

ALTERNATIVE UNITED VOICES

VOL 5



FICTION POETRY & ART

Alternative United Voices – Volume 5

A compilation of short stories and poems from the students of
Montreal's outreach high schools

Cover art by Nurakin Cobran

An Alternative United publication

Organized by Colin Throness



Find out more about Alternative United and read the publication
online at alternativeunited.ca

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This year we had an amazing guest judge, poet Jason Selman, who carefully read all the submissions and took on the impossible task of picking the winners. Many thanks to Jason for his help this year!

And last but not least, a massive thank you to all the students who participated. Keep it up! You won't regret it!

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Foreword

Whether they know it or not, the students who have written for this zine have done something great. They have written down their thoughts and concerns through poetry and prose. They have arisen to a challenge not all of us are prepared for. They have stepped up to say what is on their minds and hearts.

Most people are too afraid to reveal their true selves to anyone. But through writing, this is exactly what these students have done. For some of them, the compositions they have recently created will be the beginning of their lives as writers, full of ups and downs, rejection, self-doubt and eventually triumph. For others, though they may not have a future in creative writing, the ups and downs of life, the need to be persistent and to meet life's challenges will still be there.

As someone who has decided to make my living as an artist, I can attest that life's challenges are endless. And though there are days when I feel like giving up, I never do. This is because of the need to create and to work on my craft. The need to share my creations through publication or live performance never goes away.

The choice will be theirs, to make writing their career or to let it be their companion through life. No matter what they choose, the capacity to express themselves, to be vulnerable to others, and to be someone who uses their creativity to take care of their mental health are all extremely important.

I encourage everyone in this zine to continue to write, and to write often. To explore the world through writing while also looking in to reflect on what it can be. I also encourage them to cherish the feeling of seeing their work in print. It is an emotion I have

experienced many times, but it never gets old. To them I say, consider how it would feel to create your own work full of your own writing and the joy of reading a book filled with your own words on the page. It is an amazing feeling, perhaps something that may now seem unreal or unattainable. But no matter who we are or what we do, we all need to be bold enough to have the courage to make our dreams come true.

Jason Selman – Poet

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The Colour of My Skin
By Dodridge McFarlane

I am angry and confused
Because of the injustices that have been done
Because the colour of my skin
I now feel as if I'm a marked target
As a black male, I'm viewed as an object
They see me as quarry, but they don't see what's within
But I'm a person of value
With hopes and dreams
All I'm asking
Is that you give me a chance at life.

A Struggling, Powerless Drug Life
By Jake Simmons

Locked in by this wall,
Of addiction and hurt,
Powerless to break free,
From this comforting medicated life.

All you wanted,
Was to toss aside your problems,
Instead you signed up for a life much worse.

Haunted by your troubles,
While struggling with your next overdose,
This wall will continue to get bigger,
As time bypasses.

The struggle will only get harder,
With every pill you take,
But you insist to continue,
Telling yourself that freedom will be tomorrow,
And you'll remove yourself from such sorrows.

But you fall into this pain again,
And concoct such a lethal cocktail,
That you finally get your way.

Ending the hurt and pain,
Leaving the world,
To the next generation,
Of beings.

Locking in by the powerless drug life,
They thought would set them free.

Why She Left
By Jake Simmons

He is a storm,
And storms devastate,
But every time he hurts you,
You hold your breath
And bear the hurricane,
Repeating to yourself
One more chance
One more breath
Just one more,
And you'll fix him.

Until one day you can't
Hold your breath anymore,
And you are
Half a stormy evening,
One tear stained night,
Two minutes
And five seconds
Away from breaking down.

And you realise,
You cannot fix anyone,
Not until you fix yourself.

The Last Lucky Star I Counted
Anonymous

The sky was starry
It was a beautiful night
It wasn't scary
I was full of delight
There was no reason to be scared
I was safe with the people I cared about
My family and friends
The happiness couldn't end
I got to the destination
We walked in
That's where my heart sank
I didn't hear anything
I didn't need to
The room was dark
Even though the lights were on
I could see them
But it didn't feel like them
I left for a few minutes
And counted a lucky star
And hoped I would be okay
When I returned the people talked
And I knew that star that I just counted
Was the last lucky one.

Our World
By Junior Efedede

Our world is hard
Our world is great
I fight for our world to stop the hate
It's time we force our world to **ELEVATE**
Though equality seems far it starts with
The power to communicate.

The Fight
By Junior Efedede

Police **BRUTALITY**
They show **NO** sympathy
We **FIGHT** the fight
He's **BLACK**
He's **DEAD**
And it's over **INSTANTLY**
Police **BRUTALITY.**

Room
By Junior Efedede

Gray room two kids

LARGELY different **NO** differences

PAUSE

PLAY

Same room new kids

Minds **MOLDED** negatively **CRAFTED**

Strong sense of judgment and hatred.

Guns and Flowers
By Junior Efedede

If **GUNS** are shot

Can flowers be grown

Praying black lives could matter

Praying others can **ATONE**

Is **PEACE** a virtue?

Or is the idea of peace a fight

I must fight alone

King of the Dead
By Taheim Mohammed

I gotta find a way,
To heal these cuts.
From what's been done,
I gotta find a way out of this rut.
My body isn't proud of me,
Nor of the choices that I've made.
The awful thoughts keep circling back,
To think I thought I'd be saved.
My hands are stained red,
I think it's safe to say my feelings are dead.
Despite all of the things you said,
The vicious words rang loud and clear,
They'll never stop ringing in my ears.
You left in time,
For my scars to heal.
If home is where the heart is,
Then home is for the heartless.
I was running blind,
For such a long time,
But now I'm falling behind.
My eyes give me away,
I've forgotten what to say.
All of my senses,
Suddenly just melt away.
You took my hand as my saving grace
But you lead me astray,
And threw me away.
A dark ditch is my home,
And I'm sure as hell heartless.

Same

By Tristan Pelletier

Thinking of life we are no different from a tree
Born from a seed and placed on earth to spread our roots
From pine trees to birch trees
Both coming from a seed as do we
A simple colour of bark or shade of leaves makes each tree unique
But the interior is very much the same as like us
We may all be unique but we all are human
Colour shouldn't define a person
Nor should their apparel
Life should be sacred
And life should be free
Your life is yours
And your life is important to me

Untitled
Lau Pich

I hadn't even realized you were there
Growing, becoming a wonder I'd never know
Alcohol and drugs, leave you speechless
Killed by self sabotage
Would have I stayed?
I took the choice away from both of us
Mistook sex for love,
Now both are gone
Unable to accept the loss,
Or unable to understand it
Leaving me in a state of what could have been
The blood of lost ones, not yet leaving my sight
I drink the sorrows away, until I awaken to the thought of you
again
Those glorious nights of lights and sights
Never could I have known the consequence of life
Your world now shattered by an unexpected surprise
The stream of tears that fill the thought of you
I hate you and love you, but you'll never know

Untitled

By Dashiell Stevens

It was one in the morning. I was awake. I was having trouble sleeping. I always had trouble sleeping. Maybe it was the fact that my room was tiny, or that I was boiling hot. I had gotten used to it, however. I had been living in my apartment for four years. It was the longest I'd ever lived anywhere. Today had been a hard day. My mother had drunk too much, and the cops had come due to a noise complaint. Since I was the only child and my father wasn't around, I was the man of the house and had to deal with the police. I got out of bed and went to put on my shoes to go outside. Walking down the dim light stairs of my building I smelled a mix of weed and laundry. Nothing out of the ordinary. As I walked out of the building, I saw my boy Kavon standing across the street, smoking. He saw me and turned around.

“Yo D, you heard there gon' be a fight at Mandela, live,” he yelled from across the street. Mandela Park was the neighbourhood park where everybody would go and hang out.

I yelled back, “Not even.” I crossed the street almost getting hit by a bus.

“Dumbass,” he yelled.

“Shut up,” I said back. I was feeling a bit angry from before, since I had had a really hard day, with my mother and the cops and all. I looked at him and said, “So, we going Mandela on them or nah?” He said sure.

It was only a couple blocks away, but I knew that it would still take a while to get there. “Today was hell,” I told him. He asked why, so I started throwing up words on how I felt and everything that happened today.

“Yeah, I feel you. You know I’m there for you right?” he replied. I said of course. I felt like he really understood me. He’d been through a lot himself. Honestly, everyone from the hood had been through it. Violence and drugs helped a bit, but it was rough.

“Who the fight between?” I asked.

“Oh, it’s between T and some other mans from another block” he said.

“Deadass? I thought his dumbass was staying outta trouble” I laughed.

“His ass? Are you dumb?” he said.

“I guess.” We arrived at the park, and saw them both already there. They were each in the opposite end of the park. T stopped what he was doing and looked my way.

“Oh damn, what you doing here?” he said, surprised.

“Couldn’t sleep stillz, so I came with Kavon” I said.

He replied, “Bet.” The group of the other people started walking towards us.

“Pussy!” yelled one of the other guys. T got up, yelling angrily back at him. They got close and the boy swung on T, who picked him up and slammed him onto the ground. His friends started jumping in, and so did we. I got punched in the face by this one kid, so I started throwing punch after punch at him.

