Healing Through Creativity

An Art and Writing Anthology and Discussion Guide
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Letter to Our Readers

Grief can be a difficult journey. For young people who are figuring out their larger place in the world, having a safe place to express their emotions can be particularly hard. The process of creating, however, can provide an outlet for self-expression and an opportunity to be heard by others.

The Alliance for Young Artists & Writers and the New York Life Foundation offer this anthology of art and writing works from courageous young people to help open and elevate the conversation on grief and bereavement. Teens from across the United States submitted their creative work to the Scholastic Art & Writing Awards’ New York Life Award, which recognizes the stories of young people and their experiences with losing a loved one. This curated collection of works submitted to the New York Life Award reflects a wide range of experiences and forms of expression, and we honor the vulnerability of our contributors and their effort to bring this conversation to light.

If you or someone you know needs support, we encourage you to reach out. We have provided resources in the back of this book specifically for teens who are grieving and for the families and educators who want to support them.

We are honored to share these powerful stories of loss—and resilience—with you. We hope these stories and their accompanying prompts help open space for you and your loved ones.

Christopher Wisniewski  
Executive Director  
Alliance for Young Artists & Writers/Scholastic Art & Writing Awards

Heather Nesle  
President  
New York Life Foundation
I am haunted by an elephant. He hovers over my shoulder wherever I go. He follows me in the school hallways, sneaking along without anyone batting an eye. How can one hide a two-ton animal in plain sight? You simply can’t. The effects of such a presence leak into every aspect of your life. Even invisible ghosts have visible consequences.

It was the middle of June, and we were gathered together in the ultrasound room. After everything that had happened the previous winter, we needed some good news. Miscarriage has a way of breaking even the strongest heart, but this moment would be our redemption. The nurse jiggled my mother’s stomach, trying to get a better view. We had told her how much we wanted a boy, and she was anxious to find out if she would get to make our dreams a reality. We laughed to release the tension in the room, held each other’s hands in anticipation.

“Well, Momma, it looks like your wish came true!”

Our joy filled the sterile room, rang loud down the hall and settled around us. My sisters giggled and jumped. My dad shed a few tears. I was there behind the camera, grinning from ear to ear. Everything God had told me that night the first baby passed away was finally happening. He had promised me this brother, and he was following through.

The nurse brought out a basket filled to the brim with stuffed animals. One would have the honor of holding my brother’s heartbeat in its chest.

“We’ll let Dad decide since it’s a boy!”

“I think we should get the elephant because they both have a trunk.”

That’s the conversation that changed my life. A single, slightly euphemistic statement that brought my phantom elephant to life. I didn’t know it at the time, but soon every time I saw one of those massive creatures, my heart would swell with love and grief.

July came with more doctor visits, just-in-case checkups and ultrasounds. When we went as a family, my sisters and I laughed in the back of the room, guessing at what formless blob on the screen was our brother-to-be. We joked about how the baby sat cross-legged like a true Indian, and how his little hands covered his face. We left that day blissfully unaware of the error in my brother’s DNA, completely ignorant to the malformation in his organs.

It wasn’t until a couple of days later that the doctor called my mom to tell her about trisomy 13 and the chances of her son’s survival. The practically impossible had happened to him. His thirteenth chromosome had been repeated by some mistake in his DNA replication. He was growing and growing with the wrong instructions from his cells. The wrong pattern was being used, creating a body that wasn’t meant to live.

“You’d be lucky to have a couple of minutes with him.”

My parents brought us into the living room one day soon after that. They told us to sit on the couch. They needed to talk to us about the baby. We sat down in a row, wondering what was going on.

“The doctor said that he isn’t expected to live.”

Then it was our turn to hear about trisomy 13. We cried together as a family, something that became a regular activity in the coming months. I was broken and lost. How could this be the plan God had for us?

School started that August, life’s lame attempt at normalcy. It was my ninth-grade year, the last year of junior high in my town. I was supposed to be on top of the world. Of course, I wasn’t. I was too afraid to tell my friends I had a dying brother at home. So I lived my freshman year alone. I went through the motions of school and came home to despair. Some days my mom would be so down that none of the normal motherly chores would be done. She’d just be sitting around the house crying, almost always crying. She had begun grieving her baby the moment the diagnosis reached her ears. The rest of us seemed so far behind in the process.

My mother wasn’t like me. Her friends knew what she was going through. Soon, people sent elephants of their own. My elephant wasn’t the only one in the room anymore. Compassion drove our friends to great lengths to support us. They sent us gifts from across the country, found trinkets to show their love. Their elephants brought mine some company, but it still wasn’t like having support of my own. They knew my mom, not me. If only I had been a little braver, then maybe we wouldn’t have been as lonely, my elephant and me.

Months passed, and my loneliness consumed me. I cried silently most mornings, trying not to draw attention to my grief while desperately wishing for someone to notice. I walked to class with my elephant in tow, two tons of hurt weighing down on my soul. I wore elephant bracelets on my wrist as a physical acknowledgment of my sorrow. One day, out of nowhere, a friend asked what they were for. I smiled, so grateful for that tiny spark of hope.

“They’re for my brother. He has trisomy 13, and they don’t think he’ll live.”

“Oh, I think I’ll get one too.”
One simple sentence, and suddenly a pet elephant didn’t seem like such a
difficult thing to have.

December was fast approaching, bringing my brother’s due date with it. But it
was only November, and I told myself I still had time with him. My elephant was
getting antsy; breaking down became more common. It was the 10th when my
dad picked me up from school. I got in the car and instantly felt the thick gloom
in the air. He turned to me with fear and sadness in his eyes.

“It’s time.”

We got home and told my sisters that Mom was being induced. We’d get to
meet our brother in the morning. They must have forgotten about the doctor’s
words because they jumped and hollered without a care in the world. I stared at
my mother’s face, her uncertainty as clear as day.

“Please, no. Not yet.”

I prayed. We were supposed to have a little while longer.

That evening I rode to the hospital with my parents as the family elephant
dutifully followed the car. My sisters had stayed behind with our grandparents,
who would bring them in the morning, when the doctors were supposed to
begin inducing. We waited in our room as nurses busied themselves around us.
As the sun set, we laid down and slept on the rigid hospital couch. My elephant
curled up in the corner. We would need our strength for the next day.

I was the last of the three of us to wake up that morning of November 11. I was
about to get in the shower when my mom yelled for my dad.

“Get the nurse! Something just fell out!”

They ushered me out of the room and told me to wait with my aunt, who had
just arrived. I left in my pajamas with greasy, unwashed hair and sat in a stan-
dard hospital chair. We waited until the nurse came and took me back to the
room.

“They sent me to get her.”

I walked in, more nervous than I had ever been in front of any other boy.

That is until I saw his face. My parents had told us he wouldn’t look the same
as everybody else. My father handed me my brother, and I fell in love. It didn’t
matter that he had a cleft lip, that some things were a little different, because
he was perfect, from his head to his eleven toes. As tears ran down my cheek, I
stared, drinking in all I could of this precious baby in my arms.

“It’s going to be OK.”

My dad wrapped me in his arms as I handed my brother back to my mom. I
continued to cry as I hugged my father. I had been so worried about that mo-
ment, and there I was. I felt truly alive with my love for my brother. Tears just
kept coming. Despite how I appeared, I was finally at peace. All those months I
had lived in fear, anxiously waiting for God to do something, and there my mira-
acle was. In my arms, I held the beautiful baby brother God had promised.

