

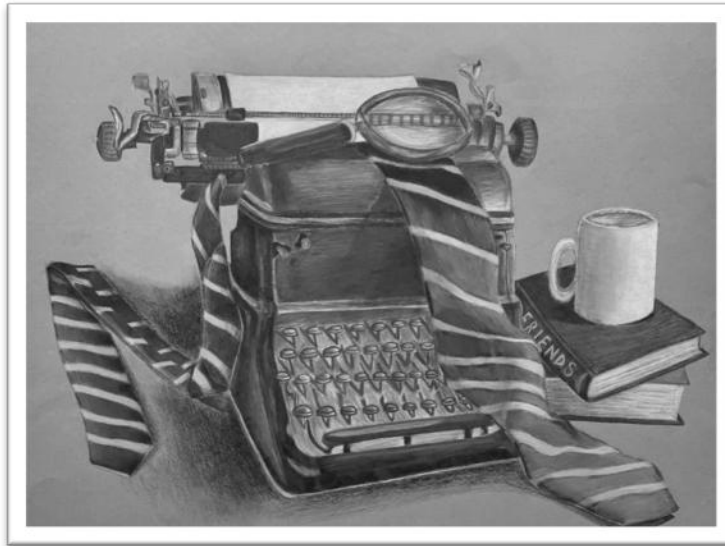
The Muse



MAYA QUINTERO | Grade 8

GulliverPrep
UNPARALLELED

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MAYA QUINTERO | Grade 8 | Beaux Arts Finalist

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Selections are labeled to indicate students who received special recognition at the Miami-Dade County Youth Fair's Creative Writing Competition and the 21st Annual Beaux Arts Student Artist Showcase.

**Gulliver Prep • Marian C. Krutulis PK-8 Campus
12595 Red Road • Coral Gables, FL 33156**

Mimosa Tree

Fast-growing, deciduous tree
Spreading habit and delicate
Beautiful wispy green leaves
Seeds in Grandma's wrinkly soft hands
A memory from home

-Larissa Rebessi, Grade 5

Spinning in a Skirt

Spinning in a skirt
Keeping it clean
In the air they spin
Rising in the air
Turning and twisting
Seeing different patterns

-Xaviera Awad, Grade 5

Sadness in the Blade

as i walk in the door
i stare at the floor
i strongly dislike the
barber shop

sadness and stress
my haircut's a mess
the distress
now i confess
i don't enjoy
the barber shop

tapeline
shattering
my brain is scattering
my haircut is unflattering
my confidence is spattering

dying
trying not to cry
my tape is not aligned
no girls
will be eyeing
my new haircut
that is why
i strongly dislike the barber shop

-Omari Watson, Grade 6



MATTHEW BAHNIUK | Grade 8

Up, Up, and Away!

The view from the top of the world,
A breathtaking ride in a hot air balloon
The sight of the glowing sun,
A scorching fireball in between the luminous clouds
The chirping birds soaring through the skies

Below the floating clouds,
Lies the crystal-clear ocean of tranquility
As the emerald seaweed floats under the waves
Sea life swims through the shimmering blue sea

The vivid balloon levitating in midair
As the burner goes up in flames above my head
An uproarious noise that keeps on going
Until it fades away
The patches of growing green down on the ground

As the crisp chilly breeze pulls my wavy brown hair back
Droplets of water crashing against my face
As other balloons float in the distance
The clouds fly above my head

The balloon floats up slowly into the mistiness of the sky
Will it ever hit the ground?
And just then the hot air balloon had flown like the wind
Up, up, and away

-Emma Harari, Grade 6
Blue Ribbon

Forever

My beloved Wewo
Now up in the sky
Used to light up my day
With his tales of Vikings and knights

My memories hurt me
They sting like a jellyfish
Sadness and tears blurring my mind

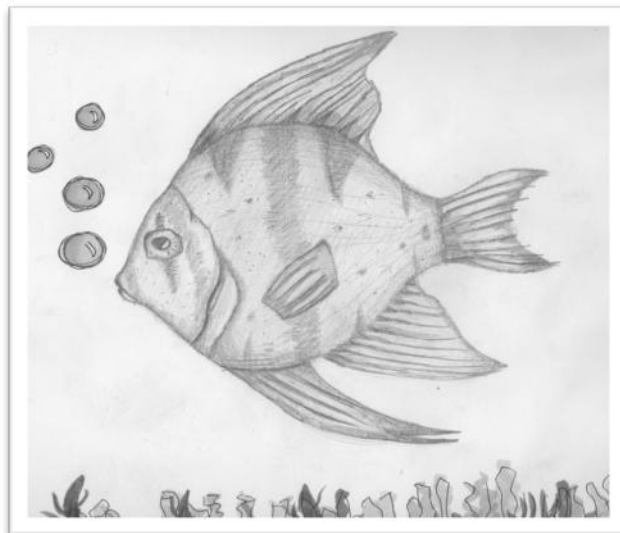
I was his most handsome
He was my hero
He was my knight in shining armor
We loved each other very much

The tears in my eyes
Make me miss him so much
My love for him
Would go very far

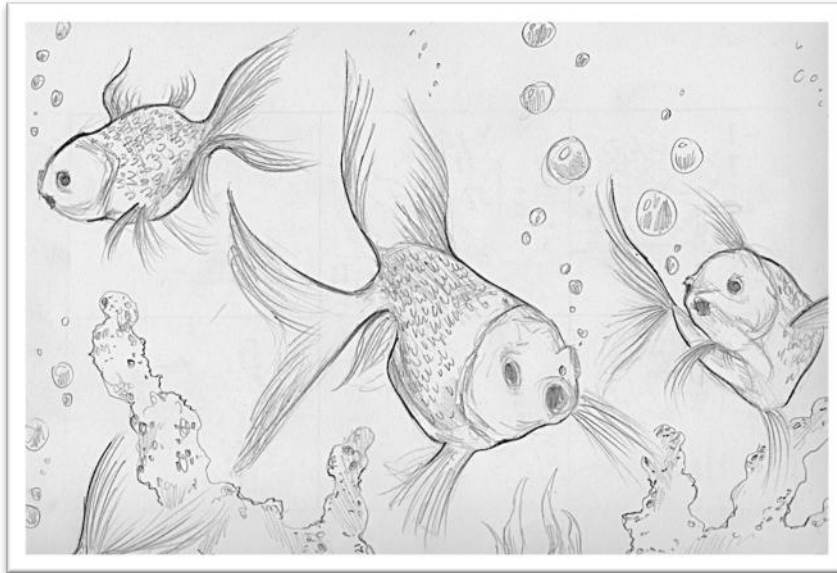
I would fly to Mars
Walk the world and back
Do thousands of push ups
Just to get him back

Although he is in the sky
That doesn't mean he isn't here
He lives in my memories
Forever

-Sebastian Taylor, Grade 6
Blue Ribbon



PAVLINA ESCOBEDO | Grade 7



TAMARA SANTOYO GEIJO | Grade 8

The View

I gazed out on the lucent ocean;
The seaway was glistening like an abundance of
diamonds floating on the surface of the water;
It was almost like my brain was visualizing the
high sea's speaking to me making clinking sounds.
The bright sun was deflecting against the smooth
silky water.
It was like the ocean was alive.

-Jesse Kaplan, Grade 6

A Blind Time

Growing up in my time and age
Feels like living in a social cage.
I feel controlled like a puppet's strung
The media is telling me what to like
Which makes my head start to ring.
I wish for the future all that would change
So that kids can be kids again,
Does that sound strange?

-Maya Welle, Grade 6

The Beach

Look up
The sun caresses your face.
In a sea of blue
Seagulls drift elegantly
The clouds, fluffier than a marshmallow.

Take off your sandals
You feel the soft talc powder sand
Your toes, slowly sinking in
Being wrapped
By a warm, powder blanket.

The ocean, so clear and blue
Almost like glass
The seafoam waves meet the sand
And gradually clash.
Seashells emerge from under.

-Isabela Solorzano, Grade 6
Blue Ribbon

I Usually Don't Wear My Hair Down

I went to my mom's hair salon
Already feeling like an adult
I had an idea in my mind
I showed my hairdresser the hair I desired.

I sat down in my chair
He didn't have to pump up the chair to make it
higher...
Like my old salon did!

massaged my head
washed my hair
Smooth water warm on my head
Soon so hot that it almost felt cold

I felt special...
Superior...
stylish...
Like all eyes were on me.

He brushed my hair
I didn't feel the hairbrush...
bristles glide through my hair
Like rain running down rooftops

He cut my hair.
chop!
chop!
chop!

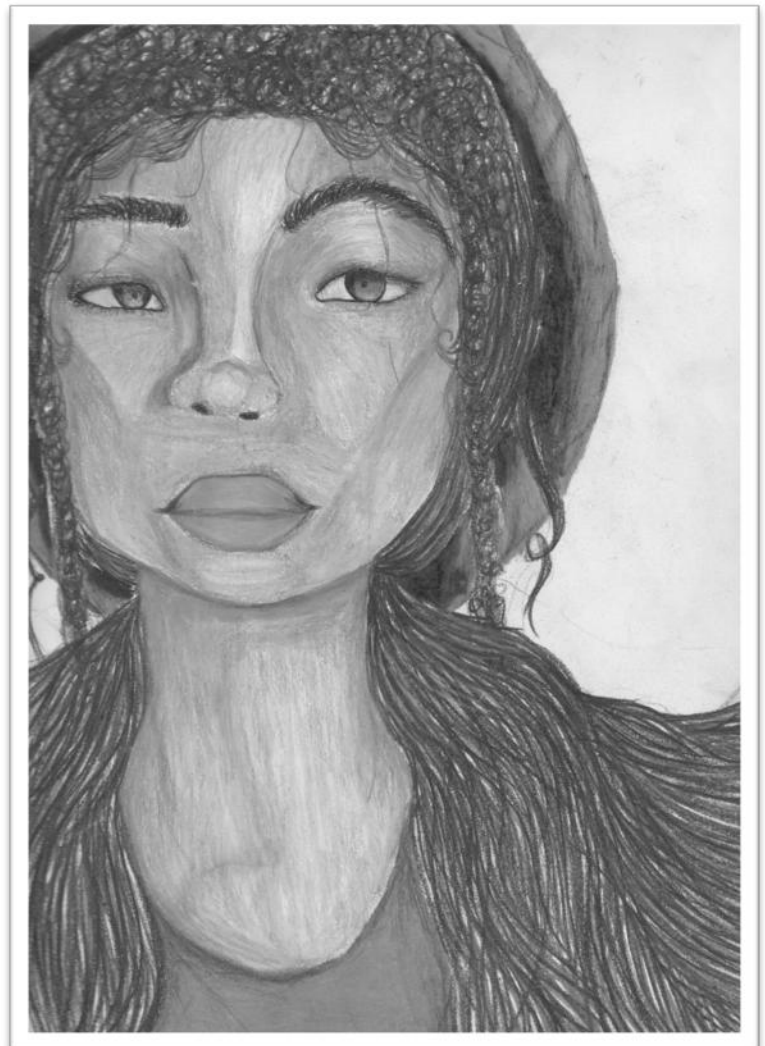
He blow-dried my hair
it twisted and twirled
Danced and jumped
As the warm air flowed in from behind me

It felt as if it had been a million years when he
finished.
He styled my hair as if he had done it a million
times before
My curtain bangs like silk curtains of a castle
Everyone at school would notice.

As I left the salon
I felt beautiful.
Fresh.
New.

I usually don't wear my hair down
Now I will,
forever.

-Chiara Maal, Grade 6
Blue Ribbon



ANTONELLA AGUERO | Grade 8

Darkness in the World

There is darkness in this world
no matter
how much we try
to stop it.

There is darkness in this world
even if
we protest
about it.

There is darkness in this world
even if
we bring justice
to it.

But, there is hope to this world.
We just need
to turn on
the light.

-Elvira Disotuar, Grade 6



EVAN WEINSTEIN | Grade 6

The Light

I see the glass
I see the blood
I see the fire
I see the light

The light to escape
The light that keeps me alive
The light that keeps me fighting
The light that I can barely see at times

But I never let that light go
I kept it alive as much as possible
Most of the time the light was dim
But when the doors of freedom opened
The light was as bright as the sun

-Tomas Lazcano, Grade 6

Flames Make Me Run

All the flames make me run
My hometown is burned
In frightening streets, I end up
As I get shifted into the unknown

Isolated from the world
Me and my bare head all by myself
Exposed to the cold ice as it blows strongly

Nothing left for me, not even hope
I am just

Homeless...
Hopeless...
Hairless...

And I have nowhere to go

-Lucia Lopresti, Grade 6

Nothingness

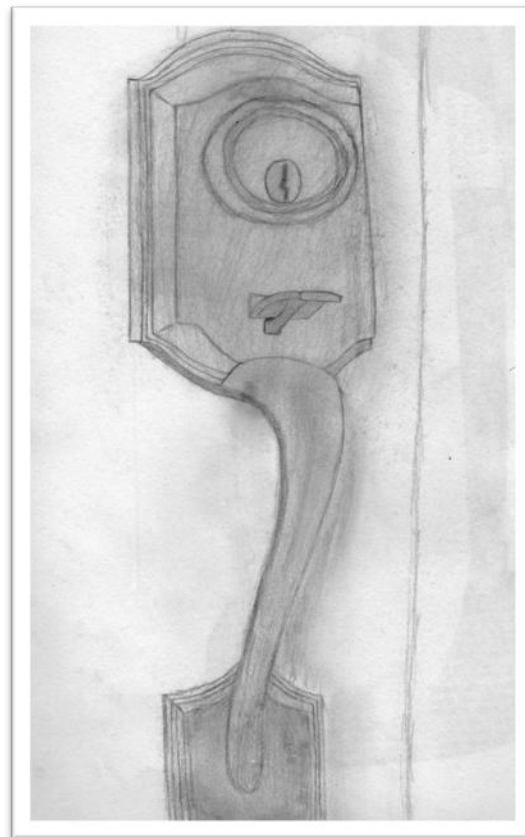
Have you ever had to write,
but nothing to write about?
Then comes that feeling,
that terrible, terrible feeling
Then you start to dig
deeper and deeper into the ground
Only to find nothing,
nothing at all
Then you start to fall,
the world encased in darkness
A never-ending loop
of falling into pure nothingness
Then the world starts
racing to you
You fall flat on your face
as the idea stabs you in the back
Then, the nothing becomes a something
as you write, and write, and write...

-Orlando Bowers, Grade 6

Stadium Home Run

Walk onto the field
Get ready,
Get ready,
Crowd cheering!
Whistling from the crowd moves steadily in the wind
Step up to the plate...
Excited, Confident
Pitcher winds up...
Whoosh!
Strike one!
Here comes the pitch...
It's going, it's going,
It's gone!
Home Run!
Stunning strike on the ball
Significant move down the baseline
That type of feeling...
That drives you forward
Crowd cheers!
Proud teammates glow
CONFIDENCE!

-Porter Kraszewski, Grade 6



AVA TIGERTAIL-CYPRESS | Grade 8

Lockdown

Still stuck inside,
Almost no sunlight,
Only screens,
I feel like it's devouring
From the inside out.

No friends,
No family.

I'm like brick and cement
Stuck
I can't get out.
Stuck.
I feel alone,
Stuck
Like the only one in the world.
Is there a way out?

-Christopher Molinari, Grade 6

Sunset

An ocean filled with calmness.
Sun, a descending gem,
a jewel not to be missed.
A gleaming pearl,
received by ocean, her familiar friend.
May it rain,
may it shine,
an event she never fails.
A cozy welcome to every night.
Waves coming and going,
waving their sun goodnight.
Rays of fading light run their fingers through the sand,
as she and her rays welcome the moon.
Thanking her lucky stars,
as she admires the beauty of it all.

-Manuela Salazar, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon

The Freedom We Need

running for your **Life**,
Nowhere to hide,
Freedom is what we year for,
Yet we shall not receive,
We are...
Homeless
Hopeless
Helpless

captured like slaves,
burning flames,
nowhere to hide,

as we walk in...
stares greet us,
trapped in **prison**,
caged like animals,

no way out...

new prisoners join the old,
somehow hope has gained,
from the once hopeless family,
finally retrieved freedom.

-Tamsin Colton, Grade 6

The Tool of Battle

The sound I make is movement,
My player grips me tightly.
The air flows through my strings
As I glide, elegantly.

I strike the ball
It clears the net,
It lands just right
It feels so good.

I get examined.
My strings are straightened, like the soft caress of a baby's touch.
I feel renewed,
Ready to repeat

I often wonder whether she could win without me.
I often wonder if she thinks of me at night - when she sleeps.
I hope I'm not
Just a tool of battle.

-Mika Ringel, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon

Real Meaning of Life

There is no definition of life as it is,
It is different for everyone and everything. The definition is up to you.

For me, life is a book,
We each write our own,
No matter what genre or theme it is giving us.

All you need is a pen and a paper, Once the ink starts to write,
It's the beginning of something great.

As we go deeper into our story we discover new things,
We never know what happens next. We need to gather more paper.

The paper represents our years of age, The pen represents our lifeline,
Once the ink is all out,

So are we.

-Nora Henein, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon



MAYA WELLE | Grade 6

Sound of Silence

Spring sings in a series of voices
a bumble bee buzz or a bird's beak,
plattering rain at a peaceful pace,
or the sound of singing, so to speak.

From the flutter out of flapping wings,
to the dewed lids of the daffodils.
From the creamy color coated clouds,
to the humped and harmonious hills.

But hears the accent I adore most:
the polite silence; no bickering.
The accordance lacking all the boast.
No rowdy clamor, just whispering.

-Anna Isabel Meyer, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon

Insecurities

She can see her reflection in me,
As she covers her face in makeup,
Everything is perfect,
It is all corrected,
Her face is shiny,
She sings a beautiful harmony,
Her hair is curly,
She looks all girly,
She has a smile in her face,
As she opens the door with grace,
She suddenly feels right...

But not like last night.

She cried all night, again,
I know it for a fact because the pillow
told me everything she said that night,
The boy didn't say hi,
The friend doesn't care,
She got a bad grade,
She's anxious and stressed,
Her mom doesn't care,
Her dad is away,
Her sister doesn't talk to her anymore,
Her brother is too busy to talk,
After she cries to the pillow she comes to me,
the mirror,
She starts to cry again,
Says she hates herself,
Her attitude,
Her face,
Her body,
And her legs,
I never meant to make her cry,
I try to make her confident,
But she just cries.

After that she goes to the closet,
Tries to pick an outfit she might like,
But she says to the closet,
"I have no clothes,"
"He'll never like this,"
"This makes me look fat,"
And so it goes,
Until she finds the same old baggy shirt and pants.

But then she comes back to me
into the bathroom and shuts the door,
Then everything changes.

She covers her face in makeup,
No more red dots no more tears,
I see it all change,
I see it all drift.

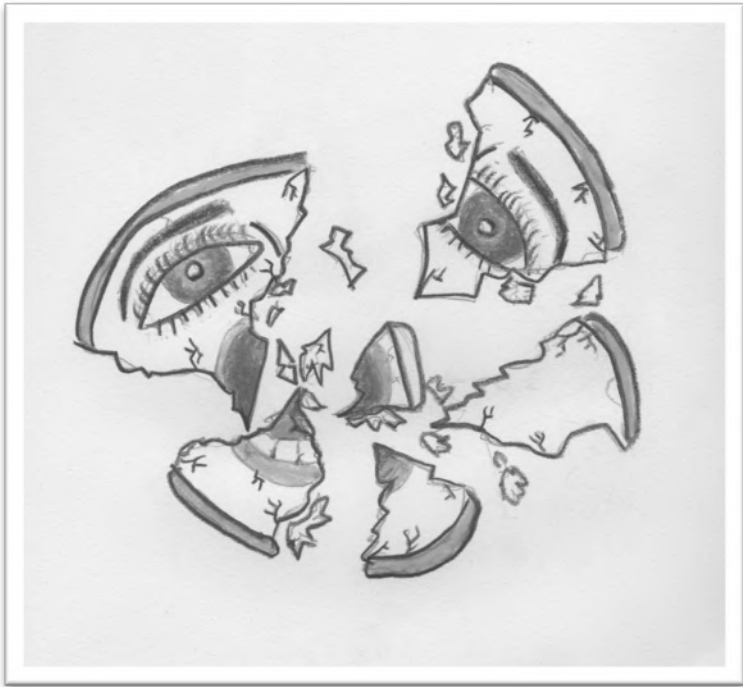
She goes out of the bathroom,
A changed person,
A new girl,
A secure girl,
A confident girl,
Everyone outside is astonished,
Everyone is amused,
By the new girl standing right in front of them,
As if she were a muse,

The pillow thinks she is her twin sister,
The closet thinks she is a witch that turns
into a princess,
The doors say she has two faces,

But only I know the truth,

She is the same girl,
Every day is the same,
She feels great about herself in the day,
But at night she cries,
And screams so loud,
She fakes that beautiful smile,
And deep down she just wants to be
the girl she's at day,
The happy,
Confident,
Beautiful girl,
Day and night,
Night and day,
The outside changes,
The inside remains the same.

-Paola Malpica Alcala, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon



EVAN WEINSTEIN | Grade 6

Water

The vivid glow of the ocean water in the night sky
captures my wide eye.
As the sand ruffles into the swiftness of the sea,
embracing the currents.

Wave after wave,
the breaks of foam wash ashore.
Whiffs of saltiness and bitterness.

I am drawn to the sea
and its salty spray,
Sound bellows deep
my thoughts preserve.

Far beyond the coast.
From the sea,
I was born,
and for the sea,
I will perish.

