BULGARIAN CREATIVE WRITING COMPETITION

2021

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APPLES NEVER LIE

Nikol Mircheva, Patriarch Evtimiy Secondary School, Plovdiv

One apple a day, keeps the doctor away!

One apple a day, keeps the doctor away!

One apple a day, keeps the doctor... away…?

You will not believe what I saw happening in front of the doctor's office! Apples were threatening the doctor to stay back but he was just trying to wash them (and eat them but that is between the lines). They were shouting and saying that if he does, they will haunt him forever. I mean... who wants to be haunted by APPLES? Probably no one... Back to the point. They were shouting but he was just looking at them and laughing.

– Apples can't haunt me! They are just some fruit! – Said the doctor whose name was Dr. Hanakepe (weird name, yes).

The apples got very mad. Before they could say another word, the doctor had picked them up and put in a bowl. He was going towards the sink! I became a witness... A witness of a murder. A murder of an apple! Now you might say that this makes zero sense but, in my world...it doesn't. Here, we have talking food. We have many different buildings that look nothing like yours... Upside down pyramids, giant – and I mean GIANT pens as skyscrapers, even our clubs are with the shape of giant headphones! On our world, there's a myth going around, saying that apples can NEVER lie.

People have experimented with apples, asked them many different questions, each one is something no more than two people know. Yet, apples always said the right thing. People could even win the lottery! Although that sounds cool, we aren't sure if the apples know or create the future. So…

Maybe Doctor Hanakepe really WILL be haunted after all? I – I don't exactly know…

A FEW WEEKS LATER…

Dr. Hanakepe has been acting weird lately…

Flinching to the slightest of sound...

Looking behind his back every 30 seconds…

He had gone insane… Probably because the apples haunted him... so…

I guess it turned out that…

Apples Never Lie.

***Now, of course this story is fake and un-logical, but it represents how sometimes, even the smallest and probably not important things can turn out to change your entire self. ***

THE EARTH'S NEW CLOTHES

Anoushey Malik, LGS Civic Center, Lahore

There used to be a time when all I wore was the lush leaves from the forest. My hair consisted of clean, sparkling water, with its gentle currents flowing throughout my hair. My accessories were the fragrant flowers that grew on my surface. My shoes were made of the shining jewels that were hidden beneath me. I was a beautiful sight to behold; anyone who saw me was in awe of my beauty.

The other planets were all beautiful, and had their own clothing and aesthetics, but I was the most beautiful of them all. Even the Sun itself envied all the things I took for granted. Mars was the most bitter of them all. He envied my exquisite clothing and beauty. My bright, stunning dress that consisted of every lush and beautiful forest I owned. The animals living amongst my forests and deserts looked like small, colourful moving lights. I was never boasting about it, but I thought I would always be this beautiful, no matter how many light years passed.

After a while, I started to notice that a new species had formed…

Humans. I was rather excited to have such complicated creatures on MY planet! They were able to act on their own free will. They followed the usual cycle of animals, but their own choices changed their outcomes. I was fascinated by them, such small organisms yet so very intelligent. I became even more envied so. The planets and the Sun all warned me, that such creatures that could think differently would cause trouble. I didn't believe them. How could such beautiful creatures ever make a mistake?

Humans remained neutral for the first few generations, they would use the blessings I had; water, food, the oxygen too! I was pleased how independent they were and only reacted on their needs, not their desires. After a while they started hunting for food, and I wasn't very alarmed as this was the cycle of life, the predator must consume the prey to survive. I was rather confused as to why they were killing the animals instead of eating the plethora of fruits I had, but that was alright.

Then came the faithful day they discovered fire. I convinced myself not to blame them. 'They need it!', I thought. The smoke made it harder to breathe, and they burned away some of my forests. But I paid no attention to it. They kept getting more and more used to the fire, and they kept using it more and more. The only planet that had noticed so far was Mars. The smug look in his eyes infuriated me. So I made sure I would never show or feel any doubt.

Humans started to communicate, create theories and explore our solar system. I was thrilled! I couldn't believe how accurate they were. They knew what my sister, the Moon looked like, they knew how to tell the time, and even look at us through their new invention; telescopes! They once again seemed intelligent and efficient, though they still created wildfires.

I loved the humans. They built houses, and created lights. So, if you looked closely, you could see beautiful, small lights twinkling far below. For houses at first, they just used dirt and straw, but after a while I noticed something…different.

I felt a horrible burning sensation and the smoke got worse. I looked down and saw they were lighting my forests on fire! My beautiful, serene forests! They were – as the other planets feared – using me for their desires. I waited a few generations, praying it would stop. But alas, it just got worse. After a while my clothes started to lose their green colour. My dress used to be adorned with the beautiful flowers and animals that lived on my dress, but now there was solid grey concrete and black buildings.

Black and grey were my least favourite colours, and only small bunches of the flowers and leaves remained! They are almost gone now, by the way. I became a subject of ridicule instead of envy. I didn't fight the humans, how could I? I was biased towards them and didn't want to harm them.

Then they started polluting the water, burning materials that made me have asthma attacks, due to how toxic they were. My hair was no longer shining like it used to. They chopped the trees and made paper out of it. Now my dress was grey, brown and white, along with some of the garbage they dropped on my surface. My shoes now had pieces taken out of the jewels on them, the humans took those as well. I had enough.

I started warming my surface, as much as it hurt me, but to give them a taste of what I felt. I unleashed earthquakes, hurricanes, and intense heat. Even after this they did not stop. I no longer was a beautiful sight to behold. I had paper, trash and soil for a dress, and almost no grass or leaves. My hat that I always wore, the ozone layer was starting to have holes in it, and the shawl I always had wrapped around me to protect me from the heat of the Sun was weakening.

Mars started to get the attention from the humans. 'In case this planet doesn't last, let's stay there!'. Even so they pollute the Solar System too. Now there is trash in the solar system, and it's hurting the other planets too. Now I am no longer wearing the beauty that I used to own. Now I am only a vessel that's being used while it lasts, and my dress is nothing but grey concrete. My clothes are faded and heavy and make it hard for me to take my daily rotation and yearly walk with the other planets. I am now she who does not get the same love she gives.

THE EARTH'S NEW CLOTHES

Maya Palmova, St George Private Secondary School, Sofia

The Earth use to be so colorful and fresh,
with bright blue clothes and no stress.
Soon a splash of green appeared
and so, the colors now where cleared.
This green splash was called "land"
And then, all of a sudden, with no demand,
The continents where formed.
The green started to "dissolve",
Life started to evolve.
From small tiny specs,
To plants, animals and more!

Another life started changing those clothes,
People started building walls.
Walls between nature and humanity
Judaism and Christianity.
Religions who made us different,
Separated us far away
And thus, on Earth started to appear grey.
Our planet's clothes darkened,
Its mood hardened.
Pollution overcame,
Covering and stealing Earth's fame.
We continued building factories and building,
Vehicles and other killings.
We didn't see what was coming,
We didn't see what we were becoming!
WE made the Earth so dark,
Not the plants, animals, WE didn't make our remark.

Trees are disappearing, because of our greed
Animals are dying, because of our "need".

The earth wears a dark blue, dark green shirt.
It has a grey, thick sweatshirt
And a black, prisoned vest.
Something it does not deserve!
And that's the Earth's new clothes.

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A PENCIL

Katrin Bahchevanova, Petko Slaveykov Primary School, Burgas

Hello lovely people, my name is Josey. I'm a pencil, and yes, you heard me right. I live at Oxford School of Art. My colour is as deep blue as the ocean and my pencil pals call me Josey the Mermaid. Now, let me tell you how every morning of mine begins…

"Not so fast, not so fast", I shriek every morning as my owner Daphne takes me to her pencil sharpener Margarette who takes care of my shape. My point gets sharpened and polished, and I get out of this ordeal as fresh as a daisy.

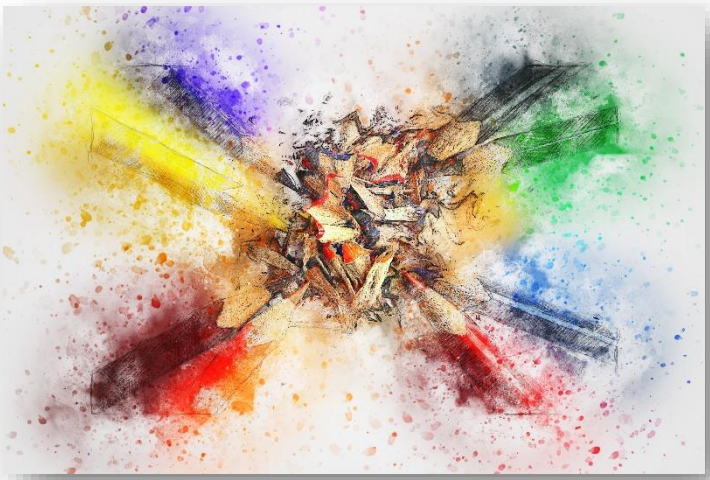
"No pain, no gain" people say. My owner Daphne gives me a smirk while sipping her coffee.

My day continues as Daphne takes me to her art studio where we begin making magic. Daphne is an artist and she loves painting.

Today, December 16th, is extremely stressful as she decides to draw a landscape of the Black sea coast, which requires a large plethora of blue shades including mine. I want to help Daphne, because I know how much happiness drawing gives her. Her parents were artists, but unfortunately, she lost them due to a car crash two years ago. Daphne has decided to follow their steps and pour her heart into art. Sometimes, while helping her draw, I think about my parents, who I can barely remember. My mother, Raspiola, was a deep raspberry red, and my father, Yelton, was a bright yellow gentleman. Both gave their last breaths in a canvas artwork that sits in the Louvre in Paris now.

As the day goes by, I feel myself getting smaller and smaller. Daphne's painting is almost ready and I am mesmerized by her talent. She has painted a beautiful coastal landscape with hues as vibrant as a starry night.

It is already four o'clock in the afternoon and my time to be sharpened again has come. As Daphne takes me to Margarette, I realize that I might not see her again. Margarette, the sharpener, takes me into her arms and the rest is just a feeling. I feel sadness of having to say goodbye to Daphne, and joy, an overwhelming joy to finally be able to be reunited with my parents.



"Oh sweet home, how much I missed you, oh parents of mine, how much I cannot wait to see you. I close my eyes as I dive into bliss of emotions.

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A PENCIL

Raya Marinova, Panayot Volov Secondary School, Shumen

When I was a little kid, I used to wonder a lot of stupid things. I sometimes thought how cool it would be to become one of my toys, a book, some type of food, a cool magazine and anything I could think of. I used to draw myself as the objects I wanted to become, though sometimes it wasn't objects but food and animals. It became something that couldn't get off my mind, I would think about it when I wake up, go to eat, play with my classmates, and even when I had to be serious. But as I grew up, I forgot about my obsession with being an object. One day when I was looking through my old drawings, I found the ones that were me as an object. That night I went to bed thinking how stupid I was.

In the morning I woke up feeling weird. I wasn't sure of my surroundings. I tried to get up, but it was very hard. Once I was fully awake, I looked down at myself and realized I was now a pencil.

– I must be dreaming! I can't be a pencil!! – I screamed from the top of my lungs, but soon after I realized that no one would hear me. After I had calmed down, I decided to try and get off my bed. It was pretty hard at first but then I got the hang of it. After getting down on the floor I realized how tiny I was. I wanted to try and find someone.

After finally getting outside I saw the school bus. I decided to get on the bus safely and act like a pencil that fell of someone's backpack. A few minutes passed and a kid saw me and picked me up. I realized that it was one of my friends.

– Tommy! – I screamed. He looked around the bus with very confused face. I realized that he would probably hear me, but very silent, since none of the other kids heard me. He sat at the back and tried to text me, but of course, I couldn't reply.

After that he went to school, while I was in his pocket. After a few classes, we had lunch. He sat next to one of our other friends, Tubbo. He said that he heard me scream his name on the bus, but I was nowhere to be found.

– Tommy, if she wasn't anywhere near you, you probably heard one of the kids on the street. – Tubbo said.

– You're probably right... – Tommy signed. – I just hope she's okay. It's not fun without her.

– You're right. – Tubbo agreed. – Now let's eat lunch before it's time for class.

I sat in his pocked silently, feeling bad that I wasn't there. Being a pencil was kind of fun if we don't count that I couldn't talk to my friends. In Tommy's next class I remembered that he kind of hear me when we were on the bus. After the class ended, I started shouting his name.

