

FIRST PRIZE

We Were Girls

Sometimes I forget my mom was once my age,
That she had her own life before she brought life to mine.
She's known me for my whole life,
While I've only known her for a fraction of her own.

Her eyes, shimmering like the stars, guide me through the night—
A reassuring presence, a peaceful light.
Her laugh, the gentle midsummer breeze,
A soothing chime that puts my heart at ease.
Her radiant smile, which she carries day-to-day,
Is as warm as the sun's beaming rays.

She was a girl,
With a dream bigger than her own hometown
And many friends along the way whom I will never meet,
Creating secrets and memories that I will never know about.
A love for nature and theatre; she's just like me,
Longing for freedom.

Sometimes I look in the mirror and see her reflection—the future.
I've turned into her.
The same eyes, laugh, and smile—not a hair out of place.
We are mirrored images of each other.
One who looks at who she may be,
The other seeing herself for what she used to be.

It's peculiar to imagine her as a fourteen-year-old girl.
How has she been the same age as me?
But there is nothing to imagine about.

She was a fourteen-year-old girl,
And I am a fourteen-year-old girl.
Somehow in different timelines,
We were girls together.

by Eva Sun (Grade 9)
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FIRST PRIZE

Girl Made of Words

Sometimes, I am more words than person,
Made of vowels and consonants instead of flesh and bones, syllables instead of muscles.

Some days, I bleed more ink than blood.
I am filled with words always—
Sharp-edged ones poking me from the inside,
Sweet ones sticky like honey in my throat.

Rants crowd inside me,
Poems nest in my ribs,
Yet when asked a question, my lips stitch shut,
All of my words curling up;
Monosyllables are the only things that escape me.

There is so much I want to say,
A cacophony of words inside me bursting to get out,
But what am I supposed to do when I've been taught only silence?
When no one cares to listen?

The words inside me begin to wilt like expired flowers,
Dying out and disappearing into the darkest corners of my being
Until slowly, I become human again—
My words, gone; my body made of flesh and bones once more;
My heart breaking, my soul aching with everything left unsaid.

The words will be back.
Once again, I will be made of letters.
And once again, they will die out and return,
An endless cycle in which I am trapped
Between everything I yearn to scream out and everything I am taught to hold within.

by Theila Cohen (Grade 10)
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Richmond Hill, Ontario

FIRST PRIZE

Butterflies Hurt Sometimes

My wings are both broken
I must've flown too soon
My legs are all twisted and bent
I wasn't ready to leave my cocoon

They're always trying to push me towards my fate
Trying to write my future before my eyes
They don't get that I need more rest
And that I'm not ready to take a stride

I'm sick of transformation being an omen
And stillness being a crime
Everywhere I look
They say, "You lived; now, you must thrive"
But I was wounded badly
And it's an exaggeration to say I survived
Stop trying to pull me out by my legs
I'll make it in my own time

My wings still have holes in them
If I come out now, I won't be able to fly
They try to force my growth
I promise one day you'll see me in the sky

But for now I shall be still
Get my sleep, and heal my light
They'll have to learn to accept
That butterflies hurt sometimes

by Jocelyn McLaren (Grade 11)
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Coaldale, Alberta

FIRST PRIZE

October

The seasons are finally changing again.
They said September took forever,
But that's crazy,
I thought it went by so quickly.

Can't they feel the time falling away,
Like sand between their fingers?
Maybe they don't mind that feeling.

I saw rising seas, falling trees.
I saw toxic mounds, burning grounds.
I could smell the smoke outside.
And why wasn't that enough?

They gave you a number of years,
And it wasn't very many at all.
And why wasn't that enough?

It doesn't seem right that it's come to this.
But you know what's worse?
That we just keep our eyes down,
On the ground that's still solid.

Will we do that forever?
Never have the courage to look to the horizon that's slipping away?

