

**I'LL BE**

**YOU**

**WHEN**

**YOU**

**GET**

**THERE**

**POETS  
WRITE TO  
THEIR  
17 YEAR OLD  
SELVES**

**EDITED BY  
SCOTT WOODS**

I'll Be You When You Get There: Poets Write To Their 17 Year Old Selves  
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To the students of South High School:  
We're all rooting for you.

Yes, you too.

**MY SIDE OF  
THE STORY  
IS THE  
INCOMPLETE  
SIDE OF  
YOURS**

**L.R.**

## CONTENTS

Steve Brightman	But Most Of All, Get Used To The Dust While You Renovate
Sidney Jones, Jr.	State of The Union Address to a <a href="#">17</a> year-old Self
Jenise Michele	Asking For Her Forgiveness (a poem for Jessica)
Tony Brown	Clarity
Wess Mongo Jolley	20 Pieces of Advice, Sent to My Younger Self, to be Opened June 15, 1978
Ruby Harper	I Really Wanted...
J. Kennedy	Untitled
Christina Hoverman	14 Year Hindsight
Nancy Kangas	Get Out
Ryk McIntyre	I Sent a Letter to Myself at <a href="#">17</a> , It Came Back "Return to Sender"
Amy Monahan-Curtis	The Fall
Lee Rossi	Instructions to My Teenage Self
Matt Mason	The Problem
Jessica Kahn	A Letter to My <a href="#">17</a> Year Old Self
Justin Lipscomb	<a href="#">17</a> Branches Won't Hold You Accountable for Your Illustrations in the Window
Dawn McCombs	Honey Girl
Omowale Crowder	To Kemet Crowder with love
Cecily King	To Cecily at <a href="#">17</a>
Azriel Johnson	You Contain Multitudes
Christopher Pinkerman	Retrospect
Karen Marie	I Long For Miracles
David Forman	Advice From my Seventeen-Year-Old Self to Me
Bluz	<a href="#">17</a>
Geoff Anderson	To My Seventeen Year Old Self
Sayuri Ayers	Time Travel to Area 51
Susan Cormier	25 Years After High School, Some Advice to My Teenage Self
Kip Knott	Boxes
Michelle Cope	Is The World Still My Oyster?
Louise Robertson	Make a Chart
Su Flatt	Things the Slutty Sister Thinks About
Rae Scott	<a href="#">17</a>
Samaa Abdurraqib	Writing Maths
Hemalatha Venkataraman	Things I wish I'd have told myself when I was <a href="#">17</a>
Steve Abbott	Parting Words You Can't Hear as You Go Out with Your Rock 'n' Roll Friends
LaLa Drew	Open Window
Zach Hanna	Dear Saboteur
13 South High School Student Writings	

# But Most Of All, Get Used To The Dust While You Renovate

*Steve Brightman*

Archaeology is  
a rich man's game  
but you seem  
to know your way  
around a shovel.  
Keep it that way.  
This world is not ever  
going to stop  
trying to bury you.  
Bend at your knees  
and not your back  
while you excavate,  
while you dig yourself  
out from yourself.  
Get real damn good  
at identifying remains.  
Do it again and again.  
Remember that bump  
in your shin, just above  
your tibia from when  
your cousin shot you  
with his bb gun.  
This will help keep  
the imposters at bay.  
Be more curious about  
where sea hits the shore.  
Ignore the stars,  
they are liars.  
There is no poetry there.  
They are probably  
already dead. Listen,  
instead, to the moon  
when she sings Hallelujah.  
Cohen stole it from her  
but nobody minds.

# State of The Union Address to a 17 Year-Old Self

*Sidney Jones, Jr.*

It would be great to state  
that the condition of this ship  
is well— better than well,  
exceptional even,  
a sleek yacht, fine-tuned  
and unsinkable, floating  
above the treachery of  
white capped waves;  
It would be nice declare this,  
but that would be a lie.  
The state of this union  
is no yacht  
No barge  
No sailboat, rowboat, skiff, or dinghy.  
In truth, the condition of this union  
is an imperfect piece of drift,  
waterlogged and afloat  
by the laws of some miracle  
that defies Archimedes.  
The state of the union is inevitable  
like noticeable patches of grey growing  
into a silver quilt, soon to cover  
the entire scalp,  
or  
the onset of time's tide eroding  
undulating beaches of hairlines,  
and unearthing uncomfortable stretches  
of forehead.  
It is as unavoidable as a son, rising  
from the east, growing taller each day,  
finding all of the steps lost by a father,  
and adding them to the stride  
of his own increasing shadow.  
The state of this union is real  
as death

as the truth,  
as the acceptance of yet to be determined  
expiration dates stamped at the ends  
of each inhale and heartbeat.  
This union's state is falling,  
but you have smelled the metallic  
humidity of cool rain on summer sidewalks,  
you have felt the juxtaposition of sand  
and sea salt smooth out the rough soles  
of work weary feet;  
You have wandered humanity's orchard,  
gotten lost  
and found friends  
and a wife  
and a son  
and unrelenting love  
that taught you how to love  
in spite of yourself,  
and how to live life  
in spite of yourself,  
and that's all that matters.

# Asking For Her Forgiveness (a poem for Jessica)

*Jenise Michele*

*Inspired by Tabitha "Succinct" Brown's "Honeybees"  
William Carlos Williams' "Danse Russe"  
and Brian "SuperB" Oliva's "Dad Poem"*

I have decided  
to ask  
for her forgiveness  
today seems as good a day as any  
for this sort of thing  
I will sit her down  
pour a glass of wine  
and take to the task  
of rehashing all the ways  
I have earned the right  
to ask for her forgiveness  
I will stare at the woman across from me  
a woman  
just looking for answers  
just looking for love  
wanting to be the answer  
wanting to be  
love  
I will tell her  
I'm sorry  
for all the times I said she wasn't good enough  
for each moment spent  
scrutinizing all the ways  
she wasn't beautiful  
for telling her to be skinnier  
when she was perfect  
thicker  
when she was perfect  
for telling her  
she wasn't perfect  
I will tell her

she is perfect  
and I'm sorry  
for all the times she traded love for orgasms  
for all the boys allowed to enter her temple  
without wiping their feet  
without bringing a sacrifice  
for all the ones she loved  
in spite of the lack of love shown to her  
in return  
I'm sorry  
for one pill too many  
one unprotected night too many  
one shot of liquid amnesia too many  
for not having the strength  
to prevent all of this  
I apologize  
for all the times she chose not to eat anything  
for all the times she thought of ending her life  
for that one night she really tried  
I will tell her  
all this time  
I thought I had her best interest in mind  
but how could a woman like me  
let her make these choices  
shouldering all the blame  
like she got here on her own  
and what is bravery and strength  
without fear and weakness  
without marker or measure  
to see where you came from  
and what is a woman to do  
when she runs to the mirror  
and the woman staring back at her  
won't look her in the eyes  
but apologize  
for dreams burst like soap bubbles  
for not telling her  
she is beautiful  
that her smile  
is a lighthouse  
calling lost souls to come home

that her body  
is not a jungle gym  
is not a catacomb  
for lost boys to bury their bones in  
it is a sailboat  
to be rocked gently upon the waves  
of a love who deserves her  
she  
is deserving  
of all things  
wonderful  
of all things  
brilliant and magical  
goddess  
queen  
woman  
forgive me  
I just hope  
one day  
I'll forgive me...

**I DON'T LIKE  
THE MAN  
THEY WANT  
ME TO BE  
I JUST WANT  
TO BE FREE**

**L.M.**

# Clarity

*Tony Brown*

Let's be clear. You won't exist tomorrow.  
Take some comfort in that.

You want to be erased, but you'll be absorbed  
instead. The net result will be the same:

I'll be here, you won't be.  
You will leave some artifacts, some traces.

Something you should know: you are doing everything wrong, but  
I turned out ok. Also, you are doing everything right, and I'm a mess as a result.

It's hard teasing those facts apart from one another  
when I look at you.

Truth is, I can barely see you: skinny little pimple farm, somehow  
not a virgin, lost in a hormone storm; nights of dread, days of dull ache,

moments of joy and this nagging obsession  
the urge to get it all down on paper.

Somehow, years from now, I will still have your notebooks.  
I will still have a version of your handwriting.

I will still have your split-window head,  
your gear-stripped heart.

The only advice I have is that I make it, so  
you must have done the right things to make that happen.

Do it all again and I'll be fine. (I know that's only a comfort to me.  
I wish I could make it easier for you but I doubt if I can without ending myself.)

The best thing I can tell you is that you end up where you end up,  
and I have ended up here, thinking about what I owe you.

I owe you thanks, I owe you love from afar.  
And after that? I can't dig deep enough

into our shared pockets  
for all the treasure I owe you, vanishing boy;

I don't know how to satisfy, to exorcise you,  
my foundational ghost. Instead, I will put

our arm around our shoulders. It's going to be tough, I can tell you that.  
It's going to be tougher than hell itself. But here I am.