– Tommy! Tommy! – I shouted. – Can you hear me? I'm down here!

As I though, he heard me. He looked around the room and then saw the pencil kind of standing up.

– Are you this pencil? – he asked as I jumped on the table. – How did this happen?!

After he picked me up, I explained what had happened. He thought it was really funny. That was the last class so Tommy quickly went to find Tubbo. He explained him what had happen as well. I was really tired so I don't remember a lot after getting on the bus. The next morning, I woke up and that time I was back to being human. It was Saturday so I decided to call my friends and go to the park with them. We laughed at what had happened to me on the way there.

I still wonder how that happened, but all I know is that I shouldn't make fun of my younger self. It was a fun experience being something I wanted to be as a kid.

ONCE UPON A TIME, BEES FORGOT HOW TO MAKE HONEY

Marina Nikolova, Acad. Korolev Math & Science High School, Blagoevgrad

Many years ago, a ball was organized in the bee kingdom, to which all the insects of the world were invited. By sending the invitations, a distracted young bee was engaged, but she was busy thinking about how to make her yellow color shiny. That's why she didn't notice how the invitation to the hornets fell behind her desk.

On the day of the ball, the field and the forest were beautifully decorated with honey garlands, and all the insects came, disguised in their finest colors, only the hornets were gone. The ball was so nice that no one noticed their absence. An orchestra of bees played, waiters served fresh forest honey, guests raised sweet toasts. Behind the lights of the copper ball, however, lurked the offended hornets. They had decided to take revenge for the insult that they had not been invited to the ball, and even more so that no one noticed their absence. They had prepared a powder of the legendary hornet's poison of oblivion. The strongest, fastest, and bravest hornet soldiers descended like an arrow unnoticed to the abandoned glass of the dancing bees and poured poison.

Early in the morning, when the last guest of the ball left, the hornets flew away, satisfied that they had managed to pour out the poison of all the bees.

Three days after the ball, the bees wandered around the field, looking at the beautiful flowers, rejoicing in it, but not producing a drop of honey because they had forgotten. A week later, people began to worry a lot, and naturally fell into chaos.

Do you remember the distracted bee that didn't notice the dropped invitation? It was she who, out of her great distraction and bustle, missed the ball because she thought it was next month. A week after the ball, out of his distraction, he thought the bees were confused and wandering because they were excited about the upcoming celebration. But day by day, things became more and more confused, and people and nature more and more worried. In the third week, even the distracted bee, going to the beehive to drink some royal jelly for eternal youth, noticed that something was wrong because the beehive was empty and the bees were wandering without working around it. Completely confused, the distracted bee asked 2-3 circling bees why they weren't working, but they just looked at her incomprehensibly and confused. Then she realized something was wrong and went to the old queen bee. Even she didn't work, she just buzzed. A distracted bee asked her why no one was working and the beehives were empty. The old bee thought. It was as if she had a memory, but it was very far away. She made the distracting bee tell her in detail what she meant and thought for a long time. After a long hesitation, the mother bee regained distant memories of how her mother taught her to make honey but realized that she was too old to pass on the knowledge to all the forgotten bees. Because she was very wise, she convened a meeting of all the bees, at which the distracted bee had to tell about the honey and try to bring back their memories. Said, done. But it wasn't that easy ... the memories came back very slowly, and our distracted bee went from being distracted to being the most industrious because she had to show each bee how to start collecting honey again.

Gradually, things returned to normal, the bees began to make honey again, and in recognition, the distracted bee was proclaimed queen of all bees. To celebrate the coronation, she decided to organize a ball to which all insects were to be invited. The hornets received their invitation, but the spring storm blew the crickets' invitation high into the mountains. Everyone came and had a lot of fun, except for the crickets, who did not receive the invitation...

WHEN I WAS IN CHARGE OF THE WEATHER

Kaloyan Asparuhov, Petko Slaveykov Primary School, Varna

When I was in charge of the weather, I screwed things up. I honestly think If I went for much longer, I would've broken the earth, even though it was just 1 day. Let me tell you what happened.

Yesterday morning when I woke up, I noticed that I was in the clouds. There was a calendar through which said it was the 25th of November. At first, I was frightened (because I'm scared of heights) but then I took a step of faith and stepped on the cloud (And I didn't fell through!). The cloud actually was pretty soft and comfy. Then I took a look at my hands and saw that they were glowing with symbols of different elements of the weather. I touched the rain symbol on my thumb and the cloud turned grey and cold and it started raining. Then I realized the power I had with this. I wanted to try everything my powers had to offer (even the once capable of destruction).

I always wanted to see big lighting strikes at night, but I had to wait for that because it was morning (and that wouldn't make a great show for me). So, I went all around the world on my cloud and made rainbows everywhere to make people happy. Then I made it rain in the dry areas so people there can have more water. I stopped some rains that would've made floods. And you are probably thinking that made the world better and it didn't break it. Well to that point it really didn't break it, but then I was starting to get more selfish with my powers.

Then I went back to the desert and spun up a tornado because it was the desert and no one's there to get hurt (right?). Well, I was wrong. I spun it up and watched in shock and awe at how magnificent it is, but then it started to go towards the pyramids of Giza. I tried every way to stop it. First, I tried to stop it by pressing the symbol on my hand again. Because when I tried it with the rain it worked, but this time it didn't. Then I tried to blow wind against it to try and get towards the other way. All of those things didn't work and the pyramids of Giza went up in the sky and were scattered everywhere in the desert.

It already turned to night so I went to a city with lots of lightning grounding rods. Then I touched the lighting symbol on my pointer and again watched with awe but pretty soon the lighting started to get bigger and bigger, and with less time in between them. Things pretty soon started to go out of control. Building started to catch on fire, but this time I managed to save things. I pressed the rain symbol and extinguished the lit buildings.

I then went back to the cloud and just went to bed. The next morning, I woke up in my room and checked the calendar and It said it was still the 25th of November. So, I guess I was just dreaming after all. I'm glad I didn't screw up the world.

ONCE UPON A TIME, THE BEES FORGOT TO MAKE HONEY

Gulwash Malik, Lahore Grammar School Islamabad, Islamabad, Pakistan

Streets of San Deliria, September, 1930

As she walked down the streets of sweltering San Deliria, she saw the city for what it was. The city was a foul-smelling place, faintly lit by soot-stained streetlamps, and lived in by people with hearts of coal. The city was a place with crimson-lit saloons, visited by everyone from con-men to cashiers to flappers. A place with walls, walls plastered with soiled posters of Charlie Chaplin and Greta Garbo. A place where the scent of cigars and crumbling flapjacks reached cramped apartments up high and run-down Cadillacs down below. Where you knee-deep in heaps of filth. This was the city of San Deliria. Currently, Valentina Wreathaway was going to Stratenger's, a local bar. The downcast 22 year-old woman was going to have a drink, after another failed performance of Don Quixote, at the theatre. She felt awful! Valentina entered the crimson-lit bar, and sat by the counter. Next to her, was a young man, with an angular face, choppy blonde hair, and eyes that shone like blue lightning in a bottle. He stared at her, as she chugged down a Scotch.

"Are ya gonna say somethin'?" she mumbled

"Sorry, umm, I'm Joey Francis, I see ya around here a lot…" mumbled Joey Francis

"Hmmm…I'm Valentina. I work at the theatre nearby, do you visit?" she murmured

Joey straightened his neck. "The theatre, do you, uh enjoy it?" he asked

"No, not at all. I just had a flop. Story of my life…" she muttered

"Listen, this may feel forward, but if you're looking to quit, I can help. I work for someone, who has the perfect use for you. -"Whoa, whoa, whoa, whadd'ya mean" asked Valentina

"Well, I work for Stanley Baker Jr." Joey whispered

Valentina's dead green eyes livened up. "You work for a Baker boy, don't they run the Bumbleb"- "Shhh…Be quiet. Yeah, yeah I do. I work for the Bee's." whispered Joey

"The street gang! What would I do with a street gang?" Valentina exclaimed

"I'm not tellin', you could rat on us. Listen, you meet the gang tomorrow, at the Dunbridge Hotel. Stan'll meet ya, he'll decide." Joey muttered

Valentina contemplated. She couldn't imagine herself working for a gang, that killed and robbed people. She needed the money, but if they weren't successful, her life would be ruined. Valentina refused.

"Listen, I don't wanna know, what it is, I don't wanna meet your boss, and I can't do this. God! I'm gonna have to do confession, just for standing next to you." exclaimed Valentina.

Joey buried his face in his hands, and suspired.

“O.K…I didn’t wanna go there, but here we are. Stanley’s a bum. He wouldn’t know good stuff, if it signed its death warrant. He’s spillin’ money on stuff, like pianos in the bar. 2 or 3 years ago, everyone knew our name. The Bee’s could’ve stung Scarface, and we’d get away with it. But, now, with Stanley, it’s like we don’t know how to make honey anymore.” Joey said, with his lip curling up as he uttered the last word.

Valentina bit on her Cupid-lip, and sighed. She had a shred of sympathy for Joey. If she could get the gang back on its feet, she’d be set for life.

“Fine, but, I wanna hear it now, and I want the job. If you can do the job without me, then you would’ve done it already. Tell me now, or I’ll rat on you.” She said brazenly.

“You’re not as blonde as you look. Here it is, day after tomorrow, the governor’s daughter, is comin’ here. She’s gonna visit the theatre. I need you to get her in there, and lock her in. You’re gonna nick her car, with me, and get the money. We’ll split it up. Capische.” stated Joey.

“Easy-peasy” fibbed Valentina. The two shook hands and finished their drinks. Valentina and Joey went home.

The following day, Valentina, worked with Joey, to prep. She bought a dress, asked if she could escort the governor’s daughter. Joey and her spent time, chatting, and learning how to knock out a chauffeur. She never met Stanley, or the other Bee’s, as Joey said, she could reveal their location. Valentina was filled with anxiety, when the day finally arrived.

She stood at the parking lot of the begrimed theatre, until a shining black Aston-Martin rolled in. Joey, stood at the crowded entrance, wearing a security guard’s uniform. Out of the Cadillac, came out the governor’s daughter. She has cedar-brown hair that she wore in curls, a bee-stung mouth and eyes that looked like pools of sizzling apple cider. The governor’s daughter was wearing a pink coat, with hosiery, that was stained with ash from the air. She grinned, and came upon the theatre.

“Hey! I’m Mallory. What are we watchin’ tonight?” Mallory asked with a honeyed, Southern accent.

Valentina, who looked as if her hair were a thousand white flames all dancing in synergy, squinted her feline eyes, and replied: “The Blue Angel. With Emil Jannings and Marlene Dietrich. I’ve heard it’s good.” as she took her pink coat.

Valentina, bolted the theatre door, and knocked out the chauffeur. She and Joey frantically searched the car, finding only an umbrella, and a stash of nickels. Joey sighed and threw his arms in the air. Valentina pursed her lips. Didn’t work out did it.

That night, Valentina went to Stratenger’s, and ordered another Scotch. She shuffled through her purse and took out Mallory’s wallet. She had grifted it when taking her coat. The Bee’s may have forgotten how to make honey, but she didn’t.

The bartender poured treacle in her Scotch, only to find that a spider crept in …

WHEN I WAS IN CHARGE OF THE WEATHER

Lia Avital, St. George Private Secondary School, Sofia

When I was in charge of the weather,
I didn't have to wear a sweater,
I went out every morning,
With the sun bright and showing.

People were sick of the warm,
So, I decided to whip up a storm.
Everyone was happy and cool,
Until they had to go to school.

All the roads were blocked,
And everyone was shocked.
Chairs were flying in the air,
People started to stare.

They said they wanted the warm back,
Or else they will start to attack.
I tried to bring the sun,
So, we'll have lots of fun.

In a matter of seconds,
People went back to running errands.
You could hear the joy in the city,
It went back to being pretty.

IF ONLY SHE HADN'T CHOSEN THE RED ONE

Daniela Koleva, Vasil Karagyozov Foreign Languages High School, Yambol

She woke up in her room and reached for the alarm clock on her bedside table. It read 4:30 am. The humid August air filled the room, as if mocking the open window that was supposed to let the breeze in. She rubbed the sleep from her eyes and sat up in bed. It was near total darkness, but she could tell that something was off. In the place where the door to the room usually stood, there were now two doors instead of the one that was put in when the house was built all those years ago.

