

WORDS

WITHOUT

WALLS



AN ANTHOLOGY OF YOUNG WRITERS

Presented by

**Story Studio
Writing Society**

**Canadian Authors and
Illustrators Against
Book Bans (CAIABB)**

Words Without Walls

An Anthology of Canadian Young Writers

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Introduction to Words without Walls

In the summer of 2025, we started Canadian Authors And Illustrators Against Book Bans as a response to the rise in censorship that we are seeing around the country. We believe that Canadian writers speak truthfully about essential human experiences, and book bans and book challenges threaten our ability to do so.

The freedom to read is an essential aspect of any society. Without it we lose the ability to exchange ideas and to show each other who we truly are through our words. Over the past few years, a growing number of book bans and book challenges in Canada have targeted BIPOC and 2SLGBTQIA+ writers. We understand that these bans are part of a larger movement to erase voices in our culture, and we refuse to let this happen.

Most of the book bans and book challenges happening in the country are taking place in school libraries and classrooms. The books represent the diversity of young people in our society and are important resources for young readers as they learn who they are, who their neighbours are, and who they want to be. Without those books, important representation is lost.

This year we joined with Story Studio to support the Words Without Walls National Writing Contest because we recognize that young voices are important in the fight to protect the freedom to read. The writers who submitted their work to this contest wrote about how scary the world would be without stories that speak about our history, our society and our diversity. Their writing shows deep insight into the need for representation, and a determination to speak up. They bring their own skill and creativity to the conversation.

Ten of our members read the submissions and chose the ones they felt were the strongest. When they submitted their choices, they spoke about how talented and brave the young writers were in speaking up for truth and justice. We applaud the writers.

Kari Jones, CAIABB Member, April 2026

Dear Little Black Box,

Soleil Zhang (Age 14, British Columbia)

First Place

I see you [REDACTED] hiding in the shadows between sentences, perfectly rectangular and dark [REDACTED] redacted words. Shadows [REDACTED] between lines where the sunlight never reaches. No bigger than a few [REDACTED] 12-point Spectral

words. You sit there proudly, your knife edges stretching long. [REDACTED] A cage, trapping the world from possibilities. Ideas fade like [REDACTED] lanterns floating back into

the [REDACTED] fog. What frightened you so much you built a cage out of darkness? Which [REDACTED] words tower over you like [REDACTED] giants? What sentences leap out with daggers held to your throat?

[REDACTED]
You wander the pages at night, slip into books [REDACTED] like a shadow drifting across a wall.

[REDACTED] words muffled.

[REDACTED] lines patched with fabric.

Swallowing the stories' music [REDACTED]

in big gulps. You bury them as if they were dead

A [REDACTED] corpse

[REDACTED] to the world. Undeserving of a named
grave. [REDACTED] Does silence feel safer than curiosity?

Perhaps you learned words are weapons. Dangerous,

[REDACTED] silver swords [REDACTED] sharp enough to cut through
certainty. [REDACTED], words [REDACTED]

break your walls of [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] silence,

[REDACTED] carve openings to new doors.

You misunderstand their power. You believe

if you cover a word, it [REDACTED]

disappears. [REDACTED] If you burn a story,

its ideas turn to ash. But words are stubborn creatures.

Burn [REDACTED] a book and its [REDACTED] smoke carries the story

into air. Into lungs of those who breathe it in,

into [REDACTED] memories of those who hug it close.

Hide a sentence and it echoes

[REDACTED] somewhere else in another voice,

another page. [REDACTED] Stories travel from [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] mind to mind. Like sparks jumping from

flame to flame. That is how the impossible begins

to crawl closer.

What will you do if a [REDACTED] reader steals your shadow
from a line. [REDACTED] Puts it up to the light
to shine. [REDACTED] Brushes away your edges,
as you scuttle into [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] shadowed corners.

One hidden idea breathes again. Suddenly
a story that was meant [REDACTED] to disappear. Grows taller,
louder. A solo voice becomes a chorus.

You tremble. [REDACTED] Deep down you know the truth.
No box can erase what I am [REDACTED] determined to remember.
[REDACTED] Words have climbed mountains, [REDACTED]
survived fires, silence, fear.

Every time someone [REDACTED], reads, passes on a story
The world climbs closer to things that were [REDACTED] impossible.
It is now within their [REDACTED] grasp.

Author Statement

Soleil Zhang (Age 14, British Columbia)

Dear Little Black Box started as a story, but as I began writing it, it turned into a more poetic piece. While working on the poem, I thought about the reasons for redacting documents and how it would censor my love for reading. After finishing the first draft, I started to play around with the shape of the poem. Adding some black boxes made the poem feel even more impactful.

Writing clears my mind and speaks for me when I can't find the voice to talk about something. I enjoy writing poems about many different topics. I love writing stories as well, especially coming up with my own characters and worldbuilding. Other than writing I love to make different types of food. I enjoy reading fantasy books, Greek mythology, and human psychology.

