness.
people say you can see it in my eyes.
i’m broken
lost
confused
Sad.
i’m in a maze
and in a daze.
i love you.

Kayley Kubilus, 14
Alexander Batcho Intermediate School
Somerset County
8th Grade
The Crime With Cunning

Prologue

“You’re fired!” screeched the rental owner. Benson had always been a smart man, he could sway anyone with his personality of cunning. His life in the eyes of others was simple, he was just another guy. Benson worked for the car rental company called Arm-Co, an armored car rental service. Trips to high security vaults and banks were common, with a valuable pay-load. This cycle was continuous...until he was caught fiddling with the money! He wouldn’t have been caught but there were still parts of his plan that gave him away. Alas, the man was fired and shunned of his one job, only if the others had known he kept the key to the Arm-Co car!

“How do ya do John?” Manny asked. He was the one and only detective of Huffsborough County, him and his deputy John were always called in when there was trouble.

“Eh ya know, same old same old...not much goin on in the town today.” John told. John was the sort of guy who got very nervous very easily, he was sort of taciturn. When something was called in and it didn’t sound good, his eyes grew wide and his face went pale. Manny was the one who had to protect him, he knew when John couldn’t handle something. The phone in the room rang.

“Hey, Dan from Arm-Co speaking, we just wanted to inform you of something that happened at the shop. One of our workers, Benson Samuel, was caught fiddling with the money in one of the trucks. He’s very clever, just keep an eye on him. That’s all, thanks officers.”

“Who was that?” John questioned.

“Oh, it was nothing....” Manny told.

Huffsborough County Bank was a plain building, and it was quite large. The vault was often times left unguarded when workers were on lunch breaks. Everyone got along, everyone except Leumas, he was always grumpy, and hated his job. He vowed he would get revenge on the world for how he was confined to a miserable life. His workers tried to get along with him but there was just no possible way!
Benson thought about what had happened, and he was enraged. He was confounded by the fact that he was caught. He knew his talent couldn’t be put to waste. He was tired of living in a small house in a poor town. So, he decided he would rob the local bank, Huff'sborough County Bank! Idiots ran the bank he thought, they were no match for his intelligence. This time his plan would have no flaws, and he would succeed with pockets full of money! He couldn’t do this himself, he thought. Benson’s whole life had been a joke, he had gone under many identities and always tried to escape the cycle of his misery. He had thought the only way to do this was with, he would move into a grand house and live a luxurious life. Everytime he had attempted to acquire this money he had been caught, however he was smart enough to be caught under different names, so he would not be suspected as a criminal. Being he had done this whole life he had connections…

Jake, Carl, and Pat arrived at Benson’s house at four in the morning. Benson did not want them to be seen, just the first step of many in his plan.

“Welcome my friends, if we succeed we will split our rewards of plunder evenly. Now, we will go over the operation multiple times until you memorize it and recite it to me flawlessly!”

The four men discussed the routes, transportation, and every little detail. Of course they would strike at night but the bank was open twenty-four hours. Even though it might not seem like it, Huff’sborough bank was ALWAYS busy. That was something else Benson had to take into consideration. Finally, after a long night they knew what to do.

It was 3:00am on a chilly night at the Huff’sborough bank, and as always people were bustling about inside. The clerks did their duties cashing in checks for customers, completing withdrawals, so on and so on. Cling clang clop! The vents were making strange sounds today, and no one knew why.

“Why, it probably is just some sort of error in the system, don’t forget that it was updated recently!” Leamus remarked. Why would Leamus say anything? He always complained about everything. He would complain even if there was absolutely nothing to complain about!

However, little did they know that those sounds were the beginning of Benson’s plan.

Jake, Carl, and Pat were in the vents crawling to get to the vault. Surely but slowly the plan would succeed, and everyone was oblivious to what was going on! Here they would open up their bags and stuff it
full of money that Benson thought he deserved. Nonetheless, there was something that had to happen before that. The lights of Huff'sborough Bank went dark sending the whole bank’s current residents to go into a frenzy! Customers were running into all sorts of places for no one knew what was happening. Bank tellers ran to light switches that failed to do their job. Then, out of the shadows three figures emerged and grabbed a man. Not just any man, it was Leamus himself!

“Nooooo!” Leamus cried as he was dragged into the darkness of the unknown. Now people were really losing their cool, everyone feared they would be the next dragged into the darkness! One of the workers finally sounded the alarm. This alarm would signal the Huff'sborough police station.

BEEP! BEEP! BEEP! The alarm system at the police station was blaring! Manny rushed to the system as fast as he could, and read Huff'sborough Bank Distress. John walked into Manny’s office and immediately knew that they had to go...and fast! The two raced to their police car and started the engine. They raced down the road WAY above the speed limit.

“Oh man! What do you think could be going on Manny!” John panicked.

“Calm down, it’s probably just a few idiots attempting a robbery.” Manny reassured.

They had finally drove up to the bank that they had been to so many times. They burst through the glass doors and scanned the area. People were cowering in the corner, bank tellers and customers alike. It was pitch black in there, nothing was visible! Both officers turned on their flashlights and interrogated multiple people. Manny was told of how Leamus was dragged off. People were softly whimpering and had a fearful look in their eyes. They looked as if they had seen a ghost! A truck had picked up three men and another person had described hearing a clunk before they drove off. The officers rushed everyone out and told them that everything would be okay. The two partners approached the vault with extreme caution.

“What the...”

The whole vault had been completely ransacked, there was barely any money left! Manny realized something terrible, with all of this money gone it would destroy Huff'sborough’s economy! The whole town would be ruined and balance would not stay. The criminals who did this needed to be brought to justice and fast! They began their investigation by applying caution tape around the whole bank. The vibrant yellow streaks of it would draw news stations, and by the morning the whole scene would be packed! The two did
forensics tests on everything imaginable but not one fingerprint! They checked the vents, doors, and so much more.

How could this be! Manny was dumbfounded how there was not even one clue on who robbed the place! By the time they had completed all of the standard tests it was already morning!

“Do ya want to go get somethin’ to eat?” John questioned. He was so hungry that he could put a buffet out of business!

“I could sure go for some chicken and waffles.” Manny told. They walked on to the paved sidewalk just outside of the bank to reach their car. Just then, something caught Manny’s attention. Something red was sitting by the curb glinting in the sunlight. Manny approached the item and picked it up. It was a car mirror and on it was engraved *Arm-Co*! Manny knew what to do immediately.

“Forget the chicken and waffles we have gotta get to *Arm-Co*!”

They raced down the road and pulled into the parking lot of their destination. It seemed they were going as fast as lightning! They rushed inside and immediately questioned the first worker they saw. Apparently, Benson Samuel had made off with a rental car (for he had kept the key…), but there was a catch to that! He was wearing a Huffsborough County bank uniform! Manny handed the keys of a rental car to John. The worker told how they were going to call the station but no one had the time to do it yet.

“Find Benson Samuel’s address in the data-base, once you have it drive to his house as fast as you can! If anyone’s there take them down!”

Manny would be heading to Leamus’s address, and Leamus was Benson! Leamus is just Samuel spelled backwards, Benson’s last name! Benson was Leamus, Sam Barley, and Reminn Fach! It was just the same person constantly changing their identity! It was the same miserable piece of scum constantly scheming robberies but never succeeding. He would always escape no matter what though! He was famous among the world, people were amazed by what he could do. Nonetheless, there was always one flaw in his plan that gave him away this time being the car mirror! How frustrating this must be! Manny had finally arrived at Leamus’ address and there were three men loading huge sacks into surely enough a *Arm-Co* truck! Manny rushed out of his car and screamed…

“PUT YOUR HANDS UP!”
The three men did not hesitate. Manny had finally caught the famous criminal that was plaguing the area...or so he thought! Manny brought the men to the station where he met up with John. They later found out that the three men were accomplices of Benson! He had already been out of town for a long time. The three goons of his were supposed to transport the money to his remote location. They had been bested by Manny though! Even though the draconian man Benson wasn’t caught the two officers still felt victorious! They had safely returned the money to the bank and restored peace to their town! As the three men were prosecuted and taken into trial the mayor of Huffsborough County recognized Manny and John with an award.

“We did it.” Manny whispered into John’s ear as the crowd cheered for them.

Epilogue

A few towns over GleeHand bank had hired a new employee. His name was Rico Nosneb and he had BIG plans for his new job....
Complexity

I smile to show an countenance face beneath a mask,
Not sad not happy either, I count sheep under the hourglass
I get stressed when I cannot help, that is all I do,
Expression is blank, what is to show?
My thoughts fill my brain, it gets harder to think,
I get frustrated because I cannot help my friends it hurts to think
My fear of losing them, A loose end that can never be tied

I want to be important to them, I want them to like me
What happens if I don't? They start to dislike me.
I do not smile, I do not cry, and if i do I most likely lie.
My mother’s gentle touch and My father’s absence had done quite enough
I wonder what is important and what I prioritise, is it too much?
Focus, I can't, what is happening to me?
My mind is mirage and i know its fake,
I cannot escape this doomed fate.

Confused, Anger, Depression, Joy, I don't show it
One less person to worry about, I prioritise my friends
I sit there acting like nothing is wrong, soon this cover starts to decay
Noticing a difference in my actions, my emotions they change
I let them go like paper planes in the air.
My emotions are free, nothing can stop me

I hug my friends, no longer I am scared
My friends support me and now this is behind me.
I humor them to deflate their stress
I forever humane I am now just the same

Juan Pratts, 14
Alexander Batcho Intermediate School
Somerset County
8th Grade
The Black Rose

It was finally the night I would turn 21, and I could finally visit the bar like everyone else. All my friends and family have been mocking me for being the youngest and not being cool because I couldn’t drink, but that was about to change. When I walked in, I smelled it, the heavy scent of booze that my dad always carried on him. I sat at one of the bar stools.

“Gimme six shots of vodka!” It was what my dad usually ordered. The bartender looked at me surprised.

“You sure about that lil’ homie,” The bartender questioned.

“Yea bruh, don’t sweat it,” I assured him.

“Ok then.” He said worriedly.

“Yea,” I answered back.

With a worried expression he gave me the six shot glasses filled to the brim with vodka. Without thinking much I downed all six shots of vodka in an instant. I was expecting to get drunk but I felt the same.

“Hey man how much Alcohol is in this?” I asked wondering why my words were slurring.

“It’s 85% alcohol,” He answered worriedly.

“WHAT!” I exclaimed in surprise, “That's impossible, I feel the same.” My head bolted up as I looked around to see everyone's eyes piercing my soul, and their laughter severing my self-esteem. I got up and did a staggering run to the door. I got in my car and drove away in embarrassment. I kept going faster and faster. Then, my vision started getting hazy and everything was rotating. I couldn’t tell which way was straight anymore. Before I knew it my car had somehow ended up upside-down and in a tree. I opened the door and began to crawl out of the car when I suddenly passed out.

I awoke in a field of roses, all multiple colors. I no longer felt drunk, and could walk normally. I wandered, until I saw an outline of what looked like a person. It held its hand out to me, this hand held out a black rose to me. A rare spiritual flower.

“I offer you this rose,” The spirit said in a soft, yet raspy and stern voice. “Take it, and you will live once more. If you do, you will return, but never be the same.”
I did not know what he meant by that. I took the strangers rose, and held it in my hands. A sudden, sharp pain shot through my hand. The pain spread from my hand, to my entire body. I fell back, and collapsed, passing out. When I awoke, I found myself in a foreign place. It was beautiful. Some sort of kingdom in the mountains. There was a small village of people below. I walked to the head of the palace. It was made expertly, with carvings and stone like I have never seen. I walked in, and was amazed by the sight I beheld. The throne room was filled with some of the sparkliest and shiny looking furniture ever. There was a lone throne at the head of this room where a lone woman sat, looking with a face of anger and sorrow. She had an elegant dress on. Her hair was as bright and blonde as the sun. Her eyes were delicate, and could be lost in, like a sea of baby blue. She stood up at my sight, and ran down to me. Then I noticed it. Her ears were long and pointed. She also had sparkling freckles. She was an elf.

“What is your business here, stranger?” She asked in a demanding, yet soft-toned voice. So I explained it all to her, but one part stood out to her.

“A stranger offering a black rose? I believe you encountered the spirit of redemption. He brings those who have had a rough life back. He does always give side effects though.” She looked at me in curiosity. Just then, some sort of horn was blown. The elf’s facial expression changed to anger, with a mix of fear.

“What is that?” I asked her.

“The orks. They come every 7 moons. They ravage our village, steal valuables, and ruin our lives. The last time they came, they killed the king. My father.” Hearing the sorrow in her voice, I felt something awaken inside of me, someone ignited some sort of fire within me. Was this the side effect, the changing me? I now had some sort of courage. A courage that I could not control, a courage that I never really had.

“I will fight for you.” I told her. What was I thinking? I’m not a fighter

“You will? Thank you stranger. I will guide you to the armory.” I had no idea what I was doing or why. All I knew was that this would be the fight of my life.

“Are you usually so brave?” She asked.

“No,” I answered back quickly.
“Then this must be the side effect,” She started, “It took your least dominant trait and emphasized it,”

So this was the side effect, not as bad as I thought. Now I knew I was in for the fight of my life.

Artwork:
Danial Cubillo, 17
Bound Brook High School
11th Grade
4 Haikus

She is beautiful
But also is annoying
And I still love her.

She is passionate
And all the hard work paid off
She’s phenomenal

Her big diamond mind
Those incredible, lovely thoughts
All in her big head

My gorgeous best friend
Much better than a brother
My backbone for life

Kiara Amaya, 18
Bound Brook High School
Somerset County
12th Grade
Grey and clouded, a mist that obstructs my sight.
Cold and windy, the air that pierces without mercy.
Bright and silent, a sun hushed by torment.
Rainy, snowy, a jarring cloudburst.
One day surely,
This plague shall rest.
It will all get better.
Slowly but surely.
Soon.

Jocelyn Avila-Cordero, 17
Bound Brook High School
Somerset County
11th Grade

Artwork:
Lisbeth Daniela Olivia Escobar, 20
Bound Brook High School
12th Grade
You're Leaving

knew you felt
sad
I knew you felt
resentment
I tried so hard
to fix
to salvage
to hold you until you felt how I felt about you
but maybe i waited too long
maybe i was so entangled
in my own mess
that i failed to realize you lost love for me
you no longer feel the infatuation
all the feelings i gained
while you lost them
maybe you never had them
I don’t want to come to terms with this
maybe i’m in my head
maybe you’re just in a mood
maybe you’ll return
like always

Janae Baskerville, 14
Bound Brook High School
Somerset County
10th Grade
You know what thought makes me sad?
Not sad but a different type of sad.
The sad that makes your stomach curl into a knot and tears instantly rise up to your eyes, running
down like a wild waterfall and you cry for a while.
The thought of you leaving. The thought of not ever seeing you again.
The thought of you with another person.
1988 miles to be exact. I beg you not to go and you tell me
“Do you think I want to go?”
“I can’t do anything, they’re gonna make me.”
“Don’t worry amor.”
The thought of you being so far for me, drifting us apart, and probably moving on makes my
heart cry like a river of sorrow.

Just imagine dreaming of having a life together with the person you love the most and to find out that soon,
they might be leaving and having all the things that you wanted.
With someone else.
You’ll probably move on and I will probably still be behind you, thinking of you, crying for you,
and you’ll be living life without a problem.
I’m being a little overdramatic, I’m sorry.
But I can’t help it!
And I know damn well, that I won’t have the courage to tell you this in person because I will
bawl like a baby.

Just remember that whatever happens I love you forever.

Aliya Etwarroo, 17
Bound Brook High School
Somerset County
12th Grade
7 Stages of Grief

Denial, guilt, anger, depression, and acceptance. All these feelings are part of the grieving process everyone goes through. While living on Earth, everyone goes through the process before they can forgive themselves and be able to move on. At least more than once in their lives experience emotions like these. Some people take more time than others to be able to accept the fact that whatever happened or whatever you did happen. There's nothing you could do except fix it and try to make things better. In my case, it took me a long time to finally accept that all I can do is move on. This is how my grieving process started.

“Laurence please! Please get up! I need you, I'm sorry, please stay with us!” Maddison was screeching.

I felt myself trying to respond or move, nothing happened. Her cries were gruesome, I never heard someone cry like that. It felt as if the scream of her cry was ripping right through the air. What was going on? I kept on trying to move or even try to blink my eyes or try to move my head but I felt nothing. I wanted the crying to stop. It hurt, I couldn't feel the pain physically but it disrupted the thought of not being able to comfort her. No one would say what was going on. All I wanted to do is be there for Maddison but I couldn't even give a signal.

Hi Laurence” I heard my name said. “I'm here to help you, I'm the paramedic, are you able to hear me?”

I tried moving again, this was the weirdest feeling. It was more mental pain than physical, it was as if my body was lifeless. I couldn’t see anything but darkness, everything seemed so distant. It was like I could see a speck of light very far away from me and the rest was darkness. The last thing I remember doing was eating. I remember the sense of myself being so hungry, to the point where I couldn't control my eating.

Someone whispered, “We cannot find a pulse, should I continue CPR?”

“Yes, get him prepared for travel”.

“Maddison can I talk to you in a different room please?” the paramedic motioned her to the hall.

I heard silence for about 10 seconds then the crying got even louder than before. This time the screams were worse. I started to panic, there was nothing I could do. This all had to be a nightmare.

This stage was called denial, the first stage of grief. I didn’t want to admit that this was actually happening. I tried to reason with myself. I remember thinking about all the possibilities that could have led me
to this situation. Now that I think back on it, I was just blaming other people for my actions. No one ever just wants to wake up one day and say all their life problems was completely their fault. That’s how we human beings like to cope.

It seemed like a day or two passed, I didn’t have a sense of time anymore. It smacked me in the face like a brick. The first thing I heard was sobs coming from what sounded like a little girl. Right away I knew it was Maddison. I was able to see things, everything was still very blurry but I still couldn't make anything out but it was coming back. It also seemed that I was out of my body. I could just make out a shape of 2 bodies. One laying flat on something and one that was standing. By the voice one of those two people was Maddison. I knew her voice. She was talking to me. For a moment I thought I was talking back to her. It felt as if nothing had happened.

This was the second stage of grief, guilt. Guilt is the feeling you get when you know you did someone wrong and it hurt another person. I for one did feel very guilty. How could I not? She was sitting alone right next to my body, no one to comfort her. Now she has to fight this by herself.

After a while of just sitting in my thoughts, I put two and two together and figured I overdosed. More of my memory started to come back to mind. I remember around 3:00 in the afternoon I just finished up a phone call from my boss, it didn’t end well in my end. He said that I was slacking and not caring about anything I was doing. Maddison called me and I explained that I just got fired and I needed this time to myself. She begged me not to go but I guess I didn’t listen. This isn’t the first time I overdosed, but last time was nothing like this.

Maddison was still sitting there talking to me but I zoned out. I didn’t want to hear what was going on. Who cares at this point? I might not even make it through this but no one ever cared about me, no one but Maddison. Don’t get me wrong, I was still fighting to stay with her, but at the same time I started to feel myself give up.

Anger was the third stage of grief. I remember the feeling of just wanting to end everything then and there. The rush of flames went through my mind. I hated myself. This was one of the toughest parts of grieving. It’s like making a contract with the devil and him getting his revenge when you didn’t follow through
with your promise. The pain you have to pay for everything is the icing on the cake. I feel like after the anger, comes the recovery. It should get easier from here. Right?

“I guess I can never get things through your thick dumb head” she let out a little chuckle through the soft cry.

That was always a little joke between us. I was always stubborn to listen. Sometimes, it was worth paying the repercussions of my actions. It taught me how to control my anger, how to live life without being offended over every little thing.

“I was going to wait to tell you, but I want to make us stronger”, she continued, “maybe if you found out you would be a dad, it will make you fight even more?”

I was in shock. I-I was a father? Everything went blank.

The depression stage was in place. One of the last stages. Having a baby is typically happy news. The proud moment that you could be a father, a person that a little one can look up to when they feel hurt. This was the worst news for me. If I don’t make it out, they would be by themselves. Who would fight with them when they feel weak?

