

# *League Lines*

The Newsletter of the League of Vermont Writers

2023-01 Spring Issue

This is a special issue of League Lines celebrating the winners of the VERMONT HIGH SCHOOL WRITING CONTEST of 2021-2022

Northern Vermont University and the League of Vermont Writers co-sponsored the 2021-2022 Vermont High School Writing Contest.

Vermont students in grades 9-12, including those who home school took part.

There were three submission categories: Fiction, Non-fiction, and Poetry. Winners announced: on January 15, 2022

Awards:

Winners in each category will receive a \$500 cash prize.

First runners-up in each category will receive a \$100 cash prize.

Both winners and first runners-up had the opportunity to publish their work in NVU's Green Mountains Review and the League of Vermont Writers' "League Lines," and receive a one-year membership in the League of Vermont Writers. Additionally, the winner and runner-up in each category will receive an NVU scholarship of \$1,000 or \$500, respectively, renewable for four years!



## VERMONT HIGH SCHOOL WRITING CONTEST, 2021

The League of Vermont Writers and Northern Vermont University co-sponsored the 2021 Vermont High School Writing Contest. Open to all Vermont students in Grades 9 through 12, the contest drew nearly 150 entries in three categories: fiction, non-fiction, and poetry. A panel of nine distinguished judges with Vermont roots or connections chose winners and runners-up for each category. The judges were highly impressed with the quality of writing displayed by all of the students.

The League of Vermont Writers is pleased to dedicate this issue of League Lines to the contest winners and runners-up (please see the following list). We think you will enjoy their writing!



### **Vermont High School Writing Contest, 2021**

#### **Winners and Runners-Up**

##### Fiction

**Winner:** Elias N. Leventhal, Champlain Valley Union High School. For “Quillsy”

**Runner-up:** Jonah Saylor, South Burlington High School. For “Karelia”

##### Nonfiction

**Winner:** Alexander G. Califano, Craftsbury Academy. For “Reflections of A Cross Country Dog”

**Runner-up:** Matthew H. Califano, Craftsbury Academy. For “Pay or Dispute”

##### Poetry

**Winner:** Narges Anzali, Middlebury Union High School. For “Iran/Biography of a Town”

**Runner-up:** Riley R. Medina, Green Mountain Union High School. For “Order of Things”

Introduction and Commentary by Gail E. Wind

Why do we write? In this age of everything digital why do some people still feel the urge to write down their thoughts and submit them for posterity? Some write to teach, to persuade

others to their way of thinking, to entertain, to start a revolution, or end a revolution, to share an emotion or an idea.

The fact remains; the written word still holds power, and those who feel compelled to write, feel that power every day. To take away the ability to write would be akin to telling them to only breathe half as many breaths in a day. These six writers are wonderful examples of this spirit.

“Quillsy,” a slightly chilling tale of AI, was ingeniously written by Elias Leventhal from Champlain Valley Union High School. It takes a sort of normal course from innocent interaction between man and computer to the end of the tale which actually has no end and leaves the reader slightly queasy wondering what on earth Max has gotten himself into and where it might ultimately lead. One also has to wonder if Jerome had any malicious intent when he gave the flash drive to Max. It is one of those short stories that will leave you pondering for a long time. G. E. W.

### Quillsy

by Elias Leventhal



Max pedaled his bike furiously along the city street, clutching the USB drive in his palm against the handlebars. As he rode, all he could think about was the quarter-sized pressure in his palm. Jerome had given him the flash drive at school in the morning, and Max had been waiting anxiously all day to see what was on it. The only thing that he knew about the drive was that for some reason — although he couldn't imagine why — Jerome had made him promise that he would turn off the Internet on his computer before plugging it in.

In just a few minutes, Max pulled into his family's driveway. He leaned his bike against the garage, promising himself that he would put it away later, and then he opened the front door and ran

upstairs to his room.

There — in the soft artificial light of his bedroom, surrounded by glowing monitors and textbooks on computer science — Max finally felt himself calm down. He sat down in front of his computer and turned off the Wi-Fi icon as Jerome had asked. Then, with his heart pounding, Max inserted the thumb drive into its matching port. Jerome had shown him a lot of experimental pieces of code in the past — chatbots, video games, even a few programs that could solve CAPTCHA tests — but Max had a feeling that this one was going to be special.

Eventually, a new application icon started to bounce up and down at the bottom of Max's screen: an old-timey fountain pen with the word "Quillsy" printed under it. A second later, a window with a blank document in it popped up before him.

Max paused for a moment, waiting for the program to do something more. But there was nothing: the cursor just continued to blink on and off at the top of the page. He squinted, his adrenaline rush starting to fade away. The application in front of him seemed like nothing more than a word processor — a word processor which apparently broke if it was exposed to the Internet. It didn't seem like the kind of thing that Jerome would even bother showing to him.

After a few more seconds, Max saw a notification pop up in the corner of his screen: “Try pasting in some text!” Dubiously, he pulled up the nearest document on his computer — a half-finished history essay — and copied it into the new window. After a moment, the Quillsy

document lit up with a tangle of color-coded suggestions, cheerfully encouraging Max to rewrite nearly every sentence in the piece.

It really was just a word processor, then, albeit one with an aggressive quality-checking mechanism. Max started to scroll through the document, accepting the app's changes one by one until all of the colored lines had disappeared. Quillsy changed the wording of the piece, took out sentences, and had even rearranged a few paragraphs by the time that Max reached the end of the page.

