

**2023  
OKCTE**

**YAWA**



Top 10 songs of this year  
Is there your favorite artist?

**GRADES 6-8**

THE OKLAHOMA COUNCIL OF TEACHERS OF ENGLISH



Oklahoma Council of Teachers of English





Oklahoma Council of Teachers of English

**2023**

**Young Writers Anthology  
Grades 6-8**

**By Students of Oklahoma**



Oklahoma Council of Teachers of English

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## **About the Anthology**

This anthology contains the winning works submitted for the annual Oklahoma Young Writers Contest, sponsored by the Oklahoma Council of Teachers of English, the state affiliate of the National Council of Teachers of English.

We received nearly 500 entries with the support of nearly 60 educators across the state of Oklahoma.

The winners, ranging from grades 6-8, submitted works for short story, personal narrative, comic, poetry, descriptive paragraph, and informational essay. To the writers included in this year's anthology, *Congratulations on this prestigious achievement!*

## **Submission Policy & Review Process**

The Young Writers Anthology welcomes submissions from any student grades 6-8 in Oklahoma between November and January via online submission form. Teachers submit work on behalf of the students verifying they have read the work, have parent permission to enter the work for publication, and that the work is original. What is submitted must be a "final" copy as we will not make requests for revisions. From January to March, the review board judges each entry using the same rubric developed by the Oklahoma Council of Teachers of English. Each piece is reviewed by multiple members of the review board. During March, the editorial and layout teamwork to copy edit and create the anthology. All writers are notified in late March through teacher contact as to the status of their entry. Anthology writers will receive a certificate of congratulations at the OKCTE April gathering.

## **Editorial Policy**

The Young Writers Anthology editorial staff reserves the right to edit minor errors such as grammatical and spelling issues.

**Special "Thank You" to YWC Coordinator:** Sarah J. Donovan

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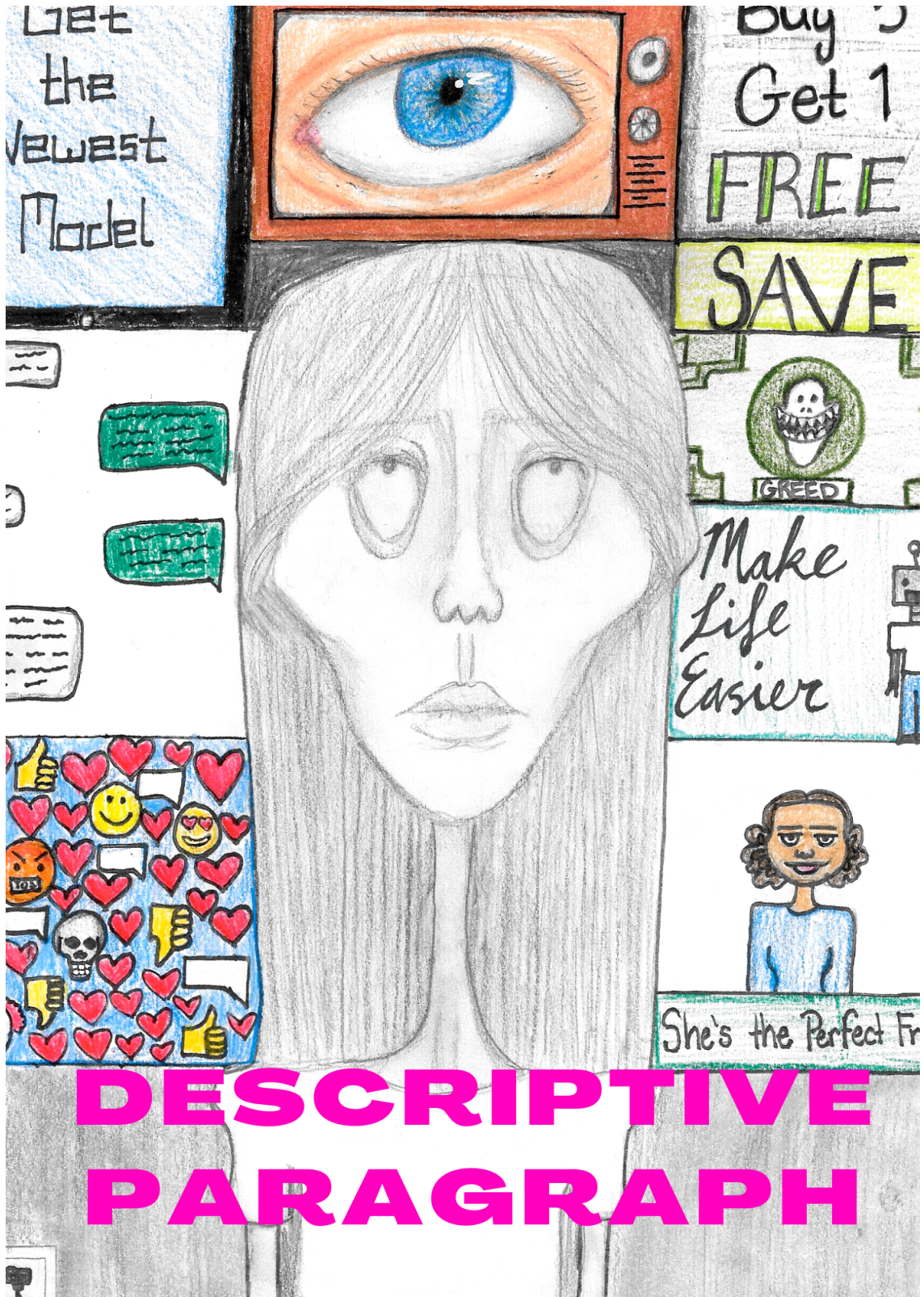
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Hannah Ince

There it was, a beautiful sunset of red, purple, blue, and yellow. The red was almost like an overly ripe apple. The purple, like a field of lavender blowing in the wind. The blue, like the ever changing ocean; the yellow, like a fluffy duckling swimming in an Autumn pond. I wish that everything was like this. The beauty, and the way the sun slowly leaves the visible sky almost as a wave receding back into the ocean. The feeling of warmth it gives me; is this love? Oh no that's silly. You can't be in love with a sunset. Can you? I don't know. But what I do know is the stirring of the cattle as they low in the field and the wondrous sight of the sun leaving the sky as the earth settles to rest and the night sky along with its many treasures comes out to play.

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## **Basketball is a Circus Performance**

Kayson Mack

Basketball is being a circus performer. Basketball is the sound of everyone's shoes squeaking, the different sounds of different shoes. By looking at their shoes you can tell if they are good. By looking at their shot you can tell if they can shoot. Basketball is IQ. Basketball is a chess game. Basketball is a concert with a lot of fans and fame. Basketball is having the ball on a string. Basketball tastes like a honey bun. Basketball is having a skillful thing. Basketball is messing up once and you're done. Basketball is a smart mind game. Basketball is the taste of salt and spice but sweet like cotton candy. Basketball is the thought of everyone working together.

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**Ticking Tower**

Milan Clinton

Its slim towering figure looms over all who pass. Its two hands never stop at labor. You can hear the constant ticking of time day and night. Gothic runes cover its vexed face. In the night it shrieks its bewitched tune. Its surface is dusty, covering the ancient oak it was carved from. What is it?

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**My Best Friend**

Evan Leatherbee

The big, silly boy runs across the yard, the sun glinting off his short brown hair. From where I stand, he appears to be barking louder and running faster than the wind. It has been a long time since I've been as excited as he seems to be at every single moment. I'm curious about how his heart doesn't explode from all the enthusiasm. I can't tell if he wants to chase the neighbor's chickens, or come give me a hug. He always has me confused on what he's going to do next— I'm not sure if he knows yet himself, or if his whole life is made up of split-second decisions. In the end, though, he usually chooses to come inside and snuggle with me. Curling up in a big ball next to me on the couch, we watch TV. (Police dramas are his favorite.) Every once in a while he sits up and kisses me on the cheek, but he returns to his ball-shaped state shortly after. This is typically how we spend our afternoons. The pizza-loving goofball makes my day whenever I'm feeling down, and his smile and enthusiasm make any good day even better. The combination of his overactive tail and his slimy tongue waving out of his mouth just makes me warm inside. I truly love this dog.

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## **The Uprights**

Berek Bawden

Tweet! The Pythons were down by 10 with only 1:00 left to play. Kicking it off into the dark frozen air to us, we are bombarded with snarling faces. Clanks of helmets bashing together and the shrill of the chaotic fans in the stands surround me. Loud deep screeches in my gut escape as our enraged coach shout out the plays. My fear rushed over my emotions leaving me speechless as a newborn baby. Drifting away to my own universe into a far land, while the game continues with no spectator. Sounds shout out in the frigid cold beckoning me back to reality. The Pythons are now down by only 2! 3 seconds left! Thoughts of terror raced through my mind worrying about the possibility of my longest field goal ever kicked approaching. The fate of my harsh kick came to view. Coach summons me onto the field. Trudging my achy, tired body toward him. Yelling to me, "You're it!" Hustling onto the frozen green turf speckled with pure, clean, snowflakes. Huddling with my anxious icy teammates preparing for the 50-yard kick. Lined up ready to smash the rock-solid, bitter-cold football. Hike1! Hike 2! Hut! Bringing my frostbitten, solid foot to the ball. It soars through the frozen night, right towards the iced golden goalpost as it soars cleanly through it!

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# PERSONAL NARRATIVE



## **My Cousin and I**

Aaron Anderson

Born in Cancun, Mexico, moving to Texas was a big step for us. I was a little Hispanic boy who loved football. My cousin took me to many of the La Vega Pirates football games. In Bellmead, Texas, growing up football was my main priority. All I did was toss a ball in the air as high as I could practicing to be a wide receiver. Years later in 2nd grade, I started to play football. Because I was scared to death of being hit too hard, my coach made me the defensive lineman, getting at least 4 sacks a game, and always getting past the O line. The coaching was tough and intense but they pushed me to be the best so I could take the wide receiver spot on the team. Football was my escape from the violence in the town. Gunshots every night, being scared for my life and wanting to not get hurt by any of the teenage gang members strolling down the block every single day. My cousin, Sebastian, and I were always outside throwing the ball around and going inside early in the evening before the gang strolled around onto our block. We always checked if the GDKs were gone, before going back outside.

