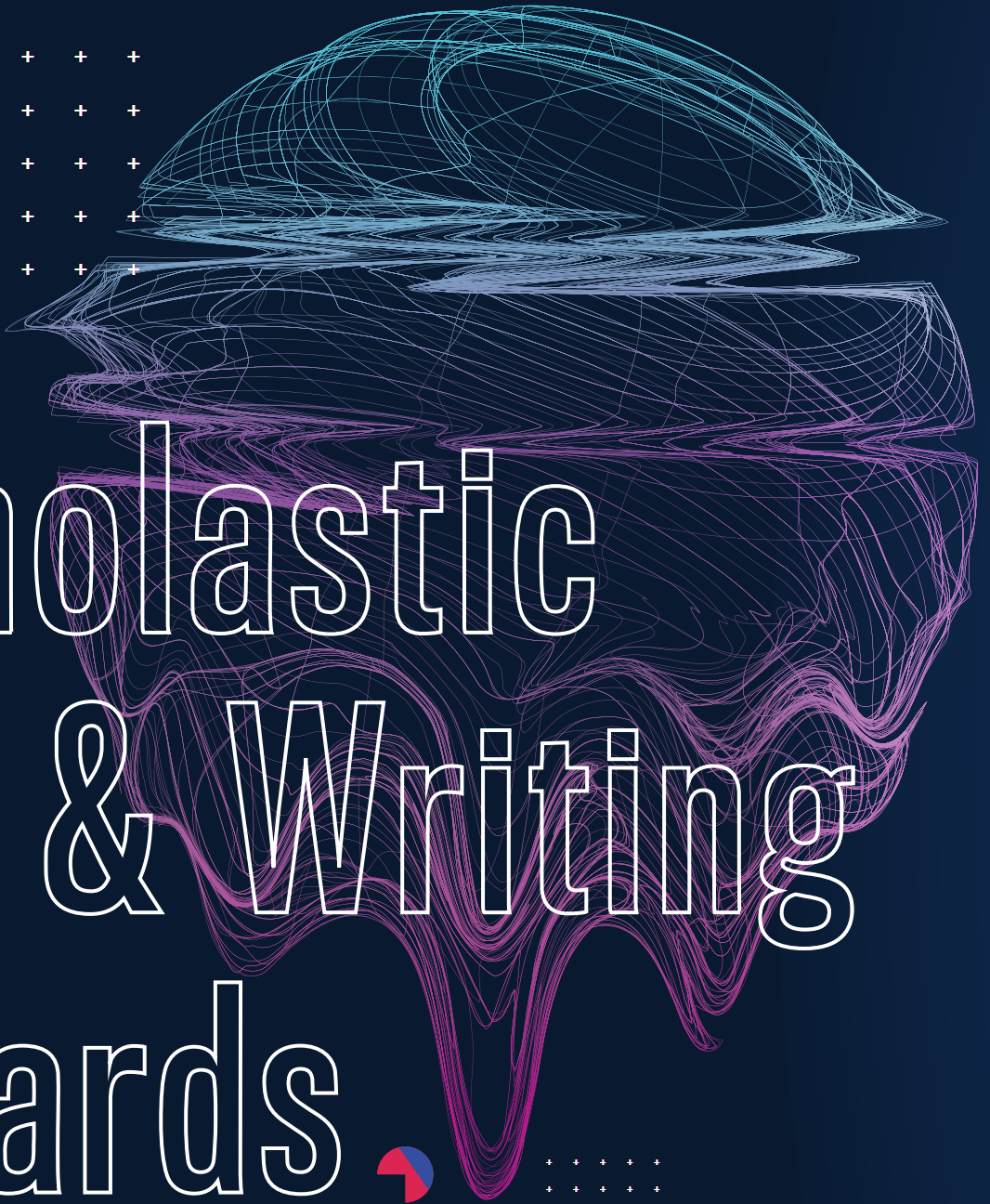




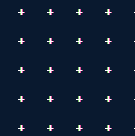
Scholastic  
Art & Writing  
Awards



Harris County  
Department of  
Education



# Scholastic Art & Writing Awards



[HCDE-Texas.org/Scholastic-Awards](https://HCDE-Texas.org/Scholastic-Awards)

[#HCDEAwards](https://twitter.com/HCDEAwards)



**WRITING**

**Gold Key Winners**

Student Name: Urooj Hashmi

Grade: 11

School: Kerr High School

Title: A Mash of Ingredients

Category: Humor

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Kathy Harrison

July 6, 2022

My aunt gave me her chocolate chip pancake recipe yesterday! I'm still contemplating why I didn't just ask or search online for a pancake recipe, but instead, chose to wait days for her to take the first step. It seems that taking the initiative is something I've always struggled with. But I digress, having recently obtained this marvelous gift from my aunt, I've decided that a chocolate chip pancake is exactly what I need to start this beautiful morning. This will be my first time cooking (or perhaps baking), and they say all you have to do in cooking is follow the recipe. How hard can it be?

1 hour 34 minutes and 25 seconds later

Having attempted it now, I greatly regret writing down the whole sentence I previously wrote. With what I experienced, everything seemed to be progressing fine with the pancake recipe. I plopped five tablespoons of flour, and a fourth teaspoon of baking powder in a mixing bowl. After that, I mixed all three of the dry ingredients and then gently cracked one egg into the bowl. I quickly poured two tablespoons of milk and mixed the contents until a semi-thick mixture was formed. Chocolate chips came last and were gently dropped into a swirl like design onto the light beige batter in the bowl. I realize now that the last process wasn't one of my best ideas, considering how my beautiful design vanished as the chocolate bits became covered with the existing pancake batter. After cooking the batter, I probably should've tasted my first creation instead of proudly handing it to my mom and sister who held high expectations. Isn't it unusual to hold expectations for a pancake? That said, I should consider the fact that they didn't expect something so simple to have such a tragic result. With my flavorful creation, I was able to impress them in a way that one cannot and should not take as a compliment. I could see my mother taking her time chewing the first bite as if she was processing each flavor, which I found really comforting. My sister, on the other hand, seemed to be holding in her laughter so she wouldn't choke on my masterpiece. A few minutes later, she calmed down using the ancient methods of breathing and apparently blocking me from her view. She managed to let out, "I like the chocolate chips" as her shoulders shook with suppressed laughter. Now I was really starting to regret letting her taste it. Don't take this the wrong way, I greatly value her opinion on my cooking. That being said, there are **No**

**table of contents entries found.** moments like these when her comments make one of my eyes twitch. My experience turned south after this pleasing transaction because as it turns out, my mother's calm and calculating face was a false advertisement: the very next second, she managed to completely wipe the hopeful smile off my face by using her soft yet amused voice to ask one question, "Where's the sugar?"

September 5, 2022

Cooking and baking shows are very educational and inspirational. That is likely why I watch *Nailed It!*, a baking show that's currently on Netflix. It consists of a variety of bakers who appear clueless from time to time and tend to forget the basic steps. Since it is a baking show for beginners, I take the opportunity to witness their unique improvisation skills and learn quite a lot: how to make buttercream and fillings, a tiered cake, how to decorate, and the list goes on. I love listening to my favorite judge Nicole, who makes me laugh every single time. I can still recall an episode where a professional baker called "Jacque Torres" asked Nicole how she would start on making the cake that the bakers were working on. The host of the show confidently stated something along the lines of marrying a man, making him buy a cake, and to divorce the man and keep the cake. Such a bizarre explanation left me dumbfounded and laughing hysterically for a few long minutes before I could continue watching the show and learn the proper steps explained by Jacque Torres. With such events, I'm able to get a good laugh while also learning valuable points. Moving forward, with each episode I watch, I'm left with a strong desire to bake a cake, make delicious filling, or just eat something sweet. Ah, now my stomach seems to be craving some sweets; I should check if there is some chocolate left in the fridge.

October 20, 2022

Waffles and ketchup may sound like an unusual and perhaps disgusting combination, but they actually taste great! Well, great is an overstatement, but it is rather interesting to try. Today in school, we ended up having waffles for lunch, but I forgot to get syrup. That wasn't an issue however, because I did end up getting something else. Ketchup! And you can guess what I did with it. I can imagine anyone reading this is scrunching up their face and thinking "ew" or "that's so weird." That's mainly because my friends said the same thing, which I found very amusing. Now consider it this way, the lack of flavor present in the waffles is aided by the strong and prominent flavor of ketchup. If anyone has a strong dislike for ketchup, then this combination should definitely be reconsidered. Then again, that would require them to actually consider it. I also tried pretzels with ranch which, let



me share, was a terrible experience. That is saying something since I've tried many weird things. This said, I'm not a complete lunatic; I've made many appealing combinations as well. Chips go well with most things, including sandwiches and pasta, so that's not unexpected. A little crunch with something soft can taste quite pleasing, unless you're not expecting that crunch, then it's just concerning.

April 26, 2023

My Mom loves watching cooking videos. Most times, I end up watching with her, and not just because I'm in the same room, but because it's satisfying to watch other people make delicious food. With this, I'm able to become more aware of what combinations are good and what aren't. In the end, I can say it's because of my dear mother that I end up adding a few extra ingredients to the many recipes we attempt, which create a whole different masterpiece. Let's call it a chef's instinct because it makes me feel professional. Today I tried a sesame sauce for pasta and it ended up becoming a science experiment. The recipe looked rather simple: Garlic, sesame seeds, ketchup, tomato paste, red chili powder, cumin seeds, salt, and well, the obvious pasta at the end. I just felt the need to add a few things to- what is that phrase people often use- brighten it up? In the end, I ended up putting a whole bucket of other ingredients such as spring onions, chili garlic sauce, jalapenos, lemon juice, and soy sauce. I love spiciness in my food, so I may have ended up putting a little too much red chili powder. I had no complaints, but my sister may or may not have had to drink a large quantity of water. That said, drinking water is healthy, so I'd say this experiment was very beneficial for her.

August 21, 2023

Cooking for other people can be an anxiety-provoking process. It's terrifying if someone doesn't appreciate what you put all your hard work into. I suppose that's how the professionals feel when they're taking part in those important competitions I end up watching on Netflix like Zumbo's Just Desserts and Sugar Rush. Anyway, I made my pasta, and yes, I finally have a recipe I can call "my" pasta \*insert tears of joy\*. It's technically an online recipe with extra ingredients that elevate the taste of the sauce. A few days ago, I decided to make pasta and give it as a present for my friend's birthday. Birthdays are always complicated because I am indecisive on what to give, so all I end up doing is giving a heartfelt "Happy Birthday!" with a few cat gifs, or "jifs" as many of my friends argue, in an attempt to make them smile. Cooking pasta was the first time I took a risk on someone's birthday, and let me just get this out, I Was Scared. I had multiple thoughts running through my head, like "Did I put in enough salt?", "What if it's too spicy

for her?!” and the most prominent one, “What if she doesn’t like it?!?”. In the end, my doubts were unfounded because my friend ended up loving it! Having acknowledged and processed her response, I suppose cooking pasta for my friend’s big day was worth it, at least so I have a memory where I took a step out of my comfort zone to make a friend happy.

It’s astonishing how my simple choice to put a mash of ingredients in a recipe brought me to where I am today. Perhaps exploring the curiosity within me will help me to discover more about myself and what I’m capable of. Well, it’s time to attempt making a coffee spice cake! I wonder if red chili powder is allowed to be in raw batter... or is the spice supposed to be from paprika?

Student Name: Ehiazele Okojie

Grade: 11

School: Kerr High School

Title: Blood on the Dance Floor

Category: Poetry

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Kathy Harrison

On a silent, serene day the clouds skimmed the sky

The light shunned through its sparse patches

As the birds glided and sung to the sun

It's tune floating in the wind

Nature is swaying to her music

The crickets rub their legs together

One

Two

Three

A rhythm appears

My once still body felt a spark deep down

Suddenly my head wants to spin around

My legs mimic those of a newborn fawn

I restrain myself trying to suppress my urge

To turn and turn my life away

My foot taps

My shoulders slide side to side

My head jumps up and down

whipping my head around

My heart beats as fast as a horse galloping in the wind

It takes my breath away as I push myself

Surrounding the cloudy skies

I prance my feet around and I shout for joy

hands flutter almost lifting me up

feet taps faster and faster

beady sweat drips off my face

I can't stop this feeling that encloses my body

I hope it lasts forever and I hope it doesn't stop

Self-absorbed am I, that I did not notice the gaping mouths

The quiet whispers and stifled laughs

I could not pay them any time as my mind was moving as fast as my feet

I turn and see a man frantically waving his arms to me

He gives me a hearty laugh and grabs my hands

We spin and spin like wheels on a wagon



Never knowing when we will stop turning

Soon I see a child moving his body towards me

His hands and feet rising every few moments

His mother jumps in, her body moving in an erratic way

With each turn I make, the more bodies I see dancing with me

Before anybody knew it the whole town was dancing,dancing for 15 dawns

The excitement, and exhilaration I felt started to weary me

The spark that once filled me, had fizzled out

It was replaced with a shortness of breath

My body feels as if I'm a fallen leaf in the wind

In the blankness, eriness of the night

All you could hear was the stopping of breaths

The speedy shuffling of feet

The groaning of the town, pleading to stop

The children cried to their mothers

The mothers begged to the Lord to spare their children

Legs shivered down to the floor

Uniform thuddings beating the ground

Bodies give into the Reaper's tempting offer

Three

Two

One<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>In July 1518 the citizens of Strasbourg, France suddenly started to uncontrollably dance for 4 full months. To accommodate the dancers, the town built a stage for them, invited a live band and brought in professional dancers, but soon the marathon took its toll on the citizens as they started to collapse from the lack of breath, or died from strokes or heart attacks. The cause of this mysterious abnormality is unknown but many theorize that it was a form of a mass psychogenic disorder or that the townspeople got exposed to a toxic mold that produces hallucinations. Other theories include that it was a religious cult dancing to attract divine favor or that St. Vitus, a catholic priest, cursed the town causing them to go into a stress-induced hysteria.

Student Name: Connor Nguyen  
Grade: 10  
School: Alief Early College High School  
Title: Debate  
Category: Poetry  
Key: Gold Key  
Educator: Katrena Reese

Words are brought to the arena.

Where they fight in the subpoena.

In a world full of idioms

Is where many people are coincide

With passion and precision, speakers contend,

Crafting narratives that transcend.

Words, like arrows, aim to prevail,

In the theater of rhetoric, where the judge hails.

Where each syllable, is a chess piece on the board,

A strategic move, could be a point on the scoreboard.

Where people argue in a linguistic art,

Debate unfolds, a cerebral counterpart.

The podium stands as a pedestal of might,

Where students are both bold and bright.

Speech, a melody in the auditorium,  
A harmonious dance, an expressive consortium.

Speech and debate, a duet profound,  
Where intellect and rhetoric resound  
Speech, a river of eloquence, flows,  
While carving our canyon where intellect grows.

In the room of argument and dispute,  
Ideas collide, truths repute.  
A dialectical tango, a verbal ballet,  
In the realm of rhetoric, minds pray.  
In the tapestry of dialogue and voice,  
Mosaic of ideas, where hearts rejoice.

So, let the words unfurl like the leaves in the breeze,  
In the discourse of minds, let ideas tease.  
Speech and debate, a duet profound,  
Where intellect and rhetoric aloud.

Student Name: Mariana Pinzon  
Grade: 8  
School: Albright Middle School  
Title: Desperation in time of Crisis  
Category: Critical Essay  
Key: Gold Key  
Educator: Megan Kelly

### Desperation in Times of Crisis

The conflict between Israel and Palestine has been a long-standing and deeply rooted issue that has brought terrible suffering to the Palestinian people since 1948. Hamas gunmen launched an unpredictable assault on Israel from the Gaza Strip on October 7th, killing about 1,200 people and taking more than 200 hostages. Hamas is a military group in the Palestinian territories. Hamas attacked Israel because of building anger over Israel's policy, including the outbreak of violence at the Al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem, but more generally over the treatment of the Palestinians and the expansion of Israeli settlement. If people believe Hamas is a terrorist group then they need to say so is the Israeli government and army.

The world believes Palestine attacked Israel first but what the U.S. doesn't want to put out there is after Israel declared its dependence on May 14, 1948 fighting with other Arab forces joining the Palestinian mandate. Israel was created in 1948, they massacred thousands of Palestinians when creating their state, Hamas wasn't created until the 1980s. Most people who hold the media in us are Jewish which is why we don't hear about Gaza, they don't just hold the media but also work with the United States. Before October 7th, 2023 they attacked Palestinian worshippers at Babas-silia, one of the main entrances to the al-Aqsa mosque compound in east Jerusalem, according to local sources in Gaza September 17th, 2023.

The United Nations agency that helps Palestinian refugees was struggling but now it faces an even bigger crisis. At least 102 workers from the largest United Nations agency in Gaza have been killed in 5 weeks of heavy Israel bombing since October of this year. They are kicking out or killing people in Gaza for the reason that they want Palestine's entire territory and they are slowly succeeding. The United Nations doesn't recognize

Hamas as a terrorist group because they are resisting and combating 75 years of oppression forced upon the Palestinian people. Hamas would not exist if Palestinians weren't being oppressed; they also haven't killed nearly as many Israelis. Now that we're on the top of terrorism, Israel has committed and is continuing to commit war crimes.

Israel's military has bombed hospitals, schools, churches, homes, ambulances, and escape routes. They've cut off water, food, and the internet. The bombs from the United States and Israel so badly obliterated and desecrated the bodies of these little Palestinian children that they no longer even have faces. Their faces are gone, melted away by the sheer heat and pressure from the bomb. The unfortunate act of children having to write their names on their bodies in case they die is extremely harmful. It destroys their mental health at such a young age.

At the beginning of this escalation about 100 Palestinians were murdered then after 2 weeks, 440 people were killed a day. Then today we're talking about more than 14,000. The number of people killed every day is increasing day after day. Standing for Palestine is not standing against any religion, it's not standing against any people, it's just standing for justice, for Gaza's human rights.

Mehdi Hasan, a British American broadcaster confronted Israel's advisor about how they pointed to an Arabic document in the basement of Gaza hospital and claimed it was a guardian list on which every terrorist writes his name but that was false, it was a calendar with the days of the week on it. That same hospital on November 15th, Israeli troops entered Gaza's biggest hospital on Wednesday and searched its rooms and basement. Finding drinkable water has become almost impossible for Gaza's 2.3 million residents, leading to a surge in cases of diarrhea and respiratory infections. People in Gaza are also sleeping three to four hours of sleep a day, with the most constant noise, fear, despair, and trauma, they are suffering from insomnia which leads to exhaustion.

The Israeli army snatches bodies from the morgue and the graveyard of al-shifa hospital and relocates them to an unknown location. Not just numbers, but humans with stories and accomplishments.

In Israel, about 1,200 of their people were killed and at least 5,600 injured. In Gaza, at least 14,854 were killed, including 6,150 children, 36,000 and more were injured with 75% of them being children and women and 6,800 missing.



If you are frustrated that the world let this go on for more than 50 days now, let me remind you this is how Palestinians have felt for the past 75 years. You might be asking what does this have to do with me? I am sure that if you were struck under the rubble not knowing if you, your friends, your family, or your people would stay alive, you would want the world to see you, and what they're doing to you, you would want the world to scream with you. You don't need to be Muslim to support Palestine, you just need to be human!

Student Name: Emiliano Pineda  
 Grade: 8  
 School: Albright Middle School  
 Title: Essence of Reality  
 Category: Science Fiction & Fantasy  
 Key: Gold Key  
 Educator: Megan Kelly

## Essence of Reality

August 19, 2037—I'll never forget that fateful day.

It was an unexpected day. The sun illuminated strongly through the azure sky. A gale breeze sharpened my face as I embarked on my journey to school. The trees were swaying to the tune of the wind. For a moment, everything appeared to be perfect. Unbeknownst to me, this would not last any longer.

The illusion of perfection unveiled itself as a radiant glow appeared on the horizon. I continued to school, unaware of the impending peril. The disaster would soon begin and it was nothing I would have ever expected. Suddenly, a rapid barrage of fireballs began to paint the landscape. What was once trees, crops, or buildings became a scarred wasteland. Earth became a canvas of destruction.

I fell to my knees in dismay. I was weak. I was weak, but then I caught it. I caught a glimpse of hope. This glimpse of hope had emerged as a cave. Local superstition has always been that anyone who entered the cave has yet to return.

However, I had no choice. The once ill-fated cave had now become my beacon of hope. Immediately, I sprinted faster than ever toward this cave. Adrenaline ran vigorously throughout my body as I evaded the blazing doom. I dove straight into the cave, barely making it as the unstable entrance was on the verge of collapse.

Unexpectedly, the temperature quickly plummeted despite the infernal apocalypse occurring right outside. The absence of light consumed me as I sat, recuperating from what had recently occurred. In my peripheral vision, I could see a dim glow from an unknown source.

Compulsed by a mysterious energy, I was urged to follow this light within the abyss. As I explored deeper, it became even colder. So freezing, my fingers grew numb. Soon, I discovered the source of this mysterious light, and I was dazed. The origin was a colossal gem that engulfed the cave and radiated a powerful crimson. I reach out with my

right hand, becoming increasingly mesmerized by the gem. At this point, it was freezing, but that didn't stop me. As I approached the gem, I could sense an intense aura pulsating to the universe's rhythm. Step by step, I drew closer to the gem until I brushed my finger against it. It delivered a slight shock which I withdrew from.

The gem however called out to me. "Child, listen closely! What you experienced out there was the dawn of a new reality, the end of this reality as we know it. If you want any chance at survival, you must come forward. Come forward and keep your palms against me!" Completely entranced by the gem, I don't question it. I obey the gem's command solely due to my obsession with it.

Taking both my hands, I gently place them upon the gem's surface. Abruptly, everything goes blank. I was caught in a stasis, floating through the ethers of the universe. I could only explain this as a dream of eternity.

An innumerable amount of time passed before the dream came to a halt. Floating throughout the universe and time itself, I felt an ethereal essence. Something was approaching, but I didn't know what. I turn around only to see a ghostly, blood-red aura. I wasn't frightened by this aura, rather I was alleviated. Perplexed, I question the aura, seeking an answer to this anomaly.

"Who are you, how much time has passed? Where am I?"

"Do not worry child, I am The Great Uri, Essence of Reality, and I have saved you. Your body is currently in a coma state, and 78 years have elapsed"

"If it's been that long, when will I wake up again?"

"I shall awaken your body, but first we must discuss something important. Pay attention; I saved you, but that was not without purpose. I am in a critical state and require someone to fill the void I will now leave."

"Why me? I'm weak, and I'm constantly getting picked on at school. I'm nothing but a scared..."

"Silence your doubts child! There will be greater threats than school bullies to be concerned about now. Emrys, it has been an incessant amount of time that I have waited for the arrival of this moment."

"Wait, how do you know my name?"

“For the exact reason you have been drawn towards me, Emrys. Fate can be powerful when you know how to manipulate it. I have carefully observed you over the years, and despite your doubts; I knew you were the perfect successor to my inheritance. Come forward now child, the ritual is to begin.”

“Uri, I am still unsure of what is to come next, but I will put my confidence in you.”

“Wonderful Emrys! Now let us proceed...”

Uri takes her palms and places them against Emrys’s forehead. The first phase of the ritual is commencing, and all of Uri’s knowledge will be transferred to Emrys.

A scarlet pulse beams from her palms into my skull. Suddenly, visions of unexplainable phenomena flood my mind. The unknown distant voices chatter as I am overwhelmed by a strange fuzzy sensation. “Phase one of two concluded. Now let us finalize the ritual.” Uri says as she begins to fade away,,,

The second phase will now seal fate and complete the ritual. Emrys will become the first descendant of the Essence.

Uri places our palms together and locks them tight. Alternating from boiling red to a mellow yellow, she grew brighter than the sun until I was blinded.

Regaining my vision, I realized where I was. I was in the cave by the gem. Uri was not with me and she was nowhere to be found. I called out to the gem, hoping she would respond. No answer.

But one thing was apparent; Uri’s power thickly coursed through my veins. My current self was unrivaled by my previous self. I was no longer weak. I was rebirthed.

Emerging from the cave, I knew only one thing. Greater threats are destined to strike down this universe again. Whether that is today, tomorrow, a week, a month, a year, a decade, or a century; I will protect the universe.

It is fate.

Student Name: Jocelyn Chavez

Grade: 8

School: Albright Middle School

Title: Grave Secrets: A Tale of Deceit and Betrayal

Category: Dramatic Script

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Megan Kelly

Characters:

NIKOLI CARAMOR: male, seventeen years old, tall, brown eyes, brown ruffled hair, kind, handsome

EMMELINE WINSLOW: female, sixteen years old, tall, brown eyes, straight auburn hair, selfless

IRENE BELART: female, seventeen years old, average height, green eyes, straight brown hair, self-absorbed, arrogant

VICTORIA DORAL: female, sixteen years old, short, gray eyes, sleek blonde hair, kind, clumsy

EVERETTE DORAL: male, twenty-three years old, tall, brown eyes, auburn hair, observant

ANONYMOUS: 'TO NOT BE REVEALED'

SCENE 1:

Scene opens with Nikoli, Victoria, Irene, and Emmeline walking through the forest, on a dark evening

Emmeline:

(Confused) So you mean to tell me you guys-

Nikoli puts a hand to her mouth before she can finish her sentence and looks around

Nikoli:

(Cautiously) Don't say it aloud. Someone could be listening.

Emmeline:

(Jokingly) Look around Nikoli! We're in the middle of the woods. Who in their right mind would follow us out here?

Irene and Victoria walk up to the pair after discussing something in secret in a far-off section of the woods, still visible on screen. Irene walks over to Nikoli, whispering something in his ear. Nikoli nods.

Nikoli:

(Seriously) Now that we've told you about- well, you know, swear an oath to never tell anyone about tonight.

Emmeline:

(Sarcastically) Me? I would never. But you know, my father might be able to-

Irene:

(Irritated) I told you this was a bad idea! All because of your foolish hope in her. We should have known she'd turn against us.



Victoria:

(Frustrated, she yells at Nikoli) Just because you're in love with her does not mean she feels the same way towards you!

Emmeline:

(Sincerely, she turns towards Irene) Relax, I won't tell him if you don't wish me to. But at least consider-

Irene takes hold of a rock and bangs it against Emmeline's head, turning her unconscious. Nikoli rushes to Emmeline as Victoria stares in disbelief at the body

Irene:

(Unphased) What? Someone had to shut her up. We don't need anyone's help, especially her father's. As head chief, he'd throw us all into a cell!

Irene shoves Nikoli off of Emmeline and starts dragging her through the forest

Victoria:

(Victoria turns to Irene, curious) Irene? What do you plan to do with her?

Irene:

(Rolls her eyes) With it Victoria. She's dead and no longer a problem to us. Nikoli go get us some shovels. We have lots of work to do.

Nikoli walks off-screen as Victoria helps Irene drag the body farther off into the woods, ending Scene 1

## SCENE 2: SEVEN YEARS LATER

Scene opens with Everette working into an office building for his new job. He looks around but stops short at the sight of Irene

Everette:

(Walking over to Irene) Hey, you're Irene, right? I just arrived today for my new job, but I can't seem to find my office.

Irene:

(Irene doesn't bother to look up at him as she is unphased) That must make you Everette. You're going to have to learn how things run around here. Rule 1, I'm in charge. Now, follow me, if you please.

As Irene stands and walks away from her office, Everette quickly takes the flash drive out of her computer; he places it into his pocket, following quickly after her. As they walk, Everett takes note of a room with a plaque labeled Belart.

Irene:

(Rapidly) Here you are. If you need anything, call downstairs. I'll be busy.

Irene walks away after leaving Everett in front of an office, his last name scrawled on the plaque. Berlin. Everette walks over to his desk, looking around. Waiting around in a chair

for a few minutes, he glances at his watch then stands to look outside of his office. Taking one last glance around, he swiftly walks out of the room and towards Irene's office.

Once inside, he observes the room, noting how sophisticated it looks. Everette opens all of the drawers and cabinets in the office, looking for anything. Unsatisfied, he slams the drawers shut, throwing everything off of the table. Frustrated, he takes a seat in the chair behind the desk. As he looks around at the mess he's made, he finds a folded piece of paper that fell out of the vase when thrown off the desk. Everett picks up the piece of paper, pocketing it for future reference. Scene ends with Everette walking out of the room, slamming the door.

### SCENE 3:

Scene 3 opens in a cluttered apartment, piles of papers covering the floors. Everette walks into his apartment, sitting on the couch as he pulls out his laptop and places the flash drive into it.

As the screen loads, a password is required. Everette pulls out the paper from Irene's office, reading '06/19/2014'. Entering the date, the screen opens; Everette opens the files going to one labeled the exact date used for the password. Opening the file, images of Emmeline and Irene flood the screen. Scrolling down, the photos are replaced with documents. Opening one, he finds it to be titled, 'AUTOPSY; EMMELINE WINSLOW'. Intrigued, Everette opens yet another document labeled, 'CERTIFICATE OF DEATH: 06/19/2014.

Shocked with his readings, Everett shuts the computer, tears spilling. Everette sits in silence before receiving a phone call. He quickly composes himself.

Everette:

(Strained) Hello?

Anonymous:

(In a distorted voice) I've just sent the photos. Do what you must with them. (Line disconnects)

Everette puts the phone down slowly, confused. He opens his email, clicking on his newest notification. Picture after picture pop up on screen of Irene burying Emmeline's body in the woods, Nikoli and Victoria helping. Recognizing the people, Everette stands and walks over to a closet, taking out a box titled, 'SCHOOL'. He pulls out a yearbook, matching the faces to names. Nikoli Caramor, Victoria Doral, and of course, Irene Belart. Enraged at the sudden truth, Everette curses colorfully as he slams the yearbook shut. Scene 3 ends.

#### SCENE 4:

Scene opens with Nikolai, Irene, and Victoria sitting in a living room, each on their phones when they hear a knock at the door

Victoria:

(She stands and walks towards the door) That must be the pizza I ordered.

Irene:

(Annoyed) Seriously Victoria? Pizza? (Rolls her eyes) We just had dinner.

Victoria opens the door to the apartment finding an envelope signed Winslow instead of pizza. She slams the door, dropping to the floor seconds later

Nikoli:

(Standing in a hurry, he rushes towards Victoria, worried) Victoria! What's wrong? Did something happen?

Victoria:

(Stuttering in shock) N-No. It's just- there's a letter outside signed- Winslow...

Nikoli immediately looks towards the door, worry spread across his face as he opens it, picking up the envelope

Irene:

(Irene stands and brushes off her skirt as she walks towards Victoria, aggravated) Are you so mindless that you can't pay for a pizza yourself?

Nikoli:

(Nikoli opens the door, and picks up the envelope, throwing it at Irene) This is serious. Unless it's your cruel idea of a prank

She picks up the envelope ripping it open without hesitation. Her eyes scan the letter, fear shadowing her face for a fraction of a second. The letter should be done as a voice-over

My dearest friends,

How could you leave me for dead? I have merely hidden away until the time was right. I now know why you so desperately feared for your secrets to be revealed. Each one of you, yes that's right, each and every person reading this letter has a terrible secret they've locked under key, but it's my turn to reveal them. It's taken me years to uncover each twisted mystery, your demeanors merely being a facade to your true identities. I know more than you'd like to give me credit for. Meet me at the Black Pine woods. I hope

you don't mind the location I've chosen. But seeing as you were supposed to kill me there, well, now I'll use the location to my advantage. I expect the three of you to arrive, alone, I may add, at dusk... I expect you are all now looking at one another, wondering what kind of sick person would pull a joke like this. I assure you, this is very much true. Have fun knowing that tomorrow you'll no longer be friends. And possibly, no longer alive.

Take care,

-Winslow.

Irene:

(After reading the letter, she lets out a hollow laugh) Do you seriously think that I didn't kill Emmeline? (Sarcastically) That she somehow miraculously rose from the dead?

Victoria:

(Standing with the help of Nikoli, worry crossing her face) But Winslow was written on the front. And they want to meet us where we left- her.

Nikoli:

(Staring Irene down) I clearly remember you saying you don't believe in coincidences. So then what is this?

Irene:

(Accepting defeat) Fine, for the sake of my sanity, we'll go to the Black Pine woods tomorrow. We leave at dusk. (Irene walks into her room, slamming the door behind her. Not before throwing the letter into the fireplace)



Nikoli and Victoria are left staring at the burning letter, ending Act 3

SCENE 5:

Everett pulls his black cloak over himself as he steps out of his car and into the Black Pinewoods. He checks his phone, the screen displaying 5:43 pm, 6/19/21.

Everette:

Right on time (He states with a sigh, acknowledging the approaching figures of Irene, Nikoli, and Victoria)

Irene:

(Motioning towards Everette) What did I tell you guys? Does that look like Emmeline? I didn't think so. (She adds triumphantly as Victoria's eyes scan over Everette)

Everette:

(Gesturing towards the group) My dearest friends, welcome. I'm afraid my dear sister was unavailable to join us tonight. You see, seven years ago, on this very day, she was murdered. By whom you may ask? (Dramatic pause; dead silence) Well, none other than yourselves. (He says, a crooked smile plastered across his face)

Nikoli:

(His eyes go wide in surprise) Emmeline never mentioned having a sibling. Let alone, a brother.

Everette:

(Solemnly) I'm afraid our cards didn't play out as expected. You see, we're twins, separated at birth under the most unfortunate circumstances.

Irene:

(Under her breath) You were twins, not anymore. (A smile tugs at the corner of her mouth)

Everette:

(Nodding in agreement) Correct you are, Irene. Please, forgive my bluntness, but now for the reason you're truly here. I promised to reveal each one of you, and that I shall do. (He walks over to Nikoli) Starting with you.

Nikoli takes an uneasy step back

Everette:

(Mockingly, he circles Nikoli) Nikoli Caramor, twenty-four years old, single, alone, unwanted. It's no wonder you helped kill my sister. You resented her. Especially after-

Nikoli:

(Angrily) You know nothing of what happened between us...

Irene:

(Confused and upset) Between you? What aren't you telling us? What haven't you told us Nikoli?!

Everette:

(Happily) It seems as if you're already tearing each other apart. Excellent. Nikoli, you used to be very fond of my sister. A bit too fond, might I add. In fact, she was quite fond of you too. But not how you'd like her to be. You went out several times together, but each time she declined your offer to become a couple. Weeks after your most recent date, she had found a boyfriend. Pity. Emmeline might still be alive if she had chosen you.

Nikoli:

(Under his breath, his eyes glazed over with tears) I didn't want to...

Everette:

Ah, but you did. You helped with the murder of my sister. And for that, you shall pay. (Turning to walk over to Irene) Now, Irene Belart. Perfect, rude, Irene. How could anyone find out who you used to be? Jealousy does not become you, Irene.

Irene:

(Scoffs and folds her arms) I know not of what you speak.

Everette:

(A smile spreads across his face) Then allow me to remind you. Unwanted you were and still are. Loved by the wrong people. You used to have it all, with your parents being rich and glorious. But then they left you to fend for yourself, didn't they? You now cling to what little power you have left. (Turns to point at Victoria) Over her.

Nikoli:

(Confused) What is he talking about?

Irene:

(Laughs) Do you truly believe the lies he spills? Don't you realize what he's trying to do? He wants us to turn on each other.

Everette:

(Accusingly) I speak the truth. Yet, I am trying to turn you against one another. But that's not all. Irene, you know about Victoria. Her secret. (Victoria shudders) So, you make her pay you every month to keep it hidden. That's where your wealth comes from. You're a fraud, Irene. Of the lowest kind.

Irene:

(Angrily) You have no idea- (Everette cuts her off)

Everette:

(Holds up a hand) Victoria, I'm terribly sorry you've been pulled into this mess. But you did take part in the vile act. And for that, I must reveal what haunts you. It was dark. You were alone, scared, but above all, intoxicated to quite an extent. No one could drive you home, so you took the wheel. And by accident, you ran over a stranger. No one to you, of course. But brother to one, father to another. Frightened by what you'd done, you drove off. A hit and run, per se.

Victoria:

(Tears spilling down her face) What else could I have done?! I didn't think I'd had too much to drink...

Irene:

(Besides herself) How foolish are you? To intrude in our lives! To hurt my friends-

Everette:

(Let's out a hollow laugh) Friends Irene? I'm sure if Victoria weren't your prisoner she would never be your friend. That's why she sent the photos she did. Isn't that right, Anonymous? Adding in that last photo of yourself led me to discover you all. (Everette implies as he looks towards Victoria) And Nikoli? Oh, it seems as if I'd forgotten the whole reason you killed Emmeline! All because of your jealousy! Jealousy over the fact that Nikoli was in love with Emmeline, not you. Wake up, Irene. Who in their right mind would ever date you?

Nikoli, overcome with shock, stares at Everette. Victoria is doubled over, crying to herself.

Irene:

(Outraged) You are horrid! You don't understand anything! (Irene charges at Everette, slapping him across his face.)

Everette:

(Shoves Irene to the ground) I suppose that was to be expected.

In the heat of the moment, Nikoli rushes to Irene making sure she's okay. Once she's standing he punches Everette. The two start fighting; Victoria stares in utter shock and Irene smirks the whole time.

Everette:

(Throwing Nikoli off of himself) You're just upset you killed your one love!

Nikoli, his nose bleeding, takes Everette by his shoulders, shoving him into the ground repeatedly. After minutes of retaliation later, Everette lay motionless on the ground.

Victoria:

(Crying uncontrollably) You killed him! You've killed both twins! (Victoria turns towards Irene, then back at Nikoli) The both of you! You're just as bad as Irene! (Victoria runs off into the woods, not looking back)

Irene:

(Walks over to Nikoli tentatively) You're not mad, are you?

Nikoli:

(Tears spilling) Irene, just go. Don't ever talk to me again.

Irene:

(Reaches out to touch his shoulder) Let me help- (Nikoli cuts her off)

Nikoli:

(Angrily, he yells at Irene) Just go! (Under his breath) Go, before I do something else I might regret...

Irene runs away, not looking back; Nikoli stares at his hands to Everette's body, ending Scene 5.



Student Name: Roqeebah Shittu

Grade: 10

School: Kerr High School

Title: Grief of a Tired Voice

Category: Poetry

Key: Gold Key

Educator:

1: I Cannot See

I can't see the stars

Darkness is plunged into the clouds

Wind is whipping the trees

Their branches breaking down in acquiescence

I can't see the terra firma

Crumbled bricks and

shattered portrait glass obscure it

A girl is smiling from all I can see of the shredded pages

Of a family album with a last name no one is left to claim

I can't see the entirety of their countenances

Not even the wrinkles and lines

That my fingers used to trace

Who owns this singed body that used to wink at me?

I can't see the future

Nor the past

The two of them warping into one

Ghastly melody of the present

I cannot see myself

Allowing this to continue

But my bones are liquid lava

And my voice is billowing desert dust

And the sea is drawing ever nearer

And I am not certain I can brave the tides

2: Lilies

Water lilies

"Careful Zahiya"

Don't go too far in the river

Beneath its surface is death and mud

With a maw ready to engulf you

I know we had

Water lilies and coconut

For breakfast

For lunch

And for dinner

But there is still this hope within me

That “you’ll have better Zahiya”

Go to school

Pay heed to what your teachers tell you

Don’t let them find you incompetent

Don’t be content with these

Water lilies

Here, before you go

Have another rapped in fish

For I pray it be your last

3: Resitant “Terrorist”

Sequestered beneath the floorboards

-The two with the incessant creak

Groaning under the weight of my feet

-Is the entirety of my family

Harsh banging rapping into a song  
Thoughts start to dance but I hush them with my stance  
Wood splinters as the door bursts upon  
Weapons I've never glimpsed before point at me

I am under arrest for refusing to rest  
While my country folk bled out on olive soil beds  
I tilt my lips as Mother attempts to conceal me from them  
Because I know that for the sake of all my people  
I shall not be sequestered beneath the floorboards.

4: Flag bearer

Banished is she  
The bearer of the "Third World" flags  
Her tears are the artificial rivers of geometric borders  
Her hair is the leaves of deforestation's victims  
She is clad in the blood of a million starved children  
Vengeance runs through her Antarctic gelid veins  
Banished is she  
The bearer of the "Third World" flags

## 7: Prejudiced Identity

I am not a song — I am the bird that sings it

I am not a leaf — I am the forest that shelters it

I am not a drop — I am the river it flows in

I am not a name — I am the person who owns it

But to you

I am a mere number — with a death date beside it

## 6: The Deafness of Silence

Maybe it was not our fault

That we were too weak to shout

Loud enough for our voices to matter

As the last of the glass windows shatter

Open your eyes dear world

Do you not have vision?

That allows you to discern

Sentiment from scorn?

Is it that you think

That after centuries of oppression

The world has gained humanity?

Enough to stop this insanity

I would blame you if you didn't know

About the bombs dropping on hospitals

Or the innocents imprisoned

The way "equality" envisioned

Actions are the fruit

Words are merely seeds

When will we give truth to what we spew

Before we are forced to rip as we sew?

Student Name: Tran Nguyen

Grade: 9

School: Kerr High School

Title: Grown

Category: Poetry

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Safraz Ali

Grown

Young and cheerful.

Colorful papers scribbled by crayons.

Wooden blocks and dolls played.

Oblivious to the world around you.

Schools look so big but yet so small.

Sweet times now lost in time.

Drained and in the blues is what you are,

From the red marks and lengthy papers.

Grasping for the future you want to see.

Playthings are now replaced with skincare.

Dressed in black as you watch those pass,

While creating new ones.

White strands start appearing.

Your youth is over.

It's time to live on till death takes you away.



Student Name: Princess Eche  
Grade: 11  
School: Kerr High School  
Title: HowTo BeThe Perfect Wife  
Category: Short Story  
Key: Gold Key  
Educator: Ayn Nys

HowTo BeThe Perfect Wife

October 25, 1920

Dear Diary,

As I sit down to pour my thoughts onto these parchment sheets, I find myself enveloped in a mixture of excitement and anticipation that I can hardly contain. Thinking about being with someone who's gonna be my partner forever, it's like a total explosion of emotions that I can't really put into words, you know? Like, I'm daydreaming about all this super romantic stuff and it's just making my dreams all mushy and lovey-dovey! I feel so, so excited and like I can't wait for something amazing! It's like, in the not-so-far-away time, I'm going to be a loving wife, and oh, boy, that idea makes my heart do happy flips and jumps! Imagine having this person who's not just my partner, but also my secret-telling friend forever and ever. They're gonna be all in, and that's like a forever kind of love, you know? I've been dreaming about it, and my dreams are all blushing with the colors of romance!

Come on now, the very idea that there exists a soul out there, destined to be compatible with mine in a tapestry of shared experiences, is both mesmerizing and intoxicating.

In these moments of reflection, I often find myself envisioning the kind of life I aspire to create alongside my future husband. Drawing inspiration from the beautiful example set

by my own parents, I yearn to cultivate a relationship that mirrors the connection they share. My father owns a huge automobile company that keeps him occupied until the sun sets, yet the bright smile that graces my mother's face when he returns home is a testament to the loving bond they share. The anticipation that builds throughout the day, leading up to that magical moment when he crosses the threshold, must be an experience beyond words. I can almost feel the suffocating aroma of culinary delights dancing through the air as I imagine myself preparing a sumptuous feast for my beloved husband.

As I pen down these thoughts, dear diary, I can't help but smile at the journey that lies ahead. The path to becoming the wife I aspire to be is paved with dreams, aspirations, and a deep-rooted desire to build a love story that stands the test of time.

October 26, 1920

Dear Diary,

How delightful it is to once again find myself in the company of these sheets, ready to weave the tapestry of my thoughts and experiences. Today I celebrated my 10th birthday!

Today's celebration bore a gentler shade, as my father's duties whisked him away on a demanding business trip. His absence, though, was cushioned by the delicate imprint of his morning kiss on my cheek at sunrise.

I ventured into the town of New York City, late afternoon. My main goal was to find the best cake for my birthday, one that would go perfectly with the pretty pink candles that would light up my cake. Each candle was like a little chapter in my life story. While I was walking around the city, I saw something really strange. There were lots of ladies who looked a lot like my mom, but they were acting completely different. Instead of being happy and smiling, they seemed really mad, like a bunch of angry clouds. They were

shouting and holding signs, like a big, noisy parade of disagreement. But my mom just smiled at me, which made me forget about all the angry stuff going on around us.

Finally, as our walk almost reached 2 hours, I found the cake. Not just any cake, but a cake with jello, blended icing, sprinkles, and big swirls. So in other words, the perfect cake.

On the way home, I saw a newspaper with a picture of my dad and his company with the words "Misogyny." Weird huh? I'm not sure what that really means, but when I asked my mother, she completely dodged my question.

Finally let me tell you about the most important part of my day. The feeling of the candles being lit all around the cake filled me with joy as I waited patiently until my mother lit the last one. I had about twenty seconds to think of the perfect wish. What was my wish you may ask?

To be the perfect wife!

October 27, 1920

Dear Diary,

Today, my father came in, almost like a big raging bull, screaming how a group of women vandalized and protested his company. My mother welcomed him home with a warm hug but my dad pushed her away. I've never seen my dad like this. The feeling of fear rushed over my body as I heard my mom and dad arguing in their sealed bedroom. Why was my dad yelling at my mom? Why did the house feel quieter as their voices grew louder and louder?

To reduce the amount of screaming I heard throughout the house I hid under the bed. Soon enough, I fell asleep. However, upon my awakening, I crawled from under the bed and peeped at my parents... fighting... no... hugging?

They were hugging?

I was so confused; it was as if napped for a whole year. I proceeded to flood my mom with questions. How did she manage to tame such an anger that kneaded itself into my father? From my mothers answers, I've come up with a list on how to calm down a man.

Talk in a charming, feminine low voice.

Tell him how amazing he is.

Tell him how much he is needed.

Wow, men are so easy. All I need to do is that? Pfft, I can do that in my sleep. Being a wife seems so easy! In the end, we all ate dinner together, laughed together, and everything just felt like home again. As usual my mom tucked me in, kissed me on the cheek, and told me how I was loved..

October 28, 1920

Dear Diary,

It's like my mom was lying to me. So, today, when I went to greet her, I noticed she had this huge, super dark bruise on her eye. Seriously, it was like the darkest black eye you can imagine! She told me when she went outside the screen door hit her face, which was kind of weird. I mean, when did my mom step out of the house? It didn't quite add up, you know?

As the day went on, I couldn't help but notice that my parents were acting all strange. They used to talk to each other a lot, but now it was like their conversations were getting shorter and shorter. They barely spoke at all! My mom, though, kept trying to get close to my dad, like giving him kisses, hugs, and she even tried talking to him, but he just ignored her. It was so weird. I started thinking maybe I should rethink the list I made. My

mom was doing everything perfectly, but he didn't seem to care at all. Was something wrong?

And as the sun started going down, the whole house just felt like it was closing in on us. Like, it was getting super suffocating, and I couldn't figure out why. It was this big mystery, and I couldn't stop wondering about it.

October 29, 1920

Dear Diary,

My father's face wore a deep expression of anger as he held in his hands the latest edition of the newspaper, which had once again ridiculed his company. The words and images on those pages seemed to taunt him, casting a shadow over his usually cheerful self. In the midst of his feelings, my mother stood by his side, her voice soothing and her touch reassuring as she gently assured him that everything would eventually turn out fine. Despite her comforting words, there was an unspoken understanding among us all that the situation was far from promising.

In an attempt to raise my father's emotions, my mother decided to prepare his favorite meal, pouring her love and care into each step of the cooking process. The enticing aroma filled our home, but even the scents and flavors of her cherished dishes couldn't take away the heavy cloud of disappointment that hung over our family that evening. However, my mother and I came up with a plan to cheer him up. We decided that if the food doesn't work, getting his favorite beer, Double Diamond, would.

As the clock ticked on, it became clear that these late-night adventures fell upon my mother's shoulders, as I was bound by the constraints of bedtime. With a gentle touch, she tucked me snugly into bed, planting a loving kiss on my cheek and assuring me of her affection before embarking on her mission into town to find the drink. As I lay in the dimly lit room, I couldn't help but wonder about the lengths my mother was willing to go to restore happiness to our family. The night was quiet, save for the distant hum of the town beyond our windows. I eagerly anticipated waking up to the prospect of a happier, more harmonious family once again, hopeful that her efforts would bear fruit and bring us the joy we so desperately craved.

October 30, 1920

Dear Diary,

"Time of death 9:42 am," were the last words I heard from the nurses before I ran out the room crying. Overwhelmed by the weight of the situation, I couldn't bear to stay any longer. Tears streamed down my face, blurring my vision as I hastily made my way out of the room. The walls seemed to stretch on forever as I tried to escape the unbearable reality within those walls.

My mother's life had been tragically cut short, not by the hand of some faceless, cinematic serial killer, but by the very man she had entrusted her heart to—my own father. It was a horrifying truth that shattered the image of the loving, devoted spouse she had always wanted to believe he was. She had dedicated herself to him with unwavering trust and love, tirelessly working day and night just to catch a fleeting glimpse of his smile. Her sacrifices and devotion were now a painful reminder of a life lost too soon and the betrayal that had torn our family apart.

This morning, my mother overslept after a late night out, leaving our kitchen devoid of the usual comforting scent of breakfast. As the sun's early rays crept into our home, it became obvious that the familiar aroma of her cooking was absent. My father, jolted from sleep and gripped by frustration, burst forth from his bedroom, his face etched with anger. His voice echoed through our small kitchen, a rush of fury aimed at my mother, demanding to know why there was no sign of breakfast. Panic gripped my mother as she rushed to make amends. She scrambled to gather ingredients, her hands trembling as she tried to regain control of the situation. But before she could even ignite the stove, my father's rage eclipsed all reason. In a terrifying moment, his anger manifested into something monstrous. With a swift and violent motion, he reached out, his hands closing around my mother's delicate neck. The world seemed to slow as I watched in helpless horror. Her eyes widened with terror, and her gasps for air grew desperate and frantic. Time froze as her life was cruelly left before my eyes, a harrowing tragedy etched forever into my memory.

My mother is gone.

December 12, 1920

Dear Diary,

It's been a long time since I last built up the courage to open this diary. Today marks the final entry, as I've made the painful decision to surrender this record to the police in a desperate plea for justice, a sign of hope that justice may finally be served for my beloved mother.

All those years, I had held my mother in the highest regard, viewing her as the model of the "perfect wife." Her grace, her unwavering love, her endless sacrifices—all were engraved in my heart as the qualities that defined her. Yet, the cruel irony of life has left me bewildered, for it was this very idealized image of her that ultimately led to her demise at the hands of the man she loved.

My mother was unquestionably an example of what society deemed the perfect wife. She gave her all, never once wavering in her devotion. And still, I find myself grappling with the haunting question: How much more does a woman have to embody this idea of a "perfect wife" just to satisfy the insatiable demands of a man?

As I pen these words, a heavy sadness weighs down upon me, and my heart aches for the mother I loved and the justice she deserves. My hope now rests in the hands of the authorities, as I offer this diary as a testimony to her life and the tragedy that befell her, praying that it may serve as a beacon of truth and a testament to her enduring love and strength.

Student Name: Rachel Draper

Grade: 8

School: O'Donnell Middle School

Title: I am Nothing More than a Campfire Story

Category: Science Fiction & Fantasy

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Kaneisha Hicks

## I'm Nothing More than a Campfire Story

They say it's what's on the inside that counts, but the inside of our old, rusted car is just...unpleasant. I was taught to appreciate the cheap stuff we have, but come on! Can't we at-least tidy it up here? My parents tell me I don't understand the importance of saving money, but I'm super smart! I know I want to be a teacher when I grow up, I love arts and crafts, and pi equals 3.14...or was it 3.12...? Eh—it doesn't matter. What I know is I want to teach art. It's an expression, a story, it's as glorious as the powdery blurring sky out my window. Maybe one day I'll be able to afford the expensive, lavish, paint sold at those fancy stores that look like museums.

As I'm gazing down at the snowy fields of Germany, I hear a soothing, breathy voice. "Irene, we're almost there." It was the quiet, murmuring of my...mother? Wait—that can't be right. My mother is so outspoken and bold. She's almost scarier when she's undisturbed. Then, I hear a grainy, booming voice. "Dear, you know how we're short on money, and—well..." He stutters for a bit as if he's looking for the right words that don't exist. "Just remember you're helping mommy and daddy, and that's all that matters, right?" That voice belongs to my father, except he sounds softer than usual. I choose not to respond, and continue to stare out the window.

We've been driving for what feels like centuries. There's a scarce amount of buildings and I can't shake this uneasy feeling piercing through my stomach. All of a sudden, the car comes to a halt, shaking me around like I'm a ragdoll. This startled me, but what's truly terrifying is my destination. I climb hesitantly out of the car, and I'm greeted with such a sorry sight. It's an oversized gray, steel, building, with no windows, filled to the brim with gallons of eerie silence. I scan my surroundings and spot a small town in view, but other than that there's just snow, upon snow, upon snow. There's one tree, one road, one store that's nothing like a museum, and one long way home.

I remember this one phenomenon my grandma once told me about. "A gut feeling." It's supposed to alert you when you're in danger. I've never had one. That was until I overheard my mother say the name, "George Friedrich." As soon as I heard that somber whisper, I knew what being in danger felt like. A tall, slender, man, with dirty



blonde hair, wearing a tuxedo, emerged from the steel door. It was as if the mention of his name summoned him from the depths of hell. He introduced himself far too formally as he shook our hands. He has a quiet, somewhat squeaky, shrill of a voice. It's as if he's been to a concert and his vocal chords are working overtime. "Hello Irene. I'm going to take care of you while your mother and father are busy." I don't speak. "Ah there's no need to be so quiet, dear, you're going to be just fine. You have me and my assistants, Ahmed Ferlach and Sam Bauer." Two young men in lab coats ascend from behind Friedrich. They look to be in their 30's. They introduce themselves and next thing I know, I'm being dragged inside the desolate steel building. My parents, thankfully, walk in as well. At-least people I trust are with me.

My parents, Friedrich, and Bauer go inside a small office. I was told to wait in the main hall with Ferlach. I plop down onto a grand couch and Ferlach sits next to me. "Are your parents nice to you?" His gentle, calm, voice startles me. I'm not used to gentle adults. "Of course! Why do you ask?" All of a sudden, he wraps his arms around me and holds me in a tight hug. "I'm so sorry, Irene. You have to listen to me. I'll help you get out of here." I'm frightened by him for a moment, but I'm instantly soothed because he seems like a father. His voice is genuine, soft, and on the verge of tears. My mother and father rarely hug me anymore. I feel water escape from my eyes. I place my hand on my cheek in surprise as I'm not feeling sad. Why am I overwhelmed with emotions? Ferlach...or Ahmed let's go of me. "Your parents have done something...really bad. This might not make sense right now, but tonight I'll meet up with you, and I'll get you out of this hellhole.. ok?" He's right. I don't know what this man is yapping about but nevertheless, I nod my head. Then, I hear a loud creak. The door to the office opened.

Mother, father, Friedrich, and Bauer all walk out of the office. Friedrich speaks first, "Do you have anything else you want to say to Ms.Hermann?" My mother and father look abnormally merry. This creepy otherworldly grin is plastered onto my mom's face and my dad looks relaxed. My dad's voice is still loud as ever, "Goodbye Irene. You're going to stay here for a few days." "You're leaving me here?!" I'm speaking through sobs and I feel my throat closing up. My mother kneels to my level. She cups my teary face in her hands. "My sweet sweet Irene, we don't want to leave you, but you're just far too expensive to take care of. You always need this, you always want that, Charles even needed to pick up an extra job just to cover all of your expenses. I mean by doing this, mommy and daddy can be happy again. Don't you want that? Don't be selfish now, Irene." My mother kisses my forehead. It didn't feel comforting or kind though It felt like she'd stabbed right through my head and heart. My sobs and screams grow louder and my dad just rolls his eyes. "Come on, Ruth. Let's go." I watch my parents walk out the door.

Friedrich is dragging me upstairs into a dimly lit room filled with machinery from hell. Ahmed hands me a hospital gown and tells me to go change in a storage closet. I do

as he says. When I walk out, Friedrich and Bauer are talking next to a table covered with what seems to be makeup products. Bauer sees me. "Oh great, you're ready. Irene, we should probably tell you what's happening, but first! Come sit." I barely move, so he walks over and drags me away. I feel astronomically weak...so I do little to fight back. I'm being pulled onto one of those hospital beds, and my arms and legs are being tied down. "Listen, there's no way to sugarcoat this, your parents sold you. We're a makeup company and we need to test our makeup to be sure it functions normally instead of burning, causing a rash, melting your skin, etc. I mean we would use animals, but as you saw earlier there's not a single rabbit living in this part of town. We opted for human volunteers instead of poor innocent animals. We don't really want to cause you harm, but it's for the company. It won't hurt that much, don't worry." The sickening grin across his face outweighs any bit of comfort I might have felt from his words. I'm lying down, and I stare at the ivory white ceiling. The fluorescent light above me is flickering and one wall is entirely glass. I'm about to be experimented on. I try to brace myself for what terrible things they are going to put on my skin. I notice Ahmed is watching me from the glass. He looks sorrowful despite being a part of this lab. Falling asleep is my best option, but no matter what, my brain won't calm down. I look up and see Friedrich moving a syringe towards my eye.

Hours have gone by. I'm finally done. The torture felt like centuries. Every limb in my body hurts. They had like—50 products to test and only 7 actually worked. How could my parents do this to me? Why? Why? Why? Why? I can barely stand because my legs are covered in rashes. Neither Friedrich nor Bauer help me walk. I get to the door and Ahmed is crying. I don't know why. He's just as guilty as those two monsters in there. Ahmed escorts me down the stairs and leads me to what looks like a prison cell. It's a small room with a single bed, a single bathroom, and a single mirror. I try to sit down, but my stomach is being stabbed every time I move or take a breath. I look at Ahmed. "Why are you crying? You helped them do this to me...all of you. Everybody has let me down! You idiots!" Tears fall out my eyes and my sobs erupt the room. I start hyperventilating which sends me through waves of agonizing pain, but I can't do anything about my emotions. Ahmed sits next to me. His hands are wiping his tear soaked eyes. "Irene, I never thought...they would hurt people for money. They were my friends—I never expected this from George and Sam...I've stayed like a coward just to feed my family." We're sent into a frenzy of weeping. Several minutes pass as we try to manage our breathing. He finally breaks the silence. "Y'know...I have a daughter about your age...Sheila. You remind me of her. It sounded like my daughter was screaming...when you..." He pauses. "It just broke my heart." I attempt to slow my gasps of air, but even doing that causes a spike of pain to jolt up my spine. My throat is aching after my sobs and screams. I finally managed to blurt out, "Why didn't you help me?" He inhales. "Well...it's not that simple. It would be 2 against 1 and even then, George's much stronger than me. I've wanted to smack them upside their heads several times haha...but...I'm afraid of losing them. They've been my friends for 19 years...but that isn't an excuse to let them torture you." My tears have

ceased and my breathing has regulated. I remember when I was younger, I would fall asleep thinking about how I wanted to change my parents. Kinder, softer, gentler, everything a good parent should be. Ahmed reminds me of those unrealistic fantasies. "But our "friendship" doesn't matter anymore. I don't want to see anymore innocent people get hurt. I don't care how old their victims are, if they volunteer or not, I DON'T CARE! Screw this STUPID company, let's end this!" Ahmed stands up. "Here's the plan." He looks around to check that not a single soul can hear us. "Tonight I have the keys to the weapons Arsenal, I'm going to get piles of TNT, a lighter, and the heftiest hammer we have. I don't have the keys to the front door, so unfortunately you'll have to break through." I feel even weaker hearing those words. "I...I don't think I'm strong enough right now to...break down the door." He frowns, but still keeps that determined look on his face. "I don't want you to have to go through another day of this torture. Please, we have to do this tonight. We can stop this once and for all." I contemplate this idea. Even if I escape, other people will be sacrificed for the sake of cosmetics. Y'know what? If I'm going down I'm taking this hellhole with me. I look Ahmed in the eyes, and outstretch my hand. "Let's do this."

While Ahmed is gone, I decide to look around for a moment. I look in the mirror to see how I've changed. My hair is matted because of the shampoo they tried, and my eyes are red from crying. My left eye is especially inflamed. That's most likely because of the solution they injected into my eye. I will never forget that feeling of a syringe penetrating my vision. The skin on the bottom half of my face is peeling, and there's an outstretched scar in between my eyes. That's probably from the "contour" they put on me. My hospital gown is wrinkled and dirty. My legs are covered in rashes along with a plentiful amount of enraged scars, and my hands have turned red. That nail polish and lotion really needs some tweaking doesn't it? I gently press my hand against my burned, deformed face. Just a few hours ago I was with my parents, at my hell of a home which honestly feels like heaven right now, painting the sky. I really want to finish that painting...

Ahmed returns. He has a full backpack (I'm guessing from the TNT,) and he has an expensive heavy-duty hammer in his left hand, along with a lighter in his right. "Here. We can do this whenever you're ready. How are you feeling? Are you ok?" I reach for the hammer and nearly drop it. My hands aren't feeling super right now (y'know, cause they're covered in burns,) but I didn't expect to not be able to carry this. I manage to hold the hammer in my trembling hands. "Feeling better than when they tried that stupid eyeshadow." He chuckles a bit. I laugh too. "Alright. It's showtime." He scans his surroundings again. "Go down the hallway and make a left. Go forwards until you see the office. The front door should be right next to it." "Got it. So...then I just go ham on the door?" He smirks. "Yeah. I'll distract them and unleash the bomb. Just—take out all your frustrations on that door. It's therapeutic I promise." I came to a sudden realization. "Wait...won't you die too?" He looks solemnly at me. "I'll light the bomb in my backpack

and...just like—jump out a window.” I smirk. “That’s stupid.” He smirks too. “I know but having a chance to live is better than dying.”

Next thing I know, I’m sprinting down the hallway, aching in every step. I run for so long across the rusted, disgusting, trashy floors...until I finally make it to the front door. It’s like I can still hear my parent’s voices in the office as they were signing my life away. The whispers infuriate me. I’m standing face to face with the door that started all this nonsense. I raise my weapon, and swing.

Swing, after swing, after swing, and my arms are howling in pain. I feel stupid for not acknowledging it, but I’m too far into this to give up now! One final swing and the door collapses with a loud thud. I hear voices coming closer and closer, and a loud bang behind me but that doesn’t matter. I’m too busy running to my freedom to worry about something so minute. Running, running, running, running, down the hill. The small town is in reach. I only see a few people in what I assume to be town square, and all of them are far too busy to notice me. That doesn’t matter to me though. I hide behind a house and sit against the wall. My hands and arms are covered in blood and my skin is raw, but none of that matters. None of this matters now. I gaze up at the laboratory and watch the blur of Ahmed plunge down out a window, tumbling down the side of the stainless-steel wall. Milliseconds after he’s out of the laboratory, the entire building is engulfed in a barrage of fire and smoke. Ahmed is now racing towards me. It amazes me how he’s still standing after that fall. He kneels down in front of me and outstretches his hand. “Irene, come with me. We’re going to get medical help, and you can live with me and my daughter.” He looks me up and down. His face turns pale. “Oh shoot! Irene...I’m so sorry. I didn’t hold them back long enough...” I’m overwhelmed with confusion, until I look down at my chest. There’s a big hole where my stomach is supposed to be. I guess that bang was the sound of a gun shooting a bullet through my life. “I knew he didn’t want you to expose the horrors of the company, but I never expected him...to kill.” I wipe my lips. There’s blood on my hands and blood pouring out my mouth. I manage to croak out a few final words. “Let me...die...please.” I don’t realize it, but I’m smiling. Maybe it’s the feeling of revenge or the feeling of saving others, but I feel fantastic. Despite my injuries...I feel amazing. Ahmed has tears pouring out of his eyes. “No-no I can’t leave you here to die.” “Please. I feel satisfied. I’ll be able to paint anything I want when I join the clouds in the sky. I’ve heard it’s peaceful there.” Ahmed stands up shakily. “Goodbye Irene. I’ll remember you. I promise.” “Thank...you...Ahmed.” Those are the final words I manage to murmur. “Thank you” isn’t that what I’ve said all my whole life to people who’ve done nothing for me? Yeah it is...except, this time, I really do mean it, and I don’t regret saying it.

A citizen eventually found my body and reported it to the police, Ahmed eventually fled the country with his daughter and is living peacefully in Sweden, and the small town eventually caught on fire and nobody knows why. Some say that I’m a vengeful monster

who struck the town with lightning because nobody helped me when I was clearly in need. Other people say that I'll haunt any soul who steps foot anywhere near the town or laboratory. I don't mind though. I'm too busy painting in the sky. The sky...that's what I've always wanted to paint and now I'm a part of it. I am at peace. Even though now I'm nothing more than a campfire story.

Student Name: Ivana Escoto Villegas

Grade: 10

School: Kerr High School

Title: I Would Have Said Yes

Category: Science Fiction & Fantasy

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Safraz Ali

The sun falls from the sky on the windiest day of November.

It's sudden and blinding. The concrete beneath August's feet cracks as buildings crash down around him. He pushes his foot down and propels himself forward against the wind, rock crumbling as he moves.

The streets are empty, but August can see families through the windows. Parents watch TV as their children play at their feet, all too busy in their own world to notice the one falling apart outside their door.

He reaches the house he's looking for after a few minutes. The wind whistles and the cold threatens to freeze August's hands.

"Wren?" he whispers, afraid of the abusive ghosts that torment the dull home. He picks up one of Wren's old books when a loud thump suddenly echoes through the room.

He shoves the book behind his back.

Glass shatters.

Thump.

August backs away slowly, careful not to make any more noise than he already has.

Thump.

Thump.

Thump.

The figure draws nearer and nearer until it's across the room. August cries Wren's name before he bolts out the door, hoping with every bone in his body it'll be him behind August.

He runs and runs and runs until his legs weaken and his sight darkens.

There's an easy fix. A usual fix. Breathe in, breathe out. He's done it a million times. Except that even in the lush greenery of the forest he has played in since he was a child, the air around him has grown thin. August opens his mouth and lets whatever air that's left make its way down his dry throat. He lets his lungs expand and retract, hoping even the littlest of oxygen will pass through.

He quietly begs his heart not to give up on him.

Fallen leaves rustle and crunch as he slowly finds his way to Old Grace, but the world is silent otherwise.

The poor car is falling apart, bit by bit, bolt by bolt. Cheap metals returning to the earth they once came from. Old Grace is a decaying sanctuary, his and Wren's own little discovery. Their own little bit of magic. They'd spent hours in this vehicle pretending, just pretending. August pretended it was a portal to some other world where thunder didn't hide in his chest. Wren pretended it was a way out, an escape from the bruises on his arms.

The world spins below him, his body collapsing against the car door. Careful not to touch the poison ivy that grows from the wheels, August climbs onto the backseat. He finds Wren's battered book still in his hand. A dusty old copy of Alice in Wonderland August's parents had given Wren for his 11th birthday. He drops the book on the front seat and lets his fingers run across the holed fabric of the backseat. He sits there for a while, making futile attempts at keeping oxygen inside his lungs and his heart inside his chest.

Ragged gasps rock through his body, pure fear clawing at his neck. Everything becomes faint and August sends out a quiet prayer to whatever God is willing to listen. Don't let me die, he pleads. Don't let this be my end. But no God answers and no angel comes to his rescue. All that is left is him and the failing organ between his lungs.

He closes his eyes and continues to beg. Please. Please. Please. Don't let the sun fall from the sky.

He is lost. He is lost. He is found. A divine being places its hand on his chest and tells him to inhale. Oxygen drips down his throat and into his empty lungs.

"Breathe," the divine being says. Warmth and a strange familiarity flow from the voice and into August, but he can't quite pinpoint where he knows it from. He takes a breath anyway. In and out. In and out.

His heart no longer pounds out of rhythm and the thunder in his ears quiets down as the world begins to clear. He opens his eyes and finds Wren waiting for him. The sun still in the sky.

"August," Wren whispers as he lightly taps August's forehead. "Augustus Flores, wake up."

"Wren?" He brings his hand to lightly rub his eyes open before he sits up. "What time is it?"

"Five a.m.," he says like it's nothing. Like the sun isn't just barely rising. Like the dark hasn't just begun to retreat. Like this won't get him in serious trouble.

"Why are you not at home?" August asks, suddenly wide awake. "You're supposed to be home, there's no way they let you out." His feet drag as Wren—very impolitely—hauls him out of his room. "How'd you even get out of there?" When they were younger, August had always joked Wren's home was like a fortress, but not one you would feel safe in. No, it was one you couldn't wait to get out of. One you hoped the bullets and bombs would tear down. He often finds himself wishing it hadn't been true.

"I climbed out the window." Wren pours him and August orange juice and lays out the bread August's parents had brought home from their bakery last night in front of them.

August takes a seat at the counter and watches Wren move through the kitchen. It wasn't his kitchen, but to anyone who passed by it would certainly look that way. "I thought they super glued those shut?"

"Nah, they just threatened to." His hair sticks out from where he's knelt down, rummaging through the drawers behind the counter. "Did you guys run out of napkins?"

"Left door, in the back, behind the glitter." August points, even though he knows Wren won't see it.

"Thanks." Wren comes back up and deposits a glitter-covered napkin next to his orange juice.



"This is unsanitary."

"It's not."

"It is." August picks up the napkin. "I can't use this."

"Sure you can."

"Nuh-uh."

"Uh-huh."

They go on like that for about a minute when Wren unexpectedly grabs the napkin and rubs it all over August's face.

"Wren!" August pushes him away and pulls a serious face, trying hard not to laugh. "That's disgusting."

"It's just glitter," Wren says, loud laughter spilling through his lips.

August frowns at him, but he isn't angry. He never is when it comes to Wren. If anything, he loves seeing the mischievous and loud side of him. It means he isn't hiding. It means there's no need to mask who he is with a polite smile and a quiet "yes, sir". It means Wren feels safe. Safe with August. And August, well, he truly doesn't know a greater honor.

Wren pokes him in the stomach until August finally surrenders and lets his smile shine through.

August is glad Wren feels safe with him, because he should, seeing as August has always felt safe with Wren.

"Why are you here?" August finally asks, wiping glitter off his face.

Wren looks away and takes a bite out of August's concha.

"You dreamt of the end of the world?"

"Yes," Wren answers, kicking a rock off the dirt road.

"Like, the end the end?" August asks, trailing behind him.

"Yes."

"That's an," he pauses, taking a breath. "Interesting dream."

Wren slows down and waits for him to catch up. "And what did you dream about?" he eventually asks, taking August's hand, and letting their fingers slide together.

"I dreamt the sun fell from the sky," he breathes out, tilting his head down. He can't help but look at where his and Wren's hands are intertwined. Wren's hands are smooth and cold, a tinge of purple showing on his knuckles. August quietly wonders if Wren feels cold. If he feels like a walking corpse because sometimes that's what he looks like. And that worries August. But Wren won't talk about it and August won't be the one to force it out of him, so he stays quiet and tries to keep Wren warm for as long as he can, until his brittle match burns out. "I dreamt my heart fell from my chest."

This pulls Wren up short. He pulls August back when he tries to keep on walking.

"What else?" he mutters, his thumb lightly rubbing August's hand, worry passing through his eyes.

"Buildings were collapsing but nobody else noticed." Wren turns to look at him. "I looked for you," he hesitates, unsure of how Wren will react. "But I only found your father." Wren turns away. "I also couldn't breathe, even in the forest. But it wasn't like the other times, it was like there was no oxygen left. And I wasn't the only one, all the birds were quiet and I'm pretty sure I saw a deer lying on the ground. It was like a slow mass extinction."

"So the end of the world."

August closes his eyes. "Yes, Wren, I dreamt of the end of the damn world." He doesn't see it, but he is sure Wren is smiling.

"Could've just said that."

"You asked."

"Exactly, and you could have started with 'I dreamt of the end of the world'."

“Oh shut up, I didn’t realize it at first, okay?” August argues. “I thought it was just me. Everyone else was fine and I just remembered the deer liked five minutes ago.” He opens his eyes and finds Wren indeed smiling at him. But the smile is sad and grief-like and nothing like Wren. “What?” He asks him. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

Wren turns away, still smiling. “No reason.”

August frowns and begins to walk. Wren trails behind him. After a couple of moments of silence, Wren grabs August’s arm and gently pulls him back towards him. “What if it means something?”

“Like what?” August queries.

“Like the end is actually coming.”

August stops and looks at him.

“Oh come on,” Wren pulls him forward, silently asking for him to keep moving. “We both dreamt of it.”

“In very different ways,” August counters. “You dreamt of the moon collapsing and seas rising. That’s very different from the sun falling, taking oxygen and concrete buildings down with it.”

“Still.”

“Doomsday isn’t coming because we dreamt it, Wren.”

“It might,” Wren insists.

“It won’t.”

“Let’s find out then.”

“And how exactly do you suppose we’ll do that?”

“I don’t know, go to a scientist or something.”

August lets out a loud laugh at that. “You seriously think they’d listen to two fifteen-year-old boys coming to them about the end of the world? They’re gonna think it’s a prank.”

Wren frowns and stops to think. A moment later he shrugs and begins to talk. "Then we find out for ourselves," he proposes. "We'll wait it out. Do you know when yours was?"

August sighs, giving in. He always gives in. "I'm not sure of the day, I just know it was in November." He remembers seeing the calendar in Wren's house.

Wren tilts his head, trying to remember. "Mine was on Tuesday the twenty-first."

August waits for him to continue.

He doesn't. "What month?"

"Oh I don't know, that's all I got to see."

"So how are we gonna wait it out if we don't know when it is?"

"We do know when it is."

"Oh yeah," he tilts his head. "When?"

"November, Tuesday the twenty-first. We have exactly one week," Wren answers.

"You're just combining both of our dates?"

"Exactly, we both had two halves of a puzzle, I only connected them."

August doesn't say much after that, he just reaches for Wren's hand again, quietly hoping he'll never have to let go.

"Why are you so interested in finding out whether it is the end of the world and not just a silly dream?" August asks, looking at the calendar that hangs above his desk. The sun just barely rising over the horizon as he and Wren lay on his bed, waiting for his mom to call them down to help bake some pastries for their "journey".

"I don't know," Wren mutters.

August doesn't push, he takes his hand instead. He brings it up and begins to trace Wren's knuckles. They're still cold and purple, even with the thick stack of blankets the two boys have on top of them.

"I guess," Wren starts, his voice a little strained. "I just—I just want to know if there's a chance we can go together." He doesn't have to ask what he means.

"Give him more time," August had heard Wren beg that night at the hospital.

He squeezes his hand.

They stay there, wrapped in blankets, limbs tangled, pretending that just for a moment they are infinite.

"What would you have liked to be when you grew up?" Wren asks as they get into the car's dirty backseat, stepping over the poison ivy.

"I was thinking about doing something dealing with criminal justice and children, maybe a child protection worker or—or something like that." August turns to Wren. "You?"

"I'm not sure." He drops his head on August's shoulder. "Probably a doctor of some kind. I'd want to take care of kids too. Help them battle whatever illness they face."

August makes a quiet noise of agreement, his left arm coming to wrap itself around Wren's shoulders, his hand delving into his hair. "How righteous."

"You don't get to talk." Wren's voice comes out muffled, his face pressed against August's neck.

August only laughs. They lay in silence for about an hour, August gently kneading Wren's scalp while Wren listens to the feeble beat of his heart.

Eventually, Wren sits up and takes out the lemon cookies they'd helped August's parents make that morning. "Would you miss them?"

"Who?"

"Your parents?"

"Yes."

Wren frowns. "I don't think I'd miss mine."

August quietly thinks he wouldn't miss them either. The only good thing they ever did in his eyes was create Wren.

"I'd miss yours though," Wren continues. "I'd really miss yours."

"Want to know a secret?" They're leaning on opposite doors, their feet tangled together, shoelaces undone.

"What?" Wren asks, looking up from his backpack.

"Do you want to know a secret?" August repeats.

"Yeah."

He takes a breath, and his heart beats a little faster. "I saw the sticky note."

A beat of silence. "What sticky note?"

"The one on your chemistry notebook."

Realization crosses Wren's face and his pale face betrays him.

August smiles and thinks back on the moment he saw it. Wren had forgotten the notebook at August's house. He only meant to return it. But when he picked it up a purple square paper had fallen out. It had been a reminder, to ask August out on a museum date once the new exhibit opened up. He remembers not being able to look at Wren in the eye the next day when he'd finally returned it.

"Want to hear another secret?" he asks.

Wren warily nods his head.

"I would have said yes." The words are heavy and glorious and oh so very painful.

“What would you have done?” Wren asks him. “On the day, what would you have done?”

It’s hours later and August is lying across the backseat, his head on Wren’s lap.

“I probably would have held your hand.”

Wren continues to run his hands through August’s curls. “Would you have kissed me?”

“No.” August rolls his eyes. “I would not have.”

“Would to,” Wren laughs. “You wouldn’t be able to resist me.”

“Maybe,” he admits, fighting the tears forming in his eyes.

“It’s a shame, you know.” This one comes out wobbly. “We could’ve had an amazing future.” He’s looking out in the distance at something. August isn’t sure what. “The best story. We’d tell everyone about it.”

He reaches up, pulling a little at Wren’s hair, making him look at August. “Tell me about it.”

Wren smiles. “The first date would be the museum. I’d let you explain all the paintings to me even though I had already gone and searched up every one of the pieces in the exhibition online to make sure you’d like it. On our second date, I’d take you to karaoke. You’d sing one song, maybe two, just to appease me. But mostly it’d be me singing cheesy love songs to you. You’d pretend to hate it but you’d secretly love it.”

August laughs, taking Wren’s hand into his.

“We’d have a million more dates after that,” Wren continues. “For our anniversary I’d take you on a drive, with a fixed-up Old Grace. We’d end up in a field and we’d climb up to the roof and just lay there watching the stars, coming up with our own constellations.

And in a couple of years, you’d be working with kids, keeping them safe, getting them justice. I’d be a doctor, making sure they’re healthy, making sure they stay healthy.

Destroying any disease they might have.” He grips August’s hand tighter. “We’d also get a pet. You’d want a cat, I’d want a dog. We’d compromise and get a bunny.”

August hums in agreement. “You’d name it something stupid.”

Wren laughs. “Butter.” He says it so fast that August begins to think Wren had planned their life out ages ago.

“What?”

“Butter would be it’s name.”

“Butter?” He huffs out a small laugh. “That’s so ridiculous. I hate it.”

“You love it.” And the truth is he does, he really does. He could never hate something that came from Wren.

“I like our story,” he whispers, closing his eyes.

Wren gives his hand a light squeeze. “Me too.”

They’re asleep when it comes. The car shakes and sirens blare. Water pools on the floor of the car. They don’t let go of each other. Not for anything. They just hold on. August can’t breathe anymore. The air won’t go past his lips.

Lightning cracks in his ribcage.

He opens his eyes and finds the sun falling.

The world ends, their hands tangled together in the backseat of a rotting car.



Student Name: Isabella Luong  
Grade: 8  
School: Albright Middle School  
Title: In Another Universe  
Category: Poetry  
Key: Gold Key  
Educator: Megan Kelly

Universe 1

I have friends that I am forever grateful for.

I have a family, they take care of me as I care for them.

I live in a town, we are all fond of one another

I cannot help but feel left out.

I find that every child has a best friend

one that they will play with every day.

I see families often go out for family dinners

and play game nights.

Could my family grow close like that one day?

Maybe I will find someone to stand by me;

that way, I don't look like the odd one out.

Could I be treated as such?

Could I fit in?

Maybe, just maybe

In another universe, I felt a sense of belonging here.

Universe 2

Dear mother, would you love me?

Food is always on the table, your roof is over my head.

But would you add the extra sweetness to my dish? The extra pinch I always added in for myself?

Would you give me an extra blanket on cold days, even if you knew I could keep myself warm?

Would you?

Mom, would you wash my back one more time?

Would you?

Dear best friend, would you love me?

If I asked, would you remember my birthday?

Would you stay up until midnight to tell me?

Would you?

If I showed you how hideous I looked when I truly smiled, would you laugh with me or laugh at me?

Would you?

If I asked, would you love me?

Is it love if I had to ask?

Maybe it could, if I begged hard enough.

Maybe, just maybe

In another universe, I felt a sense of belonging here.

Universe 3

I wish to love you like the sun.

To lay on your shoulder and keep you warm,

but it seems I only burden you with sunburns.

I wish to love you like the ocean.

To bring calm waves to your ears like a rhythmic symphony,  
but my waves stride too far and make tsunamis that frighten you.

I wish to love you like the wind.

To be a gentle breeze that carries the autumn scent to you,  
but I toss dead leaves inside of your coffee mug instead.

I wish to love you like the galaxy.

To be the North Star that guides you back home,  
but I lose my balance and drop meteors onto your world.

I cannot be the sun; I am a hot-headed mess, a blazing ball that is on the brink of explosion.

I cannot be the ocean; I am drowning in my own body, I will only take you down with me.

I cannot be the wind; I am a storm, and if you get too close, I will do more than just ruin you.

I cannot be the universe; I am too full of hidden and unpredictable secrets. Vicious, dangerous, and perilous.

But maybe, just maybe

In another universe, I can love you the way I intend to.

Where I can love you like the sun, the ocean, the wind, and the galaxy.

In a way that makes it seem like I fit in.

Maybe, just maybe

In another universe, I felt a sense of belonging here.

Student Name: Helin Wang

Grade: 9

School: Kerr High School

Title: Inbetweener

Category: Poetry

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Safraz Ali

“Go back to your country, chink.”

if it really was my country,

why do people look me down with such judgmental eyes when I return?

“Why don’t you keep speaking more of your ching chong language?”

if it really was my language,

why can’t I even communicate with ma?

“你现在不像中国人了。”

You don’t resemble a Chinese person anymore.

如果我不是中国人,

我还能是谁?

if i’m not chinese,

who else could i be?

“你现在中文讲的不好了。”

Your Mandarin is so bad now.

如果我不讲中文,

我还能讲哪国的语言?

if i don't speak mandarin,

what other languages can i speak?

the thirteen hour time difference;

the two oceans;

the infinite barriers between me and my roots.

十三个小时的时差 ;

两个大洋;

数不了我和我的起源之间的障碍。

every gathering with aunties and uncles,

every other day with random strangers,

i have been weighed down by these remarks.

每次与阿姨和叔叔聚会,

每隔一天与陌生人一起,

我会被这些意见收到打扰。

these comments are a constant reminder:

i am the kung pao chicken<sup>1</sup> amongst the hot dogs and luósīfěn<sup>2</sup>

这些评论不断提醒

我是宫保鸡丁在一个热狗和螺蛳粉的世界。

too chinese for american standards,

but relatives sigh at me as I try to speak with my broken mandarin.

对于美国标准来说太中国化了,

但当我试图用蹩脚的中文说话时亲戚们却对我叹了口气。

i coexist within two universes.

one filled with rich aromas of spices wandering through the air on chinese new year.

another with striking colors of red, blue, and white filling up the sky on the fourth of july.

我共存于两个宇宙中。

一个新年时候空气中弥漫着浓郁的香气。

另外在七月四号时，天空中充满了红色、蓝色，和白色。

always

总是



flying

飞

to

到

the

另外

other

的

side

一边

always hoping to permanently stay

总是希望

on one side.

永远留在一边。

where do i belong?

will i ever fit in?

我属于哪里？

我会融入吗？

in between the universes,

that's where i live.

两侧之间，

那就是我住的地方。

in between cultures,

在文化之间，

in between customs,

在习俗之间，

in between identities.

在身份之间。

this is where i found myself.

这就是我的地方。

i am an inbetweener.

我是一位中间者。

kung pao chicken (宫保鸡丁) 1 An Americanized Chinese dish that is often served at Chinese fast food places but not commonly eaten in China.

luósīfěn (螺蛳粉) 2 Snail rice noodles that are distinctly known for its stinky and sour odor.

Student Name: Ngoc Ho

Grade: 8

School: O'Donnell Middle School

Title: Interesting Facts and The Aspects of my Life

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Kaneisha Hicks

Interesting Fact #1: My memories come as fog.

Like a movie you missed the beginning of, with an ending you can't quite make out, my memories are random points in time. With no sequence, pattern, rhyme, or reason, my memories are unpredictable, unwarranted pieces of information about my life before the present moment. Maybe they have a good reason for being memorable, or maybe they're just meaningless moments I remember. Recalling past events in my life has always been difficult ever since my youth. Thus, this has earned me my reputation for having an unreliable memory. With this fog, you can imagine the struggles of functioning a day to day life.

"Where's your phone, Baby?"

"Did you remember to bring \_\_\_?"

"Why can't you seem to remember anything?"

These words are all I've heard and more over the years. They accumulate like raindrops in a vast ocean, surrounding and suffocating me. Honestly, though, I try. I try really hard, trust me. It just seems like nothing sticks no matter how much effort I put in. Like fog, everything's a muddled mess you get lost in. Like fog, you have to patiently wait for the air to clear. Otherwise, you get lost in the haze.

Interesting Fact #2: My people come as waves.

One minute they're there, the next they're not. Family, friends, and more, my people have a habit of being in my life and then leaving. External factors like growing distances both emotionally and physically, as well as third parties like far-away jobs and Houston's justice system, are no strangers to me. Emotional and physical distance is a tough pill to swallow, but jobs that call for employees to move states and my city's police department taking away the people in my life hurt a lot more.

Like waves, people come and go. I've tried holding onto them, but they fall through the crevices of my fingers. They get lost between the spaces of my clutched palms, like brittle beach sand slipping through my fingers. Over the years, I've learned to just let them go. Some leave willingly. Some don't. Tears, angry words, hollow promises, and desperate grasps of fabric and skin are no strangers to me. Calm goodbyes, letters of love and life updates, and bitter-sweet hugs aren't either. The threshold of my aunt's house with red and blue lights echoing off the walls with a pair of hands resting on my shoulders, cold airports filled with unseen faces hustling and bustling with their pieces of luggage to reach their destination, and classrooms with children with tearful eyes, saying their last goodbyes to friends they won't see over the summer. These are all places I've said my fair share of goodbyes in, all are along the more memorable side. Thus, these memories plague my mind and inexplicably tug on my heartstrings, causing unwanted feelings to rise all the way to my throat.

Over the years, I've learned to appreciate what and whoever I have. Over the years, I've learned that loving and losing is okay and that all I have now is all I'll ever need. Over the years I've concluded that the memories we make with our people are what matters most (regardless if they become foggy messes), not how things end between us.

Interesting Fact #3: My conversations come as silent battles.

I'll admit, as a kid, I was emotionally dense. Conversations with me were superficial and came with a plethora of blunt remarks. Although I can't remember a specific moment when I was socially inept, I can still recall the feelings I felt in my youth. Growing up, I had little concept of social cues and was a brat half the time. Since then, I've matured. Since then, I've become hyper-aware of what I say and do in conversations.

With the help of waves of people in my life, I now know what to look for in a person's words. The holes in their arguments and the points of conversation where I can interject with a question. I now know that conversations (at least with me) come as silent battles. Every sentence they say is a jab. A point in my armor where they strike. Contrary to what you may believe, these battles aren't with another person. They're a mental battle with me, myself. To pay attention to what a person's saying, to interject with a valid question and input, and to be attentive to their body language all the while wearing a face relating to the emotion and content of the conversation is a war all in itself.

To me, I win this battle by not pressing the wrong metaphorical button, not striking the wrong metaphorical nerve, etc. To me, my conversations come as belligerent, silent battles. To me, my past conversations are my battle scars, proving that I can get through

even the toughest discussions with the most...interesting people. To me, my future conversations are battles I look forward to.

Interesting Fact #4: My emotions come as a chameleon.

The book's definition of a chameleon is "a lizard that is known for their ability to change color and adjust to their surroundings." In my opinion, my emotions are an accurate representation of this ability. Changing to suit my environment and the people around me, my emotions match the intensity, passion, and range of feelings of the people in my vicinity.

With past battles of conversation, I've also learned the skill of how to be attentive to the general proximity of people and what they say. Like a chameleon, I've learned to match my feelings with my surroundings in order to keep up. Like a chameleon, I've learned to blend my feelings with my environment as a way to survive the rapid pace of my days, and as a way to adapt to the ever-changing emotions of the people around me. The mercurial moods of friends, classmates, and students at my school are what I direct my focus on throughout my day, as a mechanism to keep up with the conversations I'm a part of. My emotions come as a chameleon, blending, camouflaging, and ever-changing.

Interesting Fact #5: I am composed of interesting facts and the aspects of my life.

My memories comprise my past. My people and conversations make up my present. My emotions are my constant. These aspects of my life will always be with me whereas other factors can get swept away with the wave of time. For me, I am composed of interesting facts and these characteristics.

To know what I mean, we need to take a step back. No matter how I frame what I say or do, they can always be classified as an "interesting fact" or "interesting moment" in the past, present, or future. Therefore, I came to the conclusion that I am composed of these facts and the aspects of my life.

My memories, my people, my conversations, and my emotions all define who I am. The question I have for you is this: What defines you?

Student Name: Michael Morrison

Grade: 9

School: Kerr High School

Title: Necromancy

Category: Poetry

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Safraz Ali

Necromancy

The worst tragedy had

ensued.

I had been

murdered. Exiled.

They sent me away.

Far away.

They maimed

me.

They laughed

at me.

But now,

I've returned.

Life, death, rebirth.

That's what they say.

They

never warned me.

No one

prepared me.

Few stood up for me.

All through the

long

painful

torture of dying.

Then like Lazarus.

I rose.

I breathed in that cool,

fresh, and

calm air.

It was the bliss

of a new chance

at life.



Student Name: Sunshine Gill

Grade: 8

School: O'Donnell Middle School

Title: Nonchalant.

Category: Poetry

Key: Gold Key

Educator:

NONCHALANT.

you label me this term and i don't think its

fair i mean? cause my heart is covered

and not bare

could it be that love is blind but my fear of

the dark causes me to stare

is it cause i write my love in stone so

they're not pages someone could just tear

am i supposed to know you're someone i

can fall on while we're missing legs to the chair

did you expect me to harbor all those

beatings without a moment to myself to

prepare

you see real love is rare ...raises your hair

i swear while mine sat on my shoulders

leaving me to be oh so aware

the love i thought you had for me

just wasn't there and it hurt

i cried i thought we were the pair

but these tears won't solve anything

you know what? man i don't care.

Student Name: Kimberly Hernandez

Grade: 11

School: Hastings High School

Title: Snakes for hair

Category: Poetry

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Parbattee Maharaj

I worshiped you, I was your most loyal follower

But when I was being raped

I begged for your help

Yet you punished me for the actions of someone else

While he stood there laughing at me

Is it because he's a fellow god?

Is that why you dismissed his actions so quickly

Do you have no courage to stand up for me?

Did you ignore my cries for help because you think I am at fault

Or are you just too weak to face him.

Aside from my purity getting robbed from me

From someone I hadn't tempt

I cried for you.

I begged for your help.

Yet all you did was put me through more torture

You took away my beauty

And made a monster

You replaced my luscious hair for snakes

My smooth pale skin for scales

And now no one can look at me or else they'd be met with a life of stone

Before I was a beautiful woman

A woman who followed you endlessly,

Now I get hunted like an animal

Like a beast

A beast you created.

Student Name: Brandon Do  
Grade: 8  
School: Killough Middle School  
Title: Tell-Tale Heart ECR Report  
Category: Critical Essay  
Key: Gold Key  
Educator: Janece Simpson

### Tell-Tale Heart ECR Report

Ever wonder how a horror story or a film gets so scary? How an author creates suspense and add specific details that make a story feel scary? That type of suspense is created from many different horror elements. Edgar Allan Poe creates a first person narrative character based on their perspective. This story is a perfect example of what I am talking about. Edgar Allan Poe uses vivid dialogue language, and explains the character's actions in a way that makes the reader feel unpleasantly uncomfortable, or even terrified.

One good example of Edgar Allan Poe's use of vivid dialogue is in paragraph 4, as he tries to create an opening sufficient for his head to watch the old man. He says " Oh, you would have laughed to see how cunningly I thrust it in! I moved it slowly—very, very slowly, so that I might not disturb the old man's sleep." You see how the author uses vivid dialogue there? He talks in an unpleasant way like he is mentally ill or unstable. He also even uses repetition, constantly repeating the words "slowly," and "very" as he is putting his head in the opening, to show and emphasize how he is putting his head in very slowly in an unpleasant way.

Another example is in paragraph 13, after he kills the old man, he says "If still you think me mad, you will think so no longer when I describe the wise precautions I took for the concealment of the body." "First of all I dismembered the corpse. I cut off the head and the arms and the legs." This example creates a disturbing suspenseful moment or scene. The character inside the story performs disturbing actions that causes the reader to feel very uncomfortable and think of the character as someone who is crazy. How he is cutting off each limb and part one by one of the old man's body.

Edgar Allan Poe's amazing use of horror elements and his vivid dialogue create a perfect example of horror suspense. Horror will always be known and remembered by our society. The suspense you feel while watching, listening, or reading something from a horror story or film. Suspense is one of the most important things that even make a story or a film scary, and this story provides a perfect example.

How do bionic devices benefit us humans? Bionic devices are used to either repair or enhance limbs and organs from our body. Each bionic device has different benefits depending on what it supports and does. These devices help humans that either have missing limbs or damaged organs.

There are several bionic devices that give enhancements. One of the devices is called the cochlear implant. The cochlear implant is a device that is worn around the ear that turns sound waves into electrical impulses. This device gives enhancements to the ear by improving their ability to hear. Other bionic devices like the deep brain stimulator, a device that sends an electrode tunneling several inches in the brain, and more are devices that also enhance.

Bionic technology not only has several devices that give enhancements for humans, they have devices that can even replace and repair humans limbs and organs. The Cheetah carbon fiber prostheses is a bionic that is attached to the human's leg which benefits their ability to be able to move. There are even bionic devices that can enhance and replace! The i-limb Ultra is an artificial hand that could respond to the owner's thoughts and intentions, making it release on their command at any time. This device could literally not be part of the body at all. The i-limb Ultra could be controlled at least thousands of miles away. Another device called the hippocampus chip, that was created in 2011 made by researchers, helped Bionics replace damaged brain tissue. If this device was to be damaged, people could possibly even form new long term memories and learn new things, possibly even making them smarter.

Bionic technology could give us humans powers and abilities that we never had before, that no regular human being could do. Maybe sometime, we will all become "superhumans".

Student Name: James Gomez

Grade: 8

School: O'Donnell Middle School

Title: The Beauty Of Nature

Category: Poetry

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Kaneisha Hicks

### The Beauty Of Nature

In the colorful fields, where flowers bloom,

Nature's shade, a lively, living room.

The soft breeze whispers through the trees,

As birds sing music on the gentlest of keys.

The sun's warm hug, kissing the earth,

Awaken life, giving nature it's worth.

Mountains exalted, make it for the sky,

The rivers loose freely, as time passes by.

In deep forests, secrets are held,

Where past tales, and secrets dwell.

The dance of winter, a attractive sight,

From the bloom of spring to snowy winter's night.

Nature's music, a pleasant blend,

From buzzing bees to the songs birds send.

A prompt of of the wonders that surround,

In Nature's hug, true peace is found.



Student Name: Angelina Ho

Grade: 9

School: Kerr High School

Title: The Infinite Road

Category: Poetry

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Safraz Ali

### The Infinite Road

The wish I grant,

Goes along this road, my greatest enchant.

I need this.

The darkness of this road to the abyss.

Stuck in a place, nowhere to go

To a shine in a far distance, a bright and shiny glow.

One day i think

One day ill be there, ill be there in a blink

It's been days.

Exhausted, but i know better ways

My feet are weak

My throat too sore to speak

But one day.

One day the glow will give me the wish to say.

It's been weeks.

Faster and faster, haven't touched its peak.

I keep running, yet nothing seems to change

This loop goes around and around, feelings are becoming strange.

My eyes are closing,

Is it me or the light does not seem to be growing

Hallucinations keep a daze

This straight road feels like a maze.

I can't see the trees,

But it's ok, the glow will give me the wish that sees.

It's been months.

I am stuck.

In this trap that would "give me luck"

Tiredness and stress from no sleep,

No voice to say a peep.

I try, yet go nowhere,

Surrounding the air are feelings of inevitable despair.

No, nothing will change as I cope,

The shiny glow will give me the wish of hope.

It's been years.

What I see is not what it appears

I hear things.

People laughing as the fat lady sings.

People are mocking me.

Why is that?

I did what everyone else told me to.

Why is it that I'm the only one not knowing what to do?

I am hearing voices

Saying I regret my choices.

What wish could I possibly get?

No voice.

No sight.

No hope.

I wish to go down a slippery slope.

No matter how much I push

My body, my limbs are feeling butch.

These thoughts and pain

My wish is yet to remain.

The infinite road,

Creates time slowed.

The infinite road,

Is a case that has millions to crack a code.

The infinite road,

Shows an extravagant light that doesn't load.

The one and only infinite road;

The light at the tunnel,

Leaves your feet forever stuck in the puddle.

Student Name: Ameerah Amaya  
Grade: 9  
School: Kerr High School  
Title: The Light through the Ocean  
Category: Poetry  
Key: Gold Key  
Educator: Safraz Ali

The Light through the Ocean

By: Ameerah Amaya

I'm drowning.

but I'm not alone.

I don't know how deep this ocean goes

But what I do know is what lurks down

below is horrifying beyond human comprehension.

I have a ball in chain on my foot, I'm slowing being

dragged down to the depths of death itself.

I see others, some I recognize, some I don't.

All in total I couldn't even begin to count.

I don't know what to do. I can't breathe, but I can't come up for air

It's impossible. I can't see, I can't move, I can't change where I'm

inevitably going.

I need help.

