



## NPL's Youth Writing Challenge!

Every other week on a Tuesday, youthful library users (ages 9-18) are challenged with a writing prompt and the winner wins a \$25 gift certificate to Otter Books!

**Challenge 1:** It's not easy being a squash. Write the Cinderella story from the point of view of the pumpkin suddenly pressed into service as a carriage. Or Little Red Riding Hood, from the point of view of the grandmother or the wolf. You can choose any story you like and arrange it yourself. This can be a short story, a paragraph of a story or a poem.

**Challenge 2:** Write a story, as long or as short as you want, using all of the following four: a piece of advice; a word you have recently learned; a famous quote; and, a dream

**Challenge 3:** Write a story using this as your first sentence: *Last night I dreamed I was fighting aliens again.* Incorporate three disparate objects that are surrounding you right now.

**Challenge 4:** You are stuck inside your school overnight. Write a short story about what happens.

**Challenge 5:** Blackout Poetry—create an original poem from an existing text. Aim for short and punchy (a handful of words is most powerful) and remember that good poems create fresh images in our minds and avoid cliché. Have fun with the black and white space.

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## *The Sea Witch by Nicolas Palochki*

The Sea-Witch cut into the carp and eviscerated it with a quick slash of her knife. Blood rose into the water like smoke from a fire. She skinned the fish and filleted it with a practiced movement of the blade, and swam out of her cave. Outwater, the sun had just risen, casting dim rays of watery green onto the barren plains of the Blacksmoker Flats through the many fathoms of ocean above her.

The witch headed over to the towering geothermal vent spewing boiling water from the chasm in the seafloor, extracted a pair of tongs, and held the fish over the outer reaches of the geyser. She had never quite gotten used to raw fish after the fried fish of her youth.

The witch extracted the fish, which was by now thoroughly scolded, turned around, and yelped. She dropped the tongs and they floated down gently and settled on her barnacle encrusted tail.

There was a mergirl behind her. An exceptionally pretty one, about fifteen summers, with long copper hair contrasting beautifully to her emerald fishtail. Her blue eyes were wide and scared.

"I'm sorry, ma'am..." The girl backed up a little. "I'm just looking for..."

"The Sea-Witch?" asked the witch, recovering from her surprise. Only merfolk searching for the Sea-Witch would come to this desolate submarine wasteland of geysers and canyons.

"Yes..." said the little mermaid nervously. "Are you..."

"Yep, that's me," said the Sea-Witch, with a smirk. "Morrigan the Sea-Witch. And you must be Princess Kolga, youngest of the six daughters of King Aegir. Pleased to meet you, Your Majesty."

"How-"

"-do I know? I'm a hermit, sure, but I make it my business to know everything about everyone in the Sea Kingdom. You're wearing a crown, honey, and that kind of gives it away. Also," she continued, as Kolga hurriedly removed her circlet, "everyone knows Princess Kolga, who had her fifteenth birthday and finally went up to the surface last week. Right so far, am I? Well, I'm going go a little farther in my suppositions, so just tell me if I'm wrong. You went up above and saw some handsome fisherman, fell in love with him, and now you want me to give you legs so you can go up to the surface and live happily ever after with him."

"Not quite," said Kolga shyly. "He's a prince... and he was drowning..."

Fantastic. A prince. That made matters so much better. "Fell off a ship during that massive storm, am I right?" She pointed a gnarled finger at the carcass of a ship, embedded in the thick black mud several hundred meters away.

"That's the ship! The exact one! How did it get here?"

"Everything in the sea comes to the Blacksmoker Flats, one way or another."

"Oh."

Morrigan surveyed the girl for a moment. She'd always taken Kolga for a guppy-brain like the rest of her sisters, and this conversation should have only cemented her opinion. Instead, she felt an unexpected

wave of pity towards the silly girl. Perhaps Kolga reminded her of the teenage Morrigan, who had also dared to try for the impossible.

"Come on in," the witch said. "I can't promise I can do anything, but you might as well tell me everything while I have breakfast."

Kolga's story had all the elements of an epic tragedy in the making. She'd come up right next to a ship where a prince was having his birthday party. She'd been surprised- what were the chances? He had the same birthday as her!- and then, when she'd gotten a look at him, had instantly fallen in love. Ridiculous. And even worse that he was a prince. Princes were usually engaged by sixteen. Morrigan tried to explain that, but Kolga was adamant. "We're meant for each other!" she insisted. "I knew as soon as I saw him."

Then the storm had come along, the ship sank, and everybody drowned. The prince would have too, if it were not for the little mermaid. She'd brought him to shore and revived him by singing, but then she'd left as he woke up because she was too shy.

"And since then..." Kolga's voice broke. "I just can't stop thinking about him! I don't know what to do! I need to become human, Sea-Witch. Can you help me?"

Morrigan finished her breakfast, wiped her mouth, and then shook her head. "No."

"No?" asked Kolga, bewildered. "But I thought- I've heard you can heal any illness. Turn sharks to seaweed. Create or calm storms. And turn merfolk into humans. Is that not true? You're not powerful enough?"

Morrigan picked up her knife and stabbed it into a waterlogged old mast. "Not powerful enough? Girl, I could turn you and your entire family into seaweed and set fire to it underwater with a snap of my fingers. Be careful who you call weak."

"So *can* you turn me into a human?"

"Of course!"

"Then why don't you?"

This girl was infuriating. "Because of the price, you ninnie!"

"I have treasure," said Kolga. She held out her circlet. "I can get more if you want."

Morrigan snorted. "What use do I have for treasure? And that's not the kind of price I meant." Before Kolga could interrupt, she continued. "Spells and enchantments always come with a great toll on their creator. That's why I'm so hideous. And that's why I cook my fish in the geyser."

"You don't look hideous," offered Kolga. "You look... normal. That's why I was so surprised. I'd been expecting..." She looked down embarrassedly. "An old hag with claws and tentacles or something."

"But I *am* an old hag!"

"No, you aren't. You're a regular mermaid!"

"I'm a misfit," snapped Morrigan. "I'm not normal."

"You are! Well, maybe not on the outside, but inside, you're just like everyone else!"

"I'm *not*, and that's the final truth. But that's not important. To get back to the price of magic: what you would need to become human would be a potion. With a potion, the price would fall on you to provide, and the magic would work just as well."

"So brew me a potion! I'll pay you anything!"

"Even your voice?"

Kolga went very still. "What do you mean?"

"To generate enough magic for such a powerful spell, you have to sacrifice what you are most proud of," spat the witch. "I'm guessing it would be your voice for you, because you love singing so much, but it's different for every person. Their hair, their sight, their treasure... For me it was my beauty..."

"For you? Why would you..." Understanding dawned in Kolga's eyes as she looked around the lair of the Sea-Witch, cluttered with objects and mementoes from the human world. "Were *you* a *human*?"

Morrigan silently cursed herself for the slip. "Don't change the subject."

"You were a human, and you turned yourself into a mermaid?" asked the princess incredulously.

"Yes," admitted Morrigan reluctantly. "Princess of Ulster."

"But *why* did you leave?"

"Why wouldn't I? My life was miserable. I was a girl, so I was oppressed and pinned down, unable to do anything. The last straw was when my father arranged a terrible marriage between me and some boorish king, so I learned magic and escaped to the ocean. My beauty seemed a small sacrifice to make."

"But that's exactly how I feel!"

"I've given up that business. I used to transform merfolk into humans, yes, but then I realized all the pain I was causing. So few of those who transform find happy endings. Did I mention the side effect of a transformation for love? The day your beloved marries another, you'll turn to sea foam."

"But he won't," insisted Kolga. "He'll fall in love with me, I know it." Stupid optimistic girl.

"Oh, yeah? But you won't have your voice--"

"So I'll do without," said Kolga firmly. That was odd- Morrigan had been doing all the interrupting so far.

"Please, Morrigan. I'll take the risk."

"No. Sorry, but transformations never end happily and I'm tired of causing tragedies. Now, Your Majesty, let me escort you to the exit."

As the Sea-Witch opened the door, Kolga tried to argue. "But, Sea-Witch, at least one transformation ended well! Your own! You lived happily ever after! If you did, I can too!"

"Happily ever after?" The witch snorted disbelievingly. "I wouldn't call being a hideous old hag in a dilapidated cave on the hinterlands of the kingdom a *happily ever after*. Now please leave. Good day,

Princess.” She slammed the heavy iron door behind the desperate girl with enough force that the resulting vortex knocked several knickknacks off the shelves.