It was totally a different experience in the states even though it was just as dangerous in Mexico, especially in Cancun. All the bald, tatted, Hispanic, thugs on every street in every alley. My father had sold his soul for the gang in an attempt in making money. He was tortured and killed by one of these Hispanic gangs. My mother left me because she had become a girlfriend of a heavy associate of a cartel. She didn't want me to get hurt. She meant for me to live with my aunt, but unfortunately, my aunt denied it fearing that I would too fall into the life of the MS-13

I would soon be taken to Oklahoma to be set up for adoption.

A few years later, Sebastian took part in an MS-13 gang. It disappointed me because I worried that my cousin aka best friend, could get hurt and possibly killed! My aunt found out because she found some drugs packaged and a gun in the car's glove compartment. Sebastian was falling fast! It was sad for me and my family to see.

Sebastian now had tattoos all over his arms, and back, and a balding cut with tattoos on his face and head too! It was a disturbance to my aunt to see her own son fallen into the thuggy gang life.

I was 13 when I got a call from him, “ Aaron, quieres unirte a mi y El MS-13?”

“Of Course not, I will never do such a thing, hustle drugs, get tats all over my body, much less join a gang!”

“Lo que sea tonto!” It hurt my feelings to hear my cousin downgrade me because of my wanting to stay safe. I wanted to help Sebastian, maybe even save him from gang life, but I knew I couldn't do anything about it.

I went back to Texas to be with my auntie for a visit. Sebastian was gone most of the time. When we finally saw him, he was on a call with someone but it sounded important.

“Encuentrame en la esquina a las 8 sebastian,”

“Aunque use todas las cosas.”

They were talking about a drug deal. I didn't know what to do so I just decided to watch as Sebastian went outside with his boss .....POP!

I looked out the door, Sebastian on the ground, bloody, and screaming, “Help Me!”

Auntie rushed Sebastian to the hospital but he died tragically. Sebastian was only 16!

I was sent away from them, and then I came back to Oklahoma.

I am slowly getting over the loss. Yes, I miss them but staying away from the gangs, drugs, and all of the lifestyles has helped me. Now, I'm doing great.

So, gang life and drugs are not the way to an excellent, healthy, safe life. Stay away from it! I would never want anyone to experience what I have, ever.

## **Childhood Dreaming**

Maysen Litzell

*CONTENT GUIDANCE: I share this personal narrative for middle school readers because I know this is applicable to other people, not just me. You are not alone. This personal narrative explores aspects of violence, substance abuse, and suicide. Please read with care.*

I spent most of my childhood dreaming I could meet my biological father someday. I wanted to be part of his life and really get to know him.

One day, the greatest friend I will ever have and I were being idiotic on the internet. She searched for my name, and what we found made my heart drop. We found my biological father's obituary. It popped up because my name was in it. I didn't know what it was, so I was confused. My friend clearly did because her face dropped; she looked extremely shocked. I asked what it was because I wanted to know why she had that weird look on her face. I didn't even believe her when she told me that it meant he was dead. I didn't believe it. He couldn't be dead. I pushed the thought to the back of my mind for what felt like forever.

About two years later my mom called me to come outside. As I stepped out into the sunshine of the summer, which felt like heaven on my skin, my mom told me what I feared most. He had died. My mind went into utter chaos. I never fully processed that he might be dead. My biological father actually was dead. She just found out a year after I did because none of his family gave a shit to tell us. Three years after he died, one of his sisters finally told my mom - the mother of his only children.

I am so mad at his whole family. They had a way to contact us, but they chose not to. I knew that his family knew about us because they put me and my brother's name in the obituary. Of course, I already knew, but it just crossed my mind that he was actually not here. He took the weak way out of life. Suicide is a disgusting thing that happens. I wish it didn't because he took my only chance of ever meeting him. I hated him for that.



It broke my heart. My mom asked me if I was okay, and I said yes because what was I supposed to say?

I learned later that year why my mom left him when she did. He was a terrible father. He was never home; when he was, he was drunk or on something. He was always breaking my mom's things. He even went as far as threatening to kill us because she took us away from him and left. I utterly despise him now that I know that. I hate that I used to want to be with him. He was a terrible human, and I want nothing to do with him. He is no longer a part of my life and for once, I'm glad I do not know or remember him.

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## **Anxiety is So Hard**

Lilah Byrne

Having severe anxiety is not easy to live with. Anxiety is a strong feeling of uneasiness and extreme worry. Even if what you are worrying about is unrealistic. People with anxiety such as me still think about those things very often. So if it were to happen, I'd be prepared. I have had medication for my anxiety for the night, before school, etc.

Another similar thing I deal with is social anxiety. It's like anxiety about being social or around large crowds of people. Sometimes I can be social if I am complimenting someone or if I'm around my friends, but if I have to speak in front of my class or be active, such as running or even walking in front of people makes me feel sick to my stomach. I am okay with reading in front of my class and doing presentations in my last hour class that I have with only 7th and 8th-grade girls because I am more familiar with the girls. So it's more comfortable to do. A lot of times I feel as if people are always looking at me and judging me. Most of the time I am right to think that way. I think too much about something I may have said or done and how it could be taken out of context therefore I have to correct myself or explain myself to whoever I said it to even if it wasn't a big deal to them in the first place.

Another thing that has crossed my mind many times is how my teachers think of me and my obvious emotional problems and anxiety. I feel like they may think I'm faking how I feel to get out of work or certain situations, but I can get my work done on time. Work doesn't bother me unless the class is rowdy, and I can't focus or it has to do with public speaking. When I start crying in class or have an anxiety attack it's because I am really uncomfortable with what we are doing to the point I'd much rather get in trouble for skipping class to cry in the bathroom than actually do a presentation or do announcements or do something that involves getting my hands messy with uncomfortable materials.

I feel like I can't go to a teacher because I am too scared since I don't know how they'll react, and I don't want to make them mad. This

even includes students since none of them seem to get how this all really affects me.

When I get stressed out or overwhelmed I get told a lot “C’mon it’s not that bad.” or “It won’t take long, you have to do it.” things like that. It feels like no matter how hard I try to explain to them “Hey this affects me differently than you.” “For you, it may not be bad or a big deal but to me, it’s like I’m having a panic attack.” They don’t get it or want to understand it and it annoys me.

Just writing this is enough to make me feel anxious about if I win and the people this is directed towards read it, what will they think? I always hear that I shouldn’t care about what other people think, but I can’t really help it. Whether it’s true or not about what they think, it just bothers me. Whether it’s a rumor, something someone said, or how someone looks at me, it’s a horrible feeling.

I’ve had people say and do things that are mocking or making fun of how I deal with stress and anxiety and I hate it! Others just laugh at it as if making fun of how someone copes or deals with things is funny.

Even having problems with social anxiety and such I’ve tried so hard to put myself out there and talk to people even if it makes me feel sick to my stomach. Yet I get ignored or barely even get a full response. I get that I haven’t been at this school as long as most people have, but I’m a human, too!

Anxiety isn’t something I can control very well. I can calm myself sometimes but not a lot. I hope this helps people have a better understanding of what I and other people with anxiety go through daily.

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## **Maybe**

Izzabell Spann

I only wanted two things from her. I asked her to not pretend around me, and I asked her not to lie to me. Maybe it is my fault; maybe I asked for too much; most of all, maybe I tried too hard. When I was seven, my parents took me and my sister into the kitchen. They told us we were going to meet our birth mom for the first time in over five years. My parents never told me anything bad about her. They protected me from her as long as they could. I lived in Oklahoma at that point, and my sister and I were going to meet this woman five hours away in Texas.

When we met her, I was confused as to why she would leave me. The difference between me and my sister was, I was confused and didn't think any of it made sense, and my sister was just happy she was able to go out and do these things with our biological mother. I remember going to Chuck E. Cheese, and my sister and I were running around playing. I asked my birth mom to come play with me, but instead she wanted to sit and fight with my dad over who was right and wrong. That was the first heartbreaking moment I knew it was not about me nor about my sister. I figured out over time, our birth mom just wanted to look like a good mom to everyone else, instead of trying to be one. I was nine when she could have us for the day, without my dad's supervision. She immediately started telling me everything my parents did wrong. I did not understand anything; I was still too young. I went home and asked my parents about these things she said. My parents were never happy about what she was telling us, but the two of them always tried to explain to me as best they could. After a few months of driving to see each other, she didn't want to do the work anymore. Once again, I felt like she was leaving. My biological mom would fill my head up with lies, and she always made me feel like everything was my fault. I can remember all the awful things I would think and say about myself during those times. Most of the time it's not what she did that killed me on the inside, it's what I did to myself with how I felt. That is, overall, the most painful part to remember. My sister and I got very lucky, being able to have a real mom step in at the young

ages of two and three. My real mom was our second chance from God, to have a mom who will keep us safe and loved.

I always felt like I owed something to the woman who gave birth to me, and who would randomly try to come back in our life. I thought I always had to fix everything she messed up. My sister and I went to our birth mom's house for a summer a few years ago for a week. That summer, she was going after my sister, by telling her what she must think, what to do, and yelling at her for no reason, so I finally lost it. I told her everything she did to me, and I had an anxiety attack right there in front of her and my three sisters. My legs were shaking uncontrollably, and I couldn't breathe for about five minutes. I remember looking down at my hands and feeling like they weren't there. I thought it wasn't real. I've never been that scared in my life. I was not near my normal everyday family, and I was away from them too long. I felt like I couldn't tell anyone what happened, and I felt very lonely. I finally realized that none of it's worth it: staying up all night every night, crying, wondering where I went wrong. It was killing me. I finally decided I was done, and this time I was the one that left. She would leave all the time, and I just had to understand, but when I finally left, it was disrespectful. I've spent years making everything she did my fault. Still, to this day, remembering these things makes me shiver inside. Maybe I expected too much. Maybe I was just too selfish for wanting her to stay.... just once.