What I saw next could only be described as... the very Hand of God

I saw the surface. I saw Paradise.

The grass was lush, deep and dark emerald green, the very jewels

of the earth couldn't even begin to compare.

This was my salvation

All I could ever want or need was right here,

and I wasn't alone anymore. I don't want to leave,

but I need to go back.

I have everything I need, the only thing to do now is share it.

"Go and tell the good news." Mark 16:15

Student Name: Bajen Ceesay  
Grade: 8  
School: Albright Middle School  
Title: The Monster & The Crow  
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir  
Key: Gold Key  
Educator: Megan Kelly

My mother once told me a story from our country, Gambia. It was a tale of Ninki Nanka, a reptilian-type creature who looks like an alligator with horns. It was the story that had traveled through generations of Gambian children and had now come to me.

The folktale describes how children in the countryside had played too close to the marshlands and had gotten devoured by the dragon-like cryptid. My mother described how the creature had hypnotizing eyes, fire breath, and scales that granted individual powers to whoever possessed them. She told me that it was harmful, almost unkillable.

My mom, however, did describe the tale of how the monster was defeated by a small and brave crow. She told me about how the crow showed the reptile a reflection of itself in the mirror. The Ninki Nanka was so horrified by its appearance that it dropped dead on the spot.

The story of the Ninki Nanka is the only one I know from my tribe. I am ashamed to say that I have barely any connection to my culture. In my world, I am a black female, not a child of the Mandinka tribe. I don't know the stories, I don't know the traditions, and I don't even know the alphabet. At times, I am an imposter in my world, a disastrous version of who I am supposed to be: a child who can interact with her traditions instead of one who cannot.

From birth until I was four, I was who I wanted to be today. Although I might not have been fully aware of anything, I could be the "Mandinkan Child." I could speak our language perfectly, I knew the stories, and I was perfect. But, I was just like the children in folk tales. I was naive, and unknowing. My world as a toddler consisted of nothing but family, fun, and other things you find interesting when you aren't old enough to attend school. I might have been perfect in the cultural aspect, but I was just vulnerable, not knowing how terrible I could turn out.

When I was four, I started daycare and elementary school. I, being just a kid, never realized how the environment I was in affected how I grew up. At home, I spoke Mandingo and just enough English to where I could hold a conversation. Outside of my home, however, I spoke purely English.

Slowly but surely, the more time I spent outside speaking English, the more I forgot my native language. I remember my mother telling me how she tried speaking to me in Mandingo, but I couldn't respond. I had zero clue what she was saying, and it showed. I spoke more English at home and less Mandingo. My mom tried to get me to speak more in our native tongue, but I had fully forgotten. I had become even more like the children in the folktales; I didn't listen to my mother's warnings and had become prey to the monster stalking in the swamps.

In elementary and intermediate school, some of my most prominent memories are the ones where I am correcting someone or informing someone that I am not Nigerian. Now, I understand where the misconception can come from; there are quite a lot of Nigerian people in Texas. But when it is constant and you have to keep reminding someone you aren't Nigerian, it gets annoying. I remember a time when one of my closest friends kept saying that "no one knew of your country" and that I should just tell people I was Nigerian. I might have told this girl that she was wrong and that I was proud of my heritage, but deep down, I felt that she was right. No one knew my country, so what was the point of telling people where it was? It wasn't like they listened to me anyway.

Even though I felt that I should just lie when people asked where I was from, I couldn't bring myself to lie about my heritage. So I continued. I continued to fight when people said I was Nigerian, telling them I was a full-blooded Gambian, telling them where it was, and especially telling them that they better remember that I was Gambian.

At the same time though, the hate in my heart only grew stronger. Instead this time, the hate wasn't towards the people who assumed I was Nigerian, it was toward my culture. I felt angry that I was born into a life where no one knew who we were, and I started to despise being Mandinka. I was just like the unsuspecting victims of the Ninki Nanka, but instead of becoming lunch for the monster, I became one of its own.

The distaste for my kin had become my scales, and my negative thoughts and words had become my fiery breath. I had become filled with hatred, an emotion that was harmful to not just myself, but to people around me. I carried that hatred like it was a second skin. Whenever my mother wanted me to speak to any of my family back home, I always felt upset that they didn't have to explain that they were from Gambia and that they could be proud of their culture. I saw these relatives as perfect, as an unattainable goal that I could never reach. Looking back, I now realize how envious I truly was. I understand now that I just wanted to be like them; I wanted to be able to speak about my heritage and traditions in a proud way. But even so, the distaste for my culture had set in stone, and my thought process was warped. I hated the way of my people so much, that I attempted to shut it out completely.



At some point in fifth grade, my mother attempted to reteach me Mandingo. She told me we would learn about the basics, the letters and numbers. It took 5 minutes before I told her I didn't want to learn anymore. In my mind, my mom was calling me incompetent by starting me at the basics. Even though I knew that I needed these basics since I knew nothing, I was still offended. I told her that I didn't want to learn anymore, so she let it go for that day. She tried a few more times to get me to learn, but I was stubborn and refused every single time. Finally, she gave up on teaching me, and let me go back to my games and shows.

The Ninki Nanka inside of me rejoiced. To the monster, my culture was nothing but a waste of time, an afterthought. But deep down, there was a feeling of sorrow. Even under all of those scales of anger, there was still the girl who wanted to learn. The girl who knew that she did care, and wanted to be closer to her heritage. Unfortunately for me, those feelings wouldn't be realized until much later.

In 7th grade, I finally had a realization. I found the girl deep inside the monster of hate, the girl who knew that she didn't hate her heritage. I realized I didn't despise it at all. I realized I was simply upset I could not experience what everyone around me was experiencing. As I grew, I noticed how people were proud to display the flags of their country, proud to have the ancestry that they did. I was jealous that I could not feel the same happiness my classmates did when they spoke about their countries and traditions.

That winter, I decided I would be the Ninki Nanka no longer. Instead, I chose to be the crow. The girl who wanted to be closer to Gambia embraced the role of the bird, destined to prevail and save the day. I showed myself how ugly my negativity and jealousy were and the Ninki Nanka inside dropped dead on the spot. I took the scales filled with power and claimed them as my own. I gave myself hope, strength, confidence, and many other things just by killing the hatred inside my heart. Most importantly, I gave myself the urge to learn. Not just about learning more about my culture, but learning about how to be a better person.

In December, me and my mother plan to go back to Gambia for winter break. When I'm there, I plan to do everything under the sun that I can do. Hang out with cousins, interact with the locals, and experience life there. I know that deep inside I am terrified to go since I don't know the language or the culture, but I have high hopes. I realize that no matter where I end up in the Gambia, it is still a home. I am glad that I became the crow who defeated the Ninki Nanka because now, I can appreciate the way of life and culture. Most importantly, I can finally appreciate myself as a Mandinka child in Gambia, the way I wished to do for all of these years.

Student Name: Joy Kazeem

Grade: 9

School: Kerr High School

Title: The perfect sister

Category: Poetry

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Safraz Ali

As the wise say, "a sister is like having God's guidance,  
always by your side when you need her", and that's exactly what she provided

She went above and ahead beyond the role of a sibling,  
putting the needs of her non-biological sisters first.

She was always there to offer support during difficult times

She was more than a sister

A caring sister, who takes care of your appearance by tidying up any unruly hair,  
and giving you a polished and stylish hairstyle.

She may not always be aware of your emotional state, but she understands you better  
than anyone else and she's sensitive to your uptight and anxious moments.

She was more than a sister

A sister won't always be perfect

There would be arguments, really petty arguments

She is always willing to sacrifice her possessions, even when it not easy for her to do,  
for the unconditional benefit of her fellow sisters.

However, she is more than just a sister to them

A sister who gives guidance ,and also discipline

Not every sister will be frigid and unsympathetic,

but she implores patience and correction

A sister who can be friendly but firm when her fellow sisters are willing to do unreasonable things and make unintelligent decisions.

She is the perfect sister, the type everyone would want to have.

She fulfills multiple roles,

the role of a mother,

the role of a friend,

the role of a teacher,

the role of a therapist ,

Additionally, she is willing to sacrifice her own well-being for the benefit of those she cares about, even if they are not related to her by blood.

Her love and protection are highly valued by those who are fortunate enough to receive it.

Student Name: Iris Vasquez

Grade: 8

School: O'Donnell Middle School

Title: The sorrow of life.

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Kaneisha Hicks

Across the memory, you can see that long ago, in a hot spring near the frontier of the country, a car was on the dusty road.

A girl with dark brown hair was sitting on the car floor, looking up at her aunt, hoping to not be separated, but life is full of changes.

Isn't it better if she didn't know what would happen in her life? The car stopped, and all the people inside got out of the car.

After leaving the car, a long walk awaited—walking down a long bridge.

This was not a normal sight, was it? walking, looking everywhere, paying attention to not catching.

She thought that was what she needed to do after walking a long distance.

The person who came with her and her aunt was stopped by the authorities.

They searched for them, asking a question, and then they were ordered to enter a car unknown to the girl.

Soon the time passed, and there she was in an office.

The authorities were questioning her aunt. You can see what they were talking about in Spanish interrogative-questioning-answering. That's what was happening.

The memory becomes blurry.

Then you see them take her away.

You can see her faking her loud cries to talk to her aunt for an hour in the same scene until some guards take her, telling her lies about seeing her aunt.

She follows happily, and preceding the next scene, the little girl is in a new setting, a new place. The guards took her inside, and you can tell she was searching for her aunt.

Looking around and questioning the other people inside, you can see the realization on her face.

After two days in that cold, crowded place, the time passes again. It could have been weeks or months.

Being there was like being in prison.

You can see her broken lip.

On the cold nights, she had to endure a thin aluminum blanket on the floor.

waking up early in the morning, the days passed, the confusion became sadness and loss of hope to unknown feeling things, the cold wrapping in her body, all lonely and alone for a few weeks, days, or months? You could say the day count was lost.

Someone called her name.

It seems weird when you see her walk.

She felt a sense of humor when they thought she was from Guatemala.

She corrected them with a smile.

The man Smile back at her and told her, "It was said you were from Guatemala, but good news for you, you will be taken out of here." You could see her confusion but didn't ask more; they took her outside, and to a ban, you could see hope in her dark brown eyes—the hope to see her aunt again. But life isn't that easy.

They took her to a building-looking church.

They took her inside and told her to wait

The tension was rising in her body like fire in the woods.

Later, an old couple came and told her that she was in the U.S.A. and they were her new family, or, you could say, foster family.

They took her to their house with another girl.

They bought her clothes.

She never thought she could have them.

A few days later, you can see that she knows where she is now.

San Antonio, Texas, and that you know she is in foster care at St. PJ's Home for Children.

You can see her sadness and her feeling of busting. Some days later, she is asking to talk to her aunt. She didn't respond.

Various attempts were made, but there was no answer.

The tears started to run down her cheeks.

The feeling of abandonment was present.

And there was a loss of hope. There are some happy memories that she will hold on to.

Now that a little time has passed, life isn't fair to anyone, not even children.

A few months later, you can see her packing and moving to another house.

Then it repeated this process once more.

You can see her with a new family, and then you can see her packing again, moving to another program, and a new family coming into the little girl's life, but this time moving was different.

Her heart was full of sadness, and anger kept hiding. Her thoughts of life weren't the same as feeling the loss in her heart.

A broken heart is pitiful.

You can see her trying to adapt to her new family, but she is struggling.

Next, you see her trying to commit suicide.

It seems that her sanity is on a lower level now, and then you can see her being taken to a mental health hospital.

You can see the memory blurry for a few minutes, then you can see her smiling and talking to herself in the room of the hospital.

She was there for some weeks, then they took her out.

They have been keeping an eye on her since then in that new family.

Well, two years is a long period, but that doesn't mean her attachment to that family. was good.

You can see her crying at night, feeling the worst, and the suicidal thoughts still lurking in her mind.

The family was fine, a good, caring family, you could see that she was moving again, her heart hurting so much.

Then, after she cried crocodile tears with a soft goodbye, they took her to another family and started over again for the best.

That was what they told her there.

She was a lonely child with no one, no one, no one, no one, no one! The abandonment was everything.

She will remember hunting her forever, and ever since those medicines didn't work, why is this feeling so common in kids at an early age? Aren't adults supposed to stop this?

Shouldn't adults be responsible for their actions? But life is this way, full of everything: sadness, sorrow, hurt, love, happiness, and hope. The memories are running wild—everything at once.

Student Name: Olivia Garcia

Grade: 11

School: Kerr High School

Title: They're Saturn

Category: Dramatic Script

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Kathy Harrison

They're Saturn

A Play in One Act

Characters:

Mr. Dimple- Imaginary friend, immortal or any year that an actor chooses, like a little kid in a young adult body. Sensitive but outgoing.

Helen/Nellie - Daughter, 10 years old, energetic, innocent, very outgoing, bubbly, and forgiving. Easily forgets things, a dreamer.

Momma- Mother-40 years old, worried, loving mother, caring.

Poppa/Daryll- Dad, 39 years old, fun father, goofy.

ACT I

SCENE I:

It's a cool Spring Sunday evening in the early 2000's. A daughter's room, girly with glow-in-the-dark stars on the walls, and a desk with paper star garlands lining the sides, a nostalgic room. Yellow and pink walls with a blue splotch in the corner of the room as if someone tried to paint the walls. A wall is full of drawings made by a child. A bookshelf filled with books, toys, and a radio. A bed near a window. A mural with a moon and stars behind a misty cloud. A garland of the solar system above a window. There are glow-in-the-dark stars scattered across the ceiling. The room looks like a space collector's nook.

[At Rise: Helen is sitting at her desk working on some arts and crafts. Mr. Dimple opens the door quietly and looks around the room as he gets closer to Helen. He taps her on the shoulder. She is startled and turns around frightened by him.]

Helen: AHH! [Jumps up frightened]

Mr. Dimple: Woah! Hey! Nellie! It's me! [He approaches her]

Helen: What??

Mr. Dimple: Dimple! Mr. Dimple! [He smiles, his dimples fully seen.]

Helen: Dimple? [Pause then a gasp] Mr. Dimple! I haven't seen you in so long!

[She runs towards him to get a closer look, as if she can't believe he's there.]

Mr. Dimple: Really? [Sheepishly] I-I've been here the whole time...

Helen: Look at what I made Mr. Dimple! Look, it's a fairy and a princess and a raccoon sitting on a bench in a purple galaxy!

[Helen lifts up her picture and shows Mr. Dimple. She smiles proudly/brightly.]

Mr. Dimple: Wow! [He looks at the picture closely] Oh WOW! [He smiles] Nellie it's-

Helen: It's Helen.

Mr. Dimple: What?

Helen: Helen, not Nellie. Nellie's too childish, not something for a future astronaut to use...

Mr. Dimple: Oh...well Helen. [Awkward pause] When did you get so good at drawing!?

Helen: Momma and Poppa bought me some crayons! They even got me a whole pack of blues! [She takes out a personalized crayon box.] My favorite!

Mr. Dimple: Oh? Oh, you mean pink! Did you get hot pink too? Let me see!

[He comes up behind her to take a closer look inspecting each crayon.]

Helen: What? No. I mean blue, pink isn't my favorite anymore, it's tooooooo girly.

Mr. Dimple: [Nervously] Oh okay... Well um... How's school? You still read during recess right, I have a few recommendations. I heard that A Wrinkle In Time is good and-



Helen: [A bit embarrassed] No, not anymore, I play outside with Marrisa now...

Mr. Dimple: What? But I thought you loved reading. [A slight smirk as if he thinks she's kidding]

Helen: Yeah? Well, now I don't, I like Marrisa. She's funny, and [She walks to her bookshelf and holds up a rock that's on top of it.] She helped me dig out this rock out of the tree with this other rock that we found-

Mr. Dimple: Wait, who's Marrisa??

Helen: I just told you she's my friend [She comes back to the desk and sits down.], she helped dig out this rock-

Mr. Dimple: [A little worried] I thought... I thought I was your friend...

Helen: [Assuredly] You are ... but Marrisa's also my friend! We also play tag with this other boy. He's nice and he made me this bracelet. Look!

[She shows him a bracelet made from galaxy-colored beads. There are other beads as well, 3 beads representing her and her new friends meeting in the middle.]

Mr. Dimple: A boy? Ew! Take that off! You're gonna get cooties! Remember?!

[Dimple tries to take the bracelet off of her. She pulls away.]

Helen: No!

[Helen and Mr. Dimple tug at it until it rips off of her wrist, breaking and spilling beads all over the floor.]

Helen: What did you do!?

[She scrambles off of her chair and tries to collect the beads off of the floor.]

Mr. Dimple: Wait, I'm sorry, Nellie! You were gonna get cooties! I was just protecting you!

Helen: IT'S HELEN! And I don't need you to protect me! I don't need you at all!

Mr. Dimple: No, you don't mean that... You don't mean that. [He starts to approach her]

Helen: [half quietly and sulky] Go away!

Mr. Dimple: What? No, I'm sorry, please can you forgive me? Please Nel- Helen I'm so sorry. I'll fix it, I promise. [He hesitantly kneels beside her.]

Helen: You promise...?

Mr. Dimple: Yes.

Helen: [With a raised eyebrow] You pinky promise?

Mr. Dimple: Yes, I infinity promise!

[Helen and Mr. Dimple pinky promise.]

Helen: Okay...

[Long pause as she stares at him. She gets back up and goes to her table to draw again. Mr. Dimple follows her and sits, watching her draw.]

Mr. Dimple: Ooh, I like that fairy. [Pointing to the drawing.] Her dress is very pretty!

Helen: Really? What color should I use [Showing him the crayons in her box.]: light blue, bright blue, cerulululuulan, or indigo?

Mr. Dimple: Maybe-

[There's a knock at the door, Momma is on the other side.]

Momma: Helen? Helen?

Helen: [Looks up towards the door.] Yes, momma?

Momma: May I come in?

[Helen goes back to drawing.]

Helen: Mmhm!

[Momma opens the door and leans on the doorway, with a heartwarming smile she watches her daughter.]

Momma: Who are you talking to? [Smiles]

Helen: [Matter of factly.] Dimple!

[Momma's smile drops, and Mr. Dimple watches Momma and her reactions while she's in the room.]

Momma: [Hiding her surprise]What?

Helen: Mr. Dimple! We were just talking about what blue I should use for fairy "Mary"

[Momma has a worried and shocked look for only a moment.]

Momma: [Smiling] Fairy Mary? Is that so?

Helen: Yeah look! She needs a blue, but I don't know what blue, so I asked Mr. Dimple but then you came in, so what blue- wait! Mr. Dimple was about to tell me! Let me finish asking him!

[Mr. Dimple looks back at Helen. Momma watches her daughter with worry as Helen speaks to Mr. Dimple.]

Momma: Okay...

Mr. Dimple: [Pauses as he thinks] Maybe...indigo!

Helen: Indigo? [Playfully disgusted] That's like purple.

[Momma still watches in the background.]

Mr. Dimple: Light blue!

Helen: Perfect!

[Helen takes out the crayon and colors the piece of paper in front of her. Momma goes up to her daughter's desk watching her color.]

Momma: Very nice, Helen! [Pause while she admires the drawing.] Well, it's almost time for your bedtime just so you know, okay? I'll come check on you later, my love.

Helen: Okay, Momma!

[As Momma exits out the door she pauses at the doorway and looks back at her daughter. She continues exiting. Mr. Dimple continues watching over Helen as she colors in the rest of the fairies. He has a troubled look, but he changes back to his usual smile.]

## SCENE II:

[Scene Change: Dad enters the house placing keys on the counter. He's on his phone as he walks to Momma. Mom is standing outside the door listening to Helen. He doesn't notice.]

Papa: Hey honey! I have some great news! So you know how yesterday I- [He puts down his phone as sees her and her face] [beat] What are you doing?

[Momma looks at him with tear streaks, he puts his phone in his pocket]

Momma: It's happening again.

[Mr. Dimple can hear the parents outside the door. He listens carefully while Helen is finishing her drawing, she hums.]

Poppa: What?

Momma: Dimple...He's back.

Poppa: I thought the doctor said-

Momma: I know, I don't know what happened, I thought she was doing fine, but honey, this isn't normal. [She walks toward him] Has she told you anything about school lately?

Poppa: No, I don't think anything is going on there. She said she has friends now. Remember? Marrisa and...what was that boy's name again? Neil?

Momma: I don't know, but the doctor said it should stop happening by now, she's ten already. She hasn't been like this since she was five. I thought she stopped and that would be the end of it. Daryll, what if this is serious?

Poppa: What do you mean?

Momma: You know what I mean. This is what happened with my mother- [They look at each other as if they both know what she means.] Everyone thought she was crazy, no one wanted to help her at her worst and I paid for it. She was ripped away from me and now what if that happens to our Nellie? What if she's ripped away? I don't want my daughter, our daughter, to be stuck alone and called crazy. With no one there to tell her everything is going to be okay. I don't want her to have to go through this without me. [Pause] Without us. I don't want her to end up like mom. [beat] Maybe we should call the teacher, maybe her friends aren't really her friends? What if she's getting bullied? Or maybe her friends stopped playing with her or something? Or, maybe we should call the doctor. Maybe he might know? [She starts panicking] But what if she's taken away? Or what if I'm taken away? What if she forgets me?[She begins to sob.] I'm going insane? What's wrong with my baby?

Poppa: [Brings her into his arms.] Hey. [He comforts her and pulls away from the hug to look at her better.] Hey, it's gonna be okay, okay? There's nothing wrong with her, she's gonna be fine. Right?

[Momma nods.]

Poppa: She'll grow out of it, she's only 10, and if she doesn't, it's okay. We can call the doctor and see what to do next. It's only been a day...right? [She nods] We'll figure it out [Pause] together.

Momma: Together...

[She looks back at the door and the two of them go to another room. Mr. Dimple has listened the entire time by the door.]

SCENE III :

[Scene Change: Back in Helen's bedroom]

Mr. Dimple: Hey Helen...

Helen: Yeah? [Still drawing]

[He walks toward her]

Mr. Dimple: What if... what if we ran away?

Helen: [She looks up at him] Why would we run away?

Mr. Dimple: Well because here... no one wants me.

Helen: I want you here, Mr. Dimple! [She goes back to drawing]

Mr. Dimple: [Happily] You do?

Helen: Yes.

Mr. Dimple: [Surely] So you'll run away with me!

Helen: No.

Mr. Dimple: What? What do you mean no?

Helen: [She looks back up at him putting down whatever she is drawing with.] I can't go away. What about momma and poppa? What about Marris and- and Noah? [Pause] I wouldn't get to have recess with them anymore...

Mr. Dimple: But every day would be recess! Recess with me! We could go live in the park, or! Or! We could go live at Disneyland! Right?

Helen: Disneyland?! Really?

[She jumps up from her seat.]

Mr. Dimple: Of course! I could take you there!

[She speedwalks to the drawing of Minnie and Rapunzel on her wall of drawings.]

Helen: I would get to see Minnie! And Rapunzel! And...can I eat with the princess?

Mr. Dimple: Yes! Yes! All of that!

[She walks back to her desk about to sit down again then stops.]

Helen: [Pause] But- But what about school? What about Ms. Reena? She said I was gonna get a treat tomorrow for being nice to Millie!

Mr. Dimple: You don't need Ms. Reena to give you something just for being nice. I can give you everything, Helen, just for being you.

[He walks toward her again.]

Helen: ...But I really wanted M&Ms...

Mr. Dimple: [a hint of frustration] It's fine, don't worry about M&Ms, or Momma and Poppa, or Ms. Reena, or your friends. I'm your friend, remember?

[He gets closer, and Helen slightly backs away.]

Helen: [Quietly] But you're not my only friend...

Mr. Dimple: [He snaps] But I want to be your only friend, Helen!

[With each sentence, he walks towards her more aggressively, getting angrier and she backs away as he gets closer.]

Mr. Dimple: Please! Just run away with me, nobody wants us here, nobody cares about us! Nobody's gonna care if we go, and what if they do? Nobody needs us, nobody needs me!!!

Helen: Mr. Dimple? [She trembles.]

Mr. Dimple: What!?

[Helen starts crying quietly, she's been cornered. Mr. Dimple realizes his actions and backs up a bit.]

Mr. Dimple: Wait, don't cry, I'm sorry was I being too loud?

[Helen nods]

Mr. Dimple: I'm sorry [Beat] you know what? Forget it, we'll stay okay?

[He turns away from her.]

Helen: [hesitantly] Okay. D'you promise?

Mr. Dimple: I infinity promise...

[Helen reaches out with her pinky. Mr. Dimple pinky promises.]

Mr. Dimple: Helen?

Helen: Nellie.

[She goes back to her desk and sits down stacking up her paper, something to keep busy.]

Mr. Dimple: Nellie? Really? [He smiles]

Helen: [She wipes her tears and smiles.] Yes! I love you, Mr. Dimple! It's okay! I forgive you! Can you come back tomorrow and visit me?

Mr. Dimple: I would love that...but-

Helen: Okay! [She picks up her drawing and shows it to Mr. Dimple. She's back to her energetic kiddish self.]

Mr. Dimple: It's beautiful... [He says as he looks at her bittersweetly. Helen is focused on her creation.]

Helen: Yay!



[She takes her drawing and tapes it to her wall.]

Helen: What should I draw next? Mr. Dimple?

[She walks back to her desk and takes out another sheet of paper.]

Mr. Dimple: What about you as an astronaut? Wait, you still want to be an astronaut right?

Helen: Yeah! That's why blue is my favorite in the whole world, no. In the whole universe! It's like the sky, like space!

[Dimple's eyes fill with tears but none come out]

Mr. Dimple: I like the sky...

Helen: Okay! I'm gonna make an astronaut in space! And she's gonna have a blue suit and her spaceship is gonna be HUGE. That way I can take Marrison and Noah! And then I can land on Saturn! Because it's my favorite, of course!

Mr. Dimple: Saturn? Why Saturn?

Helen: I like how it's never alone, kind of like you and me, Dimple. It always has rings surrounding it in a hug of light and moons watching over it. Isn't that nice?

[Dimple nods, sniffing a little. His dimples peek out.]

Helen: And the rings will be blue and I'm gonna land and see aliens! But they can be green, or PINK! And you can be there too, Mr. Dimple!

Mr. Dimple: Really? [He smiles, dimples on full display.]

Helen: Yes!

[He sits next to her smiling. There's a knock at the door, it's Momma.]

Momma: Helen?

Helen: Yes?

[She opens the door]

Momma: It's time for bed okay, honey?

Helen: Yes, momma! [She starts putting her crayons into her box.] Momma?

Momma: Yes, my love?

Helen: Can you read me and Mr. Dimple a story? [She glances at Mr. Dimple and smiles.]

Momma: No, my love, you have school in the morning... Okay, let's get you to bed, peanut!

Helen: Okayyyyyyyy.

[They finish cleaning up. Human noise. Helen gets into her bed and Mr. Dimple stands nearby. Momma tucks Helen into bed.]

Momma: Goodnight, honey, I love you okay? No matter what. [Pause] To Saturn and back!

[Helen giggles]

Helen: I love you too, momma, goodnight!

[Helen closes her eyes as Momma leaves. She pauses at the door as she watches Helen, she exits and closes the door.]

SCENE IV: [Sunday night]

[Some time passes, Helen is asleep and snoring. Momma walks back towards the room, she opens the door slightly and watches her daughter sleep. Mr. Dimple has been standing beside Helen the whole time watching over her, he sees Momma. She silently cries and slowly closes the door. Mr. Dimple takes everything in.]

Mr. Dimple: [Pause] I'm sorry, Nellie.

[He walks over and sits on the floor next to her bed.]

Mr. Dimple: I'm sorry for everything. I don't know what I was thinking. I just wanted you to be happy, I'm sorry I hurt you Nellie... I'll always be here for you, but I know you don't need that... I know you don't need me. You have all these beautiful things in your life, such wonderful things, you have friends, friends! I want you to stop growing but I know you're getting older, I know I can't stop that. You're gonna be a big girl already and big girls don't need someone like me... and I'm sorry for holding you back, I want you to shine bright like the little star you are, as bright as the sun. I don't want to be the moon covering you up... I'll be your... your Saturn, okay? I'll always be in your galaxy, but I want you to meet new people and learn new things, expand your universe. I want you to have such a happy life... and if that means one without me in it, then so be it... I love you, Nellie. To Saturn and back. I'll be here, always. I promise.

[He places a bracelet around her wrist, a bracelet with all of the colors of the galaxy, and one light purple bead. A chime is heard. Mr. Dimple disappears, the glow in the glow-in-the-dark stars in Helen's room light up as if a trail has been left behind.]

[Night passes. It's now morning. Helen wakes up.]

Helen: Good morning, Mr. Dimple! [Beat] Mr. Dimple?

[She looks around. She sees the bracelet.]

[Black out]

THE END

Student Name: Ngoc Ho

Grade: 8

School: O'Donnell Middle School

Title: To Those Who've Loved and Lost; I See You

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Kaneisha Hicks

Wires and metal. My mother is talking to the body made of wires and metal. Beep. Beep. Beep. The beeping of the EKG machine. The sighing of the ventilator. The scene in front of me seemed unreal at the time-incomprehensible even. "My mother is talking to a half-dead person," I thought. This was my conclusion as a 9-year-old, who couldn't grasp how someone could be both gone and here at the same time, as explained earlier by my mom.

The sight in front of me seemed to come straight out of the comic books I loved so much growing up. Wires wrap all around the body of a man whose face I can't quite remember. Like the vines in a flourishing forest, the wires seemed nearly endless, encapsulating the man in his entirety. Metals and intricate devices surround his limbs and seem to almost suffocate his limp frame.

The body made of wires and metal was my uncle. According to my family, a couple of years back he had gotten into a tragic car accident that rendered him unconscious and comatose. Now, at that moment, he was on life support. For me, I could only faintly remember some moments between my uncle and me, but the air in the hospital room hinted that my mother cherished him. The tender face she made and the soft, melodic intonations of her voice made my heart ache with sympathy. "If someone is causing my mom to wear her emotions so crystal clear like this, then they're important to me too" was my thought process after assessing this new side of someone so dear to me.

Although my memories were faint, I still had lingering feelings from when I did know my uncle. I can remember early mornings with dew in the air, the pure joy of being able to play with him and spend quality time with someone actively present in my life at the time. If I really try, I can get inklings of small moments of intimacy that still tug on my heartstrings to this day, even if I can't quite make out what I'm recalling. And so, with

these faint memories and the sight of my mother in front of me, I was determined to at least show some care for my dear uncle.

The smell of disinfectant encompassing the hospital. The bare walls of white and little decoration throughout the room. After a while, my mom urged my brother and me to hold onto my uncle's hand and say something. "Anything." I heard her silently beg. Looking back, it must've been painful to know someone for so long, have such a deep, emotional connection, and then have your kids think of them as something close to a stranger. At the time though, appeasing my mom was my top priority, even if I didn't share the same attachment as her to my uncle in the hospital bed. Therefore, I obliged. I gently took his hand into mine and told him to get better. Squeeze. 'I'm sorry I can't remember you' was the silent apology I gave to him, for even if I couldn't recall him, he most certainly could remember me. Honestly speaking though, I had no clue what to say besides to get better. "Hi there"? "What happened?" Or "The wires and metal surrounding you remind me of Doc Ock from Spiderman"? None of these things seemed appropriate so I settled on a safe, neutral option. Call me a bad person, but I was a kid at the time. I wasn't equipped with the emotions needed in this situation.

The long, monotonous car ride back home. Driving past our personal landmark, the tower atop the tallest building in the area. Visiting time was up after a while, and my family and I set out to go home. Gazing out the window, I remember trying to digest what I saw, felt, heard, and overall experienced. I concluded and was determined that I would never get myself in a similar situation, whether as my grieving mom or my uncle in the hospital bed. To me, these options were two poisons I promised myself I would never get involved with.

In the later years after this event, I witnessed a widow mourning her husband. Originally, we had a ceremony at a catholic church. My mom, brother, and I were separated from our family due to COVID-19 regulations and thus were confined to the lobby room with no chairs. Throughout my time at the church, my aching feet were the sole object of my thoughts-as well as my top priority. After around 3 hours, everyone finally dispersed and we headed out to what I thought was back home. I was wrong. My family and I arrived at the burial site, anxiety coursing through my veins. The thought of seeing a dead body in person made my breakfast-lunch combo from the earlier morning do somersaults in my stomach. At the funeral, I saw my cousin, the wife of the deceased. She was softly caressing the smooth wood of the box holding her dearest husband,

clutching onto the casket as if it was her last life-line. I then look back to the day in the hospital. Admittedly, I did compare both of them, but I made two significant, emotional realizations. Firstly, grief varies from person to person. Secondly, mourning someone who's still alive is a completely different form of grief from mourning someone dead.

These thoughts came to me while watching the sight in front of me. These thoughts came after the after-party. After winding down for the day, and in bed. These thoughts of mine triggered a chain reaction throughout my body. The chills on my arms spread throughout my body. Goosebumps pricked my skin. The heebie-jeebies I got rattled the bones in my body. My mind cleared and I then understood. My emotional realizations may not seem like much to you personally, but for someone who's struggled with emotional density in my youth, I finally had a real-life glimpse as to how grief fluctuates between people. I look at my mother.

"I see now."

No, this isn't quite right.

"I see you"

Student Name: Lena Nguyen

Grade: 9

School: Kerr High School

Title: Written in Blood: How True Crime is Unethical

Category: Critical Essay

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Safraz Ali

True crime is a nonfiction genre popularized through forms of media such as podcasts, documentaries, TV shows, and books about real-world crimes. The genre introduces cases to the public through a thoroughly researched narrative story that presents the consumer with a crime's details while immersing them in the mystery of a dark and gritty subject (Dukes). As such, the true crime genre aims to give a voice to victims and recreate the feeling of being part of a real crime scene. For example, true crime content can come in a variety of different forms of content: a podcast, such as *Serial*, or even a Netflix TV show, such as *Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story*, highlighting its utility in different types of media. However, true crime as entertainment is morally indefensible because it sensationalizes a tragedy to the public, re-traumatizes the families of victims, and commodifies peoples' pain and suffering as a form of entertainment.

Take the case of Adnan Syed, whose conviction and story was given a spotlight in season one of *Serial*. He was convicted in 1999 for the murder of his ex-girlfriend, Hae Min Lee, and sentenced to life in prison until his exoneration in late 2022. However, *Serial* introduces the case to the public through a sympathetic lens that is biased towards Syed—Lee's alleged murderer—until he was proven innocent long after season one had already finished airing. This sympathetic bias is shown in how Sarah Koenig conducted research as the podcast's host, focusing more on finding evidence for Syed's innocence rather than his guilt. Likewise, *Serial* characterized real people involved in his case into dramatized caricatures of themselves by intentionally withholding information from the listener to create certain narratives of witnesses. This superficial distance from the actual murder has led to the privacy of real people being breached when facts and fiction blur beyond compelling media. In an interview with *The Intercept*, Jay Wilds—an acquaintance of Syed and a key witness whose testimony led to Syed's conviction—confirms, "The thing that's been the most scary for my family has been people showing up at my house...people videotaping our home and me...[going] onto my Facebook page and [pulling] pictures of my kids, my dog, my house, my wife" (Vargas-Cooper). This clear disconnect between Wilds being seen as a fictional character, rather than a real person, shows the effect of compellingly exaggerated storytelling. Consequently, the global popularity of the podcast's first season ultimately brought more attention to Syed instead

of Lee's untimely death. Keep in mind, however, that if he had been Lee's murderer, Serial would have effectively glorified Syed and downplayed her death as his advocate throughout the entirety of season one. In brief, Serial sensationalized Hae Min Lee's death to the public by producing an entire season dedicated to Adnan Syed's case, deliberately shifting the narratives of real people such that they are seen as fictional, and bringing more attention to the accused rather than the victim—in turn undermining her death as a mere spectacle for international scrutiny.

Moreover, the Serial podcast, while eventually leading to Syed's release in 2022, has led to the re-traumatization of Lee's family. Officials appealed the initial verdict for Syed on September 19, 2022, when his conviction was vacated ("Lee Family"). However, Young Lee, Hae Min Lee's brother, stated that he and his family were not given notice of the hearing that led to Syed's release, removing the initial closure created by Syed's conviction and the subsequent closing of the case (Li). Steve Kelly, the Lee family's attorney, has stated on behalf of Lee that it was "tough just for [Lee] to be back here in Maryland, and to see Mr. Syed was difficult...The whole [appeal against Syed] was just very...hard on him, emotionally draining and taxing" (Li). As such, seeing the man who was once said to have murdered your sister then lose his shackles creates a sense of unwarranted and unwanted *déjà vu*, disproving a timeline of events that were thought to have been verifiably set in stone. The reopening of emotional wounds from Hae Min Lee's death re-traumatized her family due to Syed's case being reopened and, as of October 2023, currently remains unsolved.

Furthermore, Serial commodifies peoples' pain and suffering by profiting off of viewership despite being produced around a crime. In other words, had Lee never been murdered, Serial may never have been conceptualized. The podcast's retelling of his case was dramatized into a 12-episode series strategically split to maximize viewership and profits, running with ads and recurring sponsorships—such as MailChimp—at the beginning and end of each episode (Koenig). This form of monetization means that the podcast earned money from the number of listeners and downloads they had, alongside any brand deals picked up during production. Millions of dollars were earned from the dramatization of Hae Min Lee's murder as season one of Serial reached 5 million iTunes downloads—faster than any other podcast in the world (Ellison). Additionally, Julie Snyder, a producer for the Serial podcast, also stated that she would "love it if it were possible to garner tens of millions in revenue on a podcast, but as things stand now, that's impossible...[Serial is] still just a podcast" (Ellison). In this case, the death of Lee being an afterthought shows that the producers of Serial only particularly cared about the monetization from sponsorships and ads, rather than celebrating her life—Serial was



commodified into entertainment for listeners while reporting from a very distant perspective on the case.

Finally, Netflix's *Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story* is another show under the true crime umbrella that sensationalizes crimes to the public as a form of entertainment. The show covers the life of serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer, who brutally murdered seventeen men before his eventual arrest. In particular, *Monster* exploits Dahmer's crimes by retelling how he murdered many people of color as well as bringing his life into the limelight; since its debut on September 23, 2022, the show has stood as one of Netflix's most watched series on platform (Mendez II). The popularity of the show should also be noted—the fact that Netflix had placed *Monster* on their platform along with fictional shows and movies effectively equates murder to entertainment. Netflix's attempts to cater towards LGBTQ+ communities has also been widely criticized after the platform chose to "[tag *Monster*] as 'LGBTQ' content" due to the serial killer having been openly gay. Such attempts to glorify a serial killer's life downplays their impact on the lives of victims' families and, most importantly, has desensitized the public to true crime as a whole. This phenomenon can be observed in the ever-increasing popularity of the true crime genre. Netflix's *Monster* exploits the life of Jeffrey Dahmer as a murderer to be rehashed as entertainment for those who use the streaming platform.

Likewise, the show rapidly gaining traction has led to the re-traumatization of those related to Dahmer's victims. Among many critics who have denounced Netflix's choice to produce the show, Rita Isbell—sister to Errol Lindsey, one of Dahmer's victims—has spoken out against *Monster* in a personal essay on *Insider*, stating, "When I saw some of the show, it bothered me, especially when I saw myself" (Vlamiš). Referring to an actor's reenactment of her statement at Dahmer's sentence in 1992, Isbell is understandably distraught after not just having to watch the sentence in the comfort of her home, but having to feel what it was like to live out the moment in real time. Equally important, she added that she was "never contacted about the show...[and felt] like Netflix should've asked if [victims minded] or how [they] felt about making it" (Vlamiš). The fact that Isbell had no notice or say in any reenactment of what was a traumatic experience to her only serves to show how *Monster* reopens emotional wounds for her and many other victims' families. From this information, it can be gathered that Netflix's *Monster* actually revels in the re-traumatization of the families of victims by directly choosing to create a show that would profit from their suffering.

As such, Netflix also monetized Isbell's and other's suffering by merely creating *Monster* in the first place. In response to complaints from the families of victims, Ryan Murphy, director of *Monster*, countered by stating that he would be "happy to pay" for a memorial in commemoration of Dahmer's victims (Edmonds). However, Thomas M. Jacobson, an attorney who represented eight of the victims' families, was not impressed by the director's offer. In a statement to the *Wrap*, he told them, "Milwaukee wanted Dahmer's memory to disappear...[the] only meaningful Dahmer-victim-family action...would be a monetary consideration from the Netflix profits for their exploitation and continuing trauma" (Edmonds). His rebuttal directly proves that the streaming platform has not shared profits with the victims, and as such, is commodifying their suffering into a product for consumption. Jacobson also adds that "Netflix receives the gain, the Dahmer-victim families the pain," which reflects how victims were neither contacted nor compensated for reenactments of their trauma (Edmonds). With all of the controversy surrounding where the profits for *Monster* should go, one thing remains clear: the show has effectively turned the reality of the seventeen victims' families into a 10-episode Netflix series for all of the world to see.

As it stands today, the true crime genre as a form of entertainment is not morally defensible because it dramatizes real crimes to the public, hurts the victims' families by making them relive the trauma of losing loved ones, and monetizes the pain that others had to go through into entertainment for the unaffected. No matter the type of media—whether it be a podcast, book, TV series, or documentary, to name a few—true crime reporting does more harm than good.

Moving forward, the genre should instead focus on unsolved cold cases as that is where authorities and people interested in solving murder mysteries should be paying their attention. In addition, any media created from true crime cases should only be created after makers are given explicit and continuous consent from the families of victims—any silence for the aforementioned request would be considered rejection, similar to the families of Dahmer's victims, who did not provide concrete approval. Consent for such media can also be revoked at any time. Furthermore, proceeds from any true crime media produced should also be donated to charities or the victims' families if possible, and reporting should be done with an unbiased perspective that does not glorify the accused. True crime as a genre has its flaws, but sweeping changes could be made to make the production of such media more ethical to consume in the future.

Student Name: Daniel Ramirez

Grade: 12

School: Clear Lake High School

Title: Fading Hope; let me cope.

Category: Poetry

Key: Gold Key

Educator:

Sometimes... I can't take the horror

can't look myself in the mirror

Can't take the drama

or change my demeanor

Cause all I ever feel is this trauma

Tearing at my façade

Crushing the head upon which you trod

expressions the of the past

for which no one asked

grant me pain

I pray it lasts

Or I'll be all alone in the rain, nothing to gain, not a second of refrain, just another stain  
on my name, under your strain till only you remain

It's all the same

I can't look at myself

'cause all it ever does is remind me of what I took from myself

start fantasizing of killing myself

I'd end it all, and you'd just watch as I fall

ending up just another book on the shelf

cause all I'd ever want is someone to read me

and not think I was crazy

I'm not insane, it's you, you're to blame

But there is no expression

with enough power to mention

why I can't give you attention

or learn my lesson

instead, every day I lessen

my power of retention

Slipping farther and farther, but you never bother

Cause my aspirations've

eaten at my patience

for every day since

I've lived in violence

drowned in silence

Try to scream,

got no rhyme scheme to say what I mean

I cause a scene

In every dream

As I roar

I can't take anymore

Go away

I guess what I've been tryin' to convey

is that there is something wrong inside of me

I found in all my self-reflection

That the biggest thing worth mention

is my depression.

Let me wallow

In my emptiness

So hollow



My apologies for my lack of apostrophes

Cause the only way I know how to show

the way I feel to you

is through my words,

cause with em I can fly like the birds

I never want to be part of the herd

Why be assimilated

By those I hated?

They force me to be constantly shrouded

Just like you did

So just

Leave me behind

Searching for my husk

That I'll never find

Cause everyone I ever care about leaves

Stolen by disease

So please

Please

Leave me

Prevent me

From realizing this disparity

Between you and me

Leave me before I leave you

Before the grief sees me through

Just like you

always do

I'm sorry for putting this on you

For every verse

For every curse

For driving my mind like a hearse

I made this in free verse

cause without it, I'd

feel like I'm going in reverse

This doesn't have to change our relations

these things aren't for the nations

They're for you

Thank you for reading

thank you for caring

for every rhyme I'm bleeding

But I don't want a "thank you for sharing"

Just don't let me be another number

help me leave something they'll remember

I had to try

I didn't have the strength to say good -

To say

goodbye

Student Name: Xiaomei Cai

Grade: 10

School: Clear Lake High School

Title: One Humanity; Many Genomes

Category: Critical Essay

Key: Gold Key

Educator:

The human gene pool may seem endless, but considering genes are created from four nuclear bases, the similarity between each individual's DNA is 99.6% (1). The 12 million base pairs resulting lead to incredible diversity arising from minute changes. When those bases are translated and transcribed, errors such as mutations can occur. Moreover, while every human displays different DNA makeup split between their parents' genetic material, genomes can not only originate with such distinctions, but also change in vitro as further unique mutations occur. "One humanity, many genomes" signifies that it is the mutations that enable evolution to converge, diverge, and branch into new clades that define the human race (2).

As someone with Marfan syndrome, a genetic disease that takes effect during embryonic growth, mutations color my view of the diversity of the human genome as due to both genetic variation and expressivity. Diseases such as Marfan syndrome can occur either through hereditary traits or by mutations (3). Consequently, it is not only the sheer variety of genetic expression that makes the human genome so diverse, but also the ways in which those expressions can manifest. In 2018, using the gene-editing tool CRISPR, Chinese Professor He Jiankui successfully edited twin embryos' CCR5 gene, which encodes the protein C-C chemokine receptor type 5, to prevent the HIV virus from infecting the twins' white blood cells upon birth (4, 5). He Jiankui's editing method, human germline genome editing, enables edits made to be passed down to the twins' descendants as well. While his study changed the embryos' genomes, proving we can transform the human genome during the embryonic stage, it also shines a light on why we should avoid doing so: preserving the essential multi-variegation of said genomes.

It is exactly this potential to mutate and change across generations that ensures the survival of the human race. Without such diversity, every human would have highly similar genomes, traits, and immune systems, causing heavy consequences the moment a virus were to break past the immune system of one person in a homogeneous population. Without diversity enabling the existence of mutations causing higher levels of immunity and resistance, such a virus could spread like wildfire. For example, while individuals born with sickle-cell anemia, a genetic disease caused by mutations in both copies of the HBB gene, often succumb to it, a mutation on only one copy of the HBB gene can grant resistance to malaria (6). This is due to the fact that malaria causes

hypoxia in red blood cells it affects. Meanwhile, single-HBB-gene mutation carriers can induce sickling in red blood cells infected with the malaria parasite and eliminate those cells from the body (7). While mutations on the HBB gene may seem solely dangerous, their antimalarial side effects are just one example of how eliminating such diversity could cause scientists to lose the wealth of research into developing antimalarial treatments sickle-cell anemia has driven (7).

Indeed, catastrophes caused by homogeneity have occurred, emphasizing the importance of humanity's genetic diversity; one salient example is the Irish potato famine, wherein Ireland's only strain of potato died due to the entire species' susceptibility to a poisonous fungus (8). One common example of how humanity, on the other hand, consists of many genomes is the difference between the genomes of one race compared to another. Ethnic history can alter one's inclination towards certain genetic disorders, as can birth sex, the study of which is often neglected yet which can propel medical understanding and treatments for all genders and ethnicities. Oftentimes, scientific experiments to develop vaccines, medicine, and treatments are conducted solely on Caucasians (9, 10). The quantitative data gathered may only be applicable to white males if they are the only subjects included in a study. Non-white males may even be harmed by drugs formed from such limited studies, whereas studying genomes of those of different ethnicities can provide insight into otherwise-under researched genetic diseases, further cementing the importance both of diverse genomes' existence and study (10, 11).

Without genetic variety from mutations and hereditary diversity, the 0.4% difference between all genomes of humans would suffer great loss, since it is genomic variety that keeps the human population alive. Without diversity, people may suffer more from viral infections and lose positive benefits of mutations. It is only with proper knowledge of genomic differences between ethnicities, genders, and individuals that researchers will be able to harness the greatest benefit from and to humanity's genomes.

Student Name: William Choi-Kim

Grade: 10

School: Cy-Fair High School

Title: Affirmative Action Had to End - But This Isn't How It Should Have Happened

Category: Critical Essay

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Samantha Commander

Affirmative action was struck down by the Supreme Court in *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard* in 2023. In most cases, this essay would be simple. It would start with a bold statement: affirmative action deliberately and explicitly discriminates against and robs opportunities from Asian Americans. But *SFA v. Harvard* is the exact opposite of what it should have been. It should have been a case that struck down a set of policies that, historically, have done more harm than good. Instead, it was the latest in an 8-time Supreme Court litigant's series of attempts to strike down affirmative action using hand-picked sob stories. It should have been a case that showed that in many parts of the US, including Florida, the epitome of American conservatism, a lack of affirmative action has not prevented minority populations in colleges from growing alongside the general populace. Instead, it was a case that featured that same man giving 3 different statistics for 2 different talking points on Fox and PBS. It should have been a case where Asian Americans presented a united front and a moderate stance against a policy that has discriminated against Asian Americans for decades. Instead, the nation saw stereotypical tiger parents present outlandish stories and obviously personally offended opinions that divided the Asian American population and positioned it as an object of ridicule for all to see.

To begin, it's important to look at Edward Blum, a conservative activist who served as the figurehead of *SFA v. Harvard*. Born in 1952, Blum is a white-haired white man who serves as the director (and, allegedly, sole member) of the Project for Fair Representation (though he disputes allegations of his solitude). He also founded and heads the American Alliance for Equal Rights, an organization that sued Fearless Fund for giving out grants to women of color. In order to find plaintiffs for his numerous anti-affirmative action cases, he created 4 nearly identical websites, each corresponding to a different university, that allowed candidates to submit an application to take part in the case. Before his success with *SFA v. Harvard*, there was *Fisher v. University of Texas*, a case in which Blum tried to argue that a student who failed to make the top 10% of her class and who got only an 1180 on the SAT was being racially discriminated against when the University of Texas rejected her. His plaintiffs of choice were two white undergraduate students, though one dropped out later on, but even then, he enlisted the help of 3 different Asian American organizations in order to file the amicus briefs for his Supreme Court case.



Having lost that case, Blum then rallied the Asian American community behind Students for Fair Admissions, an offshoot of his Project for Fair Representation, and sued Harvard. During the case, he appeared on Fox News multiple times, pushing the idea of Harvard having a racial quota that limited Asian Americans from comprising more than 17% of admissions. The problem? At times, that number was 19% or 15%, and all three numbers are wrong. Harvard admission data shows that the proportion of admissions to the college comprised of Asian American admissions has continued to rise throughout the years, though perhaps not keeping pace with the Asian American population in the US. Moreover, other components of Blum's case referred to Harvard's holistic admissions process, a process that, by nature, clashes with a quota system. Yet Edward Blum, a man who picks on funds for women of color and who picks and plays with plaintiffs like marionettes, won. With a conservative majority led by Justice Brett Kavanaugh and a case lauded by the Trump administration, Blum managed to end his crusade against affirmative action on a note of success.

And so, affirmative action was banned. With mainstream media criticizing the decision as a step backward in social justice and with almost all the evidence pointing to that, you'd be forgiven if you believed that affirmative action was, overall, a good thing. You may believe that it was a good policy with faults, or a necessary step in increasing diversity. But that's exactly the problem. Even though, according to Pew, 50% of Americans oppose race or ethnicity being considered in college admissions, compared to 33% that agree. Affirmative action has become a martyr. Those that support affirmative action are now able to point at all the faults of the Supreme Court case and label it as yet another conservative crusade against equality, like the ban on AP African American Studies in Florida and the revisionist edits to the recounting of slavery (also in Florida). And although, even in Florida, a lack of affirmative action has not stopped minority populations in universities from growing with the general populace, this statistic will be dismissed in favor of the fact that the median salary of minorities in California, another state where affirmative action has been banned, has gone down since that ban.

On the topic of such statistics, this decrease should be obvious. Before the ban, minority students were given an artificial advantage to attend elite universities, and so more minority students attended elite universities. Those students went on to get better jobs, and so with the end of affirmative action, not as many minority students went on to get better jobs. The idea that the decreasing level of diversity from the end of affirmative action means that affirmative action is necessary, however, is ignorant. Those that come from underprivileged backgrounds are, by the very nature of the nation's school system, underprepared in comparison to those from more privileged upbringings. The solution lies in better primary and secondary education, standardized schooling across the nation, an increase in state-sponsored extracurriculars, the abolishment of pro-child labor laws like that which exist in Texas, and better college counseling in public schools. The solution is not bolstering an unprepared student's chance to go to a college where they will most

likely find themselves overwhelmed. And not just overwhelmed: ostracized as well. In fact, even students who got in without affirmative action can find themselves shunned on the basis of their race and the assumption that they were admitted on the basis of said race: this is the exact opposite of what these supposed race-conscious policies aim to do.

Moreover, it makes even less sense to justify affirmative action as a way to allow students from less fortunate economic backgrounds to attend elite universities. Scholarships exist, in many cases, solely for the case that a student qualifies for a university and can't afford it. But to admit underprepared students to these universities, is, yet again, cruel not only to the student who lost their spot but also to the student who now has to contend with life in a school in which they are completely and utterly overwhelmed. Admission to a college should be need-blind: admit those who have the experience and knowledge to attend a school, then assist those who don't necessarily have the resources to attend that school. Instead, what systems like affirmative action and more direct need-based admissions, including Harvard's holistic review, enact is that process in reverse. Admit those without the resources to attend a school, and then admit others who are prepared. And this doesn't just build an unfair reality for applicants; in this manner, those underprivileged admittees may be left without scholarships because they lack the necessary academic qualifications that many high-value scholarships require.

Meanwhile, this entire ordeal has left the Asian American community divided and ridiculed. Often seen as a model minority with natural intelligence and an obsessiveness over college admissions, the idea that an organization supposedly representing Asian Americans sued Harvard has been made out to be tiger parents throwing a fit that their children didn't get into the Ivy school of their choice. But that isn't what this is about: SFA v. Harvard fails to properly represent the majority of Asian Americans. Imagine studying and working your entire life to go to a college you want to go to, but being rejected not because you're unqualified but because of a policy supposedly designed to help minorities like you. Asian Americans aren't naturally smart, as so many subconsciously believe. Instead, the immigrant culture that developed around the Asian American experience is one of academic success for rewards later down the line. And though many deny it, laugh at it, criticize the mere criticism of it, there is a limited number of spots to a college.

Why should we have to settle for second best? To say that second best should be good enough is to be ignorant and dismissive. Why is it that for any other person, intelligence is a trait to be lauded, but for an Asian, it's because "you're Asian"? Why is it that we're told to settle for what we have, when we deserve more? Why are we, a minority that has historically experienced violence, racism, exile from the nation, considered just as privileged as the white colonizers who came here? Because we've been a model minority? Affirmative action is a complicated subject, with a complicated history. And SFA

v. Harvard was the wrong case to end it all. But the statistics, and basic common sense, show that it had to end somehow. Now it's time to consider - at what cost?

Student Name: Sophia Pham

Grade: 11

School: Cypress Ranch High School

Title: Drowning

Category: Poetry

Key: Gold Key

Educator:

The sounds that surround me

they hurt my head.

All these bodies that reach for me

I shrink from the outstretched fingers.

The throbbing of my chest

I grip at my skin, hoping it would cease.

White silk flows against red-stained skin

I can barely feel the coldness that is blanketing me

I stagger through the sea of voices

Vision blurry, I disorientingly rush towards the end

Hands lifting me high

There is a thrill I can feel while falling

Gasping for air, I tune out the cries

I'm drenched.

I'm free.

Student Name: Elise Davila  
Grade: 12  
School: Bridgeland High School  
Title: Mirror Image  
Category: Poetry  
Key: Gold Key  
Educator:

There are three mirrors in my bedroom

And I know exactly where to stand to avoid all of them

There's the one attached to my dresser that sits across from my bed

The full-length standing one that hides in the corner

And the largest of the three, the wall-mounted mirror that hangs over my vanity

I used to wonder how mirrors worked

How there was a girl

A girl who was me

Standing there staring back at me

I thought that my uneasiness toward mirrors stemmed from this confusion

That if I understood the reflections of light I'd no longer be wary

It wasn't until I turned 14 that I realized the real issue

I think there's something living behind all my mirrors

I don't know what it is

But it shifts behind my reflection like a shadowy specter

A phantom that haunts my dark eyes and sickly skin

Her hair is greasy and long and brown

And if I squint she looks like me

But only in some ways

Because her eyes are dead and black

The sockets are hollow and swollen

Her teeth rot out of her skull, yellow and crooked

And if I look close enough, if I press my face so close my nose hits the surface

I can see the discoloration and hair all over her skin

She's always naked

She's always watching me

If I spend enough time in front of a mirror I can feel her claws sink into my head

And if I stand, just at the foot of my bed, where I can see myself in every mirror

I swear, just for a second, I can hear her clenching her teeth and scraping the surface of her cage

So I step away

And I turn out the lights

Because she's most active at night when the sun is gone and I am alone

When I should be asleep

I crawl into my bed but I lie awake

Because the second I sit up, I can see her across from me

Staring at me with her too-wide eyes through my dresser mirror

I duck down in my bed, burying myself under the covers

Shaking like I can feel her sour breath on my spine

Tucking in my legs like she's escaped from my reflection

I wonder how she can be there when I am not

I wonder why when I close my eyes, it's hers I see

Her frail hands wrap around my throat and as I thrash in my bed

I wonder if she can kill me



I wonder if anyone will know what has happened to me

I'm scrambling away from her

Tossing off my blankets and running to the corners of my room where I can't see my mirrors

Escaping into my own head so I can't hear her gnawing

Her wailing

Her vicious snarls

The tearing of her hair from her head

I'm safe

I'm safe

I tell myself that no matter what I hear,

I'm safe

Until I remember

That in my mind

There is a labyrinth of mirrors waiting for me.

Student Name: Sophia Pham

Grade: 11

School: Cypress Ranch High School

Title: MyTears

Category: Poetry

Key: Gold Key

Educator:

I was 1

Crying like a baby

Because I was one

The party was pinker than Barbie herself

Back then, nothing had mattered

I was 5

Shedding tears over the scrape that I had gotten

My dad playfully slapped the concrete with anger

And the joy I found in that was not contained for long

The cherry on top was the frosting he smeared on my face moments later

I was 10

Happiness and warmth

Spread all throughout my body

As the floating flame on the wax was blown away

And I was allowed to make the first slice into the baked good

A singular tear of happiness fell

I was 11

My parents were away

But I thought that it was okay

Because there were other people there

Deep down, I knew that I wasn't okay with it

I let the water from my shower be a cover up for the crying

I was 12

When I had first spent a birthday by myself

My parents were busy

My brother was with my cousins

My grandparents were who knows where

And me?

I was sitting alone in self pity

I was 13

I had spent my birthday in solitude

Hidden under the covers of my bed

Only coming out the listen to an off pitch song

And blow a fire before people could eat overpriced baked flour and eggs

I cried tears of sadness after returning to my blankets

I was 14

Everything was so new

But also so very old and the same

The environment, the people, the sounds

And so my birthday that year was nothing special.

Even though I had grown accustomed to it

Why were there tears again?

I was 15

I thought that maybe this was it

The change that I worked so hard to get

Only I would be foolish enough to believe that

They were gone faster than they came

I'm 16

And no one wants to come

Friends have left me

Family is too busy

It was again just like the year before

And the year before that

And this time

All I wanted was to cry

To let myself feel the relief

The comfort

The happiness of water cascading down my cheeks

Where were my trustworthy tears when I needed them

They had abandoned me too

Student Name: Nathaniel Burgardt

Grade: 11

School: Cypress Ranch High School

Title: The Color Pink

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Key: Gold Key

Educator:

I once was a cacophony of masks, each equally important to conceal a crucial aspect of my own self. As the sun spilled over the horizon every morning, I found myself awake in a crowded pile of them and fastened several on to myself without hesitation. One mask hid my body, another my face, and yet another buried any whispers of the dying voice that drove me onward each day. Ace bandages flattened my chest and compressed my ribs so that, by the end of school, I was gasping for breath. Thick hoodies negated any hint of a curve in my figure. I smiled, a minstrel man, with the sleeves of a well-loved, dilapidated grey sweater hanging off of my well-loved wrists. Blue jeans wrinkled lazily past my ankles. A mop of tangled brown hair latched itself to my head and cascaded down the nape of my neck. I smiled with white teeth but empty eyes; my laugh was devoid of the carefree light of childhood. I traveled with my friends to the girls' bathroom at the end of lunch, no matter how repulsive that sign with the skirt was to my silenced voice.

Every night, I wept. I stared at my bare torso in front of the mirror and wept. My eyes drilled holes into the tissue on either side of my breastbone. I grazed my chest with chewed fingernails and fantasized about digging a blade into those two revolting balls of flesh that hung their weight from my shoulders, slicing until they were nothing but a scar or a distant memory. I sat in my restroom at home, a pair of dull craft scissors in one hand, and contemplated. I took those scissors and slowly, unsurely, but in an entirely liberating way, snipped off an inch of my jaw-length hair. It hardly mattered if it was uneven, as long as it was freed even slightly from my scalp.

I undressed in the girls' locker room, cowering in a corner. I couldn't help but notice how it felt as though my bones stuck out at all the wrong angles when compared to those flawless pubescent girls- the confidence in the way they puffed out their chests, the lack of shame as they faced the open room with nothing but undergarments. They all wore pink and lavender. Pink bras, laced panties, red cheeks, and shiny lip gloss taunted me from all directions, no matter where I turned. Even in my corner, away from prying eyes, I hardly wanted to peel off my shirt or lower my pants.

"Why do you wear boxers?" a classmate once asked me. I was dumbfounded. My face flushed. A vacuum of shame consumed a snarky retort from my throat before it could escape.

"What kind of girl wears boxers?" asked no one but the small, yet loud, woodpecker nested in the back of my head. "What kind of girl raids her brother's laundry for boxers?"

Silence was my only answer. With an occasional flash of my middle finger to anyone who pressed too far, a dead stare, and closed lips, I deterred the external questions. However, those darker thoughts still swirled and swelled until crimson proof of self-loathing leaked from my skin. I told everyone and everything that it didn't matter and disappeared into the self-inflicted prison of my own mind. I wept anyway, because it did matter. It truly did matter.

I met Levi. Levi was a strange new student with an uncertain background, having moved from a different nearby middle school. Nobody could tell if Levi was a "he or a she", and most people did not care enough to ask, instead choosing to default to their assumptions. I felt an odd pull in my chest towards this mysterious figure, as if a magnet lodged in my heart was exceptionally drawn to the energy emanating from the stranger. I grew curious and analyzed from afar, noting each time I passed them in the hallway between classes, stealing glances in their direction at lunch, slowly creeping closer with each passing day. Levi, who had short hair and dressed masculine, but still boasted a higher voice and noticeable chest. Levi, who I grew close to. Levi, who taught me the word "transgender".

It was an instant recognition of belonging. It ripped the masks from my person and left me bare and cold against its foreign syllables and new internal meaning. Yet, at the same time, it released a warm breath of comfort that fanned over my whole body. I welcomed it as I breathed it in, breathed in a taste of who I could be— free from the constraints of my feminine body, saturated with a genuine sense of self for the first time in many years.

Levi taught me of his experience. He told me he was born to be a girl, but felt like a boy inside. He told me he wore boxers, too, even if he didn't have the body assigned to fit them, since it gave him the illusion of being in the right gender. He told me he used to wind an ace bandage around his chest, too, but now he had this new "binder" and no longer needed to hurt himself with a medical bandage.

It was only a few months later that I came out as non-binary and used the name "Dakota".

It was only a year after that when I approached my father with a note and asked to buy masculine clothing. My first pair of jeans from the men's section lit up my world.

It was only a year after that when I took my first injection of testosterone under the name "Nathaniel". But, please, call me "Nate" for short.

My past feminine facade became lost within the bed sheets, button-ups, loose-fitting jeans and pockets that were finally large enough to fit my phone in. The masks I once wore daily descended from my head like scraps of my hair after my first real haircut. Muted t-shirts and khaki cargo shorts dominated my style for the first few months with a black medical mask to conceal the gentle softness of my feminine cheeks during the stifling isolation of the pandemic summer.

I despised femininity. I treated the color pink like it was a plague I could contract if I pondered it for too long. I refused rings, necklaces, earrings, and anything more colorful than olive. Each garment or action which hinted even slightly at the girl I left behind rendered me ill while a swarm of anxious mosquitos writhed in my gut. A glance that lasted too long or a perked eyebrow in my direction wrapped constrictors around my lungs. I eliminated any hint of that girl that I possibly could. I found myself pulling masks, freshly painted in a boyish blue, back onto myself to hide that little voice again.

And I still wept. I stood in front of the mirror, my torso bare, and I did nothing but hate: hate myself, hate my body, hate my face, hate my hands, hate my hair, hate my clothes. I did nothing but hate. Insecurity ravaged the corners of my head. Vultures with wings of shadowy shame pecked at the rotting bits in my brain. I still wept for what I imperceptibly longed to be. I still grieved for the girl my family lost. I still felt as if I never did enough. I still couldn't decide if I wanted to throw away every memory of her, or carefully preserve them in formaldehyde.

I didn't bother to pull the weed from its root; I resigned to merely chopping its head, discarding it, and dressing in a suffocating black.

It wasn't until a dry afternoon in Mexico, despite it being mid-November, that I finally found my catharsis. I was indoors, yet beads of sweat still clung to my temples. My step siblings sat in zoom calls and stared blankly at their teachers who droned on in a language I couldn't understand. It became white noise to my mindless scrolling as I laid on the couch, liberated from schoolwork for a week. Boredom consumed me and left my hands itching for something to touch and my mind craving something to care about.

Something in the house caught my eye, however- a flower crown, hung delicately from a shelf against a wall. I stared at it, taking in the crisp petals and diluted, sun-dried colors. I wondered what it would look like to hold it and adorn myself with it and to spin around in the beams of passionate sunlight outdoors and stir up leaves and breezes. I



smiled gently, lost in daydreams full of butterflies and buttercups and everything in between.

During a silent lull at lunchtime, I decided to ask my stepmom about its history. "It's very pretty," I commented with the quiet hope that I would be able to try it on, maybe even sneak it on just once, and gaze at myself in the mirror.

After lunch, my father whisked me aside to interrogate me. "Are you sure about the testosterone? I noticed you took an interest in the flower crown. That's rather girly, isn't it?"

From something as trivial as a handful of flowers spawned a cold and painful, yet all the same sweet, gust of wind that knocked down the iron walls I had constructed around my femininity. I felt bare in front of this man, the sheer definition of masculinity with his heavy frame, shiny head, and salt-and-pepper beard. His hazel eyes stared judgmentally behind wrinkled eyelids and bushy eyebrows. That gaze pierced right through me and set aflame the roots of the weeds that tunneled into my flesh. The heat in the white stone house was stifling, yet I felt a chill race up my spine and bloom down my arms, manifesting in gooseflesh. I failed my task to remain boyish, to remain my father's son as he wanted me to be.

Yet, I realized perhaps the most important thing about this war of an identity I had grown into: I did not need to absorb every masculine trait to be his son. I did not need to limit myself to black, grey, camouflage, olive green, khakis, and loose-fitting blue jeans. I did not need to fear pink and pale yellow. I did not need to cringe away from jewelry, gems, and flowers as if they were coughed up by some illness.

In fact, the more I grew into my body, the more I grew back into femininity. After that day, the more I was assured people saw me as Nate and as "he" rather than "she", I slowly began to replace my barren earlobes with tiny globes of silver. I clutch a necklace close to my chest daily, a pure clear quartz hanging from a rough leather cord. I bear rings gifted to me by friends and loved ones. I buy hanging earrings and flamboyant button-ups, skinny black jeans and mosaic Vans. I still hide my chest, dreading the sight of my breasts, but no longer do I hide my face from the world, now that it has angled out and grown fuzzy with peach hairs and stubble. I sing and twirl in the sunlight or dance in the rain. I paint flowers on canvases and black on my nails without uttering an apology. I stare right back into my father's icy gaze.

In the end, it doesn't matter the way others see me- not even that man I desired so much acceptance from- because now I see myself as nothing but myself.

I go home and I still weep in front of the mirror, but it is no longer for myself. I weep now for my brothers and sisters who struggle with my same plight, who have less fortunate families and less comfortable situations. I weep for my brothers and sisters whose parents will never be as open-minded as mine. I weep for my brothers and sisters who have lost their lives simply because nature forgot to add or remove a leg of a chromosome in their physical body but not their mind. I weep for all my brothers and sisters and hold my fist high, screaming that I, too, am a human being. I weep for all my brothers and sisters and scream that they, too, are human beings. I weep in a symphony of rose pink and azure and violet, the shards of shattered masks scattered at my feet. I weep, but I finally strive for change instead of hiding from it.

Student Name: Elise Davila

Grade: 12

School: Bridgeland High School

Title: The Hare

Category: Poetry

Key: Gold Key

Educator:

In kindergarten, they used to tell us this story

The Tortoise and the Hare

You know the one,

the hare is the fastest creature in the forest

but he loses to a turtle on a technicality

And then the story ends with the moral:

Slow and steady wins the race.

I remember thinking that was a stupid moral

I remember thinking that even though we were all supposed to be rooting

for the tortoise,

I was the hare

And I would never lose to a turtle

I remember thinking

If I were the hare, I would take off at lightning speed

I would finish my race and run circles around the turtle's shell

I would take my nap after I'd won and most importantly,

I'd wait for the turtle to cross the finish line

So I could ask him how my dust tasted

That doesn't make me a very kind kindergartner

I'm aware of that

But could you blame me?

I've always been a hare

Not because I'm particularly fast or because I'm the best at something

But because if I discovered, for some unknowable reason,

that the author of my story would have me lose to a turtle

I, too, would rather take a nap than even try

If I cannot beat a turtle at my own game then I will lose the game

And I will do it so tragically and completely that there will be no question

That I am utterly incompetent

Every creature of the forest must have suddenly thought to themselves,

Had the hare ever been fast at all?

And certainly, the hare could have run circles around all of them

But it wouldn't have mattered.

Do you think that after his loss,

every creature he met challenged him to a race?

Because I do

And I don't think the hare ever raced again

The hare, once mighty and proud, was reduced to a forest legend,

A cautionary tale of hubris and incompetence

But which would you rather be?

An idiot or second best?

Because it seems to me,

The hare somehow ended up being both

No matter his best efforts to be remembered as foolish,  
An idiot who took a nap instead of taking first place,  
The moral was and will remain  
Slow and steady wins the race.

Of course, that's not true,  
The hare is still the fastest  
And the turtle?  
A fluke.

I know that we are all meant to be in awe of the scrappy tortoise  
who stood up to a wearisome brag  
But all I can think of  
Is the quick-footed hare who is forever cursed to be remembered  
As slower than a tortoise and dumber than a rock

I think I'd rather be one or the other, not both  
I think that I am the hare  
And I will never race  
Because if I lose,

Then what was it all for?

Student Name: Joey Veselka

Grade: 10

School: Bridgeland High School

Title: The One Where the Tree Leans

Category: Poetry

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Sarah Holland

### The One Where the Tree Leans

I devoted every minute to my room  
from the paint color to the wallpaper  
and the drawings to the posters  
the Polaroid pictures to the lights they draped on  
the cork board and the poems I displayed  
It was mine, every bit of it

My grandfather has a pretty property,  
one full of treetops that are kissed by the morning sun  
and a lake that's like you're looking into another world  
when the moonlight meets its glass surface

An old trailer house sits beneath an oak  
That oak seems like it's always been there,  
waiting to fall



But sometimes, it almost seems like the oak is providing shade  
and a little bit of comfort for a little bit longer

My cousins and I took the house as our own,  
decorating it with depth and character

When my grandmother and I stood in a furniture store  
to buy just a few more orange pillows,  
a few more green and tan blankets,  
a few more pretty rugs and runners,  
she told me that our house was the Eclectic House  
because each room was different  
and special in its own way

I think that's what she liked about us cousins:  
each one a little different in our own ways

I took everything out of my room  
and brought it to the Eclectic House  
From the television to the feathers  
and the candles to the vinyl records,  
the lights to the tools,  
the drawings and the sea of DVDs

And I could never forget the prices,  
the prices of the stand I built  
and the string lights,  
the vines that never found use,  
and all the fake plants  
that at least seemed somewhat alive

Everything that was already there,  
we kept,  
placed in on display  
like the cassette player  
or the broken clock  
or the old lamps  
or those couches you seemed to sink in  
or that chair my grandfather loved so dearly  
or my great grandmother's china  
or the radio that became one with the dust  
I kept all those things  
and held it in my heart,  
never wishing for them to leave

My cousins come now,

wishing for those things to go

because it didn't make sense,

but it did

It was ours,

yes it was,

but it was also its own

if that makes any sense

And I shouldn't care about that house

or what it once was

or how my grandfather loved that ugly chair,

but I still don't want to get rid of it

because the things that are ugly

sort of make it beautiful

Each time I come back,

more lights have fallen

and the silverware needs to be recleaned

The leak is getting worse

and the floors need mopping

The faucet water smells funny

It needs to be run for a while

and then we can drink it again

Mice found their way in the cabinets

and beneath the mattresses

Clean, clean, clean

Clean it all up and then it will be okay

It'll love us like it promised

and smile like it said it would

I'm not ready to give up on this house

I'm not ready to let go

Everything is gone now

so it must stay

I come home to my room to see the bare walls,

a reminder that everything is devoted to something else

My mother wants me to stay home,

she doesn't want me to be gone another weekend,

she doesn't want me to leave her for something else,

a stupid house

She just didn't understand the Eclectic House,

she didn't understand why I'd give my heart to something  
that never wanted it in the first place

I go back anyway and each time,  
I open all the windows  
but close the big one,  
the one where the tree leans,  
where it creeps a little closer  
I tell myself that it's leaning because it loves me,  
because it'll love me like it promised

Student Name: Mia Simmons

Grade: 11

School: Cypress Ranch High School

Title: The Wail

Category: Poetry

Key: Gold Key

Educator:

That midnight, I stole away to the beach off Cedar Key,

A pair of little sisters in tow, buzzing with anticipation.

One moon hung high in the stygian sky, full and swan white,

And stars like grains of sugar, scattered across the inky plate.

We had learned about the whale in the schoolhouse that spring,

The one that is so massive, yet so elusive, I said, that its nature is a mystery.

And the girls looked up from their Barbie Dreamhouse playset

How could I refuse their big, brown eyes

When they asked to see it up close?

After mowing janky lawns and walking the neighbor's beagles for two straight weeks,

We rented a go-fast boat from the angler's daughter: a '49 Custom Runabout.

That same midnight, we snuck out to the pier with a picnic basket full of snacks from the 50¢ store, and we sailed into the summertime sea.

The moon calms the waters, I told my sisters, so we can hear the whale speak...

Echolocation, that's what it's called.

The youngest looked up at me, moon in her eyes,

I want to see it, she said.

And before I could mock her, the other beckoned the stars to sparkle in her hair.

I want to talk to the whale.

I had steered the boat past the swim area buoys, where the lights on the docks of the sleepy coastal town were farther away than the stars.

Where the gentle waves lapped at the waterline of the boat, kissing and coaxing us into the sea.

Then we have to wait quietly, I said to my sisters, so the whale will come to us.

So that night, we sat in the Runabout until the snow moon hung in the west part of the sky, and the world was tinted blue instead of black,

And my sisters and I had drifted off to sleep.

A stirring woke me, and I felt the boat vibrate beneath my feet.

Wake up, I whispered. The whale is here.

Just as the girls had blinked their sleepiness away,

Another wave of whale speak came to rock the boat.

Hel-lo, said a voice from below. A mesmerizing, somber wail.

It could sing and echo, I'd thought back then.

My sisters leaned over the edge of the boat, dipping their little fingers in the black water.

They squealed at the moaning that came from beneath the boat. Hello, whale.

I am no-o wha-ale, the voice said, all too clearly, and I didn't think

To snatch the girls from the edge of the boat.

I am no-o wha-ale.

I blinked once, and a light in the sea flickered to life.

The black sea mirrored still the stars in the sky, in their bright-speckled glory,

And in the ocean, once a pit of unknown, lit then by glowing, twinkling, glittering dots,

It shined gently, a beacon of pearlescent warmth, as if it was mocking the Moon.

Suddenly, I question Moby Dick and the Sirens; Leviathan, and the abominations of the sea.

And suddenly, the illustrations in the storybooks looked awfully inaccurate.

It wasn't a whale, you see.

The boat began to rock and we were caught, enshadowed by the night, by an incoming wave.

The flood was a shower, and we too shimmered then in the light of the stars.

The waterline ducked beneath and above, and a sick crack sprinted up the hull,

And I, mesmerized again by the whale, noticed nothing but the false moon, drawing closer.

It breached the surface, and it was as if the ocean had frozen over.

Eyes, no, suckers the size of our mother's wedding plates, washed the stars away and blinded our soaking, shivering bodies..

The whale is here, I said again, but my sisters shivered too hard to respond.

I am no-o wha-ale, it said like a sob, like a warning to the other stars in the sea:

Stay behind.



And the boat capsized.

And my mind was not on my sisters, nor the speedboat or the snacks,

But of the the song, and the flickering sea lights

And the false Moon, drifting in black water.

This was no whale, and what of the creature it was?

I could not mimic its song if I tried.

Student Name: Jayla Vongsy  
 Grade: 10  
 School: Cypress Woods High School  
 Title: The Wife I Searched For  
 Category: Short Story  
 Key: Gold Key  
 Educator: Joshua Lopez

"Dad, can you stop bringing the neighbors over? They're really starting to smell." Brie wrinkled her snout in disgust and pointed to the ravine behind the house before chuckling, "At least throw them out when you're done."

"What are you talking about, honey?" Bobbie Cheddar turned from his spot at the counter where he was cutting into a small raspberry, his thin tail draping gently on the floor. The morning bustle was beginning and the animal world was slowly awakening.

"The neighboring mice, Dad," she said hesitantly, "The ones you've been introducing me to?"

"I'm sorry, dear; I really don't know what you're talking about."

Brie cocked her head to the side, her whiskers fanning out across her face, "Dad? Are you joking right now?"

"Brie, who are you talking about? Listen, I'm sorry, but I've got to go. I'll be right back," Bobbie shook his head before leaving the cupboard cabinet that they called home. He walked to the edge of the counter that overlooked the Kitchen and sighed.

It had been five years since his wife was killed by the humans, and he had loathed them ever since. His pent up rage at their insistence on killing his family had long since settled into a simmering stew, yet he performed this ritual every morning.

Bobbie stood on his hind legs and surveyed the awakenings of the neighboring animals. The cockroach family under the sink were getting ready to take the baby nymphs to school; the ants from outside began to file into the House, readying for their daily pantry-raid heist; the spiders who lived in the ceiling corners began to twist in their delicately crafted webs. This was the beauty of the animal world. The cruel humans were always out to kill them. They barely thought of the families that they destroyed or the intricate life that they demolished when they sprayed their chemicals.

The morning sunlight was beginning to stream through the large kitchen windows, illuminating the space. Bobbie shielded his eyes with his paw and found who he was looking for: his next wife.

Emerging from the highest cupboard hole in the Kitchen was Clarisse. She truly was a specimen. Her tail was always nicely polished, and her coat of fur was the best kept of any of the mice in the town. She lifted her paw and waved at a neighboring family of silverfish, her incisors catching in the light radiantly.

Today was the day. Bobbie would finally bring her home and introduce her to his daughter, Brie. The Cheddar family would become whole once more. Never again would the humans make Bobbie feel insignificant and lonely.

“Dad?” A nasally voice rang out from his cupboard home, “Can you grab me some sugar from the Pantry?” Usually, Brie was out the door before Bobbie, working with her band in the Garage. Today, however, she had decided to take the day off to ease her bout of sickness. “The White Whiskers” were the best mice band in the entire House, going town to town performing their rock-pop music on weekends. Entertainment in the animal world was a growing industry that got more and more popular with the rise of the modern world. While they were influenced by humans in some of their work, Bobbie was still immensely proud of his daughter’s band and how far she’d come since their families’ tragedy all those years ago.

Bobbie walked downstairs and beamed at her. Brie lay in an empty cookie tin, a small sock keeping her warm. Her snout was pinker than usual, and she sniffled slightly. Her mouth was downturned as she pouted.

“I have a huge band gig in a few days! I can’t afford this setback right now,” Brie huffed angrily and continued to stare at her dad, “Where did this wave of sickness spread from this time?”

“I’m not sure dear, but I’ll let you know when I come back with your sugar. Will you be okay when I’m gone?”

“Dad, I’m not a child anymore,” she scoffed, “God, I’m practically an adult mouse by now. Thanks for caring for me, but I’ll be fine.”

“Okay then, if you say so.”

Bobbie turned to exit the cupboard hole when his daughter’s voice squeaked, “Seriously though, Dad, no more mice. Stop bringing them to me—like a cat—and hurting them in our house. Dad, I hear their screams for help, and I don’t know if I can live

with that anymore. I'm happy right now. I don't need Mom anymore and neither do you." She looked up from fiddling with the sock and said sternly, "It's time to let go now."

Bobbie stared at her. He didn't move as he took in Brie's words. After a few moments of silence, he nodded to himself, grunted a goodbye to his daughter, and left the home completely.

As he walked towards the pantry, Bobbie couldn't help but think about what she had said. How did Brie know about his plans to introduce Clarisse to their family? Did he tell her previously or was his memory faulting him like it had been the past few weeks? Whatever the case, it was odd how Brie knew his next move.

Almost at his destination, Bobbie had to look twice when he saw Clarisse chatting with one of the Pantry ants. She was stunning, just like his wife. Her smile warmed the entire world whenever he glimpsed her way. She reminded him of home and the importance of repairing his family.

Bobbie put on his most charming smile, smoothed out his whiskers, and approached Clarisse. The ant, upon seeing him, immediately darted away.

"Good morning, Clarisse. How has the breezy wind treated you?" He winked at her and chuckled at her reddening snout.

"Bobbie, you are such a flirt!" she teased, batting him in the arm before turning away shyly. She was a few months younger than Bobbie and had recently moved into her own cupboard hole. Her father, a notorious underground dealer, was very influential within the rodent world. Clarisse had grown up comfortably and hadn't needed to lift a paw when it came to hard work. In an effort to change the community's limited viewpoints of her, she often came to talk to the locals. This was something that Bobbie deeply admired about her; she was determined to change for the better—maybe she was willing to do the same for Bobbie's family.

"I was wondering if you'd like to come over for dinner," Bobbie smiled, "My daughter, Brie, has been dying to meet you."