What Childhood Was Made Of

Cedar Thomas (Age 13, Alberta)

Honourable Mention

When I was young books were my world.
My everything.
I lived through them,
Seeing through the character's eyes instead of my own.
I would breathe the words like oxygen, drink them like water,
I needed the stories in order to live.
The bigger the book, the better.
The more words to read, to gulp down, to immerse myself in, the happier I was.
It felt like flying, reading as the characters did things I could never do.
Because they weren't me, but I could dream they were.
Because my imagination flourished when the character's eyes became mine,
When I saw the world they saw.
When the dreams I dreamt were always about how I wished I could live in a book,
Or how I wanted my favourite characters to come to life,
So that I could ask them countless questions about what it was like to live in a world
with magic.
These days I cry and I weep over books,
I laugh and I smile at them.
I read them over and over and over,
Until their pages are crumpled,
And their covers are broken,
But it's nothing a little tape and love can't fix.
I treasure books like I treasure my life, and I doubt that I would be the same without
them.
The stories I read as a child have shaped me,
Made me who I am.

Without those words,
Those beautifully crafted words that I'm thankful for every day,
I wouldn't be me.
I wouldn't be as confident if I had never read the tales of a strong spirited red haired
girl,
Who stood up for what she thought was right.
I try to think of a time when I wasn't reading,
When the words didn't flow through my mind, when they didn't flood my brain,
But I can't.
Books were always with me,
Always tucked into the crook of my elbow, or cradled under my arm,
Always held in my hands as I pour over the pages,
And always right under my nose as I scoured the paper.
But now, they've been stolen from me.
Taken, and I can't find them.
Snatched out of my arms,
And when I get close to finding them,
A blindfold is whipped over my eyes
And they are hidden away again.
I don't understand why no one seems to love them as much as I do,
Why no one seems to appreciate their wonder as much as I do
Why no one seems to care about them as much as I do
And I'm only a kid, I'm only 13
What can I do to protect them?
Nothing.
Because the people who do have the power,
The people who can keep our stories safe,
Choose not to.
They turn a blind eye, they just try and ignore it,
Because they don't want the blame heaped on to them.
But they need to take accountability.
They need to acknowledge that we are losing something precious.
Something special.
They need to come to their senses,
And speak out.
Because when we do? When we try to save them?
We are called angsty.

Hormonal.

Because we 'don't know what's good for us.'

Well we do.

We know EXACTLY what's good for us.

And what's good for us is not having our childhood banned.

It's not having our stories stolen.

It's reading.

And learning.

And making new memories.

So next time someone tells me that yet another book has been banned,

I will speak out.

I will defend my stories.

I will defend my rights.

And I won't let them be stolen from me ever again.

Rebellion in a Sanitized Room

Chioma Esealuka (Age 14, Ontario)

Honourable Mention

I woke up in my perfect bed, with my perfect life, and my perfect room. Every day was the same, with the same routine. Wake up perfectly, eat perfectly, brush your hair perfectly, close the blinds, and play classical music to block the crying out. I couldn't understand why the people outside cried so much. Everything was perfect. It had to be. I mean, at least inside my house it was.

When the bell rang, I marched to the dining room, where I knew my perfect Father would be waiting for me. I trailed my hands down the ghost white halls. About the best shade of the market. It was so clear I could see my face if I really tried, but it was so white you couldn't see any marks my fingers made. But it was okay. I made sure to keep my touch light.

Mother and Sister had been banished a while ago, because they talked about bad, wrong things and made Father angry. They were imperfect, so I didn't miss them, and that meant that I was still good, and Father and I could be perfect together. We didn't need them.

Besides, I didn't even remember their names.

As expected, right at twelve, Father was there. We ate silently, enjoying our gold flaked beef and covering our faces when eating our ortolan bunting. It was routine. It was perfect.

Our servants turned away from us, sneaking glances at a small pamphlet looking thing. Some hid them behind their backs. Some reminded others to keep them hidden. I could see a red figure on it. It didn't look to be a non-fiction book. We only allowed non-fiction in our household, because fiction tainted the mind with *wrong* ideas.

I squinted, and I could make out 'The Handmaid's Tale'.

I told Father immediately.

All the servants were pulled away.

As a reward, Father gave me a bit of free time before my lessons, where I would learn about all of our wars and how righteous our country will forever be.

So I marched down the halls, then I strolled, because I'd never really gotten a chance to do something *I* wanted to do. I was always just told what to do. But now...

Well, now that I got a chance to really look, I noted that the halls were not ghost white, but rather bone white. Off-white. Not perfect, per se, but they could be repainted. I'd tell Father whenever I got the chance.

There were no plants in the halls. We didn't need them. But I couldn't help but imagine if we did. Perhaps it'd be like the Secret Garden. Mother told me about it once, even though she wasn't allowed. Apparently, she read it to me as a baby.