One door was a deep azure blue, darker than the bottom of the ocean. The one right beside it was red, with a soft, yet tempting glow. As she was trying to figure out what had happened while she was asleep, she heard a gurgling noise. It was disturbing, as if you were listening to a coyote being drowned in the river. Then it stopped. She got up and carefully tiptoed to the two doors. She got down to the floor and looked under the blue one. It was dark, nothing could be seen. She scooted over to look under the red door. There were lights, dancing under it. They were hypnotizing. She got up off the floor and gripped the handle of the red door. She opened it and stepped out into the hallway of her house.

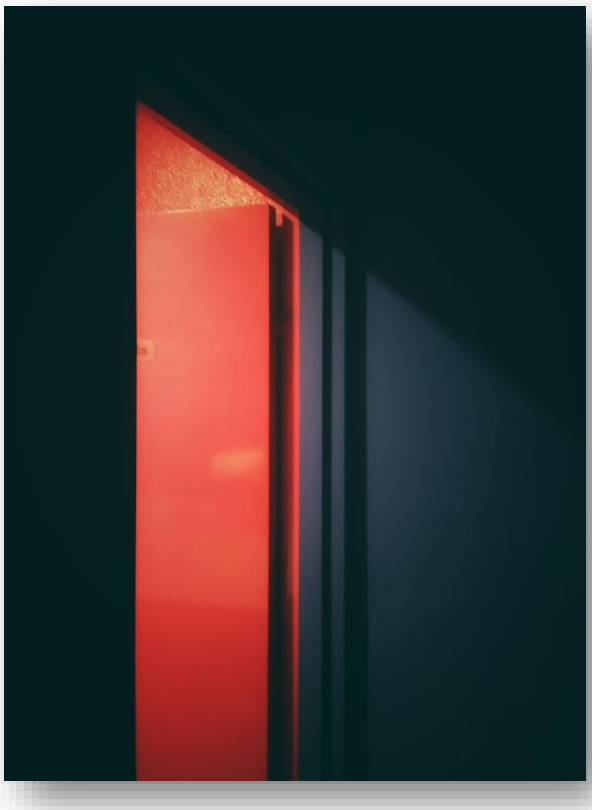
It was silent, the same heavy silence that resided in her room. Then that gurgling noise came back. She turned around in time to see a creature, roughly 9 feet tall, with grey, decaying flesh, and a truly animalistic look in its red, infected eyes, standing hunched over in the hallway. Its front limbs hung by its side, broken, with jagged bones poking through the skin. It gurgled again and lunged at her, barely missing her with its sharp claws when she swung open the nearest door and bolted into the room. She locked it behind her, adrenaline still pumping through her veins. She looked around, and realized she was in the laundry room. She panicked. There wasn't anything in there for her to defend herself with from the thing outside. She couldn't even call for help or stay in there until morning when someone could come rescue her. Suddenly, the floor shook and caved in.

She felt her body falling through an endless abyss. The next thing she knew was that she was on the ground, looking up at the grey sky. She rushed to her feet and looked around. There were humanoid shadows, the same ones that you'd see out of the corner of your eye when you got dizzy, all staring straight through her, with their lifeless, hollow, milky-white eyes. Before she could scream out in terror, the shadows parted, like the Red Sea parted before Moses. A gigantic shadow, thrice as tall as the other ones emerged from the gap created in the crowd. It had a robe on, like a cult leader. It beckoned for her to follow it.

Her legs moved before she gave them the command to do so. She followed the giant shadow, all the others following behind her. She could hear a drum playing in the distance. The procession walked and walked for what seemed like weeks. Her joints creaked and she couldn't feel her legs. She looked up again and saw that she was in a dark forest. A dark sky and twisted branches were all that could be seen for miles. Then it started snowing. The farther into the forest they went, the fewer trees there were. All of the vegetation was rotting, with naked branches and crumbling trunks. She could see hundreds of dead animals along the forest floor. From the smallest critters all the way to gigantic elk and moose. All horribly maimed and torn apart.

The drum stopped playing. The procession halted. The big shadow moved and when it was no longer blocking her view, she saw the two doors from earlier. They were cracked open. In the azure door she could make out the image of her room. The same warm bed she left an eternity ago. The same open window, trying to let in the cold night air. The enormous shadow nodded to the others. The blue door slammed shut. The red one was pushed open by the wind that passed through the dried branches of the dead trees. She saw the creature she'd escaped from earlier. It looked even more enraged than last time. It was ready to tear her to pieces. Her legs were cemented in place by fear. Her vocal cords had stopped working. The humanoid shadows that surrounded her got closer. One grabbed her by the arm, another by the leg and she couldn't even try to break free from their grasp. The gigantic shadow moved towards the door and opened it even wider with its sharp, jagged claw that barely resembled a human hand. The monster in the door gurgled, hungry for its next meal. The crowd of shadows slowly pushed her towards her inescapable fate. Towards the door that started it all.

If only she hadn't chosen the red one.



IF ONLY SHE HADN'T CHOSEN THE RED ONE

Ana Dimitrova, Math & Science High School, Burgas

I woke up with a pounding headache. I looked at my alarm clock, it was already 10:30. I opened the curtains and the sun rays lit my bedroom. My mom walked in my room with a worried expression.

"Aren't you gonna get up yet? You usually don't sleep so late. Is everything okay?"

"My head hurts really bad, I have no idea why." – I complained.

"Hm… Nothing a little hot chocolate can't fix! I'll be right back. You go wash your face; it might make you feel better."

I walked into the bathroom. As the water was running down my hands, I looked at the mirror.

I rubbed my eyes to make sure I wasn't still sleepy. But no, it was still there.

"Moom!" – I shouted hoping she'd hear me from the kitchen.

"What is it, honey?"

"Can you come for a second?"

''What's this?" – I asked pointing at the mirror.

"What is what exactly?"

"You see it right? A big star?"

"Aw, you are probably still dreaming!"

No, I know it's not a dream. I went back to my room and facetimed my best friend, Bella.

The first thing she said, or, should I say screamed, was "Oh my god! You are a Royal?!"

"I'm a what?"

"A Royal! Let me explain. It's a part of the new government experiment. They are testing it on a number of chosen people from Gen Z. Basically, if you are a Royal, you have to make a choice every day and you have two options – red or blue. Your choices affect you, the other Royals and us, regular people, so be careful with what you pick! The purpose of that is to see how our minds work depending on what choices we make."

"But why can you see it and my mom can't?"

"Only Gen Z knows about the experiment. Other generations can't see it. What are you waiting for, click the star and let's see what your first choice is!"

I gently tapped the star above my head and when I looked again it was replaced by two squares. The red one said “Become a teenage millionaire” and the blue one said “Save an endangered species from extinction”. Well, that’s an easy choice. I tapped the blue square and both squares were replaced by a tick mark.

“You had the entire day to think about it! Why did you decide so fast?”

“It was an obvious choice. Of course I chose the animal.”

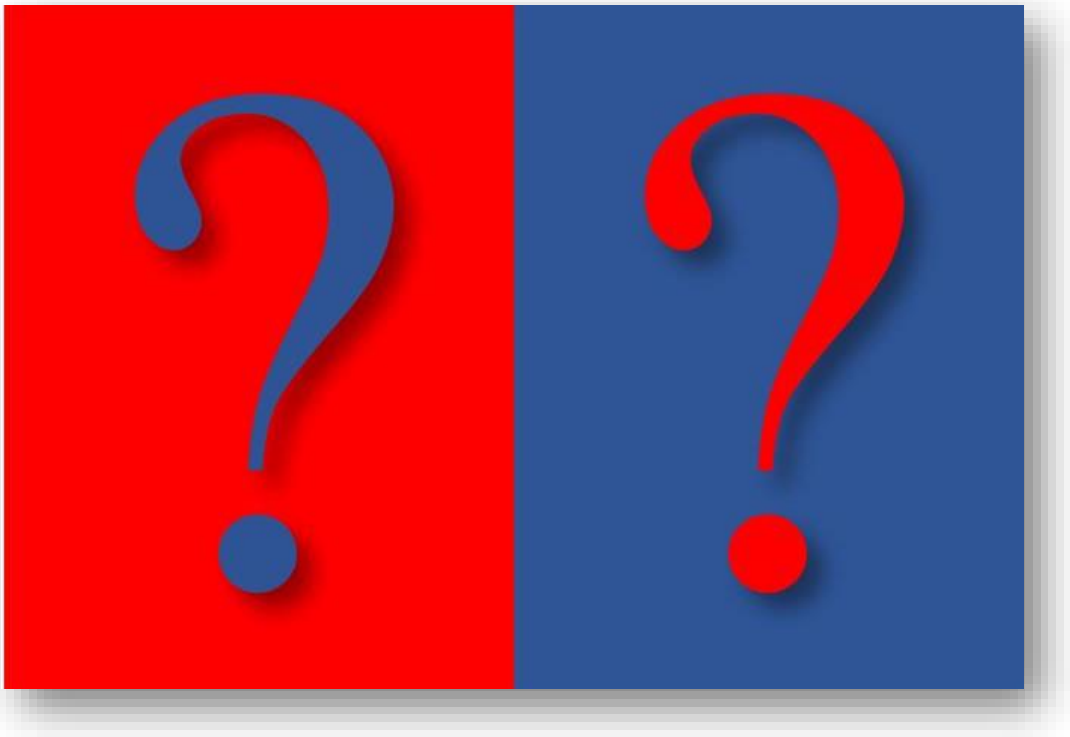
“Of course you did…”

“Darling, can you go to the store please?” – my mom yelled from the living room.

“Sure, mom. Sorry, I have to hang up. See you later!”

On the way to the store, something suddenly grabbed my attention. It was another girl with the red and blue squares above her head. I tried to read the text, but it was very hard from the distance, so I had to come closer. I gasped. The blue said “Save a starving child” and the red said “Become the richest person in the world, but the opposite of everyone’s choices happens today”. God, I hope she makes the right decision!

Later that night I was watching the news with my mom and dad in our living room. After the first sentence, I immediately jumped off my seat. The reporter kept listing bad things, one after another. I knew exactly what the reason was. I can’t believe it! If only she hadn’t chosen the red one…



I CAN BE SWEET. SOMETIMES. TO CERTAIN PEOPLE

Simona Mesheva, Yane Sandanski High School, Sandanski

IF I AM SWEET TO YOU...

There was once a girl with the name of a flower
Her name was Tulip…
Everyone knew she can be both sweet and sour
She lived in a small village called Sun Valley
Her parents were named Rick and Sally
But sadly, they passed when she was just sixteen…

She lived by herself for four long years
But she wasn't lonely, no, not at all…
She grew up to be an enchanting woman, so
Everyone wanted to be with her, talk to her, laugh with her…

Her beauty was beyond compare,
Her flaming black hair
Was formed into locks…
She was kind to everyone
But if there was something bad said or done
She wasn't as sweet and nice...

Tulip had ebony skin,
And once her beautiful hazel eyes
Looked at someone,
They swarmed with butterflies

Her dream was to have her own small bookshop,
But until then, she worked at a café down the corner of her street
One day before closing a stranger sat in the café,
He ordered coffee and complimented Tulip
The corners of her mouth formed a smile…
After she served the coffee they talked for a little while,
But she didn't catch the stranger's name.
"Tomorrow I'll come and order the same"

Days passed and every day he came
But Tulip still couldn't catch his name

In a snowy, winter day
The stranger came
And said:
“Tulip, let’s go out and take a walk”
“We can just sit here and talk,
Isn’t that a good idea?”
Tulip responded...
The man took her advice,
Because he wanted to be nice
To Tulip…
The next day rolled fast…
The man came in the café
And ordered the exact same,
But Tulip put his coffee in a paper cup
And said:
“Let’s go out,
The sight is so stunning”
They went for a walk…

After a while of talking, Tulip asked the man about his name,
“Kendrick” he answered with a smirk…
His smile has always been the same, but now…
Now it was different.

