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ArtsConnection

PRESENTS

Teen Writers Connect

A LITERARY MAGAZINE BY TEENS, FOR TEENS!

Authority in Our Present and Future Worlds

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A LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

Recent social and political movements have prompted discussion on a massive scale. The Black Lives Matter movement has called for changes to a country which permits institutional racism. Donald Trump's supporters have argued for a country of ostracism, while his opponents shiver at the prospect of a dismal nation where equality is tossed away under the facade of greatness.

Such chaos coupled with classroom conversations led us to imagine what changes we'd make to society. What world would be our utopia? What would have to go wrong in order for the United States to become a dystopia? Do some people already view our nation as a lost cause? The more we thought about it, the more we wanted to know what teens had to say.



After hours of deliberation we formed Teen Writers Connect, a call for work operated by a team of Arts Connection's staff and interns as well as by teen participants in the Freelancers program. Our theme was *Authority in Our Present and Future Worlds* and our description was as follows:

"Youth have the power to determine future political structures and create social justice. Create your ideal world that explores relationships between authority and the people in The United States. The world you create may be dreary, hopeful, animated or even dark. The relationship between authority and the people may be drastically different from our current society, or the same. Be sure to have fun with it. Remember it's your world, so don't be afraid to use your own voice and experiences."

We also want to thank Keonna Hendrick for allowing us to publish Teen Writer's Connect. After receiving multiple outstanding submissions, we are overjoyed to present the final product. The featured authors have diverse backgrounds, as is reflected by their wide array of dreams and fears. While reading the pieces, we hope that you consider the factors which could potentially enhance or destroy our world

- Esmé Epstein and Sofia Lesnewski

FREE CONE DAY



I step off the train with my dirt-stained sneakers, shoes which have lived perilous existences since the start of the softball season and the streak of muddy, uninterrupted contact which accompanies post-rain games and grassy adventures. Juggling layers of unused visors and hefty jackets, I stare at the Hudson River and try to forget that all the waves, all the seagulls and buildings lining New York's skyline, are composed of tiny little numbers. Made up of millions of calculations, the view is the landscape of my cluttered skull, scattered with visions of tests and consumed by the prospect of failing. Failing, as in not attaining perfection, as in inevitably disappointing, as in tiptoeing to reach impossible standards and silently musing over my clear inferiority. Two friends walk alongside me. Vegan Carrot with the clogged tissue of an ailing thirst for life, the congestion which I won't fully understand until a couple of months later, when I sit on her pristine, white bed sheets after her stint in a hospital and she admits she had been contemplating opening her wrists since the beginning of the school year. At the moment, though, her brother is her priority, her rock, her love, and her burden all at once. He flits through her head, undulating along with the waves.

"Take care of your brother," her parents say.

"Stay close to home."

"Cook."

"Clean."

She shivers as her skin develops goose bumps from the guilt of acting out of self-indulgence, of going out with friends instead of serving chicken and microwaved rice to her hungry sibling. Brownie Batter is next to us, with her silent woes. Her parents's screaming matches must reverberate within her eardrums, but discussing it just makes it worse, makes the pain thicker, like the gelatin which Islam forbids her from consuming.

In place of gelatin, we snort and wheeze the magnificent foreign substance that is Hoboken through crowded noses, skipping through city streets like we're addicts. The boutiques and gourmet restaurants beat the high hills of Jersey City any day, making it hard to imagine the city underwater during Hurricane Sandy. Maybe it was like Atlantis: forbidden and secretive, a land to muse over when home life seemed dreary. Recalling all the frantic news reports and images of city streams, running tears, and flooded screams, I conclude that it was something closer to Hell.

Continuing on our way, we pass high school girls with their baggy sweatshirts.

"Hudson," I snort under my breath, a habit I've developed after years of suppressing my own internal monologue. As a public school kid, I'm able to separate myself from the reputation of snobbery within such academic institutions. In such a manner, I recklessly underemphasize the advantages I've had from attending an acclaimed magnet school. In my eyes, it puts everything into perspective.

As far as passersby are concerned, the girl with the Hudson sweatshirt and myself are indistinguishable.

“Are we almost there?” Vegan Carrot laments as we stroll across Washington street. By this point, she’s accustomed to me leading her to unfamiliar destinations. When we travel, my caution is our compass. In other locations, such as Sephora’s eyebrow section, she is a sensei.

“Well...” I hesitate, attempting to gauge her perspective on distance, and hoping to provide a reassuring response.