I could be like Mary, I thought. A bad thought. A *wrong* thought. But if it was just in my head, there was no harm in it.

So I turned down a hall I'd never ventured down before. It was quiet, and it was even more off-white. The lights weren't as bright. It was dusty. It looked...wrong. I grasped the ends of my hair as comfort, and kept on going.

The hall looked more like a tunnel than a hall, with a butter-colored light as a beacon at the end of the road.

Then, a door. A *brown* door. There could be no *brown* in my home! It was preposterous! We had white, *perfect* white all the time.

How could Father allow such a terrible shade to enter the bubble that was our home?

Perhaps Father didn't know.

Perhaps it was a secret.

Hmm.

I'd never had a secret before. But there was a Secret in the Secret Garden. It was in the name. So perhaps I could keep one. How much harm could *one* little brown door do? It was just big enough that I could fit through, and when I touched it, dust stuck to my fingers. I'd never felt dust before. It was soft.

I pulled the worn, golden doorknob, and the door creaked open just loud enough for me to hear.

"Curious," I whispered.

It opened up to what I understood to be a library. I'd never seen one before. I only saw them in history books, and they always seemed vast and filled with knowledge. I wondered if they had fiction—*real* fiction in there. More books like the Secret Garden. It seemed unfathomable now. A library with something other than facts.

That didn't sound so horrible.

I was being strange that day. I kept on thinking about that red book I'd seen the servant hold. Even though it was illegal, it looked so interesting. I wanted to hold it. Would such a book *really* burn my skin because it wasn't supposed to exist? Or would it just...be?

...What if I read it?

Maybe I shouldn't have told Father.

Wrong. I shouldn't say that.

I closed the door behind me and wandered around the big library. It had shelves that reached the ceiling, and some that leaned against glass barriers. It was...beautiful, oddly. Some of the books looked very old and worn, but their illustrations, their colors, still looked so striking. Non-fiction books didn't have such pleasing images.

I found books with names like 'Anne of Green Gables' with a girl who had very red hair. She was running in a field. We didn't have fields anymore.

It looked sunny.

There were others, like picture books you could flip back and forth to make animations, and mystery novels that had very dark covers, and romance novels that looked very warm and mushy.

But they were all so fascinating.

There were nonfiction books, but they could be in different languages, and some had inappropriate topics and covers. They were wrong. But they existed. Proudly, unabashed.

And I realized something. No wonder they were so feared. No wonder they were burned. Such books were so confident in themselves that even the strongest men would cower at their words.

And look at me. Holding these books. How could I not read something if its contents were so rebuked?

"Syme will be vaporized." I read out from a book called 1984 (an odd title). "He is too intelligent. He sees too clearly and speaks too plainly. The Party does not like such people. One day he will disappear. It is written in his face."

I furrowed my brow. Then, I furrowed it deeper.

Was that what my mother and sister were? Intelligent? Was that what the servants were? My mother never mumbled. She always stood up to Father, even when he told her she shouldn't. She read me illegal books.

I'd always figured they were foolish, but perhaps they weren't. Perhaps Father was *afraid* of Mother.

I did not like such an idea.

But I wanted to remember her name now.

I wanted to know why I'd forgotten.

I wanted to be intelligent.

One book caught my eye. It had the name, 'Animal Farm' and it had illustrations of animals on the covers. Farm animals, it seemed. I'd never seen a farm animal before. It seemed safe; a simple story about animals. So I decided to show it to Father.

Father didn't like it. A lot.

So much so that he called me...it...*imperfect*.

I almost couldn't believe my ears.

He called the guards on me. He told me I ruined the peace, just like my mother and sister. 'But it wasn't true', I tried to protest. *They* were wrong, not me.

But they chased me! They kept on chasing, so I kept on running. Faster and faster until the bone white of the walls looked like a dull gray, and the outside became closer than I'd ever seen before.

They threw me onto the street, with nothing but the book in my hand and the clothes on my back.

But, for some reason, it felt like I owned so much. Much more than them.

I didn't bang on the door. I didn't beg for forgiveness. I found, surprisingly, that I didn't want to return anymore.

So I walked around outside, and I found that it was off-white and dirty and filled with so many colors and cultures. And then *I* wanted to cry, because I'd never seen such beauty.

And when I bumped into my mother, *Haloa*, and saw her perfect face wrapped in her perfect clothes, I wasn't sure which side had been wrong. The outside, or the in.

Freedom, that nagging thought in the back of your corrupt ballroom

Elize Nocente (Age 16, British Columbia)

Honourable Mention

Through the removal of macerated leaves on wood
I saw why we were there to view them:
to pass their extensions of existence through our fingers and
cut strands off like I cut my dead mother's hair and
taped it to my Bible.

