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## Rules of the Road

Cate Costley, Grade 12

That first day they flew down the highway  
Singing songs and passing pickup trucks  
No looking back, no stop signs  
Just blue skies and blue-plate specials at the diner  
They laughed under the stars before whispering good night  
And they wondered where the road would lead them the next day

They woke early and greeted the day  
With sun in their hair, they took to the highway  
Dotted yellow lines and sticky leather booths at road-stop diners  
They drove slowly, paying no mind to horns from nearby trucks  
They poured over maps and scanned the signs  
For a faraway place they could get to by night

It was dark when they pulled into the motel that night  
The glow of the neon green sign  
Was glaring and industrial compared to the cheery pink of the diner  
They lugged their bags up the stairs after a long day  
In the room, they could smell cigarettes and fuming trucks  
Their argument could be heard over the rush of the highway

That next morning, they took opposite directions on the highway  
He grabbed the keys and she hopped a ride in the bed of a shiny red truck  
By night  
She was eating a greasy Denver omelet in a diner  
And he sat alone in T.G.I. Fridays  
They both left before the waitress gave them a check to sign

You know you're lost when there are no more signs  
And you've spent too many mornings sipping cold coffee at the diner  
When you know every highway  
From here to Nevada and every day is a copy of yesterday  
When you're driving overtime through the night  
And your bed is a mattress in the back of your 18-wheeler truck

No matter where you roam, by car, by plane, by truck  
You hold on to the days  
When the always-extending highway  
Didn't seem so bad and nights  
Were adventures under the stars and zodiac signs  
When loneliness was not at the top of every menu at the diner

But the rules of the road are unforgiving and hard:  
Don't wait for a sign or a truck to take you away  
Just pack up at night and be gone the next day; stop at a diner, then take to the highway.

## Reasons for Eating off of Paper Plates

Naomi LaChance, Grade 11

So many of their dishes were broken by the time August's hazy heat filled the apartment. Each time, Sera could hear in the kitchen below: a yelp, followed by shattering, followed by the scraping of ceramic against the tile floor.

"Soon we'll have no more dishes," said Sera as if buying more were impossible.

"I offered to buy more for your birthday," said Joseph, prying a shard of glass from his big toe.

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Joseph liked to think of himself as a vessel, living to pass his DNA on to help produce an improved race. Maybe his chromosomes could contribute to the person who finds a cure for cancer or saves the world from global warming.

Probably not, though.

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'Every little girl fed on Disney and glitter becomes predisposed, whether she realizes it or not, to seek her own Prince Charming. Well, this is a cliché. But there is irrefutably a reason why clichés become clichéd,' thought Sera. 'Besides, the word cliché looks so elegant with its accent mark. Words like that ought to be used. The French think they're the only ones that can pull off accents marks, but they're wrong. God, why do the French think they're better than everyone else?

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Sera was not thinking about Disney when she went to the grocery store, nor was Joseph even considering the best way to pass on his genotype. It was a fall afternoon, and Sera did not yet know to appreciate that her dishes were fully intact.

In aisle 3, Joseph dropped a pomegranate; Sera bent to pick it up for him.

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Sera could not for the life of her understand how she could fall in love with a man so clumsy, a man who found Sarah Palin sexy. She wondered whether his standpoint on this subject was because she

was too alike or too different from the woman. She had never been more grateful that her parents were creative spellers.

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Once, they turned Joseph's tiny apartment into a fort, creating a new world under the blankets as the winter wind howled outside.

"I haven't done this since I was six," said Sera.

Joseph made hot chocolate with whipped cream. As he was explaining the way nitrous oxide propelled the cream onto the beverages, one of the mugs slipped out of his fingers and onto the carpet.

"Oh," he said. "I always thought this rug was ugly anyway."

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Joseph always wondered whether Sera read, and talked about, the books she did because she wanted to appear intelligent, or because she really was, or both. It wasn't like he felt the need to bring up the equations of uniformly accelerated linear motion in regular conversation.

Especially, he could not see how Othello related to a pillow fight.