“That means it’s far,” Brownie Batter explains with a grin. “She thinks everything’s close. She walks a lot.”

A ginormous cow, waving a bell, greets us. Not much in life is free, and the spring weather beckons enthusiastic residents with the promise of sweet relief.

To our surprise, the line moves quickly.

“Why are you holding all that stuff?”

Vegan Carrot mutters disapprovingly, consistent with her protective, mother-like nature. She motions at my stack of bags and my hefty rain boots. “Here, let me help you.”

She compels me to remove my sneakers, and as I take off the first one she hands me a rain boot. Just as I slip it over my foot, we reach the front of the line, and I’m forced to sport a mismatched combination of a boot and a sneaker.

A plump, middle-aged man with a baseball cap approaches us. He totes a spectacular companion, a husky which we’ve overheard weighs one hundred and twenty five pounds. To which, of course, Vegan Carrot and I stare at each other with gaping mouths, aware that we’ve just encountered an animal which weighs more than us.

“That’s a unique look,” the husky-bearing man comments as he stares at my shoes. I blush at his observation, and yet I proceed to the counter, carefully watching the employees scoop my ice cream.

We sit on a bench facing the street. My cone plummets, but I pick it up and savor the sweetness, disregarding the dirt. After remembering that it’s a weekday, we head towards the Light Rail.

Jumping on the first train we see, we end up zooming through unfamiliar territory. It takes a while for us to realize that we’re on the wrong train, but I bask in the quiet melody of aimlessness, dreading my return home. Vegan Carrot and Brownie Batter don’t seem so concerned either, as the train keeps them from dependent siblings and battling parents. After eventually hopping on the correct vehicle, we journey through cityscapes: graffiti-covered walls, discarded branches, and aging buildings.

We are largely quiet, a silence dominated by contemplation, but at times we ruminate on school drama and upcoming plans.

At a point of silence, I notice something. On the hills overlooking Hoboken, a tent is seated comfortably, with ropes strung to trees as support. Cooking gear and clothes surround it.

“Look!” I exclaim. “They’re camping!”

“Wow,” Vegan Carrot responds in delight, and it’s not until the train moves farther that I realize something is wrong with the image I’ve constructed of a happy family pitching tents as a bonding experience. We pass by dozens of these man-made homes, objects which blend together to form a rainbow of isolation and denial. In Hoboken, where the shops seem luxurious and the one-hundred-and-twenty-five-pound huskies seems unfathomable, people sleep in tents on the outskirts of town to keep warm.

In a monsoon of guilt, we are drenched, and we press our ice-cream-stained hands to the windows to process the images which flit by us, unseen or ignored by the train’s other passengers.

"Oh my gosh," we mutter in tones infected by tinges of adolescent hopelessness.

"How do people live like that?"
Brownie Batter inquires.

I wish that I could reclaim my role as navigator, as the girl with answers learned from books, maps, and wiser adults. But all at once, I feel lost, aware that, though we took the wrong train, we at least have somewhere to go. We trade tents for houses, places that feel cold when tensions reach breaking points, but are structurally sturdy enough to support our needs. We view these outings as free time from facing reality, as hiatuses from ages of discomfort. What we don't understand is that persistent, unforgiving time is the reality, and freedom is the misconception.

- SOFIA LESNEWSKI

As I exit the train, I embrace Vegan Carrot and Brownie Batter. Partings are always dramatic for us, as we're so often together. When they release me from their hold I wonder where the government was when Hoboken's homeless population needed support. How could a whole community have been let down? For hours such questions run rampant in the creases of our furrowed foreheads. Soon, our relentless internal monologues will regain hold of our vulnerable consciences. Numbers will gallop through my head again. Somewhere, though, off in the valleys of our minds, those tents will always be there.

COUNTING ON YOU

We count on you.
To protect us from evil
From the bloodcurdling fear we face

We counted on you
To protect us from rape
Not blame us because our "shoulders"
were showing

We counted on you
To protect us
Not kill us

We counted on you
But I guess that was a mistake
You brought fear, rather than take it
away

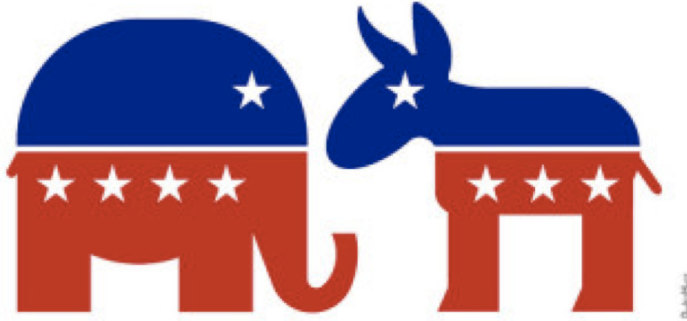
We counted on you
People who are trained
To protect us from evil

But now we count on ourselves to
protect us from YOU.