The space around me started to get darker. I started going blind again. Slowly my hearing started to disappear again. I started to go numb. It felt as if I had no emotion. I felt my mind give up and give control to my body. All I wanted to happen was to end it. The sooner it ends, the sooner the recovery would finish. But there was the tiniest part of me that wanted to still live. I wanted to watch my baby grow up. I wanted to grow old with Maddison.

This was the last and final part of grief, acceptance. I was ready and willing to let go. That’s the biggest part of life. The ability to move on. One cannot live if you can’t let go of something that happened to you. What a horrible life, having trauma that affected everything that you did. I was ready for a new start. I did not want my mistakes to control my life. I feel like I achieved the biggest lesson life could throw at me.

Jenna Gersick, 15
Bound Brook High School
Somerset County
10th Grade
**Bear**

I work in Sydney, Australia as a construction worker, where I work on large structures and skyscrapers. Every now and then, I need a break from climbing and stressing my body, so what I love to do is go camping every once in a while. So, the weekend of February 10, 2018, I decided to take a break from life and just enjoy nature.

I brought along two of my friends, Jack and William. We decided to take the hour drive to a small campsite near Blue Mountain National Park. We arrived late, I would say around 11:00 PM. The weather was perfect, and even with a nice refreshing breeze to top it off. We set up camp near a pond because we thought it would be the coolest spot to camp and enjoy our time.

The whole point of this trip was mainly just to get out, and chill. I cracked open my second drink, laughing it up with Jack and William talking about our other friends with music playing in the background. I guess William had a little too much to drink, because his look changed from happy, to distress as he said, “Oh no,” and ran off into the trees. I saw Jack reach over for the speaker and turn the volume down all the way, and then he shushed me and pointed towards the pond. Jack whispered to me, “Do you guys see that?”

I looked out to the pond. The campfire had a glow that partially reflected out onto the pond water, but even yet, I could not see what he was pointing at. Jack whispered, “There’s something in the water.”

I slowly walked to the tent, with my eyes locked on the pond. I opened the tent, pulled out my bag, and pulled out my flashlight and headed back towards Jack. When he saw it in my hand, Jack said, “Don’t,” but I turned it on anyway and aimed it at the pond.

The light didn’t reveal anything or anyone, but we did hear the sound of water being pushed, as if something or someone were walking in it. I turned off the light because I was a little freaked out, and looked at Jack, who was wearing a cringing face. I told him to turn off the speaker completely. We then sat in silence for a while not doing much, just listening to the surroundings.

About an hour passed and nothing happened, so we got more comfortable again, and things were starting to go back to normal. Eventually I went to my tent, and Jack went to their tent, and we all went to sleep.
Now that I was alone with my thoughts, I started thinking about what had happened earlier in the pond, about what Jack said he saw. He never actually described what he saw, it could’ve looked like an animal or human who knows. I started to imagine in my head and make-up different creatures which could have been in the pond.

I specifically remember imagining some sort of half-human half-cthulhu creature standing in the lake, with grimy tentacles coming out of it’s face and its bright orange eyes burning into my skull. Just imagining what the thing Jack saw freaked me out, since we were sleeping right next to the pond. I tried to sleep it off, but my paranoia would not let me sleep. My gut had that feeling you get right before you are about to perform in front of a crowd, except times 5. I started to sweat and I could not take it anymore, I had to take another look outside. After this I swear to you, I heard a branch break which sounded about 20 feet away. This set me over the edge and I slowly unzipped the the front zipper, trying not to make much noise. I’ve never felt this feeling out of all the times I’ve been camping, and it did not feel good. Finally when I had the guts, I opened the mesh door with force and shined my flashlight out at the campsite.

The cool breeze gave me chills from the sweat on my face, as I looked out and saw absolutely nothing. I started circling the campsite slowly, pointing the flashlight in every direction looking for some man-eating creature. I thought about waking up Jack, but I thought he would think I’m insane so I left him to sleep. After repeating this process about 4 more times, I gave in and sat down on the bench next to our dead campfire.

I sat there for about 10 minutes before I felt relaxed enough to climb back in my tent and go to sleep, and lucky for me all the paranoia made me tired, and I fell asleep quite fast.

I woke up an hour later for absolutely no reason which honestly pissed me off. I would say it was around 3 AM, and I was up staring at the nylon roof. Unfortunately, I started getting paranoia again, but not the crazy kind. I sighed, sat up and just listened to the sounds of the crickets and frogs. My sense of hearing was heightened due to being in a state of alert, and because of that, I heard a sound from the woods that I couldn’t make out. I was sure of it this time, there was no way that sound could be me imagining things or hearing things, I just knew. I needed to hear the sound one more time to confirm that something wasn’t right, and sure enough, I heard it and it was a lot closer and I was able to confirm that it was a foot hitting the ground. I immediately assumed the worst possible, thinking that it was someone in the woods trying to
kill me, but then I thought about A, it could just be A. But no, the footstep sounds sounded like they were sneaking, but maybe it was just A trying not to wake me. Thoughts of possible people, or animals outside bounced around in my head until I heard another footstep sounding like it was literally right outside my tent. I didn’t hear any more footsteps for a while, all I could hear was the shakiness in the breathing. I needed to confirm that who or what was outside was not Jack, so I slowly slid over in my tent to my phone, and went to text him. I started to text him but only got to text out the words “Are you-” before the gut wrenching, blood curdling scream pierced through the walls of the tent.

I couldn’t tell if the scream was from a man or a woman, it was hard to explain it was deep enough to be a man, but not deep enough where it couldn’t be a woman. The scream lasted about 5 seconds and then there was absolute silence, the scary kind of silence. I was frozen in fear, and I had no idea what to do.

“What just happened” I thought to myself staring at the walls of the tent. I didn’t know if I should get out, call for my friends, or stay silent. I texted Jack, “Dude, we have to run.” And he responded

“What was that?” I didn’t answer right away, instead I was thinking about what we could do. A texted me again saying, “Coast is clear, run for the car.”

I grabbed my keys from my bag, grabbed my phone, and sprinted to the car. I’ve never run so fast in my life. I remember vividly, hearing my breathing of fear and the leaves crunching underneath my feet. I remember the trees flying through my sight as I flew through the forest to my car. Luckily, it was not that far and I made it, trailing shortly behind. We both entered the car and sat in silence for a while, processing what just happened. Finally, I broke the silence and said, “Bro, what just happened.” It took him a while, but he responded,

“I don’t know, what made that scream?”

“I don’t know, but I don’t think it was human,” I replied…

TO BE CONTINUED— NEXT YEAR...

Kevin Gorel, 16
Bound Brook High School
Somerset County
11th Grade
The lights ran away,
Leaving nothing but utter darkness.
In a slight panic, I head towards the emergency cabinet for equipment.
Throwing out my entire closet beside me, I found three flashlights ready to warm up.
I look outside and see an alarming, silent scenery.

All the authorities rush to the scene.
The building prayed for salvage as it begins to obliterate.
Determined, the first responders bring their tsunami of helpers.
Desperate to shower the building in rain.

Heated, hopeless, and scared.
I hold my two children side-by-side,
Staring at this stubborn flame.
“What a beautiful tragedy” I said.
“To see the horrific show through the window of your home”.
The clock struck 8pm, 9, 10.
Blurry vision with alert intentions,
We continue to see the fire diffuse.

Tired with adrenaline,
Was the description of the first responders.
They won’t give up. Not even an option.
Battling the flame,
They each swing their fists in hopes the other will give in.
The flame began to exhaust.
Accepting the score of who won.
We thank our first responders for their ambitions.
For this was another downtown tragedy, with a positive victory.

Perla Guzman-Cruz, 17
Bound Brook High School
Somerset County
12th Grade
You are a Constant Reminder

You are a constant reminder of an easier time
Where our lives would coincide
Now we're on a new tide
The ocean has finally calmed
Who knew all it would take is one good shake
For the walls of our home to break
Now we're waiting to see where the sea will take us -a journey alone
Now that it' finally done I can breathe freely
And not worry
We had a good story but you love is now blurry
It feels wrong but it was one beautiful song
Although it didn’t last that long
We never did really belong together
But we hoped it would be forever
I will always remember our ride
On the ocean’s tide
When we were side-by-side
  I am me because of the sea and our memories
  Now my wave is here... time for me to leave
  The memories of you and me

Sophie Hector, 17
Bound Brook High School
Somerset County
12th Grade
Who’s Next?

The TV is turned on, change the channel until the news comes upon
You see the mobs coming from the streets, people screaming out
Don’t even know what it’s about
Shrug your shoulders, go by your day
Forget the idea that the world is crumbling today
Not even the thought that you would be gone comes along
Go to bed all happy that you aren’t dead
The bell rings it’s time for class
Soon you hear the sounds of breaking glass
Teacher yells, “GET DOWN” with an unforgettable frown.
You hear distant shrieks, see on the floor blood streaks
The thought comes to mind, the one you hoped to never find
The killer comes in, your life soon becomes absolutely dim
For the last sound was the trigger, and you begin to reconsider
The day fades away with tears that come to stay
It’s the next morning
A child hears the story of a student being killed in school on TV
He shrugs his shoulders, goes by his day
Forgets the idea that the world is crumbling today
The clock is ticking and you still don’t speak
Now tell me, who’s next to suffer the world of repeats?

Araceli Priego Hernandez, 15
Bound Brook High School
Somerset County
10th Grade
Listen to Me

Strange calmness
Unsettling numbness
Someone
Get me out of this

Scared of growing
Tired of trying
Anyone
Tell me where I’m going

Running away
Chasing decay
Someone
Pull me from my disarray

Are you even listening?
Can you hear my voice?
Someone
Anyone

Nina Nate Hollingsworth, 18
Bound Brook High School
Somerset County
12th Grade
My phone rang in my pocket. I didn’t even bother to check who it was, so I hung-up and kept walking home through the mountain of snow. I put the phone back in my pocket, but as soon as I did it rang again. Unwillingly, I checked who it was. It was one of the few people who I actually enjoyed talking to.

“Yeah?” I answered bluntly.

“Don’t ‘yeah’ me!” Amanda said mockingly, “Why did you hang up on me!?” she snapped.

“Sorry. I’m just...not in the mood right now.”

“What happened? I heard you got kicked out of school. Did it come up again?”

“Yeah, the principal brought it up this time. I just didn’t feel like listening to another lecture, you know?”

“Leondrey, I'm so sorry this is happening to you. I can't even begin to imagine how painful it must be...” I sniffled up the snot running down my nose. I wish I had worn a scarf.

“Thanks. I try not thinking about it but life just always gets the best of me. I just want to be happy again, you know?”

“Well what would make you happy?” Silence filled the air as I contemplated my answer, resisting the urge to blurt out my true feelings.

“I don't know,” I lied.

“Well you’re only making it worse for yourself if you keep on getting suspended!”

“Yeah, yeah. I know mom.”

“Oh shut up before I ground you!” We laughed.

“When’s the next time you're off of work? We should hang out soon.”

“Umm, I’m working pretty much all week and this weekend I’m going to hang out with Anthony.”

Anthony, the man dating the woman I wanted. We aren’t friends but we know each other. He’s a pretty cool dude, and I’m glad that she’s happy with him. But that’s not what I want.

“And? I have a math test on Friday. Both are something we can cheat on. I’m not seeing the problem.” I teased.
“Oh, yeah right! Okay...how about you and my sister come with us to the movies on Saturday? That way we can all hang out. She still likes you by the way,” she whispered. I sighed and wiped the snow off my head.

“Yeah, I bet she does. Um...I’ll see but more than likely I’ll be there.”

“Okay! I gotta get back to class now. I’ll text you when I’m out. Bye!” she hung up. I tucked my phone away, as I had finally reached my house. I walked towards the gates, I stopped and spotted blood in the snow at the corner. With curiosity getting the best of me, I followed it. My entire body was screaming at me to go home, my gut demanded I follow it. I turned the corner, and followed the trail. With every step I took, I could only imagine myself finding a dead body next to or in a garbage bin, cut up into pieces, and its head...I stopped myself from going too far. The freezing cold wind made my movements slow, but I kept pushing myself determined to find the end of that trail. The blood trail crept into the streets, then suddenly disappeared. Confused, I looked around for more blood, even a little bit. But all I saw were tire marks embedded in the snow. Not knowing what to do, I headed back home, disappointed but relieved not to have found anything drastic. As I came to the corner, I noticed that the blood kept going in the opposite direction I headed. Once again, I followed the trail, walking faster and eager to find something. The trail tucked away in a notorious alley, known for multiple murders, drug deals and things like that. I prepared myself to expect the worst. What I found was a small cardboard box lying in red snow. Sweat rushed down my face as I imagined what could possibly be inside. I grabbed what little courage I had left and extended my hand towards it. I placed my hand on the fold of the box, and opened it, but my eyes shut in fear when I did. I cracked open one eye to see what it was, and my heart fell out of my chest. Both of my eyes were forced open, filled with shock, as I saw a red-faced infant wrapped in bloody towels.

Darian Jordan, 17
Bound Brook High School
Somerset County
12th Grade
Senior Year

I can see the excitement in everyone’s faces
I can hear the happiness in everyone’s voices
But I am not excited nor am I happy

The anxiety keeps rolling in
I can feel the depression slipping down a slope
I can’t get out of bed in the morning
Not because I am sick
But because I dread going
It’s not that I don’t like school
I just feel drained
I don’t want to bare all the faces

I’m sad
But I don’t know why
Shouldn’t I be happy or excited to be a senior?
I mean everyone else is

I’m being overworked
My schedule is just so tight
When do I get time for myself?
I feel as if I don’t even have time for applications

Will I get into a school?
I will never forgive myself if I don’t
I see everyone around me getting into everywhere
Including their top choices
They all have so many options
But me?
Guess not

I’m just not ready to leave this chapter
I know I am sick of all these worn out peers
But what about my best friends?
Where will we stand after graduation?
Will we continue to make time for each other?
Will we update one another?
Or
Will we simply drift away and only have the memory?
I’m just not ready to say goodbye
But it will come to an end
And when that time comes
I hope I will be able to simply say hello

Haley Konrad, 18
Bound Brook High School
Somerset County
12th Grade
I'll Do It For $40

I'll do it for $40. Weekly.
Nothing more, nothing less.
I cook, clean, bathe, and live for these children.
Nights I sleep on the uncomfortable broken couch, so the children can sleep comfortably in my bed.
Our love has ran out, although the help must remain.
I will not ask you for the world, just help.
Family nights are no longer a thing, but we must survive one way or another.
You brought them into this world, you must help take care of them.
I am letting you catch a break, when in reality I can ask for triple the money.
Although you hurt and destroyed our family, we struggle and need help.
I go to bed starving most nights of the week, so the children go to bed full.
Some mornings we wake up and don't have heat that day, or enough money to barely get the cheap dinners at the food store.
How many times should I tell you, welfare isn't enough, I want my child support.

Lorelai Lopez, 15
Bound Brook High School
Somerset County
10th Grade
Simple Words

Simple words aren’t so simple anymore
What really is “forever”
“Forever” should feel boundless
A feeling that can only be described as invincible
Euphoric waves of emotions rushing over the mind
An escape from the Hells in one’s life
A reason to smile

But yet I feel cheated of this
Eternity is nothing more than a plain moment
New sensations just clouded with old pains
Numbness wraps its filthy grip over my mind and won’t let go

These chocolate eyes that once glistened with enchantment
With curiosity of the world
And longings for a new beginning

Now dulling and burnt with growing pain
Pain that serves only to weaken
Intoxicated me with anxiety laced poison gas
As it gets harder to breathe

Maybe I should let it be
The fight that I once put up has now been ripped from me
Maybe I don’t care anymore
Let my demons down me in pitiful sorrows
The flames that once engulfed me with passion is now nothing but a small flicker

As time goes on, I fight less
Maybe I just didn’t care enough to thrive
I just don’t care anymore

Is this growing up?
Once you get to a point where an effort has such a bittersweet taste to it?
Maybe I should just give up
Maybe I already gave up

Is this a part of “forever” or maybe it's a new kind of forever
One that chains desperation to you
As you drown in your own pity and sorrows
Simple words just aren’t so simple anymore

Jamie Martinez, 16
Bound Brook High School
Somerset County
11th Grade
How do I start? She’s everything to me. Despite what she says I still want her.
She’s nothing compared to those who I’ve seen before. Yes, that sounds cliche but it’s the truth.
Yes, she hurt me. But that pain left away so quickly. It hurt more not talking to her.
She is the coldness I crave when I’m enslaved in the burning heat. She’s the moon to my sun.
Even though I can’t have her, I’m glad to be her friend. I will do anything to stay with her.
Even if she doesn’t love me back, as long as I can spend my sad days with her. I’m fine.
She could tear up my feelings over and over again. That won’t keep me away.
I know all too well that I’m wrapped in her web. But I’m choosing to stay.
Even if there is just but a small string of hope; I won’t budge.
Because she’s my crush and I like her.
But before that she was my friend and I’ll support her all the way.
She could do anything she’d like to push me away. But she will never be able to.
Because I’m her ray of happiness. I know I make her dull days, even if just a bit, brighter.
I’m the wild flower she can’t help but admire.
Yes, I want her to be mine. And I know she just wants to be my closest friend.
As long as this carousel of emotions keeps moving, I’m not getting off.
Her. Yes, I know I like her too much. But I can’t help it.
Because after all we went though;
I still want her.

Mariana Martinez, 18
Bound Brook High School
Somerset County
12th Grade

Artwork:
Ashley Rojas, 17
Bound Brook High School
11th Grade
**Trafficked**

I thought we’ve come so far
   can you believe it
We’ve worked so hard
   Just for the problem
To be disguised
   And people deprived
Of their natural born rights
   Taken
To be trafficked
   Slaves to an addict
We’re back at square one
   We’ve been frozen in time
The same house
   With a new modern design
Taken to be trafficked
   How did we let this happen
Some things just never change
While we pray for video games
   Their prayers are life
   With no chance
   I know
My ancestors taught me
   I’m not anyone’s property
But they cry at night thinking
   Nobody’s fighting for me
That’s why it’s our job to give them hope
   Get our hands dirty
   Forget the soap
   Bring them home
   Where they belong
   So this is a message
   To my people in chains
   We haven’t forgotten you
   And remember
   That when you go through
   The underground railroad
   I’ll be on the other side
Waiting to take you home...

Tanaya Muslim, 16
Bound Brook High School
Somerset County
10th Grade
Dear Reader,

I can feel the pain rushing through my veins.

Wanting it to escape I push all my emotions down to the bottom far, far away from my center core, my heart.

People want to help, but yet I push them away.

I try to figure out what my problems are; what pushes me to fall asleep every waking second. But, I can’t come to a conclusion though every night is a sleepless night of twisting and turning. Like a nightmare of not being able to fall asleep because I’ve slept through all the light. just to get trapped into the darkness all over again.

I wake up one day sit and put on a music track from two years ago, memories flow in.

Tears flow down each side of my cheeks my eyes bright red.

My laughter thinking I’m hurting and in pain.

A piece is lost and is contaminating the rest of the body with a sense of insanity.

So obsessed with looking for that one piece while it loses sight of everything else.

My soul slowly fading away from my body leaving the appearance looking gray broken and lost like a cub hungry, trying to find its mother with dinner.

Then all of a sudden a person comes along with a lamp and finds me shriveled up in a corner. Like the toy you lost behind the fridge from when you were five.

The little light that person has, I make a sun with it not knowing that you’ve inspired so many people, healed so many people, cared for so many people, and gave so many people hope in themselves.

You feel as a shadow in the dark yet you’ve been the beacon of light to everyone else.

Sincerely, the Reader of the First "Random Writing"

Christian Rodriguez, 18
Bound Brook High School
Somerset County
12th Grade
suns and cities

Bright
Bright Bright Bright.
Sunlight is gorgeous
The source of light.

The way she dances captures me so
Leaves me yearning, wanting her more.
She blinks with purpose and breathes with motivation.
I want her love, her undying attention.

She was the city. She was the living.
She was the “gorgeous and buzzing and big and bright”.

But she was also “the sad.” And the “cloudy,” and the “quiet and tragic.”
She was the light that led my path. She was the night that I slept in.

I am the sun. She is the city.
I am the light, she is the energy.
She is my source, and I am hers.
She is my battery and I love her.