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Once, as the crocuses were growing through the mud, Sera invited some friends from college over.

"Joseph, where are the egg cups?" she asked.

Joseph told her they were probably in a dump across the river in New Jersey.

"I guess you could go look for them, but they're probably in lots of little tiny pieces." Sera imagined the shards as ashes, scattered across dunes of Chinese takeout and broken furniture.

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When she left, she took all her books and nothing else. The apartment was nearly empty, the bare wood shelves sticky with the haze of summer.

'Now I have nothing,' Joseph thought. Sera was quite sure he never had anything to begin with.

She always ate off paper plates after that; he bought himself a whole new set of china. He bought a copy of Othello, too, which he read every evening that September, sprawled across the rug, the cocoa stain always nearby.



Jackson Kleiser, Grade 11

### **And That's Why I Like the Seashore**

Molly Wilson, Grade 7

And that's why I like the seashore,  
Dear friends of mine.  
The rush and roar of a sea at war  
Seems to set the mortar of the buildings on edge.  
My teeth go rat-tat-tatin,  
And my hair is whipped and ragged.  
The wind howls and bellows,  
Just like an old, wild boar.  
All the houses are bunkered up tight  
While giving the sea a fight.  
All the tourists are buttoned up fast and sheltered who knows where.  
Through those long nights everyone's bitter and scared,  
Until the morning comes and brings the sun.  
And that's why I like the seashore.

### **Guardian**

Rori Brown, Grade 11

A yellow-haired child flitters and dances in the warm wind.  
A shadow-faced thief shivers, struck by the cold wind.

The blades of long grass ripple and sigh;  
soothing is the strong hand of passing wind.

On the lake, the sailboat tugs at its mooring line.  
Its sails are down, but it is restless at the memory of wind.

The shutters of an old house are bolted, and the weathervane careens on its rod.  
Inside, a friendly fire burns away the cold, unperturbed by the chill of the wind.

The dense forest, notorious for its thirst for life, menaces the edge of a town,  
but night brings a capable tempest, and the wooden denizens fall at the hand of the wind.

A lost boy wanders, turning away from the chilling air.  
Unknowingly, he is guided towards home by the wind.

The yellow-haired girl promenades in her meadow after the storm,  
clutching the warm hand of her invisible partner, the wind.

I've got nobody. I've got nothing except my dog. I like my dog. He killed a fox once. He's a hunter just like me. I like that he's around all the time. Nobody else wants to hang out with me, but I don't care. I've lost every job I've ever had. Joey the waiter, Joey the substitute gym teacher, Joey the airport janitor. The waiter job I lost in four days. This customer comes in, wise-ass rich guy. He tells me the water's not purified. He says the napkin's too thin. I get him bottled water. I get him a thicker napkin. He wants the pierogies. I ask him boiled or fried? He says what's the difference? I say one's boiled, one's fried, asshole. Apparently, my manager didn't approve.

My last job, the one I lost a week ago, was the job I had the longest. School bus driver for the middle school. The middle school I went to back in '84. It was so long ago the Cubs didn't suck. It was a waste of time job, the kind of shit no one else wants to do. You wake up and it's still yesterday. You freeze your ass off until the heater gets going. It's like driving around thirty-five Attila the Huns. The fat kids are the worst. None of them have hit puberty, so they've got these tiny, squeaky voices. They carry food everywhere and leave a crumb trail behind that even Hansel and Gretel could find. They smell like Twinkies. And not in a good way.

The worst one is this one fat kid who kept pushing my buttons last week. The kid gets on, and I've already had a bad day. He stops right in front of the first seat and starts talking to his buddy like he's giving a speech. I finally tell him I can't drive 'til he sits down. It's like I didn't even say anything. I tell him again.

"Settle down. Give me a minute," he tells me.

"You need to sit down," I told him.



“You need to get a wife and stop staring at little boys on your bus,” the fat kid said.

I grabbed his fat neck and threw him to the floor.

So now I’m forty years old and living with my mother.

“You think that’s bad,” she always says. “I do all the work around here. You don’t do anything.”