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## **Losing My Best Friend**

Wyatt Steelman

Losing my best friend was the hardest thing I've experienced. July 15, 2021, was the day I lost her. She was the kindest and most caring person someone could encounter. The way I was encouraged by her made me feel amazing. I was always enlightened to feel her warm embrace. On my birthday, she was always the one to call and sing to me first. We did everything together. She took me to get ice cream and brought me to the zoo to see all of the beautiful wildlife. She and I both loved wildlife. She taught me all I know about birds, butterflies, and anything that was alive. Her favorite species of animal were hummingbirds. She had multiple feeders that she consistently filled up so the hummingbirds would have food. She also loved plants. She had a whole flowerbed that included many species of flowers that were so vibrant and colorful. In 2011, she was diagnosed with cancer. That was a battle that she fought like a warrior. I was there whenever she was sick. She called me her little nurse. I did everything in my power to make her proud at every moment, making the best out of every second.

The day she passed away was a cloudy, gloomy day. that just didn't feel right, even before I knew it. Almost instantly after I found out, the world seemed to weep. I felt horrible. I was devastated. First, came the soul-crushing thought of never being able to feel her warm embrace again. Then, came the denial. I couldn't believe she was gone. The heartbreak when I went to see my grandpa. We shared a hug that lasted for what seemed like an eternity.

During the funeral, there was rain drenching me, but I didn't care. I was suffocated by confusion, depression, and denial. Suddenly, the most amazing thing I've ever witnessed happened leaving me speechless. The Priest was singing in Latin before her casket was lowered into the very Earth she adored with all of its beauty. Her favorite animal, a hummingbird, flew right over her casket. It seemed to stare into my family's soul, her telling us that she was okay and that we would be okay.

After the funeral and even today, I deal with depression. I feel like there is no point in life without her. I've been less active and I don't see a point in life without her cheering me on. Some people say that she is watching me from heaven and cheering me on, but that doesn't help because I can't hear her or see her. It feels like a part of me has been ripped out, and it feels like as a whole, I am incomplete. I feel lonely all of the time. Everybody else walks around like they're fine like she doesn't matter as much as she did to me. She meant everything to me. She was my entire world and every day I feel more and more lonely without her. I have grown to hate being around people, and I've adapted to being lonely. Most days is a feeling so devastating that I cannot bear it. I know people miss her but I truly and genuinely don't feel right without her.

Another aspect of the depression is that I wasn't able to say goodbye. I didn't even know that she wasn't doing well. I thought she was getting better. All of my close cousins, aunts, and even my dad were able to say goodbye while I was stuck without closure. I feel horrible not being able to say goodbye, it is only somewhat bearable because I made so many amazing memories with her. And I will have those forever.

Many people knew and loved being around her. No matter how bad of a situation, she always was optimistic. The school she taught at created a corner spot in her honor and for her love of books.

I know in the depths of my soul she would be saddened I was not doing well. I want to make her proud, but it is so very difficult without her.

My grandma was my best friend, and her name is Lillian Marie Steelman. She and my grandpa, Gary, were married for over 50 years. Together, they had three children, Brent, my dad, Jalene, and Jennifer, my twin aunts. My grandma loved and cared for all of her six grandchildren.

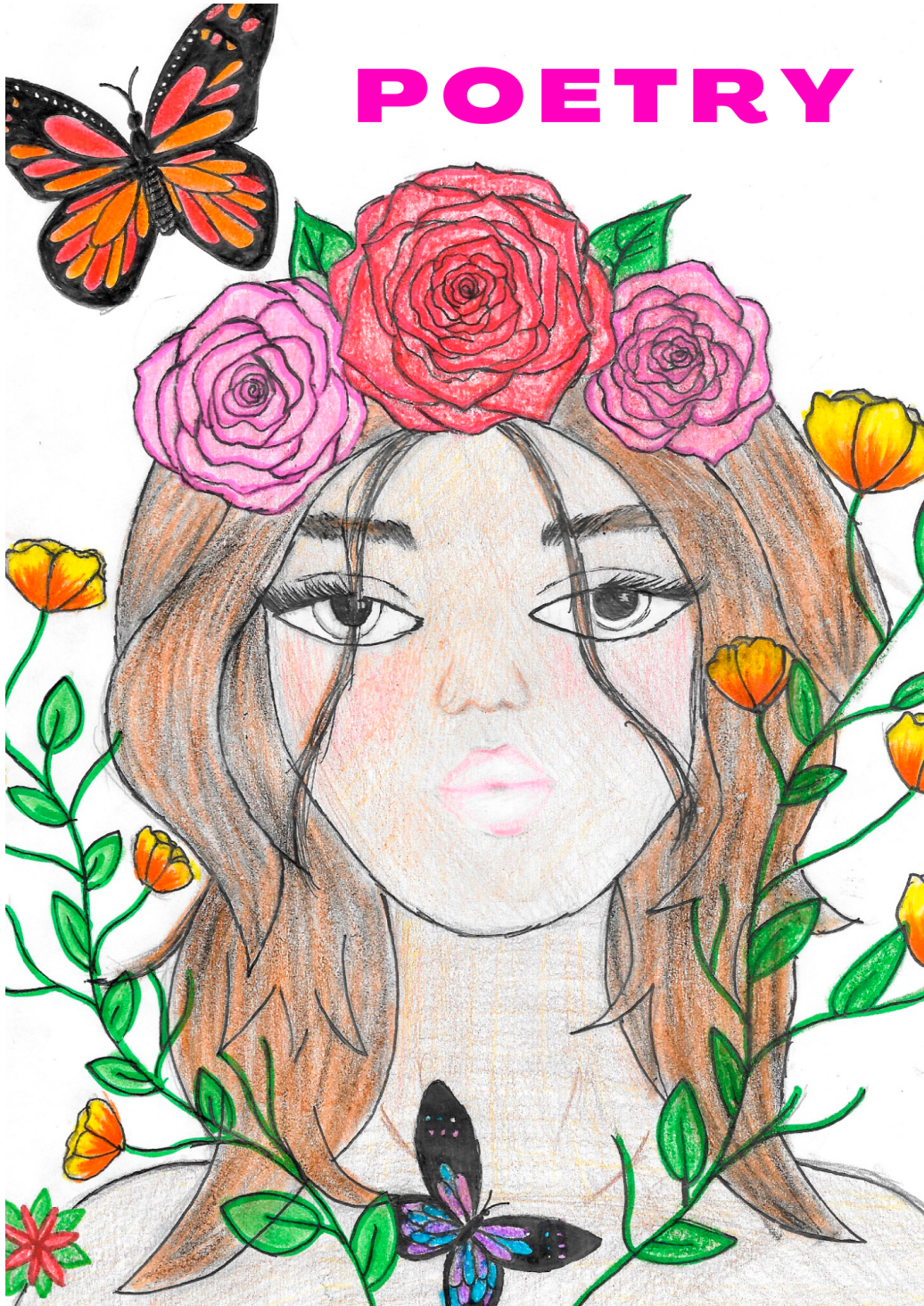
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Oklahoma Council of Teachers of English



# POETRY



## **Rhythm Zero**

Brooklyn Smith

The Artist, a statue, poses mute and meek.  
There it remains as danger kisses its cheek.  
A table holds its Doom, a clock its Time.  
The Crowd clutches its Fate, a Scalpel and Wine.

As predators infest and shadows cast on,  
The reticent sculpture is grasped by its spawns.  
They throw around the throne of their mother,  
Who's buried in Roses, gifts from none other.

Staying silent still, it's stripped, cut and chiseled.  
At the sight, the critiques taunted and giggled.  
Shortly though, for soon their master rose.  
Forsaken by amazement, they all stopped and froze.

Frightened by their reflection, the mob whipped away,  
Like that of sparrows when targeted as prey.  
All that perched was the ghost of a woman,  
Dumped by her Sculptors in a grave, earthen.

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**Tension**

Natalie Bourn

The noise is surrounding me; the classroom's really loud  
It feels like I can't even breathe, I'm floating on a cloud  
I need to leave, take a break  
The teacher asks if I'm okay  
I hold back my tears, and I say that I am fine  
I can't imagine that after so many years, they still believe that lie  
I lay my head down on the table, put my earplugs in  
Time to see if they're able to get me through this hour until when  
We can leave for our next class. I think that my ears are  
Filled with shattering glass. My eyes are closed, but I stare at a star  
I'm dizzy and I'm flying; I've got a headache  
And I'm crying. I also can't stop shak-  
Ing. I want to scream, but my mouth can't form the words  
Besides, it would be mean. Even so, it might be worth  
It. I can't think. My brain has stopped working  
I'm chilled as if lying on an ice skating rink. I've left, but the noise is still  
lurking  
I can't believe that it ever will go away. My muscles tense  
Uncomfortably. I think I've had my fill of school. Does that make sense?  
When it's time to leave school, I collapse in the seat  
Of the car. The noise that's cruel is gone, and I can finally breathe

---

## **Fitting In**

Savanah Spann

I do not fit in. You do not fit in.  
Nobody fits in.  
Does that not make everybody fit in?

But what does it mean to fit in?  
If I change my hair to look like everyone else,  
If I dress like everyone else,  
Do I fit in?

The answer is no.  
Because if you look and act just like another person,  
You are no longer being you,  
You are being them.  
Does that mean we fit in?

We are taught that everyone is special from a young age.  
But for some reason as we get older  
This lesson vacates our minds.  
We are no longer confident in ourselves.  
And we are no longer our own people.

I do not fit in. You do not fit in.  
Nobody fits in.  
Stop trying to fit in.