- MAJEEK FLORES

OUR GOVERNMENT: A SINKING RAFT



Election day: November 8, 2016.

Paul Ryan paced around the House Chamber. “What are we going to do?” He continued to stroll around while waiting for one of the four hundred and thirty four other members of Congress to come up with an idea. “Anyone? Please, don’t all volunteer at once.” He did a three-sixty degree spin around, looking for raised hands, finding none. He made a clucking sound with his tongue. “Alrighty. Here’s what we are going to do then.”

“I can’t believe I’m stuck on a raft.”

“And I can’t believe that I’m stuck here with you,” Hillary fired back.

“Wow. That was almost as lame as your Twitter comeback.” Donald laughed and let a moment of silence go by for their failed political careers. “I can’t believe no one voted for me. Look at my hair.” Hillary rolled her eyes as Donald pretended to flip his hair, accidentally causing his toupee to fall into the waves behind him.

Hillary howled in enjoyment, cut off by an exaggerated sigh. “So how does this work?” Hillary asked.

Well, without cell service you can’t delete any emails.” Donald smirked.

“Will you give it a rest? We’re going to be stuck here for a while and if you don’t want to get pushed off this raft, I suggest you stop. And don’t start up again with the racist jokes. Apparently no one found them funny.”

Donald pursed his lips and shook his head. “I think the one thing worse than being stuck here with you is Obamacare.”

“Well you know what?” Hillary sat up. “I’m thinking about adopting your gun policy when *I* am president so that I can buy a gun and shoot you.”

“Why don’t you type that in an email to me and then delete it?” Donald sat up too.

“So just to clarify, you hate women, immigrants, Mexicans, and Arabs?” Donald scowled back at Hillary, and the two sat back down on opposite sides of the raft.

November 10, 2016.

Paul Ryan was pacing again. “How long until one of them comes back?” The congressmen turned their heads in unison, blinking at each other; no one wanted to offer any suggestions.

“We should bet on who it is!” one of the congressmen shouted from the back of the room.

Another called out, “I hope it’s Trump!”

“I hope it’s Hillary!”

Paul mumbled to himself, “We’re screwed either way.”

Hillary picked at the wood of the raft while Donald chewed on a granola bar. The wind was picking up and Hillary's hair was flowing in the breeze, causing Donald to scowl. *Crack.* They looked at each other with horrified faces. The raft had split down the middle and had caused Hillary's side of the raft to begin to sink.

"Move over!" she yelled and jumped onto Donald's side. Water poured into the remaining side of the raft under the combined weight of both Donald and Hillary. He cupped his hands and tried to divert the water out of the raft and Hillary followed suit.

"You know what," Donald yelled over the screeching wind, "You win. I am a man, and I am stronger and braver than you because you are a woman. And since you are less capable than I, I will give you this raft out of pity. Women can't take care of themselves."

Hillary stopped scooping out water and looked at Donald with her mouth open. "Excuse me?" she exclaimed, still in shock. "I am just as capable as you are and I don't need *any* man to give me anything. If anything, I, as a woman, am *more* capable than you."

Donald pressed his lips together. "So, you don't want me to give you the raft?"

"No! I don't need anything from you." she continued scooping out water.

Donald shrugged. "Alright. Suit yourself." He paused a moment before hurling himself at Hilary's shoulder, pushing her into the water. "I've got the presidency!" He boasted.

Hillary popped her head out of the water. "And I've got the toupee!" She mocked, waving Donald's sopping mess of fake hair in the air.

- **NATALIE CAPPUZZO**

LABELED

"As a teen writer, writing about equality and injustice has always been a passion of mine; I love using my voice to send a message and highlight the truth."

Ahmed walks through airport security. knowing what lies ahead. The TSA agent pulls him aside to tell him he has been "randomly" selected to have a full body search, asking him to step to the side where everyone can see. Ahmed knows the drill.