“I’m watching her do a crossword puzzle. We’re sitting in the kitchen. It’s as dark as a World War II bunker. I’m wearing my camo John Deere hat. Stuck to the fridge is the first *New York Times* puzzle she ever solved. It was some big deal. All I thought it was was a piece of paper.

“What work do you have to do?” I ask. “Crosswords? Don’t hurt yourself.”

“What do you want for dinner?” she asks. I hate it when she doesn’t take the bait I’m trying to throw at her.

“Do you still eat Legos?” she asks.

“Legos?” I say.

“Yeah, Legos,” she says. “Like the waffle.”

“You mean *Eggos*, you dumbass.”

She goes back to the crossword. I can tell she doesn’t want to talk to me right now.

I go out and sit out front with my dog. I watch the cars going by. Me and the dog count the yellow ones. “Score,” I go when I see one. The dog sneezes.

It gets dark, and I go back in. She’s still doing the crossword. There’s no dinner in sight.

“Crossword’s kinda hard I guess,” I tell her.

She doesn’t say anything.

“So, are we gonna have dinner?”

She still doesn't say anything.

"You know what? I'm full from all this good conversation," I say.

"How's that job search going?" she finally asks.

"What's a four-letter word for pain in the ass?" I ask her.

"Joey," she says.

"You nailed that one," I say.

She doesn't say anything. I hate when she does that.

"Thanks for dinner," I finally say.

"You're welcome," she says without looking up.

"Is there food in the fridge?" I ask.

"Why don't you go check," she says. She's still doing her puzzle.

I open the fridge. All there is is yogurt. "All there is is yogurt," I say.

"What do you want me to do about that?" she asks.

She doesn't say anything for what seems like a year.

"You know, I'm still here," I say.

"Good for you," she says. "Believe me, I know you're here. None of my friends have their forty-year-old sons living with them."

I don't say anything.

"What," she says, "I hurt your feelings?"

I take a yogurt out of the fridge and look at it. I don't want yogurt. I open the back door and throw it out in the yard. The dog runs after it like a fat kid following an ice cream truck.

"What're you, thirty-nine?" she asks.

“I’m *forty*. I’ve got nowhere else to go. I’m living with you. I got no friends. I got no girl. I got no money. I got nothing. I’m never gonna have anything as long as I’m living with you.” My head feels like it’s being hit with a shovel. My fists are squeezed so tight my whole hand is white.

“You’re never gonna have anything period,” she says.

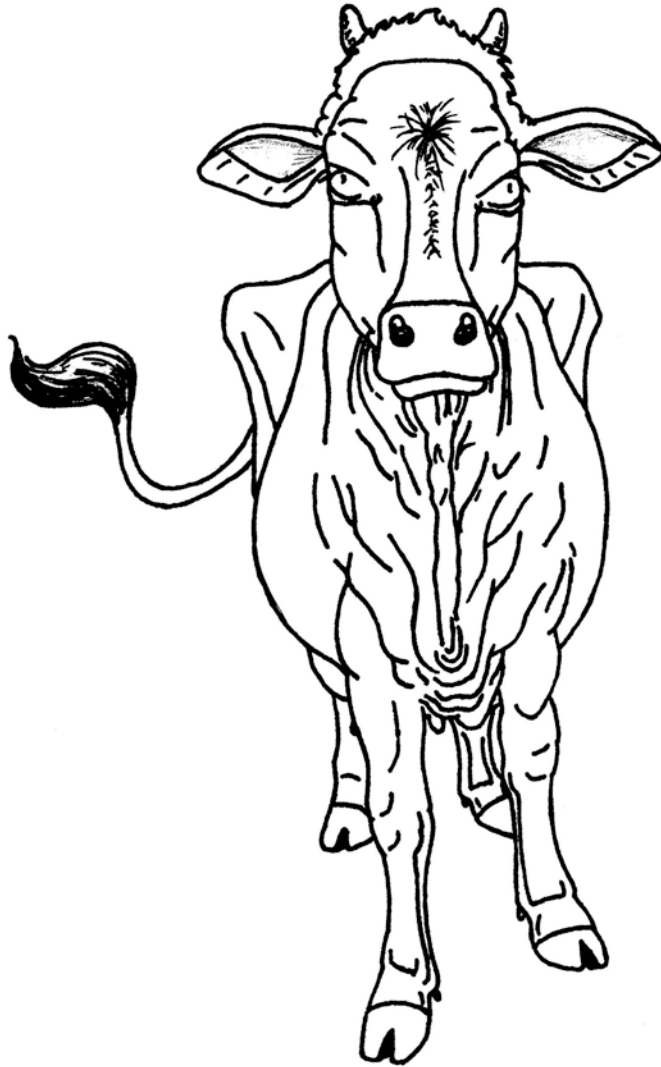
I grab her special crossword off the fridge. I hold it up. I rip it down the middle and drop it on the floor. I stomp out and get the dog.