"That sounds wonderful! I have nothing planned for tonight, so I'll see you then," Clarisse bowed her head and beamed before scurrying back to the line of worker ants.

~~~

It had been a few hours since Bobbie's interaction with his future wife, and his cupboard home was finally ready. The surfaces were polished and the cookie tins were neatly tucked away. In order to properly cleanse the house, he had to send his sickly daughter outside for some fresh air. Brie was waiting on the top of the counter in front of their cabinet.

"Brie!" Bobbie called out to his daughter, "I've finished cleaning. You can come back inside now!"

When there was no reply, Bobbie headed to where Brie was and saw her sitting down with her head under her tail. She was clutching a single pearl. Her body shook gently as she cried into the marble countertop. The breeze from the air vent blew gently from how high up they were. The sun was starting to set in the Kitchen windows, casting a gentle glow on the world.

Bobbie approached his daughter and put a paw on her shoulder, "Honey, why are you upset? Is that your mother's pearl?" Brie peered up from her tail and frowned.

"It is, but do you really not remember?" she whispered hoarsely, "Do you really not know what you're doing?" She held the pearl closer to her chest. It glimmered in the setting sun.

Bobbie's eyes furrowed as he tilted his head, "Is it because of the sugar? I can go back to the pantry and—"

"It's not the sugar, Dad," she interrupted. Brie disentangled herself from her tail before facing Bobbie completely. She wiped the remaining tears away and stared angrily.

"It was never the sugar or the new mice or the obsessive cleaning that upset me. It was your impossible goal to get your wife back. She's gone, Dad," she whispered, her voice croaking as more tears dropped from her eyes, "She's gone." The pearl that she held was his wife's most prized possession. It had fallen from a piece of human jewelry during their first date and had since been a piece of their love. Bobbie had forgotten it existed since her death all those years ago.

Bobbie began to laugh confusedly as he watched his daughter, "I have no idea what you're saying. She's coming over for dinner soon. You have to be patient."

"That is not Mom, Dad. Mom is dead," Brie was shaking with rage as she spoke to him.

"I know that sweetie," Bobbie sighed, glancing over his shoulder, "Clarisse will be here any minute now. Why don't we go back inside and clean you up?"

"She isn't coming, Dad!" Brie yelled, stalking toward him, "I told her not to come. I won't have another death on my hands."

Bobbie was tired of this back and forth nonsense. He looked beside him and saw the tall height from which they were standing. The evening was coming to an end as dark shadows emerged throughout the Kitchen. The air vent blew angrily as the sounds of the world fell away. Everything went still in Bobbie's mind.

He grabbed Brie's shoulders and said with an acute stillness, "I have done all this for you. I have been trying to find you a mother—one that is worthy for our family." Brie shook her head, trying to pry herself from his tense grip. The pearl slid from her paws and rolled away as she fought.

"The mice that I have killed are dead because they are not the ones for us. Do not let sympathy get in the way of your pain. Feel the anger, and feel the rage deep inside. I know it's there."

"It's not, Dad," Brie finally freed herself and pushed him away, "I've learned to deal with the pain, but not in this psychotic way. I'm leaving." Brie marched towards the cupboard hole but was stopped by a raging Bobbie.

"You are not going anywhere," he spat, backing Brie towards the ledge once more. His eyes were distant and cold as he herded her to the edge.

"Dad, what are you doing? Dad, stop. Dad!" She glanced behind her multiple times as the drop to below loomed closer. Brie grabbed her father's shoulders and tried to shove him away, but it was no use. The dad that she had grown to love had morphed into a true monster. Foam started to drip from his mouth as he bellowed like a human, making him lose what little common sense he had left. He continued driving her backwards even as she sobbed and clawed at him to stop.

"You want to ruin our perfect family—fine. Ruin it when you're elsewhere." He pushed forcibly with his paws and watched as his daughter fell. Farther and farther she went. The darkness mauled her gentle face, and the air conditioning blew harshly. Her fur fluttered gently as gravity claimed her. Brie's sobs echoed, the sound bouncing from the cabinets, until they stopped completely.

A lone pearl glistened on the countertop as the moonlight streamed into the Kitchen. It lay there for the rest of the night and well into the winter, only being found when a lone mouse was out searching for his wife.

Student Name: Nichole Wyre  
Grade: 12  
School: Langham Creek High School  
Title: Animalism  
Category: Portfolio Category(Writing)  
Key: Gold Key  
Educator: Jaspreet Bains

No person will understand the thump, thump, thump

Of my heart against my ribs, desperate to push its way out of

My chest to fall into my waiting hands.

But the mice will understand.

All they can hear is their own heartbeats, wild and rapid

In their little bodies. They live with the vibrations rattling their skeletons.

They do not know a life without the shaking and pounding of their hearts

But they know they want the sensations and sounds gone.

No person will understand how my heart is convinced it's a parasite

And is trying to convince my body it has no place

Amongst my lungs and diaphragm.

But the rabbits will understand.

The wild hares and domesticated house pets

That are frail and have a deep sense of wrongness within them they can't quell.



Their brains are puny little hunks of pillared matter,  
And their thoughts are consumed by an undercurrent of paranoia.  
The rabbits fear, but they are comforted knowing something is watching them.

No person will understand my desire to carve and carve  
Until I've scraped away enough at my sternum that I can  
Reach between my lungs and evict my heart from its home  
And make it mine in a way unreplicable by man.

Except for the prey that knows the laceration from their  
Breastbone to their pelvis, revealing a canyon of dark glistening silk, comes from  
The predator sinking its jaws in and delicately peeling away the layers until it  
Finds the prey's heart between shattered bone and deflating lungs and eats it whole.  
Their desire is satisfied, their desire is satisfied, but I still long for my autonomy.

Student Name: Alexa Reyna  
Grade: 8  
School: Deer Park Junior High School  
Title: Adjacent  
Category: Poetry  
Key: Gold Key  
Educator: Madeline Cornelius

Lying on the floor,

I don't know what

to think

of myself.

But the murmurs

still slip past my mouth

as I hold

Sister Esper's hand in vain.

As I hold onto

Sister Einar's secret

— yes, our little jest

only we know.

"May God be with us all,"

I whispered,

embracing the pain in my chest

as my vision blurred

into the darkness.

“May God be with us all.”

Student Name: Jaden Willis

Grade: 11

School: Deer Park High School-S Campus

Title: Black Men Don't Cry

Category: Short Story

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Denee Espree

I was born during a thunderstorm in the backwoods of the Deep South. It was the early eighties, and instead of my father, my older sister held my Mom's hand tightly as she gave birth. My father was aware, yes, but chose not to show up. His wife didn't know about me.

I was a curly haired, dark baby, with a big head and round eyes. As soon as I was out, I raised my tiny fists to the air and let out a gurgling cry.

Let it out, the thunder said, making the windows rattle. This is the last we'll want to hear it.

The first time I remember crying was when I was four. Mama had spent hours baking a 'seven-up cake'—a bundt cake with soda added to the batter—and more than anything else in the world, I wanted a piece. It was for my birthday, I thought, confident. Mama won't mind if I grabbed a piece early, right? My fingers barely grazed the top of the counter, but the tips of my fingers managed to grace the edge of the cake tin. I held it for just a few seconds before I lost my balance and fell, the cake landing on top of me. It was ruined, and I sobbed, mourning the loss of my cake and the looming spanking I knew I was in store for. My mama was a short lady, yet not one to be underestimated. Singlehandedly, she kept three kids in school, fed, and under one roof. She could cook like nobody else's business and wielded a belt like it was an extension of her arm.

When Mama ran in the kitchen, she was furious—and the sight of my tears only served to make her angrier.

"Why are you crying, huh?" She smacked the counter. "You didn't bake the cake. You can't go back in time and put it back together, can you? You ain't solved nothing. Nobody wants to see a boy cry over something he did."

Somehow, like magic, the urge to cry vanished. Instead, shame filled my tiny body, and I realized the lack of power my tears had.

The next time I remember crying, I was ten. I was lanky, more bones than muscle, my teeth slightly too big for my mouth. As I played in the little league and began to run with

the boys in my neighborhood, I realized how... odd the relationship I had with my father was. Like Santa, he dropped by unannounced, stepping out of a big truck smelling of sweat and grass. He'd speak to Mama in her room for a bit—the door was always closed—and then would ask me if I wanted to go riding. He'd take me along with him to mow lawns, demonstrating what a man's job is. He was slightly cold, a little mean, and I learned quickly to do whatever he said as soon as he said it if I wanted to avoid a big hand hitting the back of my head. Every time he finished a day's work, he'd crack open a bottle of soda and take a few gulps out of it before handing it to me. I learned to find 'I love you's' at the bottom of the bottle. Affection in the two or three dollar bills he handed to me as pocket change.

Once, I got into his truck in tears. My older brother had stolen a week's worth of money from me, all because he knew Mama was still mad about the chores I didn't do and wouldn't be quick to punish him. I was so angry that the tears almost stung as they leaked out of my eyes. Lord knows why I expected comfort.

"Why the hell are you crying?"

"I—" The words didn't leave my tongue. My throat had swollen shut.

He cuffed the back of my head. "You think you're some kind of sissy? Your mama raising two daughters? We," he gestured between us, "don't get to cry. If you're a real man, you suck up those tears and you deal. If you think anybody cares about what some skinny black boy from Texas feels like on the inside, then you've got another thing coming."

Another lesson. Tears were meaningless when they appeared on my face, as sharp and masculine as it is.

I got by dry faced for another year or two, scared straight by the talk with my father. I grew to become a troublesome, mischievous boy, eager to follow in my brother's footsteps. He was mean and a magnet for trouble, even when we were kids. Always slipping money from Mama's wallet, purposely poking at our sister to get a reaction, tricking candy out of my hands just because he could.

I refuse to do homework and talked back to teachers and bullies alike, knowing that my mouth would have to make up for my thin frame. As much as my brother got on my everlasting nerve, I wanted his approval, and often sought it out in ways that made the wrinkles between my mother's eyebrows deepen. We'd walk to the corner store and buy snacks with money he mysteriously acquired, and then rode our bikes down to the dike to skip rocks. There would be times where my brother was all there, and I loved those times because it meant that he'd come home at a decent time to not worry Mama and watch movies in our room. That lasted for a while—until a switch in his head flipped—and he

was angry. During those times, he'd cuss Mama out at the drop of a hat, scream at our sister for no reason, and have random people knocking at the door asking for money or to settle an issue.

One night, a whole crew of police officers came barging in. Apparently, my brother had been caught holding someone at gunpoint during a drug deal gone wrong. They tore the house apart looking for any sign of him or his wrongdoings, and the entire time, Mama sat at the kitchen table, head bowed.

I sat next to her and wrapped an arm around her shoulders protectively.

"It's my fault. That boy, I should've known!"

"He's always been like this," I reasoned, voice wavering. "Even if they send him to juvie, he'll straighten up and get out."

She shook her head. "No. No, you start going to jail this early and it messes with your head. I've seen it. A criminal feels so alien in the real world that he'll do anything to go back in." Without realizing, a tear trailed down my face. A thumb wiped it away, so harsh it almost stung. "Don't cry in front of these men. They don't see you as human. They see you as a number, and you showing any emotion only gives them another reason to call you unstable and put you behind bars."

Tears are ammo, she didn't say. On a black man's face, they are nothing but marks of a future offender, of a man who will fail society sooner rather than later.

Just like she predicted, my brother spent his teenage years in and out of juvie or robbing people. My sister ran to college as soon as she could, boasting that she'd become a doctor and buy more than anything Mama denied her. That left Mama and I together a lot, and we grew close. We'd ride around and watched football games together. She'd pack snacks in her purse and I hid drinks in my pockets. We went to the movies together, got food together, and spent too many nights on the couch watching murder mysteries together in silence. When I graduated, she cried enough for the both of us, making me promise to stay out of trouble and get through college in one piece.

It only made sense that the next time I cried, it'd be because of her.

Throughout high school, I dated a few girls, but only one managed to be the girl. She was smarter than me, cockier than me, and hated my guts. We knew of each other—and by that, I mean that I kicked the back of her chair in middle school—but only started dating

when our friends did. We broke up and got back together in college and dated for a while before she got pregnant. I nearly burst into tears trying to convince her to keep it, and she did. We got married and had a daughter that practically looked just like me. When she was born, I was only able to give her a quick kiss on the head before rushing off to class.

My mother-in-law adored her. My brother, right before he went to prison for the last time, held her in his arms. My mama was infatuated with her granddaughter, but was quick to remind me that my fun years were over. I bucked at the idea, years of irresponsibility and anger and party fever still itching beneath my skin. I loved my daughter, but both my wife and I were in our early twenties. People our age were getting blackout drunk and skipping class—meanwhile, I was changing diapers and cleaning up vomit. Stubbornly, I drank and took pills for those brief slivers of heaven where all responsibility lifted from my shoulders. Where I was a kid again, and the burden of being strong and caring for a family was so far away it might as well have been on Mars. I wasn't careful, and once, while pumping gas, I fell asleep. I woke up to a knock on my window, a cop with a resigned look on his face showing his badge. He found pills in the glove compartment and arrested me, and I had to tell my wife that I wouldn't be home to see my family. Then, I had to call my mama and beg for bail money.

For a moment, she didn't answer. "You know you messed up, right?"

I scowled as if she could see me. "I see the bars. I know."

"Do you?" She sniffed. "You keep this up and your daughter won't recognize your face. You keep this up and your mother-in-law will convince your wife to divorce you and go right back to being under her thumb. You keep this up, and you'll end up just like your brother—no family, no job, no nothing. I expected better out of you. I thought I raised you better than this."

I gritted my teeth together so hard that they ached. Feeling the tears well in my eyes, I got closer to the phone, trying to hide from the people around me. "Mama. Please."

"I'll send it. Don't bother calling the next time."

I'd like to say that was the last time I went to jail, but it wasn't. It took a long time for my wife and I to grow into the kind of parents our daughter needed. Due to my criminal record, my criminal justice degree was essentially useless, and I went back to community

college to get the degree necessary to work at a plant. The entire time, I stayed at my mom's house, and there were too many moments where my wife and I sat in my childhood bedroom wondering if that was all life had for us.

I got my first real job the same year my father was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. Mid thirties, I'd finally gotten my life together, finally began to pay my mother back for everything she did for me, and he got cancer.

A man whose outer shell could only be softened by the sight of his granddaughter had been chained to a hospital bed. His wife finally introduced herself to me, likely needing an extra pair of hands more than she wanted another son, and invited me into the fold. I didn't cry in his hospital room, nor did I cry on the way home. I cried, finally, while breaking the news to my daughter, wrapping my arms tightly around her.

"I need to be strong for her," I later told my wife, partially scolding myself.

"She's stronger than you think," she reminded me. "You need to let yourself feel. If you bottle everything up, it'll consume you."

I cried at work. I cried at the side of his hospital bed when he was asleep. I cried at his funeral, trying to imagine a childhood where I'd had full access to a loving, present father. A funeral where I'd have years of memories instead of rough, splintered moments spent angry. Sad.

A couple of years later, I bought my first house. Eventually, I convinced Mama to move in with us so that I can keep an eye on her. She went through a serious back surgery to help with her mobility, and nobody else was there to take care of her except me. My brother was in jail and my sister only stopped by for a brief visit before leaving, still jaded over the fact that Mama refused to pay off her overdue credit cards like she did in the past. I spent my time working or finally getting into the habits most suburban dads took part of. Grilling. Building stuff. Remodeling the home office, forgetting about it, then remodeling it again. Privately, I fantasized about the day that my brother would get out of prison. I'd loan him some money, even a place to stay if he needed it, and help him get back on his feet. He'd get to know my daughter, reconnect with Mama, and I'd be able to finally, finally, keep him out of prison.



Then, like an axe falling on someone's neck, the dream died. My brother had passed away in prison.

My childhood was gone. There was no going back to my childhood home, with its chipped paint and squeaky screen door. Mama didn't have three kids to take care of. I didn't have a dad to mow lawns with, or a brother to ride out with. I didn't have a sister to bother because my sister barely talked to us, and when she did, it was scathing and vindictive. I felt splintered, like I was a mirror and someone took a hammer to me for the fun of it. More than anything, I wanted to swallow my emotions and pretend they weren't there. Like my father was just a room over, brows furrowed, waiting for a tear to slip down my dark, manly face. It was a cold life, but a familiar one—a bony, mean embrace. With time, however, I had grown rusty at the art of ignoring my feelings, and they flowed out of me like a river.

I had a mother to plan a funeral with, a wife with a shoulder to cry on, and a daughter to look at when I needed a reminder that the world wasn't built to destroy me. I didn't hold my tears back, not one bit, too busy mourning the loss of people who left too soon.

If black men don't cry, then I'm not a black man. I've tried to adhere to the image over the years, to become an impenetrable wall to shield myself from a world that only seeks to turn me into a villain. I've failed. Humans cry, and I'm a human, as flawed and misshapen as I am.

Student Name: Sophia Hill

Grade: 11

School: Deer Park High School-S Campus

Title: Growing Panes

Category: Flash Fiction

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Joshua Nebrida

As a child, my lameness was a curse that lurked beyond the small and empty pond of my consciousness. Like how one would mistake a Dutch elm for a Weeping Willow in an early morning fog, I was not blind to the presence of this ailment but rather to its intentions. Most of my days filled themselves with dry sighs and vacant stares, while at other times, I seemed forced to resist the tepid urge of breath for fear of bursting the fragile lining that was my body. The Warden would assure me that I possessed the makings of a kind and proper child with only a few, "quite fixable," flaws.

"There is no need for worry, child," she assured me. "The youth are always finding ways to manifest the monstrosities of their own making. What they don't know is that the only monsters that could ever harm them are the ones they never intended to make at all." Then she would peck my forehead and whisk herself away, leaving behind only the pulsing image of her lithe figure. And though I held myself snug to this warming ignorance, not even an eagle, flying higher than the reaches of Earth's towering mountains, could ignore the icy storms forming below.

Like many other characteristics of my curious-self, it confounded others that I seemed no more excited to play house with the other children than I was to clean dusty, old chinaware. Rather, some of my more tolerable moments of youth were the rare occasions when the weather was far too dreary to play outside, and I could be saved from the embarrassment of my invisible disabilities. Even now, though years have passed, and I've mastered the unspoken art of masks and mannerisms, when the silver sky sinks sinisterly low upon the Earth, stewing with man's unwavering resentment - when even nature's grand structures of majesty proves petrified in the face of the rain and wind's ruthless beatings, I feel a pleasant chill, pulse from my neck and excite the edges of my barren mind.

Today is one of those days; the clouds clump over each other, pushing and mashing together as they bicker with sadistic yearning over who will cause of the most suffering to the beings below. I lay on my bed staring out the large side window, just watching with renewed contentment as the panes are tested by the whirlwinds outside. Bang. The Warden's out for business, as usual. Bang. And it must be some sort of holiday because none of the servants and workers are making their usual fuss over laundering some lone sock or scrubbing the occasional candelabra. Bang. I squeeze my eyes shut and imagine my lungs breathing in and in until finally - BANG - I burst into a million hunks of flesh! Toes spread across the starched linens, a spleen falls inside an open drawer of the mahogany dresser and - BANG!

At once, my eyes snap open and my body seizes as it struggles to remember its wholeness. As my sputtering heart slowed, I saw that the window was shattered, letting in the howls of a spiteful heaven. On the ground in front, laid many glass shards and amid them, a tiny stone, but I only noticed it for but a moment before my attention was again fixed on the storm abroad outside, now inside. With no barriers to separate my body from the wrathful air, I couldn't resist its pull any longer. The mild excitement from before grew and thrust my body into unfamiliar motion.

As if in a dream, I watch my body bound and fly with more grace than ever before. I float through the Warden's estate, unbothered by the deep, bloody gashes on my arms and the freezing mud coating my bare feet.

Eventually, my feet slowed and exhaustion set in, weighing down my soul until I could only trudge, and trudge I did, through the wild flora until I noticed it. At first glance, the glass house seemed to disappear within the rest of nature's greenery, perhaps the reason why it had gone untouched for so long in the first place. An amalgamation of life - dandelions, ivy, and poppies that lined the steel beams of its structure with a painter's precision - crammed itself within the yellowed panes and rickety bones until it was one inseparable creature, both overwhelmingly beautiful and, yet, commonplace. Curiosity bested me as I crept inside, through the door-less cavity of its being, and suddenly I found myself stunned in awe by the sight. Endless vines and wild flowers wriggled, squirmed, and desperately fought from all directions to escape the dangers outside while the browned and brittle remains of potted plants sat under a canopy of new life, awaiting the arrival of a savior that would come too late. Their universe sat before me, alive yet still; it stood in perfect harmony as if it was a mural framed in glass. Emotions trapped inside,

the happiness and fear hidden just barely beneath my skin, and the fog over my mind finally lifted away revealing a vivacious ocean of life. Waves roared higher than the sky, veiling the unbelievable depths below. I shared sorrow for a lily's death, hope for a common garden weed, and fury towards the Sun and Moon for the fickle creatures they were. How do people live with these sensations everyday? How is the burden of living both so great and terrifying? And how have I ever lived without it?

I stepped carefully with the newfound burden of life and laid upon a bed of plants, living and dead, benign and poisonous, in the center of this tiny and beautiful universe. I gazed up and saw, through the smallest hole: a speck of blue. I've met the hateful storms, the hail, and the rain of Earth hundreds of times before, but, even so, I knew I had just seen something truly beautiful for the first time: I saw the sky.

Student Name: Cielo Vega  
Grade: 11  
School: Deer Park High School-S Campus  
Title: HESYKHIA  
Category: Poetry  
Key: Gold Key  
Educator: Joshua Nebrida

Can I shape it, craft it in a way

to hurt you?

Can I turn it on you and pull the trigger?

Make the bullet tailored to your soul, so that when it penetrates,

breaks your skin,

you'll bleed out and the effects will cloak you in a deep inescapable hole.

It seems you know you'll run dry,

left to bleed out on your own whims,

yet sit there and reside in a deathly slumber.

You cloak yourself in a shadowed iron curtain.

You call it peace when you mute the word inside and out,

but I know the truth.

You'll use it as a weapon—

turn on yourself in dire times.

Times when words matter

when a voice needs to be heard because often times you think

you can't deflect the echo of their words.

Does the dead air rumble with wrath louder than it would've if there were words to be heard?

Does she slither in and sulk in a corner while the ruckus of the room grows to a violent vibrating hum?

No.

She waits till it's grown cold and stuffed

when your mind wants to explode because your mind is ricocheting with words and thoughts never to be heard.

It's like a knife to the mind

how her presence can spook and haunt your words into sheep.

That'll follow you in your sentence to solitary confinement

counting them off one by one.

Student Name: Jaqueline Martinez  
 Grade: 10  
 School: Deer Park High School-S Campus  
 Title: I Am  
 Category: Poetry  
 Key: Gold Key  
 Educator:

What do you know about being Mexican American?

What do I know about being Mexican American?

I don't even know what it's like being Mexican American.

Why? Because I'm more Mexican than American, and more American than Mexican. But I'm more American than Mexican American. Does that make sense?

My culture is here and there and right down the middle.

My language is up here and down there, and right at the border.

How can you be in the middle of the middle?

When I dance norteyas and cumbias, am I a light skin Hispanic or am I the white kid trying to be "trendy"?

Latino/Hispanic isn't trendy.

When I play loteria, am I Mexican or an American playing Mexican Bingo?

With the actual cards like "La Rosa" y "El Borracho". Not your "Bicicleta" and "Me gusta" cards.

Can I even say I'm Mexican American when the place my family comes from is becoming more modernized? More Americanized?

When a Mexican is near the border, do you call them Mexicans or Americans?

Can I even say I'm American when I feel better in real Mexican areas, or Mexican-known places instead of going to Casa Ole or Chalupas—or any Tex-Mex. Wanna-be Mexican restaurant?

Or am I just Texan?

But I don't sound stereotypically Texan.

I don't even sound Mexican either!

Is Texan Mexican or is Mexican Texan?

Am I making sense?

Sorry, I probably don't.

Should I cheer for the USA soccer team or the Mexican Soccer team?

Should I like American Football or should I like baseball?

I'm not Mexican because I'm not your brown skinned, wild, thick curled hair, beautiful authentic features, or a full body. I don't have big heart shaped lips, and I don't have a round yet slim face.

I'm not American because I'm not "white," I'm not blonde, and I don't have big blue, light brown, or green, or hazel eyes. I don't have a pointy thin nose, nor do I have thin but pretty lips. I don't have European features.

So what am I?

If we are always so caught in trying to be a part of a people group—some praised and some looked down upon—shouldn't there be a sense of belonging?

Shouldn't a people group be like a school where everyone is doing their own things and there's no judgement? Where everyone is speaking their own language, real or fake, new or old, formal or informal, harsh or sweet?

WHERE DO I BELONG.

CAN I BE ANYTHING BUT THE MIDDLE OF THE MIDDLE?

I'm not asking anymore. I'm done begging. I know I deserve to feel like I belong with whatever it was that I am. I'm tired of having to fight for the simple right of being accepted by the majority group. Even the minority group.



If you love what we give and if you love what we say and love how we behave and how we sound and how we look and think and do, why don't you love us?

If we're so important to your little economy and we're so important for diversity, why don't you allow us to be the damn change?

If you appreciate the food we bring to the table, why aren't you eating?

It's not poison. I promise. It was made with love and with pride and with a sense of helping other people.

I don't think people realize how much struggle a Mexican American goes through. A Mexican American isn't necessarily a race or an ethnicity. It's not a title and it's not something you can take with a grain of salt.

Ni de aquí, ni de allá . Sin lugar, sin amar, sin hogar, sin dignidad, sin pertenecer. ¿Pero nos quieres aún, no?

(Not from here nor from there. Without a place, without love, without a home, without dignity, without belonging. But you love us still, no?)

Amas nuestra estupidez de las mentiras que nos das. Amas lo que te damos, lo que podemos hacer. Nos das oportunidades y luego nos la rebatas de nuestras propias putas manos. ¿Como quieres que estemos satisfechos con ser Mexicano-Estadounidenses si ni nos puedes dar algo simple. Algo importante. Un lugar en donde podemos ser libres de tu mal, de tu odio, y de tu ignorancia.

(You love our obliviousness from the lies you give us. You love what we give you, what we can do. You give us opportunities then you steal them from our very own damn hands. How do you want us to be satisfied in being Mexican American if you can't even give us something simple. Something important: a place where we can be free from your evil, from your hate, and from your ignorance.)

To be Mexican American isn't to be part of an ethnic group.

To be Mexican American is to be a fighter. To constantly be deemed as less from every single point of view.

To be Mexican American is to scream in silence or shout your whispers to everybody but nobody.

Being Mexican American isn't just limited of being a way of life or thinking.

To be Mexican American is to know what you're doing and what you're doing it for. To speak your truth in any language and embrace it regardless of any negative obstacles. To embrace the culture and take pride in something so beautiful, so diverse, and so unique.

These are the struggles of a Mexican American.

What war should we fight? What group should we fight for?

We don't have to choose. We can have the best of both worlds.

So, don't tell me what you know about being Mexican American. Despite not knowing a lot, I know enough. My experiences are different from any other Mexican American, but we're a school. And you never have one of the same person, teacher, subject, or tests.

I am Mexican American more than I am American or Mexican. I am Mexican American more than I am Texan. Mexican isn't Texan and Texan isn't Mexican. Tex-Mex isn't American, and it isn't Mexican American.

Being Mexican American is to be in the middle of the middle.

And that I am.

Student Name: Anne Sasser

Grade: 10

School: Deer Park High School-S Campus

Title: I am just so tired of it all.

Category: Poetry

Key: Gold Key

Educator:

I am so tired.

People always tell me I can talk to them,

But I've shut myself off.

It isn't easy to open up to just anyone.

I can't even admit to myself when I've been wronged

As a result, I'm alone.

As a result, I'm angry.

As a result, I am incapable of forming meaningful connection.

As a result, I am hurt.

And as a result, I'm alone.

As a result, I'm angry.

As a result, I am incapable of forming meaningful connection.

As a result, I am hurt.

And here I am again, writing a cry for help

Writing a plead for it to end.

I've chosen to have good days,

It's that simple.

But often those days are ruined.

So I cut myself off.

Making sure no one can see inside the dark, concrete and lead radiation proof box

I have crafted for myself to never be hurt again.

As a result, I'm alone.

As a result, I'm angry.

As a result, I am incapable of forming meaningful connection.

As a result, I am hurt.

And as a result, I'm alone.

As a result, I'm angry.

As a result, I am incapable of forming meaningful connection.

As a result, I am hurt.

Student Name: Evan Segura  
 Grade: 8  
 School: Deer Park Junior High School  
 Title: Krampus  
 Category: Short Story  
 Key: Gold Key  
 Educator: Shelley Grant

¶1-'Twas the night before Christmas. Boys and girls all around the globe, all waiting for Santa to bring them gifts and toys. Family's together once again, celebrating the holiday of giving. The birthday of our Jesus. Kids all hoping to make Saint Nicks nice list this year. A time where spells come alive. Snows in the air, much laughter to share. And for such a beautiful season, there always comes the negative sides.

"Mom! Heather hit me!" "Mom Max stole my diary!" There was a family who showed love in a very irregular way. There was the youngest, Max. Max was a twelve year old boy. Often being moody or a trouble maker. His older sister, Heather. Heather is an eighteen year old girl, often fighting with Max multiple times. "Can you two stop arguing! Your aunt and uncle are coming. And so are you're cousins!" Max's mother yelled. "He started it! And mom I don't want them with me! Holly and Beth act like boys!" Heather complained. "Listen, I don't care. They will be here any minute so come help me hang these frames." The mother said as she grabbed a box. Heather followed her mother and left Max with his grandmother. His grandmother was baking cookies and other sweets for desert. Max's father walked downstairs with a box filled with ornaments. "Dad? Wanna watch a Christmas movie like usual?" Max asked. "No Max. Not right now, I'm busy." Max's father said as he stumbled into the living room. "Oh, that's.. that's okay.." Max said, clearly holding back his tears. Christmas music started to play on the old static radio. After a few minutes, the doorbell had rang. Heather ran towards the door and pulled it open. "Hi Aunt Cathy!" Heather yelled. "Hey Heather, hey would you mind taking this in for me? Thanks" she said as she walked on in. Uncle Hank stumbled in along with his two daughter and sons. Holly and Beth walked in along with their little brother Jordan. Then came Aunt Carol. She walked in with the baby. "Oh.. Aunt Carol! What a surprise.." Max's mother said, clearly being sarcastic. "Yeah well its the holidays. Now where can I put my stuff at?" Aunt Carol said as she walked to the living room. "Cath.. Why is she here!" Max's mother whispered loudly to Aunt Cathy. "She was alone! I had no choice!" Aunt Cathy said. "This house looks like Martha Stewart threw up in here." Carol said from the kitchen.

¶2-Time had passed and dinner was ready. They each pulled a chair and sat around. "Let's say grace" Max's mother said. "I'm quite alright. Im going to eat." Aunt Carol said. Jordan began eating and so did Uncle Hank. At this point, they decided just to not say grace. "Hey Max! Pass the Mashed potatoes now." Holly said to Max. "Can you say please?" Max responded. "Pass it!" Holly said as she flanged a pea to Max. The pea nailed Max right in the eye. "Stop that right now!" Aunt Cathy said to Holly. "Sorry. The little queer just doesn't listen" Holly said. Beth laughed and high fives Holly. "Don't say that at the dinner table!" Aunt Cathy yelled to Holly. "But look at him! He looks like a gay little twerp!" Holly said. Just then, Max hopped onto the table and crawled to Holly. "Max get down!" Max's father screamed. Beth pulled Max to the floor and they started to beat Max. Max's father pulled Max away and Aunt Cathy pulled Holly and Beth. "I hate you! I hate you all! I hate Christmas!" Max screamed as he ran upstairs. Max's father walked up to Max's room and slowly opened the door. "Hey Max? You doing okay?" Max's father asked. "Why can't Christmas be normal? Why does everyone hate me!" Max yelled. "Hey Max.. Nobody hates you. Everyone cares about you. You know, Uncle Hank, Holly and Beth, me, your mom," Max's father was trying to explain to Max. "I don't care. I just want some time alone! Please!" Max screamed. "Okay.. Just come down whenever.." Max's father said, closing the door. Max started to cry, but the shine of a ball caught his eye. It was a special ornament, an ornament given to him when he was still a baby. The ornament had supposedly been given to him by Santa Clause. Only now, Max didn't believe there was a Santa. Max grabbed the ornament, his hand in a fierce tight grip. Max shoved open his window and tossed the ornament out his window. Shutting the window, Max went to his bed and laid his head down. Just then, outside his home, the shattered pieces from his Ornament flew into the Christmas air. The breeze rang of bells. Suddenly, above came the large gray clouds, bringing a blizzard to town.

This was a colossal mistake. Max and his family had run out of the Christmas spirit. There was nothing left. They had all been naughty. This year, Saint Nicholas would not be coming. Instead, it would be a much darker, and more ancient being. Krampus. A goat like demon. Krampus usually punishes the kids. Only this time, it would be different. Max's family hit the top of the list. He would be visiting this year. Only not just to punish, but to take.

¶3- The whole blocks power started to go out. One by one, everyone's lights shut off. Max's house was the last to lose their power. "What happened!" Beth screamed. Everyone then started to freak out, screaming and yelling. Max's father sighed and made his way to the attic to check the circuit breaker. Flipping the switches, but there was no

reaction. The power stayed off, darkness continuing. "Well, there's no power." Max's father said as he walked downstairs. "I will light candles" Max's grandmother whispered. Uncle Hank grabbed a box of matches and lit the fire, lighting up the room with its flames. Max walked downstairs and looked around. "What happened to the lights?" Max asked. "Damn blizzard shut the blocks power off." Uncle Hank whispered. "You got some scotch?" Asked Aunt Carol. "On the kitchen shelf.." Max's father said with a sigh. "Great" Aunt Carol said, walking toward the kitchen. "I'm going to check that attic myself." Uncle Hank said, getting up from the chair. "It's useless but alright" Max's father whispered. "Yeah well this is an awkward situation." Uncle Hank yelled from the attic. "Come on! Turn on! Damn it!" Uncle Hank started to yell, flipping the switches repeatedly. "What the hell?" Uncle Henry said to himself, staring at a red shiny sack. It looked almost like Santa's gift bag, just more worn out. "More gifts?" Uncle Hank said to himself, carrying the bag on his shoulder. Uncle Hank walked back to the family and dropped the bag. "Hey David? Why did you have more presents in the attic?" Uncle Hank asked to Max's father. "What? I didn't have any gifts in the attic." Max's father responded. "Well I found some." Uncle Hank said, putting the gifts under the tree. "They look like they are from the eighteen hundreds" Beth said. Max's grandmother returned with a tray of lit candles. She placed the candles all around and rested on the sofa. Just then, a loud thud sound was heard from the ceiling. "Mom!" Max yelled. "It's just a squirrel" Max's mother responded. "Yeah, in this weather" Aunt Carol said, sipping her alcohol. Max's grandmother glanced up the chimney and sat down once again. "Keep the fire hot" She said, sounding quiet and raspy. "I'll deal with this" Uncle Hank said. Uncle Hank grabbed a jack in the box from the sack and threw it up into the attic. "Get out of here you filthy critters!" He yelled. Uncle Hank slammed the attic door closed and walked back downstairs. "They should be gone now" Uncle Hank said in a tired voice. By dawn, everyone decided to rest. But before they could however, a loud scream could be heard. Everyone looked around but couldn't see anything. But just then, they noticed Jordan being pulled into the chimney. "Jacob!" Uncle Hank yelled. Uncle Hank ran toward the chimney and gripped onto Jacobs legs. Uncle Hank pulled and tugged but couldn't pull him. Max's dad ran and held Uncle Hanks waist for support. But then both Jacob and Uncle Hank were being dragged. Uncle Hanks hand slipped, letting go of Jacobs leg. "No! Hold on Jacob!" Uncle Hank yelled. "Save Jacob!" Aunt Cathy yelled. But it was too late. What ever that was had taken Jacob. "What the hell was that!" Aunt Cathy screamed. Then suddenly, a box from under tree began to shake. Uncle Hank snatched a fire place tool and held it in front of him. The top of the box then ripped, a small hole was revealed. Uncle Hank poked it with his tool, but nothing happened.

¶4- Everything was now quiet. There was nothing. Just then, a large shriek coming from Holly was heard. Aunt Cathy looked over but saw nothing. "What! What do you see!" Aunt Cathy asked. "A-A clown!" Holly whispered. Holly then pointed toward the corner,

her hand shaking. Everyone watched, waiting for what happened next. Beth then walked over, a candle in her hand. "Be careful honey! Please!" Aunt Cathy yelled. She moved the light.. but there was nothing there. "There's nothing there Holly! It's okay!" Beth said. Right as Beth was about to move however, SWOOSH, two cartoony gloves snatched Beth. Beth started to scream and shout as she was being pulled around the room. Uncle Hank threw his tool at the ceiling, thus causing Holly to fall. But after she fell, then came another. "W-What is that thing!" Max's mother yelled. They were staring at another Holly. "What the hell is happening!" Aunt Cathy screamed, crying at the same time. The other Holly stood up. "I'm Holly! She's not! She's a monster!" She screamed. "No I'm actually Holly! I swear!" Holly exclaimed. But just then, Max's father grabbed the fireplace tool. "What are you doing!" Uncle Hank asked. "Just wait." Max's father said. Max's father snatched Aunt Carols scotch and poured it onto the tool. "My alcohol no! The worst lost of tonight!" Aunt Carol screamed. Max's father stuck the tool into the fire. The alcohol worked as gasoline and spread fire all around the sharp tool. Then, at that moment, Max's father threw the flaming tool and threw it towards one of the Hollys. Everyone gasped, but could only stare. The flaming tool stabbed one of the Hollys in the head. The Holly fell to the ground, and suddenly.. There it was. A large and long colorful clown sat against the wall. Everyone started at it in fear, watching to spot if it moves. Just then, the clown stood up, pulling out the tool from his head. It had melted half of its face, blood mixing with the color. It got quiet. The large clown stood there, watching them as they watched him. The suddenly, something fell down the stairs. The jack in the box, placed right in front of everyone. The clown disappeared, no where to be found. "What. The. Fu-" Uncle Hank tried to say, but was interrupted by the Clown snatching Holly. "Holly!" Aunt Cathy yelled. "Mom!" Holly yelled. Just then, the jack in the box opened, releasing a giant, tubed, jester like clown monster. It grabbed Beth and swallowed her whole. Uncle Hank grabbed a cushion and tried hitting it with it, screaming as he waked the monster. Then, out of nowhere, the bells rung. The windows were pushed in, the door busted open. Tons of worn out dark elves rushed In. They tied chains around the jack, and tied up the clown. The then chained up Uncle Hank and Aunt Mary. "Oh See you all in hell!" Aunt Mary screamed as she was being dragged. Heather was stuffed into a bag and pulled away. The elves circled Max, Aunt Cathy, and his parents. But before anything, the was a howl. The elves paused, looking at each other. Suddenly, they all ran out, evacuating the building. That gave Max and the others the opportunity to run. But then, Max saw his grandmother. She told him to be safe, not to cry.

¶15- "Mom!" Max's father yelled. Max's grandmother waved, crying. "I love you. Please, be safe." She said, shutting the door. Max and the others began running, hoping to find a safe place. But then Aunt Cathy was suddenly pulled down. "Cathy!" Max's mother yelled.



"Go without me!" She yelled. Then, Max's father was pulled. "I love you Max! I love you too! I'm so sorry! Please! Save yourself!" He yelled. "Dad No!" Max yelled. Max tried to run toward his father but was pulled back by his mother. "Max we have to go!" She cried. Yet she was tugged down into the snow as well. "Max!" She yelled. "Mom no please! You're all I have now! Please!" Max cried out, holding her hand. "I love you Max! Please go! I'm so sorry! Please be safe! Find shelter!" She yelled before being pulled down. Max fell to the snow, crying and shaking. Meanwhile, Max's Grandmother stood in front of the chimney, waiting. Then, the bricks started to bust and busts. Long, creepy skinny hands slowly began to reach out. Chains, and long goat horns started to appear. Then, out came a hunch backed demon. It wore a Santa outfit and was covered in chains. It looked at Max's grandmother and walked forward, slowly moving. It stared deep into her soul. He grabbed her head and gripped it tight. She started to scream, but all it did was make him grip harder. Then, he started to push her head down. After screams and cry's, her neck suddenly snapped.

From the sky, to the ground, a golden bell could be found. Max grabbed the bell and pulled it toward his eyes. The bell read, "Cruss Vom Krampus". Krampus left Max as a sign, a sign of what happens once all Christmas spirit is lost.

Student Name: Robert Arres

Grade: 8

School: Deer Park Junior High School

Title: Let Love Shine

Category: Poetry

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Madeline Cornelius

Love is like a shining star in the night

It fills our hearts with pure delight.

It's a feeling that makes us feel alive

a bond that nothing can ever divide.

Love is a melody that touches the soul

a warm embrace that makes us feel whole.

It's a language that needs no words

a symphony of emotions that soars.

Love is a journey an endless quest

a treasure that we're truly blessed.

It's a dance a rhythm that we sway

Guiding us through each and every day.

Love is a gift a precious treasure

a flame that burns with endless pleasure.

It's a magical force that knows no end

a love like ours my dear will never bend.

Student Name: Jaden Willis

Grade: 11

School: Deer Park High School-S Campus

Title: Old White House

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Denee Espree

On a destitute street in the town of Texas City, an old white house sat on the side of the road. White was a generous word—years of weather and general decline had created a dingy, sad gray. It was slightly elevated, propped up by large blocks of concrete. Just enough space for the average stray cat or mysterious beer bottle. The wooden stairs leading up to the front door creaked when stepped on, almost as if they were complaining about being woken up. Before it was replaced, the screen door was a faulty thing that swung open at the slightest bit of wind. Despite the cracked tile, broken blinds, and shifty neighborhood, I still love that old white house. It was the last place I saw my grandma before she died.

Affectionately known as “Granny,” my mom’s mother doted on me the second she knew of my existence. When my mom was pregnant, she was so scared of her reaction that she sent the news through email. Granny was ecstatic and directly inserted herself into my mother’s entire pregnancy, for better or worse. I was born a day earlier—the day before my great-grandmother’s birthday. Even though I was her third grandchild, I still think I was her favorite. Her favorite story to tell me was the one of my first steps. We were on the sidewalk. She put me down and ran to the end, shouting, “Come to Granny!” My mom always quietly disproved of the story.

“She remembers it wrong,” she’d always mutter with an eye roll. “You were with your other grandma at her house.”

I marked the passage of time by the summer vacations Granny would whisk me away on. Disney World. Every. Single. Year. California or Florida, it didn’t matter. Disney World—with each day dedicated to a different park—then Universal. One day set aside for touring. One year, we planned to switch it up for a Disney cruise instead. I never stepped foot on that boat, however, because she was diagnosed with cancer.

Two years later, she’d been placed on hospice. The day before Thanksgiving, my mom and I drove down to Texas City to spend the evening with her. When I stepped over the threshold of that old white house, I knew that my grandma didn’t have much time left. At that point, she wasn’t even strong enough to get out of bed. My mom had to escort her to the armchair in the living room, a strong arm secured around her shoulders. Granny

was frail, her eyes half-lidded and in pain. I thought of the gastric bypass she'd had a few years back and wished for some of the weight she'd been so eager to lose to come back.

I gave her a small, gentle kiss on the forehead. As my mom reheated plates of Thanksgiving food in the kitchen, I told my grandma about school. Sometimes, I had to repeat myself because she got confused between my voice and the television. I tried to not look too hard at the copious amounts of orange pill bottles littering the coffee table. The air threatened to choke me. Quite a few times, I had to force down the urge to cry. It was hard to correlate the woman who'd nag me about going to the nail salon and take me to get pizza every time I came over to the woman sitting in that armchair, still shivering despite the fuzzy blanket covering her body.

You aren't allowed to die, I thought. I'm not done being annoyed by you. I'm not done being reminded to text you on holidays, to call you every couple of weeks so you didn't think I forgot about you. I'm not done sitting next to you in the car while you went on errands. I'm not done watching your hands out of concern because you'd always try to multitask, somehow reading mail and eating and driving on the highway. I'm not done asking for my biggest Christmas present from you because I knew you'd get it for me, nor am I done texting you during school just to get a reaction out of you. One more conversation, I thought. One more hour, day, week, year. One more Disney trip. One more road trip to Dallas, you singing along to the radio while I sleep in the backseat. One more trip to that fancy hotel in Houston for my birthday.

I wanted to believe that Granny would beat the odds like she did once before. I wanted to ignore all the medical equipment and the tears on my mother's face that said otherwise. I wanted to sit in that living room forever, stubbornly ignoring the inevitable.

Around ten, my mom and I started cleaning up. I leaned over the armchair and gently squeezed my Grandma into a hug, whispering, "I love you." She said it back and closed her eyes, already asleep. When I got in the car, the scent of Lysol and melancholy still wafting in my nostrils, I looked at the house one more time.

Only a few days later would my mother get the call. My great uncle had gone over to the house to check on my grandma, only for nobody to answer. He banged on the back door and called the authorities, who had to bust the door in. Inside, they discovered my grandma in that armchair. In that house. On that street. The screen door, now a sturdy metal one, refused to budge as the wind pushed against it. Almost as if it sensed the fact that its owner would never enter again, the entire house went still.

Student Name: Zoie Rives  
Grade: 8  
School: Deepwater Junior High School  
Title: Solve Your Own Problems  
Category: Poetry  
Key: Gold Key  
Educator: Alyssa Hamaker

What's wrong?

Sorry, are you ok?

You know you can tell me anything right?

I'll always help you if you need it.

Are you annoyed at me?

Sorry. I hope I helped, but do you even hear my advice?

I tell you ways to handle situations, but do you care?

I want to help, I really do.

I'm so sorry that happened to you! I know what your going through.

I give you sympathy and kind words when things go wrong.

But I'm sorry I can't help all the time,

I'm not really sure how to,

You expect these things from me, but I can't deal with this.

You can't push these responsibilities on to me!

They aren't my problems.

You have to find answers for your self; I've told you this enough.

Why do you think I can solve your problems?

I have some of my own, and they weigh me down.

I don't know how to, Get out .

Get out!

I'm sorry I yelled at you.

It just got to be too much

My head is spinning, My heart is pounding.

Internally screaming,

Loud droning sound.

Tires screeching,

Stop sign, red light, headlights.

I wonder, Do you want this? This friendship?

Is it so easy for you?

Like you can leave if you want to, so go then.

I won't stand behind you, helping unconditionally.

I'm sorry, but go!

Have I made the right decision? Was this the plan?

I want to stand up, but I just keep falling down.

Help me up will you?

Oh, I forgot you left. You.. left..

Wait, have I made a mistake?

Were you all I had?

Second thoughts, no thoughts, all thoughts.

Don't leave! Please I need you!

I scream and shout, but you act unbothered.

Like you don't care, like you don't want me anymore.

Come back I'm scared, but you wont listen.

I'm getting desperate.

Why did you leave?

I feel tired now, or I'm not sure what I feel.

I might be happy, or sad.

No, just tired.

Sorry.

I've come to terms now.

Feeling better, feeling like myself again.

Sorting out my own problems.

Instead of yours.

What is this dread though?

Sadness, what am I missing?

Do I still wonder about you? Do I still miss you?

I shouldn't, I know. But I do.

Why am I like this?

Back and forth,

Blabbering on,

No cares,

No one cares,

Floating, grounded, lost, found,

Scattered, together,

Together..?

You came back.

Why? Do you need something again?

Are you sure you want to stay?



Do you care? Why do you bother?

Are you really staying?

Will you leave again? Will you?

I want answers.

Now we're spiraling.

Unending, unheard,

Hear me please!

Ignored, unwanted,

Scream, yell, silence,

Are you done?

Are we done? Is it over?

How will we know? We don't.

Separation, anxiety,

Completion, rest,

I feel better!

I still wonder about you, but that's ok.

I see clearer, brighter.

I care about you still, I always will. I won't lie.

But, I have accepted that you don't.

I have my doubts, but I'm not falling over!

I can stand on my own now, and if you can't stand up.

Too bad.

Solve your own problems.

Student Name: Natalie Duque  
 Grade: 8  
 School: J P Bonnette Jr High School  
 Title: What happened to Kat?  
 Category: Short Story  
 Key: Gold Key  
 Educator: Angela Nelson

Jacklyn's POV:

Man I wish it was Friday it's only Thursday and I want to sleep in. Why is science so hard and boring? "Earth to Jacklyn." Amy said. "What?" I said. "I've been calling you, Mrs. Turner said that we can work in partners. Want to be my partner?" Amy said. "Oh sure you know that I would always be your partner during Mrs. Turners class." I said. Amy is so nice I've known her since elementary. She's also really smart and loves science, and she's also helped me in science class almost my whole life. I don't think I'll be able to live without her, she's always be there for me. Good thing she wants to be my partner, I really need to pass this project, I'm about to fail science. "So I was thinking that since this project isn't due till next week that we can go over to my house before the others get their to do it, what do you think?" Amy said. "Sure I'm free all week." I said. "Oh are you going to the dance on Friday?" I said. "Of course I am, we're all going." Amy said. "Are we still meeting at your house tonight with everyone else?" I asked. "Yes of course!" Amy said with excitement in her voice. I can't wait to see everyone else even though we saw each other last week. They are like a second family to me, meanwhile I guess Amy is still telling me about the stuff that she wants to do because she has that excited look and tone while talking.

Amy's POV:

I'm so excited about tonight, Jacklyn coming over will be so much fun. Maybe I can also help her with her other assignments, she needs help on while we work on the project. I know how much she needs help with science. Thinking about it now me and her have been through so much together with the others. I still remember when we all met in kindergarten, I was sitting by myself too nervous to talk with anyone considering that I was the only new kid. I was coloring and drawing the first thing that came to my mind. "All right kids it's time to go outside to play." The kind of young teacher said. When she said that everyone got in a straight line excited to play outside. I was in the back of the line letting people cut in front of me. Once we got outside I immediately went over to the swings that were next to an old oak tree. I remember I was just sitting on the swing when

some other kid came over, I thought that she just wanted to be around the oak tree and on the swings, but I was wrong. "Hey you!" A girl in overalls said. "Me?" I asked confused on what I did wrong. "Why are you on my swing?" The girl said with a mean tone. "Oh, I didn't know that this was your swing, I'm sorry." I said a bit scared. "Well it is so get off!" The girl said pushing me off the swing. I fell back and landed in the dirt, but then someone came and offered me a hand. I look up and I see this other girl, I take her hand grateful for the help. "Thank you." I said in my shy but sad voice. "No problem." Said the girl with a striped long sleeve shirt. "where did the other girl go, the one that pushed me?" I asked. "Oh I told her to go away after I pushed her, then she started crying." The girl said. "So what's your name?" The girl asked me. "My name is Amy, what about you what's your name?" I said curious. "My name is Kate, but my friends call me Kat." Kat said. "Do you want to meet them, I think they would like you." Kat said. "Um are you sure, I don't want to be a bother." I said. "I'm sure, besides we were going to ask you if you wanted to join us, but you started going to the swings." Kat said. "Oh really, ok I'll join you guys!" I said with excitement I'm my voice. I've never been able to make friends in my old school but it's different here. I met the others and they accepted me. They didn't make fun of me and my hobbies and the stuff I like. They actually like the stuff I liked, so it was like a dream come true. Now we're in middle school and we've never had a single fight.

#### Kat's POV

The bell just rang and I'm walking out of the doors. I can't wait for tonight, I just wish I could go over now, because my dad is home. I don't like it when he's home, he's usually on the couch sleeping or drinking. "Well this is going to be fun." I said sarcastically. I finally get home after 20 minutes of walking, I see dad's car parked in the driveway. Well I hope he's asleep I can't deal with him right now, I have too much to do. I open the door and their he is asleep on the couch. Good now all I have to do is wait till it's 6:00 to go over to Amy's. It's only 3:50 so might as well work on the science project. It's already 5:00, how did I finish the project already!? I keep checking the list our teacher gave us on what she would be grading it by, but I have everything it asks for. "Kate come down here now!" Dad said angrily. Why is he mad already didn't he just wake up? I start walking downstairs only to see him sitting on the couch, looking angry. I start to get nervous when I speak "Y-yes dad?" I said nervous and a bit scared. "Make yourself useful and go get me another drink." He said in a dark angry voice. "Ok." I said a bit worried. I go into the kitchen and open the fridge door when I hear him say "Never mind get me the whole case, and hurry up!" He said growing impatient. I grab the case only to find that their was one bottle left, oh no. This is bad, their can't just be none left their has to be more somewhere. I start searching the cabinets, nothing, around the fridge, nothing. "What's taking you so long, hurry up!" I hear the loud thunder of his voice say. "U-um dad, y-you

drank them all theirs no more.” “What do you mean, I just bought a whole pack two days ago!” He said yelling from the living room. I walk into the living room holding the empty case, “You drank them all see.” I said with a worried expression on my face. I wish mom was here, she would be able to help me. But the fact is that she isn’t, she died before we moved here when I was in kindergarten. That’s also when my dad started drinking, I guess that was his way of coping, besides hitting me of course. “Your hiding them aren’t you!” He said looking more angry than usual. “N-no I didn’t, w-why would I hide them?” I ask scared out of my mind. The last time he thought that he went to my room and tore it up, then he started hitting me. “Go get them before I start giving you the biggest beating of your life!” He yelled. I started sprinting to my for going upstairs. I hurry to close the door and lock it, I see the time 5:50. I can start getting dressed, grab my backpack and sprint out the door if I’m fast I won’t get hit. Amy said to wear the dress that we’re going to wear to the dance, I walk over to my closet and grab it. It’s a beautiful blue dress I found at the mall when I went with Amy and the others. I start putting it on and it looks so beautiful, I just wish that I didn’t have scars on my legs from when I was younger. “Hurry up Kate I don’t have all day!” He yelled making me jump. I just need to grab my backpack and run, ok let’s go. I open the door and start running, past the stairs “What the- get back here you little-.” I’m outside the door before he even finishes what he was saying, free for now. I need to calm down and get to Amy’s. “You think you can run from me you little brat!?” I turn around and see him running towards me, I start running. I can hear his footsteps getting closer Boom Boom Boom, they make me run faster and faster. I’m close to the school just have to keep running, I’m not going to make it. I turn around and notice the gate beside the school it broken, they’ve always told us to stay out of the wood and to never go behind the gates. Well I guess this would be a special occasion for me, I quickly turn my direction to the houses behind the school to the woods beside it. I don’t want to lead dad to Amy’s house, I start running toward the gate. I’m about to make it through when my sparkling star keychain got stuck on the gate I would’ve tried to get it unstuck if I wasn’t being chased, so instead of that I yanked my backpack and kept running. Mental note come back and get it when he leaves, I keep running further and further until I slip on mud and into thorn bushes. I’m in so much pain, but I get up and try to find a way out of the thorns. After what feels like 5 minutes I’m finally able to get out, but my backpack feels lighter I take off my backpack realize that my backpack got a hole that’s just great. I grab my tape from my front pocket and patch up the hole with it, now I just have to find my way out but how? I start walking into the woods hopefully their an exit soon, at least dad isn’t chasing me anymore. I keep walking for what seems like 2 hours until I see something, I keep walking towards it only to see a building!? What is a building doing in the middle of the woods, never mind that it looks abandoned and old maybe it has some bandages in their that I can take. I look down at my legs only to realize that my dress it covered in mud and a little bit of blood from my legs and arms. Dang it well when I get out of here I could as Amy if I could wash it at her house. I start walking towards the building and look at the door, is that blood!? Maybe it’s from an animal, I continue to walk inside I wish I would’ve put my phone in my jacket pocket instead of in my backpack it’s so

dark in here. It's weird in the building their chairs thrown and broken, white clothes, and papers everywhere. I walk towards the papers and pick some up, patient 26 was on the paper I turned the page only to be left speechless. On the other page was a picture of her, but the problem is that she went missing 10 years ago. I turn the page but then crash! I hear glass brake, I drop the papers and start walking over to where I heard the sound come from. I drop my backpack on the ground and get to where the sound was, but nothing was in here that's wired. I turn around to face the door only to stop, the girl from the picture was in front of me covered in blood, bruises, and is that her brain sticking out of her head!? I start backing away slowly it looks like she hasn't noticed me that fine... crunch! I stepped on glass then there was a scream, I look up and I see her running towards me. I duck down from her hands and start running, but which way was the exit I went down this hallway or was it this one? Whatever I just need to find somewhere to hide, I keep running not looking back at the still screaming girl. I'm running towards a door until I feel something tackle me to the ground, I feel her grab my arm so that I can face her. I start to scream then I feel a sharp pain in my torso which makes me scream louder, I look down to see her ripping right through my skin and flesh feeling her take my kidneys and intestines out. Despite the pain I kick her in the face then start crawling towards the end of the hall my hands covered in blood from my wounds leaving bloody handprints behind. I reach out again but then a her hand grab my arm and she forced me to look at her, I start screaming when she put her hand in my eye and started pulling it from my socket. I felt the optic nerve ripping off of the brain, I was screaming and begging her to stop pulling my eye out. After she fully pulled it out I felt the blood coming out of my socket, I started coughing up blood from the wound from earlier, the metallic iron taste stinging my throat and making it hard to breathe. She then grabbed my intestines from earlier and started tying them around my neck making it even harder to breathe. She then started dragging and hitting me against the wall and floor, my last remaining eye starts to close then all of a sudden everything was black. Why's there nothing here, am I dead!? Well it makes sense there was no way that I would be able to survive my wounds anyway. There's a white light just like everyone said there would be, but I don't want to go. I didn't even say goodbye to my friends, I want to stay here. All of a sudden the black disappeared I'm back in the building, but how? I died I can't be alive, I turn around and I see my body. Wait this can't be true, I look at my hands there's a faint glow coming from them. I'm a ghost, I start walking around the hallway back to where I left my backpack. I see the same girl, well ghost that killed me. I take a step forward which got her attention to look up at me, she looks shocked to see me but then calms down. "Why did you kill me?" I ask sitting down close to the door. "I don't know it was my first instinct." She said in a raspy voice. "Oh, well what's your name?" I ask. "Why do you want to know?" She said in a mean, but raspy voice. "Well we're probably going to be stuck together, so, might as well get to know each other right?" I ask.

### Catherine's POV

It's already 7:30 where's Kat? She's never late, if anything she's always the first one to be here. "Whats wrong Catherine, you look nervous?" Amy asked in a worried tone "Oh sorry, I'm just worried about Kat she's always the first one to get here." I said in a nervous scared tone. We all know what Kat's dad does to her, but she never wants to make a report on him. What if he did something to her, or worse! No, calm down Catherine she's fine. "If you want I can call her phone and track it." Addison said in a hopeful voice. "Yes please." I said feeling a bit relieved. Ring..Ring..Ring, "Hey this is Kat leave a message after the beep..Beep" the voicemail said. "Something's wrong she always answers our calls!" I said my voice getting more worried. "Don't worry I'll track her" Addison said her voice a bit more worried. "That's wired, it's says that she's in the woods next to school." Said Addison in a suspicious tone. "You mean the woods that were not allowed to be in, she would never she always follows the rules." Said Jacklyn getting worried.

### Addison's POV

This is really freaky, why would she be there. "Hey wait do you guys think something happened between her and her dad, like last time?" Amy asked worried. "You mean the time he was chasing her and she had to hide in the dumpster?" I say getting even more worried. "Let's go to the woods, where her phone is maybe she's hiding from him." Jacklyn said a little bit relieved. "Yeah let's go!" Amy said a bit relieved and excited. We're walking out the door, heading towards the woods beside the school my phone flashlight shining our way through the darkness. We get to the gate when something shiny caught our eyes, we walk closer and see it's her star keychain the one we got her on her birthday. "She is here, come on let's go!" Catherine said running into the woods. "Wait for us!" Amy said running after her. We keep following the directions to her phone, until we see a building and we all stop. "Look theirs blood!" Catherine said a bit scared. "Come on she might be hurt!" Amy said running in. Were all running down multiple hallways, until we stopped a foul smell in the air caught our attention. The smell of metallic blood filled the air, but where was it coming from? We walk further down the hallway until we saw her lifeless body on the ground. We called the police and they questioned us on what we saw. 15 years later we don't see each other anymore.

Student Name: Tariq Zaman

Grade: 11

School: I H Kempner High School

Title: Inquiry and Islam: Navigating the Seas of Knowledge

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Susan Henson

When I was younger, I distinctly remember some advice from my mom: “Learn your dīn, or someone else will teach it to you incorrectly.” Dīn, in its purest form, is custom and religion. Truly, a marvelous statement, though, at the time I was all too naïve to comprehend the gravitas. In retrospect, one does not have to be esoteric, absorbed in abstract thought or metaphysics or philosophy, to know that knowledge is out there, and the one who uses that knowledge to their advantage will ultimately be the most dynamic, and redoubtable. I only realized this in a sort of epiphany.

As controversial as it may be to admit, the Western-orientalist perspective is a popular one, filled with unqualified, programmatic pundits who appeal to the ignorance of the laymen to fuel a tribalistic fire. The lesson I learned from observing this, which was the pivotal, sometimes redundant, Islamically-derived mantra of my mother is that it takes cogency, and the knowledge that predicates it, to have any sort of standing in life. To extrapolate this simply, the squeaking wheel gets the grease, and it follows from that, that it takes the grease for the wheel to run smoothly. Though when younger I used to have a squeaky voice, in this context, I tend to squeak more silently, and hungrily, calling out for more grease. That grease is knowledge.

In the Hadīth or chains of transmissions of narrated sayings of the prophet Muhammad ﷺ, he states: “Seeking knowledge is an obligation upon every Muslim.” Those who know me personally would argue that I seek knowledge to an atypical extent for the average person. This is not an attempt to portray myself as less ignorant than those around me (I will be the first to claim I do not know nearly enough), but instead a natural consequence of a culture that advocates

inquisitiveness. Take, for example, Al-Khwarizmi, the Muslim, Abbasid intellectual, whom many consider to be the father of algorithms and algebra, and more clandestinely, one of the most influential polymaths. I find his work and impact in mathematics and astronomy astonishing. I also reflect on the legacy of Fatima

al-Fihri, the Muslim woman who founded the world’s first known university, the University of al-Qarawyyin, still in operation.

Woman or man, or Moroccan or Baghdadi, these individuals, and many of the most influential academics, intellectuals, and polymaths were revolutionaries because of their knowledge, because of Islam, and because Islam, since its conception, has advocated for inquisitiveness. I find this desire for inquiry



instinctive, as I believe it is for most individuals, and as I continue to grow, I realize that Islam embraces it with open arms, allowing me to grease my squeaking wheel to satisfaction.

Isn't that great?

Well, though I'd argue optimistically that being encouraged towards curiosity and inquiry is a great ideal, it can be humbling. Sometimes, there are so many things to learn, and I can't decide what to pick, or what to delve into. I'm greased, but I roll around almost too smoothly between subjects. Incidentally, I was reading a book by Fyodor Dostoevsky, a masterful novelist, that I had seen on the internet one day: *Humiliated and Insulted*. What was it about you may ask? Well, I'd have a hard time telling you or anyone who asked. This, however, speaks more volumes about me than the novel. I seem to just pick up texts or anything I can learn from in a sort of psychosis and read them, void of true concern. In a way it's pleasant, I read until something concerns me (in a good way) and then I forget the noisiness of the things I am not concerned with. Despite the reoccurrence of this phenomenon, the pile of books I'd like to read increases, and they greatly vary in discipline—Robert Greene's *The 33 Strategies of War* to Edward Said's *Orientalism* to Daniel Kahneman's *Thinking Fast and Slow*. In retrospect, these very texts reaffirm my belief that the quest to seek knowledge, share it, and humble yourself to its vast seas is inextricable to the human condition.

Yet, this aspect of the human condition is obviously more intricate than humble humanness. Though I am no psychologist, no expert, no qualified speaker, or specialist, it doesn't take that to see that part of the human condition is stubborn. Stubborn ignorance—willful at that—oftentimes this ignorance is all too common.

What is ignorance? Is it a lack of knowledge?

No.

Ignorance is the very negligence of the responsibility to seek knowledge, pertinent to one's absence of it.

Though yet again, I am no lexicographer or sociologist, I could argue for this definition of ignorance I have outlined. It might even be oxymoronic to an extent. I am "making up" a definition of ignorance to outline a precondition to the plague of our 21<sup>st</sup>-century lives: the internet.

I referenced at an earlier point that in human nature, it is intuitive to humble oneself to the shifting tides and unconquerable seas of knowledge. The internet, however, is like a rip current. One delves into a topic, dips their toe into the water, and immediately gets sucked in. Flooded with misinformation and the veneer of anonymity, humans lose themselves and rely on chutzpah to stay afloat—little do they know that they've already begun drowning.

I once wrote that Islam was my lifeline, and in situations like that, it's what I grab onto to bring me back to shore. I dip my toes into many seas of knowledge, paralleling the many disciplines I explore, and before I drown in something that is beyond me, I can pull myself

back. Once at shore, I can pull others back, and assist others. I try to be the person that people can come to when they don't understand something. I try to be very meticulous, methodical, and minute, when people come to me for help. I firmly believe that this was instilled both because Islam has humbled me directly through faith and indirectly through fostering my voyage across the seas of knowledge. Now, in my junior year of high school, I find to be riding this cruise ship enjoyable, pulling people aboard along the way. Now, I realize the weight of the words my mom threw at me like a crashing wave—the importance of my dīn; I am one step closer to conquering the seas. But for now, that's my stop at this port.

Next stop: the ocean's edge.

Student Name: Olivia Xu

Grade: 9

School: Clements High School

Title: A Hobby to Get Hooked on: How a New Generation Has Caught on to the Joys of Crochet

Category: Journalism

Key: Gold Key

Educator:

In the sweltering summer heat of the south, I sat in my air-conditioned room and searched for “Things to Do in the Summer” on Youtube. A video by the creator @adelalala appeared on the top of my feed. Among the eighty tips that she recommended—such as “declutter your phone” and “go to a cat cafe”—the activity that attracted me the most was crocheting: it appeared engrossing and aesthetically charming at the same time. I began poring over instructional videos online, and through watching videos dedicated to teaching crochet step-by-step, I was slowly pulled into the world of crocheting. Influenced by the adorable stuffed animals and straightforward patterns that resulted from the creators’ efforts, I bought bundles of yarn and a pack of crochet hooks/supplies to try my hand at the new hobby.

From stuffed animals to sweaters and scarves, the versatile craft of crochet has been experiencing a resurgence in the 2020s. Meg Novosad, Co-Founder and President of a local high school crochet club, first began crocheting during COVID. Novosad had mentioned that one of the reasons she had become interested in crochet was because it was “cool that you could make anything you wanted.” After returning to in-person learning in the 2020-2021 school year, she and a few of her friends established the Crochet Club, which currently counts 88 members who have joined according to the club’s online newsletter feeds.

Much of the uptick in interest can be attributed to social media. In addition to YouTube, crochet videos on TikTok have amassed a total of over 15.5 billion views; in contrast, knitting videos—which have been experiencing their own renaissance of sorts, albeit paling in comparison to its more trendy cousin, crochet—have only been watched approximately 2.7 billion times. [1]

Crochet is often portrayed as a wholesome activity that requires time and a personal touch, in stark contrast to the SHEINs of the fast fashion world. Novosad concurs that one of the reasons she has continued to enjoy crocheting is because “it’s always fun to have handmade things.”

While crochet is often touted as a budget-conscious, slow-fashion method of making decorative and wearable items, the hobby is not completely without its faults. Like many other yarn related crafts, one of the most common yarns used for crocheting is acrylic yarn. Acrylic yarn is a synthetic fiber that is made of plastic and releases toxic gasses into the atmosphere when produced. Because it is an inorganic material, when decomposing, acrylic yarn takes much longer than natural materials and also expels harmful chemicals into the environment. [2]

Natural yarn fibers, such as cotton yarn, may cost more than their synthetic competitors because of the work put into their production processes. While acrylic yarn is composed of man-made poly compounds, growing cotton takes effort and experience to yield high quality harvests. [3] To turn the raw cotton into yarn, once the cotton is harvested, the seeds and the fiber must be separated in a process called ginning. Then, like acrylic, the cotton goes into spinning machines that turn it into yarn fibers. [4] Compared to acrylic, cotton products are much faster in decomposing, taking usually around 3 to 6 months. [5] On the other hand, acrylic yarn “can take up to 200 years to fully biodegrade.” [6]

Unfortunately, the more sustainable option is usually the pricier one as well. “I wish I knew that yarn is expensive,” Novosad said, “because now I have a yarn addiction.” A cursory search on Amazon shows that acrylic yarn costs about \$7 for 100 grams and the same amount of cotton yarn goes for about \$10. Although it is not always easy to find a similarly priced, eco-friendly replacement for acrylic yarn, people can help to be sustainable in other ways, like reducing the amount of yarn they dispose of.

Another consideration for active crocheters is the amount of wristwork involved. If not enough breaks are taken, crocheting can cause repetitive strain injuries on the hand and wrist areas. Like the name implies, a repetitive strain injury is caused by doing the same action multiple times for an extended period. [7] At first, crocheters may not pay much attention to the discomfort, but if not treated early, the injury may become permanent. [8]

Muscle injuries in the hands or wrists can prevent many individuals from completing daily tasks, like typing, cooking, or driving. Taking an adequate amount of breaks to relax the used muscle can help the strain from becoming worse.

Speaking from my personal journey in crochet, I have become more patient and do not try to finish an entire project in one day. Although none of my projects are that large, I still force myself to take breaks in between so as to not injure my wrists. Forcing myself to rest takes self-control, as I often want to finish making my crochet plush animal as soon as I can to display and enjoy it. I have learned to respect and savor the process.

Crochet is time-consuming, mainly because it requires following patterns and having to implement a variety of stitches or skills. When following a pattern, one must understand how to execute all the stitches included in the pattern. Beginners usually start with chain stitches before moving on to single and double crochet stitches. No matter the level of an individual's crochet ability, research seems to back up the benefits that crochet offers to one's mental health. According to a study published in *The British Journal of Occupational Therapy*, the authors found that crafting, including crocheting, improved the mood of "81% of respondents with depression." [9] Researchers concluded that how often someone crafted also played a factor into how much they were "feeling calm and happy." [10] Crocheting helps soothe depression and lower anxiety because it allows people to pass time productively. [11] "I feel calm and love when I crochet," Novosad concurs.

The calm and happy emotions can likely be traced to the repetitive motions of crochet. Some health experts have posited that crochet can increase serotonin levels, the hormone that causes the "feel good" sensation, while reducing cortisol—the hormone associated with stress. [12] Teenagers who have become in tune with their mental health are rightfully seeking activities to balance the social and academic pressures they face. According to Dr. Claire McCarthy, a pediatrician, the aftershocks of Covid-19 are present in the "alarming amounts of anxiety and depression in our children and teens." [13]

My friends and I discuss managing our stress often. With the weight of school and extracurricular assignments, I have less time to relax and unwind. When I need to take a break, picking up my yarn and hook takes my mind off the pressure to achieve. Novosad

adds, "When I crochet . . . it just calms me down from the day or situation I'm in." Because both of us had already been interested in other crafting hobbies, transitioning into crocheting felt natural.

As the current generation of teenagers starts to pick up soothing pastimes like crochet, they prove that a healthy mindset and trending fashions can overlap. Though there are downsides, crocheting benefits many parts of one's lifestyle by providing a productive hobby that reduces anxiety in the brain. Although I sometimes still get frustrated when I insert my hook into the wrong stitch, I have found that crocheting has led me to become more patient. When younger audiences are introduced to crocheting, it results in a sustainable, lifelong activity that is able to produce heartwarming products.

Student Name: Jesse Udeobong  
Grade: 11  
School: I H Kempner High School  
Title: A Necessary Accident  
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir  
Key: Gold Key  
Educator: Susan henson

### A Necessary Accident

When I was sixteen, I experienced something that would change me forever. It happened on an ordinary day like any other. I had just left school, with my mom and older brother picking me up, when, unexpectedly, a car collided with our vehicle. Unknowingly, this event would have more of an impact on my life due to my perception being altered and me growing as an individual who harnesses their hardship.

During the event, as me and my family were going home, I rested my eyes after a long day for what felt like a second until I felt myself being thrust forward with immense force. This force propelled our car in its original direction. What had happened? One second, I close my eyes, and the next, the car is totaled. "Everything is going to be okay," my mom told me. I replied, "I was fine, just a bit startled by the crash." After the crash, I was more than startled; I was horrified.

While driving, someone did not stop at a red light, causing this. While I was fine physically and mentally, something still stuck with me. After the event, I pondered how easily my life could have been over at the drop of a hat and how the conclusion of my story could have happened right there. My story could have ended before it even had the chance to start. In the end, this helped define who I was. This event allowed me to ponder how I lived my life previously. Before the incident, it felt like I was barely getting through life, like I was surviving it rather than living it.

The following days, after the incident, thoughts ran through my mind: what would happen if I had been seriously injured, or worse, accidents like that take so many lives, but why was I left unscathed, was I just lucky, and lastly, I wondered, who was I? After countless attempts to question what I was passionate about, my values, and my role in the grand scheme of things, I was left without answers. I had never been able to find out who I am throughout all my life, and that event could have ended the search.

I began to be quite skeptical about whether I was living life to its fullest potential. I knew if I were going to find out, I would have to look within myself, and that was when I could finally see who I was. I broke myself down into the two most fundamental aspects

of myself. I was a procrastinator with ambitious potential. While this sounds like a contradictory statement, it is the truth. Throughout my time in school, my ambitions and my sluggishness have fought for control over my daily life. Although I am quite lazy, I can see my own potential in the work I complete. I know I am educated enough and capable enough to become a more productive and proactive individual.

This battle within my mind reminds me of how viruses seek to diminish our health without us even knowing. While this natural process is part of us, we have the power to push the odds in our favor. While these aspects of my life both define who I am, they do not have the power to limit me since I am the master of my own story; I can decide whoever I want to be.

Finally, I believe that through demanding work, perseverance, and a new outlook on life, I will be able to change my aspects to be more positive and effective. Through this newfound understanding of myself, I believed that this could help me do more than just survive life; I could thrive in it. In the end, that car crash, although frightening, was indeed a necessary accident.

Life has always been filled with hardship and difficulties throughout history, but even though this is the case, this does not mean you crumble under pressure. Let that pressure mold you into a diamond, because sometimes life gives you your necessary accidents.



Student Name: Rosie Hong  
 Grade: 11  
 School: Clements High School  
 Title: All Things Hollow  
 Category: Short Story  
 Key: Gold Key  
 Educator: Glenys McMennamy

## All Things Hollow

Hunger is to give the body what it knows it cannot keep – Ocean Vuong

When the sparrow died, its body was lodged between the roots of a ginkgo sapling. When Popo saw this, she uprooted the carcass and took out a shovel, reminding me how dead things should always be buried in the ground. “That’s how we remember them,” she said, nestling the sparrow in the dirt, pulling its plumage back to reveal its underbelly. “So we won’t forget about them. Even things up there.” She believed that all dead things in the sky were eventually pulled down by gravity. “See this, Ying.” She nudged the sparrow’s body, its ribs shuddering in defiance—too heavy to keep it afloat. “But sometimes, that doesn’t happen.” She warned me of a woman who ventured too far up there until she was pulled from Earth’s grasp. “That woman. I think that woman was your mother.”

My mother had left me when I was still a name in her womb. She had chased after a man that was supposedly my father—a man who couldn’t bear to watch my mother’s belly ripen into a daughter with his face. A few weeks after my mother vanished, Popo had found me wilting beside the supermarket. Despite my raw body and tattered plumage, she immediately recognized me—folding in my right ear to reveal a large brown mole identical to hers. That day, Popo had cradled me in her arms, knocking in neighboring villages, begging if anyone had extra space in their home. “I am already in my 60’s. I can’t take care of a child,” she had argued. But when they all shook their heads, she reluctantly took me home, promising herself that she would raise a fledgling correctly this time—a fledgling who learned to take root in soil. A fledgling who sought after horror stories of her mother who became skybound for a man.

“What happens next?” I mouthed as Popo buried the carcass in a layer of mulch. “Does she eventually find him?” Popo tilted her head and curled her lips. I looked down at the sparrow, its half-lidded eyes and beak snapped open in hunger. It didn’t seem like it wanted to be remembered.

\*

Popo once told me that my bones were so weak they would snap if I met a bad husband. “I grew up with a body full of broken bones,” she said. When Popo was pregnant with my

mother, her husband chickened out when he heard the news. "So that bastard abandoned us," she cursed. "And left his untamed spirit with your mother." With these stories, Popo did whatever she could to keep me in her grasp, so I wouldn't end up like them.

In the supermarket, she leaned over me with one hand clutching a pouch of coins, the other knitted around my shoulder. "Bié zǒu diū le," she reminded me. "Your bones are hollow like those birds, so you must cling to me, or someone will sweep you out of my reach." She taught me to plant my feet deep into the ground, latch my heels to earth because my bones were weightless. "Like this." She nestled her feet into the supermarket's freshly mopped floor, heels dragging behind her as she ventured through her routine of picking the best duck to roast in the oven. I followed her, sliding my crooked legs along the aisles, then over the burning asphalt of the parking lot with one hand clasped in Popo's pocket, the other attached to her wrists like the string of a helium balloon.

The pavement burns my soles. I'm heavier than a balloon. Isn't this excessive? When I complained to Popo, she always argued that this was better than getting my wings clipped like other girls. "They couldn't go anywhere, cooped up in their bedrooms." When I asked her what place was so morbid girls had to be shackled to their beds, she pointed to somewhere above, tracing her fingers along half-mouthed syllables of "There, or there, or there." From then on, I would peer at the skyline every time we left the supermarket, eyeing anything that recalled death, anything forbidden. I found myself tracing the bellies of sparrows darting boundless above. Their bones were raw and hollow like mine, but the sparrows flew by themselves. They clung to nothing but their own bodies.

At the dinner table, Popo took off her apron, her hands slicked with duck grease. She threaded her chopsticks through the roasted bird, peeling the skin to reveal white flesh. "Popo," I tapped her arm. She plopped pieces of duck breast into my bowl. "How come the sparrows don't hold onto anything?" Why can't I venture away like them?

Popo lodged a duck bone between her gnarled teeth. It snapped in her jaws. "This is what happens when a bird that cannot fly grows too ambitious." She twisted the remaining joints with her thumb. A graveyard of broken bones piled up beside her, all hollowed from their memories.

\*

House sparrows abandon their nests two weeks after birth, only to return a few months later to lay a new brood. Popo warned me to never trust information like this on the internet, as all sparrows were liars, never circling back home. But sometimes, she secretly believed they did. She cracked the porch window half open at night and sprinkled roasted sunflower seeds on the doorstep in hopes of luring her daughter home. Every time, the squirrels would end up raiding the seeds, and Popo would dump a new bag before scanning the perimeter of the house for any signs of her daughter. When she came back

empty-handed, she cursed my mother's foolery, warning me with tales of girls mimicking sparrows. Girls who tried to pocket fistfuls of warmth from their youth in their bellies before taking off. "Stupid girls," she spat, slamming the door of the pantry stocked with sunflower seeds, "become birds plagued with this kind of hunger."

When I searched up hunger online, I found images of skin thinning over bones, ribs unfurling from barren chests. When I asked Popo what hunger looked like in girls, she leaned over and grabbed a fistful of air under my ribs. "You can't see it. Only feel it. It's a kind of hunger that even mothers can't satisfy for their daughters." She described girls who grew up to be mothers with hollowed bodies that wanted to be warm and nested in a loving household like all sparrows seemed to be. Mothers who yearned for fleeting love from men they fawned over, so they blindly followed them. "They abandoned their memories, children, motherhood. You cannot try this, Ying. When your father left your mother, he took that feeling away. And look at where she is now." She pointed to the same place she always did, weaving her fingers through a film of clouds, then curling them into fists pressed against her chest. As if she was caught in this hunger herself. As if she was praying for her daughter to come home in the form of a sparrow—body whole and warm and loved—instead of a starved girl who looked too much like her.

That night, Popo pulled out a photo album tucked under the nightstand. It was so old the spine cracked every time she pressed her thumbs against a page. She started from the back and flipped through empty pages where photos used to be, then through photos of a teenager who looked too much like me—cheekbones sharpened into knives, torso twisted into an hourglass, plumage woven into two braids. She flipped to the front, tracing her fingers over the border of a photo. "Your mother," she mouthed. "Wasn't she pretty?"

In that photo, my mother was a girl halving mooncakes and popping peach soda by a creek. Her plumage was sheathed under her raincoat. Unlike other photos in the album, my mother's belly was full and warm with sweets, not tattered or twisted or hollow. Wasn't she pretty? I asked myself. What more could she have wanted?

From then on, I created tales of my mother's childhood as bedtime stories—a girl cracking sunflower seeds by the doorstep while Popo combed and untangled her plumage behind her. In one scene, my mother and Popo sunbathed on the front porch, hair glued to their flushed cheeks, bellies bloated from gorging on watermelon, sticky beaks snapped shut. In another, my mother—a tamed fledgling who had yet to bear a child—learned with Popo how to build something whole. And in every scene, I asked my mother the same questions: Were your bones hollow from birth like mine? Do you remember? Are you still hungry? I tried to answer them myself, clawing at sounds in my throat for any reason to explain my mother's absence. Every time I answered, the words splintered into syllables, coughed up as sharp gasps of air.

In all my dreams, a woman with my mother's face leaned against the wall behind the supermarket. Her knees were tucked in to protect her pregnant womb. I was a fledgling, circling around the roof, the night lights flickering in familiarity. She unwound her body into something young—eyes half-lidded, mouth gaping open, ready to take flight. Her belly softened into something like a child's, hollow enough to float. And as she unfolded from the earth, I saw what she left behind. A daughter—her back digging into the parking lot, arms stretched above, watching as her mother spiraled upward into something warm and pulsing and alive. As if, from the beginning, the daughter had already learned this hunger for the sky.

When I told Popo about these dreams, she cursed herself and told me that this was inevitable. No matter how much she warned me of the sky, like many girls, I still dreamed of it—dreamed of the same thing my mother did. “Dreamed of the same thing I did five decades ago. Girls wanted to be lost. Once girls experienced girlhood, they wouldn't leave it.” Popo crouched beside me on the porch, retelling her girlhood in the past tense. How, at that time, she was pregnant at fifteen with my mother, teetering between girl and motherhood. How girls like her who tasted motherhood wanted to revert back, to experience first love and egg yolk mooncakes again. And although Popo didn't cave to temptation, my mother had seen the hunger through her. How Popo perched on the kitchen window every morning, watching mothers part with their daughters like a recurring dream. “Our hunger is searching for something we had, Ying. To make full from what's hollow.”

\*

I searched my body for all things hollow—clenching my weightless wrists and snapping my beak open and closed when I lost Popo in the supermarket aisles—trying to find the place where hunger took root. I never found it because my hunger only appeared at night. It bloomed roots in my hands, bridged the space between my mother and I as I rummaged through traces of her in my dreams. When did hunger take her? Was my birth her sin? I would wake up with my clammy palms lifted toward the ceiling fan, sometimes reaching for my mother's face, sometimes something faceless, sometimes a shadow.

By the time I opened the photo album, grime had filmed the cover. I flipped through the pages, picking out photos with my mother's face. More than half of them were missing by now, including the one with the mooncakes and peach soda. When I showed Popo the empty pages, she admitted that she had tried to bury the photos under the ginkgo sapling. “To remember her,” she said, following me as I rushed to the backyard.

What do I remember? I bent over a barren patch of land, the scarf Popo had wrapped around me unraveling, wind whipping my right cheek. What can I remember now? The photos were gone, resurfacing every time it rained, carried away by the wind until they too were skybound.

\*

In one dream, I snuck under the ginkgo sapling and dug out what was left of the sparrow. Water pooled between the roots where it was buried. I bent down and split open the tomb, fistfuls of mud sliding off my fingers. I uncovered the carcass of the sparrow, its plumage whittled into yarn. The sparrow's bones were too heavy to keep it afloat, so I rewound its body and buried it back.

In another, I felt something pulsing through the mud. The sparrow was whole and warm and breathing—a machine of hollowed bones. And as it pushed itself out of the ground, it split open its mud-caked wings, snapping its beak open in hunger.

Translations:

Popo: Maternal grandmother

Bié zǒu diū le: Don't get lost

Student Name: Mithilya Raj

Grade: 12

School: Dulles High School

Title: Cinnamon Rolls

Category: Poetry

Key: Gold Key

Educator:

We had a pristine white picket fence,  
A towering two-story house with alabaster walls,  
A wallpaper interior that whispered tales of yesteryears.  
A fluffy, joy-filled labradoodle named "Biscuit",  
And I had you.

God. You were flawless.  
You were a man plucked straight out of a glossy TV show.  
You were the embodiment of every woman's fantasy.

#### STAGE 1

He hit me and called me ugly.  
I stood there, frozen, with my face cradled in my hand.  
His face was a storm of fury,  
A twisted mask of misplaced anger.  
Tears welled up in my eyes.  
"Why'd you hit me?" I whispered.  
He echoed back, "YOU'RE TOO SENSITIVE."  
He pulled me close, enveloping me in a deceptive embrace,  
Whispered sweet, sugary nothings into my ears.  
He said I was beautiful and that  
IT WAS A MISTAKE. He was perfect, after all.

Our life was a scene from a silver-screen romance.  
He showered me with roses,  
I've always craved chocolates but,  
He said I needed to WATCH MY WEIGHT.

#### STAGE 2

I had a black eye. I had merely asked about his day.  
The pain was a throbbing reminder of reality.  
I could feel my blood pulsating behind the tarnished purple, swelled up skin.  
When I covered it with my hand and looked in the mirror,

I looked normal, perfect. Just like our life.  
Just...  
It was another mistake,  
Because he loved me, and I deserved it.

My neighbor noticed my eye today.  
I thought I let it heal enough before I ventured to the supermarket.  
He wouldn't let me out until I was beautiful again,  
Until my pale face was restored to its porcelain shine.  
She asked me what happened.  
I said nothing,  
Nothing at all.  
She offered her help if I ever needed it, and that  
I didn't deserve it,  
Not from that wretched man.  
Wretched?  
He was sweet. He bought me roses. Not chocolates. I needed to watch my weight.  
I glanced into my shopping cart and saw the box of cinnamon rolls I had collected.  
I needed to watch my weight.  
As I checked out, I told the cashier I didn't need it.  
I must've had a strange look in my eyes because the cashier asked if everything was okay.  
Was it?

### STAGE 3

I bought them.  
I bought the cinnamon rolls.  
They were brimming with creamy white frosting and  
Aromatic cinnamon swirls  
So delicious. So tantalizing.  
So...  
Just as I bit into one,  
A giant black shadow loomed in the doorway.  
It was him. But it wasn't.  
He looked angry, or perhaps more so.  
He reeked of liquor and hot red malice.

### STAGE 4

He saw the roll in my hand, and something snapped inside his head.  
He rushed towards me,  
Grabbed my neck with both his hands and  
Pinned me up against a wall.  
He just gripped and gripped, and I felt

Stupid, insignificant, worthless.  
 Hanging on the wall like some kind of  
 Painting.  
 He was

STAGE UNDEFINED

UGLY.

ALL THIS OVER A CINNAMON ROLL?

ALL THIS OVER A WOMAN WHO DID EVERYTHING FOR HIM?

ALL THIS FOR A WOMAN WHO ACCEPTED HIM FOR ALL THE DISGUSTING THINGS HE  
 WAS?

I brought my leg up right into his crotch and he dropped me to the ground  
 I sat stunned  
 At the revelation  
 At the breath of fresh air

Then I grabbed my box of cinnamon rolls and ran.  
 I called for Biscuit  
 I wasn't leaving him with that monster.

And so, we both ran  
 Ran to my neighbors house.  
 A place where my cinnamon rolls  
 Were okay.



Student Name: Jenny Wu

Grade: 8

School: Fort Settlement Middle School

Title: Colors

Category: Short Story

Key: Gold Key

Educator:

Sometimes, I like to write stories in my art.

A streak of crimson captures the raw, desperate intensity of anger, the kind that burned bridges and left scars in its wake. A dot of blue hints at possible melancholy, while the soft pastels of pink and lavender whisper of tender moments and delicate feelings. On the page, the colors weave together harmoniously.

I believe I could paint your life, your story. It would be difficult, yes, but possible. We all have bubbly clouds of color inside, and we all want to hide it, but I can see right through everyone. I can see their colors, even the ones they bury deep underneath them. I can see right through their chest and into their mind, and inspect their own personal palette of emotion.

While painting your life, I might use a peachy orange to represent the elation you feel when you reunite with your pets and your children. I envision strokes of gold depicting the warmth of shared laughter with friends, and perhaps a gentle touch of silver portraying quiet moments of reflection under the moonlight.

As the brush dances across the surface, I would delicately blend shades of turquoise to embody the serenity found in your favorite places, such as the calming embrace of nature or the soothing rhythm of the ocean waves. The intricate details— fine lines of silver and gold that showcase the strength in vulnerability, shadows that add depth to moments of solitude, and vibrant splashes that signify unexpected joys. Your story would unfold in a masterpiece of emotions, embodying the richness and complexity of a life well-lived.

And as the final stroke completes the narrative, the painting stands with a beauty found in every shade and hue, a reflection of the unique and extraordinary journey that is yours, and yours alone.

Often, I find myself lost in this process as the colors have taken on a life of their own, narrating a story that transcends beyond words. The canvas is a sort of sanctuary for me, a space where I can put my own painting aside to take care of someone else's. Likewise, many people would often come to me for advice on how to tend to their paintings. Friends, acquaintances, and strangers alike would find me within the walls of my home, sharing fragments of their lives, hoping that I could shape their stories into beautiful narratives and help them understand the chaotic beauty of their own canvases.

For me, it has always been about giving. Always about others. I've always thought that was what I wanted to do for the rest of my life— finding joy in serving others and listening to their stories. The happiness that fills my heart when I see the impact of my understanding on others is immeasurable, as I've never had that much for myself. Hearing their gratitude and witnessing their transformation is a constant reminder of why I chose this path. It's not just about painting, it is about creating a space where others can feel seen and heard.

And yet, sometimes, I wonder what my painting would look like. The painting of my life.

Would it be gray, for the isolating moments and an inability to depend on anyone? Dark red, for when my hatred runs so deep for retribution, and the struggle to find peace amidst my anger? Or perhaps tinted with olive green, when I'm feeling shame and anxiety, so much that my stomach twists itself?

I remember the first stroke of the paintbrush against my canvas. It was the first time I had experienced any vivid emotion, and as the yellow and bright pink would splash onto the

blank page, that brightness would remain for a long time. Those were the times when I laughed until my stomach ached and felt a genuine connection with the world around me.

As I've grown up, I've thought that perhaps those colors have become dull, worn with age. I didn't want to paint my own colors anymore. I found the palette of my own emotions had taken a backseat, overshadowed by the belief that the brilliance of my colors paled in comparison to the stories I crafted for others.

But today, as I stand before the canvas of my memories, I can't help but wonder if those once-vibrant colors have truly faded or if they've simply transformed into new, nuanced shades. My own voice echoed in my mind, "We all have bubbly clouds of color inside, and we all want to hide it."

With a deep breath, I picked up the brush, contemplating the canvas that lay before me. The streak of black for darkness, the dot of blue for melancholy – these were emotions I had felt but rarely acknowledged in my own narrative. The soft pastels of pink and lavender, the colors of tenderness and empathy, seemed almost foreign to the self I had neglected.

"Peachy orange," I whispered, allowing the warmth to seep in as I slowly settled the brush in a paint that resembled delicate blush found in a ripe peach. "For the elation found in joyful reunions with loved ones."

The strokes of gold followed, capturing the laughter shared with friends, and the gentle touch of silver illuminated moments of quiet reflection. Turquoise blended into the canvas, symbolizing the serenity found in cherished places.

"Gray," I murmured, considering the flashback of when I'm left alone with my thoughts, the distant cacophony of the blaring city as I stand at the edge of a building, and the

echoes of a girl struggling to pay her rent, medical bills, school fees, and take care of her infirmed family all at once.

My hand hesitated, caught in contemplation. It used to be a color that represents my weariness, a muted struggle against the backdrop of everyday life, the color that nobody saw.

But now, could it be the face of a clean slate waiting for vibrancy to be brushed back into it?

I knew the answer.

I dipped the brush into a mixture of dark red, acknowledging the times when the struggle for peace seemed insurmountable. They tell a story of when I am falsely accused of stealing from my friend, and the battle to reconcile conflicting emotions. My hatred ran deep when I found it was her who framed me. Jealousy emerges from the stark contrast between our lives—she was untouched by the financial burdens that weighed on me. Her world, free from concerns about home, family, and tuition, was an idyllic heaven I could only daydream about while donning an apron and working tirelessly from the crack of dawn until sunset. Yet, she still resorted to framing me out of avarice.

"Dark red," I whisper grimly, "a color that symbolizes inner turmoil."

Taking a deep breath, I reflect once more on the memory. A smile slowly creeps to my face. The hardships I had encountered, she knew none of it. She didn't know how adaptable I had to become, the measures I had to resort to. The challenges that forged my resilience were foreign concepts to her; she would not experience the same transformative growth that shaped me.

She would never be a survivor like me.

Somehow, my hand finds its way to olive green. It was the color that wasn't there in the beginning, one that quietly crept in day by day without me noticing, eluding my notice until it became an undeniable presence. Little did I know, it had quietly grown into an entity, transforming me into a nervous monster with each fluttering heartbeat. It would grow worse over time, as the guys in school would shove and throw me down, and the girls watched and laughed. The green would reach its pinnacle when everyone looked at me as if I was a comedy show, evolving into an insidious super-giant, and it twists my stomach like vines constricting around my core.

Could green transform, too? I wondered. Could it evolve into a shade that spoke of growth, healing, and renewal, like it's supposed to be?

As I continued to paint, the memories of the first stroke resurfaced. The yellow and bright pink that once splashed onto the canvas of my youth. Yellow, once a burst of unbridled joy, now a golden hue of wisdom gained through experience. Bright pink, the genuine connections, transformed into a soft blush of nostalgia for the laughter that once echoed through the corridors of time.

And now I know. The room held a gentle hush as I stepped back to survey the variegated canvas. The colors weren't dull with age, but rather rich with the patina of my life's journey.

Of course, if I had just painted without waiting for the layers to dry, all the colors would mix together. Ironically, all of those colors mixed together would be brown, brown for "stable and down to earth." The color is born from the mixture of highs and lows, joys and sorrows, and wisdom gained through experience. Each layer, a chapter. Every stroke, a lesson. It's the color that emerges when you mix every experience, every emotion. It's the color of finding level ground in the midst of life's whirlwind. And now, the culmination – Stability.

Student Name: Nebiy Petros

Grade: 12

School: I H Kempner High School

Title: Dear Sukey Letter

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Scheffie Lindquist

Dear Sukey,

My beloved sister, I have missed you dearly since I've fled from Eritrea to America. How have you been? I have thought about you; along with the warmth of the sweltering African sun tingling my skin depriving me of any touch of coldness, which I miss dearly. I often ponder on how people here can survive in a cold as gruesome as this. I know, if you were here, you would relentlessly try to hide your shiver's produced by the cold and say the temperature didn't affect you, but I have always found a way to look through your facade of trying to be brave. You were always brave for me-- which is why you cannot be brave anymore. Sukey, Eritrea is getting worst, the government is getting more domineering and violent. Come to America. Here we don't have to worry about the mysterious men across the street looking for Baba to get drafted in the military again, here you will be safer. The 15<sup>th</sup> of May... I think about that day daily, the day we witnessed Baba violently grabbed by those soldiers to get drafted in "the war", I dream of that night daily; I feel the gape in my heart widen as I replay your tears falling down from those eyes filled with fear and acceptance. And although safety is not guaranteed, America is far safer than any 3rd world country, including Eritrea. Over there, I used to fear for my life, looking over my shoulder every time I walked down those poverty-ridden streets noted with the absence of any community or life. And I know, you are now forced to meet these troublesome conditions with overly cautious behaviors. But Sukey, this is no way to live. I promise it is safer, over here we don't have to worry about the effects of the Tigray war and we can roam the streets without care. Another reason that prompted me to write this letter encouraging you to come live with me in America is a sign which is posted in front of my apartment complex, a sign made up of decaying wood in which neon pink letters containing the term: "Women's Rights" sit on. The American's here have coined this term to be a slogan of empowerment, meant to recognize the imbalance of rights between the genders, and I even hear sometimes they have marches which have great impact. The women here have an efficacious and empowering voice, they actively fight for equality so that one day they can reach an equilibrium of freedom. Unlike Eritrea, they are not

penalized for having thoughts or voicing their opinion. Sukey, once I heard of this foreign notion I thought of you, I've always admired your tenacity when it came to helping others. Here you are counted for, people care what YOU have to say. I guess what I am trying to convey is, the American government, although it is imperfect, is way more structured and virtuous than most foreign nations. Sukey, imagine being heard, America will only amplify your voice. Somedays, when I open the curtains to let some sunlight in my apartment, not only do I see the beautiful sunset, I see the sign, it reminds me of you and the impact you could have here and how much you can raise awareness for Eritreans. The final reason as to why I want you here with me is because of the memories we can make. Sukey, I miss you dearly, the loneliness is captivating. I thought in America I would have a home, one built on freedom and joyful feelings, but without you, it is a mere place. My apartment is vacant of any real memories because the memorable ones are with you. I try to escape these thoughts of isolation, but it is as impactful as an agile asteroid making its crater on earth, it bangs on my head like a week-old migraine. I miss you. I miss the sisterly love, love so strong to mend the planets strongest metal. I miss the sisterly advice, advice I would never have to hesitate or second guess on. I miss the sisterly cooked meals, food so warm it would give my mouth a warm hug while simultaneously quenching my starving stomach. Most of all I miss the sisterly comfort, comfort provided when I needed it the most, in times of despair or heartbreak, you never failed to make me feel better. Sukey, I hope to have convinced, or at least opened, you up to come to America and to leave that nefarious country and live with me. As I said, you will be safer, and you will have a voice here in America. I picture you loving this land of the free and the home of, to those like you, the brave.

Sincerely,

Nebiy Petros

Your younger brother who misses you  
dearly.

Student Name: Christina Dang  
 Grade: 11  
 School: I H Kempner High School  
 Title: 3/21/2019  
 Category: Personal Essay & Memoir  
 Key: Gold Key  
 Educator: Susan henson

3/21/19

There are flowers on my windowsill. The petals have crinkled into a seasonal fragility, they fall loosely from any touch—soft or rough, it doesn't quite matter—and its leaves have curled farther in from their casual green: it's autumn. It's colder. I make my bed in the morning only to wiggle back under the sheets. It's the afternoon when I've finally gotten out of my room and made myself busy with the menial task of brewing tea. The kettle is heating up. It's singing. Above its hum is an incoherent chatter held carefully in the palms of a patient listener. I will not realize it until nightfall, but I have turned kind and mushy and all things alike: not from ease, but of ataraxy, of care, and of effort. Then it will hit me—that I've finally done it. That I've met peace. This is the future I've always wanted; this is the future I once gave up on; this is the future I've fought to get back.

In the past, I was someone who always appeared to be stuck in a different season: whether it was summer or spring, long sleeves and ankle socks never seemed to leave me. I'd pile on thickly knit sweaters and people would ask me, "Isn't it hot?" I'd respond, "Not really." But the sweat beading on my knees never failed to tell the truth: it was unbearably hot for me too. I didn't like summer—not in the slightest—as the absence of school left my days empty and me alone. To be trapped in my own presence left me dreary, to the point that I could describe my body as rotting with the way my skin itched against my clothes. Maybe spring would've been better, but I didn't favor it either, since the pollen brought bees that would fly by and frighten me. And although the bloom of fresh flowers were beautiful, at the time, I couldn't care at all for their meaning. But autumn... I've always loved autumn—crunchy leaves, pumpkin spice, cinnamon, and other things alike—but I suppose back then it was because the weather made good reason to slip into hoodies and fluffy socks that covered my ankles and wrists.

Here lies a hidden history: unsaid and unshared out of the fear that people will never look at me the same. People will pity me. People will think I'm a freak. Even I tried to rack up my mind for something—anything—else to write about, but I couldn't: as there is nothing else that has made me grow any more than this, and I'm so sure of this that in the act of writing about anything else would only a bleak facade show. How could I turn away from the intensity of my identity and bury my head in shame like others have been forced to? The answer: I couldn't, I refused to. If this makes me a freak, then so be it. I am a freak; I am a fighter.