12 year old Deon loves skateboarding. Every night, when he finishes his homework, he goes with his friends to the skate park. The cops are always there, watching. He thinks it's nice of them to look out for him and his friends. That is, until one of them points a gun at his face and tells him to get on the ground, hands in the air or he'll shoot him without a second thought.

Cynthia worked hard to get her current job.
Now, she wants to run for Senate.
Her dream has always been to work in the nation's capital.
Her campaign manager tells her the public won't like her
unless she puts on some more makeup.
The current senator explains that a woman
could never hope to make decisions for this country,
not with hair like *that*.

Bill has seen hundreds of applications today.
His firm only has room for one new employee.
He's found an applicant
who meets every requirement for the job, and more.
He's got the perfect skill set, an amazing education.
But then he looks at the name.
Ricardo Gonzalez.
He throws the application in the trash.

The interview is going great for Dana.
She's made the boss laugh,
and he's clearly impressed with her
knowledge.
He keeps glancing at her shirt, a
frown crossing his face.
Just when she thinks she has the job,
he leans forward and explains that
she would be a great fit here,
but her shirt is so low-cut, and her
skirt too short,
and he can't have customers getting
"the wrong impression of the
company."

She understood, right?

-ABBY HADFIELD

HEAVEN/HELL

Somewhere it is dinnertime
or maybe time for dessert.
A baby bird falls from the nest
and will never learn to fly,
but no one seems to care.
Somewhere it is noon
or maybe eight am
and a little black girl
watches television
on an argyle couch.
She wants to vomit
but doesn't know why
until she's fifteen and realizes
that she spent a decade
hating herself.

Somewhere there is a funeral
or maybe a child is born.
My knuckles are swollen
and my throat aches
and I want to go home
but no one can tell me
where that is.

Somewhere it is graduation
day
for a class of sixth graders
and one boy takes a diploma,
although he cannot read
what it says.
His teacher pats him on the
back;
he is her favorite student
because he does as he is told.

Somewhere it is Monday
and I get another letter
from my Oma
asking if I'm safe
because, in Germany,
two mass shootings
in a month is a lot.
I send her back a letter
with a star-spangled stamp
and remind her that
people die all the time
where I am from.

Here there are no guns.
Here it is dusk
and the sun is golden.
Here flags are not on fire.
Here mothers are not
crying
and faces are not bleeding
and people are not
marching;
there is nothing to left
march for,
and we can rest.

-NAOMI TOMLIN

"I am a high school
sophomore in Connecticut
who considers herself a poet
but also enjoys animation and
playwriting. I am fascinated by
the mysteries of outer space
and the unexplored ocean."

HOLD YOUR FIRE

The topic was shot down in the days after Sandy Hook.

In doing this, the microscopic lives of lost students and school personnel are dismissed;
In media, they are reduced to 28, including the perpetrator.

As soon as the audience withdraws from the television and the hashtags become has-beens, it won't take much time before the next mass murder crime takes the scene on our TVs.

And the same questions will be raised:
“How can this be prevented?”
“Why did the shooter behave as he did?”

Before the tears of mourning are even spent, the focus on these slaughters becomes misrepresented and misconstrued,

You'd assume the magnitude of deceased kids, mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, would be instilled in the minds of viewers. But the forgotten names go too often untold.

Cold bodies are swept under the carpets to showcase the next naughty celebrity scandal. Vigil candles are smothered out to give us a daily refill of the hottest hollywood hunks.

This gilded cycle of phony bullshit will never cease to amaze me in how swiftly it can omit casualties and allow us to forget the tragedies.

We let go of Orlando.
Virginia Tech and Columbine skip our minds and we don't tend to realize the reality that media renders us blind.

The strings are pulled and our point of views manipulated to separate us from issues of grave importance.

The weight of celebrities subdue disturbances. Neglected caskets are left to stagnate without any glances.

-SYDNEY HERNANDEZ



WHAT A PROBLEM

“I believe in this world, men hold most of the **power** and put women at a disadvantage. However, I do think that men have pressure from other men to embody the notion **masculinity**. The whole system is flawed, and my ideal world is where **gender-norms** can be **eliminated**.”

She cracked an egg one by one, and the shells went down the drain.
A dash of milk, a sprinkle of salt, and he walked in with a surplus of pride.
“She cooks, what a woman!” he remarked thinking it was sane.

To him, she knew her place, she did her due, which amounted to more than her brain.
He was old, and today the roles were supposed to change far and wide.
But how can we remove the stain, break the chain, of what it means to be a woman?

