Creative Writing Awards

2018 SELECTED POEMS, STORIES & MEMOIRS

Testimony of a Poet  Household
Vet  Emotionless Thoughts
Call Me a Feminist  Swing Sets
Of Filling Empty Space with Bodies
School Land Hell  I Am Beautiful
Escaping to a Dream
Not Quite Normal  Trauma Queen

Looking for writing with a strong, clear voice, by authors who are daring, original, and unafraid to take risks
A COMPANY WITH CREATIVITY AT ITS CORE

Penguin Random House’s commitment to individuality and artistic expression has led to unparalleled success in publishing the best literature by writers in the United States and worldwide. Our company philosophy and dedication to creativity, education, and innovation are the cornerstones of our publishing mission as well as our corporate philanthropic activities. Penguin Random House is passionate about fostering the freedom to create for our authors and our employees. This freedom to create is at the very heart of the Penguin Random House Creative Writing Awards.

THE MISSION

The Penguin Random House Creative Writing Awards wants to know what young adults have to say. Our mantra is that we are looking for writing with a strong, clear voice, by authors who are daring, original, and unafraid to take risks. We want to recognize the unique vision and voices of high school seniors with scholarship awards while encouraging student writers throughout the writing process.

THE HISTORY

In 1993, immediately after establishing its world headquarters in New York City, Bertelsmann sought innovative ways to give back to the city that offered such a wealth of creative talent. Among its many philanthropic ventures was the Bertelsmann Foundation’s World of Expression Scholarship Program, designed to encourage, support and reward young writers and musicians growing up in this cultural capital.

The program began with scholarship awards for excellence in literary and musical expression and then quickly expanded to include programs that would foster that expression. Fall workshops in public high schools
across the city offered a jolt of creativity to high school seniors, jumpstarting students to create original work. Classroom teachers clamored for materials that would help them infuse creative writing into the classroom; World of Expression teaching artists responded with a booklet of lesson plans and staff development workshops for teachers and administrators. A summer writing program for juniors offered an intensive course for developing writers. The World of Expression website provided access to writing and music-related resources for teachers and students year-round.

Twenty-five years later, and known as the Penguin Random House Creative Writing Awards, the commitment is apparent. Program winners have gone on to study at a wide variety of colleges and universities around the country, from City University of New York to Harvard. Many have also continued their education at trade or technical schools. To date, the program has awarded more than $2.6 million dollars in scholarships to public high school students for original poetry, memoir, fiction, drama and graphic novel compositions. In addition, the program brings together educators, teaching artists, community leaders, authors and industry professionals (including Penguin Random House executives) to inspire, guide, read, judge and celebrate the work of hundreds of diverse writers each year.

THE PROGRAM TODAY

Starting in 2019, Penguin Random House will partner with We Need Diverse Books (WNDB), a national grassroots organization that advocates for diversity in children’s literature, to facilitate the expansion of the competition beyond its origins in New York City to graduating seniors from public high schools across the country. The goal is for youth from coast to coast to join previous recipients, who include award-winning and published writers and journalists as well as distinguished professionals in variety of fields. Winners will receive a total of $50,000 in college scholarship funds, in addition to other awards for runners-up.
# 2018 WINNERS

## FIRST PLACE SCHOLARSHIP AWARDS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Award</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>School</th>
<th>Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$10,000 Poetry</td>
<td>Yueying Guo</td>
<td>Queens High School</td>
<td>School Land Hell</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$10,000 Fiction &amp; Drama</td>
<td>Sarah Choi</td>
<td>Benjamin N. Cardozo High School</td>
<td>Household</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$10,000 Personal Memoir</td>
<td>Regina Fontanelli</td>
<td>Edward R. Murrow High School</td>
<td>Swing Sets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$10,000 Graphic Novel</td>
<td>Grace Wan</td>
<td>Bard High School</td>
<td>Smile</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

## MAYA ANGELOU AWARD FOR SPOKEN WORD POEM

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Award</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>School</th>
<th>Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$10,000 Literature/Spoken Word</td>
<td>Kadidiatou Diallo</td>
<td>Brooklyn Technical High School</td>
<td>Of Filling Empty Space with Bodies</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

## ALL OTHER AWARDS BY SCHOOL

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Award</th>
<th>Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Juan Burbano</td>
<td>Honorable Mention – Graphic Novel</td>
<td>Subject 016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rowana Miller</td>
<td>Honorable Mention – Memoir</td>
<td>A Portrait of Grandpa Abel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crystal Gomez</td>
<td>$1000 Best of Borough – Memoir</td>
<td>If Only</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rebecca Huynh</td>
<td>$1000 Best of Borough – Fiction &amp; Drama</td>
<td>Café Universe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samantha Gong</td>
<td>$1000 Best of Borough – Fiction &amp; Drama</td>
<td>Not Quite Normal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brianna Carrion</td>
<td>Honorable Mention – Fiction &amp; Drama</td>
<td>Procrastinator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alin Haberle</td>
<td>Honorable Mention – Graphic Novel</td>
<td>My Life Began With A Dream</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darius Luo</td>
<td>Honorable Mention – Memoir</td>
<td>Disclosure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marjana Tafader</td>
<td>Honorable Mention – Fiction &amp; Drama</td>
<td>This Too Shall End</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cindy Chang</td>
<td>Honorable Mention – Memoir</td>
<td>Bye Sun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monica Janvier</td>
<td>Honorable Mention – Poetry</td>
<td>Endless Tune</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blana Martinez</td>
<td>$1000 Best of Borough – Fiction &amp; Drama</td>
<td>This is Kate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maven Nzeutem</td>
<td>Honorable Mention – Poetry</td>
<td>My Epidermis is Gone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oluwademilade Ogunlade</td>
<td>Honorable Mention – Spoken Word</td>
<td>Mutual Trauma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ana Tapia</td>
<td>$1000 Best of Borough – Memoir</td>
<td>The Necklace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May Win</td>
<td>Honorable Mention – Poetry</td>
<td>Dear Dad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xin Ye</td>
<td>Honorable Mention – Memoir</td>
<td>Fragile</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NAME</td>
<td>AWARD</td>
<td>TITLE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eleanor Roosevelt High School</td>
<td>Daley Polner: Honorable Mention – Poetry</td>
<td>A Ritual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Samantha Streit: Honorable Mention – Fiction &amp; Drama</td>
<td>On Trend Monsters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fiorello LaGuardia High School</td>
<td>Athena Gil: Honorable Mention – Graphic Novel</td>
<td>Daffodils</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sydnie Kuperberg: Honorable Mention – Poetry</td>
<td>Dreamland’s Danger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kaitlyn Quach: Honorable Mention – Graphic Novel</td>
<td>My First Failure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Margaret Machlan: Honorable Mention – Graphic Novel</td>
<td>My Life Began With a Dream</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Zoe Senese-Grossberg: $1,000 Artist Recognition – Fiction &amp; Drama</td>
<td>Etz Hayim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mayumi Tan: Honorable Mention – Graphic Novel</td>
<td>Paradise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frank McCourt High School</td>
<td>Kristalyn Billips: Honorable Mention – Fiction &amp; Drama</td>
<td>The Touch of Fear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frank Sinatra School of the Arts</td>
<td>Carmela Lara: Honorable Mention – Poetry</td>
<td>Helsinki Syndrome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Angeleigh Mercado: $1000 Best of Borough – Graphic Novel</td>
<td>Here</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Aaron Pilosov: Honorable Mention – Poetry</td>
<td>Scuffed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School of American Studies at Lehman College</td>
<td>Ben Bleier: $1000 Best of Borough – Poetry</td>
<td>Escaping to a Dream</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Michelle Tatara: Honorable Mention – Fiction &amp; Drama</td>
<td>Inshallah, We Will Meet in Heaven</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School of Art and Design</td>
<td>Andre Gibbs: $1000 Best of Borough – Graphic Novel</td>
<td>Me, Myself and I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sebrina Dement Semer: Honorable Mention – Graphic Novel</td>
<td>I Didn’t Know</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Danilo Zambrano: Honorable Mention – Graphic Novel</td>
<td>What No One Knows</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hostos Lincoln Academy</td>
<td>Isieni Reyes: Honorable Mention – Memoir</td>
<td>I Am Beautiful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fernando Rodriguez: Honorable Mention – Graphic Novel</td>
<td>I Screamed with the Truck</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sabrina Salas: $1000 Best of Borough – Memoir</td>
<td>Lentils, Grapes and Spirits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hunter College High School</td>
<td>Leo Alvarez: Honorable Mention – Fiction &amp; Drama</td>
<td>Café du Mont-Royal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chelsea Chen: $1000 Best of Borough – Memoir</td>
<td>Learning to Grieve</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yeji Cho: Honorable Mention – Fiction &amp; Drama</td>
<td>Purpose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lily Goldberg: Honorable Mention – Poetry</td>
<td>Meditation on Cranwell Golf Course</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kaley Huang: Honorable Mention – Memoir</td>
<td>Dissection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rachel Lapides: $1000 Best of Borough – Poetry</td>
<td>News Cycle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Michelle Sung: $1000 Best of Borough – Fiction &amp; Drama</td>
<td>My Way or the Highway</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medgar Evers College Preparatory School</td>
<td>Khasadiah Moseley: Honorable Mention – Spoken Word</td>
<td>The Invincibility in Invisibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Midwood High School</td>
<td>Hafsa Fatima: $1000 Best of Borough – Poetry</td>
<td>What I Remember</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Millenium High School</td>
<td>Agatha Advincula: Honorable Mention – Spoken Word</td>
<td>Naked Details</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queens High School for the Sciences</td>
<td>Evan Contreras: $1000 Best of Borough – Poetry</td>
<td>In Memoriam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert F. Kennedy Community High School</td>
<td>Nicole Pomazanski: $1000 Best of Borough - Spoken Word</td>
<td>Call Me a Feminist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NAME</td>
<td>AWARD</td>
<td>TITLE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Stuyvesant High School</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria Acuna</td>
<td>Honorable Mention – Fiction &amp; Drama</td>
<td>There's a Light Inside Her</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nadean Alnajjar</td>
<td>Honorable Mention – Fiction &amp; Drama</td>
<td>Ripped Seams</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anne Chen</td>
<td>Honorable Mention – Poetry</td>
<td>5 Centimeters Per Second</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tiffany Chen</td>
<td>Honorable Mention – Memoir</td>
<td>Maybe We Took This Too Far</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophie Feng</td>
<td>Honorable Mention – Memoir</td>
<td>Tears and Vinyl</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liz Lee</td>
<td>Honorable Mention – Memoir</td>
<td>Open-Ended</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phoebe Lok</td>
<td>Honorable Mention – Poetry</td>
<td>And One Night I Died</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maya Mitrasinovic</td>
<td>Honorable Mention – Memoir</td>
<td>That Was the Hardest It Ever Was</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raibena Raita</td>
<td>Honorable Mention – Memoir</td>
<td>Why I Don’t Hate Ignorant Whites</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julian Rubinfien</td>
<td>Honorable Mention – Fiction &amp; Drama</td>
<td>Popping the Clutch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matteo Wong</td>
<td>Honorable Mention – Memoir</td>
<td>Quantum Mechanics in Asian-America</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emily Xu</td>
<td>Honorable Mention – Fiction &amp; Drama</td>
<td>Evergreen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Susan E. Wagner High School</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imani Hinckson</td>
<td>$1000 Best of Borough – Poetry</td>
<td>Ode to the American Dream</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victoria Sarita</td>
<td>Honorable Mention – Poetry</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maya Schioppo</td>
<td>Honorable Mention – Fiction &amp; Drama</td>
<td>Christina’s World</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Danya Tayeh &amp; Bridget Saw</td>
<td>$1000 Best of Borough – Graphic Novel</td>
<td>The Grasp of Our Innocence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Candace Womack</td>
<td>Honorable Mention – Poetry</td>
<td>Masks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Thomas A. Edison Career and Technical Education High School</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oluwalemi Alna</td>
<td>$1000 Best of Borough - Spoken Word</td>
<td>Emotionless Thoughts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christen De Ocampo</td>
<td>Honorable Mention – Poetry</td>
<td>Dimension</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kalyani Jordan</td>
<td>$1000 Artist Recognition- Memoir</td>
<td>The Art of Words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tanvy Rai</td>
<td>$1000 Artist Recognition - Poetry</td>
<td>1251</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maheen Siddiqui</td>
<td>Honorable Mention – Spoken Word</td>
<td>Live</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Thurgood Marshall Academy for Learning and Social Change</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awa Dembele</td>
<td>Honorable Mention – Fiction &amp; Drama</td>
<td>Elmina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jay’La Fenti</td>
<td>$1,000 Best of Borough – Spoken Word</td>
<td>Testimony of a Poet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tottenville High School</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valarie D’Amico</td>
<td>$1000 Best of Borough – Fiction &amp; Drama</td>
<td>Trauma Queen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gabriella Mingozzi</td>
<td>$1000 Best of Borough – Memoir</td>
<td>Separated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Townsend Harris High School</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waliul Islam &amp; Tara Jackson</td>
<td>$1000 Artist Recognition - Graphic Novel</td>
<td>When the Power Went Out</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Grace Wan
GRAPHIC NOVEL

Creative Writing Mantra:
“There’s a bit of myself in everything I write and draw. Sharing my writing and art is like sharing both a story and a piece of who I am with my audience, and I think that’s something very special.”