It had been 9:03 a.m. when my brother literally fell into the world. We loved
him every moment he was here. We took a million pictures to capture it all. We
were so overwhelmingly at peace and filled with so much joy. It was practically
a zoo, with all the elephants in the room. On the bed, on our laps, and in our
hands, elephants anywhere an elephant could stand. It couldn’t have been a
more wonderful day. My sisters and I read books to our little brother. My mom
changed his diaper. My dad prayed over his son.

Even as we laughed, our time with him was ticking away. His heart couldn’t
beat fast enough to keep pace with our excitement. His brain couldn’t quite
fathom our love. His lungs couldn’t breathe in enough of this life. At 5:08 p.m.,
I watched as my brother took his last breath. I watched his skin lose the colors
of life. I saw the blood rush to his head as he struggled to stay a bit longer. Four
point seven ounces of perfection was ripped away from us far too soon.

That evening I left with my sisters and my grandparents. We went to my
house, and I fell asleep in tears. The greatest day of my life had passed, leaving
me with nothing but an elephant.

My now constant companion sat at the foot of the bed that night, watched
over me and cried with me. He’d claimed me as his that day, and now he would
never leave. He patted me with his trunk, laid himself down, and drifted off
to sleep.

I remember the haziness of the next few weeks. We sat at home as people
brought us food. Life wasn’t as vivid as the day my brother was born. I floated
in and out of reality, escaping the feeling of time. Our emotions were so raw,
seeping onto our faces with every little change. One moment tears would flow
abundantly, only to be stifled by the laughter in the next. Joy was so seldom that
each little joke was savored for minutes on end. I remember my dad’s face as
such happiness crept over him. The pain so clear, yet the need to smile over-
came it. His demeanor would change as he threw back his shoulders and tears
welled up in his eyes, the purest kind of joy blooming amidst our sorrow.

My sisters returned to school rather quickly, but I stayed behind. Their class-
mates sent us cards and knew what was happening. On the other hand, I knew
all that I would receive was blank stares and hard questions about my two-ton
friend. My elephant wasn’t ready for such rejection and disregard. No way could
I expose him when we both had healing scars.

For the next couple of weeks, I avoided school in favor of my elephant. He had
taken it upon himself to never leave my side. Sometimes, he stretched himself
across my chest, crushing my heart without any warning. I don’t think he
meant me any harm; he seemed oblivious to his own size. Thanksgiving came and went without a brother for me to thank. My family and I clung to each other in the small confines of our living room. Eating and sleeping became our only reasons to move.

I finally returned to school after Thanksgiving had passed. I made myself invisible, avoiding the obvious questions of my whereabouts. I tried to keep my composure, shushed my elephant when he trumpeted in the halls. I walked into the art room and made my way around the class to the shelf with our projects on it. As my teacher handed me my sculpture, she asked the question I'd been bracing for.

“Is he still with us?”

I sucked in a breath, unable to form many words. I shook my head no.

“He was here for eight hours and five minutes.”

I could feel her compassion as tears formed in her eyes and she wrapped me up in a hug. There’s no doubt that she was thinking of her son to come. My elephant watched as the scene played out, savoring the attention. I sat back down with a little bit of hope in my soul. It’s amazing how much a single person caring lightens the load.

I went about my day, ignoring the trumpet calls of my invisible friend. I walked into the math classroom, and there my best friend stood, the only other one who knew what animal followed me around. She opened her arms when she saw me.

“Come here.”

That’s all she said. She didn’t ask any questions. She was simply there with love in her arms. My second spark of hope that day. My elephant was practically invisible, avoiding the obvious questions of my whereabouts. I tried to keep my composure, shushed my elephant when he trumpeted in the halls. I walked into the art room and made my way around the class to the shelf with our projects on it. As my teacher handed me my sculpture, she asked the question I’d been bracing for.

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“Come here.”

That’s all she said. She didn’t ask any questions. She was simply there with love in her arms. My second spark of hope that day. My elephant was practically bouncing off the walls with all the thoughts coming his way. I can guarantee you’ve never seen anything quite like that, the most massive creature jumping around. It only lasted a little while, then he settled down. He sat next to my desk the rest of the day, begging for attention that I didn’t have to spare.

School went on like that, a circus of hide-and-seek with an elephant. He tried making scenes in the middle of class, but his two-ton temper tantrums went unnoticed by my peers. He’d sulk in my lap, not leaving room for much else. My life was consumed by an elephant, and I wasn’t given any choice in the matter. Grief had interrupted my plans and wreaked havoc on my emotions. My brother was dead, and no one knew he had even lived.

Finally, ninth grade came to an end. I left the halls of the junior high along with the isolation that inhabited my days there. I thought the worst of it was over, but summer brought new challenges with it. My family flew across the globe to the beautiful little island of Oahu. There we explored new landscapes and terrains, but no matter where we went, a certain elephant couldn’t be shaken. Grief still hung in the air. We were there for a reason, and the day was fast approaching.

“Did you know his name means ‘ocean’ in Hawaiian?”

Oh, Lanikai, ‘beautiful ocean,’ the shore where my heart now rests. The waves crashed on the beach. Perfect weather. A light breeze. June 24 my family walked along a white sand beach, all of us together, his ashes in tow. The sun hadn’t risen. We were all alone. We walked until we came to a cove, a single tree jutting out into the water. I had already shed many tears as we watched the sun creep from under the sea. I drew my brother’s name in the sand as the others scattered flowers all around. My dad drew a heart and placed what remained of ours inside. We sat together holding hands, an elephant watching right beside us. Then, the wave came and swept my brother away.

“The wind and the waves still know his name . . .”*

That song played in the background as my heart continued to break. I thought the worst of the pain had come at 5:08 p.m. on November 11, 2015, but I was wrong. The pain came in knowing it’d be a lifetime before I saw my brother’s face again. For now, I’d have to live for what he left behind, a family, a legacy of love.

I started high school in the fall. This time, I was determined to be on top of the world. I walked proudly in the front doors with an elephant that I wasn’t ashamed to know. I told my friends soon after, and suddenly my elephant was easier to see. He wasn’t as transparent, and soon, people started to move out of his way.

The funny thing is that the year before, I believed I was alone in my storm. But this year, I was voted homecoming attendant of the sophomore class. I found a dress and rode in a car with a stuffed elephant at my side. I waved to the crowd, to all my friends in the stands, and smiled. I was happy, and definitely not alone.

“OMG! She has an elephant with her!”

The girly squeal brought such joy to my heart where loneliness used to reside. How my tiny spark of hope had grown in only a year! I would never be the same, but I could learn to be OK. It’s amazing how a little love can put a skip in the step of a two-ton animal. I’d be walking to class, and he’d hop all around as my friends patted him on the head. They’d smile and wave, give him gifts on his birthday. It didn’t take much to contain him. Just enough courage to proclaim he existed.

*Rituals of loss and mourning vary across the globe, and from family to family. These activities do not bring “closure,” nor should they. Ritual and tradition memorialize and celebrate the person no longer with us.
“Who knew eight hours and five minutes would equate to a lifetime of change?”
I am haunted by an elephant. He hovers over my shoulder wherever I go.
I’ve tamed him, he isn’t in control. I let him hang around in my memories and
remind me that life is good. Despite all I’ve been through, I choose to believe
him. Life is genuinely good. Bad things happen, but life isn’t the sum of every
horrible circumstance. It’s much, much more. Life is experiencing the moments
in which we are truly loved, no matter how fleeting. And I count myself and my
brother among the lucky few who can honestly say:
“I have lived.”

