

2018 YOUNG PEOPLE'S
Creative Writing Contest
FOR AGES 10-18

"The Bubble" by Madison Rice
1st Place, Informal Essay 16-18

Poems ● Essays ● Comix
Short Plays ● Short Stories

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Entries Accepted Feb. 1-March 3

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The Bubble

One day, when I was about five or six years old, I remember having some difficulty unbuttoning my jeans. I was a small child, but my pants had been tight ever since I got The Bubble. I called my mom over to help me undress for my bath. To her surprise, there was a large lump under the skin on my lower right abdomen. I named it something--I wish I could remember--but usually referred to it by its "proper title," The Bubble. My mother asked me when I first noticed its appearance. I shrugged, but grinned a second later. "Watch this!" I pushed in The Bubble. It slowly reinflated itself under my skin. My poor mother turned a faint green and excused herself as I climbed into the bath.

A few days later, I was taken to an ancient doctor who looked like the personification of the color gray. I distinctly remember how he smelled like dirt and hand sanitizer all at once, and how his grumbly voice scared me. He told me to take my pants off.

I looked at my mother, shocked. *You told me to tell you if anyone asked me to do that. Well?* It didn't seem to bother her. She just smiled encouragingly at me and nodded. "Give your pants to me sweetie and I'll fold them for you."

I complied, dumbfounded. *The gray man is seeing me naked...the gray man is seeing me naked....* He pushed me back on the examination table and started poking my belly, asking if this hurts and if that feels tight. I answered, but I felt nothing. A numbness to all emotion slowly replaced all of the heat flushing my cheeks. *The gray man is seeing me naked.*

After traumatizing me and concluding his examination, the doctor concluded that I had a hernia. In a nutshell, I had somehow torn a hole in my body and my intestine had slipped

through, causing The Bubble. He told me hernias were generally uncommon in girls, but they were virtually unheard of in girls as young as I was. Even more uncommon was that I felt no pain when he was poking me. He asked me if I knew how I had acquired it. I shrugged and stared at my sneakers. *The gray man had seen me naked.* I was done answering questions that day. He went on and scheduled my surgery with my mom.

I do actually know how I got the hernia. The story is almost as embarrassing as stripping down in front of a stranger. I had to have a major surgery to put my intestines back in place because I loved Legos too much.

My kindergarten teacher had five rules during centers: share your toys, be kind, inside voices, no running, and only four people to a centers station. Being as small and slow as I was, I generally couldn't power-walk to the station I wanted quick enough and had to play with the horse dolls. I didn't have a problem with the horse dolls, but I had some serious beef with the "horse girls." They talked incessantly about horses, which I didn't care about, and had a distinct pecking order type of hierarchy, which I ignored, causing lots of fights after not doing what The Horse Leader told me to.

One centers time I was very bored after effectively pissing off The Horse Leader and was aimlessly walking my horse across the table. I glanced up and saw the Lego table only had *three* seats occupied. The Lego table was the Holy Grail of centers stations. I knew a kid who peed himself right then and there rather than give up his most coveted spot. My heart raced. I locked eyes with Justin from the other side of the room. He was farther than I was. I could make it. I turned backwards on my chair so that my chest was against the backrest and started scooting. My thighs were strong and true. Justin, on the other hand, was forced to walk to avoid being

scolded by the teacher. I could see the pain in his eyes as he watched me scoot mightily. I was winning. Sweat broke out on my brow and my thighs burned, but I was so close I could almost feel those grimy blocks in my tiny hands....

But disaster struck. The front leg of my chair hit a knot in the carpet. I fell forward. The Lego table caught the chair, and the arms connecting into the back rest slammed into my crotch. A fiery pain in my abdomen erupted.

Tears stung my eyes, but it didn't matter. I made it. I grabbed some Legos and started building. That is how I gave myself a hernia, and I have no regrets. To this day, 10 years later, beating Justin to the Lego table is the greatest satisfaction I have ever felt. This actually is a real event that happened to me. Everyone has wacky and funny stories like that in their life: my grandpa told me just the other day about the time he had to jump into a cow pond to escape a swarm of angry bees chasing him after he dropped their hive. Interestingly, it's these weird, unconnected stories that shape us into the person we are in some ways. My grandpa is perhaps the most detail-oriented person I have ever met, and attributes this fact to his bee story. The boards in the hive were rotting, and he was careless. The scar from my hernia surgery reminds me everyday to fight for what I am passionate about. In kindergarten, it was Legos. Obviously, my passions are deeper than that now, but I am so lucky to have a physical reminder on my body telling me to push back against anyone or anything standing in my way to success.