# 20 Pieces of Advice, Sent to My Younger Self, to be Opened

## June 15, 1978

*Wess Mongo Jolley*

1. Love early. Love often. Love without restraint. Gather the pieces of your shattered heart. Mend it, so it can be shattered again.
2. Never bottle up your tears. Let them flow. They are good for the soil, and you'll be lighter without them.
3. Money isn't real, and signifies nothing of true value. Chasing it is not worth the cost. Instead, pursue beauty—both your own, and that which you find in others.
4. Spend more time in nature. Walk there naked. Scry the future in leaves you wet. Trust the animals you meet.
5. Run. Run every day. Run while it still feels like flying.
6. Learn to love the silence. Learn to love it more when it is shared. Learn to love it the most when it is unexpected.
7. Give freely. Give anonymously. Delight in the joy you bring to strangers, as much as that you bring to the people you love.
8. Tread lightly on the earth. Nurture more than you consume. Heal more than you wound.
9. Water is a miracle. Let it carry you. Close your eyes every day to feel, just for a moment, the endless ocean rushing in your body.
10. Whenever possible, disappear. Tell no one where you are going, including yourself. Float down a city street, or a desert gully, like a wisp of smoke from a long dead fire.
11. Take joy in love that is not your own. Delight in love you only witness from afar.
12. Hold your own love lightly, like a fragile thing. Learn that it grows stronger when left in the sunlight for others to find.

13. Accept that hotel rooms are the temples of the modern age. Worship your body there, in front of a muted TV. Use every towel they provide.
14. Don't be afraid to be ridiculous. The gods WANT you to be ridiculous, or they would not have made you wobble upright on two legs.
15. Soon after you learn to love, love someone twice your age.
16. Before you forget how to love, love someone half your age.
17. When someone breaks your heart, take a moment to mend it, then offer it to someone new.
18. Life is full of dark and dangerous holes, yawning chasms full of danger, and hidden cliffs that will threaten to swallow you whole. Stare into every one. Descend into a few from time to time.
19. Before you're 20, you won't have any idea who you are. After 20, you'll be sure you know, and you'll be wrong.
20. Make lists for yourself. Stack them conveniently near the matches, by the fireplace.

# I Really Wanted...

*Ruby Harper*

Longing, driven by disappointment  
Yearning, hours? days? years?  
That moment when I wanted it all and nothing at the same time  
To be heard, to be seen, to be a cantor  
For them to get my vision

Love  
A father, a mother or a  
A life of adventure, or a true love to grow old with  
To have been freer, looser and more open with my emotions  
and my body  
To be less careful and inhibited and try things  
When I only wanted to hear my dad say, I love you, before he died

One last chance with her or him to make things right  
One last warm embrace, a gentle taste  
Oh, to see her face again, and again, and again  
Someone to build a life with

Maybe cash, more time, or a doctorate in music therapy  
A baseball glove instead of a doll; the dishes  
A Barbie dream house, or to be a camp counselor

Health, waiting for the pain to go  
To keep moving when it hurt  
No matter where it hurt  
No matter why it hurt

To belong  
To find a way to belong in Israel, or Columbus,  
Or here, wherever here happens to be  
In the end, don't we all just want to belong?

# Untitled

*J. Kennedy*

Look, man, you're lame.

You think you're not, but you can't lie to me. In just over a year the most amazing angel posing as a person is going to enter your eyes and you NEED to be ready.

You have minimal skills, less money, and you're lazy. Fix these.

You love hard though, harder than Mjoliner gets thrown. We both know you can work hard too. Do it. All the time.

Speaking back through time feels like cheating and we don't do that. No, we still don't. Stop groaning, you love feeling like a good guy.

To try and rationalize this into acceptable logic, here are a few things:

Clip your nails, Jasper is absolutely right about that.

A mostly clean house is sexier than a polished poem.

When you're terrified in the Daewoo, do it anyway.

When you're walking with Phil down the store aisle, remember to turn around.

There is a difference between overthinking it and not giving it enough thought. Find the line BEFORE April 19th, 2009.

Right now you hate your ADHD. Stop it, it's awesome.

Learn to drive right now.

You don't need medication. You can trade it for effort. Lots of effort. Never mind, you don't have enough right now.

On our darkest night go up, not out.

Turn off Diablo 2, right now. Put on the jeans in the bottom drawer. Go outside and run until you need a ride home. Do it every day.

I could share more but I won't. You know why.

**BEING A  
NERD ISN'T  
THE  
OPPOSITE  
OF BEING  
BEAUTIFUL**

**A.S.**

# 14 Year Hindsight

*Christina Hoverman*

When you stood in moonlight  
and the planets aligned  
over two hearts beating  
the same offbeat rhythm,

and you thought: this is it;  
I have befriended fate.

Close your eyes and listen.  
The sun serenades the moon,  
and every night the waves  
are all the moon can hear.

Moon-eyed girl,  
not all soul mates fall in love.

# Get Out

Nancy Kangas

*Translated from the Spanish*

Go out on the streets in a group at night.  
Walk as if you would be a dangerous ball.  
Take the time to make a new name for each person  
in the group, then make a name for the group  
maybe The Ones Who Take Silence

or The Legs and then smoke ten cigarettes.  
Then shout these from your mouth – *shout them out!*  
with the water of your mouth, your mouth  
that is a feral and sweet animal. With the group,  
do great things at night. Make forks out of paper, big as a tree

or a very very long napkin  
made of many little napkins  
that you could put in the high street lights  
where it could fly. Drink beers under the moon  
while sitting close to someone who has the light of moons

coming from the skin and has his arms touching you  
a little bit. Never never  
– except a few times –  
be drunk.  
It is too much a thing of oil and water and too sad to clean.

Have your brother  
do the whole work.  
But do it so he looks to your parents  
as "the bad guy."  
Haha! No. Do not do it.

Ask your piano teacher why  
she does not teach the essential theories of music.  
Ask your parents: what are the dangers of drugs really.  
Ask your literature teacher why she does not talk of  
the difficult poems.

Ask everyone why not leave  
if you are sad. And why so sad.

Why is it all work.

Why is it not a party yet.

Seriously why.

# I Sent a Letter to Myself at 17, It Came Back "Return to Sender"

*Ryk McIntyre*

By the time I receive this letter,  
it will be years before I start,  
because time-travel is a lie.  
Writing to one's younger self  
probably won't change anything  
that made me want to write this  
exercise in begging my own past

to forgive me in the first place.  
Forget the time travel tropes  
assume nothing I do to the past  
is going to radically alter anything.  
Never mind re-written futures;  
never mind fractal parallels;  
there's plenty I can screw up

in the time period where I live.  
I warn 17-year old me, "Avoid  
romantic anythings with women  
named Amy or Ann or Jennifer."  
But I'd likely make very similar  
sad story mistakes, just different  
names carved in my soft inner-skin.

I worry 17 year-old me, receiving  
this time-traveled letter, and surging  
with youthful sureness, might re-write  
me as a paladin of romance , doomed  
and too beautiful. I worry he'd worship  
that. Better he shred the letter, "Forget  
you old man! I'm gonna be an astronaut."

# The Fall

*Amy Monahan-Curtis*

You are tough, but not tough  
enough. Barely tested. Your life  
thus far wasn't easy, wasn't  
that of just any 17-year-old.  
But the before-after date  
of your days will be Monday  
after Thanksgiving '93. You're 21.  
And then everything you've become;  
would ever want to be,  
comes crashing down. A fall  
that tears muscle, damages brain.  
And pain forever.

Would it have made  
a difference had you known?  
Would you have used your body  
more, lived harder? A choose-  
your-own-adventure book, could you pick  
a different page, stop  
that day, wake up later, take  
another route? Could you unravel it stage  
by stage? See ahead, know  
the narrowing of your options down  
to before, after? No, you lived  
in the world of the well. In the before.  
No amount of words could  
convince you, could warn you.  
The fall waited.

# Instructions to My Teenage Self

*Lee Rossi*

the next time you go for a walk in the world  
remember the stories you heard as a child

a girl goes to visit her grandmother  
two kids get lost in the woods—

those stories—  
remember, the woods are not just woods but the whole world

and everyone you meet there  
is either a wolf or a witch

they may not look like a wolf, or a witch  
they may look like your grandmother, some kindly old lady or

like some cool dude who knows his way around  
they may even look like you

but don't forget the stories  
all they want is to eat you

even your parents  
by the time you get home

if you get home  
you won't recognize them, or rather

you'll recognize them for the first time  
the wolf and the witch you've been living with all along

by now, you're part wolf, part witch yourself  
how do i know? who am i?

i'm a bird, a bug, the woods, the wind  
i'm that other part of you

the part that's left

after everything else has been eaten

the part that fails it's way into the future

i am you, who survives

# The Problem

*Matt Mason*

The problem  
with seventeen year-old me  
is he doesn't listen.  
Even to me—  
that is, himself.  
He doubts the voice  
telling him  
to put down the pen  
and look into Apple stock,  
Berkshire Hathaway,  
take a class  
in Marketing,  
Organic Chemistry.  
Good job,  
little idiot,  
says fifty year-old me,  
some fool without a 401K  
who writes this poem  
at a table in a McDonald's  
while he waits for his daughter,  
fourteen next week,  
to come back from a walk  
with her good friends,  
a smile  
hurting her face  
as she beams  
to tell me  
stories.

