

# FIRST PRIZE

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# FIRST PRIZE

## Guitar Heart

“Always play your heart out—nothing less, but everything more,” my father would advise with a grin on his face. I would nod frantically and try the piece again, strumming the notes harder and pressing my fingers down, compressing the strings. “Don’t play harder, play with more heart,” he would whisper, watching me strum. It was hard to live up to his rules on guitar. He’d throw more notes at me and watch me as I would struggle to place my fingers.

“I don’t have enough fingers!” I’d yell.

He’d look at me and say, “Until you can make five fingers act like ten, you can’t move on.” So, I would sit there into the early hours of the morning trying to follow his advice.

Sometimes we would fight about how to play a song. I’d scream at him I could never get it right playing by his rules. He would just look at me and say, “If you’re not gonna play by the rules, don’t play at all!” When I started becoming more talented he would make up more rules, making it even harder to surpass his own talent. He was scared—scared at how old I had become, most of all scared he would have nothing left to teach me.

That was before he got sick. He played less and less and one day he just stopped. It was too painful, too close to his heart for him to handle. I found myself wondering if he was more afraid of losing his music or losing me.

At the funeral, Mom wanted me to play. “It’s what he would’ve wanted,” she said.

“No,” I told her. When she asked why, all I said was, “I just can’t.”

It became too painful for me to play guitar. It started slowly. One day I couldn’t play a note, the next a whole song, then finally I stopped playing altogether. I wasn’t dying, but it felt like a piece of me had been pulled out.

It was a Sunday morning when my mom came into my room and told me she had signed me up for a talent competition. She put the flyer at my feet and left. It was her way of telling me it was time—time to move on. I looked at the closet, where a piece of me lay collecting dust. I still wasn’t ready, I was too scared. Then I remembered my father and his smile. The bad times and the good. Most of all I remembered his advice, the finest advice he ever gave me. I took a breath and opened the closet door.

*by Sindella Sugden Lingard* (Grade Ten)

The Fernie Academy

Fernie, British Columbia



# FIRST PRIZE

## The Boat People

“Hey, what’s over there?” Minh pointed to the far-off distance, gripping his sister’s forearm with an anxious tug.

Chi shook him off and continued watching the waves. She concentrated on each roll as it erupted into the air, slammed against the rickety boat, and writhed slowly down the side. In that moment, she wasn’t on a tiny fishing boat filled with 200 people headed to a new country. She was back in Vietnam, celebrating the end of the war, and getting excited to turn eleven. A jerk in the boat interrupted her daydream, and she blinked hard, trying to regain reality. The waves were still rocky from last night’s storm.

Chi thought back to last night’s nightmare. It was hazy, but she remembered. In it, her long-lost father and two older brothers had been floating on the rocky waves as pale gaunt ghosts. The three men had left three months ago to Indonesia, and Chi’s mother hadn’t heard from them since. Unlike her mother, Chi was not worried. Deep inside, she knew everything would be okay. Their family would soon be reunited, and life would go on. Chi was thankful to still have Minh with her.

Minh! She turned around only to find the spot beside her empty. Panic set in as she searched the edge of the boat, scouring the crowd for her little brother among the throng of adults. The air was painfully still as most of the boat was praying for calm waves.

A child’s yell echoed from the front of the boat, and all heads turned. Chi elbowed through the crowd, wincing at the rancid smells of rotten food and sweat from three days of travel. Loud yells filled the air just as Chi recognized her brother. The little boy was perched on the edge of the boat, gazing at a sliver of land in the distance.

As Chi got to him, all he did was smile innocently. “I saw land so I ran up here.”

“Chi!” Ma emerged from the group of people, her face wrinkled with anguish. “Where have you been?”

Just before his mother could say another word, Minh wrapped his arms around her. “We’re just playing.” He smiled calmly at his sister.