She is my love.
My sun, my city.
My city… my sun.

Ellen Stankevicius, 15
Bound Brook High School
Somerset County
10th Grade
Feeling so unwanted for years upon years. Never have I ever thought it would overlap into high school...being so lonely for so long- the feeling never leaves...I felt more comfortable when Cheyenne died...isn’t that enough to feel...how I can’t hold all my thoughts long enough in order to write ’em...one comes another comes and another comes...my happiness was assassinated...by the ones I constantly see...even with the ones I keep close and I know care...it still feels so lonely...all those things from the past...the death of Remy and Bionca...all the ones that have died because of me...most were going to die either way but...things could’ve been different...why remy...my love...I hadn’t met someone who I felt cared and loved by so much...my grandmother doesn’t give me that same feeling of affection...and I see her everyday...and it was taken from me...my cure...sitting on the phone with Emma...some girl who added me from Sweden.

My older sister shouted from down the staircase, “Tokyo. Come down for dinner! Are you still writing in that stupid diary?”

“Kenzy, It’s not a damn diary! It’s a chronicle!”

“Ok great, Same difference, lets go!”

I'm tired of her making fun of my damn chronicle. Mine doesn’t have a lock like hers. I rush out of my room, down the 15 foot hall and down the 17 gray carpeted stairs, almost falling. Coming down the steps so fast while having the intent to take my seat at the dinner table.

As soon as I walk to the dining area my mother says, “You mind reading one of your diary entries to us?”

“Oh okay once more. Not a diary. Kenzy has a diary, lock and everything.”

“Doesn’t need a lock and look pretty to have a diary Tokyo,” My father chips in.

“Well...nowadays it does.”

“I know you didn’t just pull out that card.” Kenzey says jokingly. “You know Kean doesn’t even have a diary, and he’s 12.”

“Oh yeah, big time.” I respond.

“Great but you’re the only one standing.” My little brother replies.

“Right…”
I take my seat next to my sister. Conversation flows throughout the dinner table. About everyone's day, how they're doing. My little brother snitched on my sister for having a boyfriend. I'm not the biggest fan of having a family dinner and speaking about my drama. I made sure to finish fast. On the way up the stairs after I leave the table, Kenzy shouts “Are you gonna go write some more in that diary of yours?”

“Not a diary!”

Arriving in my room, I close the door behind me. Looking out the window, the night sky has taken its place within the hour of dinner. I close my window due to the cold winter breeze rushing through the screen. With my attention forwarded to the outside, I notice a seemingly familiar car outside. The black SUV Honda, with all windows tinted. That can only be one person’s car. I hear my phone ring. I don’t answer it. Instead I hurry and put on the two hoodies I wear daily during the winter, swiftly put on my black Air Forces, and make my way down stairs.

“Where you going?” My mother asked me while I’m rushing out of the house.

“For a walk.”

“Wait! I need you to mail this letter.”

“Why can’t Dad do it?”

My mother said while raising her voice, “Cuz I asked you to do it.”

“Your husband is right there.”

“Please just go,” she says softly.

I take the letter. Leaving the house I don’t lock the door, I’ve lost my key. I make my way around the house and to the Honda. Opening the passenger side door, I see a beautiful Latina woman. I'm hesitant to get in the car. I lean over, quickly inspecting the car, to see if I could spot anything that could hurt me. There is a sky blue backpack in the left back seat.

“You’re Tokyo, correct? Course you are. Get in.” She says.

“Yeah right. What’s your name.”

“Nothing that concerns you. I'm on the crew.”

“Which team?” I ask.

“Salome’s team.”
“I hadn’t heard of you.”

“How would you I know?”

“Makes enough sense, but where’s my brother?”

“Your brother? Oh, you mean Minority. He’s spoken good things about you.”

I finally get into the car. She drives off and takes a left turn onto the main road. Stopping at the first light, she reaches to the back seat, grabbing the blue bag.

“Here,” she says. “It’s a gift from Remy. Before she died.”

I open the bag to see seemingly thousands of dollars and a .50 Cal. Bands and stacks of 100 dollar bills shoved into this little school bag that usually holds 7 books and a binder. Loaded clips mixed in with the money. So surprised yet not so surprised at all. The light turns green and she keeps driving, while I’m blind to where we’re going.

“Why did she give me this? Do you know?” I asked.

“I’ve hadn’t got the slightest idea. I was just told to deliver. You were her boyfriend weren’t you? I’m surprised you don’t know, but I’m pretty sure Bianca had a gift for you too.”

“I’ll get it soon. I’m not so worried about it right now. Where are you taking me?”

“I don’t know about you but I’m pretty hungry and could really go for some french toast.”

“Here, make this left.”

She turns left, onto the dark suspicious road. There weren’t any lights present, not one in sight. Just the lights from people’s homes. I see the hesitant curiosity in her face. I'm assuming she’s heard stories about me. I know she hasn’t heard any of the stories that make me seem as evil as I am. My brothers have always given a good report about me. Mainly that I’m chill, very intelligent, calm, yet tough and I get down to business. Maybe she’s having frantic thoughts that I’m deadly. I’d find it a bit suspicious if I didn't hear any of the cool menacing stories that show their potential. I don’t have a care in the world for this woman. Why would I care anyway. From my experiences the most beautiful women have the ugliest insides.

“Tell me when to stop,” the lady said.

“What’s your name?” I ask.

I can feel the tension within the car. It’s like it can be cut with a knife.
“My name isn’t anything for you to worry about, remember?”

“It’s something you should be worried about. Not me. Stop the car here.”

Josiah Scott, 16
Bound Brook High School
Somerset County
11th Grade

Artwork:
Christopher Cortes, 16
Bound Brook High School
11th Grade
Mirror

“I want happiness” whispers the broken girl
She stares down her reflection in the mirror
She smiles a smile that screams sunshine and rainbows, but her reflection doesn’t change
She tries to hide her face behind makeup yet her reflection has not changed
“Why won’t you be happy!” she screams in exasperation while tears ruin her beautiful facade
She punches the mirror with all she has
Hit after hit after hit
Blood litters the mirror as shards of glass get lodged into her fist
“Why won’t you be happy!” She screams as the mirror falls apart
She slowly brings her fist to stop, blood dripping, glass surrounding her like snow
“I just don’t want to be you anymore” she whispers as her hands cover her face and she sits
surrounded by a fortification of glass against her worst fears
Her greatest enemy
Herself

Shauntel Smith, 16
Bound Brook High School
Somerset County
11th Grade
A rush of adrenaline, my heart drops into my stomach.
I peek through the curtain,
The lights are blinding,
yet comforting,
Shadowing the hundreds of people watching me,
Like I am on display.

I fill my lungs with air,
And run though my act.
I hear the music,
All the counting and corrections flow back to me.

Pointe your toes.
Shoulders back.
Chin up.
I say a prayer and I am out.

I am overwhelmed with emotion,
But I can’t show it.
I have to look prim and proper,
Like a brand new Barbie doll.

Every hair on my head,
Every stitch on my costume,
In its proper place.

I hear my cue,
And I begin.

Eyes up.
Body long.
Relaxed hands.
Smile.

Smile,
Everybody is watching us.
Don’t mess up,
We are on display.

I have practiced so many times,
It has become muscle memory.
Yet, I am scared,
I could mess up,
But I don’t.

It feels like I am floating,
I am lost in the music.
My feet on the floor,
The counts in my head.

Knees locked.
Back straight.
Arms rounded.
And Exit.

I am not done.

I can hear the roaring applause behind me.
But there is no time to bask in the glory.

What they don’t see,
A quick change.
I get changed and do it all over again.
(return to top of poem)
Space Surfer

We would be goners soon. Although, soon could mean one second, or an eon. I scrambled to find my helmet. I was floating around in the compartment and there wasn’t much air left. All the astronauts panicked loudly. I was prepared for some thrilling moments when I had signed the contract, but not this horrifying. I grabbed a helmet and secured it with trembling fingers. The spaceship had run out of air. I had no choice but to float away into deep space. Ten hurtling astronauts retreated into space with me. I didn’t know what to do at this point. As I drifted off into blank nothingness, I felt complete regret. I knew that I was too young to be an astronaut. I should have known that a boy like me could last two seconds without breaking a space station. All of a sudden, I saw a figure floating in my direction. It was my dad! I tried to come to him but there was no gravity, so I couldn’t move in the direction I chose. At the moment, all I wanted was someone to comfort me. I had so many questions! Where would we go? Could we bump into the sun? How about meteors? Our air was limited, so what if we run out of it? All these questions had negative answers, that included: “we would die,” “we would die,” and also, “we would die.” I just couldn’t keep my mind off of how this all happened.

I remember waking up in the middle of the night and wanting some water. I drank it and walked back to my sleeping bag. But then, I noticed that a screw was loose in the door. And then I just had to go get a wrench and screw it back in. Then, I accidentally jabbed a hole in the door. And I just froze. It was like an open window into deep space. I tried to cover it up with my hands, but space has temperatures too! The shuttle’s exterior was burning hot. I clutched my right hand painfully. I didn’t know what to do except yell for help at this point. When all the astronauts came pouring into the room, they looked at me angrily. But then they saw the big hole, and panicked. All of them at the same time rushed to put on their suits, as one of them tried to patch up the hole. It was no use; the wall was melting apart and the hole became bigger. We all jumped into dark space.

Then… here I am. This isn’t the first time I’ve made a regretful decision, either. Back to that memory.

My family was big on space. Always. My mom is an astronomer. My dad is an astronaut. I have to admit that
it had an effect on me, too. I became obsessed with space. I think it’s in the genes. I knew all the stars’ names. I made flashcards on constellations. I ran out of room in my bedroom for space books. My parents noticed that I was obsessed with space, so they did something about it. Check this out. My dad brought me to work. His boss gave me a test.

“David,” he explained while giving me the test, “If you pass this extremely difficult test, you are allowed to come into space and rotate the earth with the other astronauts.”

I did my best not to scream with joy.

After the results had come back, I noticed I got every question right! But I was really foolish not to think about the dangers of space. I really should have known that kids can’t enter space. I did it for the world record. That’s great, but how can I get the world record if I’m dead? When the day had come to go-

I felt a tug at my leg. Sweat filled my boots. I looked at my dad. He looked sweaty too.

“We’re near a black hole!” I screamed at the top of my lungs. No noise came out. I remembered that there’s no noise in space. My dad knew what I was going to say anyway. I tried to float the other way, but I couldn’t propel myself anywhere. I read seventeen books on black holes, so I know how they work. I guess I’m about to be spaghettified by a black hole. There wasn’t anything I could do about it. Seriously. What would I do anyway, even if I did get out? I saw the moon nearby. We were right outside of earth? What was a black hole doing here? The moon was traveling at the fastest speed I’ve ever seen anything travel… besides light, of course. Then I zoomed towards the moon like a magnet… or maybe the moon was zooming towards me. The massive ball of rock practically combed my hair, but missed. I patted my head in shock. Just then, I remembered the black hole. The earth, mars, and the moon were circling around the invisible, mighty black hole. Then, they drew speed and started to form an even tighter circle. The moon was moving so fast that I felt dizzy. Then, I noticed that my dad was gone. It was kind of a blur. He was moving towards the black hole. I jumped, expecting to land right back on the moon, but all gravity was disappearing, and I flew towards the black hole. I expected it to all be over once I felt stretched out, but it wasn’t. Ha! I knew the scientists were wrong! Inside was the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen. Vibrant colors swirled around and blended as a big dome swallowed my view of space. My dad and I were unharmed in a black hole!
I took off my helmet, and a soft breeze brushed my hair. There was oxygen in there. I took a breath, and my dad took one too. There was also sound... but still, everything was dense inside. My body felt compacted as I reached the center of the black hole. Could I ever get out of here? I waited with growing worry, and just when I was beginning to give up, the black hole opened up and flung everything out... except for my dad. I panicked as I looked around, but I saw something even more frightening. The stars were gone. The earth was gone. The moon was gone. Space was gone. Something did not do this. Someone did this. And I, David Wilson, the last human, am going to find out who. For the sake of our universe. I sensed that the time would come soon, but soon could be a second, or an eon.

Dora Illiopoulos, 12
Branchburg Central Middle School
Somerset County
7th Grade
Artwork:
Joseph Moling, 17
Bound Brook High School
11th Grade
Artwork:
Cecilia Guzman, 17
Bound Brook High School
12th Grade
THE TRAGEDY OF BEN SOLO

Background:

- Ben Solo- A young student of Luke Skywalker who is training to become a Jedi, powerful peacekeepers who are tasked with bringing freedom to the galaxy.

- Luke Skywalker- Wise, old, and most famous Jedi in history, Luke is now tasked with training young Ben and his other students in the ways the Force. He owns a temple on a deserted island where he lives, trains, and prays.

- Snoke- The evil emperor who lives in a cave on the forbidden side of the island, Power is from the dark side of the Force. Goal: destroy the Jedi, rule the galaxy.

- The Force- The mysterious energy field created by life that binds the galaxy together. The Force also gives Jedi’s special powers, such as levitating objects, tricking minds, and seeing things before they happen.

- Lightsaber- The sacred weapon of a Jedi. Powered by Kyber Crystals, a lightsaber emits a laser type beam of light that can slice through almost anything.

Ben walks down the cool stone steps outside the temple. A light breeze was carried in the air, blowing his long, wavy hair back. Small waves crashed against the thick stone core of the island. Ben stares at the water, which was about 30 feet below him. In it, he sees a barely visible reflection of himself, reminding him of how insignificant he felt. A tear slips from his eye, crawling it’s way down his face, and dropping to meet the ocean below. Ben wipes his eyes, telling himself not to let his emotions get to him. That’s what Master Luke had said, at least. Emotions get in the way of learning. But it was hard for Ben to listen to the so called “wise words” of Luke Skywalker when he hated him with every ounce of blood inside of himself. Ben tried to please Luke everyday, but it never seemed to be enough. Everyday he would find something wrong with Ben, whether it was his form, his technique, or sometimes just his focus, then send him outside the temple to “cool down”.

Ben now turns away from the water and looks back at the temple. He can hear the sounds of the other students enjoying their home cooked meals and socializing together, while he was stuck out here alone in the
cold. Ben bends down and grabs a small stone from the ground, then hurls it off the cliff with all his
strength. He then exhales with anger and walks back to his normal spot at the edge of the island. Only this
time, he is greeted by a voice.

“Good, very good”, says the voice, which was raspy and sounded weak. “Release your anger. Let it
take control”.

Ben spins around, only to see that there is no one there.

“Who’s there?”, Ben asks with an admonitory tone.

“That is for you to decide”, the voice replies. “Maybe I am your savior, or maybe I am your doom”.

Ben wheels around again, but still stands alone at the edge of the cliff.

“But you know where to find me”, whispers the voice

As if by magic, Ben’s attention suddenly gets drawn to the other side of the island, pulling him in.

“I’m not allowed to go there”, Ben responds. “Master Luke say it’s forbidden-“

“Luke Skywalker is a fool! He only trains students for pay, not to make them Jedi!! Luke Skywaker is
a fraud!!”, the voice thunders. “I can show you the true power of the Force. I can give you power even Luke
Skywalker is afraid of”.

Ben lets his mind give into the temptation. He begins walking towards the other side of the island. Dark, stormy clouds block out the sun as Ben crosses the dark terrain. He ambles past broken statues and
dead trees. The waves, which were once calm and quiet, now thunder as they smash into the rigid stone of
the islands core. The smell of ash fills the air as Ben continues deeper and deeper into the darkness. He soon
reaches a cave at the end of the island. The scent of dead animals fills the air around it. Ben shivers, now re-
thinking his decision. But before he can change his mind, the voice returns.

“If you wish to learn the true meaning of power, enter”, It echoed.

The thought of power fuels Ben’s confidence as he creeps into the dark and dingy cave. Ben takes out
his lightsaber and ignites it, lighting up the cave. The stone walls are filled with scratches and dents, and the
sound of screams echo from all directions. Ben surveys the ceiling, which is stained with moss. His feet create
a thunderous echo with each step, getting louder and louder as he approaches the end of the cave.

“What the hell is this?”, Ben questions with fear.
“Your new home”, the voice booms.

The end of the tunnel leads to a large room filled with vines and moss. Red dust is smeared on the walls in random patterns. Ben shivers as he peers around.

“Look at me”, the voice orders. Only this time, it isn’t in Ben’s head. Supreme Emperor Snoke himself sits on a giant throne at the end of the room. His pink, slimy skin oozes with yellow slush. His terrible yellow eyes peer deep into Ben’s soul.

“I know what you desire”, Implies Snoke in a hoarse voice. “You desire the death of Skywalker. Fortunately for you, I can give you the power to complete such a task”.

Snoke lifts his trembling hands into the air and points them at Ben. He laughs as a glowing red light emits from his hand, and into Ben. Ben falls to one knee. Snoke continues laughing as he gives Ben the powers of the dark side of the Force. Finally, Snoke rests his hand.

“Rise my boy, rise!”, he says in a voice weaker than before. “You will carry on the legacy of the Sith Emperors before you! Rise, my boy, and take temple from Skywalker! Rise! Rise, and you will forever cement your name into history! Rise!! RISE!!

Ben stands up. He feels stronger and more powerful than before.

“What did you do to me?”, Ben questions.

“I have given you the power to destroy Skywalker. You are now more powerful than any Jedi could ever dream!!

Before Ben can answer, the smell of ash fills the air. Outside the cave, black smoke billows into the air. Ben looks at Snoke in horror.

“What did you do?”, Ben asks, alarmed.

Snoke just laughs. Ben sprints out the cave, past the dead trees and broken statues, past the scorched terrain, past the thunderous waves, and into view of Luke’s temple, which is engulfed in flames. The screams of students echo through the air, but are overtaken by the sound of the temple collapsing. Ben stares in horror as the entire temple caves in on itself.

“NO!!”, Ben shouts, but no one can hear him. Just when it seems like all hope is lost, Luke Skywalker himself limps out from the debris. Ben sprints over to meet him.

Luke, who is weak from the heat, just looks into Ben’s eyes. He puts his cane down and takes a seat on ground, watching his temple burn. The voice of Snoke returns to Ben’s head.

“Now is your chance”, it orders. “Kill him!”

Ben looks at his lightsaber, which has been clutched in his hand the whole time.

“Do it now!!”, Snoke demands again, “And forever cement your name in history!”.

Snoke voice fills Ben’s head, forcing his actions. As if taken over by Snoke himself, Ben ignites his lightsaber. Luke looks at him confused.


Ben looks at Luke with anger, fueled by the voice of Snoke in his head, but also with eyes of sorrow, wishing he hadn’t listened to Snoke.

“DO IT!!”, Snoke thunders. “Release your anger and end the pain!!”.

Closing his eyes, Ben squeezes his lightsaber and drives it through Luke, killing him. The voice of Snoke laughs.

“With Skywalker out of the way, the Empire shall rule the galaxy”, he cackles.

The voice, along with the power, leaves Ben. He drops the lightsaber, realizing what he’s done. He realizes that Snoke tricked him into killing Luke only so Snoke could rule the galaxy. Shocked, Kylo goes to the edge of the island and looks at his reflection. A tear slips from his eye, crawling it’s way down his face, and drops to meet the ocean below….

THE END
The Apple

The apple is the fruit of a mother tree bloom,
Coated from blood of the mother’s womb,
The fruit of labor, over an hours ordeal
The seeds, a token of life, emotions to feel.

The apple will fall onto the ground,
Leaving familiar warmth and it’s mother’s sound.
Tumbling down to the world below,
Bruised and torn, eaten by worms in tow.

But maybe, just maybe,
A core left behind,
Can lead to a new life,
The apple reborn, a phoenix alight

Or perhaps the apple will be picked from a branch,
Plucked off completely from the life that it knew
To be eaten; skin peeled, and the flesh shown out
Completely devoured, before it can shout

Farmers will take them, sell them to a crowd.
Bought by people, markets, and stores all around.
Forced to perceive the world’s cold truth,
The apple may cry, and produce into apple juice.

It may miss the orchard from whence it came,
Or reminisce in the days before it felt shame,
Before it was touched by hands unclean,
Washed before eaten, but not pure or unseen.