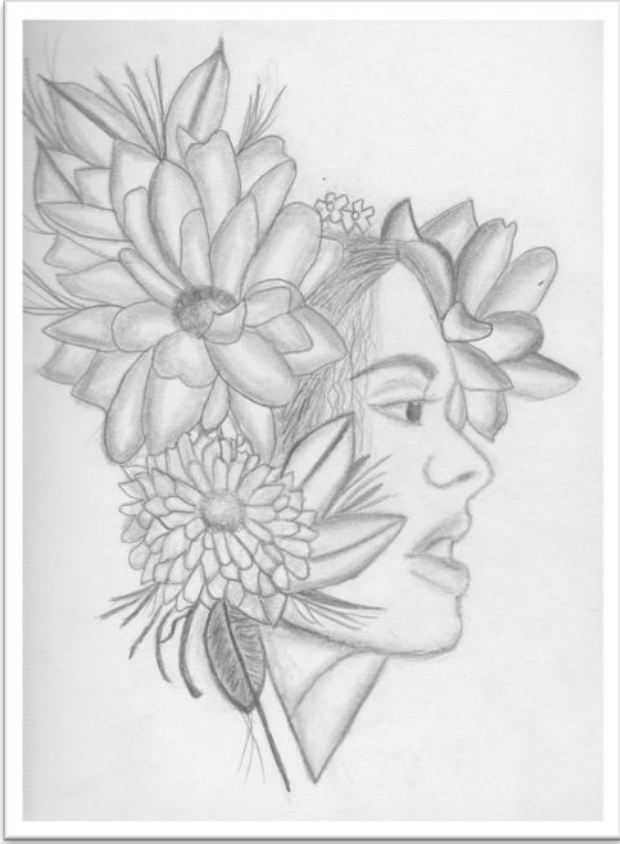
-Stella Balestrazzi, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon

Guilt

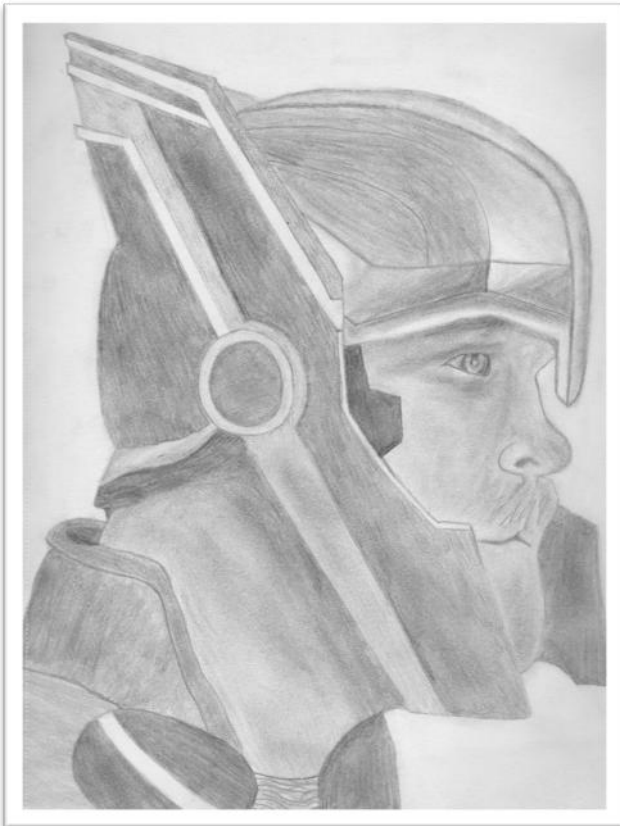
That feeling
Running through my veins
The words that tumbled out of my lips
Recalling my white lies,
just like rain
Drop by drop
How good of a liar I have become
Lying just for fun
Without thinking,
Without trying.

I don't know the pain of lying,
Until I'm lying in bed,
With my hand over my mouth,
Begging myself to not make a single noise
And the memories of me
and my mother
Laughing
all gone.
A shiver gracefully dancing
To your shoulder
to just watch it hit your heart.
That hearing of a pen clicking and foot tapping
Coming back to you just from words
You really didn't mean.
My head, my heart, her smile,
You feel like you broke it
And you know,
It's all your fault.

-Chiara Wagner Ingletto, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon



MAYA WELLE | Grade 6



MAYA WELLE | Grade 6

Polar Opposites

She is a ray of sunshine,
the type of person
you'd only look forward to seeing.
Never would she have a bad day
or bad conversation
with someone
She is everyone's dream
A friend,
the person you could rely on.

He is a ray of moonlight,
a mischievous and untrustworthy boy
---who nobody liked.
Always would his days or conversations
end in terror and extreme misfortune.
He is nobody's friend or companion,
and everyone's nemesis.

They are polar opposites,
ones you'd never expect to see together.
Never have they been seen,
but always have they been related.
Their sibling bond ties them
till their days end in happiness or terror.
They are the best companions
either of them could ever have.
They are the sun and the moon,
they are brother and sister.

-Alexa Shaham, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon

Life

Life is like a prison
Cold, dark nights
Voices screaming
People crying
Everyone, is a stranger
You sit in a world full of dark thoughts
Never being able to escape them
Cold, dark, icy thoughts.
Everyone will always be in a freezing
world of their own emotions
Some happy, but most horrible, evil
thoughts
Everyone gets wicked looks, fingers
pointing
People laughing
Blame is killing, guilt is crushing.

-Theodore Linhares, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon

The Rosebud

There in the garden, a rosebud stands still
So peaceful and lonely unlike the roses on the hill
She's so pretty and small, but full of sharp thorns
But she remains a small rosebud, while other roses form

She's as delicate as silence, but as pretty as dawn,
As she dances in the wind, out on the lawn
She basks in the sunlight and drowns in the rain
And at night looks at the moon as it waxes and wanes

She's had so many missed chances of becoming a rose
But she just can't do it, and her true self never shows
One day she'll find the courage, I assume
And the little, puny rosebud will one day bloom

-Matthew Toledo, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon

Marvelous Beach

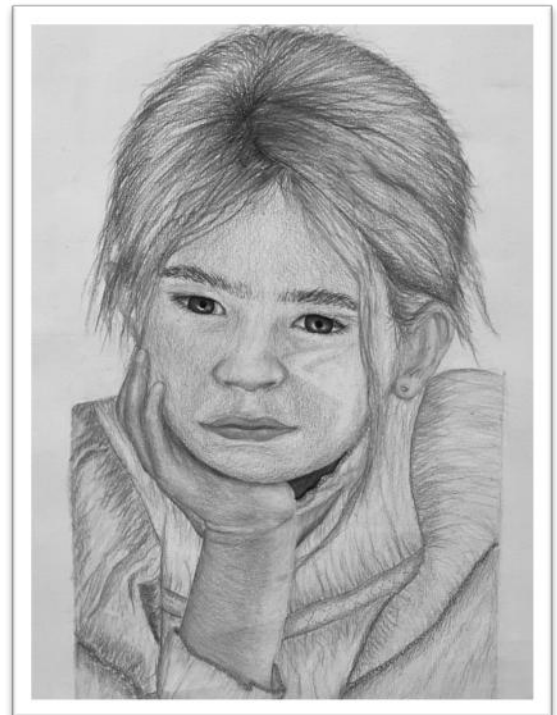
The outside air is cold and crisp
like a snowball.
The endless crystal ocean
crashes onto the tall sharp rocks.

Diving into the water,
it's as cold as ice.
Gazing into the dreamy sunset,
it lines the sea.

As the polar water glistens,
it reflects the breathtaking sunset.
Pink, orange, and yellow
shining brightly for everyone to see.
As I am departing the beach,
the water waves goodbye to me.

Goodbye marvelous beach.

-Nadya Almkhtar, Grade 7
Blue Ribbon



SIMONE MARIN | Grade 8

An Old Friend...Time

Time, who art thou?

Hear me?

Time, why are you farthing?

The hours ripen.

Your hands move.

Time, I see you move away

and I sigh.

I sigh. Hear me?

Time, please don't leave me.

Not now. The hours have ripened.

Time, who controls you?

Time, how do I still thy hands?

Time, please come back.

Let's say I miss you.

Maybe.

Time, please come back anyway.

Time, I'm losing you.

And lost already. Though you were mine never. Fleeting ever.

Time, I need more.

Time, come back. Tell me—

behind that clockface, that dust of age, that ripeness—

Time, who are you?

-Robert Esslinger, Grade 7

Blue Ribbon

She Is Gone

She was popular, says the prom queen crown on the shelf built into the wall of her abandoned bedroom.

She was insecure, says the measuring tape attached to notebooks filled with digits, getting smaller and smaller.

She was lonely, says the worn-out pictures ripped in halves.

She had been away for a while, says the pile of clothes laying on the dusty carpeted floor.

She was hiding something, says the pieces of crumpled paper in the trash.

She had a plan, says the packed duffle bag sitting near her opened window.

She was hurt, says the black-stained tissues on her pillow.

She went mad, says the bloody dagger enforced into shattered glass frames.

She had given up, says the echoey empty room.

She is gone, says the bouquets of flowers and burning candles.

She is gone.

-Charlotte Levinger, Grade 7

Blue Ribbon

My Family

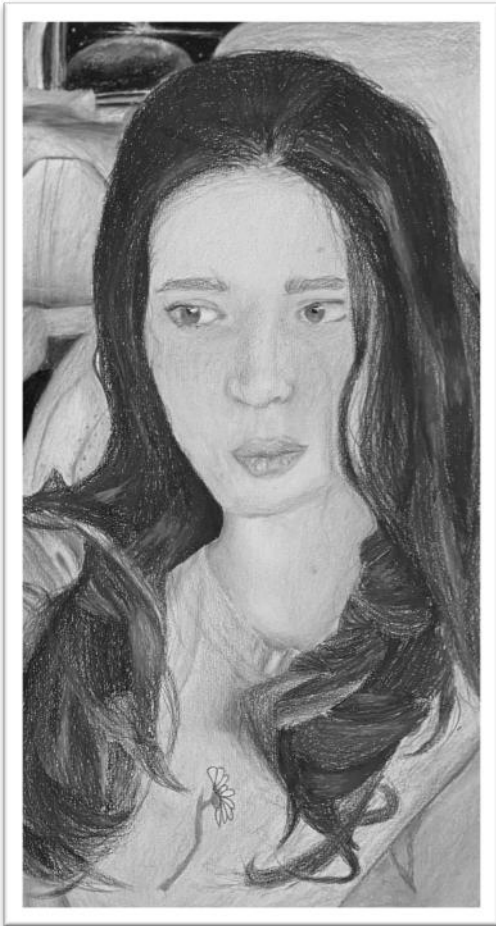
My mom is like the wind~
Breezes through life gently
But some days stirs like a tornado

My dad is like a lion~
A leader who might look scary when mad
But he is kind and funny

My brother is like a cat~
Lazy in the day
But hyperactive in the night

Altogether we are like a table~
Each leg supports the other leg

-Bernardo Campos, Grade 7



EVELYN KELLY | Grade 8

Cupid's Arrow

Love is not a thing you get a lot -
And love has got me caught
I'll always be there when you need it,
But I'm too shy to admit it.

You're so sweet and oh so kind -
You're the only one in my mind.
Without you, I feel dead and cold,
But with you, I shine like gold.

You are the sun that shines every day -
I just want you to stay.
I love your eyes when the lovelight lies,
You are my grandest prize.

A million stars up in the sky -
One shines brighter, I can't deny.
A love so precious, a love so true,
A love that comes from me to you.

They say that silence is golden -
I believe it is true,
Because in that Golden silence,
My thoughts return to you.

-Max Tabatchnik, Grade 7

My Art

I came home with a blasting headache
It felt like my head was ready to explode

I grabbed my headphones off of my nightstand
Soft music was always the best

I reached for my canvas and paints
Got a brush and water

The feeling of stress started to deteriorate
And I felt something new

Something I haven't felt in forever -
Freedom.

As the brush touched the canvas
ideas flooded through my mind

So many possibilities and so many colors
The thoughts run away from my mind

And on to the blank canvas
They spread over the blank spaces

Until there are no more

-Ava Tigertail-Cypress, Grade 8
Blue Ribbon

Cheer Competitions

They call our name
NEBULAS
We run on the floor
Our hopes as high as the moon

I take a breath
The nerves kick in
The crowd chants
My heart feels like it's on the moon
NEBULAS NEBULAS NEBULAS

5 6 7 8
IT'S ON

I'm running out of air at the speed of light
The blinding lights
The ear breaking music
The flips
The jumps
The encouraging screams
Three minutes go by in a blink of an eye

5 6 7 8
STARS

-Valentina Mouhaffel Matthey, Grade 8
Blue Ribbon

ALEXIA CHIRDARIS | Grade 8



Fall

Brown
Orange
Yellow leaves
Falling from a tree,

dancing through the wind
Like an elegant ballerina

raindrops falling from the sky
however, I wasn't upset,
Instead, I was pleasantly surprised
Drops of rain tickling my nose

Drop

Drop

Drop

The smell of air,
A very distinct smell I can't describe
I had an urge to run

So I did
I ran

I wasn't running away
I began to feel things I haven't felt before,
The weight lifted off my shoulders
I felt like I was on a cloud
For the first time in my life,

I felt free

-Olivia Rodriguez-Bracco, Grade 8
Blue Ribbon

FINN GRAINGER | Grade 6



Hiking

The rain was like hard sheets
of metal falling from the sky,
The air was like
a thin piece of paper

Our bags were heavy
We were just two miles from our last camp
But we just kept moving with the promise
of clear weather and rest

Once the rain stopped,
the journey was easier,
We got through a clearing of trees,
it was beautiful

The sun reflected off the mountains
and the river was glass,
The trees still had small raindrops
still on the bluish-green leaves

The sunset was a mix
of so many color,
The flowers in the field
looked like a rainbow

We saw a spot under some trees
that was perfect
for our next camp

-Dylan Freeman, Grade 8

The Force of Nature

by Jack Spafford,

Grade 7

Blue Ribbon



“Rumble!” A loud crack of thunder woke me up abruptly.

“Why does it have to rain on my 20th birthday?” I thought to myself.

The storm continued to intensify as I looked through the window. I saw that the rain had turned the street into a rapidly flowing river and the clouds in the sky were a dark black and gray combination. The storm had been going on for hours with no signs of stopping. Then, out of the corner of my eye, I saw a warning pop up on my tv screen showing the areas that needed to be immediately evacuated because of flash flooding and tornados. As I scanned the list, I saw the name Miami-Dade County. My county’s name! For a few seconds, I was frozen in horror because I had never had to evacuate during a storm.

“I don’t know what to do,” I thought to myself.

I knew I needed to leave, so I hastily crammed a bag full of snacks, water bottles, and clothes. Then I grabbed my phone and car keys, and I ran towards the door. The moment I opened the door, a strong gust of wind slammed into me, sending me tumbling backward.

As I was getting up, I thought to myself,

“This storm is much stronger than I thought!”

When I got up, I slowly made my way through the rain to my car. The heavy rain made my visibility limited. After what felt like a year of battling the rain and the wind, I finally made it. I jumped in and started the car. When I got in, I was soaked from head to toe, the engine roared to life, and I immediately pulled out of my driveway. As I drove, I passed homes that had been badly damaged by fallen trees. I also saw flooded cars and downed telephone poles. I was nearly hit by large falling branches multiple times, and I swerved to escape them. The rain hit the metal car’s roof as fast and as loud as gunshots. The streets were already flooded, and the water reached up to my bumper.

All of the sudden, there was a deafening crack, and a moment later, my car was hit by something massive. The car was sent airborne and when it landed, I blacked out. After a minute I slowly regained consciousness. I realized that I was hanging upside down and restrained only by my seat belt. I undid my seat belt and slammed below onto the roof of the car. When I looked through the windows, all I saw was water. I pushed open the door, and a rush of water surged into my car, sending me back into the car as it shut the door. I struggled to swim out of the car and forcibly smashed a window with my foot to escape. The shards of glass dug into my leg; however, the water in the car pushed me out of the broken window. As I was carried by the water, I lunged for a piece of driftwood. After I had climbed on

top of the piece of wood, I looked up and I saw the sky, a dark abyss, roaring furiously as if it wanted me dead. I struggled to stay on top of the piece of wood, and I was blinded by the rain pouring down more powerful than before. As I fought against the brute force of the storm, a tree branch swooped down and knocked me in the head, throwing me off my piece of wood and into the air and CRACK!

When I woke up, I was unable to open my eyes, but all I heard was the sound of birds chirping and leaves rustling in the wind.

I wondered and asked myself if I was dead, "Did the storm kill me?"

After a few minutes of lying motionless on the ground, I was able to open my eyes. I saw a street full of branches, flipped cars, telephone poles, and many other objects that were broken and twisted beyond recognition. I slowly got up and noticed that the branch had knocked me onto the bottom of a bridge. I struggled to walk due to the glass embedded deep in my leg. I stumbled to the ground and knowing I wouldn't be able to get far with my cut-up leg, and I began to admit defeat to nature. Then I heard the distant sound of chainsaws cutting through trees.

I started yelling at the top of my lungs, "HELP! HELP!"

As I screamed, I felt that it was not enough, so I grabbed a metal pipe and started hitting it against a flipped car. After two minutes of endlessly screaming and clanging metal against metal, I heard the rumble of an engine, and I saw a car coming down the road.

"Had they heard me? Were they coming to save me?" I asked myself.

As emotions and thoughts rushed through my head, my heart leaped out of my chest when the car stopped in front of me. Two tall and, burly men wearing straw hats and black boots got out of the car and picked me up by my shoulders. As they put me into the car, I smiled in victory against the powerful force of nature.

The Lucky Island

by Bella Storm

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

and

Judges' Award

"We need to take cover!" Pazy yelled to her partner. "This storm came out of nowhere!"

The wind howled, and the seas raged. The water was rough, and the waves were high, threatening to capsize the small boat. It felt like they were in the midst of a stampede, and their senses were on high alert.

"I agree," Maya screamed. "This is too dangerous!"

Their radio could barely be heard over the wind as it sputtered something about a massive storm popping up unexpectedly off the California Coast. Angry gray waves pounded their fists in the air, furious that the girls had entered their tirade.

"Quick, radio for help," Pazy called out.

The friends struggled through the stormy seas and the waves crashing on the bow of their boat. Frantically, they looked for land, but it was nowhere in sight, and just as Maya was reaching for their radio, the wind died, and the sail slammed to the windward side, throwing her out of the boat on its way. The radio fizzled out as they scrambled to get her back on board, and when the job was done, they both looked up in awe at the magical island that lay before them.

"Have you seen this island before?" Maya asked her best friend skeptically.

"No, never, and we've been sailing here for our whole lives," Pazy replied.

"That's strange."

“Very.”

The girls looked behind them at the wild sea, and their jaws dropped to the floor. It was like a huge invisible dome was surrounding the island in front of them, protecting them from the rampaging storm outside. Pazy and Maya tore their eyes from the storm and stared right at each other. Then they laughed. They laughed so hard that they both fell over, and then standing up in the boat, they rejoiced because they were safe. The storm looked extremely daunting, and they were indescribably happy to be out of it. They were so happy, in fact, that they took their positions and sailed straight for the serene island awaiting their arrival, laughing and joking joyfully the whole way there.

As they grew nearer to the island, they both went silent, taking in the extraordinary scene.

“It’s our lucky island!” Pazy exclaimed.

“We’re saved!” Maya agreed.

The island was like a mountainous jungle of green. Vines danced in the wind, and vibrant flowers covered the trees that rose high above the ground. There seemed to be large paths woven into the jungle. It was a beautiful place overall. So beautiful in fact, that Pazy considered it to be the most extraordinary place she had seen, and because of the well-timed appearance of their refuge, they thought it to be lucky.

Hauling the boat up the beach and tying it to a nearby tree, they surveyed the area, taking in all of the beautiful flora. The climate was moderate and a comfortable temperature, a mighty change from the chilly seas beyond the dome protecting them, and the beach was shrouded in soft loose sand. The wind carried the sweet smell of flowers and fresh grass, and as they walked closer to the jungle forest, small animals could be observed.

They stood at the mouth of a path looking in, and inside they viewed a thriving world that felt alive in some way. It was filled with lively greens and yellows and pinks and oranges, and all around the jungle, animals buzzed around. They saw multicolored monkeys and purple bees. The tall trees that the girls had seen while sailing towards the lucky island were even bigger now, and they enclosed the jungle from above, allowing light to enter through the gaps between leaves and branches in such a way that caused golden pools of cascading light to reflect upon the floor. The girls followed a path through the airy mass of green. They were in awe of the nature surrounding them, but soon they began to contemplate the bizarre appearance of the island.

“Hey Maya,” Pazy said, “don’t you think it’s strange that we have never seen this island before, even though we have been sailing in this bay for years?”

“You’re right. If it had been here before, we would have known. Unless we are farther out than we realized,” Maya replied.

“I doubt it. I don’t know about this place. It kinda gives me the creeps,” Pazy shared.

“I agree. Maybe we should head back to the boat,” Maya concluded.

They turned around, and off they went in the direction that they had just come from, but they soon discovered that the jungle had changed behind them, confusing them and making the journey difficult. It was as if the island were trying to keep them there, and when realization dawned on the girls, their hands grew cold, and they began to panic. They started to sprint through the jungle, but every way they went, they were stopped by a dead end, a wall of green denying them passage. Finally, the girls grew fed up with this maze, and slightly terrified, they grabbed hands and leaped through the wall of vines.

They landed face-first on the sand, relieved to have found the beach and to be safe from the deceiving jungle. As they stumbled towards their boat that lay on the beach a few meters away, the nearby vines made desperate grabs at their feet, trying to trap them on the island forever. They screamed and ran to the boat, grabbing the sides and thrusting it into the water. They both scrambled aboard, and off they went.