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“A Thought, Finally” by Charlotte Suttee
2nd Place, Informal Essay 16-18

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You know that tall grass with the grandma updo? I can't even think of what they're called, but yeah, I'm just looking at those right now, as they bounce in the sunny wind. A group of kids walk by, a few cars, and the such.

I may look all-thoughtful like, but I'm not *actually* thinking about anything. And if I am thinking thoughts, about the grass or something other, then they're sure inarticulate, or in another language entirely. I'm telling you, I've jumped to grandma mentality, you know, just eyeing birds down till they flutter away. But then again, those blue-hairs probably have a thought bouncing around in there, or more like slinking around like a sticky syrup, or a sloth.

Then some external force, like a squealing baby or a text, presses play on my consciousness, and then I start thinking again. I usually just get real mad at everyone's favorite scapegoat: time. I always expect it to wait for my return, but it's gone by the time I look up. I keep telling it to slow down and take a mental break with me, but it just sprints right through my hypnosis sessions.

"I could've done something *grand* with that hour you just spent, Time!" I say. "I could've finished a report, or that pirate movie, or even this book! I could've had a conversation with a friend, or furthered my life, even in some microscopic way, like flossing, but *noooooo*, you just gotta leave me hangin' back here with the stupid grasses that remind me of grandmas!" I jog right up beside this tickety-tockity joke, ready to unload some hearty advice through my panty breath, but then it just picks up the pace and disappears down the street into the sunset. Time stops for no one, if you haven't already figured it out. It's kind of a jerk, really.

The special needs school bus lugs around the corner. A guy in a dressy car turns left on red. The field across the street to the right of the McDonald's is still empty.

The earliest "zoning-out" experiences I can recall are the baths I took from about 6-9 years old.

Everything about them bothered me, such as the soap and dirt that stuck to my torso above the water, the cold faucet I'd shove my toe into, the deep end being where my feet were instead of where most of my body was, the buzzing yellow light that echoed in the windowless, tiled room, the cold pools of water outside of the tub that my poor pruned feet would lick once I stepped out, and thinking about all the crevasses and cracks of my body the the gloomy water was invading-- bathtime grew worse every second, yet I was transfixed by the ballet of my washcloth.

What I mean is, I'd stay in my nasty, watery seat, weaving the washcloth around my body in the lukewarm water. It looked like a stingray, but that's all I thought of it. I'd just watch it glide about, forgetting that I was conducting its dance with my forefinger and thumb. My naked body pruned after a while, but that didn't change a darn thing. I just watched it float around and around until my body became sore, but even *that* didn't get me moving sometimes.

The bushes beside the grasses are jello in the Oklahoman wind. Their leaves are red at the tips, while everything else is green. Another line of cars go by. The grass is the same.

I look back on my out-of-bath activities with even more contempt.

In the same house, just around the corner from the dank bathroom, we owned this hideous, silver block-of-a-TV in the gameroom that I had to sit real close to to make out the pictures and things, but then if you focused in, you could see all the red, blue, and green little blinkers that made up the picture. I hated that that's all it was. You know what I mean, that these people who were supposed to be *alive* were just bunches of little colored dots on a piece of glass. I wanted to feel like they were here for *me*. I know that doesn't make a whole lot of sense, but it kind of broke the magic of the TV box, anyways.

One kid that was absorbed in his phone next to me is now on the other side of the window and saunters down the sidewalk, throbbing to music. The sun is lower now. The grass is a shadowed shade of gold.

So I got into this routine of binging cable while inhaling pringles and nilla wafers, just about everyday after school. I watched every episode of Spongebob (a brilliant show about what goes on in our oceans, truly), and I'd always feel bad for Squidward, but I'd laugh at his suffering anyways. That show was the only wholesome output I can recall from these TV date-nights. Seriously, cable is a brain sucker. Guard your children.

More cars go by behind the small-toothed comb of tall grass.

On the weekends, I'd watch TV all the way from the sunlight glares, to the yellow midday light, and into the darkness. Night was when I was the most absorbed because such a pretty thing

as a glowy, talking box in the corner of a dark and silent room held my attention, but not really *attention*, you see. We kids can't *focus* on any one thing for long.