Discussion Questions
The elephant represents grief. It is forever present in the life of the bereaved.
Although you may not talk about it or acknowledge its presence to others, it
influences every aspect of one’s life. The author made clear to others that she
wanted to talk, carrying her elephant and the elephant bracelets. The mother
shared her anticipated loss with her friends. Sharing the grief (with her own
“elephants”) allowed her mother to experience the compassion and support of
others, but the author did not have her own supports. Could the author have
told her friends? What did the author think would happen if she shared her
family tragedy with others?

The family dealt head-on with their loss and grief. The author describes how
joy began to co-exist with pain, how day-to-day activities shifted and changed.
All of the children were included, no one was shielded or excluded from the
pain. Many researchers have found that children are angry in the wake of a
loss. But children state that it is not the death they are angry about, it is the
exclusion from information and activities by family members. Children and
teens want to be included. The author heard and witnessed a great deal with
her parents, what are your thoughts about the author’s involvement?

Writing Prompt
Write about a situation or event in your own life when you did not tell others
what was happening.

Thoughts From a Believer

POETRY


I began questioning God on a Tuesday in third grade
as we cut a thick, black-brown planarian in half
with a scalpel that made my fingers twitch.

“It doesn’t feel pain,”
but I wonder if it screamed.
∗ ∗ ∗

My mother shakes and closes her eyes,
palms up with strings of tension running the length of her arms.

A heavy breath dropped from lips,
rage,
nicotine streaming through engorged veins.
Tears lace her wet eyelashes like a net
and she looks up.

We stand in church beside my father
and I reach out to touch her,
to see if she is real.
∗ ∗ ∗

I stare at the list
the College Board offers
for religious belief.

Maybe I’m a spiritualist,
an aesthetic Catholic,
a Santayana without the thick Spanish accent.

But my trachea encloses,
holes burned from brimstone
and I swallow,
checking UNDECIDED instead.
∗ ∗ ∗
Heaven seems too sterile
for a woman like my mother.

Valhalla,
with its dark evergreens and glowing cinders,
more fit for such a fighter.

The man tells me, through thick glasses clouding his corneas,
that religion stimulates that same part of the brain
that drugs and sex and music do.

I don’t argue, I don’t agree.

She cries with little girl tears,
shouting to the “I Am” that lives in our attic.

Yellowed with age, her eyes search the cracks in the ceiling
for answers,
as I place a pillow over my head and scream,
blocking her out.

God is too tired to create a burning bush for my mother.

One hot night, I have a dream about
the land of the Israelites.

Cascading dunes of fossilized finger bones, folded in prayer,
trees relinquishing leaves of brittle parchment
to a sleepy wind,
heaving from countless tired lungs,

the Holy Spirit,
a large grey duck sitting atop a throne,
pretending to be a dove.

My little sister lays on a dirty blanket
and wonders what life will be like when we die.

I ask if she remembers the time before she was born,
as if the question is the answer,
and our eyes well in unison.

To whatever God there is:
You saved my mother from a hell that burned
in between her ears,
I’m not sure if I should thank you.

I reach out to pull a single white thread
from the infamous veil
in front of my face,
and it unravels completely.

From across the lake we stare,
watching her heavy ashes sink to the bottom,
and I dare you to say that there is something
bigger than us.

**Discussion Questions**

Often illness claims the lives of those we love. It is not unusual to say that now
"they no longer suffer" or are now "at peace." The author says that God saved
her mother from a "hell in her head," but that she cannot thank God for the
peace her mother experienced. **How would these types of condolences make
you feel?**

Tragedy and death cause us to explore, question, and challenge religion, spiri-
tuality, and faith. The author refers to herself as a believer in the title. George
Santayana was a Spanish philosopher. **Why does she mention Santayana in her
poem?** Consider this quote: "Religion in its humility restores man to his only dig-

**Writing Prompt**
The author refers to a number of different sources to explore her spirituality
and beliefs—biology, a Spanish philosopher, Catholicism, Judaism, modern
science, and Norse mythology. **Who and/or what would you bring in to explore
your own spirituality and beliefs?**
It is summer now. The river is running bright, and the sun is warm and sweet on the sagebrush. All around us is life; the kingfisher is rattling like a gunwale, the hummingbird buzzes and tumbles like a garnet tossed carelessly overhead. Somewhere far downstream, a grosbeak spins its messy warble. No, the trout are yet to bite and the lines yet to tighten, but the hard and bitter and perfect scent of the mountains is pouring over the valley and the sky is ever blue. My legs wobble in the water as I feel the current pulsing against my thighs, but it does not scare me; it fills me with life. I am standing next to you, and I am safe and smiling. All is well; we are together. This is happiness, I think. This is everything beautiful. This is life.

It is autumn now. The breeze is strong and cool, and it casts the leaves through the sky till they festoon the city with a million shades of yellow spark and orange flame and tender scarlet coal. The park’s paths are covered with them too, with people, with dogs, and the oaks are equally heavy with acorns and flight-feisty birds. “Nothing like a Sunday morning in the city,” you say, and I agree. Because you are right. You smile, and suddenly this October morning in the park is a play, a wonder, and all the people are adventurers and all the dogs storytellers and the oaks are mountains and the birds golden treasures spilling from caves like shattered glass. I call out the names of birds: warbling vireo! ruby-crowned kinglet! blue-winged warbler! I ask which one is your favorite, but you have none. It is all life; it is all beautiful and sacred. God is a warbler, I tell myself as we listen to the wind on a high wooden bench. God is the morning.

It is winter now; well, not quite. There are no leaves on the trees, no warblers or vireos flighty in the oaks, and the breeze is not cool but bitter. But how can it be winter when you are beside me, when the sun is shining, when the wonders of life are spread before us to seek, to love, to pray? No, winter is the season of death, and you are more living than I could ever imagine. “Where are we going?” you ask, and I call out names as we drive rapid-fire across bridges that stretch across the endless yellow marsh. There is so much, too much; shorebird roosts and marsh hawks on high and rare auburn ducks that hide on high school ponds. I want them all. You are with me, and everything there is beautiful.

But now it is winter really, and cold snows blow. And when I seek hardy black sea ducks and little spotted owls and weave through tangles of holly to see everything that is beautiful, I seek them alone. Sick is the word everyone keeps saying. He is sick in his prostate, sick in his body. I keep words of my own. Your mind is not, I think. I fight through the freezing wind and the shivering rain, and the owls and the sea ducks and the cranberry flocks of finches turn a blind eye. The beauty of everything is lost to me. And it is still winter, and I am back at the river—where—it-was-summer. The river is ice and the sun is weak and waxy-white, but the sky still keeps its blue. And though the kingfisher has fled and the hummingbird flown and the grosbeak gone far away, new life is here. The places where the river is still water are covered with mallards and wigeons and goldeneye ducks, the snowy hillsides teem with creeping gray partridge and chipping goldfinches, and where ice keeps its iron grip is the gathering place for swans, big as lions and twice as beautiful. They are like white spirits, great ghosts of frost. Ghosts. This is all that is beautiful, but all I have of you is a distant ghost. Still ill, still fighting. Still sick and far away.

But it is spring now, and with the green of the earth comes every wonder nature has to give. It is beautiful, so perfectly, indescribably, everything beautiful; warblers bubble and twirl with songs that break through the canopy of locust and golden-green larch, and snow geese come at dawn to the marshes we once hopped through, carefree. I am everywhere, to see all that is beautiful, to love the love of the world you gave me. And it is warm and life is all around me, and how can I be sad? I can see the happiness in your eyes when I speak to you, for the wonder is yours as well. You are not a ghost, never; you are here. And though I watch you be weak and sick as I have ever seen, the joy does not leave. It will never leave.