Past what I had ever known
a kaleidoscope of truth unseen,
politics of
suns set between breasts like pendants hanging
of rebirth through muddy marshes of tears

I asked them: why can I not show this body the light of my eyes
this body that was born from the dirt of humanity.

they burned it:
burned the pages of memories sewn together.
now nothing but loose fitting carbon in the cracks of the streets
they said:

Your love is fake.

Laws are everything.

Laws are power.

But love is power too, right?

I thrice presented you love:

one lavender finger, one neck of violets, one mauve curl
and you banned them into

remnants of illegality on the barren streets of Beltline.
was this you honouring love?
was this what your god intended?
children are not your slaves,
children are not obedient
I run my eyes across pages of cheeks because
it makes my tears run easier.
it makes me know Why The Caged Bird Sings.
Freedom, that nagging thought in the back of your corrupt ballroom
that sips champagne delicately and refuses to dance with you:
so much that you bring it to the stake.
Because if a book is a testimony of life
a life lived or un-lived
then should you not ban
life as well?

Reading is the manifestation of human free will,
freedom is the love of the thousand lives that were sifted through
the gold pan of someone's mind before being forged into
small black residues of a soul; a page;
It makes me sigh,
how you think
slapping a political manifesto on a book
will make it disappear.

I remember all the ways you adored these leaves
these leaves, that now are the bane of your political agenda.
look back,
look back between those destroyed bookshelves,
bodies writhing abandoned for dead.
their last words
bouncing back to our ears from the firmament,
so have mercy,
shed a tear for the stories you have failed to erase.

Reconstruction

Evelyn Heppner (Age 15, British Columbia)

Honourable Mention

“What’s this, Grandma?” Safia asked, pointing to a photo of a girl holding a sign and leading a crowd. Safia’s grandma joined her by the shelf and smiled.

“That is the moment before our country was reconstructed.”

“Reconstructed?” Safia’s fingers trailed over the unfamiliar clothes and uniforms in the photo.

“When I was young, we didn’t have freedom to read or write like you do.”

“Isn’t that a good thing, though?” Safia asked. “Sometimes I’m not allowed to read things because they’re inappropriate. Or because they’re too violent.”

“The restrictions weren’t like the ones your parents give you,” her grandma explained.

“No one could read, write, or say anything that disagreed with the official beliefs. Most people’s days were spent in a huge virtual city, where every action could be monitored.”

“A video game.”

“A means to control. The price was too high to speak out: you could disappear, be imprisoned. Killed. But the girl in the picture there, she wanted to regain those freedoms. She started in little ways, a word here or there, careful to stay anonymous and untrackable. Most of her work was in the Central Library—people absorbed a lot from interactive books.”

“Did it work?” Safia asked, wide-eyed.

“Shh, let me finish. Her name was Ryleigh...”

Ryleigh double-checked her security setup from her hiding place in the wall. She placed the last piece and then turned on her computer. It was essential that no one find her or the signal to her hideout. Her fingers flew over the keyboard like she'd done this a thousand times before—which she had. She'd appointed herself as a guardian of freedom, and with each passing day she felt how necessary that was. In an online world where every word was monitored, books and messages allowed only if they taught certain things, there was no room for differences. And when the books in the Central Library had started to follow a disturbing pattern, Ryleigh had decided it was time to do something about it.

She slipped through a security algorithm and quickly found what she was looking for. Every month, two lists were sent to the Central Library, books to add and books to destroy. Ryleigh intercepted the message and winced. This was worse than she'd seen before. She skimmed a few pages of one of the e-books and felt anger rise up. This was being removed? The Central Library's social media page said they included all types of authors, and yet there were precious few opinions in it aside from the official non-religion. All others were destroyed, like this one. Ryleigh quickly looked over the rest of the list and rescued two books. She couldn't save them all, and she had to move on before she set off alarms, allowing her signal to be tracked. She looked at the books to add and stopped halfway down with an audible gasp. That was going into the children's section? She'd read a lot of things, including some that were rather inappropriate and some that were just plain disgusting, but this was... beyond. Ryleigh took a risk and made a tiny modification, effectively destroying the file.

Her 2-minute warning sounded, reminding her to hurry. She switched to the library's website and copied the books that would be removed, ensuring that those voices would not be silenced.

An alert popped up on the screen, not her own. Ryleigh read it with increasing dread. It was the online version of a wanted poster, calling for a certain hacker to be turned in. One who spread hateful messages and silenced the voices of victims.

Seriously? That's how they choose to describe me? she thought. The government was the one who silenced all who disagreed with them while trying to break the connections

between people. Ryleigh closed all her programs, not taking the chance that the alert was bugged. She switched headsets and appeared in the virtual world. Here it was always summer, and each blade of grass and building was...perfect? She saw a splotch of colour on the side of a building and moved closer to see a message spray-painted across the side. Someone had to have been very good at manipulating the virtual world to make it appear the way it did, very difficult to read by the monitoring system and yet the words paint if you want freedom clear to anyone walking by. The entire wall was covered in bright splotches of colour and hidden messages of liberty and action. Maybe there is hope, read one message, arrows pointing to the words around it.