My Hobbies:
When I am not editing articles for my school’s newspaper or doodling on a piece of scrap paper, you can find me playing video games, from which I draw much inspiration.

College I Packed Up For: Brown University
Kadidiatou Diallo
SPOKEN WORD

Creative Writing Mantra:
“The voice I was able to reflect through my writing has proven to be a common personality in the lives of those that surround me and I was constantly approached about the ‘girl’ in my piece.”

My Goal:
Boldly share my talents with the rest of the world.

College I Packed Up For: Howard University
Regina Fontanelli
PERSONAL MEMOIR

Creative Writing Mantra:
“Through my writing, I feel truly seen. Nothing else has been able to give that to me.”

Why I Write:
To reveal the multifaceted dimensions of my identity and to communicate the complexities of life.

College I Packed Up For: Middlebury College
Sarah Choi
FICTION & DRAMA

Creative Writing Mantra:
“The night I hit ‘Enter’ and submitted my piece, I forgot that there was a panel of judges waiting. Even as I was performing, I forgot that there was an audience because my shaking voice suddenly sounded like the speaker of my story.”

My Big Plans:
I want to, one day, discover a medical breakthrough that will save millions of lives.

College I Packed Up For: Hofstra University
Yueying Guo
POETRY

Creative Writing Mantra:
“Some people sing when they are sad, others paint when they are mad, some write when they feel lost. If there is a thing such as the world’s most beautiful coping method, it would be creative writing.”

Fun Fact:
My writing has been published in Eunoia Review, Linden Avenue, and Newtown Literary.

College I Packed Up For: Stony Brook University
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Of Filling Empty Space with Bodies</td>
<td>Kadidatou Diallo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Testimony of a Poet</td>
<td>Jay’La Fenty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>School Land Hell</td>
<td>Yueying Guo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Call Me a Feminist</td>
<td>Nicole Pomazanski</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>Swing Sets</td>
<td>Regina Fontanelli</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39</td>
<td>Emotionless Thoughts</td>
<td>Femi Aina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45</td>
<td>Household</td>
<td>Sarah Choi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>53</td>
<td>I Am Beautiful</td>
<td>Isieni Reyes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>57</td>
<td>Vet</td>
<td>Imani Hinckson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>61</td>
<td>Escaping to a Dream</td>
<td>Ben Bleir</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>63</td>
<td>Not Quite Normal</td>
<td>Samantha Gong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>73</td>
<td>Trauma Queen</td>
<td>Valarie D’Amico</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
“So she filled the space left in her heart with short-lived pointless promenades.”

—Kadidiatou Diallo
Of Filling Empty Space with Bodies

By Kadidiatou Diallo

BROOKLYN TECHNICAL HIGH SCHOOL

Sets the scene.
Seventeen and rebellious. Boy sits on mattress sitting on the ground. She sits to his right. Music swells.
Cigarette smoke fills the air and lungs, suffocating them. No one disturbs the silence.
Boy puffs smoke in air.

The - still - smoked filled-air compresses, girl’s chest gets heavy
As the weight of bodies (like the weight of fear) often seems to do
Girl can’t remember how they got like this.
Can’t remember how she got like this. Eyes close.
Girl was never taught to value her time
Always running after little boys that didn’t deserve it Daddy left when she turned 8
Said he couldn’t handle it Weaved in and out her life.
Letters every birthday
until only letters she saw signed by him was child support.
Always gave up her happiness living for moments That never came
She gave too much

Girl was never taught to value her time Instead she was
Taught to be babysitter but still lover. To be mother but still wife.
Taught to pick up where boy’s parents left off. At the beginning.

Flashback.

7.
At seven years old with beaded, box braids running past her collar-
bones down her back in a sea of 4C hair
And bubblegum pop confidence that could not be popped Hand in
mama’s
Girl doesn’t notice when group of men lining the street Turn
towards them

What you tryna do shawty?
Mama says nothing
She thinks how she wants to go home Up and down. Eyes rove over
body. Footsteps quicken.

Blinks.

Girl and boy lie in quiet contemplation on the mattress on the
ground. Boy holds her hand in his.
Girl tries to remember last time he held her
Hours after the cigarette smoke had escaped the room. Answer: Never.

Boy says three words. Girl doesn’t believe him. This time boy closes eyes, boy sighs. Almost apologizes. Quiet.

Girl bends at waist to make excuses for him. Breaks her teeth and will to comfort him. Twists her tongue and does stunts to will herself to speak submission. Wills her body to speak submission.

Girl feels like everything and nothing simultaneously Girl was never taught to love herself
She sought validation in the heavy breaths and quick temper
Of little boys that couldn’t care less

She could never appreciate the curves and dips Of her own body
Never thought it could be worshipped But she could be worshipped
The queen in her, hadn’t yet found a crown that fit quite right
So instead she settled
In her often hazy drunkenness

Let them impose themselves on her
Let them force themselves into spaces where they couldn’t fit With egos too big and minds too small
She couldn’t make up for its emptiness So she filled the space left in
her heart With short-lived pointless promenades.

Blinks.

Sets the scene.
Seventeen and rebellious. Boy sits on mattress sitting on the ground. She sits to his right. Music swells.
Cigarette smoke fills the air and lungs, suffocating them. No one disturbs the silence.
Boy puffs smoke in air. Scene.
“I’m just caught in between who I want to be, how people see me and who I really am”

— Jay’La Fenty
Testimony of a Poet
By Jay’La Fenty
THURGOOD MARSHALL FOR LEARNING AND SOCIAL CHANGE

Oh child how you get so lyrical?
A miracle, truly a flower child individual.
Your words hold so much weight when you speak,
How you get deep?
Well it ain’t that hard when you’re drowning.
I write anytime I’m frowning, when my happiness is going through a recession, depression is catching up to me.
But I won’t let it be, so I write my pain to gain passion.
I’m not perfect, I always have to remind myself that I’m whole not a fraction.
I’m just caught in between who I want to be, how people see me and who I really am.
And I rather not give a damn but I do.
Much as you deny it so do you.
What’s new? Matter of fact what’s more true.
But when I write no one can tell me nothing.
And I’m not listening if you trying to tell me something.
Too busy getting high off a vibe, I’m on a different type of time.
I’m jumping off a building, looking for no one to catch me.
I’m reckless, no chains or containment.
And I’m gunning at anyone trying to kill my freedom, willingly and aiming.
Because I write too much truth to waste when I speak.
This done got me through too many night where I rather not see the sun.
This ain’t fun this is therapy but I don’t think y’all hearing me.
Then they ask me ...
Oh child how you get so lyrical?
A miracle, truly a flower child individual.
Your words hold so much weight when you speak,
How you get deep?
And honestly, I don’t know.
I just keep the words rhyming and I got a nice flow.
“Multi-cultural? Hah, it’s not a multi. It’s a single”

—Yueying Guo
School Land Hell

By Yueying Guo

QUEENS HIGH SCHOOL FOR THE SCIENCES

I. The Burial of the Living

They are in a circle around me,
They see my shaking legs and think I am nervous,
‘Relax,’ they say, ‘It will be alright.’
I do not care for what they say; I am not nervous.
I am seething with fury.
It rings in my head each morning and afternoon:
Levetiracetam, 1000mg, twice a day, every day,
Every day, every day, everyday—three hundred and sixty-five days
For two years, two years!—seven hundred and thirty days.
Side effects? Drowsiness, weakness, loss of appetite...
Increases the risk of suicidal thoughts or behavior...

II. A Game of Maze

Who the hell designed the office of
Queens High School for the Sciences?
I mean, I know we are poor, but even I could do better—
And I failed Geometry and Algebra II
(Failed means below mastery, cuz we aim for 100),
Because it’s hard to get to where you want to be
In a maze with gum-ridden desks, three-legged chairs,
Torn textbooks, dog-eared paperbacks, students
Complaining and teachers complaining about students complaining,
But I don’t know where I want to be.

My legs shake up dust-storms as I call my dad,
Begging him to take me out of this place because
I don’t want to be the next girl lying unconscious on the floor
As people step over her, laughing and pointing,
Which is all I think about since the diagnosis.

It is snowing outside as I walk to my dad’s car, and the
World is empty with people in school and at work.
The silence and stillness scare me because it makes the world look like
The apocalypse.
A ghost town.
Dead.

But although I hate the cold and all that comes with winter,
I cannot love spring, which comes only too long after I’ve asked for it.
‘April is the cruelest month,’ T.S. Eliot said.
Only now, shivering in the dark and musty back seat,
Am I reminded that I never finished reading
*The Waste Land*. 
III. The Burial of the Living, Again

When they return from spring break,
Freed from sweaters and boots and slush—
Only an occasional shower sometimes—they are beaming;
They bring out shorts and skirts and trim their hair;
They bring in balls of orange, white, and black;
And the schoolyard is filled with laughter as
Teachers prepare for trips and gossip
In the halls with ungraded homework in their office.
But I cannot, because I cannot go on the trip to the amusement park.
Since my medicine does not help, they might as well be bitter candy.

The Philadelphia trip I did go on sucked:
I drooled while I slept in the bus for eight hours,
Wasted $11 and 50¢ on food I didn’t eat,
Saw nothing but the poor corpses and skeletons
Of people who were treated as monsters—and still are—
And hated everything, from the museums to my classmates,
Who a week later either went to the physics trip or the
Multi-Cultural Feast where I was the only one who sat
Alone at a table of nine seats and couldn’t eat any of the food there because I
Had a loss of appetite even before the pills.

Multi-cultural? Hah, it’s not a multi.
It’s a single.
One.
Alone.
Lonely.

I watched them crowd around filled tables,
Pull chairs from my empty party without meeting my eye
And I wished they’d be like me:
Be spiteful of the world and fail math and science every year,
Have a neurologist who doesn’t know your name but
Sees your data and prescribes you new medicine each month,
Shred your tongue and have it swell on a bi-yearly basis,
Have tremors in your head at least once a week—
But I know even then they will not be me
And my legs shake so much they stopped taking my chairs.