March 21st, 2019: the day of my overdose. As we sat in the lobby of the psych ward, my parents begging—not for me to tell them what was going on, or to live, but to be normal—miasma'd the air around me and made it hard to breathe: they wanted a normal daughter more than they wanted me to be okay. Their words overshadowed all 6 days of my admittance, staining the entirety of this period so much that when I was discharged, I immediately abandoned the nurse's lessons over acceptance to tie myself to my parents' desperate pleas to be normal. My suicide was swept under the rug, or well, at least for everyone besides me, since the thinly raised scars on my skin burned fervently no matter how hard I tugged at my sleeves.

I tried to play the role of a normal child, to perform for society, to let the role seep into my skin...but it would fall apart at night and leave me breathless. Every day I found myself chasing an outline, stretching myself so far and so thin to reach for a collection of shards cracked like glass but the moon would dip, and the sun would peak: a new day would begin, and I would be restless—tiredly holding onto a wish inside the hands of my once again, newly sculpted self. Even so, no matter how hard it was to knead myself new at the break of dawn, I kept up with it, since only with the usage of intended ignorance and spontaneous joking did the world think of me as sweet and funny. I wanted to keep it that way—I wanted to be normal, I wanted to be loved—so I sanded my stories smooth enough to where they could slip into other people's hearts with ease; I bit back vowels and hitched them in my throat, even going so far as clenching them behind my teeth to keep everyone comfortable. Everyone except me. Even though I was trying so hard I felt completely, utterly, and entirely alone.

All I could see—or maybe, all I wanted to see—was the vision I'd coveted from imitations cluttered within my husk of a soul. But in the end, I couldn't give up my feelings and lap at the pride I found within the prowling eyes of others. And so, my desperations turned away from love to again face a familiarly heavy stench of death.

There were a multitude of days where I didn't eat. I didn't drink. I didn't shower. I didn't speak. I didn't do anything, I couldn't: there was no point in living. Every day afterwards... every second that flew by... a thought haunted me. A wish, even—but I didn't dare to admit it. I kept it fluttering within my husky throat, never to whisper: but upon writing this, I must shout it. Every passing moment, I thought about how I should've just died that day. If only... If only I could have uttered those words back then. But there was no one I could go to. I felt loneliness seep through the cuts on my ankle as if it were rain to stone, and when it had frozen over, it'd lock me out, and I would be forced to see myself for what I was: gone, empty, missing. There was something wrong with me. I wasn't normal at all, and I would never be.

Did things get better? No. The opposite. Things got worse. As time strung on, I felt the consequences slam deeper against my ribs. My failing grades left me with after-school lectures that wrung tears from my eyes and sobs that spiraled out of my control. What was I still doing here? I didn't know. I was at a loss with myself. I tried to grasp at the fragments, but they littered irrevocable marks along my skin. I tried to tie myself together by white seams. I tried to fill the space between the cracks, but as if drenched in whiskey,

everything would burn up in flames, and I would run through the cycle again and again, over and over, and it hurt. It hurt so much when I failed my suicide, when I cut my wrists and my ankles, and it hurt even more having to hide all of it, and I was so, so, so tired, but in the same way I gave up on living; I gave up on trying to die. I no longer had the courage.

I cannot point to one precise thing that pulled me out of my misery for the reason that I was never pulled out of it at all. If suicide is a ribbon, not once has it ever unraveled its grip over me. I still fidget around pills. I make it a point not to stare at the knives on the kitchen counter. My mind lingers over stuffed door gaps and lit-up charcoal. Depression is a medical disorder that never goes away, and no one wants to accept that, but you have to. I had to. It didn't matter how much I yearned for normalcy; I could never be. Even so, this is NOT what defines me. It was not the silence that fell upon me, but the first whisper that came from it; it was not my suffering, but the efforts I made to navigate it.

I am a fighter. I do not believe in easy things: I do not romanticize ease, I do not dream of being saved, I do not pray to be cured of what is incurable. It's because I have fallen in love with the fact that I can do hard things. It's because I have failed so many times and still made it out of this hell-like-life that I can face things with an undying certainty in my capability. No one can take that away from me.

I slipped off cliffs, tumbled, and slammed heart first into the ground, but I still held onto hope, let it dig into my hands, and kept living. Things got harder, I got stronger; I got better. Whether it was from the kindness of a stranger, or a nice meal, or a good nap: everything became okay. Maybe it was just for that day. Maybe just for that moment. But there was something there to hold onto, something to love, something that made my life worth living. I was smiling. I was laughing. I was happy, and maybe that's why I came to the realization that I didn't have to sink. I didn't have to wallow in my misery. I could get up, fall, and get up again: I could live a life of ups and downs, a life of love and the absence of it—a hard life. So, I did exactly that. I chose to keep living knowing it wouldn't be easy, knowing it'd be a constant struggle, knowing I'd be clawing my way up with love. I will never stop trying, never stop growing, and never stop looking for the good and love in everything. Because anything that's worth doing is worth fighting for.

Student Name: Flora Thai

Grade: 12

School: I H Kempner High School

Title: Embracing Transience

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Haley Grimes

"Happy birthday to you. Feel free to get egg-cited," read the silly Hallmark card my friends had just given me. A drawing of Gudetama sleepily holding two balloons stared back at me as I skimmed the kind messages and inside jokes scribbled around it. They had each used a different pen to wish me well in the eighteenth chapter of my life, and after being friends for so long, I know each handwriting by heart. Every flick of the wrist reflects a part of their personality, and I find it heartwarming that I will be able to keep this souvenir of my high school days until my hundredth birthday.

I begin my search for a velvet chocolate box to store the card. There, I house all the little drawings, notes, cards, and letters from my dearest people, along with tickets, receipts, wristbands, and deactivated hotel keys from unforgettable experiences. The earliest artifacts date back to elementary school Valentine's Day gift exchanges; while the other kids tossed aside the corny puns to savor their candy, I carefully read each note and treasured them for my future self to read through.

I often ponder why I have been inclined to hoard these items, especially since I fell into this routine at such a young age. Maybe it was because my life had been full of "lasts"—last times, last visits, and last chances. In preschool, I cried and cried when I discovered that I would be seeing my teacher, Mrs. Jo, for the last time. On the last day of kindergarten, I thought hard about what to give my best friend Sana before she moved to Dubai. This July, I tore up the highway in a futile attempt to see my cancer-ridden grandmother one last time. There were countless other times I had to face a last, so perhaps collecting mementos is my mechanism of preserving a moment for all of time.

Amidst my mindless rummaging and lengthy monologue, I stumble across a birthday card from middle school. Back then, the same five friends had gotten together to throw me a surprise party. Undeniably, each handwriting had changed significantly as we

matured from mischievous juveniles to young women, but the faded ink still held the charm of our girlhood. Flipping the card to the backside, I notice a picture I hadn't seen before. The aged polaroid captured our beaming, baby-faced smiles at my thirteenth birthday party, akin to those at my eighteenth birthday party today.

As I peer over the balcony to see my friends bantering warmly, I'm stricken with a wave of sanguinity and resolve—I should not think of this day as the last time I celebrate my birthday with these girls; instead, I will be glad for the time we have spent together and look forward to seeing how each script will change once we meet again after high school.

Abandoning my search for the old chocolate box, I rush downstairs to laugh with them about the old card I found.

Student Name: Linh Ton-Nu

Grade: 11

School: I H Kempner High School

Title: Giraffe Looking

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Susan henson

"You look like a giraffe," Jack said to me. I didn't respond to his comment; instead, I brushed it off, thinking he had mistakenly said that. Unhappy with my response, Jack decided to announce to the whole playground, "Everyone, doesn't Linh look like a giraffe because she is tall?" Every second grader on that playground turned their heads to look at me and started to whisper in agreement. Embarrassed by such attention, I ran back into the school, heading to the bathroom, where I stayed for the remainder of recess, crying. This was the first time I got the wrong attention for my height; unfortunately, it would not be the last.

Growing up and being a foot taller than all the kids in my class made me stand out from everyone. In every class photo, my teacher would tell me to stand in the back behind all my classmates to not be "noticeable." Still, my long black hair would stick out above everyone else, but I never thought that being tall would make me different from any other 7-year-old. It was not until my height was the only attribute people would recognize me for that I realized I would never be anything more than the tall Asian girl in Mrs. Jones's 8th grade class. When people refer to me, they don't talk about my charisma or hobbies; they refer to me as the tall girl.

Being tall was somehow bestowed upon me to become my personality, and I simply became the tall girl in people's heads. Standing in front of them, I sometimes wished to grab them by their shoulders, shake them, and shriek in their faces, "I am also smart; I am also artistic; I am also athletic and filled with so many aspirations. I am so much more than being 5'10; why don't you care about these qualities?" Instead, I stay quiet with my head down because if I voice my insecurity, I am painted as condescending. So, standing there, I continue to listen to their praises of how tall I am and how lucky I am, wondering if I am really that lucky.

While people looked up to me, I looked down upon my height. When my friends' parents talked to me, they would ask me what I did to be tall and how much milk I drank to grow so tall. The questions became never-ending, and they were all about my height. I wanted to be acknowledged for more than just being tall; I wanted people to wonder about my life and the things I enjoy. I no longer could be myself; I became known for the one thing I hated the most. Being tall. Everyone correlated my name, "Linh Ton-Nu," to the word "tall." Standing at 5'10 as a girl destroyed me since people didn't stop there; they had to ruin my identity, but they also had to ruin my confidence as they continued to make fun of me for being tall. Kids joking around would ask me, "How is the weather up there?" Not

only did this “joke” ruin my self-esteem, but it also created a false reality where the word tall made my cheeks flush with embarrassment and shamefulness. In this false reality, being tall haunted me; it attached to me like a leach that I couldn’t get rid of.

I became engulfed in the consumption of my height, a characteristic I was born with and something I could never adjust. As I grew taller, the comments never halted; they pierced my ears, draining my optimism that there could be change. In the end, I still couldn’t change who I am, so I became resentful. Questioning the universe, why was I given this so-called “gift from God,” when all I experienced was the clench in my heart and the ripping of my confidence? I sat in my room alone, with no friends, because I was considered unusually tall, bizarre, and a mutant. Begging to be shorter, I would think that if I sliced my legs open, prying the bones out, I could get rid of my height. When looking at myself in the mirror, I winced at the long legs, the long arms, and the way I looked lanky. I wanted to be anyone other than myself. To compensate for my height, I learned how to slouch. With my back hunched, it made me appear shorter, and although it ruined my posture, I kept tearing myself down to make me seem a little smaller to others.

Furthermore, the girls who were petite, with the height that every guy seemed to desire, never looked like me. During Christmas, on my wish list for Santa Claus, instead of wanting the newest Beanie Boo, I wished to be like these dainty girls. Society kept on saying that in the eyes of the male gaze, the perfect height is between 5'4 and 5'7, not some tall 5'10 girl who can't even seem to find jeans that reach her ankles. Every teenage girl wants to gain male validation, and when I never had an ounce of it, I was considered undesirable and damaged by the people who surrounded me. From a young age, people would say to me, “She’s pretty, but she is so tall.” “She will never find a guy who is taller than her.” “How is she going to get a boyfriend?” “No one wants to date a tall girl.” Unsightly, strange, and irregular were the words to describe me, because who would ever adore and fall in love with me if I were tall? When I walk past people, their heads turn, looking at me up and down and looking at me like an unusual specimen.

Being ashamed of my height made me filled with insecurity and never confident in my appearance. However, growing up and learning my worth helped me slowly appreciate my height, which eventually became one of my favorite attributes of myself.

I was proud that the models were the same height as me. Models like Naomi Campbell were able to become successful in the modeling business because of their height. Even though she was once humiliated by her height, she used it to gain opportunities that some people could not get, like walking on the runway for Chanel. Additionally, being tall can enhance a person’s athletic abilities and help anyone succeed in sports. Katie Ledecky, an Olympic swimmer who stands at six feet, was able to become the world record holder in the 1500 freestyle with the help of her height. Looking at these strong, tall women who used their height to succeed in their respective careers made me learn that instead of being ashamed of being tall, I can use this attribute of myself to improve my lifestyle. I can easily grab the cup from the top shelf and see over people at concerts. These little things taught me to appreciate a part of myself that I used to hate. One should not determine their worth based on a physical trait they can’t control; instead, they should

look at the benefits of it and appreciate themselves. When looking at a person, no one should judge them based on their physical appearance, but rather on who they are inside. Instead of holding a grudge against the people who have bullied and judged me based on my height, I used that opportunity to learn that there is so much more going on in someone's life than their appearance. We women must stand up and not let a physical attribute define who we are as a person. Unfortunately, as we progress through society, we will never be enough to appease the arbitrary standards society has placed on us. Thus, instead of abiding by these ideals, I grew out of my label of just being the tall girl. I am more than just my height.

I was once afraid of people's judgment. Now, walking down the street with my shoulders up, I strut down it like a runway. I greet people with confidence and security, knowing that even if they are making fun of me, I am proud of who I am. Being tall has allowed me to reach heights I could never imagine, such as success in swimming and a future in modeling. Even if I stand out with my height, I still shine through my bold nature and outstanding allure. So, in the present day, I no longer slouch; instead, I wear heels.

Student Name: Crystal Fu  
Grade: 12  
School: William B Travis High School  
Title: How to Cure a Vampire  
Category: Science Fiction & Fantasy  
Key: Gold Key  
Educator:

Jules stared into the eyes of his senior officer as a bead of sweat rolled down his forehead.

The officer stared back with an unimpressed stare, then glanced down to the papers in his hand.

"Private Jules Woodman," he read out loud. "Enlisted December twelfth. Two attempts to desert, twenty-five instances of insubordination. Resists participating in drills and training." He looked up over the papers and raised an eyebrow. "Well? Make that three attempts to desert."

Jules scratched at his arm, his long fingernails biting into his skin. The officer had a bandage on his face, with a hint of blood seeping through. He gulped. "Yes, sir."

"Got anything to say for yourself?"

"No, sir."

"You get caught every time. There's no chance of getting past security, not to mention the freeze. You'd die alone out there, with no food or shelter. So, Private Woodman, why do you keep running away?"

"I don't know, sir."

"What kind of answer is that?"

"I was scared, sir." That was a lie.

"Scared?" The senior officer slapped the papers down onto his desk and leaned back, crossing his muscled arms over his chest. "This is war, son. About time you got it into that thick head of yours. No running back to your mother. Now go back to your barrack. Cleaning duty. You're dismissed."



Jules clenched his fists. "Sir, I filed a release form three days ago. When - "

He was cut off by the officer's harsh bark of laughter. "Release? You'll be the last person to get released, boy, with that record of yours. You've got nerve, applying for release. We need every man we can get in the army right now, and you've been drafted for a reason."

"Please, sir," Jules spoke in a rush now. "I can't do this. I can't stay here and fight." Lie. "I'm no good to the army at all, and I'll just slow everyone down." Lie. "Let me go home. I don't want to die out there." Lie.

The senior officer's nostrils flared. "Boy, you're the most spineless creature I ever did see. Now let me spell it out for you: there is no going home. You will follow orders, and you will march out there and fight for your country. In fact, I intend to relocate you to the first regiment, active immediately." The stocky man pulled a pen from his drawer, clicked it, and began writing on Jules' files.

Jules stood in shock. "The first regiment? That's the one deployed in the very front lines!"

The officer chuckled darkly to himself. "About time you got over your cowardice, kid."

Jules couldn't push back his rising panic. This was not good. "Sir, I apologize for my rebellious attitude. I'll follow any orders they give me." Lie. "Just don't send me out there!"

The officer sat his pen down firmly. "You are dismissed, Private Woodman."

Jules backed away to the mouth of the officer's tent. "Please, sir, reconsider."

The officer stood, his face flushing dark red. "Private Woodson! I order you to leave!"

Jules stared at his face. The man's skin was red. Red with blood. Veins stood out against his forehead.

He gulped and turned, scrambling outside.

He let the tent flap fall back into place and stared numbly at the rough canvas. As if it made any difference, he whispered, "I wanted to run away. I wanted to."

Lie.

White flakes fell from the sky and dusted the soldiers' uniforms as they marched. Jules kept his head down, trying to avoid getting snow in his eyes. The dreary landscape, grey and lifeless, matched the atmosphere of the group. They, the 1st regiment, were heading out to the battlefield.

"Hey you," the person next to Jules nudged. He looked up. The soldier was young, perhaps in his late teens at most. His face was pink with exertion.

"You're new, right? I'm Thomas."

"Jules." He went back to looking ahead. Thomas poked his shoulder again, forcing him to turn back. The kid's mouth was in a wide grin.

"Nice to meetcha! Say, what brought you to our humble regiment? Couldn't have been anything good."

Jules shrugged. "Just luck. My regiment didn't have many people left, so we were reassigned." Lie.

"Wow, seriously? Were you in the last battle, at Rivertown? That was before I was drafted. I heard it was brutal." Thomas' eyes widened in awe.

He shrugged again. He didn't want to think about it, but he could see it vividly, still. The crack of guns firing. The bodies heaped on the snowy banks. The river had been dyed red. A shudder worked its way down his spine. He swallowed.

"So I was wondering." Thomas began again when he saw Jules wasn't about to answer. "How's it like, fighting in battle? I've only ever heard about it from my older brothers. They didn't say much in their letters, though. Didn't want to scare me or my Ma, I guess. But you've been, right?"

"Not really." Jules had to clear his throat to get it working again. "I deserted before the fighting started. Never fired a single shot in any of the three battles I've been in - if you can call them that."

Thomas scrunched his brows together. "Why?"

Jules thought about the soldiers falling to the ground. Wounded. Saliva began to fill his mouth, but he resolutely swallowed it down - along with his memories of the battle. "I... couldn't stand it. It was too much for me."

"Oh." Thomas looked thoughtful. "I often worry the same, that I won't be brave enough when the time comes. It must have been scary."

"Yeah." Lie.

The kid's eyes swept over the barren landscape ahead of them, and Jules' gaze followed. There was truly nothing out here. A dead shrub or two, perhaps, but everything had been killed by winter. And the war.

"Are you going to desert again this time?" Thomas asked.

Jules clenched his fists. Yes. They were going to be fighting, and very soon. Could he handle it? The image of the crimson-stained battlefield came to him again. His stomach groaned.

"Yes," he said.

"Oh." Thomas looked slightly surprised that he had admitted it so easily. "Well, okay."

He raised an eyebrow. " 'Okay'? You're going to let me off so easily?"

The kid looked down. "Well... it wasn't your choice to be here. We were all forced into this war. If you want out, who am I to stop you?"

Jules mulled over this. He hadn't expected that. Despite the flutterings in his stomach, he managed to quirk up a corner of his mouth.

The mass suddenly halted. Jules stumbled, almost walking right into the person ahead of them. Thomas's expression turned to one of shocked nervousness, then settled into determination. He hoisted his rifle.

They were here.

-Chapter Three-

Rifle fire spat into the snow at their feet, scattering their group like sheep without a shepherd. Jules scrambled back to his feet, having tripped over an exposed branch when the chaos hit.

Idiot, he thought fiercely. Idiot! You should have run when you had the chance. He turned - turned, and was about to flee from the scene as fast as possible - when he heard a shout of fear behind him.

"Help!" Thomas yelled.

Jules whirled around just in time to see the boy crumple to his knees. An enemy soldier advanced with a rifle aimed at the boy's head.

Jules' eyes unfocused at the sight of the red stain blooming out from underneath the boy's hands, clutched over his stomach.

He blinked, and he was standing over Thomas's huddled figure, staring straight at the enemy soldier. The man jumped in surprise, then aimed the barrel at Jules' chest.

He blinked. The man was now a clearing away from him, limbs splayed across the trodden snow. The gun was nowhere in sight.

Dimly, the memory of smacking the soldier with enough force to break his spine came to him. Jules gave it no notice. His mind was solely focused on the bleeding boy now shivering behind him.

He lifted Thomas under his arms with a grunt and dragged him away from the fighting so he wouldn't catch a stray bullet. He pulled the boy through a cluster of trees and set him down heavily.

"J-J-J-Jules," Thomas chattered, squinting up through tears of pain.

Jules squatted down, as if in a trance. He reached for the boy's red-stained hands, to pull them away. Thomas flinched inward, but then sighed and lifted his palms outward.

One of his hands sported a bloody wound in the center that was oozing blood. His shirt, though soaked, was intact. It was just his hand. Jules stared numbly. It was just his hand. Thomas would live.

The boy puffed white into the freezing air. "J-Jules, I was so scared when that man shot me. I couldn't move. I couldn't do anything. I thought I was gonna die. Please - it hurts."

The fingers on his wounded hand curled inward, then flinched in pain and regret. Jules couldn't draw his eyes away from the ragged hole in his flesh. A small voice in his head murmured that a bullet must have grazed it.

"Jules, please, I don't know what to do. Help me!" Thomas pleaded, tugging at his sleeve with his good hand and holding out the other blindly. Frozen tears clung to his cheeks. He's really only a boy, Jules thought, taking the injured hand gently.

Fresh blood dribbled through Thomas' fingers and fell to the snow, leaving bright, wet drops.

His mouth opened. Saliva pooled in his mouth and dripped down his chin.

Thomas' hand faltered. "Jules?"

Jules ripped himself away with a guttural cry of frustration. His hands scrabbled in the numbingly cold snow, barely feeling the sting as he pawed at handfuls of the blood-stained stuff. It was from fallen soldiers, soldiers from both sides. He didn't care.

He shoved the red snow into his mouth and crunched down ravenously. His senses were blasted with cold. His teeth screamed. But, it was there: the faint, coppery taste of blood. He shoveled more, more down his throat, until the snow melted rivulets down the front of his uniform.

"Jules!" Thomas grabbed his arm, stopping him. "What on earth are you doing? You'll be sick!"

Jules recoiled. The smell was stronger when he was near. "Get away from me!" He wrenched his arm back and crammed the snow into his mouth, but it wasn't enough to distract the hunger roaring in his stomach. He squeezed his eyes shut, despair welling up inside him. I should have run when I had the chance. Why, oh why, didn't I run?

"Jules, what's wrong? Are you hurt?" Unthinking, Thomas reached over with his wounded hand to touch Jules' shoulder. The whiff of his blood touched Jules' nose, and it was too late.

Jules snatched his hand in midair, ignoring Thomas' yelp of alarm and pain. All he could see were the streams of red trailing down the pink skin of Thomas' palm. Slowly, he brought the hand to his face, letting the half-melted snow sludge fall out of his gaping mouth.

"Jules--?"

The blood was warm and salty and disgusting on his tongue. Yet, he craved it, like a starved animal drawn to the scent of rotting garbage. He drew his tongue across the raw flesh. Thomas jerked, but he held his wrist in a vice-like grip. He couldn't let go. He couldn't stop.

"Jules, you're scaring me!" Thomas tugged in vain, his eyes wide in shock. "Jules!"

Painfully, like emerging from a pool of molasses, Jules came to his senses. He let go of Thomas' arm. He looked down at himself. His uniform was a mess of pink stains, and he knew without looking in a mirror that his face was in a similar state. He looked to Thomas, who was holding his injured hand against his chest and staring at him with scared rabbit eyes. Jules' chest rose and fell with ragged heaves, but it wasn't enough. He wasn't getting enough air.

Then a warm hand tightly clasped his. Jules' eyes flew open.

"You saved my life just now," Thomas said. He still looked afraid, but also determined. Jules hadn't the faintest idea why.

"No," he replied bitterly, and turned away. "I didn't. Because I just put you in danger of something far worse: me."

"Don't say that! You're my friend!"

"I'm a vampire." Jules let the whispered statement fall flat, let it plunk itself down onto the snow between them. "I'm a vampire, and I want to drink your blood."

Thomas let out a nervous little laugh. "Heh. That explains a lot. Then... why don't you?"

"Pardon?" Jules felt too dazed to hold together a conversation at this point.

"Why don't you go for it?" Thomas held up his hand, which was still bleeding. "It's right there."

Jules hissed and turned away. "Don't. I lost control once already." He pushed the boy away, gently but firmly, and stood. "You need to go. Find a medic, if there's even one around in this chaos." He staggered back, one, two steps.

Thomas stood, too, with a wince. "Wait. What about you?"

He turned around, unable to face the small creature anymore. "I'm leaving. Like I always should have done. I'm a monster, and I'm putting everyone in danger."

"No, you're not!" Even now, beyond Jules' comprehension, the boy's voice held indignation for him. "Stop saying that. You're not a monster. You saved me, remember?"

Jules was already feeling the saliva fill his mouth again as he spun around. "No! You're wrong! The entire time, the entire time I was back there, all I could see were the bodies.

Did you know I wanted nothing more than to rip into those defenseless people and suck them dry?" He was shaking, now. He could feel himself fall apart. He viciously swiped a strand of saliva away from his chin. "Even now... even now, can't you realize, Thomas, that I can barely hold back from eating you? What is wrong with you?"

A sob broke through. He squeezed his eyes closed and clapped a hand over his mouth to muffle the sounds, but he was unraveling.

Then he was warm.

A small body pressed against him, and two arms wrapped around his sides.

"You're not a monster," Thomas cried into his coat. "I don't care."

A blaze of terror rose in himself. "Get away from me!" he screeched, scrambling backward. Thomas held on, as stubborn as a burr.

"Please stop, stop it," Jules wailed, trying to pry his hands off. "You'll hurt yourself! Why are you hugging me?"

"Because you need a hug!" Thomas screamed. He glared up at Jules, his eyes streaming from the cold and the pain. "There has to be a way to fix this. You're a person. I mean, you couldn't possibly have avoided seeing blood your entire life."

He laughed humorlessly. "Once you're bitten, there's no going back. It's like a disease. I'm rotten to the core, now." He was starting to feel dizzy from the scent. He knew he was drooling, but he had no energy to fight anymore.

"Bitten?" Thomas wrinkled his face in thought. "You were bitten?"

"By some other vampire. I don't know. It was a year ago, maybe. I almost died that day, you know. The vampire, he bit my arm and would have drunk me dry if he hadn't gotten his head shot off the next second. It was in the middle of a battle. He must have been there to prey on the helpless. Like me." Ignoring Thomas' attempt to interrupt, he continued. "It came on slowly at first, but I suddenly felt like I had to drink my own blood. It was like I went mad. I went on, drinking the blood from my arm, until I must have passed out. Thank goodness for that. When I woke up again, my arm was sewn up and I had gotten a blood transfusion." He barked out a laugh. "Oh, the irony! They should have just given the blood to me through a straw instead of a needle."

Thomas seemed deep in thought. "He bit you..."

Then, without warning, the boy leaned over and sank his teeth into Jules' arm. A fiery pain blazed in his skin. Jules jolted away from the embrace, ripping his arm away.

"What --"

Thomas was staring hard at Jules' arm, panting. A smear of Jules' blood marked the corner of his mouth.

Jules felt a pang of horror. "No. Thomas, did I bite you back there? I thought I didn't, but maybe --"

"No! No, it was an idea." Thomas continued staring. "Jules. Do you feel any different?"

"Not really. I'm still exhausted, and it still really hurts - your teeth are sharp for someone who's not a vampire - And -" Jules halted mid-sentence. No, something was different.

It was the smell. It was still the same, but at the same time, it smelled... different.

Scared to breath, to move, to shatter this slim hope, Jules reached out and swiped some blood off of Thomas' hand. The dark red streak glinted at him, but it, too, was different. As if...

Not daring to hope, Jules placed his finger in his mouth. The flavor burst across his tongue: salty, metallic. Still disgusting.

And not tempting at all.

Jules withdrew his finger and spat. The pink-tinged saliva landed in the snow at his feet. He didn't care. For once, he couldn't care less about the blood staining everywhere.

In the war-ravaged woods, with ice stinging his skin, Jules felt better than he had in a long time.



Student Name: Jenny Wu  
Grade: 8  
School: Fort Settlement Middle School  
Title: I Used To Be  
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir  
Key: Gold Key  
Educator:

I used to be a swimmer.

I used to think I was going to spend the rest of my life swimming... until I didn't, but that was a future that seemed implausible. To me, swimming wasn't just a hobby; it was my identity, a part of who I was. Growing up in the chlorine-scented pools, my days were spent in the comforting pulse of my own heartbeat underwater.

From the very start, water was my cradle, molding the essence of who I am. Water shaped and guided me; it was the backdrop of who I am. Its vast expanse stretched out before me, seemingly endless, timeless, yet full of meaning. My earliest friends, my fondest memories, the greatest lessons I've learned, all came from the amalgamation of joy and pain that I've named swim.

To be more specific, I belonged to a small group of synchronized artistic swimmers in Houston. Synchronized artistic swimming, or just synchro, is a beautiful yet demanding sport that requires not only physical prowess and grace but also unwavering dedication and teamwork. Synchro seamlessly blends elements of dance, gymnastics, and swimming, resulting in mesmerizing and elegant performances in the water. Each graceful movement in the water is like a brushstroke in the vast boundaries of the pool that is the canvas. In the intricate world of synchro, teamwork is the most important element, as precise coordination is required among team members, ensuring every movement is perfectly synchronized to create captivating choreography.

I was extremely lucky that my team was amazing, as I had to stick with them for many years. We were always together, and my phone was constantly overrun by messages from both the swim group chat and individual team members.

However, it all took a strange turn when my mother proposed a trip to China, a seemingly harmless vacation which would disrupt the pattern of my training.

It was a dilemma: Was it worth it for me to take a break, or was it more important for me to stay and train with my team? Since the Junior Olympics, the biggest competition for us

each season, was extremely important, I knew my team would train long days and hours in order to achieve a respectable rank. On the other hand, I had not seen my extended family in years. Even though we were not close, I wanted to visit them and create more meaningful memories. In the end, a coin toss made the decision for me, leading to a two-month hiatus from the pool.

I thought it was a good idea. After all, we had nine people on the team, and only eight could make it to the team competition. Either someone was going to be purposely excluded, or they could do me and everyone else a favor and let me leave. The duration of my vacation was spent leisurely, and I barely trained. Instead, all my time was spent bathing in freedom and exploring my own interests and aspirations. Meanwhile, I felt guilty that my team was engaged in the rigors of training.

Unsurprisingly, when I came back, I was behind. Responsibilities piled on me exponentially, and time became a luxury I couldn't afford. The water that once welcomed me with open arms now felt foreign, and my skills were rusty. The difficult but fun daily practices turned into bleary-eyed challenges to survive; the exhilaration of racing became replaced by the heaviness of fatigue.

As I struggled to relearn many things, like the intricate choreography and the precise timing of a figure, frustration gnawed at me like an incessant itch. Each missed movement echoed my lapse in commitment, a silent reproach for the leisure I had indulged in during my vacation. In the water, my own whispered taunts of self-doubt rang in my head. You had the chance to stay sharp, but you chose freedom over discipline, the voice chided.

As the training became more vigorous, the reality of my decision weighed heavily on me. It was clear that the camaraderie of the team had shifted. There were distinctions now -- the younger swimmers were now incredibly skilled, surpassing their ages with raw talent and ability. They had become the stars of our team, explosive with power, and their swimming speed was astonishing -- besides, the coaches loved them. My best friend, whose swimming speed was catching up, had enough intelligence to make up for everything anyway. Another close friend of mine was so good that the coaches begged her to join the junior team. She was the best at figures, serious, and hardworking all at once. And then there was the one boy in 13-15, effortlessly cruising through, benefitting from a system that favored him due to his gender, because it gave a lot of impression points.

I found myself on the sidelines, a spectator to the world I used to inhabit. It happened too quickly, there was nothing I could change.

In fact, there was nothing for me to change. I had a conversation with my mom one night, and the topic of quitting came up. She expressed her belief that I should consider

quitting, an opinion that quite clashed with my own. In the moment, I hesitated, caught between her perspective and my determination to persevere. The words I wanted to say elude me, and the weight of her suggestion hung in the air.

All I remember was a phone call to my coach, and the anxious tone of many sentences. It happened quickly; in the blink of an eye, the decision was made, never to be reversed. In the mere span of an hour, my life was flipped over. It feels as though my identity was peeled away, leaving me exposed and vulnerable to the empty void inside of me.

My decision to quit tormented me for months and months after. I can only liken it to an octopus extending its tentacles, only to have each one brutally torn away. The team, once my second family, was gone; it was a bad, heart-wrenching breakup. I wasn't a part of the team anymore. I'm no longer defined by the athlete within me. I am not a part of that closeness anymore.

That closeness, the original familiarity that I'm used to, now dissolved into an unfamiliar emptiness. It wasn't just about the sport nor the competitions; it was about the shared dreams to become part of the national team, the unspoken understanding of being miserable at practice, the unbreakable bond that I had forged over the many years. Losing that connection is akin to losing a part of myself. The cheers from the stands, the laughter in the locker room – they were all distant echoes, reminders of a time when I belonged to something bigger than myself. The rhythm of my heartbeat that used to synchronize with the perfectly aligned pulse of the team now beats out of sync.

Another pain is not just missing the familiarity – it's the acceptance. The fact that I've accepted it as the truth. The acceptance became a constant companion, a shadow that lingered in every corner of my daily life. It followed me everywhere I went – school, gym, home, art class – everywhere. Every time I trace my fingertips over the words "Swim 4:30-6:30" on the smooth page of my agenda, written in a majestic black ink, there's that little bubble in my chest waiting to burst into tears.

I thought maybe if I would just stop thinking about it, the tears would stop staining my cheeks. Maybe if I just ran away from it, I wouldn't get hurt anymore.

But I couldn't escape it. The train of thoughts now inhabiting the depths of my mind only whispered: "I am an athlete..! Or at least, I used to be..." over and over again. Then memories come flooding back and I can recall the exhilarating feeling of sprinting down the lane, the sour complaints of the cold pools, the rush of adrenaline before a competition, and the sweet taste of bonding with a team on break after months and years of training.

These memories seem so distant, almost like a dream from another lifetime. I feel as if I could flip through these memories and read them like a storybook, only sitting still to feel waves of nostalgia wash over me.

Perhaps, the truth lies in the realization that in the realm of synchro, I no longer felt valued, no longer shared that unbreakable bond with everyone. Perhaps, it's this perspective that compelled me to bring my swim journey to an end.

Maybe I am overreacting, but some of my swim friends and I are in the same school, and even before my decision to quit, it was as if they've gotten closer without me. I wasn't a part of the inside jokes, the shared glances, the complaints about our swimming schedules— it all unfolded in front of me, just beyond my reach, as if our ties together were frayed threads on the pool deck that can't be mended. Perhaps it's natural for friendships to evolve, but the pang of isolation still lingers. It's a haunting feeling that permeates my whole being, especially as I navigate the school hallways watching the others converse joyfully and share snacks, feeling like a stranger.

Yet, quitting synchro wasn't the end of everything; it was the beginning. For now, I can just grapple with the reality of standing on the sidelines, watching the bonds I once held dear progress without me. I had so much time left to pursue everything else I had once wanted to try, such as learning new sports or spending time with my pets. Time once consumed by rigorous practices was now mine to reclaim. There's that potential for new connections, new passions, and a rediscovery of the athlete that exists within, independent of a team.

So today, instead of wallowing in self-pity, I decided to try something new. I rallied my closest school friends and we went to skate in the local ice rink. I lace up my ice skates and can't help but feel a sense of liberation. The crisp cold air fills my lungs as I glide across the frozen surface, and the sound of laughter surrounds me.

"Hey, slow down there!" my friend shouted as I sped past him.

I grinned, slowing down just enough for him to catch up. "What's up? Trying to break the ice speed record?"

He chuckled, "Well, someone's got to keep you all on your toes!"

A smile finds its way to my face, the weight of loneliness slowly lifting off my shoulders, and the feeling of friendship envelopes me again.

As of now, the adrenaline rush during the minutes before the biggest competitions and the thrill of performing in front of large crowds will come to an end with the closing chapter. If I wanted to (of course I would), I could also meet up with my synchro friends during weekends and holidays.

The past will linger, but still, the story of who I am as well as who I will become is still being written, guided by choices made outside the familiar swimming pool, marked not by applause and victory but by the gentle lapping of waves against the deck. When people ask me what sport I play, I can say that I used to be an artistic swimmer, I used to be an athlete, I used to be part of a team. There wasn't too much that changed. Right?

But every once in a while, a run outside with the prickling breeze would remind me of the familiar sensation of cool water on my skin and the memories of the past, transporting me back to moments I wanted to forget.

So where is that sense of closure I'm looking for?

Student Name: Stella Ma

Grade: 10

School: Clements High School

Title: Incessant Waves

Category: Poetry

Key: Gold Key

Educator:

Incessant Waves

Screaming, shouting, desperately thrashing

Compelling air into my lungs and splashing

The sunlit surface above mocking me

Deeper and deeper, don't know where I'll be.

Footsteps ricocheted off the hollow walls

Dust enshrouds the desolate halls,

Strident silence, waiting to be shattered

Engulfed in sorrow, nothing else mattered.

Photographs untouched, the edges frayed

Life without you, "come back." I prayed.

Blissful memories etched in my brain

Final tears glisten like iridescent rain.

An icy chill piercing through my bones  
Limbs weighted down with heavy stones.  
My vision clouded, a blurry red haze  
A once radiant world spins in black and gray.

Seeing you lay in that dark wooden box  
Wishing that I could turn back all the clocks  
Pausing time, so that you could be here  
Sobbing, weeping, losing you was my fear.

So many things we never got to do  
Now there is one, was supposed to be two.  
The tranquil nights, waiting for the sunset  
Clinging to you, don't want to let go yet.

Trying to swallow my still beating heart  
It aches, knowing that we'd be apart.  
Pleading to see your smile once more  
It's excruciating, more glasses I pour.

A roaring buzz flooding my ears

A silent cry that no one hears.

Descending down with no escape

Emotions wrapped in caution tape.

Seeing your silhouette by that fence

Only referring to you in past tense

The warmth of your embrace now cold,

My fingers reach out but there's nothing to hold.

Regret, misery, anguish, and pain

So many feelings that I can't explain.

A pestering parasite, when did I last eat?

Can't recall the last time my heart had a beat.

Rope around my throat, tighter, constricting

Can't see the damage that it's inflicting.

Cigarette burns on the couch and the bed

What in the hell is going on in my head.

The last rays of sunlight diminished

My breathing slows down, I'm finished,



No more torture, or agony, just peace

I'll tell myself. you aren't deceased.

You're right here with me.

Grief is like drowning, lost at sea

numb, and scared, with nowhere to flee,

Waves lapping, pounding you again, again

The question isn't why, it's when.

When will I smile? when will it stop?

When will I swim back to the top?

You won't, you'll sink, you'll plummet down

You too will die, and you're going to drown.

Student Name: Scarlett Yu  
Grade: 10  
School: Clements High School  
Title: Letter to My Chinese Grandma  
Category: Poetry  
Key: Gold Key  
Educator:

Dear 奶奶,

Are you proud of me?

I know how to play Für Elise on the piano,

I wear slippers in the house,

I use chopsticks and eat rice at every meal,

I drink tea instead of coffee,

I study every night,

and when I'm not, I'm playing badminton.

I'm Chinese enough,

right?

Yes, I should be able to say,

because

I have Chinese friends,

I have a Chinese last name,

I have Chinese parents,

and I have Chinese hobbies.

But, when I hear the voices around me,

whispering about my broken Chinese,

I can't help but wonder,

Am I Chinese enough?

I'm sorry I don't understand.

I'm sorry I can't speak well.

I'm sorry the only words I can mutter to you

are “奶奶好.”

I'm sorry I had to Google Translate

all of the green text messages on my screen.

I'm sorry I could only make out three characters

from the twenty lines of text you sent,

wishing I was well.

I'm sorry I'm writing this in my “Notes” app

at 1 AM instead of telling you all of this

in the language I wish I could speak.

I know I have disappointed you.

I'm sorry I'm not Chinese enough for you.

I know I shouldn't,

But sometimes,

I wish I were mute like my brother,

So I'd have an excuse for not being able to speak Chinese.

Sometimes,

I wish that I could be anything other than Chinese,

so I wouldn't be ashamed of myself

for not speaking well.

Sometimes, I wish I could ignore

The self-incriminating thoughts

that accuse me of not being

Chinese enough.

On rare happy days,

I feel proud to be Chinese,

And I feel proud of myself,

even if I only recognize basic words.

But most days, I wish I was like

the girl, two seats in front of me

in my small Chinese class,

who can read the entire Chinese textbook

without even trying.

Most days, I wish I could speak well enough

to not stutter and trip over my words.

Most days, I wish I could save myself from the humiliation I feel

when my teacher calls my name to read a paragraph.

Most days, I wish that I were more Chinese.

I wish I could feel like I belong

in this group of Chinese students,

who are all more Chinese than me.

I wish I could say that I deserve my place

in this exclusive classroom.

But, most of all,

I wish I could be

a better Chinese granddaughter.

From,

Your imperfect Chinese-American granddaughter

Student Name: Fnu Sahar

Grade: 12

School: I H Kempner High School

Title: Marred Roads of Life

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Haley Grimes

As our car jolted along the uneven road, the rhythmic thud of the tires running over the rocky terrain echoed through my young heart. I clenched my little fists, gripping the edges of the backseat, my knuckles turning white with anxiety. My padar, a stoic figure behind the wheel, navigated the treacherous terrain with a calm determination that had become his trademark. But I, in the innocence of childhood, was filled with fear, even hatred, for the rugged gaps that seemed to spell doom on every journey.

"Bismillah, I hope our car doesn't fall into the gap again," I whispered to myself with a shaky breath as sweat drops formed on my forehead.

I never understood why the unforgiving rifts marred the roads of my homeland—every journey to a destination was a challenge, never knowing when my destiny was fated for the perilous path.

Growing up in Afghanistan as a girl was an ambitious endeavor. The chasm between the opportunities available to me and those afforded to my male counterparts seemed insurmountable. It didn't matter that I had to trudge to school for half an hour, even in the pouring rain or howling wind. I was determined to make something of myself, but what could I do when I could only attend school until the seventh grade? I felt jealous. Why did my brothers get to enjoy an education while I had to figure out how to become financially secure enough to support my parents with just seven years of schooling?

However, these very gaps that plagued my journeys also instilled in me a fierce determination. I realized that if I wanted to bridge the disparities, I had to become a bridge myself, connecting the aspirations of girls like me to the possibilities beyond the rifts.

Life took an unexpected turn when my family immigrated to the United States. It was a journey that spanned thousands of miles, both geographically and culturally. The challenges I faced in my new life were different but equally daunting. A new language, unfamiliar customs, and a bewildering educational system greeted me. The stakes were higher than ever, and my determination to succeed burned brighter.

I dove headfirst into my studies, often burning the midnight oil to catch up with my peers. Those moments of frustration and exhaustion were like navigating the voids in Afghanistan, with each challenge propelling me forward. I joined extracurricular activities, determined to span the distance between my past and my future, to satisfy every curiosity of the little girl who never thought she'd have a chance to experience such privileges. As I grew, so did my understanding of the power of resilience and hard work.

I realized that the voids in life—physical or metaphorical—are opportunities for growth and transformation. As I toiled through the late hours, the rich scent of creamy shor chai and freshly baked kulchas wafted through my room, fueling my relentless exploration of every available opportunity. Just as I watched my padar navigate the treacherous Afghan roads with unwavering resolve, I learned to navigate the challenges in my own life with determination and aspiration.

The marred gaps that once filled me with fear are now the spaces where I thrive. I am no longer the anxious child clutching the backseat, but a young woman who has learned to embrace the unknown, having crossed continents and boundaries in pursuit of her dreams.

Over these eighteen years, the obstacles in my life have posed as both my greatest trials and most significant tutors. They've molded me into the eighteen-year-old I am today. From the rugged roads of Afghanistan to the bustling streets of the United States, I've traversed the hurdles in my journey and emerged more resilient and determined than ever. As I envision the future, it gleams with potential—a future where I strive—that no challenge is insurmountable.

Now, I anticipate overcoming gaps that appear on my journey.

Student Name: Lev Solomon  
 Grade: 11  
 School: Clements High School  
 Title: Millions of Critical Eyes  
 Category: Critical Essay  
 Key: Gold Key  
 Educator:

### Millions of Critical Eyes

I could say that I live in a world that is not ready for me. I could say that my generation will bring a change in society. I could even say that although the popular consensus regarding “my kind” is undereducated and immoral, people will get better as a whole. But what would that do? What is the point in waiting around for authorities to stand up for trans rights when majority of the issue is much closer to home? Members of the transgender community are dehumanized and ridiculed not only by poorly backed politicians and their followers, but also by themselves.

I am not a strong, powerful leader. I am not my generation’s MLK. I am a kid growing up in a dustbowl, getting swept by the wind as the ground escapes from under me. I am shouting to be heard past the tractors rushing west.

It is no secret that the government discourages humans’ right to be themselves. We do not have to be strapped at the waists with dictatorship to be oppressed. Congress proves repeatedly that transgender people like me are freaks of nature with every bill proposed to the House, every exile of trans representatives, and every symphony about how men and women have unalienable roles in society. The Williams Institute at UCLA displays that 1.6 million adults and teenagers in the US are transgender (Herman). The Trans Legislation Tracker shows that in this year alone, five hundred and eighty-six bills affecting forty-nine out of fifty states have been presented to silence trans voices and prevent us from living with the same freedom any cisgender person has (“2023 anti-trans bills...”). That is nearly 1.6 million US citizens whose lives are threatened by bigoted government officials whose only job is to do what is best for the nation. Discrimination is heavily present in the hands to which we give our lives, and for every second we do not push back, their palms come closer to caving in. Their hivemind manipulates us like we are puppets on strings, actors in a sick play that I am tired of performing. Transphobes eliminate the characters they have had enough with, whether they are silent fighters like the late Brianna Ghey and Rita Hester, or vocal advocates like Zooey Zephyr. Zephyr was a democratic representative in the House whose last speech, a powerful, confrontational word of warning to the opposition who supported anti-trans bills, got her removed from office (Beth). Does that sound familiar? In 1955, Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat to a white man and got arrested. In 1930, Mahatma Gandhi led thousands in the Salt March to fight British oppression and got arrested (Onion). In 1917, women protested for their constitutional right to vote and got arrested. Governments overstep, as they always have,



and it is easy for people to feel powerless given the flurry of punishment that pelts those who fight.

But the tribulation also comes from a much more painful place than the environment, the way a tumor roots into the brain or a parasite digs into the skin. The exposure of such a harmful idea, that cisgender is “normal,” gets drilled into many trans people’s brains from before they set foot in the public eye. A study done by researchers at the University of Naples and the University of Calabria explored the prevalence of internalized transphobia in the transgender nonconforming (TGNC) community in Italy. According to scholar A.I. Lev, “TGNC individuals might experience shame and self-hatred... when they become aware of living an incongruence between gender identity and gender assigned at birth.” Developing hateful feelings towards oneself is a common experience dealt with by transgender people, and one of the major causes is society’s deeply rooted cisnormativity. When all one hears consists of judgmental comments about their identity, the very idea of who they are, they cannot help but seek truth in those comments. I experienced this phenomenon myself when I realized I was not cisgender. There were two outwardly queerphobic boys in my ninth-grade Spanish class, cracking jokes about how being transgender is a choice and that it is not possible to have a complex identity. I heard it every day, and I began to resent myself for being the target of the joke. While they did not bully me directly, their words influenced my thoughts like a toxin in the air; I could not breathe for fear that I would get attacked verbally or physically just because I was trans. My existence was a fault in the world, and everyone knew it, including myself. Oftentimes the person who hurts a member of the trans community the most is themselves.

I do not mean to insinuate that since the problem occurs within the self, therapy is the answer. That would be putting a Band-Aid on a fatal wound. People need to stop the problem where it starts: the factors that cause a person to be so hateful in the first place. I implore government officials to end the transphobic bills and do whatever else they can to squeeze the hatred out of our community. Transphobia comes from ignorance, so I beg doctors and researchers to continue learning more about what it means to be transgender and sharing their findings with the world. Widespread hate does not have to be permanent. If we can work towards fixing a societal issue, there is no question as to whether we should.

I sincerely hope that as I grow up, I witness my surroundings morph into a place where my peers and I can live safely. I hope that when I medically transition, I will come across more support than criticism. I hope that looking for a job will not prove more difficult because I am trans. And I hope that when I start a family, they will love me unconditionally, and I will not become a name that must be whispered around the children.

But above all, I hope that when I grow up, I will love myself for all that I am. That is the goal, isn't it?

Student Name: Rosie Hong

Grade: 11

School: Clements High School

Title: Mountain of Golden Corn

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Glenys McMennamy

## Mountain of Golden Corn

My father's stories rest in a mountain of Golden Corn. He would tell me about the mountain's whereabouts, how it was hidden in the outskirts of China, and if I ever found it, I would have enough corn to feast on for the rest of my life. "Shou. Hands." he would often say with his fingers tracing the palm of my hands. "You see these calluses? They map the path to the mountain of Golden Corn." And as a child, I would trace these folds, draw what I envisioned as the mountain's miracles. So when it became my turn to set foot on the foreign soil of my homeland, I began to search for this treasure in the hopes of becoming rich.

### Shenzhen, China

The deal my uncle made with me was no different than committing a crime. Around us, the air was filled with thick smoke from my uncle's cigarettes. I sat in the passenger seat of his new BMW—the AC aggressively blew into my eyes and a fancy foam cushioned my neck. He swerved through the streets—darting through passengers and jamming the brakes with one hand on the wheel. His other hand was perched on the window frame, tapping the ash off his cigarette. "There, the arcade." He pointed at a building with his burnt stump, the smoke trailing his movements.

"You know gambling is worth your money when the place looks like a Chinese supermarket," he attempted to chuckle as he pulled over and parked, but his high-pitched hiccups turned into violent coughs.

We made our way into the building. A bright red sign with unfamiliar Chinese characters greeted us. The lights glared at us in subtle warning. My uncle headed to the front counter, fetched his wallet, and a stash of Yuan fell out. He handed the cashier a few bills in exchange for a handful of golden coins. "We have a deal," he glanced back. "Just don't tell your mama." He ushered me further into the building with a smile tugged on his face. I watched him approach the machine, mumbling Chinese to himself as the coins jingled in his palms. It felt like witnessing a crime.

My uncle was a master at gambling—when it came to stuffed animals. The toys were jumbled in a pile, beady-eyed, staring up at the mechanical claw. But in the bottom of the pile was a mini penguin plushie. I wanted it. “Uncle,” I poked his chubby stomach. “That one,” I pointed.

“Hao, hao,” he chuckle-coughed again. He fed the coins into the machine as it erupted to life. An automated voice came on the speaker. The buttons glowed bright red. A screen with a timer started ticking.

It only took a few tries for me to realize that my uncle was no master with the joystick. Every time the claw was positioned too far right or left from the penguin. When he took a water break, he cursed himself to give up before a middle-aged man walked over to the machine, inserted a couple of coins, and grabbed his prize. Perhaps my uncle refused to walk home empty handed, or maybe his pride was hurt from missing every shot. We walked to his car with a squeaky toy no bigger than my two palms that cost 600 yuan.

“The deal, remember? Don’t tell your mama. She’ll pester me again,” he coughed. I was scared that he would scold me for spending so much for a toy, but his light-hearted talk made it seem like nothing. I nodded and looked down at the penguin cuddled on my lap. It squeaked from the cheap plastic every time I poked its stomach—almost as if it was mocking my uncle’s squandering on a kid’s toy machine.

My uncle took me to a fancy all-you-can-eat buffet right after the hefty gambling. Looking at the mountains of food, I started to understand my uncle’s nonchalant visage to the gambling—all the money spent earlier was just his extra pocket change. Every kind of Chinese cuisine I could’ve dreamed of surrounded my dinner table. Grilled steaks so large they couldn’t fit my plate, tubs of Hot and Sour Soup, carts of dimsum bamboo steamers, and towers of pineapple and green-tea cakes. The waiter brought over a huge bowl of fruit—peeled and cut in a way that resembled stars. “Kuai dian chi. Eat quickly,” he flashed a smile, his golden-yellow teeth shining through.

Watching my uncle, I wondered whether he was one of the lucky men who found the treasures my father described. The man with all the riches in the world—was he the one who discovered the mountain of Golden Corn? Perhaps it left him with infinite boxes of cigarettes. Maybe it plated his teeth with jewels that made the words he spoke so crisp. It certainly gave him the endless stash of Yuan in his pocket.

As my uncle sat there, he was grinning at the sight of me stuffing down every possible dish in a room full of fine-diners. When I looked up at him from my plate, I saw his neat row of golden teeth. They glistened under the restaurant’s chandeliers.

Bengbu, China

Sitting in the back of a truck, my father and I breezed through the dirt roads of Bengbu. We were heading to my grandparents' corn field. In the middle of the countryside, there was no such thing as AC.

"Hen re. Too hot," I complained to my father, who was behind the wheel. He handed me a newspaper he had picked up in the convenience store earlier. "Use this as a fan," he grunted.

Dust trailed behind the truck's wheels. The cracked roads seemed untouched—no other cars were in sight. The air carried a pungent stench of moldy hay and chicken feces. The mud houses looked like they could collapse at any second. The leaves of the slender trees lining the roads wilted, begging for water. I saw a mother and her young daughter tilling the fields. The mother screamed something in Chinese with her high-pitched voice, and I jumped in my seat. Sweat drenched the little girl's bangs, but she didn't seem to notice.

After another ten minutes, we stopped at a place where the dirt roads were divided into small alleys. Beyond them were endless fields of cornstalks, swaying with the breeze.

"Guo lai," my father gestured me over with his heavy accent. He took my hand and led me deeper into the field.

In between the towering leaves were little pockets of room to navigate as if it was a trap, an unsolvable maze luring me in. I was drowning in corn stalks almost twice my height, the leaves scratching my cheek as I dug through the foliage.

"It's nostalgic going in here again," my father awkwardly chuckled. "It gets suffocating when you have to hand pick them all."

But when I looked at the corn stalks, I pictured tractors running over the dry husks, and machines separating the kernels from the cob.

"No. Shou," My father shook his head and opened his calloused hands. "The only tools you have are your hands and your back." He took one of the corn stalks and peeled the husk back to reveal the light yellow flesh of the cob.

"Bu shu," my father laughed, but he ripped the cob off the plant and held it to my face. "Young corn tastes the best when eaten raw."

I grabbed the cob and took a generous bite. The sugar oozed between the gaps of my teeth—a sweetness better than candy.

As we made our way out of the field, I hopped back into the truck and looked back to the walls of corn, the stalks covering every acre of land. I could trace my father's footsteps engraved in the cracked soil. The sweat beaded on his back, the labor of my ancestors, even the sounds of the mother screaming at her child to work the field washed over me. Was this the mountain of Golden Corn my father once promised me?

After we returned to my grandparents' house, my father came over with a tray of corn cobs. Their usual yellow hue was now a deep golden brown after drying. My father took one of the cobs and started pushing the kernels off with his knuckles.

"Corn seeds," he said. "For planting." He took a handful of kernels and dropped them in my palm. I cupped my hands and shook the seeds. A few slipped through the cracks of my fingers, and I watched them fall to the ground. By the time they hit the dirt floor, they had already turned into gold.

Student Name: shira babajanov  
 Grade: 11  
 School: I H Kempner High School  
 Title: My Identity: The Good; Bad; and Complicated  
 Category: Personal Essay & Memoir  
 Key: Gold Key  
 Educator: Susan henson

As a Jew living in Houston, the search for community and a sense of belonging is the most arduous task. When I was eleven, I witnessed firsthand how this would impact my life. This showed me how unprepared for how this task I was. Even through such an inclusively diverse school with people of all different races, nationalities, and religions; I searched for another Jewish person who went to my school that I could really relate to. I was unsuccessful. I came to learn that as diverse as my school may be, the people who surrounded me had never met a Jew. I didn't think my religion was out of the ordinary, having grown up in a Jewish community, but I was wrong.

Beginning in 6th grade history class, I wondered why Judaism was never talked about, as the other religions had 2 to 3 days focused on their fundamentals. Nevertheless, Judaic values shaped my identity as every religion does for a believer. I was overcome with pride in a sense, even through the significant backlash. Seeing looks in the halls, hearing the words "You're the first Jew I've ever met" along with explaining the basic foundations of Judaism had me questioning what kind of education was taught about my religion.

Flabbergasted, I found out the Israel-Palestine conflict taking place in the Middle East was not discussed. Though considered a prominent issue in my mind, my peers had no idea there was even a conflict going on. Breaking apart the social stigma and debunking Anti-Semitic rumors was how I decided to show my Jewish pride and make a lasting impact on those who surrounded me.

Antisemitism is one of the biggest aspects of my identity. Whether it be traveling to Washington D.C and addressing the rising antisemitism to senators, talking with peers about Judaism, or researching and writing papers following societal views toward Jewish people. One common aspect I constantly found throughout my research was the constant hate. I had always been taught that society didn't like Jews, but I chose to believe otherwise. In these past weeks, as I've seen prominent figures in my life submit in silence, I could not believe otherwise anymore. The hopes I had for the world to finally see the struggles of the Jewish nation were obliterated when this war transformed from violence to social media propaganda, and the lies that followed.

My research had concluded that: about 2% of the population of the world is Jewish. That is roughly 15 million people out of the 7.8 billion people on this earth. Keeping this number in mind, the FBI field of investigation states that: out of all the religious hate crimes in the world, 60% are towards Jewish people only in the U.S alone. Let that sink in for a moment. Over half of the hate crimes are centered toward a religion with less people

than the percentage of their population. That statistic is not even including the rest of the world. Due to the conflict's tensions right now, antisemitism has risen by 400% all around the world.

Places around the globe that Jewish people once found to be safe such as: New York, France, Washington, Berlin, even schools and college campuses are no longer safe. My parents are paranoid every time I leave the house to go to school every day. I've received comments from my peers regarding the war, jokes that I once tolerated about Jewish people have become serious topics.

I've always heard about kids who were scared to be Jewish in fear of retaliation, but I personally had never felt it. I was taught that being Jewish was who I was, and nothing anybody does will ever take that away from me. For my tenth birthday I was given my first Star of David, a symbol of Judaism, to wear around my neck, which I hadn't taken off since. That changed just this week. Living in fear, my Jewish friends removed their Stars of David or hid them in their shirts. Following this trend of alarm, my parents took away my own. They then took off our Mezuzahs (a scroll with Jewish scripture inside of it on every door post.) The symbolism of a mezuzah goes back to ancient times as my ancestors had to show their devotion to G-d. A mezuzah, while it does not prove your Judaism, does show a person's fulfillment to G-d, pride for the religion, and a sense of instilled bravery that shows through the scripture laying on your doorframe. It shows that no matter the surrounding conflicts you as a Jew decide to stand with G-d. You as a Jew choose to believe in G-d. You as a Jew show you are not afraid to stand up for what you believe in.

I've felt overwhelmed with worry, anger, and sadness as the war continues to cause destruction and terror in the Middle East. My home is being destroyed, my friends are sent out in the reserves to fight, and my family hides in bomb shelters. As lies about my people, my country, and the people who defend it circulate the media, the constant misconceptions lead to more hate attacks all around. My neck is naked, missing my star for the first time, my bracelets have the Jewish traces removed and replaced with a blue bead as if that is of similar significance, and my doors are bare where G-d's scripture used to sit. Internally I feel the six million who died in the Holocaust wince in pain every time another Jewish person takes off their stars hiding in fear, as they once had too. I now feel I have contributed to their pain. I've had to debate with myself as to how I'm not letting those +1200 innocent civilians die in vain by taking off my star for safety. How am I supposed to live my life not in fear as "Never Again" is turning into my reality? As Jewish people all around the world are being attacked, killed, and targeted I feel hopeless.

In this time of fear, I've had to figure out the actions that I can do to prevent the antisemitism that surrounds me. Refusing to submit to fear, the pride has turned into a sense of fulfillment and hope that I'm doing everything I can. I continue to advocate for my country, my people, and my future. As I've had to worry about my safety, I had to decide if I was going to continue to advocate, placing a big red target on my back. The feeling lessened, as I realized how ludicrous it was. I would never abandon my values, conforming to the ideals of others even through all the backlash. My beliefs are not

determined through silence and submission. Though I stand alone here, I stand together with Jews across the world who value the religion. Through it all, I find my belonging and embrace my values. Who am I? I am a Zionist, I am loud, and proud, and most of all I am Jewish.

As the conflict in the Middle East has always been dire, this past war has hit much closer to home. Since the morning of October 7th, I've had to continuously check on my friends and family. Hearing stories about what's happening from their perspective firsthand is surreal. However, as tensions in Israel are at its peak, conflicts in the U.S arise every day. Just last week a man was arrested for purchasing a firearm and claiming to want to "Kill all Jews." Although the antisemitism isn't as high here in Texas as it is in other parts of the world, I am directly affected by the causes of what happens here. I live in Jewish areas which are constantly getting bomb threats. Through all the negativity that surrounds me right now, I've had to come to terms with how I can process it all. As a teen living in America in a time of conflict, I do not have much of a voice. As I've been more cautious going out, more vigilant of my surroundings, and more careful about what I say I've come to the realization of what my life has truly turned into. People who once stood with strength and power, people who didn't let the world tell them what they could or could not believe in now sit in silence and fear. I might not know everything, but I do know that my family did not die in a genocide for people to still be afraid to show their Judaism. My family did not lose everything after the war, and have to rebuild their entire lives, for the younger generations to cower in fear. I choose to not submit but if I don't feel safe, should I stop? Questions like these reel through my mind unanswered and full of weight. Although I choose to remain prideful, I place a target around myself and my family. Nevertheless, I persevere, I grieve, I try to move on, and most of all I do not submit. Seventy- eight years ago, we said "Never again" but what is that saying without advocates to prove it? The time has come that the Jewish nation must come together show our strength and unity. I stand with the Jewish nation, and I stand with Israel now and forever.



Student Name: Isabella Fish  
Grade: 11  
School: I H Kempner High School  
Title: My Love; My Life; My Motivation  
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir  
Key: Gold Key  
Educator: Susan henson

### My Love, My Life, My Motivation

Knees buckling. Heart pounding. Adrenaline rushing. Feelings I felt when it was May of

2017- my first audition: 'Annie the Musical.' Standing in front of a hundred people who had no

idea who I was. Standing in front of a hundred people who I did not know. Standing in front of a

hundred people who are judging me. I sang a one-minute cut version of the iconic song

'Tomorrow.' Shakily my voice started to soar in the auditorium appearing louder than I ever

have sung before. When I finished my audition, an explosion of cheering ran through the

auditorium. I looked down at the directors, they had this look of utter awe, like they were

surprised a nine-year-old girl could produce that kind of sound. I thought to myself, "I did it," as

I walked back to my seat receiving compliments about my voice, I thought I would never hear. I

was proud of myself for what I accomplished that evening.

However, the next two weeks were torture: the waiting game of the cast list. Refreshing

the Facebook page on my mom's phone every second of every minute of every hour of everyday

until could not for my parents were going out of town that weekend. The weekend the list came

out. My grandma came over to watch me and my sister and instead of refreshing a page every

two seconds I would use my grandma's phone to text my mom if anything came out. Then the

last time I texted her it did. She informed me I did not get the role of Annie, instead I got July. I

was heartbroken. All my hard work was for nothing. This set a fire inside of me. A fire of anger,

frustration, and motivation. The motivation to become better, to accomplish and receive the role

I wanted- the role I deserve for the future.

That memory sparked a dream and aspiration for theatre in my life. There is nothing else

that brings out that joy, determination, sunshine, and greatness inside of me. It motivates me to

become the best I can be not only as an actor but as a human being in the world. It provides a

sense of hope for me in the world. Something I can look forward to in the future. This feeling

became even brighter when I started to attend Kempner High School, specifically Kempner

Theatre. The teachers, students, and community have created a second family for me. The

community thought so highly of me, and it put pressure on me that I enjoyed. It is like a

challenge that is never ending: a challenge that pushes me to become a strong, determined,

and motivated performer and person. They always have my back, always communicate, and

always push me to the best I can be. Whenever I need a scene partner or study partner they are

there.

Before I even joined the Kempner Theatre department, I decided to take their weeklong

camp they provide for students looking to join the department. I wanted to see what this award-

winning troupe was like- how they carried themselves, spoke, or even walked because I already

knew my love and passion for theatre, so of course I wanted to take that path into high school.

Before I walk in, I take breath- ready to be intimidated. But, as soon as I walk into the

classroom, I am greeted with smiles, compliments, and welcoming faces. I immediately was

comfortable and willing to succeed.

That week was splendid. Especially after covid was thawing out, I was excited to get

back into doing theatre. As the week ended, I was upset because I did not want this week to end.

At the end of our final day of camp we all started to say goodbye and hangout for one last time.

I ended up talking to the two directors of Kempner Theatre, giving my thanks. They start asking

me questions about my experience/background with theatre, and I answer willingly and eagerly.

Then they ask me, "Can you sing?" I respond, "Yes, I love singing!" They took that answer as

an opportunity to see my confidence because the next sentence they say is "Sing for us."  
My

mind immediately went back to that first audition. I start sweating, my knees start buckling, and

my breath starts shaking all over again. I answer, "I don't know." The students and directors

knew me personally at this point, so why am I so scared? Everyone started to cheer for me- I

had known these people for a week, but this time it suddenly felt harder. I chose to sing 'Part of

Your World' from 'The Little Mermaid.' I could not stand still as the music started to play, but

I pushed through and belted my 14-year-old heart out. Everyone raved about how they did not

expect that sound to come out of me. I was red with a mix of embarrassment, love, and appreciation not only for myself, but my new best friends.

Everyone is accepted, happy, and willing to work no matter the condition. As soon as I

joined it was a different feeling from any other theatre company/department I have been to. It

was a shocking switch to see people dedicated to their work, paying attention to everything, and

listening intently to every single note, even if it was not theirs. My first rehearsal there- I learned

lessons that a person may think is easy; however, it is a much more complex idea than an individual thinks. For example, at my age you can never be truly tired. Of course, you can be

exhausted if it has been a long day, week, or month but you can never be truly tired unless there

is not an ounce of any motivation in your body/mind. You can accomplish more than you think

when you put your mind to it. This burned the fire in my body even more. It was frustrating to

hear this quote because everyone thinks tired is a feeling, but it is really a mindset. This example

is a strong identification of a saying here at Kempner High: sunshine and greatness. If you have

sunshine and greatness for a dream or aspiration that you want to achieve it can motivate you to

keep pushing forward to reach it.

This burning fire inside of me grows stronger every day because my love for theatre

grows stronger every day. You learn so much from just experiencing it or living in it. It gives

you a break from the real world to have fun and live a fantasy no one else can because you work

hard to get to that point of fun and fantasy that no one else can understand because it is yourself

portraying these roles. Working hard to achieve a complex character but relating to them in

more ways than one- even if they are a villain or hero. Sitting in a theatre and watching the

opening of a Broadway show, pushes out a feeling in me that no one else can see except in those

moments. Receiving notes after the first run through of a show you are putting on, pushes out a

feeling in me that no one else can see except in those moments. Seeing your friends and family

greet you after your opening night pushes out a feeling in me that no one else can see except in

those moments. It is a feeling that I experience every day and night rehearsing, singing, and

dancing in my room to become a better actor so I can succeed in this tough industry That feeling

is complexity, ruthlessness, and love I have for the art of theatre, the art of creating theatre, and

the art of experiencing theatre. It is something that resembles the sense of pride I have as a

teenager that in my mind is sunshine and greatness.

Student Name: Tina Ton

Grade: 12

School: I H Kempner High School

Title: My Ong Ngoai

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Haley Grimes

My Ong Ngoai was the strong, resilient willow tree that held my family together. With nothing but his name, he planted his roots into the country's soil and sprouted a family embraced in love.

Before Grandpa's passing, I had never known grief; never known late nights full of regrets and tears. I'd known of death, that it would inevitably come, but I had never experienced its effects first-hand. Not until it was too late and my dear Ong Ngoai was already gone.

I remember the evening before his passing, I was upset with my parents. It was June, the peak of summer before my senior year. I wanted to be out with my friends. My parents told me to stay home, as they needed to visit Grandpa at the hospice and they couldn't deal with the hassle of making sure I didn't drown at the five foot community pool. All I could think about was how I was missing out, but less than two hours later, my sister and I received a snuffle-filled phone call from my dad informing us that Grandpa had passed.

In an instant, emotions washed over me like a tsunami— sorrow, misery, heartbreak. Leading up to his death, I thought that there was something wrong with me for feeling numb and indifferent to his condition. Since his health had been on a gradual decline, I believed I could've braced myself by turning off my emotions, but human emotions don't work like that.

During his three-day funeral ceremony, family from all over came to celebrate his life; in such sorrowful times, we found joy in sharing our distant memories and old videos that had been tucked away on dusty hard drives. In that final moment in the incinerator room, my eldest aunt and uncle put their hands together to press the cremation button. The machine whirled up, heat swelled the room, and all around us, the grief that we had all been trying to hold back poured out.

Despite his death, my grandpa's life feels more vibrant than ever. In coming together and sharing the memories everyone held of Grandpa, I was reminded what a lively man he was. Even in his final moments, he continued to be as silly and sassy as ever. In every conversation that he comes up, in every moment where the world seems a little more blissful, I think about him. I think about how I want to carry on the beauty that he had

brought into our lives. He was loved as a dedicated father and grandfather, who raised seven children and fourteen grandchildren in a foreign country and made sure they were all taught to be strong, compassionate people.

In the toughest moments of his death, there was no greater comfort than knowing my family was beside me. There was no fault in showing vulnerability and truly being myself around them. Before my grandpa's passing, I found myself mostly focusing on myself and my school life; now, I continuously make a strong effort to enjoy every moment that I get to spend with them.

For every heartache I feel in reminiscing about Ong Ngoai, I remember that life is fleeting and he would want me to live it without regrets. Even with him gone, I try to live out the morals he taught me. I have seen first-hand from his efforts that hard work pays off; in turn, I have pivoted my focus onto my own goals of persevering through the obstacles that life throws at me to make sure that I create a stable future for myself. Although this will be the first time that he won't be here for his grandchild's graduation, I will make sure to make him proud as I walk across that stage one last time. Now, it's my turn to sink my own roots into this soil and leave my mark on the world.



Student Name: Rosie Hong  
 Grade: 11  
 School: Clements High School  
 Title: nameless haibun  
 Category: Poetry  
 Key: Gold Key  
 Educator: Glenys McMennamy

nameless haibun

When can I say your name and have it mean only your name and not what you left behind?

—Ocean Vuong

in this dream, war unfolds with the movement of gong gong's lips. he sits cross-legged with yesterday's newspaper on his lap, baking his tattered palms by the fireplace. in this dream, we are nameless but whole. whole but leaving. leaving but not looking back. gong gong pulls out two boat tickets so old that if i look close enough, a film of mold yellows to gold. look at this. he presses his fingers over the creases. this currency is enough to feed us for months. he tucks one in my palms, cracking a toothless smile. i crinkle it and stuff it in my pocket. and remember, if they ask, say your name is—

\*

—stashed somewhere upstairs, my mother says, ushering me to a crate littered with photo albums and wooden frames. i pick one up and swipe off the film of dust. oh, that one. she points to the faces. me. your po po. your gong gong. you remember him? i peer into the man's expressionless face, his eyes and cheekbones smeared from the poor quality, mouth curled into a sliver of shadow. he was always out of the house, she says. rode the train back every few months to visit.

\*

in this dream, i knit my palms with gong gong's. stay close, he says. he tightens his grip. behind me, the girl who always made mud cakes in our neighborhood digs her knees into the cracked dirt. outside, there is not enough water to quench anything. the girl tilts her chin and opens her mouth, spooning fistfuls of air, unaware of the smoke gorging on her belly. i imagine this kind of hunger as the worst thing that can happen to the body—skin thinning until her ribs betray her chest. don't look back. he tightens his grip.

but gong gong, that girl, i mouth, eating the wind every time i look back. gong gong. i shake his arm. i think her name is—

\*

—gone? i swear i had kept some of them when we moved. my mother fumbles through the rest of the albums. i don't think he liked pictures. he never drank alcohol. was always

out of the house, always smoking, my mother says. she likes to ramble random facts about gong gong if she felt that there wasn't enough said. i last saw him at the harbor. took all the things he told me to take. this crate. two pineapple buns. he tucked two tickets in my pocket and told me he'd be back.

now, an ocean away, my mother still doesn't know where he went.

\*

under this bleeding sky, we are leaving but not looking back. i do not know how far we've gone, only counting gong gong's footsteps to track the distance. not far enough, gong gong says everytime i ask. i watch him wear his war-worn body like a prayer. i think of his white-knuckled fist clenching mine and know that no matter how tight i hold on, we will leave this country with our palms rusted. red because we'll never surrender to this shrapnel-strewn soil. red because i'll only remember the way gong gong parts his lips to the syllables of his name—raw and curdled in his mouth like a confession. my name. he tightens his grip. my name is—

\*

—forgotten. i've forgotten his birthday. my mother sits across from me on the sofa, uncovering a photo tucked beneath a pile of bills. your gong gong. i snap my head up. i think it was sometime last week, she sighs. the 21st. no 22nd. no 19th.

let me see. my mother nods, hands the photo over, then squeezes her fingers, relearning how to count the days in september. how we are both lost in the truth of him. me— learning retellings from my mother. my mother—reinventing all the things she thinks she knows of him. the photo is a tombstone carved with characters of a language i cannot understand. read this, she leans over me, tracing the characters. i crinkle the photo. can you read this? your gong gong, she nudges. his name is—

—here. in this dream, he  
tucks his ticket in my palms.  
i tighten my grip.

Student Name: Rosie Hong

Grade: 11

School: Clements High School

Title: on unlearning: an abecedarian

Category: Poetry

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Glenys McMennamy

on unlearning: an abecedarian

& while writing this, mā,  
i am still learning how your absence  
bites my body bare under  
yellowed street lamps,  
carves tragedy or myth or memory  
out of a girl's womb. mā, is this the  
distance between girl & womanhood? tonight, against the cold-  
faced concrete, i sketch the city skyline, trace  
every path we took down the alleys. scenes so foreign  
i find sinew thinning by your tomb until  
figments of mā mold into tā,  
& this body i  
grieve is another unrecognized.  
tonight, i slip into the kitchen &  
hover over the cutting board, squeeze the quivering knife  
while your ghost watches, warbling  
intonations of a motherless daughter.  
in every dream, i trace my  
jaw against the dust-  
speckled mirror because it only  
knows how to bare teeth.  
a family is whole, i  
learn, when a mother's & daughter's lips  
part to the same syllables when hungered,  
mouths molding to the same language. how can i  
inherit your tongue to speak my  
name? even your casket mouths  
better mandarin, snapping its jaw  
open, remembering all the  
prayers it consumes. & this is how i  
play russian

roulette with my body,  
questioning whether standing  
too close to the edge of your grave helps me  
remember. mā, is there a way to  
relive girlhood? how can i  
stroll through streets without my  
tight fists stuffed inside pockets, nails  
teething against calluses? when you are buried, i nestle my body  
in the crabgrass overgrown to your casket's shape, try to  
unlearn this bloodline without reinventing  
violence. with my knees bloody-bruised, un-  
veil a new creation. call it anything, mā,  
until this hurt unfurls to  
wallflowers, weaving along the  
backyard trellis, gazing upon  
xīng xīng until yesterday's sorrow crumples into  
train tickets you bought last  
year for my birthday. mā, i am going  
somewhere far soon. when can i mutter  
zài jiàn without a tight-lipped prayer?

Student Name: Irene John

Grade: 11

School: Elkins High School

Title: Oxymoron

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Key: Gold Key

Educator:

## Oxymoron

(in the point of view of an oldest daughter, who is a dear friend)

I have lived my life as the eternal oxymoron, a continuous contradictory statement. The reason I say this is because I am my family's pride and joy, as well as their problem child. I am the one my parents brag about to their friends, the girl with the good grades and extracurriculars, polite, nice in public, first place in religion school for nine years.

But I am also the problem child, the perpetual black sheep of my household. I am constantly too loud, too excited, too arrogant, too proud. My parents love to criticize me, hold my flaws to a standard of their own. Every test grade too low, each award that's not high, the fact that my body is not slim and slender; it is all nitpicked on and pointed out until I am in tears.

In the end, I have grown to realize that I am never enough for them. Never smart enough, never prayerful enough, never quiet or demure or everything they want me to be. The knives of their words have cut into me, drawing blood, leaving scars that do not paint a picture of resilience; instead, it is grotesque and ugly, slashes upon slashes left by years of pain. Sometimes, I stare at myself in the mirror, looking at the bruises of my childhood that decorate my arms; now, they have faded into too-dark patches on my skin; I call them my sunspots, but I know, deep down, with a grave sincerity that leaves me breathless, that I am only romanticizing the torture they have handed to me.

I think the most hurtful part about all of this, however, is that the very people who rage over my faults are not perfect either. My father has a lightning temper and gluttonous pride; my mother battles with her own insecurities, placing everyone in her life on her very own measuring scale. As I grow older, I understand that they are aware of their problems, but they use me, the ever-present elder daughter, to be their scapegoat. I listen to the same endless litany, not one that belongs in churches, but one of relentless misery; the same repeat of Dad is mad because of you or I only act like this since you are the way you are.

There are days I lie awake at night and think, what if it is my fault? What if I am the one in the wrong? That was my philosophy during my childhood years, a mantra I lived by; you're the problem. You're not good enough. You need to work harder. I brought home achievements, woke up when the sun rose at eleven years old, ran harder in my physical education class, so my dad wouldn't call me fat; worked to bring up my scores in my science course, so my mom wouldn't look at me with disappointment. I tried to be better, but it would simply make things harder, because nothing I did would ever measure up. They would always want more, and to get that, they pushed me harder and longer until I fell down.

But they would never pick me up, or extend a hand to help me; instead, they would curse me under their breath, remarking about how all the other kids, the brighter kids, the greater kids, would step over me and pass me by. I was the child forced to hold the heavy yoke, one of hopes, dreams, aspirations; and when it got too much, when my bones broke underneath its weight, I was the one to blame. And to be appreciated again, to feel wanted, to feel loved by the very ones who created me, I'd pick the burden right back up, hoist it over my shoulders and carry on, stumbling over their lashings, knees scraped, fingers broken. I would look at my younger sister, who wouldn't work half as hard as I did, who slept on her bed peacefully, never woken up by the demons of her own mind; I would cry salty tears and swallow the bitterness in my throat, take care of her when my parents needed me to; defend her in front of them to ensure she never had a life similar to how I did. While my body was beaten and broken down, hers is still intact and growing; where I have sunspots, she has no blemishes. She is free to live life with reckless abandon, throw her cares to the wind; and I am stuck in the confinements of my family's hope, a prison I try so desperately to get out of.

But I can never escape, because my mother and father have chipped away at my soul, creating a terrible creature so desperate for their approval, so willing to be bent. Even when I try to break away, disappointment chases after me; when they demonize me, praying to the God above about me, about my anger and my personality and my ruthless ways, I find myself running back; throwing myself into more and more until I cannot breathe. And even when I succeed in my rebellions, I am punished severely, ears ringing and shoulder halfway dislocated, tears streaming down my face, voice hoarse from screaming, broken skeleton, shattered soul. The way I have been raised has doomed me forever, to a lifetime of trying to solve myself, my jigsaw puzzle, looking everywhere for the pieces; only to realize my parents have scattered them away. Fears I have developed, anxieties I maintain, routines I follow- they all seem so simple, so fickle, so irrational, but I cannot be free from them.

It has progressed to a point where I worry about my future, that I can never be loved or desired, the idea that my life will always be one of doubting myself, afraid that I will turn into the very people who have shaped me into who I am. My nightmares are filled with

crying children who look a lot like me; not a spitting image but a reflection of my face, little girls who are sobbing for no particular reason. When I try to touch them, figments of my imagination, they shrink away, terror in their eyes; and that is when I realize who they are- my crying children, my little girl, a mirror of my soul, wearing the same terror I live with today. That reality scares me to death, a world I do not want to live in; because while I do know, inherently, what not to do when raising a child, I am terrified I will exhibit the darkest parts of me, one that has been passed down for generations, the same persecution that surrounded my mother and father growing up, what inevitably led them to become the way they are, cruel and deceiving, manipulative and forceful.

I do not want to repeat history; I want to burn those pages, toss the precedents of my childhood into the fire, rip apart my trauma and mold it into something beautiful. But I am not strong enough, and maybe that was always how it was meant to be; codified into my blood, something inescapable, no matter how much I try to fight it. Everything I have inherited, I push down; my mom's obsession, my dad's wrath, my vexations. I try to be happy, sunlight and rain, in order to forget my worst parts, to hide my scars.

The voices in my head rebuke me; my heart is confused and does not know where to go; nevertheless, my head knows one thing- I was born an oxymoron, but I refuse to die as one.

Student Name: Emma Tao

Grade: 11

School: Clements High School

Title: rebirth demands death

Category: Poetry

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Glenys McMennamy

dear mother, i am bitterly trying to make sense of it all-  
 how at ten years old, i carried the weight of your sky,  
 the world perched on my juvenile shoulders.  
 i am sixteen now, too old to call myself a child, and still,  
 too young to understand how still,  
 your autoimmune disease pervades you, incurable,  
 and i am not exempt from the mortality it begets.  
 is this my legacy, that i remain perched under the weight of our sky,  
 waiting for some impossible relief that will not come?

mother dear, i am tired of waiting.  
 and i have long since stopped believing in your god,  
 your god that was once ours, that was once mine,  
 but i find myself praying to him once again:  
 i kneel as you do, closing my eyes, hoping- hope, i've found,  
 is merely another more socially acceptable form of desperation.  
 indeed, desperation breeds an excellent and fervent sort of devotion.  
 perhaps that is why i find myself drawn to you-  
 you whose sickness is a death that will not stop dying.

mom, i am tired of mourning you- time and time again  
 you birthed me once but i must witness your futile attempts at freedom  
 as your body births itself- over and over again,  
 and there is no funeral to attend, no requiem that i may sing for you  
 and i demand retribution.  
 must it not hurt to resurrect yourself with each breath,  
 knowing the end- or rather, what is not the end?  
 what i am trying to say, is that it hurts me,  
 every time i recognize the heaving that i have learned to  
 hear as a prayer- for what is a cry, but a command?  
 in those moments, i answered, playing god,  
 because who else was listening?  
 our roles upheaved in a cruel reversal, you dependent,



and i your protector, as i held your shaking body that fought against itself-

mother, i am sorry i could not take your pain from you but  
i shook too, as i tried to wrap my head around the fact that  
the body that gave way to mine was the same as  
the body fighting against itself-  
teach me to die so i may live again, this time,  
free from the sickness i have half inherited from you.  
i am trying to find the beginning of the end.  
do not tell me to write of sunshine and brighter days.  
for me, who lives perpetuated in the shadows- in the bygones-  
in the places where god has long forgotten about-  
what more is there?

my bitterness has long been surrendered, but  
i am still trying to make sense of it all, just as you are-  
and sometimes i wonder whose pain i am writing about-  
me or yours. but perhaps it- perhaps we are one and  
the same, both waiting for some impossible relief that will not come.

Student Name: Tammy Nguyen-Thach  
Grade: 12  
School: I H Kempner High School  
Title: Rhinoceros: Hanging by a Thread  
Category: Critical Essay  
Key: Gold Key  
Educator: Susan henson

Monday morning in New York City is the worst day of the week. Sitting at my local coffee shop with a steaming cup in my hands, I watch the hustle and bustle of commuters rushing to work from all directions. It's true when they say that this is the city that never sleeps. At only 5:45 a.m., I watch the morning chaos: individuals running into each other, spilling their coffees across the sidewalk, and wishing that the weekend lasted longer.

As I stepped into the headquarters of Time Magazine, chaos followed. Telephones were ringing in every direction, and heels were clicking across the tiled floor. Even the coffee machine had enough of its job, exploding the liquid substance across the walls and releasing the aroma for all to smell.

I sat down in my cubicle just as Chief Editor Susan Henson arrived at my desk. A grin is plastered on her face, a distinct contrast from my mopey, tired expression. What can she possibly want at the brink of dawn? My question was answered when she revealed my new assignment. I am to produce an article about the rhinoceros, one that our readers have not read. And if done well, I would have the potential to receive a promotion. As Mrs. Henson left my desk, I closed my eyes, already wanting to leave work for the day. Surely, it was way too early for this!

The assignment itself seemed rather simple. The challenge instead lies in the fact that Mrs. Henson requested the article by 7:00 a.m. on Thursday. This woman is crazy! Concern plagued my mind, and annoyance bubbled inside me. But not wanting to turn in yet another late assignment, I opened my laptop, ready to start working.

I began to research the rhinoceros, scouring the internet for more information. After coming across the newly released documentary, *The Last Animals*, I began watching the film. The title had to be an exaggeration... right? However, I was wrong. Unbeknownst to many, including myself, Africa is currently suffering from an epidemic of poachers. And as rhinos are continuously hunted, their population is continuously dwindling to the point that they are estimated to soon die out.

After viewing the documentary, I wanted to further my research and decided to look for photographs of the rhinoceros. I was shocked to see that the first ones to appear on

Google Images showcased the beauty of these animals rather than the inhumanity and cruelty they face. These photos looked like they jumped out of a National Geographic magazine, capturing rhinos trotting in their natural habitat – vast savanna grasslands that rhinos spend their days basking on. But as I continued to dive deeper, I was met with pictures that further altered my perspective of humanity.

What I saw was anything but happiness. My screen was covered with images of rhinos whose legs and arms were bound by ties, unable to escape the human vultures. One, in particular, caught my attention. A news article cover reported an incident in Paris, France, in which a 4-year-old rhinoceros named Vince was found dead after poachers broke into a zoo. Three bullets shattered his skull, leaving blood gushing from the gaping holes left behind. The crime scene was even more heartbreaking. The gruesome sight showcased flakes of keratin sprinkled across Vince's body as the chainsaw violently severed his horn. In fact, one rhinoceros suffers this same fate every day. Additionally, 1,000 rhinos were killed each year between 2013 and 2017, with 2014 being the deadliest year with 3,000 deaths. With these disturbing statistics, I began to question how some allow their greed to conquer their humanity, doing whatever it takes to benefit themselves, even if it is to the detriment of others.

As I continued to scroll, my faith in mankind continuously diminished. After the rhino horns are smuggled across the borders, they are converted into trendy accessorizing pieces – accent bowls, necklaces, bracelets, earrings, and more – to be sold to the highest bidders across the dark web.

An image captured my attention, drawing me into a home that was covered entirely by rhino horns and items crafted from them. Across the floor lay thousands of various-sized bowls with intricate jade carvings, a highly rare commodity on the black market. But it didn't stop there... sharp horns, along with millions of glistening jewelry pieces, were displaced on acres of shelves holding thousands of pounds of goods. The owner of the home, with tears staining his pale face, is continuously spewing out words of apology in hopes that the policeman will let him go. These individuals have made a living profiting off of this illegal activity, neglecting how they are harming others to benefit themselves. It was then that I realized that this seemingly easy assignment was not so easy after all. Oh God, please help me!

In the midst of rush hour, I walked out of the office and scanned my card into the subway station. Perplexed by the hidden horrors, I decided that I would uncover the tragedies of animal abuse and provide justice for rhinos. Getting out a small notepad, I jotted down my ideas while I waited for my train to come. The possibility of the promotion left my mind, only to be replaced with the hope that by writing this article, rhino treatment would change.

There is no doubt that rhinoceroses are currently facing extinction due to human activity. However, the recent poaching crisis is not the only time in which these animals have been on the brink of extinction. Beginning in the 19th century, hunting became such a popular sport that, by 1895, only 100 southern white rhinos remained. And between 1950 and 1990, 95 percent of the black rhino population was decimated. But with the help of 'Operation Rhino' in the Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park and other initiatives, rhino populations have been preserved. Yet despite efforts made, rhinoceroses continue to be hunted.

It is, however, hard to believe that one of the largest land animals is being poached. I mean, the rhinos stand at a whopping average of six feet high and ten feet long, weighing over four tons. They are remarkably agile, with the ability to run at a speed of 45 kilometers per hour. Part of the Mammalia class, rhinos are hairless and have one or two horns on the surface of their snout. Similar to elephants, they're able to communicate through infrasonic frequencies below the human range and possess acute senses of hearing and smell.

Moreover, rhinos are referred to as pachyderms, deriving from the Greek terms pachys (thick) and derma (skin) to allude to their collagen fiber folds. They belong to the Rhinocerotidae family, consisting of five species of rhinoceroses: Sumatran, Javan, Indian, white, and black rhinoceroses. The first three are native to South and Southeast Asia, while the following two are native to Africa. Though rhinos can move fairly quickly despite their short, stubby legs, they prefer to graze in densely vegetated areas within the Eastern Hemisphere. Interestingly enough, rhinoceroses are great swimmers despite their itchy-bitsy legs and are one of the largest living land perissodactyls, famous for being odd-toed ungulates.

Fun fact, rhinos are essentially chubby unicorns. I mean, they both have long, sought-after horns and are known for their power and nobility. It's truly shocking how many can't make this resemblance (I'm kidding, of course)! Surprisingly, male rhinos are nicknamed bulls, and female rhinos are known as cows, though rhinoceroses are not related to cattle. In fact, they are cousins of the horse. Both of these animals derive from the same order, Perissodactyla, and are hoofed ungulate mammals, similar to deer, giraffes, camels, pigs, and tapirs. Furthermore, rhinos and horses are herbivores that originated in India. But through continental drift and animal migration, horses now reside primarily in North America, rhinos in Africa, and both in Asia. Not to mention, both of these animals have been domesticated for human purposes, a fact that raises many ethical concerns.

With that being said, an indisputable issue arises: should anthropocentrism be pursued? Should humans exploit others to benefit themselves? Should rhinoceros hunting be legalized in rhino-endemic countries such as South Africa?

Many contend that rhinoceros hunting should be illegal as its detrimental effects far outweigh the potential benefits. For instance, some advocates believe that legalizing this activity disturbs the natural order of the world by interfering with the process of natural selection and introducing artificial selective pressure. In a peer-reviewed article, researchers note that similar patterns have occurred in other animals, like tuskless elephants and smaller-horned goats. They fear that if the favorable trait of large and long horns is not passed down to future generations, rhinos are likely to die out within two centuries. The selective hunting of larger horns, because of their larger value, will inevitably change the genetic makeup of the rhino population, disrupting the mechanism of evolution and evidently causing the rhino's demise.

Similarly, Oscar Wilson, a researcher at the University of Cambridge, believes that the rhinoceros horns' shrinking in size will have inevitable consequences. He concludes that smaller horns will not only interfere with their ability to mate and defend their territory but that an increase in poaching will be necessary to make up for the loss in volume and value that the large rhino horns once provided.

However, though rhino hunting is a lucrative business that generates millions in profit, there is a greater cost to doing so: rhinoceros extinction. Shockingly, there are currently only about 27,000 rhinos left in the world, compared to 500,000 at the start of the 20th century. That's 463,000 rhinos in twenty-three years! Statistics like these only heighten the debate over the ethical issues of harming an animal to benefit one's interests. This is because moral virtues and principles have led many to believe that killing is inherently wrong, basing the foundation of their argument on the very fact that it is unjustifiable to cause others suffering. These advocates contend that rhinos have long been subjected to cruel, sadistic treatment by mankind, a process that must be halted.

Subsequently, proponents of making rhino hunting illegal note the detrimental effects humans have on the rhinos' lives, believing that they should be spared – that humans should not contribute to yet another animal becoming extinct. Will rhinos ever live freely without human intervention? Will the inhumanity against them ever end? Or will they only cease to exist in history books and historic documentaries?

Granted, at first glance, proponents of making rhino hunting legal make some valid points. The first reason is its potential benefits within the medical industry. For instance, rhinoceros horns have been used in traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) after being ground into a fine powder and dissolved in boiling water. In a peer-reviewed research study, scientists concluded that 80% of people who take TCM are aware of the use of rhino horn as a medicinal ingredient. And within this 80%, 21.5% of respondents have consumed TCM within the past year, though they are aware of the effects it has on the rhinoceros species. Funny enough, many believe that the horns can be used to treat a variety of illnesses, like cancer and typhoid, along with curing hallucinations and

preventing strokes, yet there is no clear or direct evidence that they have medicinal properties. So as many believe this factoid to be true and are ignorant of the pain it causes to rhinos, there is an increasing demand for horns to be poached and sold to Asian countries.

Furthermore, there is a greater advantage to making rhinoceros hunting legal for this animal: its benefits to conservation efforts. For example, most African rhinos live in enclosed areas that, when overpopulated, lead to the decline of their populations. A prominent factor in this is the aggressive, dominant tendency of old male rhinos to fight over territory, oftentimes killing one another along with females and babies in the process. These supporters feel that these rhinos are not advantageous since they contribute to the extinction of other members of their species, are unable to help with reproduction, and have a negative influence on the food supply.

In addition, hunting rhinos has a socio-economic benefit as well. As older male rhinos are killed to control the population, their horns are sold to raise money for conservation efforts. These individuals assert that if African countries like Namibia are able to see an increase in rhinos after legalizing hunting, similar approaches can be taken in South Africa. In a research journal, experts examined the fact that the black rhino population was able to double through persistent conservation efforts after dropping by a staggering 98 percent between 1960 and 1995. Other researchers, however, argue that conservation efforts actually push rhinos closer to extinction rather than helping to preserve their lives, as hunters become greedy and overkill these animals for their own gain. The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) devastatingly noted that the rhino population has decreased by nearly four percent since 2017, putting the total rhino population at around 27,000. So although proponents of legalizing rhinoceros hunting make seemingly good arguments, the premise of their claims is not based on concrete, provable facts. Their reasoning is therefore undermined, making their argument weaker than that of those who support making this practice illegal.

After considering all sides – those who favor and oppose rhino hunting – it can be concluded that South Africa should lead other nations in the global endeavor to outlaw this practice. Regulations must be implemented in order to preserve the rhinoceroses, as mankind oftentimes inflicts cruelty on the rhino population, with little regard for how they are causing them to suffer. Consequently, if future rhino generations are to persist, inhumanity against rhinos must be terminated. Thus, South Africa and other countries should unite to ban rhino hunting altogether. This is the only viable approach to putting an end to this epidemic.

It is human actions that render the rhino's ability to return to the wild, and it must be human actions that prevent the rhino's extinction.

But ultimately, the ethical debate over rhinoceros hunting hinges on basic principles: is pursuing anthropocentrism morally justifiable? Do people have the right to use their power to inflict pain on others? Where do the values of humanity lie? Is it the egocentric belief to benefit oneself at all costs? Or is it to aid those in need, protecting the well-being and livelihoods of entire species?

The answer is simple. Humans should protect the rhino species – the real-life unicorns – at all costs.

Student Name: Remi Moreno

Grade: 11

School: I H Kempner High School

Title: Start of A Never-Ending Cycle

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Susan henson

## Start of A Never-Ending Cycle

### Memories

I was twelve when COVID put our world in a pandemic, changing the lives of everyone. My entire world was flipped upside down, scarring me for what feels like an eternity. COVID began my never-ending cycle of seasonal depression: it wounded me, stitched me up, ripped open the stitches, and continued to do it over, and over again, each season, deepening the wound more, and more. A repetitive cycle of mood swings, tears, and complete isolation from others. No matter what I do – journal my feelings, open up to trusted ones, or find anything to distract me – my mental health still continues to haunt me each, and every holiday season. Every Thanksgiving dinner, or Christmas morning, my mental health keeps me locked and chained away, forcing me to recall every negative aspect in my life. The little voice in my head whispering to me and reminding me that it'll never get better. Being isolated during COVID, helped me open my eyes in several ways; as well

as, look the other way when something seems to hard – a bad habit of mine. It taught me how to put "X's" on people's faces, completely blocking them out, and only allowing a few chosen ones in. Now, those "X's" I put up, they're finally coming down, falling off one-by-one; it's still a process, but I'm making it work. Even though, it's getting better, deep down I know my seasonal depression will come, maybe not as bad, but it'll still be there. COVID permanently changed me, and no matter how much I try to make the scar fade, the scar will always be there – almost gone, but never completely.

### Tensions

Who am I? I'm the happiest-depressed girl. One second, I am smiling, picture-perfect; the next I am frowning, dark and gloomy. How does that work? How can I be so broken but so put together at the same time? It confuses me every day. I come from a loving, and beautiful family and I have the best friends I could've ever asked for. What do I have to be depressed about? I have no reason at all; however, I can't seem to escape it. Depression has attached itself to me, it gets easier at times, but it never goes away. It haunts me and follows me around wherever I go. But at the same time... I am so, so happy? Every day is full of endless smiles, and countless laughs – creating the happiest memories – then looking back at them whenever I grow old. Life has been so good to me; at the same time, horrible and mistreating. It's like hot and cold. Heaven and Hell. Sunny and rainy. Light and dark. Although, if I had a choice, I would choose to just be only happy



without hesitation because maybe life would be easier like that. Maybe I would feel better about myself. Maybe people would understand me more. At the end of the day, I can write as much maybes as I want, but I'll never truly know until the day I get released from the death-grip depression holds on me. So, for now, I will just have to make the best of it and continue to be the happiest-depressed girl you'll ever know.