“What’s the plan?” Maya asked.

“Let’s just try to escape this evil island!” Pazy cried.

“Sounds good.”

With adrenaline coursing through their bodies, they glided through the crystal-clear water. They felt some hesitation in leaving, but they remembered how dangerous the island truly was. Soon they neared the invisible barrier, and they paused briefly to mentally prepare themselves to face the massive storm that churned outside the walls.

“Are you ready?” Pazy asked.

“Do we have to leave?” Maya replied.

“Yes,” Pazy stated decisively.

They savored their last moments in the calm, serene waters before pulling in the main and charging into the storm.

They were met with forceful gales and high waves coming over the stern. When they looked back, there was no island at all. Not a trace. Was it a dream? Had they escaped? As they turned their heads forward, they stared in horror at the vast and angry expanse of ocean that stretched out ahead of them.

“Where are we?” Maya screamed.

The radio, as if in response, awakened from its slumber and rattled, “It’s a lovely day for a sail in Kangoria, folks.”

The Conductor

by Jacob Shaham

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

and

Judges’ Award

On a relatively cool winter night, with the whole world winding down from a strenuous workday, Mary Passinger was going through her usual nightly routine. She made sure that the door was locked, the windows shut, and that the lights downstairs were off. Once she saw that all was good, she made her way up the worn stairs, each one letting out a piercing *creak* noise, and into her quaint and ordinary bedroom, where she drifted off to sleep.

For the first couple of hours, all was well. Mary was fast asleep, and her house was devoid of anyone but her. There was absolutely nothing, and no one, who could cause any harm to her, and that was exactly as she wanted it to be. Then, soon after midnight, she awoke to the sound of feet pacing around her room. They were going back and forth, never taking a moment to stop. Whomever the person was, they seemingly had no idea that she was awake, and had no fear in waking her up. After lying in bed for ten minutes, her fear of not knowing finally overpowered her fear of knowing, and she pulled the covers off and sat up in her bed.

The figure, blending in with the pitch-black room, immediately stopped walking around, and stood completely idle. It was quite difficult to see, but she could make out a faint humanoid outline. They both remained there, in darkness and in silence, each on opposite sides of the room, until one of them hoarsely and with difficulty, began to speak.

“You’re scheduled to depart in one day, Mary. Do with this information whatever you’d like, and whatever you think might be, well, right.”

Mary opened her mouth to reply, but as soon as she did, the figure left as quickly as it had arrived, leaving no trace of its existence in this world. Although paranoid, Mary was rational. She did not partake in the occult and concluded that the figure was nothing more than just that: a figure, conjured

from the depths of her imagination. After reassuring herself of this fact multiple times, each time with more confidence, she laid back, and fell asleep.

Mary awoke the next morning remembering little of what had happened the night before. After a few minutes of searching through the endless filing cabinets of her mind, she came back empty-handed. All she could remember were the few words that the figure had given to her over the course of his minutes-long stay in her world. This idea of not knowing really struck a chord with her, and seeing that it was a Saturday, and that she had nothing better to do with her time, Mary decided that she would go see the local psychologist, who might be able to help her remember.

Having decided what she would do for the day, she leapt out of bed to get herself changed, then rushed down the stairs and out the door, where she was immediately greeted by the cold embrace of winter. She slowly made her way down the path and to her car, making sure to take in as much of the bright winter scenery as possible, before entering the drab and characterless office of the psychologist.

Once she did arrive at the brown office complex of the psychologist, she was immediately brought into his room. Mary looked around the room, taking note of the motivational posters strung against the walls before taking a seat. One of the posters depicted a black train, with the message "Hang in there, while you can!" Between the two, the psychologist was the first to speak.

"Good afternoon... Mary," he said, while looking down at the papers on his desk.

"Good afternoon," she replied.

The psychologist took a moment to read over his files on her before beginning to ask any questions. "What brings you here? Papers say right here that you have no history of mental illness. Although it is possible that-

"I was looking to see if you could help me with an issue," she replied. "It's very specific."

"What kind of issue is it? Perhaps you've got the wrong guy for the job," replied the psychologist, slightly annoyed at her shallow response.

"Well, last night, my sleep was... I think my sleep was interrupted by... something. And that's-

"All I needed to hear," replied the psychologist with difficulty, taking out his notebook and pencil. "I'll be prescribing you some sleeping pills. I think they'll do the job all right."

The psychologist then handed Mary the prescription and wished her well, rushing her out of his room and beckoning the next patient inside. To Mary, it had felt as if she'd been had. In her eyes, it'd felt like the "psychologist" had simply taken her money and ran. Whatever the case may be, she would not be coming back.

Arriving at the dilapidated porch of her house, she took out the rusted key to the front door and stood still. There was a newfound fear of her house. Mary had a premonition that there was someone or something close by. The sense of comfort and safety that the average person felt near home was now thrown out the window. It felt as though every breath she drew had to be short and that every step she took had to be quick. After standing in front of the door for fifteen minutes, rusted house key in hand, she finally made the decision to open it. Slowly turning the silver doorknob, the door to her greatest fears was opened.

The house was well-lit. All the windows were hurricane-proof, all the doors and walls were sturdy, and it seemed as if there was nothing out of the ordinary. But fear will, if left unchecked, always overpower logic. Whether it be that one dark corner, that one open window, or the sound you heard downstairs, it seems your mind always finds some way to put you on edge. This was nothing special. But for Mary, it seemed as if her mind was going overboard.

The hours felt like entire days. Every one of them, monotonous, but in her eyes necessary. Mary stood in her living room, gazing at the clock. The clock gave Mary some sense of safety and satisfaction, as she felt that in due time, this nightmare of hers would soon be over. When not staring at the clock, she could be found going through old family albums or laying on the couch daydreaming, only for those daydreams to take the wrong turn.

Dusk came around rather quickly, and with its arrival came Mary's departure. She ascended the stairs and went into her bedroom. The thin white drapes came down and the lights came off, and all seemed good. Mary then took a generous amount of sleeping pills and drifted off to sleep once more.

She awoke the next morning with a huge sense of relief. The sleeping pills had in fact worked. She had finally triumphed over her fears, and with that came a sense of liberation. She waltzed down the stairs and into her living room, only to find that the lights were off. And in the corner of the room, stood that same humanoid figure that she could just barely make out two nights ago.

"Good evening, Mary. I think you already know why I'm standing here once again. You can call me the Conductor, if you'd like. Right now, it's your time to depart, and I'm not going to wait."

Mary, fueled by a mix of terror and adrenaline, with no time to think rationally, raced out the front door and into the thick woods surrounding her house. The snow was thick and up to her knees, and the air was harsh and impaired her breathing. Despite these conditions, she made it two miles away from home, and onto some abandoned tracks once used long ago by the Soviet Union. Being extremely tired, she sat on the tracks. Then her eyes began to get weary, her body shortly following as she reached a deep state of sleep.

She woke up for the very last time, and it was dusk. In the corner of her eye, a bright yellow-orange light could be seen, piercing through the thick snowfall. Then she began to hear chugging noises. Both the noises and the lights got progressively louder and brighter, until the light was blinding, and the sounds were deafening. Before she knew it, the black train was there, and Mary Passinger was not.

Seeing this, the Conductor took out his notebook and pencil, and crossed a name out.

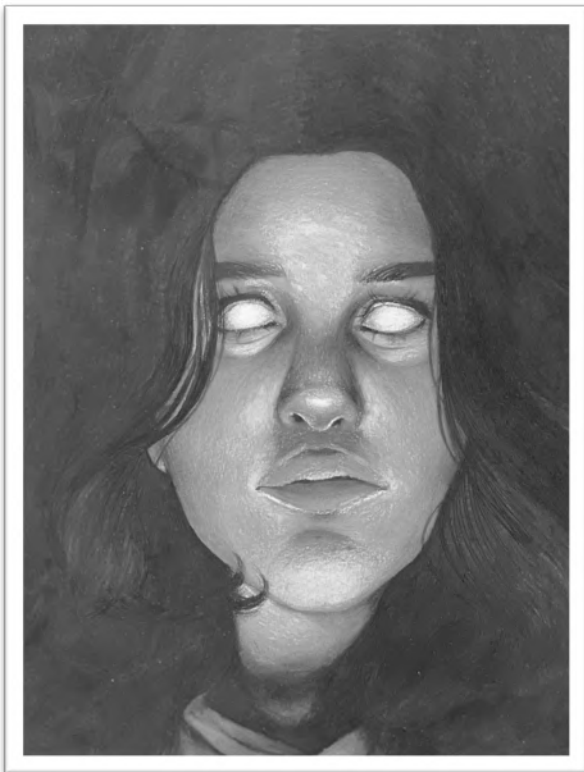
Bumps and Aches

by Tamara Santoyo Geijo

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

TAMARA SANTOYO GEIJO | Grade 8



She was in pain. That was the first thing Luci noticed when she woke up. Her head was throbbing like someone was hitting it over and over again with a hammer. She wanted nothing but to go back to sleep and to not have to open her eyes, but she knew her dad would burst into her room to wake her up in at least ten minutes, so she had to get up on her own first. When she finally opened her eyes, she was greeted by the shining rays of the sun. If this were a normal morning, she would have been appreciative of the sunshine outside, but today was not a normal morning, and she wanted to wring God's neck for making it so bright so early in the day. It was going to be impossible to get out of bed. The warm blankets engulfing her were begging her to stay where she was, but after a minute or two, she harnessed the energy to drag herself out of bed and into the bathroom to search for the headache medicine.

She and her father often suffered from headaches. Her dad never really mentioned

what caused them, but he had told her before that she had probably inherited it from him. She inherited a lot of things from him, her terrible eyesight, her tendency to be overly sarcastic, and what many people would call *crude* vocabulary were just a few of those things. None of those things were problems in her eyes, but the people at school didn't really like her. She walked over to the sink, took the mouthwash cup and filled it with water. Just as she was about to take a drink, she saw her reflection in the mirror. Her eyes widened in horror, and she dropped her cup.

Two bumps were growing out of her forehead. That couldn't be normal, could it? They didn't look like bruises. They were just two fleshy little bumps. She had never seen anything like it before. Except for her dad. Her dad had bumps on his forehead too, but he had always said he got them from a concussion in a car accident. They weren't nearly as prominent as the things currently bulging out of *her* head.

"Luci!" Dad shouted from downstairs, "Luci are you awake?"

Speaking of the devil, "Y-yeah!" Luci replied, "I'm u-up!"

"Then come downstairs. I made breakfast!"

"I'm coming, I'm coming!" Ok. She didn't have to panic. She probably just fell off the bed hard two times in one night and completely forgot about it. Yes, of course, that made perfect sense. It wouldn't be the first time she woke up with bruises due to her aggressive sleeping. Well, no matter, she had told her father she would come down, so that was exactly what she would do. So, she rushed down the stairs and headed towards the dining room.

"Oh, there you ar-," her dad said as he turned around to face her. "Oh, my god! What happened to your face?"

"Oh, this?" Luci said as she gestured to her bumps nervously. "Oh! I just fell off my bed...two times...in a row," Luci stuttered. Her nervousness didn't go unnoticed.

"Uh-huh. You can't even convince yourself. Now tell me for real this time. What happened?"

"I'm not lying!" she said indignantly. "Look, I don't know what happened. I just woke up with a headache and two huge bumps on my head. I know they don't look like bruises, but it's the only clear explanation as to why my forehead currently looks like it does." She was pacing around the dining table as she said this, not paying attention to her father's reaction to her words. It wasn't until she looked back at her father that she realized something was wrong. Her father's face had horror written all over it. She knew she looked bad, but it didn't warrant the response that she was being given.

"Dad?" her voice swayed. She called for him again. "Dad, what's going on?" Her father still didn't respond, so she raised her voice. "Ok, that's it - you're scaring me. Please tell me what's happening!"

"Does your lower back hurt?" her father asked.

Luci responded, "What?"

"Do you feel like you are growing a tail?"

"N-No? I mean what does that even have to do with this?"

"Ok, good. Look there is something I've needed to tell you for a long time. At this point, it's long overdue, but I wanted to hold back on telling you for as long as I could."

"What? What is it? Panic was leaking into Luci's voice as she said this. You could cut the tension in the room with a knife, yet her father still wasn't elaborating. "What am I, some demon or something, with my little horns?" Luci cracked a joke hoping to lessen the tension.

"You are not going to believe me one bit, but technically, yes."

Luci stared at her father's face for what felt like an eternity before bursting into laughter.

"HA, yeah right. You've finally lost your mind, you old man. You're lying," Luci said. "I mean, of course you are lying. Demons aren't real and if they are, they don't walk among us,"

“Sweetie-”

“I mean seriously, this is a serious situation here, I'm growing horns out of my head!”

“Lu-”

“Now isn't the time to joke that I might have brain tumors, I might have cancer!”

“LUCI!”

“WHAT-” Luci quickly turned around to look at her father and nearly jumped out of her skin, not expecting Satan to be standing in her dining room. Either her dad disappeared, and a red monster had taken his place, or the demon-looking thing was her father.

“DAD?”

“Now do you believe me?”

An ear-piercing shriek could be heard all around town, coming from the Adbeel family home.

“Oh my god! My dad is Satan, and I'm growing horns, what does that even mean? Am I going to become a demon too? I don't want to have a tail!”

“Ok, sweetie, I think you need to take a breath. Also, having a tail is the *least* of what you need to be concerned about.”

“What does that even mean? Am I going to die?”

“No. Just please calm down.”

“Calm down? Do you want *me* to calm down? I just found out my father isn't even a human, and that I might not be human either. How am I supposed to calm down?” Luci said in a rushed manner.

“Alright I know that this is a shock to you, but you have to understand that it wasn't safe for me to tell you about this, we live in a small Christian town. How do you think the neighbors would react if they found out Satan and his offspring were living in the house next to them? I'll tell you how, badly.”

“Look that much is obvious, but we could have just left to live in a different city!”

“Don't you think I thought of that? When you were younger, me and your mother, I planned to live in a big city where we could tell you our secret, but after she passed away, I wasn't as comfortable living in a city. It was safer in a small community.

“Mom knew?”

“Yes, I told your mother early into our relationship.”

“You know what, I can't do this right now.” Luci turned around. “This is so stupid. I'm going to my room.”

She rushed up the stairs and shut her door so hard it was heard from down the street.

Her father was the devil. That was hard to believe. If she hadn't seen it with her own Eyes, she wouldn't have believed him, but she had. She had seen his devil horns and his bat-like wings. Quite frankly, she felt like her brain was melting. Her family had always been strange. Her mother had died when she was young, and her father always had to work, but even then, they hadn't been, “Oh, my dad is Satan,” strange. Luci just didn't know what to do now.

It was a known fact that Satan was evil. He had been punished and sent to hell to Rule, which didn't sound like a punishment since he did get to torture, bad people. Either way, he wasn't good, but her dad was good. The image she had of the devil just didn't match with the image she had of her father. Her father was kind, he single-handedly raised her, and not to brag, but Luci would say he raised her well. So how was that same man the demon everyone told you would come for your soul? It just didn't make sense. Maybe they rent the same person. She could be hallucinating or perhaps just dreaming. But she wasn't, and she knew that.

Her dad was a demon and that made her a demon too. She was evil. Her family was made up of monsters who tortured souls in the depths of hell. How could she

say she was a good person? It made no sense. She loved her father, and he'd always been nothing but great to her.

Maybe he wasn't evil. The devil tortures evil people, so how bad could he be? Besides, this wasn't a question of morality. Her father had always told her that family was everything, and he was right. Luci didn't have her mother, and she wouldn't let the truth separate her from her father. He was the only family she had left, so what if he *was* Satan, people could change. She had to apologize to her father for the way she acted.

Luci walked down the stairs slowly. It had been an hour since she had stormed out on her father, but he was still sitting in the very spot she left him. He'd switched back to his normal body and He had red streaks running down his face. A pang of guilt ran through her as she realized she had made her father cry.

"Dad?" she saw him swivel his head around to face her.

"Y-Yes, sweetie?" His voice wavered, and he looked like he was going to start crying again any moment now.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have stormed off. I just didn't know what to say."

"It's ok, it's not your fault. I shouldn't have sprung this upon you."

"I love you, Dad, even if you gave me weird genetics."

"I love you too, and I know that we will have to talk more about this, but I promise I won't keep things like this from you anymore." Luci's father hugged her tight. They both knew that wouldn't be the end of the story, that they would probably have to move, and Luci would always have questions about her father's past, but they reveled in the slight peace they could have.

"Since I'm not keeping things from you anymore, you should probably also know that you are going to grow wings soon."

"Grow what?"

Tears for the Rotten

by Maggie Ryan

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

Sigh. One more report to print and then I can head home for the night. I looked at the slowly ticking clock next to my desk. The loud click of every minute passing echoed through my head as I sat and thought. The time read 12:04 am. The building was so eerily dark and empty that I swear I could have heard my heart beating as I basked in the perfect silence set across each room. I pushed my keyboard off of my lap and lifted myself out of my chair, leaving a shallow dent in the dark blue fabric which I had sat in for hours already.

I'm so tired. I want to go home.

I swiped my brightly colored notebook off the table and plucked a fancy feathered pen out of its holder. I slid them both into the large pockets of my pure white coat to free my hands. I brought my muted green lanyard up to the door handle and inserted the key carefully into the lock, trying not to make a sound and disturb the peace. I pushed the door open and clicked it shut behind me, twisting the key again to make sure no one was able to get in the office where my belongings were. I brushed a strand of chestnut colored hair from my face and began the journey down the hall.

Walk quickly and you'll forget you ever felt sleepy, I thought, trying desperately to keep my eyes open a little while longer. The supposedly short journey seemed to take hours. The faster I walked, trying to follow the orders from my brain, the longer the hallways seemed to stretch. Eventually, they were swallowed in darkness too deep for my human eyes to see beyond. Now, moving at a quick pace, I

finally reached the end. I looked around the corner slowly to scan the large metal door guarding the laboratory. Stepping up to it, I punched in the entry code to the door. *Two-five-six-one-five-three*. The number pad beeped loudly in acceptance, and I turned the door's cold, dead handle. I pressed the switch and the entire room burst with light.

The acrid tang of cleaning chemicals rushed into my nose as I shut the door behind me, the muffled *clang* sending an interminable echo throughout the building. I stared blankly at the towering glass cube several feet in front of me, waiting for my eyes to adjust to the sudden blast of light. Inside the sealed box was an awful thing which I always feared to look upon. There sat a dozing figure, covered in thin, deep-red fur. Its hands were coarse-looking and dirty, with long yellow claws at the end of its bony fingers. A once human-like face would now fashion a sharp set of curved yellow teeth, each dripping with saliva and paired with two large eyes, almost peacefully shut as it tried to sleep. A dull orange shirt and pants draped over its bony spine, making ridges in the thin fabric.

"You poor thing," I accidentally murmured, quickly slapping my hand over my mouth in an attempt to not disturb the silence. I quickly averted my gaze from the pitiful being, trying my best to distract myself. A pang of guilt began to seep into my head. I had never physically worked with Subject 3 specifically, but I felt as if I was to blame for its dreadful testing. I began to feel a soft empathy for it, almost forgetting its horrendous past. It had once been a violent criminal, a serial murderer, Wayne Shipman. My place of work had made a deal with the government, and the prison he had been held in, to experiment with him in as humane a way as possible. I feel as if we had broken that promise. Wayne's biological structure had been mixed with the one of several different animals, modifying him until he resembled a creature from the very depths of hell. His sleeping breaths were so soft, yet ragged and sharp, scratching my brain like a terrible cat. Now, he lay in his clear prison, a simple toy of science, his painful suffering unknown to the rest of the world.

Perhaps this is worse than death. Lost in thought, I mindlessly strode up to the enclosed space and raised my hand to gently place it on the glass. As I snapped back to reality, I witnessed the dull eyes of Subject 3 slowly open. I began to get lightheaded, like I was in a dream-like state. Startled, I yanked my hand backwards as if I had touched something hot. It looked at me, moving its head weakly to make solid eye contact. I was met with two deep brown pools staring into my soul. Subject 3's large mouth opened as if it wanted to say something, but no sound came out. I stared, almost mesmerized, at its appearance. A drop of saliva rolled out of its mouth onto its battered lips, now dry and cracked from lack of proper care. It gazed deep into my soul with its horrible, cloudy eyes. At this point I was holding back the urge to tremble in fear. I had never seen it awake before.

"This is awful!" I managed to whisper out before I felt sour vomit rise in my throat. I stumbled to the nearest trash bin as fast as I could while the world spun around me and released all of what had built up. Tears streamed down my face and vomit dripped from my chin. I had never seen the subject so close before, and I was almost glad I hadn't. Its disgusting appearance was engraved in my head like a nightmare. I stood there, head hanging over the trash can, weeping. I never knew how bad this had gotten. It seemed as if my own peers were monsters, lacking enough empathy to simply care for this being's basic needs. I hung there over the trash can for several more moments, breathing deeply in defeat. I slid onto the floor like a ragdoll and knelt on the ground, facing the glass enclosure. I observed the conditions in the room for what seemed like hours. It was a roughly 10 by 10 square foot case; its walls reached the ceiling where a small light hung in the center. Inside the container was simply a flat stack of blankets, presumably for sleeping, and a pitcher of water. From what I could observe of its weak, bony frame, Subject 3 rarely ate. When I finally stirred back into reality, I realized that tears were still streaming down my face. Like a crying child, I wiped my slimy, dripping nose with my coat jacket, before I got back to my feet.