You are wrong: May is just as cruel.

IV. The Physics Sermon

When I first fell two years ago on a Sunday morning,
I woke up in the hospital thinking I had time-traveled
Until I saw a video of me breaking into dance on the floor
And on a cot in an ambulance, eyes closed, skin concrete-gray
(And although they don’t say, I know they filmed it because
It might’ve been the last time they could see me outside a casket).
That’s why, sitting there, in a tissue-paper gown,
Tongue minced meat, murmurs vaguely forming words,
Obediently gulping down the pills, they pitied me too much to say, ‘You will not be going to Six Flags next year.’

At the summer cruise I went to that same year
I had an episode every night and after my return to
Ugly, drab, artificially welcoming New York City
(A.k.a the Empire State, Big Apple, Melting Pot),
I went from Levetiracetam 500mg to
Levetiracetam 1000mg and Divalprotex Sodium 250 mg,
But it’s not like I know what they are—
I just know one is white and other is pink.
I told you, I fail science every year.

Then autumn came and so did Physics class,
And I tried my best—I really tried—to understand
‘Velocity’, ‘momentum’, ‘electromagnetism’,
But I told you! I fail science every year!
And yet my red marks weren’t what barred me.
And yet the $77 weren’t what barred me.
And the nerve of the world, that when the seats were finally filled,
And I had begun to forget the dull ache of desire,
Someone drops out and—
‘There’s a seat for anyone who wants to come on the trip!’

V. The Burial of the Past
The nerve of them, to pretend to not hear
Me speak about the roller coaster, the Ferris wheel.
The nerve of them, to turn and not see
My shaking legs, clenching fists, red-rimmed eyes.
The nerve of them, to talk about
How great the weather would be, fun the day will be,
How dumb the Multi-Cultural Feast was going to be,
As I hold the $7 ticket in my hand.
The nerve of her, to not talk to me
The whole time I’m in her office, but ask my mom
How many times I had a seizure, how many pills I took,
How long I was in the hospital, how many tests I took—
As if she is the one who fell down that day two years ago!

The nerve of them, to tell me,
‘Relax...It will be alright,’ as though they know anything:
When the freshman boy who died was in the hospital,
Did they also say that?
I don’t know, but I do know that even though we held
Moments of silence, wrote letters, talked of him,
Spring came and we were freed of winter’s sorrows,
And we laughed and we gossiped and we went on trips,
Boring or fun, we went on trips
He never will.

The nerve of the world,
The nerve of all these people,
The nerve of me, who is such a hypocrite,
Because if I went on that Physics trip,
There would be none of this right now,
And I would not remember him.

‘You! hypocrite lecteur!—mon semblable,—mon frère!’

VI. Death by Summer Fun
I flip the calendar page to June.
The picture that comes along is that of a carousel,
The sky blue, machine golden, people happy,
And it says in a yellow orb in the corner:
‘Safety Tips for Summer Fun,’
Reminding me this is the medical calendar I got from the hospital.
Which reminds me of the school survey that asked,
Where would you prefer to go as your senior trip?
1. Skiing resort
2. Amusement park
3. Other:

Which reminds me of the posts on Facebook that say,
‘Choose amusement park!’
‘Write Disneyland as Other!’
Which reminds me of people who said,
‘Put skiing so in the spring we can go somewhere cold.’
‘The skiing trip will be during February...’
‘I don’t want the senior trip to be during winter!’
‘But I already went to an amusement park!’

How can they be dissatisfied with winter and spring?
How can they be so selfish as to not want a trip to an Amusement park just because they have been there?
How can they be so self-centered as to forget some didn’t go?
How can they be so inconsiderate as to talk about this In front of someone who cannot go,
Whether it be in winter or spring,
Whether it be skiing or riding.

I was always the same, and only now do I see.
Now I know, Mister Eliot, what you mean.

‘You! hypocritical reader!—my fellow,—my brother!’

VII. Another Game of Maze
Who the hell designed New York City,
This maze of speeding subways which I can’t
Ride alone in case I fall onto the tracks?
These roller-coaster-like highways which I can’t
Drive on until I’m cured of random spasms?
These blinding, flashing neon lights that don’t have an Epilepsy warning? I want to ask them,
How did you make it so beautiful?
If you teach me, maybe the office still has some hope.
Maybe I can love my school when I graduate.

VIII. The Burial of You and Your Poetry
Have you heard of the plans for the New York Wheel?
It’s a 630-feet-tall Ferris wheel in Staten Island,
Where my parents are planning on moving to,
And its opening is going to be in April, 2018.
I will be eighteen that April.
It will be my first year being seizure-free.
Of course, I can’t see the future
But I can’t see the past anymore.
The Past is not dead,
But I’ve buried it.

You said, ‘April is the cruelest month,’ but you are wrong.
Every month is the cruelest month—
Whether it be spring overtaking winter,
Or May with the newfound energy,
Or June with its ‘Safety Tips for Summer Fun’, July and August too,
And September, November, December, January, February, March.
You see, Arthur Rimbaud told me that,
‘I believe I am in hell, therefore I am.’
Only now do I remember.
I’m done reading A Season in Hell.
“Because my 80 cents to his dollar will always be my legacy, no matter how much smarter we both know I am.”

—Nicole Pomazanski
Call Me a Feminist

By Nicole Pomazanski
ROBERT F. KENNEDY COMMUNITY HIGH SCHOOL

Call me a feminist,
Because I don’t care for the catcalls or the pictures in your head of me naked.
Because I’m appalled that you kiss your Mother’s cheek with the same mouth that you used to call me a slut.
Because I have to walk faster at night when your car slows down just so I can get through to tomorrow.

Call me a feminist,
Because I’m annoyed at the crap being spewed about how my shoulders, knees and bra straps distract from your education.
Because the second I stand up to say something, your attention becomes one of a fruit fly. Interesting how that doesn’t happen when the game is on?
Because my eyes and clothes are apparently sending you messages I never said.

Call me a feminist,
Because I hate the phrase “she asked for it” that you use when you simply can’t control yourself.
Because the makeup I put on for myself, automatically makes me a product for you; one that you should “take swimming on the first date”.

Because my 80 cents to his dollar will always be my legacy, no matter how much smarter we both know I am.

Call me a feminist,

Because I know that if your grandmother knew the thoughts running through your mind as that girl walked down the street, you’d get knocked upside the head.

Because I’m scared to voice my thoughts, beliefs and emotions since they are just going to be written off as PMS.

Because my singular beliefs are written out and “mansplained” before I get a chance to even open my mouth.

Call me a feminist,

Because even though I want us to be equals, your ego will be bruised the second we are.

Because the “fingertip rule” was something I heard more in my house than anything else.

Because when I read a line out loud from this in class, you laughed and shook your head. (Oh yeah, I saw that).

Call me a feminist,

Because I despise the fact that your preconceived notions of me are stemmed from the extremists.

Because it pisses me off to no end that my clothes are created to get your attention, and the idea of me being comfortable is out the window.

Because when you mention a girl to your friends, the size of her breasts, waist and butt are the first thing they ask.
Call me a feminist,
Because late night texts seem to be your mating call, even though I’m falling apart.
Because I’m either the damsel in distress or I’m the “bitch” who thinks she can do it all on her own.
Because as a little girl I had to learn that when I don’t feel safe, the best thing for me to do is put keys between my fingers.

Call me a feminist,
Because you think this is all about women wanting to be right all the time, when it truly isn’t.
Because you continue to make jokes about how my place is in the kitchen, making you a sandwich.
Because as a way of mocking me, you change the word “HIStory” to “HERstory”.

Call me a feminist,
Because behind every man who thought he was hot shit, was an incredibly strong woman.
Because when I dressed up as Rosie the Riveter for Halloween, I was either making a stupid statement or being “cute”, no in between.
Because when you google “feminism”, one of the top stories is how the next doctor on “Doctor Who” just CANNOT be a woman.

Call me a feminist,
Because the current definition of feminism has become so extreme that those who truly believe in its original ideology need to step forward.
Because Malala still doesn’t get the respect and praise she deserves.
Because when Jesus does a magic trick, it’s a miracle. But when a woman does a magic trick, she gets burned at the stake.

Call me a feminist,
Because every person deserves the right to feel heard and represented. Because you still think feminism is all about hating on men; which news flash, it isn’t. Because I have to learn to not make eye contact with men as I walk down the street, and to not put my drink down at parties.

Call me a feminist,
Because when ASAP Rocky wears a shirt saying “we all should be feminists”, he gets ridiculed. Because I’m pretty and attractive up until the moment I reject you or put you in the “friendzone”. Because if I don’t want to be your “babe” or “baby girl”, then there’s something wrong with me.

Call me a feminist,
Because your sexual needs and the idea of pleasing you and satisfying you aren’t my priority. Because if I wait, I’m a prude but if I share myself with you, I’m a list of words ALL shaming me. Because you’re going to think differently of me for writing and reading this poem, even though it’s how I feel.

Call me a feminist,
I. Dare. You.
“…shrugging her off has become first nature, and I don’t truly wake up until that summer is over.”

—Regina Fontanelli
Swing Sets

By Regina Fontanelli

Edward R. Murrow High School

Flying fast down flights of grimy, sticky stairs, my tiny brown body bounding down the steps, running toward the landing. My mama is right beside me, frantic and chubby cheeked. “Faster, Gina.” Outside, lights are flashing red and an ambulance sounds its heavy alarm. The noise is not enough to drown out the screams of my uncle at the top of the stairs, proclaiming profanities and wishes for us to stay. It’s just past twilight, and the sky is a stormy sea. Red light mixes with blue to paint the buildings purple. Colors bounce off my pupils, and I get lost thinking of the Pollock paintings Ms. Miller showed that day. In just two years I’ve switched schools six times. My size 4 Skippy’s skipping wherever my mother is going to be happiest.

Two police officers stand face-to-face with my mom and me. My small brown fingers, interlaced in her ivory ones, finger her opal ring, a gift from her late mother. Memories drift in of hiding under flannel covers from monsters in closets and hearing mama’s whisper.

“Whenever you wear this, Grandma is protecting you.” I wonder if touching it produces the same effect.

An officer with a blond buzz cut and rigid red face asks for my name. I’m eager to answer, but am stopped short. “Why do you need to know that?” Mama’s face goes flat, like a heartbeat monitor. His jaw tightens and bones show through his fleshy cheeks. He asks again for my name. I chirp, too young to understand.

“Regina,” my voice full of innocence.
He takes out a notepad and writes it down. My fingers turn red, my mama’s grip so tight circulation halts. He asks my last name and she begins to protest loudly, desperately. His eyes remain unmoved, only mama flinches. Only when his partner finishes loading my uncle into their police car does he hesitate.

When his partner strides up, Jawbones tries to shield where he’s carved my name in his notepad; right next to the names of other seven year olds he deems have “unfit” parents. My mother’s pink, pleading face begs for the second officer’s assistance, while my helplessly round eyes search for understanding. His partner takes a moment to process “the situation,” which really means he is processing us. He takes a long look at me – my shiny bangs, my Children’s Place shirt – before proclaiming, “Erase that shit, man.”

Jawbones storms off to the police car where my drunken uncle rests handcuffed, stomping his tactical sneakers into the sidewalk with each step. Officer two sticks around a second, is fervently thanked by my mother, who clasps her hands together and praises him like the Lord. By this time the ambulances have left, realizing their time has been wasted, and the other police cars are off to whatever duty calls them. Before leaving to join his skeletal partner in driving my shit-faced uncle to prison, officer two crouches down and stretches out a calloused fist in my direction. At eye-level, I am helpless to his shimmering face. I extend my palm, curl the fingers. The impact of my tiny fist is comical. Still, his lips curve upward, revealing shiny teeth and symmetrical incisors. I’m left warm all over with this touch of fatherhood. Then he is out of my life forever.