Morrigan swam across the room and opened a towering closet made out of the skeleton of a whale. She paused for a long moment, surveying the algae-covered surface of the cauldron crouching like some greedy monster in front of her. She felt bad for turning away the princess, but she was sure it was the only way out for the poor girl. Transformations brought nothing but unhappiness.

*At least one transformation ended well...your own...*

Morrigan shook her head. This was ridiculous. She had to get Kolga out of her head. Somehow, the girl's broken heart would heal, and she would be much better off than she would be on land.

But... the Sea-Witch froze as she caught a glimpse of herself in the black metal of the cauldron. She brushed away the algae and looked her reflection in the eye: an elderly mermaid with greying black hair and sharp green eyes.

*You lived happily ever after...*

What would her life have been like if she had stayed on the land? She would have never had the freedom to choose what she wanted to do with her life on the land. She was never good at obeying without questioning. At least the choices and mistakes she had made were her own. By now her beauty would have faded, anyways- it would just have been slower to go.

The Sea-Witch had never found love or family under the sea, and there was no denying she was an old hag, but she had lived a full life, replete with adventure and opportunity. She had become the Sea-Witch, able to do what she loved to do and was good at. And that, Morrigan suddenly realized, was what Kolga meant by *happily-ever-after*.

She spun around and hurried to the door. Throwing it open, she could just barely see Kolga, reluctantly swimming along the slope that led out of the Blacksmoker Flats.

“Princess!” shouted Morrigan.

Kolga turned, her face alight with hope.

“You win! I’ll make you the potion! But if things don’t work out, it’s on you!”

Kolga swam back towards the cave as fast as she could.

“For starters,” said the witch as the princess approached, “I’m going to need a chunk of that hair of yours.”

Six hours later, sweaty and exhausted, the Sea-Witch placed a tiny vial of glowing white liquid in the hands of the princess. “It’s done,” she announced.

Kolga tried to give her the circlet, but Morrigan refused. “It’s on me,” she said. “But once you drink this, there’s no going back. So think long and hard first..”

“Thank you so much, Sea-Witch!” exclaimed the grateful princess.

“Don’t thank me yet- wait and see what happens. Just a thought: you might to want to do that on land. And also- call me Morrigan.”

As Kolga swam off, clutching the precious vial to her chest, Morrigan looked after her. She hoped her decision had been the right one. She wished Kolga luck.

“Godspeed, little mermaid,” she said to the swiftly darkening ocean. Then the Sea-Witch floated back into her cave and closed the door behind her.

## *Mister Wolf by Piper*

I waited in the bushes for the deer to walk past so I could pounce on it, but before I could I heard it ran away as a little girl in a bright red cape. "great now my lunch is gone" I snarled sarcastically. I quickly followed the girl flitting from tree to tree down a twisting path until she stopped to eat some of her cookies from her basket. I popped out from behind a tree, walking up to her asking "hello little girl what pray tell are you doing so deep in the dark woods all alone".

"Hello mister wolf I'm taking food to my grandma who is sick in bed deep in the woods" the foolish girl responded.

"Where does she live little girl" I questioned.

"Oh you just follow this trail until you reach a cottage, that's my grandmas house, why" she asked.

A sly smile crept over my face "well little girl this road is a short cut to that very cottage maybe you should take it" I suggested. She thought about it for a moment until she finally agreed "good day mister wolf" she waved goodbye as she skipped down the road.

I quickly ran down the trail to her grandma's house. When I reached the cottage. I knocked on the door "who is it" an old lady called from inside the house.

"It's me grandma I'm bringing you cookies and wine" I called mimicking the little girls voice perfectly.

"Come in" the old lady replied. As I walked in looking in I saw a old lady lying in bed staring at me in terror.

I POUNCED!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Ten Minutes Later

I laid there, in the bed wearing the old ladies spare night gown, bonnet and spectacles when I heard a knock on the door. "come in I called in the old grannies voice. When the little girl walked down the stairs and up to the bed

"what big ear you have grannie".

"All the better to hear you with my dear".

"But grandma what big eyes you have".

"All the better to see you with my dear".

"But grandma what big teeth you have" she said quivering slightly.

"ALL THE BETTER TO EAT YOU WITH" I howled jumping at her gobbling her up in one bite. My stomach was so full that I decided to take a nap.

As I slept I began having a dream which turned into a nightmare. It started with me lying in the bed and a searing pain crawled up my chest like a knife was cutting me open. as the pain intensified becoming unbearable I woke up. looking around to see if anyone was around, but no one was so I hopped up walking out of the cottage.

My stomach was so heavy that I collapsed. As I tried to claw away whatever was in my stomach. I was losing so much blood that as I scrambled into the trees all the while bleeding out.

Darkness enveloped me as I lay there dying!

The end

Of a not so

Happily ever

After!

## Cinnamologus by Nicolas Palochki

The massive bird swooped past the jagged canyon walls and plunged towards the winding and treacherous river. She struck the riverbank and pulled out of the dive with a rabbit clutched in her talons. One slash of her deadly claws put the prey out of its terror, and the bird took flight once more, returning upstream to her nest.

Hidden behind a shrub at the base of the cliff, the ornithologist tracked the bird's progress with his binoculars. His mind was awl with excitement. He had found it at last! After so many years of searching and tracking, he had finally found the mysterious and legendary cinnamologus!

Through the binoculars, the hooked beak and wicked talons of the bird, alighting upon her giant nest, were clearly visible. It was a bird of prey, that was for certain. The cinnamologus was aquiline in appearance, but much larger than an ordinary eagle- larger than any flying bird he'd seen before. She had a wingspan of at least three meters, and looked powerful enough to lift a human off the ground. Her plumage was composed of overlapping shades of russet and copper, with a mohawk-like crest and tail feathers of a cerulean color.

All these details matched the vague descriptions the ornithologist had heard of the bird. However, only one thing could convince him that this was a genuine cinnamologus. It was there.

The nest of the cinnamologus was a peculiar bowl-shaped structure perched on a ledge in the canyon wall, woven out of what appeared to be twigs. But the ornithologist could discern that these certainly were not ordinary twigs. They were long strips of reddish-ochre bark, rolled into the unique shape of cinnamon sticks. This was the only point on which every person who knew anything about the cinnamologus agreed: the bird built its nest out of sticks of cinnamon, harvested from some far-off land to the east. It was this peculiarity that earned the bird its name "cinnamon bird." The natives to this land harvested the valuable spice by catapulting boulders at cinnamologus nests, and collecting the shattered stick of bark that rained down the cliff. No one knew exactly why the bird used cinnamon, because no-one had ever had the opportunity to study a cinnamologus before.

But now it was the ornithologist's turn for fame. As a wise philosopher once said, the deepest principle of human nature is a craving to be appreciated, and in the ornithologist this craving was more powerful than in others. His rivals would choke with jealousy when he presented them with this magnificent beast. He would be reinstated as a member of the National Ornithologist's Society. Newspapers would trumpet his success across the world. Perhaps they would even name the species after him!

Better dream later, however. He had to get the bird first.

The ornithologist put down his binoculars. He reached for the short rifle propped against the rock to his left. He checked to see that it was loaded. He had made the mistake of forgetting to load and scaring the bird off instead before, and he had been the laughingstock of his class. His teacher had given him an angry lecture. *Remember, boy, he'd thundered, always be prepared! Reload your gun after every shot! You never know when the golden opportunity will come along!*

Since that humiliating day, the ornithologist had never forgotten to always be prepared. Whenever he was on the hunt, he always reloaded after every shot.

*Click.* The gun was cocked. He squinted through the scope, aimed carefully, and fired.

*Crack.* The bullet hit the ledge between the feet of the cinnamologus, several rocks split off the cliff face and tumbled into the rapids. The cinnamologus's head shot up from the rabbit she was devouring. She spread its wings and screeched angrily.

The ornithologist reloaded his rifle, inwardly berating himself. He had squeezed the trigger just a hair too early. If not for his mistake, he would have had the bird in a bag by now. But it wasn't too late yet. He aimed again, waited to be sure he had a good shot, and squeezed the trigger.

Too late. The huge raptor took off an instant before the ornithologist fired. She soared overhead and disappeared into the trees on the opposite side of the river.

The ornithologist swore and threw his rifle on the ground. Then a thought occurred to him. Why hadn't the bird taken off after the first shot? He'd seen that behaviour before with nesting birds. He'd assumed that the nest was empty, but if there were eggs... perhaps not all was lost.

He slung the rifle over his shoulder, pulled on a pair of gloves and began to scale the cliff. Many years of trekking through the wild and climbing trees to reach bird nests had made him thin and strong. This cliff was no different from any others. In fact, the ridges and jagged rocks made the climb easier than some cliffs he'd scaled before.