I may be young, but there are people younger than me.
I am not the end of history.

by Kate Norman (Grade 12)
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SECOND PRIZE

Pretty Thing

Pretty thing
People always told me I am a pretty thing
But I do not think so
To me, pretty things always sparkle or shine
I am not pretty

Pretty thing
Pretty thing
My mom told me that boys would think I am a pretty thing
Though boys do not call me pretty
Boys think that shiny cars and other girls are pretty
I am not pretty

Pretty thing
Pretty thing
My best friend told me I am pretty
Though I do not think so
She is way prettier than me
She thinks flowers and butterflies are pretty things

I am not pretty
I am not a butterfly
I am not a flower
I am not a shiny car
I am not other girls
I do not sparkle
I do not shine

I am none of these things
Yet one thing I am . . .
Is me
But is being me enough?
To not sparkle or shine
To not be a flower or a butterfly
But to be myself?

Will I ever be a pretty thing?

by Kali Gunnarson (Grade 9)
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SECOND PRIZE

Delusions of a Cloud Cuckoo Lander

I'd rather live in delusion
Where I wouldn't feel any stress
I'm not trapped in a tower
I'm just a damsel in distress

There will always be someone to save me
At least that's what I believe
I'll hold my loved ones tighter
So they can never leave

There is a peaceful place in my head
Where I can pretend the ashes are snow
And that the bombs are just fireworks
And I can feel truly safe as I hug my pillow

I can be in a world with no false hope
Where everything lost can be restored
Where every broken thing can be fixed
And every sickness can be cured

I'd rather live in delusion
Where the world isn't a mess
I'd rather live in delusion
It would hurt a little less

by Aesha Patel (Grade 10)
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SECOND PRIZE

I Remember

I remember the tears, the heartbreak, the despair you left behind.
You deprived us of an explanation of your sudden absence.
You abandoned us all,
failing to even utter a final goodbye.

I remember the strangers, friends, past lovers, and foes weeping upon your grave,
donned in an array of melancholic-coloured mourning gowns.
They came together and grieved you, reminiscing on your fulfilling past.
I never dared to join; I waited for you—
I waited for you to join us, wanting to berate you for this cruel joke.
You never came.

I remember hearing the wails of my inconsolable grandmother,
my mother trying her best to soothe her despite also being in anguish.
The mere thought of you causes a feeling of resentment in me.
Your own selfishness caused all of this.
Desperately, I hoped to forget every selfish thing about you.

Now residing in the contemporary, I no longer remember your selfishness; in fact,
I no longer remember most things about you.
I don't remember your laughter, your voice, or all the love and joy we used to share.
I hopelessly wish that I could go back in time to love and cherish you,
to create new memories that I promise I will remember.

When I lie awake, I relive our times together through the stories my mother tells me.
These stories paint a portrait of you and me that I cannot recall.
These stories help me to love you,
a version that I made up of you.
Desperately, I cling on to these altered memories,
hoping that I will remember every little constructed detail about you until I'm laid to rest.
I'm fixated upon a delusion I've made out of guilt.
Truthfully, you're just a stranger to me,
a faded memory of mine.

by Kylee Booth (Grade 11)

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SECOND PRIZE

Pescatarian Blues

In the pond behind my house, the fish swim backwards
They swim back to that first kiss
Back to that final fight
with their best friend
Epiphany
They were wrong
They swim back to that first car
Back to high-school French class
Where they learned more about themselves
than the French language
They swim back to middle-school graduation
and back through the years before that
They swim back to that hill
where they faced endless injuries tobogganing
They swim back to that favourite childhood toy
They swim back to those first steps
They swim back to their mother
Hold her close
Love brighter than a sunflower on an August day
Then, it stops
They freeze
Stuck in place by fear of death
or lack of further adventure
or maybe grief
That's when I go fishing
I break out the net and pluck each one out of the water
I give them a worm
and a handshake
and send them back on their way

by Elyse Armstrong (Grade 12)
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THIRD PRIZE

Marlie Rose

In the marsh, where the gulls fly,
The creature lies in slumber for all time.
Where the hot winds are churning the summer sky,
It waits and waits for a child to come by.

And on that very sunny day,
Little wretched Marlie Rose
Skipped down the path, on her way
To the gliding swamp crows.