I have better things to do than this. Like that report I have to print, I thought, gaining control over my emotions again. I trudged over to the printer and turned it on, humming to myself to fill the silence with something other than my sniffles. I would periodically look over my shoulder to keep an eye

on Subject 3. It didn't do very much. It just simply *sat there*, only moving to scratch its face or back every once in a while. It seemed almost peaceful. As the printer slowly spat out my report, I looked back one more time. Empathy bombarded my brain while I stared inside the almost empty glass cage Subject 3 had to live inside for the rest of its life. I walked up to the barrier once again, not thinking, and gently rested my hand on the glass, staring into the deep eyes of the captive inside. It reached out its hairy, scarred arm and did the same. My heart seemed like it was beating in my throat, and I carefully backed away from the giant container, as my hand glided off of the glass.

"I have to help you." The words flowed out of my mouth before I had even a chance to think. Subject 3 just seemed so alone, so helpless and innocent. I gazed off towards the control desk, which held a button that would open the glass cage. I stood there for several moments. Every thought passing through my head seemed to fade away, and the only thing I saw was that control desk. I walked over to it and stopped at the front of the table. It was almost completely covered with buttons and levers, and one stood out to me the most - the biggest lever of them all, its handle painted red, almost in warning. The color seemed to have slipped through my mind, and I reached out a hand to pull the switch. I grasped it tightly, breathed in, and pulled. The lights simply dimmed. I pushed the lever back up and the lights brightened again. "Wrong one, I suppose," I whispered, trying not to shake. Running my fingers around the many buttons, I caught sight of a small plastic case covering one. I hurried around to the other side of the table and gently lifted the case. Without hesitation, I pressed the button. It was stiff and almost sticky, it seemed to have not been touched in a very long time. The giant glass enclosure where the subject sat began to hum. A door, large enough to fit the average adult, was revealed on the side of the container as it popped open quite loudly. I held my breath. Subject 3 stirred and stood up off of the cold ground faster than I would have imagined due to its unhealthy frame. It turned around to face the table I had been standing behind, revealing its rotting yellow teeth in a menacing smile. My heart dropped and I became lightheaded with fear. Subject 3 took giant steps towards the enclosure door, and its unnaturally large size soon became very apparent. I couldn't take my eyes off of it. It was like I was trapped in an awful, awful dream. I began to slowly back up in the direction of the exit.

You've really done it this time, I thought, afraid and angry at myself. I looked up to where the glass cage was, seeing that Subject 3 was now completely out of the enclosure. Its eyes widened as it revealed a terrible, terrible grin. Heart pumping with adrenaline, I whipped around without warning and dashed for the door. Behind me, I heard the most awful noise anyone had ever heard. It screamed like a dying animal, like a fork scraping on a plate. Tears of pure fear began to cloud my vision as I fumbled with the door handle. I pulled it open and without looking back, I sprinted down the long hallway as fast as my short legs could carry me, hearing very large footsteps thunder behind me. I reached my office and clumsily grabbed the key on my lanyard. I shoved it into the keyhole and turned it as quickly as possible. The door opened. I slid into the room and slammed the door shut behind me, twisting the key in the lock once again to seal out the thing chasing me. Shuddering, I walked behind my desk and laid flat on the floor under it. Heavy footsteps paced outside my door all night as I waited. Every few minutes I would hear the angry rattling of the door handle and, occasionally, a quiet, raspy voice muttering to itself. I watched the clock mounted on the wall above my desk, counting each second. *One thirty a.m. One thirty-one a.m. One thirty-five. One forty. Two thirty. Three.* After what seemed like an eternity, I fell asleep on the cold, hard ground.

My eyes fluttered open to the bright beam of a flashlight pointed towards me. Worried voices surrounded me.

"Wake up!"

"Are you okay?!"

"Someone, call the police!"

I sat up to see five people huddled around me. I recognized several of them as my coworkers. They all stared at me with concern flashing in their eyes. I avoided their gazes and covered my face in

shame as hot tears welled up in my eyes. All I could say were three words as my throat clogged with a burning, searing regret.

“I’m so sorry.”

Grocery Store Reminders

by Chloe Grayson

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

The phone was ringing again as I drove along the busy street. I thought to myself, *who could it be? No one calls me at this time.* I was anxious, and the phone slipped from my hand as I tried to answer the call. I attempted to grab it as it slid across the seat, but I missed, and it landed on the floor. I kicked it with my left foot, and finally, I was able to grab my phone quickly from the floor of the car. Not looking at who was calling, I spoke.

“Hi, this is Jessie.”

“Hi Jess,” said my mom in a sad voice.

“Hi Mom!” I tried to get her in a cheerful mood. “What are you doing,” I said with a grin on my face, though she could not see me.

“I’m at your grandfather’s house.”

“What’s he doing?” Silence followed my question. “Hello?”

“He,” it was quiet for a moment. “He...he passed away.”

“What?” I thought I was not hearing correctly.

“Grandfather passed away.”

No, no, no, no, I told myself. I was never close with him like my brother was, and now that time was gone. *I wish I sat down and took the time to get to know him.* The feeling of regret was so heavy, I felt sick to my stomach. I did not know what to do. My breathing was heavy. The car was getting smaller, the walls were slowly reaching closer towards me, and the roof seemed like it was going to collapse. My eyes started to tear up and I yelled. The car reverted back to normal, and the tears blocked my vision. I let go of the wheel to wipe the salty tears emerging from my dreary deep brown eyes. As I let go, the wheel turned, and the car swerved. Quickly, I put my hands back on the wheel to redirect the car. I heard the call get disconnected and I dropped my phone once again to the fuzzy, gray floor of the car. I saw the sign of the grocery store, Publix. In a panic I sped up and arrived quickly at Publix, almost spilling my coffee. As I stepped out of the car, I felt a cool refreshing breeze blowing onto my pale face, in a way I felt a bit relieved. *Not many people are at Publix today,* I thought. I grabbed a shopping cart and walked across the cold bumpy entrance of Publix.

“Welcome!” An older man said with squinted eyes. I smiled and nodded my head, then annoyed, strutted past him. I went straight towards aisle four where they had snacks, but then I started to walk through the aisles mindlessly. My mind was not really at Publix or shopping. It was as if I wasn’t there at all. I felt disconnected from myself, drowning in thoughts. I went back to aisle four and stared at the snacks for a bit, then I looked down and saw it. There was a wallet, a warm brown leather wallet. I picked up the old worn-out wallet and opened it. I hoped there would be an ID or a picture of something so that I could return it. There was only a credit card and a couple gift cards. I checked one of the pockets of the wallet and found only money. I checked the second pocket and saw that there was a photograph of a woman and an elderly man, most likely her grandfather. My eyes grew wide, and I felt tears trying to escape, but I held them back. *Why do I feel like this? He isn’t even my grandfather.* I was speaking to myself again. I placed the picture back in the pocket, keeping the image of them inside my head. The girl was a younger woman with cherry red hair, tan skin, and dark brown eyes; the man was old with a pale snow-colored

hair, tan skin, and icy blue eyes. I left the snack aisle and kept wandering around until I found them. I checked aisle one, two, three, and then five. She was in aisle five in the condiment section looking at pasta sauces with her grandfather. Very softly, I tapped the woman twice on the back and she turned around.

“Yes?” The woman said with a bit of an attitude.

“Uh, hi! I think I found your wallet on the floor!”

“Oh! Thank you so much. I didn’t even realize it was gone!”

“No worries. By the way, since you’re looking at pasta sauces, I recommend you get one with tomato, basil, and garlic.”

“Thank you again. I will definitely try that one!”

“No problem. I hope you enjoy the pasta!” I walked away squinting my eyes and with a huge smile on my face. It made me feel warm and fuzzy inside to see someone spending time with their grandfather, since I hadn’t. I walked out of Publix and saw the older man again, and this time I said goodbye.

I got into my car and drove in silence. I felt as if I was forgetting something, but I'm not sure what. There was no traffic, and I eventually arrived home. I felt the refreshing breeze of the wind as I exited my car again. Then I went to get my groceries out of the trunk. When I opened the trunk of the car, I realized there were no groceries. *I must have forgotten them. Oh well*, I told myself. I closed the trunk, locked the doors, and gradually walked up to my house. Shaking, I opened the door of the house. I still felt a bit lost in my thoughts. I sat on the couch and thought about what had happened today. *I wish I had spent more time with him. I wish he was here. I wish I could see him smile again. I wish I could hear his contagious laughter. I wish I hadn’t drowned myself with work and ignored him when he tried to reach out. I should have given him a chance.* My stomach started to growl. I got up from the couch and went into the kitchen, knowing there would be little food, but hoping to at least find something to fill the hollow void in my stomach. I opened the pantry. There on the bottom shelf sat the lone bottle of pasta sauce with tomato, basil, and garlic.

The Golden Hotel

by Zach Smith

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

There was a series of hallways, long and wide with tall, massive arches. The floors, walls, and arches displayed a mixture of beautiful golds and subtle yellows. There were intricate, yet disturbing patterns on the floors that resembled diamonds, and basic squares and rectangles on the walls and arches. The decor gave the place a feeling of being both grandiose and ominous. Jack ran through these hallways looking for an exit. It was his third time there, though only his second time in the hallways. The first time he’d been there he had taken the stairs, something he later thought to be a mistake. The steps were made of something akin to marble that was blended with gold and yellow coloring. These steps were also much too small for a human foot to fit, making them extremely difficult to descend safely. Seemingly, the steps went on infinitely. Inevitably, he lost his balance and fell down the stairs. He tumbled and tumbled, his body suffering the impact, and then he woke up. It had been a dream. And his first time in the hallways he had spent so long being lost, he became lucid and managed to wake up. Now he was lucid dreaming again and was determined to escape the halls. But he couldn’t find an exit, they seemed to go on infinitely like the stairs. Getting increasingly angry and scared, he woke up. The time was 6:55 AM. Five minutes earlier than his alarm, and yet it felt like he had been in those hallways for years.

That was the worst thing about dreams, he thought. They rob you of sleep and time. He got up to get ready for school, still disturbed by his recurring dream, and faced his own image in the mirror. His

jet-black hair was messy and a bit long. His irises were such a dark brown that they nearly matched the color of his pupils, and he always had dark bags under his eyes, giving him a tired look. He brushed his teeth, got dressed, ate a quick breakfast, and went to leave the house for school. Then he remembered his heart medication. He was so preoccupied that he had nearly forgotten to take the thing that continued to keep his weak heart beating, and that had enabled him to make it to his current age of sixteen. Before he could walk out the door, his mother stopped him.

"Are you alright, Jack? You look tired," she asked in a concerned tone.

"I'm fine," he said in his usual monotone voice.

His mother looked unconvinced but hugged him and let him go. He went to school, unable to focus the entire day. His teachers were also concerned about him as he was usually an attentive student, but he just shrugged them off. All he could think about were the stairs and the hallways.

What do they mean? What could they represent? What does my stupid subconscious want me to know? he wondered angrily. Every night, the staircases or the hallways became inescapable. He began to lose curiosity in the dreams and instead grew in fear of them. Dreamless nights became a thing of the past for him. He grew so tired of wandering the halls that he started taking the stairs. Those horrifying stairs tantalized him with each step taken until eventually, he fell, every single time. Sleep meant fear. He tried to stay awake each night but would always succumb to the lure of sleep. His mother was extremely worried. The bags under his eyes grew darker and more pronounced, and he became more irritable.

"Jack, please. You can talk to me," his mother began. "You won't be in trouble, whatever it is, I promise. We'll get through it."

"I can't sleep. That's it. There's nothing else going on. I told you this already," he replied.

"There's a reason you can't sleep," she said in a raised voice.

"Tell me when you figure it out. I would love some help," he said sarcastically.

He didn't want to lie, but he didn't want to see a therapist either. Or worse, go to a psych ward. As the days went on, things started to get even worse. He became more fearful. It was like the fear he felt so often on those long nights of contemplation. The ones where he would think about his life, the pain, the stress he endured. "All for what," he had thought, "to die in the end anyway?" It was then that he realized what the dreams were. It was his fear, his fear of death.

After a few more days of the dreams, he began seeing the patterns. The patterns that were on the floors of the place from his dreams, those weird, unnerving diamond-shaped patterns were appearing in his head. He could look at a blank wall, and the pattern would flash before his eyes. This scared him even more. The night he first started seeing the patterns, he took the stairs again. But this time, he didn't descend the stairs. He jumped off the side of the railing, expecting to wake up before hitting the floor, just like any normal dream. But this wasn't any normal dream. He was falling for minutes, hours, days, he couldn't tell. But finally, he could make out some of the details of the bottom floor. He was around a hundred feet above it and closing. He wasn't afraid anymore, he was excited. He figured he'd found a way to always escape the dreams.

But then, instead of waking up, he landed, perfectly fine. It looked like a hotel lobby, the most extravagant one he'd ever seen. The pattern he'd been seeing was stretched across the lobby's floor, ten times bigger than usual. The lobby contained the same stunning golds and yellows with colossal pillars engraved with even more diamond patterns. Past these pillars was an exit. Two large, completely pitch-black doors with basic golden handles. The doors looked to be about ten feet tall, though the handles were level with his head. It was shocking to him to see a color besides gold or yellow in this *hotel*. He dreaded going any closer to the doors. They loomed over him with a menacing aura. But he was determined to escape, to keep going, and so he pushed on.

He started to open the door, which was incredibly heavy. It groaned loudly as he laboriously pushed the door open, his face pressed against its smooth, marble-like surface. Once he pushed it open, he was shocked by the outside world. He was in a random part of what looked like New York, and in this

area, there was no color. Everything was completely and totally gray. Everything but the hotel. He ran from the hotel to get a better view of it and realized it looked more like a castle from the outside. It towered over all the other buildings in the area, emanating a gold aura. It was imposing and foreboding, but also looked warm and friendly compared to the outside layers of darkness. He'd been in this part of the city in real life before, but nothing significant had happened there. This nearly colorless world contained no people. He wasn't surprised by this, though; it was extremely unnerving to him. He wasn't sure what to do now that he had finally escaped.

While pondering this, he was jolted awake by the blaring of his alarm. He sat upright, sweating and confused. Then his dream quickly came back to him, and he was angry. He had finally been getting somewhere, and his alarm ruined it. But he knew where the hotel would be located in the world if it were real, and he decided to do something with this knowledge. He went about the rest of his morning routine as usual. On his way out of the house, however, he felt like he forgot something. "But what could be more important than my dreams?" he murmured to himself, pushing the thought away. Instead of walking to school, he veered off towards the more urban part of New York. He hailed a taxi and gave the driver directions. Luckily for Jack, he looked old enough to not be asked questions.

When they arrived at the destination, he paid the man with some money he had saved and exited the cab. In place of the hotel was a small warehouse. He approached it and noticed the tall doors were slightly ajar. Desperate for answers, he pushed them open and went inside. It was pitch black except for the light coming through the opened doors. He turned on the flashlight on his phone and walked through the warehouse, searching for anything related to his dreams. The place smelled musty. As his flashlight beam cut through the darkness, it revealed many wooden crates. The place looked suspiciously sterile and was also very quiet. Deafeningly quiet. All that could be heard were faint sounds of cars through the open doors. It was a dream-like place. Perfectly clean and pristine, the crates perfectly stacked and organized, and everything was noiseless. There was nothing wrong with it in the slightest. No imperfections. This terrified him. He continued to search for some sign his dreams had meant something, and due to the odd condition of the warehouse, he was more confident that he would find something there. After walking for a little longer, he noticed another thing amiss. He estimated that he'd been walking around for about 15 minutes. The warehouse was too small for him to be walking this long. He turned around to look for the exit, and fear had overtaken him. His curiosity no longer mattered, he wanted to leave as soon as possible.

The light from the doors was gone. He flashed his flashlight towards where the doors should've been and realized that the light from it didn't reach far enough. His heart was pounding, his mind racing. He was back in the hallways, stuck, lost, but in real life. *Is this even real? Am I real? Am I just dreaming again?* he frantically thought. He was dizzy, he couldn't see. His phone was on the floor illuminating the roof, which was as high up as the one in the hallways. He was panicking, losing his mind. He sat down and breathed. Then he picked up his phone and continued further into the warehouse. *I'm not even in a warehouse. I'm just back in the hotel, but it has a fresh coat of paint. Or maybe I'm not. How would I know?* he pondered, as he continued moving through the everlasting darkness.

Then he came upon a set of stairs leading downward. The only thing that kept him sane when he saw this was that there was a white light at the end of the stairs. He started to descend the spotless, polished pitch-black stairs, which were so dark he felt like he was walking over a void. There was an incessant noise that grew louder as he descended. It sounded like a beating heart. He hoped salvation lay ahead for him. About halfway through his descent, he realized he was walking towards the light at the end of a tunnel. Jack wondered if he was walking into the arms of death. He decided to check out the light and decide what to do from there. "I could always go back up the stairs," he said to himself, as he continued his descent. His flashlight died, but he was able to keep going. These were like the steps from his dreams -uncomfortable and hard to walk on, but he knew them like the back of his hand.

Then he reached the white light. It turned red upon his arrival. It was a small, pulsating, glowing red cube on a black pedestal. The entire room was as black as the stairs. As he approached the cube, the

throbbing noise reached its peak volume and speed, and blood started to pour down on the cube from the darkness. He stumbled backward onto the floor. He tried to get up and leave, but he couldn't. He was frozen in horror. The red in the cube was oddly not growing brighter as he expected, but instead, was growing dimmer. Once it was reduced to just a black cube, the blood stopped pouring and the cube stopped pulsating. It became quiet. Then the cube erupted into an incomprehensible mass of writhing tendrils with billions of small red eyes. They wrapped around him, and he felt immense pain. Every inch of his body was in agonizing, blinding pain. His heart felt like it was being ripped from his chest. At the same time, he felt hollow and worthless. It was the worst thing he had ever experienced. He tried to escape, just like he had tried to escape the staircases and hallways, but he failed, failed once more. Even when he finally got out of that Golden Hotel, he just ended up right back where he was. He gave in to the pain and lost consciousness. When he woke up, he was in a void. He thought there was nothing there but endless darkness. But then he saw hundreds of structures in the distance. Staircases.

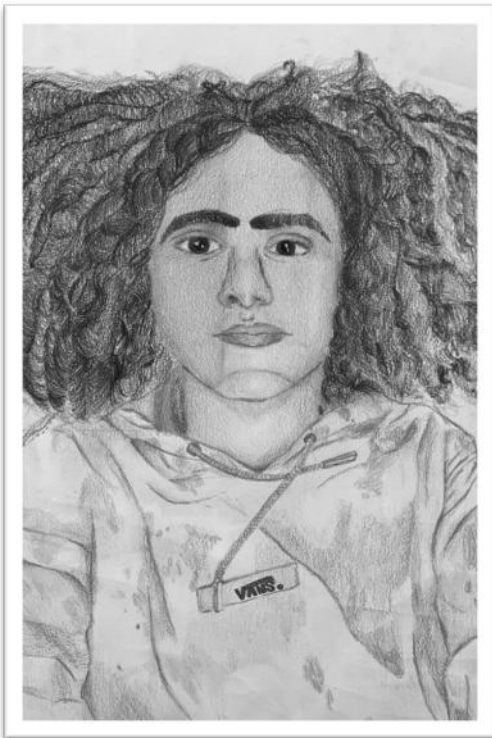
Trapped in the Flagstone

by David Ernsberger

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

ALEX NEONAKIS | Grade 8



With blue sneakers, a white polo shirt, and a good mood, Arnold walked down the sidewalk with a grin on his face. Something about the breeze blowing his hair onto his face, the chirping of birds all around him, and the kindness he received from others made walking all the more appealing. Sometimes his dog would come along with him, making the walks especially enjoyable. Arnold started whistling a tune while looking at the clear, azure sky. Then he ran into something.

"Hey, watch it, bud," Arnold said, thinking he ran into someone. But when he looked up, nobody was there. He looked down and noticed the sidewalk had stopped.

"Just the wind," he said. "I'm just going to turn around and go home." He ran into something else, however.

"What on earth is happening?" Arnold asked himself. He couldn't seem to leave the sidewalk space where he was standing. He tried punching and kicking these invisible walls he found himself confined by, hoping they would break, but it was no use. Arnold was trapped in this phantom room.

He sat down and started to think of some way that he might escape this box. Maybe he could climb out, he thought. To test his theory, he put his arms and legs on either side of the box and started to shimmy up the invisible walls. He looked down after a few minutes of shimmying and saw he was about six feet above the ground. The room was tall, but not tall enough to keep Arnold from trying. After some more awkward shimmying, Arnold reached up with his arm to see if he could touch the ceiling. He could. The room was walled off, had a roof, and had a concrete floor. Arnold could not escape the box.

Arnold then evaluated his stronger abilities and talents. He knew how to build things, mostly contraptions. After all, he had been taking an engineering class at school. Arnold looked around him and found nothing he could utilize to help him build anything. All the branches and leaves were outside of the sidewalk. He needed a helper, so he put two of his fingers into his mouth and blew the biggest whistle he ever blown. Soon after, Arnold's golden retriever, Banjo, came running around the curb.

"Banjo!" Arnold shouted. Banjo was getting closer and closer. Then Arnold realized something. If Banjo came onto the sidewalk, he too might not be able to leave.

When Banjo was a mere eight feet away from the sidewalk, Arnold shouted, "SIT!"

Banjo came to a screeching halt. His feet skid to a couple of inches away from the sidewalk.

"Alright, boy," Arnold said to his dog, "Go get me that stick over there," and he pointed to a stick.

Banjo just looked at Arnold's pointed finger as he sat there, waiting to be petted.

"Get the stick!" Arnold said. "Go get it!"