---

**Stalking**

Kate Nelson

A striped silhouette stalks  
the petite, downy creature  
with a rapacious craving  
for a drop of satisfaction.  
The soft foliage of the rainforest,  
emerald in color and lush with life,  
brushes against the tiger's ragged, ungroomed pelt.  
After a silent leap,  
the prey was caught,  
defeated  
beneath the vermillion stained claws  
of the ravenous predator.  
The satisfaction of the meal  
lasted but a minute  
for the muscular beast.  
The hunt continued for the unsatisfied killer.  
No meal could cease the ever-lasting hunger  
of the tiger fueled by desire.

---

**Happy Face**

Lily Ferrel

Happy face, happy face  
Put it on  
Make it fake  
Lights, camera, action  
Let's do another take  
Your smile's too stiff  
Try to make it looser  
Then maybe people will  
Stop calling you a loser  
I'm sorry i'm sorry  
I didn't mean to hurt her  
I'm sorry that i'm not  
Good enough for her  
I never meant to let you down  
Let me make it up to you  
I'll do anything you say  
I'll even let you hit me too  
Happyface happyface  
I am left as  
Empty space

---

**Love**

Kai Pruitt

I don't know what love is.  
Love is a forever unsolved mystery.  
Some think it's the piercing feeling in your chest.  
If you were to try and find it,  
You would get cookie crumbs.  
People think love looks like glitter,  
Maybe an angel or bright blue butterfly.  
It's not though.  
Love is messy and wild.  
Love is painful, retching, sickening.  
Love hurts you, just like a scratch.  
Love can end you like a bullet.  
If you were to feel love  
I'd feel sorry for you.  
Some people decide only people like them  
Are only worthy of love.  
Saying "I love you" is a lie.  
Love goes by in a flash.  
Love is not a feeling, love is a question.  
Love, Lamentable, Lugubrious, Lousy and Languishing.

---

**Words Better Left Said**

Dathan Empringham

They say some words are better left unsaid  
But what if that's what they need to get out of their head

They are fighting a war  
And self-hate is making a score  
What if they can't take it any more

Simple words like I love you  
Or maybe a simple haiku  
Saying hi would work too

We all have a dark place  
Where we go when we want to close the case  
But just seeing a friendly face  
Can make life a steadfast race

They say some words are better left unsaid  
But say hi and make a friend

---



**Earthbound**

Layla Chapman

Beneath the dark, desolate abyss  
he gazes upon the eclipse

Transcending past the luminous stars  
he will finally be free  
Stealing a glimpse upon Mars  
he is satisfied with glee

Beyond all his burdens  
above all his cares  
overhead are the stars  
though he is still beneath the stars

Whiskers so lengthy  
white, shimmering like snow  
fur so black  
almost as dark as the crows

His paws are burdensome, heavy as steel  
yet so delicate, almost weightless  
So light it's almost unreal

Trapped beneath the sky  
unable to soar  
on Earth he is bound

---

**Midnight Sky**

Elliana Reames

Oh dark sky, what secrets do you hold,  
Waiting to be found, waiting to unfold  
We are so close, yet so far  
From discovering the full beauty of the marvelous stars  
Twinkling and shining, like diamonds in the sky  
As I look up and wonder why  
Why it's so beautiful, the midnight sky.

---

## **Guitar**

By Gavin Wood

I am unique.

I come in many shapes and sizes.

I am used for many things.

I can make people happy, and I can make people sad.

I can make people dance or make people mad.

I feel soft and smooth like a sanded table.

I also feel coarse and rough like a shredded cable.

I move high; I move low.

I move fast; I move slow.

I move in such ways like you've never seen before,

And watching me dance is something to look out for.

I have a neck that is long and slender.

Parts of me look like chrome on a fender.

My body is curvy.

Sometimes I have a hole in my center.

I can sound soft and meaningful like a sweet summer breeze.

I can sound heavy and powerful like a raging disease.

I can be found anywhere, maybe here, maybe there.

No matter where you look, you'll find me somewhere.

All over the world, here and there.

---

**Compared**

Caprie Hart

I hate being compared to her  
It makes my emotions a messy blur  
she mainly likes sports  
but I like to do art in all kind of sorts  
my family lets her dreams soar high  
but mine can never touch the sky  
no matter what I do they only see her  
and now I'm just a faded blur  
I pretend everything is alright  
but then my happiness drifts out of sight  
and now I have to say that I'm ok  
because there is no other way.

---





## **Oh, to Run**

Zoe Hall

The two raced across the dead clearing, a large, 2,000 year old temple sitting in the middle. Diana stumbled into the course, vine covered bricks. They were a faded, pale yellow, and cold to the touch. Matt heaved himself onto a large boulder outside of the temple. They panted like dogs, attempting to catch their breath after days of running.

Diana asked, “Do you think they’ll find us in there?”

Matt followed her gaze to the temple opening. He slid off the rock and inspected the entrance. Diana observed the looming forest behind them, waiting for any sign of other beings. The smell of rain on the way filled the air slowly. The silence was loud in their ears, rattling around so they couldn't forget.

“It doesn’t look like there’s any traps,” Matt remarks.

“That’s not what I asked,” Diana mumbles angrily, “will they find us?”

“No, we lost them a long time ago. Plus it’s dark enough we can run out before they catch us.”

Diana nodded slowly, palms sweating as she turned and followed Matt inside. He struck a match against the bricks to light up their path. An elegant staircase presented itself in front of them, but Matt ignored it. Hesitantly, Diana followed him around the spacious room.

“Shouldn't we go upstairs?” she asked, unsure.

“No, if they come in they’ll probably go up. If we’re down here, we can beat them out in time. It’s also too much of a risk to fall down the stairs during an escape,” Matt explained.

They walked around for a moment longer. Diana looked back at the staircase, noticing a door on the side. She reached over to Matt as he struck another match, the other burning out. He jerked away in surprise.

They shared a gaze for what felt like minutes before Diana blinked and shook her head, pointing at what she had found.

“There’s a door over there,” she whispered, “think we can hide behind it?”

Matt glanced before speaking, “that’s a good idea. Let’s go.”

They rushed over, squeezing into the tiny room it had led to. The fit was tight but Diana and Matt could still run fast enough if they had to. Within the silence, voices began shouting their names in the distance. They shared a look of utter terror as their breathing hitched. Matt covered the match with his hand, sucking in a breath as it quickly burnt out against his palm.

The silence ticked away, booming voices getting closer as every moment flew by. Eventually they were right at the door and flowing slowly up the steps. Matt slowly reached his hand out, finding Diana’s shoulder. She let out a breath she had no idea she’d been holding. They sat still like statues, faces pale as if they’d seen ghosts.

“Run,” Matt whispered, and suddenly they were moving, already halfway to the exit.

Diana’s legs shook as she darted back across the now wet grass, rain beginning to pelt down. Her breathing ragged and short, bones aching, and mind screaming. Diana had gone by many trees before her hearing caught on a terrifying sound: silence. There was no other noise besides her own breath and feet. She halted, turning around to find nothing.

Diana’s eyes poured into the deep blackness of the temple entrance. A sharp noise pierced her ears, and her body went cold and still. It felt like ice was flowing through Diana’s veins. She waited, not sure for what, but nothing happened.

Diana choked back a sob that racked through her body. Her knees hit the ground, shooting pain up her spine. Diana gave no response. After a while, she stood slowly, teary eyes staring across the vast space. Matt had not made it, but she would. All for him.

---

## **Intrusive Monster**

Kylea Bostick

"MOM!" screamed the young girl. Tears rushed out of her pale blue eyes. "Mom?"

The tall, demonic creature slowly approached. "Hey little girl," the creature demands with a loud, raspy voice. "Come with me." Slowly growing closer, reaching its scrawny arms out. Just then, someone burst into the room: slim, blonde hair, blue-eyed figure.

"MOM!" the young girl begged, her voice breaking. "Ple-, Please help me."

The mother rushed over to her daughter, wrapping her arms around her. "What's wrong?" the mother questioned. "Is everything okay?"

"Can't you see him?" the girl screamed. "Can't you see, he's right there?"

"Baby girl, there's nothing there," the mother replied. "What are you talking about?"

"What do you mean there's nothing there?" she yelled out. "He is right there, can't you see him?"

"She can't see me," the demon hissed, holding out its apparition of a hand. "It's only you and me."

"NO, NO, NO!" she screamed, scrambling backward. "Go Away! Make him go away! Prove to her you're here! Prove to her I'm not crazy."

The mother lifted her daughter and rushed out of the frigid, gloomy room.

"You can't run forever!" the creature yelled from behind, before disappearing into nothingness.



Since then, 6 years have passed, the house has been sold, and we have moved across the country. Mother thought leaving would take that night away, but I still picture it. Soulless eyes, and a remorseless face.

“Amaya! How was it?” I hollered to my best friend as she sprinted up the sidewalk. She has been away at a dance competition.

“Syd! You see this?” Amaya yelled back in excitement, holding up a tall, golden, star-shaped trophy. “First place, baby!”

“That’s amazing, Ami! I’m so excited for you,” I scream back as she pulls me in for a hug. “I knew you could do it!”

“Thank you, enough about me though,” she whispers. “How was your date? Is he everything you thought he was?”

“Girl, he is so much more than I thought he would be!” I whisper back as we walk along the cracked pavement.

We were coming up to my house. Fair-sized, smokey gray, two-story, with high-arched windows, sitting amongst the other houses. In the distant background, blue starts to surrender to shades of pink and orange. Mother would say this is the golden hour, the perfect time for pictures. She would say this is the time to rest my mind, which I would do if I didn’t see its face. I tried to push the thought away, after all, maybe I was just being dramatic. It has been 6 years since that night.

“You wanna take a picture, Ami?” I request with subtle hints of desperation and longing for a photo, another memory.

“You read my mind!” She replies with the same desperation. Taking her phone out of her pocket, she runs over to set it on the ground.

“Smile!” I say while resting my arm around her shoulders.

We smile ear to ear, with cheerful expressions. Her long brown hair extends past her hips with caramel highlights peeking through, deep brown eyes gaze into the camera. This is perfect, everything is perfect. School is going great, my best friend is back, and the sky is beautiful. I

wish I could stay right here in this moment, but the wantings wouldn't last forever so we said our goodbyes and went our separate ways.