They went out a couple more times
And got even closer…
They shared many laughs and kisses
Tulip told Kendrick how much she misses
Her parents…

One day
The “stranger” from the café
Asked her:
“People have told me you’re not always so nice,
But with me…
With me you are always so kind…
I just want to ask why?”
Tulip answered fast:
“I just can see it in your eyes…
You deserve to be treated nicely,
To be spoken to politely…
I am not bitter,
Nor I am sweet,
But it really depends

Who I am with…”
Kendrick smiled but tried to hide it
By looking to the side,
But the fact she made him happy wasn’t a thing he could hide…

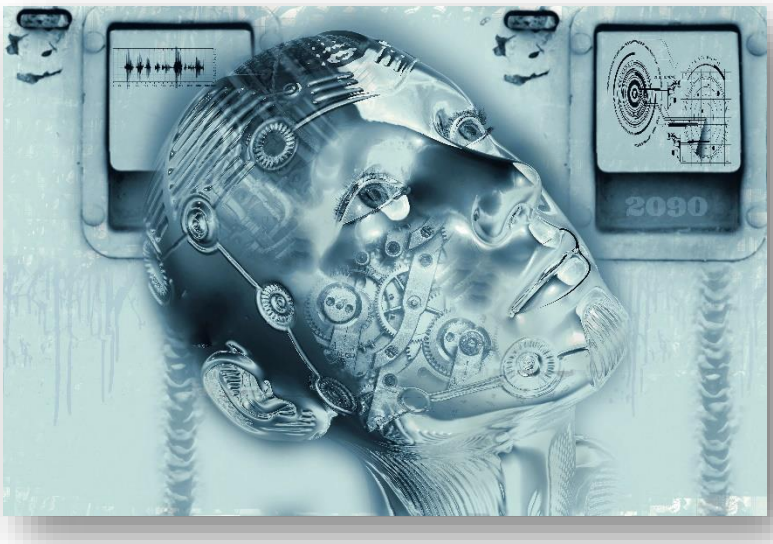
“If I am sweet to you,
Know,
That you mean a lot to me,
And even a blind person can see,
How kind your heart is,
And know that I am really…
Really hoping **this**
Is what you think of me too…”

They grew old together…
They had kids and named them Lilith and Jace…
They continued living in Sun Valley…
Tulip made her dream come true,
And not short after they both said:
“I do”
Their life was the fairy-tale they told their kids about…
They still share many kisses and laughters
And at the end they all lived happily ever after.

I'M UNUSUALLY SENSITIVE FOR A ROBOT

Nasko Fotev, Private Foreign Languages High School, Chelopech

I'm a robot, you say.
I'm the kid with the phone, attached to its hand.
I'm the reflection of everyone who lived before me.
I'm the data, saved on the disk.
The perfectly imperfect system that never stops working and never stops trying.
Why? For what?
To try satisfy someone?
To try not to be that big of a disappointment?
To be a good kid?
No.
I'm not trying to do anything of that, what I'm actually trying is to be myself.
Maybe you think that's so washed off or that's easy but think twice.
I'm the kid with the phone, attached to its hand.
I'm the reflection of everyone who lived before me.
I'm the data, saved on the disk.
The perfectly imperfect system that never stops working and never stops trying.
I'm a robot, remember?
Never cry, never feel, never stop being what I should.
Never laugh, never live, never love.
Never do, never be, never try to be something else, but glass.
A part of a mirror, a piece of steel, a loss of space.
I'm a robot, you say.
Wanna know a little secret?
I'm not.
I'm just a kid of today.



DID THAT PAINTING JUST WINK AT ME?

Elena Stoyanova, Sofia Math & Science High School, Sofia

I was listening to some music while walking down the street. My nosy neighbor saw me leave the house but he didn't even bother asking where I was going – the only place I've visited these days is the art gallery in the center of town. The reason was simple – any inspiration left me soon after I had dropped out of university last year – now I desperately needed to find something to keep me going as paint was the only thing I could do well enough to earn a living out of.

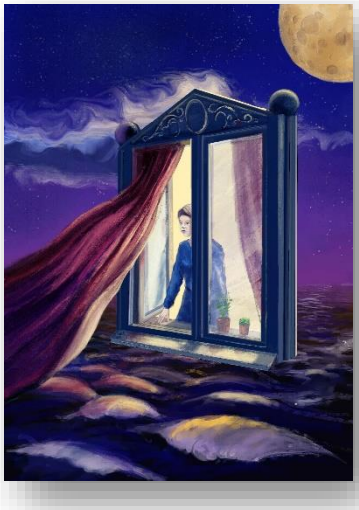
There was something unique about the paintings in this particular gallery. They were all created by local artists whose names have only ever been heard in this secluded little town in the middle of nowhere, yet they were the most fascinating works of art I have seen in my entire life. Maybe it has something to do with the stories they tell, although I have a hard time believing some of them.

Lost in thought, I found myself in front of the gallery again. I pushed the door open and nodded to the lady, who was cleaning the floor. She looked bored and tired, and the loud noise in the room didn't seem to help much. I looked around and spotted them – the two men from the second picture on the left were laughing and talking about something with the beautiful Lady Louise. Those two aren't known for ever being serious so I was surprised to see that such a sophisticated young woman had anything to discuss with them. I decided to leave them to it and took a step in the opposite direction since I was still annoyed with them after that one time they made quite a rude remark about my dyed hair.

My eyes fell on a painting placed at the end of the corridor – a young man with a book in his hands was sitting by a moonlit window. 'That one is definitely new,' I thought, and I made my way over to introduce myself. His eyes looked up from the pages and he raised a brow at me. I'll admit – I was a bit taken aback but my curiosity got the best of me and I just kept walking.

The man gave me a cheesy smirk and left his book on the table beside me. He winked at me, got up and walked out of my sight, somewhere in his own world. I was shocked but I stuck around in hopes that I would actually get to talk to him. No such luck.

The next day the painting was gone.



DID THAT PAINTING JUST WINK AT ME?

Melisa Selim, Ekzarh Yossif Foreign Languages High School, Razgrad

It was Friday – the end of a very normal week. It's strange going five straight days without experiencing any symptoms, but I'd rather not look a gift horse in the mouth for once. I don't want to jinx the progress I've made.

Coming back home is always a relief. Working in the office can be stressful sometimes, so I always look forward to coming home to paint the rest of my day away. And while the house itself isn't perfect in any way, the memories it brings from my childhood definitely are enough to keep me around. My parents have long since passed away, so I'm continuing their legacy of passing the house down each generation.

The living room is the first thing you see – a wide open room, with light brown couches and chairs, a low table usually kept somewhat messy on purpose, the decomposed corpses of my parents, and a decent amount of greenery scattered about. It looks a bit old-timey, but, hey, it's mine.

I go left of the living room and enter my study. I plan to spend the rest of my life here. The room is well lit, with floor-to-ceiling windows, a desk in the middle, a covering to keep the floor from being dirtied from paint and multiple canvases and paintings on the wall and floor.

I felt inspired today after not experiencing any symptoms for so long. I wanted to commemorate this day forever – maybe it's the start of my new, illness free life, where I won't ever have to suffer my hallucinations again, or maybe it won't last forever, but I can hold it up as a record of sorts.

I sit on the chair and carefully plan out my next move. Starting with a rough sketch, I sketch the head, the teary eyes, the bloody smile… I sketch a self-portrait of myself. That's how I want to remember this week. A portrait of me, crying from joy in my living room. It's a painting somewhat similar to the one my parents had made of themselves together once. I really miss them.

After what seems like mere minutes to me, my phone says it's almost 12AM. I have to leave this painting for tomorrow. It would be Saturday and I'd have all the time in the world to finish it then.

I pick it up and stare at it for a while – really look at it. It's me, but… maybe it's not. The happy face I drew only minutes ago seems to blur and contort… But I had taken such careful strokes, how come it doesn't look like me? Her face slowly splits in two and her mouth stretches past what's humanly possible…

And that's when it starts. A horrible pain, similar to getting your head split open by a chainsaw. I feel my brain being split into two and mushed against the sides of my skull. I feel like an otherworldly being takes out each of my eyes one by one… and eats them.

I scream from the pain and fall to the floor, the hallucinations vivid and bloody. From the open door I see my parents – or rather, what's left of them – on the living room floor, their chests split open and their organs leaking out onto the carpet…

The ceiling starts to crack and the wallpaper starts to peel off. Dust falls from the ceiling and covers everything in such a huge amount, I can no longer breathe.

“It’s okay!” I yell out, only to myself and all the ghosts watching me. A hallucination – that’s all it is, I’m sure. This isn’t unusual, this is completely normal. Just a… rather severe hallucination, nothing more.

I continue lying to myself as the previously silent house now fills with screams. “What are you doing?! Please, Scarlett, let your father go!”

“Baby, calm down, it’ll all-” the person behind the disembodied voice gags and seemingly starts choking, which is followed by a louder than it should’ve been ‘thud’. Another follows, screaming in fear, before seemingly experiencing the first person’s fate.

Palms pressed tightly against my ears, I realize – those voices are my parents’. They called my name and begged me for mercy? But I didn’t kill them! I have done no such thing! The coroners ruled their deaths accidental, I had nothing to do with it!

The screams stopped – but the house seemed to replace them. It grumbled and moaned, doors opened and slammed shut by themselves, creating a cacophony of horrible noises. My eardrums bled and dripped down my face and onto the floor.

“STOP! MAKE IT STOP! PLEASE!”

…

It was silent, at least for a while. I immediately tried getting up. I sat up, hoping everything was back to normal, but immediately noticed nothing had changed since my hallucination. The bodies remained, the cracked ceiling was still there, the wallpaper was still peeling off… What is happening?

I looked all around, hoping at least SOMETHING was still normal. The windows, previously open and letting in the sunlight – now blacked out and cracked… My previous paintings – all torn apart or dirtied with red paint… All, except one. The newest one.

My self-portrait lies against the wall, still crying from joy. The longer I looked at it, the less she seemed to be grinning because of an accomplishment and more… at me. Her smile seemed villainous, vicious, even.

She moved, somehow, still smiling, and locked eyes with me. Her tears had stopped falling, her face turning to pure joy as her bloodied hands reached up – past the top of the painting and to the light on the ceiling – the only light still working, I noticed.

I stood, petrified. There was nothing I could do or say to stop her or even understand anything that’s going on. I only stared back, a silent plea for mercy, as she winked at me before her muscles tensed, strokes of paint and pencil I hadn’t made myself, and the light went out.

She left me here?! I screamed from fear and crawled towards where I saw her last, pawing at where the floor and wall met, trying to find her. But she was gone. She left me in my nightmare – to suffer. She left me with her parting gift – that wink. To rot.

DID THAT PAINTING JUST WINK AT ME?

Mihaela Mihaylova, Yordan Radichkov Foreign Languages High School, Vidin

I'm impatiently switching feet while waiting in front of the women's bathroom cabins. The weather outside is extremely cold and I personally am not surprised in the slightest bit, it's the middle of December after all, but I couldn't help but curse a little under my nose. What in God's name is taking those girls so long?

''Ugh, it stinks! SANITIZE YOUR BATHROOMS, if you please!'' shouts angrily a dark-haired young woman, possibly younger than me. The security guard barely spares her a glance full of disgust and continues fixing his belt and searching his pockets. Or at least, that's why I hope he's doing.

I go in the cabin, do my job there as fast as I can and I'm out of there. I try finding the exact spot I had taken before I left for the bathroom and it doesn't take me long. It's right in front Johannes Vermeer's part of the spacious art gallery. If you'd like my sincere opinion, I don't particularly fancy this guy and his art. It's too harsh for my own liking, so I'm not really looking at his artwork, but then something catches my eye unexpectedly. I stop and stare at ''The Girl With The Pearl Earring''. The one and only piece I'm in love with. Not because of his style, no, you're thinking wrong.

The girl is what pleases my eyes and soul simultaneously. She is absolutely marvellous. Her deep blue eyes, not like the ocean but more like the sky at dawn. They grab me softly by my wrists and caress my palms. I feel so at ease every single time I lay my eyes on this painting, like we're genuinely flirting.

I look more and for a moment, I notice a movement on the canvas. Did she just…wink at me?

I'm genuinely going crazy. Couldn't admit it until now, but at this point, I'm definitely sure I am. I look again.

Nothing. The energy of the aura around me is going high in seconds and I have no idea why.

The familiar sense of fear climbs up my back. What's going on and why is this happening again?

''Stunning, huh?'' I hear a voice behind startling me. A tall dark-skinned woman approaches me and looks at me with the corners of her mouth going up just the slightest.

''What?...Um, yeah, I- I love it.'' I turn around and blurt out. ''What a dumb verb, you have so much to say about this piece, man up!'' I scold myself mentally.

''I'm glad you do, it's the best one we own.'' She announces humbly. So, she's the owner of the gallery. ''May I learn your name, ma'am?''

''I'm Louise.''

''Oh my god, like Louise Moillon? I adore her work! My name is Judith.'' She introduces herself and sounds exciting,

‘’Nice to meet you Judith and yes, exactly like her, ha-ha.’’