Banjo continued to remain where he was. Fifteen minutes later, the dog finally looked in the direction Arnold was pointing towards and saw the stick. Banjo loved sticks. He got up, did a little trot towards the stick, picked it up in his mouth, returned to Arnold, and dropped it on the sidewalk.

"Good boy, Banjo!" Arnold said with delight. Because Banjo had dropped the stick onto the sidewalk, Arnold could pick it up and use it to execute his escape plan. Arnold pointed at another stick and coaxed Banjo to go retrieve this one. This time, Banjo had learned that point meant *stick*, so Banjo flicked his head to see another stick. This process was repeated a few more times. Sometimes Arnold would have Banjo get a rock, or a bare-root, until he had an abundance of spare items from nature in his lap.

"Alright, boy," Arnold began, "I plan to build a wedge."

Banjo cocked his head as Arnold started building something with the things he had gathered.

"The way I'll do this is to make a catapult type thing, but instead of a bowl that holds the thing, it'll throw, it'll be just a big flat piece of wood," Arnold said. "So, if I have the catapult-wedge launch hard enough, I might be able to have it push me through whatever see-through barrier I'm stuck behind."

Banjo was panting with joy because Arnold was happy, even though he didn't know why. The dog watched Arnold slowly but surely create a stand for the catapult-wedge, and the wedge itself. This confused Banjo, as he didn't know why Arnold was putting the fetching things together instead of throwing them. But Banjo watched with slight focus, waiting for Arnold to speak again. Banjo's gleeful look made Arnold faster and more precise with his building. He stopped missing the hole the roots were supposed to go in. He stopped dropping all the sticks onto the ground. He stopped splintering himself on the branches. With Banjo in front of Arnold, he felt he could accomplish his task.

"Okay," Arnold said, "it's done. Now all I have to do is put myself against the invisible wall, then activate the catapult and have the wedge push me through."

Banjo watched as Arnold put himself between the edge of the sidewalk and the thing he made of sticks and wondered why he wasn't getting up to pet him.

"Here it goes, Banjo," Arnold said, a tad worried. Arnold pulled the root that was holding the catapult back, which sent a big flat plank of wood made of smaller pieces of wood straight toward him as he squatted on the floor. Arnold felt a big push on his right arm, which left a bruise for a while. After that push, he felt the force of gravity pulling him to be on his side with his face in the grass and an eager dog licking his face.

"Banjo!" shouted Arnold, "We did it! Your obsession with sticks saved me! Yes!"

Banjo was liking that day. First sticks, then pets. It was his greatest desire.

"Come on, boy. Let's go get you some extra-large bones. And don't worry, this isn't the end of our walks," said Arnold, as he walked home with his trusty Banjo.

Good Karma

by Amparo Torres Platt

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

Karma is a strange thing, isn't it? A person's entire fate is determined by his or her own decisions, good or bad. But what happens to those whose decisions don't end up positive or negative? Their lives, their fate, cannot be decided or created. This is when the Transgressions Bureau can intervene. The Transgressions Bureau is an organization that decides the destinies of these special people. We are not in the sky, or in space. We are not here nor there. We exist everywhere, but nowhere as well.

My name is August Hawthorne, and this is the peculiar case of Lena Ramsey, a girl whose heart was loving and passionate, but the people in her life, unfortunately, were not.

Lena was stuck in her room. Her father was unrelenting. He would never let her out, even if she got up the courage to go ask him. She decided to go anyway because at least she could die old knowing that she tried. She paced around her room, choosing the right words, rearranging them, changing the syntax to best please her father. *God*, she hated him. She hated how he talked, how he walked, even how he ate his food. He was the most evil, malicious person she had ever met. She walked out of her room, which did not have a door, with her head high. She felt like crying on the inside.

"Henry, I need to go out. My friend is in serious trouble. She is diabetic, but her parents are not home. She ran out of insulin, she doesn't have anyone to help her," Lena said patiently. Her eyes were fierce, but she wanted to beg and scream. She knew that would not help her.

"What have I said about calling me Henry?" said her dad in a violent scream. His speech was sort of slurred and he had stood up in a tipsy manner. Lena did not want to call him dad.

"*Dad*, it's urgent! I would not have asked you if it weren't absolutely necessary."

"You are a little rat, you know that? Always annoying me with these stupid lies."

Lena's eyes swelled up with tears. She would not let him see. She would not give him the pleasure of seeing in that state. He was standing parallel to her, but Lena already knew what was about to happen.

Lena returned back to her room, her arm filled with bruises, her lip a little swollen. She didn't care about that now. The only concerning thing on her mind was how she was going to get to her friend's house. She stared at the window, letting the glistening moonlight into her room, and knew it was the only way out. With all her force, she pushed the window opening, all of the noise of a normal Chicago evening entering her room at once. She was at least three stories high.

Lena climbed out and began the treacherous descent. It was nighttime, and she could barely see where she was stepping. Clinging to the protruding poles and bricks, she could see the end. When she finished climbing, she was still at least 6 feet up in the air. Her only option was to jump. With trembling fingers and a cluttered mind, she let go. For a second, she felt her life slip away from her. Soon enough, the concrete was under her feet, and she was back on the ground. She felt feverish and closed her eyes to let the world calm itself down.

"Hey, watch yourself lady!" yelled a drunk man on the street. He pushed her off the sidewalk and into the bustling street filled with cars. She turned her head, but the flashing lights blinded her.

Before she knew it, her life was over. Lena had been killed on impact. A car had hit her with so much force that her body gave in.

Lena woke up in a white room with nothing but a chair and a glass of water. She took a sip and suddenly, her panic began to set in. Where was she? The last things she remembered were the bright lights of a car and the face of a petrified driver. She now understood. While she was contemplating how her life had ended, someone had entered the room.

"Hello, Lena. My name is August," said a man in a calm tone. He was tall, brunette, and had an eager smile.

"Hi, August. Am I in heaven right now?"

The man let out a chuckle. Lena felt as if she was *supposed* to know where she was. Secretly, Lena hoped she was in heaven. It would be better than living with her father.

"Follow me please, we are quite off-schedule," said August.

"Where do we have to be?", Lena mumbled to herself softly.

He turned promptly and Lena knew to follow. When they left the room, she entered a hallway that seemed endless. She followed August to a door at the end. Inside was a wall covered in buttons, levers, and all types of screens. There was a desk and chair, tilted to the door, almost welcoming her in. Lena was speechless.

"Lena, this is your new office," said August. He was eager for her reaction.

"Sorry, but I cannot accept it until you tell me what is going on."

"Lena, this is the Transgressions Bureau. We are an organization that chooses the fate of other people. When you died, you were randomly selected as Human 3856291 to come to join us up here as a Karma Selector."

"I'm sorry but what is that?" Lena said desperately. August's answers were not sufficient for her busy mind riddled with questions.

"You can choose the karma, or fate, of any person you'd like, no matter where they are in the world or how they act. You can do whatever you want."

"I just can't believe this."

"Well, you're going to have to. This is your life now."

August left the room and gave Lena some space. She could not believe she was really gone from the world. While her mind wandered away, she took a deep breath and started fiddling with the controls. Suddenly, a screen turned on, showing Lena a video of her friend Lizzy. She was getting help from her parents. A breeze of relief washed over, and Lena was not as troubled as she was before. She turned another switch. The screen next to Lizzy turned on with a search bar. Lena found a keyboard and typed in her father's name. She switched through different channels of "Henry Ramsey's" from the world and found her father on the screen, laying on the couch, asleep with a beer can on his chest. *God, God, God.* Why had she gotten stuck with him as a father? All of a sudden, a message had appeared on the screen; "Choose Fate: Die Old vs. Die Young". Without even thinking about it, Lena clicked "Die Young". Another message appeared; "Choose Fate: Suffer Pain vs. Feel Happiness". Lena clicked "Suffer Pain". For what seemed like hours, Lena went on choosing the worst things she could imagine. She wanted her father to hurt. She wanted him to endure pain like her. In the end, her father was still laying on the couch, unaware that his fate had just been decided by his very own daughter.

"I came here to check up on you, but it seems you are doing very well on your own," said August.

"Yes, I am."

"Very well, sorry to interrupt you but it's time for lunch."

Lena followed August and was amazed by the sheer enormity of the cafeteria. They had virtually everything. She could definitely get used to this.

After lunch, Lena made it back to her office and got right back to work. Next on her list was Lizzy. Lena wanted to give her the world. Lizzy was one of Lena's only friends and she accepted her for

who she was. Messages were appearing on the screen one after another; “Choose Fate: Die Old vs. Die Young”, “Choose Fate: Suffer Pain vs. Feel Happiness”. Lena missed her friend but the only way to reach her was to wish her the best. Lena turned the first screen on to see Lizzy crying in her room. Lena had completely forgotten about her presence, or lack thereof, on Earth. Her heart suddenly began to ache. Her life had ended before it had even begun. She was only 16 after all.

She turned the screen back on her father to see his grave. She was stunned. She rewound the tapes and saw her father in a hospital bed. She rewound even farther and saw her father get hit by a car. After a few minutes of thinking, it finally dawned on her. She had made the decision for her father to die young, and he was finally dead. She had killed him. Even after all the things he did, all the pain he caused, Lena felt guilty. He was an awful person and an even worse father, but he didn’t deserve this. His own actions would be the death of him, not her. It was never supposed to be her.

With tears in her eyes, Lena ran down the hallway, trying to find August. By the end of the hallway, heard his voice. She ran and almost yelled at him while crying.

“August, I’ve made a mistake,” she managed to say through the sobs.

“I know,” he said.

Lena’s mind began to spin. How did August know about Lena’s father?

“If you could follow me to my office, Ms. Ramsey.”

Lena followed him and stopped her crying. She decided not to question him. She entered his office, much larger than hers. It was filled with screens, but not with any buttons or levers.

“Lena, you were not chosen to be a Karma Selector. In all of your life, before you died, your actions never outweighed each other. Your positive and negative actions are both the same. Your fate was not possible. You were a neutral, as we like to call it here.”

“I don’t understand,” Lena had started crying again.

“Lena, everything you have ever done never let your destiny be decided. With neutrals like you, we have to intervene and create your fate ourselves. We create tests to see how your life should play out. You passed one of our tests today. We wanted to see how you would choose to use the power of selecting other people’s fates. You could have chosen anyone in the world, but you chose those who you have been affected by. But in the end, you knew you took it too far. We wanted to see if you would realize that you cannot pick and choose who does well and who does badly just on how they treat you, their actions will resolve themselves. People cannot choose other people’s fates. This is why we have decided to send you back to Earth, to get another chance. You deserve a fulfilling fate and this test has proved that.”

Lena was almost too nervous to speak. She tried to process everything August had just said.

“But will I remember everything I went through here?”

“No, it is essential that we wipe your memory. Everything will be exactly the same as the day you left.”

Lena tried to imagine going back to her father’s house. Every memory came flooding back to her. She thought about begging August about letting her stay. Anywhere was better than her father’s house. But the realization set in, and Lena knew that her father’s actions would come back to haunt him one day. She had to be strong and know that she would end up fine.

She said her goodbyes to August and closed her eyes. She trusted him and knew she would end up where her actions led her. Everything was gone in an instant. She was back in her room and stood up from her bed. It was as she had left it. It was like waking up from a bad dream. She no longer had any recollection of the events that had once caused her to feel pain. She left her room and saw her father sitting on the couch.

“Get me another beer, will you?” said her father.

Lena rolled her eyes and went to the kitchen.

Everything was back to normal, except this time, she had good karma.

Good Illusion

by Nabeel Ishaq

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

“Good morning, Waterloo. Today, September 14th, 2047, is looking like quite a gloomy day. There is an almost guaranteed chance of rain and a high likelihood of thunderstorms. We’ll take a quick ad break now,” blared the TV.

“Run away from your reality. Neglect your problems. Enjoy your life,” buzzed the television, “I’m Mark Zimmerman, the CEO, and founder of Illusiobonom. Illusiobonom is a top-of-the-line service. We will enable you to see your wildest dreams come to life. For a cost of only five dollars, you can truly be free. Harm yourself not with thoughts, but with pleasures. We can help you bide time until death, or just a couple of years until an issue might be resolved. You choose how long you’re in for, as long as it’s at least three years. Whether you want to escape from your treacherous job of being a cobbler or just have fun. Make sure you’re at least twenty-one years of age, but no more than forty-seven! Call one-eight-hundred-illusio today, to get a discount when we launch on October 13th, 2027. Abeamus!”

Billy flicked off the TV, and sprung up from his couch, having remembered that had a meeting with a venture capitalist.

Billy’s plan for his startup, named Billy’s Beans, was to completely sell it to said Venture Capitalist for at least one-hundred thousand dollars, though the startup idea and company was an utter scam. The concept was to create tiny beans that could provide the nourishment and nutrition of full meals. All of the facts in his slide decks were lies, and there was zero truth in his company. His meeting began in five minutes, and his primary worries were making a poor impression and losing a potential client, to say the least.

Billy was a seasoned veteran in the realm of selling scam ideas to investors for high profit, for he had succeeded multiple times doing such. He put on his lucky black loafers from his favorite shoe brand Laborem, which he particularly liked because they were hand-tailored.

Billy arrived at the office, parked his car, and dashed inside of the building. Seated behind a desk was Mr. Antoinette's wife Maria, who operated as his secretary. Billy noticed that on her desk was a little gold-plated name card. He also noticed that she was wearing couture, along with the thick diamond necklace on her neck.

“Excuse me, ma’am, is Mr. Antoinette ready for our meeting,” inquired Bob “I know I’m a tad bit late, but is he still available to meet with me? I desperately need this meeting.” Trisha looked at him as if she hadn’t a clue what he had been referring to. “Oh, I apologize, the name is Billy,” Billy said, “Billy Roberts. The CEO of Billy’s Beans.” She paused for a moment and then seemed to recall.

“Didn’t you get my email? We filled your slot with someone more consequential, so Mr. Antoinette is meeting someone else right now,” she smiled and added, “We have no intention of doing business with you. Have a good day sir.”

Billy sighed and nodded to show his understanding. As he walked toward the door, he looked back and saw a recognizable figure. Billy quickly realized that it was none other than Mark Zimmerman. He saw Mark lean into Trisha’s ear, and being the curious man Billy was, he made up an excuse and slowly walked into the bathroom near the front desk so he could eavesdrop through the door.

Billy locked the door and put his ear to the door. He noticed that using his ear to the door is ineffective for listening, so Billy rapidly ripped up a toilet paper roll down to the cardboard and put it against the door to eavesdrop.

“Did you deal with the government?” whispered Mark.

"Yup," whispered back Trisha, "I got connected to the Prime Minister himself, and I made it clear that he would be heavily rewarded for endorsing Illusiobonom to the people. He agreed for a small thirty million in gold. He also promised a pardon in case of any legal troubles."

"Are you sure he isn't gonna take our money and put us behind bars? According to poll data, almost all of our potential clients are a middle-aged or working class, which could just slightly affect the economy, and cause his political reputation to waver. I just want to make sure everything is ready for launch in a week. Also, remember to book my vacation to Italy," inquired Mark.

"Positive," said Trisha, "Also I booked a first-class flight to Italy that leaves in a couple weeks. I was also able to close that deal with Laborem."

"Great work, the CEO is a close friend of mine. Let's make this dream a reality," Mark said, "Or should I say, make this reality a dream. See you later."

Bamboozled about what he had just heard, Billy flushed the toilet and used the sink to avoid suspicion. He exited the bathroom, quickly left the building, and drove home.

He reflected upon his eavesdropping, and Billy concluded that Illusiobonom will hurt a lot of people, even though it was purely speculative and just a hypothetical. Unaware of how or why, Billy thought to himself, "I'm done hurting others for my own personal gain. Most people sustain lifestyles without needing to lie or hurt anyone. I'm going to become one of them."

Twenty-five days later, Billy opened his phone and saw that the Prime Minister of Canada had endorsed Illusiobonom, and the Prime Minister had put up promotions all over social media. He read a quote from one of the Prime Minister's pages that read, "Canada, the future is coming, and reality is here. Join the Illusiobonomians." Billy wanted to learn more about Illusiobonom, because he thought it would ultimately hurt to people, taking what he had just read into account.

10 days passed and Billy had prepared a slide deck for a good and truthful business idea when he decided to take a break, which prompted him to have turned on the television. Illusiobonom had been launched for a few days.

"We need to embrace technology. Let's be real. Reality is disappointing. Life is death. Every waking moment is a struggle to stay alive. In these moments of struggle, we can't enjoy life. Enjoying life means interrupting sustainability for some of us, which results ultimately in early death. I've founded Illusiobonom with the purpose of not yielding profit but making people happy. We do something amazing - we bring your dreams to reality and make those dreams your reality. You needn't concern yourself with issues like money, food, love, or family, for these shall all be in your dream. While in this state of dreaming, your body will be preserved in a capsule, until your time is up or there is an emergency. To those of you who are suffering, do this. Don't leave yourself susceptible to the constant stab from the blade of life. Kick back, relax, and join us at Illusiobonom! We're exhilarated for launch today." Billy turned off the TV with only one thought having occupied his mind.

"I've gotta stop them," thought Billy, "The problem will only fester like an untreated wound." Billy drove to Mr. Antoinette's office, entered the building, and spotted Trisha at her desk

Billy inquired, "This firm has investments in Illusiobonom, does it not?"

Trisha said, "Yes, we do. Now go away, I politely told you a month ago that we aren't interested in doing business with you. Have a good day."

Billy pushed back and said, "I want to work at Illusiobonom. I find myself fascinated with the concept, and I would love to work with you all." The fact that Billy told a lie particularly pained him since he had vowed to become a better person.

"Honey," called Trisha, "We have someone interested in being an Illusiobonom employee." Mr. Antoinette came out from behind a pillar as if he had listened to them the entire time.

"I'm not going to make this an arduous process," stated Mr. Antoinette "In fact, I'm not even going to pester you. Would you like to work with us at Illusiobonom? If so, follow me." Mr. Antoinette went to his office, and with little hesitancy, Billy followed.

Billy was whacked by something on the back of his head, then Mr. Antoinette said "This is an NDA, so sign it and don't even think about disclosing the contents of this conversation. Not that it matters if you do, this is just a precautionary measure for us. If you do wind up spilling the beans, like your company, then we'll kinda have to kill you. Got it?" Billy signed the NDA, and bursted out into a fit of laughter.

Billy chuckled "'Kill me'? 'Spill the beans like my company'? Nice jokes man, that was hilarious." Billy had let his guard down. He had anticipated that Mr. Antoinette would brief him on what the company did, and what they needed internally for support. Billy was completely neglecting the conversation he had overheard, and he was getting more affable with Mr. Antoinette

"My entire family calls me the joker for a reason," said Mr. Antoinette, "Let's talk business. Everything is a lie. From start to finish. We don't allow people who aren't consenting customers to enter our properties for a reason. As soon as people enter our facilities, they will be sedated with an injection, taken to another room, then injected lethally. Albeit, the tube part was partially true. We carefully take apart their bodies and keep each part inside of a little preservative tube. Until we want to sell parts on the black market, and to other countries. Sometimes we sell people alive but under the heavy influence of sedative medications. We make tens of millions per person; hence we struggle not with money. We have a lot of dedicated workers on our team, so would you like to join us, and become one of them? Sure, we kill people, but at least we're not involved in insider trading." Billy was aghast, and overwhelmingly disgusted in what he had just heard. He was also genuinely concerned for his life, and for that of others in Illusiobonom.

"FIGHT," Billy thought to himself, "I can only live on if I keep fighting. I will surmount every impossible challenge, every demanding sacrifice, and incredible hardship. Failure is death. Victory is life. Even if I die, at least I'll put up a fight. I'll never throw away my morals for personal gain or benefit. Taking the life of another will erode from the happiness and joy of one's own soul. I'm not conceding my humanity for greed and money." He had evaluated his options, which consisted of mostly violent solutions, and he then awaited whatever came next.

Scared, but still confident, Billy exclaimed "No way!"

"Good, because that also was a joke. I'd be genuinely concerned if you were to accept my offer. I'll be honest, we don't really need any more staff. We already have tons of hard-working employees manning our facilities, and everything at the executive level is going well," Mr. Antoinette said, "There's nothing beyond what meets the eye with Illusiobonom, all we do is let people live out their realities as we say on TV. Do you need anything else?" Billy felt a wave of relief and was glad to hear that there is nothing wrong with Illusiobonom. He still had a couple of unanswered questions that regarded the involvement of the priminister, and their business model, but he was too afraid to ask.

Billy said, "No sir, I'll just be heading home now. Thank you so much." Billy scurried out of the office, and he drove home as fast as he can. He went home and writes out a couple of his thoughts. He came to the conclusion that it would be impossible to have sustained a business as expensive as Illusiobonom that had multiple national facilities, high technology equipment, and customers that paid only ten dollars upon entry. He realized that there might have been some truth to Mr. Antoinette's words, but he was too scared to find out.

Paralyzed by fear, Billy dared not speak out about his discovery. He knew that there was already government interference, and it was evident crimes were sanctioned for associates of Illusiobonom. Speaking out was death for him, regardless of what actually occurred within Illusiobonom facilities. He also knew that he would be in clear violation of his NDA if he spoke out, which could cost him a ton. Billy bid time, because he knew that the hammer of justice would strike down on Illusiobonom for their grave sins. His voice had been effectively silenced, and his life became extremely monotonous and off the radar.

Ten years later, Billy had still kept his mouth shut to date. Around ten thousand Canadian Citizens had gone into Illusiobonom in total. Families of customers began to complain, which caused a

global movement that supported the notion of letting people know what was going on inside. The U.N. called for an international investigation of Illusiobonom.