#### Greatest Factor

Society has probably played the biggest role in figuring out who I am. I've always been so self-cautious; never wanting to do the wrong things – as in what society claims to be the wrong things. I go on social media and see all these beautiful people with this perfect life, and society idolizes them as, "The World's Top 10 Most Perfect People to Live!" For hours at a time, I would scroll, and scroll, searching for every bit of advice of how I could be just like them. How could I be the most beautiful person to live? How could I have the "most slim, yet juiciest body?" How could I achieve the most perfect life? Endless YouTube videos of: "DIY Nose Job," "30-Minute Slim-waist Workout Routine," "Best Skincare Routine," "What to Wear to Spice Up Your Wardrobe," "How to Basically Kill Yourself Trying to Be Perfect." That's not a real video I watched, but it's as if it was with every video I binged. I didn't eat for three days. Three whole days I starved myself because I don't have Kendall Jenner's model-body. I tried so hard to be this perfect person, that I didn't realize I was literally killing myself in the process. It wasn't until I was lying in bed, too weak and too depressed to move, that I realized what I was doing was stupid. Nobody is perfect at all, there is no one who lives a perfect life. I was seeking to be this person who in reality, doesn't even exist, and that's what changed me. I finally stopped caring what society wants because the person who society wants you to be and who they claim as "perfect," isn't real. There's not a single person on this Earth who is society's ideal person. No one is just born into this world with their whole life planned out by a checklist; there's not a rulebook on how to live your life. So, I finally started living mine – the way I want to live it. Sometimes I do get self-cautious again, but it isn't to the point where I'm willing to change my whole life to be "perfect."

Student Name: Mithilya Raj

Grade: 12

School: Dulles High School

Title: Sugar Coated

Category: Poetry

Key: Gold Key

Educator:

In the innocence of my childhood, I believed I was a gift,  
Bought from a baby store, wrapped in cellophane, adorned with a big red bow.  
A beautiful, no-hassle, pre-packaged delight.

I reveled in the sugar-coated truths spun by my grandparents,  
Each one a sweet morsel, a delightful fragment of my upbringing.

At the tender age of three, my grandmother would gently warn,  
"Leave not your food unfinished, lest the lake ducks come to devour you at dawn!"  
Her words echoed in my mind, and not a morsel was ever left behind.

When I turned five, my grandfather spun a tale,  
Of a watermelon seed swallowed, and a watermelon in my belly unveiled.  
His words painted vivid pictures, and I swallowed no seeds thereafter.

At seven, my grandmother would savor chocolates with a grimace,  
Declaring them bitter, likening them to medicine,  
Her words were my gospel, and my sugar consumption saw a decline.

When they bid this world adieu, their tales lived on,  
Kindling a warm glow within me, a beacon in the dawn.  
Each little untruth was a sculptor's chisel, shaping me into a better person.

So numerous were these tales, that to call them 'lies' seems unjust,  
For they were, in essence, little white truths, coated in sugar.

Their legacy lives on in me, a testament to their love,  
A reminder that sometimes, the truth needs a little imaginative shove.

Student Name: Bilal Khan

Grade: 11

School: Clements High School

Title: Tears OfThe Olive Grove

Category: Poetry

Key: Gold Key

Educator:

In the heart of Palestine, beneath a sky so stark,  
Violence erupts, leaving a brutal, indelible mark.  
Streets once filled with life, now echo with despair,  
Lies the weight of the innocents, when conflict is left bare.

Homes shattered, dreams torn apart in ruthless spree,  
Lives of the young and old taken so mercilessly.  
The air, thick with grief, tells tales of sorrow and loss,  
A community bearing the unbearable, insufferable cross.

In the rubble of what was, memories linger, so profound,  
Of laughter and love, now silenced, never to resound.  
Each life lost, a story untold, a future unfulfilled,  
Leaving behind a void, so painful, never to be healed.

Amidst this chaos, the world watches, heartbroken, still,  
Hoping for peace in lands where blood unjustly spills.  
In the heart of Palestine, where tears endlessly cost,  
We mourn for the lives in this tragic massacre, lost.

Student Name: Khushi Patel

Grade: 10

School: Clements High School

Title: The Global Impact of Period Poverty

Category: Critical Essay

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Stephanie Yang

Tisanai Shaushi, a 15-year-old Maasai girl from Tanzania, endures an acute monthly challenge that few face in developed countries. For Tisanai, getting her period is synonymous with missing out on important parts of life. She dreams of being an engineer but has to miss several days of school each month due to unbearable pain and the absence of adequate medication. Unable to access sanitary pads, Tisanai is forced to use unhygienic cloth substitutes and live in constant paranoia of bleeding through her skirt. Access to period products is a luxury for girls like her. All over the world, millions of girls experience the same plight and are unable to access basic menstrual products. The inability to access these crucial resources, referred to as 'period poverty', can have a myriad of detrimental effects on the way that girls and women navigate through facets of life.

Period poverty is defined by the Journal of Global Health Reports (JGHR) as a lack of access to menstrual products, hygiene facilities, waste management, and period related education. Over 500 million menstruators experience period poverty annually (JGHR 22). Period poverty is fueled by several factors. Poor healthcare systems and the uneven distribution of medical infrastructure throughout a country can cause a shortage in the supply of menstrual products available to those who direly need them. Even when products are available, high costs may hinder an individual's ability to access them. Period poverty disproportionately impacts menstruators who are a part of marginalized communities or live in lesser developed countries. Women facing period poverty are often forced to sacrifice crucial period products in order to do something as "common" as putting food on the table.

When menstruators are forced to sacrifice period products in exchange for basic necessities like food and water, it can take a massive toll on their physical wellbeing. For those who lack access to sanitary period products, they are forced to resort to cloth napkins, socks, toilet paper, and even newspapers to serve as reusable substitutes for pads and tampons. Makeshift pads can have negative cascading health effects. They are detrimental towards a menstruator's sexual and reproductive health and can cause ailments such as urinary tract infections and hepatitis B. When untreated, this can drastically increase the chances for a woman to develop infertility and other reproductive complications later in life. Access to proper sanitary pads can greatly reduce the aforementioned risks and decrease the chances of preventable ailments. Studies have found that the use of sanitary pads proved effective in drastically reducing the risk of

bacterial vaginosis and sexually transmitted diseases (Benshaul Tolonen et al. 2019; Phillips-Howard et al. 2016). Menstrual hygiene is not only affected by the products someone has access to while on their period, but also the quality and availability of hygiene facilities. The United Nations reports that over 1.25 billion women do not have access to a safe, private toilet. The direct implications of this equate to menstruators being unable to access sanitary locations at which they can change pads/tampons and thus, are forced to do so in areas where infectious and bacterial contraction is likely.

Period poverty has detrimental impacts on how an individual is able to navigate through life, particularly the social sphere. For young girls, a lack of access to period products and pain medication often means that their education is at stake. UNICEF reports that more than half of the schools in developing regions lack adequate hygiene services. This makes it difficult for girls who are menstruating to properly manage their period at school, which in turn, forces them to stay home and miss out on valuable education. For Tisanai, her dream of being an engineer can start to feel more like a false hope if her period continues to hinder her access to education. Tisanai, whose school does not have access to toilets with running water says, "I feel ashamed... [I] keep on wondering how it will be in class." Girls may feel embarrassed to go to school if they fear that they will bleed through their clothes. The Tanzania Water and Sanitation Network reports that periods keep almost 16% of girls out of school and UNESCO reports that 1 in 10 girls in sub-saharan Africa miss school during their period. The long-term impact of absenteeism is near deadly. Girls who frequently miss out on their education are forced to drop out of school since they start to fall behind. In Kenya, 70 percent of menstruating girls reported that missing school due to their period had a negative impact on their grades, and more than half reported that they had started to fall behind (Mucherah and Thomas 2017). In developing countries, it is common to see the gender ratio in schools start to skew towards higher attendance rates for male students as both groups approach puberty. This is in part due to the onset of menstruation and the lack of proper resources to support menstruating students. When a girl drops out of school, her opportunities become severely limited. Without a strong educational foundation, she is restricted from pursuing a career and may be forced into early marriage as a means to support herself. Teen pregnancies are a likely consequence of forced marriage and the psychological and physical toll it takes on a young, adolescent girl can be devastating. Period poverty and social stigma can also lead to unsafe practices. In cultures where periods are seen as a sign of impurity, even being in proximity to menstruators is frowned upon. Despite being declared illegal, the practice of Chaupaddi (period huts) still persists in parts of Nepal. Girls on their period are banished to isolated huts where they are forced to stay until their period is over due to being perceived as impure. Extreme temperatures, poor ventilation, and snake bites have led to the deaths of several women banished to these bare-bone huts.

It is urgent that immediate action is taken to combat period poverty. First, the social stigma surrounding periods must be dismantled. By incorporating menstrual education into health curriculums, schools can ensure that young girls do not feel embarrassed and ashamed of their periods. It's also important that discussions about periods are

normalized and not viewed as taboo. A study conducted by the Tamil Nadu Urban Sanitation Support Programme (TNUSSP) found that 84% of girls experienced “fear, panic, and confusion” during their first menstruation cycles because they had never received period education about what exactly the process of menstruation was and what equipment was needed to manage it. Period education is crucial in dismantling the stigma around periods and allowing menstruators to embrace this process rather than fear it. Things like hiding pads on the way to the bathroom or substituting names for the word ‘period’ are all ways that social stigma impacts the discourse surrounding periods. By incorporating menstruation education into schools and fostering shameless open discussion, the taboo views surrounding periods become non-existent and a more open and supportive environment can be fostered. Second, is making period products more affordable. To provide free period products in school would only cost 2.48 dollars per person and is already an initiative that 15 states, including Washington DC, have committed to. One way to make period products more affordable is to eliminate the luxury sales tax that is often placed upon them. Access to sanitary pads, tampons, and menstrual cups should be viewed as a right, rather than a privilege. In lesser developed countries, equipping menstruators with long-lasting products such as menstrual cups would be both cost effective and environmentally sustainable. Lastly, it is crucial that governments take steps to implement adequate medical infrastructure, especially in regions suffering from poverty. Something as simple as access to a toilet with running water can drastically reduce the risk of infectious and bacterial disease for women on their periods.

The struggles of Tisanai Shaushi are echoed in the stories of girls and women from all over the world. Period poverty is a pressing issue that has been swept under the rug for far too long. Let's aim for a future where every girl is able to access basic healthcare and the menstrual products she deserves. Let's aim for a future where access to period care stops being a dream and instead, a reality. But most importantly, let's aim for a future where every girl feels empowered, and is able to unapologetically pursue her dreams without her period being a barrier.

Student Name: Hana Taddele

Grade: 11

School: I H Kempner High School

Title: The Lady Liberty

Category: Poetry

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Susan henson

Our Lady Liberty once represented the promised land  
her torch shine as bright as a lighthouse, a sturdy beacon of hope and  
served as a promising opportunistic golden door where  
America could grant you all your hopes and dreams there.  
Our Lady Liberty promised all that came into her embrace  
that no matter where they originated from that they too, would enjoy America's grace.  
Our Lady Liberty promised us the infamous American Dream,  
that anyone can achieve their goals and reap  
prosperity and wealth for generations to come.  
But now the land Lady Liberty once protected is gone.  
The once pristine golden door,  
seeming with what appeared to be infinite opportunity galore,  
has fallen victim to its own corruption,  
leaving this once magnificent country in disruption.  
The people who were once connected through this wonderful American Dream,  
now have devised devious, selfish and wicked schemes;  
the riches they gleam are theirs and theirs only,  
and these comrades who once stood together now stand lonely.  
They bicker amongst themselves and a country that once stood united,  
now can barely stand at all and is left divided.

Student Name: Katelyn Huynh

Grade: 11

School: I H Kempner High School

Title: The Land of Liberty

Category: Poetry

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Susan henson

As history presents,  
 we were a nation in our adolescence,  
 always unpleasant and tremendously tense.  
 As history presents,  
 we were a nation of distrust,  
 who acknowledged outsiders with nothing but disgust.  
 Our past situation can be no different,  
 from places with little opportunity;  
 Jobs vanish without a trace,  
 because of the dependence on economic activity.  
 With prices soaring and inflation sky rocketing,  
 a once prosperous country,  
 irritated by foreigners who settled accordingly.  
 Despite our unwelcoming past,  
 we now embrace newcomers overseas;  
 We can now confidently agree,  
 the wonders that define America evinces we are free.  
 We share our sorrows with our people,  
 arms scarred with emblems of history;  
 Do not be afraid, so long as we are still a mystery.  
 Our name still lies ahead,  
 as we repeat the memories on a record player;  
 Forever embedded in our heads,  
 we shall nourish the tears we shed.  
 The lands still burn with youth and lust,  
 the flame still brightens and combusts!  
 The Land of Liberty, home of the eagle,  
 America shines her feathers onto thee.  
 We have fought and fought to experience,  
 much farther than what freedom prohibits us to be.



Student Name: Adamary Pealoza  
 Grade: 11  
 School: I H Kempner High School  
 Title: The Land of Nothing  
 Category: Personal Essay & Memoir  
 Key: Gold Key  
 Educator: Scheffie Lindquist

## The Land of Nothing

Dear Uncle Bruno,

I recently overheard your call with my father in which you expressed your desire to move to the United States. Back in Mexico, you have finished packing your bags. A few hundred-mile-long trip North is the only thing dividing you from embracing a new beginning, a new life, and a new you. In the call you made, I could almost hear your excited smile. I apologize for having to turn it upside down, but is it better that I let you live in a lie?

Uncle, I wake up each morning, brush my teeth, change my clothes, eat breakfast, and go to school. My father wakes up each morning, brushes his teeth, changes his clothes, eats breakfast, and goes to work for the remainder of the day. Life in America is the same regardless of age: bland and repetitive. Is this the kind of life you long for?

I must be frank. If your desire is to improve your lifestyle, you are better off working toward that improvement in Mexico. America is not the glorious country you think it is, I promise. In fact, it is quite the opposite. While TV shows and news outlets may advertise America as a sort of heaven filled with a rich culture, I can assert you that this is false. America has only one culture it cares about: money-making.

I often feel like America puts its inhabitants in a cage, for it is a prison that forces people into an endless cycle of working. In recent years, more than ever, prices for everything—food, clothes, housing, everything—have been skyrocketing. The problem is that an increase in salaries has not accompanied this increase in prices. People must work extensive hours just to afford their basic needs and survival.

I hate to use your brother as someone to compare your possible fate to, but take him, for instance. My father works for around 12 hours a day, and some days, I do not even see him. What I have seen, though, is that my father's hair is beginning to disappear because of excessive stress and his knees become worse with each passing day, but what can he do? If he does not work extensively like he does, he cannot provide a proper living for my sisters and me. I am beyond grateful for all the work my father puts in for our family, but the whole situation is very unfair to me. How can a man who loves his family enough to overwork himself to the point where it deteriorates his mental and physical health not be allowed enough time with them? Why must work come between a family? That is America for you, uncle. Unfair, unfair, and unfair.

I oftentimes find myself feeling a sense of jealousy toward you. Shocking, right? I am jealous of the sounds that fill Mexican air, of the children running around screaming, aunts huddling to gossip while they enjoy the most scrumptious meals, and of course, dance music blasting in the nearest speakers. I am jealous that work prevents my own family from being this bright.

I have seen pictures that prove you love the outdoors. I know you love being out in the fields with the sun hitting your tan skin in a way that makes you glisten. I have seen the pictures and how free-spirited you look in all of them. I can only dream of having this free-spiritedness.

I know you are trying to come to America to earn more money than you do back home. I know that you think that the new version of yourself will be so much better than the current one, but do you think it is worth it to sacrifice one of your best traits for money? With all the work you will be doing, you will lose your free-spiritedness and become trapped in work. You will also be apart from your family. Money will not make you happy; your family's time together and sunlight make you happy. Prison-like America cannot provide these things, and therefore, you will be miserable here.

I beg you to consider all the things about Mexico that make you happy and recognize how lucky you are to have them. I am afraid the U.S. and its work culture will dim your bright light and ruin these things for you. Are you really ready to give yourself and the things you love up? Are you ready to be deprived of feeling joy?

Please, uncle, realize how special your life is back in Mexico. Realize that I am only trying to protect you from losing yourself. America will leave you feeling lonely, exhausted, and most of all, unhappy. America is not a dream, but rather a never-ending nightmare. Your life in America will, like for most Americans, be boring and full of misery. This country is nothing like Mexico, for it is gray instead of an array of colors. Becoming accustomed to this gloomy life will not be easy. If your greed for money still blinds you from seeing that you should not come to the United States, then do as you please, but you cannot say that I did not warn you. Unpack your bags and enjoy the life you have now; enjoy it for those of us who cannot.

Student Name: Sophia Liu

Grade: 10

School: Clements High School

Title: The One Where the Moon Comforts You

Category: Poetry

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Stephanie Yang

September 15: reach up, palms splayed, fingers a constellation  
of bones and sentences strung unsaid.

You are dabbled in pretense and The Man

In the Moon. Once again, lunar maria is mistaken for a face;  
wounds for a smile. You beg the question of the dark.

Are tears not ichor?

(water of pain; blood catheterized to godhood)

We are born criers, celestial in form.

We are born strangers.

The Man In the Moon says he does not know you —  
to hurt does not mean to interpret hurt;  
to undergo does not mean to understand.

But at least when he becomes New,  
you can tear away the night sky and dye  
your gray hair to black.

Student Name: Jessica Jackson  
 Grade: 9  
 School: Dulles High School  
 Title: The Past Lingers Like Smoke  
 Category: Short Story  
 Key: Gold Key  
 Educator:

### The Past Lingers Like Smoke

One mid-July noon in 1959, a choir of cicadas chirped in the scorching sun; roadside weeds wilted and curled. Even the willow trees appeared sickly, with their leaves drooping lazily and shadows huddled tightly. It's much like I am, baking in my room and napping on the bamboo mat. The early summer vacation at my boarding school started four weeks ago, because all the high school teachers in our city were commanded to go to the People's Communes for temporary re-education.

A raspy voice awakens me, "Ching, get up!"

Stretching sluggishly and curling back up, a drop of water falls onto my lashes, forcing my drowsy eyes open. I rub them listlessly to adjust to the midday sunlight. Before me popped up a flushed face dripping with sweat. It's Mom! Being a housewife, how could she disappear for a month?

"Listen" she panted, "we have to take a train right away."

"Really!?" Upon hearing the word "train," I sprang up and hugged her with delight. Riding a train has always been my dream — at last, at the age of fifteen, it came true. While I am bouncing around, my eyes land on Mom, her face haggard with dark circles under her eyes, pants cuffs and shoes coated in a layer of dust.

"Oh! Mama, where were you? What have you been doing? Is everything ready —"

"We have almost three days on the train to talk." Ignoring my questions, Mom starts packing. "Hurry up, just take what you need," her tone becomes hasty, "I already have our travel permit and tickets. Let me leave a note for your dad, we must leave now!"

Waiting on the station platform, drenched in sweat, I can't stop myself from bombarding her with more questions. "Where are we going? Why are we in such a rush? How did you get the money?"

"We're heading to Sandun-town at the edge of the Gobi Desert," Mom pauses to steady herself, then reluctantly continues, "to see my elder brother."

"What!?" I stood in a daze with widened eyes. "But how come I never knew?"

In this moment, the loudspeaker announces the train from Peking to Lanchow, ours, is arriving.

With a mighty roar, a dark-green giant grows closer and closer. White clouds of mist spew from the locomotive, accompanied by the deafening screeching of the brakes. A gust of wind rolls from beneath this monster, causing nearby bushes to swirl around. Instinctively, I pull Mom back a couple of steps and latch onto a cement pillar, afraid we'll be blown away.

Aboard the train, I glance around curiously, everything is novel to me. On both sides of the car aisle, green vinyl benches are arranged face-to-face with wall-mounted tables in between and compartments on top. Only a few people sit sporadically, while an attendant is calling out to the passengers to check for tickets. Right after we settle down, the giant starts moving, whistles echoing in the wind as the scenery outside gradually recedes.

The wind rushing in from the open window cools me down. "So mama —"

"Let me get some water first" she huffed, pulling out her enamel mug. A piece of white porcelain glaze is chipped off the bottom, revealing the black cast iron layer underneath, like a scar.

As she trudges away, I peer out the window. Along the railway, many farmlands lie fallow and nearly all the trees have been cut down, leaving farmhouses looking lifeless. Wreckages of small blast furnaces from the Great Leap Forward still hunch in the open land. Faded slogans on the walls keep surging into view:  
Overtake the UK in three years, catch up with the US in five.  
One day equals twenty years, communism is in sight.  
How bold a person is, how productive the land is. ...

Hearing Mom's footsteps, I avert my gaze from outside. She sits down slowly across from me, both hands holding her mug, takes a sip, then clears her throat.

"Ge-ge's name is De-ren, my only sibling who's eleven years older than me." Cautiously surveying our surroundings, she swiftly grabs a folded envelope from her inner pocket and passes it to me under the table. "This is my only photo of him, taken when he had just enlisted. Make sure nobody sees it," she lowers her voice. "My name means virtuousness; his, benevolence — the name suits him well." As she reminisces, a faint

blush spreads across her pale cheeks. "We were very close despite our ages. Without him, I'd have been deprived of the right to education."

I peek at the sepia-stained picture carefully tucked in the envelope. A handsome young man in Nationalist Army uniform gives a dazzling smile. His clear and sparkling eyes under the cap emit wisdom and kindness. His well-defined lips, with the corners of his mouth stubbornly upturned, exude pride and determination.

The train races forward; Mom continues her story.

Her father, due to his poor health since childhood, developed an opium addiction which led to the family's fortunes gradually drying up. Consequently, there was no intention of sending Mom to school no matter how desperately she cried and begged. Knowing that, De-ren initiated a hunger strike with her. He even threatened to drop out of school, which is unacceptable in a patriarchal family, and promised to save some of his expenses for her tuition. In the end, Mom prevailed. After the Marco Polo Bridge incident in 1937, putting down his pen and taking up arms, De-ren fought the Japanese throughout China and Myanmar till 1945.

"In those days, he sent me letters and treats every once in a while," she mutters, "the American chocolate was the most delicious thing I've ever tasted." A smile graced her face, radiating a sense of contentment and happiness, like a bright sky with beautiful clouds following a storm. "I'm taking these letters with me to surprise him."

Even though I have no idea what chocolate is, I can still sense the rare joy in Mom's expression.

De-ren's fate turned tragic at the end of the Chinese Civil War. The Nationalist Military unit he belonged to mutinied and was deployed to Korea under the name of the Chinese People's Volunteer Army in the fall of 1950. In response to his diary entries, such as "The lies written in ink cannot cover the truth written in blood," and his questioning of the term "Volunteer Army," he was reported as a counter-revolutionary. Especially, his collaboration with American military advisors, during the War of Resistance against Japan, led to him being suspected as a spy. Therefore, he was immediately sent to a labor camp in northwest China at the end of 1951.

Mom remained unaware up till De-ren's wife informed her. That poor woman was ordered to relocate to a ghetto in the Great Northern Wilderness, the north easternmost part of China, shortly after De-ren was imprisoned. One year later, she committed suicide with De-ren's only child after being forced to divorce him. Until their deaths, no one told her exactly where her husband was.

"Since he joined the army, I haven't seen him again," Mom laments. "About a month ago, I received the first letter he was allowed to send out, as he was so sick and didn't have much time left to live. Without that letter, I wouldn't know where to find him either." Her face turns somber. "He didn't want me to visit him, same as your dad; they feared we'd be implicated with him. I wrote back saying that as his last remaining family, I'm going no matter what," her gaze hardened. "I worked day and night as a postpartum nanny for the past month and earned the money for this trip on my own. This was something I had to do, and I apologize for not telling anybody."

The following two days, the train gallops across the Loess Plateau. The earthy-yellow land rolls into view under a grayish sky. Cave dwellings scattered across the Plateau nestled within hills, seamlessly fusing with the arid and barren landscape.

At each station, a dense crowd of people packed the entire platform, appearing pale and thin with dull eyes and tattered clothes. It's said that almost all of them are peasants fleeing famine or seeking refuge with relatives. Many, unable to afford the fare, climb into the train through windows. The railway cops, holding their batons, berate and shoo away those without tickets or begging for food. Soon, the train is full of people, shoulder to shoulder, squeezed onto the narrow seats or into the tight aisles, some even on the overhead compartments. The car buzzes with the scolding from the attendants, the shouts between passengers, and the cries of children. A blend of odors from all corners mingles in the air.

On the last day, we switched to a bus traveling along the Gobi Desert to the town near his labor camp. Endless sand dunes stretch along both sides of the road, making it seem like the desert extends to envelop the Earth. Outside, the setting sun is blood-red, the sound of the sandy wind raging on. Inside, Mom's eyes are bloodshot, her lips chapped.

Fatigued, we reach our destination, a desolate desert town; the night has become pitch-black.

Early next morning, Mom went to the labor camp, leaving me to rest at the only hostel in the town. The desert sky, rarely adorned with dark clouds in summer, is overcast. I huddle in bed, reading outdated newspapers, and then lull myself to sleep.

The sudden sound of a door opening startles me awake.

Eyes glistening with tears, Mom stumbles in, nearly falling, and collapses onto the bed. Suppressed, agonized snivels escape her lips, as if being painfully drawn out from the depths of her soul, thread by thread. The sorrow diffusing throughout the room, weaving a tapestry of dark-blue melancholy, makes the air dim and oppressive.

"What happened, Mama?"

"He p-passed away two days ago," she sobs, while opening the bundle she brought back. Inside are a letter and a cyan scarf. As soon as she sees the scarf, Mom clutches it to her chest, large shimmering teardrops cascading down her cheeks like rainwater in a stream. Her voice chokes, "H-he kept the scarf I made till the end!"

"Have we really traveled all the way for nothing?" my voice is disheartened. "Did you even see him?"

"No, the odious guard informed me of his passing and ordered me to leave immediately once he handed me Ge-ge's bundle," Mom sounded indignant. "I didn't dare to open it then, fearing I wouldn't be able to control my emotions." She bites her lip and hangs her head.

Staying silent for a while, Mom wipes her swollen eyes with her sleeve, smooths her disheveled hair, then says decisively, "I'll hold a simple ceremony to send him off. Ching, you want to join me?"

"Of course, Mama" I respond soothingly.

In the evening, as darkness falls, Mom and I arrive at a nearby expanse of desert with two white candles we just bought and a small wreath of old newspapers we made. Surprisingly, the sky is devoid of any stars, even the wind seems to take a break.

Lighting up the candles, Mom passes De-ren's letter to me with a shaky hand, "Read it to me."

The handwriting is elegant and neat, just like him. Holding a candle close to the letter, I read softly:

"De-shu, my little sister,

When you read this letter, it signifies the greatest distance has emerged between us: life and death.

Sorry for being unable to wait for you. I have so much to say, but I'm not sure where and how to start.

It's still vivid in my memory, the scene where I helped choose a meaningful name for the newborn you.



Live well! In the darkness, keep the image of the sun in mind and an eye on the light.

Thank you for being my sister! I wish we had more time together, let's be siblings again in the next life.

Missing you!

Ge-ge De-ren.

Remember: Burn everything related to me that you have."

Hearing the last sentence, Mom snatches the letter and bursts into tears. Her wailing, mixed with exhaustion and pent-up emotions, finally releases at this moment.

Sadness fills my being and pains my heart; tears well up in my eyes.

While she begins to calm down, with a few strands of hair still clinging to her tear-streaked face, I stifle my tears and gaze at her.

"Ge-ge, sorry for coming late." She ignites the letter I just read with a candle, followed by the others she had brought, then the wreath and the scarf. "I'm sending you these as sacrificial offerings, so you won't feel bored or cold in the other world." She purses her lips tightly.

Illuminated by the flames, Mom stares intensely at De-ren's picture. A teardrop slides down onto it, as if the image itself is crying.

Abruptly, she throws the picture into the fire.

"Mama, that's the only photo of him!" I exclaim, trying to stop her. But too late!

The flames lick the edges of the picture. Its corners curl up, turning brown, spreading quickly toward the center, melting, swallowing, and disappearing.

"I've engraved him in my heart," Mom explains, fixated on the dying flames. "He's right, keeping memories of a 'counter-revolutionary' can only bring us trouble." Shaking her head in resignation, she sighs deeply. "Nobody will remember him once I leave this world."

A breeze rises. The ashes are scattered, floating in the air. "He's finally free now!" Mom looks up, whispering with relief, "let the past stay in the past."

The past drifts away with the wind yet it lingers like smoke.

Student Name: Haley Finley  
 Grade: 11  
 School: I H Kempner High School  
 Title: The Sun is Still Shining  
 Category: Personal Essay & Memoir  
 Key: Gold Key  
 Educator: Susan henson

Every individual has different qualities from each and every person, and they all possess a unique identity that needs light to be shined upon. Because once the light shines greatness

comes along with it to clear up the negativity that the storm brings along. Unique identities must

be exhaustively explored and carefully crafted through acts that build self-esteem in life, like

success, teachings, and rewards. All of these factors combine together to make up one's true self.

Because the sunshine and greatness of someone comes from within.

Like Afridi's personal essay "A Gentle Madness" she had to relive an experience to gain a sense of who she was, her own personal light that would uplift her soul. Her identity was

shaped by an old incident that continued to weigh heavy on her mind and influence her actions.

She had to learn to be proud that she was from Pakistan, and not let her past control her future

endeavors. I also have memories from the past that live on within me. Teaching me how to build

myself up in life, one step at a time. These memories built my character and have been an important part of my growth, leading me to make the right decisions in my journey throughout

life. I have belief in myself because my past has boosted my self-image and self-worth in my

eyes.

For example, when I succeed on a test, sport, or certain task I see myself better than I did before my achievements. I see myself as a crowned champion and that motivates me to keep

going. Repeated achievements help me to gain belief and confidence in myself and my abilities

(physical and mentally). These situations have shaped the very way I see myself in life. I can

shine in life and spread my greatness onto others because now I have extra boost and willingness of how to do things right.

Who am I? That is a complicated question. It is more than just gaining self-esteem through successful attempts at a particular task. It is much deeper and more complex than that.

My identity also involves my upbringing. Which is the way my family interacted with and raised

me. The way I carry myself is the way I saw it being exhibited in my household. As I child I learned to think this way and that way based off of what I was exposed to on a daily basis.

My parents showed me the way I should believe in myself by telling me and, through me, watching their actions.

For instance, I used to have trouble staying focused in school when I was younger. My mind used to drift and wander onto other items in the classroom that weren't involved in the

assignment. Being off task became a regular occurrence for me and teachers would get frustrated

and start to think that I was purposefully disobeying them and not that there was a mental roadblock between me and successful concentration. Part of the reason my focus always drifted

to other things was that I didn't believe I could do the work, so I wasn't motivated to try.

My mind was preoccupying itself to avoid the dreadful work. My parents helped me change this

view about myself by reinforcing encouragement into me by repeatedly supporting me until I got

it right. They would say things like "You got it" or "your almost there" and "I believe in you".

Those remarks lit a fire under me that really altered the way I viewed myself and my abilities by

enlightening the perception I held of myself.

My self-confidence was also molded and built through rewards for proper deeds. If I completed a task correctly, receiving a prize for my efforts often made me feel better about

myself. I started to view tasks as not that bad and I had a bit more motivation because I now

believed I wasn't going to give up; I could do it! That can-do mentality also improved when I got

things like stickers and lollipops for answering a question right. I now viewed myself as smart

and intelligent because the award made me feel empowered. This created a pursuit of a workhard like attitude that contributed to me pushing myself higher because the belief and faith in

myself led me to think that I can be triumphant.

All and all the many life lessons and teaching of how to be confident and true to myself have paved the way for me to be who I am today. The parent-taught lessons, successful attempts,

and rewards for completed tasks come together to bring out the perfect mix of my pride and

dignity. Like the sun I my self-esteem radiates positivity and spreads joy to all who encounter

me. The impact of these factors leads to me lifting others up and so they can find power and

control over their own destiny. Because once I find my true self I can outwardly shine and influence my factors on others. The greatness I have is harnessed from my identity and my

factors continue to help me conquer life.

Student Name: Nishka Agarwal  
 Grade: 12  
 School: I H Kempner High School  
 Title: Through Thick and Thin  
 Category: Personal Essay & Memoir  
 Key: Gold Key  
 Educator: Haley Grimes

Mortified. It was six feet long, ivory colored, with horns as pointy as a knife, and it was staring right at us.

I was absolutely mortified. On the other hand, my dadu (paternal grandfather) was composed watching me worry and sob uncontrollably. "Let's go back home! It's too dangerous!" I squealed to my dadu. He remained silent for a moment and put his finger out for me to latch onto. At age five, hand in hand with my dadu, we approached the very creature I had hoped to avoid. He whispered, "Only a cow nishku; don't be scared...I'm here na."

I still vividly recall the humorous encounter, especially since it was one of my first memories of India. It laid out my connection with India and deepened my bond with my family, who sat halfway across the globe. After four long years of WhatsApp video calls and voice messages being my support systems, I sat on a plane to India to visit my family. My family, who are always so eager to meet me that our daily calls always ended with "So, when are you finally coming to India?" My extended family seems like the only place where I can let go and be free from my three-person household. And it is not that I cannot get privacy when I am with my parents; I am an only child, after all.

Although I appreciate the attention and love from my parents, the dynamic in our small family has pushed me to become more independent and resourceful. I felt protective of myself. I felt insecure talking to my parents, scared it would end up in an argument or lecture.

And because of this tension, I tried to solve everything myself and grew to be more independent. I was eight when I took a taxicab by myself. I learned how to stay home alone from the age of nine. I wrote in diaries with locks to suppress my thoughts. I have never been able to share my favorite song or dance because it felt embarrassing, but I realized long after that it was because I feared they would misunderstand me, resorting to comfort from those distanced from me.

If not with my cousins, it is with my dadu where our nightly strolls allow us to engage in genuine conversations that transcend the mundane topics of school, fitness, or social life. We talked about the littlest things this time, such as how I would go to the nearest market to buy caramel toffees or how we would also debate about when would be the right time to finally get a Jhula (traditional Indian swing). My dadu has always been by my side, holding me while getting my ears pierced, standing by me suggesting

what Lehenga (traditional Indian outfit) I should buy, helping me with my math homework, and teaching me how to drive a Moped.

The summer when it all changed. I felt different on my flight back, and it felt like a rush of emotions was now safe in India. This summer might be the most stimulating yet memorable part of my whole high school career. And I am glad that it is. I came back confident, embracing my identity, and estranged from the negativity. It feels like I just let go of my past and unwrapped that protective layer.

I wish for my vacations to be longer, and I long for my family to be closer. But being the only one foreign to India, it is often hard to connect, especially if I am not able to physically be in touch with them as often as I hope. Nonetheless, remembering how my dadu helped me control myself facing the cow, I know I can think about him being there right next to me like I was five again, tightly grabbing his hand, hoping everything would turn out just fine.

Student Name: Elliot Tian  
 Grade: 10  
 School: Dulles High School  
 Title: Universal Chronicles  
 Category: Flash Fiction  
 Key: Gold Key  
 Educator:

The Cleric drifted in between tall rows of volumes. Shelves and shelves of archives, stacked up to infinity, beyond what the eye could see. They glowed with an ethereal blue light, seemingly to ward away the infinite blackness that hung far, far above them, which each Cleric knew existed, but preferred not to see.

He ran his fingers along the volumes. These volumes weren't normal books, such methods of storage weren't viable here. Instead, what the Clerics used were neural disk drives, a compact way to store memories. One needed simply to plug the disk drive into their neural reader, which was directly wired into their brain. Once plugged in, they could experience the memory directly.

He glided between the shelves, a translucent barrier beneath him. He didn't need feet.

The sensors on his fingertips gave him a brief description of each volume, fed directly into his brain, before being instantaneously replaced by another. He considered, then dismissed, each of them.

A grade school student receives full marks on a hard test, 5/4/2022. Elation: 443, Surprise: 173.

A little boy scrapes his knee on the sidewalk, 5/11/1973. Fear: 230, Pain: 350.

An old farmer lays his wife to rest, 3/5/890. Despair: 785, Sorrow: 694.

Some of the older Clerics could skim many volumes in seconds. He wasn't quite at that speed, though he didn't have to stop for each one.

A sailor on a ship faces a salty morning breeze, 6/6/1432. Eagerness: 271, Satisfaction: 186.

A slave picks crops under a hot midday sun, 5/4/667. Despondence: 660, Irritancy: 322.

The Cleric's thoughts drifted as he glided down the shelves. Despite the forceful blip of each description fed into his brain, he found he could often fit thoughts in between each blip, saving each into a neural drive for further ponderance.

He began to think. Little bits of information surfed across the top of his head, but thoughts churned beneath them. Often, he recalled the beginning of his time as a Cleric.

The Chronicle Project started as a project in the 25th century or so, when a group of engineers and neurologists decided to study emotion in vast detail. Developing hyperdrives worth of information and feeling, they called upon vast amounts of scholars to study their archives. The Clerics had been given life-extending medication and were guaranteed the best possible care they could have, as long as they were consigned to their little archives, alone. Their practical knowledge of humanity was too dangerous even to be with other Clerics. Once every few years they met up to exchange analyzed information, but such meetings were often short-lived and distant.

He didn't remember the last time he had some sort of meeting. The medicine they gave him destroyed his sense of time. They told him it apologetically that was for his sanity, but he agreed. The stories of far too many people in these archives ended in insanity.

He kept watch for high emotion indexes. Those were rarer now, sent to the higher archives for deeper analysis, but some were missed.

He kept drifting. It could be weeks or months before he found one.

A child sleeps in the middle of a rainstorm, 1/3/1955. Comfort: 440, Fear: 043.

He kept going.

A teenage girl plays with friends in a place of worship, 6/24/2023. Bliss: 996.

The Cleric paused, thinking. 996 was only four away from the maximum index, and most volumes had at least two emotions. A volume with both meant an irregularity or a very unlikely find. A marvelously rare find. He would need to check to make sure there were no errors.

He pulled it out and slid the volume neatly into his n-reader. The archive faded away as the reader began to project into his mind.

Preparing volume a80b59-435970-6b626d. Duration: 5s.

Well, its length wasn't a surprise. Such a strong emotion never lasted for more than a few seconds.



Playing...

-----  
It is past midnight. Tonight is the last night of camp, and the day had already been full of activities, but none of it matters! The night sky is pitch black, and I still have to wash up, and I will be leaving this place in the morning. But time can't reach me here. Life will continue on, but God prepared me this special place, and He has given me this place to feel His glory!

I laugh as I hit the ball back into the air, my clothing ruffling behind me. Nothing can touch me.

-----  
The Cleric floated. Though his feet seldom touched the ground anymore, he still thought much about practical matters. How nice it must be to have as much trust as that girl!

Bliss, he realized, was one of the emotions that Project Chronicle had trouble profiling. Many attempts to artificially generate the emotion had failed or gone awry, and many researchers had deemed the emotion "unconstructable".

But, of course, it real. It wasn't something he'd experienced in a long time, with his endless analysis of the ever-flowing neural disks, but he remembered it. Most proponents of Project Chronicle believed in the ability to reconstruct and demystify all sorts of human condition and emotion, so they'd long since deemed the feeling illegitimate, a fabrication of the human mind. Just like all of his other colleagues and coworkers, the Cleric travelled down these archives, continuing to examine data about human emotion over and over to refine his conclusions about the fundamental tenets behind human thought. Perhaps he had begun to believe so too.

But this girl wasn't anything special, was she? Anybody could've experienced what she did. Perhaps emotion was meant to be experienced instead of deciphered. Maybe the indexes and summaries weren't useful for individuals.

And maybe, then, it was worth experiencing everybody else's emotions.

The Cleric's fingers slid over to the one on the right.

An aspiring teenage poet struggles to compose a poem, 12/3/2023. Aspiration: 430, Frustration: 196.

He slid it into his n-reader.

Playing...

Student Name: Tingyu Wu

Grade: 11

School: Clements High School

Title: Unseen Woes of South Korean Schoolyards

Category: Critical Essay

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Stephanie Yang

Beyond the gleaming facade of cultural richness and the demand for academic excellence, in the dark alleys of South Korean streets (beyond the eyes of the CCTV cameras), innocence is shattered like a soju bottle under the weight of a harrowing reality that lurks within—the shards of glass carrying the droplets of misfortune that scarred the victims' bodies. Through the quiet hallways and neatly pressed uniforms, a haunting truth unfolds with the release of the anticipated drama, *The Glory*, which features real-life cases that inspire the film's three themes: bullying, suicide, and revenge (*The Glory*). A country known for its academic achievement by students, economic progression, and rich cultural heritage has found itself in a deep-rooted social issue hidden from the public: school bullying. The failure of schools and the law to protect children aggravates the issue of school bullying and violence in South Korea. This failure has detrimental consequences on the younger generation's mental health, leading to long-lasting effects that demand the urgent attention of civilians, society, and the government. *The Glory* stirred netizens to unveil the past issues inflicted by the hands of cruelty. Almost 15 years after the incident, Park Sung-min, a victim, painfully opens up about what happened to her, saying how "some days [the bullies] would poke [her] whole body using a fork," even once tearing the "iris in [her] eye" (Tiwari). The chilling tales of violence leave scars more profound than wounds, eviscerating the heart and soul of a victim. Rather than classrooms being a place where education blossoms, they have transformed into battlefields, with some students wielding weapons of fear, violence, and humiliation against helpless victims. These narratives reveal the heart-wrenching reality faced by countless students who must navigate a labyrinth of fear and discrimination, carrying the trauma throughout their lives. Who would commit these outrageous acts? Children under the age of 14 (Min-sik). As the justice system fails the students, the school systems and even parents remain oblivious to their silent suffering due to the social hierarchy of modern society. The realm of fear and vulnerability provides no hope for the victims, eclipsing the sunlight of their precious youth.

School bullying in South Korea is not a new phenomenon; its roots can be traced back to the traditional values of Confucianism that emphasized hierarchy in one's livelihood when it was first brought over from China. While Confucianism has positively influenced aspects of South Korean culture by giving it order, it has also contributed to an environment where bullying can unfold. In the Korean Confucian tradition, social position,

age, and gender are essential in determining one's status in society (Cawley). In Korean schools, "hierarchies" can be due to money or grades, where teachers and parents can protect bullies due to their strong reputation. Commonly, the wealthier students turn on the less financially fortunate students since their parents' contribution and influence to the school protect them from any repercussions. These values are reflected in the powerful dynamics within modern schools, enforced rigidly by students, parents, and teachers.

The intense competition for superiority based on age in a rapidly modernizing society has allowed the schools to breed a toxic atmosphere within schools, fueling student bullying. For example, when a sophomore sees a junior in high school, they would usually bow to them. Depending on the bow's degree, it reflects the status of the other ("The Social Hierarchical System"). Typically, when greeting someone, the first question you would ask or get is, "How old are you?", as the question impacts the direction of conversation (Logan). Additionally, there are specific terms to use when addressing others, such as oppa or hyung, meaning older brother, and nuna or unnie, meaning older sister (Toyryla). It puts students above each other based solely on age. Similarly, many bullying cases are related to a student's background. Compared to the US, South Korea's social hierarchy of age is less about the idea of upper-level students and lower-level students but more about the numbers. In a classroom environment, students attempt to prove themselves "worthy" to their peers and teachers, making them more "powerful" in the school hierarchy through grades, and if not grades, then physically.

At the end of 2022, *The Glory*, a highly awaited psychological drama, released by Netflix, follows the fictional story of Moon Dong-eun and her perfectly planned revenge on her bullies. She was a 17-year-old high school student bullied ruthlessly by a wealthy group of students with influential parents. She reported these bullying incidents to the police chief of her jurisdiction but received no justice. However, she was burned repeatedly with a curling iron the next day by the bullies. She then went to the school nurse, wanting some hydrogen peroxide to clean up the wound without reporting the bullies, but the nurse realized instantly that someone must have done this to her. Suddenly, the main bully, Yeon-jin, appeared and said confidently she made those marks. Subsequently, a few days later, the nurse resigned, reflecting the wealthy families' power over educational institutions. Dong-Eun dropped out of school, identifying the bullies as the reason. The vice principal was furious because he knew that a reason like that would damage his reputation, making it seem like he permitted bullying. In front of all the teachers, he tried to force Dong-eun to change her reason, but she just stood there even when he physically smacked her several times, causing her to fall to the ground. From never receiving the justice she deserved through the criminal system nor family warmth, Dong-eun plotted a decades-long revenge plan on her bullies, introducing the main plot of the drama (*The Glory*). In current South Korean high schools, teachers are often found physically assaulting students, but they only do this to financially lower-class students. Despite the

legal ban, there have been many instances where teachers continue to use physical punishment as an acceptable means of enforcing discipline. Thus, real-life cases inspired *The Glory*, reflecting upon the harsh realities victims may have faced. Although this is a fictional film, it truly reflects how cruel South Korean schools can be to the students based on the student's wealth and background.

Some South Korean schools want to present themselves as perfect institutions for education, while in reality, they fail to address outbreaks of violence that occur beyond the walls. The most well-known aspect of the bullying in the drama was how the bullies used a curling iron to burn the protagonist while holding her down, using her skin as a way to check the temperature of the curling iron, similar to a case in Cheongju. In 2006, a third-year middle schooler surnamed Jung was hospitalized for six weeks after enduring torture by her classmates. Her nightmare started 20 days prior, one night when three classmates approached her while waiting for the subway. Because she did not answer her classmates' questions, the three classmates started physically assaulting her. The bullies started demanding Jung give up all her allowance to them. When she did not have enough, they also assaulted her physically. Because they felt they were not getting their point across, one of the bullies burned the victim's bare skin until her skin was "sizzling" and left with giant red welts. Eventually, as the skin healed, it scabbed all over. Nevertheless, the bullies cornered her after school, ripping the scabs off her body. The victim said that it felt like she was going to die, but she could not run away or scream since the bullies told her if she "screamed from the pain [they] would kill [her]." Additionally, she suffered from a protruding tailbone and streak marks all over her chest because the bullies were trying to disfigure her chest permanently. At first, the three bullies bullied Jung to name three random girls as the actual bullies. Soon after, Kim (one of the bullies) confessed to all crimes, and on "June 2nd, the Cheongju District Court issued an arrest warrant against [her]." However, the school released a statement saying how, after conducting an internal investigation the three students and Jung's stories were not matching up, so the investigation was hampered, leading to no consideration of any stricter punishments. Kim was the only one arrested and was placed under supervised watch, meaning that she would need to be watched by her parents or an officer, but it did not leave a criminal record, creating no real obstacles in her future ("Real case behind bullying"). One glaring issue this case has brought to light is the failure of schools to fight for justice for the victims. Although the school might have conducted an "internal investigation," the statements released were flawed. They should have been further investigated when their statements didn't align. Instead of cultivating an atmosphere of understanding and safety, schools like this one turn a blind eye, making it an environment where bullying can thrive.

South Korean schools and laws have failed to protect the youth facing these traumatic experiences inflicted by their peers, never giving the justice and closure the victims deserve. *The Glory* took inspiration from another middle school bullying case from 2006.

Park Sung-min's nightmare started in her second year of middle school. It all began one day with two girls asking her to borrow a dollar, to which she agreed, but one dollar turned into demands of a more significant sum. Park eventually ran out of allowance money, so they started physically beating her and even dragging her to one of the bully's houses to use her as a punching bag. The bullies threatened Park that if she did not follow their orders, they would assault her younger brother, so she went, reluctantly, getting abused for days. In an interview, Park stated that "they would burn [her] arm using the hair iron for five whole minutes." For instance, the bullies threw a plastic pipe at her face, which hit her eye, permanently damaging her cornea and causing vision problems. In the interview, the interviewer asked her why she did not try to leave; Park only said there was no point since the bullies knew where she lived and would come over and make it difficult for her family. One day, the teacher noticed pus oozing from one of her arms, finally bringing light to the bullying. However, everyone in her life assumed that she must have done something to provoke the bullies. In the heartbreaking interview, she said, "I [did not] do anything wrong." Ultimately, the bullies never received any real consequences for the trauma they caused. The three bullies laughed in her face while apologizing to her. Only one got 40 hours of community service and one week of school suspension, and 17 years later, one is a nurse, and another is a social worker, making the victim "very angry" (Tiwari). Despite the widespread public support the victim received once the case became public, some have questioned the fairness of the justice system. In this case, the bystander effect, when an individual is less likely to help someone else in the presence of another because they think that the other person "might just help," plays a role (Cherry). In many cases, other students might also have "[feared] that [they will] get bullied just like the victim" ("How Bad Is Bullying"). This disturbing reality prevents a sense of responsibility for students who have seen the incident to report and bring a situation like this to light. Through the days she faced torture, she still went to school, yet no one checked up on her well-being, despite signs such as the bruises she got or the drastic emotional change.

The lack of protection for children in South Korean schools regarding the issue of bullying has led to unimaginable consequences on the victims' mental and physical health, demanding that society unite and bring justice to these victims even if the administrations are not assisting them. Chung Sun-sin, the new chief of the National Office of Investigation, was reported to have stepped down "only a day after being appointed on February 24, 2023" (Jung). In 2017, his son was attending a private high school where he was found to be verbally bullying his roommate. Nevertheless, the problem arose when the school's bullying committee charged his son with misconduct and requested that he be transferred to another school. Chung refused to believe that his son would do such a thing, so he used his authoritative power to appeal to a "Gangwon Provincial School Mitigation Commission" and dragged this case to the Supreme Court, where he lost the case. So, he appealed again. Ultimately, this allowed his son to get into the most prestigious university in Seoul with no acts of bullying in his record; when the

people heard this, they were infuriated (Jung). Furthermore, Article 9 of the Criminal Code of the Republic of Korea states that “the act of a person under fourteen years of age shall not be punished” (Republic of Korea). This means anyone under 14 who commits any crime, from stealing to committing murders, would not be charged. In extreme cases, one could get two years in a youth detention center, which is usually unheard of, leading to numerous acts being committed since they understand anything they do won’t have criminal consequences until they are 14, showing how the law fails to protect children and civilians. From the ruling Democratic Party of Korea, representative Kim Hoi-jae revealed that “5,390 teenagers under the age of 14 were accused of violent crimes” between 2017 and 2021, including “10,199 battery crime cases, 1,913 sex crime cases, 47 robbery cases, and 9 murder cases” (Sang-yun). It is essential to understand that bullying is real and shouldn’t be downplayed by money or wealth because the aftereffects can traumatize someone for a lifetime that no amount of therapy can repair. Awareness is necessary to make bullying more widely known, allowing society to know that every child’s cries are significant, illustrating a dark story that lies deeper than on the surface.

Some may say setting the age of criminal responsibility, which is when a person is held legally accountable for their actions, at 14, in South Korea, allows rehabilitation and education for young minds rather than strict punishments. As heinous as these crimes committed by teenagers are, no punishment was ever really inflicted upon them because of the nature of the law. Kim Seong-don states that “[t]he initial age of 14 is modeled after the juvenile and criminal acts in Japan,” only years after the Korean War in the 1950s without any “infrastructure for research” (Min-sik). However, in the 21st century, the introduction of smartphones and the internet has led teenagers to access the world at their fingertips, allowing kids to use these laws to their advantage for the worst. The increased exposure to graphic or sexual content at a young age could cause desensitization and normalization, influencing the younger generation’s behavior (Bishop). In a progressing society, punishments for those committed should be fitted within the circumstances of the crimes, allowing for a safer society overall.

Furthermore, school violence prevention committees exist throughout South Korea, generally established with good intentions, but they have been proven to be ineffective, contributing to a failing system of protecting the youth and civilians. It has been reported by The Korea Times that the committee members include students’ parents, teachers, and government officials from offices of education. The committees mainly consisted of a small group of members with only two or three legal experts. Few attended the meetings, contributing to a lack of professionalism. Many problems arose from reported cases such as parents of perpetrators taking advantage of the committee to object to decisions to assist the victim (Ko). The lack of experience from members of these committees can lead to ineffective intervention. They may fail to address the root cause and provide the needed support the victim deserves igniting the potential for further bullying cases. These

acts have led to the ignorance of many crimes that can be detrimental to one's livelihood when they go unsolved, increasing the risk of depression, anxiety, and even death.

Hakpok #MeToo movement has swept Korean society with the prevalence of school violence throughout South Korea. Hakpok (학폭) refers to actions one has done that are not only "physical abuse but ones that also [cause]...mental and property damage to someone" (Yun and Cha). Bullied victims now are publically "[naming] and [shaming] the perpetrators of school violence decades" after the crimes were committed, giving the victims a voice they desperately deserve ("As 'Hakpok #Metoo' Sweeps South Korea"). Unfortunately, the current age of responsibility doesn't account for protecting youth from future incidents, but this is still an ongoing debate among many. Society should give a voice to the silent victims by illuminating the minds of the young victims with hope and justice. Even though the launch of committees in grade schools and new acts passed regarding school bullying, the problem is still rampant. The first episode of *The Glory* drew inspiration from the cases that happened decades ago by allowing society to remember these real-life cases. May these movements and history introduce the possibility of societal change, transforming the jagged shards of exclusion into harmonious inclusivity where everyone can find their rightful place and receive the justice they deserve.



Student Name: Minahil Junaid

Grade: 11

School: I H Kempner High School

Title: What they ask for

Category: Poetry

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Susan henson

What they ask for جو وہ مانگتے ہیں۔

No new land, no sky they desire

چاہت۔

only refuge and peace they ask for.

A chance for more in life and

a chance to learn is what they ask for.

From homelands ravaged they are forced to flee

sanctuary is all they ask for.

Born with dreams in their hearts,

better days is what they pray and ask for.

They run away from false promises,

in hopes they will finally get what they ask for.

اس امید میں کہ وہ آخر کار وہ حاصل کر لیں گے جو وہ مانگتے ہیں۔

کوئی نئی زمین، کوئی آسمان وہ نہیں

وہ صرف پناہ اور امن مانگتے ہیں۔

زندگی میں مزید کے لیے ایک موقع اور

سیکھنے کا موقع وہی ہے جو وہ مانگتے ہیں۔

تباہ شدہ وطن سے بھاگنے پر مجبور ہیں

پناہ گاہ وہی ہے جو وہ مانگتے ہیں۔

دلوں میں خواب لے کر پیدا ہوئے

بہتر دن وہ ہیں جو وہ مانگتے اور مانگتے ہیں۔

جھوٹے وعدوں سے بھاگتے ہیں

Bereft homes, loved ones and all that's familiar

بے گھر گھر، پیارے اور وہ سب کچھ جو مانوس ہے

a welcoming embrace is what they ask for.

Displaced by violence, chaos, and terror,

stability and peace are what they ask for.

Carrying what little possession left,

basic needs met are what they ask for.

The young still cling to each brighter tomorrow,

Their dreams being reality is what they ask for.

ایک خوش آمدید گلے وہی ہے جو وہ مانگتے ہیں۔

تشدد، افراتفری اور دہشت سے بے گھر

استحکام اور سکون وہی ہے جو وہ مانگتے ہیں۔

جو تھوڑی سی ملکیت رہ گئی اسے اٹھانا

بنیادی ضروریات پوری ہوتی ہیں جو وہ مانگتے ہیں۔

نوجوان اب بھی ہر روشن کل سے چمٹے ہوئے ہیں

ان کے خوابوں کو حقیقت بنا کر وہ مانگتے ہیں۔

Having weathered unspoken traumas untold,

healing old wounds is what they ask for.

Trudging onward through courts and immigration offices,

عدالتوں اور امیگریشن دفاتر کے ذریعے آگے

بڑھنا

kindness and an entry is what they ask for.

ناقابل بیان صدمات کا سامنا کرنا

پرانے زخموں کا مرہم وہی مانگتے ہیں۔

مہربانی اور داخلہ وہی ہے جو وہ مانگتے ہیں۔



Yearning for a chance children deserve,  
the hope of a new life is what they ask for.  
Seeking not to conquer but to work and learn,  
فتح حاصل کرنے کے لیے نہیں بلکہ کام اور سیکھنے کی تلاش میں  
peaceful coexistence is what they ask for.

بچوں کے لیے ایک موقع کی تڑپ  
ایک نئی زندگی کی امید وہی ہے جو وہ مانگتے ہیں۔  
پر امن بقائے باہمی وہی ہے جو وہ مانگتے ہیں۔

What they really ask for,  
is a chance to live the American dream.

،وہ واقعی کیا مانگتے ہیں  
امریکی خواب جینے کا ایک موقع ہے۔

Student Name: Sophia Liu  
 Grade: 10  
 School: Clements High School  
 Title: When a Ghost Bleeds  
 Category: Short Story  
 Key: Gold Key  
 Educator: Stephanie Yang

December, 1937— five days after.

The skies finish crying when shadows fall from cloud to soil. Cold, wet breaths puff over me as winter walks into my room. Lixue's muttering nestles under my skin. Her syllables huddle for bits of warmth tucked somewhere between blankets. They dig into walls of muscle, drink from strings of lymph.

"Yuze," Lixue calls— her voice the waver of a zither string. The door blows shut behind her. "Brother."

I pretend to wake. My vision is bleared from watching dawn push its soft-lit edges across the ceiling. I rub at my eyes. When they refocus, Lixue is staring back. There's a puddle that her embroidered shoes trail in from the courtyard. Her cheeks and nose are tinged red from cold, and her dark hair sticks to her forehead.

"Hm?" I urge her to continue.

"Can you get me another pair before we leave?" she asks and looks to the floor. "There's a hole in my shoe." I glance down at her feet again. The white of a sock peeks through where the center of a peony should be— flowering from its embroidered frays.

"Yes, I can." I feel a tightness in my nape. "How old are these ones?" I think of wielding summer memories like the batons of the Japanese, the rifles of the British, a flag of China.

"I don't remember." The moment passes at Lixue's response. "Don't buy anything too expensive, I just want to keep the snow out," she adds.

"Okay, hand me the coins," — I frown at the thin cardigan she wears over her gown— "and then go put on a thicker coat."

Lixue nods silently. She places the pouch of silver in my palms and turns to go. I want to ask her how she's been. It's not hard to talk to her— except my blood clots in my veins, soft. In the corner of my mouth, a tongue presses the words "hard" and "painless" into the same shape. It tastes something like copper.

In the end, I decide on:

"Take care of Ma— if I don't make it back."

Lixue sucks in a wispy breath; nothing comes after that.

December, 1937— two days before.

There's a woman across the street. My father and I blink at her from the depths of an alleyway, by the soil hollow. Our chests heave and sweat mixes with filth. Mud drips like ichor from our fingertips. We put our shovels down and rest for a moment.

The sharpness of the night air colors me feverish; my body burns amidst a world that wants to be cold. The stars are licking their wounds behind smog, so it is dark too.

The only light comes from a streetlamp many buildings down. It lines the woman's jaw in gold— a sunbath at night. She is sickeningly beautiful: naked, bare to little mercies and larger cruelties. The lower half of her body is splayed across the concrete. The upper half leans against the open door of her car. Her baby is bundled up with warm wool in the passenger seat.

Father and I first walked past during daylight, the mundanity of her rotting flesh did not call for attention. Now, purple and gold blur her contours, blend where dried blood ends and asphalt begins. Wounds and scratches clothe her in place of torn linen scraps. Tucked into the dark, she could have been more than just a dead noblewoman.

When Father and I first walked past during daylight, the soldiers were already done with her.

"It's too late to save her," Father said. "We'll come back when it's safer, at night."

So, the moon is out as we drag the woman to the alley. Pieces of her skin tear on loose rocks and sharp edges. I glance at Father. He's not looking at the woman.

At the edge of the pit, he takes the car keys from her clasp. It's a little difficult: rigor mortis touches her fingertips— posthumous in its protection. I think of what Father told me the first time I learned internment. There are many things that are too late, but endings only come early.

"Go get her baby, we should bury them together," Father tells me tonight.

December, 1937— the day of.

A murmur mingles with the dying air. I pause as I pass the master bedroom. Behind a door, words hide under floorboards.

"—was out...devils...over Nanjing...kids...with us." I try to make out my mother's words. I tighten my grip on a bundle of freshly steamed buns, the warmth seeps into my aorta.

"It's—"

It's getting dark now. Gray-blue hues spill over the walls and trees. The window is open to air the room out, and I see dim silhouettes tremble inside. My nose tickles when a breeze flutters by. I clamp my mouth shut, but I still sneeze. Behind the door goes quiet.

After a moment of silence, I call, "Ma, I bought the buns you asked for."

The door opens just enough for Mother to slip through. Her eyelids are pink and swollen. I inspect the hem of her dress, the mole on her arm, the ends of her hair. I try to at least look her in the face— if not the eye.

I can hear Grandmother's sniffing slip out from the bedroom too. In her whimpers, the house is rotting. The roof gives under the press of the sky. If I reached for its wooden frames, they would come away under my hand. I don't reach out.

"The soldiers are in a frenzy," Mother whispers. "They aren't human. Stay inside unless you must leave. You don't know what they'll do." I cradle the bread closer as she goes on about the war. She gasps every exhale, as if the air may stay trapped within her lungs. Then, her words catch in her throat. Her whole face crumples inwards like a body hit by gunshot.

"They got your father."

At this, I meet her eye. I don't understand what she means; the walls of my heart squeeze harder, anyway.

Mother pushes the door open wide— an ache creaking on its hinges.

There's watercolor marred into Father's skin. Maroons and purples paint a man on his last breath, who already took his last breath. Crimson slicks across his chest. The fester of a wound becomes familiar, now.

Grandma sits by Father's bedside. She clutches at a thin blanket and pulls it to rest over his face. My eyes trace the planes of shadow on it, waiting for a shift of movement. The blanket is still.

Something in decay wafts out from my ribs. It pulls me apart at the seams. It makes it easier to press on where it hurts. Bile comes up my throat, and rancid edges grate my insides. I turn from the door as it spills out of me. The earth spins too.

December, 1937— a week after.

The heavens are holding back. I look up at the stained splotches of clouds and evening: cupped hands interlinking. Stray snowflakes flutter down between the blue's fingers. The earth is powdered white.

Lixue is looking out the window to my right. She sits where the dead baby had lain.

Mother and Grandmother are pressed together in the back, eyes closed. They would collapse under the weight of their own spines, if not for each other.

My foot is light against the pedal. The car glides forward.

I don't drive like Father did. He brought the car to our home with a route read from the lines of his palm. I slip tires over ice and sprawl westward instead, maybe to Hefei or Chongqing. I don't know how far I can go before the West becomes East again.

The walls of our courtyard crawl away into the looming ones bordering the city. They are crumbling at the ridges. The car tumbles toward an arched gateway, with a river just beyond it. There's a small gathering of a few soldiers. One of them points at us, and then bullets swirl up with the snow. Mother and Grandmother still rest behind me, but Lixue leans against the window. She doesn't flinch when a shot streams past the glass.

The shadow of the arch settles over us, then evaporates. We make it to the bridge, and the fallen bullets patter at our backs.

"There are so many bodies," Lixue says. The riverside is a field of faces. Every gaze I meet belongs to an unblinking eye. Stretched arms reach out for the water. The ones that fall in get a burial, at least. The dirt runs red into the Yangtze. "Is a funeral under your own blood worth it?"

"Don't look," I tell Lixue. She keeps looking anyway.

February, 1939— two years after.

"Please," Lixue begs, "don't leave."

"It's for the country." Lixue doesn't let go of my arm, and her fingers trace a trail of pink.

"No one cares about the country." Lixue tries to pull me back inside the house. "You'll die. The fighting only ends when there are no more lives to take."

"I'd rather it be mine than yours," I tell her. Lixue keeps pulling. The battle has already started, then. Sometimes a war is just the ways we hurt each other: a conversation stretched taut, a look tinged to bruising.

"You're being selfish," she says. "I can't drive, and what is Ma supposed to do? Her bones snap at a brush now. Have you seen her face, how she wanders through the days?"

"I couldn't drive either. You'll learn." I wrap my arms around Lixue. Her grasp goes slack. "I'll miss you."

April, 1941— four years after.

It's quiet in the plain. I'm hidden within tall blades of green, syncing my inhales to the rustle of wind. The sun shines yellow. It's peaceful out here, in the middle of the battle. Everyone is scared.

I hold my gun tighter and walk ahead. The tips of the silver grass brush my cheeks. Just as I turn around, someone pushes from my side. We tumble into the soil. I blink up at the soldier, and he shoots me.

I pull the trigger too. The man slumps into the earth. I press a hand to my ribs, and it comes back red and damp. I stare up at the swaying grass. Rays of light cut through in stripes, mellow. Then, I turn my head to the side. I come face to face with the man.

His eyes are black like mine, and he blinks slowly. A trickle of blood wells up my throat. I part my lips to let it drip out. The other soldier is coughing, and the wetness leaves him in bursts. It's best like this: two saviors, two murderers. The bullet in my side would decompose with me. The others would die unused.

The man gives me a smile, triumphant. I smile back.

August, 1947— ten years after.

Lixue holds my funeral two years after the war ends. There's no body, but she's mourning a remembrance. Even the living become dead once they are forgotten. Incense is lit, and joss paper burns softly to the side. The orange-kindled flames glare against a backdrop of gray. Lixue huddles inwards— shivering from cold and tears. It is evening time; no other warmth burns in this house.

She picks up a rusted photo frame. In it is a picture of us from before the war. Her thumb brushes against my cheek, and I stay smiling even after it pulls away. Then, Lixue places the frame down beside her. She hovers her hands over the fire. Her palms stray together, and she reaches in to cup the flame. It ignites across her fingertips. When it crawls up her arms, setting her gown ablaze, she drops the pile to the floor.

A line of heat snarls across the floorboards. Lixue watches how winter melts away as the fire rises. She lies down next to the incense— smoke curling around her body like a dragon's tail. She whimpers a little, but only her eyelids tremble.

Lixue looks frail now. Her breaths are pulled from her in tremulous drags. There will be no one to hold her as she passes into the afterlife. In that way, survival might've been the worser end.

Still, her gaze softly flits to me— as if seeing. Lixue's eyes are the same as they were in our youth. One of those early summers, she had asked me, what does a ghost do when its haunting place fades to the past? Does it gain a home or lose one?

Student Name: David Beckham Unaegbu

Grade: 10

School: Elsik High School

Title: Whispers in the Silence

Category: Poetry

Key: Gold Key

Educator:

In the quiet corners where memories reside,  
Shadows linger, and emotions coincide.  
A solemn dance unfolds, sorrow in the air,  
As life's story takes on a somber flair.

A hushed dirge echoes through the heart's maze,  
Where sunlight fades, and shadows graze.  
A haunting melody whispers a goodbye,  
Tears paint portraits against the evening sky.

In the calm of twilight's tender embrace,  
Grief dons a cloak, a starless space.  
Footprints of absence mark time's shore,  
Love's echoes linger, forevermore.

Moonlight weeps in gentle streams,  
Reflecting shattered fragments of dreams.  
Each teardrop carries a silent pain,  
In emotions' realm, where feelings wane.

Yet, in the depths of the soul's abyss,  
A resilient ember persists.  
Love's legacy, a flickering light,  
Guiding us through the darkest night.

In the tapestry of loss, threads may fray,  
But strength emerges, finding its way.  
In the ebb and flow of grief's tide,  
Hope whispers, "You're forever by my side."

Student Name: Kayla Le  
Grade: 12  
School: I H Kempner High School  
Title: High School Portfolio  
Category: Portfolio Category(Writing)  
Key: Gold Key  
Educator: Haley Grimes

### A Vital Role

Humorists have been around for centuries. They have been entertaining us, making us laugh

about relatable moments, and commenting on social issues surrounding their time. Humor plays a role not only in entertainment but also in politics, famous satiric pieces, and witty social commentary. Today, humorists can expand their audience on social media and make a more significant impact. Social media has given an opportunity to up-and-coming humorists to compete with the audience of famous comedic shows, such as Saturday Night Live (SNL). This made small comedian's effect extend further than before social media was prevalent throughout the last twenty years. However, we must keep in mind that their audience varies in perspective. Therefore, criticism and praise can both be expected. In his 2004 book *Status Anxiety*, Alain de Botton argues that humorists are vital to society; therefore, humorists get "to convey with impunity messages that might be dangerous or impossible to state directly." Although some humorists indeed play a vital role in society, like satirists, most humorists often receive backlash and serve to entertain, making their impact on society less significant.

Satirists fall under the category of humorists but address more serious topics surrounding society. It can center around obvious ironic, bitter, or lighthearted humor while addressing some serious topics. Authors of satire tend to get away with publishing bold and controversial ideas because most of them are not supposed to be taken seriously. In "A Modest Proposal" by Jonathan Swift, he proposes the "modest" idea of consuming babies like livestock animals to address the famine and corruption in 18th century Ireland. Eating babies is an obviously absurd idea that is not intended to be taken literally, but Swift goes to ensure that he portrays his actual thoughts on corruption, famine, and poverty in a specific paragraph. He changes his syntax, tone, and italicizes it to make the text stand out even further. This illustrates how satirists can get away with sending seemingly strange plots and ideas because the main purpose of the piece is to focus on a specific social ill. Additionally, in political cartoons, illustrators purposely exaggerate symbols to portray their message



and usually show their actual perspective on the issue through the title and subtext. However, political cartoons are an example of satire that can be unsuccessful of creating concrete change. For instance, Thomas Nast created multiple cartoons criticizing the political machine Tammany Hall who took advantage of immigrants and vulnerable businesses. Although many agreed with his political cartoons, Tammany Hall still had supporters. Not only are satirists the ones who usually get criticism, but it is more frequent through comics.

Most humorists do not fully get away with conveying messages with impunity because of increased social media presence and different individual perspectives. With social media, humorists receive more criticism because they reach a wider audience with varying viewpoints. For example, humorist David Sedaris received responses like "How dare you torture animals like this!" from a harmless joke about a bear not knowing English which is fictional. Sedaris comments on how there is nothing you can say without a negative response with increased internet use. Social media has given a platform for words to be taken seriously at the first glance and scroll away. Humorists are aware there can always be criticism, meaning some jokes can be more misinterpreted than others. A popular instance is when comedian Chris Rock made a joke about Will Smith's wife, Jada Smith's hair loss, and Will Smith slapped him. This created mixed reactions: some felt angered, while others were perplexed and confused about his reaction. Nonetheless, most reactions were hostile, attacking Will Smith, saying he was dramatic and that his response was unwarranted. Social media only made it more widespread. It became a buzz in the daily news and snuck into classroom conversations. Overall, humorists can convey messages with punishment rather than getting away with it. This decreases their overall impact.

Granted, humorists do criticize social ills, which in turn, can make a positive impact. By calling out the wrongs of a viewpoint, those on the side of the social ill could feel encouraged to change their behavior. SNL's "President Barbie" parodies a Barbie commercial where the narrator pushes the young girls to play with President Barbie when they would rather play with their toys. The SNL skit reveals pushy "feminist" attitudes of the past, where women becoming President is unimaginable, but the kid replies, "I wasn't alive then!" Now, kids live in a reality where becoming a president isn't a farfetched goal, so pushing these attitudes on them is not empowering—just forceful. Therefore, this skit shows how actual feminism allows girls to play with any toy and, through a bigger lens, lets women have autonomy over their choices. Pushing old values on the new generation where it does not apply can call out the audience and make them want to change their behavior and make a positive impact. However, varying reactions are still

inevitable. An example of a satirical show that backfired was “The Colbert Report,” where comedian Stephen Colbert assumes the character of a conservative cable news pundit. Since it plays along with conservative beliefs, many can mistake it for an actual expression of his political stance rather than a parody. Fake news is now more prevalent than ever with social media, with many being the culprits believing the first thing they see without fact-checking. Consequently, this leaves humorous pieces to be taken literally and backfire from their original purpose. Additionally, Poe’s law, an adage of Internet culture, says that, without a clear indicator of the author’s message, any parody of extreme views can be mistaken for a sincere expression. The fact that there is an internet phenomenon as such speaks to the extent that humorists can be misunderstood. All in all, humorists can still carry a positive impact by criticizing problems, but varying reactions can muddle the intent of humorists and lessen their social impact. Therefore, their effects on society are not as significant because they can be misunderstood.

In conclusion, although some humorists play a crucial role in society, most humorists often face repercussions and serve to entertain, causing their impact on society to be less notable. Distinctions between audiences will always exist, but we should strive to connect and discover the underlying meaning behind humorists' intentions for the audience. Whether to amuse or to create change, humorists seek to influence the world, so we should give them space for it in society.

Student Name: Rida Ahmad

Grade: 11

School: I H Kempner High School

Title: Who Am I if Not Sunshine and Greatness?

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Susan henson

When I was around the ages of 10-13, I remember clearly being embarrassed to be out anywhere with my mother. If I saw someone I recognized while shopping, I would quickly hide in another aisle. Her long shirt with designs like flowers and shapes embroidered all over, with a scarf draped over her chest. Even her earrings, shipped from our homeland. It all screamed Pakistan. Since I was born and raised in America, I was used to this scream. It cried out for me to remove anything that seemed too ethnic from my life. Because, in my head, sunshine and greatness was to be what I saw on TV, an American girl living the American dream. Already set back without the pale skin and blonde hair, I was determined to get as close to “normal” as I could.

The earliest I can remember of this odd fear of being seen with my very culturally appearing mother, is grocery shopping. We picked out all the essentials for dinner. Waiting in the line, I cautiously watched our surroundings for someone I might know, as this was a popular destination to be at an all too popular time. When it got to our turn, I helped bag the items while my mother attempted to speak with the cashier in her broken English. I would always attempt to talk for her but to no avail. She would always stick up a finger, signaling me to stay quiet as she wanted to speak for herself. Back then, I tried my very best to tune it out as I listened to the shuffle of plastic bags as I placed them in the cart, embarrassed when she asked the employee to repeat themselves.

As we walked out of the store though, to my horror, we saw a bunch of friends who were

familiar to me at school, not so much outside. With no aisle to duck into, I greeted them without

looking at my mother whose very Pakistani appearance was standing out between all of us. She

greeted them too as best she could.

This small instance made me feel the color gripping onto my skin all the way on the ride home, and the alarm inside my brain made my ears ring as if my mom could control our ethnicity.

From then on, I continued to cautiously watch myself, hating my home life where I imagined I was not fit. I never understood why, if we lived in America, it was so important for us

to continue acting so foreign. I would even put on extra perfume before walking off to school at

times in fear someone would point me out for “smelling like curry,” a popular phrase said to

those who were of South Asian descent. I felt like the Evil Queen straight from Snow White. I

would look into the mirror every day asking it if I was someone I wanted to be, but was not. And

when I couldn’t become someone else, I tried everything to make myself change. Only the girl

staring back often wouldn’t suffice, even with all my hard work to make myself exemplify greatness.

Suddenly enough, my sophomore year of high school began. By this time, I was sure of what I was. I was a coconut—this name made to mock those South Asian who were cleansed of

their culture. I surprisingly sat comfortably with this name. I remember being asked by a group

of girls I was familiar with if I wanted to participate in “I-Fest.” I-Fest was an event at Kempner

celebrating diversity and the rich culture existing within its walls. It was the opposite of what I

wanted, to dance on stage flaunting exactly what I needed to hide from the world. I couldn’t

fathom flaunting off some unique music and dances to anyone let alone my classmates, the same

people I wanted to show my capabilities to. Yet, the answer that came out of my mouth was

“Yes.”

Practices went by all too fast, like a blur and eventually, there we were, ready to run out on to stage. I had only chosen to do one dance, as I had already felt my stomach drop at the

thought of being on stage for more than I had to. I was decked out in full Pakistani attire, tikka resting on my head, flared pants, a short top that ran down into a sheer net on my hips. I was the center of attention no matter where I went. It was excruciating. At least when we practiced, I didn't have to look Pakistani. Caught between my thoughts and the crowd's cheers I heard my cue.

I ran out like planned and got into position but when it was time to do the first move, I froze. I felt like a dog with a tail between its legs. Only this dog had an audience, making it more devastating. Missing the first move, I contemplated giving up and running off that stage. Until I heard it.

An uproar of screams and surprise. "All of that, for us?" I thought to myself. I felt like an attraction when I got on to the stage. But in that instant, I felt something more powerful. I had

something that made it worth the crowd's applause, I just had to figure it out. All of these thoughts ran through my head within the span of a second and I found myself dancing to the

second step, third, fourth, until I eventually got comfortable enough to display emotion on my

blank face. By the end of it all, we all spun out of a circle, creating an array of dresses flowing in

a circle motion. Without realizing, and adrenaline filling my very core, I gave the crowd a kiss

and spun once again behind the curtains. There it was again. That same cheer from the crowd,

same enthusiasm. I couldn't believe it in the beginning, but it was true.

My culture, the very thing that diversified me so much from other American's was the same thing that brought sunshine to that auditorium. The same sunshine I spent my whole

education trying to find, lay atop the tikka on my forehead, and the embroidered gems in my clothing.

I knew from that moment; sunshine is not in who I wanted to portray myself to be, but who I already was. And that greatness is how well I utilized my identity and its ability to change

the future for myself, and others like me. So, from now on, I will participate. I participate culturally, I diversify my path, make it stand out compared to others and follow the sunshine that

illuminates the path into greatness.

Student Name: Kayla Stewart  
Grade: 9  
School: North Shore Ninth Grade Center  
Title: My Former Refuge  
Category: Poetry  
Key: Gold Key  
Educator: Charlene Culpepper

My Former Refuge  
As I approach the door  
I run my hands along the foxtail bushes  
The satisfying feeling of the bristles against my skin  
the backyard  
A big dog  
We're almost the same size  
I'm almost scared as he jumps on me to play  
The lemon tree  
The unripe lemons as they dangle on the branches

Upstairs  
The computer room  
Games to play for hours on end  
My uncle's room  
The slight smell of must and cigarettes  
The dreamcatchers by the window  
The sunlight peeking through the window shades

Now  
My uncle's house  
I stare blankly  
At what was once  
Lucious green bushes  
Now brown, dried, and dead

The backyard  
Bear is long gone  
The lemon tree  
Pulled from the ground  
I stare in its absence

Upstairs

The computer room  
The stench of urine drowns my nose  
I can't even step inside  
My uncle's room  
Now belonging to my cousin  
Still smells the same  
He's just like him

Nothings the same  
It's ruined  
and now I grieve  
My former refuge  
has its former refugee



Student Name: Adelayda Rodriguez

Grade: 10

School: Galena Park High School

Title: The Cycle

Category: Poetry

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Melanie Stephens

Love is a series of complex chemical reactions taking place between the brain and body and it comes and goes. That warm feeling of butterflies in our tummies, well it fades. You let it go and it fades, fades, fades, and fades away until you're left with nothing but pure emptiness. It's a fairytale, it's beautiful, and it's a "never-ending puddle of happiness." The love isn't lost but the feeling changes, "Oh to have that feeling again!" Nothing can be better than when we met right? Wrong, pain comes and goes. These tests, they drain you. They bring you down and they put you through everything until you feel as if you can't anymore. Until you fall to your knees begging for it all to end. Draining your tears as they hit the floor. Everything fades away. I can never look into his eyes again. No fair, no fair, no fair. Boom back into that chemical reaction. He stayed, he cared for you, he loves you. All over again you get to feel a stronger warm feeling going throughout your body. The warmth of his hand in yours. The happiness your heart feels. It's home, he's home.

Student Name: Angel Pina  
Grade: 12  
School: Galena Park High School  
Title: The Investment  
Category: Poetry  
Key: Gold Key  
Educator: Kendra Walker

It's all a journey  
Even if you think it's baloney  
You have to fall in order to get up  
Just make sure you don't give up

Reach out and learn  
To reach what you yearn  
But remember that there's a cost  
There's no time to be soft

I've let go of a lot  
Just to reach my spot  
I didn't start with much  
Had to separate from the bunch

There was no support  
Morale was short  
All I had was my own will  
To pay a large bill

With my heart, I poured  
Effort was all I could afford  
Earned a spot on the podium  
And claimed my reward

Student Name: Mia Cantu  
 Grade: 11  
 School: North Shore Senior High School  
 Title: Unveiled  
 Category: Science Fiction & Fantasy  
 Key: Gold Key  
 Educator: Manuel Marasigan

Dr. Buonopane has a mission. He doesn't know how to execute it, nor does he know if it is philosophically possible. However, many years of experience have led him to a conclusion: What we see is an illusion—merely a blanket of false emotions and identity. Therefore, Nicolò Buonopane is going to yank off the blanket. Countless vials and decanters sit along the walls, placed in rows atop worn-out wooden shelves. They each contain oddments and specimens of all sorts, found in strange corners of the earth in times past. One jar, held in the skillful hands of Dr. Buonopane, consists of an eye-catching psychedelic fuschia-pigmented flower. The label reads Loropetalum, sparking a sense of curiosity in Nicolò. “How could such a distinctive flower be placed in my laboratory without my knowledge? And with such an unnecessarily large amount of soil?” Finding himself becoming increasingly confused, he quickly strides toward a bookshelf in the back of the lab. His fingers deftly skim the spines of each book, in search of the right one. Botany and Botanicals: Volume III. Dr. Buonopane flips through the alphabetically sorted pages, until he lands at L. Loropetalum, a plant native to south-eastern Asia, China, and Japan, is haemostatic and purifying, known for its ability to treat tuberculosis, dysentery, and enteritis as a decoction. “You might be worth my while.” Dr. Buonopane says, staring appraisingly at the flower. He places it in a nearby crate for usage. In the crate, there are many other jars sitting in wait. Many have been here for months—others have just been placed within recent times. As he flips through pages of notes and procedures, the door is suddenly opened. “Good morning, Doctor.” A young woman says, standing behind him. Nicolò slowly straightens himself and turns to face her, taking off his spectacles in discontent. “How do I find you?” She asks. “In the middle of momentous experimental preparations.” He states in a formal manner. “Oh, lovely. I was hoping that you might spare some time to look at my thesis and abstract?” “Perhaps if you had knocked or initiated a meeting in advance rather than boorishly waltzing in

my lab and disrupting my own research, Ms. Shi." Dr. Buonopane deadpans.

Anna Shi frowns. She hasn't ever seen him this offbeat.

Rumors circulate the University that Dr. Buonopane is going mad due to his "pivotal" experiment, which has been in the works for over a year.

Anna stares at the wooden crate sitting behind him.

"What's in the crate?" She asks, walking up to it.

"Many things. Many things which you have no business asking about or looking through." Says the Doctor, but it was no use.

Anna Shi picks up a vial filled with a round and gooey pale pink substance. There were small chunks of what-looks-like dried mucus.

"Salamander brain. What for?" She asks, tilting the jar and examining it.

There was an uncomfortable moment of silence.

"Yes, the salamander, a symbol of fire, an element often linked to passion and intensity, represents the act of being vulnerable and expressive in order to convey one's desires and emotions. Though the species is also known to embody the essence of the soul and authentic existence, and by utilizing the cognitive capacities of this creature it will allow me to demonstrate the profound ardor and genuine identity residing within our own souls."

Anna carefully places the vial back in the crate, looking up at Dr. Buonopane.

He does this often. It is what he is known for.

Many describe him as, "the man who knows everything about anything."

Perhaps he should have been a detective or a philosopher.

Anna Shi decides that this was his way of punishing her: Presenting a long and intellectual theorem that greatly surpassed her knowledge and made her feel inadequate.

She places her packet of literature on the workbench, smiling regrettably at Buonopane.

"Please excuse my lack of respect and nosiness. I have been experiencing some stress lately, which has caused me to become insensitive. I understand, however, that this is not a valid excuse and I apologize."

"Stress, you say?"

"Yes, Doctor. Nothing severe." Anna smiles.

Nicolò Buonopane scrunches his nose in weariness. He is blasé.

"Return here in the evening. I will have your thesis ready to give back to you."

"Thank you, Dr. Buonopane." Anna Shi bows her head gratefully, leaving the lab.

Two questions remain: For how long can one hide their true thoughts and frustrations before

they instantaneously fall into torment? For how long can a smile be forced before the face relaxes and reveals a true sense of pain?

Nicolò makes his way to the shelves, determined to find the next component. Simply by listening to Anna Shi, he finds himself more motivated—more certain that emotions can be altered and should be shared rather than bottled up and kept in the dark. Arowana scales

have much potential, though if Dr. Buonopane was caught using them—or even possessing them—he’d be fined and feasibly imprisoned. Still, they have potential. He was nearly there. Every element and material that effectively expresses human emotions and their importance is crucial for his concoction.

Some mint could do, Nicolò thinks to himself, imagining the feeling of cleanliness and refreshment that is brought by mint. Similarly, expressing one’s emotions is a purifying and cleansing experience for the mind and soul. Yes, mint.

The mint jar is placed into the overflowing crate without hesitation.

Nicolò’s hands move with vigor, scribbling notes and strategies onto paper.

Black swan blood, Haworthia cooperi, Moonseed, Heartwood shavings, Blue Jay beak.

“Caffeine break.” Dr. Buonopane implies, fixing his coat and exiting the lab. He walks in cogitation—the experiment is all he thinks about. Day and night.

Rather than sitting in rapture—sipping afternoon tea and watching cooking shows—like any other midlife Italian man—he spends his days standing amongst bubbling flasks and a questionable assortment of mythical items, whilst engaging in one-sided conversations with inanimate objects.

This project is his cordial reverie. His life purpose.

“Morning, Doctor. Your usual?” Asks a young barista in a lavender apron.

“Yes, of course. Work to do, potions to brew.” Dr. Buonopane retorts.

“How poetic.” The barista chuckles.

Nicolò Buonopane observes the man. Marko Skänder, a short, brawny music major and part-time barista with light brown skin, silver square glasses, and a charismatic mask of blithe and cheer which causes every nearby individual to become captivated by him and his curls.

Yet, does he know how visibly his veiny hands are shaking, seized by post traumatic stress and anxiety as he deliberately designs foamy milk art?

“Your latte, sir.” Marko offers the paper cup, mindful to use two hands for support.

“Doing all right this morning, Skänder?” Nicolò asks, earning a puzzled tilt of Marko’s head.

“I’m fine, just a rough day so far. Why ask?”

Dr. Buonopane watches Marko place his hands on his hips in anticipation, staring intently.

“You will find out by noon.” Nicolò sips the hot creamy liquid, the intensity causing him to lose consciousness for a short moment. He lets out a grunt of consumption before strolling in the opposite direction, leaving Marko in disarray.

Colors and particles of gallimaufry swirled wondrously, encompassing a black cauldron in a cloud of charm. A smirk of fulfillment plays on Buonopane’s lips as he tosses dust and flowers and gunks into the brew. Bubbles and steam rise to his nostrils. Aromatics dance in the air.

It smells of floral notes—accompanied by a small whiff of fungus and blood. The color is deep—resembling an eggplant or raisin.

Dr. Buonopane stirs the potion diligently, transferring it to a large round flask soon after. He swirls it in his hand, focusing on the thick texture. The potion possessed the clarity of a crystal—transparent to an extent—yet within its depths, it expressed an intensely luminous shade of inky purple.

He lifts the bottle to his lips, his curved mustache twitching at the bizarre aroma. Without batting an eye, Nicolò swigs the fluid in one. The feeling is crisp—the flavor is metallic and perfumey. He wipes around his mouth, suddenly undergoing dizziness and heart palpitations. The taste lingered, leaving a reminiscence of herbs and fresh mint.

He observes the room, wondering how he would call for help if he faints. The floor began to spin, making him feel another five feet lower. He holds onto the workbench in stupor. A thick folder sits on it—it is far away from his reach. Suddenly, there are words.

They float in the air, surrounding the burnt yellow paper. He cannot recall what resides in it.

Mendacious. Apathetic. Dull. Fraudulent. Cursory. Entitled. Sloppy. Plagiarized.

Perhaps, Dr. Buonopane's eyes are deceiving him—perhaps this hallucination is a side effect. He snatches his spectacles away from his face and vigorously rubs his eyes, seeing prism noise.

The dizziness is gone, yet the confusion still stands. Nicolò watches as words pop up into the atmosphere. They are hovering around the folder, still.

The disorientation has caused him to forget why he is here—why he wanted to brew the potion in the first place.

He walks to the folder. It is Anna Shi's thesis. He must be seeing the emotions within it.

The tones and feelings inhabiting her written words.

Impossible.

He stares at it, acquiring any piece of information he possibly can. The words continue to emerge, now becoming phrases and expressions. One thing is certain: Anna Shi has failed. Nicolò Buonopane, however, has triumphantly succeeded.

He lifts his wrist, looking down at the time. He is determined to have a trial—a moment of truth.

It is just before noon, and Dr. Buonopane has already chosen his first subject.

"We meet again, Doctor."

"Yes, Marko."

There is an entire story circling Marko Skänder's head. As Nicolò's gaze intensifies, Marko finds himself confused once again. He starts to believe the rumors. They would make sense. "Is there something you want, Dr. Buonopane?" Marko asks hostilely.

"You read my mind, Skänder. I simply want closure. Concealed in your presence are the intricacies and former conflicts that you choose to ignore. Nonchalantly, you dismiss your vices and detrimental habits, camouflaging them, duping those around you, projecting a false persona. I cannot find peace until it is clear to you that you are deceiving not only yourself, but those you hold dear to you." He asserts with severity.

Nicolò Buonopane's fluent Italian accent projects itself more than usual.

"I'm not sure I know what you're referring to." Says Marko, his eyebrows crinkling. "Then I shall dumb it down for you. As a child you chose to engage in verbal outbursts towards your parents, this behavior resulting from a teenager struggling with intense anger problems and lacking the financial means to seek therapy. Consequently, your father who adored you developed into an alcoholic, saddened by the belief of his own son hating him. He passed on due to liver disease, thereby influencing you to mirror his behavior as a means to cope with your grief and regret, despite your mother repeatedly warning you of the consequences, you proceeded to hide liquor bottles around your bedroom, bottles which had been given to you by a group of outlaws you encountered one night in a nearby alleyway. Outlaws who encouraged you that the solution to your issues lie at the bottom of a bottle. Shortly thereafter, your addiction surfaced and you found yourself in the frequent company of criminals of a considerably higher age. After becoming an adult and obtaining your driving license, you succumbed to its influence when you drove while intoxicated, killing two of them in a tragic accident, presenting you with the dire depiction of not only your dead father but also your two closest companions who offered you guidance and support during your period of mourning. Even now, you persist in holding yourself responsible for their deaths. You hold steadfast to the notion that it was your actions that killed them, yet you adamantly decline seeking mental assistance. You refuse to acknowledge your deeply rooted trauma and anxiety. You refuse to allow others into your life due to their likely perception of you. It is your belief that regardless of who you seek solace in, you will unquestionably be recognized as nothing more than an untold killer."

Marko Skënder's feet stay planted on the floor, a guilty expression on his face. His eyes are glossy. His lips are curved downwards in a frown, rather than the usual cheerful smile. Dr. Buonopane leans closer to Marko's disheartened face, beside his left ear.

"You bear no culpability, for you are not of the sort of a killer. Except, you are unveiled, and you must seek help." Dr. Buonopane rests a hand on Marko's shoulder.

Marko looks at the floor, feeling an immediate sense of dread.

Nicolò moves back and wears a small beam of hope, before walking away once again. As he returns to the laboratory, he finds an unexpected visitor.

"Ms. Shi, you are early."

"Yes, doctor, I apologize. I happened to notice that the door was left unlocked, and I hoped to briefly check on my thesis." Says Anna Shi, with a slight flush in her cheeks. Dr. Buonopane sees the words. There are many, and they are startling. He hadn't expected this.

"On another note, I couldn't help but notice your brew. What is it? How is your experiment coming along, Doctor, if I may ask?" Anna Shi nods her head to the bubbling cauldron. Upon scanning the potion, Nicolò notices a singular extra word in the air, near a jar.

Turning back to Anna Shi, he stares into the brown of her eyes, detecting utter betrayal.

"What's wrong, Doctor?"

"I half expected you to tell me, Anna Shi. But since you chose not to, I suppose I will tell you."

Anna bites her lip in fear, her stomach plummeting as if it descended into the depths of hell.

"In regards to your thesis, I was quite surprised by your failure. It appears that you have utilized

external sources without thoroughly reviewing your work. You have clearly plagiarized, improperly conducted the experiment, and demonstrated minimal effort. You approach me seeking assistance, fully aware of your lack of potential and dedication to successfully graduate, although the hoax thesis is of no importance to you as it was simply used as a distraction." States Dr. Buonpane.

"Doctor, I believe you are mistaken." Anna Shi contests, promptly becoming disrupted by him.

"I shall answer your first question: I would venture to say that my experiment was carried out with great proficiency—to an extent where I have the ability to see through you. I see through the underlying emotions and decisions within you, and I have seen enough to discern that you snuck into the main office last night with the intention of acquiring a key to my laboratory, where you audaciously placed a suspicious flower on my shelves. You were well aware of my guaranteed skepticism, so you waited for a proper chance to carry out the next part of your plan. Just moments before our current discussion, you surreptitiously gained entry into my lab once more with the same key, attempting to convince me of my own negligence in failing to lock my own door—a mistake I would not ever make. You were hoping to discover that my experiment had not yet begun, allowing you to return to your flower and introduce a toxic metal into the soil. Unbeknownst to you, my initial suspicions regarding the excessive soil in the jar prompted me to research that *Loropetalum* can thrive with minimal water for a brief period, without requiring such a substantial quantity of soil. The flower obtains a faint smell of arsenic—a smell which fills my nostrils at this current moment—allowing me to naturally see through your demeaning attempt to poison me in order to fulfill the widespread rumors that I have, in fact, lost my sanity."

"Doctor, please, may I explain?" Anna Shi panics, her thin eyebrows creasing in worry. Buonpane interrupts her, his voice becoming thunderous as his revelation story escalates.

"It was your expectation that others would perceive me as having inadvertently poisoned myself by becoming so deeply engulfed in my experiment, leading me to carelessly overlook an unfamiliar plant. You employed your 'thesis' as a diversion from my work, and opted to exploit the poison incident as a means to cover up your heedless misconduct, fully aware that the act of plagiarism was easily detectable and anticipating my intention to report you. You awaited me to become easily intrigued by the flower, and allocate my time dwelling on it while the roots absorbed every mass of the poisoned soil, where I would then stir it into my brew and consume it, dying in an instant, before having



seen your 'thesis' and seeking your expulsion from the university for murder and delinquency."

Anna Shi's tears gathered in her eye, threatening to spill. She felt nothing but regret.

"How did you know this?" She let out, her soft voice quivering in fear for her future.

"Simply, the highly anticipated project which I have been dedicated to for more than a year that

led the campus to perceive me as a mad scientist with an odd talent for alchemy. Black swan blood, owing to its symbol of vulnerability and aid. Loropetalum petals, as the flower is purifying and healing. Haworthia cooperi, a flower with pellucid petals, symbolizing communication transparency. Moonseed, a seed with layered foliage, embodying layers of hidden identity. Salamander brain, a passionate and expressive creature. Heartwood shavings, as in the openness of the heart. Mint bestows fresh thoughts. Blue jay beak, the bird's whispers illustrate confessions. Limestone silt encourages optimism. Jellyfish tentacle, an animal connected to resilience of pain. Finally, Duck eye signifies our self-discovery." Nicolò Buonopane smiles in satisfaction. "Anna Shi, you are unveiled."

Student Name: Karina Pedroza  
 Grade: 10  
 School: Ball High School  
 Title: The Saints Implore  
 Category: Science Fiction & Fantasy  
 Key: Gold Key  
 Educator: Lauren Seiler

Oh, how longingly the saints cry out to me!  
 They wish for me to follow them yet I desire to be free

With every choked breath I take of the dank, putrid air of this shattered city, I feel evermore bound to this prison of mine. This city is contaminating me from the inside out. I can feel it in my bones, just as I feel the vibrations beneath in the bones of the earth Herself. They are screams of anguish as our Mother is being drilled and bored to Her core. Yet within the turmoil, order is contained. Our work progress is logged to determine the amount of food we deserve. We labor from sunrise to sunset or else our hearts stop, our bodies slaves to the chips They brand us with. We walk in single file as if we have no minds of our own. There are no rules, there are only the paths They want us to follow and we must if we value our lives.

Yet some are a glitch, a menace to our artificial society. Some stand up to our shackles and spit in Their faces. And perish. Against my better judgment, I cannot help but agree with them. What is the point of living if it is like this? Why not die expediently instead of rotting away as the butane and radiation slowly destroy us? I am witnessing it occur at this moment as another collapses from our poisonous air and is whisked away by two rusty droids and a hover stretcher. I continue on in silence as I scan the chip on my wrist and push the turnstile to board the light rail. We are all condemned to a death sentence in this penitentiary of frigid elevator cells guarded by unmerciful, all-seeing droid wardens. If only I had the courage to rebel in some way, any way, just to show Them that They do not own me completely, that I have these thoughts They cannot own.

I push these musings out of my head and look towards the gray sky to view the home of our shackles, the pristine Heaven. We strip our only home of its resources to preserve Their perfect paradise. Often I wonder what They'll do when Earth finally gives in to Their perpetual violation of Her vessel.

The bell on the rail dings, indicating that the workers stop here and I am jerked back into reality. I stand up stiffly to walk out of the light rail, but spots invade my vision and I begin to feel lightheaded. The world is spinning, my feet become heavy like cement. I stop walking for a moment, and in my peripheral vision I see the droids finally noticing this atypical behavior, until at last the darkness claims me.

The voices whisper bitter words of cruelty and hate,

But why must their tone be ever so irate?

Groggily, I open my burning eyelids to a piercing light and the hazy image of an angel hovering over me. She has kind eyes, a beautiful smile, and a halo of light shining behind her. I attempt to make a sound of surprise with my scratchy throat and she laughs. It is the most possessing sound I have heard in my entire life. Her voice and face disappear like a distant dream, and all I am thinking is I must be dead. This has to be Heaven, because never have I felt this lovely.

My head pounds with the burden from billions of sins,  
The chorus is agonizing as I hear the singing of hymns,

Heaven has tied me down with bands of iron and pierced me with wires and needles. I am not sure I am in the right Heaven. The passage of time is lost to me, life is a blur of waking and sleeping and the angel. Whether she is real or a figment of my imagination is unclear.

My waking periods seem prolonged each time they happen. The iron constricting me is not too tight that I cannot breathe easily, but I cannot seem to wriggle out of them. Always after I try to escape, darkness chases me into a deep subconscious that I cannot resist. This peace is unusual. Having enough sleep is unusual. And yet if I am dead I would not need to sleep. A small notion surfaces within my muddled thoughts. What if I am being held in the paradise of the sky where They reside? Where else could I be, so clean, so white, so perfect? Too clean. Too white. Too perfect. It feels resoundingly fake and artificial.

I hear a door open and the angel walks in with her bright smile.

"How are you feeling today?" She asks while setting a tray of food on the counter. As she lowers my bedside table towards my lap and transfers the tray to it, I whisper, "Are you an angel? Have I finally escaped my miserable existence to be received into the gates of Heaven?"

Her demeanor becomes uncharacteristically somber and her lovely eyes become grave. She stares at her slender hands with an expression I cannot quite make out.

"I am afraid you are as far from Heaven as one could possibly be."

"How am I not dead?" I cry out in alarm. "All I remember was the world fading to black and then I saw radiant illumination and felt lighter than I had ever felt and...What is happening to me?"

"I'm sorry." The Not-Angel says in a hushed tone. "I'm not permitted to tell you."

Suddenly, I feel unnerved and disgusted by this perfect mystery world. Even this angel who is not truly an angel frightens me. The unease and stress I have felt over the past few days boils into anger and overtakes me. I push my food tray on the ground like a child.