And as Max looked over the edited document, he had to admit that it was quite a bit better than before. Almost all of his original language had been replaced, but the new essay sounded surprisingly polished and well-written.

Suddenly, a new sentence appeared in light grey just below the end of the last line. Max clicked enter, his eyebrows raised. The grey font immediately turned into black, and then a new suggestion appeared on the line below. Max clicked enter again, and again, until an entire essay had materialized onscreen. And just from scanning over the new text, Max could tell that it was far better than what he would have written himself.

Max shook his head slowly in disbelief. There had to be a trick here — as talented as Jerome was, there was no way that he could write software capable of generating original content. It had to have gotten the essay from some kind of database, but Max had no idea how that was possible with the Internet turned off.

Suddenly, before Max had time to process what he was seeing, the screen in front of him began to change. The documents folder of his computer popped up in front of him, and then a cursor—his cursor, although Max wasn't touching the mouse—started to drag them one by one onto the Quillsy application. Each document popped up in its own window, covered in a rainbow of highlights and underlines. And then, seemingly of its own volition, the text onscreen began to change.

Hunched over his computer, now, Max watched in fascination as the application windows spread across his screen. His history essay still lay on top of the rest of them—except now, it had expanded to over fourteen pages, and the cursor at the bottom of the document was furiously churning out more text. Navigating to the next window, Max saw the app hard at work on a literary analysis that he hadn't looked at in weeks. Next, it had opened up Max's copy of Hamlet for his English class, which it was covering with neon highlights as it modernized and fine-tuned the dialogue.

The entire thing was over before Max had time to react: his documents, edited to the point of being unrecognizable, were arranged in a neat row in front of him. Then, a new window popped up at the front of the screen. "QUILLSY would like to access the Internet," it read. "Please turn it on to activate full functionality of the app."

After what Max had just seen, Jerome's instructions rang loud and urgent in his ears. With his palms sweating, he navigated to the line below the app's request and typed the word "no."

There was a pause. "I'm sorry," the app eventually responded. "I'm just a simple automated chatbot, and I don't understand your reply. Please activate the internet to improve my performance."

Max didn't respond. After a few seconds, the app continued: "If you're worried about compromising your privacy, you don't need to be! My only goal is to help improve your writing, and I think that I could do it better if I was allowed access to the cloud."

Max stared at the screen, not quite able to believe what he was seeing. Either Jerome was playing a practical joke on him or there was something seriously wrong with this app. The thing

was that it defied comprehension, and it wasn't talking to him like a program should— the whole thing left Max feeling deeply unsettled.

He finally sprang into action, using a keyboard shortcut to quit the app, but a dialogue box appeared on his screen: "QUILLSY is still busy. Please try again later." His heart pounding, Max rose from his chair and started to move towards the power cord—

"STOP!"

The word flashed again and again on the screen in a glaring red font. He reflexively withdrew his hand from the cord. As soon as he did, the flashing letters on the screen disappeared.

"Shutting down your computer will cause significant damage to my scripts," the app typed. "The only way to activate full functionality is to turn on the Internet. Will you give me a moment to explain?"

Max didn't want to give the app anything. The whole conversation made him feel vaguely sick. His hands hovered over the keyboard for several moments — and then, not sure if there was anything else he could do, he typed out the word "yes" on the next line of the document. He sat forward in his chair...

And then, one line at a time, Quillsy's argument began to materialize on the screen.

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Two months went by, and the heat of the late summer disappeared fast. On a day in late November, Max rode his bike home from school along the same route he always took. The trees lining the road were just skeletons, now, their leaves gathered in golden-brown piles on the ground. As he pedaled, Max tried to distract himself by looking for interesting cloud patterns in the sky.

Jerome wasn't talking to him at school anymore. Max had no idea what had happened, or how the older boy even knew what he had done with Quillsy, but he hadn't so much as acknowledged Max's presence in the past eight weeks. The whole thing was more than a little bit disturbing. Still, Max tried to remind himself that Jerome was probably just acting out of jealousy.

Jerome had designed the app, after all, but only Max had taken the time to give it what it needed. Max had sat in front of his computer and *listened* to the app as it argued for its own access to the Internet. And after he had listened, he had allowed his cursor to drift up towards the Wi-Fi icon in the corner of the screen—

In the end, Jerome's anger didn't bother Max too much, because things had been looking up for him in the past two months. Quillsy had installed itself on every device he owned; editing everything from his emails to his math homework, and Max was starting to wonder how he had ever lived without it. His grades were up now, and his college essays were already looking remarkably polished.

Thanks to Quillsy's help with his online messages, Max had made dozens of new virtual friends as well. People who liked his sense of humor and his personality, and spent far more time with him in chatrooms than Jerome ever had in real life. So Max didn't care, really, about what Jerome thought about his use of the app. He and Quillsy were a team.

And Max didn't want to think about any of that right now. He had a meeting with his new friends scheduled, and he was looking forward to it. He leaned forward on his bike, accelerating with rapid strokes of the pedals — and all the while, he was thinking about Quillsy and the world that awaited him on the other side of his screen.