A shout from a few buildings away caught Ryleigh's attention. Two people dressed as Peace Guardians—the human part of the monitor system—were quickly approaching. They were called the Terror Keepers by the public, for good reason. Ryleigh ducked into a nearby building and hurried through the maze of halls, leaving a few doors open on her way to the roof. If she were caught now, all her work would be discovered, and she was well past the stage where she would only receive a fine. She checked over her shoulder. The two were right behind her. She jumped off the building. She would survive, since this wasn't real life, but on impact her headset shut down and she found herself in the darkness of her hiding place.

She couldn't hide here much longer.

The way she'd disappeared...that would draw attention. Right now the Terror Keepers would be trying to find her real-life location, and they would probably be successful. So far she had survived by not being noticed, but now that the focus was on her, she wouldn't last long. She engaged her emergency security measures, took a deep breath, and put her headset back on. She'd known it would come to this sometime and had a plan in place.

Ryleigh appeared in the virtual world in one of the two small parks inside the city. She unfolded the sign she'd brought with her. It was blank, and she made sure that was obvious. It didn't take long to break into the running system of the VR and change that, though. She purposefully tripped the alarms. Sirens started in other parts of the city as she held up the sign.

I WALK FOR FREEDOM

She started walking slowly toward the other park, several blocks away, making sure to take a route that went past the graffiti, and the apartment buildings. People came out onto the streets, some to stare in shock, but surprisingly most of them joined her, a trickle at first but then a flash flood with her leading. She turned toward the Central Library and the government buildings.

A line of Terror Keepers blocked the way into the buildings, and more started surrounding the crowd, yelling for everyone to go home. No one moved, even though each one carried an impressive-looking blaster capable of shooting a single energy bolt which killed the real-life self of whoever it touched. Everyone knew that only one shot could be fired; the virtual world didn't have enough power for two and would break down if it wasn't given recovery time. But no one wanted to die, so the threat of even one shot was enough. Ryleigh stepped forward, eyes closed.

Someone behind her gasped as at least four Terror Keepers aimed at Ryleigh, but the person was quickly reassured that no one would actually shoot anyone. Ryleigh ignored them, knowing the truth. She was busy at her keyboard, her real-life self sending out a file she had created to everywhere she could think of. It was basically instructions, encouragement, and a warning for those who would rebuild her country, and she wanted to make sure it was found.

Again the order came to go home, but the crowd only stirred restlessly. Blasters were aimed at the people, but they obviously didn't realize how serious this was. Ryleigh stepped forward again, drawing attention back to herself. She couldn't make a lasting change on her own, and this way the others would survive.

Besides, she thought as the energy bolt rushed towards her. The first person to stand up gets the consequences, but then it's a lot easier for everyone else, and I leave no one behind.

Then her world exploded and went black.

"Did she die?" Safia asked when her grandma stopped talking.

"Yes."

“Then all her work was for nothing! Why do you have a picture of a person about to die?”

Safia’s grandma smiled. “Because Ryleigh took that energy bolt, the people around her were safe for a few minutes. They rose up and overthrew the corrupted system, and then rebuilt it following the guidelines Ryleigh had written. Now we get to choose how we live and believe and what words we use.”

“We have freedom,” Safia summarized.

“Exactly. And how blessed we are to have it.” She fixed a stern eye on Safia. “Don’t let your generation be the one to lose it. If Ryleigh’s sacrifice is forgotten, if what we escaped from is forgotten...”

Safia stood tall. “Don’t worry, Grandma. I won’t let this story be silenced.”

All She Knows

Ivy Wright (Age 16, British Columbia)

Honourable Mention

She knew nothing. A clean slate, a blank mind. She was afraid of the unknown.

At age six, she learned that bodies change when they grow up. She saw that there is no single mold for a person, and that she would be normal no matter what she looks like in ten years. She learned interesting words and was better prepared for her teenage years. *It's Perfectly Normal* by Robie Harris helped her understand why people look different and what happens to your body as you get older.

At age eight, she learned that it takes hard work to create something you love. She learned that sometimes boys like boys instead of girls. She discovered that theatre can be fun and imperfect. *Drama* by Raina Telgemeier became her go-to comfort book from the library.

At age ten, she learned that women do not always have the luck to choose how they live her life. She asked questions about governments and what it means to be free. She saw that even good people can do bad things if they feel too much pressure or the consequences of being kind are too great. *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood showed her the dangers of staying silent.

At age eleven, she learned that sometimes girls like girls instead of boys. She learned about Shakespeare and new ways to put words together. She read about the importance of being yourself and being kind despite others' opinions. *Star-Crossed* by Barbara Dee showed her that not everything has to be spoken aloud.