On December 15th 2057, the U.N. deployed a group of soldiers and detectives alike into each Illusiobonomian facility to obtain the truth. The group saw that each customer was in a poor condition. They were each wearing the same clothes that they entered in. The customers were frail, with loads of calluses coating their hands. They had been clearly malnourished by Illusiobonom. None were dead, but it became evident that each person was made to do heaps of manual labor, where they produced shoes and clothing for the company Laborem. The outside of the facilities had an almost impenetrable metal and brick shielding, and no door was even possible to unlock inside without fifteen different keys. Every other Illusiobonom facility looked exactly the same inside, and all of the customers said the same things about them, even if their respective facilities were hundreds of miles away. The facilities each had a small bathroom, kitchen, print room, and rooms for shoe production. Each corner had a camera, which were incredibly high quality and audio sensitive. The shoe production room had all necessary materials for decades of work, to minimize outside contact. Each worker had their own fax machine for daily instructions from Mark. There were no sleeping quarters because the customers were allegedly forced to sleep at their respective workstations, and only request food or the restroom when it was an emergency. The customers claimed that they were to write daily reports about the behavior and progress of their fellow workers. If a person misbehaved, or was out of order, one of the people watching the cameras from a shack nearby would come in and beat them up until the brink of death. These facilities were isolated from the outside, unless the canned food needed replenishing, the workers had completed their products, or someone needed a beating.

Monthly, an Illusiobonom employee would collect those products and put them onto a truck, where they would later be taken to Laborem headquarters in Waterloo. These produced products were then sold to Laborem for a fraction of what Laborem would later sell them for. After being payed, Mark flew to Italy to spend all of the newly acquired funds on gold. He then came back to Canada to trade in his gold for Canadian dollars, to ensure that he had only clean money.

The U.N. freed all of the customers and sent them each back to their families. The Canadian Prime Minister was removed from office because he was involved with Illusiobonom and their fraudulent ventures, which jeopardized his credibility and ruined his career. Billy finally felt like he could speak out about this because he felt safe. No corruption could silence his voice. The NDA was irrelevant because he knew that all associated of Illusiobonom were going to shambles anyways. Billy couldn't be the only one who knows some truth. Billy believed it to be his duty to talk about what he saw, and to prevent similar situations from occurring again. Thus, he wrote a book about everything he heard and experienced regarding Illusiobonom, titled 'Good Illusion, Bad Reality'. He was globally applauded, and he gained the respect of a lot of people, so when he launched his own company, he attained great prosperity and wealth. Shortly after Billy founded his own company, Mark, both of the Antoniettes, all employees, and associates of Illusiobonom were convicted of fraud, treason, human rights violations, money-laundering, and many more felonies. They got life sentences, where they had to also be constantly doing service and labor in each of the prisons they were in. Laborem and Illusiobonom alike were forced to shut down, with most families of the victims suing each company individually and being decently reimbursed.

Decades later, Billy gave a talk about his book to a group of high schoolers. Even though so much time had passed, his book was still incredibly popular and famous. "Truth is inevitable. Share the truth. Spread the truth. Repressing the truth doesn't work. Truth is light. Lies are dark. You can't put a price tag on the truth. Don't run away from your problems. No illusion can help you evade your problems. Problems don't go away because you neglect them. Keep on fighting and live a life where you always tell the truth, face your problems head-on, and bring about justice," he exclaimed "Remember, don't fall for a good illusion that causes a bad reality, because nothing is more disappointing than a life stained with lies."

Shot Through Trust

by Balthasar Laemmli

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

I sat down at my desk feeling exhausted and excited. The semester was ending, and we would have an extended weekend. I was ready to unwind on the final day of turning in our work because I've already taken care of everything in the past week. I was sitting next to one of my good friends, Nick, who looked equally tired.

"Let's end this semester with a bang," our math teacher exclaimed loudly, "remember to have all your work turned in by 11:59pm tonight so I can put in a grade for you. You guys have been doing so great and I would hate to put a failing grade in anybody's gradebook!"

His unmotivated voice did not catch anyone's attention, and no one bothered to even look at him. His classroom was rather big. It could fit about 30 students. It was always a very laid-back class because he let us do homework in class and it would turn into a study hall most of the time. I turned to Nick, one of my closest friends and we started talking about what we wanted to do over the weekend.

"Hi Nick," I greeted.

"Hey Daniel," he responded.

"Are you free on Sunday night?"

"Yeah, do you want to go watch that new Marvel movie? I've heard it's really good."

"Sure, I'll look at the times."

"Ok, should we invite Keighleigh and Alex?"

"Yeah, I'll text them right now."

"Good," I said feeling happier that I'm making plans already, "there are some good theaters near my house. We could go to th--"

I was interrupted by the shelter-in-place alarm signaling a lockdown. These drills were quite frequent at our school as there have been numerous school shooting threats at the beginning of the year.

"On the last day," I thought to myself, "really?"

I started to make my way to the back of the classroom with Nick, still thinking it is a drill and that it will be over in just a few minutes, and we could continue talking about our plans for Sunday. But then, I saw Mr. Wilson's face. It was red and panicked. He was sweating and panting. He was frantically running around the room covering the windows and turning off the lights. It was at that moment that I knew, this was not a drill. I instantly started panicking and thought that this would only end with death. I froze. Nick had to grab my arm and pull me under the countertop in the corner of the room. Everything was quiet. No one made a sound, no one moved. Tears started streaming down my cheek as I started silently sobbing. I remember seeing movies about this and how the characters always text someone "I love you". I reached for my phone and that is exactly what I did. First, I texted my mom, then my dad, my grandparents, and my friends.

I whispered to Nick, "Do you think it's real?"

"Yeah, but I doubt it's a shooter because we would have heard--"

A gunshot. Everyone heard it. The silence was the worst part. No one moved, no one made a sound. It had come from about 100 feet away. A second one. A third. A fourth. It was horrifying. It kept getting closer and further away. It was coming from all directions. I was hugging Nick just because I had no idea what else I should do.

I heard Mr. Wilson silently and frightenedly on the phone with the police, "Yes, it came from right outside my door. We're in room P-11"

Mr. Wilson had continued to speak to the police for a couple of more minutes. The gunshots had stopped for about the time that Mr. Wilson was on the phone. I was still holding Nick, and nobody had moved or spoken a word.

The first sound they had heard in a while was a knock on the door, "Sheriff's office, it's safe to come out."

I whispered to Nick, "I never heard sirens. Did you?"

"Yeah, I also never heard any."

"Me neither," chimed in a few other students.

Mr. Wilson had heard the whispers and responded with, "When there's an intruder, the police usually come silently so they can take them by surprise. The police have probably detained the shooter, that's most likely why the gunfire stopped. I'll go check with the police officer so we can safely get out of here."

He made his way to the door and opened it a little. The next thing I heard was a loud bang and I saw how Mr. Wilson fell to the floor. The girl that was next to me let out the loudest scream I have ever heard. We were all in shock that Mr. Wilson had just died before us. A dark figure emerged from the doorway.

"Don't move. Don't speak," the figure said in a deep, intimidating voice,

The person started moving around the room looking under desks, into closets, and under counters. Me and Nick did not dare interfere with this person. I knew the power they had and knew that right now, they control whether I come out of this school building alive or dead.

I felt Nick ever so slightly tucking my sleeve and uttered in the quietest whisper, "When I say 'go', we're going to run for the door, down the hallway, and outside."

"Yes," I whisper back.

The person makes their way around the room for a little longer. From what I saw, I made out that it was a man no older than the age of 25. At one point, he looked in my direction and I just stopped breathing. He looked in the closet that was about 5 feet away from our hiding place and found someone in it. There was a bang, and I immediately knew what happened.

Miraculously, he walked right by me and Nick.

"Go!"

Nick grabbed my hand, and we ran. We sprinted through the room knocking over chairs and what not. I heard screams and more gunfire coming out of the room, but I did not dare look back. Out of the room we came, and the bright light of the hallway blinded me for a second. We kept running down the hall when I tripped over something. Everything hurt. My nose started bleeding, my elbows hurt, and the pain in my hand was excruciating. I was in this stupor of pain, rolling around the floor groaning in pain. Nick was trying to help me up by grabbing my hand. I had fallen on my hand and my fingers were all facing the wrong way,

"Come on! Get up!" Nick was trying to help me up, but I could not bring myself to move.

Eventually, I gathered the strength to stand up and tried to run again. We were moving at a much slower pace because I started to feel like I was going to faint. We turned a corner, and I could see the exit doors.

"Finally, we can escape and get the hell out of here," I thought to myself. With the motivation I got from seeing the exit, I started jogging. We were about halfway through the hallway when a person appeared from a door frame in front of us. The person was wearing a black sweater and gray, ripped jeans just like the guy in Mr. Wilson's classroom also wore. But this person was taller, more muscular. I saw him holding what looked like a gun in his left hand.

He said in a stern, almost mocking voice, "Where are you going?"

I was at a loss for words. I had no idea if I should just ignore him and keep making my way to the exit or if I should freeze and comply with whatever the guy says. He put his other hand on the gun and loaded it. I heard that awful Click-Clack sound that it makes.

I turned to Nick with tears in my eyes, saying while heavily panting, "Nick, we're dead. We're going to die."

"No, Daniel, you're dead."

Nick pulled out a gun from under his sweater aiming it at me.

"Nick please don't," I gasped out. There was almost no sound in my voice. It was a faint, gasp of horror that I let out. At that moment, I died inside. Everything shattered.

Nick loaded his gun as well. He aimed it at my stomach and looked at me with a grin on his face. At that moment, it all came together. There was more than one shooter, Nick wanted to leave the room so I could die, and he purposely tripped me so I could not fight back. I looked back at Nick's face with utter disgust and sadness.

"Why would you do this?! Why me?" I cried.

"Because you're weak."

"How long have you been planning this?"

"A few months. And now, the plan can be finished," he said with a grotesque joy in his voice.

He pulled the trigger. I felt everything and nothing. The blood streamed out of my wound. Me laying in it helplessly. My eyes closed. The palpitations in my ear as Nick walked away. The sorrow in my heart. It all felt so unreal that I chose not to believe it.

My eyes opened and I saw white.

"Great, I survived, best part of my day," I thought to myself.

But after turning my head to the right I could make out two exit doors. I was so done with life. I was in extreme agony and had just been shot by someone who I thought would save me.

I inched towards those doors. It took forever. The sounds of gunfire were still echoing through the halls. I had to pretend I was dead several times when the shooters came into the hallway again. After what felt like several hours, I touched the door. I touched it, I rubbed it, I tapped it, I did anything in my power to just even try to move it. Nothing happened. I gave up. I closed my eyes.

"Wake... safe... up," I heard a voice say. I had not fully woken up yet and came to so I could only make out those words.

I felt my body being lifted off the ground and onto a soft fabric. Something touched my face and that was when the oxygen started flowing. I opened my eyes. I saw people crowding around me in what seemed to be an ambulance. I started being able to process everything, that was when I felt the pain. It was a sharp, horrible pain in the center of my stomach. I screamed. I screamed so loud everyone around me was startled. The paramedics put me to sleep. I woke up, the third time that day, in a hospital room. This time, my family was surrounding me. They were all crying. I was not sure if they were tears of joy because I had woken up or tears of sorrow because of what happened to me.

I went home two weeks after that. I had learned that at least twenty students had been killed and some were still in critical condition. I returned to school another week later after having overcome most of my trauma with a therapist.

I was swarmed at school. Everyone wanted to know everything from how I survived to how I was feeling. School was such a surreal place after what happened to me there just a short time ago.

I was still processing being shot by someone I trusted. I knew that it would still be a long time until I fully recovered mentally. Maybe, I would not even fully recover at all. The pain was still too much to process. But, it was getting better because of spending time with friends. Friends that I trust.

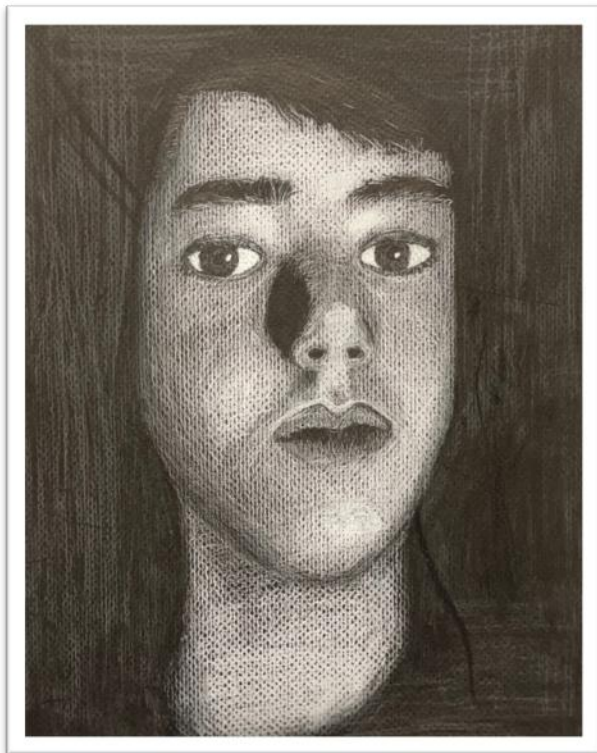
The Knight in Cardboard Armor

by John Blakely

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

JOHN BLAKELY | Grade 8



I was a bit of an imaginative child when I was a boy, and looking back I was also quite comical. One day, when I was five years old, my parents went out of the house to go get groceries, and I was left alone. I had been sitting on the couch watching television and eating baby carrots when all of a sudden, I heard a noise from downstairs. I jumped behind the living-room sofa. After a few minutes of waiting, I decided to be a “big boy” and try to find out what made the noise. I realized that the noise must have come from the basement, and so I thought of how to prepare for such a task.

I knew this would be a daunting journey and that it would take plenty of supplies in order to fully be completed. The night before my parents and I had watched a movie about King Arthur. I had seen the horses, javelins, armor, swords, and everything else there was to know about protection in the 5th century A.D. Because of this, you can imagine how much of a genius I felt when I was able to produce for myself a set of armor. My first obstacle in my quest for the armor was getting a pair of scissors

from the cabinet I was not allowed to go in. However, after a few jumps (and the obtaining of a stool), I ended up doing just that. Then, scissors in hand, I went into the dark garage and stumbled over some old cardboard boxes.

“My suit of armor!” I whispered excitedly.

After cutting some holes in the boxes, I had procured a helmet, a chest plate, and some leggings. Finally, I had to find my weapon. And because I had watched the medieval movie the night before I decided to go with the classic sword. I knew that, in order to take down the basement beast, it had to be sharp and, thus, extremely unsafe and dangerous for the use of a five-year-old child. Don’t worry, I did not grab the kitchen knife, instead, I drew a sword on my coloring book, and then glued it onto a cardboard cutout. This weapon that I had was the definition of *cool* as it made me feel powerful and unstoppable. I felt like one of the knights of the Round Table, ready to do anything!

I was prepared to go down the stairs. Through my five-minute arts and crafts session, I had done something that would take grown men days. Wait, I had almost forgotten, I also called upon my noble steed Oliver! Oliver has been my companion through trouble and strife; he has shared my sweat and tears; and he is also my dog. Together, like a true knight and horse, we glided down the stairwell. As I reached the door, I heard another sound. The sound of something hitting the ground rang right through my ears and my feet automatically skidded to a stop. A noise, something like growling, wormed its way into my terrified, little ears.

In my head, I screamed, “I am just a little boy, please don’t hurt me!”

Then I thought of how badly I wanted to be a man, and I knew I could not give up, not yet. And so, I levitated swiftly back up the stairs and considered a new plot that had just popped into my head.

The idea that was so ingenious, so insane, so amazing, was lunch. After my masterminded meal of leftover pizza, I considered a second attempt. This time I knew that whatever was in the basement may take a while to fight (If I could get myself to fight it), and so I took apple slices with peanut butter, as well as a water bottle, on my quest. I paused for a moment to remember all that I went through in the past 30 minutes. I had done things that I never thought I could. Fighting this *thing* would require the newfound confidence I had acquired during my travels up and down the stairwell. Oliver and I were ready to come down the stairs once more, hoping to slay the evil beast that was surely terrorizing the basement's inhabitants.

At the basement, I opened the door and turned the light on using the switch I was barely able to reach. I found an open can on the ground followed by a trail of tomato-sauce-covered footprints. These footprints led straight behind a box. As I laid my hand on it, I heard an intense purr-like growl. (Not giving up). And when I turned the box over, I found the beast. It had smooth black fur, glistening sharp white teeth, and a tail just as long as its body. The problem was that it wasn't a monster; it was an adorable little kitten.

Just as I found him, I heard the front door swing open.

I yelled, "Mom, dad, come here!"

They realized that I was in the basement and ran down to see if I was okay.

Once they saw me in my cardboard armor, they knew I was on one of my little adventures again. I asked them if we could keep the beast, and they reluctantly decided that we could; I was elated. I realized after this amazing experience that to get over a fear, you have to face it.

Now I had a noble steed as well as a dragon!

The Lucid and the Ignorant

by Matthew Bahniuk

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

Amid the dominant bleakness characteristic of the winter period, the squalid Antoine Johnson deviated from his minute shack situated among numerous other proletarian establishments. There was no logical purpose or objective for which Antoine sought, but, rather, a random inclination which had suddenly possessed him. It was due to this grand instinct—which it may be more convenient to term as curiosity—that Antoine did diverge from his dwelling. The monotony of the proletariat's being had been too much to bear; Antoine was in pursuit of an, albeit small, experience, which he would be allowed to cherish in his memory in the future.

The general terrain of the encompassing area of Antoine's residence was of great familiarity to him; it was, however, the great chasm subdividing his minor land from the uncharted territory that lay beyond, that chained Antoine to his home. The indescribable terror of meandering too far from his habitat sufficed to pressure Antoine to the bounds of his isolated sector of land; it was then a doubt of whether Antoine's curiosity or terror would prevail.

It had been, without question, the former. The reign of terror had oppressed Antoine's soul; the regime of fear had for too long been established and productive. The era of dread was then to be beheaded by that of inquisitiveness. It had been with this renewal of spirit that Antoine did embark on his venture, his objective, to sate the demands of his newfound curiosity.

It was until Antoine's encountering of the great ravine that his sentiments of optimism did remain in high capacity; for, upon the mere sight of the split in land, Antoine had been compelled to

turn back, and abandon all prospects of discovery. However, to his great surprise, Antoine chose to proceed. Upon being so close as to fall from inside the void, a vivid realization was awakened within him; the chasm had not nearly been as large, nor as menacing, as he had originally found. The gorge existed only in his imagination, as he never had truly gazed within it. It was with this other startling discovery that he simply strode about the ravine, moving on not with hesitation, but motivation to further nurture his inquisitiveness.

Having made several consecutive revelations, and debased a fundamental axiom of life he previously considered true (that of remaining in one's domain), Antoine's hunger for more adventure exponentially increased, so that it turned ravenous. Antoine could nearly have sprinted forth, but his incapacitated body prevented him, at length, from strenuous actions upon the body.

Despite this, he, most unwisely, strained his own self. Antoine dashed onwards, when his environment suddenly, of its nature, changed. His dilapidated dwelling was of all luxuries absent, and of all isolation, copious. It was due to this that the sight of large, triumphant edifices dazed Antoine. They consisted of beams and spires, the latter of which disappeared into the clouds spread far above. They were swarmed of individuals who were donned in fine apparel, and upon various forms of transportation, all of which Antoine had never witnessed. A substance unknown to Antoine was in large amounts in the air, being emitted from about all conceivable origins. With these many factors was he intrigued, prompting his descent through the slope distancing himself from this new region.

To Antoine, it seemed, these individuals were of the same species as himself. To his surprise it then was, that he was very rapidly avoided and shunned by these other humans. As they traversed, they altered their routes of travel so that their distances from Antoine were not less than two meters of length; it was also strange how the foreign humans' countenances distorted from those of normalcy to vehement repugnance within moments. The infants beneath the wings of their mothers were disturbed by the sight of Antoine; they began to violently shriek, inducing their mother's deep analyses as to the source of discomfort. Upon realizing Antoine's responsibility for the fright of their young, the females began to pummel him with the strikes of infuriated souls. Antoine could determine not one justification for the torture inflicted upon him; had he done any wrong? Shortly afterwards, the men, too, became discontented; the noticing of their angry wives stirred them to hatred. Seeing, also, the appearance of a proletariat who brought about fear and hate to their wives and children inclined the men to join in the torture of Antoine. It was by this time that the instinct of fear regained its dominance over Antoine; shielding his face and all else that could be accessed from incoming harm, Antoine fled far from the crowd.

Having found the least of an asylum, Antoine was brought to the realization that he had lost himself. In his spell of curiosity, he had developed a loose control over his mind, and thus found himself in the current unfortunate circumstance in which he now was. Bruised and scarred, Antoine pledged to never leave the confines of his residence again. Although his makeshift refuge, which was a desolate region positioned at the crest of a hill, did not rival his horrendous cabin, it suited him better than naught. Antoine was equipped with a panoramic view of the dimension of the bourgeoisie; the large edifices no longer seemed fascinating as they once had, nor the people as splendid. He considered it all to be abhorrent and nightmarish.

It was at this moment precisely that a peculiar anomaly entered Antoine's vision. Into his perspective an object, which could, at minimum, be denoted as an illusion, could be obviously seen. Of its nature Antoine could ascertain nothing, and, aware of this, he was prompted to a more thorough scrutiny of the thing. It had a complex structure, with various geometrical forms of mostly dark colors. From it emanated a ghastly essence which could not be felt. But with this higher order of inspection was Antoine's already shattered soul further battered. His spirit was plunged into a mood that resulted in the temporary paralysis of his body; he could not be brought to movement nor thought. This illusion--if as this it may be named--was in closer analogy to a portent than a mere natural phenomenon. It was a warning of calamity, of impending doom; and this message of utmost significance was correctly

interpreted by Antoine. He foresaw the deaths of many a person; peculiarly enough, however, he could not predict his own fate.