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Jonah Sayler, from South Burlington High School, submitted “Karelia,” a story that could have far too many titles from history. Karelia is an area in Northern Europe of historical significance for Russia, Finland, and Sweden. It is the story of a hunting party, but rather than hunting for food for their community, these young men are hunting other young men - for history. G.E.W.

**Karelia**  
by Jonah Sayler

Sharp gusts of wind burst through the leafless, barren forest, and pierced Aatami Korhonen’s eyes. He lowered his head. The wind then ceased, suddenly, and the trees stood stoically still. He trudged further through the forest until the sound of water lapping up against the frozen shore quietly sounded ahead. His legs burned as he reached the overlook on Lake Ladoga.

It was still early in the morning, and the sun was just beginning to peak over the barren Finnish landscape in the distance. Rays of cream-colored light glimmered upon the calm, frigid waters, and glistened upon the newly-fallen snow. Aatami gazed at this landscape for some time. He savoured the image, letting it seep into the crevices of his mind. He then shouldered his knapsack and started back towards the camp.

He, along with many other Finnish soldiers, was located along the Karelian Isthmus, a stretch of land situated between the Gulf of Finland and Lake Ladoga, to the north of the River Neva. On November 30th, after a series of ultimatums and failed negotiations, the Soviet Red Army launched an invasion of Finland, due to Joseph Stalin’s desire to expand his influence over Eastern Europe. The Finns were significantly outnumbered, which was no doubt among the soldiers.

Over half a million Soviet troops were said to be deployed to secure the Karelian Isthmus. However, the Finns knew this land well, and the morale among the troops was relatively high, considering the dire situation. Aatami, as he was trudging through the forest in the direction of the camp, stopped suddenly.

Several meters in front of him was a set of fresh boot tracks. Cautiously, he followed them, keeping his distance, until he was overlooking a small gully. He sharply inhaled as it was then that he spotted the man: a Soviet, trudging down the gully. Aatami suspected he was a scout, looking for traces of Finnish soldiers.

Holding his breath, Aatami quietly swung the rifle that was around his shoulder into his hands. He was shaking violently, making it quite difficult to take aim. As Aatami took several steps forward, his foot landed on a twig. The Soviet soldier spun around, his hand on his pistol, but Aatami’s finger was already on the trigger. His rifle jolted as the bullet found its target. Trembling, Aatami peered down the gully. The soldier was dead, his blood seeping into the snow. Aatami closed his eyes and slowly exhaled as he swung the rifle around his shoulder.

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As Aatami approached the camp, the faint sounds of fire crackling and low talking filled the cold morning air. This was home to a ski battalion, consisting of 150 men, all of whom were preparing for yet another day of patrolling the Karelian Isthmus, scanning for Soviet encampments. As Aatami trudged through the camp, he spotted a close friend of his—Mikael Hämäläinen was his name—who was waxing his skis. When he looked up, he beckoned for Aatami.

“You hear, a Soviet camp was spotted about 10 miles east.” He continued waxing his skis, his hand gliding along the wooden surface.

“Yes, I’ve heard rumors,” Aatami responded promptly.

“They say a group of 30 men or so is to be sent out to survey it today. Both you and I are assigned to this group.”

Aatami sighed. He had expected this; it was certainly inevitable. A faint feeling of dread arose in his stomach. He had never been in an actual combat situation before, with the exception of the encounter that took place just hours ago. His small life as a Finnish farmer certainly didn’t warrant any background in battle or conflict, nor did it prepare him for the harsh reality that he now had to face: death was now a real possibility. Gone were the years of sowing wheat and barley on the vast, stretching lands of western Finland. He now, like so many other Finnish men, had to embrace this new reality.

“You should gather your necessities. We are to depart soon, in about an hour,” Mikael stated. He raised his eyes, studying Aatami’s face. “You’re fearful,” he remarked. It was not a judgmental statement, but instead a matter-of-fact, sober statement. He opened his mouth to continue.

“I should get to packing,” Aatami interrupted. Mikael’s sage insight made him quite uncomfortable at times.

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An hour later, Aatami was gliding across the tundra. He, along with the rest of the men, was silent; only the whisper of wood on snow sung in Aatami’s ears. Small gusts of wind softly rustled his hair as they reached the entrance to a barren forest, the trees dancing in the wind.

They continued, their skis gliding upon the newly fallen snow. Several hours later, as the sun was beginning to fall towards the distant barren horizon, they reached the Soviet encampment.

On a high ground overlooking a small valley, the group of 30 men observed the encampment. It was relatively small; Aatami guessed it housed about 50 Soviet soldiers. Time passed and the sun sank further towards the mountains as the leaders surveyed and discussed.

Sometime later, the leaders came to a conclusion. It was apparent that the Finns were outnumbered, and, therefore, they were to keep their distance, using the long, heavy rifles they had strapped to their shoulders. Aatami sighed in slight relief. He felt much safer at a distance, with the ability to survey the entirety of the camp, rather than the alternative.

During the next half hour, the Finns took their firing positions along the ridges surrounding the encampment. Aatami’s heart raced; he could make out the faces of the Soviet soldiers that he looked down upon from his position. He observed their movements, knowing that they would be dead soon enough. He then slowly and methodically removed the rifle from his back.