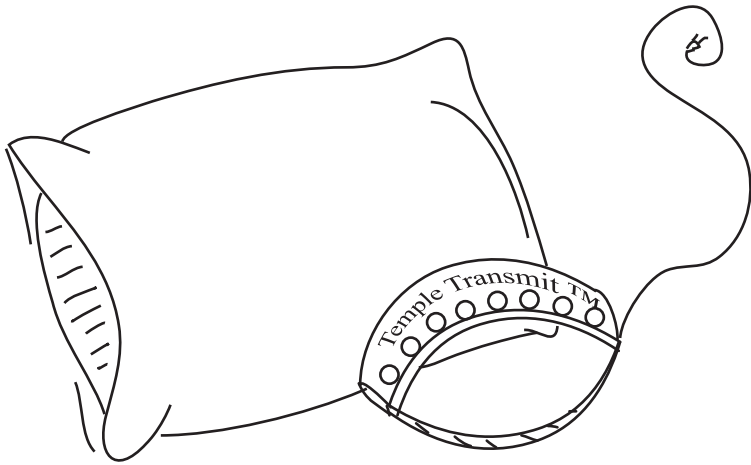
“Innocence is bliss,” was Ma’s soft reply.

As the crowd around the three thickened, the boat reached shore. A group of Indonesians waved from the dock. Among them, three men stood out, all sporting the same dimples Chi and Minh proudly wore.

Chi’s heart soared as she smiled proudly. Beside her, Ma was sobbing. Chi wrapped an arm around her, and felt more like the mother than the child. Everything was going to be all right.

*by Linnea Vo* (Grade Eleven)  
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# FIRST PRIZE

## Unplugged

I check the holographic numbers at my bedside: 10:57 PM. I have to be up at seven for my proposal. I need to be tucked in and hooked up in three minutes. Frivolously, I begin to tap the keys on my electronic nightstand as my pupils rapidly scan for attractive topics.

“Skydiving?” *No.* “Fashion show?” *No.* *I’m not in the mood for an eventful dream—then again tranquil doesn’t seem appropriate either.* Slowly I hit the letters s-u-r-p-r-i-s-e.

“Did you mean surprise party?”

I try again. But words like “random,” “irregular” and “unexpected” aren’t available dream themes.

All I want is change. I have a meeting with clients tomorrow and I don’t have a single painting. It’s not like it matters. Who wants to buy from a washed-up sixteen-year-old anyway, when twelve-year-olds are creating masterpieces? I’m past my prime and in dire need of an edge. By relying on my own dream preferences I’m not getting anywhere. Everyone knows dreams are the birthplace of creativity.

I settle on “hike” from my week’s history, hoping nature will spark something.

After selecting “eight hours,” I get cozy and put on my fuzzy temple-transmit. For the umpteenth time I wish my parents would spring for a pillow adapter so I wouldn’t have to wear this band across my forehead. I’m about to hit “knockout” when I remember hearing Stella Adrianna, the brain behind *The Love Rectangle*, got her billion-dollar idea from unplugging.

Unplugging. No temple-transmit, no pillow adapter, no theme. Trusting your subconscious to entertain your slumber. Absolutely unheard of, and there’s a reason why. The warning labels say unplugging can cause you to forget a dream entirely. No happy memories throughout the day, just blank confusion when you awake. Plus there isn’t a guarantee you’ll even fall asleep. You could lie there for minutes, hours before drifting off! I can only imagine the agonizing frustration and boredom. And not to mention the horror stories of bad dreams. Images so scary you are awoken by pure terror. How did Stella ever cope with such a risk?

The instability is enchanting—raw emotions waiting to be decoded, unforeseen feelings lying deep within your being. . . . One can only dream of the creative possibilities.

I wake up with a stiff neck and twisted body position. I battle my eyelids: 8:34 AM. *That doesn’t make sense. I can’t be late. Especially not from a silly reason like “sleeping too long.” My customers will never buy it.*

*Buy it. My painting. Those weaving brush strokes and fleecy colours, unique content. It’s revolutionary!* I spring out of bed and step over to my cold temple-transmit. I can’t wait to transfer it all onto canvas.

**by Sarah Collie** (Grade Twelve)  
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# SECOND PRIZE

## Final Days

The drumming of hooves on the turf thundered in my ears. Clods of moist earth stung as they hit my flushed face. Fragments of mucilaginous mud worked their way past my lips retracted from my teeth in a grimace of determination. My vision tunnelled as I approached the final hurdle and amid the silver glint of horseshoes the fence rose rapidly in front of me.