‘’That’s amazing, good luck exploring!’’

‘’Thanks a bunch.’’ I wave at her and smile to say goodbye.

I walk away and my feet move like jelly, my head feels three times bigger than it actually is.

This happened yesterday as well. In the cafeteria while I was talking to a complete stranger in the queue and my coffee said I would mess up my routine if I drink it now. Last week, when my uber left me in front of the dorms and the old rug looked at me with disappointment while I was trying to get the keys out of my backpack and I fainted.

‘’Am I going insane?’’ I whispered. Why is talking to strangers makes me see and feel things I don’t usually see and feel?

I look up and my eyes meet Lucifer from the “Fallen Angel” painting laughing at me with a bully-like grimace on his stupid handsome face. I look on the left side and see the man and woman from “American Gothic” pointing the sharp tool at me and getting closer and closer.

I look on the right side and see the old woman from “The Whistler’s Mother” standing up and tilting her head as if she’s a serial killer.

I step back. My feet still feel like jelly and the air is getting thicker and I can’t inhale by the time I’ve moved an inch.

My hands start shaking and I want to scream. I want to sit down, cover my ears and cry hysterically. And I do it because I’m helpless, my senses are numb, my whole body is having a complete relapse and I’m feeling all their eyes staring at me, grabbing chunks of my soul like it’s a chocolate cake they’ve been craving for ages, it hurts and it hurts and it hurts and it-

I open my eyes abruptly. I stare at “The Girl With A Pearl Earring” and it’s quiet. I don’t feel anything besides warmth. I distinctly remember the weather is freezing. It was so loud seconds ago. Everyone in the gallery is walking calmly and smiling.

I look at her. I’m mesmerized by her beauty.

I think I see movement on the canvas.

The sense of fear crawls up my neck again.

Did she just… wink at me?

It’s loud.

And I scream.

BOTTLED EMOTIONS ARE ON SALE

Georgi Atanasov, Vocational High Schools of Electronics and Electrotechnics, Bansko

If you could buy emotions, what would you buy?

Happiness, maybe? Pride? Love?

Think about it. *Really* think about it. If you could buy any emotion, what would you buy?

Inspiration, maybe? Creativity? Empathy?

If you were able to buy bottled emotions, which one would you run to first? Which one would you fight for, live for, breathe for? If every emotion in existence was neatly packaged and stacked on a shelf, sitting patiently and ready to be felt, which one would you desperately tear open the packaging for?

What if those emotions were from the people in your life? Who would you feel from? Who would you take from?

Would you bottle up the most positive person's sunshine, fervently filling the glass bottle with radiance and warmth for those days when you're lacking luster? Or would you catch compassion cascading out of the most empathetic person you know? Their sympathetic words would bounce into the bottle as you maniacally maneuvered the glass to catch them, fearful that any missed word would lessen the empathy.

It would be a game, almost. A game to see how much sunshine you could summon, how much compassion you could catch, how many emotions you could experience.

How many emotions can I acquire in one day? You ask yourself as your bag bursts at the seams with bottle after bottle, each one heavy with emotion.

How many people can I embody at one time? You ask yourself as you hear the satisfying *pop* of the corks unleash the feelings from your never-ending supply of bottles. The *pop* is magnified in the hollow, uninhabited room you store your bottles of feeling in.

The feelings and emotion are limitless, but you are still numb. You are filled with feelings, yet hollow.

Which emotion do I need today? You ask yourself as you sift through your supply. You pass the bright, blinding bottle of happiness. It's shimmer readily replaces what you can't produce on certain days. The light inside the bottle restores what was lost in your eyes, in your soul. Your lethargic finger pauses on the happiness bottle. *Not today,* you say. You have enough from the last unleash.

The words in the empathy bottle are bouncing buoyantly; the energy of the compassion is slowly loosening the cork. *I don't need empathy today,* you robotically recite as you tighten the cork, suppress the feeling, and continue on.

You eye the bottle of creativity; it's intricate designs and unique color draw your attention to it immediately. *Do I need creativity today?* You ask as you study the bottle. *Was this my own feeling bottled, or did I take this from someone else?* You run through a mental list of the most creative people in your life. Would they let you steal a sliver of their individuality?

You continue on.

Your defeated, exhausted fingers pass over the final bottle in your collection. The burden of a thousand emotions takes a toll on your soul and your mind. They haven't been unleashed yet, but it's their very presence that is so heavy. The feelings you stole, the emotion you bottled, the weight of what's not your own is crushing.

You almost missed the last bottle because it's the smallest one, concealed from the rest. The happiness bottle is brighter than this one. The empathy bottle is heavier, denser. The creativity bottle is, well, more creative than this one. This bottle is simple. You appreciate the simplicity and pick the bottle up, eager to see which one it is. There are so many bottles that it's easy to lose track of them.

As soon as you pick it up, you realize that it is the bottle of contentment. It's filled with the moments when you and others felt most at peace. You laugh as you recall the times where you unscrewed the cap of the bottle and tried to catch contentment. You eye the abundance of feelings and emotions standing before you, each one stolen from someone else.

You decide to feel content today.

You unscrew the cap of the bottle and unleash peace and satisfaction. You let the contentment flood your body and screw the cap back on. You delicately return the bottle that gave you emotion for the day and exit the empty room filled with feeling.

DESPITE THE BLINDFOLD, HE KNEW EXACTLY WHERE HE WAS

Aleksandra Stoynova, Bertolt Breht Foreign languages High School, Pazardzhik

THE LIFE THROUGH A BLINDFOLD

Have you thought what a blindfold means?
You claim you know, but it is not so simple as it seems.
Using our eyes, we are able to see the light,
but only with a blindfold we can feel what is shining inside.

To be aware of where you are is not to know the exact place,
but to be aware if you are still a part of the life race,
if you are lucky enough not to be alone in the endless Space.
To feel not the loneliness's cold,
but to be warmed by the eyes of your soul even wearing a blindfold!

Which is more important then?
To open your eyes to explore the reality
or to close them and get touch to the people's personality?
Actually, sometimes the truth is in the depths,
carefully kept under a thick layer of sadness!

Most often, the eyes must be closed so as to see
what is hidden in the soul of every person, even you and me!
Because we all know what is seen by the heart
Is the life's most valuable part!

In case you do not know where you are,
do not open your eyes looking for a sign.
Just put a blindfold to realize who you are
And everything will begin to shine!
To discover the secret of life, follow this emotional rhyme!

BOTTLED EMOTIONS ARE ON SALE

Niya Balcheva, 2nd English Language High School, Sofia

Someone knocked on the door of the Mirror house. Beatrys lifted her head from the black coat that was laying in her lap. The blood did not come out of the fabric despite her efforts. She moaned in despair and put the cloth away.

The knocking became more and more insistent while she was aiming for the door.

The Mirror house creaked indignantly. Beatrys was used to the bad tempered behaviour of her cottage. It usually did not like the clients of her owner. Although this time the witch sensed that it was more than the simple displease of humanity that made the Mirror house upset.

“Be quiet,” Beatrys murmured. “You don’t want to get us killed, do you?”

The symphony of strange noises dried up.

The witch opened the door. There was a guard on the threshold. A young man with long blond braid and grey eyes. They looked even colder than the autumn day outside. Beatrys was glad for the fireplace and all of the candles in the Mirror house.

“Let me guess. You are here for the sale.”

The soldier nodded. He looked distressed and Beatrys couldn’t blame him for it. It was unusual for someone working against magic to seek its help.

With the edge of her eye she read the sign on the outer side of her door. “Bottled emotions are on sale,” it said.

“What’s your name?”

“Thobbias,” the man said after a moment of hesitation.

“Very well. Now when I know what to call you, I can easily put a spell on you,” she laughed. “Think twice before you do something stupid.”

Perhaps Beatrys saw a smile on the face of the guard as he was following her into the house. The witch was amused as well but not because she was joking.

Thobbias was looking around with curiosity. The walls of her house were all covered with mirrors – some of them were cheap. Others had delicate silver frames which were glowing in the darker corners of the room. The light here was soft and the scent of wood, herbs, and old paper was surrounding them.

“It looks smaller from the outside,” Thobbias stated.

It really did, Beatrys thought. She made a spell on the house so it wouldn't look suspicious for the travellers who often passed the building. That's why she needed all of the mirrors actually. In the cottage there were dozens of rooms which were hidden from her clients.

Beatrys settled on the pile of colorful pillows on the floor.

"If you could excuse my curiosity, I would like to ask why you need my help. Your king is the reason the magic in our world is weakened. People like you usually seem to support his decisions."

The man did not sit. Beatrys could feel his raging emotions. Thobbias needed to share his story even with someone like her.

"My wife and I decided to create a family together years ago. We had a beautiful daughter. She looked a lot like you actually – black eyes that sparkle when she is smiling. Long hair, pale skin. I always knew she was magical even before we found out about her powers. She was a child when the witch hunt began. I had to kill her so she wouldn't be suffering more."

"Witch hunter, witch hunter, witch hunter," the Mirror house whispered.

"After what happened my wife isn't the same. She is like a ghost that's unable to feel anything. That's why I need these bottles. I can't stand the thought of losing her too."

Beatrys could sense his emotions – sadness, anger and remorse. That was all she needed.

The witch stood up and took the rest of the bottles she had. The tubes were colourful and looked alive. Their etiquettes were showing the emotions every single one of them contained.

"Take them all. You don't need to pay for them."

She tried her best to smile. Thobbias did the same as he was putting the bottles in the pocket of his uniform.

"Thank you."

Beatrys turned around so she could open the door for him.

That was when she felt the metal dagger impaling her heart.

"Thank you for letting me find peace again."

Even in her final moments, Beatrys could feel how his range disappeared.

"Someday all of the magic will be completely destroyed," Thobbias promised. "No one will suffer any longer."

"Witch hunter, witch hunter, witch hunter," the Mirror house screamed. It didn't matter because its owner was already dead.

THE SMELL OF SILENCE WAS EVERYWHERE

Gabriela Neycheva, 4th Foreign Language High School Frederic-Joliot Currie, Varna

It all started approximately 200 million years ago. No, I'm not kidding. It's safe to say that this story has been in the works for a while now. I wouldn't label it *my* story simply because that couldn't be furthest from the truth. The mere use of the word "story" implies that it's not just about me: a real story could never belong to one person only, after all. We're all tangled, interconnected, the invisible strings that connect us stretching but never breaking.

So, the beginning is as distant as it can get and it is not clear how exactly it all turned out to be the way it is nowadays, when there are seven continents instead of just a giant chunk of land like back then. One thing is for sure, though: there were trees, wetlands and volcanic lava. Then, the lengthy, million-year process started. Involved were ash particles, tiny minerals, dust and, somewhere in-between, invisible streams of fate. It may sound pretentious to assume that a force as important and as strong as destiny would care enough to create a perfectly chaotic mess resulting in my existence. But it seems like it did, because here I am, sat in my dad's old SUV, my fingers curled up around a small rock. Only it is not a rock, it is petrified wood. That's right. Remember the weird stuff I was talking about? All that "trees, lava, 200 million years ago" incomprehensible narrative? All of those things aren't just a figment of my imagination. They are real, and have been long before any Homo Sapiens existed. The evidence is right before my eyes, in the Petrified Forest National Park, full of both little and enormous fragments of those trees that have been around long enough to witness the dinosaurs' extinction. How? Well, the splashes of water and lava that I mentioned made sure the logs turned into half-fossil, half-mineral rocks. And people from all around the USA come here to see them while contemplating the inevitable truth: our lives are insignificant even compared to those of some lifeless mix of tree and quartz.

As a resident of a small town in the state of Arizona, where the park is located, I was aware of the its existence ever since I was a little kid. Regardless, I had never visited it, partly because I was never one of the children wildly interested in nature, partly because after my mother's death my father never had the time to bring me here. But now I'm here and despite the fact that I took Dad's car for the solo road trip, it feels like my mother is way more present now than he is. I'd like to believe it's because I think about her so often that her spirit is always with me, but I know it's just the effect that the piece of paper I'm holding has on me. She left it for me before she died, a sheet full of her cursive writing, that reads "Bucket List". And I'm about to check the last item on it, which says "Return this rock to Petrified Forest National Park. Demand to see the letters. Your luck is in your own hands."

I tenderly grabbed the piece of petrified wood again, wondering why she asked me to return it. The other items on the list were trivial, easy-to-guess things that are probably on anyone's bucket list: go skinny-dipping, kiss a stranger, get familiar with the town where you were born. Although they were fun to complete for the sake of making my mother smile in heaven, they never intrigued me as much as this one.