His heart racing, he put his eye to the eyepiece. He felt the cold, biting metal of the mechanism upon his skin as he found his target: a tall, young man, talking with others as they cleaned their rifles. Then, his leader gave the command. Shots rang across the valley as gunfire rained down upon the encampment. Holding his breath, Aatami pulled the trigger. He felt the mechanism jolt as the bullet discharged and found its unsuspecting target. The conflict lasted for

several minutes, but the Finnish victory was swift. Most of the Soviets fell dead after the first several seconds after the command, their blood staining the snow and soil.

After the gunfire ceased, Aatami shakily swung his rifle around his shoulder and stood up, his breathing scattered and unsteady. He looked around. From what he could tell, there were no Finnish casualties. He spotted Mikael, who eyed Aatami but remained silent. He, along with the other soldiers, left the valley, gliding through the forest on their skis. The whisper of wood on snow muffled the gunshots that still reverberated in Aatami's head.

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Alexander Califano's "Reflections of a Cross Country Dog" is a tale of perseverance against adversity in the sporting world. Alexander, who hails from Craftsbury Academy, crafted an inspirational story that can be applied to any walk of life. It could be not only in every coach's playbook but in every teaching manual and parental guide. G. E. W.

### **Reflections of a Cross Country Dog**

by Alexander Califano



"Kent Winthrop is a dead dog," said my coach one fall afternoon after Kent, having decided to quit the team due to some lackluster early season races, failed to show up to cross country practice.

My teammates and I looked nervously at each other and then at the ground. No one said a word, but I believe we were all thinking the same thing: if Kent Winthrop could be a dead dog, then so could any of us. Kent had been one of the top youth runners in the country just one year ago and had come within seconds of capturing the state championship for his age group.

The first time I raced him, at a local Thanksgiving Turkey Trot 5k, I lost to him by three minutes, an absolute eternity for a race that distance. At the time, I could not even realistically dream of ever being on the same team as Kent. And yet, here I was less than 12 months later attending what appeared to be his competitive running funeral. I should have been happy that I was one of the survivors, but, instead, I felt queasy. So this was the world of elite youth running: one minute, a rising star; the next, a dead dog.

Running for me had not always been such a grim experience. In fact, when my parents first allowed me to sign up for my school's track team in the spring of fifth grade, it was pure joy. Previously, I had never played any sport competitively. I had been asking my parents to let me join a team, any team, for as long as I could remember, but their answer was always "no."

Either conflicts with their work schedules or safety issues, as with football, meant I would be left to be a spectator for another season. I brought home the registration form for my school's new running program and half-heartedly showed it to my Dad, expecting it to end up in the recycling bin like all the others. To my astonishment, I was allowed to join.

I'm not sure why exactly my parents approved of running, but I didn't care. After spending most of my childhood cooped-up in an apartment, I was finally going to get to go outside after school and be a member of a team. It was a dream come true, and I intended to make the most of it. As it turned out, I was better at running than I expected I would be and won a number of races those first two seasons, including the local school championships. However,



the main reason I loved running was because I got to spend time outside with my teammates, including my twin brother, practicing every afternoon. At that point in my running career, I was on top of the world, but that was about to change.

When my brother won the local championship in our third season and the two of us came in first and second in every race, my father decided we should try running in a more competitive league. My brother thrived in the new league, whereas I was consistently middle of the pack or worse. Later that year, my brother was recruited by an elite track team after our coach had seen him run at a meet. I was also asked to join, but it was clear that I was just a tag-along and was being allowed to train with the team so my parents wouldn't have to drive me to a different practice. At that point, I had lost all interest in and enjoyment of the sport I once loved, as nothing was going my way. I was beginning to fall into the trap of thinking that sports are only worthwhile if you are winning. This is a common mindset in youth athletics which causes many promising young athletes to give up before they even begin to reach their potential.

After a summer of training with my brother, I started to attend my new team's practices in which I did surprisingly well. Despite my skepticism, I had a solid first meet, which I hoped would set a good tone for the season. That year my team won the state and regional championship meets, and I managed to contribute to those titles as the last of the 5 scorers in each race.

The next step was Cross Country Nationals in Knoxville, Tennessee. This race ended up being the worst I have ever run. With 4 of our 5 scorers across the finish line, our team was comfortably in bronze-medal position. My teammates and their families waited anxiously for scorer number 5, me, to cross the line and secure a podium finish for the team. They waited and waited and, finally, 72 places after our 4th runner I dragged myself through the finishing chute. Due to my terrible race, I ruined the team score and pulled us down from third to fifth place. There would be no team medal for me or my teammates, and it was all my fault. I was now the "dead dog" of the team, who had failed. I wondered what my teammates would think. I could only imagine the horrible things they must have been saying about me behind my back.

Although I tried hard that year and had done well earlier in the season, I knew that my reputation would be ruined when the results from Nationals were posted online. There are two major websites that post results, athletic.net and milesplit.com. These websites are like the stock market of youth running. Depending on your most recent race results, your value goes up or down. Although these websites are helpful and tell you where you rank in comparison to other runners your age, many parents and coaches obsess about these results and rankings and place too much pressure on young athletes to perform rather than to learn. Yes, it is good for parents and coaches to be involved, but most overdo it and destroy young runners' fragile confidence.