The cinnamologus attacked when he was halfway to the nest. He was prepared for this, however. Holding onto the cliff with one hand, he extracted his gun with his other hand and fired in the general direction of the bird. It missed, but the bang had the desired effect; the giant acciptrid screeched and swerved away. The man continued the climb, keeping an eye out for another attack.

At last, he fastened his hand onto the final handhold and pulled himself onto the ledge. The river flowed some thirty feet below, churning and spraying against the rocks. The ornithologist allowed himself to rest for a moment, and then, trembling with excitement, manoeuvred himself around the woven structure of cinnamon bark to get a good look inside.

The scent of cinnamon wafted into his face, making him dizzy. He clung tightly to the nest for a moment to allow himself to recover, and then he looked inside.

Eureka! There were three large eggs nestled in the center of the six-foot diameter platform, each approximately the size of a softball. Their shells were metallic blue with brown specks scattered across their gleaming surfaces.

The ornithologist grinned. This was going to work out even better than he had originally planned. Instead of a mere carcass, he would have three eggs, and, with proper conditions, he should be able to hatch and train one of them. Then he would not only be the discoverer and cataloguer of the cinnamologus, but the only known person to have tamed one!

He grabbed the rim of the nest and swung himself over. Sticks snapped under his weight. The wall of the nest shifted, and a cloud of spicy-sweet powder swirled into the face of the ornithologist. He doubled over, wheezing asthmatically, unable to see or hear anything through the wave of scent coming at him.

It was at this moment that the cinnamologus struck. The ornithologist felt a blast of wind and, with watering eyes, saw a shadow in the sky. He had just enough presence of mind to duck. The talons of the raptor brushed his head, and he was thrown back by the powerful wings smashing into him.

When his vision cleared, the cinnamologus was standing in front of her eggs, wings spread to their full extent, beak open, and making a strange hissing noise. She towered above him, golden eyes flashing furiously.

*You haven't won yet, birdie*, the ornithologist thought grimly to himself. *Not by a long shot*. He reached for his rifle. The cinnamologus let out a terrifying screech and attacked. The needle-sharp claws dug into his arm, and the ornithologist screamed in pain. As the curved yellow beak plunged towards his jugular, he swung his gun and hit the cinnamologus in the midriff. She let go and toppled onto the floor of the nest. The man swung off his rifle, cocked it, aimed it at the stunned bird, and pulled the trigger.

*Click.*

The ornithologist frowned. He cocked the gun and fired again.

*Click.*

And then it dawned on the ornithologist. After the cinnamologus's attack on the cliffside... he had never reloaded the gun.

*Always be prepared! Reload your gun after every shot!*

"Damn!" he exploded. The golden opportunity had come along, sure enough, and it was the one time in fifteen years that he'd forgotten to load his gun!

He frantically tried to reload, but his fingers slipped on the gun, and as he swore and tried to insert the bullet, the cinnamologus unsteadily got back to her feet, narrowed her eyes, and charged. The ornithologist saw her coming and tried to fire the rifle, but his hasty reloading had jammed it.

The raptor crashed into him at full speed. Bird and man struggled in a whirl of feathers and claws. Pain shot through the ornithologist's chest as the deadly talons dug into him. Feathers and scraps of cloth flew everywhere. The battle narrowly missed crushing the eggs, still nestled in the center and unaware of the life-and-death struggle taking place outside.

Finally, the ornithologist broke free from the cinnamologus. His face and chest were criss-crossed with bleeding slashes from the bird's claws, and his jacket was ripped to shreds. He lunged for the gun, which he had dropped on the opposite side of the nest, but the raptor blocked his way, hissing angrily. The ornithologist looked around frantically, and then his eyes fell on the eggs.

He lunged and grabbed the nearest one. The bird gave a piercing scream and moved to attack, but froze when the man held the egg over the ledge.

*One move, and it goes, birdie*, thought the ornithologist with satisfaction. He noted with surprise that the bird seemed to understand: she backed off, eyes smoldering, but not daring to make a move. Still holding the egg, he walked towards the rifle and picked it up with one hand.

That was when he realized his problem. He couldn't reload without putting down the egg. If he put down the egg, the bird would attack. If he didn't, he and the bird would be caught in a stalemate.

Finally, he decided to put his foot on the egg to secure it. He leaned down, placed the egg on the ground, rested his foot on top of it, and glanced down to make sure it was secure. That was his mistake.

Something massive struck him in the chest, and the ornithologist went flying backwards. He managed to catch onto the edge of the nest and hung there for a second, with a vertiginous view of the raging river swinging unsteadily below him. His gun fell and disappeared into the water. The cinnamologus shrieked a jubilant cry that almost sounded like mocking laughter. He tried to get a hold on the nest's rim, but the cinnamon sticks began to snap. The ornithologist was not a featherweight, and the nest walls began to give way under his weight.

He had enough time to curse the bird. Then his handhold disintegrated, and the ornithologist fell, clutching a handful of cinnamon.

The ornithologist hit the water with a tremendous splash and was dragged under by the currents. He struggled to the surface, where he was instantly dashed into a boulder and hurled into the rapids. His world became a whirlpool of water, foam and rocks.

He only survived by seizing onto an overhanging branch and pulling himself out, a second before he would have gone over the waterfall. He clung to it tightly for a second, breathing heavily and relishing the air. Then he took stock of the situation. He had been dragged a good distance downstream from the cinnamologus's nest. His rifle was gone, sucked into the bowels of the river. However, he had a spare gun where he'd left it with his pack. *Then* he would get the blasted bird.

After an agonizing trek the ornithologist, bruised, covered with lacerations, and dripping wet, collapsed by the shrub where his things were. He glared at the nest, now with a large chunk taken out of it. He couldn't see the eggs, but he assumed they were back in their spot. The cinnamologus was looking straight at him. The sight enraged him, and he reached around to grab the gun. His heart constricted as his hand closed on empty air, and he realized the gun was gone.

In the nest, the cinnamologus adjusted her perch on the cold steel of the rifle and watched the man's dance of rage. She kept an eye on him, through his sloppy and rapid packing and his departure from the canyon, until he disappeared from sight. Then she examined her beautiful eggs, ensured that there were no cracks in any of them, and finally tucked her head under her wing and went to sleep.

The eggs rocked gently. They had no idea what had happened around them this sunny afternoon. The creatures inside slept peacefully, their shells growing tighter around them, waiting for the dawn of a new generation of the cinnamologus.

Note: the cinnamologus is a "real" mythical bird from Arabia, likely invented by the traders to raise the value of cinnamon. It was recorded by Herodotus, Aristotle and Pliny the Elder.

## Pumpkin by Veronica

It was a warm, humid day and the residents of the Patch were basking lazily in the golden sunlight. I too, closed my eyes and enjoyed the glorious weather. My eyes flew open as I heard an unholy screeching come from inside the House. It was one of Cinderella's psychotic step-sisters. She seemed to be chattering about some sort of 'ball.' Before long, Cinderella's timid voice joined the fray. She was yelled at and within moments she ran outside into the Patch, wiping her eyes. She knelt among the squash and pumpkins and began to cry, her tears dripping onto the soil around me. 'Ah,' I thought, *'finally some good minerals.'* Cinderella was clearly distraught, but pumpkins are not very good at comforting humans so there was nothing I could do. Cinderella sniffed, "I *will* go to the ball," she whispered tearfully, "I *will*,"

Beside me, my friend, Louie, muttered, "again with this drama." Louie was an old, grumpy zucchini. All he liked to do was tell battle stories from the Veggie-Wars and complain about his arthritic stalk. "Cinderella!" called her stepmother, "why aren't the dishes washed?!" Cinderella picked herself up off the ground and hurried back into the House. "She's got some nerve, walking in here like she owns the place," Louie grumbled. "Louie, she does own the place," I explained, "or, at least her stepmother does." Louie went off on another rant, his monotonous voice combined with the lazy droning of the bees put me right to sleep.

Louie woke me up when the sun was starting to set, "what?" I mumbled groggily. "Look!" Louie said excitedly. I peered into the House, the commotion inside was like nothing I'd seen before. The stepmother and her daughters were rushing around the house in a flurry of silk, velvet and assorted jewellery. One of them barrelled past Cinderella, almost knocking her down the stairs. "MY NECKLACE!" The stepmother shrieked, "WHERE'S MY NECKLACE?! CINDERELLA, FIND MY NECKLACE, WILL YOU!" We all watched in awe as they started painting their faces with strange, colourful powders. "What in the name of the Great Squash are they *doing*?" Louie asked in awe. "Turnips almighty," I said, "they've gone insane!" Finally, the stepmother and the two stepdaughters hurried outside, climbed into a dainty silver carriage and took off down the road. Cinderella was left alone, "show's over, I guess," said a butternut squash.