Ten minutes after I parked the car and went through the bucket list again, I 'm standing in front of the cabin of the park rangers. The smell of silence was everywhere. A girl opens the door after the third knock and when she hears my demand about the letters, she smiles.

'Are you a journalist or something?' she asks, her smile still wide.

'No, my mother sent me here.'

'Is she here?'

'Well, she's dead,' I answer, causing awkward silence. 'But she made a bucket list for me, all around the state. She left this rock for me and suggested I return it and ask to see the letters.'

The staff member nods, then goes back into the cabin. When she returns she welcomes me in, pointing to a giant pile of letters sitting on an oak desk in the corner of the room.

'I suppose you don't know why your mother sent you here, so I'm gonna explain. Long story short, you know that the petrified wood pieces are very precious. Not in price, but they are important because of how they were formed and all. They are like the plant equivalent of dinosaur fossils, you know. So, naturally, when this park opened people started stealing little fragments as souvenirs. It wasn't until the 1930's that they realized,' she says, letting out a sigh. 'They realized that theft is bad. Not because of their moral compass or anything. There was just a rumor that whoever took a piece, had bad luck for the rest of their life. So they started mailing us not only the rocks, but apology letters as well.'

I took a look at the pile, then grab a letter and start reading it. For all I know, I don't stop reading until hours later. Does bad luck exist? I'm not really sure. People have shared some horrible stories about divorces, death and all of that after they had stolen a petrified wood piece. But then, they returned them, however late. They took the matter in their own hands. So that was my mother's message: to take control of my own fate.

THE SMELL OF SILENCE WAS EVERYWHERE

Zlatimira Milcheva, Prof. Assen Zlatarov Foreign Languages High School, Haskovo

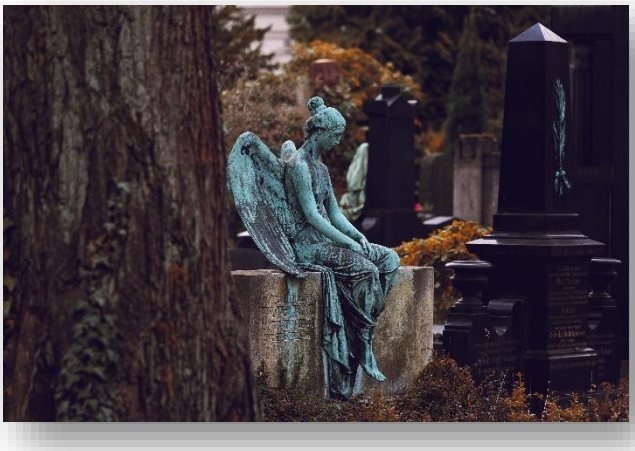
It was on a freezing winter day when I noticed the cold rainwater dripping down from the ivy leaves onto the grave. Cold fog was filling the graveyard no more than the silence of the crowd. You could hear drops falling into the muddy ground; aching; filling the space as far as I could hear. Heavy was the air that I breathed. It went into my nostrils, filled my lungs with pain, and went out into an empty void we called funeral while leaving a stench of a certain awkwardness caused by silence.

I was suffocated by it. The silence. Indeed, I would not expect more from such a group of people so high up the clouds they didn't even bother about it. As far as I was concerned, it had been there for months, but it was time it finally killed one of us. If you're wonders whose grave I was standing over – it was Tom's – the boy who had fallen a victim to the quietness. I can give you a slight insight to how it started but not to when, since it absorbed all five of us piece by piece, pulling us apart.

First there was the summer, that eventful summer before eleventh grade. Every member of the group had made a promise to stay together until we graduate. But it all started with Molly. She was the daughter of our town's mayor and wouldn't miss an opportunity to be the queen of every party she came across. This didn't make Tom too happy. After all, she was his girlfriend and he never agreed to letting her go to a party alone, until one day he had to. I never found out what happened at that party. All I know is that the next day Molly no longer sat with us at lunch and the smell of silence had filled the first us.

Next, there was Jenny, the cute nerdy girl. The moment I noticed how relentlessly she made that promise I knew she wasn't going to keep it. And she didn't. Jenny spent the entire summer in Italy, we didn't hear a word from her until two days before school started. She had changed. Her blonde hair was replaced by a greenish colour and she had completely subdued to the fashion life. Needless to say, she was gone too, every time I passed her, I could smell the same silence I smelled with Molly.

Tom was slowly overcome by the smell. The absence of Molly started it. I never noticed when exactly it got him. It was there when he started walking past me, when he looked away, but he was the only one from whom I could smell it even when he answered and talked to me. The silence had got him fully. It was there when he laughed and smiled. It filled every inch in the room when he entered.



At that funeral the smell of silence was everywhere – in Molly, in Jenny, in Tom's grave. Each molecule was drenched in it. I had strayed away from it for too long. Perhaps, at this moment, it was starting to get to me too.

SHE KILLED ME WITH A SMILE

Mihaela Ivanova, Yoan Ekzarh Foreign Languages High School, Varna

THE REVENGE OF THE MUSE

I'm struggling with my own magic time,
my time so close and even far away.
I'm struggling with my own fearless rhymes,
with my own fearless light within the day…

I'm struggling with tiers to find the muse,
to find my own direction back to home,
I heard that happiness is stronger than abuse,
I heard the synonym of strong is just alone…

I'm struggling and tried to kill myself,
to kill myself with fear, and pain, and tiers.
I'm taking some old books from dusty shelve
to see what helped the people through the years,

To find another way, to find a muse,
to see the inspiration of the man
My only opportunity to choose
Is choosing just between the death and pain…

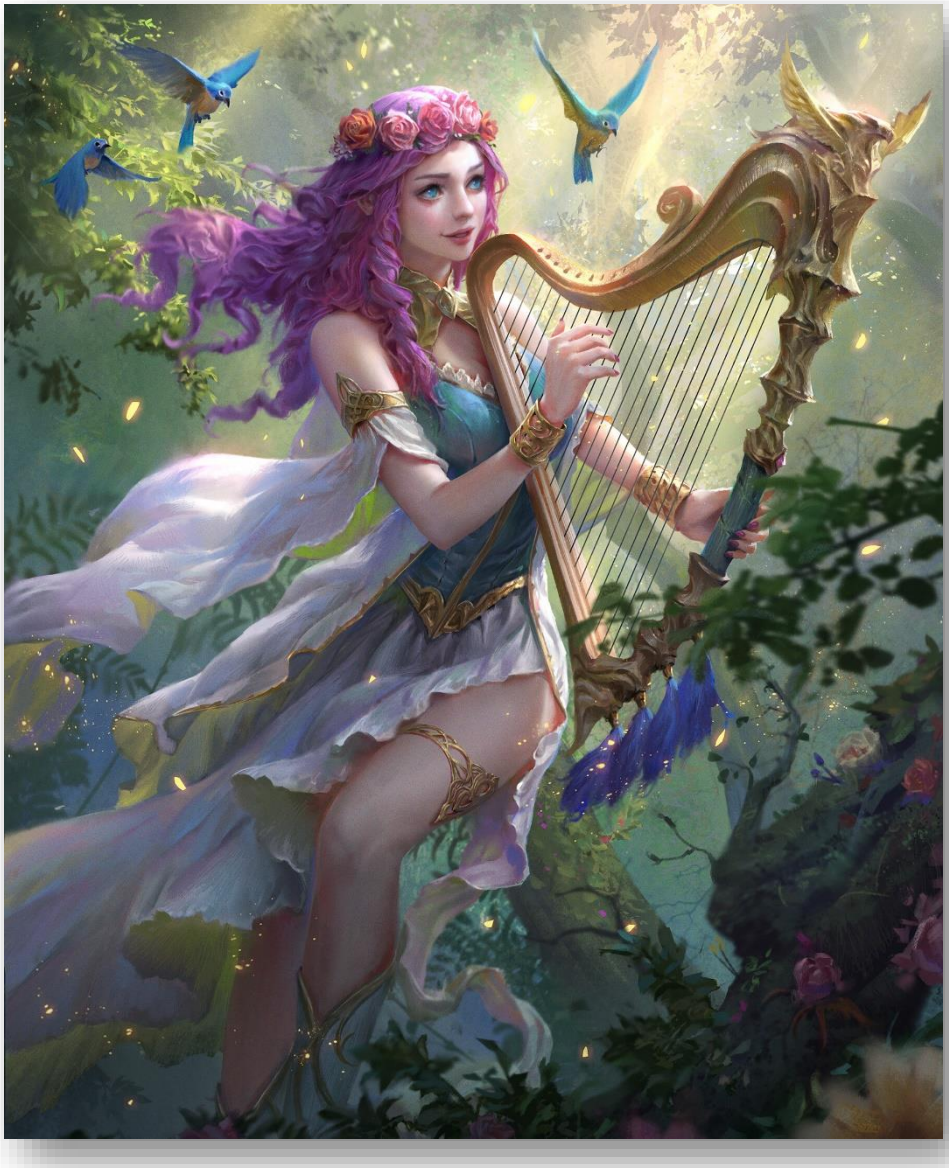
And something is just killing me inside.
The muse is here, it's just in front of me,
But I'm the only one, who's by my side,
I have no ears to hear and eyes to see:

To see the muse-she's there inside the books,
to hear the muse-she's in a song of birds,
so blinded from the light, the way it looks
and stunned, too, from the other people's words.

I thought just: „I'm about to die".
I thought my killer was the sadness,
I didn't give a chance for me to try,
I didn't give a chance for muse's madness...

And that's why now I'm actually dying,
I didn't see the happiness, the muse,
she killed me with a smile, while I was flying,
I'm not calling myself a loser, but I lose…

And that is happening with pessimistic people
and also people who can never change.
The muse she killed me, yes, for not believing
in her own power of the smile. It's a revenge...



WHEN NOTHING IS GOING RIGHT, GO LEFT

Lyubomir Yanchev, 4th Foreign Language High School Frederic-Joliot

"Go right," they said, "right is always fun." they said.

Yeah right, for all the times any of us have joked about how going right is always an adequate choice, here is some food for thought: What if every time you turned right on a road, you got closer and closer to Tartarus. You know, the deadly chasm where only devilish beings can dwell for only so long. Ok, so we're going left – right? Wrong. Left is where Death awaits, at a river bank. It just sits there, patiently waiting your arrival. You can only turn right so many times to avoid it. So, here's the riddle. How do you get out of this road alive?

You turned here by accident, you were driving on the main road to Nashville and suddenly you took a swerve to the right. You drove for about half an hour before noticing something was off. The trees you were passing by started to appear in repeated patterns. The road ahead had the same bumps and holes as the one before it. The sky was tainted grey, but the clouds were not moving. You took out a map to check your location. After careful studying the roads you noticed that you have swerved on an path, not marked on any map you open. You start to panic – this is impossible, it has to be, the nearest road should be in a 10 minutes ride away from you, but you haven't seen another car in 40 minutes. This is odd. For now at least, don't worry, it gets worse.

After scrambling about in your car, horrified, you think of a plan. You think to yourself: if the road going forward won't lead out of here, then maybe the one going back will take me on the main road again. So you start the engine and you turn your vehicle south. After no more than 10 minutes of driving you step on the breaks, as your car lets out a horrible screech. In front of you stays a man, a farmer maybe, that's what you make of his clothing – his straw hat, short-sleeved shirt and well-worn trousers.

"Heya." he greets you, "wat'cha doin' out here, driving all by ya'self?"

More shocked than scared you speak.

"I–I got lost, I was going down the main road when I took a turn to the right. And this road seems unending... Do you know a way out of here?"

Honestly, it's a relief seeing another human being amidst this odd situation. You notice that mist starts to crawl up around the road.

"Poor being," the man chuckles, "you won't get out of here."

Your heart drops, chills run down your spine. The man is calm as a lake in the garden of Eden. He points to you.

"You will head down this road again and you will see it split into two. Take the right again and you will reach Tartarus – the gate to hell – where you will eventually fall into oblivion and be forgotten, at the very least it won't hurt though. That's what you should do."

You gulp and timidly ask:

"And what if I go left?"

The man stares at you for a second than smiles maliciously and says with an unnatural grin.

"Nobody goes left. If you go left you will see her on the river bank. A large indiscernible silhouette with a scythe in one hand and a clock in the other. She will judge you, and you will die."

...

