

Middle Grade Poems

by Sara Holbrook and Michael Salinger

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Confused

by Sara Holbrook (originally published in *Am I Naturally This Crazy*, Boyds Mills Press 1998)

Stacked and squashed.
Crammed and bruised.
My bureau looks a bit **B**
confused.

A soccer shoe, a music box,
a china lamb,
five unmatched socks.
A magazine and candy wraps,
an old stuffed dog,
two baseball caps.
A Lego car, a compact disc,
a watch, a comb,
one bowl (no fish).

Its drawers are drooling everywhere,
legs and sleeves and underwear.
Nearby a chair is nearly dressed
with cut-off jeans and Sunday best.

Above it all
a stickered mirror
reflects MY face.
I=m growing here!

Coming Soon

by Sara Holbrook (originally published in *Am I Naturally This Crazy*, Boyds Mills Press 1998)

I am how I act
and
I am what I eat.
I sometimes react,
and
I'm not yet complete.

Nothing about me is permanent.
Growing up
is a chain reaction.
The mirror may reflect
ugly duckling,
but inside I'm a
coming attraction.

Gaming

by Sara Holbrook (*Interface*, Rubicon Publishing, 2012)

Who knows the far off dog
whose bark bangs against the hollow can
of night?
Bang!
I snap to attention,
shouldering a cartoon gun and spring from behind boxes,
through the doorway and across a crumbling bridge
shedding boulders into the black abyss.

Jump! Oncoming train!
Spring. Land. Pivot.
Protect my flank.
Sweep the room.
Bang. Bang.
Panting, my back against
a brick wall, bullets whizzing by.
Thumbs itchy,
eyes full of cascading lights
twitch.
I try to combat crawl into sleep
then jump like I
straight-snatched my chain.
No rest.
My head's still in the game.

Nothing's the End of the World

by Sara Holbrook (originally in *Nothing's the End of the World*, Boyds Mills Press 1996)

Mother Nature is my mentor,
She tells me I'll be back,
even when my brain gets bruised
and my heart takes forty whacks.

That when I kick up storms
and my wind and hail bring pain,
She shows me sun can shine
after hostile hurricanes.

That breathless, cliff-clinging highs
and pelican-plunging lows
crest and fall like waves
and I can surf in this natural flow.

That every stage
seems reasonable,
if I look at life
as seasonal.

That what slips and goes deep
finally rises.
That what's dull
hop-toads with surprises.

That even strip mine wounds
can heal,
and the promise of spring
is real.

That sand in an oyster
may pearl,
and that **NOTHING'S**
the end of the world

SLIPPED

by Sara Holbrook (originally in *Am I Naturally This Crazy*, Boyds Mills Press 1996)

I slipped.
Everything seems to stink.
I better
check my shoe.
I can't tell
where or when
but, yes,
I guess,
I stepped in a rotten mood.
Peeeee-u!

The Fear Factor

by Sara Holbrook (*The Poetry Friday Anthology for Middle School, 2013*)

I know you.
You.
Courage,
how you ask for what is mine.
How you swell in my chest,
speak up,
straighten my spine,
and whisper in my ear,
 Okay, you say.
 Okay.
 It's going to be okay.

More than
the shoe, the step,
the doorknob turn.
More than a precipice.
A fall.
A burn.
I fear you will abandon me,
evaporate
and not return.
But every time,
when faced with
choice or change
it is your voice that
cuts through clouds of gray.
 Okay, you say.
 Okay.
 It's going to be okay.

Victimized

by Sara Holbrook (originally in *Nothing's the End of the World*, Boyds Mills Press 1996)

I'm the victim
of the worst hair cut
that ever sat on a head.
It took twenty minutes
and fifteen bucks.
I wanted a TRIM,
instead,
I got weed-whacked
in a shear attack
by that scissor-handed fiend.
My friends will laugh
and hoot and gasp.
I'm a fall-down,
fright-wig-scream.