Slowly, the residents of the Patch settled down into their usual stupor. 'That's that,' I thought, feeling slightly disappointed. Suddenly there was a loud 'pop!' and a flash of light and a woman appeared out of thin air. She had wings and was wearing a horrific dress that looked like an umbrella covered in neon spray paint. In one hand she held a glittering wand. Adjusting her Dollar Store quality wig, she walked up the path and knocked on the door to the House. Inside, I saw Cinderella run down the stairs. "Don't open it!" Everyone said simultaneously. Cinderella opened the door. I'm sorry to break this to you folks, but with her eyes red and her nose streaming unidentifiable liquids....well, let's just say she did NOT look attractive. She and Wand Lady had a conversation, Cinderella's expression slowly lit up. Wand Lady stepped back and waved her wand. There was a 'poof!' and an explosion of sparkles that immediately triggered one of Louie's allergic reactions. When the glitter cleared I saw that Cinderella had been decked out in a frilly dress and some sweet glass kicks. Even her face was barely recognizable! "Whoa," Louie said, sneezing sparkles all over the ground, "the plot thickens." Meanwhile, the Wand Lady had transformed some mice into people, '*she knows what she's doing*,' I thought.

Then, before I knew it, she had stomped into the patch and yanked me off the ground.

"LOOOOUUUUUIEEEEEEE!!!!!" I screamed as she tucked me under her arm. "This one's perfect," Wand

Lady told Cinderella, her wig leaning dangerously to the side. She waved her wand again, and with a 'poof' I was transformed into a violently orange carriage. Let me tell you; being a pumpkin is one thing, but being a pumpkin on WHEELS was a whole different story. Wand Lady whipped up some horses and within a few minutes I was barrelling down the street, with Cinderella inside. "I. Hate. This." I thought, enunciating each word with every bump on the road. Finally we stopped, Cinderella got out and ran into a tall stone castle.

I stood idly for hours, praying that it wouldn't start raining. Finally the clock struck twelve. Cinderella zoomed out of the building as if her dress was on fire. Being the ungraceful little girl she was, she tripped and fell down a flight of stairs, one of her glass slippers was catapulted off her foot. She ditched the shoe, hobbled the rest of the way to me and climbed inside. As we reached the house I felt myself starting to turn back into a pumpkin. Cinderella carelessly threw me into the Patch, I rolled a few feet to come to a stop right beside Louie. And then something terrible happened. As if in slow motion, I watched Cinderella's monstrous foot come crashing down. Right onto Louie's head. There was an awful squelching sound, "Louie!" I shouted. "No!" I sobbed, as his green juices flowed into the ground, "Louie!" Louie was very much dead, which was right about how I felt at that moment.

After a week I wilted away.

One day in vegetable heaven I was watching the news. The first few weeks here had been enjoyable, I had seen great grannie pumpkin, and my favourite cousin, who had been turned into a jack o' lantern. Then the days had started melding together. I watched as a very familiar face appeared on screen, "big news, folks!" The announcer squash declared excitedly, "down in the world of humans, young Cinderella has found herself a man, and a life!" I smiled knowingly, yes, well, this wouldn't be worth remembering if there hadn't been at least ONE happy ending. As for Wand Lady, she had been arrested for homicide. That's what Louie told me, he's a much nicer zucchini in heaven, you know, now that his arthritis is gone.

## *Last Night by Veronica*

Last night I dreamed I was fighting aliens again.

It was a stormy evening, and my loneliness was desperate and unavoidable. The house was quiet, except for the soft patter of raindrops on the window, and the occasional gust of cold air that rustled the cottonwoods. "Hullo," the cottonwoods greeted one another, the wind freeing their whispery voices, "terrible weather isn't it." "Horrific," they murmured in agreement. The gust died down, silencing them. Outside, the cold rain froze into little bullets of hail and they sang merrily against the glass.

Though my fire crackled in rebellion, somehow the wind managed to worm its way under the door, and burst through the sellotaped window, inviting the hail to bounce onto the linoleum and melt into little pools of fresh water. I shivered, deciding to venture upstairs for another moth-eaten blanket and a cup of tea. Grabbing my crutches, I hobbled into the kitchen.

Though it had been my idea to vacation in France, it had been my friend, Zacharias, who'd decided to take me skiing in the Alps. "You'll be very safe," he'd promised, peering at me earnestly from under his mess of dreadlocks. My crutch caught on a loose floorboard and I almost went sprawling, '*very safe, Zacharias, very safe indeed.*' I put some water to boil on the stove and selected a packet of chamomile tea from the cookie tin that held a mess of instant coffee containers and various, dusty teabags. The pot started whistling squeakily and I poured some steaming water into a blue chipped mug, dunking my teabag in it and cursing when the string came off. After I'd scalded my hands good and well, I began the climb up the stairs, wincing with every squeak of the railing.

The wind was loudest in the attic, screaming to be heard. I breathed in the cold air, feeling all my nose-hairs freeze, and wishing I was downstairs by the fire with my tea. I fumbled with the lock on my trunk, letting it fall to the floor with a clatter that was lost in the mutterings of the cottonwoods. "Cold," they said, "so cold." "Cold," the little birches agreed. "Cold," whispered the maples. The old fir trees remained silent, too ancient to understand the words of saplings. I pulled out an armful of blankets and scooted down the stairs on my rear end, too chicken to hop down like a normal human being with a broken leg.

As I limped into the living room again, Lula lazily raised her head, her thick brown and black fur soaking up the warmth emanating from the fire. I bent down to scratch behind her soft German-shepherd ears. She rested her head on her paws and blinked, ears twitching with every creak of the house.

I wrapped myself in a cocoon of blankets, popped a few pain meds into my mouth and sipped my tea, wondering if Zacharias was enjoying himself in France. "Bring me a baguette," I muttered to an imaginary Zacharias as I dozed off, the hail knocking rhythmically on my window. The ancient firs opened their wise, twisted mouths and uttered one word, "sleep," they said, the letters mangled and beautiful on their wooden lips.

I felt the warm sunlight on my face, distracting me from trying to remember a strange dream I'd had about aliens. Lula pawed at my leg, the one that wasn't broken, and gave a whine that said, 'feed me.' "Feed yourself," I grumbled, wiping my bleary eyes, and blinking at the bright sunlight streaming through the window, the sellotape holding on by a thread and flapping like a big red butterfly in the breeze. The embers of the fire glowed softly in the grate, popping gently and making Lula jump with each spark. My

stomach growled and I peered into my half-empty cup of tea, poking the skin of milk that had formed on the top with my finger. In the kitchen I found a can of peaches and sat on the front porch, eating canned fruit and feeding Lula bits of expired turkey. The trees were content, even the cottonwoods basked in the sunlight. A nearby stream bubbled and laughed with the hail that slowly melted into the ground. The old firs opened their eyes, sap running through their veins, their bark crackling merrily as they stretched their branches towards the sun.

## Story by Vayda

Last night I dreamed I was fighting aliens again. They were so slimy. They were teal with black eyes as big as an orange. They had giant guns as large as a small child and big space ships the size of a house. We were on the moon but some of the aliens were going to earth, I was worried they would hurt my family I had to do something. I ran as fast as my feet could carry me and jumped onto one of the many space ships and the next thing I knew I was at earth but where on earth was I? I jumped off the space ship one of the aliens saw me on the ground and he somehow called the other aliens with a strange call that sounded like a bird call.

## The Chase

All the space ships started to move closer and closer to the ground I ran into a phone shop. There was no one in the phone shop why I wondered to myself. It looked like all the aliens just walked past me, did they see me I asked myself. Just then one of the aliens at the back of the group saw me out of the corner of his eye and did the same bird call from earlier. I bolted out of the store and jumped into what looked and smelt like a large trash can. The aliens split up so I was in a lot of trouble if they were to find me. I had to dig deeper into the trash so the aliens would not find me. "Ahhhhhh", I yelled as I saw a mouse leap past me.

## The Calling

I heard footsteps coming my way. I froze for a minute, I could not move. I wiggled myself down deeper into the trash and then that's when I heard it, the call. It was the one that I had heard the first time I got caught jumping off the space ship. But it was not only one call, it was like an echo of sounds. The sound kept going and going and the foot steps started to fade. I lifted my head and there were no aliens to be seen. The bird call stopped. Just like that, I woke up.

# THE END

## *Regular Malfunctions by Nicolas Palochki*

Last night I dreamed I was fighting aliens again- my least favorite nightmare. As expected, the cabin depressurised at the worst possible time and the alarm began blaring. The brakes jammed, and as I sat in the control chair, paralyzed with fear, my ship went on a collision course with the alien spaceship. Its blue lights came nearer and nearer...