It made me feel a bit better about my day, but not entirely. Violence didn’t always help me feel better. Normally just taking a bus ride or a bike ride at night did it. It didn’t matter though. I wanted to beat the hell out of someone, and he had started it with me. I was a skinny kid, but I was very fast. I could easily dodge punches and run faster than anyone there at the park.

Thirty seconds later, we heard sirens from the police swarming the area around the park. Everyone stopped for a second. Flashing red and blue lights started appearing in the distance.

“Fuck!” I heard T yell. He was on probation, and if he got caught, he could go to jail until he turned 18. We all ran our separate ways, except for Kavon and I. We ran one way, while the others all split up. I knew the area like the back of my hand. Kavon and I jumped two fences, which led us to the other street on the other side of the block.

For some reason, the others all ran towards the highway, while the people from the other hood ran towards the metro station. After a few breathless minutes of running, we ran behind my building, and stopped in the dark, panting continuously for at least a few minutes. Both of us, being heavy smokers and having asthma, were both on the ground gasping for air.

Finally after three or four minutes, Kavon managed to get out a few words. “That *gasp* ended badly,” he said.

“Swear,” I panted. I lit up a cigarette, and Kay started playing music on his speaker, still completely out of breath.

“I hope T is a’ight,” he said. “I’m ’a call him, hold up,” I replied. No answer. “Goddamn it,” I said. I called two more times, with no answer.

“I swear to god I hope his phone’s just off, and he didn’t get caught,” Kavon said.

“Swear” I replied. It was July, during a heatwave, with humidity making it around 30 degrees centigrade, even at this time of night. In all honesty, I was used to things ending this way. We all were. Taught to hate each other at a young age, just because we

weren't from the same hood, taking out our anger from our lives on each other, just to make ourselves feel better. All of us had different charges. It didn't excite anybody, it was just part of growing up in the hood. There's a saying, *the hood don't excite nobody but someone who wasn't raised in it*, and that's entirely true. It didn't excite anyone anymore.

The bottom line was that everybody was stuck. It sucked. My only hope was to wait a few years until I turned 18, save up money I didn't have, to try to get my own place. I had given up on going to college. I was done caring. I just wanted to end this continuous cycle.

My Childhood
By Tiffany Torres Dupuis

Imagine an innocent little girl having nothing, having your mom trying to do everything for her and you to have what you need with a little bit of money, seeing your mama getting hurt, things in the house breaking and thrown everywhere and you under the table feeling scared, not knowing what's going on or what to do and just seeing your mama get hurt by a scumbag and not knowing what to do or understanding what's going on.

'Til this day I see this image and I regret not doing anything. I wish I was able to call 911 for help or someone for help but I was too young, and lucky my mom was able to do something about it. I remember my mom telling me she was okay and everything would be okay, but I was too young to understand anything that's going on or why that happened and there are times when this scumbag sneaked into the house trying to hurt her more. Having your sperm donor saying I'm coming for you, I want to see you, you are an innocent child waiting at the window for him and never showed up, that feeling is like someone crushing your heart and he comes and goes like the wind and makes it seem your important to him, but if you were important to him why could he see you or try to fix things for the best, but no he just left like nothing that's how important you were for him. Finally the day comes and your mom steps in to have full custody of you so she would not have to go through that again.

Years later you start school, you know you're different compared to the other kids, but yet you mind your business and imagine a young girl walking in a school and not like the other kids quite, lonely, not that many friends until the day she met a girl named Amanda came up to me to ask to play with her. And from

that day on we were close friends and became best friends. Sadly I had to change schools but she was there too!! So I wasn't lonely and I had someone I knew. I got bullied a lot at that school. I got picked on, name-called, pushed, got scarred, marked. Even though all of this happened to me almost everyday, I always had a smile on my face going to school.

Imagine a little innocent girl going through all of this at the age about eight or nine years old. Years pass, high school, and my mom found someone better who I could call Dad, having a beautiful home thinking, "Wow, who would have ever thought me and my mom would be where we are now?" Goes to show when you go through something tough, hurt, heartbroken, lonely, you will find the good person to light you up like fireworks. It could be a friend, best friend, neighbour, boyfriend or girlfriend in your life to make it better and make you realize your worth, how good of a person you are. Therefore even though this little innocent girl has a terrified childhood she has a bright future coming to her.

My Hardest Decision to Make
By Luisa Diana Urrutia

I'm on the phone with my boyfriend, we're playing Call of Duty and I hear my mom call me through my headphones. I ignored her the first time hoping she wouldn't call me again. Now she's yelling. "Jessie come downstairs now!"

"I'll call you in five minutes. Ugh, my mom's so annoying," I told Justin then hung up. I took my time. Before coming all the way down, I think I heard somebody say my name.

"Are those your friends?" Mom asks me.

My boyfriend's ex and her sister?

What are they doing here? I heard about them before briefly but I never talked to them or texted them. From what I heard, they dropped out of school, no job and they are always outside causing drama. Is she here because I'm with Justin? I went outside.

"Hey, what's up? Have we met?" I asked.

"How about you give me your phone and let me block Justin and you never talk to him again, or you and me are going to have problems." Emma responds.

Is she insane? I don't know if she's being serious right now but all I want to do is laugh, but then I realise why would she joke?

"First of all, Justin and I have been together for a month and we're happy. I met his family and we hang out everyday and you can't stop us from being together. He doesn't talk about you. I don't know why you are here honestly," I spilled and went back inside. I called Justin right away and told him what happened.

"Don't worry I'm always going to have your back. Just promise you won't leave no matter how bad it gets, you know I love you. Genuinely, Darcy," he told me.

“Babe, I promise. You know I love you forever. Are we still playing COD?” I suggested and we went back to play.

The next day I wake up from five missed calls from Bethany, my best friend since the start of high school. I assume it’s important so I call her back while still half asleep.

“I don't know if this is true but Emma posted a pregnancy test and it said it was posi—”

“What?” I woke up from my bed. “Look, I know this is hard but you really only knew Justin for a month and a ha—”

“No this can't be true he would have told me, there is no way this is true,” I interrupted. “I'm seeing him at lunch later. I'm gonna bring it up,” I say, grievously. I don't think too much of it because I don't want to stress myself out.

It's almost lunch and I'm nervous because what if it’s true. I text him to make sure we are still meeting. He says, yes. I told him to meet me at my locker right when the bell rings.

“So Emma posted a pregnancy test and so many things are racing through my mind right now and I want to know if it's yours, when was the last time you saw her—”

“Darcy, stop. Honestly about a week ago she told me she was pregnant. I haven't seen her since she and I broke up. I'm with you and everything about you made my life better and I can't see myself with anyone else as long as you're in this world. I don't have any feelings for Emma and I got scared so I didn't tell you. She knows we are over so what she decides to do is her decision, but I didn't know she was serious about keeping the baby,” he explains to me.

“I can't be with you, it's too much. She hates me and we just met barely two months ago. I have problems of my own I need to

figure out, I don't need more. I really love you but this is not what I expected this to be—”

“Let me finish. I don't love her. At this moment I love you and it wouldn't make a difference if I was with her for a year or ten. I moved on and it's her choice if she wants to keep the baby with or without me and if that's my son then I will be a dad to him because I grew up without a dad and I don't want any child to have to feel like that. But I don't love her. I don't see a future with her. Let me prove that to you. Please,” he begs.

I still have so many questions and I was just astounded by the news. I didn't know how to react. Emma and Stacy. They're not classy and I've met girls like them before, they are aggravating, not mature, and act like children and more. I blocked him everywhere while I was walking away so he couldn't reach me. His mother, sister, all his social media and started planning my life without him. Yes, I cried almost every day, missing him, thinking about all the fun times we had even though it was short but I wanted to have his baby and didn't want to deal with Emma and her sister.

We met up later on, four months after our breakup and we had the same bond. The same conversations that would last hours and we never got tired. I saw him while I was walking in the mall with my girls and he was with his friends. Both our friends' groups ended up leaving together. We talked for hours and I ended up going home at 1 a.m. We were walking and talking for hours on hours like we never split. He showed me that he didn't want to talk to anyone else because he never stopped loving me and he understood why I left but was hoping we would get back into a relationship. So if we both still feel the same way and he actually shows me that we are meant to be, then I'm positive we can work things out together.

We keep in touch with Emma. She had his baby and he is now two years old. She's much more mature and is respectable to me because she is now a mother and no one other but her child should be her priority. He gets him on the weekends, his name is Adam, he's so cute and I'm really proud of Justin for how he is being the best father he could to Adam even if he was a surprise. I'd rather him be present in his baby's life and doesn't have the kid to wonder where his dad is. And now we are planning our life together and our next plan is moving out and marriage and soon we will be having a family of our own.

We Will Thrive

By Jahnei-Nesta Been

We will survive
We will stay alive
Us, black people, will not die

Our melanin is forever
We will be together
and united

I hope we can understand each other
Because we can't fight one another
We will thrive

Nothing will stop us
Nothing can break us
You can't shut us up
We are going to stand up
Black lives matter with our fist held up
This time, we will speak up
We will thrive

The World
By Billie White

I live in a world where
People around us are doing drugs
Only because they want to forget what's going on
They want to forget the pain they are feeling
They want to let it all out
But why?