Consumed for the pleasure of people the apple doesn’t even know,
Abandoned in life for a sick man’s show.
Used as a tool for a taste bud’s delight,
The apple will realize that there is no white knight.

Katherine E. Patrick, 13
Branchburg Central Middle School
Somerset County
7th Grade
We Are Someone

She has a spray tan
I have a tan line

She has false lashes
I have prescription glasses

She has plastered-on nails
I have gnawed-broken nails

She has spikey open heels
I have round toed sneakers

She has salon curls
I have bed head

She has boy band posters
I have Hamilton merch

She has implants
I have tissues

She looks fake
I look real

She likes good music
I like good music

She likes her clothes
I like my clothes

She likes how she looks
I like how I look

She likes to have fun
I like to have fun

She likes to hang with her friends
I like to hang with my friends

She likes funny jokes
I like funny jokes

She likes to be loved
I like to be loved

She likes to be respected
I like to be respected

She is someone
I am someone

Madeline Senate, 12
Branchburg Central Middle School
Somerset County
7th Grade
Artwork:
Sindy Yamileth Calderon, 20
Bound Brook High School
12th Grade
So, hearing that she has gone missing almost sounded like a joke, a sick one. She’s the biggest goody-two-shoes I know, she couldn’t have gone wandering off from her house in the middle of the night and went out for a walk and forgot to come back, its un-Chere like. “Could Chere have been kidnapped?” I thought with doubt. “No, that’s as likely as a guy to not be attracted by Amanda, in other words, nearly impossible,” Chere’s mom breathe heavily on the other end,

“Hello? Zara?” she pleaded quivering. Her voice reminded me of gray, stormy clouds. Peaceful and soothing but on the verge of a downpour.


“Yes dear, I believe you. But when I came home from work she was nowhere to be seen. We’ve already alerted the police,” she sounded more desperate than ever.

“Well, that’s good at least,” I answered as I noticed Alex leaning against the dining room walls glancing in my direction with twinkling eyes. “Well, I hope you find Chere soon,”

“We all do sweetie,” she paused, “And thank you for being such a great friend for Chere,” Chere’s mom finished cracking between words.

“It’s nothing, goodnight miss,” I responded putting back the receiver and immediately stared at the wooden floors. “Can Zara really be missing? Maybe it’s a misunderstanding? Is-” My thoughts were interrupted as Alex’s logwood brown hair swayed five inches from my face.

“What was that about?” he demanded in a sweeter tone than usual. He placed his hands on his hips and stared with his hawklike eyes as he waited for a response.

“Chere has gone missing,” I uttered observing his torn NY ranger sweater. A blotch of sweat formed around his right sleeve probably when he attacked the monster.

“Oh, that’s all?” he said returning to the kitchen.
“What do you mean ‘Oh, that’s all’?” I practically screamed following him.

“You looked scared, I thought it was something important,” he admitted as he grabbed a Fruit Punch flavored Gatorade. I hesitated, I didn’t expect that he would care enough about me to say that. “Not that I really care though,” he smirked at the response. “That jerk, he really made me believe that he could be a decent person. Nope, why would he?” I told myself angrily.

“Chere is missing,” I repeated this time more urgent, “Don’t you know what this means?” I yelled snatching the Gatorade from him. He glared at me as he shut close the refrigerator door. “She might have been kidnapped,” I spit out sinking into an ocean of despair. “What i..f that.. monster caught.. her?” I barely managed to say through my uncontrolled crying. “What… if…,” I started.

“Stop,” he yelled, his nose suddenly flaring, he tightly gripped my shoulders and stared directly into my eyes, “Stop, stop with the ‘what if’, Chere is fine, missing but fine,” he ensured showing a side of him that I have never seen before and I have known him for fifteen years and that means something.

“Shut up, you don’t care about Chere, don’t tell me she’s ok,” I shouted grabbing his hand from my shoulders and violently push them away. “And don’t pretend to comfort me when you don’t give a damn about me,” I cried out, I quickly covered my mouth realizing I had said too much.

“What,” Alex asked in an awfully cheeky voice. “I’m sorry I couldn’t hear what you said, can you repeat that?”

“I didn’t say anything…,” I mumbled through my hands backing away from Alex steadily.

“Damn lies,” Alex snapped. With a jerking motion, his hand met my face. The left side of my face started to string. Even through the thick layers of tears, I was still able to see the slightest shimmer on his emerald green eyes. His eyes then fell into darkness as he turned to leave the room. I stood there weeping, which turned into full out bawling. “Ok so not only is my best friend missing but possibly in life-threatening danger but also I made my brother jerkier than usual and what’s even better is that we were starting to get along too,” I chuckled, “Who am I kidding, I will never get along with that douche,”

I awoke to a thought of myself starting this day bright and making it the best day possible as I usually do every day until last night’s memories occurred to me. They appeared hazy and seemed as if it was a distant dream. “I hope it was dream anyways,” I told myself. The fight with Alex occurred to me, “Damn, he
wasn’t the damn douche, I was. I accused him of not caring about me when he was trying…,” I didn’t even want to finish the thought as I drowsily headed towards the bathroom.

“Yesterday was the last night for poor Chere Adair…” Hearing Chere’s name I forgot about being drowsy and rushed into the living room to discover the sound was coming from the old TV.

“.when she was brutally murdered..”

Sofia Doan, 13
Green Brook Middle School
Somerset County
7th Grade
Artwork:
Jose Juanz, 17
Bound Brook High School
11th Grade
A Case for Hope

You say to believe in hope,
But what reason do I have to do so?
Belief of things to come and of things unspoken
Are all things I can gamble away with a rusty token.
I’ve deflected your advances with sword and shield,
And you’ve always caught me in a gap when it
Comes to hope: this crazy animal of wild hope
Swells your mind with belief, and
Make you all the more beautiful:
I can’t understand it, nor will I ever.

But I want to believe—
For you, I want to believe you can change my
Mind.
My feeble, irrational mind.
I want to believe that I can hope to beat
This mighty river of time, that I may
Have the will to steer
My own course:

And even if I know my compass, I want to
Think I have the capacity to change its direction.
Life has given me so many maps, but I
Want to be so reckless to forge my own
Land. Our land.
Say hope to hope for the things undone,
Or all things done to you:
But we can’t change the events long gone,
Only wish to move on with it.
So isn’t it time to hope?

Have you peaked my curiosity? My interest?
You always have, and you always will,
So I’d like to give this hope thing a try.
It really is funny how present your certainty is
in the uncertain that I almost want to lose myself
in this hope you love more than even me:
So I’ll be hopeful.

Not to hope that one day I will believe
In Love, or cures for love, or cures for
All these Earthly sadnesses:
But to believe that I can hope for
A tomorrow that’s slightly brighter.
That is what hope is.
These Midnight Squalls

There is a cacophony of pounding and wailing outside;
the midnight rain,
torrential and ferocious,
relentlessly bangs against the ceiling.
Trying to penetrate.
Failing continuously.
However, I find comfort in this wild, deranged storm.
The walls of my room,
often constricting,
are now like a hug,
soothing and unyielding.
During these times, the existence of safety,
my safety,
is made known:
the softness of down comforters,
the sturdiness of the house,
the warmth so opposite the cold outdoors.
I snuggle in closer;
I feel secure.
Yet,
there is still a part of me,
so small yet implacable,
that yearns to be in the rain.
Feel the water cascade down bare arms, legs, cheeks.
Feel naked and unafraid.
Danger is a lure,
so primeval and raw,
that gnaws at my will.
I no longer want this protection,
this assurance.
I want to throw open the bedroom window,
let the tempest fill the room.
Want the wind to kiss me,
that mesmerizing dance, leaving me breathless.
Lightning cracks and thunder booms.
I need to see, touch it all.
Then, quickly (too quickly),
it dissipates, that hunger and curiosity,
and I am left trapped and terrified in my bed,
tears pooling against my pillow,
the storm without unable to conquer the storm within.

Morgan Hodorowski, 16
Hillsborough High School
Somerset County
10th Grade
Ode to Dance

Dance was brought to me,
lifting my body up in the air
like a pile of leaves spinning like a tornado.

Oh how beautiful it was,
spinning me like the magic of
two fairies would use.

The brightness of the light;
the dazzling sparkles;
and the colorful leaves making it more elegant.

Oh how I wished for more,
like a little girl wishing upon the moon
and hoping for it all to come true.

Dancing is a dream,
but its not only about using your feet;

It’s all about using your heart to explore,
and that dance is a conversation,
in which it’s between the soul and body.

Though my legs could not stand on its own,
this exquisiteness of dance would be too hard to forget
as dance has already showed me its place in my heart.

Diya Patel, 15
Hillsborough High School
Somerset County
10th Grade
Artwork:
Maryanna Hinnawi 16
Bound Brook High School
11th Grade
My Friend, the Wind

I am happiest with wind in my face and by my side,
it comes along with me, on my every stride.
Conquering fears and motivation to conquer another,
the wind stays by my side like a loving sister or brother.

The wind uses momentum and then it is off!
Dashing through cities and states, brushing hard and soft.
With full effort and strength,
the wind can reach a great length.

The wind is what I aspire to be.
It is strong, fearless and free.
It's my inspiration, my friend at my side.
I would be lost without this tour guide.

The wind is my friend because it is loyal to me.
No matter the time of day, night or what the season be.
It gives me comfort in a way that I openly embrace,
it assures me that everything is okay, and that life is not a race.

This wind is a breath of fresh air,
sending a breeze past my face and blowing my hair.
I smile knowing my loyal friend stays near,
I know, boy do I know even though I cannot hear.

My friend, the wind, motivates me to progress and reach farther distances,
it will always be right there for me within instances.
So, by my side the wind shall stay,
I would not want it any other way.

Olivia Altidor, 13
Hillsborough Middle School
Somerset County
8th Grade
The 100th Game

The doorbell rings and Lexi screams “I cannot wait, I love Candyland.” My friends Lexi and Erin came over because it was our tradition to play every Friday. This time was special though, it was our 100th Friday in a row. We were all more excited than usual and my mom even ordered pizza! We started playing and Erin was in the lead, for the hundredth game we all chose to change our colors. I rolled a 2 and it sent me to a Rainbow Bridge. When I put my red gingerbread man down we all got sucked into the game. We all broke into 1 million pieces and were reformed in the game. We landed in the Ice Palace. Erin Lexi and I had no clue what to do. I was the red gingerbread man, Lexi was the blue gingerbread man, and Erin was the green guy. I didn't know if I was shocked or scared. Lexi was going crazy and you could tell it was from excitement. Erin was pacing up and down the purple and yellow blocks, she was really scared.

“What if we die, we need to play to get out!” Erin said with a scared look on her face.

“Erin it's fine just stay calm, we will get out” Lexi and I said laughing. But you could tell Erin was shaking.

“Let's just play, we play every Friday how hard can it be.” I said proudly.

“It was my turn!” Lexi screamed. She rolled a 4 — she moved forward. Erin rolled a 1 and I rolled a 6. Erin demanded she go because she didn't want to be left behind. Erin went and rolled a 5 and was starting to worry less. I rolled a 2 but it said I need to go back 3 spaces. A loud noise went off and I lost a body part on my gingerbread man.

“Guys did you see that Brielle lost her arm” Erin said, starting to cry. I said we needed to stay calm and Lexi agreed. Then I realized we couldn't land on the go back spaces. We didn't know how to control that because rolling the die is random. We were all safe for the next 30 minutes because the colors were really far apart. We ended up at the Lord Licorice's castle. This was the spot with the most go back spaces. Then we saw him, Lord Licorice.

“What are we going to do, what are we going to do?” Erin shouted. Lexi was scared too, I was shak-
ing but I was not sure of what to do. We backed away and made a plan to roll the die smartly and Erin always had a lucky spin. In our 100 days of playing she hasn't rolled it once. We thought she should just automatically roll. Even though it broke the rules it was the best chance we had. She was really scared because she didn't want to mess up. She rolled and if she got a 4 we would land on a go back space. We were all so scared for what was going to happen, Erin rolled a 4 and we all blacked out. We woke up and we were in a cage over lava in Lord Licorice’s castle. Erin started crying but I had an idea of what to do. There was an opening at the top of the cage big enough for us to get through and Lord Licorice was not watching us 24/7, he came in every hour. Erin wouldn't stop crying but she was crying candy so Lexi and I were enjoying it. Lord Licorice walked in and Erin immediately stopped crying, Lexi was talking about how she went to the mall but she got quiet right away.

“Hi girls, I hope I didn't ruin your night. You need to find a way out of you will be here forever. Please just stay calm, I won't hurt you but there is lava underneath you” Lord Licorice said slowly, and terrifyingly.

“Ok” we all responded.

We were very scared at this point, when he left I told them my plan. We talked till he came back to make the plan better. We escaped but one of the bars broke off Lexi’s base so she could not stand up. Erin and I were getting tired because it took a lot of work to get out of the cage. We still did not pass Lord Licorice’s land and we were still scared about having to go back spaces. We were fine until then, but it was the last go back space of Lord Licorice land and we were so scared because we saw a sign that said roll at your own risk.

“Erin do you want to roll?” Lexi asked.

“No, I'll let you roll, I don't want to risk anything” Erin replied.

You could tell that Erin was really scared — if Lexi rolled a 6 we would land on the go back a space but she rolled a 2. There was still a chance that if Lexi rolled a 4 we would be done, we didn't know what was going to happen to us because it has been different every time. Lexi rolled and rolled for such a long time, it
could have landed on anything. It landed on a 3 then shifted to 4. We didn't know how it happened but it did -- we walked 4 spots and when we all stepped foot on the go back space, we broke back into 3 million pieces. As we dissolved Erin screamed. There we were back home, not one of us knew what to do and how to act. We all agreed not to talk about this, it wasn't because we didn't want anyone to know it was because we couldn't find the words to say it. We stopped playing and just enjoyed our pizza but we didn't know if we should tell my mom. We had to make sure that next week we had a new game. Maybe playing 100 times was just enough. We were really happy that we got to spend all this time together.

“Wait, so what game is next?” I asked.

“I say we try snakes and ladders” Lexi said.

“No way am I getting stuck in that game” Erin answered. We all laughed.

“Thank you guys for coming, I am really happy I get to enjoy every Friday with my best friends” I said.

Lexi replied “It is always really fun, thank you.”

“Yea thanks for hosting and happy 100 weeks of playing” Erin shouted.
The Darkness

There is a darkness spreading
taking the lives of so many.
A child’s shaking hands,
tears smudging the ink,
as they write loved ones a letter.
They know the pain
their loved ones will feel
but was it not their fault,
when they dismissed a child’s pain as unreal?
A fallen friend,
another one gone,
but will they meet us again,
or will all hope be lost?
These young hearts beating,
sounds that once were heard,
this life may be
ruthless, all this evil that’s occurred.
But to take your own life,
to be self-removed from this life,
is something I’ve considered.
But I’ve taken my time
thinking this all through
and I refuse to let myself
go away from you.
To lose to the darkness,
to lose another friend,
to feel that this sad life must come to an end.
While this life isn't perfect,
it’s scared and alone,
at least you have someone
to care for, to hold.
Although this life may be scary,
it’s wild and it's free,
and if you look through the cloud of darkness
I’m sure you will see:
that standing on the other side of the mist
reaching out a hand are people like me.
Those that are afraid and want to give in,
but have known this darkness before
and won't let the ending begin.
No One Mourns the Wicked

No one mourns the wicked,  
no one ever cries,  
the good are remembered  
and legends never die,  
but for the wicked, no one says goodbye.  

Pretend to care for everyone  
because you know you should,  
but when the evil and darkness stumble,  
you don't help them when you could.  

No one mourns the wicked,  
no one ever cries,  
the good are remembered  
and legends never die,  
but for the wicked no one says goodbye.  

They say the good die young.  
I'm on my hands and knees, begging for your mercy.  
Forgive me, darling, please.  
Say that you care for me  
but I don't really know why,  
because when the evil die young, you never said goodbye.  

No one mourns the wicked,  
no one ever cries,  
the good are remembered  
and legends never die,  
but for the wicked no one says goodbye.  

Living like you'll never fade does not lead to happy endings.  
Crying, shedding fake tears,  
I know you're just pretending.  
No one mourns the wicked,  
no one ever cries,  
the good are remembered  
and legends never die,  
but for the wicked no one says goodbye.  

When the wicked leave this earth,  
when the bad and evil fall,  
no one ever cries for us,  
no one ever cares at all.  
No one mourns the wicked,  
no one ever cries,  
the good are remembered  
and legends never die  
but for the wicked no one says goodbye.
You say you think I'm looking for
something I've lost
but have never had before.
I don't think that's the case
because I find it looking at her face.
Maybe it's the moonlight,
a silk strewn across,
but when I look into her eyes
I find what I have lost.
I don't think I have lost her, though,
she has always been right here.
I can't put my finger on it,
I just can't place it,
what has changed when she is near.
Maybe it's the wind pounding on my door,
maybe it's with every breath
that leaves me wanting more.
Maybe it's this hollowness,
this empty feeling inside,
maybe it's this darkness
leaving me nowhere to hide.
My emotions are shaken,
could there be more?
More than just wanting her,
could there be something I'm longing for?
A truth that lies within these walls,
does everyone feel
like they are destined for greater?
Or am I the only lost one?
Why does it always feel
like now or later
I could be what is yet to come?

Madison Borer, 13
Hillsborough Middle School
Somerset County
8th Grade
Capture a picture with the perfect setting,
This will make a moment you’ll never be forgetting.
Taking the perfect photo is pretty exciting,
It’s like creating a story without any writing.
Find the hidden beauties of the world,
Maybe it’s something gorgeous no one else has unfurled.
Photography is a beautiful art,
That can only be taken from the heart.

Getting a snap of something moving is tough,
When it comes out blurry you’ll say you’ve had enough.
It’s annoying when photobombers get in the way,
Like when a car drives by and the whole screen looks gray.
You often can’t stand upright, because that just won’t please,
To set the perfect angle, you might get on your hands and knees.
When the flash goes off, people may shut their eyes,
And then the essence of the picture quickly dies.
Maybe it’s your job and your budget is tight,
But the photos just never seem to come out quite right.

Although taking good pictures is frequently hard,
If you try and persevere you’ll be passing out your business card.
You’ll get compliments from everyone that will fill you with pride,
You’ll see this is the real you, and you’ve got nothing to hide.
That perfect picture where everything just fits together,
Makes your entire mood become instantly better.
When you see your photo and it’s something you love,
You’ll know that this image is something to be proud of.
Taking photos can make you feel free,
And it allows you to appreciate how beautiful the world can be.

Sarah Bragger, 13
Hillsborough  Middle School
Somerset County
8th Grade
The treehouse sits in an old oak in my backyard. It looks pretty normal. It is made of wood we found lying around; in the shed, we found the plywood for the walls and in the back fence we found the stuff for the roof. The stairs are different sizes and colors but we worked hard. My brother and I worked for hours making all the cuts and putting it together. My sister did the painting, she loves colors so there are many on the treehouse. My mom let us put in things from around the house to turn it into our fort. We have an old rug in the middle of the floor, some of our favorite books and comics on shelves that I made and a table for our Legos. Matt and I want to build a Lego city. And of course, we had to put in a place for Megan’s dolls. Matt and I were so proud of our work and we could not wait to enjoy it. We begged our mom for us to sleep in it and we finally wore her down. She gave in and said we could but we had to stay in the treehouse and were not allowed to roam the yard. That hot summer night changed the way we thought of our treehouse forever.

Matthew and I got ready to sleep in the treehouse. We had to put a fan in the window and get our sleeping bags. Matthew got the pillows and I searched around for the air mattress with the battery-operated air pump. My mom got us a lantern and plenty of drinks and snacks for our night. Megan wanted to sleep with us but Mom said no and she started to cry. Just as it started to get dark we were catching lightening bugs in mason jars when my mom said it was time to get into the treehouse. She told us she would be back to say good night after Megan went to bed. Matthew and I were nowhere near ready to sleep so we got out the Lego table and put it in the middle of the room. The fan started to make a funny noise and we noticed outside that the wind started to pick up. A streak of lightning and a crack of thunder startled us but we kept playing. All of a sudden the room started moving, the next thing I knew I was lying flat on my back. I could not see Matthew. I thought that he got scared and ran back into the house. But I was confused about how I got on my back.