It is still spring when I am pulled from school early in the morning, when I am told that I am to return home, for my mother wishes to see me. I know. For the sake of my family, I keep my face passive, but I had always known. And as we drive slowly back home, not saying a word, about to face whatever is waiting in that house ready or not, I look and listen. I see the blur of green as we drive down the streets, the leaves on the trees stretching out to greet the morning sun, and the redbud blossoms still hanging on, to the last petal. I see the sun glistening on the harbor water where I row and the seabirds my coach chides me for stealing glances at. And song; I hear it everywhere. Robins and song sparrows serenade me from every corner, and as I step through the threshold, heart pounding, I can make out the faint warble of a mockingbird. I make a note of its final melody as the door slams behind me.
And then it is time to hear the news, time to cry, to hold each other tightly. I watch the mockingbirds, flashing white and grey outside the window, through every moment. I had lost the father who stood strong, who showed me nature and God and everything beautiful there is to be seen a long time ago, I think. You only left me birds.

I cry hardest when they take away your body, for I will miss your smile as I name each song in turn and your steely eyes as we speed to catch a rarity. You taught me, taught me well, and you watched me learn from nothing to twice as much as yourself. But you will not be there to greet me again. I kiss your forehead once and weep once again.

But despite my sadness, it is still spring, and if through all my father’s teachings I had learned one thing, it is that to waste beauty and action and love is the greatest waste of all. So it is the evening of the next day, and my father’s body is still yet to be ash, when I swing on my binoculars and head out the door. My friend meets me on a grassy island, and we speak as we walk. For hours we speak, of where we will go and what we will see for years to come. I tell him of your death, and he is stunned. I tell him the truth. “I have no regrets. He was a great father and a great man. He would not want me to sit and cry in my room. We were happiest out here, together. This is where I heal.”

It takes time, but I heal.

And it is summer now, summer again. The sea is swaying gentle and blue and the maple quivers shy and green. The song sparrows sing from beach roses and the mockingbirds fight on the lawn like scattered newspapers wheeling in the wind. I can hear the terns calling from on high, making their nests in the little rocks at high tide. The sand is in my toes. I see the house you taught me in, the house you loved me in, the house you lived and died in. The wind blows, not cold, not light, but strong. It is strong with your spirit, strong with the man who gave me my life. You are not a ghost. You will never be a ghost. For a ghost is a spirit without love, and the wind speaks to me. Your spirit is love itself.

Discussion Questions
The author’s love of the beauty and spirit of nature is initially challenged when his father becomes ill. He questions, “How can I be sad with all that is beautiful?” He finds that “though I watch you be weak and sick as I have ever seen, the joy does not leave. It will never leave.” How does one hang on to joy in the face of sadness and difficulties?

The author captures the essence of each of the seasons—both the beauty and joy and the sadness after the death of his father. He sees his father in death as he did in life, offering him love and strength. In a 2015 book titled Sons+Fathers, the musician Bono writes about the loss of his father. Other essays include discussions about how sons James Baldwin and Barack Obama began their own journeys after the death of their fathers. What new beginnings or purpose might come from the loss of a loved one?

Writing Prompt
Being present in one’s emotions and having a friend to share the honesty as well as the burden of grief is powerful. The author and his friend return to a place of happiness—a grassy island—for healing. Describe your place of healing.
Hug Coupons and Shoe Boxes

PERSONAL ESSAY & MEMOIR


She had fallen before. Yet amongst the cacophonous clatter of cream of mushroom cans and the metallic taste of pure horror as my mother collapsed straight into a seasonal grocery store display, seven-year-old me felt a profound pain and shock unlike anything before in knowing that things weren’t going to get better. In an instant, the most compassionate, inspirational, and affectionate person I’d ever known had been reduced to a solemn, unresponsive slump on the floor. Even worse, a crowd began to gather around her like ravenous hyenas after a fresh kill, making me want to shriek at them for degrading her with stares overflowing with condescending pity.

With the assistance of my father, who came sprinting through the store once he heard, my mother eventually recovered and was provided with a scooter cart for the rest of our shopping trip. Yet nothing could stop the torrent of tears that poured out of my eyes that night while my parents slept. After all, here was the mother who had read to me every night and watched movies with me in my parent’s bedroom on the weekends, broken by the stage IV lung carcinoma that had metastasized to her brain. In the coming weeks, the only solace for me would come when I saw her in the hospital, the refuge where she still never ceased to love and embrace me in every way she could.

Needless to say, when she passed away, I was devastated. Mother’s Day and its memories of jubilant breakfasts in bed morphed into solemn reminders of how empty the world was without her. Free hug coupons and personal drawings that I had gifted her took on a melancholy hue as I stumbled across them in the bedroom where we had once watched movies together as a family. My once-attentive father all but receded away, leaving me in a bleak house with empty painkiller bottles piled up in dilapidated shoe boxes and other shocking reminders that my mother was gone. In short, I had been plunged into a world of grief and adversity, of brutal ironies and cruel jokes, of debilitating despair and excruciating emptiness.

In the face of such anguish, I found solace in the last note that my mother had written to my father and me. On it, she wrote a simple message: “Go, Brian! Do the best you can!” From the moment after I read it, I have made it my mission to persevere and honor my mother’s memory in that simple way—constantly doing the best I can for myself and those around me. Through lonely days and sleepless nights, storybook tragedies and missed movies, her words are the wind in my sails that propel me into a future where no free hug coupon goes unused.

For now, while my mother may never have cashed in her free hug coupons, I carry both them and her final note with me wherever I go. They give me the grit to lead multiple honor societies and to pick up trash in my mornings even when pouring rain all but washes me away. They give me the opportunity to pass on those free hug coupons to the struggling students I tutor and melancholic members of my community as I remember the extraordinary grief that we all come to face in our lives. They give me an inexpressible appreciation for the immense beauty in our world, whether it be in the awestruck eyes of a kindergarten class as I play Liszt or the blazing passion of a ninth-grade science bowler as we gush about mitochondria. They give me hope that for every life I save or help, I can begin to make up for the one I lost. Yet most importantly, they give me indescribable optimism, solace, and satisfaction in knowing that I’m working to accomplish my mother’s dream every day.

Discussion Questions
In what way was the hospital a refuge for the author?
What were the brutal ironies and cruel jokes in the author’s life?

Writing Prompt
If you were to leave a final message for a loved one, what would it say?
Sinking Down With You

About This Work
Perhaps the most stirring and thought-provoking part of this work is the rippling on the surface of the water, as the person “sinks” below. The impact of a loss in one’s life (and the people in our lives) can be likened to a stone thrown into a pond. The ripples emanate from the center. The metaphor “ripples in the pond” can also illustrate how many people are affected by a singular loss. The person in the center who has lost a mother or a father or both, or a sibling or siblings, is the most vulnerable, but there are others who are affected as well. We can be at the core of the ripples in the pool or caught in the ever-widening currents of another’s tragedy.

Discussion Questions
What or who do the ripples represent in this person’s life?

What does the title of this work, “Sinking Down With You,” mean for the healing of the bereaved person?

Describe the object below the “sinking” person—can it support or suspend the downward trajectory? Is this support without its own consequences of pain or discomfort?

Writing Prompt
The colors of the underwater ecosystem can speak to the richness of a new experience or the darkness of an unknown, new, and strange environment. Some of the colors are in the light, others in the dark. Describe how this environment represents a person’s world after loss.
About This Work

Artists, presidents, poets, and writers have referred to "suffocating grief"—grief that can be so overwhelming and all-encompassing it leaves one with a feeling of being trapped, oppressed, or suppressed. As one grieves, there are moments that we try to speak to another, but as much as we can hear the words in our heads, we cannot express them to others. We are alone. No matter where we look, the grief is there.