# A Letter to my 17 Year Old Self

*Jessica Kahn*

This is going to seem anticlimactic  
but I am going to tell you something-  
You do not have to proclaim all  
Your identity and secrets out loud...

You are of several communities-  
Possibly the only really true intersectional person you know  
So you cannot trend as an SJW  
    And this will make you very lonely  
And as a person with limited intellectual ability may make you feel insecure  
BUT be strong enough to keep it inside  
    Because inside your imagination, thoughts and dreams  
    You have community and ability  
        embrace that secret world

Go ahead and interact with people from multiple  
Communities, but don't feel pressured to  
"out" yourself.

Even in this hidden position you will plant seeds  
And however you struggle intellectually-even YOU in modest ways have a legacy  
Learn to accept your intellectual limitations, it will only make it harder if you strive to the point  
of the bottle, much more beyond them.  
You will always need help, but that's not a reason to drink  
Learn to say no, even if you feel inferior.  
Sexual harassment is never ok  
Don't be afraid to go skittles and "taste the rainbow" (don't let the experience with Kristen  
prevent you)  
-but realize when you're being used  
Feel free to say no to physical relationships.

But, listen now. You are seventeen and Tupac Shakur was just murdered.  
Read and ask about him-because your NA ancestors (be proud to be part of these people) and  
descendants of African descended slaves fought tyranny and slavery together in another land in  
the greatest revolt in SA -That's what the Tupac Amaru (Condoranqui) in Tupac Amaru Shakur is  
about. ...

These are your brothers and sisters too, this is an important part of your history-  
African Americans have specifically given you opportunities and civil rights here in the US-  
Stand up for them wherever and in whichever way you can- big or small...  
And for this reason remember even as you code switch, that you will always defend African  
descended people without hesitation-  
Las raizas indigenas antes de ser Latina (the indigenous roots before being Latin)

And of course

“ama sua, ama qhella, ama llullakuychu”

- Quechua Proverb for “don't steal, don't be lazy, don't lie”

You'll see that becoming religious is not a conflict with who you are

There is a community out there for who you are

**I'VE LEARNED  
ABOUT  
SEGREGATION  
AND  
DISCRIMINATION  
MY WHOLE LIFE  
I'M WITNESSING  
IT RIGHT NOW.**

**D.C.C.**

# 17 Branches Won't Hold You Accountable for Your Illustrations in the Window

*Justin Lipscomb*

Don't count  
the days to the future,  
backwards wishes  
will hound you soon enough,  
you will blush at the time you  
left on the counter  
while seeking change.

It's OK to scrawl  
on the walls of your mind,  
build a place of comfort,  
let hope guide your pen.

Rife with artful bonds  
these halls won't let you escape  
no matter how hard  
you press your back into broken locks.

If you take more than you can chew  
your love will eat you from the inside out.

Learn to savor touch,  
your recoil will send you  
hurtling down a path where  
blame will always catch up  
with you.

*Potential* will echo  
from a cavern  
meant to consume you.

Right your own ship.

Doors will see you  
less as a token,  
more as a portal to indulgence.

# Honey Girl

*Dawn McCombs*

You are the honey made  
from nectar of native sage,  
that grows on mountains,  
fed by the fingertips of the sun.

*Don't let anyone tell you differently.*

Passed from bee to bee, you are  
tucked safely into perfectly waxed  
honeycomb cells. Like a Queen,  
you are fanned by resplendent wings.

Let them stir away your despair.  
Sleep tight. All of the wrongs  
become aright.

What has been taken  
will be transmuted,  
sealed and protected.  
Your spirit will live forever,  
wild and sweet.

*Don't let anyone tell you differently.*

# To Kemet Crowder with Love

*Omowale Crowder*

One day you'll be king.  
Today, you feel invisible but know that one day you'll be seen.  
Though you don't feel complete, know that today you are whole.  
Someday you'll be on stages pouring out your soul.  
There will be many triumphs and failures, embrace them and expect them.  
One day you'll reach goals but make sure you don't wait too long to set them.  
You are perfect with every single flaw.  
No need to fear rejection or to ever feel small.  
To turn into your superhero form, you should reach inside self.  
But the biggest thing isn't saving the day, it's saving yourself.  
It isn't selfish to start with selfcare in all that you do.  
Focus on helping others but always save some for you.  
One day you'll find the true meaning of wealth  
You will be a millionaire, but true riches will be giving kindness and cherishing how it felt.  
You will lose people.  
important people.  
loving people.  
close people.  
Don't miss out on saying "I love you" to all those people.  
Today you'll see folks you think will be here forever, but they will eventually pass away.  
So, honor each moment and don't forget to tell them what they mean to you and always say  
what you have to say.  
Today you are in quiet pain.  
know that it will not last, you will heal and by it, gain.  
Don't spend too much time trying to get people to accept you.  
No one can validate your existence except you.  
Start by demanding that you respect you.  
You are picture perfect.  
When you question why you are here, I want you to picture purpose.  
When you question your purpose, I want you to picture service.  
When someone calls you worthless  
Look at them and picture circus.  
If you think others look better or have more than you then I want you to picture surface.  
The beauty inside will eventually rise to the surface in surplus.  
Now love yourself deeply.  
You are worth so much and you are not made cheaply.  
In closing, please read books.  
Read many books.  
Then read more books.

Then read another book.  
Then write a book and write from your core.  
After you write, then read some more.  
The more you read, the more you'll know.  
Use this advice wisely.  
Now ready,  
set,  
go.

# To Cecily at 17

*Cecily King*

If it's the start of 17,  
You're sandblasting your pain  
With addiction  
You don't know or care  
If you're addicted.  
No one grieves that child but you.  
You grieve it enough for everyone.  
You're already carrying some of the stones  
That will keep you fighting  
to get your head above the water  
for the rest of your life.  
You guess more stones are coming.  
You are already a good guesser.  
You can say you aren't trying to die from it  
But you aren't trying to live through it either.  
You're never going to be a good liar,  
Not to yourself, not to anyone.  
The truth is already a hilt-less blade in your hand  
You learn to hold it  
By learning how to take the cut.  
If it's the tail of 17,  
You're still gritting your teeth against sobriety  
You know you were addicted,  
You know you're going to live through it,  
Carry its stones to the next thing.  
You drive over the mountains  
You make promises that you carry forever  
You don't know that they're stones.  
You're planning your great escape  
It won't work the way you hope  
But it'll work.  
You never get home  
But you get out.  
You survive this year  
You keep surviving.  
Some of your children will live,  
And they will be amazing.

That will be the thing you win.  
You will lose almost everything else.  
You'd fight what's coming,  
Will fight it.  
You don't know your own strength yet  
Because your strength is not the thing you think it is,  
It's something colder, but you have it,  
You have it in spades.  
You're going to bury so many things you love with those spades  
It'll be your strength to keep turning the dirt  
And walking on.  
You hope better for yourself than what you become.  
I hope better for you too.

# You Contain Multitudes

*Azriel Johnson*

Learn to draw. Learn to paint. Learn to play guitar.  
These will all be skills you'll wish you had.

Learn to do taxes. It's annoying and awkward  
and I could use the experience now. Money  
is going to be the bane of your existence, if you work  
on the basics now, by the time you're my age,  
it won't be a thing.

Get in shape. I'm a mess. I'm an overweight diabetic  
trying his hardest to undo all the damage I did  
when I was younger. Don't become me.  
Eat better, exercise more. Get into martial arts.  
Mixed Martial Arts is pretty big, who knows what might come of it.  
You might become the beginning of the next wave of Warrior-Poets.

Speaking of poetry...

Your love of words is not going to go away. Cultivate it now.  
You don't have to go to college right away, because \*I\* didn't,  
but find yourself a writing community and become part of it.  
If you can't find one, make one of your own. You're good  
at building communities, that could be a career path for you  
in addition to writing.

Finally...

You contain multitudes. You are the master of realities  
people don't know. You don't even know them yet.  
You're going to tap into realities that exist somewhere  
and it's going to be the best and worst parts of you.  
Your obsessions and your focus. You'll draw  
upon your deepest depths of imagination  
to present these worlds to other people.  
You contain multitudes, don't be afraid of them.

# Retrospect

*Christopher Pinkerman*

I wish I would have told myself that life goes on. Though it may have seemed like the end, life was just starting to begin.