Later that night, as I studied the photo for hours, it hit me, the changes I have experienced over the last few years and how amazing it has been since I moved. Meeting Amaya changed my life, I have been able to share the most gruesome and darkest memories that I hide from the rest of the world, hoping to never have to go through them again. Instead, I have these new and meaningful memories to remind me of how far I have come, just like this astonishing picture. The glow left of the sun beating down on us; leaving shadows of the trees trying to fight it. My pale blue eyes shined in the sun, my smile was wide and my shoulder-length, platinum-blond hair was tied back in a loose ponytail, her shoulder against mine. Similarly, her deep brown eyes shined in the sun, her smile wide and free. Houses lined the street behind us and trees were categorically placed in each yard. Bikes were resting against fences guarding the houses, toys were scattered in yards, and small patches of colored exposed flowers were hidden in the bushes. It was as perfect as perfect could be, my new favorite picture of us together. We were free, content, and had not a care in the world.

I throw on my favorite plaid pajama bottoms and make my way down the hall. As I walk into my room, bitter chills run up my spine, I think nothing of it and brush it off. I crawl into my big, tranquil bed and replay the events that happened today.

My thoughts are interrupted by a pounding coming from the closet. I freeze, petrified of what comes stumbling out as the door flies open.

It is back! Towering, shirtless figure, spiraling horns with a deadly aura, and a gray-black complexion. Lurching towards me, it has the same remorseless face as before.

"I'm back!" It screeches with a loud raspy voice. Same tone, and the same goal.

"You've already ruined my life once," I scream back at it. "What do you want now?"

“I want you dead,” it remarks back extending the same apparition of a hand. This time grasping my arm, slowly tightening its grip. My arm was crushed by the increasing pressure. I try to scream but was silenced by a sharp jab in the side. I look down and see dark red blood dripping from a sharpened knife held in the demon's other hand. Blood slowly starts running down my side and onto my bed, staining my lilac-colored sheets.

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## Pills

Emma Madden

**CONTENT GUIDANCE:** *I wrote this story for middle school readers for entertainment purposes only; however, this short story explores aspects of drugs, overdose, and death. Please read with care.*

Braindead, there was nothing they could do. My older brother had taken that stupid pill, and it killed him. The paramedics said that he had been dead for hours before they got there. When the paramedics took him away on their silver cart, only my parents and I were left. Behind us the cops searched his room, They could have prevented it. I thought to myself watching them roll away, they could have stopped him.

It is funny that only a year later I came to sell the very pills that got my brother killed. You would be surprised how much people forget.

“Are you sure these aren’t counterfeit pills?”

I just looked at the senior in front of me “Would I give you counterfeit pills for this much money?” I held up the stack of cash in my hand and pointed to the pills. “They’re real.”

“Calm down! I’m just asking, I heard you went off the deep end after your brother Lux died last year.”

I looked him up and down. He was only a year older than me and 2 inches taller. I took a step forward menacingly. I knew he was scared of me. There were rumors of people dying when they bought the pills I sold, no one could prove it though, as there wasn’t enough evidence.

“Keep my brothers’ name out of your mouth!” I hissed. My fist slammed into his jaw and my foot swept at his back legs causing him to lose his balance until I was the one towering over him. “Good luck explaining that bruise to your parents,” I turned and walked out of the dimly lit alleyway.

“Lilith, is that you?”

“Yes.”

“What were you doing out so late?”

“My friends and I were studying and lost track of time,” I lied. They never quite got over my brother's death. Lux was their golden child, the one who could never do anything wrong. Except, of course, die. My parents don't even blame him for that.

“Lilith?”

“Yeah?”

“The police called, they've decided to look into your brother's case.”

“After a year?”

“Yes; and they wanted to know if you could help.”

The next morning instead of going to school I went to the police station. They quickly searched me and then led me to an interrogation room. It wasn't like the movies. Instead of a dim room with a single light, it was brightly lit with white walls and a gray table in the middle. The officer opened the door and stepped in. He then sat me down and told me what they already had on my brother's case which was next to nothing. They told me their next steps and how I could help.

“Do you remember if he told you where he got the pill? Or if he told you about the pill at all?”

“He did tell me,” I wasn't going to tell him more than he needed to know. “And I know where he got it.”

I told the officer the information of my rival dealer and heard my phone ding in my pocket, another order for tonight followed by their location and time we would meet. I sent back the price for their order and put the phone in my pocket.

“Would you like to be here for the interrogation tomorrow?” I shook my head and walked home. The next day I got a call from the station

after school saying that they arrested the man who had killed my brother, and they would continue to investigate his death. Dropping the phone from my ear, I smiled. They were finally investigating my brother's death, and they got the wrong person.

Walking through the hallways of school people made a wide arc around me. They probably don't know what happened but they know something did. The day droned on but I felt an air of power, knowing that the cops still haven't figured out who killed my brother more than a year ago. When I walked home from school that day I noticed the officer from the police station outside my door. I frowned, confused why was he here, and was I going to jail? He ushered me inside and explained that they had found out that my story and the man they arrested didn't match up.

"I was wondering if there was anything else you can remember about that night."

I thought back to when my brother died. Lux had taken the pill that I had made him the one with way too much fentanyl. He begged me for the pills and told me that he would pay any price. Is it my fault if this is what he wanted? The thought circled my brain as I replayed the scene of him collapsing in front of me, silver tears streaming down my cheeks as I finally realized what I did. I fled that room and tried to convince myself that it was all a part of my imagination. When my parents woke me up screaming the next morning I knew what I had done was set in stone. I knew my brother was dead, and I was the one who killed him. Since then many people who buy my pills have died. I feel no guilt though none of them are as important to me as Lux was. They can die for all I care.

I looked up "No officer, that's all he told me I guess he must have lied. He probably just didn't want me to tell."

"Thank you for helping us, Lilith."

"No thank you, officer."

He nodded, "We will try to get you and your family the closure you deserve."

I dipped my head and walked with him to the door. Waving him off and laughing silently to myself. I wasn't the grieving little girl they expected. I don't think I ever will be either, guess they'll never know.

## The Potassium Man

Bryce Bramlett

In a hospital in Oklahoma, something very odd happened with this baby. This odd family was overly yellow; people guessed maybe a birth defect, but one day we all knew why. They were twenty-seven percent banana, so when that little boy was born he was a banana! His name was Java, a little boy... or whatever he was. By the age of seven, he was already getting bullied; he was so sad. He thought he would never amount to anything, yet he never knew how much his future choices would really matter to countless others.

At the age of fifteen, he saw that a disease was going around, and the cure included potassium. He knew this was his chance. He thought this was the way he could do something with his life. Everyone told him he wouldn't do anything with his life, but he could prove them wrong. So he started the event and made a way to accomplish this. Java has a plan.

His planning was going well until he ran into a problem; it would cost more than ten thousand dollars to make his machine, and he was bitter. He went back to being what those kids said he was. He was getting depressed. He didn't know what to do, so he went to school to see his teacher. In the morning on the bus, kids started making fun of him and punching him; he was now more determined than ever.

At school, he was going through the class and was thinking, and he felt his teacher might have an idea. He got to class and sat through it, waiting. He started talking to his teacher after class, and he had an idea.

"I think you need a thinner needle and that will help you," Mr. Mayfield said.

"Thanks, teacher, so much. You will not regret this."

Java went home and started working.

He starts working. He gets all of his parts together and makes the adjustment; it now takes potassium, and it's going well. His part is a little weak, but that's what you get for ordering cheap stuff. So he tries it his

first time, and it works! He cures one of his friends, Aaron. His friend was so hyped! However, the next morning, Java woke up sick. He had no idea what was wrong. He went to the doctor, and he was lacking red blood cells. The machine was taking potassium and blood. He didn't know that. So once again, the invention was a bust, and he was livid.

He doesn't want to give up, so he heads to school where he meets his teacher early. His teacher has an idea.

" You will need a thinner needle that will block the blood," said Mr. Mayfield.

"I think that will work; do you know where to get one?" inquired Java.

"Yup, they are like five cents at Target."

"Thanks, you won't regret this.

He goes home and works on his machine. That needle works, and he cured five of his other friends!

He keeps on curing people, and he is getting recognized by the news. He got a statue in Oklahoma City; he is getting offered money by scientists to test on him. He thinks that the scientists are trying to steal his work, so he rejects it. He is happy as ever, stops going to school, and is getting a little hot-headed. Yet his teacher calls, and he rejects the call.

He was being spurned; he didn't want to go to school. He thinks that school will make him too busy to work on his invention, and he doesn't need it anyway. His teacher called, remembering what he did for him, and thinking Java will answer. Java says that he doesn't need it and to stop peer pressuring him into doing it.

He isn't going to school...  
just letting the machine pump away and away; he was getting fat. The next morning he couldn't get up; his body was so achy and he felt awful. He tested his blood and all the levels in his body...



it was bad. People were banging on the door wanting the cure. He was scared and didn't know what to do. He passed out. He was sick of lacking potassium!

He was out for fifteen hours.

His teacher was sick of him not answering his calls, so he went to his house. He knocked on the door; no one answered. Mr. Mayfield was scared, so he busted down the door. He sees Java on the floor and picks him up and rushes him to the hospital. Java wakes up and sees his teacher at his bedside, and he is so thankful.

"Thank you so much, Mr. Mayfield. I would have died without you," said Java.

"You're welcome, but you have to promise me something. You have to come back to school," said Mr. Mayfield.

"You got it."

Java gets healthy and he gives the scientist enough potassium to get a cure. He noticed that he was getting dumb, so he keeps his promise and goes to school. At school, people love him for saving the world from a lack of potassium, and he is now happier than ever. He gets a scholarship to his favorite school, and begins living his best life.