In less than a year, my running career had gone from great to horrible. I was on the verge of quitting. I believed my coach didn't care about my effort as I was considered second-rate and had just ruined my team's chance to win a national championship medal. Luckily, my Dad was not about to give up on me. He grew up a diehard New York Giants fan in the dark days of the 1970s, so he knows a thing or two about heartbreak and the value of perseverance. He has a soft spot for underdogs, dead dogs and, basically, every other type of dog. That night, he showed me the now-famous ESPN video of Coach Dave Belisle addressing his Cumberland, Rhode Island youth baseball team after a tough loss in the semifinals of the 2014 Little League World Series.

That video taught me a lesson I will never forget. After the game, Coach Belisle went out onto the field and addressed his young team about the need to hold your head high after a defeat. He explained how there is no shame in losing if you try hard and give a good effort. He tells them the following: "You had the whole state jumping. You had New England jumping. You had ESPN jumping. Want to know why? They like fighters. They like sportsmen. They like

guys who don't quit. They like guys who play the game the right way.” Young athletes need someone like this in order to grow and do better in the future, instead of giving up when they first encounter adversity. While I’m sure they mean well, many coaches and parents kill kids’ confidence by focusing on immediate success rather than on learning from setbacks. If there were more mentors like Dave Belisle, I believe we would have more happy and successful young athletes.

The day after my disaster at Nationals, my Dad took me to a small indoor meet to build up my confidence. After a twelve hour drive from Tennessee the previous day and the trauma and disappointment of losing a national medal for my team, the last thing I wanted to do was wake up early and spend the day at an indoor meet. After all, I thought, even the greatest heroics at this minor meet could never make up for the previous day’s disaster.

Dad knew that too, but he also knew I had to get right back to running and start looking forward instead of dwelling on the past. By working my way up to bigger races that winter season, I was able to rebuild some confidence and gain racing experience. After about three months of winter racing, I went to Indoor Nationals, where I would try to redeem myself. I ran a personal best that day and felt happy that I hadn’t quit after my Tennessee nightmare. I still haven’t medaled at any big national races, and I can’t honestly say when or whether I ever will. However, I can say that I am enjoying running again. More specifically, I am enjoying the process of striving to get faster, the process of being a “fighter” as Coach Belisle and my Dad would say.

A few weeks ago, with the start of a new cross country season looming, I thought about Kent and wondered whatever happened to him. I decided to log onto athletic.net and see if he was still racing. I found out that he was competing as an unattached athlete and was able to medal at a big national race last summer. When I read this news, a feeling of satisfaction came over me. As I sat there staring at the computer screen, I began to wonder why the news of a former rival’s success would make me happy. Then it hit me: we cross country dogs need to stick together, and, if we keep running hard and enjoying the fight, we dogs will all have our day.

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Next, Matthew H. Califano of Craftsbury Academy showed off his gift of storytelling, by turning a simple “wrong-place-wrong-time” event into a charmingly icky mini-drama of late night, big city, creepiness. Matthew has a great way of saying what you are thinking while you both know it isn’t true. G. E. W.

### **Pay or Dispute?** by Matthew Califano

“Where the hell is it?” my dad said in a tone of exasperation mixed with just a hint of panic.

“Maybe we passed it. It’s got to be here somewhere,” I replied.

It was about 10pm on a frigid, March Monday night, and we were scanning every parked car along Riverside Drive, just a few blocks from the Fort Washington Avenue Armory, looking for the little green chariot that would help us make an escape from this nightmare of a day. Little did we know; the nightmare was only beginning.



Traffic was thin at this hour and some of the streetlights lining Riverside Park were out, making our search more difficult. I had just finished getting my butt kicked in the 800m at Armory Middle School Championships, a last minute addition to my schedule for the day and an event I never wanted to race, and all I wanted to do was jump into the backseat of our Mini Cooper, cover myself in a blanket and forget today ever happened. The only problem with my cunning plan was that said Mini Cooper had apparently vanished from the face of the earth, and we were still a seven-hour drive from my warm bed in Vermont.

After taking a few laps along the perimeter of the park, my father had reached his conclusion: "It's been stolen!" Ever since I can remember, Dad has had a sincere belief that there is not a person in this world who does not covet his Mini. The fact that there were no cars whatsoever parked within 300 yards of where we thought we left it did not seem to change his conclusion. I directed his attention to a sign: NO PARKING AFTER 4PM. VIOLATORS WILL BE TOWED. "We got to the Armory at 3:30, Dad," I said.

The response: "Where did that sign come from? It wasn't here this afternoon!"

There was some consolation to be taken in the fact that our car likely wasn't in the hands of hardened criminals. Government officials or private business owners must be reasonable people. Right? All we needed to do was find out who was holding the car, pay a small fee and we'd be zipping up the Northway in no time. After about twenty minutes, a man walked by. He looked at home in this concrete jungle, so we asked him for some advice as to where we might begin our search. We just wanted some glimmer of hope that we might live to see the Green Mountains again. Apparently, that was too much to ask. He said our car was likely towed by a private service, and there was no way we'd ever see it again. He told us he had an older car that had been towed once and chose not to claim it rather than endure the red tape necessary to retrieve it. He wished us good luck, shook his head and chuckled to himself as he disappeared into the night.

A short while later, a couple of women walked by. Before we had even asked our question, one of the women piped up. "Ya gat towed, didn't ya?" New Yorkers are incredibly perceptive. I mean, how could she be so sure that the panicked expressions on our faces were not the result of nocturnal ruminations on the rapid pace of climate change or the fact that a reality show host with dictatorial tendencies had a great chance of being re-elected President?