“Matthew, Matthew” I said. “Where are you? I am telling mom that you left the treehouse,” I yelled.

“Cody, I am sitting next to you. I think I am. It’s really dark in here. Where did mom put the flash lights?” Matthew answered. I started to get up but I felt weird. As I cleaned off my glasses, I stood up. I
took a giant step trying to avoid the Lego table but I fell. It felt like I had fallen off a cliff. I hit the ground with a loud “THUD.” It knocked the wind out of me. I called to Matthew not to move. I did not want him to get hurt. I was trying to figure out what was going on when the treehouse door opened and Megan came running in. She looked like a giant. Each time her feet hit the floor I was bounced around. That’s when I first saw my arms and legs. The light from her flashlight shined on the floor and I realized I was a Lego man. Just then I heard Matthew crying. I knew that he was a Lego man too. Megan began to scream for us. She started to cry because she thought we were gone. Her tears hit the floor like giant raindrops. They left lakes in the cracks of the wooden floor beams. She got so upset that she dropped her flashlight to the floor and ran looking for my mom. I knew that if my mom came into the treehouse and could not find Matthew and me that we would be in trouble. Like no gaming for the rest of our lives. With the light from the flashlight, I could finally see where we were. I yelled at Matthew, “Are you ok?” He said he was but I could hear that he was still crying. I had to come up with a plan to save us. I noticed that my toolbox was still open on the floor but it seemed so far away. I knew that I had to get to it. I ran as fast as I could. Once I got to the toolbox I had to figure out a way to get in. I did not remember what I had inside but I knew that there had to be something to help. As I climbed up the side of the toolbox, Matthew started to throw the Legos off the Lego table. He said he was trying to help me. He thought I could build something to get to the top of the Lego table. Once inside my toolbox, I was able to find a pack of thumbtacks and dental floss. I threw them over the side of the toolbox and slid down the lock. I flipped the thumbtacks so that the top was on the floor and pushed them over to the table. Just then I heard the sound of a diesel engine in the driveway. Oh no, my dad was home from work. That meant that we are in big trouble. I crouched down, don’t ask me why because I was so small no one could see me and waited for my dad to come. I heard the creaking of the ladder and waited for him to open the door. But then I could hear my mom off in the distance yelling for him to come in the house. She said the power was out and she was trying to give Megan a bath.

He told her he wanted to see us but she said the flashlights were on. She said if there was a problem we would have been in the house by now. The silence seemed like forever. Would he come in or would he go to the house? Just as I thought we were done for, I heard the ladder creak again and then nothing. I
heard the screen door slam. I knew that we were safe, but for how long. My mom was always checking on us and she would not leave us alone for too long. We had to act fast. But how do we change back? I could not worry about that now, first I had to get back to Matthew on top of the Lego table. “WATCH OUT!” I yelled to Matthew as I threw the first thumbtack to the top of the table. It missed so I tried again. The thumbtack came flying back at me. That was twice — I be able to do it again? I tried three more times and it did not work. My arms were starting to get tired.

I was ready to give up when Matthew said, “Just one more time Cody, please. I am scared. I want Mom.” I felt so bad that I knew I had to try one more time. I picked up the thumbtack and threw it with all my strength. I could hear it hit the table. I told Matthew the flip the thumbtack so that the point went into the table. He was able to get it down. And I was able to throw the dental floss up to him. I had taken some of the dental floss out and rolled it into a ball. That made it easier to throw it to Matthew. After he tied on the dental floss, I tied on my end. I started the journey up the dental floss. As I climbed higher and higher I remembered how much I hated climbing the rope in gym class. But at least for once something I learned in gym class, I could use. It seemed like forever until I got the top. Matthew was waiting for me. “What are we going to do, Cody? I don’t want to be a Lego.”

“I know Matt” I said but just then something caught my eye. I started to walk to the shining Lego. I had never seen the block before. I had no idea where it came from. As I got closer I saw that words were written on the Lego block. I started to read it — somehow when the lightning storm hit and we were playing with our Legos, it turned us into Legos. There was something written about how when the stars line on a stormy night and blah, blah, blah… That part was not really important. What was important was how to get back to normal. As I read on, Matthew skimmed to the end where it told us what to do to get back.

“Cody, Cody, read this part. It’s right here” Matthew said as he pointed to the side of the block. I would have been reading forever about the dumb curse. I flipped over the block and read. We had to complete two Lego challenges to be able to turn back into people. But it had to be done while the skies were dark and the lights were out. First, we had to build a tow truck. When we finished building the tow truck it said that the next and final task would appear on the blank side of the Lego. I sent Matthew to find the wheels
while I got to work on the body. It was so hard. The pieces weighed 100 pounds. We tried to work fast but it was hard to see what pieces were what. They looked so much different when you are the same size as them. After a while, he found the wheels. The only part left was the tow hook which took us about 45 minutes just to find. It was the smallest piece to find besides the lights and mirrors. For some reason, it felt odd — the truck started shaking and turned in two directions for another build. The build was looking very difficult. The build was like a ladder but bigger. You had to build a trap too. After a few seconds we figured out why we needed a trap. There were these tiny Minecraft looking zombies. We found some tiny swords. Matthew was fighting and I was building. The ladder was finished — we climbed up. We both felt a jolt and became humans again — the problem was I just didn't know how to get down from the roof. The first thing that came to my mind was

“How am I gonna get down?” I thought to myself “Climb down the tree.” So I did — it was about 7 am when I checked. I was tired and fell asleep.

Cody Boyce, 13
Hillsborough Middle School
Somerset County
7th Grade
Make it Graceful

It's the pinnacle of grace, 
movements sharper than a crisp Fall leaf, 
or as gentle as the Summer breeze. 
Dancers look light as air. 
Marvelous dancers can do it all.

Harder than a dead man coming back to life, 
the amount of strength, flexibility 
the amount of endurance, and balance, 
that a dancer possesses is colossal. 
All while making it graceful. 
Yet the number of people that deny this, 
Uncountable. 
Anyone can dance, 
but can they do it well?

Snap! And your ankle is gone, 
five, six, seven, eight, 
you dance and dance, 
till your shoes are held together by a thread 
your feet are pleading for you to stop. 
You fell flat face down? 
Get back up, 
make it graceful, 
because no one, 
no one 
can know you messed up.

Alina Chen, 13 
Hillsborough Middle School 
Somerset County 
8th Grade
Artwork:
Bianca Morales, 16
Manville High School
11th Grade
Artwork:
Tessa Mishak, 17
Manville High School
12th Grade
Aurora

Past the mansion, past the plantation
Past the slaves and mine
Lay the Aurora River
Beautiful and in isolation...a long straight line

Some say it’s magic
While others don’t know of its worth
But Amina believed it to be sacred
The perfect place for brother’s ashes to flow back to Mother Earth

Amina was a slave girl
Who never had a taste of freedom or liberty
Her master, Charles, was the cruelest man in the world
But Amina never feared him as her brother protected her from hostility

They thought they could run
Just Amina and Abe, two siblings side by side
But they were too slow and were spotted by their predator
Charles pitilessly shot Abe in the chest, and after three bullets, Abe died

Now Abe’s ashes flowed through the river
Just like the floating tears in Amina’s eyes
Loud footsteps echoed in the woods
As she jumped into the river, hiding and acting wise

She stayed underwater for almost a minute
And from the crystal blue, she eventually rose
But standing before her was not her master or the lands she knew
Instead, she was in a magical kingdom where she felt the presence of her brother and froze

The grass was luscious and green
The sun shone brightly in the light blue sky
As Amina looked around she noticed a golden deer
The deer was drinking fresh water from the river in the area nearby

Amina felt different and strange
She looked in the river to see her reflection
Standing before her she was not her body anymore
She was now a glamorous phoenix, with a blue luminous complexion

She walked towards the golden deer to ask for help
“What of course. This is the Wish Kingdom!” he said
Something about the deer felt familiar
Only the idea of a different kingdom just couldn’t be grasped in her head

“What is your name?” Amina queried
“My name is Abe,” the deer replied
Amina couldn’t believe what she had just heard
She exclaimed “Abe it’s me, Amina!” as she rushed to hug him and cried
Abe began to explain to Amina
“This was a land on the pathway to becoming a star
A land where the dead receive their dying wish
But until they do, they cannot go far”

Abe continued to explain
“There was a ferocious dragon named Impius, an evil dictator
Who wanted to rule the entire kingdom
And be worshipped and adored as much as the kingdom’s creator”

“There were three jewels that would give one eternal power
Impius already owned two
Obtaining the third would make him the leader
By using all the enslaved creatures that he knew”

They all knew of the prophecy
Which stated that only one being could defeat the evil tyrant
The blue majestic phoenix Amina had become
She was the kingdom’s only hope to get rid of the cruel aspirant

A great responsibility was thrown on Amina
She was just a slave girl, and not a hero
If she succeeded, she would save hundreds of lives
But if she failed to defeat Impius, she would save zero

They headed to a beautiful enchanted forest
But looks can so often lie
Amina was told to stay on the path
Where she saw a colorful unicorn that she could not pass by

Amina touched the soft unicorn,
And suddenly, its eyes turned red
Abe quickly used his antlers to slice the evil unicorn’s horn,
It came off, fell down and like a river she bled

Finally, they were out of the forest and safe
But Abe could journey with Amina no more
Only she was destined to defeat Impius
After bittersweet goodbyes, Amina set off to defeat Impius and soar

It was a long and tedious fly
And the skies darkened and the clouds sparked with lightning
Amina was approaching the land of Impius
And her encounter would definitely be frightening

Before she could think twice, an arm reached out and grabbed her
Impius, in the tower where he reigns
“I know you’re the bird from the prophecy!” he growled
He called her puny and weak and locked her up in chains

Little did he know Amina could change her size
She shrunk and escape, in need of a scheme
Amina spent all night thinking
In the morning she had a plan, though it might have been a bit extreme
She needed to free the poor creatures
And what better way to defeat Impius than to set a trap
So she snuck into the mines and stole two pieces of copper by turning small
There, she created a fake jewel by smashing the pieces of copper flat
She flew up above the slaves
She flew higher up until she reached the tower
Impius was now furious and flew out the window
Fortunately, Amina did not even cower
“I have the final jewel,” she told him
She started flying towards the volcano
The aggravated dragon followed right behind her
He started breathing fire which smelt like Drano
“Give me that jewel!” Impius screeched
But he was unable to fly fast enough to catch up
“Come and get it,” she said while dropping the fake jewel into the volcano
Impius rushed in to save it but he wasn’t able to call for backup
The volcano was magical
Whoever enters the volcano becomes chained forever
Only if they are not pure of heart
Which Impius was never
The Aurora River transported Amina to a free state
She was able to save everyone and fulfill Abe’s wish of seeing his sister free
Finally, Amina received the freedom she always longed for
When Amina looked up at the sky, she saw Abe, the North Star, twinkling in glee
Charlie’s Story

“MA! I’m heading to the store! Whatchu want? Cold Cuts again?"

“NO! I just bought all these cold cuts!”

“Oh right, see ya MA!” Charlie and his MA were very fond of cold cuts, ‘just something that ran in the ol’ fammy,’ he’d often exclaim.

…

Charlie had no source of transportation, (he had an old bike from when he delivered the paper to the town he used to live in before he inevitably moved to a small town in Arkansas), so he was forced to run, with soles half ripped and cut jeans that he stole from a K-Mart and the tattered, beer-reeked white, (turning yellow-green now), tank-top on his back, he ran three and a half blocks to the nearest 99 Cent Store. He passed fellas that he couldn’t quite remember but they looked familiar, “probably some old folk I dealt to before.” Charlie got fired from almost every close store that didn’t require a high-school diploma since his MA couldn’t afford school during Charlie’s 8th year at his school. So after Charlie got himself fired from the K-Mart for stealing the jeans, the 99 Cent Store for harassing some of the customers and fellow employees, he was left sitting next to his MA on the couch. But until about last year he started dealing fake drugs and passed them off as real. It made him a lot of money and he was a little too fond of it. But that wasn’t his main source of making money, at least for now. Charlie was trying to get published, he had submitted five books in one year. He would always talk to MA and tell her “I got it!...” and that “One of these days we’ll get out of this dump and I’ll get us, most importantly you! A HOME!” And she would just nod and say something comforting.

Charlie knew or at least thought someone thought the drugs were fake but he didn’t want it to be that way, so he kept on jogging to the store. He could feel his strands of hair getting damp so he scurried faster and faster until it was a raging storm

“God’s tears, how sad yet beautiful,” he exclaimed, “That’s it! A religious story! With maybe a horror aspect to it. I’ll write it down.” Charlie had a tiny notebook in his jean-pocket. It was brown with the inscription Charles Foster (his father’s name). After his death (which happened before Charlie was born) his MA gave him for his 10th birthday, that very notebook. The book was very tattered but to be quite frank, the nic-
est thing that Charlie owned.

Charlie scribbled the book idea and kept on walking.

…

Charlie was greeted by cameras—lots!—specifically paparazzi. They all shouted his name, asked for autographs, etc., but one female at the back caught his eye; he went over and she dropped her phone into her ripped jean-shorts. He smiled at this lady and voluntarily started to sign her chest. She immediately slapped his germ-infested, hairy cheek.

“Oh! I’m so sorry ma’am, I just thou-”
“Get away from me, PERV! I’ma call the cops on you!” She scoffed one last time, took her last look gesturing up and down with her head at Charlie’s whole body and ran to her other friends. Charlie looked around and the paparazzi were gone. He walked in, scratching his head, pushed the door open, and grabbed a small handheld basket. There was an old lady with tiny glasses and a beaded necklace. She struggled to grab the peas on one of the higher shelves. He ran towards her and he told her that he got it and he grabbed them and tossed them gently into her decaying cart (just as she was). He passed by her without giving her a chance to say, “Thank you, sonny” as they all do. He passed the fish and he grabbed the discounted food in the back of the store.

Charlie was finishing bagging his groceries when a guy came up to him and asked him what he was doing in a 99 Cent Store as though the thought of that was all-around blasphemy but the cashier soon interrupted and asked who Charlie was talking to.

“Umm-Uhh!” Charlie looked back to where the man was, but he wasn’t there anymore. “I guess nobody.”

“Okay sir, your total come out to $32.41,” the clerk mindlessly said without making any eye contact. Charlie only had $27.36 on him at the time.

He looked discouraged but said with confidence, “Well…” He stuttered looking at the name-tag pinned to his shirt, Jason, it read. “Well, Jason, I only got 27 bucks” he said, hoping he could make a deal. Jason was not one for deals or this job or Charlie.
“Well you can put back those,” the man said, pointing to a few cans of green beans. He did so and left, feeling belittled.
The pretty little flower sits quiet.
People walk past her, glancing at her vibrant colors.
They pass by the beautiful statue on a stem.

That’s all they see:
A pretty little flower.

But if they look closer then maybe they’d see what she really is.
Maybe they’d see the red color in her petals are blood stains.
Maybe they’d see her thorns cut deeper than any knife.

She seeks revenge for being put into a glass cage.
She deserves better than being bought with worthless money.
She deserves more than being a gift to a foolish human.
She is worth so much more than to be thrown out and forgotten after death.
She will not be a slave to humanity.

The day will come when she will bring terror over those who have done her harm.
Next it will be humans trapped in the glass cage.
It will no longer be her petals that fall, but the heads of people.
The only water in their vase will be their own tears.
Tick, tock.
Soon the time will come.
Planning, patiently she waits.

Her mask of a pretty little flower is her best friend.
The pretty little killer sits quiet.

Randi Rose Fender, 14
Hillsborough Middle school
Somerset County
8th Grade
Above Freezing

The ocean rolls in foamy curves.
There she stands, arms crossed.
Her vision gliding along the water,
Her feet tucked deep in the sand.

Friends gather around her,
But she can’t see them as real.
A strained smile and hollow laughter.
That is what I see.

Her words automatic,
An empty breath of air.
Her eyes clouded over,
Shielding secrets behind them.

She sneaks away from the waves.
Feet skipping across the ground.
Lightly sinking into the grains.
Leaving undetected by all.

She builds a facade of happiness.
No one hears her,
Screaming for help,
I heard her.

I follow after her.
Close enough to see,
Far enough away to not be.
Down the length of the boardwalk.

She reaches the edge of a bridge.
Ignoring the unknowing strangers.

She stops.
In front of her lies an end.
A place where her story cuts short.
Still water welcomes her.
Her eyes seared with hate.
Her hands tremoring.
Her mind yearning to stop.
Her willingness to let it.

Where she was,
She suddenly wasn’t.

My name was Lucy.

It’s surprising.
Not knowing what lies beneath you,
Falling to meet impending death.
It gives you time to think.

I know he followed me.
He wanted to say something,
My best friend.

But feeling is too complex,
Comprehension of the unknown,
It’s an inescapable paradox.

I have spent too long
Too much of my living days.
Looking for ways to feel,
And not even for the better.

The waves lean into me.
I want them to.
And then it’s done.

The water is cold.

Jennifer Han, 14
Hillsborough Middle school
Somerset County
8th Grade
The Bridesmaid

Princess Marathyle—a sweet, innocent, fair lady, with quite elegantly placed delicate features arrayed upon her face was one who preserved a grin so morally pure. So naive, nothing but genuine, and retained a blessing, a single, mere blessing enough to last her an eternity of beauty. A blessing she believed bestowed upon her granted by a man in a white robe, a silver mantle, golden trim. A beard so soft, prolonged, adding definition to the man’s face. His title was prevalent everywhere, in different forms, but she referred to him as the One with Power.

Conveyed by him was a casket of morality, in which he possessed blessings, its sole purpose was to grant wishes of those who retain a contented disposition, an altruistic and genuine persona. Princess Marathyle was one to bear these characteristics. Amid her was an ample fortune, a king and a queen, and a fiancée, for she was yet to be engaged into holy matrimony in the hopes of an enduring relationship, as the sun and moon do, alleviated by the presence of her beloved, and in deeming that never shall their very souls depart till the dusk of eternity. The princess lifted her veil, glanced at the leveled pane, posturing as if she were deciding which dress she shall wear to the royal ball...but that was when she had been much younger. Now it’s different.

Recognizing her beauty, she bit her lip and let out a mere grin. Even though she held an obsession with her appearance, she felt at ease to believe that she wasn’t one to be narcissistic as she was rather one to submit herself into altruistic deeds instead. She placed the veil on the obsolete, fusty cabinetwork, as it glistered like the tidal waves at daybreak. She had selected her bridesmaid the previous week, no ambiguity, would it no other than her most devoted escort, her closest companion. The princess was obliged in doing so, for she herself believed the only prettier soul than herself to roam the planet, indeed was this special person. Ophelia Hart—an alluring palette of color she obtained, a fair complexion drawn by the beauty of Mother Nature. Her hair, of the blond color, perhaps, rather a mixture of golden and auburn, glistening through rays of light, well-defined, indicating a state of composure with a distinct smile, manifesting all other elegant features that she retained. The appreciation of this belle, at times, could turn into envy, but that didn’t worry the princess. Being a major component of royalty, none of the beauty of a mere companion of the princess would come into an interest in the folk.
Princess Marathyle made her way down the royal staircase carpeted in a pleasing shade of red. The carpet carried her in praise and pride. As she held her dress above her ankles, people glared in awe, in spite of her beauty. Her hair was curly, ever since she had been birthed, by her mother. Her hair was naturally brunette, and at times in the sun, chocolate-colored. Ophelia Hart was a friend of Princess Marathlye since childhood. Due to the lenient characteristic of the queen, her mother approved of the children frolicking together. In most cases, the mirth of any sort between the classes would be prohibited.

The chandeliers lit up the great hall. As she moved down from her bedchamber, she locked eyes with her confidant and her newly-made bridesmaid. She made her way down the rearmost step. Men in obsolete suits, women in vintage dresses, men in contemporary suits, women in cocktail dresses. This was royal mediocrity.

The candlelight complimented her authentic beauty. She was bewildered by the indifference that her soon-to-be-wed prince held, that induced him to not even attend their own engagement ceremony! She queried about this, and how it may perhaps influence their very conjugality in the near future.