I live in a world where
People of all races are hating on each other
Without making the peace
They'll hate you because you're being you
They'll hate you because you're small, weak, large, tall, strong, and
being yourself

I live in a world where depression and anxiety
Take over people who don't deserve it at all
Depression and anxiety are the two strongest enemies alive
We must come together to defeat it

I live in a world where
Love isn't capable of good
They don't use "love"
It should be shared upon others,
But instead, they use "hate"
Your family, your friends, the elderly, the weak, the poor, and even
the rich
Loving people could change the fate of evil
To bring out the good in people

The world I want to live in
It should be full of Love,
Understanding,
Peace,
Equal, and so much more positive moments.

The world I want to live in
Shouldn't have "hate" in it
It should have Love and loyalty all around

Now that, my friends,
Is a world to live in.

Gaze
By Sami Boudebba

Hey lil' mama I see you
Come over here and my boo
Sitting alone looking all cute
And I just wanna be with you
So tell me love what you'll do
I parked the whip to gaze your view
Will you hop inside like kangaroos
Put the seat belt on the foreign zooms

Roaming through the streets late night catching a vibe call it a date
Babe, I'm trying to make you mine, your presence only heals my
pain
I don't wanna waste my time I made my mind you're all I think
About every single minute when I'm with you let it sink

Loving your slim waste cute face
Only on first base first place
Giving you mileage speed race
You like the adrenaline rush
I won't wipe out in me you could trust
If I'm honest I think you're my crush
I could see that I'm making you blush
You should give in and follow your gut

Maybe it would lead us where we never knew existed
I'd give you the world and everything in it with kisses
Hershey sweet I wouldn't cheat on you I know you're different
I can say this is love at first sight romantic vision

Any problem that will come your way I'll be there by your side
So baby girl don't worry I'm behind you one step at a time
You'll never have to stress financially lil' NiCCi's on his grind
She says she doesn't want my money I could see it in her eyes

That she's not lying
To some people that's surprising

It feels so satisfying
Just to witness when you're smiling

You came in my life when it was dark you made it brighten

Lean your head against my shoulder gaze at the horizon

This is how I met this diamond

Hey lil' mama I see you
Come over here and my boo
Sitting alone looking cute
And I just wanna be with you
So tell me love what you'll do
I parked the whip to gaze your view
Will you hop inside like kangaroos
Put your seat belt on the foreign zooms

Roaming through the streets late night catching a vibe call it a date
Babe, how can I make you mine, your presence only heals my pain
I don't wanna waste my time I made my mind you're all I think
About every single minute when I'm with you let it sink

When a Tree Lies
By Kaesye Duncan

*A lonely flower under a tree
Allowed no water for a century
Did nothing but come to life
Which condemned it to the afterlife
No crimes committed but to breathe the air
But nature it did not, no it did not care
He wanted nothing, but to do what's right
But nature it planted him with a knife
No sun, no rain became their strife
His loneliness became his wife*

A little boy stuck in a cell
And from freedom he has fell
Did nothing but be born in this life
Which will send him to a lightning strife
His crime in life, was to breathe at all
Because upon these people he will befall
Nothing but slurs, crimes, fears and lies
They'll send his way, to his surprise
No second chance, no final call
He may not speak to defend at all

*A wilting flower always stuck in shade
Reseeds towards ground in the day
No rain to feed, no sun to shine
No way to help its body slowly climb*

A sickly boy always in the dark
Told by the judge that he may not depart
No truth be told, no innocence found
No way to save himself from underground

*A notice placed upon the tree
The flower's end's been set
No chance to unwilt
No chance to reach tall
No chance to see the sunset
A wilting flower leaving life
Because they forced him to exist*

A letter shoved right through a slot
Tells the boy his date's to come
His execution will come to rest
No chance to see the sun
No chance to breathe fresh air
A sickly boy counting on death
Because they forced him to exist

*Three seconds to the end
The flower rests its head
Innocence will not come to visit
Or to save his life
Two seconds to the end
The flower remembers
All those who fought to save
Those who will not regain
The time they gave
One second to the end
He takes his final breathe
Hoping to God no other flower
Will face his fate again
The clock hits zero, the petals fall
No time to scream out about last call
No final words, just a final sigh
The dying flower, no longer wilted*

But crushed upon the ground

With the flower gone, the man sits still
Questioning why he feels so ill
No more pen to paper
His will already written
No more questions on where he fits in
“Last call,” the guards screams loud
The sickly boy now a dying man
Packs his bags to Heaven’s gate
Getting ready for the final stage

He walks out, sighs
Head held high
The other men start to cry
Their friend’s life no longer light
No one to listen, no God to come
So they prayed and screamed
He wasn’t alone and he knew
So the second they tied him down
Condemned for things he didn’t do
He smiled wide, said goodbye to the sky
Said one last prayer
And like the flower, was crushed

No flower wilting
No deadly man
Just a bunch of lies
That a tree sold to the world

The Essence

By Jackie Hemingway

“Ugh, my head is killing me. I’ve been having these crazy migraines for the past week.” As Rose got out of her bed at 6:30 in the morning, she looked outside of the window to breathe in something that could calm her system because lately she’d been feeling exhausted.

“Man, the leaves on the tree look sort of turquoise. Whoa, they’re starting to get really blurry, maybe I should go downstairs and eat something.” She proceeded to go down stairs but was walking slowly, she felt that if she were to make a sudden move her vision would get blurry again. So she stepped down from the last set of stairs and took a big breath, this was kind of frightening for her because she lived alone in the suburbs where there weren’t that many houses surrounding the area where she lived.

Afterwards she made herself a little snack and decided to go outside, it was a little foggy though it had just stopped raining and it was now around 8 a.m. Rose wasn’t getting any better though, she wanted to call the doctor’s but at this time people were supposed to book beforehand because there was a virus going on and not many people were going outside like there would usually be, because of this virus. Rose just felt like she needed to go outside, she was cooped up inside her house and thought that if she didn’t go outside soon she would start having more of those strange voices, except once she was walking down the street nothing had changed. She then crossed the street to sit on the little bench where there was a pond.

It was still pretty chilly, the wind was getting strong, swaying the big tree leaves back and forth. The wind had an ear-splitting howl to it. Well, so Rose thought but in actuality there was no wind.

The pond in front of Rose started to shimmer and a swirl of different colors started to blend into the pond. Rose didn't notice anything until the water began to rise like a pizza in the oven. It started to grow larger and larger until it swept Rose so fast she couldn't even react. The water was rushing down like a whirlpool, Rose thought to herself where am I going, why does this have to happen at this time in all places? Her head was spinning but she slowly started to feel better. She was now floating in mid-air, her eyes were closed the entire time until she dropped down to a plush patch of grass, one where the grass looked like waves.

Rose's eyes were still closed. She wanted to take in the nice comfort of the soft grass, so she did but fell into a deep sleep until it turned to nighttime. Rose then woke up to the sound of a piano playing in the distance, she heard this melody before but couldn't quite put her finger on it, so she started walking to the sound of the music, she could barely see anything but she wasn't afraid. It almost felt like she knew this place from somewhere else but it wasn't clicking. So as she was thinking about that and walking towards the music. The grass got taller and taller she now felt like she was in a maze of some sort because the music kept switching places. So instead she just decided to go straight.

Along the path there was nothing but tall palm trees towering over her. There was nothing in sight until the music stopped and she saw a little farm house over the hill. She started running towards it hoping she could find somebody to help her get out of this place. She stepped up to the door and knocked. Only to find that there was no one there. So she knocked again, no sound of anyone, so she opened the door and slowly walked inside.

As she walked inside the house, it looked spick and span until she walked inside the living room where there were a bunch of books lying around everywhere. Something that caught her eye was

all the books were opened to the same page, she then noticed the books were aligned in a perfect circle.

The writings on the pages popped out, they started spinning around Rose rapidly until a man stepped through the doorway. He was very tall and had a black suit on with a dark blue tie. Rose was stunned. She couldn't move her lips to say anything it's like they were zipped up.

The man walked up to Rose and said, "Welcome to Konoha Island, Rose. I'm Mr. Pog."

"Wait how do you know my name and did you teleport me here with a magic spell?" Rose said.

"As a matter of fact, yes, I've been expecting you."

"Okay. Mind me asking what this place is?"

"It's the in-between world, not heaven or hell, but a place where the soul of one develops."

"Um, alright, but what am I doing here?"

Mr. Pog then goes on, saying, "Well, in your past life it seems that you always come back as Rose. So that shows that you're one of us, your soul is so strong that you couldn't have a different identity, so that's why I think you should stay with us and help restore the energy of Konoha that was once lively and powerful, since so many of us have disappeared. I don't know why but I think with your help I can find out."

Rose massages her temples for a brief moment. "Okay, I'll stay."

And so with the essence of her soul she restored the life force of this in-between world to what it once was.

A Canuck in Vietnam
By Nicholas Pearson

Disclaimer: This story delivers the harsh reality of war, however not every detail is accurate or realistic. This story is not for the faint of heart. It also contains offensive language for the purpose of realism.

In an Albertan town lives a nineteen year old. This nineteen year old works at a small restaurant called “John’s Diner.” He was raised Christian and goes to church every Sunday. He is a fervent Canadian nationalist and patriot. His name is Brian Mills. Brian's mother is American and his dad is Canadian. This grants Brian dual citizenship in Canada and America. Brian's parents both reside in Fort McMurray otherwise known as “Fort Mac” where Brian grew up. After he turned 18, with enough money saved up, he moved out of his parent’s house and currently lives in a small apartment. The year is 1966.