Generations of expectations and the difficulty to go against the grain.
She’s bossy, she talks too much, and, of course, you can’t forget that she lied.
But “She cooks, what a woman!” he said thinking it was sane.

She must be on her period, because she’s being *such* a pain.
Pain you say? If it were up to women, that baby would just glide.
How can we remove the stain, break the chain, of what it means to be a woman?

Will he call? Will he text? Does he like me? She can’t ask him to explain.
She’s a prude, she’s a slut, she’s a bitch, she’s a whore, she wanted it... but she denied.
“She cooks, what a woman!” he remarked thinking it was sane

Women and men can’t be defined by two different lanes.
These ideas are formed in a knot that needs to be untied.
“She cooks, what a woman!” he remarked thinking it was sane

Men are heightened by many years of patriarchal reign.
What can happen in the the future doesn’t just benefit one side.
If both genders build each other up, there’s nothing to lose, and all to gain

Men don’t have emotions. That is simply insane.
Contrary to popular belief, being “a man” does not mean those tears need to hide.
How can we remove the stain, break the chain, of what it means to be a man?

He may wake up, put on his suit, and catch a taxi in the rain.
It was passed down from his dad and his dad’s dad, that he needed to provide.
If both genders build each other up, there’s nothing to lose, and all to gain

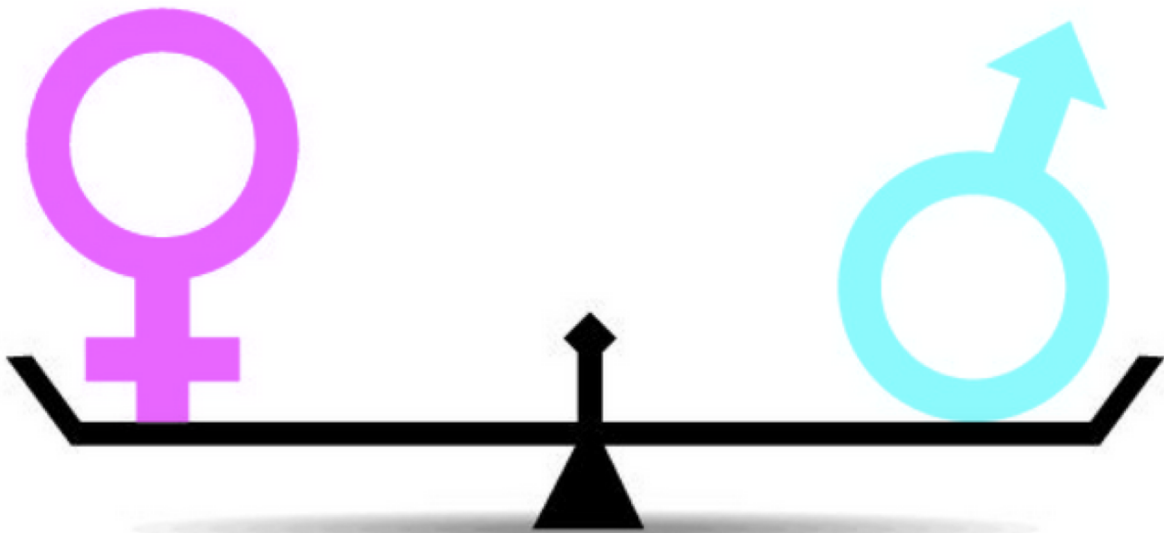
“Dude, have a beer. Why the fuck
are you drinking champagne?”
Blue means boy, pink means girl.
Even objects face a gender divide.
How can we remove the stain,
break the chain, of what it means
to be a man?

Get her wasted, and that girl is
your domain.
It might not be about getting the
girl, “But bro, you can’t be
bisexual.” his friend replied
If both genders build each other
up, there’s nothing to lose, and all
to gain.

Gender is divisive, in the home, in
the workforce, and even in the
presidential campaign.
The pressure upon both sexes that
can’t be denied.
If both genders build each other
up, there’s nothing to lose, and all
to gain.

How can we remove the stain,
break the chain, of what it means
to be a woman?
How can we remove the stain,
break the chain, of what it means
to be a man?

-Esmé Epstein



“Our human
compassion binds us the
one to the other - not in
pity or patronizingly,
but as human beings
who have learnt how to
turn our common
suffering into hope for
the future.”

-NELSON MANDELA