For a while, we are homeless. Not on the street homeless, but homeless nonetheless. It’s only years later when we watch “Inocente” in my 8th grade class that I realize one can have shelter and not have a home. Desperate for a place to stay that was devoid of alcoholism and violence, we stay with my mom’s friend Suzanne who, upon hearing about the incident with my uncle, immediately offered us refuge at her tiny apartment. Despite this much-needed generosity, Suzanne is also sketchy. Often, I find her watching me, rabid eyes peeking out
below greasy bangs, buck teeth slipping over crusty bottom lip. She touches me in small, unquestionable ways; a flick on the forehead, a pinch on the arm. She stares into my eyes and spills vulgarities about her and her lovers when my mom is not listening. Except for the time Suzanne flashes me, nothing ever escalates beyond “play.” Regardless, relief floods my body when we move to Monica’s. Warm, sun-kissed Monica who makes crunchy, sticky struffoli and lasagna bursting with ricotta.

The elementary school I attended while at Veronica’s was kinder than my previous ones. As a new student I was automatically interesting, and my worldly knowledge of late-night sitcoms distinguished me as “cool.” My clothes, which up until then were hand-me-downs from my much thinner cousins, were replaced with hand-me-downs from Veronica’s daughter, who was actually my size. All of this made me resemble someone an eight-year-old would want to be friends with. Though it definitely didn’t hurt that some girl peed herself my second day. No one can be less cool than the girl who pissed herself.

While I was living it up after nearly a decade of playground loneliness, mom was getting involved with an ex-cokehead, whose past charges included choking his sister and threatening an officer. Neither of us knew any of this in the beginning. All my mom knew was that he was Suzanne’s ex from a gajillion years ago, and that he was willing to take on her, plus her small brown-ish child.

The first time I met Bill was at a Bay Ridge movie theater where, years earlier, a mouse was found in the popcorn machine. He took us to see Madagascar, and laughed at me scream-singing “We like to Move It, Move It” on the way home. His laugh was destabilizing, a low howl that revealed his bright yellow teeth. Too young for intuition and too elated by his approval, I ignored any unease I felt and carried on flailing and flapping down the street, while they fell behind talking and laughing. Days later, my mom found an apartment with his help, and it was decided that he’d stay on the weekends. No one was bothered by the fact that my mom would pay the bills alone.
That first weekend I slept on an air mattress, while they slept on a fold-out a few feet away. There were no dividers or curtains. An overhead light on the stove was used as a night light and cast a faint glow through the tiny apartment. I lay motionless on my left side, staring blankly into the night. My eyes brown saucers. Dilated, gaping black holes. Bill, who had been lying on his right side, cried out, “WHAT THE FUCK.”

My eyes searched him like a minefield, but my voice wouldn’t leave my body. I focused on him in panic, my countenance quieted by his roar.

“Never have I ever been fucking stared at like this, Angela,” he told my mom. “This is un-fucking-acceptable.” Spittle spilling from his thin, flaky lips.

My mom appeased him, switched sides on the bed. “Okay, honey, okay, honey,” she whispered meekly, “Go to sleep,” and before I can even process, he’s back in bed. Virtual moos and clucks emanate from under the covers, and it dawns on me that he’s playing FarmVille...

Then just like that he clicks off, the house is a half shade darker. I don’t dare look back to see if my mom’s asleep. Instead, I root my waist to the right side of the bed and agonize over what’s happened, searching for where I went wrong. And wondering why I couldn’t just say, “I wasn’t staring at you.”

Of course, he wasn’t always terrible. Like any other father, he could envelope me in safety and love. Bill would just occasionally, sometimes send my sense of security crashing around me with a smack or push into the wall. No day better exemplifies our rollercoaster of a relationship than the time we went to Build-A-Bear. Clutching my brown rabbit, all dolled up in blue velvet and carrying a wish just for me to know, I felt like I was in an American Girl Doll movie. Except instead of going home to a nice villa in the middle of Mount Bedford, my home was a shady basement with an old boiler in Brooklyn. American Girls also weren’t hit over the head with metal spoons for being ungrateful, like I was that night. Tears ran down my face as he cracked the spoon over my forehead and pushed me with
bright red hands onto the floor. My mom was nowhere to be seen, but in the kitchen the kettle was whistling and water splashed against the bottom of two fake-Lenox mugs. A few minutes later a cup of tea appeared on the floor next to me. Nothing else was said.

The bigger my breasts grew the worse the situation became. The development of my body stripped the protections childhood gave me. I became a 5-foot-4 punching bag. Every mistake made resulted in violence. His belief was that I could now fight for myself, but my reality was hiding in closets while he pounded against them. The events became less frequent around 14, only because he became less frequent around 14.

After months of slow disappearance, her worst fears were finally confirmed by a booty pic to the wrong number – my best friend Minnie, who I had called on his phone over the weekend. In the photo the cellulite-covered ass of an older looking Italian woman leapt toward the camera lens. Minnie called me, shaken as any 14-year-old would be.

“Ginaaa,” she said. “Your stepdad sent something weird…”

That Friday while I was sleeping over a friend’s, my mom confronted him. But staying true to the snake he is, Bill feigned innocence by squinting his eyes and spewing some bullshit. My mom, desperate to hold onto the man for whom she had sacrificed her time, her money, and her relationship with her child, believed all of it; despite the photo being very obviously taken in his room, on his blue and white comforters, next to his broken air conditioner.

When he finally stopped coming and replying to calls (and voice-mails and instant messages and even emails) my mom’s battery was drained. Day after day, the walls filled with faces in front of her; smiling dead parents and wistful grins from ex-lovers. She lay awake all night every night, medicated eyes wide. Ambien, klonopin, depakote, despite all her dosages being increased, there was no break to her horror. It wasn’t that I didn’t know she had Bipolar Disorder or that she had a more active life when Bill was around. It was that my middle-school cerebrum saw the diagnosis as a baseless label. How
does an eighth grader really understand the complexities of illness? When I was small it was explained to me in song. Ma would take my hands in hers, swing them up and down, and chant in a crackling soprano, “happy! sad, mad, happy! sad, mad!” As a spastic four year old, I could only think about swing sets when she sang it, and that image remained my understanding for a long time. The tarnished rubber seat shooting towards the sky, then crashing back down in a jangle of chains. While my mom lay frozen, I took advantage of my newfound freedom to do whatever I wanted. Hang out with a group of boys I just met in the park at their apartment? Why not. Talk to fifty-year-old men about their relationship problems on a park bench? Sure. Richard was really nice. Wander aimlessly eating nothing but McDonald’s for days on end? I didn’t even know the movie Super Size Me existed. My friends would have to be inside every day by 9 pm and eat “balanced” diets, but I could wander in at 11 or 12 o’clock, right past my insentient, drooling mother without reproach. On the day of eighth-grade graduation, she attempts to wake me up at five am to talk. But shrugging her off has become first nature, and I don’t truly wake up until that summer is over.

High school is a welcome change. Here, dressing like you’re poor is cool and my long hair is beautifully feminine, though the reality is just that I’m too broke for a haircut. It’s not long before someone notices my glow sophomore year, and it all goes downhill. He is long, like a string bean, and pale as a sheet of paper. His Adam’s apple bobs awkwardly and his dark bangs contrast so greatly with his complexion that he looks ill. From the way he eyes me, I know he thinks I’m beautiful. Sexy, even. I sop up his attention like a sponge would water. Glance back at him, shy, the way I think I’m supposed to glance at him. It’s only a number of days before we are dating, by which I mean, hooking up in his apartment after he gets me high. The joint and his mouth taste bitter. Blacken the inside of my lungs, but I don’t care. My euphoria with freedom is becoming tiresome, and I wish I had a mother who didn’t vomit first thing in the morning, and ate meals at regular hours of the day. His parents (an art dealer
and a music producer) have three well-balanced meals a day around a table. Whenever I kiss him I think about how charming I’d be if I were to meet them, how I’d pass a porcelain bowl of snap peas to his dad and heartily laugh at his mother’s jokes. Like every ingénue on every show I’ve ever watched. I take up drinking with him and his friends by the Gowanus and unknowingly tag along on trips to steal Triple C from the Rite Aid. One boy with a triangle face and piercing blue eyes becomes a friend. I share with him how my boyfriend treats me, and he shares with me how my eyebrows are too dark. He tells me I’m fucking dumb, but only because he cares. By March I’m cutting myself with butter knives and razors. In my mind I see myself going too deep, being too absorbed in the process, and slicing through my jugular veins, so tiny Bic blades and ribbed knives are all I use. Another cutter and I become friends, and we spend hours in her bed, counting scars and crossing each other’s wounds. My journal at that time, a 50-cent marble with pages loose at the binding, fill with poetry about her. This is when I realize there may be more to the jittery feeling I get around girls.

On Easter Sunday, my mom cannot cheer me up. There is a small, momentary reversal in the roles we share. She applies blush haughtily in our toothpaste-flecked bathroom mirror, while I stare expressionless at my reflection. I do not put on makeup. I do not speak. I do not change.

“What’s wrong, Gina?” she asks. The holiday has rejuvenated her Catholic spirit, and brought to life her favorite memories. I say nothing. Pull down my pants to reveal where my thighs are marked and bleeding. The expression on her face falters, but her lips quickly resume their previous position. Her eyes take on a stony look. She tells me to go get dressed. So I do, but the next day I ask my friend for her therapist’s number, because it’s clear no one is there to take care of me but myself.

Rebecca is a holistic Wiccan. In her drawer, there are salves and serums and lemon-scented lotions she makes herself. She’s on the skinny side, with a sunny face. In her office I mourn the life I have
always wanted. The one with the father who carries me on his shoulders, and threatens to “take the bat out” at the threat of boys my age. The one who held my left hand while my mother held my right, and lifted me across the street. The one where my mother is an art dealer, or a kindergarten teacher, or a veterinarian who asks me how I’m doing every day after school, and always makes sure there’s food in the house. The one where we all sit in the library talking about the books we’ve read and the grades I’m getting and how I’m liking the drama classes they’ve enrolled me in. In her office I’ve killed the dreams of being beautiful, owning stylish clothing. The dreams where boys fawn over me, lust over me. Where I own jeans that fit my heart-shaped bottom perfectly. Where I wear PINK sweaters and have perfectly straight hair, perfectly straight nails and perfectly straight sexuality.

I’ve put flowers on the grave of being everything I’m not. Set up a lovely ceremony, hired a priest to bury my Catholic upbringing, invited the pew of old, wrinkly, leather-ladies who made me feel I wasn’t light enough, skinny enough, woman enough to be beautiful. I’ve done my alms, burned my palms, got my last rites read, all under the concerned, squinting eyes of my kind, hippie therapist.

The summer before my senior year, I was nominated for Posse; a scholarship program dedicated to finding young leaders who may be overlooked in the college admissions process because of race, class, or other socioeconomic issues. In layman’s terms, it’s a scholarship to help broke brown kids like me. The only person I knew who had received the award had been an honors student at Stuyvesant High School, a published writer, and an amazingly kind and well-rounded person. I ran my fingers through my newly shaved sides and thought it over, “I’m kind right,” and so I decided to dedicate my not-so-new, but true self to the process.

When I got the phone call after four months of interviewing, I knew. I had gotten home from the final interview only an hour before, back of my blouse soaked with sweat and toes cramped by $12 loafers. My curly hair falling into my eyes (maintaining short
hair is expensive). I had been sitting on the bathroom floor, reminding myself that life would go on no matter what happened, when the unknown number flashed across my Obama phone’s screen. I answered to the Dean of Admissions soft Kolkata accent.