One day, while Brian is at home, he decides to listen to the radio, dreading what he will inevitably hear again. Brian is pro-Vietnam War and is disgusted by the way returning American soldiers are treated when they return home to the States. After turning the radio on, he hears an announcer talking about the Battle of Sau in Vietnam. While Brian listens, the announcers suddenly say that during the aftermath of the battle, it has been discovered that a U.S. Special Forces team suffered five killed and twelve wounded.

After hearing about this, he becomes upset. In a fit of anger, he punches his wall, putting a hole through it. He thinks to himself “I have to do something. I can’t just do nothing.” With this all too common revelation, he spends days trying to figure out a way to fight in Vietnam. One day, after a long shift at the diner, his co-

worker Alex tells him that his friend is going to fight in Vietnam. Brian, surprised by this, asks how that is possible.

Alex replies, “Don't you know, Canadians from all over the country are joining the U.S army to fight?” Brian is surprised since he thought that was treason. Mark says, “It is not illegal, the government just doesn't like it.”

In excitement, Brian decides to go to the United States, much to his parents' disapproval and dread. He enlists in the U.S. Army. After four long months, he finishes basic training and is officially a soldier with the rank of private. After another year of additional training, Brian now possesses the rank of private second class and is now known among his peers to be an excellent soldier. He has not been given the opportunity to deploy to the Vietnam War yet which starts to worry Brian.

One day, while he is on a training exercise, he is suddenly instructed by his superior to come with him into his office. He promptly does so. After they both sit down, his superior, whose name is Wayne, gives him some news. He tells Brian that his great intellect, impressive physical strength, and his aptitude for being very self- and team-motivating has made him an excellent candidate for the Special Forces. Brian, shocked, asks which Special Forces unit. His superior informs him that it is the seventy fifth ranger regiment. Brian, filled with joy, says yes. His superior says “Great!” and will have him transferred to Fort Benning, Georgia for his Ranger training.

After a long eight weeks of mental and physical torture, Brian successfully completes his training. After walking into a room with a sign above the doorway that says, “Rangers Lead the Way,” he is introduced to his new squad. Jackson, a member of the squad introduces him to Ricky, Zak, and three others. Jackson asks Brian

where in America he is from, Brian explains to Jackson and the squad that he is Canadian. The squad is surprised and thinks Brian is crazy for joining the American Rangers to fight in Vietnam, but the squad expresses their admiration for Brian's decision. They also said that they thought Brian's Albertan accent was funny.

After a couple of weeks, it happens. Brian and the squad are deployed to Vietnam. After a long plane ride to a base in Vietnam, they finally arrive. After dismounting the plane, they are all greeted with the classic Vietnam War smell, which is a mix of rotting garbage, burning garbage, feces, burning feces, rotting flesh, burning flesh. They are then put on a helicopter to be sent to another base where they will be stationed for the duration of their deployment. As the Huey that Brian and the squad are in is flying, Jackson decides to turn on the mounted speakers on the side of the chopper. They're next to the mounted miniguns with the door gunners, blasting *Fortunate Son* and *Ride of the Valkyries* through the jungle and sky. After thirty minutes of flying over the humid, dense, thick Vietnam jungle, Brian hears a loud blast coming from the trees below them. Before anyone can do anything, Brian hears and feels a loud crash and then blacks out.

Brian wakes up to hear sparks and metal scraping against steel. He opens his eyes seeing that both pilots in the front are dead from a huge branch that impaled the cockpit causing their blood to be all over the controls, broken radio and the front cockpit windows with one of the pilot's sausage shaped intestines to be dangling on top of his right leg. Brian gets up with a slight headache and partially slashed forehead which is slightly bleeding. Everyone addresses their squad members injuries, Brian sees that everyone is for the most part banged up but mostly unscathed, however then he sees Jackson. He sees that Jackson has a piece of shrapnel lodged in his leg and sees that it is too dangerous to take

it out since the emergency medical kit is missing, presumably having fallen out during the crash. Pulling the shrapnel out will make it bleed more and there will not be enough bandages to stop it. The lodged shrapnel is currently blocking most of the blood from spilling out of Jackson's leg. With all his adrenaline pumping, Brian pulls his squad and squad's gear out of the helicopter just in the nick of time as soon after, it bursts into flames due to a spark and punctured, leaking gas tube in the severely damaged helicopter.

After everyone gets their bearings, it hits them. They are in Northern Vietnamese territory. One of the squad members who is a medic creates a temporary makeshift splint for Jackson's leg. With this being done, Jackson has to limp but for the most part, he is in stable condition.

Jackson, being the Squad leader, orders the rest of the squad to move out and find a way out of the enemy territory. They observe the map that Brian pulls out of his rucksack and see that they need to head south from their current location. Jackson sees that he has a flare in his pocket. He says that once they get far enough away from enemy territory, he will ignite the flare and use it to flag down any passing friendly aircraft. Jackson explains to the squad that he knows that there will be enemy combatants looking for them since they were the ones that shot down their Huey and the smoke from the fire is a dead give away, so they should try to move fast. After hours of trudging through the muddy and damp forest, Jackson hears something. He and the squad move to the sound. To everyone's shock, they see a POW camp with what looks to be American POW's being whipped for their disobedience and other American POW's working in the fields guarded by Northern Vietnamese soldiers like slaves.

The squad debates whether they should try to rescue the POW's or continue on. After a not so democratic exchange of words, the squad comes to a conclusion. They decide that they will keep on moving to get to the exfil and once their exfil is a success, they will tell the Army about their sighting of the POW camp. Two hours later, everyone is exhausted and sweaty so the squad takes a rest in their makeshift camp. After they all congregate around a campfire and eat their MREs, they hear something. They hear what sounds like a twig breaking, and a gunshot follows. One of the squad members is shot in the head creating a bright pink mist to form in the air from his brain matter. Everyone ducks for cover grabbing their issued M16s, M60s. Jackson yells in agony as he too has been shot in the other leg, now in the kneecap. Now both of his legs are injured rendering Jackson immobile. Due to the immense pain, Jackson falls unconscious. Brian sees this and runs to Jackson as bullets whizz by his helmet that has a Dirty 1957 Canadian Red Ensign flag patch next to a Dirty American flag patch on the back and on the side of his helmet, reads "Isaiah: 6-8 "Whom Shall I send? And who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I. Send me!" " and on the other side of the helmet, reads "Born to kill". After taking a quick glance, Rick, behind a large tree, yells, "FIVE G**KS, TWELVE AND TWO O'CLOCK!"

Brian picks up Jackson and throws him over his shoulders. He runs back to his previous cover, but gets grazed in the side of his stomach by a stray bullet. Brian grunts in pain but pushes forward, braving the pain. He makes it to cover, quickly patching up his wound with his spare bandages. As the rest of his squad are in an exchange of gunfire, Brian sneaks behind all the enemies. He sees them all, looking away from his direction, shooting at his squad. Brian sneaks behind all of them. He uses his K-BAR knife to quietly slit each of their throats and puts his boot on two of the

enemy combatants lying on the ground head, promptly shooting them each in the head killing all enemy combatants. All becomes silent. The squad looks to hear a sound emerging from the bushes and are shocked. Covered in blood, Brian walks out of some bushes holding a bloody knife and yells to the squad to move out after he puts Jackson's unconscious body over his shoulders.

After walking one point five clicks (kilometers) to a safe distance, safely out of "the shit" as it's called, to their exfil, Brian gently puts Jackson down and takes the flare out. He lights the flare with his matches which are usually used for his Camel cigarettes and sets it down on the ground. Five minutes later, a Huey that is part of a search party for the squad sees the red smoking flare in the sky and makes a landing. Everyone rushes onto the Huey, with Brian carrying Jackson and allowing the medics onboard the helicopter to tend to Jackson's injuries. After a long trip back to a U.S aircraft carrier with medical personnel on the ready, they land. The first thing Brian does when he exits the helicopter is tell the U.S. army about the location of the POW camp that they saw and the extent of Jackson's injuries.

A couple of days later, the U.S. government awards Brian with the Medal of Honour, the highest award someone can get in the U.S army for his valiant conduct in the field along with some other medals for some other reasons. The rest of the squad also get awards and medals for other reasons. After saying his goodbyes to his squad, he returns back to Canada to his ecstatic but worried parents' relief. After a couple of weeks back home in Fort Mac, he becomes an advocate for Vietnam War veterans, especially Canadian ones. Brian decides to start a company that helps other Canadian Vietnam war vets and over time, his company prospers.

The Entirely Boring Life of Good Old Albert
By Adam Siegel

Hi, the name's Albert, Albert Inestine. Yes, I know I know the name sounds familiar. God, if I had a functioning brain cell for every time I heard that I might be just as smart as that man. My mother dearest just thought it was an absolute blessing to have a last name that sounded just like the legend of science. So she found it fitting to give me the first name that I have now. But do you think that it's a "blessing" to be bullied in school just because of a name the teacher reads off the attendance sheet? The ironic truth is, despite the "genius" name that I was given at birth, I am one of the dumbest people you will ever meet. Passing school with borderline sixties would be an extreme overstatement. Because I don't pass with borderline sixties. In fact, I don't pass at all. I fail spectacularly. I fail so bad that I feel I give my mother a special sort of pride. A pride that says, "Only my son is stupid enough to get these grades." But that twisted sense of pride must be buried deep below all of the shame and anger. That's why as soon as I'm legally allowed to, I plan to change my name to something so boring, so typical that no one would bat an eyelash when they heard it, like John Smith.