The rich smell of freshly mown grass was rudely replaced by the clinical smell of antiseptic. Sunlight reflected off the whitewashed walls as I awoke to yet another day. Ninety-six days later, what was once my dream vocation and a life I adored is now my perpetual nightmare.

That last hurdle was the last I ever took.

I have no recollection of what actually happened and even though I dream that leap every night, the memories never become clearer. I have been told countless times how it is a miracle I survived, as hooves smashed my unconscious body to the ground. Despite reassurances this is life, those who say that have never been in my purgatory. I should be grateful to have survived, but somehow I think I'd rather have peacefully departed the semi-vegetative state I live today.

I have one sky-blue eye that roams restlessly around the room. I have no mobility as I am paralyzed from the neck down, my head held in a brace. Daily, a physiotherapist, a psychologist, and a battery of doctors have been parading through my life, inspecting, prodding, and coaching me back to an existence I am not sure I even want.

This all changed yesterday. I was confronted by the stark reality of my impending death as I looked into the limpid brown eyes and furrowed brow of my doctor as he broke the news to me. Yet I felt nothing, not even fear.

As he stood in front of me, eclipsing the early morning sun through the window, he pronounced his latest prognosis. The drugs have ceased to heal my wounds and my organs are beginning to shut down.

I reassured him this was not bad news. It was simply news. From the first knowledge of my accident, to news of life continuing beyond my four walls, I can accept and acknowledge the world has continued to evolve despite my state of suspended action.

As I lie here in an increasingly semi-comatose state, I feel myself relax and a new peace settles over me. Will tonight bring more restless dreams, or is this sense of calm a sign my damaged body is shutting down? I feel my eyelids droop, closing out the light.

Will today be my final day?

*by Piers Waldie* (Grade Nine)

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# SECOND PRIZE

## Consequences

I'm not mad at the sorry little punk at the other end of the table. Hell, nobody could be, not at this trembling wretch. It doesn't change what's coming to him, though. He knows it, too; he's not stupid.

His voice is shaky. He's afraid. Of course he is. He's not stupid. "I'm not stupid," he says, and I barely hold back a smile. "I know what's coming to me. I knew it then too."

How could he not? I make a point of letting *everyone* know what happens when they steal from me. "Yeah," I say, "and you went for it anyway. This doesn't make you 'not stupid.'"

Poor kid. I'd like to leave him, let him go, but I can't do that. Not in my business. Innocent until proven guilty just doesn't apply here; mercy is a foreign concept.

"But this way I had a chance," he says, breaking down a little. "I couldn't just stand there and *die!* I had to do *something*, try *something*."

In this line of work, we call compassion by another name: weakness, but I decide to let a little show. "Look, kid; I understand. When you've got a choice between a chance and no chance, you take the chance. I don't blame you for it," I promise him. "But you see, I can't let people run around thinking I am the chance option. I wouldn't last a day."

The condemned man across from me seems less than comforted by my little speech. My concession of feebleness at the end—in fact a confession I would never tell to anyone with a life expectancy exceeding a minute—makes him blanch and stop breathing for a moment. He'll stop once more soon enough.

"Well," I say, "I did treat you fairly, didn't I? Offered you . . . opportunities. I suppose we'd better get this over with. I just wanted you to know I don't blame you, and I hope you don't blame me."

I turn to get my gun. I see him reaching into his jacket with stiff and trembling fingers a moment before my revolution carries him out of sight, and for a split second I wonder. . . .

Then I hear the click of a safety. It takes maybe a half second to go from flipping a gun's safety catch to pulling its trigger, maybe a full second if he's an amateur, maybe a third of a second if it's a newer model.

When you're about to die, your life is supposed to flash before your eyes, but my eyes are full of gun trivia. Because these fractions of a second, these minuscule amounts of time . . . they are the grand total of my remaining existence.

*by Zorn Rose* (Grade Ten)  
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# SECOND PRIZE

## Dragons

“What are you doing, little goon?”

The frosty early winter air bit into my cheeks and the tip of my nose as I flapped my arms and ran circles around Cristofer. The clouds were grey and bloated with the prospect of snow, the air so cold I could see my breath condense before me.

With my arms spread wide, I sped ahead of Cristofer and, spinning around to face him, let out a huge, almost fiery breath of warm smoke.

To my great surprise, he only laughed and gave me a look of utter confusion.