Discussion Questions

As much as the person in this image is prevented from speaking, it seems that she can still hear or see, although she chooses to close her eyes. How do the artist’s choices reflect the nature of suffocating grief?

How can one emerge from the solitary oppression of grief? What allows one to “breathe” again?

Writing Prompt

Reflecting on the power of this image, describe how this artist captures the essence of “suffocating grief” in one’s life.

Pulling Tight

About This Work
People often refer to a “broken heart” after a loss. The strings in this work are tied to a heart—simultaneously pulling the heart together but unraveling in other parts of the image. Perhaps as soon as one “pulls things together,” they let loose and come undone in another place.

Discussion Questions
What does the facial expression of the painting’s subject tell you about her “work” pulling the strings to her heart?

Kintsugi is a Japanese art form in which breaks and repairs are treated as part of the object’s history. Broken ceramics are carefully mended by artisans with a lacquer resin mixed with powdered gold, silver, or platinum. The repairs are visible—yet somehow beautiful. How might kintsugi apply to the artist’s interpretation of the heart in this work?

Writing Prompt
The words heart and strings are often used in literature and art to illustrate how we deeply feel love and loss. Write about a poem or another work of art that uses this same imagery.

Traveling With My Reflection

About This Work
Going through a loss of any kind causes us to reflect. We might stare out a window at the world around us. Sometimes, however, we look but do not see because we are confronted with our own images and thoughts at the same time. The loss and our grief travels with us much like the reflection in this work.

Discussion Questions
What parts of the reflection are visible in this image? What can you learn about this person and their life?

The word reflection can mean “the throwing back by a body or surface of light, heat, or sound without absorbing it” or “serious thought or consideration.” Is one meaning more strongly represented in this work?

Writing Prompt
This photograph can inspire a deep narrative. Write a short story about what you imagine is happening. Using rich and vibrant adjectives, describe the scene and where this person is traveling to or where they are traveling from.
Sometimes I Feel Like There’s Nothing Left

About This Work
We can view this work as expressing a wish for handling grief to be as easy as going to a vending machine to get what we need when we are struggling—with a crisis, difficulty, or loss. By using this visual as a metaphor for that desire, we can reflect on methods for how we can heal.

Discussion Questions
The artist uses a hole to illustrate emptiness. How else could you illustrate a person when there is “nothing left”?

Where can we find the important contents of this vending machine in our own lives—a person, a place, a book, music, a painting, a film?

Writing Prompt
Look at the “offerings” in the vending machine. Which of these are the core of one’s healing after a loss? Select one bottle or can in the vending machine and write about how you’ve used its contents (love, hope, joy, strength, etc.) in your own life.
American Tears

About This Work
When there is devastation or death in our communities or schools, the public outcry is heard and repeated, “Our thoughts and prayers go out to….” The collective grief we feel is overwhelming and affects every person in uniquely different ways. This image may not only refer to death—there are other losses precipitated by the actions of others, individually or collectively, legal or illegal. The grief felt by the young man in the photo is eclipsed by the blood dripping from the American flag.

Discussion Questions
The artist has created a provocative image to make her point. What does this work mean to you?

What do the characteristics of the young man in the work tell you about his experience?

Writing Prompt
A photograph can inspire social justice actions or a movement—we remember the heart-wrenching photos of Alan Kurdi, a Syrian boy; Oscar Martinez and his daughter in the Rio Grande; students at Kent State during the Vietnam War. How would this image inspire you to take action and become an advocate for a cause that you believe is important?
In Loving Memory

About This Work
A photograph is an integral tool of grieving. A photograph allows us to keep close the image and memories associated with the deceased. Decades-old photographs remind us of our history and those who are no longer alive. Creating photographs can also heal us. British photographer Kirsty Mitchell recalls how her world fell apart after her mother’s death from a brain tumor. Photography became her “only escape” when she could no longer talk about how she felt. She produced pieces that “echoed the memories of her stories.”

Discussion Questions
Look at the hands of the person holding the photograph. Describe what his or her relationship with the subject of the photograph might be.

Look at the subject of the photograph. The fingertips in the artist’s piece seem to gently touch the face in the old photo. What thoughts come to your mind?

Writing Prompt
Write about a photograph you have of someone who is no longer alive. Where do you keep it—in a drawer, in a frame, a book, or a special place? How often do you look at it, and what thoughts come to mind?

Lauren Yang, Drawing & Illustration, Grade 11. Dulles High School, Sugar Land, TX. Gold Medal, 2018.
The Beautiful Day Dance

Darius Atefat-Peckham, Grade 11. Interlochen Arts Academy, Interlochen, MI. National Student Poet, 2018.

for my father, widower at 33

Mornings, when I woke up, my face sagging, defeated, Dad would smile at me and wave his arms above his head, his legs kicking beneath him, a desperate flail but a chance to show that he could move his body as well as anyone—when the sunlight seemed to break and spill down his raised chin like egg whites and the chill bit into us both—he'd sing.

The song isn’t as important to me now as the beauty of the dance (and I’m sure the melody was a repetitious rip-off of “Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah,” though sometimes we tilted our heads beneath the sky and just yelled it, despite the neighbors, dispensing puffs of warm air from our mouths as we screamed “It’s a beautiful day” to the blue that filled the space behind the clouds, to whoever was listening—to the way I sweat at nights, Dad rubbing the wet T-shirt that clung to my back, whispering, It’s all right, we’re OK, over and over, like a chorus, to the broken limbs and the deaths that rendered us, for a time, living memories, regretfully alive, but thankful that we could always spin ourselves around, arms spread wide to live and dance and)
to sing anyways—
to sing always.

This work was previously published in the Class of 2018 National Student Poets Program Chapbook.
Peace Is Only Real in a Photograph

POETRY

Phoebe DeAngelo, Grade 10. Waring School, Beverly, MA. Gold Key, 2017.

The ocean behind me seems at peace.
It sits still, no waves in sight.
As if all the bad in the world was paused
For just one moment.
On the horizon, a rock wall separates
Sea from clear skies.
A few boats float in the distance
But they’re blurry and they lack importance.
Sand ascends from the water,
Creating a hill of craters in the foreground.

My uncle’s name is John,
But we call him Johnny.
It just always seemed to fit him.
He is the center of the photograph.
His right knee is propped up,
Providing a seat for my sister, Cecily.
I am plopped on his broad shoulders.
His hand grasps my ankle for support.
John and Cecily look forward,
I stayed focused on the hairs of his head.

Uncle Johnny kept us laughing.
Burning mixtapes for my sister and me,
Labeling it “Girls rule, boys drool.”
I still have it.
It’s too scratched to play
With a big stripe of red nail polish.
“Follow Me” by Uncle Kracker
Stays in my favorites on iTunes.*

I can hear his laugh echo in my head
Thinking about all the times he got on all fours,
To act as a pony since I always said I wanted one.
The laugh that’s contagious.
That hurts your sides.
That makes your eyes well up.
My aunt was always mad at first.
Muttering something about how he’s going to hurt his knees.
He never cared.
Never stopped.

His smile always bigger
Than anyone I had ever seen.
It pauses time,
Makes everyone forget.
It forces everyone to think about
Only important things.
Happiness, Laughter, Positivity.
He lightens up a room in a way
I always wished I could have.