I wish I would have told myself to enjoy being a kid. Though I was never innocent, the jaded years had yet to come.

I wish I would have told myself to pursue my wildest dreams. Though I'm far from giving up, priorities always seem to intervene.

I wish I would have told myself that the pain never ends. Though the wounds have healed, the scars are eternal.

I wish I would have told myself life is what you make it. Though it may seem cliché, we decide our own fates.

I wish I would have told myself love is greater than hate. Though time would tell, forgiveness is absolution.

I wish I would have tried to make a difference. Though I was always willing to help, I didn't put forth the effort.

I wish I would have told myself another year would change everything. Because once you cross that line, there's no turning back, life becomes tragically real.

# I Long For Miracles

*Karen Marie*

Be careful of the lonely, the sad, the fear of never finding...the one.

Be careful with yourself. You see those same emotions can mean that you are not loving you. Upon plenty of time with others, when you feel this, may you look within.

I have wants. I get that. But I do not long for connection. I don't even long for company. I long for miracles, experiences, togetherness, beauty in watching people become gentler with themselves and others. I cry at the thought of these daily beauties...

Why is it that I never wonder about the plethora of love and capacity I can provide, but I wither in worry about the scarcity of love in return? Not that someone would not love me at the capacity I love...more so that someone as dynamic, spiritual, complicated yet easy to be around, beautiful, inside and out, physical with passion and romance, intellectual with quick wit and humor, driven with ambition and purpose, kind and patient with singses of past mistakes...Why is it that when I feel ready....the one I want is not? Am I not really ready? Is my idea of love so foreign? I think I am on to something though.

Love without expectation...but natural choice. A magnetism that is mutual and kinetic. A gentle love. A kind love. A powerful love. I want to love myself like this. Without the doubt, without the fear of arrogance. I am caught in the cycle of productive procrastination. I trudge through, but I have to change my mindset. I think I am on the right path and I have to trust the process, however, my mind screams for now and signs and my heart wants to be patient and not settle but know magical love daily.

I stop and think I have always been like this. There are various factors, but mostly it's me. It's my woman hood. It is my sensitive soul. And it is okay. I always felt like it wasn't okay. I want miracles. Daily. And I want to recognize that I am a miracle. Daily. And that is okay.

# Advice From my Seventeen-Year-Old Self to Me

*David Forman*

Don't be a hypocrite.  
You don't need much.  
You don't need to be safe, and anyway, you can't be.  
Read more.  
Go in the woods.  
Your friends are everything.

Everything alive is made of the same stuff. We're all part of one big thing.  
That means, try to be good.  
Most rules are stupid.  
It's good to be surprised.  
Girls are more interesting than boys.  
It doesn't take money to have fun.

Dear fifty-eight-year-old me,  
Please don't forget me, and if you get to make love  
to someone you really like, who really likes you back  
don't you dare take it for granted.  
And do me a favor. Drop me a note  
and let me know I have that to look forward to.

Also,  
David Gilmour.

Note: Old people are always sharing their wisdom with young people. Time travel is hard, but I can remember that when I was young, I was sure teenagers knew things old people don't. I still am.

# 17

## Bluz

When you walk into 17  
You will have already exited high school  
    But there will still be an education lacking  
A street ready to teach you some life lessons  
A mother and father who won't survive their marriage  
A brother who will feel abandoned by your maturation  
    He will find safety and comfort in an institution designed for war  
You will be proud of the skin he shed and uniform he put  
You will be proud he took the uniform when the towers came down  
You will try to find this new thing you do called poetry  
To write the memory of his friends  
    No longer toy soldiers but reclaimed dog tags  
    Out from the graveyard in his mind  
You can't. You cannot save him from this pain. His guilt.  
    You learn to help him learn,  
        to deal with it  
You learn how much big brother you can and cannot be.  
You will fall deep in love, then fall into a deeper depression  
When you discover the depths of her betrayal  
You learn to forgive, you learn to fall in love again,  
    but now your heart and bones know how to survive  
        the fall and the landing  
If you should happen to be alone at the end of either one.  
You will be bad with money, but will have the time of your life.  
You will discover yourself and then rediscover yourself  
    but not before you do something drastic with your hair  
        Or buy clothes you will regret when you turn 21  
You will pray to make it to 21.  
You pray that you are not swallowed up by the street lesson  
    or shot by a police officer afraid of how loud your beautiful skin tone can be  
        or the depression  
The voice telling you to second yourself, that death is an option  
Pray that your confidence isn't broken  
When the other black kids try to remind you  
That you can't skateboard or play soccer  
That black boys are hoop dreams and football scholarships  
They want to define your role because someone has defined theirs  
What I told myself when I 17 was that no matter what  
I will always be black, and awkward  
But what I cannot be is their expectation

I am raised middle finger to black status quo  
But still the blackest mofo you know  
What I wish I told myself at [17](#)  
Is what I tell myself every day  
You are fine. You will be fine. You will hurt. You will heal  
You will find your voice  
And when you do  
Be loud, confident, compassionate, and creative  
As f--.

# To My Seventeen Year Old Self

*Geoff Anderson*

*after Ellen Bass*

Your grandmother dies.  
I say this to relieve you;  
I do not know whose

number to punch before  
the tone slacks, emptier  
than a bell without a tongue.

My health scares me,  
each physical I pass  
a trick to feel control

over the heart, the beats  
it has left to hammer.  
For hers to quiet, it'll take

an aneurysm, a night  
you'll spend plucking  
corners of bedsheet

off sweating laminate.  
I keep confusing future  
and past. To this day,

her cell dials the landline.  
I pick up to listen for  
a sound that is not

my breath. Hello? It's me  
I cannot stop talking to,  
wondering when to say

goodbye. At my age,  
death is less a hanging  
up than a wish for a

call back, why you will  
answer to ghosts until  
the phone goes dead.

# Time Travel to Area 51

Sayuri Ayers

--for KB

I whirl back to Dreamland:  
you and I stalled  
on the edge of barbed wire.  
We lean on your one-eyed Pinto,  
and swig Skye from a bottle.  
I sparkle in blue eyeliner,  
you in rings of mood-stone.  
You tap a Lucky from a pack.  
Gazing into night sky,  
you wait for it to fall. Satellites whirl  
along Milky Way's contrail.  
You jab at cracks between clouds  
where Martian beacons sweep through.  
I cradle you as you shudder.  
Voices howl in your mind:  
fumes whipping  
over a lake's parched bowl.  
Lockheeds drag the moon  
in place. Stars glint  
like crystal cups  
on heaven's buckling shelves.

# 25 Years After High School, Some Advice to My Teenage Self

*Susan Cormier*

1. Skip class more. Regardless of your actual grades, you won't have the confidence to apply for a pile of scholarships anyways, so as long as you pass all your classes cleanly it won't really matter. Go enjoy your time.
2. Tell off those bitches who keep harassing you. Loudly. In public. Make a scene. You'll likely get the shit kicked out of you and get in trouble and nothing will change, but it will be cathartic.
3. It's not just you: everyone is confused, angry, scared, and trying to find their way. You don't need to understand, accept, or forgive them for how they behave - but you do need to be aware of the reality you're surrounded by.
4. Say something to him. Anything - as long as it's kind. You don't know how to effectively flirt or play it cool anyways, so don't worry about looking like a fool. Those years of boys who are teaching you that any guy who appears to be interested in you is just playing a cruel prank on you - they are just being jerks and not worth your time. The guy who blushes or looks away too quickly when you look him in the eye - he *\*is\** worth your time. Talk to him. If you can find the courage, kiss him.
5. Your body, your ideas, your money and possessions belong to you and only you. Don't let other people's confidence, guilt-trips, and threats fool you into thinking otherwise, even if - especially if- they're a friend, boyfriend, or family member.
6. Most of what you are being taught in class is just foundation ideas; the details will be forgotten. The only important things that will stick with you longterm are the substitute teacher's overview of a structured essay, and the writing teacher's insistence that everyone carry a notebook to jot ideas in. Decades later, that essay format will influence much of what you write, and you'll feel lost if you don't have a notebook and pen with you at all times.
7. Don't hold close those who make you feel bad. The 'friends' who abandon you when your bones, spirit, or heart are broken. The boyfriends who threaten, ridicule, or intimidate you, who cheat on you, who dump you right before something important like the prom, or who are more interested in your pretty friend. Relatives who criticize you endlessly. Anyone who refers to you with the phrase 'not good enough.'
8. Keep doing all those things that bring you joy on hard days - those things that adults say are a waste of time. Doodling weird angry art in a notebook; writing overwrought poetry to secret crushes; taking long walks in quiet places; staring out the window for hours building intricate daydreams; listening to poignant songs on repeat repeat repeat. These are your sanctuaries.

They will help you survive the worst times, and will help you decide who you want to become.