A typical day for me is the very definition of a routine. It's at the point where if you watched a movie of my life on a day-to-day basis, you would think that the rewind button on your TV remote was broken. Because every time I go to bed and wake up in the morning, my day looks exactly like it did the day before. My routine consists of waking up at 7:30 to catch the 8:00 bus. Brushing my teeth with all the gusto I can muster. Slipping into the same dirty pair of clothes from the day before. Skipping out on the "most important meal of the day" and leaving at 8:10. Which of course means that I missed the 8:00 bus, again. Waiting 40 minutes

for the next bus, and finally arriving at school at 9:30. Which would be perfect, if I lived in a different time zone. In reality, my school starts at 8:40. The rest of my day is very typical for teenagers, sitting in the back corner of class with my head in the crook of my elbow. Getting home at four in the evening and passing out until dinner out of pure exhaustion and boredom. After dinner I'm no longer tired so I stay up until three in the morning, watching whatever I can find to try to drag me out of this slump that I appear to be in, only to fall asleep and wake up the next morning, destined to be trapped in the same, never-ending loop.

Today however, finally seemed to be different from the rest, a glimmer of hope in the dank confines of my jail cell. The beginning of my day presents no change out of the ordinary, I still arrive fifty minutes past due. But this time I was greeted by a principal. A very stern looking principal at that. He summoned me into his office like a judge about to give the death sentence. He tells me to take a seat, which I proceed to do. He speaks in a low solemn voice. "Kid, I think you know what I want to discuss."

In an attempt to play dumb I simply answer with, "Hmm?" He carries on unfazed despite that semi-rude response.

"You have been late consistently as well as failing every single class."

"Oh," I respond, unsure what to say. But he doesn't continue speaking this time so I assume he is expecting an answer from me, so I follow up with, "I have?" Smooth, Albert. You are a real smart guy.

"Yes, I have given many warnings to you and your mother but still no changes have been expressed."

"I'm sorry," is all I could say at this point.

“I’m sorrys run out after the first dozen, Mr. Inestine. I truly believe that you are a smart, capable young man, you just need to apply yourself.”

I resist the urge to vomit from hearing that textbook typical sentence that every principal needs to memorize. I know better; he doesn’t think I’m capable of anything, nobody does. But of course I would never say that out loud, so instead I say, “Thanks.”

“This will be your final warning Mr. Inestine. One more ‘incident’ will result in permanent expulsion.”

“Understood, thank you for the warning.”

“I will also be contacting your mother tonight to tell her about our little conversation.”

Crap, I was so close to walking out of that room unscathed, instead I’m going to get the worst punishment possible.

“OK...” I try to add a tone that says please don’t, I’m super sad and sorry. But in return I only get, “Good, you may leave my office. I expect you to be here tomorrow at 8:35 at the absolute latest.”

After I leave his office I finish off my day and leave to catch the bus home. I can’t stop worrying about what hellish torture methods my mother will come up with this time. It chills me to the bone just thinking about it. I get on the bus to find that all of the seats have been taken by elderly ladies and tired peers. After a while of self pitying that nothing is going my way I stand next to the bus driver.

On the way home I notice something funny about this bus driver in particular. He keeps passing stops by accident and he frequently checks the GPS as if he doesn’t know where to drive and where the stops are. Poor new guy, he’s just trying to learn the

route and he is getting yelled at by passengers who missed their stop. I remain unaffected for the meantime because my stop isn't for a while. So I continue standing next to him minding my own business. A bit later, I hear police sirens flick on.

“Damn,” the bus driver mutters just loud enough for me to hear. At first I thought he was just saying that because now he has to pull over on a busy street and let them pass. However, he instead presses on the gas a little bit harder and mumbles, “How did they find me?” At this moment I start getting a little bit panicky. I ring the bell that tells the driver I want to get off, even though it isn't my stop. But he just speeds right past it, turning instead onto a less busy road where he is free to speed.

I look around me to see the others are just as concerned as I am. One old lady gets up and hobbles to the front of the bus. When she gets there, she looks at the driver and says, “Excuse me sir, I think you took a wrong turn.”

Instead of saying something comforting he says, “Shut up. Return to your seat lady.”

“Excuse me?” she says half confused, half offended.

“Shut up! Return to your damn seat!” he yells this time.

The lady hurries back to her seat and stays there. From a distance we hear the cop cars turn onto the street we are speeding down. “What the hell is going on here?” I hear from a couple people in the back.

This time the driver doesn't answer. He just keeps blazing down the abandoned road. The cop cars close the distance with no real struggle. One pulls to the side of the bus and through his megaphone orders the driver to pull over. At this moment the bus

driver jerks his wheel to the right and slams the bus into the car causing it to spin out of control and topple over.

The other passengers on the bus erupt in screams. I, however, am too paralyzed to move, or scream. I can't believe what is happening right now. When I wished for a more eventful life this is not what I had in mind. I find myself looking back to the times where I just laid on my bed, eating chips, watching whatever and suddenly cherishing those safe moments. I was spoiled to have wished for more. What I had was safe and comfortable. I wonder why I chose to remember those moments now. Of all times I pick the one where I'm in a high speed chase with a criminal bus driver. I snap out of it and look at a girl to my left. She is sitting down with her phone in her hand. At first, I wonder why she is on her phone at a time like this, the police already know of our situation. However, as I continue to stare in a rather rude fashion I realize she is reading the news. Of course. I'm just too much of an idiot to realize.

As the second and final cop car draws near I whip out my phone and Google the news. I scroll and scroll but I can't find anything. I guess it's too early for the news to cover this, live or not. A man at the back of the bus gets tired of all of this and makes a break for the driver. When he gets to the front of the bus he pushes me out of the way and punches the driver across the face. The bus swerves but the driver corrects himself eventually. As a response to the punch the driver opens the bus door and uses his free hand to give a hard shove and push the man off the bus, which is going 70 miles per hour. The bus is filled with screams again as the bus driver re-closes the door and continues driving. After a while the bus merges onto the I-95 highway and picks up pace.

I check my phone again to see if there are any updates on the news. There is now a live feed. But I don't care about that since all they say there is that a bus is in a high speed chase, which, of course, I already knew. So I keep searching.

Eventually I find an article that was posted recently: "Escaped prisoner convicted of murder hijacked bus in attempt to get away un-detected." As I read my already-paralyzed self seems to go so stiff you'd think I just got off a twenty-one hour flight with no breaks. That already sounds familiar to the scenario that I am in now, but to top it off, the article came with a picture of the convict and surprise surprise, he looks just like my good pal, crazy bus driver man. So at least now I know why I am in the situation, but that doesn't really help me. It just quenches my deep-rooted human instinct to understand.

While I am in the middle of a little research session, the chase outside has only picked up heat. The bus is now swerving from lane to lane hitting the occasional bumper. More cop cars have been dispatched according to the live feed but I don't see any around me. Still that same car that has been following us ever since the chase began.

Eventually, the driver mumbles, "Perfect, I'm running out of gas." This at first sounds like a huge relief to me. But that relief is short lived. The driver's decision for his gas problem is to get the police car right behind him, which he does by slamming on the breaks causing the police car behind him to slam against the back of the bus. The police car then gets hit from the back as well from the car behind, since suddenly breaking on the highway never ends well. The driver smiles at that, as if it gives him some sort of devilish amusement. He continues to speed off and leave the highway, since the border is coming up and he has no hope of crossing that. He has lost the cars for now but the helicopters are

still soaring high with 4k cameras right on him, broadcasting countrywide.

As the driver turns onto some really sketchy street, I get a call. I open my phone to see that it is my mother calling. I answer the phone to a bombardment of questions asking where I am and why I am late coming home. She obviously doesn't know about what's happening, which doesn't surprise me. My mother isn't really one to watch the news.

I tell her about Mr. Crazy Man and tell her to read the news or watch the broadcast. At first she thinks I'm joking, maybe this was some messed up cover story for why I was already almost three hours late. Although, when she opens up the site I hear her gasp. Not like a punch-to-the-gut sort of gasp, more like a stab-through-the-chest gasp. I hear her start to get very worried, as mothers tend to, so I just say I have to go. It's not necessarily true, I mean, the driver hasn't come to silence us yet like I see in the movies. But I just don't want to hear her worry anymore, it stresses me out more than I already am.

The driver pulls into a gas station, which I never would've expected. I mean, that seems like such a stupid idea. Most people just ditch the getaway vehicle and run the rest of the way into hiding. The driver tells us if he sees anyone leave the bus while he goes to get inside to get the pumps working he will not hesitate to fire. He then flashes us his gun and goes into the store without taking his eyes off the bus.

From the window I see the murderer trying to pay for gas. That seems kind of ironic to me for some reason, like once a person commits a crime they will never follow any laws again. It seems silly almost. A man escapes jail, steals a bus and kidnaps a bunch of people, then goes to pay for gas in the middle of a chase?

I mean it makes sense it a way, you know, don't attract anymore attention. Unfortunately for the driver, I see the cashier reject the money, and point to a TV displaying the news. A lady on the bus says, "I saw that cashier calling someone before the crazy guy walked in, he must have been calling the police to inform them of our new location!"

