

Level III

Third Place Winner

Campbell Budzar

(Grade 12: Roosevelt High School, Kent. Sponsor: Pamela Harr)

Letter to poet Andrea Gibson concerning her poem, “I Sing the Body Electric, Especially When My Power’s Out,” from her album *Flower Boy*

Dear Andrea Gibson,

There was a time when I felt like a stranger to my own body. Like I was not the inhabitant and rightful owner of it, but rather an outside observer with a front row seat and a big buttery bucket of popcorn, anticipating the moment that my skin would split and a monster of a cicada would crawl out from it and wreak havoc on all my friends and family—making that awful screeching noise that cicadas make and then devouring them all alive. I’d be cursed to spend the rest of my life as this giant ugly cicada, and as if that wasn’t already bad enough, I’d be alone too, because when you eat all your friends, you don’t exactly have anyone to hang with.

Well, needless to say, that scenario was a very vivid nightmare I had when I was thirteen, and throughout the next couple of years that same nightmare would take many different forms, each time jolting me awake in the dead of night with my heart pounding and my palms sweating. I was insecure, I was troubled, and I couldn’t really pinpoint the root of it all. Now, I’m no dream analyzer or whatever, but I’m really sure those nightmares were some sort of sick metaphor that my subconscious made up to tell the other parts of my brain that the concept of me growing into myself struck it with the literal fear of God. Growing into myself only had one possible outcome, which was the absolute end of the world. No one would ever accept this cicada for who she was, and therefore something would snap in the fragile balance of the universe and life would cease to exist—especially if that specific cicada just happened to like girls a whole lot.

The point of everything was that I was so tightly wrapped up in my anxiety that it was a struggle to breathe. I was a queer kid in a cruel world, and it hurt me to have to hide who I was from all my friends and family because the fear of rejection manipulated me like it was the puppeteer and I was its marionette: it determined my every move and completely took control of my life. I had internalized homophobia, because my friends at the time were toxic influences. The only reason they woke up every morning was for the sole purpose of making gay jokes. It was like they couldn’t function without throwing a slur in at least every other sentence. For some reason (still unknown to me), hurting me each day became as vital to their survival as air itself. These “friends” acted as a slow poison, and being exposed to them day after day made me hate myself; it happened so gradually that I barely even noticed that the little house built inside my heart was being burned down by the very same people I had let live in it! On top of this, I was just starting to face the symptoms of depression and anxiety.

Poetry is an outlet for me. Reading and writing has become a coping mechanism for me and it’s been a big part of my life for nearly as long as I can remember. I’ve always had an instinctive attraction to it. I was reading Emily Dickinson and Sylvia Plath in elementary school, and attending poetry readings on a pretty regular basis by Fifth grade. I think I might have been a poet in a previous life, because I feel like I came out of the womb with a pen and the desire to get

in touch with my emotions through language. Poetry has always helped me to understand that I am not alone, and that I can confront my fears by turning them into works of art.

The first time I had heard someone read your poem “I Sing the Body Electric, Especially When My Power’s Out” was shortly after I had dealt with a major episode of depression due to having to hide myself for who I really was, and wishing that I was anyone BUT me. The first time I heard it, there were fat, gloomy tears rolling down my cheeks. Your poem made me understand that: beautiful things can spring out of unpleasant experiences, no one has the right to dictate to me who I am (that right belongs to me, alone), and that I AM lovely. I realized that one cannot fly by simply jumping off the ground— a person must be lighthearted, free of heavy, emotional weights and gather the wind beneath their wings and soar. There is a bright light burning deep inside of me, and though its hue might be different from others, it is nonetheless warm, illuminating, and beautiful. Though my inner light is different, there is so much, much more to me than that: it should not, must not be all that people see in me.

After first hearing your poem, I wished that I could’ve read it sooner—I would’ve benefited from its message so many years ago. I’m thankful now, though. Your words are able to reach others whose situation is similar to mine and equally inspire them to use their pain and hurt to become stronger.

I am now proud to say that I am comfortable and unapologetic about who I am. I’ve been alone, I’ve been mistreated, I’ve hit every high, and I’ve hit conceivable every low, even to the point when I thought I couldn’t sink any deeper. I’ve experienced heartbreak and loss within my time in the public school system. But, I am still tender, I am compassionate, I am bigger than the downfalls. I want to help others and teach them to understand that they are worthy of so much more love than they could ever even imagine, exactly what you have done in your writing.

I’m the exponentially gay kid in their senior year of high school, and I want them all to know it. And in the springtime, I’m going to throw my graduation cap high into the air and scream at the top of my lungs

Hallelujah to the ache
To the pull
To the fall
To the pain
Hallelujah To the grace
And the body
and every cell of us all.

Sincerely,
Your favorite cicada,
Campbell Budzar, age 17