He fell in love with my aunt Kim at UMass.
A beautiful blonde undergrad student.
She can recall the moment she first saw him.
“It felt like I had known him my whole life.”
They quickly thought about their lives together.
A home,
Children,
A family.

This photo was taken on July 10, 2003.
I was two-and-a-half.
Five hundred and fifty-two days later,
We lost him.

My uncle’s name was Major John Ruocco.
When he was a junior in high school,

*The lyrics of “Follow Me” by Uncle Kracker have significance for Phoebe. Listen to the song and read the lyrics, and imagine what those words and music mean to her.
He was in a head-on car crash. The driver was killed. He decided he wanted to go into the Marines. To make up for his best friend’s life somehow. He graduated college wanting to be in the Infantry. Scoring so high on an entrance exam, He was convinced to be a pilot instead. He completed 75 missions in Iraq. Leaving his two young boys And beautiful wife At home.

He came home different, Changed, unrecognizable. Awoken with nightmares, He struggled To connect with Kim and the boys. The problem became obvious When he told his 10-year-old He forgot to watch the Super Bowl. Joey handed the phone to Kim. “Something’s wrong with Daddy.”

She flew across the country to California. John had two days before he was deployed. She went to the base first. “I don’t know what to tell ya, He didn’t show up this morning.” In panic she went to his hotel. She sprinted through the hallway on every floor. Hysterically calling his name. There was a large man kneeling Head to toe in camouflage. It wasn’t John. This man stood next to an open door. Without saying a word Kim walked in.

He had taken his own life. He couldn’t handle it. He gave up.

The photograph is loosely taped to my wall, Squashed between pictures of my closest friends. Everyone who made a difference is up there. It blends in with the ones around it Yet it’s always the first one I see. It’s my favorite one of us. Not because it’s the best picture. But because it’s the last.

I see his smile first, But then his eyes. I see joy, love, compassion. Five hundred and fifty-two days. Only five hundred and fifty-two days. I settle back into the ocean, It just looks dark.

Discussion Questions
The word peace is mentioned only once in the poem (describing the ocean, “still, no waves in sight”), yet the author reminds us that how we appear in photos, or face-to-face, can hide the underlying sadness and even turbulence in our lives. How can we reveal our sadness to others?

Joey is Uncle Johnny’s 10-year-old son in the poem. How did he know something was wrong with his father?

Writing Prompt
The photograph of Uncle Johnny, Cecily, and the poet launches and inspires this poem. She tells the story of her uncle through this one image. Think about a photograph of yours, perhaps the last photo of you with a friend or family member. How would you tell a story about this person in your own life?
Carrying Season

Mackenzie Whitehead-Bust, Grade 12, Denver School of the Arts, Denver, CO.
Gold Medal, 2018.

June—Vershire, Vermont
It was a late summer.
The cows had been pushing since May and still no calves by June.
In fact, nothing living came from all that pushing but another gasp of cold,
a fetus spilled onto the ground. A wet, unbreathing heart.
At the county fair, the church woman taught us how to keep ourselves whole.
She took us by the arms and showed us how to hold a red balloon
with only our waists,
how to make our hips curl in like spoons,
how to make our bodies into hollowing utensils.
And when the first calf finally came,
all the women stood in the barn
with curled-in stomachs and buckled knees,
ready to do what our bodies had been taught to do: receive.
That first calf came like a bullet from a loaded gun.
The delivery stole the oxygen from our lungs and left us gasping,
this is what my body could do
if I knew how to use the machinery of my limbs.
This is the sharp relief to the desire I never knew I had
but that I was born shrieking and accustomed to.
This is how I could learn to love the thing that tears me in two.

July—South Florida
The night my grandmother died on her couch in July,
the temperature on her thermostat still read 67 degrees.
In Florida, we sat on the tile floor
and sorted my grandmother’s jewelry between our legs.
We made piles. We breathed through our mouths because
it smelled like cigarette smoke.
I looked at my grandmother’s body.
I didn’t touch her forehead like my mother did
because I was afraid it would echo.
My sister said she didn’t love her anymore because love was a living thing.

We swam in the ocean and I got a tan line from my grandmother’s silver.
My mother cried so hard she thought she dislocated a rib.
I told her it’s OK, once, when I was in Vermont,
I saw an animal ripped in two by love.
She said, bring me coffee.

August—New York
The cicadas didn’t start up until August.
At the MOMA, we studied photographs of women
cutting fruit, carrying children, holding their hands in fists inside their pockets.
We named our future daughters things we would name our sons:
Jude, and Addison and August.
The cicadas were relentless.
I read an article that said,
to understand how female cicadas make their mating sound,
imagine pulling your ribs to the point of buckling collapse.
I looked at a picture of a woman holding up a bloody beet.
I tried contracting the muscles in my chest and
carving my stomach into the outline of a red balloon.
It’s the August before I turn an adult
and I am just now learning the uses for my waist, for my ribs.
I wonder why they don’t tell us when we’re young
how women must learn to break themselves for love;
that the only unbroken rib we will ever know was Adam’s,
and there’s a reason Adam didn’t carry life.

Discussion Questions
Kay Redfield Jamison said, “Grief is so human, and it hits everyone at one point
or another, at least, in their lives. If you love, you will grieve, and that’s just
given.” How do Jamison’s words fit with the stanza “July—South Florida”?
The people in this poem respond to death differently. There is no “right”
way to respond—only your way. How is your way different from
another’s experience?

Writing Prompt
Select the poem’s most physical words. Try them out with your body.
Write about the sensations you experience. Can physical actions help heal?
The Mourning Of

Kendall Vorhis, Grade 11. Goose Creek High School, Goose Creek, SC. Gold Medal, New York Life Award, 2018.

The sun rose that morning, as it always did. Autumn sunlight parted through the living room blinds, casting vertical shadows upon your sunken cheeks, highlighting every wrinkle, every blemish I so hastily tried to memorize before they faded like your lasting breath.

They told me you were at peace, but your barren, half-lidded eyes would not shut no matter how many desperate attempts I made to close them, for they did not want to pretend to be asleep—but taunt me as I pathetically clutched your rigid hands to my hollow chest.

Your lax jaw hung open, mouth paused in an eternal gasp for air that would never be fulfilled. If this was peace, unrest was a bitter punishment for the damned.

Saturated and lively, Autumn sunlight parted through the living room blinds, and though you did not rise to greet its mourning debut, the sun rose.

Discussion Questions

Our biggest fear is that we will forget the face, the sound of a father's voice, or the touch of a hand on our cheek. **How do we capture and hold on to these sensations after someone has died? How do we not forget?**

The morning of death brought deep and detailed observations by the poet. Gazing on the face of the deceased is a long-lasting and powerful moment. Although the author was taunted and "pathetically clutched," she stayed in the moment. **How do we stay present in the face of grief?**

Writing Prompt

We usually think of sunlight as the début of morning, but in this poem it is the beginning of mourning for the poet. The sun still rises, although life is changed forever. **Write about one time where you expected the world to be forever changed in the wake of a tragic or sad experience, but it was not—when did you come to that realization?**
To the Dead Bird in the Target Parking Lot

Amanda Chen, Grade 12, Westlake High School, Austin, TX. Gold Key, 2019.