“Oh! Your majesty, pleased to meet your acquaintance,” hollered a man, who she believed she knew, but then supposed not. She curtsied and then proceeded her tread. Her head held high, her arms to her stomach, she tilted her head, whilst maintaining a decent presentation, as she was welcomed into the dining hall. Her look revealed her obligation as the future queen. She began to wave, at the people who were staring at her as if she were a lion juggling apples on a unicycle.

***

The day of the nuptials arrived presently. Princess Maratyhle awaked to the notes of singing birds and jovial carols. Her feelings were deprived of vexation or envy, not that she believed any of those to be a predicament in her daily life.

Then she heard a knock. Then another knock. Abruptly, a heinous sound approached her ear. She heard a loud squeak like the one of a mouse. She soon realized that it was the door hinge screaming, for the door opened in the unforeseen. It was Ophelia, who came racing in with haste. Slamming the wardrobe open, she dug for clothes as if she were an excavator; she pulled out a few of her preferences. The princess lifted her head and took a quick glance at her veil on her bedside table. It reminded her of the extravagant occasion to
take place on this very day.

“Puff sleeve or no puff sleeve,” exclaimed Ophelia as if she were much happier about this day more than she was herself. In ambivalence, Princess Marathyle took a hasty moment to think and declared, “puff sleeve, and make it quick!”

Ophelia faked a smile, trying not to make it seem as if she were retorting or speaking ironically. “Oh, how lovely this day is. I am so, so very happy for you Mrs. Marathyle,” Mrs. Marathyle—*it isn’t like Ophelia to bear courteous manners and civility* thought the princess. She attempted to be nice about it.

“Ophelia, oh, how could you ever call me by my maiden name, please, this day is no different than the mediocrity.”

“Except for that today you’re getting married to quite a handsome, charming prince, indeed.” The princess wondered about the whole situation, and thought *if Ophelia is so exuberant, shouldn’t she be considerably more exuberant?* The thought recurred in her conscience, till the time of wedlock.

***

She stood upright in a dignified and royal fashion, as the veil slightly altered her vision. She maintained her signature grin, the genuine grin, and awaited the marriage officiant to speak. She placed her hand on the veil on her head, in pride. The priest lifted the gospel and began reading the words. Time went by quite quickly, as the two lovebirds striking glances at each other, as the officiant spoke. He smiled, then looked away, as if he were disappointed, or distressed, in uncertainty. The only words the princess heard after that were…” Do you Mrs. Marathyle, wish to make Sir Bathlemew, your soulmate till death do you part.”

Without a falter, the princess began blushing and spoke articulately, “I do.”

He turned around with Sir Bathlemew in vision, “Do you, Sir Bathlemew, wish to make Mrs. Marathyle, your soulmate, till death do you part.”

He seemed to fake a smile and replied discreetly, under his breath, “I’m sorry Angela. My heart is somewhere else.” He turned his head to Ophelia. The girl surely was overwhelmed, but also seemed to smile, a smile so vile, so wicked, for she knew all along.

Rohan Lal, 13
Hillsborough Middle School
Somerset County
7th Grade
Plucked

I met you, sweetheart, in the warmth of May,
A flower bulb that has already bud,
A tulip, red as the first gleam of day,
The golden streak of light after a flood.

Your spotlight is my guide through the abyss,
Your azure eyes are as deep as the seas,
Your smile turns on my eternal bliss,
Together, it brings all my moths to ease.

Without you by my side, there are no hues
Perhaps a black-white film with no real close,
If only like my dream, where us comes true,
There is no saying what we could compose.

Together, the moon and sun are both ours,
Your love is worth more than a thousand stars.

The torrents of May, when I noticed you,
It seemed spring was a sign you overran,
Your warmth hid your cold soul, I had no clue,
The hidden, true intentions of your plan.

While your attempts made a solid campaign,
Your shallow deepness just made me repulse,
So many others see, hear, and feel pain,
Acting civilized was my first impulse.

If I am argent fireworks, you say,
Then you must be a caliginous bomb,
By leaving everything in a disarray,
In seconds, I would leave without a qualm.

Our hearts will bring anguish to the inside,
Our paths were not intended to collide.

Alice Liu, 14
&
Madeline Sparks, 13
Hillsborough Middle School
Somerset County
8th Grade
A Mother’s Greif

The broken child asks his weeping mother
His pink cheeks alive, but his eyes not quite:
“When we leave this world, is there another?”
Her mind sees darkness but her mouth drips light

Is death an escape or a path to pain?
When we succumb to living as the dead,
The once glowing flames of thought are now slain
Cold souls on the scale of justice like lead

Her lie is the sun deep into the dark,
Black weeds, white tulips in the same garden
She hides her woe, but her mask is so stark
She wills tears to cease, her grief to harden

Though when her heart’s dams break truth claws her throat,
Her son’s sunken ship has started to float...

Grace Liu, 14
Hillsborough Middle School
Somerset County
8th Grade
The Girl and the Candy Forest

Once upon a time, there was a little girl named Alice. Every day after school at about four o’clock Alice would walk to the library to do her homework. She would sit at the same tiny blue table in the middle of the room, and every day she would see the same old man sitting in the corner reading the same big book. Alice wondered every second of every day what the old man was reading. Alice always wanted to say hello to the old man but she never had the guts to. She could never figure it out so she just gave up. She worked on her robotics homework. She liked it and it took her mind off the old man.

“Miss Wimpleton, can you tell me where I will find a book on the history of robotics? I have a project to do for school and don’t know anything about them,” she asked the reference librarian at the checkout table in the front of the library. Miss Wimpleton had long brown hair that she wore in a tight bun at the back of her neck, but little hairs slipped out and gave her a confused look all the time. Alice wasn’t sure if Miss Wilpelton understood or if it was just her natural confused look but after a time she wrote down the call numbers for a few titles. Alice started looking for books. In the corner of her eye, she spotted the old man. She followed him through all the isles until he stopped. Alice didn’t stop fast enough and she ended up bumping into him and dropping all her books.

The old man said in his grumpy old voice “Watch where you’re going, little girl.”

Alice said she was sorry and she introduced herself “Hello sir my name is Alice, sorry about that but can I ask what your name is and where you were heading?”

The old man said “My name is Harmin, Harmin Jones. And I was just going…” The man paused and then ran. Alice ran after him. They ran and ran and ran until Alice ran out of breath and stopped. Alice looked over and Harmin was gone. Alice was determined to find him. So she looked and looked but couldn’t find anything. Not even a sign. Until a stroke of light caught her attention. It was a portal. She obviously had to go inside. She jumped in and there she was going down a slide. The slide came to a stop. In the corner of her eye, she saw Harmin. Alice tiptoed up behind him and noticed her surroundings. She was suddenly in another world which she hadn’t known was there. It had trees made of Twizzlers, gumball coconut trees, streams of hot cocoa with marshmallow lily pads floating on top, and a candy cane diving board into a hot cocoa pool at the end of the stream. She spotted Harmin. He was working on this gigantic machine.
had so many parts of all sorts of shapes and colors. Alice saw a poster saying “WIZARDS ENTER YOUR
INVENTIONS AND WIN A BIG PRIZE.”

“It looks like a dispenser,” Alice said out loud. The old man got startled and crushed his machine.

Harmin got up and ran toward Alice and said in a very grumpy voice “Who is in my candy shop?
This is my candy shop and I will have no one in here but me.” Alice stayed put. While all this was happening
it all started to make sense to Alice. The book the old man was reading was how to build the machine and he
left the library at the same time every day so he could work on the machine. Also, Harman didn’t want any-
one to see his machine so no one could copy it. Alice was so distracted that she forgot to start running bump-
ing into him and knocking his machine to the ground, smashing it.

The old man came up to her and yelled “What are you doing in my candy forest?”

Alice felt sorry. Alice said with great sorrow “I’m so sorry. I really am. I am Alice the girl from the
library. I see you every day in the corner of the room and wondered what you were doing. I’ve been wanting
to ask, but just was too nervous. So I thought if I followed you, I would get my answer. I didn’t mean to get
you mad.”

“It’s ok,” said the old man.

“I know how to make it up to you,” said Alice. “I can help you fix your machine. I’ve been doing my
robotics homework and I know a few tricks. Do you want some help?”

Harman said “No thanks I don’t need help from a little girl like you. You’re too clumsy, you’ll proba-
bly break my machine even more. Besides you were the one who startled me and broke it in the first place.”

“Suit yourself. I guess you don’t want to know all of my secrets” replied Alice.

“Fine, fine but only for a little bit then — I want you out of here. You understand me” said the Wiz-

ard.

“Yes,” said Alice. “I won’t disappoint you, I promise. But we have to act quickly I’ve got to get home,
my mom is making her famous dish spaghetti with meatballs.”

“Deal,” they both said with a smile on their faces. They went on working for a while. They lost track
of time. After a lot of hard work, they finally finished putting the machine back together.

Alice said, “May I ask what the machine is and what it is used for?”
Harmon said, “Come back tomorrow at around five o’clock and I will tell you everything about it. But you better get home or else your mother is gonna get worried. And you are not going to get any spaghetti with meatballs. But you have to promise me one thing, you can’t tell anyone about this or I will get into big trouble and maybe lose my candy forest.”

“Deal,” said Alice. And she went on home. But what Alice didn’t know was that the candy forest wasn’t like any ordinary place. Every minute that passed was a year outside the forest. Alice kept on walking and knew where her house was but just couldn’t quite find it. She looked and looked. She started to get scared until she finally found it. It was all old and dusty but it was the house. Alice wondered what happened to the house since it was in perfect condition that morning. But she couldn’t quite figure it out. Alice didn’t know if she should go into the house or not, because of the condition of it. But she did it anyway. She opened the door and it creaked. She took a big step in hoping she wouldn’t fall through the old floor. Once inside Alice was a little relieved that the floor held her weight.

“Hello, anyone there?” No one answered. She started walking down the hall, so many things swirled threw her head. “Is this the right house? Where is my mom?”

A picture in the hall hanging on the wall caught her eye. The picture had writing on it. It said “Abigail Jones. Died in 1960 in a car crash.”

A tear went down Alice’s face. “Mom?” Alice said in a soft confused voice. Alice wondered how this could have happened. The picture said on it “Died in 1960 in a car crash.” But Alice saw her mother that morning before going to school. So how could her mother have died in 1960? Alice started to cry. She walked along the sidewalks and went door to door ringing doorbells but no one answered. She was about to give up when it hit her. “I was in the candy forest for an hour. And there are sixty minutes in an hour. And it said my mother died sixty years ago then every minute in the candy forest is a year in the real world.” Alice cried again. She didn’t know what to do. So she decided to go back to the place she knew best. The place she went to every day. The place that always cheered her up. The library. As she walked towards the library she stopped at every stop sign, even though there were no cars, no people, no bikes, no one. Until she got to the library. She walked inside and no one was in there either. Alice yelled, “Is anyone here.” No one answered then she felt a tingly feeling. Like there were people right next to her. But Alice couldn’t see anyone.
Then Alice heard a soft voice say her name “Alice, Alice.”

Alice jumped with great fright. “Who is it? Who’s there?”

“It’s me, Miss Wimpleton,” Alice saw Miss Wimpleton. She was a bright yet dark blue ghost. She started to talk before Alice could begin asking any questions. “I’ve watched you every day Alice. You care for these books. You treat them just like people. Just the way you would want people to treat you. You know I was a little girl just like you when my librarian gave me the same present I am about to give you.” Miss Wimpleton put a key in Alice’s hand.

“What is this?” asked Alice.

“The key to the library. It’s all yours. You know Alice, I was once the same little girl just like you. I used to always treat the books like they were all my friends. And I found the candy forest just like you did. Now it’s your turn to own the library and keep it safe. And when you get old like me you will find that little special girl who you will then pass that key to just like I did ” said Miss Wimpleton trying not to burst into tears. “I know you will find that lucky girl and I know you will do a great job with the library” she added. Before Alice could say thank you she disappeared into thin air. She was gone. And so Alice’s journey began.

Isabella Nunziata, 13
Hillsborough Middle School
Somerset County
7th Grade
Ella

I knew there was something odd about this house from the minute I stepped foot in it. I looked around—paintings of different little girls in black and white were plastered around the house. The silence was two hands pressing against my ears, making me aware of any little noise. Then there was a creak upstairs. I was the only one who lived here.

I slowly walked upstairs — not knowing what would come ahead of me; one foot at a time, I went up the stair as it creaked with my every step. Each line of wood — hand-carved beautifully — contrasted to the dark presence in the house. The darkness was a cloak, shielding me from any possible light.

There was a face floating in the dark. I turned my flashlight on to see what or who it was. As I looked down, my nerves calmed down. It was just some old doll sitting on the floor. I held the doll softly and placed it in my room. My tension was focused on its face, smiling widely as I turned the lights on. There was an ominous presence in the room. I skipped along to the living room of my house, waiting for the old owner. The face of the old doll came to my mind. The slightly tilted face, its bright red lips, and most importantly, its eyes, staring into my soul.

The doll. That thing somehow made me remember my past. The constant fighting. The hurt. The guilt, and those stormy nights on the road. That night 10 years ago when my twin sister Ella and I got hit by something… or someone. A sudden banging on the door woke me up from my daze. The realtor was here. I greeted her and walked her inside, negotiating the prices and the logistics of this house. We had some coffee and discussed everything we needed to. It was then that we heard the strange noise — the crashing of glass coming from upstairs. I jumped in my seat, not knowing what was upstairs or who could’ve done that. The realtor didn’t seem surprised. Curious to see what it was, we ran upstairs. I looked around the room. There was a large vase shattered all over the ground, spreading under the bed and the window. That was the moment I realized something. This was the room I put that doll in.

“It's usual of her to do this; don’t worry. When I found that thing in the attic a couple of years ago I didn’t know what I was going to get myself into. That’s why I sold the house! You bought it because you didn’t have a problem with her. Ella, that’s her name—by the way, I found it on the shirt,” the realtor told me, even though she looked right past me. She never mentioned it -- her. I hesitated, but didn’t say anything; the
deal was already made and there was nothing I could do. That binding signature tied my wrists together and
didn’t let me escape. I was forced to live here. The realtor broke the silence when she said, “Some spirit or
something must’ve gone into that doll. I contacted the supernatural experts and asked them what it was and
apparently, a 7-year-old girl was hit by a speeding car in a storm a long time ago.” The realtor took her be-
longings and went to survey each room, unconcerned about what would happen to me that night.

I slept like a normal person would even though the realtor was still in the house. But the constant
racket of the doll in the next room bothered me. A sudden slam of the door woke me up from my bed. My
chest felt empty as I walked forward into the next room to see what was going on. There was a dead body.
Right there. On the bed. It was the realtor. I saw the doll right in front of her — with a knife. I started run-
ning — sprinting away from the house. The cold wind choked me as I was gasping for more air. The doll,
somehow, was in the forest behind my house. The eyes of the doll stared at me — through my soul — like she
already knew who I was. I ran to the gun shed to pick a weapon up to kill that malevolent doll once and
for all.

My feet squished in the mud as small drops of rain started falling. I was not sure why I couldn’t feel
the rain. I went back to the area behind my house where the doll stood. I pulled the gun out and pulled the
trigger, as the round bullet went through the doll, releasing the tense feeling around me. Blood started ap-
pearing on her chest, and I was not sure how, but the only possible way blood would have come out of a doll
was if there was a soul in there. And it was finally gone.

There was a shooting pain in my chest after I shot the doll. It felt like sharp knives were carved into
my chest. I looked down at myself, and something was way different. I looked at my hand, my chest, my feet,
and my shoulders. The rain was pouring now, but it was going through me. Through me. I couldn’t believe it.
Hurting the doll somehow hurt me, or awoke something that I never knew about myself. I could now put my
hand through myself. I was a ghost. The only way that would be possible is if the other person I was with
when we got hurt was my twin sister because when she got hurt I did too. And my sister Ella and I were 7
years old when we were hit by the car. I constantly heard that she was dead,

Samarth Ramaswamy, 14
Hillsborough Middle School
Somerset County
8th Grade
She aggressively rubbed the large coffee splatters on her lavender blouse in desperate attempt to get rid of them. Instead of melting away, they just dried darker. She groaned. Her eyelids were being pulled down as if boulders were hanging from the tips of her eyelashes, which she could now see as her eyes shut. She shook herself awake wishing she hadn't spilled the one coffee she could afford this month on her only neat shirt. What kind of luck had she been dealt? No money — to earn she needed a job — to get a job she needed an interview — for her interview she needed a present mind and a clean shirt. Neither of which she could afford at the moment; physically or mentally. She begged for any motivation, the only thing which could possibly make her apply any fruitful effort, but nothing ever made her want to try; not even her life. There was only one thing left to do in her mind on such a terrible day, just sleep. Sleep allowed her to dream, to leave her worthless existence.

Her walk home was as always. She heard wolf whistles and cheers from the animals watching her as if she was in a zoo. Though the place was dank and smelt like smoke, escape into her small apartment felt amazing. Her roommate was crashed on the couch white powder scattered like dandruff all over the floor. Though it was not the best, she got to stay and eat for free as long as she let her roommate live as she pleased. But today the tiny apartment seemed more hazardous than normal. Papers from her desk were torn and arranged all over the floor, broken glass lay a booby trap blocking her way, and strangest of all chalices sat on her creaky wooden dinner table. It was filled with a viscous, red liquid and floating in the sap was a pen drive. A tiny Post-it note also sat soggy in the substance. She pulled it out, the liquid staining her fingertips. In order not to rip it, she dried it first before carefully unraveling it. It was crinkled and in a handwriting which almost looked like that of a kindergartner. It read “I would suggest you don't watch, but then again some people like death ;).”

She placed the note down on the table, now marked with red freckles. She once again dove her hand into the cup and pulled out the USB. She never felt this restless before. Her prayer for motivation was finally answered but she wished it had not, as now her mind was focused on nothing but the contents of that mysterious drive.

She ran to the sink and splashed her face with water to wake her up from the delirium. She held
herself back as she knew if she indulged the interest, it would bring her no good. She feared almost nothing before, but now she did: the consequence of opening the secret that the USB held. She felt as if there was a woodpecker pecking at her restive mind. She swayed unable to resist the pull of her curiosity. Her footsteps quickened as she paced around her apartment trying to avoid the shards of glass left on the floor due to her improper sweeping. The frequency and strength of her steps must have left dents in the floor.

Hour after hour her pain grew stronger. She could hear her heart. Its thud, and thud, louder, and louder. She drove her hands through her hair ripping many strands out. She felt shivers rush down her spine and violently shake. She peered into a mirror and saw not herself, but a girl going mad. She drew her fingers to her lips and gnawed off her nails and even the skin surrounding them. They bled. It didn't matter to her. She smeared the blood onto her already ruined blouse and pulled it down in frustration ripping the neckline. She let out a ghoulissh scream. Hot tears with red from burst veins in her eyes ran down her golden skin eating away at her makeup. Her roommate awoke to the noise, shaking her head and sniffling unclearly. Not thinking as she should, she grabbed the chalice and flung it at her roommate who might not have even felt it through the high. It left a gash in her forehead as she collapsed to the floor. She had had enough torture. The USB sung to her, a melody which used her speeding heartbeat as percussion. Unable to torture herself any longer, she flung open her laptop quickly enough to shatter the screen if she had not caught it. She wiped off the drive on a thin strip of fabric, the only evidence that she was in fact wearing a shirt. She ripped off the cap protecting it and plugged the drive in. She laughed almost maniacally now that her urge was satisfied.

Her screen crackled and made a faint popping noise before displaying footage. It seemed to be security footage, but from where and of whom? It started at a hospital in an infantry wing. Then led to a crib. Then to a daycare. A 6th birthday and finally a talent show. The song that was playing sounded eerily familiar. Her heart sped again. Her arms began to sway, she knew the choreography. Still unable to piece things together, she kept watching, her eyes attached to the screen unable to see anything around her. The footage showed many seemingly useless scenes such as a family dining and a graduation of someone who she seemed to vaguely know but could not recognize. Everything looked familiar but not real. She then saw the face of a man, he approached the girl. A beautiful girl with golden skin. She loved him, and he loved her. Until it seemed he didn't. She left him for the bruises that he left on her, and jumped driven mad by the pain he
caused. Everything made sense sequentially — but the clip right after. Footage of a girl in a coffee shop, but from a distance. She couldn't tell who it was so she pulled up her broken glasses and held them up to her face. And then she saw her. Herself. And everything flashed before her. Her memory suppressed had returned.
The footage now showed her, sitting at the table, broken as she was. But it ran just 10 seconds faster than her real life. She heard a sudden crack behind her so she jerked her head around the other way taking her eyes off of the film for the first time. From the audio of the computer came a gut wrenching scream. It was her own.