When my mother found out, she retreated into herself, hid from the daughter she thought would stay forever. For years she shaped her days around my coming and going. To school. To my friend’s. To writing workshops. She learned to rely on the clock that is my schedule, use it as an alarm for making food for herself, getting out of bed by daybreak. Without me, she fears losing all she has built. The night she told me she wouldn’t survive without me, in the most literal sense of the phrase, I took the day off from school. Left voicemails with her clinic, argued with her therapists over treatment plans, while she lay in bed, child-like, big brown eyes, wide as saucers, searching. All she was looking for was someone to take care of her.

I am scared of leaving all this pain behind. When I look at her face, I see shadows like the ones she sees in the walls. All the women she has tried to be in attempts to reach happiness, and the effects they’ve taken on her skin. When I look at my own face, I see that the women who haunted me have disappeared.

I am scared as hell of going away to college. But I am more scared of accumulating shadow.
“Am I a savior or am I the beginning of the end. Lol, I don’t even know if I’ll be alive tomorrow.”

—Femi Aina
Emotionless Thoughts

By Femi Aina

THOMAS A. EDISON CAREER AND TECHNICAL EDUCATION HIGH SCHOOL

Everywhere I go I hear “Revolution” “Can we have peace?”
“Why do we follow rules?”
Questions that ramble through my mind every day.
Am I a true Christian? Will God Save me? Is God even real?
Will I burn in hell for not believing? Do I love my girlfriend?
Do I Love myself? Do I hate others?

You know sometimes I just want to shoot these white crackers in
the face for all the things they’ve done to us.
But is that the way?
Does that make me better than any of those ignorant Bigots out there?
Does that even matter?

I always thought let’s overthrow the government
Maybe that will spark change, but the bible states in the heart of
man is evil
If we overthrow the government will it not create a cycle of the same
shit again?
Seven years I’ve been in this country and I see all these kids piss away the same opportunity that my parents starved and worked like fucking mules just to bring me here.

First thing my parents drilled in me is that Being Black meant I had to work twice as hard
If I ever wanted to get the same recognition as all the white kids.
Don’t say this, Don’t say that
Straighten up your posture
Don’t offend anyone
You can’t have your hair like that
Why is everyone looking at me?

Sometimes I’m so scared, sometimes I’m not scared at all.
I mean what is the point of all this? Why are we all here?
Why should I care about some writing competition that I may or may not win, when my Brothers die every day in the hood?
Guess that’s the black man’s plight, shit I might choke,
Dress proper talk proper and you’re acting white
Scared to be yourself because the world looks at you with fright
Two days ago, Another one found dead, Gunshot wound to his torso, Over an iPhone Bro?
Are you fucking kidding me? That boy was only 15,
I bet you don’t know who he is,
What scares me is that one day that could be me if I get caught lacking in these streets,
Will anything matter then? Will the world care or remember me?
Will it matter if I passed English or geometry?
Or will I be another lifeless body laying 6 feet deep,
Nothing but forgotten dreams.

Fuck the Government,
Fuck everything,
And whoever’s listening to this Fuck you too,
I’m not here for you
So What am I here for? What is my purpose?
Am I here to revolutionize the youth?
To shit on the very system and foundation that led us up to here.
I mean look how far that got us,
Or am I here to rot away like everyone else, to live a life with
no purpose
Nah I’m here to make a change, to leave a legacy
Make future generations look back and say “He’s the guy I want to be”
I’m here to shock the world, To make you rethink and question
everything you thought or heard.
Am I a savior or am I the beginning of the end.
Lol, I don’t even know If I’ll be alive tomorrow.

You know when I was told that they wanted something different
for this,
All I could think about is all the kids writing about daddy not
buying them some bullshit toy they wanted and how somehow
that emotionally scarred them.
I don’t mean to put anyone down or nothing, but at least you got a toy.
I’m not even supposed to be alive right now.
Do you know how it feels to miss a meal?
To live in an uncompleted building without electricity or even a bathroom
We did our business and threw it in the river,
Or do you know how it feels to almost die as a 1 year old and have your uncle deny to give you the very blood by which you are related.
I guess he didn’t think I was worth it
Do you think I’m Worth it?

STOP! My mind tells me stop,
But my soul wants to go.
Nothing to end this perfect piece I wrote but a quote,
A quote which says
“That’s all he wrote.”
“All of her essence fit into that single box.”

—Sarah Choi
Household

By Sarah Choi

BENJAMIN N. CARDOZO HIGH SCHOOL

There was no void when she left. I stopped noticing the empty seat at the dinner table, the ever-present mug in the dishwasher, the white Converse stained black with the evidence of her wandering, of her not coming home. Perhaps I never noticed in the first place because she always ate on the bed, in her room, at a different time than we did, because she stopped drinking the coffee concoction that concealed her fatigue and brought color to her paling skin, because she would always shove her shoes into the darkest corners of the rack, the kind of darkness that complimented the shadows underneath her dulling eyes.

I didn’t think of her every day, nor did I feel an emptiness every time I passed by the closed door. My heart didn’t suffer from that sharp, painful clench, saturated with regret every time someone would mention a song she liked, or if someone asked how she was doing without knowing what was going on, because of course, I didn’t tell anyone, and it wasn’t anyone’s fault but mine. Why? It would show weakness, that I cared, that I looked up to her. I didn’t. But I didn’t hate her.

All of her essence fit into that single box. It was strange to see because I was used to her having her books on her desk and bed, clothes draped over the back of her chair, and the wires for her phone, computer, tablet, lamp, tangled in a web at the corner of her bed, right next to the dolphin plushie she’d always drop in her sleep. I was used to seeing her pink, fluffy bed disheveled and white blankets unraveling onto the dark floors because she refused to make her bed.
every morning, the bed I could not touch because she would glare at me, bare her teeth like a tiger, and tell me to not touch her things. I was used to having her scowl at me as I browsed through her pencil cup, which held all the useful pens in the house, while she ceased her singing to Bieber’s “Let Me Love You” to stalk me, watching if I would take something she liked. What did she like, anyway? She never liked Justin before.

She’s hard to remember. She’s blurry, her image barely collecting as a grainy portrait, not even in color, in the corners of my mind. Her voice is a muffled memory, as if someone encased her in a cotton pillow; it sounded strangled, as if something was trying to stop the words from coming up the back of her throat. Her touch does not exist because we barely made contact. I don’t know if her skin is warm, or cold, or room temperature. But she looked cold. She was cold. This I knew without touching her.

At first, I didn’t know what I was looking at. It was definitely her, but the essence of her was missing somehow. She rotated from side to side, slowly, sluggishly, feeding off the energy from my opening the door. Gravity dictated her movements, confined her body to dance only in the directions her head could tilt. In my memories, her eyes were open, but I can’t say for sure. I can’t remember clearly. I can barely remember her face. But I do remember the confusion I felt as I stared at the unnatural angle forced upon her cervix. It was not horror, but simply the perplexion stimulated from looking at...well, her. I didn’t know what to do. I wasn’t expecting to see her, not like that. I was distressed in a matter of seconds. Fear showcased its ugly face; its hands seized control of my spine and slithered into the muscles of my shoulders, arms, and legs. It jerked them into motion to save my mind from being consumed by the wretchedness she allowed around her neck, and from the truth that weighed down her body.

I was expecting her at home that day, just like yesterday, the day before, and the week before. I returned home late to discuss a grade from my recent report card, and I saw her shoes by the door when I came in. But when I called for her, she didn’t reply with the usual
“Taking a dump” or “What do you want.” I didn’t bother checking for her. Older sisters have a thing about their personal space and privacy. They like being cooped up in their rooms, curled up on a chair with a bun, T-shirt, and eyes glued to the phone. When I’d come into the room, she’d just look up, raise an eyebrow, and look back down. Sometimes, she’d glare, and tell me to get out. Other times, she wouldn’t even notice because she was asleep on her desk.

I didn’t check on her because I never did. I wasn’t going to start to that particular day, but I can’t help but think that maybe I should have. I doubt the action would have changed anything, but nevertheless, there is that what if, because what if I opened that door? I don’t know when she did it, or how long she was there. Maybe she did it before I came home. Maybe she did it even before then, in the morning after Mom and Dad left for work, and I left for school, and she was supposed to leave for school. I don’t know. Did I even want to change anything? ...I ought to stop thinking; my sentimental thoughts are pointless, exploring scenarios that I have little understanding of. Exploring them won’t change the fact that there was an inconceivable darkness living within the walls of this house. I whisper that it’s in the past, and that I don’t want to think about it. Yet something compels me to continue searching for reasons, causes, incentives, beckoning me from the confines of her room. And so I sit alone in the cover of the night, facing the box, facing all that is left of her. I want to name that urge “curiosity” because it definitely is not “love” that convinced me to sit on the floor, to face the box, to face the closet, to face the truths that I would rather burn my eyes than see.

I remember the biology test, being buried in books before hunger enticed me from the depths of homeostasis and organ systems as I prepared for the cruelty that awaited me the next day. But when I looked through the fridge, there wasn’t anything to cook. I looked at the stove, which was littered with large wooden spoons, used pots, and dirty dishes. My sister had dinner without me. She seemed to have enjoyed a hardy meal for two. All that remained was cereal; Mom and Dad weren’t coming home until later because some meeting I never
thought to ask about. I didn’t have money for take-out because I forgot to ask, and spent the remaining change on coffee that morning.

I called her name before I marched from the kitchen; she probably couldn’t hear me because she was blasting Ed Sheeran through her headphones. Even now, I still don’t understand why Mom bought her headphones knowing that she already had a tendency to ignore people without them. This may have been my jealousy talking, but I don’t want headphones anymore, so I can’t say for sure. Or maybe Mom felt bad. Maybe she knew. Maybe this is why she lies on the bed, staring at the bleached ceiling, searching for an answer between the cracked ridges of paint, and spends hours listening to the heater hiss in the ever emptying room, murmuring incoherent apologies, profanity, questions, as she bores her eyes into the box that holds the remnants of her existence.

When I made it to her room and opened the door, it was empty. The lights were off, but her desk lamp was on, the concentrated glow outlining the dark corners of her room. The silence was eerie, but I wasn’t going to call 911 simply because she wasn’t in her chair, on her phone, headphones on, and mumbling the words to “Best Mistake” under her breath. I was already holding her pink Kate Spade wallet as I told the air that I needed to borrow some money because I didn’t want cereal for dinner. The only response was the low, consistent buzzing from the bent lamp, mimicking the growing guilt that crawled up my throat; I felt the urge to return the twenty I had pulled out. She was greedy, yes, especially with money, which was why I considered wordlessly taking it for the sake of pissing her off (I was doing her a favor in the first place, letting her know I had her unguarded wallet), but she worked for it. The wallet itself, though, was from either her best friend of forever, or her boyfriend of two-or-so months. I forget if she even has a boyfriend.

But I felt some sympathy. I searched for her. I initially assumed that she was out, as there were days where she would meet with her friends and “forget” to leave a message. Dad always got mad, but she never cared to change. All Dad ever did was get mildly irritated and
slip a few comments on her habit, and she’d roll her eyes, and it was over. Perhaps I should start doing the same, seeing that she always seemed to get her way by doing that. Unfortunately, my eyes don’t roll back far enough. I don’t admire her enough to take after her. There is no one to roll my eyes at now, either.