I woke up an instant before the crash. I sat bolt upright in bed, breathing heavily. The ship and starry skies faded, but the alarm was still going, and there were two blue lights on the other side of the room.

I yelled with fright and hit the light switch. The yellow bulb flickered to life, revealing the blue lights' source: the binocular-like head of a robot, mismatched arms folded and triangular tracks at a standstill. Although its face displayed no emotions, its entire demeanor indicated annoyance.

"Have a nice nap?" it hummed.

"Lyra," I said with relief. "You scared me."

"The red alert was activated 10 minutes ago," announced Lyra.

"Wait- a red alert?!" I scrambled out of bed. "Why didn't you wake me up?"

"I did, the alarm didn't, why- I don't know," stated Lyra in a flat monotonous voice. "There has been a security breach, so put on armor. And you might want to grab a weapon." On that ominous note, she turned and motored out the door.

I buckled on my vest, pulled on my goggles, grabbed an electrogun, and dashed out the door.

Outside, the alarm hurt my ears almost as bad as the frigid air did. Several hundred feet below, the icy wasteland seemed to stretch endlessly to the horizon. Glancing up at the huge helium-filled shape of the zeppelin, I couldn't see any problem with the airship, at least not any which deserved a red alert. The deck was empty, so I headed for the bridge.

Captain Taliesin was at the helm, her fingers flying across the control board with the speed of a professional secretary's, while Phileas was examining a map of the ship. Raven was nowhere to be seen.

"Glad you could join us, Nicolas, Orion's escaped," said Taliesin darkly.

"Who?"

"The warbot that the twins were designing," she explained. "Orion 2.0. It went haywire and got out of the lab."

"What? How-"

"A power surge," Lyra explained. She reclined against a wall nearby, fiddling with her sticky toaster switch. The blue glow from her eyes was purpling, a sign that she was getting upset. "Raven was testing the engine. She turned up the amperage for the laboratory to check the breakers, they didn't trip, and everything blew..."

"Well, that doesn't sound too bad," I said. "Just replace the bulbs-"

“...however, Phileas plugged Orion in to charge, and forgot to unplug it for the test,” finished Lyra. “The surge appears to have overloaded its brain, fried its reasoning circuits, and released its cautionary bindings. The warbot shocked Raven and bolted.”

“Where’s Raven? Is she all right?”

“Yes,” growled Phileas. He slammed the map down. “As soon as she recovered, she headed below decks to get that bot. And I had better go after her. Nic, Tal, you’d better help.” He put on his helmet, the newest and weirdest yet (I privately thought that it looked like an upside-down colander with springs welded on) and strode out of the door.

“You go with Lyra,” Taliesin said in a strained voice, eyes fixed on the clouds ahead. “I need to stay here—nasty wind coming up.”

“You keep Lyra. I can manage one measly robot on my own.”

“Not this one,” hummed Lyra. Her eyes were now an angry violet. “Raven and Phileas fitted it with several of the devices that they have been designing and experimenting with, including a brand-new, cutting-edge electromagnetic levitation/electroshock beam, abbreviated as EmLEB. The EmLEB can deliver electroshocks powerful enough to temporarily stun a human from a distance of three meters, and, in tests, levitated a 137-kilogram piano at a height of 254 centimeters before it ran out of battery and dropped the piano, as you may have guessed, on me. As you are aware, I only have an EmEB, and an outdated version to that. So we must go in at least groups of two if we hope to contain Orion at all.”

Lyra was certainly not the same robot she had been when Taliesin had first bought it, a featureless white android designed solely to help around the lab, five years ago. For starters, a failed attempt by Raven to update its software had accidentally turned Lyra from a docile, brainless lab assistant to a sentient being who insisted we call her *she*. Over time, Lyra had developed a touchy personality that made her seem almost human. When her legs and right arm were badly damaged in an explosion, she replaced them with respectively tracks and a pincer. Later, when she complained that her brainpan was too fragile, she created for herself a “new-and-improved” head (a.k.a. a pair of modified binoculars and a harmonica). It was followed by a completely new torso of her own design after the aforementioned piano test (utilizing a toaster and an accordion). Today, nothing was left of the white android except the computer brain, the left arm, and the voice box. The rest of Lyra was a conglomeration of metal household appliances, but the mischmasched parts made her somewhat unnerving.

“Okay, then,” I said. “Where to?”

“I had closed down all the air ducts in hopes of trapping Orion inside, but it had already left,” hummed Lyra. “Where, I do not know.”

“Phil and Raven are searching the bow,” said Taliesin, pulling a lever. The ship rocked violently, throwing me off balance and into the wall. Lyra, of course, was unaffected. “Check the stern.”

“Thank you, Captain Taliesin.” Lyra drove out the door before I could pick myself off the ground. When I got outside, she was already descending the stairs at the back of the ship, much faster than any robot with tracks should be able to. Certainly faster than me. I had to run to catch up with her.

We made our way along the corridor through the belly of the airship. There was no sound except for the humming of machinery, Lyra’s treads sliding against the floor, and a distant crashing coming from the engine room.

I pulled open a door. Inside, the kitchen was dark and shadowy, so I couldn't see if there was a crazy robot blowing things up in there or not, but due to the oppressive silence, I assumed not. I was about to close the door when Lyra grabbed it and held it open. "We need to search everywhere."

"Well, I don't hear anything," I growled. "Wouldn't it be ripping the place up?"

"You have no idea what it may or may not be doing, and we robots do not automatically become threats with one deviation from the plan," hummed Lyra angrily. Her eyes were beginning to glow magenta, not a good sign. "Otherwise you would all have been in serious trouble ever since my first software update. Please keep in mind this is the real world, not a science fiction story where malfunctioning robots consistently turn into killing machines and run amok."

"Shows how much you know," I muttered.

"It is far more likely that Orion 2.0 is simply sitting down in a corner of a closet," insisted Lyra. "Search every cranny, or we may miss him."

We searched the kitchen. No robot in the fridge (although there was a bag of moldy carrots, which Lyra promptly incinerated). Moved on. Ransacked the food storage. No robot in the chests of canned fish (enough to last us for several years). Checked the bathrooms. No robot in the toilet paper cupboard (Lyra made a note to restock). We basically searched every room, unnecessarily thoroughly. It was obvious that the escaped robot was not in any of the rooms, but Lyra insisted.

"This is stupid," I growled, fighting my way out of a bunch of cobwebs. Lyra made no move to help me. "We should do a sweep check or the stupid bot might get away! Then come back later if we missed it—"

"Excuse me," Lyra said icily. I glanced down at her and nearly jumped out of my boots. Her eyes were a burning, furious crimson. "Did you just call my strategy stupid? And *stupid bot*?"

I realized my mistake instantly. Lyra was extremely touchy and took any derogatory terms aimed at robots or machines personally. Because of all the problems we had regularly with devices on the airship, she got offended regularly. She would go off and sulk for the next few days before returning, grouchy and snappish. But her eyes had never gone this red before— they usually stopped at magenta. And steam was hissing from her engine, filling the entire room with an oily miasma.

"Lyra, I didn't mean..."

"Do you think I don't know what you mean?" hissed Lyra. "As a sentient robot I'm always the outsider. No one really accepts me, least of all you. You're a misomechanist—"

"A what?" I wondered what a misomechanist was. It sounded either like a bad compliment or a good insult.

"You're bigoted against machines," growled Lyra. "You think humans are better than robots just because you created us. Do you have any idea how hard it is to live with the knowledge that you were created as a mere tool— a slave?"

"You don't think I should even exist in my present form. Every human I've met thinks that. They may not say it out loud, but I know they think that. They think I'm abnormal."

"You *are* abnormal," I mumbled.

I didn't mean it as an insult, but I'd never seen Lyra so furious. Her eyes flashed scarlet with rage, and electricity sparked from her hands. "Just because I'm made of metal doesn't mean I don't have feelings!"

"I didn't say that!" I held up my hands. "But not all abnormalities are bad. They make everyone unique. I guess your "malfunction" gave you a... free will. The truth is that a machine with free will is... well, unnerving."

I faltered, realizing Lyra wasn't listening anymore. She was looking down the corridor to the engine room, where the crashing was getting louder, punctuated by small explosions and yelps. The flow of steam had stopped and her eyes had returned to purple. Thank goodness.

She shot a look over her shoulder back at me. "I suppose we should go over to the engine room and see what that noise is." Her voice had also gone back to normal.

"Okay." I didn't want to risk another temper explosion, so I followed without further comment.