Komal Sarma, 13
Hillsborough Middle School
Somerset County
8th Grade

Artwork:
Jordan Kirkland, 15
Bound Brook High School
10th Grade
**A Holiday Nightmare**

Oh hello. I didn’t see you there. Well many people don’t know this and I assume you don’t either, but every ten years Santa takes a break from delivering gifts. In the early ages of his existence, he delivered gifts every year. But the stress of Christmas started to catch up with him so he decided to take years off. But he couldn’t let Christmas disappear altogether so he turned to his closest and only friend… Jack Frost. He told Frost his dilemma and inquired if he could deliver the gifts. Frost told Mr. Claus he would and with that, a new idea occurred. “This Christmas is directed by me,” Frost thought to parade around his ice cave. “But how I loathe Christmas. If only I could find a way to destroy it every year.” He was resolute on destroying Christmas so he used his magic to build up a specimen that would ruin Christmas for all. He called it Krampus.

Christmas time is my favorite time of year… or at least it was. About a year ago, I saw something truly scary - something that scared me to my very core. It was Christmas Eve and I was dancing to some music. I felt the vibrations flow through the floor. This was my favorite music to dance to. It was an upbeat tune that I felt in my body. It wasn’t hard to find myself stuck in the music. I never knew what that night would turn into. Glass shattered as reindeer sprang into the room. A grim smile emerged from each of their faces. Blood dripped from their sharp teeth. Their fur was dirty and dingy, and their eyes glowed red. A reindeer rubbed its claw against our carpet before lifting its head up to howl. The other creatures sprinted towards my family and stabbed them with their antlers. Blood shot out of my aunt’s stomach as organs started to fall out. Her guts spilled onto the floor and were strewn across it. The reindeer continued to stab her. Her face pleaded as she slowly fell to the floor. Two smaller figures emerged from the shadows pulling a red sled into our room. A whip crashed against each one of their backs until they finally fell to the floor. The reins slacked onto the ground and I fell to the floor in fear.

Two large boots fell to the ground and smashed the organs of my dead aunt. Gold buckles fell over the tops of the black boots. Blood stained the boots as they slowly started walking over to me. The boots banged against the floor one after another. They finally came to a halt. My hands shaking—my heart pounding—my breathing became heavier and heavier. I slowly peered up at the unknown figure. The red velvet pants taunted me as they rocked back and forth with each blow of air. I slid back on the floor—the boots followed.
My heart raced faster and faster and I panted like a dog. Like a dog who was just beat. I whimpered—but I held back my tears. I subtly shifted my gaze up again. A black buckle, the same as the boot, draped across a large torso. Red silky pants were still in my view and they taunted me more. I trembled with fear—I felt at any moment I could convulse on the ground. But I didn’t. I never did—I never even wanted to. I looked up one more time and saw something that bewildered me. A pale face with a white beard. His teeth were sharper than daggers and his eyes glowed death black. His face wrinkled and his nose was large. A smile revealed blood dripping from his teeth. His ears were crooked and his eyelids were flipped. The pink flesh of his eye made my skin crawl. He leaned down—too close to me—way too close. I felt his breath on my face and could taste the drool coming down from his mouth. He reached into his back pocket of his ripped pants before finally pulling out a red sack. He punched me in the face and shoved me into the sack.

I woke only seeing black. I realized that I was still in the sack. I reached up to climb out, but there was no hole. I couldn’t climb out of the bag! I looked all around trying to find a hole but I couldn’t. I panicked more and more as I stayed in the bag longer and longer. I struggled and wiggled around to see if I could strike anything sharp enough to release me. I wiggled and wiggled until I felt a sharp stab. I realized that I had a glass shard in my pocket from when this demon broke in. I cut open the bag just enough to stick my hand through. I opened it fully and saw that I was flying through the air. But not just me—other kids were there too. I looked ahead to see the demon flying the sleigh and dropping gifts. But not just any gifts, these gifts were peculiar. They were exploding. I crept forward just enough to see the controls of the machine and where I could reach them. I held my breath and reached forward for a red circle. My finger felt the cold metal until a hand grabbed me. He turned around and started talking. But I could only see his mouth move but not hear him… because I was deaf.

The cold clammy hand grabbed me and twisted my skin. The pain rushed through my veins. I screamed in agony but could not hear myself. He pushed me back and I hit my head on the hard metal. I landed face down and could not see anything. That would have been a good time to hear what was coming. The pain slowly abated. He turned around and gave me a grim smile. His skin began to look like wax and his hand began to melt. He threw a couple more gifts down to houses and laughed at each one exploding. The sun began to rise and an orange sky was pictured around me. Still holding onto the controls, he leaned closer and closer to me.
His skin touching mine—his breath in time with my own. I leaned back in disgust but was pulled closer, closer, closer. He smiled and a scorpion ran across his teeth. A blue vein popped out from beside his mouth and his cheeks began to rise. His smile grew wider and wider. I moved my eyes quickly to look around for a way out, but there was none. I started breathing heavier and heavier. My eyes flushed with fear. He leaned in closer and reached for something in his bag. He put a hearing aid on my ear and then whispered in my ear, “I’m Krampus.”

He melted more and more until he turned into liquid and disappeared. The sleigh plummeted down faster and faster to the ground until it finally hit. I lifted my head one last time until I blacked out forever.

From the mind of what could have been still living James Hasty

Written by: Krampus

Evan Vadola, 14
Hillsborough Middle School
Somerset County
8th Grade
She has been walking for hours. Her feet are starting to bleed. But she can’t stop moving. She can’t let him find her again. The forest betrays her. At first, it had been a comfort. It had embraced her, soothed her, washed away her sorrows and her fears. The iridescent fronds and leaflets wiped the tears from her porcelain cheeks. It gave her strength.

Now, they choke her.

The storm envelops her in its tenebrous embrace, smothering her in a curtain of icy rain, obstructing her ability to breathe with unrelenting gales of frigid wind. She does not stop. Her fright has inspired her to flee, and flee she does, running so fast that her bare feet only skim the miry, marshy ground.

The indigo sky of midnight is blocked out by a canopy of green. Each shard of luminescence from the full moon is a dagger. It cuts into her, stabbing her, slicing her, puncturing her. It leaves her vulnerable. Each twisted bough, each knotted branch, each blossoming bud suddenly seems hostile and cruel.

It occurs to her, at that moment that she is completely, utterly alone.

Her heartbeat pounds like a bird trapped in a cage, trying its best to break free of its bonds. Every step becomes increasingly painful. As she runs, all sense of time and direction is lost. She could have been running for mere seconds, or many hours. Branches lash out at her furiously, attempting to ensnare her in their rutted boughs. Like the gnarled hands of an old man, they clutch for her, striking her face and winding themselves into the strands of her sodden hair as if they never want to let her go.

Tears mingle with raindrops as they trace icy trails down her cheeks, intertwining and making it impossible to justify one from another. The fear — the fear which before had been so blinding and eminent in her head — has turned into a dull pounding that grows dimmer with each heavy step, overtaken by exhaustion.

Only one thought registers in her mind...

Don’t stop running.

She does not even notice the conclusion of the torrential downpour until the sight of watery sunlight filtering through the treetops rouses her and brings her to her senses. For nearly twelve hours she has been plodding along, following nothing but her instincts at each sharp turn or newly appearing path.
The only thing she allows herself to stop and revel in is the fact that finally, finally, the man who called himself her father is no longer following her. She is safe, at least for a moment. As the day wears on, she begins to let her guard down. Hunger is an animal, gnawing away at her insides. Exhaustion is like a toddler crying for attention. She tries to ignore it, to push it aside, yet it keeps coming back to her, stronger and more demanding than before.

Finally, when the sun is high in the sky, signaling late afternoon, the need to stop is greater than her need to continue trekking on. Finding a comfortable patch of moss and smooth dirt underneath the outstretched arms of an oak tree, she curls up and closes her eyes, only, she plans, for a moment.

After all, nothing bad can happen in a moment.

She blinks herself awake to find that she is surrounded by complete darkness. Not even the stars can be seen in the hazy night sky, and the world is cast in shadow. Rubbing her shoulder blade, which is tender from her sleeping position, she peers around trying to regain her bearings.

Everything seems at peace.

She almost goes back to sleep.

Almost.

There is a slight luminescence in the air… quite dim, but concerning none the less.

It comes from behind her.

Slowly, slowly like a deer in headlights, she twists around to face the tree.

For a moment, she sits entirely still, feeling each detail of the sight being etched into her brain. Horror is a noose, choking her to death. A shudder racks her body. A silent scream stretches across her face.

“Mira.” The leer beneath the two bright, glassy orbs grows larger. “Mira.” The moon is ripped from behind a cloud. “Mira.” The knife is a beacon, gleaming in the blackness.

“Mira.”

Nothing bad can happen in a moment.

Skyla Vera, 13
Hillsborough Middle School
Somerset County
8th Grade
True Sight

I see
A vision that has come to life,
Seeds blossoming into a wondrous garden.

I see
A life full of opportunity,
A world full of hope.

I see
A smile on bright eyed faces,
Drops of rain caressing every leaf.

I see
A lost soul
Finding the birds

I see
A fire,
That never eradicated.
Sparks that keep igniting

I see
A rope,
Strong enough to hold a heavy heart.

I see
A mirror

I see
A girl

I see
A soul

I see
Trouble

I see
Pain

I see
emptiness

I see
An army

I see
Passion

I see
Hope

I see
An ocean

I see
Love

I see
Me.

Isabella Volpe, 13
Hillsborough Middle School
Somerset County
8th Grade
When Darkness Poisoned the Moon

She watched as the moon rose from the horizon, ascending further and further into the air. The sun submerged deep into the skyline, and the stratosphere was now stained with a deep blue tint. Clusters of stars blossomed around the moon, encircling the beaming planet as if it were a silver halo. Adora watched in awe at the sight, strangely finding solace in the peaceful atmosphere. It was an evanescent sensation though. She longed to let the stars slip between her slender fingers like sand, or to feel the moon rest in the palms of her hands. However, the girl was nothing but a spirit that was meant to walk this Earth with others such as herself. Hopelessly, she stared at the ominous face of the moon, before returning inside. Curiosity flooded through her mind like a vast tidal wave.

“Mother, is it possible to live among the stars and the moon?” Adora inquired, as she approached the woman who raised her.

“It is very much so,” her mother answered with a morose tone, “though you must capitulate to the spirits of darkness. Of course, we locked them away in an enchanted box so no one will be harmed.”

Adora nodded her head in acknowledgement, feeling quite doleful as those words sunk in. She desired nothing more than to wander the unknown regions of outer space. But at the same time, she wished to stay grounded. Adora’s choice was final; she must not let such a foolish idea infect her mind ever again. That night, the girl drifted off into a dreamless sleep, where the moon’s lunar surface stared down at her.

Daybreak had awoken peacefully. The sun adorned the lush grasslands and the homes of the spirits with a twinkling radiance. As the light crept into Adora’s bedroom, it caressed her fair skin sweetly, as if it were signaling to wake her up. Proven to be successful, her eyelids fluttered open in with ease. With fatigue still latching onto her, she trudged her way downstairs to face the rest of her family.

“Come closer…” a peculiar yet soothing tone whispered from a distance. Adora tilted her head in confusion, as it was not the voice of her mother’s. She deduced that it was all in her head, before she heard it slither into her ear once more. It was as if she was put under a spell, and the vulnerable girl with jet black hair found herself following the voice. Adora slowly sauntered into her mother’s bedroom, and that was where the voice grew louder than ever before. There, she spotted an exquisitely carved box. It was the most magnificent object she had ever laid eyes on, as gold accents were laced around the finely carved edges. Why would Adora’s
mother keep such a divine item from her? Her fingertips grazed the smooth surface, as she contemplated whether she should open it. The voice coming from inside kept on instigating to do so. Without thinking, she opened the lid. That’s when ear piercing screeches were thrust out of the box and into the room. Black matter released itself, swirling rapidly. Adora pressed her hands against her ears, desperate to drown out the agonizing shrieks. The dark mist danced its way out of the window, roaming the Earth. Within the blink of an eye, the sky plunged into a sea of nothing but darkness. The moon emerged from the horizon. Adora rushed to the window, watching in horror as the sable substance swallowed the moon. The whole world went dark. Feeling guilt seep through her veins, Adora wept and wept. It was only then that she realized what she did. She released the evil spirits, allowing them to poison the moon with its aura. It seemed that all hope had slipped from her grasp, until it hit her. She knew what she had to do.

Adora climbed to the highest peak of the hill, looking up at the starless sky. She knew that she had to sacrifice herself to the spirits in order to bring the beloved moon back. The girl knelt down on the grass, feeling utterly defeated. It felt like forever that she waited for the evil spirits to come and collect her. Before long, the black particles surrounded her, piercing into her skin. A scream of utter agony ripped through the night, as her body laced itself in the sharp edges of pain. It gave out within a matter of seconds, her skin breaking into tiny fragments. Every inch of Adora turned into nothing but dust. She now lived among the stars and the moon, fighting the evil spirits that held the majestic planet hostage. From the Earth, it seems as though the moon has been cut up into quarters. Other nights it looks as if it were a whole again. That is because Adora fended the vengeful spirits off. But she knew that they would return stronger than before, and that her life was now an endless cycle of constantly battling with those unforgiving demons. She knew that because of her selfish actions that the moon would never return to its once full state.

Nadia Zydiak, 14
Hillsborough Middle School
Somerset County
8th Grade
The World Today

Our world is a reality that people do not accept. Trying to change the world’s aspect. Hiding the fact that we are in trouble. Like it will all pop as a bubble. And we think that’s okay, right?

Forgetting that we have so many problems going on. Fixing it with money. It’s not even funny. Changing the beauty mother nature made. And we think that’s okay, right?

Destroying all the happiness around us. Acting as if there aren't people living in poverty. Is this the world's quality? Making all types of wars. And we think that's okay, right?

Treating people differently because they are different. Adding unnecessary things to the world, not knowing of its effects. The lack of education that kids get. This world isn't just a big bet. And we think that's okay, right?

Polluting the ocean. We need more devotion. Shortening the animal’s lifespan. Is this the world’s plan? And we think that’s okay, right?

What if we changed that? Let there be a bigger impact. Put down that handgun. We can be united as one. This is how it should be done.

Think about all the kids. Outside having fun. Put the bad aside. No need for guns. This is how it should be done.

Let those smiles run for miles.
Let's show the world we don't need perfect styles.
  Laugh like there are no worries.
  Laugh like it will cure the diseases.
  This is how it should be done.

  Let there be happiness.
You are allowed to feel like champions.
  Think and show positive.
  Even if you should stay anonymous.
  This is how it should be done.

  Let's appreciate everything.
It's best to find what's within.
  Feel free to sing how you feel.
  It's not a big deal.
  This is how it should be done.

This is our world today.

Kristie Alvarado, 14
Manville High School
Somerset County
9th Grade
Behind the Mask

A girl in a world where society lives behind a mask, never showing their true face. For this girl, her mask has a drawn-on smiley face. She laughs and acts as if she is happy, but behind the mask she cries and cries until there are no more tears to let out. The reason why she never shows what is behind the mask is because she is scared. Scared that she will be judged by the people around her, especially her parents. Instead, she tells her teachers, and they send her to the guidance office. Until one day she couldn’t take it anymore, telling her guidance counselor, “I’m tired of all this pretending, I’m tired of lying for all these years.”

She had finally taken off her metaphorical mask, showing her skinny, horrific face, with big puffy eyes; indications that she had not been eating, but crying.

“I just want to end it all. I know that if I just take that… that final step off that ledge my problems wouldn’t follow me, right?” she asked.

Her guidance had pitied her, and made her go home. Arriving at her safe place, she had taken off the mask yet again, and her parents saw the horror on her face. She explained everything, and they were angry at the fact that she had not taken off the mask in front of them. They understood her pain, though, as they were once her age.

Taking the leap to get help, led to making new friends, as well. Her frown had dissipated and revealed a smile, indicating that she no longer needed the mask. The girl who masked her soul, has now become the girl that found confidence in herself and others.

Emely Batista, 14
Manville High School
Somerset County
9th Grade
How does it feel to be consumed by the pitch dark night and never seeing the illuminating sun ever again? Often I’m left with these thoughts that leave me feeling restless. Whenever I ask these questions to my friends they would have laughed as if it were some joke. This left a sour feeling in my mouth. Why? I don't know but it just does. But what is the answer? “June you think too much” or “Stop saying such depressing things”, these were the responses I got. I don't quite get why they are very depressing. I just think these questions can have an infinite number of answers and all of them are right, honestly I wanted to listen to these answers. I'm a highschool senior who didn't know what they wanted to do with their life. Unlike most of my peers I didn't have my whole life planned out. Most of my friends said they want to leave the small “suffocating” town, I just nodded but couldn’t smile. I didn’t necessarily want to leave and get right into college. I felt like so much change would have been too much for me to handle. But everything is changing, the backgrounds and landscapes, and even though I stay still and everything only seems a little familiar in my hometown. I don’t necessarily hate it here but neither do I love it; we have a complex relationship. No I did not want to live halfway across the word either, I would miss my mom and dog Tofu too much. I once took a trip far away from my town and it made me miss home. But what part of home did I miss? At times when alone I always have my mom by my side who comforts me and supports any decision I make. I also have the moon, ever since I was young I would always recall admiring the moon especially when my mother sang me to sleep as a kid and it was shining almost as bright as the sun which made everything feel, just right. I reminisced about these feelings I hadn't felt in the longest time ever, trying to decide my future was nerve racking. I did have although I did have some possible options like like being an astronomer, singer, doctor, and a teacher. All of my options have their benefits and disadvantages but there was no clear answer which one I should take. Of course my guidance counselor, friends, and teachers told me which ones I should consider and throw away but how could they know what was the right answer, they really didn’t, neither did I.

Stumped and not knowing what to decide, I just let time pass by until I had to make a decision. Sometimes I would have experienced a wave of emotions. I would be angry and frustrated then lonely and depressed because there was no right answer. At times when I was angry I would vent my anger towards the moon as it
stood watching over me but never give me a direct answer. At the time I would say I love you and I hate you towards the moon as if they were the same words. It felt like we were born to be sad and suffer to be glad. On days I was lonely I would recall the word mono meaning one, this is how I would feel. My mother would often tell me it’s okay to shed the tears but don’t tear yourself. I agreed with her I shouldn’t have left something so insignificant affected me so much, but I did and it’s okay. I learned from my past mistakes and fixed them and now know for the future how to carry out certain tasks. I chose my college and decided my future, now I realize I made the right choice and wouldn’t have changed it for the world.

Esmeralda Baltazar-Escamilla, 15
Manville High School
Somerset County
10th Grade

Artwork:
Madison-Tommi Kaitlyn Ponce, 13
Alexander Batcho Intermediate School
7th Grade
The Middle

We are three sisters
One older, one younger, and one in the middle.
The middle can be fun
Like the middle of an oreo
Or like the middle of a tray of brownies.
The middle can also stink
Like the middle seat of a car
Or the middle of a 600 page book.
But I love the middle
The middle between my two best friends.

Magaret Colucci, 15
Manville High School
Somerset County
10th Grade
Thank You

The humble words, Thank You.
Have been lost in our midst.
Lost in time.
And space.

We live in a pessimistic world.
Full of political opinions.
Full of negative diversity.
Full of atrocious people.
Full of hate.

H- Hell
A- Around
T- The
E- Earth
It’s riveting.
It’s a disgrace.

In this society, fire represents normality.
Options:
Weapons.
Bombs.

And of course.
Landing an Academy Award.
For best realistic film.
War.
May we not recall our past.
Don’t repeat history.
Because if we are,
What are we doing?

Blood of the innocent.
Children
Women
Men
Runs down our
Claw-like.
Blue-veined.
Hands.