9. It's going to be okay. Despite what you are so often told, these are not the best days of your life - these are the \*hardest\* days of your life. You just gotta get through them. There is so much more out there beyond this. Do whatever you need to get through this. It's going to be okay. Just - get through this.

10. Decades later, the scribbled notes will be tucked away in boxes with souvenirs from days you don't remember; the photos will be faded and bent; the pages of sentimental poetry about teenage boys will bring you laughter, bittersweet memories, and mild embarrassment. But the prom dress will still fit - or even be a little too big. And that, of all things, is the least important of all.

# Boxes

*Kip Knott*

When the time comes to open the cardboard box you keep  
under your bed, you will find inside an old pine box  
Inside the pine box you will find a yellowed ivory box,  
then a silver box, then gold. With each new box

your excitement will grow less containable.

After six boxes you will begin to curse Hungarian curse  
your grandmother taught you when you were just a boy.  
Eventually, you will come to the last box,

a platinum box too small to open with your hands  
stiff and gnarled from a lifetime of hard work and worry.  
You will try jimmying the lid with your pocket knife,  
beating the box with a hammer, stomping on it,

cracking it open in your vice like the walnuts you husk,  
running it over with your well-traveled car,  
but nothing will work. Exhausted, you will give up,  
flip on the TV, plop on the couch for a nap, and dream  
of the treasures you locked away too many years ago to remember,  
as close as your irregular heartbeat, as distant as the nearest star.

# Is The World Still My Oyster?

*Michelle Cope*

At age 17,  
a number far from today's age,  
my world felt like an oyster.

I was an awkward adolescent grain of sand.  
I was caught between balking parental type units,  
frantically fighting for acceptance,  
and adamantly insisting for independence.

Because . . .

At age 17, that oyster cramped and confined me to the point  
I felt gritty and irritable toward family, teachers, rules,  
assignments, bullies . . . anything,  
that held the hint of advise, adversity, or lessons.

Because at age 17,

I felt as if I would be oyster trapped,  
forever more.

At age 17, I already knew everything.

I wasn't a pearl in the making.

I was already a pearl.

Let Me Out!

At age 18,

I naively felt the immediate entitlement of adult freedom.

I plunged ahead, taking no lessons from the past,

because now the world owed me rights and

wealth that the stifling oyster had begrudged me.

I Was Out!

Then . . . fast forward,

to an age sometime

between 45 and 50,

a number not so far from today's age.

It was then, in my mind's eye,  
I replayed my life's video. I was a pearl.  
Yet, I had been housed in many oysters.  
The proverbial kind, places and people  
who helped me relearn, heal and start again.  
I had somewhat matured, yet was chipped and oxidized.  
I was a pearl marred by  
missteps, mistakes, losses and wins.  
These were all gained through life's turmoil  
and some through my own stupidity.

At age 57,  
a number I live with this day,  
I often yearn for a trip back in time.  
I don't know how much I would change.  
In reality, physics won't let me change anything.  
Yet, if possible, I would simply wish to talk to me.

At age almost 58,  
given the chance,  
I would hold the hand of my 17-year-old self.  
After advising that the shag haircut is not a good choice,  
I will tell her that she will  
stand tall, fall hard,  
laugh, cry,  
like, dislike,  
love, hate,  
find, and lose.

I will tell her that  
when she's maimed in mind, body, or creativity,  
she should look for a proverbial oyster.

It is where she will be healed.  
Her chips repaired,  
and her soul gently polished.  
And, she will once again find her bravery.

If she asks about the future, I will tell her —

“Forever more, you will be a pearl.

And, forever more, you will find amazing new oysters.”

**DON'T  
FORGET  
YOU WERE  
A TEEN,  
TOO**

**J.H.**

# Make a Chart

*Louise Robertson*

I feel like making a chart for you.  
One side says: "You require."  
The other says: "Your qualifications."  
A good cover letter trick, I know.  
Still, in one column:  
You require a friend.  
Your qualifications? You notice  
that some  
people hide like you hide:  
closet, cloud, book, story,  
sunshine, water, bike.  
Some people, tiger lilies  
spread in the sun, hot  
tongues licking out, seek  
you. You know, you know.

I feel like making a chart.  
One column: Advice.  
The other column: Advice you'll ignore.  
They are same list. Avoid.  
Pursue. Eat this. Stay hungry.  
Be quiet. Say something. Be quiet.

I feel like making a chart.  
One column: People who  
don't know how to love you.  
The other: People who try  
anyway. One is a long list  
and the other is your mother.

I feel like making a chart.  
Start anywhere: beach,  
lettuce, pencil, cup, legs.  
Everything else is: keep going.  
Which you did.

# Things the Slutty Sister Thinks About

*Su Flatt*

I sit on an island  
in your kitchen  
swallowing  
leftover nuptial crumbs.

You pray through the phone  
For my sister,  
Pray away her fear,  
Pray against her pain,  
Pray joy into her wedding bed.

All glow and mamashine,  
You hang up,  
Send praise up,  
Tell me again  
How you prayed  
Over all your babies.

“Their bodies are gifts.”

Prayed God would protect them,  
That they'd marry their first kiss,  
How God granted you this,  
How He preserved their gifts.

And I think of how you say  
You prayed  
For me  
Everyday  
Since you gave me away.

You prayed across a planet  
For me  
Prayed away fear,  
Prayed in joy,  
Prayed curiosity into my head,

How when I was 17, God told you  
To pray against pregnancy.  
How He preserved me,  
You tell me again  
Our bodies are gifts,  
How God is good,  
How He kept those babies  
Clean, crisp.

Unwrapped on wedding nights  
Finally untying the tidy white bows  
on their spotless lives.

And I know I am cast, on this island,  
A rumpled package  
Filled and emptied and filled and emptied  
And filled and emptied and filled again.  
A container that's held too many contents.

And I wish someone had told me sooner  
My body is a gift.

My body  
My parts  
My bits  
My heart  
Gifts  
All gifts  
My body my gift  
My God, gifted  
This body  
To me  
My gift  
Not from me.

My fingertip gifts have traced miles  
Of curiosity, trust, calm, rest,  
Across backs, necks, lips, chests,  
Of everyone I've loved.

My kiss gifts ask silent questions

Taste delicious answers  
My kiss gifts say safe, say love,  
Say fun, say hey, say -- stay.

My chest gift finds breath  
And rhythm against another chest  
Says everything falls away,  
Save this breath  
Save this forever  
Save this right now.

My startle gift says  
Step light, speak low,  
I sleep soft.

My polyglot sigh speaks  
Every language  
From exhaustion to ecstasy.

My wholebody gift sharefeels  
More truth than  
Breath  
And throat  
And teeth  
And tongue  
Can shape into words.

And I look at you,  
Say, "Yes."  
Say, "God is good."  
Say, "Our bodies are miraculous gifts."

I resolve to teach my sisters this.

# 17

*Rae Scott*

Hey Girl,  
can I have your ear?  
I want to let you know  
I love your spicy  
around the way girl spunk.  
Just,  
don't let the fires burn out your flavor.

This life is silk road  
looking to barter  
and  
or  
for sure,  
trying to steal your organic  
and baby  
you ain't just salt and pepper.  
You are cayenne, ginger, turmeric,  
basil, sage and rosemary.  
Not all at once though.  
You shake and cut what you need  
when it's appropriate.

You have what we call  
all the black girl magic.  
Even with your light skin.  
Nothing about it waters down your power  
or your experience.  
Nothing about it excuses you either.  
Not in the past, present, or future.

At this age  
you haven't discovered the antiquity of your healing abilities.  
Once you walk into them  
they will become storefront,  
Some people can only shop  
at your window.  
Leave them be.  
Don't discount your worth.

You are  
allowed to find fault and error  
in status and power.  
I know you already found it  
in a salad seasoned with hair.  
The abandonment you felt  
when,  
in that moment  
your catholic school uniform couldn't mask your poverty,  
or save you from embarrassment that  
you:  
girl from dysfunction,  
with two parents as separate as two coast,  
who only dreams of living in all that square footage and spotless carpet,  
didn't feel you had the the right to say..  
Can I have another plate please?  
Someone's hair is in my food.

Remove that shame.  
Stop hushing your rights.  
Speak your truth.  
It doesn't mean you are flawed.  
It means you love yourself

Enough.  
So,  
when you find yourself  
In his 19-something cutlass.  
On Livingston.  
Call his bluff.  
Don't let his threats silence you.  
Bluffs ain't shit without execution.  
Besides, you know your way home.  
Walking is better than  
stroking anyone's ego.

Do I  
still  
have your attention?  
Listen to me clear.  
Connect with the  
people and places  
that snap and tap at your heart.  
They will save you.

At least aide you in all your healing.

On healing.

You will never stop counting.

You will make an anniversary of  
someone you never knew.

This year would have been their  
21st birthday.

One day you will have a daughter  
and that is when  
you will forgive  
your mother.

Although you understand her position  
you will always respect your daughter's choice.

Hey girl,

I am proud of you.