“Don’t wander out to that swamp,” Ma’d said.
Marlie continued to sing, ignoring her mother’s pleas.
The creatures scatter, as Ma’s old words rang:
“And don’t forget the beast. . . .”

But as Marlie played in the swaying trees,
The mud started slinking far,
Snatching her ankles in the soupy breeze,
Making her sink down in the tar.

An icy fear slinked into her heart,
As she shrieked and screamed to the sky,
And awoke the mysterious beast with a start,
Hungry for the child’s cry.

It skulked in the mud, shaking sleep from its eyes,
Closing in on little Marlie Rose.
Its mouth opened wide against the sunrise,
As it sucked the voice from her throat.

That morning, against a new day,
Marlie came crawling home,
Her dress caked in mud, tear-webs across her cheeks,
Happy she wasn’t alone.

But the monster still roams the marsh,
Waiting patiently for the next child,
Through torrid days and sharp storms,
To wander into the wild.

by Reita Liu (Grade 9)
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Richmond Hill, Ontario

THIRD PRIZE

Lost Jewels

In the corner, the piano stands with immense pride, unobstructed
Gleaming in its pure, shimmering, jet-black paint

Its smooth ivory keys are whiter than the stars
And they beckon me to come and play

Its lustrous, smooth gold pedals hide under the piano
Yet glimmer magnificently under the light

The rich brown leather of the ancient piano bench
Pleads me to come sit down just once more

But as much as I want to play this beauty
As much as I want to pour my heart and soul into this

I cannot play this magnificent monarch at all
For my coarse, fragile hands refuse to move as freely as my music

I remember the times I used to empty my soul into the piano
The gateway to turn sounds into pure gold

It was the window for my true feelings to speak
The only way for my heart to sing

And now, that is all gone

I prized my talent beyond rubies and sapphires or any jewel that lay
Buried in the deep dark earth

My talent created the shimmering light
That extinguished the dark shadows of our world

And now, it renders useless
My jewel of music has shattered

The only thing that remains
Is my beautiful black piano

by Seniru Kothalawala (Grade 10)
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THIRD PRIZE

Symptoms of a Panic Attack

pounding heart, sweating, chills

The way the light reflects today is away.
It was so cold this winter, I feared that
the windows would shatter—stained
glass becoming a fragile, thrashing
heart beating inside me. Sometimes,
I woke up sweating, blind to the refracted
light. Somehow, I feared that I had missed
all of winter anyway. I think I'm used to
fearing many things—flatlines, overthinking,
and forgetting. It always ends up cold again.

insomnia, chest pain, dizziness

They said that all of it would hurt less with
time. I would argue: it hurts as long as
you don't let go of it, and I'm very good
at not letting go of it. How can I? They
said to count sheep and put down fingers
for minutes of lost sleep, but the light still
hits my closed eyes. I'm dizzy with the
thought of forgetting; I'm being devoured
by every memory I've ever had. How do
you live, perpetually hungering for more?

difficulty breathing, nausea, numbness

Count your breaths. Claw yourself back
to your own body because there isn't
enough of anything—you're running out of
fingers to count symptoms on, and you're
running out of time to panic. Winter has
left you dazed and winded. The sheep have
already lost all their wool. Impossibly, shamefully,
you want all this to mean something anyway.

by Jessie Zou (Grade 11)
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THIRD PRIZE

A Moment in Nature

I take a deep breath,
I've done this many times before,
A calming ritual of inhales and exhales
That cleanse the soul,
The same way they have for many years.

Most times, we take
Conscious breaths
To settle the jitters
Of an important performance,
A big game, or a class presentation.

Right now,
As fall turns to winter,
My lungs fill with
Crisp air,
And a gentle smile forms on my lips.

My eyes scan the horizon,
A gorgeous sunset
Featuring cotton-candy clouds.
The trees cast long shadows that
Dance over the yellowing landscape.

All is peaceful.
The only noise is the
Whispering wind
That gently blows stray wisps of hair
Over my eyes.

As the Sun retires for the evening,
A slight chill settles in the air.
I sigh, zipping up my jacket.
Eyes closed, I soak it all in.
There's no place I'd rather be.

by Signy Thorsteinson (Grade 12)
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