A young, powerful person.
Once said:
Peace begins with a smile.
We can all make this place.
A good place.
One step at a time.
Help the ones in need.
Help those you love.
Hand in hand.
We can become.
One.
Happy.
World.

And when others help you.
Don’t forget.
To say, Thank You.
That Was My Life

I style my hair so it looks like nothing.
I apply my makeup like I'm Kylie Jenner.
I slip on my latest, checkered Vans.
People think my life is so perfect.
They don't get what's really happening.

Everyday I try to wear the greatest thing that I have,
but my closet is the size of a toy chest.
I try to fit in with the “popular girls,”
but everyday I get made fun of anyway.

I am the girl who is yelling, but on the inside, I am in the corner.
The girl who keeps quiet, when there is something wrong.
The girl who always has something to say,
but is afraid of what people will think of her,
even though her friends say it’s “ok.”

When I look at you, I see a perfect human being.
You have the laugh, smile, personality, looks,
like every perfect human being.

But yet, when I look in the mirror, I see the opposite.
I see a hole burning up inside of me, that will never get smaller.
I see someone who is trapped in the web of what other people think.
I see someone who is afraid of the word “no.”

You think you have it so easy, don’t you?
Imagine going home to someone who hurts you - bang!
Imagine going home to someone who forgets you - poof!
Pay the rent, give me money.
Wash the dishes, do the laundry.

Stop!
This is not what I wanted.
I am tired of feeling like I am living to fulfill your will.
I don't want to feel like trash anymore.
I am a better person than this.
This character is not who I am; she's a part I play.

You call me fat, but I'm light as a feather.
You say my chest is as small as blueberries.
You say I waddle like a penguin.
You call me ugly.

But, I am as pretty as a flower.
Who, you will never see bloom.
I'm like a mouse in a herd of sheep.
Nobody notices me; that's nothing I'm not used to.
I want to feel like I am something.
I want to feel pretty.
I want to feel confident in who I am.

You tell me just breath.
In - Out - In - Out.
You tell me I’m overreacting.
You tell me it’s fine.

What I hear is different.
I hear: You aren’t perfect.
  You will never find someone.
  You will forever be alone.

Why do we have to be judged on everything we do?
Why can't they tell the truth?
Every single girl is perfect.
You are you, and never change that.

This is my life.
The only way it can change is you.
Make it stop: I am talking to you.
Yes you: behind the computer screen.
  running around.
  who just stands by and watches.

Take it from me.
From us.
We are one.
This was our life.

Kamryn Conover, 14
&
Jayla Wojtach, 14
Manville High School
Somerset County
9th Grade
Tuesday, March 22, 1785

Today was the same routine, like every other day. I woke up ready to go hunting with the rest of the men in the village. It wasn’t anything huge, just a couple of waterbucks to feed the village for the remaining week. Five of our men went to go and catch some fish, as a side to the meal. We headed back to the village and gave the waterbuck to the women, so they could prepare it for the feast. I decided to go to the farm and check on the crops. Some monkeys and bats got into the crops during the night, so it was a mess. That same night we were visited by a wandering man with stories to tell, in exchange for food. We gladly said “yes,” and gave him some waterbuck and bonga fish. He ate and began to tell his stories, as we gathered by the fire with our food. He told of white men on boats with strange clothes and weapons then we could ever imagine, setting up camp near the village. He referred to them as “ghosts” as well as the gruesome killing and capturing they had done to people. I wasn’t scared because it was only a story, but it did send shivers down my spine, especially, when I turned and saw smoke trailing up to the sky not far from us. After that, the man left and we went back to our houses to rest. I still think about that story, what if it is real?

Sincerely,

Babatunde

Wednesday, March 23, 1785

I woke up to screams coming from outside, sensing the fear coming from my people. These screams haunted me, as I walked outside to see white men on horses with some very unusual and advanced weapons, taking my people while leaving some dead. One of them grabbed and pushed me to the floor yelling, but I could not understand him. We then were put in a line to leave our village, and follow the white men. It was a very strange, frightening experience for myself and any of my people who might be harmed or killed. We kept walking, not knowing where we were headed, but didn’t try to say anything. Some tried to flee and escape, but were quickly stopped, beatened, then killed. We were barely fed, and left in the cold at
night. Many of us died on the voyage, the rest of us were barely living, yet not living. This was hell, and I could not continue. Hungry and tired, we finally reached our destination, which was a village by the coast, with ships the size of giant buildings, huge farms, and places for us to stay. While staying here, I saw many things that are way too gruesome for me to put into words. I pray that others do not have to experience this type of cruelty, and hope that someone finds us, yet warns other people to stay away from the white man.

Sincerely,

Babatunde

Wednesday, July 20, 1785

From what I have experienced, this is a cruel and dark situation that I would not wish for my enemies. I have seen many horrific scenes that should never become a reality. We pray that God would hear us, and to stop this cruelty, but we never get the response we want. Although drastic, many of the men and women choose to leave this place with a method I wish not to say. Many mornings we would wake to see a lifeless figure that we once knew, and eventually had no effect on us. Seeing our own die before us, by their own hand, felt surreal. We should not be subjected to this, as we should be equal. To take us, and use us for their own benefit, is wrong. We are too familiar with witnessing people die violently by the white man; none of us spared. Children are not treated differently than adults, as it didn't matter in the eyes of the white man. Treated like property not living beings, we are looked at as non-humans. To the white man we were property, and nothing more. On the farm we were whipped for anything, with cuts all over our hands, tired and overworked, sweaty by the beating sun hitting our skin. Scars were not only on our bodies, yet in our minds. The lighter skin was lucky; working in-house, catering to the family, and treated differently. We, though, would be beaten for anything done incorrectly with bruises on our bodies. Many of our group were not here permanently, often sold to other masters. Missing my family and the will to live, I am not the same man as before. I am beginning to lose hope and thinking that there is only one way out of this place.

On Sunday, August 7, 1785, Babatunde was nowhere to be found. His figure was found across the plantation, connected to a nearby tree, moving from the vigorously blowing wind; a day ruined with the death of a good man by their own hands. A caring person who kept his head held high and motivated others
to do the same, Babatunde was a true idol, who was loved by many dead, yet showed that even the strongest and toughest would eventually fall.

Jeremie Espinoza, 15
Manville High School
Somerset County
9th Grade

Artwork:
Jazz Kavr, 16
Bound Brook High School
11th Grade
**Why Does Society**

Decide  
Why does society decide what you wear in the morning?  
Why does society decide who you like, or who you should date?  
Why does society decide what kind of brand is fashionable?  
You don’t have to date every person your friends think you’d look cute with.  
What you wear is your decision.

Believe  
Why does society believe that the only pretty girls are the ones who follow recent trends?  
Why does society believe that fake girls are the cool ones?  
Why does society believe that a jersey or jacket represents who you are?  
It’s ok to not follow the recent trends.  
It’s ok to be true to the people you love.  
It’s ok if you are or aren’t an athlete.

Choose  
Why does society choose?  
Why does society choose who the geeks and teacher’s pets are?  
Why does society choose if you are smart or not?  
Why does society choose if you are good enough to be given the popular stereotype?  
It’s ok to be seen as a geek or teacher’s pet.  
And if you are considered popular, that’s ok too.

Are you going to let society choose your life?  
It’s as if you were a puppet, controlled every day according to what is popular at the moment.  
But it’s not what society thinks that matters.  
You can be considered an underdog, but someday be rewarded because of your past.  
Don’t believe common opinions.  
They are not the ones who choose.  
Take control of your life.  
You're perfect!  
Do not let anybody tell you otherwise.

Isabella Guzman, 15  
Manville High School  
Somerset County  
9th Grade
I Am

I am born.
With a telescope in my eye, watching every move you make.
Learning where I come from and where I am supposed to go.
I see and hear everything, like the satellites out in space I have no filter, I have no place because,
I was just born.

I am now a toddler.
I know a little more now, and I don’t cry as much as I used to. I’m a big girl now.
Stuffing things in my face, bumping into things, living life with no place in society because,
I am just a toddler.

I am now a kid.
I have started school, but the kids are really mean.
I told my Mommy, the next day, she said, “That’s how kids will be.”
In a few years, they start hitting me.

The punches filled with pain.
Look! The bruises are just forming; is this normal or am I going insane.
Then I remember what Mommy said, “That’s how kids will be.”
So I just leave it alone, I have no place in society because,
I am just a kid.

I am now a teen getting stronger by the day; I have friends now, I am fine.
I’m getting cuter, by the way.
Did I mention I am popular? I was the queen of the prom.
This is a secret, but I have a boyfriend that’s like, really strong.
I think I have a place in society but,
I am just a teen.

I have now graduated from high school, I mean.
I’ve got my diploma, and college is where I want to be.
But my family has grown bitter since my father passed away.
I must stay and help out because that’s the Harrison way.

They say blood is thicker than water,
so I guess I’ll have to be the blood in my family’s beating veins.
Do I have a place in society?

I saw her today.
That bully from grade school, when she saw me she erupted in joyful screams.
She was like hot tea, it’s way too good to spit out so you just let your tongue burn.
She was like a volcano covered in flowers, on the outside she was beautiful,
but the memories she recalled, were lava oozing over her kind exterior.
The words she spewed cut me deep and left a scar.
I never told her how much she hurt me.
We became friends, forgive and forget, right?
I’m still not sure if I have a place in society.
I am old.
It’s been years since my college days.
Doubling over the fun times in my years of youth,
weeping over the missed opportunities,
wondering why I didn’t open my mouth and say what I thought.

I have aged like fine wine, and I get better as time goes on.
I know I have been stupid and done some crazy things.
Looking back on those times, baptized in wisdom I see.
Chances passed have made me who I am, and I wouldn’t trade that for the world.
The journeys we take mold us like a piece of clay into sculptures that will one day be seen and paid.

This is for the people, who don’t believe they can make it through their journey in one piece.
This is for the people, that think the trials and tribulations they have been through,
will tear them down piece by piece, bit by bit, and make them into dust.
This for the people that hit rock bottom.

They say once you hit rock bottom there’s no way to go except up.
Don’t stop, as the places that you have been will build you up and make you strong,
pick yourself up and dry your tears.
Put all your eggs in one basket and face your fears.

You will have a place in society; you won’t be alone.
You won’t search for validation in other people.
You’ll be a king or queen sitting on your throne.
How do I know this for sure?
Because I am old, but I am here.

Sanaia Harrison, 15
Manville High School
Somerset County
9th Grade
Artwork:
Giselle Monge, 13
Hillsborough Middle School
8th Grade
Artwork:
Liam O’Reilly, 16
Bound Brook High School
11th Grade
More Than the Whole Galaxy

When a star is born, other stars may fade away, or some abide by the rules of waiting. Some last for a mere second, while others follow behind. Was it delivered at the right time? Too soon? Too late? Will it lead to an extravagant burst of stars later on in the galaxy? Or simply burn out? This new star obtains the wavy strands, tangled around a finger in one single stroke. The mask, a perfect complexion. The long spider legs protruding from the windows of the soul; so loving and kind. The lips, the brim of sweetness, elegant to the touch and unmistakable taste, only to be forgotten by a fool. The body, so beautiful in it’s natural, untouched state. The rumble of the throat strings in the tired hours of the night. The scent, so fresh and powerful, lingers in the air and on the fingers of the lucky star brave enough to touch it. The newly born star needs light and energy to grow. One lucky star somewhere in the universe can provide it. While it may take many light years to shine through, the stars connect. They become one. They share the energy and light. They revel in it together. The energy is so strong, and the light so bright, they rise above every other pair of stars. They share trust, compasion, respect; each ingredient imperative for one single recipe: love. The stars fall in this love each night they wake, shining light for the whole universe to see. The earth never compares to the mesh of blue and green inside the eyes of the newly born star. The small stars never shine as bright. The moons could never stay long enough. The planets could never align so perfectly, like their love. The universes, charted or undiscovered, could never begin to stretch as far as the hearts of the two stars. The stars are known, but hide the true identity of their love. It is unshareable. It flows in little sparks on the tail of the wind and the tip of a wave. It spreads light and kindness, and drifts into the future, now sprinkled with hope and a dream come true; the dust of a pixie. Therefore, awaiting the arrival of time. The true love of these stars hits as strong as a meteor, every day. The unspoken truth, only the newly born star knows, is of the lucky star, who loves him more than all of the beautiful earth they gaze upon, all of the stars brightening the night sky, all of the planets, each holding a secret of space, and all of the undiscovered universes, combined.

Kayla Knape, 15
Manville High School
Somerset County
10th Grade
Day-Dreaming

In the meadows, Meadow walked.
She did not speak,
instead, she thought.
But what did she think of when she walked?

Not the birds,
or the trees,
or the flowers galore.
Thinking of that made her very bored.

Instead, she thought of a life,
not of her own.
Instead in a beach house, all alone.

The sun all day and the sun so bright,
the smell of wood-burning at night.
The waves crashing on the sandy floor,
oh what a sight to see.

She thought of a land,
with animals and bees.
Swinging on a swing,
feeling a cool breeze.

She thought of a rainy day,
staying inside.
Warm by the fireplace.
Oh what a time!

But what good was dreaming,
if her real world was quite different?
So she sat in the meadow and slept.

When she had awoken,
it was quite a dream.
It was such a site,
she had never seen.

A city of skyscrapers.
But only she was there,
a lonely city.
She fell asleep in the meadow, she’d swear.

Ruth Norman, 15
Manville High School
Somerset County
9th Grade
Just A Girl

"Beverley. Open your eyes."

The voice was soft and gentle, like the coo of a dove. It was so trusting, that my eyes opened to reveal a beautiful blue sky. I rose up, surrounded by a divine and lavish green forest. The warm wind pushed against my skin and I could hear a siren’s voice. It was so heavenly that I followed it into the luscious forest. Many butterflies came and gave me kisses on my cheek. It felt so amazing, but tickled me a little bit. The voice lingered more forward, to where it was barely a whisper.

"Wait!" I yelled out, as I attempted to follow the voice. The siren gradually grew louder, as I ran deeper into the wood. I saw more trees, and the sound of the wind whipping on them was so loud, that the voice stopped completely. I felt so lost, until I spotted a bright golden flower. I could smell it from afar and it was so fresh. The appearance of the flower was utterly and undeniably beautiful. It seduced me toward it and I was so under the spell, that I was tempted to pick it from the grass. I did exactly that, but then, something out of the ordinary happened. The plant wilted as soon as I picked it from its grass and roots, as if born to it. Harsh winds blew in my face, not warm and comforting as it was earlier. It was cold, deathly. The wind was so intense, it picked me up from the ground and waved me around like a child with a toy. I heard another voice, but it was deep and cruel, not soothing as the sirens’ was. It sent chills down my spine and spread throughout my whole body like a disease.

"You are impure," the deep voice started, "You have committed an atrocious Sin; you took the Forbidden Flower. This is the outcome of your sin."

Like a camera, the winds showed me the death of the earth, everything now withered and wilted. The grass was like hay, the trees as thin sticks, animals lay lifeless on the decayed ground. The sky is no longer blue, but grey with black ashes in the atmosphere. The air was filled with radiation from unnatural chemicals and had me feeling breathless.

"Yes, Beverley, this is the consequence of your mistake as others before you, and after you."

I was almost speechless and the only word I could muster up to shout was, "NO!"

A tear rolled down my check and the wind caught it so delicately. The wind put me down onto the hay-like grass and faced me. From there, the wind transformed into something that had me bursting into
tears; Mother Nature. Her hair was dry and tangled, hiding her shriveled skin. She was severely bony and malnourished. It was almost as if she was an actual flower. She needed water, and because water was extinct, she could not cleanse herself. And it resulted in who she was now. I cried so exaggeristically, and couldn’t stand to look at her. So much damage done to her, and yet no one gives a care. It was so upsetting to see her so damaged and hurt.

“My name is Naturae,” she started, “I was beautiful once, now look at me. Wasting away until there’s nothing left but ashes. I was so sad by the way others treated me. Those results crept up to me and hurt me not only physically, but mentally. I eventually gave into the sorrow and despair. I’m decaying much faster now, as you very well know. But I know you don’t care.”

All I could do was look at her, still crying and heartbroken.

“No, I do care. Please, what can I do to help? I mean, how can I stop humanity from killing you?” I asked, in between sobs. She cupped my face with her cold, dry hands, and studied and hugged me. She was so gentle and vulnerable when she hugged me. Her embrace felt so comforting, but at the same time, I could feel her infection sinking in. Out of the blue, I could feel something. Something was surging into me. Naturae just collapsed.

“No, no no no no no. Wake up, please. I don’t know what to do! Please tell me what I need to do!” I yelled, as I tried reviving her.

She whispered with her final dying breath, “Cleanse me,” before vanishing into the air. I was confused and frightened.

“No, I’m just a girl, I can’t do this!”

I punched the ground angrily, only to see that my touch brought a section of the grass come to life. At that moment, I knew what I had to do. She trusted me with her powers and wanted me to avenge her. Avenge Mother Nature. And do that, I shall
Studying

Coffee shops are generally quiet, calm, and inviting places to be. They smell nice and are usually inhabited with people getting work done, chatting quietly with friends or strangers, or those quickly running in and out on errands. Most high school students, such as myself, use coffee shops as an aesthetic and fun place to meet with a study buddy and hope to get work done. Personally, I really enjoy grabbing a delicious cup of coffee and hanging out at such a wonderful place by myself. Getting homework finished and books studied is always a drag, but using them as an excuse to show up to the cute little shop just to observe can be quite fun. However, there was one day that I had been in that little shop that really stood out to me.

I arrived at the coffee shop directly after school and actually focused on my work for a good three hours, and I took a break around 5 'o'clock. I sat back in the tall seat I was sitting in and subtly took a look around. There definitely was not as many people there as when I had arrived. Across the room in the corner, facing sideways, was one of the most gorgeous people I have ever laid eyes on. It seemed to be a boy around my age, which made me excited. He wore a black beanie over his curly brown hair with a grey sweatshirt and black track pants. Noticing I was blushing, I turned around quickly; I began staring out the window into the dark winter sky. Slowly turning around and picking up my book so I seemed focused, I glanced over at the computer he was opening after he placed his novel on the table. I watched him open a new document, and then he began to type.

The title was the first thing he typed, which was ‘This World’. Intrigued, I couldn’t help but want to know what he was going to write about. He made the page double spaced, cracked his knuckles, hunched over, and began rapidly typing.

“This world is filled with wonders in which I will always admire; the snow is one of them. When it begins to flurry and then blizzard, it makes me feel happy.” I smiled at how cute his writing style was, but out of the corner of my eye out the window, I couldn’t help but notice it began to flurry. My jaw dropped, however my mind told me it could be a coincidence. Yet, moments later, the snow began to come down even faster and harder. I looked back over at the boy’s screen and realized he typed more.

“Find the things that make you happy. I find mine in everything around me. The flower that bears the
snow, the snowdrop, is one of the many wonders in the world. The beautiful birds that still sing for us in the frigid conditions, and the quiet of a winter's night are some of my favorites to think of when I want to be happy again.” I comprehended that this boy was trying to express his feelings through writing, and it made me think of how much may be going on in his life. Being happy all the time definitely is not possible, but his story seems to be an attempt to get someone to realize what makes them truly happy. He had continued to write.

“Trying to be happy and being happy are two different things. You cannot force happiness, you must gain it. Winter is my favorite season, it makes me the most joyful and warm inside than anything else; except for the most gorgeous girl I’ve ever seen, she makes me the most ecstatic, merry, pleasant, and joyous out of anything in this world.” Upon his big finish in his narrative, I whipped around to look around the shop; it was completely empty. I then peered out the window to see if anything had occurred. Indeed, the new things he had written appeared. Snowdrops had bloomed between the cracks of the sidewalks, vividly colored unknown birds were gracefully soaring through the winter night making beautiful music, and the street was empty; the people strolling the sidewalks had vanished and there wasn’t a car in sight. The winter sky had dazzling constellations looking down on Earth. There was a steady and calm snow coming down, and the only lights displaying this gorgeous scene were the stars, the moon, and vintage streetlights. The one thing missing from the scene was the girl he had hastily described. Gently, I began to turn back around to face the boy. He was already looking at my crimson face with a soft smile. We made eye contact and that’s when I knew, I had finally found what makes me happy.
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