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## **The Boy Who Cried Vampire, Part I**

Kee'ilah Love Frazier

Once upon a time, there was a remarkable boy. He knew everything about everyone. He knew every secret and every answer. His name was Ezra Perez. He was a young, handsome boy with hazel eyes and short black hair. Now let's go on to the story.

I was sitting in my room reading a book called *How to Kill a Mockingbird*. I was on page ninety-six when my little sister burst into my room wearing a bright red and black short dress, with black boots and a clip in her hair.

"Here, mom wants you to give these to the neighbor."

I thought it was weird that someone had moved in there because nobody wanted the house. Some people believed it was haunted while other people thought it was a creepy house. I didn't think the house was haunted because it was beautiful.

"Okay," I said while getting out of my bed. My sister handed me a fruit basket that contained apples, plums, strawberries, blueberries, bananas, and oranges. I started to walk down the stairs and out the door. I looked both ways and then crossed the road.

I knocked on the door three times before taking a small step back. I waited a few seconds before the door opened. There stood a beautiful young woman who had on a short black dress with short heels.

"Umm! Hi, I'm your neighbor from across the street," I said while she grabbed the fruit basket out of my hands. "My name is Ezra Perez and my mom made you a delicious fruit basket."

"My name is Rose Diaz and tell your mom thank you."

"Okay, I will. Are you the only one living here in this big house?" I didn't want to be in her business but it was a simple question. I decided to look over her shoulder since I'm a few inches taller than her and saw two teenagers. One was a boy and the other was a girl. They both had short

black hair but the boy was taller than the girl. The boy was wearing a Nirvana shirt with black jeans and vans. The girl wore an oversized Chucky shirt with baggy brown jeans.

Once Rose saw me looking over her shoulder, she turned her head to see the two teenagers. “Oh yes! These two right here are my kids. My daughter's name is Athena, and my son's name is Samuel.” She placed her hands on both of their shoulders. The kids looked annoyed by their mother.

“Hi, ” they both said at the same time.

“Umm! Hi, my name is Ezra Perez. I'm your neighbor from across the street, ” I said. I was creeped out. “Are you guys twins?”

Before the two teenagers could answer, the mom spoke up. “Yes, they are. They just turned sixteen last month.”

“Okay... well, it was nice to meet you.” Before they could answer, I turned around and went to walk across the street. Once I was by the front door, and before I could open it, my mom opened it and looked at me. Without speaking to her, I walked up the stairs and into my room. My walls were gray with a bookshelf on the right side of my room. I had a king-size bed in the middle of my room that had a white cover on it. Next to my bed was a desk with a lamp and a few horror stories. On my left, there was my walk-in closet. I had a black rug on my floor. I walked over to the bookshelf to get a book. After a few minutes of finding a book, I chose *Goosebumps* by R.L.Stine. I'm a big fan of his books. I walked to my bed and opened the book. I was halfway done when I felt a pair of eyes looking at me. I turned to look out my window.

I saw Samuel looking at me from his window that was by his bed. He just stood there, staring at me, with a strange look. I went to my window and waved to him. He didn't wave back but, instead, made a creepy smile appear on his face. Then he closed his curtains and left. I was a little creeped out by him but shrugged it off. I went downstairs into the dining room where my mom and dad were with my sister.

I put some steak and mashed potatoes on my plate. Halfway through dinner, my sister decided to talk. “So, how were the neighbors?”

“They’re a nice family but her son creeps me out.’

“Why! Did he mention the boogie man?” she asked with a fake scared emotion.

Before I could say something Mom decided to step in. “Alright, you two, cut it out.”

“Sorry,” we both said at the same time.

After dinner, I stepped into my room. I sat on my bed to think about the new neighbors. Sighing loudly, I changed into my pj's and laid down. After a few minutes, I was half asleep. Suddenly, I smelled something terrible. Then I felt the cold wind beside my bed. I opened my eyes and turned around. I saw that my window was halfway open.

*“Weird, I don't remember opening it,”* I thought. Shrugging it off, I got out of my white cover. When I was about to close the window, I heard a painful scream from my neighbors across the street. What in the world were they doing over there? Not really caring about it, I closed my window. I walked back to my bed and laid down.

My eyes were slowly closing, when I heard another painful scream.

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## **Touch Tone Telephone**

Emberly Bently

Writing, writing, writing.

I focus on her voice, her pre-recorded A.M. talk show. My notes are a mess, every time I look at something and then back, I can't remember what I was trying to say. I keep restarting, it'll all make sense later, I keep saying that. But I can't stop. Veronica. I need her to kiss me, to understand, to believe me. I'm not crazy. They don't know what they're talking about, it's a chemical imbalance. Not insanity, I'm not insane, and there's things that need to be done.

Call her.

She'll answer today, I can feel it. I can feel it. I was wrong yesterday but I can't be today. I can't.

Call her.

Right, that's the important thing. What was the last thing?

Call her.

That's what I need to do right now. But I'm writing, wait- what? I look back a little, set down my pencil and re-read what I wrote.

Doesn't make sense. It's illegible. I can't read this and by the end, it just says "Call her". I look around for the water I think I brought. I can't remember, it was so loud on my way here. She was my main priority - I could watch her lips move and eyes sparkle when I wasn't even there. God, she's pretty. Where's my water? Standing up feels good, how long have I been here? Is that clock right? I think it's off by an hour. My phone should be right. It always is, right? Where's my water?

What time is it?

I grab my phone and pull up her contact

"Veronica♡♡"

God, I love her. Messy black hair, brown eyes. Her paintings make me wish I was there, where she painted. I call her, and it rings. I can't stop thinking about what I'm going to say, I'm not even sure what I want to say anymore, it rings until it goes to voicemail.

"Hey! Veronica, it's me again. Just wondering if you wanted to hear about the thing I've been looking at! I can't ever seem to get ahold of you -"

I'm cut off, and she responds.

"Yea I know who it is, why are you calling me so early?" She sounds so blunt, so tired, so beautiful. "To talk about one of your, your discoveries?"

"Wait, early? What time is it?" I ask.

"Oh, it is uhm, 7 am. Isn't it too early for you to be at work?"

"I guess. Didn't even realize."

"Oh okay, I'm going back to bed. It's too early to be awake."

"Okay! Goodbye, Veronica. I can tell you all about this later! Maybe when-"

She hung up. I wish I could talk to her. God, she's so pretty. I don't think anyone else can understand me. I love how she puts up her hair with her bangs still flowing out. I wonder if I'm going to be invited over again soon. I remember when we were closer. I would go to her house after school and watch tv, what did we watch? I'll have to find the show when I get home. What time is it? Where's my phone? Watching her paint was amazing, it was like hearing angels sing. I have to get back to work, I have to start again, where was I? I have to start again... again.

Btzz, btzz

A text, but I'm already writing again. I can't look at my phone, but there's a buzz. Someone texted me. Texts get two buzzes and other notifications get three. Or was it one?

Btzz, btzz

That's a text. I check my phone, "three texts from Veronica♡♡" I click on the notification.

"Hey, I'm sorry about this morning and cutting you off, maybe we can talk about your stuff later. I have a thing to get to. Sorry :) <3"

Right, I tune into her radio show. I see her lashes flutter and eyes shine when she gets excited about things. I can see her pushing her bangs out of the way when they fall. What are the bangs called? Curtain bangs? And her piercings, I remember going with her to get her ears pierced, I got to hold her hand because she was scared. She squeezed it so tight but I honestly couldn't care less. How many piercings does she have? She texted me.

"Also, can you stop calling me every day? It's kind of annoying, and I'm feeling creeped out."

What? I'm just trying to tell her what she needs to know, that we fit like yin and yang, sun and sea, stars and moon, impossibly beautiful. I can be the stars to her moon, to watch people discover her. To watch people try to see the side of her that only I know.

What was I doing? Right, she texted me. What'd she say?

"Also, can you stop calling me every day? It's kind of annoying, and I'm feeling creeped out."

Maybe every other day? No, even less than that. Once a week? Twice? I can do twice. Maybe. One more text.

"I'm not like trying to be rude though, it's just making me a little uncomfortable. <3"

I love seeing that heart. It's my favorite part about our texts. The smiley faces, the hearts, the stupid emojis. God, I love her.

"Of course I can! Mondays and Fridays maybe? Don't know what I'd do without you, lol."

Typing, she's typing. I hate waiting, I would rather be calling. That way she can't laugh at me with her friends. But she wouldn't, right? She loves me. She wouldn't be mean to me.

"Uh, sure! I'll let you know if I'm busy! Good luck with work :)"

"Bye!"

It doesn't seem right to just end it with "bye!".

"<3"

Yes, that should convey enough emotion. What time is it? 8? Already? It's still so early, and I have all day to sit here. And write. Right, I was writing. Where was I? What was I thinking about?

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## **Organic**

Mila Steiger

### Stage One: Preparations

Commander Juno Lee was chosen for a prestigious role. It's November of 2030, and a starship was pulled into Earth's orbit. A team was assembled for investigation and, if they were lucky, first contact with the supposed pilots.

Her team were issued special suits for their mission: a new sort, made for both the conditions of space and biohazardous environments. She connected the hard upper torso to her several layers of garments and pulled the lower torso assembly to seal, then tugged her gloves on.

"Alright," begun Juno, "are you all ready?" she asked, receiving their affirmatives. They opened the airlock hatch and delved into the starship.

### Stage Two: Entrance

The lack of gravity had lifted most of the weight her suit forced onto her. It felt like floating in a swimming pool, a light anchor tugging on your feet.

"No welcoming party," Specialist Brandis commented, "though it looks like there's been lots of parties."

Specialist Brandis' remark had been directed to absolutely thrashed state of the corridor. The floors and walls looked scorched and objects of unknown uses had been flung all over the hall. Under all the damage done, the walls had been decorated with plaques or paintings.

"I'm guessing this won't be a first contact thing, after all," Juno added.