Lyra glided down the hallway to the biggest door at the end of the corridor, from which the banging was coming. She silently opened the door and peered in. Then she turned her head, nodded, and slipped inside.

I readjusted my hold on the electrogun and followed as quietly as possible.

The engine, a huge hulking machine connected to dozens of brass pipes running to the walls and ceiling, rumbled and rattled, spewing a lot more steam than it should have. A cracked seam glowed with bright green light from the burning phlebotinum, our choice crystalloid fuel. Ten kilograms of phlebotinum powered the airship for a week, and released only microscopic amounts of pollutants, beneficial to the shiitake mushrooms thriving on the cornices up above.

The engine room was a lot noisier than usual. I could hear crackling electrical sounds and something large smashing repeatedly against the ground coming from behind the machine. There were also occasional flashes of green light, in time to the smashing, and high-pitched squealing noises.

I crept around the engine, ducking behind the crates of spare parts and phlebotinum. As I reached the other side, I saw the source of steam: one of the pipes had been cut cleanly in two. The severed electrical cables were shooting sparks, and a thin stream of steam hissed from the broken pipe. What concerned me more was the robot sitting on the pipe.

I was rather disappointed by the "warbot." I'd expected a six-foot tall brute with lasers, guns and a skull shaped helmet. What I got was a cute little white baby-like android, approximately two feet tall, with no visible weaponry. It had big black camera eyes in a globular head, a disproportionately small body and molded articulated arms. That may sound scary, but believe me, anyone who saw it would have an urge to pick it up and hug it.

I was resisting that urge when the baby robot pointed at a pale brown armchair. I recognized it as belonging to Raven. A green ray of light shot out of the robot's palm, hit the armchair, and the robot raised its arm. The armchair, skewered by the beam, lifted off the floor. The robot began slamming it against the floor, making excited squealing noises. In fact, it looked and sounded like a happy baby banging a rattle against the floor.

Then Orion 2.0 spotted me. Its eyes widened. It said "Oooo!" excitedly and threw the armchair at me. I dove to the left and the armchair slammed into a crate, which burst open and spilled gears all over the floor.

I recalibrated my opinion of the robot. Sure, it was cute, and it seemed to think like a baby, but that made it almost more dangerous. Orion was an unfortunate combination of dangerous weaponry, a super-short attention span, and insatiable curiosity about the power of its EmLEB.

Which it tested on me right then. I yelled with pain and was thrown backwards into the armchair. It flipped over and I fell into the sharp pile of gears. I got to my feet as Orion got bored and began throwing handfuls of gears everywhere. Lyra was nowhere in sight. I pointed my electrogun in Orion's general direction and fired. A bolt of lightning cracked across the room. It was supposed to incapacitate the warbot, but all it did was knock it off the pipe. Orion hit the floor with a clunk and a cute little "OOF!" I turned up the amperage and was about to fire again, but Orion got to its feet, yelled "BANZAI!" in an adorable little voice, and jumped into the pile of gears. It rolled around in the gears like a little kid in a pile of autumn leaves.

My heart melted. How could I zap a cute little thing like this? It hadn't meant to hurt me. Maybe we could just leave it alone and it wouldn't bother us...

Then I saw the tower of boxes behind Orion lurch. I had an urge to snap him up, but it was too late. The boxes toppled, spraying wood, spare machine pieces, and green crystals of phlebotinum everywhere. Orion disappeared. Lyra appeared, dusting off her pincers.

"Perfect," she announced. "Unfortunate about the mess, but we will clean it up later. Now all that remains is to collect the target."

"What?" I stared at her, aghast. "You just killed a baby!"

Lyra snorted. "What are you talking about?"

"You squashed Orion!" I gestured angrily at the pile of metal and crystal.

"I neutralized the threat," hummed Lyra. She looked puzzled. "This was our goal. You saw how dangerous it is- it cut a pipe in half and shocked you. Phileas incorporated the cuteness to distract enemies from its potential danger." She surveyed me coolly. Her eyes had turned back to sky-blue. "Well, that feature certainly worked on you."

"But it acted just like a baby!"

"A flaw in its programming. We cannot have emotional attachments interfering with duty. This is a robot, not a person."

"So are you," I noted.

Lyra froze. Her eyes turned green. She didn't say anything for a long moment, just staring at where Orion had been.

Just then, Orion wriggled out of the pile. "WAAAH!" It began banging its fists on Lyra, who twisted it into a headlock. She was still looking rather stunned and confused, and she didn't reach over to press the off button on Orion's chest.

Orion squirmed, yelling like an angry baby. Rays of light shot out of its eyes and hit the phlebotinum. Green flames roared up everywhere the rays hit, heading rapidly towards me.

Oh drat... this cute robot had lasers, too. I thought briefly about shocking it again, but Lyra was holding it. She was made of metal, which could possibly cause major damage. I turned and ran.

"YAAAAAAH!" Orion broke free from Lyra's grip. Its rocketboots activated (I had to have a word with the twins about their weaponry), and it zoomed towards me over the phlebotinum fire.

I ran as fast as I could. It wasn't fast enough, though. I was suddenly lifted off the ground. Orion swung me around and dumped me in a shiitake tray. The cornice that supported shiitake and me groaned and sagged under our weight.

Orion turned towards Lyra and zoomed back over the fire. She was hemmed in by the crates behind her in the fire to the front. Knowingly or not, the warbot would destroy or seriously damage her with that that momentum.

I couldn't let that happen. I crouched in my shiitake patch and, as Orion went under me, jumped on top.

For a minute or so, everything was a whirl of green flames, bronze gears and fungi. When my vision cleared again, I had pinned the robot to the floor and was kneeling on its chest. Lyra, who had managed to get out of the fire, was holding its arms, so it couldn't use its EmLEB, and its head was immobilized, so its lasers were useless.

"You deactivate it," grunted Lyra. "I cannot reach the button without releasing his arms."

"His- okay. What will the button do?"

"The same as mine. It will put him into sleep mode. Nothing else."

I reached over, and as the little robot struggled, pressed the button.

Instantly Orion went limp, and the glow in his eyes faded. I released him cautiously and stepped back. Nothing happened.

The door on the other side of the room burst open, and Raven raced in, followed by Phileas. "Nicolas! Are you all right? Where's the robot?"

"Right here," Lyra said coolly, pointing at the sleeping robot, which had begun snoring. "Raven, we need to have a talk about safety checks. And I will require your help to dewaterize Orion- he appears to have acquired a rudimentary form of sentence, and we cannot have him running loose around the ship with all these dangerous powers. Nicolas?"

She held out her hand. After a moment, I realized what she wanted me to do, and we shook hands.

"Well done, partner," I said. "And Lyra, I'll try to be a little more conscious."

Lyra tilted her head. "I think you already are."

I turned to Raven and Phileas, who were keeping a good distance from Orion. "Well, crew, congratulations! We got ourselves a baby. Phileas, you're on babysitting duty. Raven, I'll need you to write a learning logarithm for Orion. Something that will also teach him responsibility."

"Wait... Orion's intelligent?" asked Phileas. Raven punched him in the arm.

Lyra cleared her voicebox. We turned to face her. "Do you think it's time to put the fire out yet?"

*Locked by Veronica*

## **LOCKED**

November 16th 2020

9:00 p.m. Central time. Chicago, Illinois

Are u actually doing this?

Why not? I get 50 bucks.

Mr Anderson will kill u

Ya

U will be in sooooo much trouble O\_O

Mason said he'd pay me and Mira 50 bucks each

.....

U don't have to do this

Shut up and focus on getting your family un-deported

I like being a ward of the state ;)

No you don't

U don't have to break into the school just to earn money for ur tuition >:(

I don't want to make my parents pay for it. Not that they would in the first place.  
Anyways, Mason will kill me if I bail now

He's a wannabe gangster who's too lazy to steal his own spray paint.

...So?

I'm literally 50 bucks away from my tuition.

Why do you even bother?

I want to make my parents proud

And I want my parents back from Cuba. Not happening.

Ur parents won't even care if you get the tuition. :(

Gramma will

U should run away to Cuba w/me :)

:) We'll see

Oh hey, Mira's here

Mira's stupid to be doing this with u

I needed someone with a car.

I'll text you when we get to the school

I'm telling u, ur going to regret this.

November 16th 2020

9:27 p.m. Central time. Chicago, Illinois

You have reached your destination; Amundsen High School, 5110 North Damen Ave

What?

That was me trying to imitate the GPS lady.

Wow. How're Mira's driving skills?

Questionable

What, like her sanity?

That's rude >:)

How are u getting in?

We left a window open in the basement.