So what now? If you go left, you'll die, if you go right you might have a chance of seeing the bottom, but you will still be forgotten. The latter won't hurt as much though, so it seems like the obvious choice, right?

That's what you think to yourself after your conversation with the man, who in turn bids you farewell and goes off into the distance. You take a moment to contemplate your situation – what did you do to deserve this? To need to make such an atrocious choice. No one should ever have to choose between these two things. Have you been evil to deserve this? Maybe... But then again, I'm not here to judge you, I'm just telling your story so that the next person knows what to do in this situation. Sorry, but you'll have to figure this out on your own, buddy.

You turn car around and start driving again. Eventually, you reach an area where the trees are starting to get taller. Their branches twist in unnatural ways and block the minimal amount of sunlight that is pouring in from the sky. The mist has now spread over the road as well, and it's getting thicker. The road itself is getting narrower by the second, eventually becoming so narrow that only one car can drive on it. Finally, you reach the split. It isn't what you expected to see, no signs, no tree marks, no nothing – just a road that splits into two.

You've been thinking about what the man told you on your way here. About whether to go left and die a gruesome death, or go right and suffer less in the tides of oblivion. You remember his words as fear and anxiety of the upcoming choice start to floor you mind. "Nobody goes left. If you go left... you will die." you recall what he said. You mind tries to neglect, it tries to deny the reality you're presented with, it can't handle it. Tears stream down your cheeks as you realise your death is imminent. Desperation steps in.

...and then there is silence.

A moment of peace before the tragedy. You've already made your choice – you are going right. That's the only logical thing to do, isn't it? No one wants to suffer. Nobody goes left. So why should you? You swallow the rest of your tears and just as you step on the pedal...

Wait a minute. What **are you doing**? Did you really just choose to be forgotten just to save yourself some pain? How selfish. How cowardly.

...oh, what is that? That's not how it happened? Really?

Of course, it didn't. You realised something vital, moments before heading off to your death. **You** are **you** because **you** make the choices in your life! Are you seriously going to do what someone else has told you just because it was **right**?

SCREW GOING RIGHT!

YOU ARE GOING LEFT!

Because how can you know if something is the right thing for you, if you don't try it? If everyone has gone **right** and has suffered less, then you're going **left**, because you aren't "Nobody", you are Somebody. And most importantly of all – you will be REMEMBERED.

Before you have the time to doubt yourself, you violently turn left, going down on a bumpy and wrecked cement road. You drive for a few minutes, stepping on the pedal as hard as you can, until the scene changes.

...you arrive at a quaint little lake, with booming flowers on its banks. Near it lay quietly an old wooden cabin made of oak. And on the shore you see her. A beautiful, vibrant young lady, with not a scythe but a comb, and with not a clock but a basket full of fruit. She turns to you, she smiles. Her pink cheeks light up.

You get out of your car an approach her, with a strange relief. She hands you over a bright golden apple and she invites you to sit beside her. You have a moment of peace with this lady then you ask:

"Why am I not dead?"

She giggles and looks at you with her shining blue eyes.

"You are the first one to make it, the first who dared to see me."

BEING LAZY IS A TRUE ART

Yordan Vrabchev, Nikola Obreshkov Math & Science High School, Burgas

„Take your time, Elliot, and just let go of all your worries, lay down and chill out", whispered Elliot to himself. How could I though? Why would I? I've got so much to do, so many places to explore, emotions to feel. I drink my coffee every day and just set off on the next adventure. The overload of energy running vehemently through my veins, making my heart pump like crazy; just the very thought of these massive majestic landscapes to behold and capture, to get immersed into, all the people and their hues, vivid and eclectic, with personalities ample and thoughts as bright and plentiful as the stars in the night sky. The stars… all those shiny little dots, confidently standing up to the dark night sky and exclaiming "Shoo,

shoo,

big blue guy",

pulling a face,

sitting, oblivious to, or despite of their insignificance,

shining.

And not see my buddies every night. Never! Never would I just lay down in bed, my head upside down, staring at the grey walls of my bedroom, sporadically throwing an eye at the ceiling, the window maybe, getting agitated by the fact that it is framing the whole wide world I could explore at that moment.

Off with that white frame of yours!

I want to see colours!

And not hearing the buzzing of the cars, the melodies produced by birds and leaves in harmony, the murmuring of the droves and droves of people, crumpled in the little big world we live in. The cute puppies barking, just waiting to be pet, the cats, just ignoring you while you try to catch their attention. The kids who think they are on the top of the world just because they have learned that super cool trick with their skateboards.

And all the motions,

leaving their invisible traces behind,

and their traces in your mind…

At home there is the grey wall, you standing with your head upside down and just staring.
Staring.

All is dormant.

All is dull.

I cannot comprehend how I could just drop my wonderful coffee cup, let it fall down the kitchen floor, let it hit some hole in the wall, and disappear in the vortex hidden behind the cupboard. If I just laze away, how will I ever find out what happened to my coffee cup? It has maybe gone down the hole,

rolled down a spiral, specifically created by those witty mice I know are hiding somewhere and at night are stealing my favourite cottage cheese,

down through their diminutive tunnels,

until it reaches the end. There, a figure, a formidable creature, just its two fingers managing barely to get my cup and, finally,

having got hold of it, just looks at it for a second and smirks. And then, throws it into the abyss. And there my cup perishes and I am doomed to never again feel enjoyment from drinking my coffee from this particular cup and just get depressed and dreary and unwilling to even move. Just from that one act of laziness,

I have lost a precious object.

And for good!

No, Elliot, you can't let yourself betray that cup which has served you tirelessly all life long. I can feel the warm tears of mine just falling like waterfalls. The screams I let out for I feel a bleak helplessness,

for am a traitor

and my slip

has costed

a life.

Elliot. Relax. It could be for the better. The cup is not gone.

It is thriving in there! Witty mice? They are quite cool actually, and are just doing their job to get their stomachs filled up. That is no evil doing, Elliot. They are middlemen. Well, middlemice, occupied in the transporting business, working for a boss, who is not obliterating objects down in its dark realm, but is a kind, lovable person, a magician who wants to assure that every object is granted a fate full of joy and light. My cup is not forsaken, for good consumed by that ravenous tornado, filled with irk and loathing, never again feeling at peace and at home. It is taken by the hand by a charming gust of rainbow wind, to a majestic steed that will accompany it to the land of coffee.

There are lakes and rivers,

oceans and sees of coffee,

depressingly flowing by, waiting for a cup, a special, amazing cup, to fill.

Here comes my cup,

finally, within the cup heaven,

perpetually strolling about,

filling her bottomless self with warm coffee.

Isn't that the dream?

And it happened only because I lazed.

That's a disturbing thought… Perhaps I should actually not always act,

and not always be on the run,

always feeling extensively and intensively,

always filling my head up with vivid memories and…

just lay in bed and ponder, beholding my grey wall, the ceiling and sometimes the window. Could there be a gateway like the one behind my cupboard just below my bed? And where does it lead to?

My thoughts were ceased by a shout, a knock, and my mum, with hands on her hips, looking at me exasperated.

„Mister, get out of bed already! It's late afternoon, and you have not got up yet? It's dark outside already. How could you stay so peacefully, just staring at that blank wall of yours? C'mon! Get up and go have you break… dinner, actually. And quickly, you've got homework to do afterwards!"

BEING LAZY IS A TRUE ART

Iva Bankova, Yoan Ekzarh Foreign Languages High School, Varna

Aergia

Trapped in a wild-goose chase
Like a desperate knight I came
In the court of Hypnos
Searching for my long lost fame
Numb were my lips
I stood confined to the ground

As thorns with nothing else
But blood began to wrap around
My legs, my heart
They wanted to finally rest
I gave up trying
The sloth was like pest
As soon as I fell
I lost track of my goal
My deeply desired
Fame and control
I felt like a sailor
Gone mad from the song
Of one beauteous siren
Now lost in the fog
Dizziness, calmness, chimera
Desire to stay right where I am
Desire to die in the hands of inertia
Desire to lay down and wait for the gem
The gem of this court
Her name is the slothy Aergia
She's more than enchanting
This beauty Aergia
She's queen of supremacy
Art for my heart.

IF ONLY SHE HADN'T CHOSEN THE RED ONE

Nadezhda Zlatareva, Plovdiv Language School, Plovdiv

"Emily. Emily, wake up. Come on, we have to leave." – her brother said as he leaned over her and poked her cheek.

"Right" – Emily answered. She'd forgotten they were going to their grandmother's.

She never liked going to the village.

It was very small, with very few villagers. There weren't many children or young people. The air always smelled like manure and grass. You could only hear birds chirping and the sounds farm animals made. Many would find that relaxing, but Emily just didn't understand how. It was weird. It felt like she was all alone, like she was lost forever. Plus, the villagers acted kind of creepy around her. They always talked about an old legend, but they never told it to her.

"Well, whatever." – she thought every time she had to go to the village. – "At least I'll know that grandma is alright and I'll get to see the garden."

The garden was a strange place. Many people didn't like it and didn't even get close to it. Emily often wondered why. It was probably the only place and thing she liked in the village.

The garden was on a hill west of the village. It was a really nice place. It was completely quiet and smelled like flowers, not like manure as the village did.

Anyway, why was it even called "The garden"? It didn't look like a garden at all. It was kind of too wild to be called a garden. Right on top of the hill, a tree grew. No one knew what kind of tree it was. People just called it Josh. And around Josh grew all kinds of flowers. Sunflowers, chrysanthemums, daffodils, hydrangea, carnation, and others which Emily didn't know the names of. There were many wild flowers, too. Every year, different kinds of flowers bloomed. And they grew in an almost perfect circle around the tree. That was kind of weird, considering the fact that nobody ever went there. Besides herself, of course, but she only sat there. She didn't take care of the garden.

There was another weird thing. Was there actually anything normal about this place, Emily sometimes wondered. She didn't care too much, though. She really loved the garden, after all. There was no way something stupid would stop her from going there. But about the weird thing, she didn't feel alone and lost when she sat in the garden. The feeling she had there was nothing like the one she had in the village. She felt safe. Like something was protecting her, keeping her from danger, from getting lost and being alone. She loved that feeling and cherished it.

So Emily went to the garden.

There were many flowers, like usual. This year, she couldn't tell the names of many. There were sunflowers and poppies. Still, what were the others, she couldn't tell.

Emily sat down and looked around herself.

“So pretty…” – she thought.

The way the flowers surrounded her brought her that feeling. That feeling of being safe. It felt like they were calling out to her. Like they were saying “Come closer, come to us. Sit with us and we will protect you. We will take care of you, don’t worry. You’re not alone here. You know where you are, so you aren’t lost, right? Come, come, come. Sit down and breathe in. You can feel our sweet smell, can’t you? It’s really nice, right? We worked hard to produce it…”

“Now, here. Pick one of us. Whichever you like, whichever you want, whichever you choose. Go on, don’t worry.”

Every year was the same. Emily picked a flower and tacked it in her hair or held it to her chest. And when she did, she felt like the flowers were thanking her. As if they smiled at her and sang gently as the calm breeze blew in her hair.

This year, Emily decided to pick a poppy. There were many different poppies, of course. There were white, pink and red ones, small and big ones, ones with round leaves and ones with pointy leaves, with black, blue, green seeds…

Emily made her choice and picked a big, red poppy. Suddenly, everything went dark. It was fine, of course. The flowers were protecting her. But what was going on? Emily stood up, not letting go of the poppy. There was a white light coming from the direction of the tree. And there, in the light, stood a man.

Poppy went to him, hoping he could tell her what is happening.

“Hello?” – Emily spoke.

The man didn’t answer. He offered her his hand.

She took it and they were gone.

The next year, another tree grew next to Josh.

“If only she hadn’t chosen the red one…” – the villagers said to each other when they told the legend.

DESPITE THE BLINDFOLD, HE KNEW EXACTLY WHERE HE WAS

Gergana Alexandrova, Atanas Radev Math and Science High School, Yambol

It had already been three years since Robert lost his sight completely. Three years of complete darkness. Three years during which he relied only on his other senses to get things done and walk around his small flat. And he had gotten used to it – to all the loneliness and darkness… Or at least that's what he claimed when his children offered to put him in a retirement home. He didn't want to be a burden to them. He referred to his blindness as "a blindfold" and told them that he could always take it off and "see" with his hands or ears. That also helped with his grandchildren who used to be afraid of him.