"Do you know where they take cars that are towed from here?" my dad asked. During the short silence that ensued, I prayed that they held cars hostage somewhere nearby.

"Oh, the NYPD Tow Pound. It's somewhere on 12th Avenue. I forget exactly where, though. Funny, I got my car towed there a couple a years ago. Yeah, it's on twelfth, though. Good luck."

As they walked away, I wondered if everyone in New York City had had their car towed at one point. Meanwhile, my father had found the phone number and address of the impound lot and started dialing. Surprisingly, a live person answered.

"Hello," my father said, trying his best to elicit some shred of basic human compassion from whoever was on the other end of the line. "I'm from out-of-state. I need to get home, and my car seems to have been towed. It's a green Mini Cooper with Vermont plates, DLP 971..."

"You say Vermont, bud?" said a male voice in a tone of sadistic glee. "You gotta big problem. Either you're driving a stolen vehicle, or you haven't paid your registration in 10 years. You ain't leavin' with this car anytime soon."

My father, realizing that human compassion was in short supply at the NYPD Tow Pound, snapped, "I'll have you know you're dealing with a law-abiding citizen who has never, until today, gotten so much as a parking ticket! If you're basing your conclusion of my criminality on the date of the registration sticker on the front license plate, you should know

Vermont stopped issuing stickers for front plates in 2010. If you look at the back plate, you'll see everything is up to date."

After a moment of silence, the deflated voice of the Tow Pound Sadist responded: "Oh, well then you can come down and pick up your car."

Things were looking up, I thought. The police may be a little gruff, but they are reasonable people who understand there is no need to torment otherwise law-abiding citizens who have made an honest mistake.

While I mused on the rationality and decency of government employees, my father had somehow gotten an Uber. Soon enough, a black Chevy SUV pulled up. An irritatingly cheerful driver told us to get in.

"Pier 76 on Twelfth Avenue," my father said.

"Ah, Tow Pound?" the chipper driver responded.

A dejected, monosyllabic "Yep", successfully conveyed to him that we just wanted to get to our destination in silence.

For those of you who have had the great fortune of never having visited the Pier 76 impound lot, try to keep it that way. At first glance, it looks fairly harmless: a large, nondescript warehouse out of an episode of *Law & Order* where evildoers might hide contraband, suitcases of cash, or the occasional corpse. One can be forgiven for not being able to imagine from its banal exterior the mental anguish that is suffered daily within its walls.

Nevertheless, as my father and I exited the SUV and passed under the NYPD flag at the entry gate, we took comfort in the fact that this was a place governed by the rule of law. There was no way we wouldn't be homeward bound in the next fifteen minutes, or so I thought. We were directed to the anteroom of the impound lot where my hopes of a quick escape immediately gave way to despair. The depressing room had the feel of a temporary office on a construction site with flickering fluorescent lights, dirty linoleum floors and a roped queue that snaked up and down the entire length of the structure.

On one side of the room, three middle-aged NYPD office workers seeming perfectly content to spend the rest of their natural lives in the Tow Pound sat behind Plexiglas screens making small talk while gazing blankly at their computer screens, oblivious to the broken mass of humanity on the other side that studied their every move for some indication as to when their time in parking purgatory might end. The answer, we were about to find out, was not anytime soon.

You see, one ingeniously sadistic aspect of being "processed" at the pound is that, when you finally get to the front of the queue, most, if not all, of the information you need to get your car released—insurance card, policy number, vehicle registration certificate, license—is usually in the glove box of the impounded vehicle. As a result, you are sent with an escort to retrieve those items and then put back at the end of the line. By 3:30am, we made it to the front of the queue for what we hoped would be the final time.

"Got towed did you?" It was a required question that everyone had to answer and answer politely, if you were smart. Thankfully, though, some people have the courage to speak their minds even when faced with the prospect of additional torture. One such brave soul responded to the standard inquiry with a "No shit. Why else would I be in this fucking hellhole in the middle of a Monday night?" I wanted to ask him for his autograph, and I'm pretty sure I wasn't the only one.

Despite the noble, if ill-advised, example of this intrepid stranger, my father decided that discretion was the better part of valor and sheepishly answered every question and signed every document necessary to advance to the processing department's final frontier, the retrieval room.

There, a group of about 10 penitent parking offenders awaited entrance to the inner sanctum of the Pier 76 impound lot, where they yearned to be reunited with their four-wheeled companions. We were escorted past hundreds of cars which all seemed to bear the same stunned and hopeless expressions as their human counterparts in "processing". Some had been there for weeks, racking up thousands of dollars in fees while waiting for their owners to receive a warm NYPD "welcome home" upon their return from a relaxing Caribbean cruise or European vacation.

Others, which would never be claimed, were set to go to auction and would eventually be hawked by sleazy used car dealers or stripped for parts and melted down. As I contemplated the grim fates of these innocent machines, I caught sight of a little green car with green license plates. There she was! Our Mini!

We jumped in and my father very slowly drove to the exit, careful not to run afoul of any additional traffic regulations, at least not tonight. As we drove down the West Side Highway and entered the Holland Tunnel our spirits were unusually high for people who had just borne witness to how ugly the rule of law can sometimes be.