We sit outside for a while. “We can stay outside as long as you want,” I tell the dog. It’s dark and quiet and there’s an echo after a car goes by.

The dog’s ready to go in. I peek in the window.

She’s at the kitchen table trying to Scotch tape the crossword. I watch her for a long time. It’s getting colder. Once, when I was a kid, she spent the whole day with me in New York City just to see the Intrepid. She knew I loved big jets. She even let me go up and touch the SR-71, which was my most favorite plane my whole life and still is.

I look back at her through the window. She looks older than before. Tomorrow will be the same as today. I decide to stay outside.



Emily Renzi, Grade 12

## **The Secret Kept From Teenage Girls**

Hallie Walker, Grade 11

The utility of femininity is discovered in  
winter, as lambs are born.

The musky smell of elbows slick with blood  
drowns out perfume

The function of Carhartts against the life-stealing cold  
outlasts fashion

With hair tied back and slumber shaken out of fingertips,  
we discover:

Our purpose is not to attract, but  
to carry  
to protect  
to endure the pain,  
the fear,  
the darkness of the longest hours.

## **Pretend**

Erin Ostheimer, Grade 11

The leaves fall in a colorful array, but we pretend  
it's summer, sweet and young, we can pretend.

She plays with her dolls to drown piercing words.  
If it silences the seething sound, she will pretend.

Footsteps echo bitter drones down hollow halls.  
But a figment of our imaginations, easy to pretend.

You say we think we're invincible, so what if we do.  
We're only young once, we have time to pretend.

His fists clench in ineffable rage as he gasps a word.  
Not here, not now, we're gone if only we can pretend.

The memories tend to fade to grey as the days pass.  
Left with what could have been and what is pretend.

The years are much shorter than they ever used to be  
But hours plod monotonously, so we wait and pretend.

Then someday, old, frail and almost to the end, there  
will be no difference from what's real and what's pretend.

## 5 Ways of Looking at a Tiger

Nick Carson, Grade 11

1.

When nothing in the jungle stirs,  
One thing does:  
The black and orange striped  
Killer

2.

As birds fly overhead,  
They dare not touch down  
For fear of trespassing  
On the territory of  
The tiger

3.

After a challenge,  
A tiger must accept  
And fight  
To the death

4.

One time the people built a cage,  
A great cage they called  
The tiger cage,  
They tried to find a weak one to catch  
But couldn't

5.

When nothing in the jungle stirs,  
When the canopy sounds so still,  
A cat that has an unthreatening purr  
Poised and ready to kill

## United

Kelsey Hebert, Grade 9

Can you hear him?  
Can you hear the sound of the world?  
The trembling melodies  
Of ingenious methods  
Of combinations and flirtations.  
The prickly strings that  
Cause the ringing of bells  
In your ears

Do you hear him?  
He's using his fingers to bind  
The world together  
To make all people  
United in one way  
It's the start of a tradition  
Of how the world will be

He uses the strings of sounds  
To astonish the world  
And his fingers tickle  
But he keeps surprising  
He continues the ringing  
The reoccurring, rapturous ringing  
In your ears  
Can you hear him?