“I’m a dragon,” I said matter-of-factly. “Didn’t you see the smoke billowing from my dragon snout and nostrils?”

Cristofer laughed again as we continued along the path back home. “So you’re a dragon now? Weren’t you . . . what were you last week? A rock?”

I huffed indignantly and crossed my dragon wings. “I was a bear, Cristofer. I was not a rock.”

He snorted. “You might as well have been. I had to carry you most of the way home last Friday.”

“I was hibernating because it was almost wintertime, silly.”

He ruffled my hair, grinning. “So what’s brought on this sudden transformation into a dragon?”

“Bears have to stay in hibernation for the whole winter. I got bored,” I replied with a shrug. “But dragons don’t need to. They can use the winter to do fun things.”

“Like what?” he asked after a moment’s pause. He sounded distracted.

“Dragons breathe fire on *everything!*” I giggled. “I can protect you from anyone, Cristofer; I’ll just set fire to their noses!”

I looked to him eagerly, waiting for a response, but none came. Disconcerted, I scrutinized the area ahead to see what had his mind so effectively preoccupied; in doing so, I painfully realized what had so easily slipped my own. We were approaching the cemetery . . . on the day of the third anniversary of that which nearly broke my brother.

Upon entering the cemetery, Cristofer solemnly guided me to a section of tombstones at the far end of the graveyard. We wove our way through to a tombstone marked with the name “Daniel Jusgrove.” Daniel was Cristofer’s best friend, killed in an automobile accident three years ago—and the reason we walked home every day.

After what felt like ages of silent reflection, Cristofer drew himself back with sombre, glistening eyes. *He’s near broken*, I thought despairingly. The past could not—would not—repeat itself.

I hugged him tightly, refusing to let go. “Don’t let the monsters get you again,” I pleaded.

He looked to me, a sad smile playing on his lips. “And if they do?”

I thought hard. “I’ll just set fire to their noses.”

*by Catherine Wang* (Grade Eleven)

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Toronto, Ontario





# SECOND PRIZE

## Midnight Thunder and Artificial Lightning

My year in Colorado was meant to be relaxing. I had decided to get away from the East Coast; all the immigrants in New York seemed to create a certain type of nausea. The fresh air of the American frontier should have suited me well, but I didn't count on the unsettling edge of electric current floating through the countryside.

There was news of a mad man in Colorado that summer. He wasn't your typical Jack the Ripper-esque psycho. He was a more sophisticated, more gentlemanly, more charming lunatic. The mad man had come from New York in the spring of 1899. The rumour mill claimed I was following him, searching for the secrets to his art. It was just coincidence that I had the same taste in surroundings as a crazy person.

I came to Colorado Springs to escape the suffocation of downtown diners and crowded coffee shops. He came for the very same reason, but he kept to himself; he hid in his mountaintop manor, gated from the criticism of the outside and he was never seen, only to be heard from at the most peculiar hours of the day.

I would bolt awake, the sound of thunder resonating through my head. My legs hung off my bed, my body tense, seemingly electrified. My bed frame would indistinctly glow a pale violet, soft spheres of plasma forming at the peak of my bedposts. The thunder would roll, but my window remained sombre. The lamp in my room would ignite even though it was switched off. Peering through the curtains, the horseshoes strewn across the lawn were lined with blue halos of St. Elmo's fire. This is how I spent my nights for nearly a year.

The summer turned to fall, the thunder grew louder and the lamp in my room shone brighter. The horseshoes radiated a pure white light that illuminated the terrace. I disembarked at dawn, following the low rumble of turbines and the sudden shattering of the cool morning air. In the distance a gate rose from the earth; it, too, undoubtedly had electricity pulsing through it. There was no sign of anything that could be making such a deafening noise, no clues to who was waking the residents of Colorado Springs every night, and no explanation to what was causing me to shock myself every time I turned a doorknob. As spontaneous as the midnight thunder, a man emerged. His thin, lean frame cut through the morning fog. His face was soft but distinguished. He wore a sharp jawline, accented by his moustache. Dressed in a suit, his hair parted, he opened the gate and extended his hand. "Welcome to the lab of Nikola Tesla."