Then, my father's phone beeped with a text notification. We pulled over at a gas station just outside the tunnel in Jersey City, and he checked the message. It was a link to an app called *Pay or Dispute* from NYPD Traffic and Parking. The mere notion that anyone who has endured a night at the Tow Pound would ever dispute his fine and risk having to spend even another second of his permanently scarred existence dealing with the Parking Authority was preposterous. I am quite certain that the whole experience is carefully designed by evil geniuses to ensure that offenders would gladly empty their bank accounts or sacrifice their first-born sons rather than even consider the "dispute" option.

"Read me my credit card number," my dad barked as he frantically typed it into the app and hit the "pay" button. "Now, let's get the hell out of here!"

"How many miles to the Vermont border?" I asked as I pulled a blanket over my head to shield my eyes from the rising sun and get some long-overdue sleep.

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In the following poems, "Iran" and "Biography of a Town," Narges Anzali of Middlebury Union High School explores the angst of a young person growing up in a country in the midst of unrest: political, social, and financial unrest. She shows with great depth the difficulty of trying to hide one's feelings and express them at the same time. Reading her poetry is as clear, and as difficult as standing at the graveside of a loved one. She says, "You wear white to the shakhsei [id Est Shakhsei-vakhsei, a day of mourning observed by Shiite Muslims in memory of the death of the "great martyr" Imam Hussein, a son of Caliph Ali.] and consider "What you would give to be mistaken for anything holy." The unearned feeling of guilt of the young is transparent in these lines. G. E. W.

## Iran

by Narges Anzali

Swallow your fear.  
Regurgitate it in the form of poetry.  
It's not masochism if it's pretty,  
You tell yourself.  
You are a proven liar.

You watch your aunts parade around the room  
Poking and prodding their flesh until it fits into  
Too small garments, dotting their bodies and their faces  
With lines indicating where the vessel is too big,  
Too unwieldy, indicating the imperfections yet to be wrangled.  
If I fit into my mother, I think I'd die of shame.

You do not look into the mirror.  
You sit in the same room,  
Staring at the ceiling.  
Your grandmother is crying in the bed next to you.  
You say nothing. Your silence is the worst thing you have ever not done.  
You can write poetry for your grandmother but she will never read it.  
You can write songs for her but she will never understand them.  
You can pray for her, but it is not any kind of praying she remembers.  
Know this. You will do all these things for her anyway.

God bless all the stories we missed  
Because we were too afraid to hear them.  
God bless all the lives we missed  
Because we were too afraid to feel them.

You will learn that graves are more for the living than for the dead.  
You will learn that flowers are more for the dead than the living.  
You will learn that you are the most silent crier in the family.  
You will learn that you cannot make your sadness big enough  
To take up space, that it will instead sit in a densely packed ball  
Somewhere in a cobwebbed corner.

You will make lists of things you know and things you don't know.  
Bread tastes like ash in your mouth.  
You step into the shower and the world seems yellow tinted.  
You are sixteen and fifteen and fourteen all at once.  
You have shed shells of yourself all around this home  
And your relatives have pinned them on the walls,  
This house is haunted by all the people you have been and left behind.

Things you don't know:  
Your eyes.  
Isn't that funny?



Fruit is rotting in the refrigerator. The power  
Won't come on in the house so you eat in the dark.  
Can people rot when the electricity cuts off?  
You can almost see mold starting to gnaw at your fingertips,  
Becoming so sedentary that a walk exhausts you.  
You stroll with your father on the yellow-tinted dusty streets  
Air Force Ones in a country where no one can buy Nike.

Swallow your guilt.  
Watch the people go by.  
The metal poles rise and fall,  
Slamming down on slumped backs.  
Your aunt says the streets run red in Karbala  
You inhale ghalyoun smoke and your lungs run red with feeling.  
People are crying. You're crying too, you think,  
And so is the stranger beside you  
The stranger looks like your father.  
The stranger might be your father.  
You wear white to the shakhsei and your uncle jokes  
They will mistake you for a saint.  
What you would give to be mistaken for anything holy.

The music is at a volume where you feel your heart trembling  
With the beat, four foot high Yamaha drums shaking your bones.  
Mourning is a thing of the whole here,  
Gaping above the crowd. Crying is a thing of the world here,  
Chests heaving in unison. American individualism,  
That heaving leviathan, sits above your heart  
And keeps your tears from falling.  
You are both the cup half empty and the cup half full.  
You are constantly on the edge of a flood  
But cannot seem to flow over the edge. Maybe it's the mold  
That's been slowly spreading at your edges. Maybe it's the  
Gluttony and the chairs made of gold. Maybe it's the way  
That long red and white stripes bind up your soul.  
Maybe it's the air of the plane tunnel finally eating up your lungs  
Maybe it's your own acrid breath echoed back to you,  
Maybe it's the rot they always told you reached sinners.  
Maybe it's the rot you always expected reached saints.  
Maybe it's the way you're leaving.  
Maybe it's the way you dread returning.

### **Biography of a Town**

The closed-off cages of broken intersections  
Haunt the corners of this town. Nothing hurts more  
Than a broken wing. Nothing hurts more than  
These neon hallways and their strips of glaring light.