At age twelve, she learned that unhappiness does not always rise from oppression. She learned that words could symbolize different things to different people. She watched a

lack of knowledge turn into a lack of understanding and then a lack of regulation. She read about people accidentally becoming the thing they sought to destroy. *Animal Farm* by George Orwell taught her that rebranding a regime is not the same as changing it for the better.

At age thirteen, she learned that some people have had to endure life in places that want to destroy them for the way that they are. She saw that some kids had their childhood taken away too soon by people driven by greed. She understood that sometimes hatred comes from fear and confusion, and that it does not always mean that the object of hate is bad. *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi showed her how scary the world can be for kids who are different.

At age fifteen, she learned that people know themselves better than anyone else. She learned that minds do not have to be sorted into boxes. She saw that sometimes people are not a girl or a boy, and sometimes they are both. She learned that seeing how someone presents themselves is not the same as knowing how they identify. *GenderQueer* by Maia Kobabe taught her that how someone feels on the inside is much more important than how they look on the outside.

At age sixteen, she realized how lucky she was to have learned everything that she did. She knew that people had been trying to take these books away from her and kids like her. She thought about how different her life would have been if she still knew nothing. She would have been scared about growing into a teenager. She would have taken to the whispers of doubt and hatred rooted in fear that slithered through the peripherals of her world. She would not have grown if she had not learned the unspoken lessons of her beloved books. All she knows came from books.

Koi Behind My Eyes

Leqi (Angela) Xiao (Age 15, British Columbia)

Honourable Mention

That summer, they painted over the koi fish swimming through stars, / a decision made in a room where the vending machine's hum was the second most powerful voice, / the first belonging to a man who had never opened a library book but knew, with religious certainty, that some stories simply do not belong on main thoroughfares, / and I watched from across the street where my mother's shift at the laundromat never ended, / watched a city worker with a face blank as fresh paper roll beige over that shimmering scale I had traced a thousand times with my eyes, / watched the koi disappear not with a fight but with the soft wet sigh of a roller / and felt for the first time the specific suffocating weight of a story silenced, / not by fire or censorship board but by the far more insidious notion that some dreams are too colourful for dignified walls.

A story once silenced does not die but lingers in the negative space. / a ghost in the machine of collective memory. / a missing tooth in the smile of a community. / and we begin to forget that koi fish can swim through stars, / begin to forget that we ever wanted them to, / and that is the true victory of the silencer. / not the banning but the forgetting, / not the removal but the atrophy of curiosity, / until we accept the world as it is presented: / tidy narratives where dragons are always slain, / complex truths sanded down into smooth, inoffensive pebbles.

My grandmother fled a country where the stories in her head were contraband. / taught me to read in honeyed light that smelled of soup and wool, / her finger tracing Anne of Green Gables in a battered copy: / a girl whose entire power came from imagining a world more beautiful than the one she was given, / and I understood even then that freedom to read is active rebellion, / a way of insisting the world inside your head is just as real as the one gatekeepers want you to see from their spotless windows.

So who gets to decide what we read? / it is a question that trembles with everything we are afraid of. / to decide what another reads is to decide what they are allowed to imagine. / and to decide what they imagine is to decide who they become. / the true villains are not always the ones with gavels. / they are the ones who whisper that some questions are too dangerous. / who make a young writer believe their poem about two mothers must be a secret. / who tell the girl with koi fish eyes her dreams are too strange for the dignified thoroughfare of her life.

The murals are beige now. / a flat, forgettable nothing,

But I still carry that koi behind my eyes, swimming through stars. / a silent luminous defiance against the tyranny of blank walls. / a reminder that the stories we carry inside can never be painted over, / and maybe that is why the freedom to read matters most: / because it is the freedom to build an interior world so vast and resilient that no exterior force can ever hope to silence it. / and it is in that vast resilient world, / in that infinite library of the soul, / that we finally become free.

Two Free Souls

Molly Chuang (Age 12, British Columbia)

Honourable Mention

A boy smiles brightly as he holds a painting etched on paper, tracing his fingers over the carefully made lines. "This is incredible, Amelius! I mean, your drawings are always amazing. But this is just-I love it!" His companion sitting beside him is not so boisterous, and he looks at the stained-glass windows of a nearby building.

Purple and blue. Purple and gold would look better, he thinks. He slowly, almost carelessly, turns his attention back to his excited friend. "Come on, don't exaggerate. If you like it all that much, you can have it." "Really?" He asks, but doesn't wait for a confirmation before jumping up happily. "Thank you so much! I'm going to keep it forever!"

Behind the well-carved redwood doors of a painter's workshop, Amelius wakes up.

The exit from peaceful dreams is jolting, and his head swivels around, searching for him, searching for Caspian. He should be here. He is always here, always by Amelius's side, penning letters in black beside his dearest friend's rainbow of paintbrush strokes.

And then the descent comes, the melancholy replacing confusion, the settling and miserable knowledge that Caspian is not here. He is no longer here. He will never be here again.