*by Brady Keeler* (Grade Twelve)  
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# THIRD PRIZE

## The Rabbit Foot

Amid the downtown streets, a tall, dark-haired woman walks briskly on a fall evening. The chill pulls at her bones, the aches rise up and make her feel empty. She sees the sign for the C-side Café and halts. Her phone rings and she takes it out from her pocket and answers the call she's been waiting for from her employer.

"Maria, do you know where it is?" the man enquires.

"Of course, I do," she confirms. "So, what's the deal?"

"Retrieve the rabbit foot and the trade will be made at the wharf at midnight for double the regular pay. And for heaven's sake, don't touch it," he urgently instructs. He hangs up on her abruptly, which is typical of the business man he is. She has been working for him, doing odd jobs like this, using her special abilities, for years and he hasn't changed much.

Maria walks into the café and sits at a small table in the corner. She takes out her laptop to look occupied.

"What would you like?" asks the waitress.

"Just coffee," Maria answers.

After surfing the net for a while she finds some old legends about the rabbit foot. One states the foot will bring much luck to its possessor, but if it is lost that luck will literally run out.

Suddenly, a couple comes in and sits at a booth. Maria spots the man with the rabbit foot. He is a middle-aged man wearing a newly acquired expensive suit and Rolex watch. He is engrossed in conversation with the woman who is dressed equally as lavishly. It looks like the rabbit foot is surely working.

The couple both have coffee and leave after half an hour. Maria packs up her things and follows discreetly. The woman parts from the man after five blocks. The man turns around and looks straight at Maria. He takes the foot out of his pocket and holds it up.

"I know you've been following me. You want this rabbit foot, don't you? Well, you can't have it. I'm not giving it up. Not now, not ever!" he exclaims.

Maria swiftly snatches the foot, touching it with her bare hands. She is astonished at her foolish mistake and begins to flee. The man pursues, but does not see the oncoming car. He is dead on impact. Maria realizes she cannot hand the foot over to her employer or she will have a similar fate. She quickly retrieves a lighter from her bag and lights the foot on fire.

"Nobody should have power over luck," she states.

*by Catriona Stark* (Grade Nine)  
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# THIRD PRIZE

## In the Eyes of the Beholder

Luther woke up panicked and in a cold sweat once again. He didn't understand why slumber always brought him such horrendous nightmares, but he was able to recover quickly thanks to daily practice.

He rolled out of bed and plodded to his dark, meagre kitchen. Had he not been slouching so severely, he would've knocked his head on the door frames. He served himself a bowl of oatmeal. It was deeply unsatisfying, as usual.

He looked out through the dirty window; it was a bright, sunny day. "Disgusting," he muttered with a scowl.

Luther had to go out into that bright and sunny world that day. That world full of ignorant people with fake smiles. That calamitous world disguised as a beautiful place full of dreams.

Luther finished his breakfast and stepped outside without cleaning up. He lumbered down the street unshaven, unwashed, but not unnoticed. Mr. Pomery crossed to the opposite side of the street when he saw Luther coming with his perpetual frown and dark clothes hanging off his lanky frame. Luther didn't care. He had grown used to it over the years. There were very few people whose presence could affect him. And when he looked up, he saw one of them.

Down the street, right in Luther's path, stood Wallace Denton with his wife. He smiled and waved to everyone as they passed. When he saw Luther, his smile didn't waver, but something in his eyes changed momentarily. "Morning, Luther," Wallace said nonchalantly. "Out for groceries?"

Luther grunted affirmatively without making eye contact.

"You seem troubled," Wallace went on, unfazed by Luther's response. "Did you sleep all right?"

Luther didn't respond. He was watching Mrs. Denton, who was noticeably uncomfortable, knowing his reputation. She was fidgeting a lot and looking down at her expensively clad feet. "Goodbye," Luther mumbled. He then turned and trudged straight back home.

Wallace watched him go, shaking his head.

Sweat started to drip off Luther's nose in the mid-summer heat. *Am I really the only one who knows that man's true nature?* he thought, frustrated. *Does nobody else see through that smile? He's certainly not the happy do-gooder everyone seems to think he is. He's vulgar. He's arrogant and manipulative. He—*

Luther arrived at his house and sat in his old, dusty armchair. He caught a glimpse of the framed photograph on his end table. It was a picture of him and the now Mrs. Denton, laughing together before she had been stolen away by that awful excuse for a man.