Sarah Robinson, Grade 12



## **An Ode to Time**

Eliza Densmore, Grade 12

Here's to Yesterday:  
it is a stone,  
too heavy to carry on.  
Another to place in your  
collection of cracked  
seashells and rough rocks.  
It will crunch you to  
the ground  
(if you insist).

Here's to Now:  
it is an entity,  
to be bunched up  
and plopped in a box.  
To be covered with glossy paper  
and velvet bows.  
To be given to the  
three-year-old  
with eyes aglow.

Here's to Yesterday:  
it is a stone.

Here's to Tomorrow:  
it is a balloon,  
afloat in the air,  
at the will of the wind's  
incantations.

Here's to Yesterday:  
it is a stone.

Here's to comfort:  
Stones aren't balloons.

“Hey loser, nice skinny jeans,” Schylar says to me from behind as I walk to my locker.

My throat closes up and I can’t find a way to stick up for myself.

Ridgewood High School. Ninth grade. Complete and utter torture. For some reason I can’t explain, *certain* people transform over the summer of eighth grade to somebody completely new, and you never know what to expect. It is December 17<sup>th</sup>, a Friday, and ever since September, Hadley Alcombright and Schylar Sherman have been making my life pure hell.

I twist the knob on my baby blue padlock to open my locker and pull out my history book, agenda, and purple binder from the shelf. On my way to Mr. Bennings’ classroom I pass by Hadley’s locker where she and Schylar gossip and snicker.

“Madison,” Hadley says, glaring at me, her eyes thickly coated with eyeliner. “Why are you going to class so early? The warning bell hasn’t even rung yet!”

“Uh-h-h-h, I have to ask Mr. Bennings a question about the project,” I lie. I slink off, but can still hear Schylar say, “She’s such a geek.” The girls smirk.

After history, I head off to math. They’ll *both* be there. One girl at a time I can handle, but when the two of them are practically stapled together they are a force I don’t want to fight. I want to fold myself into an enveloped and seal it up tight.

As soon as I step into Ms. Wilson’s math room, I smell cleaning disinfectant and Expo markers. I start to feel uneasy. I take my seat in the fourth row and adjust my glasses just as Schylar walks in.

“Hey Madison,” she says to me in a plastic voice, like she’s my friend. But really, I know she wants nothing to do with me. Hadley struts in and takes the seat behind Schylar.

“Hads!” Schylar shouts. They hug each other. “I *missed* you last period!” They start chattering like two little birds to catch up on everything that happened in the previous fifty minutes.

“...and then Mr. Bennings said the lesson was over, so we could hang out for a few minutes. I looked back at her, and she was actually *reading* a book.”

Before Schylar can say anything else about me, I hear Ms. Wilson. “Ms. Sherman. Would you rather teach the class?”

Serves her right, I think to myself. What a bitch.

Lunch is next. My stomach churns, and not because I’m hungry. Lunch is the one time during school when we are not confined in a classroom, so everyone has all this pent up energy that is just bursting to get out. The cafeteria is the catchall for gossip and bullying. I get in the soup and sandwich line. I stand there, look down at the ground, and try to look interested in the red and yellow checked floor. I probably look like a sorry loner.

And then I see him. *Him*. Eddie. The hottest tenth grader at Ridgewood High. Dark brown hair, dashing eyebrows, soft skin, a sensitive smile. The guy I’ve had a crush on since September. He is right in front of me in line. Here is my chance to talk to him, to say something intelligent he will remember. Maybe—just maybe—he would even think I’m pretty. I’m not pretty in the obvious kind of way like Schylar, but I’m not ugly either. I have gingery hair, deep olive eyes, and a sprinkle or freckles across my nose and cheekbones.

But who comes swooping into line, bumping into me to stand right next to Eddie? Yep, that’s right. The inseparable witches. Ruining my chance to talk to him. Hadley’s fingers latch onto Eddie’s left hand; Schylar’s hook onto the other. My eyes shift down and dart around the lunchroom, trying to find a lifeline.

Schylar moves her hands to her hips. “Are you excited for our Christmas dance party tonight, *Eddie*? It’s gonna be so much fun.”