I look back to the window to see the driver outraged. He pulls out his gun and shoots the cashier right in the chest. A few gasps escape people's mouths but most of us stay quiet. It's as if we are now used to seeing people getting brutally hurt. That scares me a little. It feels as if I'm losing my ability to feel empathy to those who are injured. As if this experience is turning me into a sociopath. One person takes that as an opportunity for an escape attempt. Since all the bus doors were locked, he gets ready to charge right at the back of the bus. I try to stop him, I get in his way and say, "Listen, man, that guy can see everything. You won't make it out if you try this."

"Shut up, I'm going crazy right now. If I want to do this, you best back the hell off of me!"

I sit back in my chair and let him try his daring escape attempt. He charges at the back door and shatters it all the way through. Of course, though, the driver heard this from inside and runs outside aiming his gun at the now running victim. One shot is all it takes and a fellow civilian is face down on the cold hard ground, his life forever lost.

The driver is now rushing back to the bus. He grabs the pump and inserts it into the fuel tank. He must have found a way to turn it on himself. His fuelling is cut short however when we hear the faint sound of sirens approaching. I hear him curse from

outside the bus and re-enter, sitting himself in the driver's seat. He re-inserts the keys and turns bringing the bus back from the dead.

The driver is now slowly picking up speed, with police right on his tail. I feel a breeze and remember that the back door is broken open. I start feeling happy that the man tried to escape and died. It makes me sound like a monster, maybe I am one. But that is all I can feel right now. I whisper to the crowd of people in the back of the bus my plan, and a few of them are surprisingly on board.

The bus is now going at 40 miles per hour. That's survivable, I think. Although I have to act quick because the bus is still picking up speed, and with every second that passes, my odds of survival dwindle. I take a fake leather sweater out of my backpack. I usually use it for the cold days, but now I think it could come in handy. Then I put my backpack on my stomach to help take some impact. Apparently I'm taking too long to get ready to jump and people behind me are getting nervous, so they jump out before me, screaming as they go.

After the first few people jump, the driver is alerted. His head whips back but he does not ease off the gas. He keeps accelerating.

"What are you doing back there?!" He brings his gun out of his holster and aims it right at me. I am frozen still. I am almost literally staring death in the eye, or in this case, in the barrel. Meanwhile, the bus is still picking up speed, but no one is steering. I hear a big boom and I think that's it, I'm dead. However, it wasn't the gun.

The bus drives right into a tree at now 65 miles per hour. I fly across the bus, hit my head on a steel pole and through one of the windows. I feel as if I am falling forever, but at the same time, it all happens so quickly. One second I was a seventeen-year-old

hostage in the back of a runaway bus with a murderer at the wheel, and the next I am a seventeen-year-old limp bloody body sprawled across the lawn of some sweet lady's house, barely clinging to consciousness. My vision is so blurry and it's as if I am deaf. Every second I can't tell if I'm about to die, if that second is going to be my last. How could I? It's like going to sleep. You never know when you are, you just feel yourself slipping away. And that's what I did. I slipped away.

Epilogue

Albert died that night in the ER, but his sacrifice saved everyone else on the bus who were sitting, gripping onto the bus poles for dear life, bracing for impact. Witnesses who were on the bus referred to Albert as a hero who motivated people towards action and sacrificed his own life. To commemorate Albert's memory, the city had a ceremony where they spoke well of Albert, and gave his mother a medal to frame above Albert's now empty bed. They also invited his mother up to talk about what he was like. Albert's mom walked up to the podium, with tears stinging her eyes, threatening to overflow. This is what she said:

“Albert once came home from school and told me he was sad. I asked ‘Why?’ and he said ‘Kids at school call me stupid all the time, Mommy.’ Now that broke my heart. Albert never thought he was worthy of his name, he never thought he was worthy of anything. He thought just by owning his name he was smudging the very legacy Einstein left behind. He always thought he was stupid just because of the grades he got and what other kids would say. But the problem with that is, people tend to gauge how intelligent you are using the grades you get in school, or how much money you earn at your job. But that couldn't be more wrong. My boy sacrificed his life to save others. He tried to warn a person to not get off that damn bus. He saved lives. Now, to

whoever thinks that all that makes him stupid needs to go rethink what it means to be dumb. Because Albert may not have been as intellectually advanced as Mr. Einstein, but to those people on that bus, and to me, Albert is a hero.”

Trouble
By Latisha Simpson

When I heard that song from Flor-ida
I said why can I not be a
Trouble troublemaker
Latisha on the roll

I'm a six year old
Mischievous and energetic
My friends are all so good
I gotta be bad

I'm the baddest badass
You can't stop me
This is my dream and career

I will always make trouble ooh
Planning in my sleep and in my dreams
Food bombs splattered in the locker
You won't know what hit you

I'm the baddest badass
You can't stop me
This is my dream and career

I can be as fast and as loud as you can
And I don't care what you say
Remember that it's my career
I'll be topped at Crime Stoppers

I'm the baddest badass

You can't stop me
This is my dream and career

I have the genes
Making trouble with the big girls
If anything happens to you
Call me, and I'll deal with it

I'm the baddest badass
You can't stop me
This is my dream and career

Spoken word: My Mistakes
By Latisha Simpson

To pick my nose
Bite my nails

Tantrums
Stress, Anxiety
Suspiciousness
Trouble concentrating

Sleep disorder
Neglect family
To be negative

To not talk to my friends at times that I need it
To bother people
To have pride for myself
To gossip
To be biased
To be too serious

This is what happens when nobody's perfect

Gang Life
By Ordia Aigbokhan

Gang life is a reality for kids who live in poor neighborhoods. If you weren't playing or good at sports you were either in the streets or occupied doing school work. School, sports or gang life. All depends on what path you want to go in life.

First of all, here's the story of one 17 year old's experience in and out of a gang. How it all began, Alberto was just eight years old when he witnessed a shooting and a dead body in front of his house. It was very bright outside with very green grass. It was probably morning time 'cause the sun had just risen and when the sun rises it's at its brightest. Alberto can get a good look from his window 'cause he lived in a one-story rundown house.

Alberto woke up to a very loud bang and since he was so little he didn't know what it was and he was very curious to what the loud bang came from. As he got out of bed in a rush he put on some Nike shorts and socks. He walked straight to the living room hallway and looked at the window to the street view and he saw something weird. Someone was just lying on the grass in front of his house, beside his porch. He hurried and opened the rusty brown front door and to the left side in front of his house he saw somebody lying there, begging for mercy, begging for their life, and brave Alberto ran over there and that's when he saw the pool of blood around the body on the ground. A big hole Alberto saw, through the guy's white bloody shirt.

He ran quickly back to the house and woke up his mom in a panic and his mom knew something was unusual when Alberto said, "Mommy, I see blood everywhere in front of the house, a man is dying." His Latina mom who was in her late twenties got up and rushed to check. The front door was already open and to

the left of the porch, lying on the shiny grass was someone potentially dying, 'cause now the person was lying face flat to the grass—before he was lying on his back. When she yelled in a state of distress and called 9-1-1, she drew attention from her neighbours and more and more people started coming from the neighbourhood, and even kids from Alberto's school came out. The adults in distress tried to pour water on the man's face, trying to keep him awake so that he didn't die. The kids were standing around watching, like a scene in a movie, completely in shock.

Alberto ran back in the house, he just couldn't stop shaking and was wondering how the person ended up on the front porch, covered in blood. With all the yelling outside and talking, he understood the person was shot. Even at a young age he was used to hearing loud bangs but never saw anything odd.

Fifteen minutes later on the ambulance arrived and made sure the person was not dead and then everybody went into their houses, still in distress. The community was small in Jacksonville so everybody knew who everyone was and they stuck together and everyone was close with each other.

That was Alberto's first taste of trauma and it stayed with him for the rest of his life. Seeing something at such a young age has an effect that never leaves.

A Change in View
Anonymous

During this quarantine, I can say it's been a roller coaster of emotions. At first, I sat alone in my basement with a sense of aimlessness and loneliness, consequently stricken with a deep despair for life. I thought life was meaningless and the world was inevitably doomed by humanity's ignorance, greed and futility. As a result, I thought it was pointless to pursue contacting the few I called friends or engaging in activities of any sort, which was just an endless loop of pain.

Then I had a small epiphany. I thought, in this world for there to be happiness, there needs to be sadness. For there to be love, there needs to be hate. So I began to think that I'm going to appreciate happiness a lot more when it does come. It may be a while but knowing it'll come keeps me going.

I had stayed in that state of being on the fence of optimism and pessimism for a while. Afterwards, something I deem too personal to share happened to me, and it kind of changed my life in a way. I realized the outbreak was more of a blessing in disguise than anything else, regardless of all the death and turmoil it has caused. I convinced myself to just have faith and believe that everything happens for a reason and it'll work out just fine. I found most of my challenges or obstacles in my life were mostly from within. I now believe with the right attitude, self-imposed limitations will vanish. I most definitely still feel these negative emotions but not to the extent I used to. I might not be the most optimistic guy, but I can confidently say I'm not the most pessimistic either.

When I have moments of doubt and despair washing over me, too strong for even me to bear, I think back to a place I will never forget. A place in Ontario. A place of beauty.