That photograph was the last image in Luther's mind before he slipped into the nightmares again, the lines on his forehead deep and his nails bitten down to the quick.

by *Emily Helmer* (Grade Ten)  
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# THIRD PRIZE

## The Old Dusty Rails

Stu woke up on the side of the seemingly endless train tracks, next to the derailed electric train. He rubbed the sleep from his eyes, and walked down the trail beside the road. Stu did not know where the rails led, only that they kept him on the path of finding dried-up towns. The world had nearly ended, and Stu didn't quite know what to do at the time besides wander.

Stu walked for several hours until he reached another town. *It would be a good time to scavenge for supplies*, he thought. Stu found a deserted grocery store, and filled his grey backpack with cans of beans, soup, and Spam. He was startled by a gunshot that sounded from behind him.

"Who the hell are you?" the gun's owner asked with impatience. He pointed the shotgun at Stu.

Stu explained how he was a wanderer, and the pair palavered for a few moments about how the world once was. Stu said goodbye to the man, and left for the train tracks.

When he arrived back to the rails, Stu spotted an electrical train sitting on the bars. He walked up to it, and entered it through the steel sliding door.

Two men were talking to each other in the cabin of the train. It was a luxurious palace of a room, with red carpet stretching from end to end. Stu greeted the men, and asked which one was the driver.

"I am," the man with the dusted cap said.

"I would request of you to get off of this train and walk the rest of the way," Stu said, staring deeply into the man's face with his cold, grey eyes.

"That's absurd. These trains are the fastest way to get to the end of the tracks."

"Have you not seen the derailed trains dotting the sides of the rails? You're doomed."

"Well, who says this one will derail? We've gotten this far, and we're likely to stay on the tracks the rest of the way. You're free to come, but if you don't want the easy way, you can get off."

Stu left the car while he shook his head and watched the train drive off with the other stranger, who was most likely another wanderer.

He continued down the path while eating a can of soup, and after a few hours heard a crash from up ahead. When he got to the source of the noise, he found the train he had just been in, derailed and smashed onto its side.

"Rushing will never get you anywhere," Stu said, and thought of his mother's old smile. He threw the empty can into the rubble, and continued on.

*by Ian Topham* (Grade Eleven)

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London, Ontario



# THIRD PRIZE

## **This Morning's Sun**

This morning's sun rose by the small town. Its glow woke the west side of the valley with a shine. Its radiance gracefully reflected off a nearby lake, which sat very still and alone. Even though the world was still asleep around her, Lucy was awake.

Her home was built for her by her father, and the woodland view was more than decent. She watched the early winds rush through leaves of old oak trees and made the branches shake rapidly. She grew envious of their sturdy roots that gripped the ground and held them strong in the air. She lifted her hand that shook without her control, as it did often in her old age. She hated remembering she could no longer climb those trees and play in those leaves. She was bound now to this chair without her legs. There was nothing to hold her up—nothing to keep her strong in the air. She sighed and looked away.

She could hear the birds that sang, and their song made her think. They were black, yellow, and blue. When she was a little girl, she would chase them around every morning, and never catch a single one. She would run in circles, sometimes for hours, just chasing. Even at that age she knew she would never catch them, she knew it was a hopeless endeavour. It was a constant game of chase she could never win. Yet she did this almost every day of her childhood years. When she thought back to it, how it angered her. How frustrated she became. The hours spent, the time wasted on something that produced nothing. Her shaking hand clenched the best fist it could and she began to cry.

“Why chase what will never be caught?” she yelled to the sleeping town, but nobody responded. Nobody heard, and it was doubtful anyone cared; however, her mind was set on understanding why—why a girl with youth and life would waste time chasing the uncatchable. She could see the fault in this more than anyone, her frail bones and tethered muscles showed her. She wished someone would have told her what she would become. She relaxed herself and looked to the trees once more. She felt the cool rush of the breeze calm her and play with her hair.

Then suddenly, she remembered the birds she had momentarily ignored, and listened to the song as a child she loved and adored. With that moment, as swift as it was, she forgot everything she knew but this morning's sun.

*by Jacob Pucar* (Grade Twelve)  
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