It was with this that the reins of fear loosened their supremacy over Antoine. Despite the immense suffering he previously endured, he returned to the lair of his punishment, with an air not of curiosity, but of necessity to warn the others.

The previous enthusiasm that had defined his disposition had long since vanished. Upon arriving once more at his destination, now frantic as opposed to gleeful, the identical reaction as had occurred before took place. He was very quickly shunned and glared at.

"You all," he said, "I have the most unfortunate species of news to propagate. I have seen the most unusual of naturally occurring phenomena. It whispers to me the dreadful fates of you, which will arrive much sooner than anticipated."

A sudden silence had seemed to consume the crowd. Although they had very clearly heard Antoine's cries of warning, they were not stirred to listen, nor to act. Among the first to respond was a woman, who was finely dressed and was encircled by several others who seemed to be her companions.

"The uneducated proletariat speaks? Such a pleasant surprise! I could never know that the hour would come in which one of the lower class would administer commands," she said.

Her comment was supported by laughter on all ends of the crowd. None of them could care; they only lent their attention to that which may boost their egos or inflate their bank accounts.

"Sir, do you happen to be acquainted with any field of study? Do you have any licenses? I happen to, and, as I must regretfully inform you, no such omens or tellers of the future exist. You are attempting to instill unnecessary fear and lies into our peaceful domain. To you, I can only respond: be gone!" said a man who had an atmosphere of both education and ignorance.

Although his tone was serious, his face had come to possess an idiosyncratic shade of red. Very shortly after, as though his countenance was to erupt, the man burst into a violent laughter.

The bourgeois, on this occasion, did not bother to physically torture Antoine. Earlier, they had resorted only to physical attacks because Antoine had seemed to be a regular proletariat, one not worth the utterance of a single vowel. Now, however, they used the device of words to slice him; this made them no less sadistic. The words, in fact, penetrated Antoine in greater degree than any physical strike.

It was with this that Antoine fled once more. Very quickly he forgot the others and thought only in regards to his own self. He had been humiliated and beaten both in the soul and in the body. The ravine, which somehow seemed yet more minute than before, was to him of no interest whatever; in fact, no object nor feeling bore to it any significance to him.

The previous exertions Antoine had forced upon his body now took their toll. As he stumbled into his shack, he dropped to the floor with such force as to injure yet another sector of his body. The body of Antoine had been dirtied and wasted; it served no purpose and had lived sordidly for all its being. As Antoine finalized the assimilation of this fact, a sludgy tear materialized in his eye, and a momentary tremor flowed through his skeleton. He was to exit the corporal world in solitude, in poverty, and in starvation; the three great burdens of his poor soul that had accompanied him to the tomb.

It had been not more than three hours since. Rumors of the demented proletariat ran rapidly in the well-developed town. Not an individual could bring himself to hold faith in the dire warnings of Antoine; in fact, they had all refused to listen. As the comfortable families with not a burden upon their shoulders prepared themselves for another night of rest, still with a tinge of laughter lying in their throats, a slight vibration in the ground could be felt; but this was promptly dismissed as the sound of a storm. As the minor vibration evolved to a moderate shake, panic began to strike the citizens more sharply than their words had struck Antoine. The shaking then became a series of spasms, and then a raging movement of the land itself. The supposedly invulnerable palaces of the wealthy toppled and dropped to the ground, burying with them their possessors, who now comprehended what they had done.

In My Hands

by Fernanda Naranjo Franco

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon



Wake up. Eat. Get ready. Go to work. Come home, eat dinner, sleep. That's what my life consisted of. Every day the same routine. No excitement, no special someone, no happiness. It was all meaningless; I didn't see my purpose. There'd be days in which I would just never leave my house. And ever since I can remember it has just been me. I was never really close with my family and had lost contact with them a while back. And I'm not a very social person either. I seemed to be existing yet not living. That was until I went to see my doctor that Sunday May 19, 2022. It was for my usual visit, to get a refill for my anti-depressants. But this time, my doctor wanted to speak to me first.

"Come on in Eric," said the doctor, "I just want to speak to you about a new possible solution for you." It had been years since I was first prescribed my anti-depressants and that's all I had to help me.

"A team of scientists created a pill. It is said to take a person back to a time during their

peak years. It'll take you back to the age 23 with all the knowledge you have now. This then will allow you to make a change in direction for your life." he explained, almost impassively. In that moment I blanked. I just couldn't process it. Really? A possible cure for me? Right now, I think I would do just about anything to be happy again.

"That's all? One pill that will allow me to rewrite my life?" I asked with the only words I could manage to get out.

"Yes," the doctor replied. I started thinking some more. As much as I wanted to have taken it without even thinking, my mind still needed to have some questions answered.

"And are there any risks that I should be severely concerned of?" I asked, knowing that not a lot could make me not want to take it.

"Well, you would be one of the first to try it. A guineapig per se. The risks are still in the unknown." the doctor mentioned. I took a second, gathered my thoughts, and made a decision. If you really think about it, the odds were in my favor. If I were to go back with all my knowledge, I could do everything right. I'd be able to make all the successful decisions that would lead to my happiness. I would start a brand-new life, be a new me. I really didn't have much to lose and frankly, it was worth the risk. "Ok, I'm in," I finally concluded, "when do I start?"

And just like that, the pill was in my hands and my brand new, improved future ahead of me. I put the pill against the tip of my tongue, sipped from my cup of water, and swallowed it.

I woke up because of the strong sunlight peering through my window. I had no clue for how long I'd been sleeping. All I know is that when I started to stand up, I felt no pain. I hadn't felt that way in the

longest time. I went to the closest mirror to see myself. My reflection hit my view. It worked! I looked 23 again yet seemed to retain all my previous knowledge. I couldn't quite believe it; it was all so crazy. But to reassure me I wasn't dreaming, the clock hanging over my bed stated May 20th, 2000. "Today is going to be a good day." I affirmed to myself in the mirror. The day seemed bright ahead of me. I quickly got ready in my favorite clothes, as it felt fit for the occasion, treated myself to a nice breakfast, and well...started rewriting my future.

The first set of years went beautifully. Since I remembered everything from my previous years of life, I would win bets all the time. I'd bet my friends on who would win the Super Bowl each year, who would score that goal, predict what movies would win Oscars and win every single time. This knowledge also came to my advantage for when the pandemic of 2020 would strike. I had already created my business that sold masks and I had invested in zoom. It seemed money rained for me. During this time, I rejected every job offer and did not meet any people that brought me any sort of negativity in my old life. I was in my honeymoon phase in life. I was on the highway to my dream life, and everything was falling into place. However, I did notice I started to miss the excitement of the unknown. I always knew what was coming, but I guess that's a small price to pay for all I've been able to fix. Yet, this feeling only started to collect more momentum as time went on. And as time kept moving forward, I found myself losing grasp of that new excitement and happiness that was brought from the change.

That realization settled one month after I had returned to my original age, 45. Yes, I'd relived my life the way I'd wanted to. I was successful and had everything I had ever wanted. But that day, I felt oh so empty. Why all of a sudden did I not feel fulfilled? It started to hit me that I was heading down the same path I was on. How did I restart my life, make all the correct choices, and still end up where I started? I'd spend days laying around, without anything to do, no one to see. I had a beautiful house, and I could afford whatever I wanted. But I guess that didn't change the fact that I was still alone. No amount of money or riches could make up for the whole within my heart that kept me up at night. I only came to terms then, but that was the one problem I was yet to solve. It was a need that had been wanting to be satisfied for the longest time and I just hadn't known how. And then I remembered the true purpose of me taking that pill and reliving my life. "Rewrite your future" I told myself. Whatever I made of my future was in my hands and I didn't have to sit with what was currently sitting at my feet.

So that's what I did. I rewrote my future. I picked up the bits and pieces of my life that I had to put together. As years passed, I worked on myself. I went out of my comfort zone and met people who are now my life-long friends and who I thank God for every day. I gave to others which in result made me feel good about myself. I found a job I love and surrounded myself with an environment that made me happy. Life wasn't "wake up, eat, get ready, go to work. come home, eat dinner, sleep" anymore. It gave me joy to be alive at this very moment. So much that by 50, my antidepressants weren't prescribed to me anymore. Yes, it might have taken me a trip to the past and living two lifetimes, but I truly understand now. I understand that it is in my power to guide my life the way I want it to go. It is entirely in my hands.

Passing Nightmare

by Lucas de Godoy

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

Martin walked home from work to his house on the edge of the woods. He lived in a small town up north, where he worked as an insurance salesman. He stopped at the local grocery store to pick up milk and eggs. He followed the dirt trail leading up to his house, the pine trees seemed to stare at him as he walked by. He arrived at his house, almost engulfed by trees. His dog, Scott, was laying on the porch.

“So how was your day?” Martin asked playfully. Scott laid unresponsive. Martin sighed and opened the door. Scott followed him inside and laid at the foot of Martin’s bed. Martin sat down on his old couch, stained and ripped, and turned on the TV. His stomach rumbled as he watched the 7 o’clock news. It’s the same as always, people die, the police find the one responsible, and it all repeats itself again. He was too tired to make himself a real dinner, so using the milk he had just purchased half an hour before, he made himself a bowl of cereal. He sat back on the couch and listened to the news anchor say something about a recent murder. About an hour later, the news ended, so he turned the TV off and put his bowl back into the sink, which was full of dirty dishes he had yet to wash. He slowly shuffled towards his bed, climbed atop, and sluggishly pulled the covers over him. He was exhausted from his long day at work. He fell asleep at 8:23 PM.

Suddenly, he woke up and looked at the clock, which said 10:42 PM. The TV was on, but it was just static. Scott was sleeping peacefully at the foot of the bed. Martin gets up and turns off the TV. He looked outside the window and saw nothing. It was abnormally dark. Martin flipped the light switch, but it didn’t work. It was still very dark. “Huh,” he exclaimed in confusion. “Maybe the fuse box...?” he thought to himself. He opened the door to go check the fuse box. It was extremely dark outside. He looked up into the sky, but he couldn’t even see the moon, even though there were no clouds. It was as if all light in the world had simply vanished. He walked around to the side of the house. He opened the fuse box, but it was empty. “What!?” he exclaimed. “What happened to the-” suddenly the ground started to crumble below him. He turned and ran back into the house. The TV was back on, and the static was still plaguing the screen. Everything was collapsing into an empty void below, which was somehow darker than the moon-less sky. “Help!” he shouted in vain. The ground crumbled away below him, and he fell into the dark void. He heard the static growing louder. He felt a chill run down his spine. The static was deafeningly loud.

He woke up startled. “It was just a dream,” he sighed in relief. Scott was sleeping at the foot of the bed. The TV was on, but it was just static. He turned it off. He looked out the window. It was still very dark. He flipped the light switch on, but it still wasn’t working. “Again?” he thought aloud. He opened the door and walked outside over to the fuse box. Thick vines coming from the forest were all along the floor. “That’s strange,” he thought. “I’ll have to trim those tomorrow.” He opened the fuse box, which was no longer empty. He flipped the switches on, but the only thing that gained power again was the TV. “Strange,” he thought, “I’ll have to call a repairman tomorrow.” He stepped back inside and closed the door behind him. The TV was back on, and still blasting the static. “I guess I’ll watch some TV,” he said, grabbing the remote and flipping to the next channel. The TV didn’t respond. “Huh?” he said, confused. “I guess the batteries are dead.” Suddenly he heard a blood-curdling scream from outside, followed in quick succession by a gunshot. Martin anxiously ran towards the door to see what was happening, but as he got closer, the TV static got louder, and louder. He wrapped his hand around the doorknob with the intention of opening it, but it was somehow locked from the outside. He ran towards the window. The static was very loud now. He looked out the window. He saw a dark figure standing over the body of a woman, presumably in her 30s, holding a gun, still steaming from the gunshot. The static was deafeningly loud.

Martin woke up in shock. “Another dream?” he said, surprised. Scott was sleeping at the foot of the bed. The TV was on, but it’s just static. He looked at the clock, which now says 11:32 PM. He got out of bed and walked towards the light switch. As he had anticipated, the lights were still not working. “The fuse box should be working now,” he thought, “It was just a dream after all, right?” He opened the door and walked outside and over to the fuse box. The vines had grown all over the back of the house, covering the fuse box. “How did this happen!?” he thought. It was as if the forest was conscious and was trying to drag the house into it. “Who do I even call to fix this?!” he shouted, still stunned at how quickly the vines had grown. He walked back inside, still confused. Suddenly he heard a loud thud come from the basement, along with a noise that resembled that of dragging something across the floor. “What was that?” he asked himself, approaching the stairs to the basement. He slowly crept down the

carpeted stairs to the heavy basement door. The dragging and stuffing noise continued until he touched his fingertips to the doorknob, which caused the sound to suddenly stop. Martin slowly opened the door to the basement, which opened with a slow creaking into a dark, cold room. He stepped into the dark basement, the door shutting behind him.

The darkness was so thick you could cut it with a knife. He felt his hand along the wall until he came upon a light switch. He flipped it upwards, which illuminated the seemingly impregnable darkness. The basement was empty, except for a brown box in the corner that said "MEMORIES" on the side in black ink, resting upon a crimson red carpet. He walked over to the box and opened it to reveal a collection of pictures of Scott, his wife, and him. It had been years since his wife had passed away. It was right after they had gotten into an argument, although he could hardly remember the reason, and she stormed out of the house in a fit of rage, only to be murdered by some sick psychopath. He looked through the pictures, remembering the good times he had with his wife and Scott, until he heard a gunshot from outside. "Another!?" he thought nervously. He sprinted towards the basement door, but it wouldn't open. "What?!" he yelled anxiously, "It's stuck!" He slammed his body against the door repeatedly, but it would not budge. "Help! I'm stuck!" he shouted, "Please!" The basement light began to flicker, until it went out. He was now surrounded by the impenetrable darkness once again. He could feel the sweat trickling down his forehead as he banged desperately for the door to open. He started to hear the static again. "Again!?" he thought, as the static grew louder. The static became so loud, that Martin put his hands over his ears in a futile effort to block out the noise. The static was deafeningly loud.

Martin woke up, covered in sweat. "Just a dream," he thought, "nothing to be scared of". He looked at the clock which now says 12:07 AM. The TV was on, but it's just static. Scott was at the foot of the bed. He automatically assumed that the power wasn't working and didn't even bother going outside to check the fuse box. "This was super weird" he said, staring into the TV static. He swore he could almost see a dark figure in the static, but he was probably just hallucinating. His stomach began to rumble, and he walked over to the kitchen to get something to eat. "A glass of milk sounds nice," he said to himself, opening the fridge door, but the fridge was empty. "What the heck?" he said, confused. "I could've sworn I had got milk and eggs earlier". "I think the store was still open. I better go get some milk now before I forget again". Martin opened the door and began his 20-minute walk down to town.

The trees, almost covered in vines, leaned towards the dirt road he was treading on, as if they were watching and analyzing his every move. Shortly, he arrived at the town. He looked back at the forest and saw that the vines were slowly creeping out of the trees, and into the town. For some strange reason, the town had a sort of empty feeling that made it seem like it had been abandoned for a long time. He approached the grocery store, which was strangely the only building with the lights still on. He walked inside, but for some reason, the entire store was empty. He walked over to the milk aisle, which had a single carton of milk left on it. "Well, that's convenient," he said, slightly amused. For some reason, the grocer was not there, so he paid for the milk and left the money on the counter. He turned and walked out of the grocery store, whistling a tune he had heard from a TV commercial to try and break the eerie silence. He had not walked a hundred yards when he turned and noticed that the lights in the grocery store had gone out. "That's weird" he said, as he turned and walked back up the dirt road.

He was about halfway back to his house when he heard that same familiar gunshot in the distance. He sprinted back towards his house, the static from the TV growing louder with every step, until he came across the same figure holding the gun, standing over the woman. "What have you done!?" he yelled at the man, "You've just shot this poor woman!" The figure holding the gun turned towards him. They locked eyes. It was himself. He stared into his own eyes, and his own eyes stared back, except those were his eyes no longer. They were the eyes of a murderer, the eyes of a psychopath, who had just killed a woman in cold blood. "You're..." he stuttered, "you're me?" The static got louder. A freakish smile stretched over the face of the murderer. The static was deafeningly loud.

Martin woke up. "It was just another dream..." he thought, "Will it ever end?" He looked at the clock, which said 1:54 AM. The TV was on, but it was just static. Scott was at the foot of the bed. Martin noticed that his house now looked centuries older. The wallpaper was peeling, the ceiling was stained, and everything was coated in a thick layer of dust. Martin's stomach rumbled once again, and he got up and walked towards the fridge. It was still empty. "I guess I better go get more milk," he said half-heartedly, as if this strangeness had become some sort of routine, some sort of chore. He opened the door and stepped outside. A cold air washed over him. "Why was it so cold all of a sudden?" he thought. His house was covered by vines, but he didn't seem to notice. He closed the door behind him and began his slow walk to town.

He arrived at the town and was treated to a peculiar sight. There was not a single drop of light emanating from the town. All the buildings looked older and were full of cracks. The forest was overgrown, the trees were seeping into the town. The vines had grown over every square foot of the town. Every building was covered in thick vines. It was as if the forest had swallowed up the town. "Forget the milk, what the heck happened to the town!?" Martin yelled in shock. Once again, he heard the gunshot coming from his house. He turned and fled from the town, running as fast as he could back home. He made it home, and found the door wide open, with a trail of blood leading inside. He walked inside and saw the static still broadcasting through the TV, with the strange dark figure still there, walking closer to the screen. Scott had disappeared from the foot of the bed. Martin saw the trail of blood stop at the foot of the basement door. He could hear dragging and stuffing noises coming from inside the basement. He crept down the steps, his shoes getting stained with blood from the trail, until he reached the doorknob. Once again, as soon as his fingertips touched the doorknob, the sounds had ceased. He opened the door.

The basement was empty, except for the brown box with "MEMORIES" written on the side, now in bright red ink, and the crimson red carpet. The trail of blood continued towards the red carpet, but then suddenly stopped. Martin lifted up the carpet and uncovered a secret compartment in the floor. Martin lifted up the wood boards, to find a large burlap sack stained with blood. Martin opened the bag and dumped its contents onto the floor. It was the corpse of his wife. "Oh my god!" he yelled in surprise. There was a bullet wound that pierced through her stomach. The TV static grew louder. "I did this?" he thought to himself. He was reminded of the argument he and his wife had had before she died, how angry he was. The static grew louder. He thought of the wicked smile he had seen on his face after he had seen himself shoot the gun. The static was deafeningly loud.

Martin woke up in pure horror. "Dream," he muttered to himself, sweat pouring down his face. The windows had broken open, allowing the vines to seep into his house. Everything was covered in vines and moss. His house resembled more a forest than a house now. He looked at his clock. It was broken, with vines coming in and out of it. The TV remained intact, however even it was covered in vines. It was still broadcasting the static. Scott was still gone. Martin walked over to the TV, and brushed the vines off the old, cracked screen. He saw the dark figure closer than ever before. The figure approached the screen, and he could see that it was the 7 o'clock news anchor. She began reading the news off the stack of paper in her hands.

"A local woman identified as Martha Quinn was murdered earlier today by her husband, Martin Quinn. Police surrounded his house at about 3:00 PM today, where he committed suicide out of pure desperation..."

The news anchor kept talking, but Martin didn't want to listen any longer. He felt a mix of emotions wash over him, all at the same time. It was time to end this nightmare. He walked over to the kitchen and grabbed a knife off the countertop. He positioned it against his stomach. A strange smile contorted his face, the same gut-wrenching smile he had seen on his face once before. He pushed the knife through his stomach and collapsed to the floor. "It's always the same old story," he thought, his smile growing wider. People die, the police find the one responsible, and it all repeats itself again.

The Dreams That Saved Her Life

by Mia Sullivan

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

Silence. Complete silence was what 17-year-old Addison Acosta heard when she first opened her eyes. It was a chilly fall day in San Diego, California. October 26, 2019 was the date she had read on the TV put in front of her. She looked around the room. It was very plain. Gray walls, a TV, and one picture of a frog in black and white. She noticed she was lying on a bed with a nightstand next. On the nightstand was only one thing. An ancient lamp that looked almost as if it had mold on it. She turned her body, and the bed creaked the loudest sound she had ever heard. It caught her off guard. She jumped in fright from the sound. As soon as the bed made that noise, two faces instantly appeared in her vision.

"What- wha- w- w- where am I?" she managed to get out of her mouth. She had no idea where she was and no idea what was going on.

"Oh my gosh, sweetie, you're awake," spoke a woman in surprise and shock.

This was a woman she had never quite seen before. She looked to be in her late 40s, early 50s maybe. She had bright blue eyes and very fair skin. Her light brown hair was in a high ponytail, with a few front pieces framing her face. She was wearing white jeans with a blue V-neck long sleeve shirt that had the word 'DREAM' written across the middle. She was staring at Addison with her eyes brightening the more she stared. She had a massive smile on her face, but Addison found her smile quite ugly.

"Who are you?" Addison asked, questioning whether she knows this woman or not.

She was trying to remember who this woman was, but nothing came into her head. She had never seen her before. Her mind became filled with even more confusion as she turned to the man next to this woman.

"And you? Who are you guys?"