Think about this with me: You were small and naive, and terribly bored. So you'd listen to the news anchor say something about politics that would fail to register anything in your young brain, so then you'd let his voice become something like a moist towel that settled at back of your mind, blotting out the boredom. Do you feel it, sinking into your brain? Soaking up all your thoughts? Just letting them bleed away...

I don't think anything came to the rescue for hours at a time.

A pair of highschool boys cross the street, their hoods up and bandanas tied to their belt loops. Nothing else has changed.

I couldn't tell you what all I watched because I only remember the things that would really scar a kid, like the murder-rape news stories (yeah, those would snap me out of it), and I wouldn't ever remember the cheesy sitcoms because those were the things that would lull me to that drooling trance you can probably imagine so well by now.

I *do* remember one thing about those "comedy" shows, though: that audience laughter, you know, that the crew would cue when the actor makes a not-so-witty remark. You *know*, the scattered, sullen almost, "ha ha has," followed by the late giggle. I think about what those people were actually laughing about when the studio recorded them, but I think I know now.

Kids soccer practice begins on the field across the street. The grass waves in front of their scrimmage like windshield wipers. The low sun shoots into my eyes.

They're laughing at this race that I don't even know why I'm in. You know this race against time that everyone talks about-- it's all a big joke! Every instant time laps me on this endless track, they start their ghostly bullying. *Ha ha ha!* How hysterical I must look to them!

It makes me want to cry. It really does.

The late sunlight guards the window from my eyes, so I pack up my belongings and walk outside.

I don't know what to make of this *thing* that I do, and I don't entirely know why it's all so upsetting. So I'm jotting this down in case you might know, or in case you want to tell me it doesn't matter. That it's okay. That maybe my time wasn't wasted this afternoon, giving the grandma grasses a good, long look.

2018 YOUNG PEOPLE'S
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“The Beautiful Ocean” by Joseph Williams
3rd Place, Informal Essay 16-18

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The Beautiful Ocean 1

Have you ever been to the beach? To the ocean? Have you ever seen, with your own two eyes, the big beautiful blue? The waves crashing against the rough, coarse, sand. Seagulls flying overhead. Surfers catching waves. Water crashing against the rocks and the shore. People laying on towels sunbathing. Yeah? Well, the ocean is garbage. Complete trash. You like the ocean? Is that what you just said? Then sit up, shut up, and listen up.

The ocean is malevolent, merciless, and malicious. It's ruthless. It doesn't care about you, it doesn't care about your cheating wife, it doesn't care about your husband with a secret alcohol addiction, it doesn't care about your paraplegic grandmother, and it most certainly doesn't care about your two-year-old parasitic baby who cries about everything and doesn't even help pay rent. You want equality? Go into the ocean. It treats everyone equally. It doesn't matter if you're rich or poor or black or white, the ocean will try to kill you just like everyone else.

You might be thinking two things to yourself right about now: "The ocean doesn't try to kill anyone, it's just accidental. The ocean is just a bunch of water, it's not even alive!" Or, "dude, chill, what do you have against the ocean? Who hurt you?" Firstly, if you're in the former category of thought, then you've obviously lived under a rock your whole life and literally know nothing about how anything works, much less the ocean, so screw off. Secondly, if you're in the second category, you don't know me, you absolute walnut.

Now, to answer the first question. The ocean is often thought of, by ignorant landwalkers, as a beautiful sight to behold, endless and vast, majestic in all its glory. Those people need to stop watching dumb Hallmark movies because that is utter bologna. Except it is endless and vast, that's true. Its endlessness and vastness know no bounds, no mercy, no love. Its depths hold monstrosities no man or woman could ever imagine or dream of. You think the ocean is just a giant collection of water? No, it's sentient. It has a will. It's malevolent. It's hateful. It despises humans and humanity. It has, for thousands of years, and will continue for

as long as it lives, to swallow ships into its depths, take lives of sailors, soldiers, explorers, beachgoers, stowaways. It will continue to slowly, slowly, erode away the land, making cliffs fall into its grasp, eaten up, consumed, until the water overtakes the land, and in a thousand years, maybe a hundred thousand, maybe longer, the only land left will be pockets of islands and mountains and the rest of civilization will be submerged underneath the vast, endless, expanse of the ocean because no matter what we humans do, no matter how hard we try, no matter how highly we think of ourselves, nature always wins in the end. And while the land throws its temper tantrums every once in awhile, collapsing a few buildings and creating sinkholes, the ocean can wipe entire coasts away in less than thirty minutes with one big wave, and if it's feeling patient, it will be content with slow erosion, because it knows, it knows, it will win, and there's nothing we can do to stop it.