But despite all his efforts, his son and daughter decided to put him in a facility for the elderly. To compensate that, they decided to surprise him with a trip to a special place on his birthday. And when the day came, they all got in the car and drove away. Robert didn't know where they were going and they refused to tell him. He was getting quite annoyed but decided not to say anything.

After maybe a two-hour-long drive, he felt the car stopping and his daughter's voice rang in his ears.

"We are finally here!" – she said excitedly. His son helped him out of the car and Robert could tell he was also excited.

"Can you guess where we are, dad"- his son's voice trembled.

Robert turned his head around, as if he was looking around, and breathed in the fresh mountain air. And he knew!!! They were near their old cottage house. He hadn't visited it since the troubles with his eyes began, but he could have never mistaken that particular smell – the smell of life and happiness. All his memories came flashing in his mind and he couldn't help it but shed a tear or two.

When they walked in the house the smell changed. It was that woody smell he had been dreaming of for the past few months. But there was something other in the air too – love… Oh yes, he could feel the love of his dear wife – Jane. They had met in the near village and that was their first home as a family, but they had to move to the city to find better-paid jobs. But they weren't nearly as happy in the small flat as they used to be here…

Jane had passed away a decade ago and her final wish was to die at peace here. And when that time came Robert drove her here and held her hand as she fell asleep one last time…

Oh, Jane… He would never forget how beautiful she was, how her eyes sparkled every time she saw him and the way she laughed… Robert could swear he hadn't heard a sweeter sound… And now, as he stood in the middle of the living room, he could swear he felt her hand in his… He was overwhelmed. That was the best birthday gift he could have gotten. He smiled, ever so slightly, and gently whispered "Wait for me… we will be together again soon…"

After that he turned to his children and hugged them tight, thanking them and telling them how much he loved them. They spend the rest of the day talking and laughing and in the evening he convinced to spend the night there.

When he finally fell asleep, he dreamed of Jane. He dreamed of her, telling him to take his blindfold of and that's what he did. And there she was, standing in front of him with those sparkling eyes. He smiled and took her hand…

When his son and daughter came to wake him up in the morning, they found out that he had passed away in his sleep. But neither of them cried, because they knew he was happy now and was finally able to see again…

THE SMELL OF SILENCE WAS EVERYWHERE

Gergana Dimitrova, St. Sedmochislenitsi Secondary School, Targovishte

– So, I won't ask twice. I need to know what happened.

– I… I don't know anything…

The big tattooed man behind me stood menacingly. I could feel his gaze on the nape of my neck, where my hairs stood still. An uncomfortable cold sweat layered my back and hands. I didn't want my voice to waiver, so I pushed my stubborn tongue town to lay on the flatness of a calm demeanor. I knew there was no going out if I didn't tell them anything. They knew enough to recognize my "I know nothing" act.

– Fine…

– Good girl. Now, how did you first learn about the facility?

– I was at my grandma's place a few days ago.

– Has she told you anything – he immediately interrupted.

– No, I've never heard her say a single word. Through all the years I've known her she had such bad dementia she thought she was blind, deaf, couldn't hear, smell, taste, feel, no nothing.

– Good, carry on.

I should've paid attention to that weird little line of his, even though I'm not sure that would've changed anything…

– We had to clear out her house after she passed away so we can sell it, but she had so much stuff it took us forever…

– Go along – his cold eyes pierced my gut.

– Well, there was this room that was just filled to the brim with junk. While I was cleaning it up, I noticed a crack on the wall. But not a normal crack, it was somehow also popping out. I got worried it would be an issue for the buyers and decided to check it out. I found a small opening that was obviously covered up after the main construction. There were dozens of files and documents.

– So, you read the documents that were hidden in the wall? – he made it more than clear he didn't believe me.

– Well of course, I thought my grandma was trying to commit some sort of tax fraud.

– Do you even know how tax fraud works?

– Well, no, but… I… anyhow I started reading and I thought it was for some kind of fantasy book or something. There were these descriptions of… I don't even know what they were. Creatures? They were classified and numbered and shit… I mean… and stuff. And erm… I thought it was some kind of joke, so I left them there… Maybe the next owners found them and took them seriously…

The man suddenly stood up, pushing his chair back with a loud screech. I jumped in my seat as my stomach sank. The heavy figure behind me started breathing heavily as if excited to finally do something to me. Something bad.

The interrogator had this look in his eyes that was deprived of any mercy. The shadows on his face made him look like a demon and his long arm freaked me out.

– Do you like living? – he asked, more calmly than ever as a drop of sweat dropped from his forehead.

I lost my cool. I froze. The blood gushing through my ears was the loudest sound ever. The smell of silence was everywhere…

– W-what? – I could feel the blood leave my face as I almost choked on my own voice.

– Do you like living? – he continued, this time more sternly.

– Yes – I almost couldn't hear myself.

– Then tell me the truth, okay? – his voice almost sounded kind and assuring if it wasn't for the wall with chains behind him.

I just swallowed and shook my head lightly.

– I um…

Don't cry. Please don't cry.

– There were pictures. A lot of them. Attached to the files. They were weird but they looked real so I didn't know what to think.

– What were they?

– There was this one of a giant slug. The description said it sprayed toxic waste and that it could dissolve anything on earth, including the earth itself. There was like a name of a volcano there, but I'm not sure what…

– P-78… Okay, what about the others?

– I saw a thermal picture, but it didn't show much. Just these little specs that were glowing like they were hot. It said something about self-multiplying radiation and something about Chernobyl, but I didn't read it all. And then there was this crystal ball in a box…

The man suddenly looked horrified. The type of horrified you see on people's faces in movies right when they realize humanity is doomed. He stood from his chair and in milliseconds his face was right next to mine. He clutched my arms with his big long hands and whispered, as if anyone could hear:

– What did you do with it?

– I put it back.

– You… do you know what that thing does? – His eyes were about to pop out of his sockets.

– I… I don't, no.

– It… hold on.

He went to his phone and called someone. They whispered to each other and used codes I knew nothing of. Then, slowly and calmly, he turned to me and began to explain things.

– I'm going to make this very clear, okay? I need you to know we're not bad people for what we're about to do, okay?

There was that silence again. That terrifying, deep, daring silence.

– Okay – I answered lightly as tears were rolling down my face.

– So, the thing you found is very, very dangerous. And we need to get it to protect everyone. Do you understand? Yes? Good. A few years back we visited a small village in South Africa. There was this small ritual hut in the middle of the village. Looked normal on the outside, sure, but on the inside it was an enormous space with all kinds of holes, entrances, dolls, stones, runes, painting… and they all seemed to lead to nonsensical places. Floors on the celling, space, oceans made up of lava… But really, they all lead to different dimensions. And we can't just let that be, right? So, we put it in another room, but then that room lost its place and time. And then we put it in a box, but if somehow this box gets left open it will devour us, do you understand? We don't know where we'll go or what will happen to us. Where did you leave the box?

– I um… I put it back in the hole in the wall.

– Okay… okay good…

After that, a sudden flash hit my eyes and I fell to my knees. I couldn't do anything. I was trapped in my body.

For twenty years, I was trapped. Everyone thought I had dementia, but really, I couldn't move my own body. Couldn't talk or write…

And now, with my last remaining piece of sanity I tell you this, somehow having been able to write, defying everything I've ever known.

But it might be too late now. I had left the box open. And I lied about where I put it. So now I finally believe them, because when I looked out the window a month ago there was a hole where the moon should be. And it gets bigger each night.

WHEN NOTHING IS GOING RIGHT, GO LEFT

Anton Pantev, Nikola Obreshkov Math & Science High School, Burgas

I look around the space I'm standing in, but I see nothing. Everything is pitch-black, no source of light to illuminate my surroundings. I feel my heart beating in my chest so rapidly, as if it's about to explode. I have a headache, as if someone is bursting my head open.

'Where am I?', I whisper to myself, but am unable to answer. It's so painful and I just want it to end.

Then, all of a sudden, everything swooshes to a stop. I open my eyes wide open, take a deep breath and realize I am in my living room in my house. There are plenty of people around me, they're dressed fancy and are holding wine glasses in their hands. They are talking and laughing, they really seem to be enjoying themselves. I look down and I see myself wearing a long, black dress and high heels. Then I feel a hand gliding around my waist and I startle.

'Woah, relax, it's just me', tells me some man whom I have never before seen in my life.

'And you must be…', I ask him, to which he simply replies with a laugh. He has a broad, shining smile. I can sense he's a good guy, but I have no recollection whatsoever of his identity.

'Very funny', he replies. 'Come on, your guests are waiting.'

He gently guides me into the center of the spacious room. I feel all the stares on my whole body, like insects crawling on my bare skin. I hate this. I scan the room for any familiar faces, but then the strangest thought strikes my mind – I don't have any familiar faces. At this precise moment I can think of no person existing in my life. When I start to think about it more, I realize I can't remember my life at all.

The man shoots me a look of affection, and proceeds to hit his glass with a fork in order to get everyone's attention. The voices slowly fade away to silence and everyone's eyes are focused on the two of us.

He clears his throat. 'Hi everyone. Thank you so much for coming. I'm so glad me and Caroline get to celebrate our tenth anniversary with such amazing people. And Caroline', he then turns to me again and our eyes lock, 'I'm so happy and honored I get to spend my whole life with you'.

My stomach drops instantly. When he says my name out loud it's as if a thunder has struck me in broad daylight. Unexpectedly a tsunami wave of memories floods my whole mind.

My name is Caroline O'Brien. I'm thirty-five years old, I live in a small town in California, I work as a cashier in a big-chain supermarket. I don't belong in this place, and I definitely do not have a husband.

Tears form in my eyes. I waste no time to think and burst out of the room. I can hear the murmur of the crowd behind me, but I don't care, I don't know any of these people anyway. I find the nearest bathroom and lock myself in. I take a look in the mirror and audibly gasp. I touch around my face in a shock. 'I'm look so young and beautiful', I whisper to myself.

More memories start to race into my mind. I have two kids, a ten-year-old and a five-year-old. I did have a husband, but he left us so long ago. I remember losing my job. They took away my kids. Kyle

and Austin, I now recall. These are their names, my babies… I now begin to sob uncontrollably, sitting on the cold bathroom floor.

Someone knocks on the door. 'Occupied', I reply through my tears, but the person keeps on knocking. I wipe my face with the back of my hand and burst the door open. Now there is another man in front of me, old, around sixty maybe, looking at me with a smile.

'Hello Caroline', he says with a soft but kind of raspy voice.

'I-I'm sorry, do I know you?', I ask him, to which he chuckles.

'No, no you don't, really. But I have something to tell you, so why don't you come with me will you?' He reaches his arm towards me expectedly and after a few considering seconds I take it. We leave the house and the party behind us. 'Let's go for a walk, shall we,' he says to me.

As we're walking around this neighborhood, which I've never seen before, he begins to talk.

'Now, Caroline, do you remember anything from your life', he asks.

'Um… yes, sort of', I reply cautiously.

'Hm… that's not really what was supposed to happen. Let me ask you – what is the last thing you remember?'

I take second to think and then it hits me.

I am driving my car on the road outside my hometown; tears are flowing down my face as I step on the gas more and more. I've just been fired, and I know that when I come home I am going to find a social service worker in my house. It's dark again, and it's snowing. I can't see the road very well. And then I come to an intersection. Every single day I pass through here, and every single time I turn right towards my home. This time I decide to turn left.

I have no idea where I'm going; all I know is that I so desperately need to escape. The speedometer shows 90 now, but I don't care even a bit. And then it appears, out of nowhere, a deer in the middle of the road. I scream, and I turn the wheel trying not to hit it, causing the car to sway out of the road. On the left of the path is a deep abyss, which I find myself plunging into.

I hit my head a million times, and when the car finally finds the bottom, I am dead.

'Now, Caroline', says the man to me, taking me out of my trance, 'when we usually do this we don't tell the humans what's happening. But somehow you managed to remember your previous life, and I have no other choice but to tell you what's going on.' He takes a deep breath. 'We're giving you a second chance, a better life for you. You have a nice, loving husband and many great friends.'

'But…', I take some time to let all of this information go through my mind, 'what about my children?'

'Well, they are going to keep on living their lives, but you will, unfortunately never be able to see them again. Now, I have an offer for you. And believe me, this is something I have never done before. I will give you two options.'

At this moment I realize we've reached and intersection and my thoughts stop racing to a halt.

'Would you like to continue your old life, which I assure you, will be extremely difficult, or would you rather spend your days happy? It's your choice, darling, left or right?'

LEFT
RIGHT