Dead Bird in the Target parking lot,
Hi. I’m not too sure how to start this . . . it’s three in the morning, and I have no idea what to say to you. I’m sorry?
I can’t stop thinking about how you died. A car came by; there were birds in its path. In moments like that, I always wonder if the birds are going to get away, and they always do. But you didn’t.
You tried to get away, but you hit the car’s bumper on your way up. I remember praying that you’d get up or army crawl out of the way or something. But you just laid there. And then the car ran over you, and you died. You didn’t even twitch. It all happened in probably half a second.
You were there, and then you weren’t. And then I started crying.
Don’t take it personally, but looking back, I don’t think I was crying just for you. The truth is you died in the same way that my six-month-old brother died: suddenly. I cried for you just as I cried for him. I cried because it wasn’t fair. I cried because I hated how one moment you could be in a dirty parking lot or in an antiseptic hospital, but gone in the next. I cried because I missed him.
He was twelve years younger than me, and I loved him—still do. I took him out on walks in his blue stroller, warmed up formula, burped and bathed him, sang to him under my breath, and dressed him in outfits that matched mine. I pushed his cradle up to the piano and played Mozart’s Sonata in D Major, smiling at his giggly accompaniment. And when he was hospitalized because of bird flu, I held on to his tiny hand and a desperate hope for forty-five days, humming Mozart between broken sobs. I prayed for the first time in my life. It felt like I sat there under that stupid painting of a cartoon giraffe for years just staring at him, willing him to get better. But he didn’t.
I often wonder about the impact your death had on your family. Are they pacing their nest or birdhouse waiting for you to return? Do they refuse to talk to your siblings about it because it’s easier to forget? Does your dad work overtime just to deal with the pain? Does your mom whisper in her sleep that she doesn’t want to live anymore, knowing that her other children are only a room away and the walls are paper thin?

I want to thank you for making me cry. I know that’s weird, but I’ve never really been able to acknowledge the pain. It’s easier to fake a smile and pretend that everything’s fine even when my chest aches with grief and a million unspoken words. It’s easier to talk about a hard calculus test at the dinner table than about the night I spent crying into my brother’s old blanket. It’s easier to try to forget.
Except, somehow, the easier hurts a whole lot more, and forgetting doesn’t fix anything.
I don’t want to forget anymore. I don’t want to hide my brother’s picture in a government textbook where I know my parents won’t see it. I don’t want to flinch at the sight of a random six-year-old boy, the age my brother would be now if he were still alive. I don’t want to cry when playing Mozart because it’s so empty with the ghost of his laughter. I want to remember: you, him, the pain, all of it.
I promise.

Discussion Questions
You’ve been asked to create a public service announcement or video for parents on how they can talk to their kids about grief. List just three suggestions for how they can do this—what would you say in this video?

Sometimes the most innocent situations remind us of previous losses. They are connected, the most distant and the intimate both speak to how we experience death in our lives. A helpless bird, a baby brother—no other characteristics are the same except for suddenness. How has grief resurfaced when you least expected it?

Writing Prompt
Young people are incredibly observant. They can catalog all the ways death changes their lives and how others respond—what they do, what they say and most of all, how they shield, protect, and avoid talking about the loss with the surviving siblings. Write about one time you knew much more than the adults in your home thought you knew.
I checked my watch, snapping it closed with a loud CRACK and a sigh. These things can’t be rushed, of course, a fact that fails to make my job any less tedious. It is what it is.

Knowing I’d be here a while, I decided to take a seat in one of the pews, careful not to crease my suit doing so. I looked around the chapel, at the hushed crowds huddled together in small groups like roosting crows. I overheard my name more than once; mentions of how they knew me, stories of their friends that I’ve met with before. I usually ignore this idle gossip. I’ve become accustomed to their hate and fear. It is what it is.

The mother caught my eye, sitting alone on a bench. She sat in rigid silence, a stark contrast to the woman I’d visited only a few days prior. Then, there were tears and shaking fists. Then, she’d been screaming and wailing and clawing at my face, trying her hardest to chase me away. Of course, I didn’t go away. I never do.

Now, she simply sat. Staring unseeing into space through dull, rusted eyes. It’s sad, in a way, to see this switch flipped. To watch as an intricate tapestry is torn and frayed and bleached, to watch a bright and lively woman wilt into despondent weed. One would think that after all I’ve seen, I’d get used to it. I never do.

Perhaps it’s an ache of guilt, buried deep within my bones. Perhaps it’s simply a reminder, a sign of purpose and existence disguised in this terrible pattern. Whatever the case, it pangs whatever heart I have left each and every time. It is what it is.

And perhaps that’s why, on this particular afternoon, I stood and, hesitantly, approached her. I said nothing—just sat by her side. I braced myself for her to lash out, to attack me again, but she didn’t even look up. Just stared at her hands, clasped tightly in her lap. In a way, it would have been more reassuring if she’d at least reacted, whether it be in anger or otherwise.

But she didn’t.

Finally, a hoarse whisper etched a crack in the silence.

“Why?”

I didn’t respond. Usually, any comment on my part stimulates bargaining, which I really can’t afford to do. Not anymore.

She buried her head in her hands. “It’s my fault. I should have known. I’m his mother. If I’d noticed something was wrong, then maybe…”

I wanted to tell her that nothing had been wrong. That she wasn’t to blame. That it was just the way of the world. It is what it is.

But I didn’t.

The father came and sat beside her, wrapping his arms around his wife. He looked tired—so very, very tired. The last few days had aged him, though not beyond the point of my recognition. I nodded to him, noting how he wearily nodded back. So, he did remember me. Of course, he did. He’d seen me more often than most. First his mother, then his father, then his sister, and now… well, it is what it is.

I cleared my throat and stood, brushing off my suit. For some reason, I couldn’t stand to be in the presence of the parents any longer. Couldn’t stand the sight of something so broken. Not that I hadn’t seen it before… but that afternoon, something was different. Wrong.

I decided then that I’d leave, get some fresh air. There isn’t much where I live, and I take it when I can. By then I’d be feeling like myself, and then I could finish my job. It’s just a job, that’s all it is, it’s nothing personal. It is what it is, I thought, and in retrospect, I believe I was attempting to convince myself more than anything.

But as I turned to go, a young girl approached me, tears streaming down her face. Without warning, she forcefully kicked my leg, causing me to wince. Ah, yes. The sister.

“How could you?!” she screamed, swinging her fists. I stepped backwards nervously. It seemed I had had the opposite effect on her as I did the mother. I distinctly remembered this girl denying my existence just a few days ago, muttering about nightmares and needing to wake up.

Now, she’d woken up.

“You took him!” She was still yelling, still crying, still trying in vain to pummel me with her delicate hands, hands much too small for such a feat. “You took him! You took him, and you’re gonna bring him back!”

I just sighed and strode away, leaving her to her wailing and stomping and the forced, premature growth that shouldn’t have come for many more years. However much it pains me to see children shrouded in black, they just never understand. Would I bring them back? Would I, if I could? Perhaps. Perhaps not.
But either way, I can’t—a fact they never seem able to process in their innocent minds. I can’t, so no matter how much they plead, I won’t. It is what it is.

Another girl stood by the door, looking down at her handheld screen and chewing gum. She wasn’t dressed like the rest of the people in attendance, wasn’t wearing ink and shadow. But she was carrying a weight, I could tell. As I approached, she popped her gum, made a rather rude hand gesture, and stormed out.

I stared after her, confused, and a voice behind me said, “Sorry about that.” I turned and saw the brother. He was staring at the floor, hands in his pockets. “She doesn’t mean any disrespect,” he said quietly, still not meeting my gaze. “She just doesn’t know how to help me, that’s all. She doesn’t know what to say.”

I said nothing, and he laughed weakly, running a hand through his hair. “I guess I don’t, either. Or, what I should’ve said, anyway. I didn’t mean to snap at him . . . but it was late, and I had a lot of homework . . .”