I love you.

17 is hard but it is also  
becoming.

You are doing it beautifully.

You've made my foundation

All rock and steady.

Thank you for your ear.

# Writing Maths

*Samaa Abdurraqib*

Was it all useless practice?

The rigidity of rules –

The formula of five –

The math that whittles a body down to three.

What was it all for?

This obsession

with the geometry

of the inverted triangle.

This tapering down to a point.

The point being the fulcrum

this entire system depends on.

Bulging at the seam, overfull. Somewhere

between breathless and nonsensical.

So much dedicated time spent

Tetrising ideas between commas.

And what of the insistence

on the erasure

of the subject?

As if hands didn't craft these words.

As if the act of writing isn't *also* corporeal.

# Things I Wish I'd Have Told Myself When I Was 17

*Hemalatha Venkataraman*

You're digging your spikes deep into the ground with every stride,  
practicing block starts, learning how to take off with the wind  
you've already trained yourself to flee at the slightest hint of a thunder clap  
and for that, you win medals that you proudly display at home--  
one for each flight you needn't have made.

Your past ten years have been about learning to mould yourself:  
learning what gives you broken bones and shattered knees  
creating strong casts around your heart for muscle memory  
parrying the pain away, always ready to throw a fist,  
in which you carry poems you've just begun to write  
on a ferry

into the darkness that has begun to be your blanket  
without horizon--

your axis is a star in space  
no one ever knows where you are,  
or *if* you are when they look at you.  
They only know that you shine in the sky.

You shine, burn long after hurt  
and I don't blame you.

I still see you every night in a foreign country  
eight thousand miles away from what used to be home  
your loneliness and strength still a north star in my life,  
I see you.

You birthed me in that encompassing darkness  
and as much as I love it

I keep wanting to break your axes  
and return on the fourth plane to who I was  
because

you still have a home,  
you still have those friends with whom you're vulnerable  
to be unafraid to ask for a hot cup of *chai* and summer nights  
on water tanks atop terraces,  
you still feel like you belong somewhere.

You haven't yet had a broken heart from love  
...or lack thereof.

You still think this *strength* is good for you.  
My strong one, I don't know if this is strength at all.  
I need you to pause for a moment.  
Look up from all those classic books  
you're trying to check off your list  
and listen to me  
because years from now you'll have bags full of medals--  
their satin ribbons intertwined like the words you wish you'd said  
a sliver of silver or gold shining in the reflecting light of  
a few spikes saved at your table draw at your parents' home,  
they'll weigh the world in your palm,  
more than you can take  
but you'll carry it all anyway  
until bones crack in you  
and the casts do nothing but try to hold broken bones in place,  
your every step will be a battle.  
I need you to pause for a moment  
and listen to me  
telling you that I see you,  
that you matter  
that I'd throw you surprise birthday parties  
and make you feel loved  
if I could travel in time  
that you should trust enough to let go  
because before you become me,  
you have choices to make.  
You still have a choice to be wonderfully vulnerable,  
you have the choice to not be afraid  
to ask  
for love  
and maybe have the call answered,  
you can choose to stop running now  
because later  
your feet will forget how the brown earth  
and damp soil feels like under your soles.  
I just want to see you before you'll never know  
how it feels like to be grounded  
anymore.

# Parting Words You Can't Hear as You Go Out with Your Rock 'n' Roll Friends

Steve Abbott

*for my 17-year-old self*

because you have no patience  
for anything  
not shaped like a song  
I'll take only a moment  
to offer this  
simple tune:

embrace the unfamiliar  
music ready  
to dance when  
the beat fills  
your body and skull  
with scimitars  
and sighs

the moon will drop  
its full weight  
on your face  
many times before  
any sun throws a shadow  
to give you  
direction

# Open Window

*LaLa Drew*

I have a narcissistic wound

according to a book which reads me like I read it  
& tells me about my scars  
like it was there when they were cut into my skin

from the inside

toughened, strengthened  
constricted

which is why I didn't know  
I tried to tamp me down  
dreamer, lover, achiever

was buried beneath the scars  
I've found an ointment I rub it on my skin  
I don't know where it came from

I found it in a tin on my window sill

I left the window open last night  
felt a breeze graze my face as I slept  
traveling across unfamiliar lands

with old familiar guides

I awoke to find the gift waiting  
'use me' it said  
'I will help to heal you'

I don't know the names of the gods who bless me  
that knowledge was twice taken from my spirit

but I feel them with me  
know they bless me

as I love on them, they love on me  
it's comforting to be loved in such a way

this is the love to sustain me

# Dear Saboteur

*Zach Hanna*

Dear Saboteur,

Less.

You've got more than a decade left  
before the friction feels even  
close to aging.  
Stop relying on the stop sign in the sky  
to skip the process- you'll be startled  
to find yourself  
topside of the topsoil,  
every day for years.

I don't know how it happened, either,  
but that whisper of electricity you're gut grinding  
and jaw snapping through;  
don't mistake it for resentment,  
listen to its foreign tongue,  
that steam vent hiss of gratitude  
you've been punk rock humming over,  
it's going to save you from all your best parlor tricks.

Slow.

Every moment in you has sped ahead  
of your good senses.  
You know better than me  
how it feels to look back  
on the last fraction of a second  
with questions.

Braking is a homonym.

We are both aware of this.

Every decision does not need a scorched earth policy. Your body is not an Autobahn of "will this kill me?" There are blood-brain barrier battering rams you haven't even dreamed of, like patience, or relaxation.

Quiet.

Your noise won't wake the neighbors  
but sometimes I still lose sleep  
listening to your bluster.  
You will never drown out the silence  
you're so afraid of  
if you never stop to listen. And

stillness doesn't have a you-shaped vacancy, friend, rather the inverse.  
I'm not going to tell you to love yourself, that's impossible right now,  
but if you shut up  
and look real close in the mirror,  
you can see your breath.  
Remember that.

Sincerely and unfortunately,  
You, but better looking.

P.S. Keep your chin up, fucker, our favorite music still sucks.

**WE'RE  
MERELY  
SOLDIERS  
AMONG  
MANY  
DICTATORS**

**A.R.**

# **13 South High School Student Writings**

# The story of A.S-F

## Chapter One: Looking Back

As a ninth grader I was a fool  
If I could go back, I'd tell myself  
The alarm is not a foe but a friend  
I need to show kindness to myself by telling  
Myself the things I tell others  
I need to really look at myself in the mirror

## Chapter Two: What I've learned

I made a mistake when  
I said to people "I don't care."  
Cause I do  
But I learned caring for others isn't caring  
For myself

## Chapter Three: Not Anymore

I want to toss  
My phone out after dark so I can sleep  
I want to stop listening to people  
Who don't follow their own advice

## Chapter Four: This Year and Beyond

This year I want to be  
Awake when I need to be and  
Also listen when I speak.  
When I'm I'll remember  
The time that I wasn't the friend. I needed  
I'm like a turtle  
Because I'm strong on the outside  
But I'm soft on the inside.



# Typical Teenagers

A.R.

Countless people of and older age  
Watch and criticize us because we are teenage  
We try our hardest to prove we are strong  
But they tell us over and over how we did it wrong

They say our clothes are inappropriate, and we don't dress right  
It is not our fault we don't like wearing belts and tucking our shirts in tight  
They say "back in my day technology wasn't as advanced"  
And I say if you lived young in our day tech would put you in a trance

They think "you don't know love, those kids don't love you"  
Just because you're older than me doesn't mean you understand love more than I do  
They think we're addicted to drugs and alcohol like Hennessy  
Just because some are doesn't mean all are, quit hindering

Also what's the problem with staying inside and being lazy when I've got nothing to do  
At least I'm not out on the streets selling drugs and naming people to shoot  
And when I don't do what you say don't call me disrespectful or disobedient  
It's not my fault I have a different opinion and you won't listen to my reasonin'

They say our music is illiterate and distasteful  
We don't care what you think so saying those words is wasteful  
But then again, we're merely soldiers among many dictators  
Because they're typical adults and we're typical teenagers

# Untitled

A.S.

I was in the third grade at the time, attending Moler Elementary. My teacher was using the board to write and as she continued talking and writing, I began to notice that I couldn't see the board anymore. My vision was very blurry. I tried blinking and rubbing and rubbing my eyes but still nothing changed. When I got home that day, I told my mom that I couldn't see the board at school anymore. She made an appointment to see the eye doctor. The doctor told me I needed glasses and I got them the same day. I got to pick my frame. I got a black and pink with gold flowers on the side for my first pair. I loved them and I felt very confident because I looked good and most importantly, I could see!

When I went to school the next day, I didn't have any expectations for having a new accessory on my face; I was just glad I could see. But when I got to class and sat at the table with my friends they were shocked! They called me "Four eyes". When they called me that at first I didn't know what it meant or how to feel but eventually I knew it was a funny insult but it still affected me in a way that hurt my feelings. I began to receive a lot of compliments, boosting my self-esteem. Teachers said I looked very mature and that my glasses were really unique. Most of the people in my family wear glasses and when they found out I had them they told me I looked like a respectful young girl.