"I don't want your food!" I yell. "I don't want anything to do with this strange-" my voice starts to warble. I feel exhausted and the darkness of unconsciousness is dragging me under..."take me ba-" my voice fades away and I submit to the shadows yet again.

Methuselah, did you ever feel forsaken?  
You knew that your loved ones would never awaken,

When I wake, I distinctly sense eyes watching me. Every move I make must be monitored. That is how They knew to tranquilize me when my temper exploded.

The angel has not come. No one has come. I regret screaming at her. I am sure she did not choose the life she lives. She is as trapped in her situation as I am confined to my own. It was unfair of me to lash out at her in that manner. I felt the confusion of this Heaven-like Hell overwhelm me and I was not thinking and-

The door swings open and my frenzy of thoughts become still. Have They arrived to dispose of me?

The angel walks in tentatively. Shall I apologize or choose to be prideful? Even after everything, she smiles at me as fervently as before. However, her eyes hold a foreign expression. I notice they are wary and guilt crashes over me.

"Allow me to apologize. I am not sure what came over me and am so very ashamed of acting as an animal would."

Her enchanting emerald eyes turn jubilant again as she strides toward me and I feel a glow of warm happiness within my core.

"Why, of course I forgive you, silly fool. I understand completely why this bizarre place must make you uneasy, especially considering the contrast from the Hell you've lived in your whole life. Which is why..." she leans towards me with a playful expression and whispers in my ear as if she has a grand secret to reveal, "I asked the Council if I could inform you on why you were here, to prevent further outbursts of rage." Her breath tickles my ear softly and I feel a pleasant fluttering in my stomach. Normally, I would recoil from such intimate closeness but I am as still as a statue, as unflinching as stone. She giggles sweetly and straightens. The angel continues checking my vitals, speaking as she works. "All I was allowed to disclose was that They said you were promising, I am assuming that means you are exceptionally capable in some way or the other and They wish for you to work for Them." She turns and I examine the golden ringlets of hair cascading down her back.

"I cannot refuse, can I?" I ask quietly. She inhales sharply and whirls around. The angel swallows and the tension in the air becomes palpable.

"You'd want to work with me, right?" She responds feebly. Before leaving, she faces me and mouths, 'Be patient'. My mouth dries and I sit in silence as she exits.

"Wait, angel!" The words burst out of my mouth quickly. My ears promptly turn red from the embarrassment of calling her that, but she seems amused and pleasantly surprised by the sobriquet. "I cannot just call you...angel, can I?" She considers this for a moment.

"You may refer to me as Helena if you wish." She leaves. Helena. Light. The brightness that guides me through the misleading darkness of this vicious world I have found myself trapped within. I stare into the lamp beside my bed until my vision distorts and I close my weary eyes. Why did Helena tell me to be patient? Why am I of use to the Demons that

lord over this so-called Heaven? And if I am to help Them, must I be restrained? I fall asleep to escape the tormenting questions swirling through my mind, if only for a few hours.

Did your God-given blessing warp to a curse?  
Living on while others couldn't must be adverse,

I wake to shaking and an urgent voice whispering for me to rise. The remnants of sleep cling to me and I attempt to blink the sleep out of my eyes.

"Is something wrong?" I ask weakly. At first, I could not detect who the mysterious figure was. Yet when she speaks, her voice sweeter than honey even while alarmed, I know immediately.

"No time to explain. It is necessary to leave at once."

I notice the bands that were previously around my waist and legs have peculiarly disappeared. As I swing my legs over the side of the bed, I look into Helena's eyes, searching for answers. I see nothing but distress in her dilated pupils. "Keep steady, now. Staying completely bedridden for nearly two weeks causes muscle loss."

She offers her arm and I tremulously stand up. She's correct, I can hardly maintain balance, but she provides support and I somehow manage. We hobble out the door slowly and it is ever so painful, but I grit my teeth and carry on. I know not where I am journeying toward, but Helena does and I trust her wholeheartedly. We pass through corridor after corridor of this huge labyrinth, but I hardly notice. The only thing I am focused on is placing one foot in front of the other and bearing the excruciating suffering.

"I wonder how long Maitho can carry on with freezing the cameras...and if Araminta can distract the guards just a bit more..." she mutters to herself absentmindedly. Initially, I barely process the words. But then I do, and the striking revelation numbs the affliction shooting up my legs slightly. Helena transferring me from the room I was imprisoned in is an unsanctioned activity. As I contemplate this, we arrive at our destination. I gaze upon the gigantic expanse filled with hundreds of spaceships of numerous sizes. People rush around hurriedly and Helena pulls me behind a ship before one is able to catch sight of us. I stare at our intertwined hands and feel a hinting of warmth upon my cheeks. She observes this, then grins. "Let's pray that you're not afraid of heights."

Noah, did you feel no shame as the human race was eliminated?  
I wonder if you truly believed that their minds were contaminated,

The next thing I know, we are on a spaceship and leaving Heaven behind us as the sky burns with a sunrise. And I feel something I've never felt before, an emotion that is bubbling warm in my stomach and makes my heart soar. We are free, free from the restraints and the constant surveillance and the haunting terror. However, I remember one detail that shuts down my fleeting happiness.

"Did you leave friends behind that aided in our escape?"

Helena sadly gazes at the approaching ground ahead of us.

"They'll be alright. They were discreet about their work, no one will know. I offered for them to accompany us, but they turned me down. Said their whole livelihood was there and they couldn't abandon everything."

I stay silent, deep in thought.

"We should prepare to liberate everyone, all of those who are slaves to Their corrupt ruling."

She turns her melancholy eyes towards me and smiles slightly.

"I agree."

We observe each other, not speaking. Our eyes were speaking the words we didn't need to say. I softly break the silence.

"I used to think the world was ugly, but then I saw you and you became my world."

Her eyes fill with tears as she glances out the window, blushing.

We land in a clearing in one of the few existing forests on the opposite side of Earth that Hell is in. Helena suggests that we scope out the area before unpacking the various supplies in the ship.

As our doors slide open, I hear a deafening sound ring throughout the clearing and echo off of the ship's metal. I watch in shock as Helena falls down bleeding, and I feel my former happiness freeze over and shatter into a million pieces.

Inside your ark, did you look as your friends were sentenced to the grave?

Did you ponder how God could be so heartless as children were overwhelmed by a wave?

I feel oddly calm as the ice of hate takes over my heart and infects my soul. I behold the people in front of me who took the love of my life and I come to the conclusion that I despise them with every fiber of my being.

"How?" I utter the word coldly.

One snickers. "Forgot your wrist chips, stupid."

Of course. They could track us. They mutter amongst themselves, "We can't kill that one, They're planning on using him."

My hate swells and increases even further. After everything, after murdering the one hope in my despair-filled life, forcing me to waste my life away as mindless labor, restraining me and drugging me, they expect me to help them? Never. Never. I refuse to allow Them to force me, I have had enough with Them writing the story of my life, with Them determining my bleak destiny.

With every loathsome thought, I sense a power growing within me and I let it thrive. My head is abruptly thrust back and agony like I have never felt before attacks me, but I don't attempt to stop it from taking over me. I black out.

Abraham, did you truly love the Lord or were you a sabian?

The Bible asserts your perfection but can a heathen be pelagian?

I hear the ancient whispers of Earth speak to me. She declares the answers of the universes that no human mind could comprehend. But I do, and yet I don't, and I'm confused and clear-headed and alive and dead and everything and nothing. She tells me that what I yearn for is contained within the stars. She comforts my troubled soul. I swim through the darkness punctured by holes of stars and planets, searching for the opening back to Earth. I ask Her to take me back and She complies.

The heavens revealed the secrets of the universe as God remained silent,  
Then why towards Judaism were you so compliant?

I am the Earth and the Earth is me. I burst up from the ground, breaking the crust open. I rise and relish their screams of horror. I cherish that they find the monster I have become terrifying, that the Earth has created me anew to be the epitome of any human's nightmares. I destroy them brutally, hoping their torment pays for the emptiness in my soul they caused. An eye for an eye, They say.  
When their screams fade, I lift my eyes towards Heaven.

Their resentful pleas reach out toward me and tear at my weary heart,  
What must I do with this knowledge that they have desperately chosen to impart?

I considered sparing Helena's friends, but then I realized I don't care. Heaven crumbles like dust when exposed to my blows. I watch a mother and child fall from the sky, clutching each other, and I briefly wonder what I have become, but then the foolish thought is banished from my mind.  
I see the humans on Earth become free. Heaven, the control center, is gone, so the droids are deactivated. This was my purpose. So what do I do now?

The saints attack every holy belief I've been enlightened with since youth,  
I cannot help but wonder if they really do speak the truth,

Earth told me that what I desired would be found among the stars. And so I wander the universes, searching until the end of all time for a dimension where my love exists. I must find her. I'm desperate to see her so I can feel again, so I can love, so I'm not a monster anymore. I know deep in my shriveled heart that throughout everything, she would see me instead of this violent monstrosity I have been made into.

The realization dawns that what I have suspected, they have confirmed  
Is it the billions of sins of the Lord that condemns our depraved and corrupt world?

Student Name: Yassine Ouardi  
 Grade: 8  
 School: Baytown Junior High School  
 Title: A Helping Hand  
 Category: Poetry  
 Key: Gold Key  
 Educator: Delynna Kelley

A helping hand  
 Rarer than finding kelp on land  
 Someone who can understand  
 Someone who can help him stand

A lot of people say his life is fantastic  
 They just don't know that he's masking  
 He calls for help but no one listens when he says "I am sick"  
 No one can understand what he felt when life's hand hit  
 No one can understand it

And everyone says that they do  
 But you all don't  
 He's almost at the end of his small rope  
 While he sits trying, but he does not cope  
 He just sits here can't even bawl or moap

Sometimes he's content  
 But he knows is just an accident  
 A mood swing  
 What a weird new thing  
 It's giving him false hope

He's there at the end of his small rope  
 And he's gonna tie it around  
 if he continues to fall down  
 this tall slope  
 You try to understand but you all don't

He has a higher chance getting hit by thunder strands  
 Than he has to find someone who understands  
 And he has a higher chance of finding a specific grain of sand  
 Than he has trying to find this



helping hand

Student Name: Caris Gray

Grade: 12

School: Impact Early College High School

Title: Democratic Accountability and the Enforcement of Democracy

Category: Critical Essay

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Kristen Olin

Within the status quo, not all judges are obligated to provide reasoning for their decisions on sentencing those convicted of crimes in both civil and criminal court. This lack of justification for the accountability and retribution that the judicial system deals out can lead to a lack of trust from their community and a lack of accountability to the judges themselves. By implementing democratic accountability to the judiciary, we are effectively implementing a policy that will make judges provide reasoning and justification for the sentencing they give in both civil and criminal court. As it stands within democratic states, these judiciaries should be held democratically accountable because not only does it help ensure reasonable sentencing to those convicted, but it also helps involve the community in the judicial system itself while reflecting the value of democracy within these democratic states.

When judges are not obligated to announce the rationale behind their sentencing decisions publicly, it leaves exponentially more room for bias and prejudice to play a part in their decision. Mandating they justify their decisions force judges to find legal reasons behind them. In the Columbia Law Review, Rebecca Brown argues within her work that there is a fundamental misguidance within our view of democracy. She contends that democracy is not about majority rule but rather individual rights. Within this work, she “asks the reader to wonder instead how one might justify a system of majority rule in a government whose final cause is the protection of individual rights” and argues that “accountability is best understood, not as a utilitarian means to achieve maximum satisfaction of popular preferences, but as a structural feature of the constitutional architecture, the goal of which is to protect liberty” (Brown 535). Under this assumption, the primary goal of democracy is to protect liberty, and when we cannot hold judges democratically accountable, we are jeopardizing that liberty. Justice should be impartial, without bias or prejudice. When we make judges explain the reasoning behind their decisions and sentences, we are helping to ensure that judges’ political views, biases, and prejudices play less of a role in their sentences.

The decreased chance of bias within the judiciary system also helps increase public trust because being transparent with the public gives them more of a chance to be involved within their legal system. By relaying justification and transparency within the judiciary, the community can also approve or disapprove of the reasoning, which helps increase public awareness and further affects what legislation or changes to existing legislation get passed. In Economic and Political Weekly, Krishna Iyer argues, “trusteeship and

accountability go together, and constant monitoring plus social audit of the power process are a watch-dog factor." Currently, "executive power is accountable to the parliament and the parliament to the people. Judicial power is not accountable to the executive nor to the parliament in any direct sense. Nevertheless, being democratic institution, the judicature must be answerable to the people" (Iyer 1808). By allowing citizens to hold the judiciary accountable, we can expand their knowledge and understanding while providing an extra check to the judicial system that is not in all democratic states. When citizens understand how laws affect sentencing, they are better able and better informed to critique those laws and better guide their representatives into passing legislation they value more. Without public and open reasoning for decisions, the public and the average citizen are effectively blind to the true effect the law has on them. The idea of democratic accountability within the judiciary also ties into the value of democracy as a government. The purpose of democracy is for the people of the state to have a major role in their government and legislation, whether directly or indirectly, through representatives. By having judges explain their decisions and how the law affects those decisions and sentences, the public can more clearly understand how the law relates to the cases and trials daily. This transparency is essential because, with this public reasoning, the average citizen is made aware of how laws, rules, and regulations affect sentencing decisions. As Joy Moncrieffe writes in the journal *International Political Science Review*, "Within democracies, governments, bureaucracies and civil society ought to actively endorse the underlying principles of the system." This will help enforce the value of democracy while simultaneously serving to enhance it. Moncrieffe further says that "they are, therefore, obliged to perform in such a manner that the goals of democracy are enhanced, including guaranteed political rights and civil liberties and the commitment to justice" (Moncrieffe 392). As democratic nations, we should attempt to continuously evolve and enhance our government along with the changing times. By holding judiciaries democratically accountable, we are further enhancing our value of democracies and embracing our political rights, civil liberties, and commitment to justice. Democratic accountability is not only a necessity for the average citizen to fully understand their judicial system, but it is also a means to help secure reasonable sentencing and limit bias and prejudice within democratic states while simultaneously upholding the value of democracy and what it means in the context of the judicial system. We, as citizens, have a right to know how our laws affect us and others. By keeping the reasoning behind sentencing private, the judiciary effectively prevents our complete understanding of our legal system. As members of democratic states, the value of democracy should be one of our priorities, including mandating democratic accountability for our judiciaries.

Student Name: Luis Barragan  
 Grade: 11  
 School: Ross S Sterling High School  
 Title: I'm Proud of You  
 Category: Personal Essay & Memoir  
 Key: Gold Key  
 Educator: Delynna Kelley

All a son ever wants to hear from his father is, "I'm proud of you." Growing up, I was what many would consider to be a "difficult child." I had no plans for my future set in mind, nor any ambitions of what I wanted to become. I had perpetual bouts with my inner consciousness concerning whether I would be accepted in my father's eyes. My eldest brother had always been the golden child who excelled in everything he decided to partake in. He effortlessly gained one of the only things that ever meant anything to me, our father's approval. My dad is a man of few words, only speaking when he deems it necessary. As such, hearing him say he was proud of you was truly as rare as a sunflower in the desert, completely out of the question. That fact stuck with me throughout my whole life. This single thought led me into a downward spiral of low self-esteem, frustration, and nervousness about what was to come. The frustration of challenging myself to grow, the nervousness of facing adversity, and low self-esteem from the feeling of never being enough. I inevitably found this unholy trinity to be the origin causing my despair. I knew I needed to find a way to overcome this, not only to prove to my father that I was worth more than I let on but to prove to myself that I was not going to back down without a fight.

This flame inside of me ignited the day my brother won the National History Day Fair contest at his school. Seeing his project obtain first place in the competition ate me alive internally. My father began to regard him differently, just as suddenly as the sunbeam's rays creeping up from the horizon. He was never the ideal loving father that many strive to have. No, he was always away working and showed us little emotion when it came to milestones in his children's lives. When he was around, he was stern, yet was regularly fair to us. He showed us the values of right and wrong, and of hard work's rewards. Although he explained it, I never saw to it that he would practice it. He'd leave me alone with my mother while he and my brother would spend a seemingly infinite amount of time together. From the viewpoint of an innocent child, this seemed as if it were the ultimate betrayal. My father, the man who brought me into this world, the now Judas Iscariot in the story of my young life. It sounded too far gone, what

was I to do to win over my father in a ceaseless grudge between myself and my own brother?

I would now soon begin secondary school, in the very same desolate dread where my father was taken from me. This was not an outright waste; however, I viewed this as an opportunity to recover what I lost. Entering honors classes in middle school meant I was required to compete in the National History Day Fair. To come close to my brother's prestige, I studied vigorously day and night. I constructed the finest exhibition project to the best of my abilities. The day of the contest came, I was eager to show off what I worked so hard on and demonstrate to my father that I was not a failure or even just a lousy son he believed I was. The final scoring was complete, and the judges were going to announce the winners of the contest. As they were going down from fourth place to first, my heart was racing to hear my name called last, yet much to my dismay, I was not the last called. My name was recited just before the true winner was announced. Hearing that statement fully and utterly shattered me. In that moment it felt as if I had been shot in the liver, and the judges gave my own brother the honor of claiming the coup de grâce. Although everything I knew crashed down on me in the blink of an eye, I saw a glimmer of light shining at the end of the tunnel. At that moment, a revelation had etched itself firmly into the labyrinth of my mind. Why should I strive to earn others' approval? Is my own opinion of myself not enough? I felt released from the chains that clung to me for so long. It was wrong for me to compare myself to others, just as it was wrong for my father to favor my brother over me. No one is perfect and I was bestowed with the privilege of accepting this ideology, elevating me to a higher plane within the bounds of my existence. I am blessed to be who I am, why should anyone seek any more? We were all placed in this world with a purpose, some spend their lives trying to figure it out, and many die before they can uncover it. I am one of the lucky few. However, although it may seem overly simplistic, I truly have faith that my purpose is to live my life on my own terms. Never again will I reside in anyone else's shadow, nor will I concern myself over the intricacies of something as minuscule as someone's approval. Our time on this planet is finite. We cannot allow the uncertainty of our short-term emotions to consume us. As Wendelin Van Draanen once wrote, "Sometimes a little discomfort in the beginning can save a whole lot of pain down the road."

Student Name: Abigail Walmer

Grade: 10

School: Kinder High School for the Performing and Visual Arts

Title: A Girl Shaped Like A Gun

Category: Poetry

Key: Gold Key

Educator:

### A Girl Shaped Like A Gun

My mother was sixteen when she fell in love  
with an assault rifle. She followed him to the firing range,  
danced atop the ashes of every kill. In the smoke, desolation  
became desire, and every scream sounded like a kiss.

He followed her: feminism flaunted at a firing range, an assault rifle  
for a heart. She held his hand like a trigger, like a deer in the crosshairs  
of desire, every kiss a scream smothered against cold skin. The truth is,  
every daughter is a signal flare, bright against the stars of her father's sin.

He held the trigger like a child's hand, his wife a deer in the crosshairs.  
She learned to skin herself, to serve her own organs for supper, to shoot  
her daughters like signal flares, a father's sin bright against the stars  
he was too drunk to see. Sometimes, even sobriety can look like love.

She served herself at supper, wore her own skin for a wedding dress.  
He poured gasoline in every punchbowl, gave her matches instead of a ring.  
Sober or not, it didn't matter. To a drunk man, even red lights look like love.  
The truth is, some marriages must begin with a priest and end with police.

I was weaned on gasoline, slept with a matchbox instead of a doll.  
My friends called me gunpowder girl, lit the fuses in each fingertip.  
At confession, the priest offered me a police officer as penance.  
I chose to remain silent, my tongue rounded like a rosary bead.

Now, I live fuse-fingered and friendless, a girl shaped like a gun.  
When I dance, I taste ashes. I remember my mother, another stillborn bullet.  
In the dark, I string silence like rosary beads and tell myself that I chose this.  
But I am only sixteen, and when I fall, I think it is love.

Student Name: Vivian Buchanan  
Grade: 9  
School: Carnegie Vanguard High School  
Title: Dragons and Hurricanes  
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir  
Key: Gold Key  
Educator: Rachel Bohenic

One of the most significant things I remember about my first school were the shelves of books lined up in the hallway. My first school wasn't a traditional school though. It was a Montessori school. I attended this school from pre-K to third grade. All the outdoor environment at my Montessori school was structured like a farm. Each class had vegetable gardens. My school also had a flock of chickens, an orchard, a pond, and beehives to produce honey. There were no grades, no tests, no homework, few rules, and not much work. Instead of lessons and classwork, we did activities like counting beads, cooking, cleaning, and learning the parts of a turtle shell. It was quite different from a traditional school, but I loved it there.

My Montessori school used to have a real library, but it was closed due to mold infestation after flooding from Hurricane Harvey at the beginning of my elementary school years. The mold spores were in the carpets, ceiling, and ventilation system of the library, so it would take a long time to clean. I was very upset about this, because my goal was to read every book in the library. When the library finally reopened in the middle of Lower Elementary, I was ready to read, but not ready for the library's setup. The new "library" was just shelves of books in a main hallway. I didn't realize it until later, but the new setup ended up being helpful for me because the books were all spread out. I started finding books that were more interesting than the fairy books I had been reading at the time. The first large book that I picked up was the first book in The Land of Stories series. I couldn't put the book down once I opened it. I spent all the unconstructed class time, which was most of the school day, reading that book on the rickety couch in the corner of the classroom. When I got home, I didn't stop reading. Even when I was supposed to be sleeping, I pulled my first intentional all-nighter reading that book. Then, I took it back to school the next day and read it the entire day, even at recess. It was that good!

Eventually, after three school days and two all-nighters, I finished the book. High on elation, my back stiff from all the sitting, and my fingers peppered with paper cuts from clumsy page turning, I knew my brain had been rewired forever. No book had ever really made me feel anything other than surface level excitement for the characters. This book made me feel like I was inside the story instead of simply watching the characters. For the first time, I felt like I did something while I was reading. I dove back in to read the second book in the series, and then the third. I read a bit slower and took breaks when I got to the

third book, and that rickety couch in the corner of the classroom became my second home. Those books were the warm ocean air for my hurricane, the fuel that started it all. My life from that point onward would be the evolution of that hurricane. In a way, Hurricane Harvey started my own hurricane.

About a year later, during the middle of my last year in Lower Elementary, my parents told me something that I wasn't expecting. I remember the January day they broke the news. They had both come to pick me and my brother up from school, which was unusual because one of them was usually working. As we drove away from the school, I set the fifth book of *The Land of Stories* on my lap and opened it to the first page. My mom, who was in the passenger seat, cleared her throat and told us to listen carefully. She said that she and my dad had an announcement that would affect all of us. I suppressed an irritated sigh and snapped the book shut. Then, my mom said the word I was least expecting: we would be moving schools. After I heard that, I sat in stunned silence. The first question I asked was if the new school had a library. It did, and it was a proper library, not a hallway lined with bookshelves. The second question was why. Why were we moving schools when I was happy where I was? My parents told us that my brother and I weren't learning enough at my Montessori school. They weren't wrong. I was in third grade, and I barely knew my multiplication facts. The only reason I knew how to spell was because I was reading so much.

At the end of my third grade year, I listened to my classmates and friends talk excitedly about Upper Elementary at my Montessori school and the teachers they might get, while I thought about what the new school had in store for me. Little did I know, my life, in a few months, would turn into a full-fledged hurricane. The coming hurricane would be a perfectly destructive storm, for which I didn't have any insurance.

At the beginning of the summer before I started at the new school, my parents enrolled me in a two week writing summer camp to prepare me for the new, more challenging school. This is where I acquired my one and only lifeboat for the hurricane to come: more books. My camp counselor read to us, or at least the ones who wanted to listen, during the lunch hour. At first, I was skeptical about the book she was reading, but I decided to listen. She was reading a book about dragons! I had never delved into the realm of dragons, but the book she was reading had me hooked. It was a long book, so she didn't finish reading it to us by the end of the camp.

On the last day of camp, I ran up to her and asked her what the name of the book was. She told me it was *Wings of Fire: the Dragonet Prophecy*. I kept repeating the words under my breath throughout the day so as not to forget. When I got home, I wrote the title of the book down in a notebook. However, as a nine-year-old with a short attention span, I forgot about the book. Over the rest of the summer, I completed pages of workbooks to



prepare me for the coming school year, and any memories of the book had gone. Before I knew it, the summer was over, and my hurricane was about to make landfall.

The first few months of fourth grade at the new school were fine, but after that, things deteriorated. The new school was a very small, restrictive, deeply religious private school that didn't tolerate free thinking. There were very specific expectations and rules for females and males. Girls and boys were separated and not encouraged to interact. Girls could only wear skirts and boys could only wear polo shirts with shorts or khaki pants. There were very few girls' sports or activities other than choir and folk dancing, while boys were constantly encouraged to play sports and be confident members of society. Some of these rules were not written down, but they were expectations and ideals that, if they weren't followed, resulted in social consequences for the rulebreakers. This was opposite of what I was used to. At my Montessori school, girls and boys were treated equally, we were encouraged to express ourselves, and we could wear what we wanted. I wasn't expecting these kinds of rules, and neither were my parents. The hurricane had already made landfall, and it was too dangerous to leave now. We had no backup plan. We had to ride it out until we figured out what to do. We were in the depths of the hurricane, and slowly but surely, as the system was designed to do, the expectations and rules started to permeate my brain.

I began to conform to the expectations and adopt many of the rules at the new school to try to fit in. I didn't realize what was happening at first, but I was changing. Instead of speaking up as I had done before, I stopped speaking at school. I barely talked to anyone, and made few friends. I stopped playing at recess, and instead just sat at the picnic tables. All the girls were talking about phones, folk dancing, choir practice, and dolls, while all the boys played games and ran around screaming. I didn't fit into that world. I felt like I was losing something, but I didn't know what.

The hurricane, instead of burning out, kept raging and getting stronger inside of me. Whenever we went outside for lunch and recess, I stayed under the trees with the other girls and stared at the chain-link fence that surrounded the playground. I always imagined climbing up the fence, away from the floodwaters below, and running far away into the surrounding neighborhoods to escape the storm.

At the beginning of fifth grade, I found my only lifeboat and hopped in. What I found wasn't really a lifeboat, it was more like a submarine. It didn't take me away from the hurricane, but it made things less wet, even though I was still in the flood of the hurricane. At the school, only students in fifth grade and above were allowed to go to the school's library and check out books. The first time my fifth grade class went to the library, I felt, for the first time at that school, like I was alive! The library, unlike all the other rooms in the school, wasn't dim, but illuminated with bright, warm light. It had large windows where sunlight flowed in like rivers of pure gold. Comfy couches, bean bag chairs, and

work tables lined the sides of the library. But, the best part was the books! The library had shelves filled with what seemed like every book under the sun. It felt like I was in a dream, and I didn't want to wake up. While in the library, I felt like my true self, and it was because of the books. I was disappointed when my class left soon after we arrived, but I looked back at the library and vowed to return.

The next day during recess, I asked my teacher if I could go to the library. She said yes and handed me the keys to unlock the gate to the fence that surrounded the playground. I walked across the soccer field as if I were swimming underwater. My hands shook as I stuck the key into the keyhole to the gate and turned it. A loud click answered back, and the gate slowly swung open with a loud groan. I yanked the key out of the hole, ran through the open gate, and kicked it back shut.

I ran across the school campus and burst into the library. I looked around in awe. I went up to the librarian's desk and asked if I could check out some books. She said yes. I walked through the rows of shelves, brushing the books' spines with my hands as I passed. I arrived at the fantasy section and found what I was looking for: the last book of The Land of Stories series! I picked it up and stared at it. I was so happy to have something familiar. As I started walking back to the librarian's desk, I saw another book out of the corner of my eye. Its spine seemed familiar. I pulled it out of its slot on the shelf, held it in my hands and looked at the cover in surprise. In raised, golden letters, it read: Wings of Fire: The Dragonet Prophecy. Curiously, I looked around and saw nine other books marked with the Wings of Fire emblem, neatly lined up in a row, but with different titles. My submarine had arrived!

Every day after, I went to the library during lunch and recess to read and check out books. I was grateful to leave the floodwaters, even if it was only for half an hour. I wasn't happy at the school, but I had something that was my own and made me happy. I had read all the Wings of Fire books by December and read other fantasy books: The Girl Who Drank the Moon, Harry Potter, and Warrior Cats. It wasn't until later that I realized how much those books and the perspectives they gave me helped me through that difficult time. I would disappear into a world where problems could be solved, and people had personalities, hopes, and dreams that were their own. The characters in those books became my friends. They were the rays of sun that I could see through the storm.

For me and my family, the COVID 19 pandemic and the events that happened during the height of it allowed full light to be shed on the situation at school. I attended school virtually for the end of fifth grade and all of sixth grade. Many of the same gender expectations and restrictive rules during in person school also existed during virtual school. Although I still had to log on to school, I was finally physically free of the school's damaging clutches. Once my parents witnessed virtual school, they came to realize the issues with the school and how it was negatively impacting me. They asked me, as they

had many times before, how I felt about the school. Before, I couldn't articulate what was wrong with the school because I didn't know specifically what the issues were and couldn't find the words or examples to explain them. However, with being physically away from school, I was able to see, understand, and verbalize the issues easily: I couldn't be who I needed and wanted to be at the school, and what I was losing was myself. I was detached from myself and had lost my sense of who I was. So, at the end of my sixth grade year, my parents pulled me and my brother out of the school. The first part of the hurricane had passed, and the eye of the storm had arrived. Things were calm, but the storm would rage again soon.

The eye of the hurricane is a period of calm before the other half of the storm unleashes its fury. During the eye, the damage the hurricane has caused is clear, but it's useless trying to fix it because the other half of the hurricane is coming to cause more damage. I began seventh grade at a new school. It was a large public middle school. Up until that point, I had only been in small private schools, and going from private schools to a large public school was one of the hardest adjustments for me. Throughout seventh grade, which was the eye of my storm, I saw how different I was from my peers and their experiences. Boys and girls had clothing options of their choice. Many of my peers weren't afraid to speak their minds. People of different genders, orientations, religions, and backgrounds mixed and existed in the same space. My peers had good friends of both genders who they talked to. I was so surprised and overwhelmed by the stark difference between where I had come from and where I was then. It was like I was coming out of a cave and seeing the light for the first time.

For most of seventh grade, I didn't speak much at school. I just observed in silence and tried to figure out what to do. I was torn between the shadows of the silent, restricted me and the possibility of a renewed, free me. I couldn't figure out how to be, so I chose the shadow version of me. I didn't end up making any friends that year. Instead, books and their characters became my friends. The books I read during this time period had characters that reflected how I wanted to be: *Class Act*, *Grishaverse*, *Sparks*, *The War That Saved My Life*, *The War I Finally Won*, *Front Desk*, *The Hunger Games*, and *Emmy and Friends*. All the characters I read about in these books were determined and always found a way to get things done. Again, it was books that provided solace and comfort for me during that difficult period.

The next year, in eighth grade, I was determined to put the shadowed version of me aside. That entire year, I battled the shadow version of myself for a chance at living life normally again. I had to learn to speak again, to advocate for what I wanted and needed, and learn to make friends. It was one of the most challenging times I've had, but I learned so much about myself and others and began to find my footing.

The day of eighth grade graduation was the end of the very long and destructive hurricane. The storm was over and I was mentally ready to move on. It was time to start throwing away all the water-stained rubbish, clean the things I still had, and rebuild what had been destroyed. A new era would start, but living in a world with hurricanes I know the importance of bracing myself for the next one. Hurricanes will always come, no matter how hard I wish they wouldn't. Indeed, books will always provide me some refuge during life's hurricanes, but now I know that I can weather the hurricanes by doing my best and using what I've learned and who I am when they do come.

Student Name: Autumn Liu

Grade: 11

School: Carnegie Vanguard High School

Title: Game Theory and International Politics: The Prisoner's Dilemma

Category: Critical Essay

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Rachel Bohenick

On the morning of August 6, 1945, a brilliant white flash enveloped the Japanese city of Hiroshima. Within seconds, the city was completely flattened, and within minutes, firestorms devoured what little remained. Yet, the physical destruction was only the beginning; over the following months and years, a silent killer— radiation— would slowly claim the survivors of the initial blast. By the end of 1945, roughly 140,000 civilians and soldiers had perished as a result of the detonation of “Little Boy.” President Truman confirmed responsibility for the attack later that day, announcing America’s nuclear monopoly to the world: the United States, and the United States alone, was capable of annihilating entire cities with a single bomb. However, the U.S.’s monopoly over nuclear weapons would not last for long; merely four years later, in August 1949, the Soviet Union exploded its first nuclear bomb in Kazakhstan. Now, there were two nuclear superpowers.

The presence of multiple countries with nuclear weapons posits the doctrine of “mutually assured destruction” (MAD), which highlights that a full-scale nuclear attack on a nuclear-armed defender would result in the annihilation of both the attacker and the defender. While the U.S. and the Soviet Union were not capable of effectively launching nuclear attacks against one another in 1949, the existence of MAD prompted a nuclear arms race; by the 1960s, both the Soviet Union and the United States had developed thermonuclear weapons with megaton blast yields (hundreds of times stronger than the “Little Boy” of WWII). Moreover, these weapons were produced in high enough quantities such that either country could completely and irreversibly destroy the other. Consequently, in order to ensure the continuity of MAD doctrine, both the U.S. and the Soviet Union aimed to maintain the delicate balance of nuclear power.

While the Cold War has long passed, modern international relations theory builds on the principles established by Cold War-era politics. Realism, the dominant theory of international politics, has three primary tenets:

I. Statism: Political realism supposes that nation-states are the primary actors on the global stage of international politics. As a logical consequence, nation-states are in competition with one another, and thus, are self-serving but rational.

II. Anarchism: International relations are ultimately governed by anarchy; there is effectively no central authority that presides over the collective nations of the world. It is assumed that nation-states will prioritize their own interests over those of intergovernmental organizations (such as the United Nations or the European Union).

III. Power Politics: The predominant interests of all nation-states are power and security. Similarly, MAD doctrine inherently assumes that all nuclear powers are rational and retaliatory; nuclear deterrence is ineffective if a country irrationally launches an unprovoked nuclear strike. The nuclear arms race between the Soviet Union and the United States aimed to provide power through the development of stronger nuclear weapons and security through the maintenance of MAD doctrine. As a result of this arms race and consequent nuclear weapon development, the most powerful nations are those with nuclear weaponry; non-nuclear states are at the utter mercy of nuclear states. Realist international relations theory suggests that the goal of every political leader is to ensure the preservation of their state in a competition-oriented world. To do this, they must act in accordance with the self-interests of their nation while accounting for the self-interests of other nations. Opposing interests incites conflict, and, on the scale of nations, conflict resolution involves compromise or war. The best outcome of such a conflict maximizes gain and minimizes loss. Thus, political leaders are faced with the dilemma of choosing the action that will lead to this optimal outcome.

A step in this dilemma's solution was formulated when mathematician John von Neumann founded the field of modern game theory with the proof of his minimax theorem in 1928. While game theory as a discipline had existed long before von Neumann— Gerolamo Cardano published his *Liber de ludo aleae* (Book on Games of Chance) in 1663— von Neumann was the first to utilize rigorous mathematical proofs and apply them to strategic decision-making. Von Neumann's initial iteration of his minimax theorem stated that, in two-player zero-sum games with perfect information (where both players are aware of everything that has occurred since the start of the game), there exists a set of strategies for both players that will minimize the maximum losses for each player. In 1944, von Neumann extended the minimax theorem to apply to games with imperfect information (games where some aspects of play are hidden from the players) and games that involved more than two players, publishing his findings in his *Theory of Games and Economic Behavior*.

Contrary to popular belief, game theory is not about "playing;" rather, game theory, at its core, studies conflict between rational but "distrusting" agents in opposition. A classic example of game theory can be found in poker. The primary objective of poker is to draw the best hand of cards; in this regard, poker becomes a simple game of probability. Yet, certain actions such as calling (matching a placed bet), raising (increasing the size of a bet), and folding (resigning) adds a psychological element to poker. For instance, consider a poker player that always plays using probability theory: they calculate the exact chance that they have a winning hand and place/raise bets in proportion to the strength of their hand. While this hypothetical player might win the first few poker games, this strategy is inherently predictable; other players will soon determine their cards by the bets that they place. Indeed, a good poker player contemplates what other players are thinking without giving away what they are thinking. Occasionally, they might try to bluff or deceive other players to gain an advantage. Poker is a game without perfect information; no fair poker player is aware of the hands of all their opponents. By contrast, chess is a game with

perfect information, since both players are aware of the positions of all the board's pieces and any prior moves made. The game of international politics is inherently one without perfect information.

While the creation of modern game theory can be attributed to John von Neumann, he was not the only one working on game theory at the time. In 1950, mathematicians Merrill M. Flood and Melvin Dresher developed a game theory thought experiment that involved two rational beings; both are given the option to either cooperate for mutual benefit or betray the other for a greater individual reward.

Suppose that the owner of a used Toyota Corolla wanted to sell their car for \$5,000, and that they had two options: they could either sell the car through a used-car dealer, or directly to an interested buyer. If the seller sells their car to a dealer, the dealer takes a 20% commission fee and puts the Toyota Corolla on sale for \$6,000. In total, the dealer would make a profit of \$2,000, while both the seller and the buyer would "lose" \$1,000. If the seller went to the buyer instead, the seller would not have to pay the dealer's fee and the buyer would get the same car for \$1,000 less, effectively leaving the \$2,000 that the dealer would have gained to be split between the seller and the buyer. Now, the question becomes a matter of how this "saved" money should be partitioned. The fairest option would be to divide it down the middle: the buyer would get the same car for \$1,000 cheaper and the seller would get \$1,000 more versus the dealer's offer. However, the seller could also request \$5,500, \$5,750, or even \$5,999; all three of these options would save the buyer some amount of money. On the flip side, the buyer could deny these deals and say that they will pay a maximum of \$4,001. In this scenario, the seller could simply refuse the buyer's offer and tell them to "pound sand," but remember that the dealer would only give the seller \$4,000. Note that the more "unreasonable" party would always get the better bargain.

Fellow mathematician Albert W. Tucker later formalized this thought experiment, turning it into a game of sorts, and named it the "prisoner's dilemma." The game functions as follows: two prisoners are separated into different rooms and are unable to communicate with each other, making it a game of imperfect information. Each prisoner is given the option to testify against the other (betray) or remain silent. If both prisoners stay silent, they each receive a one-year prison sentence. If one prisoner testifies while the other remains silent, the prisoner that testifies goes free, while the other prisoner receives a three-year prison sentence. If both prisoners testify against each other, both receive two-year sentences.

The prisoner's dilemma, like the previously described car dealer scenario, is not a zero-sum game by nature; the net gain for both prisoners is greatest when neither testify, and least when they testify against each other. This suggests that the prisoner's dilemma rewards cooperation and punishes betrayal. However, for the individual prisoner, potential net gain is greatest when testifying. If the opposing prisoner stays silent, the best response is to testify, since freedom is better than spending one year in prison. If the opposing prisoner testifies, the best response is also to testify, since spending two years



in prison is better than spending three. Therefore, in a “one-round” prisoner’s dilemma game, the optimal strategy is to always testify/betray one’s opponent.

Now, consider the “iterated prisoner’s dilemma,” where both players remember their opponents’ actions and are able to respond accordingly. There are two versions of the iterated prisoner’s dilemma: one with finite rounds and one with an infinite or unknown number of rounds. In the first variation, the optimal strategy remains the same as the standard prisoner’s dilemma: testifying/betraying every round. The logic behind this is as follows: one should always testify on the last round, since the opponent cannot retaliate. Given that the opponent realizes this, it is assumed that they will also testify on the last round; then, one should testify on the second-to-last round. Again, the opponent knows this, so they will also testify; this will repeat until the first round is reached. In the second variation, since the length of the game is unknown or indefinite, always testifying is no longer the best strategy.

Robert Axelrod investigates the iterated prisoner’s dilemma in his book *The Evolution of Cooperation*, published in 1984. In it, Axelrod describes “tournaments” in which different computers using various strategies competed against each other in repeated prisoner’s dilemma games. To quantify the success of each strategy, Axelrod used a point system based on Tucker’s conditions: cooperation (remaining silent) would grant both players three points, while mutual defection (testifying) would grant both players only one point. If one player defected while the other chose to cooperate, the defector would gain five points while the cooperator would gain nothing. One of the simplest strategies that participated in the tournament was “Always Defect” (ALL D), which would, as its name suggests, choose to defect in every round. Conversely, “Always Cooperate” would choose to cooperate in every round. “Random” would randomly choose between cooperating and defecting.

The first tournament that Axelrod conducted featured fourteen strategies submitted by fellow academics, each one playing a single 200-round game against every other strategy, “Random,” and itself. Axelrod then averaged the scores of every game that a strategy played to calculate its overall score. The best-performing strategy was called “Tit For Tat,” averaging 504.5 points per game. Tit For Tat would effectively copy its opponent, choosing to cooperate if its opponent cooperated the round before and defect if the opponent defected the round before; Tit for Tat would always cooperate on the first round. The second-place strategy, “Tideman and Cheruzzi,” functioned similarly to Tit For Tat, but the more often that its opponent defected, the more defections that it would retaliate with. Axelrod’s second prisoner’s dilemma tournament functioned much the same as the first, but with two key differences. While the number of rounds in the first tournament was predetermined, the length of each game in the second tournament was effectively randomized (there was a set 0.346% chance of every move ending the game).

Additionally, entrants were told the results of the previous tournament, which introduced an implicit goal of creating a strategy that would beat Tit For Tat. This time, there were 62 distinct strategies submitted. Yet, despite Axelrod’s changes and the added challenge for Tit For Tat, Tit For Tat won again, with an average score of 434.73 points per game.



Tit For Tat's success can be attributed to three attributes: "niceness," retributive, and forgiveness. Axelrod defined "nice" strategies as those that would never defect first. Tit For Tat begins by cooperating and does not defect before its opponent. However, simply being "nice" is not enough. For instance, "Always Cooperate" is the epitome of a "nice" strategy, and yet, it is easily exploited. Strategies must also be retributive; Tit For Tat responds to defection with defection, which gives the other strategy an incentive to cooperate. Lastly, strategies must also be forgiving. Tit For Tat does not hold a grudge against its opponent; as soon as its opponent cooperates, it will cooperate the following round, even if the opponent defected the past hundred rounds. Counterintuitively, Tit For Tat never "won" a single game. By nature, Tit For Tat is only capable of tying with its opponent or losing in score, since it never defects first. In contrast, "nasty," or defective strategies can never "lose" a game. Yet, none of these strategies placed in the top half of the first tournament, and only one placed in the top fifteen of the second tournament; meanwhile, in the bottom fifteen, all but one strategy was nasty. It should be noted that the performance of Tit For Tat (and every other strategy, for that matter) is dependent on what other strategies are present. For instance, if Tit For Tat was placed in a tournament where every one of its opponents was Always Defect, Tit For Tat would be dead last, as Always Defect would score 5 points on Tit For Tat in the first round of every game. In essence, interactions between nation-states are prisoner's dilemma games of unspecified length. However, a key difference remains between Axelrod's strategies and nation-states as players: nation-states are capable of changing the "strategy" that they use. While Tit For Tat always responds to cooperation with cooperation and defection with defection, nation-states can choose to defect or cooperate with others at will.

The historic nuclear rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union is a prime example of this. In 1949, both the United States and the Soviet Union possessed nuclear weapons; each nation recognized that the other had nuclear weapons and had to make the decision whether to build a nuclear arsenal. On one hand, if the United States did not create a nuclear arsenal and the Soviet Union did, then there would be a severe power imbalance between the two, in favor of the Soviets. Conversely, if the United States did make nuclear bombs and the Soviets responded in kind, then MAD doctrine would nullify any advantage that one country had over the other. The optimal strategy is then to continue building more and stronger nuclear weapons. Yet, the number of nuclear weapons held by the U.S. and the Soviet Union peaked in 1966 and 1986, respectively; today, there are significantly less nuclear weapons than during the Cold War. If the aforementioned scenario were analogized with a prisoner's dilemma game, it would appear as a string of defections by both sides, followed by the United States initiating cooperation in a "strategy change," and a few rounds later, mutual cooperation between the two.

It should be noted that the iterated prisoner's dilemma and realist theory makes several assumptions, of which are not always replicated in actuality. Firstly, both assume that all involved parties are rational and will seek maximum self-gain. In reality, perfect rationality is impossible to achieve; human behavior is inherently subject to bias. For instance, the

constituents of a democratic nation may not always act with perfect reasoning and/or vote for policies that would maximize the nation's gain. Additionally, the cohesiveness of a nation-state is presumed; for realist theory and the prisoner's dilemma to apply, a nation-state must be treated as a single unit. The existence of civil wars and internal conflicts are evidence to the contrary. Lastly, the prisoner's dilemma surmises that every nation is equal in power. The sheer strength of modern nuclear weapons implies that there is a clear power disparity between nuclear states and non-nuclear states, although the small number of nuclear states (seven, four with nuclear weapons deployed) suggests that the prominence of this issue is minimized.

Nevertheless, the principles highlighted by realist theory and the prisoner's dilemma remain relevant for the vast majority of interactions between nation-states, serving to explain the behavior of nation-states on the international stage. Indeed, Axelrod's experiment provides the rest of the solution to the question posed by realist international relations theory. For maximum gain, nation-states should seek cooperation over defection, but remain retaliatory in the event that another nation-state initiates conflict. Yet, nation-states should also be forgiving if an opposing nation-state ceases conflict. Lastly, nation-states must be capable of changing their approach to international relations in response to the actions of other nation-states: if other nation-states are hostile, then there is no reason to cooperate and be exploited; conversely, if other nation-states are cooperative, then defection only brings about harm.

Student Name: Christine Novelerio

Grade: 10

School: Kinder High School for the Performing and Visual Arts

Title: I Cry at the Pinoy Store; Not H-Mart

Category: Flash Fiction

Key: Gold Key

Educator:

The scalding door handle: an analgesic for my soul. My fingertips don't agree, as I can feel them rising in blisters of revolt. Do I care? My college GPA would, unfortunately, once it realizes I can no longer write notes. So I have no choice but to pry my five flesh-wrapped IV tubes off the metal and use my other hand to open the door. If only analgesics weren't left as your last option. If only I didn't insist on holding your steel-cold hand when they pried the IV tubes out of you.

The hanging doorbell jingles as I step into paradise pocket-sized, at least for Filipino snack lovers like me. Why am I here again? I'm not even craving anything. I glance to my left and for the first time in my life, the office door is closed. I step closer to the door, hold my breath, and listen. No laughing accompanied by some quip in Tagalog I can't understand. No shih tzu barking. Not even the faint clacking of a keyboard. I'm suddenly hit by the acute awareness of how cramped this place is. Or maybe the walls were always this tight, but I never noticed when you were beside me.

I pass between the twin freezers as they hum in identical monotone. Monotone, monochrome. The color of my days as of late. Funny how all the things you tune out as a child are the ones you pay attention to as an adult, and the other way around. Maybe I'm not the right person to say that, considering that the line between childhood and adulthood was always a blurry one for me. Not because of you, of course. You were always standing at adulthood's starting line, tracing it with bold marker whenever life threatened to push me over. But Father, on the other hand...

I hoist one from the stack of wheeled red carts with long black handles. Plastic leashes, to tug it around like the adorable pet I once imagined it to be. That was before a certain someone's appetite grew into an insatiable mutt whom leashes could no longer restrain. I—we, the two of us—were then forced to abandon this pocket-sized paradise when it turned into a ticket to hell, via his airtight ears and heedless hands digging an ever-deeper financial pit. You might not be with me, but at least he isn't. No one's hands to hold back, no one's credit card to keep in check but your own.

I feel the cart thud-ump and a broiling gust of air greets me as I cross the threshold into the store's back portion. Gray walls, crackless concrete, the garage door visible in the

back. Just like the world's largest oven. If the front portion of the store was cramped with its meager square footage and narrow aisles, the garage is a sardine can. Just like the ones lining the aisles, only rectangular and oversized. This garage might be packed and cluttered, but at least it has a purpose. Like you. Unlike Father. Unlike our own garage, before our house was repossessed and the two of you finally went your separate ways.

I stand there for an entire minute, staring blankly at a package of Filipino spaghetti sauce before I realize that my face is wet. I'm... crying? Wait, I remember now. Why I came here. I wanted to see what it would be like to mourn my mom from inside a freezer full of Asian goods. Like Michelle Zauner. Except I'm Filipino and I've never been to H-Mart.

Tears still staining my cheeks, I turn the corner to the giant freezers, cart in tow, and—

That's when I see him. He's got his own red cart, filled as high as the days when it was my job to leash his wallet. All the acid I swallowed at my mom's funeral threatens to disgorge from my throat, leaving his disfigured corpse to decompose in the heat.

How is it fair that Father is the one standing before me now when you stood beside me my entire life? How is it fair that his appetite remains unsatisfied while you're decomposing six feet in the ground?

It should've been him, not you.

Student Name: Paloma Santamarina

Grade: 10

School: Kinder High School for the Performing and Visual Arts

Title: Increasing Incidents

Category: Humor

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Vicki Fowler

The first time he had to sit down and write the letter, it wasn't the letter. Not quite yet. It was a letter, for an unfortunate event: Mr. Duncan's secretary had quit.

Just that Friday morning, the elevator doors had opened onto his office floor to Pamela, standing behind her desk with a full-to-the-brim cardboard box that would sink the heart of any employer. Pamela was a good girl, a hard worker who kept her chin up and smiled all day outside Mr. Duncan's door. She scheduled his appointments, brought him his lunch, typed up his reports... and seemed perfectly happy with her job. Up until now.

Mr. Duncan stepped out of the elevator as a chill ran down his body. "Pamela, if this is about last week, I told you it wouldn't happen again —"

"I'm done with this place," she interrupted with a huff, storming past him and into the elevator doors. Mr. Duncan swiveled around and watched her press the button furiously, and the doors closed all too soon, before he knew how to react.

Now he didn't have a secretary. But next week would be busy — as the summer season quickly approached, there would be interns in high school or fresh out of it looking to join the company, and budgets to be cut, and all those other pesky reports various employees and employers had filed that he would finally have to answer. Of course he couldn't work on all that by himself. He needed a secretary, and at the moment he was quite secretary-less. So there was one very pressing matter he needed to resolve now.

Mr. Duncan needed to write to his boss.

So he pushed aside the chills and, pointedly ignoring the now-empty secretary desk next to the door where Pamela had sat for months, walked into his office. Cool as you please, he sat down before his typewriter, flexed his fingers, and began to type.

Mr. Marks,

I'm afraid an unfortunate situation has occurred. My secretary, Pamela, has walked out on me, and I need a sweet, hardworking girl to come and take her place — not for long, I imagine, but please send her as quick as you can.

From,  
Mr. Duncan.

That ought to do. He grabbed the paper from the typewriter and folded it up neatly. "Pamela!" he shouted, but then recalled the situation at hand with a flush of embarrassment. If Pamela were here to take the letter, he wouldn't be writing one in the first place.

The new secretary arrived on Monday.

She looked fresh out of high school, with a pink sweater, a white pencil skirt, and an apprehensiveness in her chocolate brown eyes that could only be found in somebody who had no idea what they were doing. Mr. Duncan found her in the lobby, looking at the elevator nervously as if it would grow teeth and eat her. He hoped not. He needed someone to do the dirty work around here.

"Alright, love?" He asked, coming up behind the girl. "Looking for someone?"

She jumped, yelping softly as she turned to face him. "Um... yes, sir." Her voice was quiet, though that could have just been from nerves. "I'm... supposed to be on the third floor. Working for Mr. Duncan. Do you know him?"

Mr. Duncan chuckled to himself. "I'd certainly hope so, considering I am him."

The girl's eyes widened, and she blushed furiously. "I'm so sorry, sir! Real sorry... It's my first day..."

A brief hesitation, from both of them. The girl went even more scarlet.

"I know," Mr. Duncan said after the awkward pause. "Er, what's your name, dear?"

"Rita," she said.

Mr. Duncan leaned over and pushed the button for the elevator. Rita mumbled her thanks.

"Well, Rita, we'd better get started."

And the work week began.

By Friday, he was back where he'd started.

Mr. Marks,

Unfortunately, that last girl you sent - not quite the right fit, I'm afraid. The typewriter terrified her, and every time I either closed my door or opened it she nearly flew out of her seat — the setting was too quiet for her, every loud noise was startling. And she didn't seem to understand my job very well. No, no, I'm afraid she's called the quits as well. It's very unfortunate, too - the incident that brought this all about was really very funny, but I guess she couldn't laugh at herself.

On Thursday morning I asked her to write a couple of letters to the employees we decided to let go last week, notifying them of the circumstances (that bout of firing was sad, but deserved. I'm on your side, Mr. Marks!), but it seems one thing led to another and I found myself detangling poor Rita's hair from the typewriter ribbon while she shrieked her head off. The incident left her quite shaken - I don't think a girl like her can stand a lot of excitement in her life - so she handed me a letter of resignation that evening as she left.

So all this is to say, could you find another secretary for me? Maybe one with more... experience, although Rita was very lovely to have around. This environment just wasn't for her. The enrichment wasn't cutting it, you could say.

Please have the new girl here by Monday. I know you want me to get on those misconduct reports! And as we both know, time waits for no man!

Sincerely, your employee,  
Mr. Duncan.

The next girl — well, wasn't much of a girl. A woman in her mid-30s, maybe, but certainly around Mr. Duncan's age.

Mr. Duncan looked at her awkwardly from across the floor, where she had already settled into the desk, clicking away at the typewriter. He vaguely recalled placing a hastily-scribbled report there on Friday for the new girl to type up, before leaving for the weekend, and brightened up a bit - this girl seemed to have her wits about her. This certainly wasn't her first shindig.

"Hello, dear woman!" Mr. Duncan called out, crossing the floor in long strides. She looked up, fingers ceasing their flying for a moment. She didn't smile. She didn't look like she'd ever smiled in her life. It made Mr. Duncan frown.

"Good morning," she said brusquely. "It's a pleasure to work for you, Mr. Duncan, even if you only want my services for a week or two." Her voice was flat, without much enthusiasm.

Mr. Duncan scratched his head, then put out his hand in the awkward silence. The girl leaned forward to shake it, and then went back to her typing.

"Erm... what's your name, dear?" he asked.

"Adeline," she said, not looking up this time.

"Well, Rita, it'll be a pleasure to work with you, too, I'm sure."

This made her pause. She looked up, puzzled. "My name isn't Rita."

"Really? Then what is it?"

"It's Adeline," she repeated slowly. "I enunciated it quite clearly."

"...Sorry, Adeline." Mr. Duncan hurried into his office, blushing faintly from the embarrassment. He was more than ready to start the work day.

Mr. Marks,

It pains me to write this as much as I'm sure it pains you to read this. Well, it happened again - Adeline has called the quits and I need a new secretary. Only for 2 weeks, though! 2 weeks to get everything all sorted out around here and then I do believe I'm done looking.

Adeline is a very hard-working woman. I appreciated what she got done, but unfortunately on Friday morning I made the mistake of inviting her into my office to bring me a box of staples — my own had run out, you see. I had also requested a coffee earlier, but my footnote about leaving it outside the office must have been unseen or plain ignored - when Adeline came up from beside me, I had just dropped my empty stapler



(curse my butterfingers!), and it fell onto her foot with quite an unpleasant THUNK. Who knew those metal bricks were so heavy!

Sadly her reflexes insisted that she drop everything in her hands to assess the damage on her foot - and this included the still very hot coffee, which went all over her nice turtleneck sweater and I imagine burned her quite badly. She asked to drive herself to the emergency room, though, and told me in no uncertain terms that she wouldn't be back for her second week.

Some of the coffee also landed on a couple of contracts that I'll need to reprint and revise again, so that is... an extra week of work needed. Please, send down one more girl? Simply one who knows how to use a typewriter, but maybe someone with a bit more finesse... you could get me a neurosurgeon, maybe a belly dancer, it doesn't matter to me, as long as she's not doing anything important at the moment... it would be appreciated. Sorry again.

Very, very sincerely,  
Mr. Duncan

Mr. Marks had sent this next secretary with a note of his own.

Don't get too friendly with me, Duncan. Do what you're getting paid to do.

Mr. Duncan sighed, lips pressed thin together. The girl blinked owlishly at him.

She didn't look too old, but not fresh out of high school, either. She had thick, horn-rimmed glasses, and a pair of clean black slacks with a white turtleneck sweater. Overall, quite classy - but she hadn't said a thing since the elevator doors had opened and Mr. Duncan wandered onto the floor.

"I'm Linda," she said finally as he drew closer to the desk.

"We'll have a great time together, Adeline," Mr. Duncan said with an attempt at a smile, and then hurried into his office.

Mr. Marks,

This is not a request for more secretaries or more weeks. Nothing like that. In fact, it's the opposite — everything has been completed, all our ducks are in a row, thanks in part to the help of the lovely ladies you sent by to help me out. And I don't want another secretary.

None! Nada! Zilch! Zip! I am thoroughly over with them, because not two hours ago in the middle of the day did the most recent one get carried away in an ambulance while I was interrogated by police. Whatever curse is on these secretaries, I want to stop it before it gets anywhere closer to me!

I'm sure you'd like to know what happened, if the chief of police hasn't informed you already.

This time, it was a trick of the weather — today, Friday, there was a thunderstorm with some very heavy winds. It was a pain even getting down to the office in the first place, but I managed!

Well, though I managed to make it through the day unharmed, my newest secretary wasn't so lucky... As you know, there's a rather big dead tree near the window of the building, one that I've been meaning to get cut down for a while now. But as of late I've been too busy to get all of that sorted out, with my rotating door of secretaries, incidents, and paperwork, so I sort of forgot about it over the past few weeks. But the thunderstorm today was simply terrible! The wind was so gusty that I suppose that old dead tree fell right over. Onto the building. Which doesn't have the most structural integrity.

I guess what I'm trying to tell you is that the tree crashed through the wall and fell onto Linda.

Well, not directly onto her, as she was hiding under the desk at this point. But she was pinned underneath the rubble, in quite a bit of pain, I can imagine.

By the way, do I have to pay the repairs on the building? Is it covered by insurance? Just a question. But anyway, by sheer luck the telephone on her desk had narrowly avoided destruction, and when I exited my office and saw the predicament before me, I did the good deed of calling an ambulance for her. Unfortunately, with the ambulance came police, looking for answers to a freak accident.

This bad luck has got to stop! As I previously mentioned, what if it ends up spreading to me as well? So I've decided — I don't need any more secretaries — I can do the heavy lifting by myself. Sorry, Mr. Marks.

Ultimately and pensively but (once again) very sincerely,

Mr. Duncan.

Student Name: Mahati Kadiyala

Grade: 8

School: T. H. ROGERS SCHOOL

Title: Inferno's Waltz

Category: Poetry

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Sam Brown

With every step, her stance unyielding, bold  
In fiery rhythm, she walked, her soul on fire  
Steadfast, a wild blazing ember

Against the winds, her spirit stands, never folds  
No force can move the mountain she is  
With every step, her stance unyielding, bold

Through trials faced, a truth she embraced  
With a resolute mind, the path she's retraced  
Steadfast, a wild blazing ember stood

A stubborn heart, with dreams that burn cold  
Brighter than the light of 1000 suns  
With every step, her stance unyielding, bold

Yet, shadows lurk, and start to scold  
Is her fire a vice, a fault to find?  
Steadfast, a wild blazing ember stood

But in her gaze, the burn never hurt  
Her inferno lit the path she dances on  
With every step, her stance unyielding, bold  
Steadfast, a wild blazing ember stood

Student Name: Emery Goldstein

Grade: 11

School: Kinder High School for the Performing and Visual Arts

Title: Jaguar Ring

Category: Short Story

Key: Gold Key

Educator:

## Jaguar Ring

It was the sort of ring for a mistress. Mister Taft had planned to go off the cigars for a month in order to save up enough money without his wife noticing, but his tongue was beginning to itch and the mistress, Rosie, was hounding a little too much to be cute. He bought the jaguar ring for two weeks of cigar money, and another two weeks later Rosie got the ring and was so insulted she never saw him again.

Jaguars were still very mythical then, and therefore inaccurate. The ring looked like a lumped cat that was circling a woman's finger. It had a terrible red mouth, little green stones for eyes, and sharp teeth made of pearl. Except none of the stones were real. Rosie wore the ring for two hours then put it in her jewelry box.

Two years later Rosie was married by a ring that took two decades of saving, by a man who'd pined for three. Five years later the man developed a disease which ate away his bones and left him yellow and jiggling in bed. Rosie was prettier as a widow than a wife. She played cards with men and women but when she caught her youngest, Missy, tasting the liquor she slapped the girl across the face. It was exactly how her mother had looked when she told her she was seeing a married man. Rosie's mother had been married since fifteen and had never taken off her wedding ring even when, in old age, the finger swelled like plum flesh around it. Rosie's mother didn't know nothing.

Rosie tamed herself to aprons and raspberry pies. The taming was tiring. She went to sleep around eight and her two little girls would sift things around in the wardrobe. Sandra was bigger and older but Missy was a bully. Sandra always got stuck with the jaguar ring.

There were many stories to play with the jaguar ring. Missy's favorite was one where Sandra was a terrible witch whose ring allowed her to turn into a jaguar in order to hunt the princess, Missy. Missy put on the nightgown from her mother's wedding night, her hairpins, and pink velvet shoes. Sandra couldn't wear shoes, because she was a jaguar. She'd get down on all fours and growl silently, in order to avoid waking their mother. Sandra was a marvelous actress. Missy was not. Eventually Sandra's eyes would seem a little too glowing and the teeth too sharp, and Missy would scream, for real, really scared, and their mother would sit up like the undead in bed. Missy would scream that Sandra had scared her. But their mother smacked them both equally, for she was not a fool.

Sandra outgrew the ring when Missy did, which was at age fourteen and ten, respectively. Missy had many suitors who would use their allowances to buy her hair ribbons, which were much more in style. Sandra participated in school plays, and as she got older her hair curled, the limbs sprouted, and the eyes cleared, and Sandra went from playing jaguars to ensemble to witches to princesses. Princesses always got married in the end but there was never a ring, perhaps because the school lacked the budget.

Missy married a man who claimed to be a prince but was actually from Kentucky and sold counterfeit shoes. Missy had no daughters but one son, who grew up to be a money man like his father. Sandra had graduated high school and gone to college. Rumor had it she even got a PHD. Either way, when their mother died it was Missy who got all her stuff. For a while business was really good, because no one had the money to buy real shoes. Then business was really bad, because no one had the money to buy shoes at all. Missy sold all her mother's things and would've sold the jaguar ring, too, but it dropped down from a hole in the box and Missy's son, who was lazy, mistook it for a bottle cap and didn't bother retrieving it. It rolled down the slope of the floor, dipped into the kitchen, bumped against the door. Three days later an awful dust storm rattled the house and Missy opened the door to call the dog in, and the wind blew the ring up and away. It looped onto a scarecrow's finger. Rattled but didn't rot. About an hour went by, and a bird that hadn't been whipped away by the dust took the ring to court his mate.

Birds are not aware of the romantic significance a ring has. In fact, they would've found the ring entirely unremarkable if not for the jaguar's glittering green eyes. The nest was built upon the ring but not very well. Years later Missy was bopping a grandchild on her knee when she swore she saw her mother's ring in a bird's nest.

"Johnny, is that my ring?" She pointed a thin, whittled finger.

Her son laughed, vaguely remembering the bottle cap, but not thinking twice about it.

"I sold it, Ma." He kissed her head. "Remember when times were rough like that?"

When any land became good land, neighbors cultivated the dust into homes and then neighborhoods and then towns. The tree with the ring was chopped down to make room for a bench. The ring was swallowed by a rabbit which mistook it for clovers. The rabbit was very stupid. Not too long after, war broke out and the same rabbit was slaughtered and slit, the ring glistening like something biblical. The soldier put the ring in his pocket, thinking he'd propose to his sweetheart if he survived.

Miraculously, he did survive. But it took him a while to get married, and not to the original sweetheart, who cheated on him with a coward who refused to fight. His wife was beautiful, too beautiful to seem like the love would last, but it did.

"I got this ring from a rabbit during the war." He said. "It's an ugly bit, but it tells a story, huh?"

She was a humble woman, that wife. Bore five children, nursed two back out of death's grasp, sewed all the clothes but read their textbooks so she could know what's what. Her

daughters fought over who would get the ring, for it was a reminder of their mama. But it'd only fit on the runt, Lottie. The whole family was too trusting and when a man broke in only the dog, an elderly war shepherd, bothered to jump up and snap. The man had time to grab the entry-way vase and the ring Lottie left beside it. She'd taken it off to water her mother's tulips. The man ran and the dog got him by the heel, but his teeth were soft and slipped. The ring smacked into the soil. The whole family cried for days, thinking it stolen and gone. But a mouse had gotten the ring stuck on her head and died two days later. Natural causes.

Pinkie was nicknamed for a mouse. Perhaps this is why she felt such a kinship for the dead mouse, or perhaps because it was dead, and children are fascinated by death. Pinkie had no parents. They weren't dead, but one beat her and the other called her bad names, worse than Pinkie, and so she lived on the playground. She would've started school about a year ago. She played with other children until their parents noticed how dirty she was, how hungry her eyes were, and suddenly the children had to leave for dinner, even if it was three o'clock. The neighborhood was poor, and the children were cruel, and so there were always dead animals for Pinkie to bury.

She's never found one with a jaguar ring. The ring resisted a little coming off, but it didn't leave more than a greasy indent in the mouse's neck. It smelled awful, like sweat and animal. Usually Pinkie was very respectful of how she found the animals, but she hadn't eaten more than flowers for two days. Eating flowers was losing its charm. She wondered what she could get for such a ring. At least a ham sandwich.

The first three stores wouldn't let her in. But the fourth, which sucked in its breath between two larger buildings, which had the shades pulled down and an old-fashioned buzzer instead of a security guard, did. She trotted up to the counter. The man that greeted her was one anyone besides a hungry little girl would find remarkable. His hair was a delicate red, the pupils so light they almost blended into the whites, but they were clear. He was short and clean and had a marvelous mustache that curled on the ends.

"Hello, little girl, are you lost?"

He had a wonderful accent, but she didn't appear to notice.

"No." Pinkie answered. "How much can I get for this ring?"

She dropped it on the counter. The man picked it up.

"Did you take this from your mama, little girl?"

"No." Pinkie answered. "How much?"

The man paused and looked at her. She was small, her bones were pointing out, she had the fierce, feral look ill-bred children often have.

"I don't do business with thieves." The man said gravely.

"I didn't steal it!" The little girl cried. "I found it. On a mouse. Please, can't you buy it? I'm hungry."

The man's wife, who was polishing watches in the back room, poked her head out. The man shook his head and she shrugged, retreating.

"How about this?" The man said. He looked at the ring again, pretending to find something interesting. "This is a good piece of jewelry you've brought me. How about I offer you hm, lets see, three meals. Do you have a place to sleep tonight?"

"I don't stay with strangers." The girl said.

She was skittish, and the man thought of his home country, of being a little boy that stole and fought for bread.

"It's a business exchange." The man said. "My name is Dima, hm? You've brought me a very worthy product. My wife will cook something for you. If you want, you can sweep up here and there for your meals.

For a moment it seemed the little girl would dart. But she suddenly went soft with a weariness totally inappropriate for her age, and she nodded.

"Tanya, pull out the leftovers from lunch, hm?"

His wife reappeared, narrowed her eyes. The man nodded. She nodded back and smiled at Pinkie. The little girl followed his wife upstairs, to their apartment, where there was food and heat and safety.

The man looked at the ring. It was dirty, and stank. One of the eyes was missing and the other couldn't have been anything more than junk. The man laughed. He tossed it in the trash. Wasn't worth selling.



Student Name: Abigail Walmer

Grade: 10

School: Kinder High School for the Performing and Visual Arts

Title: Love; Echo

Category: Poetry

Key: Gold Key

Educator:

Love, Echo

Beloved,

I have come to understand words, the way they taste on an untouched tongue. The way they bend, like a bow beneath skilled hands. How to hoard them, hold them, kiss the copper shine off their newness. How to eat them, savoring each thick-shelled thought and sucking the tender hearts from within. How to wield them, like the eyes of Medusa, turning her enemies to art with a single gravestone glance. How to love them, lose them, like water through a pair of clenched fists.

And yet, it is you I long for, my Narcissus, my nectar, my fistful of rootless roses. It is you that I write to, on this paper that is too thin to become a prayer, in this ink that tastes far too much like my own blood. It is your name that I bear in the weight of every witnessed bone, your gaze that I wear like a cloak of borrowed light, your honey-hot hands that I will never hold, your altar that I bind myself to again, and again, and again. You, who know nothing of silence, of subtlety, of that which moves beneath the skin. You, who despise the very dust you walk on, simply because it cannot help being conquered. You, who speak only in the language of reflections: a mirror, an eye, a smooth-skinned lake, a smile curved like still water. You, who could never imagine any gravity but your own.

Love,

Echo

Beloved,

Wanting had nothing to do with it. Not your palms, pressing the pulp from this ripening poem, from the soft flesh of my heart. Not your eyes, too rich with beauty to bestow more than a glance on these begging lips, these empty hands. Not your voice, sucking the marrow from my every desire, spitting the pale bones at my feet. Now, I know one more way to swallow a dagger. One more daughter that will never learn the meaning of

drought. One more graveyard where a tongue can be buried. But I still do not know the words that will contain you.

Narcissus, wanting had everything to do with it. With my bones, too hollow to hold me above this hateful earth. With my blood, too cold to fuel your funeral pyre. With your arrows, each one an exclamation point in the legend of our bodies. With my sisters, staining their lungs with sacrificial smoke, folding their fingers around revenge. With Nemesis, her shine on this water, her breath against your neck. And with you, my Narcissus, a sky unbroken by mortal hands, a black hole not worthy to devour itself, a sun drowning in its own reflected fire. Now, I know one more way to watch a man starve. One more day before the moon survives. One more body that cannot bear to be immortal. But I still do not know the words that will release me.

Love,  
Echo  
Beloved,

I am here. Always, I am here, orbiting the very edges of what I will never call my own. And yet, the closest you come to me is an eclipse-darkened shadow, a keen-boned back, the weeks-old warmth of your footsteps in the marsh. Tell me, Narcissus, what is the difference between a nearsighted man and a blind one? Between a poet and a girl without words, a girl without worth? I cover you in the horse-whip wind of night, a shroud against the eyes of death. I raise bread to your lips and you do not taste it. I cradle wine within my palms and watch it leak away. At last, you have rooted yourself, but within a wilderness that will not allow me to enter. Still, I cannot bring myself to blame you. After all, what does a faithful moon matter against the backdrop of these brighter suns?

Why, Narcissus? Why can't you see me? I know how many constellations your sky holds. I know I am but a single star, a single tooth in a many-mouthed monster, a single fist against the blades of this dark. But you are an astronomer. At least, I thought you were.

What is love? I know how foolish I must sound, asking such a question. Love is too bitter a draught for the likes of you to stomach. There are some answers that only the drowning can give.

This is love: a slow collapse at the edges of oneself. A mouthful of songs, but no music to bear their weight. A beggar outside the doors of a feast, grateful for the scraps that no one else will swallow. A stonemason before a quarry, with no tools but his own two hands. The truth is, like all women, I am an addict, in love with my own slow death. The truth is, there is no way to win this game.

Love,

Echo

Beloved,

Do you know how long a lightning bug lives? How much oxygen it takes to kill a candle? Soon, I will learn with you. How to breathe when my body is a burning house, collapsing rafter by rafter. How to be a match, striking suddenly. Dying softly. Soon, I will become your reflection, a girl blue-skinned and beyond saving. A phantom in skin as well as speech. An exoskeleton, empty only on the inside.

Narcissus, my mayfly with only a day to live, would it have made a difference if I was beautiful? If I had quartz-kissed skin and faceted eyes? If my touch was ambrosia, that which is sweet enough to kill slowly? If my body was as easy to break as the flowers cursed with your name? Or would you have thrown the grenade anyway?

Would it have made a difference if I told you about the fireflies, the ones you never cared enough to catch? How they share a single kiss and then succumb, the opposite of a sleeping beauty? How they are born to bleed light, a spark inherited within cupped hands? How they only burn once, so bold and so brief? Or would you have struck the match anyway?

I don't know. I don't know.

Love,  
Echo

Student Name: Grayson Michael Harper

Grade: 12

School: Kinder High School for the Performing and Visual Arts

Title: Omaha

Category: Poetry

Key: Gold Key

Educator:

omaha

(and you're thinking nebraska, but all i  
taste is texas  
it's hot in  
my mouth, like a lover's fist.)

i kiss the bullet that screams across the prairie and wish. not for anything in particular, i  
just do. the sun sheaths itself in the hip of the southern horizon and the coyotes whine in  
the trees, the moon smiles like a grandmother. shoulderblades buried in the dirt, i sleep in  
the kind of quiet that i could never find at home; the quiet of a small town choked up in  
the light of stars, real stars. i've been thinking about them a lot lately and how i wish i  
could be one. your star, easy lover.

two stoplights and a cemetery. my grandmother, born and buried three miles apart. we  
planted tomato seeds out here the day of her funeral, said we'd fix the farm up nice. the  
texas sun twisted my skin pink and i thought something big of myself, doing what she  
would've wanted – that's what my father said it was.

when i dance in the yellowing wheatgrass, you're there, smiling. and you've got that  
sweet smile, a smile that says, let's waltz, cowboy. our roughed up hands fold together  
and soften at the center. the pulp of my heart knows your touch anywhere.

the places i love have loved me back in all forms i've taken, a sweet song for the child i  
once called a stranger. the truth is that i cannot make an enemy of what i used to be. the  
second truth is that omaha watches me and breathes me and holds me like its newborn,  
all two stoplights and two hundred stars.

Student Name: Jordan Muscal

Grade: 10

School: Kinder High School for the Performing and Visual Arts

Title: on language; tea leaves & quicksand

Category: Poetry

Key: Gold Key

Educator:

you will say family's an ocean,  
i will argue something more intimate:  
a bayou, the water filling a kiddie pool...  
i will show you the yellowed photographs  
of women with sharp chins, men looking past the camera,  
enunciate my last name

i will tell you today was a good day,  
my dimple easy as mother tongue,  
the way my cousin has two  
i am working to be grateful, only ask from language  
as much as it will give me

i will tell you this country fits  
like quicksand but i am calm &  
time will tell anyone they belong, tug tight  
on ankles, scrawl the family tree that looks half barren

i will tell you all the myths  
i scraped my elbows on, the old blacktop & wax wings,  
my father's ESL teacher,  
a neighborhood pool, oversaturated,  
the Israeli beach next to a power plant

you say identity should fit  
like an old sports bra, a little tight around the lungs  
but today is a good day

so i will tell you i didn't know  
it was a test, brought my sister  
like an explanation, a rusted mezuzah, a snaggletooth

i will tell you the tea leaves are growing

anxious, & all lessons lost in translation  
are birds migrating somewhere warmer

Student Name: Sophia Zhao  
Grade: 11  
School: Bellaire High School  
Title: One and the Same  
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir  
Key: Gold Key  
Educator: Kelly Quarles

Clash!

A mascara tube hits the tile as I frantically hover over the countertop, scrambling for my tools to create another artwork. Smears of blush, powder, and pencil cover my wrists, and I wipe my skin to start over.

“Again, just try again,” I tell myself.

Flecks of mascara dot over my eyelids like constellations, smudged concealer mixed with a rainbow of shades cover my restless nights without sleep, and tiny pieces of paper fall from the sink countertop as I lean over the sink to dissect my looks.

No, the lighting is not quite right.

I turn to the side, but still, I am not satisfied with myself.

The peeking light of the morning sun streams in the window as I pore my desperate eyes over every little bump, proportion, and mistake.

Glowing sun tendrils over my skin and highlights every curve and line. My father’s eyes, my mother’s lips, and my disheveled appearance radiate in the mirror as I stare back at myself. Gripping the edge of the sink with such ferocity, my hand begins to sore. Minutes pass as I continue to digest who I am. Am I pretty? Am I disgustingly grotesque? Neither, I decide, but looks are my obsession and fill my energy, mind, and identity.

---

“She looks just like her baba, doesn’t she?”

In the hallways of church, the ladies in fellowship would laugh and nickname me “Xiao Zhao Qiang,” meaning little Zhao Qiang, my father's name.

And indeed, they were right. With my eye shape, posture, and expressions, I was his carbon copy.

At that time, I was fond of the name, but with time, I grew to hate that comparison.

My reflection did not exist when I was young. When I went to the bathroom, I never lingered, never looked at myself.

I didn't notice my crooked teeth bound with wires, my thick black hair, my eyes matching the midnight sky.

I noticed my other features: my love for the crisp pages of a new book, my ability to finish a math worksheet before my peers, and my urge to sing loud and clear in public spaces. Since I learned to read, every night meant lying in bed, stiff from the piles of books on top of me, ready to be devoured. The dusty glass kitchen table, always accompanied by a trail of sugar ants, was where I ate every meal with a side of Little House on the Prairie, Frog and Toad, and Harry Potter. The littlest things made me smile: the kindergarten artwork plastered on my wall, my nursery crib in my room like time stood still, and the sound my feet made across the wooden panel floor. It was like I could always rely on those items. They were constant in my passage of childhood.

Other things were constant, too.

Like the rumbling sound of the garage door opening that seemed like an earthquake, shaking the cups and legos on the carpet floor. At age seven, it served me one purpose: signaling me to hide.

So I would throw down my Lego castle and, without thinking, dash into the game room's closet, shutting the door, only slightly letting a crack of light in as my fearful eye watched.

The front door would be slammed open, and Baba stormed in.

I learned to recognize his footsteps early on, the way they trudged across the room, the booming sound of his voice along with them. Sometimes, I didn't understand which version of him was true: the gentle, soft-spoken one at the communion on Sundays or the raging, abusive version at home.

Do not find me! Do not find me!

I repeated it over and over my head as his footsteps thundered onto each step towards me. Clicking away at her computer across from my hiding spot was Mama. She concentrated solely on her work when he came up the stairs and immediately started verbally attacking her. The screams ricocheted off the walls as I absently twisted my hair. I twisted it until my scalp was in pain, and when it was all quiet again, the closet no longer became a refugee hideout, and Mama continued clicking away.



It started in middle school when I started desiring to look different. I noticed the physical similarities between my father and me and wanted them to disappear. Sometimes, my sister and mama would list them out.

“You even have the same feet as him! And the same calves! See, I got mom’s legs!”

“Thankfully, you inherited my lips and hands. They’re so pretty. I do wonder where your nose came from.”

Longing to look like my beautiful mother, I tried to mask my eye shape, overlining them with black liquid shades. Referred to as the “cat-eye girl” in middle school, everyone recognized me because of my overdone makeup.

It was never enough to hide it away, and I grew to despise my eyes, but the amount of eyeliner could not give me the satisfaction in the mirror. All I saw was him.

Years later, Mama divorced him. So he moved out, leaving only the remnants of his old life a bedroom away. The poorly taped Christmas cards, birthday cards, and random childhood drawings of mine he kept close to him still hung onto his walls as if reluctant to accept change.

I remember walking past his room and impulsively stepped inside, wanting to explore the fragments of him scattered behind.

Stacks of Bibles, translated in Mandarin, still sat collecting dust on his table. An oriental fan clasped tightly was tangled in his sheets. It was the same one he gave me when I was little, teaching me what the scrawled calligraphy on each fold meant. He always feared the heat and needed something to keep him cool.

I let my finger linger on a dress shirt he religiously wore every Sunday to church and felt hot tears blurring my vision.

He’s gone, and yes, I did want him gone.

But I felt a pain in my chest because he did love me; why did he ruin it?

He was supposed to be a mentor, a friend, someone who unconditionally accepted me.

Instead, he chose anger every single time.

And felt no remorse

I cried to myself in his room that night, wishing he was different, wishing instead of lingering remnants of his life wasting away, he could make us whole again.

---

It was in the middle of a class. I was playing my harp solo to my teacher when she noticed, “Keep all your fingers together; do not let your pinky stick out!”

I then realized my pinky naturally stuck out when I plucked the strings.  
Afterward, Mama walked me to her car and said with an air of humor,

“You know, your pinky reminded me of your dad. He also tends to stick his pinky out.  
Guess it’s just genetics.”

I paused, then caught myself in the rearview mirror, the glass just high enough to see my eyes.

I laughed, realizing he and I were simply the same but nothing alike. It will not stop me from trying to hide him, but I can never escape him wherever I go.

Student Name: Kaela Pham  
 Grade: 12  
 School: Westside High School  
 Title: PARTY RAT  
 Category: Humor  
 Key: Gold Key  
 Educator:

EXT. FRATERNITY HOUSE - EVENING

The FRATERNITY HOUSE OF CHAPTER ALPHA ALPHA ALPHA is brightly lit with different colored lights. TANNER stands on the second-floor balcony with a megaphone in his hands. He is looking down at the CROWD OF BOYS who are standing in the yard below him.

TANNER  
 (screaming into the megaphone)  
 WHO ARE WE?!

CROWD OF BOYS  
 ALPHA ALPHA ALPHA!

TANNER  
 I SAID, WHO ARE WE?!

CROWD OF BOYS  
 ALPHA! ALPHA! ALPHA!

TANNER  
 That's right boys! Let's party hard today!

The crowd of boys cheer and disperse into the house to finalize the preparations made earlier.

INT. FRATERNITY DORM - EVENING

TANNER  
 My god. It sure is hard work being president of Alpha Alpha Alpha.

BRAD is standing behind Tanner with his hands clasped together behind his back.

BRAD

Of course, it is.

TANNER

I know, Brad. I wasn't asking, and it's sir to you.

BRAD

Sorry, sir.

TANNER

Now leave. I need to get ready. Jessica is coming tonight.

Brad turns around and walks out of Tanner's bedroom. He grumbles while making his way to the last door in the hall.

BRAD

(mumbling while walking into his dorm)

Fucking Tanner...

A SMALL SQUEAK is heard.

Brad moves towards the CAGE ON HIS NIGHTSTAND, poking his finger through the gaps to stroke the ANIMAL'S FUR.

BRAD

Don't worry... It'll be your time soon.

EXT. FRATERNITY HOUSE - NIGHT

The fraternity house's door is open, music blaring out. Outside of the door stands DANIEL, a member of Alpha Alpha Alpha. He is greeting party attendees as they walk in.

DANIEL

Hey, Jessica! Sarah! I'm glad you guys could make it!

Daniel pulls JESSICA into a brief hug. In his hand is a red cup with an unknown liquid that splashes around as he moves.

JESSICA

Of course. I wouldn't miss it for the world.

SARAH

(glaring at Daniel)

Watch out! Your stupid drink is gonna spill on her new dress.

DANIEL

Oh. Sorry.

SARAH, who is behind Jessica, pulls Jessica out of Daniel's hug.

SARAH

Whatever.

DANIEL

Well, welcome to the house. Hope you ladies enjoy the party.

Jessica and Sarah walk into the house together, entering a living room full of people.

INT. FRATERNITY HOUSE

TANNER

Jessica! Glad to see you here!

JESSICA

Thanks for the invite!

TANNER

(smirking)

You were first on the list.

SARAH

Jessica. Let's go get some drinks.

JESSICA

Oh, right. I'll see you later.

Jessica waves goodbye before turning to follow Sarah towards the kitchen. Inside the kitchen is Brad, who is sitting down at one of the many dinner tables.

SARAH

Are you new?

BRAD

(turning around)  
Who? Me?

SARAH  
(rolling her eyes)  
Yes, you.

BRAD  
Oh. Yeah. I just joined a few days ago.

JESSICA  
What's your name?

Jessica begins to pour a drink for Sarah and herself. She makes her way to the table to sit next to Brad.

BRAD  
I'm Brad. You?

JESSICA  
Jessica.

JESSICA (CONT'D)  
(pointing to Sarah)  
This is Sarah.

BRAD  
Tanner's mentioned you! Nice to meet you guys! How are you enjoying the party?

Sarah sits down next to Jessica. She takes a sip of her drink and pulls out her phone to mindlessly scroll.

JESSICA  
We just got here, so we haven't seen much, but it looks like it'll be fun. I see some people I know here.

BRAD  
That's good. I hope Tanner hasn't gotten to you yet. Don't tell him, 'cause I know he's the Pres' an' all, but he's kinda weird.

SARAH  
Trust me. We know.

JESSICA

(whispering)

He's not that bad.

BRAD

Really? Finally! Someone else who thinks he's weird. Everyone else in this house worships him I swear.

SARAH

It's only because he can kick them out whenever he wants.

BRAD

Y'know what I think we should do? We should-

Tanner walks into the kitchen.

TANNER

(interrupting Brad)

Hey! Jessica! Want to play a game with us by the pool?

JESSICA

Oh... um. I was hoping to talk to Brad for a little longer.

Tanner's smile visibly drops. He walks closer to the trio and leans against the side of the table.

TANNER

Brad?

BRAD

Yeah?

TANNER

Shouldn't you be restocking drinks?

BRAD

But they're full?

TANNER

I said. Shouldn't you be restocking drinks?

Tanner GLARES AT BRAD. Sarah quickly looks up from her phone.

BRAD

Yeah. I guess so.

Brad sighs and gets up, heading into the pantry closet to retrieve more drinks. As soon as he leaves, Tanner pulls Jessica up and starts to take her outside.

TANNER

C'mon! It'll be fun.

A few seconds later, Brad returns from the pantry.

BRAD

He's gone?

SARAH

Yeah. He took Jessica outside.

BRAD

Of course, he did.

Brad rolls his eyes and drops the box of alcohol to the floor. He goes back to his seat and quickly finishes his cup of juice.

BRAD (CONT'D)

You wanna help me get back at him?

SARAH

How?

BRAD

We crash the party.

SARAH

(side-eyeing Brad)

We're already here, dumbass.

BRAD

I know.

SARAH



Whatever you say.

Sarah gathers her belongings and leaves the kitchen, disappearing into the living room. Brad smiles and follows her out, but later takes a turn into the hallway with the fraternity's bedrooms. He opens his door, and a SQUEAK is heard.

EXT. FRATERNITY HOUSE BACKYARD

Jessica and Tanner sit at the ledge of the pool, each holding a drink. It is dark outside except for the lights coming from inside the house and neon pink shining from the bottom of the pool. Several party guests are lounging in reclined chairs or the water.

TANNER

So, what were you and Brad talking about?

JESSICA

Nothing special. Just introducing ourselves.

TANNER

(taking a sip of his drink)

Really now?

JESSICA

Yeah! I've never seen him around before.

TANNER

He's new. Kinda weird, but whatever. He's rich.

JESSICA

He seems... sweet.

TANNER

He's weird. Nobody even knows anything about him.

JESSICA

What do you mean?

TANNER

He doesn't talk about his family. Last holiday all the other boys went back home to see their family, but Brad stayed back.

JESSICA

Maybe he lives too far away.

TANNER

But he doesn't. He said he was born and raised here.

JESSICA

Then maybe he doesn't have a good relationship with his parents.

TANNER

I wouldn't be surprised if his parents threw him out. When I got back, I saw him hanging out in the dumpster behind the house talking to himself. He's crazy.

JESSICA

Hey. You never know what someone's going through.

TANNER

Whatever.

JESSICA

Tanner. I've known you for years. You've gone through some things, so he probably has too. Give him a break.

TANNER

That's different.

JESSICA

How is it different?

TANNER

It just is.

JESSICA

This is why you lost that D1 scholarship.

TANNER

What the hell?!

The atmosphere is awkward, and Tanner can't tell if Jessica is joking or not.

TANNER (CONT'D)

Right... Anyways, Brad is weird.

JESSICA

He wasn't that weird when I talked to him. Seemed like a normal guy. I didn't expect him to be in a frat though.

TANNER

Yeah. He's not athletic. Or social. Or fun. Or smart. He's just a guy.

JESSICA

There's nothing wrong with that.

TANNER

Jessica. This is Alpha Alpha Alpha. The BEST fraternity in the country. How did he even get past the first round of interviews?

JESSICA

Maybe he's super charismatic when he wants to be.

TANNER

I don't know. I might kick him out next semester. He's been hiding something in his room.

JESSICA

I thought you guys did room checks?

TANNER

Yeah, but he hides that dumb box every time we do. I don't know how he-

A LOUD SHRIEK pierces through the air.

JESSICA

What was that?!

TANNER

What's going on?!

INT. - FRATERNITY HOUSE

Brad is standing on the second-floor balcony that overlooks the living room, laughing as he watches a girl scream.

GIRL 1

What is it?!

GIRL 2

A RAT!

GIRL 1

A what?? That's literally impossible. You've had too much to drink.

GIRL 2

No! I swear, I saw a rat!

GIRL 1

Let's get you a cup of water.

The girls stumble towards the kitchen, weaving around drunk, dancing bodies.

GIRL 2

You have to believe me. I know what I saw.

GIRL 1

You're drunk. Go sober up.

Girl 1 grabs a plastic cup and begins to fill it up with water from the refrigerator.

A SMALL SQUEAK is heard.

GIRL 2

What was that?

GIRL 1

What was what?

GIRL 2

That sound!

GIRL 1

What sound?

GIRL 2

The squeaking!

GIRL 1

Girl... Drink this water.

Girl 1 hands Girl 2 the cup of water she just finished filling. Girl 2 accepts the drink but continues to talk.

GIRL 2

I know what I heard. There was definitely squeaking.

GIRL 1

Whatever you say. I just want to have a fun time

A SMALL SQUEAK is heard.

GIRL 2

Did you hear that?!

GIRL 1

Hear what?

GIRL 2

Oh my god. No wonder you're failing all your classes. You don't listen to anything.

GIRL 1

Excuse me?!

GIRL 2

I said what I said.

A rat appears on the counter.

GIRL 1

A RAT?!

GIRL 2

A RAT! ITOLDYOU SO!

Girl 1 runs out of the kitchen, screaming for help.

GIRL 1

There's a rat in the kitchen! Someone kill it!

Brad, who is now standing by the front door, grins.

BRAD

Hey, guys! I called some people out to help earlier.

GIRL 2

Thank god.

GIRL 1

You knew there were rats?!

Brad opens the door, revealing a swarm of rats. They rush inside and begin to terrorize the party, knocking over furniture and tables of food and drink.

GIRL 2

I thought you called the exterminators?!

BRAD

I did! My human exterminators!

GIRL 1

You're crazy!

Brad smiles and calmly walks up the stairs to watch over the party.

EXT. FRATERNITY HOUSE BACKYARD

TANNER

Why is there still so much screaming? Whatever. Some girl probably got too drunk.

JESSICA

Shouldn't we go help her?

TANNER

Nah. That's not my problem.

JESSICA

Tanner. You're the president of this chapter.

TANNER

And? Brad does all the dirty work around here.

JESSICA

You're hopeless.

TANNER

For you.

JESSICA

What?

TANNER

Nothing.

JESSICA

I think you should check in on the people inside. It's been a few minutes, and they're still yelling.

TANNER

They'll be ok. This isn't the first time I've heard so much screaming.

JESSICA

What?

TANNER

Yeah. My parties are super crazy.

JESSICA

They're really not. I would know. I've been to all of them. The most exciting thing that happens is a vase breaking.

TANNER

A vase broke?!

JESSICA

Yeah. The purple vase with the pink heart-bubble things on it.

TANNER

Those are the ashes of my dead fish!

JESSICA

Oh... sorry for your loss.

TANNER

You should be! Mr. Fishy was my best friend! How could you not tell me someone knocked over his urn?!

JESSICA

How was I supposed to know that was your dead fish's ashes?!

TANNER

Because it has a label that says "Mr. Fishy's Ashes. RIP 2023-2023" on it!

JESSICA

It died this year?

TANNER

Yes!

JESSICA

Oh wow.

TANNER

What do you mean, "Oh wow?"

JESSICA

I just didn't think a frat president would be crying over a dead fish...

TANNER

Well... I am.

JESSICA

Ok. You really should go check on the party. They are not quieting down.

TANNER

Why do you care so much about them? Let's just hang out here.

JESSICA

It's your party.

TANNER

And it's going great.

Jessica squints and tries to look through the window blinds.

JESSICA

I think someone's about to knock over that green bowl.

TANNER



Mr. Fishy 2.0's bowl?!

INT. FRATERNITY HOUSE

Sarah pushes her way up the stairs, finding Brad standing on the balcony overlooking the living room.

BRAD

How'd you get up here? I thought guests weren't allowed upstairs.

SARAH

Oh my god! That doesn't even matter right now. Brad, what is wrong with you?!

BRAD

What are you talking about?! I thought you were in this with me?

SARAH

I thought we were going to push Tanner in the pool! Or do something harmless! Not invite a hoard of rats.

BRAD

Well, this is what I meant when I said "Crash the party."

SARAH

You're unbelievable.

BRAD

I do what's right.

SARAH

And you think inviting a gang of rats is the right thing to do?!

BRAD

You wouldn't understand.

SARAH

Of course, I don't! Who the hell has this many rodents on speed dial? You're fucking insane.

BRAD

(raising his voice)

You don't know what I've been through! He was there when nobody was. He's the only one who understands me.

SARAH

Who are you even talking about? They're rats!

Sarah wildly gestures to the swarm of chaos downstairs caused by the rodents.

BRAD

Party Rat! He took me in when my mom kicked me out. He's the one who taught me to raid parties. He showed me what life is all about.

SARAH

Your mom probably kicked you out because you're literally insane!

BRAD

(yelling)

Shut up! You don't know anything about me!

Brad takes a moment to catch his breath.

BRAD (CONT'D)

(seething)

You wanna know why she kicked me out?

SARAH

Why?

BRAD

Because some bitch named Tanner told her I was gay.

A brief silence falls between the two.

SARAH

You're gay?

BRAD

No! I'm not gay!

SARAH

You're bi?

BRAD  
No!

SARAH  
Pan?

BRAD  
No!

SARAH  
Then what are you?!

BRAD  
Straight!

SARAH  
(tilting her head)  
Really? I don't see it.

BRAD  
Just shut up! The point is, I. Hate. Tanner.

SARAH  
You couldn't have talked this out with him?

BRAD  
Do you think I could?! He got me kicked out of my own home. Do you know how hard it was to get into this school? How hard it was to apply to this frat? Let alone get accepted? I've spent my entire life tracking this kid down. I'll get back at him if it's the last thing I do.

Sarah begins to back up towards the staircase, preparing to make a run for her life.

SARAH  
You're insane. You're actually insane. And it's not because you're gay.

BRAD  
I'm not gay!

SARAH  
You're right. You're delusional!

Sarah bolts down the stairs.

EXT. FRATERNITY HOUSE BACKYARD

Daniel rushes into the backyard and jogs over to Tanner, who is about to get up and enter the house.

DANIEL

Tanner!

TANNER

Daniel, what's going on? Is Mr. Fishy 2.0 safe?!

DANIEL

There's a shit ton of rats in the house!

TANNER

There's a shit ton of what?

DANIEL

Rats!

TANNER

What have you been smoking? Are you drunk?

DANIEL

No! I swear on my life bro. There's so many rats in the house right now!

Sarah bursts through the backyard door.

SARAH

Tanner! Oh my god. Brad is gay and in love with you! He sent in a whole bunch of rats to kidnap you and take you away!

TANNER

Ok. You're most definitely drunk.

SARAH

I'm not drunk!

TANNER

Yes, you are!

SARAH

No, I'm not!

TANNER

I saw you drinking earlier!

SARAH

Doesn't mean I'm drunk!

TANNER

Where are you guys even getting this info? How did you both come up with the same dumb rat idea?

DANIEL

Because there's a bunch of rats in the house! I saw it with my own two eyes!

TANNER

I'll believe it when I see the rats. And you never answered me! Is Mr. Fishy 2.0 safe or not?

The sound of glass shattering interrupts the conversation, a mass of little grey bodies pouring out the window. The rats scramble across the backyard and climb up anybody they come in contact with.

TANNER (CONT'D)

THERE'S ACTUALLY RATS?!

Sarah whips her head towards the sea of rats and points a finger towards Tanner.

SARAH

It's him! He's the one you want!

The rats all change direction to run towards Tanner. He tries to outrun them.

JESSICA

Jump in the pool!

Tanner jumps in the water.

TANNER

Ha! I know you won't get in the water!

SARAH

Are you dumb? You've never heard of a New York sewer rat?! The ones that climb up your toilet?!

TANNER

What?! Bt Jessica said-

The conglomerate jumps onto Tanner and pushes him down under the water. He tries to fight back but is unsuccessful. After a few minutes of struggling, Tanner stops moving.

INT. FRATERNITY HOUSE

Tanner wakes up, only to find that he has been tied to a chair. He tries to pull his arms from behind the chair but ultimately gives up after a minute of struggling.

A KNOCK IS HEARD coming from the door.

The door swings open. In walks Brad, now wearing a rusted crown. His left palm is facing upwards and a grey mound is resting on top. The mound rises to sit on its hind legs, revealing PARTY RAT.

TANNER

What are you doing?

BRAD

What I was born to do. Serve Party Rat.

Brad struts towards the open balcony doors, taking a deep breath before he steps out. He cups both his hands together and raises his arms above his head. Below the balcony, a CROWD OF RATS has gathered.

BRAD

(laughing hysterically)

WHO ARE WE?!

CROWD OF RATS

(squeaking)

BRAD

I SAID, WHO ARE WE?!

CROWD OF RATS

(louder squeaking)

BRAD  
ALL HAIL PARTY RAT!

TANNER  
Oh my god...

Brad turns around to look at Tanner.

BRAD  
You see this? This is a real party!

Brad lowers his hands to the ground and releases Party Rat from his palms, letting it crawl across the floor towards Tanner. Party Rat climbs up Tanner's pants, eventually perching itself on his shoulder.

TANNER  
What do you want from me?? Is this because I called you gay in front of your mom?!

Party Rat SQUEAKS and lunges at Tanner's face.

CUT TO BLACK

Student Name: Aayushi Bharati  
Grade: 10  
School: Carnegie Vanguard High School  
Title: Remembrance  
Category: Poetry  
Key: Gold Key  
Educator:

The emerald forest sways to a soft melody  
as she pads peacefully along the verdant moss.  
An incandescent scene of serenity the green is a remedy  
she yearns for since her mother's loss.  
Her seraphic hum is carried by Her-  
an heirloom passed by hands turned cold.  
Life passed by in a blur,  
yet her quiet music whirrs, a mellifluous whisper.

Somewhere in the labyrinthine thicket arises a songbird's chirps,  
an ephemeral chorus of color that echoes in turn.  
The sweet notes lurk in the wind,  
a serendipity known to return.  
We fade as time passes,  
yet our music amasses.



Student Name: Emery Goldstein

Grade: 11

School: Kinder High School for the Performing and Visual Arts

Title: Roadkilled

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Key: Gold Key

Educator:

## Roadkilled

The boy saw his dog get hit by a car and die when he was seven years old. It was not as gruesome as it sounds. It really wasn't. In fact, the boy's father had promised this exact scenario when they first got the dog.

"We live by such a busy road." He said. "It's cruel to get you something that will die. Something that isn't supposed to die. Why not a fish?"

But most seven year old boys don't want a fish. They got the dog from the pound and it was a good dog, although the boy's father said it was a very stupid dog. It was dead within three months.

When the boy's dog died, he didn't really know what to do. He had not grown old with the dog. The dog had not died a hero, as all dogs do. It had been hit by a car and the car hadn't stopped.

Eventually the boy picked the dog up. It was heavier in death. He took it to the back yard, went inside, took his mother's pillowcase, a glass of milk, drank the milk, came back outside, put the dog in the pillow case, and buried it. He stared at the ground and felt the heady, pleased sensation of someone waking from wisdom tooth removal. Whatever pain he should've felt was numbed, or maybe buried with the dog. He nodded. He'd done well.

\*

By the time the boy became a teenager the family hadn't moved from beside the road that killed his dog. There was something about this rural stretch of land that possessed those traveling it. The people became animals and the animals became people, or something vague and mysterious like that. He always walked home with his eyes down. If he looked up he'd see death along the road, and he couldn't bear it during the day.

Burial was an evening activity. Sunset, to be precise. The sunsets by the road were swelled with otherworldly color. The teenager often wondered how much the animals liked sunset, but he figured they ought to have a last one regardless.

The teenager's father did not like the whole business of burial. There was something unnecessary and unnatural about it. But the teenager was not hurting himself, in fact, the act seemed to settle him in a way that sudoku or rocking chairs might settle another. He stopped using his mother's pillow cases. He funded the burials himself and was always washed and ready for dinner immediately after.

After a while there came a day when the teenager was suddenly hit with the change from adolescence to adulthood. Is this, he wondered, even worth it? But then he saw a mother possum with babies on her back like sausage links at one of the graves (dead, scavenging, who knows) and he was certain she was mourning. Then he felt sick and sorry and never questioned again.