She didn't recognize him either. She found that very weird. Why was she stuck in a room she had never been in, with two people she had never seen before? What was she missing?

He was a tall man with big brown eyes and freckles. He had a lot of freckles. More than she could count. Weird, she thought. Why didn't she know them? He was wearing a black sweatshirt and gray sweatpants that had the Nike symbol on them. She noticed his lips, they were bright pink, way brighter lips than the woman had.

"Addison, honey, I'm your father, and this is your mother. Do you remember us?" Her father noticed her confusion and spoke again, "You got into a car crash. You have been in a coma. We thought you wouldn't make it."

Addison was in shock. She never remembered getting into a car crash, and even worse, she didn't remember her parents ever looking like this. Addison quickly realized her brain didn't remember anything. She had so many questions but decided it would be easier to stay quiet. Addison felt lost. Her mind was spinning. Like she didn't belong or like something was out of place. Something was off, she could tell. But what? She had no idea, but soon she was going to find out that all her instincts were right all along.

"Where are we?" the teenager asked her parents. She felt locked in this place. Like there was no escape for some strange reason.

"We are at our house, and this is your room," spoke her mother with that constant smile remaining on her face.

Addison wasn't sure why she was smiling so much, but she noticed her teeth were very yellow and crooked. How is she, my mother? Addison was confused and didn't even know what to do or think anymore. Why didn't she remember anything? Why wasn't she in a hospital? How long was she in a

coma? How bad was the accident? Those were questions that filled her mind over and over again. She never remembered her room ever looking like this. Why was it so plain and ugly?

"Addison, honey, your dad and I are going to get started on dinner. We know you must have a lot of questions, but we think you should get some more rest," spoke her mom to break her out of her thoughts.

They left the room, and she dozed off again.

"Kidnapping only happens in movies," she said to her best friend while setting the book down. "We don't need to read about it."

"Well, how many people do you think don't know that they are kidnapped because they were forced to only know it like that?"

"I don't know, probably a lot if you think about it," she replied, realizing she wasn't going to win.

"Fine. We can read the chapters due tomorrow but then after, can we make Tik Toks?"

"Ok, that works," replied Amelia, happy that she could get her homework done.

"Addison, dinner is ready!"

Addison shot her eyes open, startled by those words. She had fallen asleep. Oh, that was only a dream. She rapidly got out of bed and left the room, only more confused when she realized she didn't know how to get to the kitchen. She could go left or right, and she decided to go right. She quickly noticed that she was walking into another bedroom as she walked. She continued walking in that direction with curiosity until she was in the room. She looked around. White walls, a bed, a chair, and a painting with another type of frog were what she saw in this room.

"What are you doing?" Addison turned around, startled by the voice behind her.

Her mother looked at her with a stern look on her face.

"I uh I got lost, I don't know where the kitchen is," replied Addison, quickly walking out of the room. She waited for her mother to leave the room and followed her into the kitchen.

A few days went by, and everything remained unfamiliar and felt strange to Addison. She had asked to go outside, and her parents told her that she wasn't well enough to leave the house yet. Something about that answer didn't settle well with Addison. She found it very odd, almost as if the outside world hid something from her. She decided to ignore her ever-running thoughts and did everything her parents told her. Shortly after dinner one night, she fell asleep and had another dream.

"Happy Birthday to you, happy birthday to you. Happy birthday dear Addison, happy birthday to you!" The 8th candle went out right before she was going to blow it. She looked up to see her dad running to her cake to relight the candle. His long blonde hair almost caught on fire as he bent over to relight her candle. Addison quickly blew it out, looked up, and saw her beautiful African American mom cheering and smiling at her. With beautiful straight white teeth, she thought to herself. She wished to smile like that when she was older. Addison couldn't wait to grow up and become more like her mom.

She woke up, gasping for air. She was dripping in sweat, and her head was pounding. She had had another dream. But what was strange about this one was how familiar it felt. It felt more like a memory than a dream. The mother and father in the dream made her feel more loved and safer than her parents did. She felt as if she knew those people like she had met them before. She got up and walked to the bathroom. As she looked in the mirror, she noticed she looked like the mom in her dream. Her skin was the color of mocha, and her teeth were as white as clouds. She smiled in the mirror and immediately felt goosebumps. The smile reflecting back at her was the one her mom had in her dream.

Time went by, and day after day, she couldn't stop thinking about her dreams. She felt like they were snapshots of her real life and that her life right now was a lie. But how could this be? Why did her dreams feel more familiar than her day-to-day life? She second-guessed her life every day and constantly wondered how she got to where she was right now. She always had thought something was off, and now she was more confident than ever that the life she was living was not the life she was born into.

Later that day, she finally got her chance. She was in her room, doing absolutely nothing but staring at the ugly gray wall that was peeling more and more by day. Her parents hadn't given her anything for entertainment except a book series called *Dork Diaries* that she has read over 6 times. She had nothing else to do except read the stories that she honestly didn't even find interesting. She wanted to do something else, something more exciting. Since Addison knew there was nothing else for her to do, she decided to re-read the second book of the series, which happened to be her favorite one of them all. She was about to flip to the second page when she heard the front door slam close. That was something she had never heard before. Her parents had never left the house since she had gotten out of her coma. She immediately called out for her mom and dad but got no response. For the first time, she was alone. She quickly ran and tried to follow her parents out the door, but it was too late. She was dead-bolted in. She finally realized that she had been forced to stay in this house for whatever reason. At this moment, she remembered when her parents told her she couldn't go outside. She didn't even know whether to call them her parents. She prayed they weren't her parents and didn't believe they were. It wasn't for her health that she couldn't go outside. They didn't care at all about her health. She may not have ever been in a coma. They had kept her in the house so that she couldn't escape. They wanted her here. They were holding her captive.

Desperate for answers, she looked around the house for anything that would confirm her suspicions. She had to be fast because she didn't know how long she would be alone. Then, out of the corner of her eye, she noticed a door that she had never seen before. The door was locked, but she still tried to open it over and over again. Finally, she managed to break the door open with one final push. In the center of the room was a desk with a laptop. As she quickly opened the computer, her hands shook with fear. As soon as the screen lit up, what she saw took her breath away. It was an Instagram page. It was her Instagram page. Picture after picture, her dreams became a reality. She saw the long blonde-haired man in her dreams and the beautiful woman with the most beautiful smile she had ever seen.

As she clicked on the photo, she saw a caption under it which she mumbled out loud to herself, "To my beautiful parents, happy anniversary. Thank you for everything that you do for me. I love you guys so much."

She was speechless. All along, she had suspected something was wrong, and this was the proof that she was right. She was kidnapped. She was lost for words and wasn't sure what to do. But what she did know was that she wanted her real-life back. She reacted quickly and decided to send multiple direct messages to the contacts she had followed on her Instagram account, desperately hoping someone could track her down. She realized it was a huge risk, and the kidnappers could find out. But she knew this could be her only chance to get her real life back. She took the risk.

Days went by, and she started to feel hopeless. She wasn't sure if anybody got her message or could even find her location. She was scared to leave her room if the kidnappers had found out because she didn't know how they would react. Her mind took over her body, and she started thinking about all the horrible things that could happen to her. If they had found out, maybe they'd decide to kill her. Perhaps they were going to send her away, far away, so her parents could never find her. Again, her thoughts were interrupted by a voice that she now finds horrifying.

"Addison! Addison! Come to the kitchen now," one of them yelled from another room.

They were calling for her, and that frightened her. But, as she walked into the room, her fear calmed down as she saw a smile on one of the faces in the room.

"We are going on a vacation," said the man.

She didn't even know what their real names were at this point. All that she knew for sure was that these people were ugly. Not only in appearance but inside too. How could someone have a heart so cold and so cruel? How could someone ever do this? Take a teenage girl's life away, for the sake of what? For fun? Why would they do this, she thought. What did she ever do to them?

"Am I going too?" asked Addison, hoping they would say no, but acting excited and hopeful.

“Of course you are! We think you are well enough to enjoy the outdoors again,” replied the man with a giant smile on his face.

Addison sensed the fake smile on his face and instantly realized they had found out. She quickly caught on to their plan. They were trying to take her away if someone had gotten the message. These people were so sick.

“What time are we leaving?” asked Addison, faking her excited emotions and confirming her fear. The kidnappers knew, and they were on the run. They weren’t going to let her go.

“We are leaving in the middle of the night to avoid traffic. We will wake you up to leave,” said the woman looking at the man.

False, she thought. They were leaving late so that if people were searching for her, it would be harder to find her in the middle of the night rather than in broad daylight. She knew what they were doing. She might have been clueless initially, but now she was aware and horrified.

Addison was sitting in the back seat with her head resting on her arm. They had been driving for over an hour, and the radio directly in front of her showed it was now 12:04 am. She believed they left a little before 11, but she couldn’t quite remember nor care. She hadn’t spoken a word. She did anything she could to keep her mind off of her current situation. She was angry. She had lost her chance to be found. She thought about her parents. They must miss her. How long has it been? Are they still looking for her? Her thoughts were interrupted when she heard the sirens of a police car behind them. She looked at the kidnappers and saw their eyes fill with worry. He pulled over, and the policeman pulled up to the driver’s window.

“I need to see your driver’s license and registration, sir. You were speeding,” said the policeman while taking a look into the car.

Addison and the policeman locked eyes, and at that moment, she knew that he knew.

He gave her a slight smile of reassurance and said, “Sir, you need to step out of the car and put your hands behind your back. You are under arrest.”

La Tarjeta de Mamá

by Luciana Rodríguez Guerra

Grade 6

Blue Ribbon

Bip, bip, bip. Ese sonido era mi despertador para el colegio que me olvidé de apagar para el sábado. Pero ya no me pude dormir más. La luz del sol reflejaba en mi ventana y me brillaba en los ojos. Con pereza, me levanté de cama en mi pijama verde con rayas azules. Me bañé, cepillé los dientes, y me puse la ropa, una blusa blanca y unos jeans con agujeros.

“Andy, baja a desayunar”, gritó papá. Baje las escaleras. Mi papá estaba preparando un desayuno de huevos y tostada. “Uyy que rico. Mi desayuno favorito. ¡Gracias, pa”! Cuando me estaba sirviendo los huevos, Papá dijo, “Mi amor lindo puedes ir a la tienda a comprar flores para la tumba de tu mamá”?

Desde la muerte de mamá, hace 13 años cuando era recién nacida, papá siempre llora y me suplica que vaya todos los días a visitar su tumba. Aunque nunca la conocí bien, siempre hago un esfuerzo para decirle a mi papá que todo pasa por una razón y trato de ir al cementerio cada tarde. Mi plato ya estaba vacío. “Okay pa, voy pero no tengo plata”. Papá me dijo, “Andy toma estos quince dólares y compra flores y una tarjeta de, “I MISS YOU”.

Mi mamá murió de un accidente de carro en el año 2006. Papá no me deja ir en carro a ningún lado. Siempre se preocupa. Pero como la tienda solo está a dos cuadras, ya estaba entrando al almacén

a los cinco minutos. Cuando me acerqué a los ramos de flores, vi todas las opciones. Había flores moradas, amarillas, rosadas, blancas, y rojas. Escogí las rojas porque se veían más lindas y más formales para una tumba. Las tarjetas estaban cerca la caja de pagar, entonces me acerqué a ella y escogí la más bonita.

Cuando vi a la cajera, mi di cuenta que la señora se parecía mucho a las fotos de mi madre. “Wow”, pensé. Era exactamente como mi mamá. Todavía estaba en shock cuando la mujer con pelo marrón y ojos azules me dijo “¿Estás lista? ¿Esto es todo cierto?” “Si” le contesté. Le di las flores, la tarjeta, y la plata. “Gracias”, le dije. Ella me contestó con una sonrisa. Saliendo de la tienda me sentí rara como si mi mamá estuviera ahí en una tienda vendiendo flores. Volví a casa.

Llegué y enseguida fui a la tumba de mi mamá. Puse las flores rojas y la tarjeta que estaba vacía en su tumba. Decide escribirle un mensaje: espero encontrar una persona que me recuerde de ti. El cementerio solo estaba a dos minutos de la casa, entonces había llegado rápidamente a casa. Mi papá estaba esperándome para la comida. “Entonces mi hija, ¿compraste las flores?” Le dije que sí y que ya las había puesto en la tumba. “Bueno mi hijita, ¿entonces te pasó algo interesante hoy?” Con una sonrisa falsa le dije que no. Estaba tratando de esconder el hecho que había encontrado a una señora que se parecía a mamá. Papá es muy sensible con el tema.

Estaba subiendo las escaleras cuando se me ocurrió una idea brillante. Iba a conocer a esa señora, no sé como pero lo iba a hacer. Quería conocerla porque parecía como si quería hablar conmigo más, pero yo ya me había ido.

Al día siguiente fui caminando a la tienda y otra vez estaba la señora allí. Le pregunté si tenía un minuto para hablar. “Te pareces mucho a mi mamá que se murió cuando yo era pequeña y tu me recuerdas a ella”, le dije. Se veía con un corazón abierto y una sonrisa caliente. Tocándose el corazón, me contestó, “bueno mi amor me alegra que te acuerdes de tu mamá conmigo. Yo siempre he querido tener hijos pero nunca he podido quedar embarazada”. Las dos nos quedamos con una sonrisa. “Bueno, fue muy chevre conocerte”, le dije y “gracias”. Pero antes de que pudiera salir, me siguió.

“Espera”, me dijo. “Quiero charlar contigo”. Alegre, le dije que sí y nos sentamos en un parque cerca de unos niños pequeños. Le conté de mi mamá, Alejandra, y como nunca la pude conocer porque se había muerto en un accidente de carro. “Siempre he querido verla pero ni siquiera me vio tomar mis primeros pasos o verme ir a mi primer día de colegio”. La mujer estaba muy interesada. Ella me contó cómo nunca pudo tener hijos porque tuvo un problema de infertilidad. Después me dijo algo que me sorprendió mucho. Ella era una prima lejana de mi mamá y la había conocido antes. La conoció cuando estaba embarazada conmigo. Eso probablemente explica la razón porque quería seguir hablando conmigo. Al parecer, nos habíamos olvidado del tiempo porque habíamos pasado media hora contando historias. “Bueno gracias por compartir y antes de olvidarme, mi nombre es Linda y cuando quieras, me puedes llamar a este teléfono.” Yo le respondí, “gracias Linda, mi nombre es Andy”.

Cuando llegué a casa mi papá estaba muy preocupado por mí y se puso un poco enfadado, pero le expliqué sobre Linda y se interesó mucho porque era prima lejana de mi mamá. “Conocí a Linda una vez en la reunión familiar de mamá en 1997”.

El siguiente fin de semana llamé a Linda. La invité a almorzar y le dije que mi papá quería conocerla. Me confirmó para la una. Estaba emocionada de que íbamos a tener una vista en la casa.

La casa estaba desordenada aunque solo vivíamos papá y yo. Papá estaba muy emocionado por conocer a una mujer que podía compartir cuentos sobre mi mamá. Papá puso el único mantel que teníamos que era uno que mamá había comprado. Puso 3 platos con unos individuales muy lindos y formales, pues son los únicos que teníamos.

Cuando llegó Linda, ella tenía un vestido de color blanco con escarcha. Se veía como un vestido de *quinceañera*. El vestido azul medio corto que yo tenía puesto era lindo, pero no comparaba con el de Linda. “Hola, ¿cómo estás Sebastian?” le preguntó Linda a mi papá. “Bien, Linda”. Yo la saludé y ella se emocionó mucho al verme. Se sentó a la mesa y dijo, “antes de comer quiero jugar un juego de mesa”.

“Bueno”, dijo papá, “¿trajiste uno”? “Sí”, contestó Linda, sacando el juego MONOPOLIO. Yo estaba muy feliz porque nunca tenía con quien jugar un juego de mesa, pero ahora sí.

Yo gané el juego pero decidí no hablar de eso para no hacerlos sentir mal. Cuando se terminó el juego Linda dijo, “quiero agradecerles por esta oportunidad de estar con ustedes, pero más de eso gracias por hacerme sentir acompañada y sin estar sola”. Sonreí mientras pensaba lo mismo. Pensé en cómo se convirtió en realidad la carta que le escribí a mamá. ¡Me escuchó!

Y esa es la historia de cómo conocí a mi madrastra, Linda, hace 20 años. “Bueno ya son las diez. Dile buenas noches a tu papá”. “Me voy a dormir. ¡Los amo”!

Amor al baloncesto

by Felipe Rodríguez Guerra

Grade 6

Blue Ribbon

¡Hola! Mi nombre es Mariano y tengo 23 años. Me encanta el baloncesto, pero tuve que pelear para poder amarlo. Cuando tenía 7 años, mis papás me contaron que necesitaba seguir la compañía de mi papá. Ellos tenían mucha plata y yo pensaba que hicieron toda su plata gracias a su empresa. Yo sabía que podría ganar mucha plata si controlaba la empresa, pero mi sueño era jugar baloncesto. Cuando les conté que quería jugar baloncesto, inmediatamente me dijeron que no. Insistieron que yo tomara control de su empresa con mi hermano mayor. Yo protesté esa idea pero mis papás me contaron que me sacarían de la casa y yo pensé que era una broma. Cuando empecé a reírme, mi papá me miró directamente en los ojos para mostrarme que no era broma.

El próximo día, mi papá me dejó en el centro de adopción. Pasaron meses sin que me adoptaran. Un día, entró una pareja que no podía tener hijos y estaba buscando niños para adoptar. Yo tuve una conversación con ellos y les conté la historia de cómo mis papás me abandonaron. Me adoptaron y el próximo día, por fin tenía casa. Mis nuevos papás no tenían tanta plata como mis otros papás, pero me amaban diez veces más que esos desconocidos que me abandonaron. Ellos me apoyaron con mi sueño y me compraron un aro de baloncesto por mi octavo cumpleaños. Aunque era bajito, practicaba tres horas cada día. Cuando llegué al sexto grado, fui el capitán de mi equipo y ganamos el campeonato. Seguí jugando baloncesto por años y mejoraba más y más cada día. Cuando tenía 17 años, mi equipo llegó al campeonato de baloncesto y jugábamos contra el mejor colegio en Florida. La novia de mi hermano era una animadora del otro equipo y él quería que mis papás biológicos fueran con él para ver el partido. Me estaba alistando para el partido cuando vi a mis “papás”. Ellos me miraron directamente en los ojos y no reaccionaron.

Empezó el partido y todavía me estaban mirando. Habían pasado 23 minutos y quedaba un minuto. Estábamos empatados y el otro equipo metió un tiro de dos puntos. Entré otra vez al partido cuando quedaban 20 segundos. Me pasaron el balón e hice un tiro de 3 puntos para ganar el partido y el campeonato.

El próximo año, llegué a la NBA y les compré una casa más grande para mis papás adoptivos. Dos años después, recibí una llamada desde una cárcel de Florida. Oí la voz de mi papá biológico y me contó que la policía averiguó que él estaba robando plata de las cuentas de banco de muchas personas. Me contó que necesitaba 7 millones de dólares para salir de la cárcel y me rogó que pagara por él. Me reí, porque hace 15 años, yo fui el que le estaba rogando para quedarme en su casa. Pagué lo que él necesitaba para mostrarle que todavía lo amo después de todo lo que pasó.

Sebastian, el futuro de fútbol

by Felipe Cuono

Grade 8

Blue Ribbon

Un niño llamado Sebastián nació en Lima, Perú. Sebastian no era un niño normal, tenía mucho talento para el fútbol. A los 7 años ya jugaba a un alto nivel en Perú que lo mandaron a Barcelona, España para jugar con la U-7 en la academia del Barcelona. Fue el jugador estrella del equipo y realmente demostró ser uno de los mejores talentos jóvenes de toda Europa.

Siempre pensaba dos pasos por delante de todos en su equipo y en contra. Los entrenadores lo vieron y con 16 años firmó un contrato profesional con el Barcelona B. Una vez más demostró ser la estrella del equipo. ¡En la temporada que jugó, jugó 30 partidos y metió 40 goles! Una vez finalizada la temporada se convirtió en uno de los mejores jugadores U17 del mundo. Pero por alguna extraña razón Barcelona no le ofreció un contrato para jugar con el equipo A. Entonces Paris Saint Germain siendo muy inteligente lo compró y le ofreció una buena cantidad de dinero para que no lo rechazara. Estuvo en la rotación del equipo porque no era uno de los mejores jugadores como Messi, Mbappé y Neymar. Aunque si se quedaba, eventualmente jugaría con jugadores como De Jong, Pedri, Ansu Fati, Piqué y muchos más. Sebastián jugó 17 partidos en la temporada y metió 20 goles. Jugó tremendamente y ganó el premio al jugador joven del año.

A los 18 años debutó internacionalmente con Perú. Jugó su primera Copa América y llevó a su equipo hasta la final. Pero Perú perdió y Argentina ganó 2-1. Sebastian no pudo ganarle a Lionel Messi. En su segunda temporada Mbappé ya fue al club Real Madrid. Sebastián consiguió el puesto de delantero y jugó junto a Messi y Neymar. Jugó 36 partidos y metió 45 goles. En su segunda temporada ganó la "Champions League", la "Ligue 1", y ganó el balón de oro. Los siguientes cinco años jugó doscientos quince partidos y marcó doscientos setenta y seis goles. Ganó el balón de oro en tres ocasiones. Ganó la "Ligue 1", cinco veces, la "Champions League" cuatro veces y finalmente ganó la Copa América una vez. Jugó 10 temporadas más y logró 482 goles y jugó 510 partidos. Se mudó al Chelsea en la primera Liga y ganó la primera Liga dos veces y la copa FA tres veces. Sebastián se convirtió en el mejor futbolista de todos los tiempos.