Life can be so mean.

Born to Skate

by Sara Holbrook (*The Arrow Finds It's Mark*, Roaring Book Press, 2011)

Wood pusher.
Curb jumper.
Helmet head.
I could be
sittin' safe, instead
wrist guards,
kneepads,
scuffed up jeans,
driveway tricks,
and half-pipe dreams.
Soften knees,
duck, jump, drop,
kick-it, big spin.
Hope! Believe.
Grabbing air,
ollie, slide.
Each rail, each ramp
a high risk ride.
Practicing
first light 'til late.
 Foot pumper.
 Stair bumper.
Born to skate.

I Want to Move Across the Street

by Sara Holbrook (originally in *Nothing's the End of the World*, Boyds Mills Press, 1996)

I want to move
across the street
where the crackers aren't stale
and the closets are neat.

Where the furniture's polished,
and the carpets are swept,
and the scissors are found
where the scissors are kept.

Where they're not out of tissues
and no one is late,
you can always find house keys,
both sneakers and tape.

Where nobody swears,
hogs the last slice of bread,
fights over chairs
or wishes me dead.

Across the street
the fruit's never brown,
and nobody's yelling to
"Turn that thing down."

I want to move to a new home
where the loudest sound
is the telephone.
To where Mrs. Wilson lives . . .
alone.

Shopping

by Sara Holbrook (unpublished)

Would this sweater make me popular?
Make my teeth straight?
Bring me joy?
Would I be famous in the hallway?
Could it help
attract a boy?
Will this sweater make me skinny?
Tall? Exceptionally brave?
Would it text me when I'm lonely
or make my hair behave?
Should I borrow from my mom
or borrow from the store?
Put this thing on credit?
Would this sweater make me more
than who I am?
Hanger in my hand,
I eye my future debt,
weighing what I want
against
what I'll really get.

Labels

by Sara Holbrook (originally in *Am I Naturally This Crazy*, Boyds Mills Press, 1998)

People get tagged with these labels,
like African, American,
Native, Indigenous,
White,
Asian, Hispanic,
or Euro-Caucasian --
I just ask that you get my name right.
I=m part Willie,
part Ethel,
part Suzi and Scott.
Part assembly-line worker,
part barber, a lot of dancer
and salesman.
Part grocer and mailman.
Part rural, part city, part cook
and part caveman.
I=m a chunk-style vegetable soup
of cultural little bits,
my recipe=s unique
and no one label fits.
Grouping folks together
is an individual waste.
You can=t know me by just a look,
you have to take a taste.

(**Note from sara:** This is an international version of this poem. The US version reads:

*People get tagged with these labels,
like African- American,
Native-American,
White,
Asian, Hispanic,
or Euro-Caucasian*

Why do you think I changed it for an international audience? Does the poem still work?)

Cool Food for Thought

by Sara Holbrook (*The Poetry Friday Anthology for STEM, 2014*)

Plants!

The original solar panels,
whether swaying or standing still
transfer
blue and red wavelengths of sun
into 30 shades of green
known as chlorophyll.
Whether you pluck your food from a tree
or eat it on a bun,
of all the lion-human-stinkbug
links in the food chain,
plants are number one.

But plants not only feed our stomachs,
they also scrub the air,
converting carbon emissions
into the oxygen we share.
Sustained by an army of organisms,
7 billion in every teaspoon of healthy soil,
plants feed us and cool the atmosphere
so people don't starve
or start to boil.

Note from sara: Here are three poems that I often read as a single set without any breaks. The First is **What's Real** (*Am I Naturally this Crazy*), the second is **Scream Bloody Murder** (*I Never Said I Wasn't Difficult*) and the third is **Violence Hurts** (*Walking on the Boundaries of Change*).

Pictured between reruns
and what commercials want to sell,
explodes another war in some far place
that I can't spell.