\*

Freshman, sophomore, junior, senior were just the names of years where death occurred and could be organized. Graduation was the inconvenient exception. When the teenager came home he was supposedly a man and no animals waited for him on the road. A suitcase sat by the door with things he hadn't realized he owned—socks, knitted sweaters, ties. He hadn't realized he was leaving, going to a sweaty place where people retire and college students terrorize suburban areas, didn't realize he was becoming a college student. There had been pamphlets, applications, acceptances, of course. But for each there'd been a death, a burial, and what was more important: his life or their death?

\*

The college was not by any roads. The only animals were birds, and in the rare instance that birds were run over, there was not much to bury.

\*

After college there was the degree and the job in the forest. The man went to a training with about six men on either side, tanned, buzz-cut, arms crossed, where they laughed when told what to do if a grizzly bear attacked, or a moose charged them. The man listened closely. The road burials were not favors, and even if they were, he did not think them transferable to the forest.

But he did not last long anyways. The cold gave him an unpleasant clarity. Death was different. It meant the life of another, maintaining the balance. The forest did not need him.

\*

About five years after he left, the man returned home. His parents didn't want him living with them again, so he built a little house a mile away. Here he lived alone.

The man had much to catch up on. The remnants were scattered about liberally, waiting for him. He brought them all into the house and laid them on the chairs, as though they'd come for dinner. He pared the films of foam from mouths, bathed the broken bodies, adjusted the expressions from grimaces to steady displays of fierceness. They were not his friends. They were not his to know. He was simply a hand carrying them from one injustice to retribution. It was the least he could do.

\*

It could've gone on forever. Eventually the man would succumb to some mortal inconvenience like heart disease or cancer. Withering. A grain in the dessert.

But, one day, he was disturbed. It was a day, just a day, signified only by those buried on it. A squirrel was being washed in the sink like an infant. A cat performed its last inconvenience, blocking the tub. The little house had a surprisingly mellow odor. Soured dirt and scones from the morning.

The man was walking back from dinner with his parents. It was easy for them to like each other now that their son's greatest flaw remained swept out of sight. They ate dinner frequently, and afterwards the man always felt the most pleased he could outside of burials.

As the man walked down the road, a bloated form came into view. The man sighed. He had seen this show many times and still the ending wounded him. A doe. Rudely gruesome. But no, not just death, not just a doe.

A little fawn.

It was standing by the shredded doe, wordless. It raised its head as the man approached and the man paused. He did not know what to do. This animal was not dead. It was alive. He did not know what to do.

He went the long way, away from the fawn. He continued his job methodically, grabbed a tarp from the cellar, gloves. He hoped the little animal would be gone when he returned. No such luck.

The man continued around it. He had a soft spot for deer. They were such tragic animals, always prone to violent ends. He handled the corpse with particular tenderness, but could not help but be disturbed by the fawn. It was still watching him. Silently.

The man pulled the doe onto the tarp, and began to carry the body back towards his house. He relaxed a bit. The corpse would not be picked apart, would not be ravaged. He would take care of it now.

But the fawn followed him. It did so casually. Like this was the only natural course to take. The man tried to nudge it away, first gently, then more insistently. He tried to show the fawn that the deer was dead. Would not be coming back. But the fawn just looked at him with bottomless eyes, as though to say, 'and?'

The burial was a brief one. The man returned to his house, lit the fire, drank a glass of milk. The fawn regarded him hungrily. It was shivering.

"No." The man said. He pointed a finger at the fawn. "I don't owe you anything. You are not my responsibility."

The fawn continued to look at him. It was alive, not dead. It had no mother. If it was dead it would be so much easier. Just another thing to bury. Like the dog, the doe, the birds, the possums, the cats. His dog. The man began to cry. His dog.

The fawn looked startled. It wobbled up to him, butting its head softly against the man's knee.

"You are not my responsibility." The man repeated. "You are alive."

But the fawn would not waver. Finally the man's crying dwindled. His breaths were rattling and disturbed. But he felt alive. He gave the fawn his glass of milk. Finally it made a noise, bleating. Eager to live.

Student Name: Nisha Thukral

Grade: 9

School: Bellaire High School

Title: Sea Change

Category: Poetry

Key: Gold Key

Educator:

As a kid I used to be scared of the dark  
now I look back and realize  
I wasn't scared of the dark  
rather what lurked in the shadows  
as a kid I used to get on my hands and knees  
and try to find a 4 leaf clover in the cracks of the driveway in a patch of weeds  
as a kid I used to lie awake in bed thinking about all the possibilities  
and how the night always suffered an overactive imagination.  
now that I think about it  
I'm not scared of the dark anymore  
it's more of a quiet place I come home too  
now that I think about it  
I would never dig through a pile of weeds  
I'd rather just find a flower  
now that I think about it  
I don't lie awake at night  
I fall asleep exhausted from the day  
when you think back isn't it funny how in the moment  
nothing changes but when you look back  
Everything is different.  
people change  
friends walk in and out of your life  
you lose pieces of yourself you never thought you would lose.  
and sometimes it feels like you're drowning beneath the waves.  
Then all of a sudden those pieces start to rearrange themselves and come back together.  
all of a sudden you would do anything to be scared of the dark again  
or to scout for 4 leaf clovers in the cracks of the driveway in a patch of weeds  
or to be washed over with imagination  
all of a sudden you realize that change is beautiful  
and that a butterfly was once a caterpillar.

Student Name: Charlotte Witz

Grade: 10

School: Kinder High School for the Performing and Visual Arts

Title: Stealing Coins From a Fountain in Italy

Category: Poetry

Key: Gold Key

Educator:

we come as the sun rises and wade in the water up to our hips,  
hands entwined and molten as we fumble for copper,  
nickel, zinc, an american penny rolling from my hand back into the water,  
i curse under my breath in italian. we move like we always have,  
you sloshing about silently, me working with deft, calloused hands.  
there is a knife in your side that has always been there, and

if you are dead i have heard no word of it. tomorrow we will  
play sharks and minnows, i hide behind  
the smooth sheet of water cascading from an angel's mouth,  
a cherubim's crinkled up smile lines. when the cops arrive, and the cuffs  
and plastic evidence bags come out, we are both long gone. you engage

in living the last year of your life as a ghost just for the hell of it,  
i am a lion and you are a witch and this place, this sacred  
place, is our wardrobe. (hands full of murky yellow water, the  
startled yelp of coins as they fall from our hands,  
officers with guns pointed at the sun.) we are  
never going to die and we are certainly not immortal. an officer

just barely older than you buries a bullet in your side, i flee. i think  
that maybe they've locked you up once and for all. but when i return,  
you are sprawled in a pool of coins, the angel looming  
overhead, her smile twisting down as she observes. i kneel before you,  
plucking coins from your hands and the dirt you lay in.  
in this way, you have become our own little fountain.

Student Name: Charles Yu

Grade: 11

School: Bellaire High School

Title: The Plateau View

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Key: Gold Key

Educator:

The view from the top is gorgeous. It's a triumphant feeling that supersedes all other emotions of doubt and anxiety and results from the culmination of the climb it took to get there. For that brief moment, you're at the peak of your field, your passion, your age group, your league, and most dominantly, your importance. Such was the glorious sight thrust upon twelve year old me during one of the most important swim competitions in my short existence playing mermaid.

It was a regional championship with rigid time standards with the most renowned swimmers from the most prominent clubs. I had scraped together a handful of times that met those standards from the early season, but no one expected my winning streak.

In those races, water flowed past me while I mustered a primal strength, my muscles extending and contorting while some unseen hand shoved my head under. During those moments, my mind projected incoherent images of the most random objects in my mind, overstimulated and exhausted.

The rush of touching the wall and spinning my head around to see the number one next to my name sent sparks down my spine. I demolished kids who now rank in the top 50 in the nation, who now are committed to prestigious universities, who now attend national championships. And I too, saw myself on that path. Me, who traveled alone with my team's assistant coach while the other swimmers came in droves of team vans. Me, who trained five times a week while the other swimmers had an intensive regime of twice a day, every day. Me, who lacked a wet bag to store my equipment in or even a pool that had more than six lanes.

Here came a kid from a team no one had ever heard of, who swept the entire competition off their fins, winning precious accolades and being recognized as the high point swimmer of the meet. I remember the announcer pausing before he announced the award, giving an ungainly reference to another swimmer who was projected to win. "After a close contest, Charles Yu comes out as your high point champion!" I had beaten the runner-up by nearly 100 points by winning six golds.

The sheer unprofessionalism of my emergence startled others and myself. People began to know my name, they recognized me when I walked past them, and competitors started paying attention to my online profile, tracking my progress to see how I got to where I was. It filled me with a sense of purpose and a desire for more. I don't remember who, when, or where I did it, but I promised that I would never stop pursuing the sport, and become the best swimmer I could be. I was not on top of the world, I was the world, and I wanted to orbit even greater stars.

But many people only tend to notice the landscapes far away on a mountain's peak, and I was no exception to that caveat. I was certainly at a high point, but I was so blinded by the sun's radiance that I didn't realize what I really stood on was not a mountain, but a plateau.

I pledged absolute loyalty to my swim team. It was a small one that I had been a part of since its conception as an annexed leg of a summer program. I treasured the valuable private lessons with the assistant coach, where we bonded over our shared interests in Nintendo and anime for over a half-decade. Without his guidance, I would never have made it to that regional competition in the first place. I still remember one of his most repeated mottos before a race: "Being nervous does the same thing to your body as if you were excited." I thought it was stupid. Nevertheless, we spent countless afternoons dissecting my technique and coming up with ways to improve it. He had this habit of only breathing out of his nose after a hard swim, giving off the impression of a tired hippo during his in-pool demonstrations. We laughed together at how ghostly smoke slowly drifted from the outdoor pools in cold winters and cheered together when we grabbed lunch at the end of big meets. Since I was the only one who qualified, it would usually be just the two of us.

After I reached the peak, my practices resumed as normal. Perhaps that was my biggest mistake, in that feeling content with such a dominant win meant no more innovation was necessary. And as the months went on, I realized the land I was on was no longer bringing me uphill. I was stuck.

No one dared to utter those words: "Maybe you're plateauing." To be on a 'plateau' meant that you no longer swam any faster, you wasted potential, with what could have been dangling in your mind like the unobtainable candy bar you ask your parents to buy at the supermarket.

To address it meant that it was true, and that all the excruciating hours and suffocating training thereby meant nothing. So I filled my vision with excuses. "Maybe it's the same for everybody," I thought. "Maybe it's because I haven't tapered for the final meet at the end of the season." I secretly celebrated every time my rivals added a bit, hoping that I was not alone in my perils.

One month was excusable. Three months was concerning. But one year was too much. The same people whom I silently reveled in as they added time began improving, and even obsessive preparation over a single meet resulted in little movement. The older swimmers on my team all left, leaving a handful of kids my age I could interact with, and none who swam with the intensity I needed. I vividly recall crying alone in my hotel shower after a particularly disastrous meet. I had failed to even make finals, leaving me with an empty afternoon and a heart just as vacant. Tears slid down my face, lost in the illusion of running water from the shower, and ran away into the drain below.

I had taken the wrong path on the mountain, and instead of ascending, I traversed a barren wasteland that I stubbornly refused to retrace, unwillingly to cut my losses and leave. I refused to switch teams or to swim significantly more yardage, promising after each failed race to make a drastic change that never happened.

So I became worried. I went from going faster on every single time trial I swam to only shaving off a few milliseconds at the biggest tournaments. Each meet I went to my mind was solely locked on the times I was getting. I tore myself apart when I didn't swim any faster, berating myself for not reaching new times. My assistant coach assured me it was just a bump in the road, a temporary pause. The older head coach said it was just my mentality that needed fixing. I refused the offers of both theories. I scrambled to find some minute detail, some inconsistency, some flaw that led to my incompetence. An Aha! moment that I would fix and instantly regain my footing at the top.

So I became nervous. I had forgotten what my assistant coach told me two years previously on that 'miracle meet'. I had removed the excitement of swimming, allowing a whirlpool of anxiety and fear to consume my swims. My hands trembled as I placed them on the edges of the diving block, knowing that I hadn't been improving in that event for months. At practice, we started adopting a new strategy in hopes of encouraging more speed in my races. Instead of intensive heavy workouts, we had recently resorted to 'sprint' swimming halfway across the pool and back. Touch the wall and go to half. Touch and go. Over and over.

So I became angry. I groaned every time we had to kick with our heads down to half for five minutes straight, bounded by the limitations placed on us. I was not pleased by the inefficient workouts, but I guess my assistant coach was even less pleased.

It was a chilly night in early autumn. We bobbed slowly on the wall, listening to the head coach give out another set of five minute non-stop swimming to half. The assistant coach sat on a mocha beige lawn chair next to him with the hoodie of his midnight black parka over his face. I swam halfway, stopped, and I swam back. My assistant coach tells me, "Someone like you should only need one breath each way." I gave some haphazard



response of acknowledgement and continued. I swam halfway, stopped, and I swam back. Through the constant haze of splashing water droplets, I saw spit flying in the air. My assistant coach is standing up now, speaking to the head coach. I swam halfway, stopped, and I swam back. The assistant coach was no longer there. I stopped and asked my friend where he went. They muttered something about a disagreement. I assumed he was just grabbing something from the car. I swam halfway, stopped, and I swam back. That was the last time I would ever see my assistant coach at practice. He sent a message later that night to all the swim parents saying, "Sorry about this. I just can't handle working under the environment I'm in." He had copied and pasted the same text to each parent, but nothing was sent to me.

The last thing he told me that day, how I should have been a better swimmer, became another reminder of the plateau. I was angry with how practice continued after that, how the head coach refused to reconcile, and how the team became less lively. Above all else, I felt the heavy weight of inaction, that somehow my not swimming fast enough led to his resignation and equated to me being worth less as a person.

All I saw was the view from the plateau. I was tempted to stop traveling the seemingly never-ending path and make peace with where I was. It completely baffled me why life, after years of effort, would remain so meek and unchanging.

But I continued and continued and continued. Each weary breathtaking chest-bursting practice came and went over the years. I remembered that decade-old promise to no one in particular, where I had vowed to try my best. I hated lying. I refused to leave my hopes alone, and I vowed to never let them leave me. Eventually, the plateau began to become more angled, its trajectory gaining an upward force that lifted my spirits.

Maybe I continued swimming because I associated it with my expectations of myself. If I were to give up on this dream, then there is nothing that can come close to it. Maybe it was because I wanted to prove to the swimmers who doubted me that I was worthy, rebuff those who made fun of how little I practiced even as I swam until my head spun. Maybe it was just an archaic mental memory, a husk still bound to the ears of a whimsical promise. Maybe it was a little of everything.

And that was the beauty of a plateau. When you stop to take a look at the broad expanse around you. Even if I didn't improve on paper, each failure shaped my response to disappointment. The lonely times in the pool became less of a pitiful embodiment of incompatibility and more of a haven for self-reflection. Even in this flat land, I was still able to take a deep breath and take in everything around me.

My assistant coach called me in tears, over a year after he left. My family and I had just gone on a trip to San Diego, the first vacation I had in years. We were waiting in the

airport when he texted me, asking if I was available to call. It was a strange request, considering my previous attempts to arrange lessons with him were ignored, but I relented and answered.

He was in the ICU. There was a life-threatening hole in his small intestine, and he had passed out cold right after calling an ambulance days before. They had to do emergency surgery for three days until he woke up. He was still in the hospital bed when he called. "I'm sorry for not being there for you." He spoke in a coarse, mournful manner, muddled by tears in his throat. "When I was lying there, I was thinking of you, your mother, the entire team. I wanted to see you all again," he choked through the phone. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. Those private lessons you wanted? I promise we'll do them. I want you to know you are an amazing kid." he spoke with a sincerity that I had never heard before. I wondered what he went through, to be on the brink of death, assuming that every memory may be the last. And out of his three decades of life, I was part of those thoughts that gave him the strength to live. Words cannot describe the feeling that washed over me as I sat at that bustling airport terminal. I had never experienced such a primal form of appreciation, your life unknowingly saving others.

I never did hear my assistant coach's voice after that. I had brief communications with his mother and him over text afterward, wishing him the swiftest recovery. Maybe it was the euphoria that came with surviving a near-death experience that pushed him to call me that night, but he never did end up delivering on his promises. Even now, more than six months after the event, it has been radio static. Our chat logs are a blue wall of messages, and once again, I was alone.

But it was different. I wasn't mad at my assistant coach for his absence. I learned later that he was struggling with depression and other mental health issues. I understood that he was going through his own plateau, maybe not regarding swimming, but a road that I had traveled before. Those words exchanged in that final call brought me closure, just as I transitioned to a critical period where my commitment had finally borne fruit.

Today, the path I travel is no longer a straightforward plateau. It is a mountain pass that inclines up and down and up again. I recognize my periods of stagnation less as deficiencies in my character, but more as opportunities and puzzles. I ignore the nonsensical way that life betrays your expectations, for better or worse. What matters most is that I keep traveling this path I'm on. Persisting whether it remains level, spikes up, drops down, or even if it's not related to swimming at all. The view from the plateau is different from the view at the top, but the distance you travel with each step remains the same.

Student Name: Kat Huang  
 Grade: 9  
 School: Bellaire High School  
 Title: two birds on a wire  
 Category: Poetry  
 Key: Gold Key  
 Educator:

two birds on a wire  
 one says to the other,  
 "will we leave, today, this wire?"  
 but the other says, "no,  
 not today, i am tired;  
 so for now, i'm afraid, it's this wire."

two birds on a wire  
 one says to the other,  
 "will today be the day we fly?"  
 but the other says, "no,  
 not today; tomorrow."  
 but little do they know; he's a liar.

two birds on a wire  
 one says to the other,  
 "today we take leave of this wire!"  
 but the other says, "no,  
 i'm sorry, but no. the rain clouds  
 are rolling, the thunder is booming."

two birds on a wire  
 one says to the other,  
 "i want to leave this wire!"  
 but the other says, "no,  
 the hawks are crying; to leave now  
 is equivalent to dying!"

two birds on a wire  
 one starts to fly away  
 "goodbye. i am done with this wire!"  
 but the other cries, "no,  
 i promise we'll leave soon.

so don't desert me quite just yet."

two birds on a wire  
one inquires the other,  
"do you ever plan on leaving this wire?"  
the other says "yes,  
trust me my friend,  
like you, i want to leave this wire."  
but he is a liar.

two birds on a wire  
one, without a word to the other,  
finally flies away from that wire.  
the other does not break  
their unbroken silence  
because they both know  
that he is a liar.

Student Name: Ana Alonso

Grade: 10

School: Kinder High School for the Performing and Visual Arts

Title: We All Wear Crowns

Category: Short Story

Key: Gold Key

Educator:

Lily was a collector.

Well, she was many things: a poet, an extrovert, a hater of modern interior design, a constant contemplator of death...

But above all else, Lily was a collector.

Every note Katie passed to her in English class. Every bottle cap Theo gave her at the park. Every birthday card, no matter the mounds of glitter or excessively cheesy line. She stuffed each and every charcoal stained paper and sparkle strewn card-stock straight into her pockets. She didn't care for the mess it made of her clothing. That must've been the one thing she didn't care about, because that's another thing Lily was. Someone who cared.

Katie met her when she was twelve.

Lily was munching on a sandwich underneath a tree at lunch, quietly observing her classmates from afar. She wasn't paying attention to the one above her.

Katie had always loved scaling trees, no matter how scraped her knees got or how tousled her hair. She wanted to taste the stars and live in the breeze.

But she could only hold on to this branch for so long, her hand trying to tighten its grip as her legs scrambled to find more tree to stand on top of. Nothing.

Katie let go.

She landed in a way that wasn't graceful, but didn't hurt. Her legs put her in a squatting position, with her hands outward. She blew over-long bangs out of her face, glancing at the classmate suddenly next to her.

Lily was unphased, except for the grin that started from the left corner of her mouth. She had dimples.

"Nice to meet you," Lily said. She didn't know that in Houston, new friends grew from trees.

"I'm Lily."

Theo met her shortly afterward.

They were in the same science class. Theo had noticed Lily from day one, because it was hard not to. Her hand jolted up at every question, unafraid of having a right answer, because she never had answers, only more questions. How rare was it that Earth could

create life? Did other planets have the same phenomenon? Did other galaxies? Universes? Why create all this life, just to also invent death? One class period, that had involved a rather active bout of questioning from Lily, particularly about the “inventing death” inquiry, Theo found himself approaching her after class.

“Newton’s third law.” He mumbled.

She was grabbing her things, squatting down, then turned up to look at him. Her eyes were big and green and embodied curiosity as well as she did. “What?”

“Newton’s law,” He said, fiddling with his backpack strap. “Every action has an equal and opposite reaction. Push and pull. Jump and fall. Life and death.”

That’s what he used to make sense of it, anyway, after his mom had passed. Nothing anyone told him to comfort him about her death ever made sense, but this Issac guy seemed to know what he was doing.

Lily’s expression didn’t shift, she just blinked a little. She tilted her head, then turned back to her stuff.

Theo turned away, fiddling more with his backpack strap, and headed toward the hallway.

“First law of thermodynamics,” The voice he always heard chirped at him. He turned around.

“Energy can neither be created nor destroyed,” Lily recited. She had collected her stuff, and started walking with him. “So something must happen to us. Not just death.”

Theo lifted a brow. “Like the afterlife? Do you think our souls live on forever?”

She nearly laughed. “I don’t know what I believe in, but it’s definitely not forever,” she extended a hand, “I’m Lily.”

“I know.”

She smirked. “Because I never shut up?”

“Maybe.”

He shook her hand. An odd thing to do for a classmate, but it didn’t seem odd to Lily.

“Theo,” he said.

“I know,” she grinned.

He blinked. “How?”

She shrugged, “Not only do I never shut up,” She pulled her hand away. “I always listen.”

Years brushed by like wrinkled book pages. Seventh grade traded for Tenth grade.

Katie often came to Lily’s house, after exhausting conversations with her mother.

“It just frustrates me, with her,” Katie would ramble. “She treats me like the person she wishes I was instead of the person I am. Wear more dresses. Put on more pink. Climb less trees. Read more books. I don’t know who she thinks her daughter is, but it certainly isn’t me.”

Katie’s face got all red when she was angry. Then she lost every cent of energy, sinking to Lily’s floor, defeated and deflated. “It’s like I’m not the person I’m supposed to be, meanwhile I don’t even know who I even am,” she huffed, “is it my aspirations? Do those

define me? Everything I wish I was? Everything I wish I wasn't? How.. how am I supposed to know?"

Lily's clear and crisp voice reached out. "You don't have to."

"I want to, though." Katie fumbled a hand through her bangs. Still overlong. "How do you define yourself?"

Lily paused, then spoke. "I don't know. I think the most important thing is that you choose how."

"So how do you choose?"

She paused again. "I'm not sure."

"Me neither," Katie mumbled, then dropped her head in her hands. "I'm sorry you have to listen to me ranting."

Lily sank down on the floor next to her. "It's one of the grandest honors of my life, actually, so don't apologize." She nudged Katie's elbow. "And whoever you are, know that I love her. You and Theo," Lily made jazz hands, "My Katheo."

Lily grinned. Katie smiled back a little, through a mess of choppy dark hair and fading anger.

"You're ridiculous for that name," she said. "And, yeah, I love you too."

All of them often hung out at the park, in the fall. They had a spot, right next to the bayou. There, they'd lay their heads down, stare up at a Houston sky. They had a habit of tracing the clouds with their fingertips.

"I think I'm going to make a treasure," Lily blurted one day.

The breeze blurred by, and Theo arched his brow. "What does that mean?"

"Sort of like a time capsule," She explained. "A little note, and maybe an item or two, for us to find together senior year."

"But you'll know where you hid it," Katie had scaled the tree above them, dangling precariously over the bayou. (She had only fallen in once. Her mother had been furious.)

Lily shrugged. "Maybe I'll forget." A leaf fell on Lily's head. She put it in her pocket.

"Will the items be something you make?" Theo prompted.

She smirked. "That's for me to know, and for you to find out."

Lily sat up, staring at the bayou. She stood, and dipped a hand in the water. She pulled out a soaked plastic bottle. "But it'll be something important, same with the note. Maybe something like answers."

"Answers?" Katie inquired from above.

Lily put the plastic bottle in her pocket, staining her pants a darker shade. She had a twinkle in her eye. "For me to know, and for you to find out."

Theo would visit Lily at his best and at his worst. The most notable time was one particular day, the anniversary of his mother's death. He was stuck on an old video. His mother, with his smile and nose, cooking something with his father. The clip captured a snippet of her laughter. He played it over and over and over again, just to hear the sound. Just to memorize it. Just to know.

But just after the ringing song of her, the video ended.

It always ended.

The thought tasted like salt on his tongue.

Theo knocked on Lily's door a half hour later.

The words spilled out of Theo as soon as the door opened.

"You don't believe in forever, right?" He asked. She paused a little, confused.

"No, I don't."

"So then nothing good ever lasts?" His voice was an earthquake, breaking in on itself.

The following silence was glass that could cut.

"Theo." She said it softly. She pulled him into her house, bringing him up plain stairs to a plain room. She sat him down on her bed. "Wait right here."

She left, and he heard little muffles from another room, of Lily fighting with someone else.

There was a following bout of stomping up the stairs, and a breathless Lily made his way to him. "I told my Mom to call Katie." She sat down on the bed next to him.

"Why?" He asked.

"Because she's always there to support her friends," Lily answered, "And she's got the candy."

Katie arrived swiftly, hugging Theo on arrival and showering him with month old halloween sweets. "I'm spoiling you because you deserve it," she said.

"Are these expired?"

"Not if you don't think about it," Lily chimed.

Katie beamed, then pulled up her bag. "I brought my laptop, So that way we can watch terrible movies and laugh at them for their terribleness." They couldn't use Lily's computer because she didn't have one. Her parents didn't let her online at all. Katie and Theo never asked why.

Katie dug into her belongings for her computer, while Theo turned to Lily.

"Seriously, do you believe that nothing good ever lasts?" Lily always had questions, but sometimes she had explanations. He needed one.

Lily paused. She let out a long sigh, slightly shaking her head. "Maybe?" She unwrapped a chocolate bar, then shrugged. "But right now I'm on my bed. I have endless amounts of potentially poisonous halloween candy, a trashy movie, and the people I love most," She paused as Katie scooped in next to them, "So I'm not worried about forever, or lasting. I'm living," she took a bite of the bar. "I think that's enough. For right now."

Theo let the words echo in his head, swallowed the thoughts on a salty tongue.

"It's enough." He repeated.

She nodded. She turned her head to the 2000's pop-rock movie they were watching, a song with far too many "oohs" and "yeahs" playing in the background.

Theo stared at her a moment more, then thought of his mother's laughter. It still rang in his head. She hadn't lasted. Neither would he. Neither would anyone.

Everything would end. He wouldn't forever be alive.

But right now, he was.



Was that enough?

"Can you hand me that wrapper?" Lily asked Katie. She gave it to her. They laughed at something on screen.

Theo smiled.

Yeah, for now, that could be enough.

It was like the closing of a book, when she left. A journey fit between pages, ended at a moment's notice. Only there was no epilogue. It was early winter of sophomore year.

She told them right at dismissal. The day of.

"It's in Dubai. New job, or something." Lily's clear crisp voice turned into little puddles of rain, unsure and quiet. "I, uh, I won't have technology or anything, but I can try to write."

Katie and Theo stood in silence.

"I'm, um. I'm sorry."

Glass silence cut them up into pieces with the sharpest of edges.

"Why didn't you say anything earlier?" Katie was messing with her bangs as her voice broke.

Lily swallowed. She shrugged. "I didn't want my last days with Katheo to be spent with that knowing. That it was going to end," Her stare flicked to Theo. "But I guess that's everything, right?"

He had nothing. Nothing in his gaze, nothing in his stance, nothing all over.

He fiddled with his backpack strap.

"I'm really sorry guys."

Lily's Dad's car pulled up, and she managed one last burning look at them.

Then she left, mounting the sienna colored vehicle. The car was gone in a flash.

That was it right? A flash. Of her smile, her eyes, her questions, her.

Katie and Theo had nothing. Nothing in their gaze, nothing in their stance, nothing all over.

A flash. And she was gone.

You never truly have something until you lose it.

When Katie visited Theo's house, it was a day afterward. He heard a frantic knock at his door, far too late at night, and far too stormy outside. He opened his entrance to a soaked Katie, who looked like she'd been dipped in the bayou tenfold.

"The treasure," she scrambled, holding up her phone. "I got a message from an unknown number that just says 'TREASURE.' I think Lily found a way to break her technology rule, for just a bit." She shook out her shoulders, cold. "She wants us to find it. And I think I know where."

He wanted answers. So did she.

They wanted Lily.

It was far too late at night and he had school in the morning...

Theo made sure his father couldn't hear him starting the car.

They shot toward the bayou after a half-hazardly parking job, throwing themselves in the direction of their old hang out. Half-submerged in muddy bayou were the beds of grass they used to lie on. The storm roared at them to hurry.

Kati paced around the water's edge. Theo mimicked her, racing back and forth, and back and forth, until-

Theo tripped, headed face first into the currents. Katie caught the end of his hoodie just in time, reeling him back in.

"You're really strong!" He called.

"Trees!" She screamed back.

Right as they were about to shoot in other directions, Theo caught a glance of what he tripped on.

"There!" He pointed.

The corner edge of a wooden box stood out from the rest of the dirt. They dug their hands into the soggy sediment to retrieve it.

Katie brought the box to the top of the bayou, then collapsed down next to a tree, body weighed by exhaustion.

"What do you think it is?" Theo shouted. Thunder threaded under his words.

"It has to explain some things," Katie yelled, running her hands over the box, "We kept asking her questions. Maybe she figured them out." It sounded more like a wish than anything else. Katie covered the box with her arms.

"I don't want to wait, Theo."

He paused, considering the storm.

Then he sat down next to her, trying to fit under the sliver of tree that covered them up.

"Me neither."

They took a deep breath, synchronous with one another.

The last piece of Lily they'd get.

Katie opened the box.

My Dearest Katheo,

The only scenarios in which I would use the word "Arbitrary" are the following:

1. I have to write a really boring english essay because my parents are threatening to take away my dinner, so I'm using fancy and lavish language to cover up the fact that I have zero interest nor care for the assignment.
2. I'm telling a dad joke that has something to do with pirates.
3. I'm talking about the concept of "forever."

You guys know me better than anyone. You know how often I lie in bed and stare at the ceiling, puzzling, trying to untangle the concept of "forever."

A strange idea to come into existence. To say that something could live forever. To say that something could be gone forever. With such contemplation, I find that “gone forever” rings in the back of my head, constantly.

When the noise is particularly shrill, I look at my stuff. All of it.

The stray notes and bottle caps and and fragments of a life,

That I realize we, and all of these good things,

cannot be “gone forever.”

It’s as if we all wear crowns. Each one adorned with a different set of a million jewels.

My crown is set with the ruby of my mother’s hugs, the amethyst in Katie’s smile, the emerald of Theo’s laugh.

Each and every good thing, good moment, good person I know, is a gem I carry on my crown.

Creating a little patchwork of everything I love.

That’s how I choose to define myself.

With this crown, whose jewels I pass along. Katie’s waves to greet people in the halls.

Theo’s resilience to stand up for those I love.

Our jewels are traded, passed on, passed down, generation after generation, into some semblance of forever.

A semblance of forever.

For as long as we all wear crowns.

And I hope you know, Katheo, that for however long my semblance of forever is, I will spend it in gratitude for the crown you carved for me. I will spread its shine and I will pass it down.

Because you’re the kind of good thing that deserves to last.

The items you’ll find are physical manifestations of said crowns. (I used the actual little pieces of you guys that I keep, along with some little notes along the way.) They are for you to have, as a reminder of the crowns you wear. Maybe you give them to the people who most shape you. Whatever you want. They’re your crowns.

Thank you for existing in my little universe. It has been the honor of a lifetime.

Lilly Devin Shannon

Lily was a collector.

Theo knew it. Katie knew it too.

Wherever she went, she saw and breathed and broke and leapt and fell and got back up again.

But above all that, wholly, Lily was a collector.

Theo and Katie stared at the items, paper crowns with their names in dry sharpie, made out of old notes and bottle caps and candy wrappers.

Katie grabbed hers, twisting it in between her fingers, trying to keep it in a spot where it wouldn't get soaked. The things you love..

Katie put her crown on Theo's head.

He turned to her, smiled, and laughed a little. Some semblance of forever..

He heard his mother in his laugh.

He grabbed his crown and placed it on Katie's head.

They walked back to the car, heading home. They wore crowns shaped with bottle caps and candy wrappers,

Sort of smiling.

They would pass the jewels on, the stray patchwork,

Of someone who cared.

Student Name: Divya Keswani  
 Grade: 10  
 School: Carnegie Vanguard High School  
 Title: Women in the Emergency Room  
 Category: Poetry  
 Key: Gold Key  
 Educator: Rachel Bohanick

Me next? Hello  
 Sorry about this  
 I didn't have time to do my makeup this morning  
 I couldn't sleep cause of all the pain  
 Which doesn't help these bags under my eyes  
 I didn't plan for you to see me like this  
 Didn't mean to ruin your day with my existence  
 And oh god don't look at my hair  
 I mean to wash it yesterday  
 But then this happened  
 And I didn't shower last night  
 and I couldn't find any hair bands in my house  
 Do you guys have any hats in here?  
 I look a mess today  
 These clothes are old  
 I just grabbed the first thing I saw  
 And there was nothing else to wipe the blood with  
 My bum looks terrible in these pants  
 I swear, I only wear them in the house  
 And and I would usually look better  
 It's just, I haven't been going to the gym  
 And I've been having a lot of cheat days  
 Cheese and chocolate  
 My kryptonite  
 Silly of me to  
 Enjoy life  
 Oh you should have seen me when I was a teen  
 All bones and insecurity  
 So beautiful  
 It's getting quite cold in here  
 Ah sorry if I'm being a bit bitchy today  
 I want to smile for you  
 But recently I've been feeling like the sadness is eternal

And I can't go on  
Ha!  
Sorry my laugh is horrendous  
More of a screech if anything  
Joy falls out of my mouth  
Jagged before I have time to make her pretty  
Christ, Look at me chatting away!  
Sorry for taking up all this space,  
I know there are other people waiting  
What do I need to fill out on this form again?  
Sorry I can't really read it  
My vision is sort of going black  
Do I look weird?  
Just image me perfect  
Just imagine me drop-dead gorgeous

Student Name: Alexis Norman

Grade: 12

School: DeBakey High School for Health Professions

Title: Wounded

Category: Poetry

Key: Gold Key

Educator:

Viscous blood trickles into a wound  
Turning its pale white pit into a lake  
"It's going to be alright" I whisper,  
releasing a breath I didn't know I was holding.

Time crawls on, my cut ignored  
Maybe it has festered, and gangrene is creeping towards my bones  
Maybe it has healed into a silvery line  
Or maybe it was just a dream concocted by my mind.

But none of these are true.  
It's still there, crusted in a deep, dark red  
Hugging my skin tight, holding on for dear life  
with every stretch and shift my body takes

And I wonder,  
How I managed to ignore it  
When I can feel it brush against my clothes with every step  
When the shower stings and I have to hide  
And when I stare at its brethren on my thighs

And I wonder,  
How did it multiply so fast?  
My firstborn is beautiful compared to them  
It retains a kind of innocence  
Which is true, it was the product of an unspoiled mind

The very first cannot be beat  
The rest are mere imitations, harsher, deeper, but somehow weaker  
than the tiny red mouth that caused so much ambivalence in my thoughts.

And I cannot forget the way it made my brain go numb and my body come alive

Student Name: William Owens

Grade: 11

School: Hargrave High School

Title: Headlights

Category: Dramatic Script

Key: Gold Key

Educator:

## ACT I

### EXT. DARK FOREST-NIGHT

Crickets.

A skittish whitetail doe walks onto scene and grazes on some grass. She goes about her surface-level deer activities (getting scared of crunchy leaves, chewing on plants, etc.) for about a minute or two. She happens upon a road and goes to cross it, but a car begins barreling at her at 40 miles per hour.

As deer do, she freezes in the headlights. As she stays frozen in the street, the car keeps driving, passing right through her as if she were a ghost.

She brushes it off and keeps walking, noticing a door on the other side of the road. The door is a normal wooden door, but it doesn't seem to be connected to any building. She goes and knocks.

Inside the door is a room where DREAMTHERAPIST is shown. She's an elderly woman with white hair, dressed in a fancy suit and wearing a monocle. She's sitting in a lavish throne-like chair and concentratedly writes on paper with a quill and ink.

DREAMTHERAPIST

(Without looking up from her paper)

Come hither.

The doe pushes the door open with a hoof. She tries to enter the door, but she suddenly gains antlers that get stuck on the frame. She takes off her head, revealing the human head of KARA, a woman in her early 20s. The antlers aren't seen again, but Kara carries around her deer head like it's a mask.



Kara's eyes are naturally wide. Thus, she's constantly looking deep into the distance. Her hair is tightly curled and afro-like, forming a wild, flowing ball around her head that doubles the width of its silhouette.

She stands up on two legs and pushes the door like a human. She's now a bipedal deer with a human head. She walks into the room and awkwardly stands in the silence for a moment.

INT. DREAMTHERAPIST'S OFFICE- NIGHT - CONTINUOUS

DreamTherapist's office is a rectangle with doors on either of the short sides. In the middle of the room is a lavish rug separating DreamTherapist's Brazilian walnut desk and a sofa pushed against the wall.

DREAMTHERAPIST

Do indulge in the spoils of finding a  
seat. Wipe from your brow the spoils  
of my own, for to desire what one  
cannot hath is pointless as a dull  
blade.

Kara sits on the couch facing DreamTherapist. DreamTherapist writes for a little longer, then puts the quill away and faces Kara.

DreamTherapist is slouched while Kara sits perfectly straight with her hands in her lap.

DREAMTHERAPIST

By coming hither, 'tis only nature to  
assume thou hath adequately dealt with  
the situation we discussed?

Kara takes a moment to think.

KARA

I think.

DREAM THERAPIST IS SHOT NORMALLY AS SHE TALKS, GLORIOUSLY EVEN, BUT KARA IS SHOT FROM DREAMTHERAPIST'S POV: UNCOMFORTABLY FAR AWAY AND PARTIALLY OBSCURED BY DESK ITEMS

DREAMTHERAPIST

I pray thou aren't pulling my leg, for

it would pop right off, who at the  
murder's fault but thou?

KARA

(Hesitantly)

There's still one thing I haven't  
dealt with yet.

DREAMTHERAPIST

The wolves?

Kara nods.

DreamTherapist sighs, putting her head in her hands. She takes her head out of her  
hands to talk.

DREAMTHERAPIST

The reaper has pulled all the stops  
but this, and yet thou hath yank it.  
There is but one desperate measure I  
pray not use.

DreamTherapist disappointedly sighs. She opens a drawer in her desk and pulls out a  
vibrant orange scarlet potion, which glows and has a tag that says "Drink Me," like in  
Alice in Wonderland.

This deeply worries Kara, who leans forward and furrows her brow.

THE POTION IS PRESENTED OMINOUSLY AT A LOW ANGLE WHEN IT'S PUT ON THE  
TABLE.

DREAMTHERAPIST

For what do thou wait for? Sip and do  
not waste a drop. Thou require this  
tonic like a poor man requireth a  
pinch of anything and a rich man  
all of nothing.

Kara frantically shakes her head.

DREAMTHERAPIST

(Getting annoyed)

My ears turn deaf at thy empty pleas.  
 Drink and think no further. Else, thou  
 shall lose one hind limb. Do not think  
 me as harsh, for the side lessened shall  
 be subject to thy own choice.

Kara begins chugging, the drink stinging her like a strong liquor.

DREAMTHERAPIST

Upon one-twelfth of the clock being  
 eaten, thy deer fur will then will  
 itself wolf-like.

As Kara finishes the bottle, DreamTherapist grins with malice. Her eyes turn into snake eyes, and she flashes her snake tongue.

SLOW CAMERA ZOOM AS THIS UNRAVELS.

DREAMTHERAPIST

(Snarkily)  
 If gullibility were granted guise,  
 thee would be her name.

The room turns the same tint as the tonic. Kara stands up, panicked, ready to bolt out the door.

WHILE THE ROOM IS RED, THE CAMERA SHOTS ARE ALWAYS MOVING. THE CAMERA MOVES QUICKLY AS IT ZOOMS IN AND ROTATES DURING THE WHOLE SCENE.

KARA IS SHOT FROM A HIGH ANGLE IN HER NEXT LINE.

KARA

(Panicked)  
 Did you poison me?

DREAMTHERAPIST

(still snarky)  
 I find it rude of thou to insinuate me  
 a liar. I tell no lies, but never once  
 came from my twisted mouth the whole  
 truth. Only halves. In return for this  
 tonic, all I ask is for one of thy

anterior appendages, in full.

KARA

(With more of a frozen type of  
fear than a frantic type)  
(In a quiet voice)  
I'm not letting you take my leg

DREAMTHERAPIST

To run is futile. I'll wait here until  
thy inevitable return.

Kara gets on all fours to bolt, but the ground has zero traction, acting like ice, and there's also a low gravity effect. Kara can't get any footing, and when she does, she barely goes forward, spending plentiful time in the air flailing her limbs to move.

Meanwhile, DreamTherapist picks up her quill and continues writing, unbothered. After a while, Kara finally reaches the door. She opens it, then comes out the same door she just opened.

She "runs" to the other side of the room and opens that door, only to be met with the same room again. Eventually, she gives up, panting from exertion. The room's red tint goes away, along with the moving shots.

DREAMTHERAPIST IS NOW SHOT FROM A LOWER ANGLE AND KARA FROM A HIGHER ONE.

DREAMTHERAPIST

Hath thou finally caught thy own tail?

She looks up from her paper and holds out her hand. Kara acquiesces to the situation, using her teeth to pull off her left front leg. It's a painless, goreless process, and she acts defeated instead of hurt. She places the leg in DreamTherapist's hand.

DreamTherapist opens a drawer in her desk (which we see is full of various random objects, including other animal parts) and places The leg inside. She goes back to writing.

There is a moment of silence as Kara adjusts to having only 3 limbs.

There's a knock at the door. Kara's head jerks toward it. DreamTherapist doesn't look up from her paper but stops writing.

DREAMTHERAPIST

I much wish I could say it has been a  
pleasure. However, I cannot say so.  
Pleasure much is married to brevity.  
Now, I've given thou everything thou  
need, so I beg thou leave my office  
immediately. Selfish is thy name if  
thou believe thou art worth a second  
more of my time.

There's scratching at the door, which gets more frantic as the two speak.

KARA AND DREAMTHERAPIST'S DIALOGUE IS SPLICED WITH CLUTTERED SHOTS OF  
THE DOOR. EACH KNOCK BENDS THE DOOR LIKE IN A CARTOON.

KARA

(Desperate)

Will the tonic actually turn me into a  
wolf?

Canine whimpering is added to the scratching. This worries Kara.

Kara's comments anger DreamTherapist, who rises from her chair in impatience.

The lights in the room dim.

DREAMTHERAPIST

But of course. Dost thou suggest I  
lie? I jest? Thou come into this  
sacred place just to spit in my own  
face? I should ask gold from thou for  
simply associating with me. As matter  
of fact,

A red glow comes from beneath DreamTherapist. She extends her hand again.

Kara panickedly stands up.

KARA

(Barely containing herself from  
crying of panic)  
No!

The scratching and whimpering is now at its peak, with barks being added.

DREAMTHERAPIST

(void)

Answer my calls, Kara, or  
I will strip you of all your vices.

Terrified yet, Kara starts pacing back and forth as DreamTherapist tells her phrases about how she's wasting her time and will have to give it eventually.

A moment of calmness comes when the scratching and barking are replaced by a long howl, followed by silence. The glow under DreamTherapist goes away. Though the external tension ceases, Kara is deeply shaken.

EXTREME CLOSE-UP OF KARA'S EYES AND SWEATY FOREHEAD.

Kara freezes, then trembles while ripping off her right back limb, placing it in DreamTherapist's hand. DreamTherapist puts the leg by her feet and continues writing.

DREAMTHERAPIST

This office is not a lounge. Don't  
make me repeat myself. That would be a  
burden upon my soul.

Kara is too scared to disagree. She stumbles over to the door, where we see her deer head is instantaneously put back on as she opens the door, and she's back on fours (twos now).

A man in a dress shirt and tie is at the door. He looks her down like a predator intimidating prey. They look at each other as they slip past each other. The door slams.

EXT. DARK FOREST - NIGHT - CONTINUOUS

Kara looks toward the road and sees a car pass, so she decides to turn back and stumble on her two legs deeper into the woods.

The door in the woods is never seen again.

As Kara struggles to walk, she hears a distant howl. She's immediately at attention. She sees nothing, so she keeps stumbling until she hears a branch crack. She jerks to look and sees 4 deer running away.

KARA

No! Wait!

The deer look at her but keep running.

She keeps walking for a while. As she scans left and right, she notices a WOLF feeding, snout tinted red.

She stumbles to hide behind a tree, but the noise gets the wolf's attention. He snaps in Kara's direction, looking for the source of the noise, but misses her.

The wolf picks up what he was feeding on, a nicely cooked and garnished cut of meat and a glass of red wine, the same tint as the red on the wolf's snout. The wolf gets on two legs and carries the meal back to a den.

JERRY is there, a wolf wearing a bonnet, nightgown, and slippers, carrying a candlestick.

The wolves keep a constant flippant tone as if they've had their whole lives easy.

WOLF

Hey, Jerry, what's cooking, good  
Looking?

JERRY

Ah, just another day in paradise.  
What's up, how are you doing?

WOLF

Same old, same old. I just  
heard a little bit of a ruckus in the  
leaves  
(Pointing to Kara's direction)  
over there.

JERRY

(Concerned)  
You don't think it's a-

He whispers a word only Wolf can hear.

WOLF

Pshht, I doubt it. The chances of one of those popping up around here are the same chances as the Dolphins winning a Super Bowl: zero. Amirite?

JERRY

Yeah, I thought we chased them all out. Those antler-heads really grind my gears When they pop up around these parts.

WOLF

Right! They should learn by now that this is a wolf city. Wolves have lived here since my grandpa was roaming this place.

JERRY

Yeah, and it's not like we're scared of them-

WOLF

(interrupting Jerry to joke)  
Because we're not!

The wolves laugh, and it turns into a howl.

JERRY

Yeah, because, like I was saying, this the place is built for wolves. A whitetail roaming around here is suicide.

WOLF

(Introspective-mannered)  
Mhm. Their antlers always get caught on branches. I find it crazy.

JERRY

(Making another quip)  
Crazy? Y'know what's crazy? These gas prices?!



The two laugh again.

WOLF

(Regaining his introspectiveness  
from the laugh)  
No, no, it's just that our same jaws  
that could easily tear down the  
branches and plants that their antlers get  
stuck on, we instead use them to...

Wolf trails off, and Jerry watches, waiting for an answer. He doesn't get one.

JERRY

Oh, I forgot to ask you. How's the  
venison?

This startles Kara. She stumbles over, and the noise catches the wolves' attention.

CAMERA IS NOW SHAKY AND HANDHELD.

They slowly look in her direction. Jerry licks his fingers and pinches out his candlewick,  
somehow making the entire forest darken to the point of invisibility.

There's a still moment. Nothing can be seen, and only Kara's deep breathing can be  
heard. Then, the candle's flame reappears near Kara, lighting up just the grass and leaves  
around it. The face of a wolf jumps into the light.

JERRY

Boo.

Kara loses her footing and falls. The forest is illuminated by the moonlight again, and Kara  
stumbles away. The wolves are on the ground, kicking their feet laughing, and holding  
their stomach. Thankfully, they don't chase Kara.

She keeps running and panting, then she slows down as she gets far away. In the  
distance, faint howls are heard. Kara comes across a den, very wary, walking quietly and  
looking carefully into the den.

Neither the audience nor Kara sees an animal inside the den, so she decides to go to  
sleep inside it. She comfortably walks inside and then curls into a ball. The scene gets  
darker as Kara eases into sleep.

CUT TO OUTSIDE THE DEN AS THE SCENE DARKENS.

We hear a growl, and then the scene quickly brightens again. Kara stumbles out of the den. She looks back and sees AGGRESSIVE WOLF emerge from the den.

The wolf chases after her and she sprints for a solid 2 seconds before tripping and falling. The wolf laughs and trots up to her.

AGGRESSIVE WOLF

(Manic, predatorial, licking his lips)

Look at you, such a brave little deer walking in these woods alone.

Kara gives up trying to run, staying deeply alert to the wolf, panting as she watches him.

SHOT FROM KARA POV, FOLLOWING THE WOLF AS IT CIRCLES HER. THIS IS SPLICED WITH EAGLE-EYE SHOTS AND SHOTS FROM THE SIDE. THESE SHOTS ARE SHAKY.

AGGRESSIVE WOLF

And at night, too. You're BEGGING  
[He lunges closer to her as if to bite]  
to be eaten up.

He licks his lips and continues walking around her. An ominous red glow slowly begins to light the area

AGGRESSIVE WOLF

I've been longing for a meal as delicious as you. I could eat you right now, but I want to tease myself, make me wait, want for your flesh even more. Let me tell you what I'm going to do. I'm going to first bite at your thigh, the meatiest, juiciest part of your body. I'm going to crunch down until I feel bone, then suck that entire chunk of meat up into my mouth. The hole will gash with blood, which I will challenge myself to lick up, lapping my tongue against your body.

After getting enough blood to satiate  
me, I'm going to rub my tongue through  
your tasty fur, savoring the taste of  
it before I put it all in my mouth.

KARA

(Feigning confidence)

No. You're not laying a hand on me!

The wolf lunges towards Kara again, overflowing with aggression, barely holding back  
from eating Kara whole.

AGGRESSIVE WOLF

(Ridden with more mania)

Does it look like I care what you  
think is going to happen?! I'm  
proceeding whether you say no or not

Kara reels back and kicks the wolf in the jaw. The wolf is knocked back some feet. The wolf  
bleeds thick white from its mouth, then wipes it off.

AGGRESSIVE WOLF

What's wrong with you? I deserve this.

I haven't had a meal in my entire  
life, Kara.

Kara suddenly begins wincing. She checks her watch (Which until now wasn't on her wrist  
and disappears after she checks it), which has over 20 hands pointing in various directions  
and spinning at various speeds. Instead of numbers, the clock has monopoly board pieces  
at 3, 6, 9, and 12.

KARA

(Panting)

Has it been an hour already? Once I  
turn into a wolf, I'm going to eat you  
instead.

She suddenly begins violently twitching. There's a little smoke explosion around her,  
obscuring her, and the wolf looks into the smoke for quite some time. When the smoke  
clears up, Kara is not a deer but a naked human. Her deer skin is on the ground beside  
her like shed snakeskin.

The wolf yelps in shock and then unceremoniously disappears in another smoke bomb.

Kara is confused but not angry that she became a human instead of a wolf.

She walks back to the den and sees a pile of leaves. She arranges the leaves into a blanket, lying down, and beginning to rest.

The scene darkens almost into complete obscurity, just broken by the loud flicking of a switch. Kara is smothered by a bright overhead light, making the scene uncomfortably bright.

She opens her eyes wide, petrified of the light, and sits up.

NOW WE ARE SEEING HER FACING AWAY FROM THE CAMERA AT A 3/4 ANGLE.

INT. KARA'S APARTMENT BEDROOM - DAY - CONTINUOUS

Just as the shot changes, so does her setting. Now she's wearing a large shirt and underwear in a comfy-looking bed in a small studio apartment.

She takes up the left 1/3 of the frame, and the sun is peeking over the horizon into the window in her room, taking up the other 2/3.

Instead of the warm chirping of morning doves, an eerie humming VFX is heard. This is not a "good morning".

-END SCENE-

Student Name: Ella Abarquez

Grade: 12

School: Atascocita High School

Title: How to make a baptism stick

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Key: Gold Key

Educator:

### How to make a baptism stick

1. Have me baptized at 3 weeks old. After spending days in the NICU, ears clogged and skin jaundiced, whisk me away from white LEDs to stained glass arches. Feel holy water wash over your fingers wrapped behind my tiny, tulle body, feel the water pour thrice in succession.
2. Take your daughter to Easter Vigil Mass when her memory is not present enough to be steady. What is present is a warm haze, dripping wax, the first proclamations of Alleluia! My baby memories of the church are without imperfection. They are still warm and hazy and shaky and tulle and cream and candle and LEDs and candy and cake and communion and wafer and the sense of slipping on pleasantly scented oil and the sense of sprinkling clean water.
3. Do you think holy water is like mango juice? A sort of stick that can't be scrubbed away with just soap? If not stick, then seep. Seeped into the soil of home, already humid and gasping. We are supposed to visit after I graduate, but the thought makes me sweat. Walking christened earth with christened feet and a brain that cannot lie, what will I do when faced with my people? I pass the ambry with averted eyes and a fastened pace on the off chance that it can latch too.
4. When your kids, now verging on the ages of older, ask how you would react if one of them were gay, do not say that you will be sad. Even if you follow your sadness with a justification that they choose a life that is hard, all I will hear is they and choose, your despair in the name of love, and what you think is loss.
5. Please do not say you will be sad, because when I watch a lesbian rom-com promised to be bubbly and light, I will instead witness what I've accepted to never have. Embracing, kissing, dancing, loving; surrounded by not a chosen family, but the family that they've had since birth. I will finish the movie in gasping tears. I will mourn what I have lost too.
6. If I let fear invade my mind, allow the thought that ghosts are real to enter my brain, and accept it as true, is it not expected that the next time I venture into the dark I will see a wispy figure, white and floating? Shouldn't my paranoia manifest into perception?

7. If I accept the figure of God, great and divine, into my life, he too should appear like a ghost. He should be present in the prayers that I whisper to myself, half-asleep, wrapped under layers of blankets.
8. So why, when I beat on my chest in the dark, begging for unconsciousness, why can't I find the part of me that is molding?
9. Maybe the difference between ghosts and God is that I am not afraid of the transparent.
10. Baptisms as of late have become more tears than holy water. I feel more rip than removal of sin. You baptized me to give, but we forget that it takes.
11. This is what renewal becomes as we grow older.
12. Mama, how can people be intertwined with others who love them, singing swaying praises, and deduce that the immensity they're feeling is from a power above rather than the arms that currently hold them? In your tight embrace, I learn that the power of God is more in arms than in spoken tongues. You teach me that God is not Person, but people. God is present in an overwhelm of love.
13. I am overwhelmed by love.
14. If you ask me now, whether that was an intervention of the Holy Spirit, ghostly and divine, or a warmth of my own desperation, I will not have an answer for you.
15. You will try, and say, See? That was proof, that is the most solid proof you will ever have of the Holy Spirit. You are lucky to have even felt Him.
16. You will be wrong.
17. If you try, and say, you were lonely, your brain was tired, and you became emotional in the midst of a practice you've known since childhood.
18. You will be wrong.
19. What happened is proof of one thing.
20. Baptism absorbs.
21. Then learn quickly that holy water is not glue. That it does not stick and it does peel up, but in my case, it will linger, melding into a person anew.
22. Your daughter may not drink directly from the baptismal font, but I will still dip my hands in every Sunday. I will still join hands with you in the name of Our Father, will still bow in front of Christ, the Redeemer, compressed into a small wheat disc. I'm still yours.
23. Learn to laugh alongside me when we watch Lady Bird, formerly Christine, eat communion wafers like Ritz crackers. Sing along with me when my favorite hymn makes an appearance, and don't flinch when Lady Bird's mother never says goodbye. Try not to comment on how sad the movie was, and try your best to hide your tears well.
24. Remember that at the end, Lady Bird, now Christine, in a brand new city, calls her mother to apologize. To say and not say, that she was right all along.
25. I am too proud, but know.

26. Know that the priest makes no mistake, pouring water over an infant's forehead, eyes crinkling and mouth opening in protest, no mistake in baptizing, his faith, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
27. I know you did what you were supposed to.
28. You did what you were supposed to do.
29. You did.
30. You do.

Student Name: Antara Varma  
 Grade: 12  
 School: Jordan High School  
 Title: A Eulogy: Survivor's Edition  
 Category: Poetry  
 Key: Gold Key  
 Educator:

A Eulogy: Survivor's Edition.

When you die, I am taking a math test. The lights are fluorescent and my pen skitch-skitches with every word, protesting my mistakes.  
 It is 73 degrees, my jeans are too tight, and my mom packed a sandwich and a sugar cookie.

When you die, I've reached the bottom half of my coffee. My friend is in the middle of a story she's already told before, and I think about what I'm going to do after school. The chips are too salty.

When you die, I'm passing my card to the cashier. We exchange pleasantries and the world is none the worse. Christmas has passed, but pumpkins still surround the store.

When you die, I'm combing my hair at lunch. My ponytail is too tight, so I comb through gently and braid my hair in two parts. When you die, I am searching for a rubber band.

When you die, I'm at home. I see the news and curse.  
 You should've died when I was at school.  
 I finally had a chance for a spectacle, an excuse for clemency, a gentle week or two from teachers and friends, but God forbid a good deed.

I have a quiz tomorrow and I'm running out of milk. What else is there to say?



Student Name: Grace Zhang

Grade: 11

School: Jordan High School

Title: A Progression on Grief

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Key: Gold Key

Educator:

Grief is the broken silence at 3:41 a.m. when you jerk awake from your spot on the couch, surrounded by empty liquor bottles, to the steady brrrt of your phone's ringtone. The call was long-awaited—after all, you drank the alcohol to burn away the dread—but this is when grief becomes sticky and tangible, a specter solidified like viscous tar. You have always hated loneliness, and by extension, silence. They come together. They are a pair, a two-for-one deal. But now you have never felt more alone, and silence has never been so far away. Oh, yeah—you just remembered. You haven't picked up the phone yet.

.....

Grief is the flick of a switch. One moment, he is alive and well. The next moment: "We regret to inform you that your father has passed away following a car accident in—" – click.

.....

Grief is the happiness at the playground you pass by. You see little children with scarves and watchful parents. Small dogs yip and tumble around in the grass. Their happiness is nowhere near perfect—a young boy has scrapes on his hands and tears in his eyes; a mother berates her daughter in exasperation; the dogs are covered in mud—but happiness is happiness all the same. Joy is bright and fulfilling. Theirs stings your tired eyes, lines them in silver. Grief only makes you fall.

.....

Grief is the purple hyacinth you leave on their bedside table, one each week, even though it probably doesn't mean anything to them anymore. That memory is gone, flitted away or dissolved, just like all the others have over the course of the past few years. Every goodbye creates grief: when you watch your brother pack his things and move out for college, you grieve your shared childhood. When you part ways from the one you love, you grieve that old intimacy that cushioned your every fall. But this goodbye is different, because they are neither gone nor here. They are in the gray area between death and distance. You will grieve them when they eventually pass on, and learn to take your hyacinths to the grave, but your grief sprouted years ago. In a way, you have already lost them.

.....

Grief is a blanket, like the one nestled around her thin frame on the hospital bed. You rest your fingertips on the top of her hand, frozen in both time and space, and you (clumsily) tuck the blanket more securely around her waist. Meanwhile, even before death has

arrived, grief is blanketing itself right over you, making your head hang downward and your shoulders droop. How rude, honestly. Inviting itself in like a close friend would, getting way too familiar in way too short a time. Tsk. Can't get rid of it, either; it has written itself into the code of your existence, latched onto your very soul just like the tumor has within her body.

.....

Grief is the air at the funeral, a funeral you forced yourself to attend. You go along with the rituals, abide by the traditions, and try to cry when it's time to cry. Together, you and all the other attendees grieve. We understand each other, some believe, because we have lost the same person. What they don't want to say is that in reality, grief is relative. There are two sides to the equation of loss. Your \_\_\_ may have died, but the woman standing beside you has lost a \_\_\_. Perhaps to you, the air is light and speckled with rain. And maybe to her, each breath settles in the lungs like a granite stone. Who knows, maybe openly acknowledging that grief cannot be understood, that the burden must be borne alone, is too painful to bear. But both of you agree that your lives without that person will never be the same again.

.....

Grief is that specific shade of blue, those particular pastries from that one bakery up north, the distinct smell of honeysuckle tea. It doesn't matter whether you want to forget or not—there is no choice in the matter. You will never forget the grief for as long as you live, because to live is to grieve, and life must go on.

.....

And go on it does. And maybe one day, you will yet again stumble across their old stuffed bear, or glance at a picture of them, or see someone with their hairstyle, and you will brace yourself for a fresh torrent of pain that never comes.

.....

It is a crisp autumn day. You brush your hands over rows and rows of books at the library, all lined up neatly on shelves. Your fingers stop over a title that you recognize as one of their favorites. The book reminds you of them. You think of them, and you smile.

.....

Grief does not quantify. It does not fit neatly into a box. There are no right angles or straight lines. Grief is a messy thing, changing into something unexpected each day, full of surprises and hidden tripwires.

.....

Grief is a cycle and a constant. Grief is the chicken and the egg. The human kind of grief is a part of life, no matter how crooked and sharp and oftentimes painful it may be.

...

Grief is the end. But it can also be the start of something new.

..

Grief means turning the page to the next chapter.

.

Grief is the next step forward.

Student Name: Anna Perry  
 Grade: 8  
 School: Tays Junior High School  
 Title: AI: The Future Of Education  
 Category: Critical Essay  
 Key: Gold Key  
 Educator: Elizabeth Walls

Chat GPT is an artificial intelligence-driven humanlike chatbot. It has a myriad of uses, especially at work or school. Due to its extensive knowledge on a wide range of topics, it can write text, such as essays, almost indistinguishable from that written by a human. It can also solve math problems almost instantly. Despite the numerous opportunities that Chat GPT provides, some argue that Chat GPT could be harmful to students' education. A prominent argument against the use of Chat GPT in schools is that it can help students cheat on assignments. Students can simply ask Chat GPT to write an essay on any topic, change a few words, then turn in the work as their own. While this is an issue that certainly requires addressing, it leads many to overlook the many positive aspects of Chat GPT's abilities that could be used in the classroom. For example, instead of simply asking students to write an essay from scratch arguing for or against a certain topic, a teacher could ask students to have Chat GPT write an essay about that topic, then have students analyze and find faults in Chat GPT's arguments. This would teach students valuable skills, such as critical thinking, that could be used in a variety of situations.

Chat GPT could also be an extremely useful tool in math. If a student is struggling with a certain skill or topic, Chat GPT can generate practice problems for the student to work on. It can then provide answers and very thorough explanations. Students wouldn't need to feel self-conscious about asking the teacher too many questions and slowing down the class. Instead, students could learn at their own pace, focusing on strengthening their weaker skills rather than endlessly repeating skills they've already mastered.

A major problem with our current system of education is that many teachers feel overworked. One of the main reasons for this is the huge volume of assignments they must constantly grade. Chat GPT could significantly improve this problem. Not only can it grade multiple choice assessments almost instantly, it can also quickly grade more abstract assignments such as essays and provide extremely useful feedback for students. This would likely allow teachers to have more free time after school and students to access their grades much faster.

Society tends to fear things when they are new. This fear is likely the reason that Chat GPT seems to have a negative reputation in schools. It is possible that people's fear of Chat GPT is based not on its capabilities, but simply because it is new and unfamiliar. One must let go of this bias in order to see Chat GPT for what it is- a tool that can be used in a multitude of ways. Artificial intelligence will likely become more and more common in the

future. Making Chat GPT a part of education is imperative in order to teach students how to navigate a world where AI is used in everyday life.

Note: This essay was generated by a real human.

Student Name: Faizaan Syed  
 Grade: 8  
 School: Adams Junior High School  
 Title: Ambrosial Alchemy  
 Category: Short Story  
 Key: Gold Key  
 Educator: Martinez Kelly D

## Ambrosial Alchemy

Dear Students,

I sincerely hope that the past four years you spent at the Arcane Institute of Magical Arts have been enjoyable. As you all know, AIMA is amongst the most prestigious and esteemed colleges that our world has to offer. Moreover, AIMA is a member of the renowned and reputable "Mystic League". The culmination of our academic voyage leads us to none other than the famed Arcanic Practical Dissertation. To obtain your degree, each of you will collaborate in groups to complete a unique project.

I wish you all the best of luck,

Professor Bivolo

Ben Clarke, Olivia Jackson and Ella Cooper all sat around a table at the Grand Atrium of AIMA, with its crystallized roof arched overhead, resembling a celestial sky of shimmering stars, sparkling and twinkling over the populous Atrium like a magnificent and exotic spectacle.

The hushed tone of students trickled over the Atrium like a mellifluous stream. The harmonious mood was a symphony of delight, aided by the throng of magical creatures fluttering above.

This euphony was briefly disrupted by an exuberant exclamation from Ella Cooper- "I can't wait for our Practical Dissertation!"

"I definitely can," said Ben, brimming with apathy. "I get a unique project, work on it for a month or two with two crazy girls, and, 'Oh! I forgot,' it's all assigned by Dear Professor Bivolo!" Ben finished mockingly.

"Two crazy girls?" Olivia questioned sarcastically, while staring blankly at the statue of some famed wizard.

Ben grunted in assent.

"Maybe if I lose my sanity we'll have three," Olivia retorted.

"Whatever you say" muttered Ben distractedly while striking his staff authoritatively to summon an Arcane Attendant for some spare Sorcerer's Scroll.

"Well it's 4 o'clock, time for us to receive our project." Ella chimed enthusiastically.

"D'you reckon we'll get something easy? I heard that the worst project someone has ever gotten was to make a variation of a spell! Could you imagine that?"

"Is that what you're hoping for Ella?" Ben remarked, as the group ventured out the Atrium and through the stunning mahogany corridors, glancing at the resplendently vibrant portraits of those same statued, old-timers, as Ben called them; "Because you seem overjoyed at the prospect"

"I just hope we pass this silly 'Arcanic Magical Dissertation' to get our degree" Olivia declared emphatically.

"Arcanic Practical Dissertation" Ella corrected, while sighing disdainfully.

Her mood illuminated, however, as they eventually arrived at the ornate, heavy oaken door of Professor Bivolo's office. It had the intricate embroidery of the Mystic League, and it imposed a menacing and intimidating mood as it gazed upon them haughtily. Ben rapped the door 3 times in quick succession. With a creak, the door oozed open. Professor Bivolo sat there waiting, with an inviting glare and a beckoning smile, he called upon the trio to advance. Ben, Ella and Olivia cautiously ventured into the embellished and elaborate room. They all sat at command of the Professor's gesticulation, and they waited anxiously.

"You all have great potential in this 'Wild World of Mysterious Magic and Mystics,'" Prof. Bivolo commenced.

"Of course he quoted Silas Ward," Ella mouthed exasperatedly.

"Is there an issue?" Professor Bivolo questioned. Taking the silence as an answer he continued, "therefore, I am faced with a conundrum. I could give you all a simple incantation or recitation for your practical dissertation, or,"

Ben winced bracingly.

"I could push the boundaries of magic, and present you with an unparalleled challenge—a quest that will validate your ingenuity and perspicacity. You will create a spell" Bivolo finished with a flourish as he snapped his gauntlets. At that moment Ben, Ella and Olivia felt a rejuvenating aura sweep over them like a zephyr. Ben flinched, staring at those gauntlets, he was already petrified at the prospect of some difficult task for his dissertation, and now Professor Bivolo was suggesting something even more daunting. He had to find a way to make his dissertation a success or risk his entire education.

"2 weeks in, and we don't even know what we want our spell to do!" Ella declared wildly.

"No need to panic," Ben began desperately, "let's just think. Maybe Bivolo gave us some clue when he was giving us our quest."

"You think Bivolo -Sage of the Unknown, Arcane Arbiter, Miserly Master, Meanest Professor at AIMA- would be kind enough to give us a hint?" Olivia said incredulously.

"Do I need to remind you that he failed all of us on our incantation projects just because our pronunciation wasn't 'magical' enough."

"Wait, who was that wizard that Bivolo quoted, Ella?" Ben asked, ignoring Olivia.

"His name was Silas Ward II, and he was incredibly influential in the development of all the spells and potions that we have today." Ella started. "He passed 80 years ago from—"

"Magical Overdose!" exclaimed Ben and Ella simultaneously.

"That's perfect," Ben began, "If we can make a spell that cures Magical Overdose, then we'll be the most famous witches and wizards ever!"

"Yeah, but it's not like Magical Overdose is an easy fix, it affects hundreds of millions of people every year and- Ben, do you even know what MO does?" Olivia questioned.

"Of course.." Ben started nervously, "it's an overdose.. of magic!"

"Ben, MO is a very serious issue, it happens when witches and wizards spend too much time around concentrated magic," Ella explained with an aura of a teacher, "if someone spends too much time around their wands, staffs, gauntlets, whatever, it can lead to a deprivation of the magic inside them."

"It doesn't seem that difficult," Ben remarked, "we just need to look at the cause."

"What causes MO, Ella? Olivia questioned, finally trying to contribute.

"No one really knows, but there are many theories and sources. The main one- infected ambrosia" Ella stated.

"Ambrosia?" Ben said dubiously. "Ambrosia, the healing elixir?"

"Yes, before Ambrosia is formulated into a liquid elixir form, it's in a semi-solid form, kind of like a honeycomb. Many experts suggest that during its distillation process, it tends to get infected. No one has been able to take action because the Ambrosia industry is so huge, and so many people depend on it" Ella said.

"Ok, that theory checks out, ambrosia needs to be activated by magic, and when you spend more time around magic you get exhausted, and consume more ambrosia."

"Exactly, and the issue with infected ambrosia is that it isn't fully purified, and it still lies in your system, intact; then spending time around magic activates the ambrosia and poisons your magic; inside of you."

"We need to start researching about that- compile our knowledge -mainly Ella's- and spend our time working on a spell"

"Perfect, I agree" said Olivia, who had zoned out at the sign of complex magical talk, her effort for contribution crushed.

The trio converged at the Atrium, pouring over books, analyzing and studying the composition of Ambrosia and potential flaws in its structure.

As they worked, Olivia began to seem more and more fidgety. It occurred consistently until...

"I've got to go," Olivia said suddenly.

Despite Ben and Ella's protests, Olivia got up promptly and left, in a hurried manner.

"This is only the second session she's joined, and she's left early again."

"I know, and she has such a disgusted look whenever we analyze flaws of ambrosia"

"You noticed that too?" exclaimed Ben.

"Yeah, it's like we're insulting her each time we find a defect."

"I mean, I kind of get her, Ambrosia is amazing, it heals any disease, other than MO, because it causes it, and it tastes like whatever we want it to!"

"Of course, I see your point, but there's no reason that she should have that much of an emotional connection."

"I know, there's something she isn't telling us.." Ben finished dramatically.

They both burst out laughing, but as the echoes of their mirth faded away, the air was still thick with Olivia's absence—solidifying the change, from friend to enigma.

As Ben and Ella continued their research in the Grand Atrium, Olivia's absence became more and more profound. All the magic around them seemed less enchanting without the vibrant energy that Olivia brought.

Olivia's departures became more and more of a pattern, and as the days of poring over monotonous books, scrolls and ancient texts stretched into weeks; Ben, and even Ella began to feel discouraged.

One evening, after another abrupt departure from Olivia, Ben turned to Ella with a determined look, "We can't keep ignoring this, Ella. Something's wrong with Olivia, and it's affecting all of us. We need to find out what's going on"

Ella nodded in agreement, her concern mirroring Ben's. They decided to confront Olivia, aiming to provide support for whatever burdened her.

The next day, when the trio gathered together in the Atrium, the tension was palpable. Olivia was clearly distraught, her eyes puffy and red. Sensing some apprehension, Olivia attempted to hide the distress etched on her face.

"Olivia, we've noticed something's not right" Ben began gently. "You've been leaving abruptly, and it feels like you need to tell us something. Whatever it is, you can trust us" Olivia began to tear up as the weight of her personal turmoil compounded. It all began to spill out.

"My mother is in a critical condition right now," Olivia began shakily, "she's on the verge of- of- she's only hanging on because of Ambrosia right now."

"Olivia, I'm so sorry, I didn't know you had such a storm to weather,"

"Likewise, I'm so sorry Olivia," exclaimed Ella

"I completely regret not telling you guys about my situation, but I thought I could handle it on my own. However, there is a positive to this situation."

Ben and Ella stared at each other incredulously.

"My mother has been suffering for a long time, from MO actually, but that means I've been studying everything about MO since I was a kid. I've discovered that the fibers of Ambrosia are very difficult to break down, however, if we use the causative agent itself, it might be curable with the right spell."

Ben and Ella, now intrigued by Olivia's sudden breakthrough, leaned in to hear more.

"You see, the key is to understand how Ambrosia causes MO, and how we can reverse it inside of the victim's system. It's not just regarding the purification of Ambrosia; it's making sure that it's completely compositionally deconstructed. So, I've discovered that the only way to truly purify infected Ambrosia inside a person's system; by combating Ambrosia with Ambrosia. If we somehow formulate a spell that harmonizes the causative agent with its purified counterpart we can heal MO.

Ben's eyes widened with realization. "So, we use Ambrosia not just as a healing elixir, but as a catalyst agent for a spell, so it will directly counter the effects of MO? That's brilliant!"



Ella, her mind practically vibrating with innumerable possibilities, added, "So synchronizing the effects of Ambrosia with the spell will create a viable remedy for Magical Overdose?"

"What are we waiting for?" They all exclaimed simultaneously.

Ben, Ella and Olivia all rushed to the Archives. They needed to formulate and create the spell quickly. They all delved into the various components needed for the spell.

"The spell is very Ambrosia based, so when we create it, we'll need a large supply" Olivia stated.

"Lucky for us, our Healing Ward has a massive supply of Ambrosia at our disposal- I'll be right back." exclaimed Ben.

As the group converged, they all compiled their knowledge, and individual insight. Ella, with her extensive knowledge of magical theory, suggested theorems and formulations during the process. Ben's knack for physical applications helped the trio, though not as much as his humor. Olivia drew on her personal experience and intensive study to provide invaluable details and caveats on the nature of Ambrosia.

At last, with a simultaneous snap of gauntlets, strike of staff, and swish of wand the spell was created. The spell was a magnificent amalgamation of the properties of purified Ambrosia.

"We did it. I can't believe we did it" Ella kept mouthing breathlessly.

They all stared at each other, stupefied at their genius.

They rushed to Professor Bivolo's office, regardless of the unholy hour. Ben rapped the door 3 times in quick succession. This time, there was a slight delay before the door opened. Professor Bivolo's silky voice sounded through the night.

"Who is it?"

"Ben Clarke, Olivia Jackson and Ella Cooper, Professor."

Professor Bivolo opened the door with a very vexed face.

"Professor, we're extremely sorry to bother you, but we've successfully created the spell to counteract Magical Overdose," Ben announced eagerly.

The trio entered the synergy between purified and infected Ambrosia, the harmonization of magical properties, and the potential it held for curing Magical Overdose. As Professor Bivolo listened, his eyes glinted with a mix of curiosity and approval.

"Impressive work, students. You've not only met the challenge but surpassed my expectations. Now, the true test awaits. You must demonstrate the efficacy of your spell."

With a nod from Professor Bivolo, Ben retrieved a vial containing a small amount of infected Ambrosia from his bag. The trio gathered around, their hearts pounding with anticipation. With a synchronized incantation, they cast the spell over the vial, weaving the magic to counteract the effects of Magical Overdose. A soft glow enveloped the vial as the spell took hold. The infected Ambrosia underwent a visible transformation, purifying

before their eyes. Professor Bivolo observed with a keen gaze, nodding in approval as the spell demonstrated its effectiveness.

“Well done, he finally remarked, his voice carrying a rare note of admiration. You've not only created a spell but a potential solution to a longstanding magical ailment. This accomplishment will be recognized beyond the walls of AIMA. This confirms the theory that Magical Overdose is caused by nothing other than poisoned Ambrosia.”

The news of their success spread through the Mystic League, earning the trio a newfound respect among their peers. They became known not only for their academic prowess but as pioneers in magical healing. As for Olivia, the spell held a personal significance that surpassed academic achievement. The potential cure for Magical Overdose brought hope to her family and countless others who suffered from the affliction. The bond between Ben, Ella, and Olivia strengthened, solidified by the challenges they overcame and the triumph they achieved. In the weeks that followed, the trio continued refining their spell, documenting its effects, and exploring potential applications. Their work not only altered the fabric of their magical reality, but the fabric of their camaraderie.

Student Name: Dishita Patil  
 Grade: 8  
 School: Adams Junior High School  
 Title: Awakening of the Heir  
 Category: Science Fiction & Fantasy  
 Key: Gold Key  
 Educator: Brittany Setzekorn

[Sixteen years ago]

Amid the chaos and destruction, Seraphina's breathless voice rang out, "What do we do?" She clutched her newborn daughter tightly to her chest, scared to let her go.

"I-I don't know," Thalorin responded urgently, his voice barely audible over the screams filling the air. The realm of Eldertwyl teetered on the brink of chaos if it hadn't already succumbed.

Seraphina's mind raced as fast as the speed of light as she pondered ways to safeguard Elera, her and Thalorin's child, the sole Fae heir with the power to save Eldertwyl. But Elera was still too young; their only option was to ensure her survival until she was old enough to rule.

"Wait... I have an idea," Seraphina said with hesitation, her uncertainty evident.

"What is it?" Thalorin questioned.

"I think we might have just enough power to open a portal to the human realm if we combine what little remains between us."

"That might work. It's not like we have any other options."

Together, Seraphina and Thalorin mustered every ounce of their remaining strength to conjure a portal leading to a human home. Seraphina quickly cast a spell on Elera and her new family, erasing their memories. Elera would learn of her heritage when the time was right.

As the portal closed, Seraphina and Thalorin collapsed to the ground, destined to never awaken again.

"Elera, wake up! Time to get ready for the first day of school!" The voice cut through Elera's dreams like a freshly sharpened sword.

Elera shifted uncomfortably in her sheets, the dream she just had still replaying in her mind with vivid detail.

"Coming, Mom!" she called back, her mind still racing. Since turning sixteen, these strange dreams had become a regular occurrence. Sometimes they felt more like visions.

"I don't know what could be happening; it just feels so real," Elera muttered.

After dressing, she headed to the kitchen for breakfast. She knew right away that her mom had caught sight of the dark circles under her eyes.

"Honey, you look tired. Again." Her mom remarked.

"Sorry, I had some really weird dreams, so I couldn't sleep well," Elera responded as she sat down at the table, taking a bite out of her egg-covered toast.

"Well, if you want, we could go see someone who could help."

Elera had a feeling that no one should know about these dreams. It felt like her own secret.

"No, it's alright. I think it's just stress."

"Okay, then. Let me know if you change your mind?" She glanced at the clock on the wall.

"You should get going, you're going to be late."

"Alright, bye Mom."

As Elera started to walk to school, a strange feeling that she was being followed nagged at her. She turned around, hoping to find no one there, but instead, caught a glimpse of a shoulder behind a tree. Elera thought it was probably someone just taking a walk, but her gut was saying otherwise.

"Come out!" Elera screamed, trying to mask her trembling voice to intimidate whoever might be following her. Elera stood alert as a figure emerged from the shadows, her face falling once he came into the light. It was an elderly man.

"Hello, Elera," the old man said.

"H-How do you know my name?" Elera responded cautiously, her voice quivering.

"You, my dear, are the only hope for saving our world."

"What are you talking about?"

"My name is Avalon Whisperwind, and I am here to guide you to discover who you are. Your true heritage — the Fae."

What the heck is he talking about??

"The Fae? I think you got the wrong person; I have no idea what you're talking about."

She was bluffing, of course. The Fae and their abilities had been mentioned several times in her dreams, but he didn't need to know that.

"You're lying."

"Y-you're wrong. As I said, I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Just listen to me, I know who you truly are. There is no reason to fear me."

What's going to happen to me? Maybe I should play along.

"Fine. But I wasn't fully lying when I said I didn't know what you were talking about. What exactly are the Fae?"

Even though Elera had dreams of the Fae, they didn't tell her much. Not as much as she wanted to know, anyway.

"Well, the Fae are powerful beings, each with unique abilities, including control over magic and shapeshifting."

Elera's mind was still awash with questions.

"But what does this have to do with me?" she asked.

"You are the heir to the throne of Eldertwyl, the realm of Fae that lost its rulers sixteen years ago due to the chaos and destruction that still plague it today. Now that you are old enough, you can return to the aid of our people and restore peace."

What did he just say? I'm heir to what? Eldertywl?

"But what about my life here?" Elera responded, her mind still trying to process everything that he just said.

"You must do what is right, my lady. Leave this world and start one anew with the Fae."

The thought of leaving her life behind was daunting. What about her parents, who had raised her with love and care? She couldn't simply abandon them. Perhaps this explained why she had always felt like an outsider among others. Joining the Fae might be a chance to begin a new life among her kind. Also, she had to save them, right?

"I'll cast a spell on everyone who knows you, erasing their memories of you and your departure. Are you ready to accept this task as our savior?"

Elera's resolve began to waver, so she replied before she could change her mind; "Yes, I'm ready."

Right when Elera entered Eldertwyl, she was immediately aware that something was wrong. The air was thicker and unsettling as if souls were trapped and couldn't get out. What was more surprising was that after stepping through the portal, Avalon turned from an elderly man to a striking, youthful figure, seemingly in his late twenties. He was much taller now, looking about six foot five, and his ears turned upward into subtle points.

"Avalon? Is that you?" Elera questioned, her disbelief evident.

"Yes, it's me. In my Fae form."

"Fae form?"

"Yes, my Fae form. But we must hurry, it's not safe here. I promise to explain everything later."

Elera followed Avalon through the enchanting forest, surrounded by lush trees and mystical creatures she had only seen in her dreams. Light, melodic music wafted sweetly through the air, a magical tune that seemed to emanate from the harps of tiny fairies. Just as she was about to ask Avalon more, she noticed a cave entrance and followed him inside.

It was beautiful.

"What is this place?" she wondered out loud, voice filled with awe.

"It's our haven for now," Avalon whispered back.

After a couple more moments of admiring the scene, Elera snapped back to reality. "Can you please tell me what's going on?"

"Of course, let's just get something to eat and drink."

After they got the refreshments, they both sat down on a huge rock. Avalon explained everything to her. He explained how Elera's real parents were the rulers of Eldertwyl and they both died saving her. He explained how the nefarious Zephyrion Blackthorn, an evil Fae lord who sought to conquer the realm, was attempting to seize control. Avalon elaborated on the ongoing battles and sacrifices being made by countless individuals and, most importantly, how Elera could be the key to saving them all.

"Oh, my goodness, everything makes so much sense!" Elara exclaimed, alluding to her dreams. "But how can I become queen without being Fae? And what if I lack the qualifications?" Elera voiced her doubts, her hopelessness evident.

"Don't worry Elera, you are Fae, but you just have to know how to shift into it," Avalon reassured. "Also, about your qualifications, we are going to train you and make sure you are the best."

"When do we start training?" Elera inquired.

"I cannot personally train you, as I lack the necessary expertise, but I'll arrange for the finest trainer. Her name is Serena Boulevarde," Avalon informed.

Serena, that's a pretty name, Elera thought.

"When can I meet her?"

"I will get you to see her immediately, just wait here," Avalon replied, and he left immediately to go get Serena.

Will Serena like me? I hope so. I've never met another Fae before, so I hope I don't do anything weird, Elera started to wonder.

As her mind drifted further, Avalon returned with a beautiful girl who appeared to be Elera's age. Maybe this won't be so bad after all.

When Elera first met Serena, she had anticipated a friendlier encounter, but reality proved quite different. Upon saying hello, Serena merely nodded and began to walk away. Elera quickly realized she should follow suit and briskly matched Serena's pace, uncertain of what to expect. Eventually, they arrived at a secluded field of grass, and that's when Serena began the training. She started by teaching Elera some basic moves, which she picked up with surprising ease, likely owing to her Fae genes.

After approximately two hours of practice, darkness began to fall, signaling the need to return to the cave. Avalon was also present and showed Elera her sleeping quarters, which consisted of a beautiful and comfortable bed deeper into the cave. Exhausted, Elera promptly fell asleep.

On her second day in this new place, Elera had to rise early for her training. The previous night, Avalon had mentioned that she would be learning how to shift into her Fae form today. He also reassured her not to be concerned about Serena, explaining that she was going through something difficult. Elera understood not to question what happened.

Other than that, Elera felt a sense of excitement, eager to discover her true self.

When Serena visited Elera, she expected her not to talk after their interaction from yesterday, but once again it was completely different.

"Hello, I'm so sorry for my attitude yesterday. I had lost my mate in battle; do you want to go get breakfast with each other and catch up?"

"Of course! And please don't worry about it. I'm so sorry for your loss, and yeah, let's go."

That made much more sense in Elera's head about Serena's attitude. She truly felt bad for her. She also read about how the Fae can have a mate that they only meet once in their lifetime and when someone loses their mate, it's like losing a part of themselves.

Elera trailed Serena as they emerged from the cave, the aroma of food wafting toward her. Upon reaching their destination, a gathering of Fae surrounded them. Towering figures with pointed ears filled the scene, yet amidst them one individual caught Elera's eye—an attractive man with the darkest locks and striking blue eyes.

He was beautiful.

Serena somehow knew who Elera was looking at and started to snicker.

"What are you laughing at?" Elera said casually, pretending not to know.

"You know what. Anyways, his name is Lucian, and he is one of the most skilled warriors I have ever seen, and probably throughout Fae history."

That's cool, Selena thought, starting to blush, but he could never be with someone like me.

"I know he may seem very attractive, but he's not the most social," Serena added.

"Oh, it's fine, I just thought he looked cool."

After Elera and Serena both got plates of food, they went back to the cave, and it seemed like they were the only ones there.

"What are we going to do now?" Elera questioned.

"Well first and most importantly we are going to eat the food, and then I will tell you about shifting," Serena replied, looking longingly at the full plate in front of her.

The food was so good that Elera couldn't even describe it, but she had to eat it quickly.

After they both finished eating, Serena started to explain.

"Some Fae can shift very easily into their form, but others can't. Also, not all Fae shift into humans, my other form is an owl."

"That's cool! But how do I shift?"

"You just have to focus, and your body will do it. I know it sounds skeptical, but just imagine it, I promise it will work."

Elera listened and did whatever felt right. Right when she was about to give up, she felt a sharp pain all over her body.

"Oh, my goodness, you did it!"

Elera's senses were sharpened, and everything seemed so much clearer.

"Wonderful! Now this is the part that will take the longest, the training. Since you have royal blood in you, it means that your powers will be the strongest. That's why we need you out on the battlefield to defeat Zephyrion and his army."

The next couple of days were just the same, but the training got increasingly more difficult. Eventually, Elera got so good she could defeat Serena.

"Now this might sound weird, but I need you to fight Lucian. Just to see if he thinks you're good enough," Serena informed.

Elera started to feel nervous, but she took a few deep breaths and decided that she could do it. She followed Serena and they got to another field of grass where Lucian was already waiting, looking as handsome as ever. Elera stepped onto the field of grass and Lucian had already gone for her right side. Luckily Elera's fast reflexes let her dodge the move. After a good twenty minutes of fighting, Elera finally got Lucian in a headlock on the ground.

"You can stop now," Lucian grumbled, his voice low.  
 Elera let him go and she was happy at herself that she defeated him.  
 "She's ready," Lucian nodded towards Serena.

In a whirlwind of chaos, the journey to the castle of Eldertwyl unfolded with Elera, Lucian, and Serena together in a struggle against the malevolent Zephyrion. As the confrontation between Elera and Zephyrion reached its zenith, the air crackled with intensity. In a moment of despair, Serena got injured, and Elera lost hope, but Lucian brought her back up. That was when Elera saw how strong he was and admired his strength. They both worked together and combined their powers. Against all odds, the duo managed to reclaim Eldertwyl, their triumph resonating through the castle's ancient walls.

They won.

**THEY WON!**

After the intense battle, Eldertwyl began to transform. The once desolate realm now blossomed with vibrant colors and life. The trapped souls found peace, and the air became light and invigorating. Eldertwyl was reborn, and Elera stood at the forefront, the true heir who had brought salvation to her people.

Elera stood at the entrance of the castle, her heart pounding with excitement. The once shattered realm of Eldertwyl now lay before her, bathed in the soft glow of hope. The citizens, once living in fear, now looked at her with admiration.

As she entered the grand hall, the Fae citizens erupted in cheers, acknowledging their new ruler. Elera felt a mixture of responsibility and privilege. The weight of the crown on her head reminded her of the sacrifices her real parents had made to ensure her survival. Avalon stood by her side, a proud smile on his face. "You've done it, Elera. Eldertwyl is in safe hands now."

Elera addressed the gathered Fae, her voice steady and filled with determination. "I may not have grown up in Eldertwyl, but this realm is now my home. We will rebuild, and together we will ensure a future where darkness cannot prevail. But I won't do it alone." Turning to Lucian and Serena beside her, she continued, "Serena, your guidance and patience have been invaluable. Lucian, your strength and skill in battle have been a pillar of support."

Lucian, though still reserved, nodded in agreement. Serena gave Elera a genuine smile, her earlier aloofness replaced by a newfound warmth.

Elera worked tirelessly to establish a fair rule as the days passed. She sought counsel from her advisors and leaned on the wisdom of those who had long served Eldertwyl. Lucian and Serena proved to be invaluable allies, their skills complementing Elera's leadership.



In the evenings, as the sun set over the rejuvenated realm, Elera often found herself on the balcony of the castle, gazing at the landscape. Eldertwyl, once scarred by chaos, now thrived under her reign.

One day, as she stood alone on the balcony, Lucian approached, breaking the solitude.

"You've done a remarkable job, Elera," he said, his gaze fixed on the horizon.

Elera smiled, grateful for the support. "We've done it together, Lucian. Eldertwyl is not just mine; it belongs to all of us."

He turned to her, his expression softening. "You've proven yourself, not just as a ruler, but as a Fae. I must admit, I had my doubts initially."

Elera chuckled, "You weren't the only one. I doubted myself too, but with the right allies, anything is possible."

"Elera, I've been thinking this for a while, will you take me as your king?"

"Of course," They both had gotten closer over time and Elera always had a feeling that Lucian might be her mate, she did truly love him, and she was glad that he felt the same. Lucian extended his hand, a silent gesture. Elera took it, sealing the bond that had been forged through trials and triumphs. He then pulled her closer and gently kissed her.

In the months that followed, Eldertwyl flourished under Elera and Lucian's rule. The scars of the past were gradually replaced by a blooming realm. Serena stood by their side, all of them being a beacon of hope for the Fae.

And so, the once shattered kingdom of Eldertwyl became a testament to the strength of unity, the resilience of the Fae, and the power of a queen who had found her purpose.

Student Name: Grace Ding

Grade: 10

School: Obra D Tompkins High School

Title: dead dove

Category: Poetry

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Kelly Moore

she was a dove / 'waiting' for you / to sink your filthy fangs / into her fleshy heart / thorns  
like bristles / lined on jagged teeth / lumps of hunger / rotting away / in a sunken stomach

you arrived / with the crisp breeze / of tender winter / the whirling cool / of quiet  
snowstorms / the angry shrieks / of protesting blizzards / and — your glacial gaze of greed

even her crisp white feathers / could not camouflage her / in the slush snow / you found  
her / slithered into her life / exploring every crevice / weaving every moment / hiding a  
pronged tongue / swelling veins / cutting fangs

you waited / to pounce / thirst on her fear / she squawked for help / white wings flapping  
wildly / writhing under your hold / your tongue coiled around hers / wind whipping  
around her tail / cold air stinging warm eyes

your starved lips / feasting on / her weary wails / as you devour / her bitter body / your  
fangs / slicing / through / her / breast / while you let her icy tears / clink to the ground / like  
shattering glass / your spirit / as cold as the winter air

rotted teeth  
stained with  
ruby blood,

simply because  
you were a snake  
and she was a dove.

Student Name: Edlyn Wang

Grade: 10

School: Jordan High School

Title: Delusion

Category: Flash Fiction

Key: Gold Key

Educator:

"Happy birthday dear Zara,  
Happy birthday to you!"

The voices of my mom, dad, and little brother rang in my ears as the song came to an end. I knew it was time for me to blow out the 11 candles that rang the silver foiled sparkler impaled into the center of my birthday cake. I hadn't made up my mind on what to wish, so my thoughts drifted back to the last year when one less red-stripped candle had adorned the fluffy white cream atop my cake. Sure, 365 days and nights had passed since that last celebration, but who could say how much time had really passed? My memories of that last birthday were dull, overshadowed by the day afterward when I woke up on a cold hospital bed and knew instantly that a paradigm shift had taken place in my universe.

The story is this: in some university lab somewhere, some scientists had accelerated a photon faster than the speed of light in a giant particle accelerator. It was perhaps the biggest advancement the scientific community had made in years, but breaking the laws of nature did not come without its consequences. The space-time continuum had rebounded as the plane of time attempted to right itself to the flat continuous plane it had always been. Time had been inconstant since that day, at times it would flow between my hands like a swiftly moving river, and other times it would cling stickyly to my fingers like deep brown molasses. Each time time seesawed between speeding and slowing was accompanied by a piercing headache. After all, humans weren't made to withstand this. I could imagine it in my head, us as a point of the fabric of time carried along each time a crest or trough passed through like ripples on the face of a lake. Sometimes I worried the fabric would fold over on itself altogether, and we would all be transported back to the past, but I knew it was unwise to speculate about things purely theoretical and relevistic. I couldn't remember now where I had heard this story, but it made sense in my mind.

It was why Billy from across the street, no longer swept by my house in circles on his green scooter each Sunday to make jests at my bony knees and frizzy black hair while I read the Encyclopedia of Astronomy on the porch step. Now whenever I made my way into the brick step, seeking sunlight and warmth to lessen an oncoming headache, Billy would scooter the other way, making sure to keep his pale head of golden hay bowed, not meeting my coffee eyes as he passed. But I had understood. Bullying the neighborhood outcast was no longer fun when you were wracked with migraines. But I kind of wished

he would still come. I had always thought he could be my first real friend, outside of my family, once he had grown out of his bullying.

It was why this summer when Mrs. Peters from down the street had passed away, Mom had dressed me in a black dress that hung limply on my thin boxy frame, and taken me to church for the first time to pay our respects. When Mom saw Mrs. Peters's body lying prone in the casket, she had clenched my hand in hers so tightly that I watched my fingers turn the color of moon cheese as my blood drained out. I was surprised to see Mom so affected; we had only ever seen Mrs. Peters wandering the cul-de-sac on occasion, muttering blankly about whatever world she was in after her diagnosis with dementia a few months earlier, and never even spoke to her. "...taken too soon.."; I had heard her mumble, eyes glistening in the sunlight coming through the arched glass windows. Mrs Peters had been 89 when she died, according to her eulogy. She had lived a fulfilling life and was loved by her many children, grandsons, and granddaughters. With her wiry white hair and pale papery lined skin, she resembled an antiquated ambrotype from the last century. But I had understood what my Mother meant. But I kind of wished the three months between Mrs. Peters's diagnosis and death had not passed like a race, that everyone could accept it had been a fair fight and move on.

It was my birthday cake now was exactly the same as last year, all scalloped icing trim and bright red berries garnish, with the exception of the addition of a candle on top. The sparkler shooting off sparks captured my attention once again. They danced erratically and floated down towards to table like feathers on the wind.

I sat lodged in my seat watching their grand performance. It is an eternal shower of shooting stars, I imagined I could make a wish on each one. I would have been content to watch the sparks for the rest of eternity, until the little flecks of light burned themselves permanently into my retinas, and I would be able to see them in my death. I hoped I could still watch them when I died.

"Honey, it's time to make a wish, honey."

My mother's voice startled me out of my reverie.

"Oh, yes, the wish"

I squeezed my eyes shut and thought for a moment.

"I wish that the scientists will find a way to still the space-time continuum, and then none of us

"Oh honey," my mom gasped, her palm rose to her face, the unextinguished candles reflected in those watery pits.

I smiled boldly at her, proud of my selfless wish "It's okay Mom, I just want everyone to be happy, this will make everything better."

"No honey", she whimpered, "there is nothing wrong with time. It's you."

I don't know what became of the candles and sparklers. I didn't blow them out. Maybe they will continue to burn. Maybe I can watch them once I'm dead.

Student Name: Matthew Wei

Grade: 8

School: Rodger & Ellen Beck Jr High School

Title: Echos In Reverse

Category: Short Story

Key: Gold Key

Educator:

The coffin lowered into the ground. Nobody was there to be sorrowful. Nobody was there to remember him, no mourner lingered, and no memories echoed. As the man's body was left for the rest of time, the cemetery found itself also dying, enveloped in a haunting fog, whispering, reaching out with whoever was left to hear them.

Hospital lights glaring at me, daring me. Monitors beeping dangerously for so long it became meaningless. Facing an inch from death, I try to remember all the things in my life, as that's what most people do in their last hours, I suppose. Except, I come up blank, with meaningless faces and places. Now, with nobody but a doctor at my side, my life doesn't "flash before my eyes" but rather is giving me its last goodbyes, an ending that I feel-, no I know is ultimate. Anyway, I look forward, to whatever is next.

Life at one of these nursing homes, despite its appearances, held its own bubble of personality. Time passes as effortlessly as sleep, and memories linger everywhere. Retirement, though not the vacations and retirement I envisioned, shielded me from the horrors outside- pollution, and overpopulation. I feel lucky to be the ones in here, rather than out there in smoke and fog that fills lungs as quickly as a snake on a rabbit, immediately biting and waiting for the venom to sink in. I'm grateful now that my younger self decided to pay for me. Days go by, and each one is another chance to do something meaningful perhaps. Weeks go by. Each one is a chance to have a final laugh and burst of happiness. Sometimes, I think about how time is the most expensive thing you can own. Money can't buy time, so you can't be rich enough. Oh, and I still have my trumpet, an instrument that very few people know existed, one person even thought it was a hologram projector when I showed it to them. I forgot how to play it, but I still held it until the end, as it represents a lot of my childhood. The trumpet witnessed my end, as after weeks of sickness, and I can't say I wasn't expecting this to happen, I looked one last time at the place where I'd spent much of my years before being transferred to the hospital. Anyway, I look forward to witnessing what may be the end of Earth.

My house is a fairly nice place, retirement has finally come, and my kids have found jobs. Days spent are mostly dedicated to trying to make the most out of what I can. Taking walks, maintaining the garden made by my late wife, and resupplying my stock of masks. The TV says the government recently announced that all student loan debt from college

should be forgiven, even though I already paid most of it off. After a short speech by the president, it tells stories of the global warming crisis, as well as evacuations and panic everywhere. Looking back at my younger self, I was naive to think I could change the so-called “global warming” when the real culprits were the politicians and company owners. Wars break out, and after the downfall of many past “ancient” countries that many people from my generation still remember, it seems like our world may never recover. Oh, and the money from my retirement funds that I was oh-so looking forward to having is now used for survival, rather than seeing the world. Oh well, it’s too late to do anything significant now. Money is low, so I made the hard decision to sell the house and move into a retirement home. Anyway, I look forward to being reminiscent, and all of that.

Good news! After working hard at my job for many years, I’ve finally become a millionaire, although the meaning of that has changed since I was a kid. Inflation is the current issue of the moment, although people seem to be suing companies for the cause of climate change. The skies outside are indeed darker, and animals are dying, however, as long as the higher-up people are doing something, it should be fine. My kids are in school, and my job has constantly been giving me work. Right now, and hopefully, for the rest of my career, I work for Tesla, you know, the one that makes all that transportation across the world, promising us a better future. My job is to find current problems in our world such as current wars and pollution spills, and list some potential solutions to send to some higher-ups who decide if it’s important enough to spend our limited time and money on. With all this work, I don’t have much time to do much of the other things that I used to have time for, but I’m sure in the future when I get that sweet retirement money, I’ll be able to play golf and poker all day. However, right now, I’m still many figures in debt from college, a degree that I now see didn’t help all too much. Living the American dream is something many people seek, as the population hit 15 billion a couple of months ago. Entertainment has shifted too, as instead of going outside to eat at a restaurant once in a while or go bowling with your old man, the kids put on a VR, and instead of working on a job, spend hours scrolling. Speaking of entertainment, I stopped practicing the trumpet, and now it’s more of an artifact than something that people know of. Also, I recently thought about going on a world trip, something I dearly looked forward to as a kid, but I guess there’s plenty of time to enjoy all of that later. With all of that to look forward to, I still grieve for the recent all too all-too-fresh memories of a hyperloop crash where my parents were planning to come visit from across the country. If only I hadn’t decided to move so far away from my family. Well, retirement is coming soon, so I guess I’m looking forward to that.

College graduation! After a long time and much effort and sleepless nights, I finally have a degree in environment, hopefully finding a decent job and earning all the money for the debt. However, the economy recently changed, with the government placing heavy restrictions on major companies and their quantum vacuum pollution, and I think it’s a bit over the top. If society can’t produce its goods, how can we function? Regardless, life has

never been better. With a wedding coming up, as well as the prospect of living on my own maybe even far away up north, I feel as if my dreams are coming soon, even planning for a vacation to a couple of countries. With that said, I recently applied to a couple of jobs and now have to decide between two of the biggest company rivals in a leading future, with some people even saying only one will survive within a couple of years. Tesla Vs. a newly formed "QWERTY," a competition said to be one of the most important in humankind's history. With a bright future ahead, even starting a family and a promising future, I hope that my future is a fulfilling one, continuing to play the trumpet, the instrument that got me the scholarship. Anyway, getting a job is coming next so I'm looking forward to that.

High school graduation is something that came way sooner than I expected. Despite my college counseling, I still don't know what specific career I want to do. However, I hope to do something that impacts the rising problems that exist within our community, and maybe change the world. It sounds ambitious, but with hard work towards college, I'll be sure to work hard, I hope to make a difference. However, saying goodbye to some friends, and losing some activities to focus on others is not something I look forward to. Oh and, playing the trumpet got me a scholarship, so I hope to do that on the side as well, maybe start a TubeYou channel? Anyway, College is coming up soon, so I'm looking forward to all that freedom and excitement.