It was unusual for her to leave the house without her wallet. It was strange that she wouldn’t take her credit card with her. Or her phone. Or keys. I called out to her again; I concluded that she was probably in the house, whether or not she was answering me. Bathroom? No, she’d never leave her phone. Kitchen? I was there. My room? I was alone for hours. I knew the living room was empty because I had to pass by to get to the kitchen and back. I remained in her room to search for her, wherever she may be hiding. At one point, I accidentally kicked a box, and it shoved itself into the closet door, which creaked opened. I didn’t think or expect anything I stepped over the box and swung her closet door wide open; I did it just because I could. Thus, I was surprised to actually find her in there. And I was going to tell her about the money when I realized something was wrong. I stood, frozen, before stumbling backwards, tripping on the box. I got a good view of her.

I was more confused than horrified. I was stunned, as if someone had struck me in the face and blinded me, disorienting me for the next several moments. But I wasn’t eager to recover. I got up and walked out of the room, ignoring the impulse to return and confirm what I had seen. It was her, but at the same time, it wasn’t. I was looking at her body, not her. I was wrong. She had left the house.

I called Mom first. I told her that I found my sister in the closet. I told her that she was hanging from the bar. As I spoke, I realized that the box in front of the closet was filled with blouses and jackets that were supposed to be in that closet, hangers and all. And as I passed the shoe rack on my way to the door, where her white Converse peeks from behind, I realized that the small step ladder, which we kept folded against the wall, was missing. I didn’t consciously put two and two together, but it made me feel sick.
I walked out into the cool night in my socks. The goosebumps that dotted my skin weren’t from the cold. I didn’t bother to lock the door as I “uhmm-ed” into the phone, my mother’s silence crackling obnoxiously against my eardrums. I didn’t look back. I didn’t know what else to say. Mom asked me “What?” because she couldn’t comprehend what I was saying, so I repeated it for her. I was strangely calm. Looking back, I was overwhelmed with shock. My mind kept returning to the reality that behind me, inside my house room, was an empty shell of someone I once thought I knew. I couldn’t erase the image of her swaying back and forth in a sinister trance with death, mouth slightly agape as silent curses leaked from her bluing lips—

“She’s hanging.”

“What? What the hell are you talking about?”

“Mom, I told you. She’s hanging. She’s inside the closet.”

“This is not a funny joke.”

“Mom. I’m not joking.”

She sighed.

“Mom, I’m not sure what to do, so hurry up.”

The line crackled.

“Mom, I’m going to call the police. That’s okay, right?”

A faint whimper tickled the edges of my ears.

“Mom. I’m going to hang up now. I’m calling.”

I heard her sob.

“Bye.”

She wasn’t hard to remember. It was hard for me to remember her. It was hard because she was a victim, and I knew. Her blurry image was not the result of trauma, of my desperately, aggressively, trying to rip the memory from my mind, and making a mess of her picture. I never faced her, never looked her in the eyes. Her image was blurry because I refused to look as she stepped out of the shower in the morning, purple fingerprints branded into her skin. I did not have a clear picture of her because I did not want one. I did not want to see evidence that tore apart the portrait of a perfect father, a righteous
father, my father.

I did not want to hear her voice because her silence cradled the abomination that was this household. I did not want to know the truths that would spill from her lips when they were not encased in cotton, when her head was not thrust into a pillow, fingers jammed into her mouth to keep her quiet as tears spilled down her face, when the perfect father, the righteous father, my father, was doing unspeakable things, thinking that I would not hear her muffled screams, strained with curses that only died down when he left, but came back the next night.

She was not hard to remember. She was pretty. She didn’t want to be. She hated my entering her room because she was afraid I would find pieces of her soul. She didn’t want me touching the blankets that he had touched, ironically the only shield that covered the angry red streaks on her back. She ran out with her friends and waited until Mom came home so he couldn’t reach her, but when he started beating Mom, she came home early, and sat in her room, drowning herself in songs that would make her feel normal. She spat venom at him every time she could because this was all her shame would allow her, an illusion of a battle.

Mom was crying when she woke me up this morning. I was lying on the floor next to the box, the heater warming my hair. The sun was barely up. She kept telling me that she was sorry, but it was not for my ears. She embraced me. I would have returned it if I didn’t start shaking, and whimpering, and hiccupping. I was crying for a lot of things.

I did not want to see your body, dear sister. I did not want to see the suffering you endured in trying to keep the image of “father” clean and pure for me. I did not want to see the stares you gave the kitchen knives; whether it was for you or for him, I’d rather not know. I did not want to imagine the relief you must have felt as the bedsheets caressed your skin, as your feet left the ladder’s surface, as you struggled to release your last breath, as you slowly left the house.

I cried for you, and the household you took with you.
“The Bratz dolls, with their big heads and small bodies, were always the dolls my parents bought me because they looked a little more like me than Barbies do.”

—Isieni Reyes
You can say growing up was easy. I had a great childhood full of happy memories with my family. I had the best grades, and everybody saw me as the perfect girl. They supported and praised me. Everybody thought everything was good with me, but everything wasn’t. My parents wanted me to be smart like those white girls on TV.

One time when I was throwing a tantrum in Applebee’s, my dad told me to behave better than those “ghetto niggers” in the streets. Boys in school chose the light-skinned girls over the dark ones.

Why?

Cuz supposedly black girls are uglier.

Am I ugly?

My parents don’t think so. But on Victoria’s Secret commercials I saw growing up, there were skinny, white models who were deemed beautiful and sexy. Not seeing a lot of black women on TV as I was growing up gave me the idea that they were undesirable because of their skin tone. I wasn’t the only one thinking this.

On my subway ride to school one morning, a little black girl, probably five or six years old, told her mom, “I don’t want to go to school, Mommy. The kids say that I’m ugly.”

She shattered my heart—and made me remember Toys ‘R’ Us.

I walked that day with my parents and siblings, past the stuffed animals, past the baby toys, past all the Nerf guns and action figures in the boys’ section where my brothers roam around, past the Barbie dolls section that I look at with disgust because they don’t look like
girls, they look like women, and finally onto the Bratz aisle. The Bratz dolls, with their big heads and small bodies, were always the dolls my parents bought me because they looked a little more like me than Barbies do.

I wanted Cloe, the blonde haired, blue-eyed Bratz doll I thought was the prettiest among the collection. My dad said, “No. Get the black doll.”

“But I want the pretty doll, Daddy,” I responded.

“What? You think the white one is pretty? Black is beautiful. You should get the doll that looks like you. You are a beautiful girl and not just because you have dark skin. Get the black doll.”

So, I got the black doll.

At first, I hated the doll. I would look at it with such disgust. I refused to play with it. I played with other dolls that were of a lighter skin color, but my brother ripped their heads off and threw them out the window.

The black doll was one of the few left with a head attached, so I was kinda forced to play with it. The more I spent time with the doll, the more I looked at her features. “Sasha’s really pretty,” I realized, “and she doesn’t really look much different from the blonde doll besides the coloring.”

I think that reassurance made me love Sasha and I begged my dad to buy her a beautiful biracial friend.

However, learning to love Sasha only helped me slightly with my insecurity, because the doll’s flawless skin and perfect makeup didn’t make me feel better about myself.

Back on the subway, my thoughts were interrupted when I heard the little girl’s mom say, “You don’t need to be light skinned to be cute, baby girl. Don’t let those kids tease you. You are beautiful.”

A six-year-old already has that insecurity about herself?

I used to think my looks weren’t good enough and thought my intelligence would make up for it. As much as I tried to convince my brain, convincing my heart to do the same proved to be a difficult task. I stared at the mirror every day as I brushed my teeth, pointing
out every flaw, every blemish, everything I thought was ugly.

“Look at my big nose and enormous eyes. Why God? Why have you cursed me? More importantly, why am I ashamed of my skin color? Of myself?”

One day, my mom was looking at me and my brother. “You have the same nose,” she said.

I always hated my nose, but when my mom said that, I looked at my brother, who I thought was pretty good looking, and thought if he looked good with that nose, then I didn’t look that bad with it either.

In middle school, I hung out with girls who had dark skin, so I wouldn’t feel left out. I thought my friends were pretty and they had that confidence that attracts guys. I felt that if I had their confidence, I could get attention as well.

Social media was starting to become a trend. More and more women were starting to stand up. They started to demand that these little girls look up to role models who look “normal” and represent ordinary girls. Black models such as Naomi Campbell and Tyra Banks became icons. Oprah Winfrey demanded respect. Beyoncé, who is my idol, has a song called “Run the World (Girls)” which made me believe that girls really do run the world.

On the subway, I saw a mom helping her daughter to appreciate her own beauty. She helped me.

The fact that women these days are better represented helped me. It has taken some time, but when I look in the mirror now, I embrace my flaws and accept myself.

I am beautiful—
The color of coffee—
Dark like the sweet milk chocolate I crave—
Dark like cinnamon—
Dark like that Hennessy—
Dark skinned and beautiful—
I am beautiful.
“Sorry to bother you, but I’m a homeless veteran.”

—Imani Hinckson
The Penguin Random House Creative Writing Awards

POETRY

Vet

By Imani Hinckson

SUSAN E. WAGNER HIGH SCHOOL

The connecting doors of the subway car

slide

open,

A ragged man with wintery-white hair walks languidly through the doors.

center stage

Dingy white t-shirt, tattered khakis, black and white sneakers, with soles hanging on by a thread.

“Sorry to bother you, but I’m a homeless veteran.”

The overwhelming smell of old laundry and urine consumes the car.
The towering man with a crisp black business suit and briefcase makes an escape

The brunette

in front of the door
studies her shoes.

The man continues,

his voice fades with the roaring shrieks of the tracks. “I’m hungry, I haven’t eaten in three days.”

A brown sack is draped over his slumped shoulder.

One man is digging for spare change. Nothing.

The ragged man still proceeds,

“Can anyone help out a homeless vet?” “Can anyone help out a homeless veteran?”

He looks around desperately for a moment.

Other passengers divert their attention to phones, or casual small talk.

Nothing.

He steps out of the car onto the platform and awaits the next train.
“I use my book as a shield, but nothing reaches me on my perch above the sea of familiarity.”

—Ben Bleir
Escaping to a Dream

By Ben Bleir

HIGH SCHOOL OF AMERICAN STUDIES AT LEHMAN COLLEGE

I watch everyone, the students, the players, and the red faced coach angrily shouting his commands. I blend into the background and go unnoticed by my peers. That’s how I like it, hidden behind my old book. I hide right on the brim of the crowd, looking down over the ledge at the players. The herd of large, muscular teens lumber down the court, their feet pounding the floor rhythmically, the ball bouncing adds an extra footstep, giving them more than just two legs. Their flushed faces contort with exertion, and their nostrils dilate like a wild horse huffing its hot breath in the frigid air. They gallop down the sand, and their short, flowing hair lets off a salty spray.

I use my book as a shield, but nothing reaches me on my perch above the sea of familiarity. Everyone is focused on the players, their eyes tracking the ball’s movement on the court. The players can’t hear anything, not even the crowd that cheers for them, let alone the thoughts of a lone dreamer.

I don’t belong in this crowd, and I try to go back. I look up to the sky to return, but there are no clouds. The ceiling of the gymnasium greets me; its rafters speckled with trapped balls and shining, aging balloons. A balloon should have freedom, a chance to drift away to my frozen fantasy. But my life is bound by my two feet, and like these trapped balloons, I will drift through a life I don’t belong, knowing my suspended aluminum body will fall slowly until I no longer can keep myself afloat and only a glistening memory of me will exist.
“I took another look around the field to try to memorize every detail; hoping that, even if I never had the chance to go back, I’d always remember the one night I didn’t have to worry about anything or anyone.”

—Samantha Gong
“HANNAH!”