### Stage Three: Investigations

Because there was no "welcoming party", as Specialist Brandis had phrased it, the team explored the starship to their liking. The first room, looked similar to an office. More of the same plaques hung on the walls,

and there was a desk in the center of the room. It was made of a blue wood, judging the spirals that ran across it. Sitting atop of the desk's surface were piles of documents, equipment that was clearly not supposed to be there- judging by the frays and damage- and tiles from the ceiling. Covering the floor were more of the same documents scattered everywhere, and blackened, ratty leaves from the plant in the corner.

“Well, I think a hint about our crew is that they're from a garden world, judging the wooden desk and floor plant,” Specialist Fox commented.

“Could be, although if they're capable of interstellar travel, perhaps they're from different worlds?” Captain Vargas suggested.

The team inspected the rest of the office, finding nothing to be clear other than the signs of havoc.

“I'm starting to feel a little dizzy,” Specialist Brandis groaned.

“It could be from the lack of balance,” Juno responded. She was somewhat right; the starship had no gravity, as it was exposed to the vacuum.

“I know we need to stick together, but just go on without me for a bit and keep me updated- I'll catch up.”

“Captain Vargas will stay with you to oversee your condition,” said the Commander, giving a nod to her.

#### Stage Four: First Contact

The Commander and Specialist continued down the hall for a few minutes, when Captain Vargas began shouting down the hall about Specialist Brandis, reporting that he'd passed out.

“We'll take him back to the shuttle and then continue. I don't want to abandon the mission.” She said.

When the team returned to where Specialist Brandis had been, they found him unconscious as Captain Vargas had said. Juno placed her gloves

on his helmet, delicately pushing the visor up. Specialist Brandis was missing his face.

### Stage Five: Realizations

Specialist Brandis' face had been devoured. The cartilage to his nose and ears had been eaten away, and the muscle to his face were exposed. His communications cap had chunks taken out of it, leaving wires bare and fragments of fabric floating in his helmet. No one said a word. Juno took the corpse of the Specialist and pulled him back towards the shuttle.

After the team had caught up to where they'd been before a panicked Captain Vargas had shouted at them. They found themselves at only a doorway. There was an atrium beyond it, filled with hundreds of large cases. Each case was wired to a series of machines that let out a soft glow. The Commander led her team farther into the atrium. Upon inspecting one of the machines the case was hooked up to, it was easy to understand. The characters that covered the screen were unknown, but the buttons seemed obvious. One of them had a warning in the same incomprehensible letterings; the other was blank.

"The power still works for these machines," she commented. Juno pressed the blank button, releasing an airlock on the case.

Inside was a carcass so disfigured that it was hard to even tell it was once a living being. It was humanoid, yet not quite human. The face was almost completely gone, pieces of the skull were chipped and caked with some sort of goo. A mandible jutted out of it, with the same chips and gunk coated on it. The body had two sets of arms, all eaten away at and plastered in the goo. The internals were also exposed with empty spaces filled with a sludge instead of organs. Dribbles of the goo began to float in the absence of gravity.

"Oh my god! What is that?!" Captain Vargas shouted.

"I think that's-" Specialist Fox paused, I'm guessing that's who this starship belongs to."

### Stage Six: Fear

The Commander continued down the row of pods. Each one she opened had the same sort of scene. She turned back to her team once she'd seen enough.

The whole unit now advanced further down the atrium, coming to find a control center. Unlike the machinery in the previous room, there was no power to the control boards, the keys and switches dead.

Juno explored the center, Captain Vargas looking over her shoulder. She heard Specialist Fox moving what sounded like a sheet of metal over his mic, and a scream right after. The two turned around, finding Specialist Fox engulfed in a black swarm. He let out a shriek of fear and pain as it shredded his suit and layers, exposing him to the vacuum. When the Specialist gave his last breath of terror, he still twisted his body. All that was left was muscle, bone, and pieces of his suit that clung on. He looked like a dog-eared curtain.

Captain Vargas grabbed Juno's arm, and pulled her away. There was a closet they hurried inside of, only hoping it would keep the swarm out.

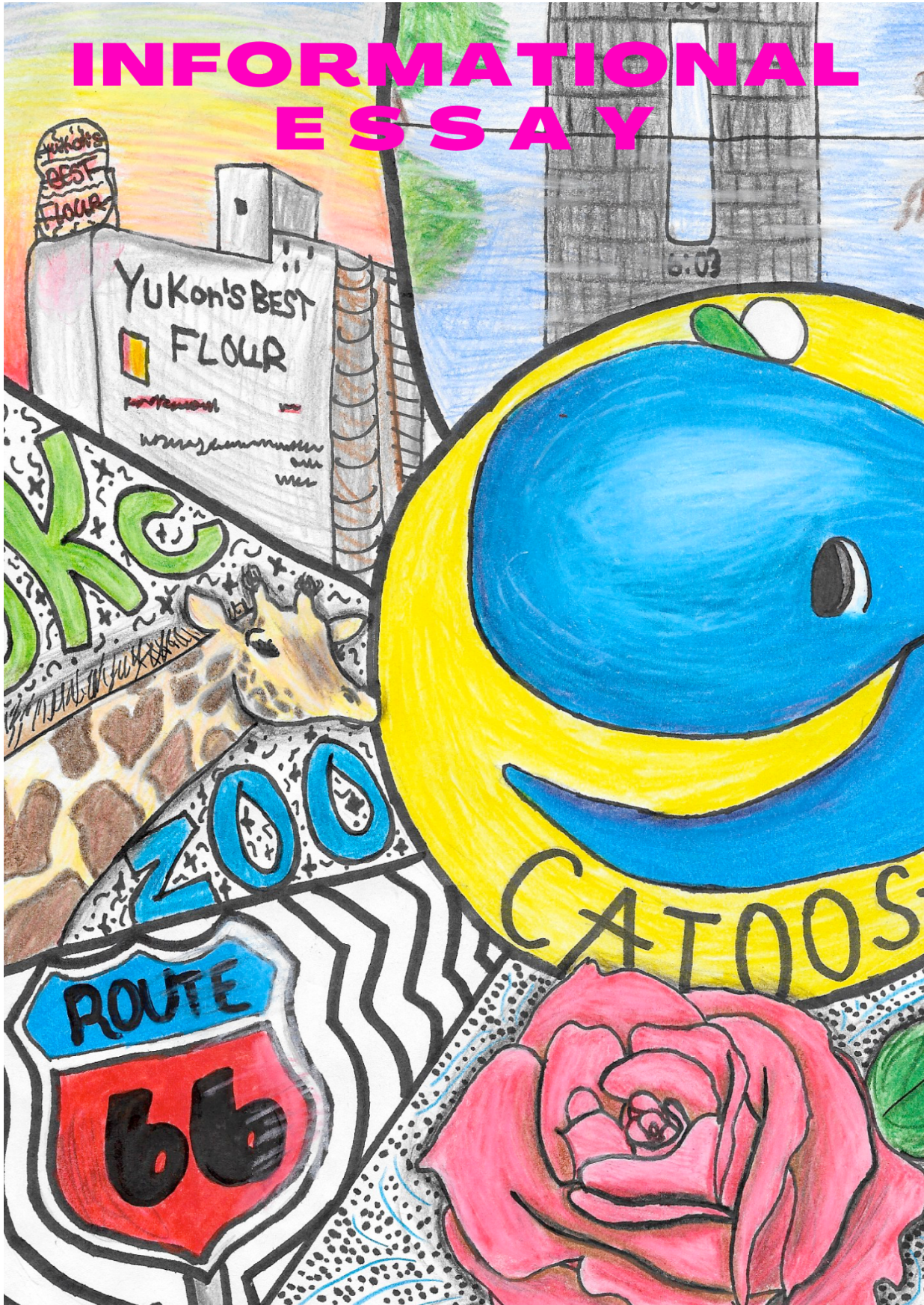
### Stage Seven: Failure

It's been a month after the team was declared MIA. Another is sent to investigate the starship. Stage one begins.

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# INFORMATIONAL ESSAY



## **What Are You Listening To?**

Merritt Mantz

Music has become a large part of our everyday lives. Whether it be a way of expression or a new way to cross cultural barriers, our lives would be unrecognizable without it.

On the scientific end of the topic, our human brains love patterns. Many songs have repeating lyrics, known as the chorus, rhythms, melodies, etc. The rhythm has a way of reaching the body. The human heart and lungs have a way of forming a synching pattern with the music through entrainment, a way of the body accelerating with its environment.

Music has actually evolved dramatically since the early songs. What used to be chants and simple instrumental noise is now jam packed with words and melodies. Instruments have come a long way, too. Many early, famous composers like Beethoven and Mozart actually started their music careers on an instrument called the harpsichord before the piano became a commonly used item. Classical music has been known to be soothing, using alternate dynamics that we don't always recognize in modern, lyrical pieces.

Music is used in all sorts of classrooms and households as a focusing technique. Teachers in multiple schools around the country use music as breaks in between lessons to awaken their students. According to a study by Florida National University, "Music produces several positive effects on a human's body and brain. Music activates both the left and right brain at the same time, and the activation of both hemispheres can maximize learning and improve memory." Using music while studying is very beneficial, as it can help with retaining information. It is also becoming more and more common, especially in schools and colleges.

A vast majority rely on music as much as face-to-face human interaction. Psychologically, it can be mood boosting. Music triggers the brain's hormones, releasing a specific hormone called dopamine. The team at Spiritual Care and Support at NorthShore University Health System highlights some of the benefits that music has on health and well being.



“... [Music can] Lower blood pressure, decrease cortisol (stress hormone) levels and increase serotonin and endorphin levels in the blood.” Dopamine and cortisol have opposite purposes, therefore music’s reaction with the brain is an intricate process.

The well renowned poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow once said, “Music is the universal language of mankind”. Almost every single country in the world has a different music genre. Often, genres are multiple combinations of cultures’ music. Take the jazzy, blues-based style Creole, for example. Both the cultural music and its people cross all sorts of racial boundaries. The music is based on the traditional Louisiana roots of French, African-American, Cajun, and Spanish music. Also, the way that music is written for choirs, instruments, and bands can be learned through any language. The musical staff contains notes able to be read and transposed all around the world.