I was alone at the bottom of a hill, following train tracks on a four wheeler, when I stumbled upon beauty in the least likely of places. I had noticed through the naked trees a beautiful mixture of pink and yellow piercing through the branches. My curiosity got the best of me and I decided to climb the rocks that towered over the treeline. When I reached the top, I was absolutely mesmerized by the scene before me. The colours of pink, orange and yellow emitting from the sun were astounding. The colours and the sun floated above a lake coated with ice and snow that gave off a magnificent reflection.

The scene was sublime in ways other than looks. The way it made me feel was a feeling I long for constantly. I can barely even put what I felt into words because I couldn't even fathom the feelings surging through me. I felt lighter and happier, like the view detached me from the reality I considered unbearable.

The sad part was, it only lasted just under an hour, somewhere in between four and five p.m. Still, it made me appreciate it more knowing it wasn't going to last. There needs to be ugliness for there to be beauty, just like happiness comes with sadness, and love with hate. I visited it almost everyday and purposely didn't take pictures since I thought it would've degraded its beauty tremendously. A photograph could never encompass its depth. I think it would be wrong to not share my discovery. I will eventually bring someone to this view. I don't know who yet, but they'll have to be worthy. Something so beautiful shouldn't be shared with someone undeserving.

My Life in Pieces
By Christina G

BEEP BEEP BEEP...

I slowly open my eyes and let out a weary sigh. Today marks another year of school which in my opinion I find completely pointless. Regardless, I'm extremely excited to attend the same jam-packed, sardine-filled school that is rated most dangerous in my province.

I begin by sitting up, letting blood rush to the bottom part of my body since I slept in such an uncomfortable position and couldn't feel my feet. After much contemplation, I finally get up and go into the main bathroom, the only bathroom. All of my friends are rich spoiled white kids who secretly- not even secretly- say slurs and defend themselves by saying that their friends are black. It's not my problem to talk about but it sure doesn't seem right.

I stare at myself in the mirror for 15 minutes straight then splash some lukewarm sink water to rinse out the fear of going back to school this year. I pat my face down and quickly brush my teeth, I have approximately fifteen minutes left before my younger brother will come banging the door down for his turn to use the bathroom. The only bathroom.

At last, I leave the bathroom not looking or smelling any differently than when I first went in. I naturally smell good therefore I personally have nothing to worry about.

I get dressed and eat a super filling back-to-school breakfast, one third of a stale waffle. Delicious, absolutely scrumptious if you ask me.

After arriving at my destination, I walk around the school to get familiar with the oddly eerie environment. Afterwards I try to find my friends from last year. Even after being in this establishment for almost over four years, I still get this freshly new and unknown feeling during back to school time.

“Ari? Is that you?” asks Kylo. My best friend for over 12 years. I nodded and forced a smile. I haven’t seen him in such a long time. We decided to spend time apart this summer since he had made himself some new friends from the west coast in Alberta. I wasn’t too worried since I expected us to get close again, we never left off on bad terms, so why shouldn’t we?

“I missed you so much!” Kylo whispers after strangling me into an uncomfortable bear hug. “How was your summer without me? Hope it wasn’t a bummer.”

Now that I think about it, how was my summer? Looking back on this summer, it was extremely boring. I stayed in for three and a half months. I become paler from day to day. My light European skin is begging for some vitamin D.

“My summer was great!” I exclaim. Yes, I lied. So? Don’t look at me like that. I just don’t want him to feel bad. You just don’t understand our type of friendship. Now keep reading. “How about yours? How was Alberta?”

“Alberta was awesome, wish you could’ve been there. I went to the pool, played basketball in the streets, ate sush—” See, now this is where I completely zone out. I never asked what he did in Alberta, I guess that’s just me being jealous. My summer was so uneventful. It’s miserable.

“Uh, and yeah, that’s it.” Nice. We missed the whole discourse.

“Well that’s great to hear! Glad your summer was great.” I say, back on track. Look at how enthusiastic I sound.

“My grandma died, how does that make my summer great?” He says in a sad and weary tone. Good job, Ariana. You’ve done it once again. Zoned out and possibly ruined someone's whole year. Great!

“Oh my god—I’m sorry, Kylo. I didn’t know I zoned out and didn’t hear. I’m sor—” I reply in a rushed, worried tone. Kylo cuts me off.

“Psych.”

Psych? Psych?! The nerve of some people these days. Since when was it cool to joke about someone's death?

“I knew you were zoning out. It’s so obvious,” he says in a calm but confusingly upbeat tone. “We’ve been friends for 12 years, if my nan would’ve died you’d be the first person I’d call.”

Right. 12 years.

After a long exhausting first day of school, I walk myself to my humble abode. When I say humble I mean my arrogantly loud and overly obnoxious household, where my two parents who clearly are contemplating divorce act like they are still in love with each other 15 years after having to marry each other because of my mistaken appearance.

I get to the front door and airily place my ear to hear if anything is going on. The sounds I hear are rather questionable but I won’t get ahead of myself and quickly assume. Sounds like they’re maybe discussing something? Honestly really unsure. I try to ignore the voice in my head who speaks louder than my parents arguing in the living room.

“How are we going to be able to protect her if we aren’t with her, Marcus?” Marcus is my dad, if it wasn’t obvious enough. He’s about 37 now. Actually, I don’t know his real age. What’s 2020 minus 1985? Whatever! Not the point. What was my mom talking about? Protect who? Me? I press my ear firmly on the door so I can really hear and capture the discussion that is going on inside.

“Ewa, you need to understand that she’s 15 now. She’ll be 16 soon. He... I mean she can take care of herself like a big girl. She’s got my genes after all,” Marcus says. I don’t call him dad. Same way he sometimes doesn’t call me Ariana or uses the wrong pronouns, misgendering me. You get used to it I suppose. “She’s got your genes and that’s why I am worried about her. Look at you! I don’t want my only daughter to become like her lowlife of a father.”

Well, my mom wasn’t wrong. He is a lowlife kind of. He doesn’t have a secure stable job. My mom is the reason why we have food and a roof over our heads. Marcus tries to take credit for it sometimes. I always take mom’s side, therefore our debates always end up being two against one. We win all the time, of course.

I’ve been eavesdropping on them for about 15 minutes now. My arm is getting sore from applying pressure onto the door. I push myself off of the door, my arms feel like there’s static running through my veins. Is that normal?

I finally (finally) open the door and slowly walk into the house. My mom is holding a wine glass filled with what appears to be orange juice. Classy. Marcus is full-on shotgunning a tiny can of beer. Not so classy.

“Hello?” I whisper. They keep talking, am I that invisible? To think that they’d notice me since they’re literally having a

conversation about me. I stand there, waiting for someone to recognize me. “OH! Sweetheart! Hello, you’re home!” Marcus exclaims. No one asked him to talk. I stare at him blankly waiting for him to lower his hairy arms. “Ah, alright. Gotcha,” he responds to my glare. Much better.

“Hej älskling! How was school?” Before you ask or maybe just stare in confusion. *Hej älskling* means *hi, my love*. It’s Swedish. I used to live in Sweden when I was younger. Not anymore, obviously. After meeting my father they made terrible decisions when he went to visit Sweden for the meatballs. I spent most of my years over there. Where I lived was relatively quiet and calm. Especially compared to Canada. Which also explains my mom’s name. Her name is Ewa, pronounced Eva.

“School was fine. What were you guys talking about?” I ask. I know it HAD to be about me. I’m unsure if it’s good or bad. I need to know.

“Uh, we need to talk... Ariana.” This tone, her voice. She’s never sounded so serious before. The PAUSE between talk and Ariana is freaking me out. Did I do something wrong? I’m scouring the entirety of my brain trying to remember if I had done something to anger them. No results. Oh, heck. This isn’t going to end well.

“Your father and I have been having economical issues.” Economical? ARE YOU SAYING WE’RE BROKE? Oh no... Please. Actually, I’ve seen homeless people have bomb shoes. Guess being broke won’t be that bad? “Is that all? I can get a job when I turn 16 and help provide fund—”

“Ariana, I appreciate the efforts you are willing to make to support this family. It’s sadly too late for us to look at any option but to send you to Caramella’s.”

Oh, no. Oh, god. I've never met Caramella personally. Maybe she's a sweet woman? Or maybe she's a vicious monster. I swear she's named after the Caramella Girls. Or were the Caramella Girls named after her? Ah, doesn't matter. My parents are throwing me away! They are getting rid of me! How irresponsible!

“And since Caramella lives quite far, you're going to have to change schools. I'm sure you wouldn't mind, right? You'll still have contact with your friends on your phone or those websites. FigureBook, right?” Marcus chuckles. He's not funny.

My mother and I stare at each other and turn our heads to him and give him a cold deadly *you're so unfunny* stare. “Marcus, read the room. The child is being taken away from everything she's learned to grow up with ever since she came to Canada,” my mom replies with a raspy voice. She takes another sip of her orange juice. Classy.

The Artist
Camron Gordon

After creating and selling his first abstract painting bringing notice to the racial conflicts in the world the 19-year-old artist was living in the spotlight of fame. Enjoying his popularity, the young artist struggled with the confinement of his own mind and increasing pressure of creating his next piece.