To me, war appears as broken bodies
burning buildings, and smoking gas,
interrupted by auto salesmen, frosty colas
and kitchen wax.

Every evening around dinner
devastation is served up with my meal,
then sprinkled with laughs and laundry powder.
Can you tell me
which pictures are real?

When I see bodies on the news
it makes me want to cry all night.
'Course even if I do
it doesn't bring them back to life.

What's the use in caring?
Can't we just pretend?
That everyone is nice
and that all lives have happy ends?

If I turn my back to horror,
if I hum and close my eyes --
If I just refuse to see,
does it mean
those wronged
died twice?

Flailing fists
can be one solution,
one way to conflict resolution.
So's an insult. So's a gun.
We could fight to the death, get vengeance obsessed,
or strike like a hit and run.
Or we could huddle on neutral ground,
pass a few words around.
For once, we could see if just talking works.
Maybe settle this.
Violence hurts.

Running Laps

by **Michael Salinger (unpublished)**

Frank and Matt messed around on the bus,
they kicked the seats, made animal noises,
I think Frank even cussed.
So now we're *all* running laps
even though we won our match.
The cramp in my side
feels just like a knife;
my calves they are on fire.
Our coach says there isn't any I in team
and I'm not calling him a liar,
but why do we all have to suffer
because of two guys who didn't think ?
I want to give Matt and Frank
pink bellies, or maybe a punch in the arm.
I'd teach them a lesson
that would really last,
but rats!
Those two are just too fast!

Don't You Boys Know Any Nice Songs?

by Michael Salinger (*High Impact Writing Clinics*, Corwin 2013)

the drummer's playing ultra-loud
and he's out of time again
the bass guitar is tuned too flat
our keyboard sounds like a startled cat
we've been practicing for over a week
and I don't think we'll ever get it
I am pretty sure
the singer makes up the words
as he goes along
and I figure
I'll be an old man before this song
sounds like anything
but an ear destroying train wreck

then

like marbles circling round
circling round a steel bowl
slowing down
slowing down and gathering
in the middle
we stumble upon that magic groove
my guitar becomes a part of me
and everything starts to move
like slow motion
and everything and nothing
is happening all at once
a surrounding sound of
power chords, slaphappy bass,
cymbals sea-wave crashing,
floor tom keeping pace
yeah we're a REAL band
and then I hear my mother's voice
"YOU BOYS ARE MAKING TOO MUCH NOISE!"
and I shout back, "FINE,
we'll shut things down
after we play *our* song
just
ONE MORE TIME!"

911

by Michael Salinger (*A Bear in the Kitchen*, Red Giant Press, 2013)

hate is extremely flammable
its vapors may cause flash fire
hate is harmful if inhaled
keep hate away from heat, sparks and flame
do not breath the vapors of hate
wash thoroughly after using hate
if you accidentally swallow hate
get medical attention

prejudice is an eye and skin irritant
its vapors are harmful
do not get prejudice in eyes
or on clothing
prejudice is not recommended for use
by persons with heart conditions
if prejudice is swallowed induce vomiting
if prejudice comes in contact with skin
remove clothing and wash skin
if breathing is affected, get fresh air immediately

violence is harmful if absorbed through the skin
keep violence out of the reach of children
do not remain in enclosed areas
where violence is present
remove pets and birds from the vicinity of violence
cover aquariums to protect from violence
drift and run off from sites of violence
may be hazardous
this product is highly toxic
exposure to violence may cause
injury or death.

Cookout

by Michael Salinger (*A Bear in the Kitchen*, Red Giant Press, 2013)

Arrange your ideals in a pyramid in the center of the grill.

Open your mind by pressing thumb firmly on the red dot.

Squeeze 1.6 fluid ounces of your principles per pound of belief.

Set beliefs on fire immediately.

In approximately 15 to 20 minutes or when beliefs are ashed over spread ideas evenly.

Wait 5 minutes and begin writing.