With having glasses of course there would be some stereotyping. While having glasses one of my close friends named Allita called me a nerd. She said that only nerds wear glasses. I denied and said wearing glasses doesn't make you a nerd they just help you see. She said now that you have glasses you are considered smart and you have four eyes. I said to her sternly I am the same as I was before no one can tell me different than that. Glasses help me see better not think better and that's the only big difference. The definition of a nerd is "A foolish or contemptible person who lacks social skills or is boringly studious", and that is what I am not. This made me not want to wear glasses anymore. I started to become insecure and embarrassed and I wanted to take my glasses off and never wear them again.

Telling females that they are better looking without their glasses is a dangerous thing to say. This comment can ruin a female's self-esteem. It ruins their self-esteem by making them seem like they aren't good enough for the hottest guy in school so if they get rid of the glasses they seem more attractive. So she tries to live up to another person's standards by changing her appearance and taking off her glasses. For example movies like *The Princess Diaries* the main character of a movie she wears glasses and when she becomes princesses she stripped off her glasses. Why can't she be a princess and keep her sane appearance? Is it because most princesses don't wear glasses or because they look nerdy?

I came to appreciate the fact that I wear glasses and I wouldn't change a thing about myself at all. Glasses make me who I am and that is unique, smart, beautiful, and a work of art in my own skin. I got to point in my life with the help of my family, they are the ones who

motivate me to push through the ignorance of the stereotype of having glasses. "For all the females that wear glasses" don't be ashamed of it, strut your stuff because there's nothing wrong with it. Learn to appreciate the things you have in life. Being a nerd isn't the opposite of being beautiful because everyone has beauty. Why take off something that makes you, you? We need to stop this Hollywood trope of the "ugly princess with glasses" because it's giving women the wrong point of view of how to show real beauty. Telling us that in order to get that super cute guy is to change the way we look is damaging. In the future we could make this change by portraying more movies and television shows for women that wear glasses and how they don't always have to be portrayed as nerdy. Instead portray these women that by wearing glasses you can be sexy and smart because smart is beautiful and also is a powerful thing that we need to recognize as a whole.

# Love Is

*C.T.*

You say love is blind  
So why are you so blind to the fact that love is love?  
You see a man and a woman holding hands, it's normal to you  
But you see a woman and a woman  
A man and a man  
You automatically see us as an abomination  
You discriminate us  
You say that's not what love is supposed to be

But love, what is love?  
Love is not about gender  
Love is not about race  
Love is powerful  
Love is a very strong feeling  
Love is not a feeling you can choose  
It is a feeling you can't shake

When growing up, they paint this picture perfect image  
Telling you what you should and should not be  
What is right and what is wrong  
Making your choices for you

But you see in my world

I see no gender  
I see no color  
I see love as love

This is my voice  
I will stand up for myself  
I will love myself  
I will walk around with pride  
Never shame

# Story of J.D.

*J.D.*

I'll start with Chapter One or "Looking Back"  
As a ninth grader I...  
was a TERRIBLE DECISION maker.  
If I could go back, I'd tell myself...  
if it's fun DON'T do it.  
I need to show kindness to myself...  
by doing what's right.  
I need to mend myself...  
by blocking out all the haters in my life.  
Chapter Two will be titled, "What I've Learned"  
I made a mistake...  
when I tried to impress the wrong people.  
But I learned...  
the only thing that matters is what I think about myself.  
Another Chapter, Chapter Three, will be called "Not Anymore"  
I want to toss out...  
the people who always doubted me in my life.  
I want to...  
stop caring what people think about me.  
The last section will be Chapter Four, named "This Year and Beyond"  
This year I want...  
to be able to only caring what I think  
When I'm older....  
I WILL block out all NEGATIVITY  
I'm like a...  
Rhino because I'm POWERFUL and no one can hold me back  
I can't be CONTAINED.



# My African-American

*D.C.C.*

You and he are that of the same coin. His back getting shoved into a cop car. Your head on the television for millions to see shooting a three-point shot or performing your new hot track. They want to live these such simple and common lifestyles. Such lifestyles that are only divided by the space from one side of the coin to the other. Yes, I am saying that he and you are really no different from one another other.

You both are the same word with a different suffix. Both are dogs but one was disobedient so we had to whip him back into shape. I look at you and be only concerned with the safety of my own life. I don't care about you, no swear is needed. Racism breeds stereotypes that give way to these wicked thoughts. I want to change this, but him and you don't. Anyways can you change something from the inside out. Will I need help from the outside in? Honestly, I have no clue. I'm daunted by these thoughts every day. The strangest part about this is that these negative perceptions first realized by myself of the African-American didn't arise from the white man at first, it came from he himself. So in return I tried to be a slight bit different, something more respectable. Consequently, I was still seen as just another African-American.

It really made me think. I've learned about segregation and discrimination my whole life, I'm witnessing it right now. The "leader of my nation" is in my face doubting me because of my skin, he looked right past as if I'm made of glass. I've never had this sensation before feeling like I'm invisible. It was as if with one glance he could explain my character just from one action. That feeling made me feel not human anymore. Moving forward from that experience I went soul searching and wanted to define my African-American. A character as bright as the sun, one you could not look through or even at without shielding your eyes. I wanted to leave a mark on every individual I've come into contact with. This is how I plan to oppose negative stereotypes of the African-American

Point one, I am an athlete. Common for my race but I promise to excel and dominate and use my influence off the field also to make my community and brethren have a better environment. Point two, I am a scholar. I promise to compete with myself to reach greater intelligence, and find my calling in the scientific studies so I can become a great scientist of all time. Point three, I am a male. I've never had a man in my life to tell me the things I messed up in my romantic and personal life, but I promise to never again do wrong again to a female or a male in a relationship, even with this little facade I have going on not needing to go into further details. Point four, I am human. I am one of billions, but was given a heart of gold. Although I have to divide naivety from honesty, I will never turn my back on someone who is truly in need.

# A Single Story of a Southerner

E.A.

Recently this summer, I went to a week-long camp called Camp Wilson. I was one out of only five African Americans that attended the camp and majority of the rest were white. Of course I'm always the first one to introduce myself, so I went up to one of the people in my cabin and said "Hey, my name is Evon what's yours?" Her name was Chloe and she was really sweet, but as our conversation continued we got into the topic of schools. She went to Olentangy but when I told her that I went to South High school she seemed pretty confused. She asked did I mean to say Westerville South and I said, "No, South High school as in on the south side of Columbus". That's when her face really turned upside down. I asked her why she was so shocked and she told me that I seem like I would live in a suburban neighborhood and that I don't act like I would live on the south side of Columbus. She told me that one of her friends live on the south side of and she is loud and always is getting into trouble. So she just assumed that everyone on the south side would act the same way.

The fact that teenagers like me are given such terrible stereotypes really frustrates me. There are some kids that live in my area that act that way, but there are also a lot of kids that maintain a positive image and try to improve the way that people view us. But as always, people tend to look at the negatives more than they look at positives. Even when I was in elementary kids used to think that I came from a really good family and that I lived in a suburban area just because I got good grades. In fifth grade a little boy even told me that I talked like a white person in front of the teachers. In my point of view I thought I was just showing respect.

What people don't know is that I come from a single-parent home with two siblings and I am the oldest child. Growing up my family did not have a lot of money with it being one parent in the house. But I still manage still managed to maintain honor roll every quarter and even participate in extracurricular activities after school. Some of my peers on the other hand, get into fights, are not involved in anything, and do not even try to get good grades. I have seen a few movies where there have been teenage kids who are loud and disrespectful. These are already some stereotypes that are given to teenagers, but some people seem to think these stereotypes particularly apply to kids on the south side of Columbus.

All people are not the same. No one acts the same, thinks the same, or feels the same. Once one story is told somehow it turns out to be the only story that is believed. Sometimes it may not be true and sometimes it is, but just because that story may apply to one or two people, that does not mean it applies to everyone. Stories are told all of the time, everywhere, and are about everything and everyone. People should not base their opinion off of what they have heard. You should get to know the person more or at least have some personal experience with them before judging them.

# Why Are Expectations for Teen Girls and Boys Different?

J.A.

One day, I was talking to my older brother, Paul. We were having a conversation about why teen girls and teen boys are different from each other. This conversation was brought up because I wanted to go to the park. But, he wouldn't let me go because there were boys at the park. I wondered why he thought I shouldn't go to the park while boys were there. It's not like they're strangers to me. I know almost everybody that goes there.

Paul said, "You can't do the things I do because you are a girl."

I said, "I know that I'm a girl, but I feel like I should be able to have sexual relationships and any kind of other relationship just like you."