I wanted to tell him that it wasn’t his fault. That he had no need to carry this burden, not all on his own, in any case. That he was allowed to cry, allowed to mourn. That he and his father didn’t have to be the strong ones, and that there’s no shame in leaning on others for support. It is what it is.

But I didn’t.

I stood frozen at the door as he shuffled back into the chapel, where his family was waiting. And there I stood for a long while, not knowing what to do. A breath of air was no longer as enticing as it had been before. And besides, it must have been almost over by now. I’d met with the mother, the father, the sister, the brother, even the brother’s girlfriend . . . who else would my work have affected?

My silent query was answered as I looked around, eyes lingering on everyone present. Coaches and teachers, wondering if they’d been too harsh or pushed too hard. Teary-eyed girls, heads swimming with the unsaid declarations of love that they’d been too shy to confess. But one particular boy caught my attention, hunched in the corner. Almost without thinking, I approached him.

He looked up as I neared his secluded spot, and a flash of fear crossed his features as I realized he’d been trying to avoid me. His eyes were rimmed red, and he wiped his nose on his sleeve before speaking. “Why?”

The friend’s hoarse, whispered word echoed with a different sort of pain than the mother’s. Perhaps that’s because he wasn’t really asking me—not really. He was wondering why he’d been left behind, left alone on this miserable rock between birth and death. A common, slightly aggravating reaction. Why do they always assume I know all the answers? Why do they think that just because I’m here, I can see into the mind and heart and pain of everyone I take? I’m not here to ask questions, and I’m certainly not qualified to answer them. I’m here to do my job. It is what it is.

The friend wiped his eyes and took a photo from his pocket, creased from the constant folding and unfolding it had been subject to these last few days. I’ve often wondered why people keep these pictures, looking at them again and again when they never truly replicate the spark of a real smile. When the memory they treasure so much and carry in their pocket only serves to remind them of what they’ve lost. But they can’t let go, not of old photographs or sweatshirts or blankets. It is what it is.

I turned back to the chapel doors, knowing it was nearly time. I’d given them all long enough. But before I could take another step, a girl appeared in front of me, face red and eyes fixed on her shoes. “Um . . . I’m so sorry to bother you, but . . . here,” she murmured. “I-I was wondering . . . could you please deliver this? If not, that’s fine . . .” She held an envelope in her shaking, outstretched hand. I was surprised by the gesture, and I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t slightly irked as well. I am not a mailman, I am not a servant, and I am certainly not a friend. But, unsure of what else to do, I took it. With a sigh of relief, the girl darted off, disappearing into the crowd.

I stared after her a long while before opening the letter. All it said was this: I’m sorry I didn’t get to know you, and I’m sorry I didn’t say this before, but thank you for helping my brother.

I frowned and craned my head to see where she’d gone, catching a glimpse of her at the side of a young boy . . . a boy in a wheelchair. I cursed the pang in my chest, cursed the melting hunk of ice that was supposed to be my heart, and turned away. It’s only when it’s too late that they remember these things, or care enough to bring them up. They think that maybe, just maybe, the words they’d left unspoken could have changed what happened. That’s absurd, of course. Nothing can prevent me from my purpose, whether I like it or not. And, as I’m beginning to discover, it’s not an enjoyable position to fill. It is what it is.

And so I went to the long, wooden box, polished surface gleaming in the dim light of the chapel. I went to the box and found the one I’d come for sitting atop, legs swinging and eyes wide as he looked out across the crowds of people gathered for him. I beckoned for him to follow. He hopped down and reached for my hand, then hesitated. “I . . . I didn’t mean for any of this,” he said quietly. “This wasn’t supposed to happen. If I’d known . . .”

“Known what?” I said, caught somewhat off guard by my own gravely, seldom-used voice. “Known the sorrow of a mother? The pain of a father? The bitterness of a sister, or the guilt of a brother?”
The boy was silent, but I was not.
“You, all of you, never understand. This doesn’t end with family and friends. I’ve seen it, time and time again. I’ve watched strangers weep and wail and harbor responsibility over someone they never really knew. I’ve watched lives crumble, and since the beginning of time, I’ve said nothing. Because . . .”
Here I took a deep breath.
“I could say it is what it is. But that doesn’t mean it should be.”
He nodded and looked away, blinking back tears. We stood in silence for a while longer, watching the unraveled world slowly begin to knit itself together. Then, with one last glance over my shoulder, I took his hand in mine.
And I led him home.

Discussion Questions
Families often blame themselves for not preventing death, no matter what the cause, not only suicide. The narrator describes how men, young and old, have to be “strong”. If you could tell the father and brother in this family how to express their grief, what to do, who to talk to—what would you say?

To be present is one of the most comforting and supporting acts we can offer those who are in pain. The Canadian philosopher Henri Nouwen says it perfectly: “The friend who can be silent with us in a moment of despair or confusion, who can stay with us in an hour of grief and bereavement, who can tolerate not knowing . . . not healing, not curing. That is a friend who cares.” Is death telling us something we need to do when we come face-to-face with those who grieve?

Writing Prompt
A girl gave the narrator a card to give to the boy who has died, thanking the boy for his kindness to her brother. Do you think it is ever too late to express your gratitude, even after someone has died? What would you say to this person? How would you write it, and who would you tell?
Resources on Grief and Bereavement
Childhood bereavement is one of society’s most overlooked, least understood, yet most pervasive social issues. One in 14 American children will lose a parent or sibling before age 18, and the majority of children experience a significant loss by the time they complete high school. Recognizing the critical need to provide greater support to grieving children and their families, the New York Life Foundation has made childhood bereavement a key focus area over the past decade. Find local support as well as online resources for you and your loved ones.

achildingrief.com

You can find an electronic copy of this book on the Scholastic Art & Writing Awards website, as well as additional resources and information on how to apply for the New York Life Award.

artandwriting.org/newyorklife

The Coalition to Support Grieving Students is a unique collaboration of leading professional organizations representing the school community who have come together to support grieving students and their families. The Coalition has created and is sharing a set of industry-endorsed resources that will empower school communities across America in the ongoing support of their grieving students. As part of this initiative, New York Life created the Grief-Sensitive Schools Initiative (GSSI) to better equip educators to care for grieving students by introducing GrievingStudents.org and other valuable grief resources to local schools.

grievingstudents.org

Apply to the Scholastic Art & Writing Awards

1. Create an account.
Visit artandwriting.org to create a student or educator account. The Scholastic Art & Writing Awards open in September every year.

2. Upload your work.
Share your best art and writing.

3. Complete your submission.
Send a signed submission form and payment or fee waiver form to your local program.

Guidelines and deadlines vary by region.
About the Alliance for Young Artists & Writers / Scholastic Art & Writing Awards

The Alliance for Young Artists & Writers is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization whose mission is to identify students with exceptional artistic and literary talent and present their remarkable work to the world through the Scholastic Art & Writing Awards. Through the Awards, students receive opportunities for recognition, exhibition, publication, and scholarships. With the support of the New York Life Foundation, the Alliance offers the New York Life Award, which includes $1,000 and $500 scholarships to students whose visual art or writing deals with grief and bereavement.

artandwriting.org/newyorklife

About the New York Life Foundation

Inspired by New York Life’s tradition of service and humanity, the New York Life Foundation has, since its founding in 1979, provided nearly $280 million in charitable contributions to national and local nonprofit organizations. The Foundation supports programs that benefit young people, particularly in the areas of educational enhancement and childhood bereavement. The Foundation also encourages and facilitates the community involvement of employees and agents of New York Life through its Volunteers for Good and Grief-Sensitive Schools programs.

newyorklifefoundation.org