GRUESOME

by Michael Salinger (*High Impact Writing Clinics*, Corwin 2013)

Gruesome is kind of hard to look at
Because he is not the prettiest sight
His appearance could make your mother
Gasp, groan and shudder
And eyeball dangling out of its socket
Intestines outside instead of in
Body parts strewn across a room
Maggots crawling out of the skin
His flesh is peeling off his bones
His hair is full of worms
He takes you out of your comfort zone
He's gonna make you squirm

MAYHEM

by **Michael Salinger (unpublished)**

Mayhem may be short on charm
But he is an overachiever
When it comes to doing harm to others
Inflicting injury on purpose
Is his favorite ploy
He seems to truly enjoy
Mutilation and destruction as a means
To an end
This includes rendering his victims
Unable to defend themselves or others
Whether planned or random
Mayhem supports reckless abandon

Digestion

by Michael Salinger (*High Impact Writing Clinics*, Corwin 2013)

I have a mouth where the food goes in
My pharynx decides which path it should take
Down the esophagus my munchies pass
Peristalsis pushing and squeezes
The chewed up goo into my stomach
Mixing with acids and enzymes (and a little gas)
For a bit of time
Then into the small intestines
Where my bloodstream receives a nutrient injection
Once we've squeezed all the good stuff out
We visit my large intestine
Where compacted waste is sent for collection
Then stored in my rectum
And when the time is right
It's expelled through my anus
What's for dinner tonight?

Diet

by Michael Salinger (*A Bear in the Kitchen*, Red Giant Press, 2013)

I have recently begun eating my words
Boiled they slide from the page like a pat of butter
across the bottom of a heated sauté pan
but their texture and flavor is bland
like overcooked polenta
rib spackling filling but overall
lacking
So I try again
Chopping and dicing
spicing them up with chilies and cardamom
stir frying then serving over saffron rice
They become lost in the seasoning
artifice masking for meaning
Baking I decide
three hundred and seventy five degrees
for forty five minutes only left my words dry
sticking to the bottom of the tin
So I threaded my utterances onto a skewer
An orderly syntax shish kabob
marinated in olive oil and pepper infusion
roasted over glowing charcoal briquettes
of mesquite and cherry wood

Close

but not quite good enough
for dishing up to persnickety company
Finally I just rinse them in a colander
under the tap
pile them free of pretense
raw into the wooden bowl
sitting on the countertop
to be absentmindedly snacked upon
while reading a good book

DECAPITATE

by Michael Salinger (unpublished)

Decapitate has literally lost his head
By guillotine, sword, or axe
His noggin's been removed
And it ain't coming back
To rest on his shoulders
Without a whole bunch of stitches
And even then it probably won't stick
'Cause sewing a head back onto a neck
Would be one heckuva trick
Decapitate should always remember
That his "to do list" had better start
With keeping his head affixed

If I were a Gear

by Michael Salinger (*High Impact Writing Clinics*, Corwin 2013)

If I were a gear
I'd have teeth but not a toothbrush
I could mesh with other gears
I would turn in ratio
Depending on the size of my neighbor
If they were bigger
I'd be quicker
If they were smaller
I'd spin slower
I'd turn in the opposite direction
Of my partner near
But together as two gears
We'd get the job done
Whether used in a watch
A transmission or a winch
Remember to keep
Your fingers clear
Or else you just might
Get pinched.

JINX

by Michael Salinger (*High Impact Writing Clinics*, Corwin 2013)

You could say Jinx is loaded with luck
As long as you admit, all of it is bad
When a project is chugging on track
Jinx will show and make things worse
It's as if she carries a purse filled with broken mirrors
Black cats to cross your path, or salt to spill at your table
But something's definitely going wrong
Unless some way, somehow you are able
To ward her off by knocking on wood
Carrying a four leaf clover, or avoiding sidewalk cracks
Because jinx is a noun *and* a verb just walking around
Planning her sneak attacks.