The school has a basement? O\_O

November 16th 2020

9:31 p.m. Central time. Chicago, Illinois

We're in. This place gives me the creeps.

OMIGOD. There's a freaky MANNEQUIN in here!!!!

Um, why would there be a mannequin?

I think it's a prop.

Mira's freaking out

Y did she agree to this again?

Hello?

Are you really going to ignore me?

Is it the Wi-fi?

No. It's the window, it literally went and shut on us.

???????

I can't open it.

U can open it later, go get the spray paint

This is so weird. The school feels...*deserted*.

Where are u?

By the gym.

This feels kind of wrong.

Ya, it's not like ur breaking into the school or anything ;)

Easy for you to say, you're the one chilling at home with sour cream chips.

I'm predictable. Did u find the spray paint?

No

What?!

The key isn't where Mr. Anderson usually leaves it.

I'm looking for it

If u leave that school without the spray paint I will never buy u Pop tarts again

Mira found it.

In a flower pot :P

Buy me Pop Tarts.

O\_O Just get out of there

The window's still stuck, but I think the back door might be open.

.....

Never mind, it's locked.

Try the other doors.

Ok

November 16th 2020

9:53 p.m. Central time. Chicago, Illinois

This is so hopeless!

Don't tell me they're all locked

.....They are.

EVERY. SINGLE. ONE.

Mira is so mad at me right now :(

Break a window?

You're kidding, right? If the cops find a BROKEN WINDOW I'll be sent to JUVIE or something!

I hear juvie's not that bad.

Send me a postcard.

Not funny >:(

I guess we could spend the night in the janitor's closet.

I can tell ur parents that ur at my house.

Or you can come and save us....

Good-night!

Come on! Seriously?

*Zzzzzzzzzzzzz*

Fine, be that way.

November 17th 2020

1: 07 a.m. Central time. Chicago, Illinois.

Are you there?

Hello?

Please don't pretend to be asleep again

I'm scared.

Mira broke the window

We're running now. But we triggered an alarm

S\*\*\* I think the cops are coming

WAKE UP!

Eli, don't be so stubborn!

I think they saw us.

Why did I do this in the first place, Eli?

You were right.

I'll send you a postcard from juvie.

Eli, I never got to tell you this but-

November 17th 2020

8:30 a.m. Central time. Chicago, Illinois

Sorry

I just woke up

What did u want to tell me?

Are u at home now?

Are u at Mira's?

Hello?

Why are you ignoring me?

November 17th 2020

8:46 a.m. Central time. Chicago Illinois

Did the cops get u?

Please tell me where u are

This isn't funny

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July 28th 2022

5:12 p.m. Pacific Daylight time. Henderson  
Nevada

Hello?

July 28th 2022

10:42 p.m. Cuba Daylight time. Havana, Cuba

Hey

It's been a while.

And I never got your postcard from juvie, you know. ;)

Oh wait, that's probably 'cause I got deported....

You haven't changed one bit.

### *Magi the Fluffy Bunny by Kim*

Last night I dreamed I was fighting aliens again, which is weird because I normally dream about getting the pet that I saw at the pet store for my sixth birthday. Celeste's grandad had always told her that he would get her a pet for her sixth birthday. "Whoopie!" cried Celeste, "I am six today and I will get a pet from Grandpa. "There is cat with these little kitties at the pet shop. How about one of those, Celeste?" asked Grandpa. "They are cute but that's not what I want," replied Celeste. Next came two puppies. "Do you like these Golden Retrievers?" he asked Celeste. "How adorable, but I know exactly what I am looking for," she replied. So Grandpa took Celeste to the pet shop that she went to in her dream. There were pigs, hamsters, and colourful birds too, but Celeste didn't want them either. She was now sad because her pet was nowhere to be found. Just then, a big black bird swooped down and pulled off Celeste's brand new hat that she got from her Aung Magi. The bird dropped the hat on a bunny. "Oh! This is exactly what I want!" said Celeste with excitement. "I shall call you Magi the fluffy bunny!" and carried her home.

## **Writer's Block** by Nicolas Palochki

The writer cut a thick line with his pen through the offending sentence. He groaned and banged his head against the table, then crumpled the page up and threw it into the wastebasket. It bounced out and hit the floor, joining the scattered piles of many other failed attempts.

The writer grabbed a fresh sheet of paper and sat at his desk for a long time, scratching his head with the end of his pen. He had a deadline to meet. The magazine he worked for required his submission within the next two days, and he had been stalling and struggling for the last two weeks.

The clock struck midnight. The writer groaned, rubbing his eyes, and regretted his resolution to stay up until he had the first draft of his story down on paper.

He was a fantasy writer, for goodness's sake! Fantasy was where you could let your imagination run wild, where you could create any world and any rules. But despite those freedoms, this story was impossible! His creativity and inspiration had dried up over the last week. He would start a story, and it would seem to be going well for a paragraph or two. But whatever he wrote, it didn't capture his imagination the way it should have.

The writer trickled off in the middle of a sentence, unable to continue. He chewed his lip for a while. Finally, he stood up and headed for the kitchen, deciding to check the fridge to see if there was anything to eat. As his hand closed around the door handle, he had an overpowering sense of déjà vu and remembered that he had done that only five minutes ago. Then he veered to the computer to check his email. He wondered why it didn't wake up until he remembered, irritated, that he had unplugged it to stop himself from getting distracted.

Oh well, there was no escape. Resigned to his fate, he walked to the crammed bookshelf on the other side of the room. He searched for a while until he found a dog-eared book he'd found at a garage sale last year. *2,020 Great Writing Prompts*, the title proudly announced. He'd rarely used it before, but why not? Maybe he'd find the inspiration he needed here.

He opened the book and scanned the page. His eyes fell on prompt number 504: *Your protagonist has writer's block. Write about how he gets out of it.*

Interesting. An idea - at last! - began to take shape. The only problem? It wasn't fantasy.

And then the writer suddenly realised why he had had so much trouble coming up with ideas. He had been writing fantasy to the exclusion of every other genre- trapped in his own school of thought. He had to break out of fantasy and write something else for a while to stretch his imagination.

This prompt seemed like a good place to start.

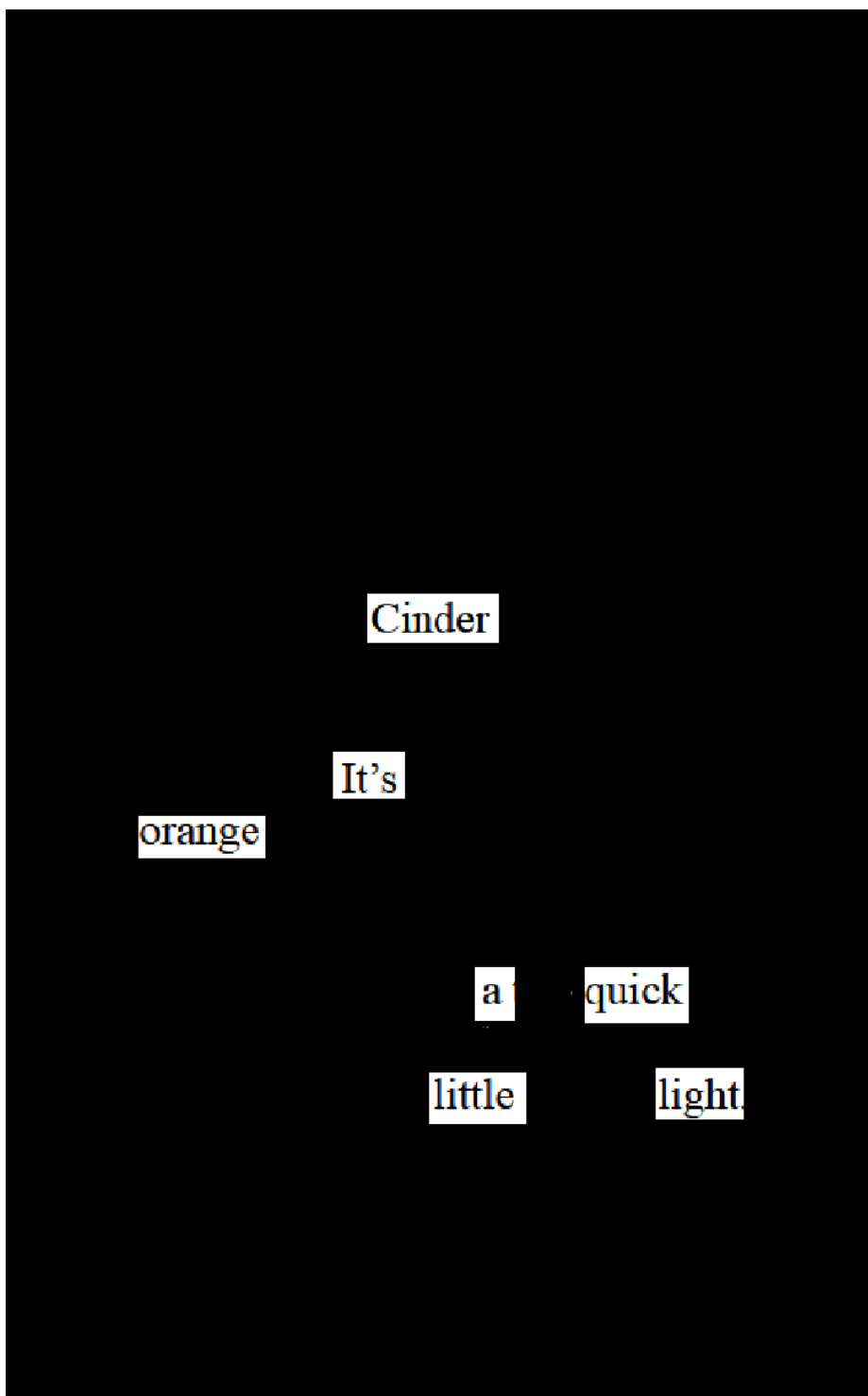
The writer grabbed his pen and another sheet of paper. He set it to the paper and hesitated. Then, before he could change his mind, he started writing.