“Oh yeah, I forgot, that’s tonight. I guess.”

Schylar whines, “How could you forget? We’ve been talking about this for weeks.” He turns to face her, shrugs, and then turns back around.

Of course I wasn’t invited to the party. I think about tonight, about how Hadley and Schylar will be draping their slim bodies over Eddie, while I’ll be sitting in my tiny bedroom, the soft glow of the TV illuminating my face.

“Hey carrot top, daydream much?” Hadley tosses her careless words at me and a milk carton onto her tray.

That stings. Like a cut you accidentally swipe with nail polish remover. I swallow hard, unable to speak. Eddie pays for his bagel and salad. He glances back at me.

Suddenly, the lunch lady, who looks like a pumpkin with her orange eyes shadow and matching sweater spits at me, “You’re slowing up the line! Move it along.”

“Sorry,” I say. I grab for a Go Green cup of tomato soup and a grilled cheese sandwich.

Schylar laughs and whispers to Hadley, “She’s *soooo* clueless.”

I give my neatly folded money to Mrs. White, the cashier. She smiles at me and slips a peppermint from her apron onto my tray.

It helps. But only for a second. I look out at the endless sea of tables and kids who look like they belong. No one is sitting by themselves. I guess I’ll be the first one.

I sit down at the farthest end of a table on the left side of the cafeteria. There are a few girls dressed in black graphic t-shirts immersed in their iPods a few feet down. I take a sip of the tomato soup. It is warm and feels good going down my throat. The tang is just right, too. I stare

at the floor again, at the red and yellow checks. Hadley, Schylar, and I, we are like those squares. Colors clashing up against each other.

Someone plunks down across from me and I hear a deep, “Hi—” I look up. I can’t believe it.

My cheeks flush. My breathing is quick and shallow.

“Are you okay?” Eddie says.

Wow. Hot, handsome, Eddie is sitting with me? Asking if *I’m* okay?

“Yeah...I’m fine.” Fine? I’m in a dream!

“Do you mind if I sit here?” he asks.

I shake my head. My heart dances a bit in my chest, and I know my cheeks turn the color of my soup.

Eddie sits. “Those girls. They’re jerks.”

I nod and catch him looking at me. Actually looking at *me*.

“Yeah,” I say. It’s all that will come out. There is an awkward silence, and we both try to look preoccupied in our lunches.

Finally, Eddie says, “So how’s soccer going?”

How did he know I was on the team? “Good, I guess,” I reply. “We have a game tonight against East Woodside.”

“Oh yeah,” he says. “Good luck.”

“Thanks.” I tuck a loose strand of hair behind my ear.

For the last fifteen minutes of lunch, we shut the rest of the world out, chatting once in a while and smiling. This is probably the longest I’ve talked to anybody since September. Eddie isn’t judging. Or gossiping. Or teasing. He’s just sitting here getting to know me.

I barely notice Hadley and Schylar glaring at me.

Who cares about their party?

Not Eddie.

Not me.

When the bell rings, we clear our trays and go our separate ways, he with his friends, me by myself. But it doesn't matter. Eddie has left me happy. For the first time since September, I leave the lunchroom smiling.



Amalia Leamon, Grade 9

## **My Midnight Acolyte**

Ned Kleiner, Grade 11

A girl I once knew  
Waits for me  
There  
When the sun sets just that way in the park.  
Or there  
Where I kissed her once.  
I pass by  
About to miss her in the shadows  
Until she steps out  
Suddenly  
Knees me in the gut,  
Or slaps me in the face,  
Or slips a knife into me  
Between the long rib and the short.  
I hold my tongue  
Though I want  
To moan, or weep,  
Or call her name.  
She follows me home  
By my trails of tears.  
All night, she throws pebbles at my window,  
Or rocks,  
Or Molotov cocktails.  
Her visits are less frequent now.  
The first month or so,  
She bled me like a leech.  
Maybe one day,  
She won't come back.  
Maybe one day,  
I'll forget.  
But not yet.

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