You might be thinking now, "wow, I never thought of it like that. Maybe this raving lunatic has a point." If so, then stuff a sock in it, I may be raving but I'm not a lunatic. If you thought for yourself instead of drooling in front of CNN all day maybe, just maybe, you'd be able to come to your own conclusions that actually make sense, you useless paperclip. Now, if you would stop interrupting with your pointless and entirely irrelevant thoughts, I will enlighten you on the other, just as menacing, side of the ocean: underwater.

"Why is underwater just as menacing and less friendly than a tsunami killing thousands or millions of people and the ocean slowly eating away all the land?" You might be thinking. Well, I literally just told you to stop interrupting with dumb thoughts. Are you deaf or just really stupid? Have you ever heard of the Kraken? What about Leviathan? Those made up nailheads ain't got nothing on the real-life horrors of the sea. Take for example the Sarcastic Fringehead. Sounds silly, right? It looks like fish combined with an eel, but it can open up its mouth like the freakin' Demogorgon from Stranger Things, except instead of looking like a poop-stained flower,

this fish actually looks scary. What about the Fang Fish? Not only does it look creepy as your grandma's dentures, its teeth are long enough and sharp enough to bite right through your neck. Have you ever seen the Alien movies? If you haven't, get your life together and stop wasting oxygen. If you have, how would you like to know there's a fish that resembles a xenomorph? In all likelihood, an alien facehugger mouth-humped some fish a while back which gave birth to the Black Dragonfish. Back to the Kraken for a second. Ever heard of the Giant or Colossal Squid? Giant squids are about 18 meters long, almost as big as a blue whale. Colossal Squids are longer and bigger than blue whales. These things are thought to be the origins of the Kraken myths because they would occasionally attack the underside of boats. How about the Pelican Eel? It's an eel with the mouth the size of a pelican's that could swallow your firstborn in one gulp. And don't get me started on the Anglerfish. Remember that fish with the glowing light and giant teeth from Finding Nemo? The females literally absorb the males into them and the males just become a pair of gonads hanging off their sides. And the females can absorb as many males as she can fit on her body, and use them to impregnate herself whenever she feels like it. And these few fish are just the tip of the figurative iceberg. Watch out, Titanic.

Time to hit you with some science. The deeper you dive underwater, the more pressure there is, because of all that water pushing down above you. After ten feet, unless you have protection, your ears start popping. Your head starts hurting. The water above is literally crushing you. If you suddenly teleported three hundred feet below the ocean, you would be crushed like a soda can between Chuck Norris' buttcheeks. And guess what? The deepest part of the ocean is 36,000 feet. On record, the deepest a human has ever been is about 1,700 feet. But the scary thing is that there are hundreds, thousands, maybe hundreds of thousands of species that live as deep as the Mariana Trench, surviving and thriving in the ocean that would instantly crush a person without a drop of remorse or shed of the tiniest tear. Does that scare

you? It should. The ocean isn't a beautiful vacation spot for a cruise. It's evil, and it's home to the most dangerous, terrifying monsters on this planet.

Now, to answer the second question. If you're developing Alzheimer's and don't remember the second question, it was "dude, chill, what do you have against the ocean? Who hurt you?" Easy, the ocean hurt me. Almost killed me, my little brother, and my dad. All at once. But that was years ago when I was little. We were smashed against the rocks at the base of the cliff by the ocean's waves. Tossed around like a ragdoll possessed by Satan's third nipple. I had to get five stitches in my leg, my brother had a lump on his head like Elmer Fudd after getting whacked by Bugs, my dad had a gash down the length of his leg that needed stitches. I still have the scar on my leg. So yeah, the ocean hurt me.

Obviously, these new facts expose a clear bias that I have against the ocean, and if you have any brain cells, you would realize that because of this bias, this whole text may be inaccurately skewed and you should probably, if you haven't already, disregard everything I've written so far. But even despite what happened to me, what the ocean did to us, if I had the chance to go surfing again on those hateful, spiteful, crystal blue waves a hundred feet off the shore again, I would do it in a heartbeat. Because even though the ocean is a malevolent, evil beast home to terrifying creatures, there's no way in Satan's blue hell I would let that stop me or make me afraid of it. No way. The bias I have against the ocean has not skewered the facts or made me inaccurately present information or speculations. Rather, the bias has only influenced the topic of writing. So, all you numbskulls out there, sit down, shut up, and ponder.