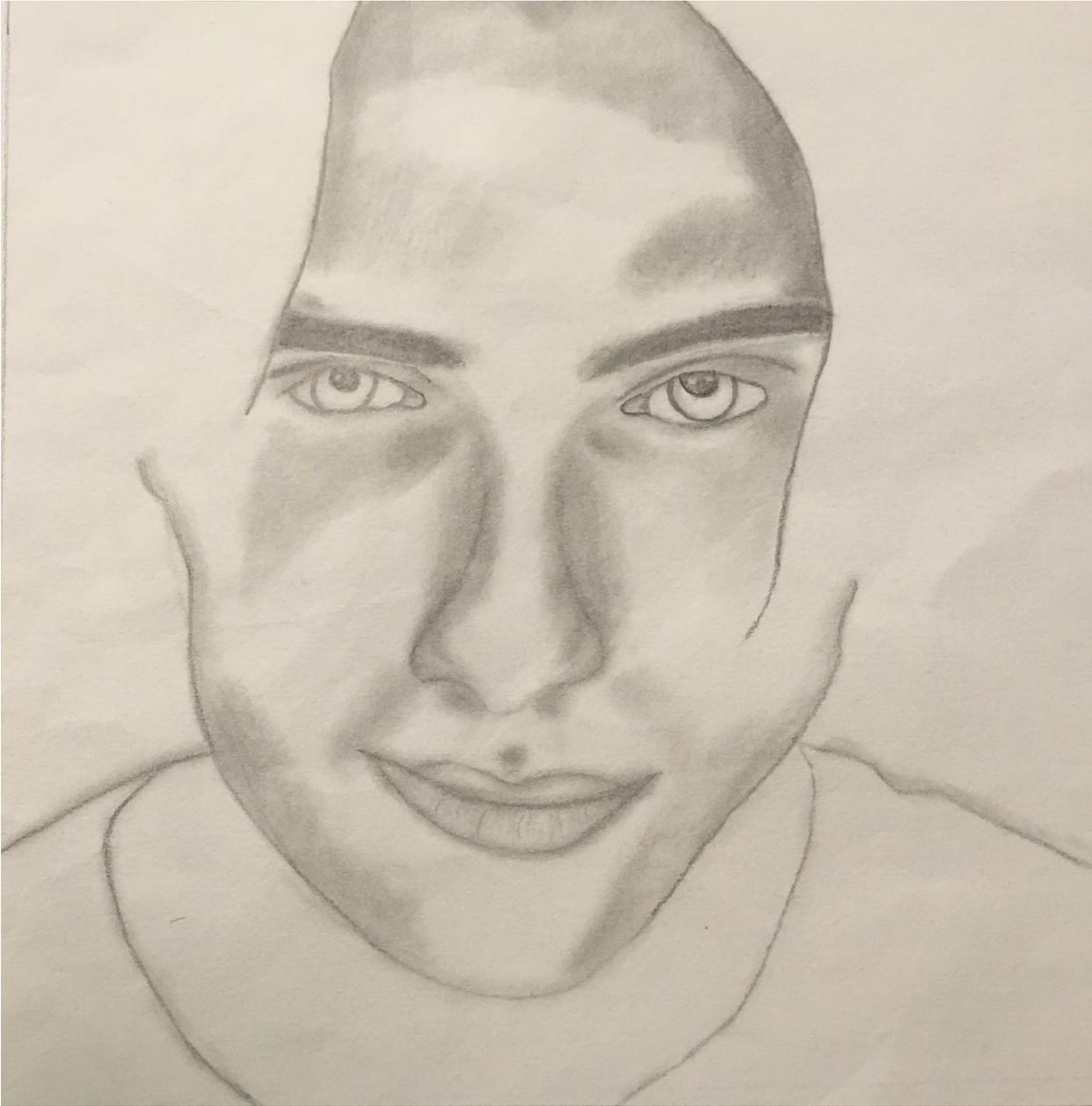
With so much interest in his first piece, the artist wanted to create something that would top his current fame and give him a life of luxury that he always dreamed of. Being able to take care of his friends and family providing them with homes, cars and designer clothing. The artist experimented with different techniques and textures in order to create a new masterpiece. With each new attempt the artist became increasingly frustrated feeling that he was being limited by his mind. Alone with each piece close to completion he violently destroys his incomplete artwork as his greed within his mind builds. He could see failure down the long tunnel. He knew that one day his popularity would diminish and he would fail.

Then he got an idea, what if he captured files of failures that happened in history and mixed it with his art. He began, put his idea to work using different techniques, but none of them stood out until he used oil paints on the largest canvas he could find, a large blank brick wall bordering the highway for everyone to see. He brought his idea to life and that's when he started to feel confident, too confident. With each stroke of the paint brush his greed increased.

He was thinking not all of his friends needed a new house so he started cutting people out of his life. Why give money away if he could keep it for himself. Another colour was added to the canvas and another person cut from the list of the artist's future. The young artist did not notice that the conflict he was having in his mind was slowly cutting out the people who love him.

The artist was unable to feel the guilt of his behaviour. As the brick wall slowly transformed into a bright reminder of the racial conflicts throughout history, the artist was too busy to notice he had now cut family out of his future wealth.

He stopped taking phone calls from people who loved him, often telling them he no longer had time for them. The artist dipped his brush one more time in the paint and the final stroke of colour was added to his masterpiece. He stood back looking satisfied with his work, proud of what he'd accomplished. He was excited for the world to see his work but when he looked into the crowd of admirers he seemed lonely and sad. His conflict and greed gave him money and fame but left him unhappy and alone in a crowd of strangers.



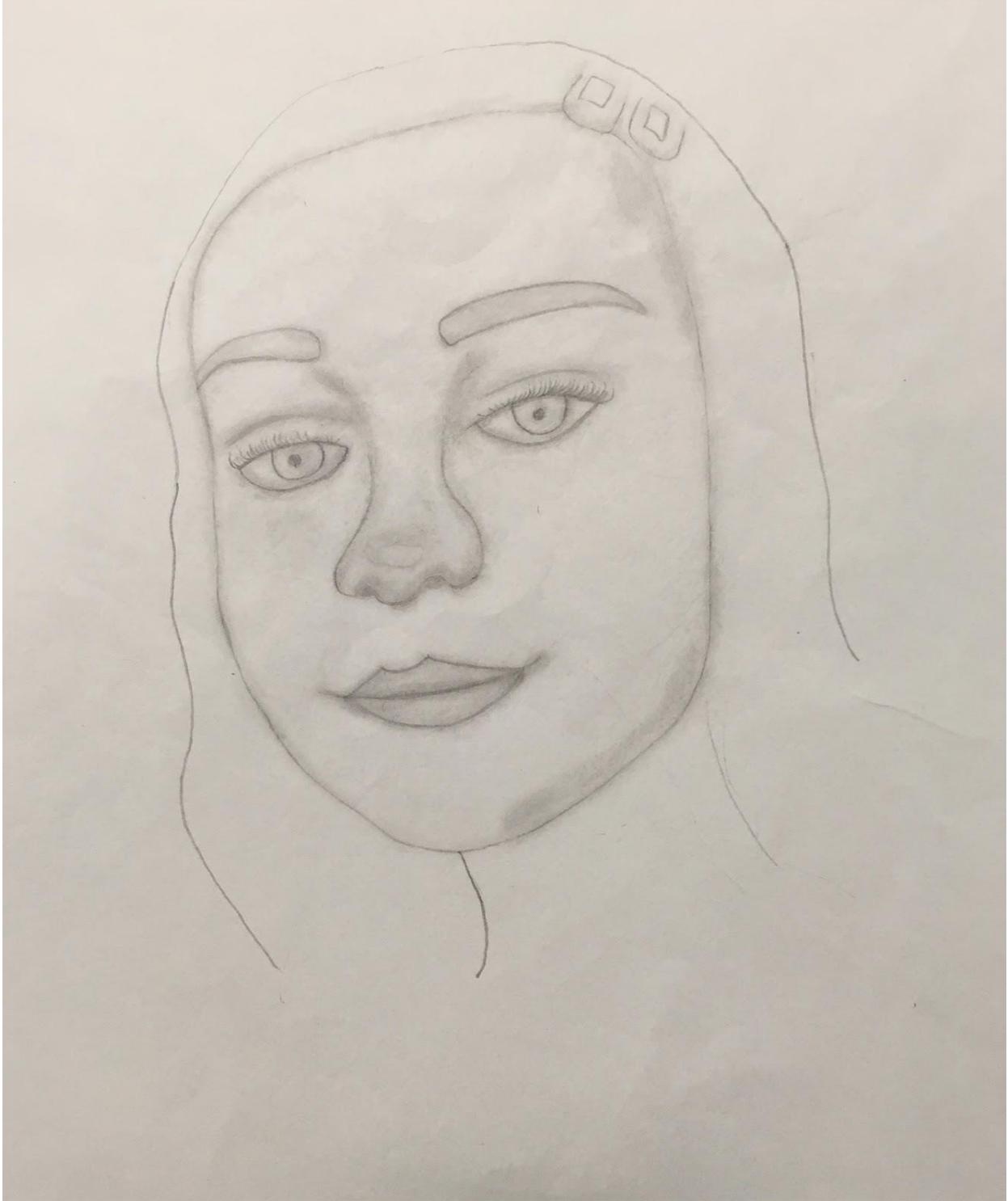
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