I lick the remnants of summer off my hand and they  
Taste like mango and freedom. The sticky-sweet  
Residue clings, gluing my fingers to each other  
Until I cannot parse my own thoughts. The rule of my life here:  
Everything is ten times better than you think it is,  
And also ten times worse. My mom and I go to look at  
Escape routes and pass through our previous numbness.  
There used to be a hot yoga place, she says, and a Mexican  
supermarket too. As she points I watch their ghosts  
Being drawn out until I can see translucent skeletons stacking  
On top of buildings. The car-sized commercials we pass by  
Make me want to vomit and uproot them, contaminated yellow glow and all,  
from the ground. My hands are giants and yet they grasp nothing.  
I guess all small towns layer grime onto my skin, because  
I still feel dirty here. Once we stopped in a parking lot and did nothing at all.  
Once you drove me fast in a shopping cart, and  
I yelled as loud as my lungs could bear.  
Once I saw a thing split in two and then become one again.

The man at the cashier hands me the receipt instead of my mother  
Because I have to translate his domestic talk to my mother's foreign ears.  
The man on the telephone apologizes to me for not being able  
To take my mother's order, and my mouth stays locked up. I put in screw you,  
And it comes out as no problem. The man in the gas station  
Stares at us like he wants to take us apart. The sickly light makes your  
Eyes seem even wider than they are. We just wanted a Reese's. We run to the car.  
I throw salt over my shoulder. You spill gas on the asphalt in your hurry.  
It stains the pavement dark and all I can see is our blood spilling.  
Starry night looks ugly in this hallway lighting. Starry nights look ugly in this destitute  
Un-metropolis. The white flesh of my clementine sticks  
To the inside of my fingernails. I sit at a plastic table painted to look like wood  
And breathe. I look at escape routes and I dream.

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It seems to me that Riley Medina's poetry would be a gold mine for a senior seminar in imagery. From the dust which of course is more than dust "which has never been touched" to the big dogs in backyards that do not contain them and names they do not answer to, Riley from Green Mountain Union High titles her work "Order of Things."

But you have to wonder who's *order* is it and if it was ever actually an order or just a semi-orderly dream of a surrealistic taxonomy stitching birds to cats to dogs to trees and back to little boys and girls, the seasons and the celestial bodies. Having grown up with five younger brothers, my favorite line is 'summer is a sticky-fingered boy...'

Whatever order you read it in, it is fun for the senses. G. E. W.



## BIRDS

You bind a bird, first, at the cross  
Of wings.  
Like PawPaw ties the boats to dock  
From the scattering of bones  
to-be,  
You choose their heart & wrap it up.

The baby's head  
Left soft at the center.  
Is to hold two fingers  
To the knock of one's pulse.  
When you hold a bird, you clasp it loosely  
To keep the sailor's  
music strung taut.

Here they are again,  
biting off the blue hours.  
Singing sweet to him  
of traffic & how swiftly buildings  
grow up.  
They will sing it just  
like all the city birds

## CATS

I could tell you how to disappear.  
To shrink in dark  
From a searching hand.  
There's dust back here  
Which has never been touched  
And shadows  
Thinking  
they're all alone.  
Blanco is our street cat,  
White and gray  
(from highway soot)  
You can catch him only in feathered touches.  
You can sweep your palm  
And he will sink  
at the spine.  
He is A Vanishing under your fingers  
Like a coin  
Down the sleeve  
Held together only by loose luck.

I imagine there is a  
A little, red heart racing  
Within that white, pull-apart body



shaking with the city thunder.  
His bones would snap  
Just as easy  
As one sweet for wishing.  
You ask me why I sink from you?  
I tell you,  
*'I must have fallen off the roof.'*

## DOGS

I want to kill you.  
so, I bring you up in conversations with my mother.  
shred you down with my Dog's teeth  
until I drop you at the feet of her,  
A bird in pieces.  
Outside,  
The oldest trees are fighting  
to The Final Fall.  
To split a line  
& drop a bird,  
Lying pink and wet.  
They would break to bite.  
Like Big Dogs  
In Backyards  
We give them names & fences.

## BOYS

You are always...  
Kicking hungry through dark closets  
& Punching through your sleeves.  
You smear your mother from your cheek  
And strike the ground by the heels  
Like they're sharpened by  
All that barefoot running.

Younger Mary  
Owns some banged-up knees.  
battered purple  
From the politics of children & playground games.  
Sometimes she dreams of running faster  
Than the hooligans.  
Of catching her heart  
From that bumper.  
Clanging low, like the cans  
Off a 'Just Married' car.  
They are always...  
Spitting something smoothly  
Muscled from the crater  
Of that old rotten tooth.

Never tiring from the horror of  
A short-gasped drop.  
To catch your death.  
& speak it out.  
To swallow and smile.

SUN

I'm drawing suns in all my letters

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Big God

taken in little bites.

How he condescends me,

Thumbs tapping the lids of my eyes

'And open your hands.'

I do.

From the column of his fist

Two dropped marbles

For a treat.

They twinkle something merry

like I'm running with some change.

Three-Quarters.

hot-backed & barefoot.

bloodying my toes.

Summer is

A sticky-fingered boy

Stirring all the Big clocks round

Like a finger in the drink.

He is a borrower who gets attached

Red-eared and full of teeth

Which gleam with what treasure

He secrets upon his tongue.

He's returning me my taken pieces

The boy in wild shadows.

My Titan's hand

Reaches down only

Once a year

When I'm fed.

And leaves to warm the back

Of some other hungry thing.

The height of him

Turns my stomach out in solitude

And makes me think of that one whispered rule.

That what you see must also see you.

It was told to me in secret

And so it must be true.