Paul said, "Boka! You can't because you're a girl and at your age people will think you are just running around the streets with little boys your age." Then Paul said, "If you do, they will give you titles, and call you names that are not true because of your past relationships."

I said, "So if a boy was my age and they ran the streets with girls, shouldn't they be labeled too?"

Paul said, "No because boys are supposed to do stuff like that when they get to be your age."

Then he added, "And if they do get a name it's a good name. "

This double-standard had me stumped because boys are expected to have relationships and girls are just expected to sit back.

My brother ended by saying, "If a girl gets called a name that's because she was having sex with many people, with another girl's boyfriend or they just don't like you for being with a nigga."

I thought to myself, a girl can quickly get a bad reputation for dating, while boys are seen as heroes. My brother and I disagree with each other because we both have two different perspectives on the fairness of the double-standard between girls and boys dating life and reputation. His point of view come from being an older brother and wanting to look out for his younger siblings. He is a teenage boy, he has experienced more than me in life. He tries to tell me, the kinds of games teenage boys like to play on girls. He doesn't want to see me get hurt or make a stupid mistake. He discourages me from experiencing relationships. But I want to have my own experiences so I can make good decisions in the future.

But in trying to protect me, he's keeping me from living my life the way I want to. I want to have the freedom to go to movies, go out to eat, go to the park, or my friends' house without him scolding me. I do understand why my brother wants to protect me but I still want to go live my life while I'm young. My mom taught her kids to speak their minds when they a question or an opinion. I think double-standards are unfair. My mother always says "If you wanna get heard you gotta speak up or you won't get nowhere in life." This stuck with me because I believe I should have the relationships that I want to. I've learned to speak up about the things I believe in.

# Untitled

J.C.

When I was in 5th grade I had to move schools because my brother got expelled from the school we were at. I really didn't want to change schools, but my mom made me because she didn't want my brother going to school alone. On the first day, I walked in class and I was immediately bum rushed with a lot of work. The teacher, Ms. Skipfer, didn't even tell me how to do it. She just said I had two weeks to finish it. I was instantly intimidated by the work ahead of me.

From the start, I realized Ms. Skipfer wasn't going to be very helpful. I knew she wasn't going to be helpful because every time I would try to talk to her, she would catch an attitude as if she didn't want to do her job. She never would answer me, I would have my hand in the air for hours switching from arm to arm trying to get her attention. This is when I realized she wasn't going to benefit me at all that school year. One day, Ms. Skipfer began to pass out fraction worksheets. I then raised my hand and it felt like I had it up for hours. Eventually, she said, "What, Ja-kye?" and I said, "I need help, I've never added or multiplied fractions before."

I used to always goof and play around in her class. From the first day I walked in the classroom, I immediately met two boys who were just as goofy as me. All we did was mess with people and constantly disrupted the classroom. As time went on I realized that I was playing a little too much, so I slowed down on the playing, but it was too late. Ms. Skipfer already had the impression of me that all I did was disrupt learning and make fun of students. She lost all other thoughts of me and just stuck to the thought that I'm a bad child. So she didn't help me with the worksheet and I ended up getting my first D ever. My mom was disappointed. I was disappointed. Even GOD was disappointed because we all knew I could do better. As the year went on Ms. Skipfer kept giving me problems. I was never allowed on class field trips, I got kicked out of class almost every day and most importantly I never got to learn anything. For me to know my teacher didn't like me... it was almost agonizing. She didn't even try to see the other side of me. She already had her "single story" of me. The whole school year it felt like I was carrying a huge burden. My color card was never on a good color. It seemed that as soon as I walked in the classroom I earned a color change.

Looking back on the school year, I realized that in Ms. Skipfer's eyes I was never going to be nothing in life but a "fast food worker on child support." But I had a dream that one day I would prove this teacher wrong and become a successful BLACK MAN. I maintain myself by never losing my cool and defeating her with kindness, so she had no choice but to watch me graduate. Now that I'm in 10th grade, I look back to my 5th grade year and realize I've never had a teacher like Ms. Skipfer. Yes, I still play around and I don't think that will ever change, but all my teachers have been here to make me better, not worse and I thank them for that by continuing to get the grades I get. So now I can say that I am definitely living my BEST LIFE!

# Teenage Dream

*J.H.*

The adults like to call us young and dumb  
I wonder what they were called when they  
were this young  
I know what you've seen  
I know what you've heard  
But if it was on the news, know they only show the bad things there  
These stereotypes got us all wrong  
Yes, I'm a teen but I don't smoke weed  
I do think about the future and what it could bring  
I'm living the life of a typical teen  
I have a job and I can stay focused  
I'm trying to live my life to its fullest  
I'm not perfect, I can't lie and  
Yes, I make mistakes I can't deny  
I'm not the smartest but I'm still bright  
I can see your shock and you're surprised  
Maybe the prejudicial things you heard just  
Weren't right  
Don't forget you were a teen, too  
How would you feel if people thought these things about you?

# The "Real" Way To Be a Man

*L.M.*

The "normal" man is scared of naught  
Then there's me, scared a lot.  
Told to fight by other men, but I've already made a fight.  
A constant fight with myself,  
the person everyone wants me to be.

But the man I am will always fight with the man I'm supposed to be.  
For this other me is brave and bold, and that's what's expected of me.  
So I stand tall with my mask firmly on,  
and continue to face everything head on.  
This is what is expected of me.

As life goes on my mask just gets tighter,  
only to be taken off when I feel safe to be the real me.  
The me that only my closest friends can see.  
But the older I get the more they see in the other me, a stronger me.  
But I don't like the man they want me to be, I just want to be free.

So still I fight the person everyone wants me to be,  
to break the mask that hides the person I want myself to be.  
If this mask is to break the real me would be free.  
This would mean i won't have to hide the little kid inside my mind.  
I would be free, to see the world with my own two eyes.

# Growing up African

*P.D.*

From the day I was born  
Assumptions were made about where I'm from  
Since it's not the United States  
Ivorian I am Liberian is in me  
My roots are a part of me  
But don't define who I could be

When I tell people I'm African  
Most of them don't believe  
They ask me if I "speak African"  
And wonder why I don't stink  
I never really understood those questions  
Or what they truly mean

I remember when I was little  
Oh how observant I was  
I noticed how others would flee  
Once they learned of the  
African in me

I grew up thinking  
Being African was a bad thing  
Always dwelling on what others would think and  
Not ever seeing the beauty in me

As I got older  
things really didn't change  
Many people mocked me  
But eventually it did not hurt the same

I got used to it  
The rude comments would come and go  
But it only took one realization  
For me to know  
That if I loved me for me  
Those comments would never hold

# Black people are...

L.R.

Go ahead  
Think of us as a stereotype.  
Pin single stories on everyone with pigmentation.  
Save us in your mind as if we are meant for a collection.  
Are we thieves and crooks?  
Uneducated people who can't read books?  
Do we sell drugs or do them?  
With so many desirable choices.  
It seems that we don't have a voice.

Are we all "abusive"?  
Will we always be "exclusive"?  
Do we not work "hard enough"?  
Do we complain "too much"?  
Are all of us in gangs?  
Do we not have any control when it comes to guns?  
Do we abandon our daughters and sons?

But here's a challenge to your single story.  
I am not a crook; I am a middle class male.  
I love reading books; I get college acceptance letters in the mail.  
I don't sell or do drugs though I know people who do.  
I didn't become a product of your environment.  
I'm not just another statistic.  
Even though you want me to.  
I know that part.  
To be true.

I have known abusers and victims from it.  
But abuse I haven't endured that shit.  
Unless you mean verbal from this crazy society.  
A few will understand; still it's driving me crazy.

Most of my life I have WORKED my ass off.  
Never did anything less than B work.  
Yet my work hasn't paid off.  
My payment to you is like a cough.  
You blow it off.  
I can't speak for everyone but I don't complain.  
I'm always up for the challenge.

I'm just trying to tell you how I live.

I have never been in a gang or pretended to be in one.

I don't know how to hold or shoot a gun.

I have no kids cause I'm only 21.

Too busy

Focused on college classes.

I'm out there, shocking the masses.

Umm... about that wardrobe piece?

I wear suits, you know, a three piece.

Please tell me again about the things you have heard about black people.

Never mind, if I let you go on and on we won't have enough time.

Apparently, we need a rewrite.

My side of the story is the incomplete side of yours.

Your side of the story is the incomplete side of mine.

So... I have a question.

Can black people be defined?

If so, what do you think would be the first line?

Dear people who feel the need to define black people.

We can do that ourselves, we don't need spokespeople.

We aren't mute, yet it seems that way.

I know.

I know.

Conversations are going to come up and you just let your words flow.

Everyone has opinions.

Mine, upon this topic, I can't let go.

You heard my part.

You may or may not have a change of heart.

Or mind.

Cause I feel people aren't meant to be defined.

Study your collection of stories of us.

You know what the news shows.

Maybe you should put a book to your nose.