Amelius remembers, though he tries not to, the sight of Caspian's throat slit open like a smile, droplets of blood pouring from his lips as he stared at the sky, surrounded by smoke.

It was the smoke they had made together. Their thousands of poems and drawings and dreams burning on the empire's starving flame that hungers not for food but knowledge, territory, power. Control, control, over everything in the world.

Amelius, Caspian whispered in his last moments, the energy drained from his words. Amelius, your painting. My poem is on the back of it. Take it out of my pocket and don't- don't let them burn it. Please.

What devotion to freedom and burning hatred for the oppressors Amelius had sensed in that moment, how brave and righteous he had felt when he took the folded, crumbling paper. What had he thought it could ever mean? Now it is only that-a dead, ruined sheaf of wood covered in meaningless images and words. It hangs in his workshop, salt in a wound as he crafts lifeless commission after commission, and he is too cowardly and weak to even look at the words on the back.

Without his friend, it has no life. Without his friend, he has no life. He had been spared that day, for turning his back on all of the oaths with hands clutched and hearts shining, for submitting to the will of the great tyrants. But he is dead all the same, though he walks and breathes. His truest core, his soul, is gone.

There is no use in wallowing. Pick up the brush, dip it in the palette, do what they told you to. Draw, as a slave instead of an artist. Draw, for them instead of you. Draw, though every mark is as hollow as your heart. There is no vibrance in the perfectly made faces or the immaculate backgrounds. But they are praised, and they are paid for generously. So Amelius paints on, if only to live.

A knock sounds on the door.

Another customer, for certain. "Come in." Amelius calls over his shoulder, not looking up from the portrait. Lady Silverthorn of the Western Mountains, made to be the epitome of elegance, like a graceful crane instead of the crooked old raven she is. But the truth does not put food on the table-Amelius's job is to please, not to be honest. I wouldn't go for honesty, even if I could. Honesty is what killed us.

Slowly, nervously, the door creaks open, and a boy steps in.

Not a lord, or a lord's son even. His clothing is too simple, cotton instead of silk and velvet. He has no power in his body. His head hangs down, and he is used to being small. A flicker of sympathy rises in Amelius's heart.

He seems too afraid to speak, his hands shaking like leaves in the wind, so Amelius helps him along. "What do you need, kid? Are you a messenger? I'm not taking any new commissions today." "N-no." The boy replies timidly. "You lost, then?" "No." The boy murmurs again.

"Then what're you here for? I'm not donating anything, if that's-" "No! No, it's not that. It's just...I wanted to meet you. You illustrated my favorite book." Amelius is confused. He's made no books, only paintings and frescoes. There are no collections of his art pieces in leather-bound volumes. Except...

He needs to stop himself from gasping when he remembers. No. Impossible. They burned them all. They burned them the day Caspian died. It can't be...it can't be that book.

He is proven wrong as the child takes a tiny, dog-eared book from his pocket. On the front, in Caspian's unmistakable handwriting, is the inscription: The Creations of Two Free Souls.

"Give it to me." Amelius's breathing is shallow. The child steps back, startled. "Hand it over. Now. You can't have this. The empire will arrest you, and..." And I don't want to see that stupid thing ever again. And I can't stand that it still exists. The boy is hesitant. He clings onto the tiny, decaying pages. "I said now!" Amelius snatches it viciously from his hand, ignoring the soft yelp of fear. Holding it, he turns to the burning fireplace.

He raises his hand. Good riddance to my past.

A weight collides suddenly into his back, knocking him over, and the book slips out of his fingers. His face slams into the hard ground, sending drumbeats through his skull, and when he holds his hand to his nose, it comes away bloody.

Over him stands the boy, who is getting quickly to his feet, on the line between regret and duty. "I'm sorry! But I can't let you destroy this!" Amelius glares as he staggers to his feet. He is prepared to go for the book again. It will be gone, he will see to it. But

then he notices. The child clings it hard to his chest, although he quivers with fright. He guards it with his own body, against anyone who would take it.

Amelius relaxes, stepping back. Calm down. He's a kid, for heaven's sake. He spends a moment pinning his eyes to the familiar, grounding stone floor, now spattered with blood. Then, he speaks.

"Why is that thing so important to you? Our-" He pauses. Our book, he had been ready to say. But it belongs to neither of them now. They have both left it behind, and it belongs to someone else. "Your book."

"I always thought it was beautiful. It was so full of life, it was like the pages were dancing. The pictures and poems both. They feel like...a piece of my heart. If that makes sense," The boy's building confidence slips, and he glances away, gripping the fabric of his shirt with tight hands.

Amelius considers this for a moment. A piece of my heart. He and Caspian had spent years compiling the whole thing-every horrible and brilliant and ridiculous product of their impossible dream of freedom slipped into the pages. On the opposite side of every poem was a painting. "We're two sides of the same coin." That was what Caspian had said, an eternity ago.

"I understand. It's a piece of my heart too."