Recently, rap and hip-hop music has swept the country. People prefer it for its upbeat feel, and its poetic lyrics. It is a new way of making art out of music, and there are so many different varieties that almost any person could find a song to relate to. Many find that some songs are very explicit, but there are artists that strive to go in the opposite direction, writing songs with positive messages and avoiding controversial terms. Eminem’s “Lose Yourself” was the first hit rap song to win an Oscar award, which is a dramatic, catchy song about seizing every opportunity.

Music serves as a vital part of today’s lives. It is used for psychological development, social expression, and exploring other cultures and languages. There are countless genres of music, new and old. Songs not only affect our brains, but also do numerous things for our bodies. Without music our society would be completely different. An article written by Nielsen, a global leader in audience data and analytics, found that 93% of the U.S. population spends more than 25 hours a week jamming to their favorite music. So, the question remains, “What are you listening to?”

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## **The Dynamic Life of Louis Zamperini**

Jackson "Quinn" Mosher

How does Louis Zamperini's life exhibit dynamic characteristics? Louis Zamperini's life was a crazy one, from being a criminal and problem child to becoming an Olympic runner, and even a P.O.W. The different chapters of his life can be characterized as bold, accomplished, and persevering which make him dynamic in his character.

Louis Zamperini, during his childhood, exhibited boldness, especially when fleeing a crime scene. This excerpt from "4 Lessons in Manliness from Louis Zamperini" describe some of Louis's mischievous behavior: "He formed a gang of fellow toughs that engaged in hi-jinks both comical and criminal; they rung church bells in the middle of the night, grabbed pies from a bakery, and pinched liquor from bootleggers(Louis said they made the best victims since they couldn't incriminate themselves by reporting the theft!)" (McKay 2). In Louis's youth, Louis committed crimes with not a shred of remorse. This bold behavior caused Louis to gain quite a deplorable reputation among his peers.

Later, Louis participated in track, and he put constant effort into training, breaking bad habits, and sculpting his body to the best of his ability. This quote from "4 Lessons in Manliness from Louis Zamperini" shows how hard Louis trained, and how much effort he put into improving himself: "I knew however much I struggled against it, that running was the right course to follow. To stay on the straight and narrow I made a secret pact with myself to train every day, no matter the weather" (McKay 2-3). Louis hated the thought of becoming an athlete and training altogether. His brother, Pete, still held some confidence in Louis's ability to become an athlete, and that happened to get Louis running in the right direction, and accomplishing his goals.

During Louis Zamperini's imprisonment in a POW camp, Louis exhibited perseverance. According to the "Great Zamperini", "The Bird ordered Louis to heft a beam over his head and hold it. Louis only weighed ninety pounds, but lifted the beam and held it until The Bird became enraged



and punched Louis in the stomach. Louis had held the beam over his head for a total of 37 minutes" (Simon 2). This quote shows how Louis stayed unyielding to The Bird and his torture during his time as a POW. Louis illustrated perseverance because going through torture, and then surviving and having a good life, is better than giving in and not having a life at all. Before that, when Louis actually arrived at the Naoetsu POW camp in northern Japan, he endured so much starvation and disease, and he still managed to survive. "Zamperini would end up in Naoetsu camp in Northern Japan, enduring more starvation, disease, and unspeakable torture until Japan was liberated in 1945" (Cobb 2). This quote shows how much perseverance he showed not only through The Bird's torture but the disease and starvation as well. Louis said he survived because he wanted to inform the American Government about the soldiers that died in the camps, and how much he missed his family. He also thinks he survived because he kept both hope and the unwillingness to give in to his captors' torture.

Louis Zamperini illustrated boldness, accomplishment, and perseverance throughout the different chapters of his life, making him dynamic in character. Louis Zamperini's life was a great one, and I think these words describe it well, but, what do you think?

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## **Reduce, Reuse, Recycle**

Jennifer Ku

Have you ever heard of “Reduce, Reuse, and Recycle”? Maybe you just saw it on a poster, or maybe you saw a video about it, but just scrolled past it. But it really does have a lot of meaning. Littering is killing our planet. Even small little mistakes are making our planet Earth closer and closer to becoming a planet that is uninhabitable. Maybe you forgot to turn your light off after you left or maybe you didn't delete your spam emails. Those are mistakes we all make. But maybe you did delete some spam emails or you made sure to turn off a light. We need to do more if we want to live in a healthy, clean environment. We need to make sure we are doing everything we can in our day-to-day lives to help.

A lot of people don't even try to help because they hear everyone saying “there's nothing we can do,” but that is not true! There are plenty of ways to help! You can even make it fun. Reuse everything you can! Make a new purpose for it, it just takes a little bit of creativity. For instance, you could make a snow globe with an empty Mason Jar, or perhaps a button from your shirt fell off. You could make earrings out of buttons! It all depends on the perspective and mindset you use.

A lot of people think that Social Media is bad, but it can be good! You can spread awareness using Social Media apps! But, Social Media can also be bad. A lot of famous influencers are promoting fast fashion brands. The problem with fast fashion is there is a high chance that the brands are exploiting children and adults in horrible living conditions. Some of these children don't go to school and work just so that they can help provide for their family. A famous brand forced workers to work 75 hours every week and paid them only 95 dollars a year. Fast fashion also has a lot of bad chemicals and raw materials to produce their clothing. They use a petroleum-based fiber that would take a multitude of years to decompose. Some fast fashion brands even steal independent brands' designs and then claim it as their own. Most of the time, you can tell when a brand is fast fashion when they sell their products at extremely low prices, the clothing item smells unpleasant, and the fabric easily pills. If you can't

afford to buy slow fashion, there are tons of other options. Thrifting or buying secondhand clothing items are great examples.

The Earth has done so many good things for us, but we repay the Earth by littering and polluting the environment. Many people don't spread awareness because they think it will make them "uncool" or "weird," but at the end of the day, you shouldn't care what they think. I would much rather be called "weird" and "uncool" and live in a healthy environment than being called "cool" and live in a horrible polluted environment. Don't be afraid to spread awareness.

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## **Precautions of Scuba Diving**

Lucas Payne

While scuba diving can be really relaxing once you know how, there are some precautions you need to take before you get in the water. You need to check your oxygen tank to see if you have the right amount of oxygen. Make sure your regulator works properly as well. Check to see if it is a good place to scuba dive. Only then can you relax and enjoy scuba diving.

First thing you do after your gear is set up is to check how much air you have. A good amount of air for a thirty minute to forty-five minute dive would be about a level of three thousand. If you do not have enough air, talk to your instructor or fill it up. Then, double check if your air is at a good amount. After that, you can move on to the next precaution.

After you complete the first step, there are still things you have to do. You need to check if your air works. To do this, simply turn on your air and see if you can breathe. If you can, move onto the last precaution. If you cannot however, you need to talk to your instructor so they can fix it.

The final thing to do is to look for a place to scuba dive. These places are normally marked with a buoy floating above it. If there's a possible threat, talk to your instructor to see what to do. If not you can just get everything on and then get in safely. Congrats!

There are many other precautions you need to take when scuba diving. But mainly check how much air you have. Then, check to see if your air works. Finally, look for a spot to scuba dive. There are many other things so if confused just ask your instructor. You also are required to take an online quiz and tests in a pool to see if you can get certified. At last you can enjoy scuba diving!

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**Your Life is Like a Book**

Ellie Jeffery

Your life is a story it may not be told many times but it is like a story. Everything you do or choose changes the path you go down but like stories it can go many ways but you decide what path you take not anyone else. One way you can choose a job or college you choose to do or go to. Another is how you decide to do things like homework or just work you either do it all and get done with it or you can wait till the last day or last minute to do it and you might have to stay up and work but you life you path your story and there is always the next blank page to do things right. You have a lot of choices and you don't know you have all of this till it gets taken away. Life wasn't meant to be easy and not everything is easy. Everyone would do it, not every job is easy or everyone would work many jobs and you control all of these things you do.

Emotion is another thing you control you don't always have to be happy you have other emotions and not everyone has an amazing life but that can change it is your choice if you are going to change those things not everyone or everything there is an uphill and downhill in everyone's life there are good and bad memories those memories are like chapters in a book both make your book more interesting and things aren't always going to be so bad or good your book is good one even if you don't think so. A book is not always perfect but I also know that you never judge a book by its cover. Every book is handled with care and your book is valuable. Other things you look for in a book are its different characteristics. Just like a human there might be similar interests and taste in clothes and music and they might be different but that should not ruin your friendship it is other things.

A life is your own story. Many choices make you make those choices and you do things your way or you can do it others way cause they are cool but you chose to be yourself is great advice and most to all stories are beautiful. If you have a dream and will take the time you might achieve it, not a guarantee all the time but most of the time if that dream is what you

are longing for go for it. Now if you read this thinking what kind of book are we talking about well there are many genres of books but some of them can not be your like like fiction or fairytale but a lot of things that make it a book is chapters you life has chapters and pages and you book can go on and on now if you think life is like a nonfiction book it is not you don't always get the person that is the person that you think is the love of your life and may not get your dream job but that is a possibility but life is a gift everyone is a gift in this world whether you like them or not but keep it realistic but a lots of things are possible if you think they are. If you are willing to put in the work then you can do lot of things and try and make the world a better place. 👍

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"X-BOX PROBLEMS" BY ILY UHRIG





"AT THE SHOP" BY YALENA HERNANDEZ



Oklahoma Council of Teachers of English

**In gratitude...**

A very special thank you to all the teachers who nurture the hearts and minds of writers so that they can be, now and in the future, our scholars, activists, storytellers, and poets.

The writings in this book are winners in the 2023 Young Writers Contest for Oklahoma students, sponsored by the Oklahoma Council of Teachers of English (OKCTE). This year there were over 500 entries from 58 teachers. The contest is a way for OKCTE to encourage teachers and students to extend their classroom writing to public spaces and by doing so give voice to the lives of Oklahoma youth.

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