My eyes snapped open, a loud bang bringing me out of my day-dream. I heard faint footsteps from outside my bedroom. The image of a peaceful field quickly faded from my mind. I sighed heavily, removing my bare arms from around my jean-clad legs, dropping my feet from the chair to the floor. I got up from my desk where my laptop was open to a blank document and my Human Geography textbook lay open. I grabbed the scarlet sweat jacket off the back of my desk chair, wrapping it around my shoulders to cover my thin black tank top. I rushed to the door, zipping the jacket. The footsteps were getting louder, and angrier. If angry footsteps could be heard from my room, then I must have done something wrong.

I always did something wrong.

A deep inhale was my only preparation for the approaching tongue-lashing. I opened the door and walked out, closing the door behind me just as my mother reached the top of the stairs. “Yes, mummy?” I asked, not bothering to hide the sarcasm in my voice. I leaned against the wall, arms crossing my chest, waiting for her to shout at me for whatever she thought I did.

“Someone called me today,” she seethed. “Do you know what it was about?” I shrugged, not really giving a damn. “Someone told me you haven’t been at school at all this week. Is this true?”

“No.” It wasn’t a lie. Physically, I had been in all of my classes that week. Mentally, not so much. But I had been in school. It was
probably some stupid kids in my grade trying to get me in trouble.

“Why would they say that then, huh? Why are you lying to me?” I rolled my eyes, feeling her hysteria grow. She was still in her work uniform, a red apron with Danny’s Diner on it in white. She had just gotten home, then.

“I WAS at school. Believe it or not, but I’ve never lied to you.” I knew she was stressed, working two jobs, but my behavior hadn’t warranted her yelling at me. She made me want to scream, hit something, cry - but that never helped. I pushed off the wall and walked past her, down the stairs. “I’ll be downstairs making dinner if you wanna keep yelling at me.”

“Don’t walk away from me,” she screamed. I continued down the stairs, my hands gathering my hair to pull it into a ponytail. Faint rumbling and mocking sounds could be heard as her footsteps faded. I sighed, my shoulders sagging. It seemed like we always fought about something - she didn’t understand or I didn’t do something - and it broke my heart. I loved her, and it was obvious she loved me; but we just couldn’t seem to express that to each other. She worked so hard to give me everything I could ever want; and I did everything possible to ease her burden and do what she asked. It wasn’t fair how much crap life threw at us.

Later that night, after a very quiet dinner, I went back to my room to at least attempt to finish my homework. The assignment was to write an outline of a chapter from my Human Geography textbook, so it wasn’t hard - just long. About halfway through the chapter, my phone vibrated in my pocket. It was Mom. I’m sorry for yelling at you, honey. I nearly screamed in frustration, disbelief washing over me. Who apologizes through text when you’re in the same house?!

Mom, why? Why can’t you just talk to me like you used to? Why won’t you just sit with me and talk? Saying you’re sorry through text doesn’t make things better. I know you’re sorry and I know you love me, but you should JUST TALK TO ME. I hit the send button, throwing my phone onto my bed. I turned back to my laptop, rushing through the rest of my
homework, not really caring about what I was typing.

For half an hour, I angrily typed out the remainder of the chapter. When it was finally finished, I slammed my textbook shut with a harsh sigh and closed my laptop with a gentler touch. My arms folded atop the desk, my chin dropping to rest on them. I turned my head to place my cheek on my arms and stare out the window next to my bed. The sky was an ombre of dark blue to soft orange, shifting through deep purples and bright reds. The vibrant colors of the sunset were framed by the white trim of my window, and the window was accented by my black bedspread and the slate-grey walls. My eyes slid shut for half a second before a sharp buzzing sounded. My eyes snapped open and were immediately drawn to the lit up screen of my phone. I groaned. Getting up from my desk, I sat on the edge of my bed with my gaze glued to the floor. I grabbed the vibrating phone and answered the call.

“What do you want, Dad?” I wasn’t in the mood to listen to him. Whenever he called, he was usually drunk or high - and he always said really creepy things.

“Hey, baby girl.” It was slurred and drawn out, making me aware of his state. “How are you?”

“Fine, Dad.” The annoyance was clear in my voice.

“That’s good,” he replied. I could practically hear his goofy smile. “You know I love you, right?”

“Yeah, Da-” I was cut off by his voice, deeper than it had been a second ago.

“I love you so much, baby girl. The way your silky hair feels when I run my fingers through it, and how your skin is so soft under my lips. I love you so much, baby.” His voice faded as he continued. “I’m just talking to Hannah!” His voice was so quiet, it seemed like the phone was farther away. He sounded angry. There was a loud crash in the background and I yelped despite knowing the crash was nowhere near me.

“Hannah, kid, it’s your Uncle Sean.” He must’ve taken the phone away from my father. “I’m so sorry about this. Your dad called me
earlier and when I came in to the apartment he was on the phone with you. He’s drunk and he was just saying crazy things. I’m so sorry you had to hear it. He really doesn’t know what he’s doing. I’m really sorry, kid.”

“It’s fine, Uncle Sean,” I told him. There was a sound, almost like a knock, and my head snapped up from the floor to the dark wood of my bedroom door. “Hold on a sec, Uncle Sean. I think Mom’s outside my room.” I walked to the door and opened it, but the hallway was empty. “That’s odd,” I muttered, leaning against the doorframe. “Hannah? You ok?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. Go take care of Dad for me?”

“Sure, kid. I love you. And your dad loves you too.” He sounded tired. I felt bad - taking care of my drunkard father was not his job. “I’ve gotta go.”

“Yeah. You’re a really good best friend, Uncle Sean.” I moved the phone away from my ear and ended the call with a tap of the screen. I slipped my phone into the back pocket of my jeans, dropping my head back to let it rest on the doorframe. Knock knock knock. My head shot up from its resting position, tilting out of the doorway to look into the hall. “Mom? Is someone at the door?” I called out; making sure my voice was loud enough to be heard from downstairs.

“No, honey. There wasn’t a knock.” She sounded tired and sad.

“Okay, Mom.” I tried to make my voice lighter, wanting to relieve some of her stress. “You should get some sleep, Momma. I’m gonna turn in early, okay? I love you.” Now I felt bad for text-yelling at her earlier.

“Okay, honey. I love you, too. Sweet dreams.” She sounded a bit happier, like a pressure that had been on her chest was removed and it made her voice lighter.

“You too, Momma. Night.” I closed the bedroom door gently, gathering my pajamas from the floor. I withdrew my phone from my pocket and tossed it onto the bed, along with the rest of my nightclothes. I unbuttoned my jeans, sliding the denim down my legs, leaving it in a pool on the floor and stepped forward, freeing my feet.
from the pile of fabric, to slip into the grey cotton shorts I usually wore to bed. I stripped my red jacket from my body, letting it fall to the floor, leaving my sports bra and thin black tank top on.

I sat down at my desk, grabbing a hair brush from the bottom right drawer and quickly ran it through my thick black hair before checking my email. The only piece of mail in my inbox was a reminder from my Human Geography teacher, stating that there would be “no excuses for not turning in the easiest of assignments.” I rolled my eyes, placing the brush next to the computer, and logged out of my email before shutting down the laptop, waiting for the screen to go dark before closing it. I put it in my bag, pushing my textbook to the side of the desk and shoving the finished assignment into a folder in the bag. I went to turn off the light when a light knock knock sounded to my right. In front of me was the bedroom door, so it couldn’t have been coming from the hallway; and it was too loud to be coming from outside. I moved to my bed and peered out the window - just to check.

Seeing as no one was out on the sidewalk, I went back to the bedroom door to turn off the light. Again a knocking could be heard, louder and more insistent now. “Hello?” I whispered, feeling ridiculous. I stood with my back to the door, scanning my room. There was a single loud knock. It had come from my left, where my closet was. I stared at the closet door, waiting for either my curiosity to subside or for there to be a clear sign of my insanity. A couple minutes of staring proved to be unbearable. “Screw it,” I whispered, laying my hand on the handle, flexing my fingers for a moment before tightly gripping the smooth metal. I pushed down and took a deep breath. I exhaled, yanking the door open, telling myself to be ready for disappointment.

The sight in front of me was a far cry from disappointment. I stood there, in my closet doorway, jaw unhinged with no hope of closing. Before me was a field of grass spanning at least thirty meters out on all sides. Directly in front of me, beyond the grassy plain, was an enormous lake. The opposite shore was nowhere in sight, but on the nearest side of the lake a cluster of rocks sat a couple of feet from the field on the sand of the beach. Around the rest of the field were
tall trees, climbing to what I estimated as fifteen meters up. I took a cautious step into the field, my bare feet meeting the firm ground. The grass was soft, like stepping onto carpet or a fine rug; and the ground beneath was warm and dry, so there was no need to worry about dirt. I gasped at the breeze that blew through the field and gently tossed my hair, caressing my face. I hesitantly walked a few steps farther from the doorway, closing my eyes. The soft wind continued; the sunshine warm on my face.

Sun? My eyes opened once more and I was staring at the blue sky, featuring a large yellow sun quickly dropping towards the horizon. A bubbling laughed escaped me, my body feeling lighter than it had in a long time, any trepidation leaving my body. This is amazing! There was a field inside my closet - the same field I’d seen in all of my daydreams. There was a sense of warmth and safety, like nothing could touch me. I could relax and let my mind wander without my parents’ oddities and eccentricities looming over my head. Opening my eyes, my curiosity guided me around the field. I walked through the tree line, letting my hand graze the rough bark of the trunks and my fingers feel the silky leaves, making my way to the small beach in front of the lake and wading into the water until it was up to my knees. The warm liquid seemed to caress my soul, washing away stress and fear that lingered from the day. My eyes slid shut once more, and everything disappeared around me as the warmth surrounded me.

After a few minutes, I moved to sit down on the rocks. The sky was dark, reflecting the time of day in the real world. I don’t know how long I sat there, staring out over the lake, the corner of my lips seemingly permanently upturned. It was warm enough that being in shorts and a tank top didn’t bother me. I closed my eyes, my smile growing, knowing that no one would bother me.

I don’t know when, exactly, but I must have fallen asleep. I opened my eyes to bright sunlight, my head resting on the flat side of one of the rocks. I rubbed the sleep out of my eyes, stretching out to wake myself up. It’s so bright, I whined to myself. I nearly fell off the rocks
not a moment later. *Crap, what time is it?* My head whipped around, trying to find the door back to my room. After a minute of frantic searching, I spotted it across the field and my feet began pounding the ground, disturbing the soft grass. The door was still open, so I could see the window in my room as I approached - it was still dark in the real world. Breathing out a sigh of relief and sinking down to sit on the grass right in front of the doorway with my back facing my room, I took another look around the field to try to memorize every detail; hoping that, even if I never had the chance to go back, I’d always remember the one night I didn’t have to worry about anything or anyone.

I got up a few minutes later, quickly walking out of the field and closing the door behind me. I leaned against it for a moment, my hands and forehead resting against the smooth wood. I reached down and grabbed the cold handle again, standing up straight. I held my breath as I pushed down, hoping against everything for the field to still be there. It wasn’t a surprise, though, when the door opened to the mess of clothing I owned. Deflating a bit before swiftly grabbing a flannel shirt and a pair of black jeans, I closed the door with a loud *bang*.

“What was that!?” my mom called. I looked to the clock on my desk, reading the digital face. 06:39, it read. “Are you okay up there?”

“Fine, Mom,” I called back, no emotion leaking from my voice. There was about five minutes to get to the bus stop to make the trek to school. I shucked off my shorts and pulled on a pair of jeans, tying my shirt around my waist and slinging my bag over my shoulder. I grabbed my hair brush and ran it through my hair a few times, tearing through the knots, before slipping my dad’s dog tags around my neck and my mom’s ring onto my right middle finger. My hands scrambled through my unmade bed to find my phone. When I found it, I shoved it into my bag and rushed down the stairs, pulling my combat boots on as I hopped through the house to the front door. “Bye, Mom. Love you,” I told her, grabbing the apple she held out to me as I rushed past her. I ran out the door, sprinting to get to the bus stop. I was
panting and out of breath as the door opened, but made sure to not look flustered as I walked through the bus to find a seat.