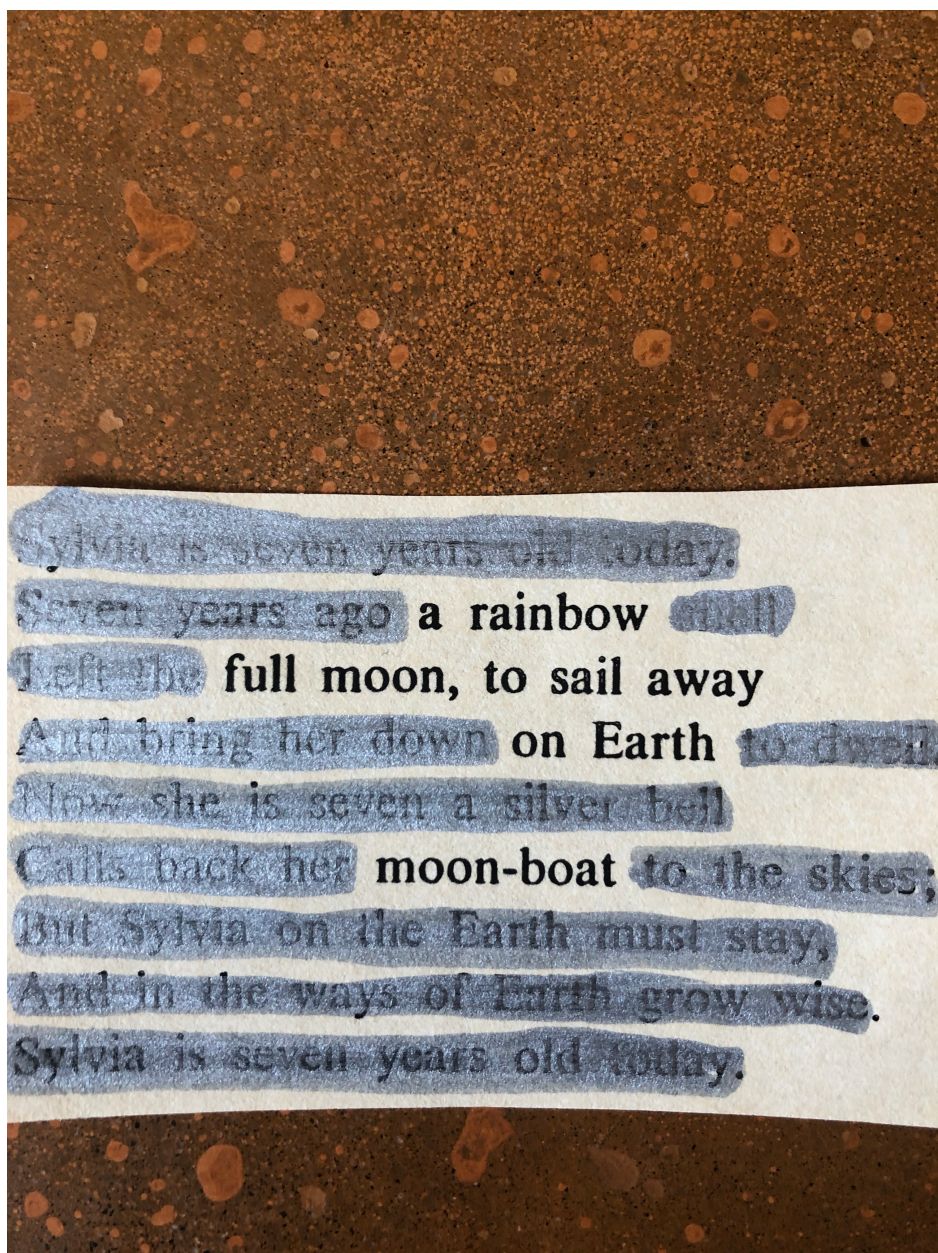
*The writer cut a thick line with his pen through the offending sentence. He groaned and banged his head against the table, then crumpled the page up and threw it into the wastebasket...*

### *School's Out by Izabella*

Today my class was dismissed early because my teacher got sick and there was no one to cover for her. Then to top it all off they sent the notification that there was going to be no school today late! My mom is too busy to even look at those so called silly reports and so she didn't even know what was going on. My dad is in the Bahamas on vacation with his new family so he's out of the picture. Here I am waiting at the steps of the school when my teacher says, "Is someone going to pick you up?." "Oh of course any minute my mom will come, don't you worry," I say with a fake smile. "Ok then, i'll see you tomorrow," says my teacher Lola. What an absurd thing to do, to leave an irresponsible child to wait for their mom alone!! I don't know what is going through that crazy women's head?! So I go back inside to call my mom and of course she doesn't pick up her phone, its probably dead. Then all the lights go dimmer and the doors lock. What am I going to do for the next while... Slide down the halls in socks and sing on the top of my lungs just for the satisfaction, mimic the teachers in the class rooms, stand on the desks. Pretty much anything I can't do in school. Now its 7:10 and I'm confused why my mom hasn't put two and two together and checked at the school for me. I look outside to see a wicked snow storm. I think I might have to stay the night which is pretty convenient because then I definitely won't be late for school tomorrow. Now its 9:30 so i'm about to go to bed when I realize there is probably food in the teachers lounge fridge and I won't let this possibility go to waste. After a few drum sticks and vanilla ice cream i'm stuffed and ready to go crash. I sleep in the lounge on the velvet coach which is very comfortable. I wake up at 8:45 and i'm still late for class!Ahhhh! I look in the mirror and say to myself "I look a mess." I race down the hall straight to gym to find everyone lined up against a wall, they all stare at me when I walk in. After school and soccer practice Alistair's mom drives me home. I find my mom talking to the police about what I look like just when I walk through the door she races up to me and hugs me so tight I think she might suffocate me, but otherwise I like all the attention. Now it is time to explain to her what a wild adventure I just had!!!

*Cinder* by Nicolas Palochki



*Rainbow by Avellana*

## Pineapple by Lola

people's drinks. This was one party where she didn't get scolded for doing what comes naturally, like playing feelies in a glass for cherries, lemon slices and celery sticks. At my parties, people didn't like a raccoon pawing their ice cubes. I would have offered them new ice but they always asked for a new drink.

Tabasco was the only drink at this party and she wasn't interested in it. She stayed home that day. Todd had just come home from work and was holding a large glass of beer. "I'll bring Tabasco home," I said. "I've finished it, okay?"

"Okay, I'll tell you when I get it," he said.

Gary and Carol were sitting down to hamburgers when I spoke to them. They were looking at their screen door, a hole put in it by the raccoon. I said ruefully, "Your son's having a party."

"Yes, Todd just phoned to tell us he's having a steak with Tabasco," he said. "That's what he's doing with a nine-year-old," Carol laughed. "He's drinking Tabasco. Don't worry, if he's not back in an hour I'll go and get it."

Just after the party was over, I had to wait away for three days. I missed her. I worried about her. I couldn't concentrate on my work. But I stopped myself from phoning the railway station and asking if anybody had seen her. After all, I told myself, I had given her the choice.

But people phoned me. "Have you lost your raccoon?" asked the man from the bookstore. The lady from the

## Minute by Daisy