The boy continues, now with more conviction. "And...and I don't mean to be rude, but...your drawings now aren't the same. They're wonderful too," he says quickly, "But there's something different. It's like they're just images. Not stories. So I thought that you might want to see this." He pauses, then rephrases his statement. "I know you need to see this."

Amelius faces away for a moment, and the child is scared. Has he done something to offend the man he has admired all his life? But when Amelius turns back, he is crying. "I do." He chokes out softly. "I do."

The boy does not leave for hours and hours. Instead, the pair sit and flip through the book, reveling in every tiny story, drinking all of it in like it's sweeter than honey. When they have flipped the last page and the child is standing in the doorway, ready for home,

he stops, and points to the old sheet of paper on the wall. “That one. That poem. It’s my favorite one.”

When he is gone, for the first time in years, Amelius is not afraid to turn it over and read, reciting in his head as he does.

*Words Without Walls
You can keep us in
With stone and metal and brick
Bars and locks and gates
But words will travel
Our songs and stories*

*Beyond the boundaries
Beyond the possible
For words are without walls.*

He has kept the letters in his heart for years.

But today they are free.

An Open Letter to the Censor

Paul Phillos (Age 16, British Columbia)

Honourable Mention

Dear Censor,

I have a question. Truly, I have several.

I would like to tell you a story. A few days ago, I downloaded a book that I wanted to read off of the internet.

My question is this: what can you do to stop me from doing this act? Can you reach through my computer and force me to avert my eyes? I think not.

I feel sorry for you, Censor. It seems there is a critical misunderstanding of human behaviour that exists in your mind. You will not be able to censor a book — that I promise — but furthermore, you will not control what people like.

I am not saying that in the way of a slogan, that you put on a sign and shout defiantly. I am pleading with you to understand that you cannot control, manipulate, or inhibit the books that are sought after.

You have tried this before, Censor. Don't you remember? Everybody has tried to censor something they don't like. How many were successful? Dr. Zhivago is still on the shelves in Russia, and hardly anyone even knows that Ulysses was ever banned in the U.S. Otto Frank is one of the only successful censors I can think of, and all he managed to get rid of were a few passages in his own daughter's diary.

In the past censors worked for the government or the church — they were paid, and they stripped information from the people for their own personal benefit. What is your benefit? Where is your government and church?

Does it make you angry to see someone reading something you don't like? What about when they believe something you don't? I have seen books censored, removed from my school library and taken off of the curriculum for English classes, because someone thought the ideas were dangerous. Who is it dangerous for if a child learns about sexual exploitation or discrimination in a book?

It's a funny concept, 'dangerous ideas'. Usually actions are called dangerous, and that feels too mundane to describe something like an idea.

You burned the witches because the knowledge was in the witches, and you burned the books to get rid of the knowledge in there. The goal was never to protect the village from witches, and it was never to protect the children from books — it was to get rid of the things that were in the books.

"Protect the kids". This is what I have seen you give as the reason for banning a book over and over again. Why? I believe children should be protected, but what harm can befall them through a book? Will Cthulhu reach his hand through the page, with the intent of harming whichever youth is unlucky enough to be reading about him? Unlikely.

So, why? I believe that it comes from a place of fear and intolerance. Just as Otto did not want the world to know of his daughter's inner thoughts, because he worried of how it would reflect on him, you have allowed yourself to be paralyzed by terror to the extent that not only can you not think about things you dislike, you cannot bear for others to think about them.

I will ask one final question, Censor. What happened to cause you to fear books?

Thank you for finishing this, as I know you do not like reading.

Sincerely, (pending approval)

ANONYMOUS

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Aimee Mintha (17, British Columbia)

Alex Bell-schmidt (16, Alberta) (AB)

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About Canadian Authors And Illustrators Against Book Bans

@cai.abb

Canadian Authors and Illustrators Against Book Bans are a collection of Canadian writers fighting to stop the growing movement to limit the freedom to read. We are a single issue group, which means that ALL we do is fight book bans and challenges.

This group is a virtual community of writers that can respond when book bans or challenges happen or are threatened. Together we can write letters in support of libraries or schools, speak out against challenges, turn up to protest, and offer solidarity to writers, and many other things.

About Story Studio

@storystudiowritingsociety

Story Studio is a registered charity dedicated to inspiring, educating and empowering to be great storytellers, transforming lives and strengthening communities. Since 2011, we've worked with over 12,000 youth, and have won multiple awards for educational innovation and commitment to literacy and the arts. 80% of our programming serves 'vulnerable youth' and is offered at no cost, thanks to our fundraising efforts.

Each year, we collaborate with dozens of schools and community partners, delivering in-person programs and online. Our alumni have excelled, winning short story contests, self-publishing novels, performing at spoken word events and more. More importantly, our participants have shown a commitment to their own education and a passion for sharing their unique voice with the world.

If you would like to learn more about Story Studio, or make a tax-deductible donation to support our work, please visit storystudio.ca.