At the back of the bus was an empty seat, and I took it, leaning against my bag. I sat there with my hands in my lap, spinning my mom’s ring around my finger. It was a promise ring - to show me how much she loved me and to prove how hard she worked to give me everything. I resisted the urge to put my feet on the bus seat and curl into a ball. Instead, my feet stayed planted on the floor and fiddled with my dad’s dog tags. He had given them to me when he and my mother separated, the last time I had seen him clean and sober. My Uncle Sean had come to pick him up because he and Mom were fighting, and he told me that he wanted me to have them so I would always remember him as a hero, not the man that couldn’t be around his family. The thoughts were pulled to the back of my mind as the bus squealed to a halt in front of the school. I missed when we were all together - the four of us: Uncle Sean, Dad, Mom, and me.

I got out of school around four in the afternoon, my last class having finished at 3:45, to find my father waiting for me outside the front entrance of the building. He was leaning against a car and scanning the mass of students exiting the school when he spotted me. “There’s my baby girl,” he exclaimed, walking towards me. He reached out to pull me into an embrace, but I ducked under his outstretched arms. “Don’t be like that, Hannah,” he pouted.

I noticed he didn’t smell like alcohol or drugs, and it occurred to me he was actually sober. “Does Mom know you’re here?”

“You’re still wearing them,” he said softly, ignoring my question. He placed a hand on my shoulder, stopping me from walking away any further. “I’m clean right now,” he pointed out.

“Yeah, Dad. I can tell.” I turned to him, shrugging the hand off. “Why are you here?”

“Am I not allowed to see my own daughter?” It burned my soul to hear him so sad.

“Go home.” His face fell, his shoulders sagging. I couldn’t look at
him anymore, so I turned on my heels and walked away, tears threatening to fall down my cheeks.

I got home, walking into the kitchen to see my mom preparing dinner. “Hi, honey,” she greeted, kissing my cheek. I let out a short hum. Without giving a proper response, I continued through the house and up to my room. I closed my room door behind me with a frown, dropping my bag on the floor and pulling my laptop out to put it on the desk. I kicked off my boots and angrily threw my socks into the corner of my room, pulling off my flannel shirt and yanking open my closet door.

A sad smile found itself on my face, a warm yellow light shining on it. My hair was tossed behind me by a soft breeze. I stepped through the doorway, my bare feet meeting warm earth. I sank down to the grass, brushing my fingers through the soft blades, my knees resting on the ground.

And I cried.
“This was after the incident, however, so nothing she said would’ve made any difference.”

—Valarie D’Amico
Trauma Queen

By Valarie D’Amico

TOTTENVILLE HIGH SCHOOL

Trauma Queen: The Consequence of Being Constantly Alive

“You at home can easily decide what’s right by glancing very briefly at the songs I write” –The Who,

However Much I Booze

“Behind everything beautiful there is some kind of pain,”
–Bob Dylan

December 28th, 1981

Roger rolled over in bed, stroking my hair as I looked up at the painted stars on our ceiling. “Are you happy?” he asked me. “Have I ever been,” I simply responded.
I had accepted that I would never be conventionally beautiful. Sure, I had a great body, but my face was the real problem. I was what you’d describe as snub-nosed, fat-faced, and my forehead seemed too small. My eyes were nice though. When I was older, one journalist described them, to my dismay, as “smoldering gypsy eyes.” That’s neither here nor there right now. I knew I would never share my grandmother’s sophisticated Italian grace, my half-sister Marie’s all-American-girl-next-door appeal, and I wouldn’t ever look like my mama. The only physical trait we shared was our lightly tanned skin. For some reason, the idea that I was less than them in any way irked me. I did my best to correct it. I poured over fashion magazines, trying to make myself look like Twiggy or the Shrimpton sisters. I’d spend hours in the mirror, mentally dissecting my face. My grandfather would stand in the doorway, saying, “Lilla, Lilla, jesteś piękna to prawda!” That translated to, “Lilla, Lilla, you’re beautiful, it’s true!” I would always respond in broken Polish, saying, “Go away you kind old fool!” It happened so often that whenever someone passed by the bathroom, I’d cry the phrase out. So when I saw a silhouette standing in the bathroom doorway, I cried out my now famous phrase. “English, squirt. Speak English,” a young man’s pubescent voice spoke. I wheeled around to face my best friend Roger, who leaned against the door frame. At age thirteen, Roger already looked like a man. He stood well over 6 feet, and black curls pooled from the top.
of his head. He looked like a bust of Alexander the Great. “How did you even get in?” I asked him. He shrugged and smiled with his shit-eating grin, “Your grandma left the window in the hallway open. I crawled in.” This didn’t surprise me in the slightest.

“What are doing here?” I asked him, applying my third coat of pink colored lipstick. It looked strange against my skin. “I practically live here at this point,” he told me, “and besides, it’s your birthday.” Shit. It was my 12th birthday and I forgot. My own fucking birthday and I forgot. In my defense the past few months had been a living hell, but still. Forgetting your own birthday was a new level of stupidity.

Roger interrupted my mental scolding, asking what kind of cake my grandmother made for me. “Probably a chocolate Betty Crocker one. Why?” He only smirked and went downstairs. I followed him. He peeked into the kitchen, finding the cake cooling by the window. However, to get through it, he had to go through my grandmother. She was sitting at the kitchen table, sewing a dress that I assumed was for some rich old woman in Manhattan. Her glasses made her eyes look huge, all seeing. Roger, with as much stealth as a fawn learning to walk, moved into the kitchen. He reached out to grab a chunk but was met with a wooden spoon to the hand. My grandmother turned back to her sewing. Roger came back with his head hung low. “You had to know she was gonna do that,” was all I said to him.

We went up to the attic to wait until my mother and grandfather came home from work. The attic itself was always hot, no matter the season. You could always hear the wood expanding and popping. We crawled onto the oversized bed that my mother and I shared and pressed our faces against the window, watching as Brooklyn life floated below us. Years later Roger would try to fuck the demons out of me on that very bed. I lazily reached over and turned the record player on the nightstand on. We had left a Beach Boys album on it. Immediately Brian Wilson’s voice rang out from the shitty old machine, singing about how it nice would’ve been if we were older. Yeah, it really would’ve been. Roger reached under the bed and pulled out a trashy gossip magazine for me and some weird comic
for him. He once told me that when he lived on the reservation in California the kids would trade them. “Guess who I met today,” he said. “Rita Moreno,” I guessed, giggling.

Roger rolled his eyes, “No. I met a hooker.” I laughed even harder. “Where in the hell did you meet a hooker?”

“I was walking Cropsey Avenue today and this girl in a blue dress leaned out of her window and asked me if I wanted to have a good time. I told her I did and started climbing up the fire escape. She asked me how old I was and I told her the truth. She turned red and closed her window. I spent ten minutes banging on her window to let me in, but some huge guy opened the window and told me to fuck off.” Now I believed him. Roger was too proud to tell anyone else such a dumb story. I stared at him for a second then told him he was an idiot. He responded by gently shoving me off the bed.

My shirt rode up, revealing the tops of long scars that I gained only a few months ago. Roger came to sit down on the floor with me, and he reached out to run a long finger across each one. I shivered. He asked me if I still felt Claudia hurting me. I didn’t answer. He already knew.

The two of us resembled young lovers, the way we wound our arms and legs together. There was nothing romantic or sexual about the act. Roger and I just always did that, especially when we were young. It was a comfort for the both of us. I needed to feel someone next to me, their chest rising and falling as they breathed. It made me feel needed and protected. I guess Roger felt the same way. He never told me otherwise. Before I knew it I heard the soft noise of socked feet rushing up to the attic. Before Roger and I could untangle ourselves from each other’s limbs, mama burst into our room. A look of shock graced her tired face. She grabbed us both by our wrists and practically dragged us downstairs. If this was before the incident, she would’ve lectured us about sex and probably mentioned how she went on the pill the second it was invented. This is funny because I was born six years before the pill was invented, but I digress. This was after the incident, however, so nothing she said would’ve made
any difference. She only let us go, looked at us disappointingly, before informing us that dinner was ready. I was about to explain rather sarcastically that two kids cuddling wasn’t sexual, but I could tell she had a hard day at work, so I kept my mouth shut. She must’ve seen my father.

My mother was a beautiful woman, of Romani descent. She had long red hair and was considerably tall. Her eyes were like my grandmother’s: large, dark, and alert. Her features were dainty and she still had a figure to die for. However, she was cursed with a constant look of world weariness. She carried herself with an aura of lacking confidence and being generally sick of everything. I figured it was my fault she was always so tired. I wasn’t a particularly difficult child, I was just a monkey wrench thrown into her life. I forgave her for it, being at sixes and sevens with me. I couldn’t have been easy to deal with.

My grandfather’s voice snapped me out of my thoughts. “Najdroższy, we’re waiting for you,” he scolded gently. Roger threw me over his shoulder and brought me into the kitchen, plopping me down at the head of the table. My grandmother put a plate of food in front of me while my mother messed about setting the table. There were three sharp knocks at the front door. My mother, expecting it to be Marie, went to answer it. However, a man’s gruff voice made us all stop and look into the hallway.

“I just wanna see the kid on her birthday, Sylvia. What’s so wrong with that?”

“Well, I think you lost that right a while ago.”

“I brought a gift and everything. Don’t be such a bitch about it.”

My mother slammed the door in my father’s face. She came back with a present in her arms and tears in her eyes. She dumped the gift in the trash and sat down. Nobody said much or ate much. My grandmother went to comfort her, but mama slapped her hand away. Mama wiped her tears away and looked at me, “I’m sorry about that, baby. Why don’t we just skip to the cake and presents and make it a real celebration?” As if on cue grandma started clearing the table and
Roger went to get his present. The good thing about my family was we all did a great job of making each other feel special on occasions such as this. I’d say it was an Italian thing but my grandfather was Polish. Anyway, three wrapped packages sat in front of me. “Open mine first,” Roger urged. I ripped into his. It was a copy of *Valley of the Dolls*, a new book everyone was reading. It was about three women who went crazy after they became famous. I was dying to know how it ended. I hugged him and kissed his cheek. My grandmother had made me a new dress and my mother had scraped up enough money to buy me a little gold ring. I kissed their cheeks and thanked them profusely. People in poverty were usually very grateful for gifts.

“Are you staying the night, Roger?” mama asked as she cleaned up all the wrapping paper. Roger shrugged, “Sure.” She smiled, “You can stay with Lilla and I.” We spent another hour eating cake and watching the news. My grandparents went off to bed and then my mother did. Roger and I had the house to ourselves. We didn’t do much, just read our magazines and watched *The Tonight Show*. Around midnight we heard noises coming from the side of the house. It was too loud to be a raccoon or a cat. Roger grabbed one of my grandfather’s guns, and we went to the side door to investigate. All we saw was a dark mass running out into the street, and the ember of a cigarette glowing near our gate.

That was the last time I ever saw my father.
Creative Writing Awards

Kadidiatou Diallo  Femi Aina
Ben Bleir     Nicole Pomazanski
Yueying Guo   Imani Hinckson
Regina Fontanelli
Sarah Choi    Jay'La Fenty
Valarie D'Amico
Isieni Reyes  Samantha Gong

Penguin Random House
1745 Broadway, New York, NY 10019
(212) 782-9348   FAX (212) 782-5157
creativewriting@penguinrandomhouse.com
social-impact.penguinrandomhouse.com/creativewriting