I can't wait for the new video game to drop, everyone's talking about it, but instead of buying it for my birthday, I decided to ask my parents if I could start to play an instrument. Strange choice for a kid, but I already have a whole collection of video games, and it'll probably sit on the shelf. Yesterday, we went to a new energy plant, and I was able to realize that our world was sitting on its edge, and I wanted to change it. Anyways, High school is coming up, so I'm looking forward to that.

"The best time to plant a tree was 20 years ago. The second best time is now."

Student Name: Aanisah Chiedozie  
 Grade: 8  
 School: Morton Ranch Jr High School  
 Title: Fate Is Not Chosen  
 Category: Poetry  
 Key: Gold Key  
 Educator: Brian Branks

### Weary Is One Who Wears The Crown

Don't you find it odd that a king despises the authority of a ruler?  
 He wakes up in his bed decorated like a throne.  
 It seems he can not leave the glitter of gold no matter where he goes.

Servants flood in to place on his shoes and remove his nightly robe.  
 Do they not know  
 he can do it on his own?

They tie the smooth laces of his shoes in an intricate bow,  
 reminding him of his days as a babe.

They guide him through the halls, guards hovering around him.  
 Securing his safety, and closing him in.

His throat closes as they step closer, pushing and pressing him into the middle of  
 the guards' hoard.

They open the door for him and lead him through,  
 opening the velvet red gate for him to step into the next room.

Why does the feeling of being pampered make him feel inferior?  
 That is the  
 last thing he is.

Mankind surrounds him everywhere he goes.  
 Chatter and calls for the king's opinion overwhelm his ears.

He longs for isolation, a chance to breathe  
 He always feels suffocated.  
 He was not born claustrophobic.  
 It was forced onto him.



He puffs his chest and speaks with a boastful tone,  
shielding fear of the multitude's piercing gaze  
This is what he was called to do.

But even a king grows weary under the crown's weight.

Even a king tires of the throne's gentle embrace.

### Born With A Silver Sword

Don't you find it strange that a soldier resents the motion of war?

He staggers his feet and wields his sword.  
It sits heavily in his hands, movements clumsy and strained.  
Left then right. Right then left. The motion is utterly repetitive and predictive.

He puts the same armor on to protect his skin.  
The metallic scent of iron fills his head,  
weighed by the cries of the people he's killed while he lived in their stead.

Tears of guilt and regret prick his eyes as he tightly clenches his fists.  
Armor does not reach the mind. The soul. Armor can not protect him, he persists

It's all the same. It's always the same.

He itches for a brand new adventure. He craves it, like Tantalus, a taste of water.

He wields his sword, soldiers do not think.  
Soldiers fight.  
Soldiers are strong.

He is not.

His shoulders slump and he closes his eyes and the battlefield  
transforms into pages where his stories unfurl.  
Where instead of a sword he wields a pen.

A warrior of a different kind, fighting battles of words and spilled ink.  
The sword clatters out of his hands and he's brought back to his  
world of violence.

He stutters in his steps. This is not what he was called to do.

This life; he did not choose on his own.

Soldiers do not think.

Soldiers fight.

Soldiers are strong.

He is not.

He

hangs

his

head.

Even a soldier loses the zeal to fight.

Spilled Ink

Do you not find it strange that poets harbor a distaste for sitting down to write?

The foreboding feeling when I open my worn-down journal.

I gaze down at the page and a sense of passion fills my every being,  
almost entirely shadowing the gentle feeling of hesitation.

The metallic fragrance of ink coats the air, like wasps of coffee from a mug.  
It flows into my nose and gently wraps my heart in a sense of bittersweet familiarity

Contours of unease etch lines on my face, resembling the harsh marks of a frustrated  
artist

With furrowed eyebrows and downcast lips, I will words on the page to  
simply exist.

I place the honed tip of my obsidian pen on the page and time freezes

Words that once flowed like a gentle river, dry up and

and cease to exist

My mind draws a void of emptiness.

Nothing.

The grip on my pen tightens, my knuckles drawn taut,  
as a growing feeling of pain fills my chest.

My heart aches to spill the heavy burden of words onto the page,  
releasing it from the crushing grip.

Yet, my mind turns its face to my struggle and refuses to lend me its aid,  
leaving me to fight despite the fact that I am afraid.

I was called to write.

That is what I was meant to do.

There's nothing else I can do but place the words flowing like honey in my heart  
onto the page to create  
a sickly saccharine story.

But even the poet

runs

out

of

words.

The rush of ink finally stops, a dam suddenly halting the river's flow.

It spans wide, eagerly blocking off words that push aggressively against its hold.

The water crashed against it in heavy waves, praying for gentle erosion.

The words' hope dwindles as the dam holds firm, the words wilting and sagging

against the ocean floor

The poet's whispered prayer falls deaf against the water's motions.

"May the dam be weathered down and let my words be set free." A daily devotion.

Student Name: Arianna Hodge

Grade: 11

School: Jordan High School

Title: Fields of Awe

Category: Poetry

Key: Gold Key

Educator: William Clouse

No one knows except I, where my heart lies  
I live there. I think there. I breathe there.  
A vast landscape of nothing  
Well maybe ideas and maybe flowers  
Wild ones. Like me.  
And maybe I've already exposed myself too much  
Why should I tell you where I spend my time?  
I escape there. I get lost there. I found myself there.

Why should I open the door for you?  
Shine a light on me for you?  
Or release the flooding gates for you?

What then?  
You see me for who I am, who I've become  
Good or bad  
What then?

Will you still love the person on the outside?  
Or will you despise the person on the inside?

All these questions, all these answers  
Well not really... there's only two.  
Yes. Or. No.

No one knows except you and I, where our hearts lie  
We live there. We think there. We breathe there.  
A vast landscape filled with our secrets  
Well maybe ideas and maybe flowers  
Wild ones. Like you and me.  
And maybe I'm opening up more  
Trust plays a part  
Why should we tell them where we spend our time?

We escape there. We get lost there. We found ourselves there.

Our fields of awe are exciting  
Our fields of awe are burdening  
Our fields of awe are unexpected  
Our fields of awe are imaginative

Our fields of awe are who we are,  
who we've become,  
who we want to be.

It is us.

Student Name: Asher Blut

Grade: 8

School: Adams Junior High School

Title: Helping myself

Category: Poetry

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Alex Wissen

1: How it used to be

I used to be blessed with averages above 90, I thought I was a genius

I used to be confident, I thought life was easy

I used to stand out on top, I thought I was the best

But now its no longer that way

I have grades below 70's

Just writing this makes me anxious

Thoughts of failure infect my brain with an incurable poison

I used to be smart

I used to be carefree

And I used to be on top

But I'm no longer that

I wish I could go back

To how it used to be

I wish I could be him,

And not this mound of doubt and anxiety

2: How it is now

School is a drag

Most of my anxiety can be blamed on it

I hardly have days off without homework

And time for homework takes up time to study for tests

Getting dismissed from school doesn't bring me joy

I try really, really, really hard to elongate my walk home

Home is where disappointed parents wait for me

Disappointed parents usually yell at me

All of this leads to my Anxiety  
Which leaves me unable to sleep  
I've found something to keep my anxiety at bay  
But this something feels like a curse

I smoke cigarettes  
And I think....

And I know I'm addicted

### 3: Addiction

Tests, Quizzes, and exams all start piling up  
I haven't started studying  
The pressure to do good is like a weight on my shoulders  
Hands start shaking  
Great! Now my Addiction is acting up  
Thoughts of failure begin floating through my head  
Now I have to deal with this too?

After the dismissal bell rings, I burst out of the doors flying  
I run as quickly as possible to a corner of the school  
No one can find me here  
The relief I craved made me careless  
And I realized how much trouble I'm in

My counselor,  
She saw everything

### 4: Therapy

'What were you thinking?!'  
'Smoking on school campus?!'

Curled up like a hibernating bear, I'm bombarded with the sound of disappointment  
The counselor hasn't said a word  
I'm more scared of what the counselor is going to do with me

'Why do you smoke?'



The counselor was leading forward with her finger pointed at me  
 My parents stopped shouting  
 'I know the kind of people you talk to, and they don't seem like the kind people to  
 pressure you to smoke.'  
 She paused  
 'So why do you smoke?'  
 It helps me get rid of my anxious thoughts

The counselor stood up and looked at me  
 'I can't help you with your addiction then, but you can.'

I left her office pondering about what she said to me.

## 5: Meaning

When I got back home I pondered on what my counselor said  
 I can't help with your addiction, but you can  
 What  
 Does  
 She  
     Mean?!  
 For once, I'm thinking about something other than my anxiety  
 The meaning of her words feels unreachable  
 My addiction is because of my anxiety  
 And my addiction is caused by school  
 SO WHY CAN'T A COUNSELOR FROM THAT VERY SAME SCHOOL HELP ME?  
 I calmed down a bit and thought about what she said  
 It's not like I can stop being anxious  
 Right?

Well...  
 I mean

Maybe I am choosing to be anxious  
 Maybe it's because I always think about and focus on my anxiety  
 Maybe she is right  
 Maybe I am the only one who can fix my addiction

## 6: How it will be

I woke up the next day with this in mind:

I used to be blessed with averages about 90, and I can still strive to get those grades  
I used to be confident, and I can still be confident  
I used to stand out on top, and I can still try

But although I am none of those things,  
A surge of confidence and inspiration flows through me  
I'm no longer thinking about my anxiety

I used to be smart  
I used to be carefree  
But what's stopping me from still being those things?

Now I'm moving forward  
This is how it will be  
Focusing on myself and my flaws  
The only person who can help me...

Is me.

Student Name: Deborah Chung

Grade: 12

School: James E Taylor High School

Title: how (not) to hide the fact that you're depressed

Category: Poetry

Key: Gold Key

Educator:

step one: ignore it.  
forget your thought life,  
forget the world behind you.  
you are (not) a healthy, functioning individual.  
you are (not) happy. you have to be.  
do (not) read the (not).

in this city, there are too many with whom  
i cannot  
compare. in  
the country's  
capital  
& i dream of  
capitulation.  
even on vacation, i do (not) love myself.

step two: deny it.  
there is (not), you do (not), you are (not).  
no. you are enough.  
you are enough. you are still  
(not) enough.  
do (not) read the (not).

come nighttime, migraines do (not) steal my sleep  
away. metanoia leaves no room for mindless  
midnight scrolling. i do (not) stay up  
late calculating recalculating.  
staring at my rankings & scores & screaming at hotel  
room walls, dragging long scratches down  
my skin. scraping & spinning & spitting &  
spiraling & staying up knowing when you're  
a number, there's always one higher.

step three: resist it.

you know your value is (not) tied to \_\_\_\_\_. you  
are (not) confident. you are (not) happy.  
do (not) read the (not).

next morning at breakfast, bread & butter stay separate  
for the sake of a blade sharp enough to crisply cut glass  
glass like mirrors routinely smashed: pound  
crack marred surface edges jagged  
shards splinter in rivulets, cascading  
broken showers perhaps it explains  
the myriad cuts inexplicably scarring my  
hands. "eat happy live happy"  
is easy for you to say when you're thin.  
i am happy. i mouth the words but can't  
stomach them. i am (not) happy. living the life is  
living a lie like the crinkle of a  
candy wrapper enclosed sweet a sickly stain  
marked with mental note: (not) for consumption.

step four: eliminate the source of it.

remove what makes you unhappy.  
disconnect. discontinue this mess of  
worthless unworthiness.  
eliminate me.  
remember: do (not) read the (not).

afternoon, trains pass breathing artificial wind whipping  
my face. meanwhile mind itches toward the edge,  
the allure of free-falling &  
a sudden oblivion while  
my feet inch back, shuffling  
on the platform - do (not).  
what a thrill it is (not).  
railings are (not) for  
throwing oneself over  
train tracks are (not) for  
stepping on  
moving trains are (not) for  
jumping off of  
i do (not) have l'appel du vide.

step five: understand that your efforts are useless.

futile, amounting to nothing.

resign yourself to the realization.

no lying, denying, or escaping it:

you

are

not

depressed.

i am not a mistake.

Student Name: Rachel Yun

Grade: 11

School: Cinco Ranch High School

Title: If I Could Go Back In Time

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Key: Gold Key

Educator:

Summer had always been a bustling time of creativity, innovation, and DIYs, a time where the never-ending pile of homework vanished and the worn yellow pencil could be dropped with relief. As a child, summers involved stargazing expeditions on the trampoline, sprawled out jigsaw puzzles on the dining room table, and fires in the oven from baking fiascos. The days stretched out on the front lawn drawing trees on my sketchpad and immersing myself in the world of Harry Potter, taking 'Which Character Are You' quizzes and attempting to memorize the entire encyclopedia in one day. But year after year, summer was simply a season that passed, a antecedent to the upcoming school year and part of an annual cycle where growing sprouts eventually withered to brown brittle leaves, crumbling under brand new sneakers walking to the red stop sign, where the bus screeched and heaved out exhaust fumes. But the summer of '22 did not happen as every other summer had - instead, it changed my life forever.

Choosing courses to take often felt like looking around in a gigantic supermall. So many to choose from, with their sparkling display windows featuring everything you could possibly dream of as the hours tick by. It was a Tuesday afternoon that I was sitting on the couch, one hand holding up the tablet propped up against my knee while the other reached through the bag for a cheese ball puff. Leisurely scrolling through the diverse courses offered, reading knowledgeable posts from seniors who boasted of having a 4.0 without breaking a sweat, and receiving top-secret counsel from my friends told me that 1. AP Psychology was one of the easiest classes ever, and 2. Once I finished with the class, I would have no more need of it whatsoever. Take this class, and your summer will be a breeze, they told me. I needed no more coaxing of this perfect summer, and with a ready smile, I clicked Enter.

Skip forward to June, and I was ecstatic about it. The tidbits of information detailing the unconscious motives of people I applied to all aspects of life. I idolized Sigmund Freud, was astounded by Zimbardo's prison experiment, and gaped with escalating terror at the results of the Milgram experiment. When my sister stubbornly backed her claim that mermaids were real by citing an article that reported discovering "mermaid remains," I applauded myself for diagnosing her with the confirmation bias. Upon my discovery that I had become full after eating two bowls of ramen, I gazed in wonder at the genius of my hypothalamus. As I stared up at the ceiling in bed, I debated between the arguments of the activation synthesis theory, information processing theory, and Freud's dream interpretation theory, and wondered if my dream of getting chased by a bear was simply

my brain detangling itself or a sign that my subconscious had identified an imminent danger. This was no longer a class I'd speed through for thirty minutes so that I could get back to blowing dandelions outside. This was a class I looked up to in absolute awe. It was a Thursday evening when I first found myself disagreeing with the words that stared up at me from the computer screen, black words against the white page as if to be declaring themselves to be irreversible facts. My eyes narrowed slightly, taking in the words again and again. The bystander effect is a theory that when among a group of people, an individual will be less inclined to help others than when alone. For instance, when faced with a struggling person in an elevator who has dropped their papers on the floor, you'd likely not help them if there were others present. To be accused of such a crime by my favorite class, I was offended to say the least. I was utterly convinced that while others might be susceptible to this effect, I was among the heroic minority, swooping in when there was a call for help. The bystander effect had nothing on me. I was proved wrong a whole two months later.

It was August. The shopping cart pushed on noisily along the epoxy floor, the broken wheel causing the cart to hop along as if on pin and needles. As if it knew of the situation that was about to unfold. It was the grocery store curse; there hadn't been a shopping trip without my picking out the cart that had the broken wheel. It was an inescapable, undesirable fate. Being only eight in the morning, I found myself inwardly groaning. Right now, I was supposed to be happily in bed, dreaming away in euphoria. Instead, I found myself behind the loudest cart in the world, the way its wheels shook and the handle shivered under my fingers with Mom impatiently scurrying away, noting that mangoes were in season and oohing at the price of the strawberries. The cart bounced along as I trailed after her, warily scanning the shelves for whatever more she could possibly want to buy. Perhaps I was so focused on the small annoyance of the jittery cart that I couldn't do what was needed of me. At least, that's what I tried to tell myself after.

My subconscious acknowledged what happened before I did at the sound of a dull thud. The carton of almond milk dribbled onto the tile floor, seeping under the cluttered gondola shelves who took no notice of the woman leaning against them. Her head rested on the shelves as her hands above her head supported another carton that had fallen in the domino run. Her arms seemed to sag under the weight of the carton, resting against the shelves as if to give up in despair. A low moan escaped her lips. It was an inescapable fix. If I could make a comparison now, she strangely resembled Atlas holding up the world.

Drip, drip.

I could only stare at the carton on the ground, where milk continued to spill out of a crack on the bottom. Something which lasted only a few seconds has turned into a everlasting memory in my head, and the details are still starkly clear. The almond milk carton was blue and made of cardboard. Its bottom left corner had torn, causing the ever-growing puddle of milky white. By the slightest turn of my head away from what I had witnessed, not knowing what I, a mere sixteen year old, could possibly do, I had rendered myself susceptible of the bystander effect. In those few seconds time stood still, a man on the

side rushed in, doing what I had failed to do. My arms hanging limply; I walked away, contemplating what had happened. What I had failed to uphold for myself. My sense of integrity had fallen over and broken, just like that carton of almond milk.

In the days that followed, I found myself replaying the scene over and over and over again. Then, I had not been part of the heroic minority. I was yet another example to enter into the pages of my beloved psychology textbook of people who had witnessed and failed. Was it not ironic that someone who had only months before pruned through psychology course, delving through topic after topic with intense scrutiny and captivation, be still ensnared by the curse of the bystander effect? I had prided myself on my analysis of others' actions through my lessons from my psychology class, but now, I found myself zooming out of my own perspective and into the lens of the world.

The woman still lives in my head, her roots graying, her eyes looking up with relief at the man who had stepped in. In my head, her eyes turn to me. Gray and quizzical, testing me. If I could go back in time, it would be to the summer of '22.



Student Name: Gina Shim

Grade: 8

School: Adams Junior High School

Title: Is This Me?

Category: Science Fiction & Fantasy

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Alex Wissen

"Quick!" I tell all the unicorns. We were all running from the Evil Queen, Nyx. The dragons were following us as we escaped to the Room of Portals.

"Ah!" My little sister, Nightshade, falls. I ran back to help her get back up.

"Leave me! There's no time!"

"I can't leave you again!" I say as I pick her up.

"Hurry up!" Blazig, my dragon friend, told me.

I ran as fast as I could when we all entered a portal. We weren't sure which one we went to, but we escaped the Evil Queen at least.

"Woah, where are we?" Nightshade asks.

"Ah!" I screamed when I saw her. She wasn't a unicorn anymore... She was a-  
"HUMAN!"

"What are you talk- AH! HUMAN!"

We both pointed at each other. I glanced at everyone to see we were all our biggest nightmare. Since the Evil Queen is a human, we are all afraid of these creatures because they should all be evil, right?

"Are you okay?!" Blazig darts to me.

"Yeah, I'm fine. What happened to all of us?"

"I think we accidentally went to the Anthropoid World."

"Oh, no. It's time," my dad murmurs.

"What do you mean?" I question.

"Us, adults, have been preparing for this world in case we ever had to come across this place. Follow us. We have a house we can all live in."

We all followed our parents to this HUGE mansion. It's so big we could store a town. How rude of me- I forgot to introduce myself. My name is Starlight, and I'm a unicorn! (I think?) My little sister is Nightshade, who is also a unicorn. My best friends are Blazig, dragon, and Melodia, mermaid. I haven't heard from my mom since I was a little pony, but my dad is the best dad anyone could ask for!

"Kids, listen up! We are in the Anthropoid World, aka the Human World. It's a scary world, but here's the plan. We have to disguise ourselves as humans so people won't get suspicious of us. You kids are going to school. We will all need human names, so make up your name!" My dad, the leader of the unicorns, ordered all of us.

"What's your name going to be?" Blazig asked me.

"I was thinking, Selena. Like Selena Gomez!"

"Ew, Selena Gomez? She's so lame," My worst enemy, Beatrice, spoke.

She's my least favorite fairy. Most of the fairies are like mean girls, dragons are the jocks, mermaids are the artistic kind, and unicorns are more commonly known as nerds. (Don't ask me how I know what the Human World is like.) I don't know what I ever did to Beatrice, but I hate her. No, no. Hate is a strong word.

"Just ignore them," Blazig told me.

"Yeah, I know."

My sister changed her name to Naomi, Blazig's new name is Blake, and Melodia's is Mariah. Most of us are terrified to be here, but I'm excited for the Human World. Is that weird? The fairies always say I'm so strange that I question myself as a unicorn.

THE NEXT DAY...

Yahoo! First day of school! I kept jumping up and down because I was so excited.

"You can't be that excited for human school, are you?" Beatrice questioned.

"Are you kidding? It's going to be a blast!"

"Weirdo."

All of the youth for the mythical creatures are going to Eureka Academy. We all enter the school and- WOW! It's not as cool as I thought it would be... People are shoving each other in the halls, girls are spitting gum everywhere, teachers are yelling at the students to slow down, and worst of all- the smell! Back in Magix, it would smell like flowers or scrumptious desserts every day. Now it reeks of sweat and axe body spray.

"Hi! Welcome to Eureka Academy! My name is Julia, and I will be your student tour guide!" A girl comes up to me.

"Tour guide?" I questioned.

"You know, to show you around the school."

"OH, right! Sorry, hi, I'm Selena."

"That's a pretty name! Come on, let me show you around." I noticed Blazig- I mean Blake, seemed upset.

"Can my friend come too?"

"Yeah, of course! The more the merrier!"

Julia showed me and Blake around the school. I officially made a new friend. I met with Mariah at lunch since we had the same lunch. "I didn't think the Human World would be this cool!" I told her. (I forgot we don't get the fancy font in this world.)

"Aren't you scared Nyx would one day show up and capture us all? I mean, we're unprotected!" Mariah expressed her worries.

"Stop worrying, Mariah. Nyx won't come after us!"

"Shhh. Don't be so loud."

"Sorry. Anyways, how has school been so far?"

"To be honest, pretty great! Orchestra and choir is very fun!"

"See! I told you!"

"You always see the bright side, huh?"

"You know me! Maybe I should try a music class."

"There are afterschool clubs you could do. I'm sure you would do great in anything."

"Thanks-

"ALL RISE!" A woman shouts. We all turn our heads to see all the students standing up. Mariah and I did the same so we wouldn't get in trouble. "Today is double homework day!" The woman announces. All the students groan. "Oh, stop complaining. It's good for you!"

"Who is that?" I asked the person next to me.

"That's Principal Xiomara. We all hate her," they explained to me.

"Hate is a strong word."

"Whatever."

After a few weeks of school, I realized we are just like humans. We all have our groups, there's still bullying (unfortunately), there's still school, and the principal oddly reminds me of the Evil Queen. I was in my room studying when Mariah screamed. I dashed down to the pool to see what happened.

"Are you okay?" I inquired. I looked at her to see she was back in her mermaid form! Oh my gosh! How?!"

"I don't know! I was swimming until I started singing underwater when I realized I was back into my mermaid form!"

"Wow, that's great! Right?"

"How am I supposed to go to school?"

"Maybe try getting out?"

She did as I suggested, and her tail transformed into her legs.

"Aha! I presume when you sing when there's water nearby, you turn into a mermaid!"

"Avoid singing when there's water. Got it."

"FIRE!" Someone squealed.

Mariah and I rushed to where we heard the scream. We went outside to see it was Beatrice pointing at a burning tree! Blake was trying to relinquish the fire. In an instance, Mariah waved her hands, and water splashed onto the tree. The fire was out, but the tree was severely burnt.

"What in the world happened?!" I freaked out.

"I believe that was my fault..." Blake admitted.

"How?"

"I was practicing basketball when Beatrice came over. She complained about me being too loud, so I started getting furious until fire sparked on the tree."

I don't think Beatrice heard that because she hugged the burnt tree. Suddenly, lights formed, and the tree grew back into its healthy state!"

"You guys have elemental powers!" I exclaimed.

"What?" They all questioned.

"Think about it. Mariah could turn back into a mermaid and put out the fire with water from her hands. Blake summoned fire on the tree, and Beatrice hugged the tree to make it grow back!"

"Selena, you're a genius!" Blake declared.

"We still have magic with us! Just not the powers we're used to."

"Not to be rude, but what about you or Naomi?" Beatrice brought up.

"Maybe it didn't come in."

"What's going on here!" Our leaders inquired.

"Blake, Mariah, and Beatrice have elemental powers!" I blurted out.

"Oh, it's time," they said.

“Huh?”

“Since you are growing mythical creatures, you guys will always have magic with you. That’s why you have elemental powers in this world,” my dad explained. “We have a place where you can train. Follow us.” We followed the leaders down a hidden staircase. It led us to a whole arena! It had everything we could need to train for battles. “Your training begins- now.”

“Wait, Dad! I know my powers haven’t come in yet, but could I still practice in combat?”

“Be safe.”

“You don’t have to worry about me!”

A FEW MONTHS LATER...

We discovered my sister, Naomi, had shadow magic, hence her real name, Nightshade. What about me? I still don’t have mine, but it’s okay! I’m highly qualified in combat. (At least.) I was in the school library examining past yearbooks when I noticed something peculiar. Our principal, Ms. Xiomara, was never in any of the yearbooks from the previous years. Maybe this is her first year. When I scanned a yearbook from more than a decade ago, I saw the valedictorian was a girl named Naria Yasmine Xiomara, and the salutatorian was a boy named Alan Garcia. My dad’s human name is Alan Garcia, and Naria Yasmine Xiomara? N-Naria, Y-Yasmine, X-Xiomara. Principal Xiomara has to be-

“What are you still doing here, young lady?” Principal Xiomara appeared.

“Hi, Ms. Xiomara! I was just looking at past yearbooks...”

“It’s past library hours.”

“Right. I’ll be going now.”

“I hope your dad is doing well, Selena.”

Her words caused chills up my spine. I ran as fast as I could. What did she mean? Is Principal Xiomara, Queen Nyx?! I sprinted back to my house to tell everyone the news. I gathered Blake, Mariah, and Beatrice to my room.

“Ugh, what do you want?” Beatrice whined.

“I believe Principal Xiomara is Queen Nyx!”

"Are you sure? I know she acts evil and all, but that doesn't mean she's the Evil Queen," Mariah tried to reason.

"I have it all right here-" I tried to grab my phone when I realized it wasn't with me. "Nononononono!" I panicked.

"What? Did cat catch your tongue?" Beatrice teased.

"My phone- it's gone!"

"Oh, boo-hoo!"

"Beatrice, with all due respect, please shut up," Blake spoke. "What makes you think our principal is Nyx?"

"Because it says it in her name! Naria Yasmine Xiomara! N-Y-X! She was valedictorian for Eureka Academy 15 years ago, and the salutatorian was Alan Garcia- possibly my dad!"

"Okay, I don't want to be all 'Negative Nancy,' but I think this is all a stretch," Beatrice commented.

"I know I don't have any solid evidence, but I swear she's the Evil Queen. You believe me, Mariah, right?" I glimpsed at her face, and she seemed guilty.

"I'm sorry, Selena. I would like to believe you, but there's no good reason why it's her. I'm with Beatrice."

"Can we go now? I have better things to do than sit in your room," Beatrice asked.

"Yeah, whatever." I gave up. Beatrice and Mariah left. Blake still stayed. "Aren't you going to leave?"

"No, because I believe you."

"Really?"

"Really. We can look back at that yearbook and for your phone tomorrow."

"You're the best!" I hugged him but broke apart after a few seconds, realizing our position. There were a few awkward seconds of silence.

"I should finish up my homework!" Blake excused himself.

"Yeah, me too. I- uh- Bye!" I unintentionally slammed the door in his face. I don't think he was bothered by it.

THE NEXT DAY...

Blake and I returned to the library for the yearbook and my phone. We asked the librarian, but she said she didn't find any phone, and the yearbook was unavailable.

"Well, that was a bust." I agreed.

"Can I have Selena Garcia head to the principal's office, please?" the speaker announced.

"Oh, no. What if she's onto us?"

"It's okay. I'll be there in case anything happens."

"Great, thanks." Blake walked me to the principal's office. He wished me luck and pretended to go back to class.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

"Enter!"

I set foot in the office to see Principal Xiomara leaning against her chair with her legs proposed up to her desk.

"Did you need anything, Principal Xiomara?"

"Sit," she ordered. I did as she said. "I'm assuming you're looking for these," she showed me the yearbook and my phone!

"I was looking for my phone."

"Well, you're not getting either of these." Suddenly, the two objects in her hands-  
VANISHED!

"It- It is you!"

"I knew you were the smart one."



She pushed herself on her roly chair from her desk and summoned a new surrounding that appeared to be a forest. Blake, Mariah, Naomi, and Beatrice all teleported here as well!

"I finally caught you all!" Nyx revealed herself.

"Oh my gosh. You're the Evil Queen!" They stated. I wanted to say I told you so, but that wouldn't do anything.

"I'm feeling nice today, so I'll let y'all try to fight me."

"Wha-"

"AND LET THE BATTLE BEGIN!"

We all tried to attack her, but she was too fast. Mariah attempted to summon a tsunami, but Nyx was able to block it. Beatrice invoked giant roots from the ground, but she was about to cut it away. Naomi used her shadow magic, but Nyx was somehow always able to detect her. Blake blew fire on my katana so we could double-attack on her. Nothing worked! The Evil Queen was too powerful. We needed help.

"Selena! Watch out!" Naomi called out.

I turn around to see a wave of dark magic coming towards me. I instinctively raised my katana, but I could tell it was losing its stability. Suddenly, someone jumped in front of me and blocked the magic!

"BLAKE!" I shattered. The others were trying to distract Nyx while I checked on Blake.

"Blake, talk to me."

"I have enough energy to send a signal to the adults.

"No, save your energy. We can do this!"

"Selena, be for real. We're losing. We need help, and you know it. I can do this."

"No, I can't lose you!"

"Please, let me do this." I nod in approval, unprepared for what's about to happen.

"I call upon all the help we can get!" Blake proclaimed.

I stepped away because I knew his body would burst into flames. Soon, everyone from Magix appeared and attacked Nyx. I could tell she was getting exhausted from all of the

battling. When she was at her weakest point, I picked up my katana and charged towards her.

“By the raging fire, the crashing waves, the lurking shadows, and the steadfast earth. I summon the elements to power my sword with unstoppable might!”

Bright rainbow glow rings circle my sword. I take a big swing, and it clashes with her wrists. There was a blurry ringing in my ears when I glanced around to see the Evil Queen vanquished. Everyone cheered when they saw what happened, but I immediately rushed to Blake.

“Blake! Oh my gosh. I can’t believe this happened.” His body was smoked from the fire. It wasn’t dissolvable, so I touched his cheek with my hand. “I’m so sorry. It’s all my fault. You will be better.” A tear dropped from my face and onto his cheek. Suddenly, a wave of glitter circled us, and it slowly reformed Blake back into his human self!

“Woah, what happened?” He questioned.

“BLAKE!” I instantly hugged him. “Is this you? The real you?”

“I believe so.”

“Thank goodness! I thought I lost you.”

“You could never lose me, Selena.”

“Guys! The Evil Queen is arising!” Mariah warned us. We all circled Nyx.

“Oh my gosh. It’s you,” my Dad spoke.

“Alan...” Nyx replied.

“I thought I’d never see you again,” my dad expressed. We were all puzzled.

“I don’t know what came over me. One minute we were in Magix, and then an evil spirit went inside my body!” She recalled.

“Can someone explain what’s going on?” Beatrice inquired.

“Selena, Naomi, this is your mom.”

“What.” Everyone spoke

"You're saying our enemy was our mom this whole time?!" Naomi asked.

"Yes."

"You have got to be kidding me!"

TWO WEEKS LATER...

It was time to go home since the Evil Queen- or my mom- was good now. I don't feel like this is right. Ever since I came to the Human World, it felt like my real home.

"Are you coming?" Blake.

"I- I think I need to stay."

"What? Why?"

"I never felt like Magix was my home. I always questioned myself as a unicorn, but when I became a human, everything made sense. And I love this world! I'm still discovering who I am as a person. I want to try out those music clubs- or volleyball! I need to stay here."

"Okay, if you're staying, so will I."

"Really? You would do that for me?"

"Yeah. To be honest, I may have been in love with you for two years now."

"If I be honest, so was I."

"What are you kids doing?" My friends and family were watching us.

"We want to stay in the human world."

"Are you sure? You guys can't come back until every six months."

"We're sure."

"I'll stay with you. You guys need an adult." Mom offered.

"But we just reunited," Dad opposed.

"It's okay. I can visit you and Naomi every six months. I would like to know my oldest daughter first. Till death do us part?"

"Till death do us part." I felt bad for separating my mom and dad after everything they'd been through.

We all said our goodbyes; Naomi didn't want to leave me, but I knew she had to go. Mariah apologized for not believing in me, and Beatrice surprisingly apologized as well for bullying me all these years ago. It's been a few years since this all happened. I feel good- fantastic even. I know I made the right choice. This is where I belong. I almost lost hope in finding my place, but that was my power: Being the light in dark times. (Hey, it's back!)

The End.

Student Name: Sofia Prada

Grade: 12

School: Cinco Ranch High School

Title: Let It Go

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Mary Sarver

I remember both the physical and emotional pain I went through the day we broke up. We both kind of saw it coming, which I don't know if it's a good thing or not, but I know our fingers were tired of holding onto something that we needed to let go of. The idea of losing her terrified me, I was so attached to her and what we had. That was kind of the problem, though. All my brain would think about was her. My heart desired her. My body needed her. I felt like I couldn't function right without her by my side. I realized relying on someone like that wasn't good for me. So, I figured I needed to take care of myself first and not put the responsibility of my happiness on someone else.

It was in July, in the middle of a Texan summer. I'm sure you can imagine how hot it was. I had just finished my shift lifeguarding, and my friend drove me to her house so that we could talk. We had previously texted about things we needed to talk about, so I thought that meant the conversation would go smoothly, but it ended way worse than what I anticipated. When I got to her house I was an anxious mess. She didn't want us to stay at her house, so we walked for about 2 miles in the deadly heat discussing our feelings. The conversation brought out every emotion in me. I was angry, I was sad, but in a way I did feel relieved. The walk there was awful for many reasons. I was sweating from head to toe and I had been crying so hard I had a headache. We got to this pond where we sat on the wooden floor to talk some more and that's when things got worse. We looked back at our time together, trying to figure out what came next. Neither of us wanted to let go of the other, I still really wanted her in my life and she wanted me in hers. The relationship had just turned into something we couldn't handle.

I was only 15 at the time. It was both of our first relationships, and to make matters more complicated, she's the girl that made me realize I love a little differently than the norm. There was so much confusion in my head. I thought love was supposed to be simple and make you feel on top of the world, but my experience falling in love made me feel like I didn't even belong in the world. Life felt very unfair and there was not much under my control. I just liked a girl that happened to like me back. It shouldn't have been so complicated for us.

Our relationship involved a lot of unnecessary drama and pointless fights. We'd argue over the smallest stuff and it would affect us both. I remember the way my stomach

would sink when we were upset at each other. However, something always kept me around. I don't really know what it was, but besides everything bad we had going on she still made me feel things I didn't even know I was capable of feeling. The feelings I had kind of took over me, which is what made it so hard for me to move on. It's like I was stuck. Breaking up wasn't what I actually wanted, it's just what I thought would be better in the long run. Even though we loved each other so much, we were too young and immature to have this kind of weight on our backs. Ending it was the only way I could stop the cycle.

For months after I became really depressed. It was the opposite of what I wanted to happen. I thought that by cutting her off I wouldn't feel the stress and pressure anymore, but that was not the case. If anything I felt even worse than when we were together. I'd sit alone in my room looking at old pictures of us letting tears roll down my cheeks. I didn't get why I couldn't just let go and work on myself like I needed to. All my mind would think about was her and how badly things ended. Everyday I woke up with hatred for myself. Did I do the right thing? Am I going to feel like this forever? I'm not sure that I ever wanted to love someone like that again. Having to put myself out there became the most difficult thing to do. I did not want to risk my heart hurting like that again. There's no metaphor I can think of to describe the pain I went through.

Everyone in my life saw me get to my lowest point. It got so bad to the point I didn't recognize who I was anymore. My behavior became really self destructive and harmful. Luckily, my parents were always very supportive of me and helped me every step of the way, my friends were there for me when all I would talk about was missing her, and I went to therapy to help me get my thoughts in order. At the time it still felt like nothing was getting better. I would still cry about her everyday and reminisce on all the good moments we had. No one's advice was ever good enough to bring me back to my normal self. I couldn't see the light at the end of the tunnel. Maybe I didn't want to see it. At some point being sad just became my norm. Self sabotaging was like my strong suit.

It took a while for me to fully feel over it. After almost a year of being hung up on it I was finally able to let it go. I was always open to telling people my story and what had happened. I hoped they'd say or do something that would magically make me feel better, but no one had that kind of power. It wasn't until I had a talk with my aunt about it that I decided to make a change. She said these words to me: "Let it hurt. Let it heal. Let it go." Those words really stuck with me and I realized it was up to me if I wanted to stay living like that or not. So, I followed the advice and made the change. Following the advice ended up saving my life. I realized that staying in the past did me no good. Instead, I started living in the present, connecting with the emotions I feel in that moment. This mindset is what got me out of the deep hole I had dug myself into. I finally felt okay and I was even ready to fall in love again when the time came.

Regardless of how hard it was, in a way I'm very glad this experience happened to me. For the longest time I was mad at the fact it had to be me that went through all that. With time, I realized how much everything that happened changed me for the better. Turns out I was right about it being better in the long run all along. It just took a little bit of extra time for me. I got to learn things about myself and life that shaped me into the person I am today. No one should be responsible for your happiness. Love shouldn't bring you down, it should uplift you. Not everything is under your control. You need the low moments to reach the highs. This turned me into a strong believer of "everything happens for a reason." Now that I am where I am, I can proudly say time heals. I'll continue following the advice I received from my aunt for the rest of my life. Let it hurt, let it heal, let it go.

Student Name: Markus Brikho  
 Grade: 8  
 School: Adams Junior High School  
 Title: Mars Exploration  
 Category: Critical Essay  
 Key: Gold Key  
 Educator: Martinez Kelly D

### Mars Exploration

A lander is orbiting Mars, preparing to descend. The crew of 3 onboard starts the engine and descends through Mars's atmosphere. Once slow enough, the parachute deploys, and the engine fires again. 10 feet, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, touchdown! Mankind has landed on Mars. Mars exploration is the next step in mankind's exploration of space. There are many great rewards to going to Mars, but like any good reward, there are challenges to overcome. Among these are propulsion and protection on the Martian surface. But overall, the rewards are worth the risks and the cost.  
 Benefits: Scientific, Economic, and Survival

One of the best benefits of exploring Mars is the scientific gains. We can learn about Mars' past and we can also apply this knowledge to our own planet and what we can do to make our planet a better place to live. One of the main drives of exploration is curiosity. When we have the opportunity to explore a new place, we take it. Spain, France, and England jumped at the opportunity to explore the new world. It is just the same for Mars. Risks won't faze the astronauts who get the chance to explore a new planet. The physics and chemistry community would do what they could to get on Mars and build labs and particle colliders. Biologists and archeologists would come to explore potential Martian life. Astronomers would set up observatories on Mars's moons, and environmental scientists would study Mars's surface ([ESA](#)). Exploring Mars would also have a huge economic gain as well. The planet would be open to businesses and factories. Engineers could come and build things. tourism would be a huge industry as well. All in all, Mars has many benefits to both the scientific community and the economy.

Setting up a colony on Mars is also good because it would make it harder for our species to go extinct. An extinction-level event on Earth would not be a total loss if we had a colony of a few thousand on Mars. Our species would go on exploring and very few space disasters can wipe out entire solar systems. Mars exploration is a stepping stone to the solar system, and we don't just die off without a fight. Exploring Mars gives us safeguards and our new Asteroid redirection tests can save us from extinction.

Mars exploration is also a stepping stone for interstellar travel. By setting up a distant colony, we can prepare for what it will be like to live in another star system when it takes



years to communicate with Earth. Mars exploration could also allow us to make huge jumps in technological advancements. We would be building interstellar engines around Mars and sending the crew from Earth. Mars's surface has a large concentration of Iron which could be harvested to make materials for the interstellar vehicle or whatever else is needed. With all that open and remote space, future astronauts could make a particle collider to make rare metals and antimatter for interstellar or interplanetary propulsion.

### Challenges: Fuel and Survival on Another Planet

To get to Mars, the crew would need to have a lot of fuel and an efficient engine. The rocket would need to have 3.9 km/s of Delta V (Delta V is the change in velocity a vehicle can produce) and another 5 km/s of Delta V to orbit and return to Earth ([Marspedia](#)). This is not too big of a problem because we have sent large payloads to Mars and beyond. We just need to have a large booster and spacecraft engine and we are off to Mars.

The astronauts landing on Mars need protection from entering the atmosphere. The lander would need a heat shield to enter the atmosphere. This isn't a huge problem though. Mars's atmosphere is so thin that it would only need a small heat shield. The insulation would almost be enough to protect the astronauts. They would need parachutes and engines though. The parachute would slow down the lander by it would need engines to land safely. The landing gear would also be necessary because the landing site might not be level. The crew would crash and tip over if they didn't have landing gear.

Another issue is how the astronauts will stay safe on the Martian surface. They will need to have an artificial habitat that provides a constant temperature and oxygen supply. This wouldn't be too hard because we have set up the international space station and it has never run out of oxygen or lost temperature. The next major issue is protection from radiation. Radiation is a major problem because Mars has a weak magnetic field, meaning that a lot more solar radiation can enter Mars's atmosphere. This can be dangerous for the astronauts because that amount of radiation is dangerous to the human body. There are simple ways to protect from radiation though. The colony would only have to harvest carbon dioxide (which is abundant in Mars's atmosphere) from the atmosphere and make a dry ice barrier around the colony. The astronauts could also use yarn on their space suits to protect themselves from radiation ([NASA](#)). This would protect the crew from intense radiation and could keep the colony cool during the Martian day.

### Why We Should Explore Mars

The problems that we have to overcome have already been overcome by the Apollo and Artemis programs. Entering Mars's atmosphere has been done before and is easily done. Surviving on Mars should be just as easily done. Getting to Mars won't be that hard either. We have sent lots of large probes to Mars and they required a lot of fuel. NASA is also producing the new SLS (Space Launch System) which has more than enough fuel to get to Mars and back.

Even with these challenges, the reward is greater. We would have much more information about Mars, and start paving the way for solar system-wide colonization and interstellar travel. We would also be preventing our extinction. Mars exploration really is worth the risk and cost. The challenges of keeping the crew safe, building colonies, and landing won't keep us from exploring Mars. Mars exploration would be like the Apollo missions of the 21st century. Completely doable, but challenging. That didn't stop early NASA from going. It encouraged them to go further and explore.

Student Name: Edlyn Wang

Grade: 10

School: Jordan High School

Title: Mudlark

Category: Short Story

Key: Gold Key

Educator:

Anne Green's arrival into our dull suburban town was like a cold snap: sudden and her presence was lingering.

Our town had one school, one playground, one supermarket, one library, and one convenience store. It was merely a rest stop for outsiders on a journey to a greater city. My parents were probably the first newcomers since the settlement of the land that had stayed to raise their children. But it wasn't by choice either. They had been stranded by poverty and lack of opportunity. Anyone else rarely stayed over a month. The house next door often hosted the newcomers, building up wear during periods of disuse. Peeling mint-green paint on the exterior walls revealed the previous canary yellow paint job, and slanted discolored trim garnished the window frames and roof. Our neighbors would scamper in before the morning bells tolled and leave under cover of night. Between now and then, they remained out of sight, avoidant of any attention. I had the courtesy to allow it. I used make up backstories for each newcomer. A family of nervous Mexicans were illegal immigrants, by the way the parents never allowed their children to speak to me; a large tattooed man was a runaway criminal, by his avoidance of our one county sheriff; a scrawny pale man was a drug addict, because once I saw him passed out on the sidewalk bleeding from the mouth, and Mom told me he had overdosed on coke. Over time, I took this to be a part of life, no longer peeking for the new occupants each time I saw polka-dot shades exchanged for striped curtains and back again.

But the arrival of Anne Green was different. On the first day of winter break of my 7th-grade year, the winter sun hung watery behind a veil of slatey cirrus clouds, casting our small town in a sickly pallor. The leaves had all fallen suddenly from the trees, leaving twiggy branches twiggy. I watched from the kitchen window with initial disinterest as a mud-crust black Ford pulled up to the vacant house next door, the owner's entire life packed into a few cardboard boxes stacked haphazardly in the trunk. The passenger side door was flung wide open, and a petite freckled girl with hair the color of autumn leaves skipped through down south that danced like flames in the wind hopped out onto the curb. She clutched a rectangular box tightly between her folded arms, yet the steady gaze of her pear green eyes conveyed the sense of a lion hunting prey, rather than a young girl whose life had just been uprooted. Another woman, the girl's mother, rounded the car. Mrs. Green was tall, with hair as vibrant as her daughter, but pulled back into a neat bun. She wore a black overcoat, and the sound of her heels clicking on pavement reverberated

through the empty street. That was the only glimpse of the pair I got before my mom dragged me away from the window, carping over my nosy, lazy self.

The next day, the girl was still out in the cold, but wearing an emerald green jacket I hadn't seen prior. From the kitchen window, I watched her sprinkle water on the dead front lawn. Finally, at midday, my mother, who had grown tired of my inattentive carrot chopping, ordered me out to introduce myself.

"I've been waiting for you to come say hello!" the girl trills to me the moment I step out the door. "Saw you peeping at us when we pulled up to the house." She speaks with an accent, consonants emphasized and vowels skimmed over. It makes her sound more mature, though I already know we are the same age. "Anne Green, pleased to meet you." "Vivian Wu. Uh, nice to meet you too I guess."

"You're cold standing out here right? Let's talk inside." Anne dropped her watering can in the grass, and spun towards her front door. A response lay forgotten on the tip of my tongue as I hurried to follow her.

I trailed behind Anne as she led me to her room. When I entered her room, the first thing I noticed was the ebony box placed atop a plastic folding desk in the corner of the room. Anne flopped down onto an air mattress on the floor of her room while I confined myself to a square of carpet near the desk.

"I suppose you want to know what's inside," Anne stated, following my line of sight. "You can take a look."

I was beginning to think she was a bit presumptuous, but I could not deny my curiosity. What could a girl like her value enough to carry so close? Carefully, I unlatched the lid, revealing the treasures inside. And I am... disappointed. And confused. Her box is a junk drawer.

The box contained a rainbow stew of various colors and textures, although all possessed rounded worn edges. Tarnished silvers were embedded in a matrix of beads, coins, blue and white ceramic shards, shells, bent pins, and marbles. No two objects are the same. A shimmery seed bead, an orange and yellow speckled lampwork bead, a blue corn bead, a round flowery millefiori bead. A shamrock-colored plastic terrier, a children's thimble, a thin bone-carved pipe, a steamboat penny toy, a mud-encrusted azure swallow brooch.

"Isn't it amazing?" Anne peered over my shoulder. "The history, I mean."

I didn't understand.

Anne spent the next few hours reciting an explanation for each piece while I listened intently. The small spoon with a man in robes engraved on the handle was an apostle spoon a patrician had used to stir sugar into their tea. An awkward snake-alligator hybrid was painted on a ceramic dish by an Italian artist who had never seen a crocodile. An iridescent blue bottle had stored elixirs concocted by 16th-century witches and warlocks. Under her masterful conduction, each item took on a life of its own.

"Oh what, was any of that true?" I laughed, suddenly realizing the absurdity of her claims.

"Maybe. Maybe not. Does it matter? Would you rather this vial have held an elixir for life or just another drunk man's poison?" She questioned, now holding a green tear-shaped flask. "My dad was a history professor back in Glaucenshire. He used to take me mudlarking on the weekends. Teach me about the Roman Empire when we found coins in the river. He told me that our interpretations of the past will never be completely accurate. Why not make them a little more exciting then." a smile played across her lips as she reminisced.

"Your dad?" This was the first time I had heard of him. "Where is he?"

"He died from a heart attack. That's why we moved. I don't think Mom wanted to stay in that rural village either." Her tone was matter-of-fact, yet I found myself averting my eyes as she wiped a tear away. Anne took her box from my hands and gave it a rough shake.

"Look." She breaks the silence that had stretched between us, "These were my favorite to collect with Dad back home." She gestures at the box of stars. Star-shaped tablets, some loose, some in stacks, had risen to the surface, reminding me of the PEZ candies my dad liked to buy from town. On the face of each slate star, feather-shaped ridges radiate from the center along each arm like petals. Although they didn't shine like the starry sky, or the other glass beads for that matter, the little stars had an attractive force as strong as any, and I was instantly mesmerized.

"Crinoid fossils," Anne answered my unasked questions, a genuine smile lighting up her face. "Or fairy money. Sometimes they drop their loose coins into rivers for us to find." I tried my best to envision that and found I could with surprising ease.

That night at home, I sat before my father's computer to do some of my own research. First I searched for Gloucestershire. The image results revealed a quaint village of Tudor-style houses tucked between rolling hills of an English countryside. Anne was right, between her tightly knotted hair and starched blazers, I could not imagine Mrs. Green settled in a drowsy cottage to care for her child. Next, I looked up the term mudlark.

"Those, particularly in London during the 18th and 19th centuries, who scavenged through river mud for items of value, typically the unskilled and impoverished." appeared from the first search result. That didn't seem like Anne. I knew she was no beggar. She was creative and brilliant, and so was mudlarking.

One might have supposed that if you grew up with the same class of students and parents every year, you would all become pretty close with each other. That may have been true for my other blonde-haired blue-eyed peers, but it was certainly not the case for me. As the only Asian family in a fifty-mile radius, we were the de facto outcast. When Mom and Dad realized they weren't going to find a job in the city, they immediately refocused on making friends and connections within the town. But no one showed up to the Lunar New Year party my mom threw that year. Or the Thanksgiving potluck she had hosted the following. Or my 6th birthday party with my newfound classmates, even though my mom had bought sparky invites to send out. Perhaps that was why I was so drawn to Anne from the moment we'd met. Fiery red hair was unfamiliar within our beige

lives. She was different, like me, but never shied away from the crowd. She was a breath of fresh air amidst a static and stifling heatwave, and I would have been glad to be swept along with her.

A few days later, Anne stood on my doorstep, dressed for opportunity in her emerald coat, baggy denim jeans, and conspicuous knee-tall black rubber boots.

"We're going mudlarking," she announced.

Surprised, the first thing I blurted out was "Will there be more of those crinoid thingies?"

"Maybe. They were everywhere back when they were alive. We can search for them, but I'm sure there'll be plenty else to find."

Satisfied, I threw on a puffer jacket over my pajamas, slipped on a pair of sneakers, and tramped down the street to the creek that cut straight behind our houses.

In the absence of summer rain, the river had slowed to a mere trickle, leaving the muddy foreshore exposed. Upon the sight of a crumpled plastic bottle bobbing in the current, I began to doubt Anne's assurances. If England was an ocean of history, our suburb was a mere drop of rainwater on the surface. Nevertheless, Anne squatted down on the bank and began scouting through the pebbly embankment. I imitate her crouched posture and swiveling head on the opposite bank. For the next few hours, we scrambled over gravel and twigs, chasing the sun to the horizon. I quickly discovered myself to be blind to the little details. Anne told me to look for shapes, colors, and textures that stand out from the surroundings, but my exhausted rods and cones started blending everything into one. I hadn't thought it would be that hard. Perhaps I had expected to trip over a stash of trinkets in the grass.

"Can I come over to your side; someone must have combed through this side of the bank before me." I joked after Anne flourished a speckled feather from underneath a rock. She looked up and seemed to register the misery in my running nose, raw fingers, and the mud-soaked hem of my pajama pants. Instead of calling it a day like I hoped, she hopped over to my side of the creek and scanned the ground. Then, in one swift movement, she plunged her fingers into the dirt in front of my shoes and pulled out a tarnished and grimy silver ring. I could make out the lustrous shine of a red center stone inlaid at the head. How had I missed that?

"Look harder. We're not leaving until you make your find as well."

I groaned. Wanting nothing more than to return home for a warm cup of cocoa, I picked an interesting piece of flint, jagged and flat, 2 edges dragged out to a point, and handed it to Anne. "This work?"

Anne inspects the shard. "Nice find. I'll bet a native american brought down a buffalo with this arrowhead." She slipped the weapon into her pocket where it joined the ring, feather, a lilac pony bead, and thumbnail-sized green-glazed teapot. I suddenly wished I had kept the rock for myself. That was the effect Anne had on me. Her words could polish trash into treasure. It was just another thing I could never do for myself. I felt a hookworm, it must have been, burrow itself into the soft lining of my stomach; my

discomfort grew. Perhaps I had inadvertently swallowed it along with Anne's words that I drank the same way my father downed a cold bottle of beer on Friday nights.

The next day, Anne showed up on my doorstep, dressed in the same uniform, with the same invite to join her on the foreshore. "Sorry, my mom got mad at all the mud I tracked in yesterday, she probably wouldn't want me to do that again." I excused. That was only partially true: while she had scolded me for my grimy fingers at the dinner table, my mom was more excited that I had finally made a friend. But it was easier to lie than to confess the way her success, or my lack thereof, had left me tossing and turning all night, wrestling with the knot. Part of me worried she would call out the lie, but she took my response in stride, leaving with no indication that I had offended her. That evening, she appeared at our dinner table to present her day's findings. And the night after that. And the night after that. Mom and Dad never addressed Anne at the table, but I thought they were secretly mollified by her presence. A steaming bowl of white rice waited, along with silver forks and spoons that had never served a purpose until then. Mom never chastised Anne for the outside shoes she wore in or the dark smudges her hands left on the dinner table.

One night, Anne seemed especially excited; she wore a grin stretching from ear to ear. She shoved an open palm to my face the moment I sat down in the chair beside her.

"Look!" she exclaimed "I finally found these!"

In her palm were a few unremarkable cheerio-shaped pebbles.

"Nice rocks?" I replied encouragingly for her sake.

"No silly, they're crinoids! I told you they were everywhere, didn't I? A little different from the ones back in England, but still feel like home."

She had been here less than a week and already fit more into the town I had lived in my whole life than me. The hookworm was squirming through my intestines.

"You must barely even miss home anymore," I replied.

This routine continued for a while. She would bring over something new every night: a 1989 Georgia quarter, plastic jumping frog, or my least favorite: more crinoids.

On Christmas Eve, Anne presented my mom with a ring box tied with red ribbon. Inside was a shining silver band topped with a gemmy red stone. It was almost unrecognizable from the junk she had pulled from the river mud the week earlier, and my mom had rewarded her with a genuine smile, proclaiming that she hadn't imagined anyone would be more thoughtful than her own daughter. And I hadn't believed she would be quite so materialistic. What type of mother loved other children more than her own? Now that little worm of envy was not just squirming around, it was eating right through me. Later, I pulled Anne outside into the darkening sky. "Look," I explained, "Mom didn't want to tell you this after your gift, but she doesn't want you over for dinner anymore. Not that she

doesn't like you or anything, just, it would be better if you ate with your own mom, ya know, spend time with your family and all."

"Oh, no, I understand, it's alright." she stammered with a confused smile, but her eyes were overcast by more than just the porch light. For the first time in a long time, I no longer felt the hookworm's weight inside of me. I really was just as capable of spinning my own tales.

On Christmas Day, there was an empty seat beside me when we sat for a feast. "Where's your friend?" My mom asked. I replied, "Maybe she finally realized we were second-class nobodies to her."



Student Name: Reese Banister

Grade: 11

School: Jordan High School

Title: my home; it's shared rooms.

Category: Poetry

Key: Gold Key

Educator:

my home; it's shared rooms.

in another life i touch my skin and it is smooth  
it is not the new body i have crafted  
raised with rough skin  
it does not sting to the touch  
it is not woven and intertwined with  
a scarlet ribbon  
that attempts to cover the battle lost  
to the monster i met in my wardrobe at 14.

but this body is my home, and i have done renovation.

i characterize this house as an extended manifest of my past  
much like the stretched skin around my thighs  
and i attach myself to others  
only to compare to the same way  
the skin empathizes with the dips in my hips,  
needed but not desired.  
and i am left feeling  
i cannot wear my skin right around my ivory bones.

one day you will visit my home  
and i will think back to when the sun placed freckles all over my body.  
i know they were not intended for you to kiss,  
yet you insisted  
you kissed me just as the sun had.

i will feel guilty for letting you  
overstay your welcome,  
my hate and love for you will share a room like sisters-  
wondering which will cave first

and sleep with the comfort of the other.

in the shortness of my breath  
 you place yourself between changeful gasps  
 begging one day you will get it right,  
 one day i will swallow you whole.  
 you will sit in my insufflation  
 praying not to follow out with the carbon  
 for if you have to stay in my lungs-  
 you would be suffocated all your days  
 to reside in a place adjacent to my heart;  
 the organ you long so profoundly to be trapped in.

you can have my heart.  
 but this house is mine.  
 it belongs to me not you.  
 and i will learn to love this home-  
 the cracks in it's walls  
 and cobwebs in it's corners.  
 and where you see empty halls  
 i will show you exhibits of art  
 for my body is the only thing that is truly mine.  
 my body is my home.

Student Name: Jocelyn Johnson

Grade: 9

School: Jordan High School

Title: My Wheelchair

Category: Poetry

Key: Gold Key

Educator:

My Wheelchair

By:Jocelyn Johnson

I glance down at my set of glistening wheels.  
At my personal throne that I'm permanently imprisoned in.  
Where chains wrap around my legs and force me to stay.

I gaze at the people all around me at school, and I look at them, and then I look at me.  
They don't say it,  
but I know.

When little kids stare up at me with those big curious eyes, as I'm passing by.  
And sometimes act like I'm another species.  
They're so confused.  
They don't say it,  
but I know.

I rarely ever go to friend's houses, but when I do  
The space is tight,  
The bathroom's difficult,  
My mom always has to accompany me.  
They probably wonder why I'm this way, they don't say it  
but I know.

Sometimes, I wonder what the 1st thoughts my friends had about me were?  
How they labeled me.  
How they saw me.  
Was I "girl in a wheelchair?"  
"Disabled."

I know I'm not that to them now,  
Back then though, was I really just "Jocelyn."  
They don't say it,

but I know.

Even though, in my mind's eye I'm the same.  
To everyone else, I'm different.

I have hobbies, passions, interests, that my heart is longing to race after.

They don't say it, they don't show it, they don't act like it  
but I know  
I know  
I'm not the same.

Sometimes, I wonder if it's all in my head.  
The way others see me...  
Sometimes, I wonder if it's all in my head.  
I wonder if this mechanism makes me more conscientious.

But even though they don't treat me differently,  
Don't talk about it,  
Don't act like it,  
Don't show it.  
I know.  
I know I'm different.

I get home, and my eyes are glued to my mirror, and in its reflection I see me.  
I see me...attached to this piece of machinery...  
Attached to this...this thing.  
This thing, that will forever be a part of me.  
This thing that I've gotten so used to by now.

But still  
I glance down at this piece of machinery that I'm forever a part of.  
Forever trapped with.

And even though it's forever a part of me  
I wish it wasn't.

In my mind's eye, I'm forever running.  
In my mind's eye, I'm forever skipping, running, tumbling, dancing, jumping, running.  
Endlessly running.

When I'm hiding in my own fantasy world.

When I'm imagining, daydreaming, it's gone.  
It's vanished.  
Suddenly disappeared.

And suddenly, I'm running again.  
Running, running, and running.

And I know that only in my dreams  
I am free.

Student Name: Grace Ding  
 Grade: 10  
 School: Obra DTompkins High School  
 Title: NOT A POEM  
 Category: Poetry  
 Key: Gold Key  
 Educator: Kelly Moore

This poem is not a poem.

It refuses to be named,  
 Categorized; it struggles to  
 Find the right words. It hurls  
 L e t t e r s onto the page, and they  
 Bounce off  
 and  
     fall  
         into  
             the  
                 mumbled  
 Darkness.

This poem is not a poem.  
 It will not be tamed, its words  
 Have a spirit that cannot be  
 [[Caged]]. This poem's words s c a t t e r  
 Like leaves:  
 Fragile,  
         fluttering,  
                     wild.  
 They-cling-to-the-wind.

This poem is not a poem.  
 It once tried to conform  
 to writing conventions,  
 [jailing] [words] [to] [fit] [its] [stanzas].

Like prisoners, the words  
 P  
 A  
 C

E

D

In their cells, aching for

The poem to set them

free.

This poem is not a poem.

Its word s

and let ters

are now at war,

Clashing con/sonants, brawling vowels,

They howl at each other,

Pushing others off the page.

This poem is not a poem.

It cannot

control

itself,

Instead, it lets the words

Jump UP from the page,

And walk away,

And all it can do

Is w. a. t. c. h.

Student Name: Ameerah Lawal  
Grade: 12  
School: Jordan High School  
Title: Ever-tangled Ropes of Society  
Category: Portfolio Category(Writing)  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: William Clouse

Chasing A Fantasy  
\*\*\*Beep Beep Beep\*\*\*

“Wait, I can’t find....” “Two minutes and....”

The harsh screech of the alarm piercing my early morning peace

Early morning math, the bane of my existence

The allure of sleep battling the looming specter of unfinished homework

The careful dance that I’ve become oh so accustomed to

Five more minutes in my bed equals another 10% of effort not put into finishing my  
evergrowing stack of homework

\*\*\*Ding Ding Ding\*\*\*

“Did you see the game..” “The calc test was crazy, l..” “Last night..”

Chatter like bees, the whispers of high schoolers float through the air.

The ever-present key to peace, glued into my ears.

The bass of the drums ground me as I float through the halls.



Slowly taking my time cause there's no rush in life. Whether I walk at 2X speed

Or cruise through as if walking a runway, there's no difference.

I'm still going to class.

Each day I choose to defy the rush surrounding me

\*\*\*Pitter Patter Pitter Patter\*\*\*

"Can't gotta go..." "Can you believe..."

The bell rings and organized chaos ensues.

The roar of footsteps echoed through the halls as people run in every direction.

Oh so eager to finally leave the building.

I stay steady in my rhythmic walk.

What does it matter if you run out to the parking lot and hop into your car?

What does it matter if you run to the buses eager to get a seat?

At the end of the day, you're still going to be wherever you need to be.

\*\*\*Squeak Squeak\*\*\*

"Now why would..." "Kini o fe, ogede tabi..." "Donc à quoi ça sert..."

A battlefield of tired souls or a grocery store

Everyone zooming past with the sole goal of quickly escaping the oddly fluorescent-lit aisles

Spill in aisle 1 they say, yet no one stops to care

Glancing around, meeting 1 set of eyes after another

Some weary yet others bright as if they're all in on a hidden promise

A promise of something that some never find

\*\*\*Chirp Chirp\*\*\*

The gentle rustle of trees follows me as I carefully stroll through the park

Cherry blossom clouds mingle with grey as a group of men puff their cigarettes away

The smoke carries away lost dreams and yearning for something indescribable

The distant hum of birds clashes with the toddler screaming to play for just five more minutes

Sand flies into the air as others chase towards an invisible finish line

Yet, each hurried step lacks direction

Everyone races but for what, if exercise why not just jog or walk

Some don't know either, their faces marked with uncertainty

\*\*\*TinkleTinkle\*\*\*

An amber glow guides me into a quaint shop across the park

Pictures upon pictures line the walls

Vivid colors cause a rush of memories

Hitting a home run with my little league team

Such a tiny feat, yet left me feeling on top of the world

Younger me drawing at the kitchen table

Happy, ignorant of the world's troubles

I follow faint music into a dark room,

A man looks up from a sink of indescribable tools

His lopsided grin shifts something inside me

Maybe there's meaning to the world's madness

---

\*\*\*Beep Beep Beep\*\*\*

"I got it now..." "Almost there and..."

The mellifluous song of the alarm, a welcome interruption to my dreams

I peer at the half-developed string of film above me

The allure of sleep no longer wins against the battle of mundane chores

Now the prospect of unfinished projects looms over my head

Five minutes no longer symbolizes effort but rather the loss of life's possibilities

\*\*\*Ding Ding Ding\*\*\*

"I can't believe..." "Never again will..." "Ready for the..."

The soothing breeze of voices, each carrying its own serenity

My constant companions forever nestled in my ears.

The hum of a piano mingles with the surrounding conversation providing me solace.

Swiftly squeezing between the crowd, a new yet strangely familiar dance

Taking account each new source of inspiration

The destination may be the same, but a buzz of purpose almost makes me believe in hedonism

Defying doesn't mean ignoring, but rather embracing

\*\*\*Pitter Patter Pitter Patter\*\*\*

"See you..." "I only have..."

The bell rings and organized chaos ensues.

Waves of footsteps crash through the halls, each person following the tide toward a common goal.

I stride in, out, between, around the others

A wave of anticipation flows over me, ready to illustrate the day's journey

If I run, I can hear more about my mentor's time in Turkey, capturing the essence of life

Hope of gaining his pearls of wisdom pushes me to navigate the afternoon rush

\*\*\*Squeak Squeak\*\*\*

"I can't remember..." "Maulap ang lahat pero..." "Há mais para..."

An ocean of worn faces litter the grocery store

Some aisles filled with people with one sole goal, not willing to leave unless its fulfilled

Closed off to the world, trying to reach a fantasy they don't know if they can reach

I meet eyes in other aisles, secrets I now understand are filled with passion, a vessel of stories

Such secrets leave people lost in a cycle of chasing the same, unattainable dreams

Running towards a fantasy that only seems to get further and further away

Rather than focusing on fleeting joys and turning those into life's meaning

\*\*Chirp Chirp\*\*\*

Perched on top of a lone rock, I peer down at the park

Listening to the trees whisper tales of a forgotten time

I snap a shot of kids throwing a frisbee around rustling the overhead trees

Dancing away their burdens, leaving space for peace

I snap a shot of a group of teens each dancing to their own rhythm

Something so simple, yet by capturing the candid moments, you can feel the loneliness  
and fear radiating of each's soul

Feel as if everyone can see them, but no one knows their true place

Growing up, we're told to shoot for the stars.

The world is our oyster

We must work hard to achieve our dreams

For some, that alone keeps them going

For others, such mentality only leads to emptiness

As one wonders if they're really taking their place in the universe

Day after day, you give your all but to what extent

The good grades, the money, the cool job

What does it really mean

"75 years

75 winters

75 springtimes

75 summers

75 autumns"

If you're lucky

"When you look at it like that, it's not a lot of time,"

Tomorrow it could all be gone

Life is that precious,

You only get one chance at it all

Student Name: Surya Reddy

Grade: 11

School: Jordan High School

Title: Premedical Weed-Out Courses: An Impact Analysis

Category: Critical Essay

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Jonathan Frishman

The path to becoming a doctor in the U.S. is a long and hard one, filled with many challenges that often test students to their limits. Though there are many different pathways to becoming a doctor, the most common one -- and the one discussed in this paper -- is through the acquisition of a bachelor's degree and completion of pre-medical requirements from a four-year undergraduate institution. Weed-Out courses are usually first or second-year undergraduate courses that are designed to assess whether students are ready for medical school and are a big factor in medical school admissions. Since doing badly on a weed-out course is detrimental to medical school many students decide to opt out of the pre-med track and switch to a major. For example, a study by Dr. Zhang and colleagues at the University of Minnesota reviewed 15,442 students across 102 undergraduate institutions in 2006 and 2009, and found that "only 16.5% of students who intended to major in pre-med graduate college with the required coursework for medical schools" (Zhang et al. 1). Tanya Sanabria and Andrew Penner from the Department of Sociology at the University of California, Irvine state that though "qualities like grit and resilience are rightfully celebrated" and supposed to be enhanced by weed-out courses, they have been shown to have negative effects (Sanabria and Penner). The many controversies surrounding such classes beg the question: how do pre-med weed-out courses affect the growth of future doctors in the U.S? After careful analysis the course of action is clear: colleges should abolish pre-med weed-out courses because they reduce ethnic diversity in medical schools and can cause over-resilience.

Current research on weed-out courses in undergraduate schools is scarce and there needs to be an increased investigation on the subject. However, there are a few studies done on the effects of weed-out courses in college on decreasing the ethnic diversity of medical school applicants. One such study was done by Dr. Donald A. Barr, a professor and health policy affiliate at Stanford University, along with other colleagues. The study examined the progression of interest in medicine among both Underrepresented Minority (URM) and non-URM pre-med students at Stanford University from 2002-2007 (Barr et al. 503). The URM races included were defined as African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans. The non-URM survey population consisted of Caucasians and Asian Americans. There were two parts to examining the responses of both groups of students: first a survey was administered, then students were selected for interviews. In the first part of the study, the 1,056 participants of the survey were selected by their responses selecting medicine in the Stanford University freshman survey (Barr et al. 504). The



survey was a simple ten-point scale that asked to rate their interest with ten listed as an interested level of “so committed to that nothing can stop me” (Barr et al. 504). The survey also gave different descriptions of the levels of interest including level seven correlating to “probably will be premed”, level four correlating to “probably will not be premed”, and level one correlating to “absolutely no interest whatsoever in pre-med” (Barr et al. 504). In order to assess the progression over time of interest, the survey was given three different times, time point one was at the beginning of freshman year, time point two was at the end of freshman year, and time point three was at the end of sophomore year. Researchers tried to limit the effects of nonresponse bias by emailing the survey multiple times and were able to receive 362 students who responded to all three-time points. It is important to note that after testing for nonresponse bias, by calling students who were unable to fill out the survey at time point two, there was a decrease in the mean interest level of the nonresponders at 6.44 compared to the initial responders at 6.73 (Barr et al. 504). Though the investigators do not follow up on this assessment it can be assumed that the responders of the survey in general were likely to be the ones more interested in medicine. The results of the survey showed declines in both URM and non-URM populations, however, the significance of the study comes into play when examining the difference in the severity of the decline. The URM students had a mean interest decline of 1.467 points whereas non-URM students only had a mean decrease of .905 points (Barr et al. 506). Scholastic ability, measured by SAT scores of the students, was considered as a possible confounding variable, but found “no significant association for either individual SAT scores or the ratio of SAT scores” to medical interest (Barr et al. 506). This shows that the decrease of interest experience in URM students was not due to lack of scholastic ability. Some critics of the study may argue that the study was not specifically highlighting weed-out courses and other variables could have explained decreasing interest. However, the interviews conducted by Barr et al. shine light on the true effect of weedout courses with 36 out of 68 interviewed students mentioning course difficulty as the reason for their decline of interest (Barr et al. 507). One student was quoted as saying “I experienced the same distaste[as other premeds] for the large pre-med classes .. you think that no one wants to support you; they’re just out to get you.” (Barr et al. 507). Barr et al. include this quote to show just how strong of an impact weed-out courses can have on students. For further evidence of weed-out schools affecting the interest of URM students more than others, Dr. Barr and colleagues conducted a similar survey-based study, but this time at the University of California, Berkeley (UCB). The purpose of this study was to determine whether the trend would continue in a large public school like UCB compared to the small private school of Stanford (Barr et al. 46). Both studies used the same survey scale and interview questions, however some logistics changed such as the use of “cohort mean responses rather than individual student responses” since their system was not able to link individual students across both checkpoints, at the beginning of freshman year and the end of sophomore year (Barr et al. 46). The results of the Berkeley study was that “at both private universities such as Stanford and public universities such as Berkely, this weeding process continues and falls

disproportionately on URM students" (Barr et al. 53). An interesting point about the data collected in the Berkeley study was that the mean total decrease in interest was significantly higher than that of Stanford, 2.402 compared to 1.164 point decrease (Barr et al. 48). Barr et al. also discuss possible theories for this trend and note that "many of these[URM] students may have come from high schools that had relatively weak offerings in science" and that this leads "to these students questioning their own ability to continue to pursue a medical career" (Barr et al. 52). This insight brings to light how weed-out courses may be dependent on other factors rather than just a test of grit and academic resilience. With this possibility, the integrity and effectiveness of weed-out courses to choose future doctors come into question.

Clearly, there is evidence that weed-out courses negatively affect ethnic diversity in colleges and can translate all the way to the physician level (Barr et al. 52). Decreases in diversity are dangerous for the healthcare industry of the future because of the need for primary care physicians that treat vulnerable populations. Anuradha Jetty, a senior epidemiologist at the Robert Graham Center for Health Policy, and other colleagues wrote a 2022 review that used data from 2016 to 2020 in order to determine the relationship between patient vulnerability and the URM status of family physicians. In this study the criteria for vulnerable populations were to be "uninsured, insured by Medicaid, homeless, non-English speaking, racial or ethnic minority or traditionally underserved populations" (Jetty et al. 223). Hispanic and non-Hispanic Black family physicians had the highest proportion of physicians with a patient portfolio of more than or equal to 50% vulnerable, with 28.5% and 29.5% respectively (Jetty et al. 224). Meanwhile, only 13.5% of Non-Hispanic White family physicians and 16% of Non-Hispanic Asian family physicians had a patient portfolio with a greater than or equal to 50% vulnerable proportion (Jetty et al. 224).

Proponents of weed-out courses often state the importance of such courses to build the resilience needed for medical school course rigor, however, there is a potential danger to this theory found in the concept of over-resilience. Dr. Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic and Dr. Derek Lusk, both Ph.D. degree holders in psychology, discuss this topic in their Harvard Business Review article titled "The Dark Side of Resilience." While the article mainly focuses on the phenomenon of unhealthy resilience levels in the workplace many of the concepts can be applied to premedical education as well. For example, the authors state that "too much resilience could make people overly tolerant of adversity ... this can translate into putting up with ... demoralizing jobs ... and particularly bad bosses" (Chamorro-Premuzic and Lusk). This example of how resilience can lead to continued persistence in bad situations is similar to how many premedical students over the years have put up with their extremely unfair classes and demeaning teachers. Recently Dr. Maitlan Jones Jr., an organic chemistry professor at New York University, was fired after 82 out of his total 350 students signed a petition "expressing concern about the effectiveness of his teaching" (Williams). Elizabeth Cargile Williams, a Ph.D. candidate in the Philosophy Department at Indiana University, wrote about Dr. Jones Jr.'s firing in her article on the ethics of weed-out classes (Williams). This event shows the power of

student's voices if they break their mentality that they need to be "resilient" and suffer in class in order to get to medical school. However, there are many complexities in this type of issue as critics of the firing say that the decision was just made to appease tuition-payers and may have been too extreme (Williams). Though there can be arguments made against the firing, the administration at NYU made the decision after reviewing the student performances in the class and the many negative reviews, showing evidence that there was some responsibility from the professor (Williams). Those who point to studies such as an experiment done by Michela Braga, a professor at the Department of Economics of Bocconi University, and colleagues that show students as being unreliable evaluators of teachers, should note that this study measured student evaluations during teaching as compared to grades and other factors after the end of the class (Braga et al. 1). The study does show that student evaluations negatively correlated with the grades, but in this case the evaluations were given in response to bad grades that were confirmed by NYU administration (Braga et al. 1). The important thing however, is that before this case, there was a lack of student voices in standing up against such weedout classes. This relates back to over-resilience and how Dr. Chamorro-Premuzic and Dr. Lusk state that "there is no indication that people act on these attitudes" that their work is a hostile environment, attributing resilience as the causative factor for this stagnation. In conclusion, premedical students have been suffering for a long time under a flawed medical education system in the U.S. The importance of healthcare workers has never been clearer after the pandemic and will only continue to rise as America's population ages. By getting rid of weed-out courses, the future of healthcare will be much improved with the increased ethnic diversity and decreased over-resilience.

Student Name: Charlotte Primrose  
 Grade: 11  
 School: Jordan High School  
 Title: Seasons change and skin age  
 Category: Short Story  
 Key: Gold Key  
 Educator:

### Seasons change and skin age

The ancient Greek story of Narcissus tells a tale about a man who fell in love with his reflection. He bent to drink from a pond and caught a glimpse of his own face, Narcissus proceeded to stay at this pond, more than content with his reflection.

The ornate gold mirror had been a part of my family for generations. As a kid, I'd go to my Grandma's house and put on her blood red stiletto heels, if I was lucky I'd be able to catch the top of my head in the mirror. The window opposite my reflection displayed the falling snow, the white powder delicately floating down.

At 16 I'd steal Granny's orange lipstick and sneak downstairs in the dead of night. The shadows made it difficult to see in the mirror, a small sunset smudge coated my chin. My painted nail would remove the makeup, the polish beginning to chip, similarly to the gold on the mirror. I used to believe the gold was real. Grandma told me it had been in our family for years. Grandma was also a pathological liar. The green leaves growing back on the trees rustled as if they were laughing at me. They could make noise, me I didn't have that freedom yet.

At 26 my visits were sparse; however, the golden sunlight played on my hair as I readied myself for our first date. Fixing my hair brought back childhood excitement that I haven't felt since those desperate fleeting moments of teenage rebellion. With optimism I decided the summer glow was an omen of luck, the shine twinning gold in the mirror before me. Fading gold edges, fading golden sunlight and fluorescent golden hair.

At 36 Grandma was dead and the house was mine. My husband and I attempted to rid her memory from the house. It was too painful, her presence, everything that was hers mocking me because they knew her better. They saw her in desperate moments. I could part with all except the fake gold mirror, always a hostage of this house. My "supposed" pregnancy glow was not evident in my reflection, maybe I just don't glow anymore. I was due in October, just a week after Grandma's birthday, funny how she died just a month prior. Orange leaves, the color of her lipstick played down the window. I'd like to think that's how I move through life, with grace. Floating and fluttering down the road of life. In all honesty, the only thing moving down was my skin. And not gracefully. My plumpest parts dragged down and pulled at my reflection, always twinning with my surroundings.

At 46 we'd grown accustomed to our home. Grace would stretch her little neck to see her mirrored image. Snow painted her brown hair from playing outside, she loved the falling flakes. I could see it now, an astral projection, me leaning against the stairs, a grin playing at my lips. My smug smirk admires my daughter, reminding me of who I used to be and reflecting on who I am now. She would play for hours, twirling in the winter sun. You could always pick out all the little details of the snowflakes in her dark hair. I always believed Grandma would find solace in her, in her iridescent smile and free spirit.

At 56 Grace was out of the house but the memories of her presence were forever evident in our home. She was familiar with teen angst, in fact one day the mirror got the brunt of it. A drunken fall to the reflective surface and years of memories clamored on the floor. For one fleeting moment, one I'm afraid to admit to even now; I was more afraid for the mirror that my inebriated daughter littered in broken glass. A blur of green reflected in the glass from the incoming spring bloom, the shards looked like leaves themselves. The pointy ends, the jagged sides. The green reflective glass coated in blood was a gruesome reminder of Christmas months prior. The festive lights still hung around the house, half out of laziness, half out of a morbid desperation for something good.

At 66 the mirror was rehung. Shards missing from the edges, cracks creeping into the gently distorted center. Golden age, golden sun, faded golden hair. The walk to the mirror is getting slower. Now that Grace was out starting her own family it seems I'd lost all my Grace. Or maybe that was my own metaphorical excuse for my noisy movements. The agility in my joints came to screeching halts and pauses. Graying hair creeping in from the edges as if the shards were chasing the follicles. The sunspots adorning my skin reminded me of the blazing summer sky casting brilliant light and deep shadows across the room. The same beautiful sun that caressed my skin with its violent hands. I knew it never meant to do harm. Maybe that's why this summer is so beautiful, the sun was begging for my forgiveness. In the mirror, for a moment I saw my Grandma staring back at me. I'd seen her gaze into the same spot countless times, her expression the same as mine: lost. I used to watch her and think she was so beautiful. Even as she pulled at her skin testing elasticity, and almost overdosing on collagen supplements every morning. Why couldn't I see myself the way I saw her? Why couldn't I be beautiful too.

At 76 the creaking wood floors were worse than before due to the glide of wheels on the ground. My new legs, like a little girl again I could make out my head in the mirror. The stringy gray hair juxtaposed by the orange backdrop. I wonder if the mirror squinted enough through its lensed vision it could still see me at six years old. Desperate to get a glimpse just like Granny. My eyes were the same, maybe my smile. Grace visits on occasion, the winter was still her favorite season. Her two boys wanted nothing to do with the mirror. Of course when they were young they tried to peek their blonde heads into frame but gave up and moved on to the next thing that caught their attention. That's why I think women are cursed. We're cursed with the primal obsession to check our appearance. Maybe just the women in my family, however Grace recognized it too. I remember her face when her boys didn't care about how they looked, the relief painting her expression.

The changing leaves made me feel better about the aging of my skin. If the falling leaves were so beautiful that I named my daughter after them, why couldn't I be an autumn leaf? At 86 the fold paint was almost all gone, the rust that detailed the sides burnt like flame. The snow had fallen and melted, pulling back everything it coated. With the little strength I possessed, I pushed myself up to be face to face with Grandma's mirror. I watched my mirrored image, the duration of my life suddenly clear everything at bay. The snow that covered my life flowing in rivers around me, pooling at my feet. Here I stand, like the ground outside, the winter of my life. Everything laid bare.

It occurs to me now from the grave that I set my daughter up for failure. I passed on my vanity before she was even born. I named her after something I found beautiful while looking at my own reflection. A falling leaf, something that floats and twirls, dances down to earth. But it always hits the ground. I gave her a name of obsession, and from her birth she became as neurotic as I. Grace lies in the earth now pushed between soil and bugs, for after I passed and she inherited the mirror she became obsessed with her reflection. She couldn't handle owning it; it became her everything. It wasn't long for her to take a shard from what took everything from her and give it one last gift, her life.

Narcissus died at the pond. His body mere bones and his flesh food for bugs, he watched his eyes gloss over and the light leave his cheeks. He loved it, in fact couldn't look away.

Student Name: Charlotte Holmes

Grade: 11

School: Jordan High School

Title: See You Later

Category: Poetry

Key: Gold Key

Educator:

This isn't goodbye, it's just see you later.  
That's what my freshman English teacher told me on the last day of 10th grade.  
This isn't goodbye, it's just see you later.  
Tears streaming from my eyes as I agree, nodding my head.

We both know it's not true.  
She's moving to Austin, I'm staying in Katy.  
She will never teach again while I'm condemned to always be a student.

I look into her eyes and feel a warmth I've never received before.  
The pure pride in seeing her life affecting mine and I decide to become like her when I'm older.  
Be brave like her  
Be bold like her  
be proud like her  
Be warm like her  
Be sweet like her  
Be loving like her  
Be more like her.

This isn't goodbye, it's just see you later.  
The words ring in my ears as I sob into my friend's shoulders.  
The anguish I feel overwhelms the love; overwhelms the life I know she will enjoy when she is finally free.  
Free to fight for her beliefs  
stand up for what the students need  
and love without fear of a single thing

This isn't goodbye, it's just see you later.  
I'll see you in the tiny pumpkins during autumn.  
I'll see you in the books lining my shelves.  
I'll see you in the lines of my poetry.  
I'll see you in the woman I'll become.

This isn't goodbye because I'll always see you.

Today.

Tomorrow.

Later.

Forever.

I'll always see you.



Student Name: Moemal Al-Wishah

Grade: 9

School: Jordan High School

Title: Silent Desolation

Category: Poetry

Key: Gold Key

Educator:

Commencement of Diary Entry 3/19:

In the realm of silence, I plea:

"Can anyone discern my plea?

Allister, my steadfast friend,

Can you perceive the words I send?

I yearn for aid, I yearn for grace,

In this unheard and voiceless space."

Within this soundless realm I dwell,

Where Piers and Allister's spirits once fell,

A tragic room, devoid of sound,

Their bond, once rare, now underground.

Their happiness lies buried,

Beneath the weighty soil that bars me,

From ever reaching its serene embrace.

Pondering and lost in solitary contemplation,  
with isolation

is my so-called "destination".

The meaning of life,

despite being an extrovert or introvert

is never determined or set in stone.

Like an ever-changing state of ice,

Shifting form, adapting to sacrifice.

I am Gladion, bound to this fate,

A sip of invisibility, my chosen state.

In this potion's trance, I'm confined,

Within this elixir's spell, I'm confined,

Only my voice echoes, solitary and defined.

Misunderstandings and grief intertwine,  
Shrouding me in invisibility's fine line.  
Isolation's grip, my reluctant companion,  
An introvert's haven, reaching its zenith, undone.

Now, I, Gladion, glimpse life's darker side,  
Isolation, the sole solace where shadows reside.  
A world veiled in darkness and sorrow's reef,  
Where my fate is sealed, its toll beyond belief.

At the center, a black hole's beckoning maw,  
Ready to engulf, devour, without a flaw.  
In its cosmic abyss, anyone may be caught,  
Swallowed by darkness, all battles fought.

Student Name: Sophia Tang  
Grade: 10  
School: James E Taylor High School  
Title: The Mind-Sea  
Category: Poetry  
Key: Gold Key  
Educator:

The waves they listen to me  
And I to them  
I'm following following  
The sound of the sea  
Of sickness and sea breeze  
How could a man  
Once lost in that endless plain  
Ever return

The sirens they have  
An endless trove  
Of song and glittering gold  
Of bones and withering skulls  
How could a man  
Once lost in those endless depths  
Ever return

The mind it rages  
Like the twilit sea  
Deep and dark  
and never  
never  
calm  
I'm running running  
From that tunnel of sadness  
How could I  
Once lost in the quicksands of madness  
Ever return

The sirens they wait  
Below the surface of that  
Mind-sea  
They're waiting waiting

To pull me under  
 They're singing, screaming  
 I keep running running  
 I keep  
 Listening  
 And now  
 I'm screaming too

I give in to the mind-sea  
 There's water in my lungs  
 Sand in my chest  
 My limbs are seaweed  
 Useless against  
 The tides of murky madness  
 Suffocating sadness  
 Around me

I drift  
 Down  
 Down  
 down

The mind is a strange thing  
 In its euphoria  
 It thinks of nothing  
 Except the beauty of everything outside it  
 In its pain  
 It thinks of nothing  
 Except the ugly truth inside it

Sometimes I think  
 Life is a meaningless pursuit for meaning  
 A wild goose chase for a reason to keep being  
 And sometimes  
 Like when the mind-sea swallows me whole  
 I know it

Student Name: Micah Obonyano  
Grade: 8  
School: Adams Junior High School  
Title: The World WE Live in  
Category: Poetry  
Key: Gold Key  
Educator: Kim Crandall

This world we live in.  
My light shines so bright it can't be contained  
I walk tall and confident for I am strong  
But the world I live in stands to knock me down  
Why?  
Is it  
The color of my skin?  
My beautiful brown skin?  
Or is it  
My unexplainable joy?  
That attracts most but repels some  
Triggering their hidden insecurities.  
They don't know me yet they judge me  
Some pierce with words but others with a strong gaze.  
Can I touch his hair?  
A normal yet uncomfortable occurrence  
And  
Oh those judgemental eyes  
How they tempt to make a tall man trip  
Telltale looks, misinformed hearts near slips, and spills  
And the trolls of deception  
Is he a  
Thug  
A Criminal  
And when I stand up for myself I am profiled!  
How quickly they call me  
Aggressive  
Angry  
And Volatile  
But worst of all you victimize me  
You make me the next valuable yet negative trend  
until I am replaced by your next choice of deception  
Why?

My mistakes are highlighted  
I am watched with a magnifying glass  
therefore  
My consequences are multiplied  
And I am forced to welcome the most extensive repercussions  
So I contend with the system  
The one designed to help us  
Give my all fighting for justice  
But  
I Fail  
For the system is faulty  
Leaving me torn and beaten down.  
Oh those teary nights  
My pillow filled with tears.  
My thoughts piercing my mind  
Do I shrink and hide  
Am I overconfident  
Am I...?  
It's too much for one boy to handle  
But  
I can't let them see me cry  
I can't let them see me as weak  
For I must be strong for my brothers and sisters  
This is a battle I can't lose  
A war I must win.

So how do I survive in the world we live in?  
The one that dares to mask my light.

I'll just keep fighting  
For my God-given right  
To shine even brighter  
Despite the inevitable darkness that lies at my heels.

Student Name: Mason Krueger  
 Grade: 8  
 School: Adams Junior High School  
 Title: To Live Is To Hurt  
 Category: Personal Essay & Memoir  
 Key: Gold Key  
 Educator: Kim Crandall

Life is like an ocean. It can bring beautiful wonders to the world but it can also bring raging storms that dismantle the land. Everyone has those storms. They bring you to your lowest moments. But how you respond to those storms is what defines who you are. I'm going to write about two of my storms that really broke me down, but define who I am.

One hot summer day in 2014 the sun was like a glowing lamp. The grass was green, The sky was bluer than the sea, and you could hear the birds chirping in the trees. My Mother was mowing the grass. I had the most genius idea as a five year old to prank my mom while she was near the porch. My Grandpa had laid out some water balloons for my brother and I to mess around with later. So my plan was to fill up one of the balloons, sneak around the porch, and throw the balloon at my mom without her ever knowing. It. Was. Foolproof. Or so I thought.

So I got my balloon, filled it up, and crept around the porch. Just as I planned. My Mom was reversing the lawn mower right next to the porch so it was the perfect opportunity to strike. I stayed low and...BAM!! It went straight for her head. I hoped she didn't notice, she was listening to music, so I blitzed out of there. By said porch, the dogs were known to dig holes all around the area. But I kept running. It was as if the ground itself gave way resulting in me tripping. My Mother still didn't see me so she continued to reverse. Note this is an actual John Deere lawn mower and not a dinky little one. It was like the beaches of Normandy trying to crawl away. But like many of those soldiers, I got caught.

The back left wheel grabbed my leg and rolled me under. The light of the sky instantly turned to the black shadow of death. I was trapped. I rolled to my side to keep my face protected and I saw the most beautiful horizon ever. The smell of blood filled my nose as I screamed for help. But there was no pain. All I could feel was the elegant light streaming into my eyes. I thought I was in heaven at that point. But there was a voice. The most powerful voice filled with love and strength. The light was glowing brighter and brighter and brighter until it reached its threshold. The voice spoke out and said, "Your time isn't over yet. You have a whole life ahead of you." The light faded until my eyes refocused, I was back in the yard.

I heard voices but my eyes still weren't the clearest. They were my family's voices and they sounded horrified. My Dad lifted the mower up, propped it on its side, grabbed a knife, cut my shirt free from the blades, and threw it across the yard. My Nana handed him a towel to apply pressure to my wound. He picked me up and rushed me inside. The whole thing was a blur. Voices screaming everywhere.

"WE SHOULD CALL THE AMBULANCE NOW!"

"GET HIM TO THE CAR NOW WE AN AMBULANCE WOULD TAKE TO LONG!"

The whole time I was so high up on adrenaline I was confused that I was hurt and clueless to what was going on. My parents decided that the car was a better option. My Dad sprinted straight to the car while my Nana hopped in the driver's seat. My Grandpa and DeeDee stayed to comfort my Mom who was crying on the floor. We sped down the freeway ignoring all traffic laws that would slow us down. My dad applied so much pressure to my injury that his hand went numb for weeks.

We made it to the hospital and I was rushed into the doors. Doctors and nurses surrounded me while I was laid onto a stretcher. They applied a large plastic band-aid to keep me from bleeding. The rest of my family made it there just in time to see me being lifelined to Memorial Hermann in downtown Houston.

The helicopter landed with a thud. More doctors rush from the lower floors and wheel me away to an operating room. The anesthesia hit me like a truck. My eyes went all droopy and the last thing I saw before going unconscious was the panicked faces of doctors.

I woke up alone. Alone and afraid that I would most certainly die. I would find out soon that the blades of the mower were a millimeter away from my sciatic nerve. Yeah big deal. The sciatic nerve allows you to run, walk, and stand. So by just a hair I would be able to walk again, but there was a problem. The damage done to my leg was so severe that it would take months for me to recover and it was even unlikely that my leg would be lame. Weeks passed in the hospital. Every aspect of being there was unbearable. I was away from my friends, I was a cripple, and I had to always jam painful IV's into my arm. I hated it. After some nights, I felt so powerless and meek that I just believed it was over for me.

Eventually, My last surgery was finished. I was cleared from the hospital stuck in a wheelchair. They prescribed me months of physical therapy until it was confirmed that I could walk without aid. Physical therapy was ok, for a five year old at least. I remember one day my trainer asked me to walk to her without my walker but I was so scared that I just said no and tried to hobble away. At home that day I was so mad at myself for being weak that I decided enough was enough. I leaned against my walker and pushed back.



## I WAS STANDING!

With one choppy step after another, I made it back to my walker. I repeated this over and over until my joy filled me like a full glass of water spilling over the top. Over time, I was cleared from physical therapy. I could walk and just be a normal kid again.

Looking back on it now, I see what such a valuable lesson that I currently hold as one of my core values. Don't give up. Life likes to throw bad storms at us to shake us down but keep standing. That strength will carry you your whole life.

This next story is a little different. I was super close with my uncle Jeff. When I was little we would always play football in the yard or he would sneak treats for me and my brother. He was a super amazing person that I really enjoyed being around. He was living with my grandparents for a while because he hadn't decided where he wanted to live yet. He had been looking for houses in Colorado and Oklahoma for some time now so he decided to go check out these properties in person.

One day when I was ten, he left for Colorado. We all wished him good luck on his travels and waited for his return.

But he didn't.

He was in Oklahoma at the time. His car needed gas so he stopped by a gas station to fill up, nothing strange about that. He was walking out of the gas station when two police officers stopped him and asked him if he was on drugs. He had bipolar disorder which caused him to change moods super fast or mumble to himself. Answering the strange question, he said no and tried to walk back to the safety of his car but they grabbed him and slammed him onto the car's hood.

He yelled, " STOP, I'VE DONE NOTHING WRONG!"

The cops laughed and tried to handcuff him but he resisted. This prompted them to both pull out their tasers and shock him repeatedly. He begged for them to stop but they just kept shocking him; over and over again.

Until he stopped moving.

Once they realized what they had done they called an ambulance to rush him to a hospital. They got there just in time to put him under life support. He was rushed to the hospital and placed under emergency care but it was no use.

He died in his sleep that night.

I don't know how much longer later but a few days after the incident a police woman appeared at our door.

My Dad answered the door and asked, "What's the problem ma'am?"

"I have some news that you need to know."

"What kind of news?"

"Your brother was murdered on the first of July sir."

My Dad stood there petrified. "Thank you for letting us know."

"I'm so sorry for your loss but have a good rest of your day."

"You too."

He called my brother and I into the kitchen. We were confused at why he did so but we obeyed his call.

"Boys..." he said as my mother walked into the kitchen, "I have something to tell you."

"What is it?"

"Your uncle won't be coming back..."

"Why did he find a new house?"

"No... he, how do I say this? Jeff is in heaven now."

My world crumbled into a million pieces. Jeff dead, no that couldn't be right. How could he have been? He wouldn't have done anything wrong, would he? Was it a car crash? WHAT WAS IT!

I broke down into tears. My brother's emotions all faded into a blank stare of depression. My Mom, who also thought Jeff was a great person, broke down into tears as well. We all stood there for a while in our sorrow.

It affected my Nana the most. My Poppy was in great disrepair but he didn't show it. My Nana cried for days and days on end. The next time I saw her her eyes were swollen beyond belief. The whole family took a major blow. I remember being so angry in the coming days that I wished for those men who killed my uncle to die. I really did. My brother wouldn't talk to anybody for a couple days and for someone who is younger than

me he took it way better. My Dad went into a deep and unreachable place. His desolation was so severe he would just lock himself in his office after work. There was no joy in the Krueger family.

In the following months nothing really changed. We were all so depressed it was like a wall was built around our happiness and whenever it decided to show it was immediately locked up.

In August we held his funeral. At that point in my life I was so full of rage and anger and sadness that I turned into a bomb with a lit fuse. During the funeral, My Uncle BJ, My Dad, and I all had a speech to give. My Dad talked about his brother's influence on his life and other people. I can't remember what he exactly said because I was just too depressed to completely retain all of what he said. But I do remember what my Uncle BJ said.

"When I was younger I was afraid to try new things. I would see Jeff and Jim always playing these games together online but I was afraid to try. One day I asked him if I could give it a try. He picked me up, placed me in his chair, and handed me the controller. He guided me through and gave me something new to enjoy. Without that event I'm pretty sure I wouldn't be the same person today so I thank Jeff for that."

My part was a bible verse to reflect on his affect on everybody he was around. I don't quite remember what it was but I told a story about my uncle and I would race to see who was faster. He obviously won but I would give anything to have one more race with him.

At the repast, I was so built up with anger that the bomb in me finally exploded. I was so angry that I blamed myself for his death and I blamed God for his death. I was just so enraged. Luckily, I had a close friend of mine there with me and she told me that God's plan has a couple bumps in the road but he never intends to hurt others. Maybe his passing is a new beginning for someone else.

That statement has stuck with me ever since the repast. I use that in my daily life even today because it's just such a great quote to live off of. My greatest fear in life is to lose people I care about. I feel like a weak and defenseless man if I lose someone close to me and I just need the support that they give. But by trying my best not to worry because somethings are just out of my control I think I'm happier.

So life sucks at times. It tries to drag you down so low that you don't ever want to get back up again. But if I can walk again after a freak accident or learn to be happy again after the loss of someone close to me you can too. The winds of life are strong and they can knock you down but you must find the vigor to stand again. Scars heal if you give them the chance. So the best thing to take off of this is to not get brought down by life

and just keep standing. Being strong in hard times is the best way you can heal others and yourself.

Student Name: Saakshi Kumar  
Grade: 8  
School: Adams Junior High School  
Title: Under the Stars  
Category: Poetry  
Key: Gold Key  
Educator: Brittany Setzekorn

### UnderThe Stars

She met her comrade in her early years  
Guffawing with her on trivial matters  
Sitting on a hilltop side by side  
And talking about everything under the stars

As the years went by she changed  
Her words were as fake as faux flowers  
Her attitude stung like a bee  
Even her parents thought wrong

The two girls divided apart  
One girl got hurt

e

a

r

tore apart

And the other was lost in her own world of materialism  
Forgetting her friend  
Who would have been there from the beginning till the end

As the days went by  
She realized who she had become

Demolished by all her fake friends  
She wanted to eat herself there and done

She went into a spiral of depression  
With no friends and no love

but her one friend came to the rescue...

the one she left behind

even so

Her friend found pardon in her actions

Together they rebonded

And once again

they talked about everything under the stars

Student Name: Mariya Shpui

Grade: 11

School: Cinco Ranch High School

Title: Well; That's It

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Mary Sarver

Only the cold wind of January is crying outside the window. This lyric from the song “ Hy Вот и Всё ” ( translated to “ Well, That’s It ” ) would play every summer in my grandfather’s old car upon my long awaited return to Belarus. I lived there until I was six, when my parents decided to split up. My mom and I moved to New York and just like that, the two sides of my family were on opposite sides of the Atlantic. But the heart of a kid is as fragile as a pane of glass, and separation of such vast proportions could shatter it completely. Therefore, we made it a summer tradition to visit Belarus.

The moment I received my luggage at the airport, I would run to the meeting area with sporadically opening doors and my eyes would move quicker than I could process until they finally came across the familiar face of my grandpa. Incredulity was my immediate response, followed by a sprint across the room to finally hug him after a year of nothing but short lived Skype calls. We made our way to the sea of vehicles outside, and I’d always spot ours - the antiquated one with a faded coat of golden brown - very easily. We would turn on “Well, That’s It, ” and then we’d be on our way to Maryina Gorka, the small town in which he lived. The lifestyle in the small towns of Belarus is quite different from the one we’re used to in America — majority of the regular folk lived in small worn out apartment buildings that often had corroded doorways, balconies with drying laundry hanging on a string, and creaky floors. My American lifestyle was lavish in comparison, but his shabby building was like a luxurious castle in the eyes of my younger self because of the nostalgia it evoked. A few days after arrival, we’d drive to my dad’s house and spend about a month there. In a way, that month would always feel like a reunification of my family, or one half of it at least. And then came the drive back. To be completely honest, I conditioned my brain to spend the summer wearing rose-colored glasses, ignoring the temporality of this reunion. I would build up denial as if I was blowing more and more air into a balloon hoping it wouldn’t rip apart. But alas - endings are inevitable. And balloons eventually pop.

After looking around my room one final time, saying my goodbyes to my dad, and looking back at him as my grandpa’s car began to pull away from the driveway - I had no choice but to accept that the trip was coming to an end, yet how could I? As we drove back, I remember perpetually crying and asking my grandpa questions like, “Why is life so unfair? Why can’t I just stay?” And he would try his best to calm me down, which was no easy task because the naivety with which children view the world is delicate, and sometimes, things are better left unsaid.

After I flew back to the US, my grandpa continued to be one of my biggest supporters, even if it was through a screen. He was invested in every grade. Every accomplishment. Every certificate. He was worried every time I was sick and encouraged me every step of the way. And so, our familiar cycle of biweekly calls and summer reunions remained... until the unprecedented hardships of 2020.

Unfortunately, I was unable to visit Belarus during the summer of 2020 due to COVID-19 restrictions, which left me full of shock and uncertainty. But I guess my grandpa's support was immune, because he remained optimistic and assured me that we'd see each other in the blink of an eye. In the meantime, he decided to renovate his archaic apartment so that my next visit would surpass all previous ones. Every other call, I would receive updates about the freshly painted walls, the beautiful stained glass, the new kitchen archway - you name it. We were already beginning to look forward to our next reunion. But little did I know that the first month of 2021 would alter the trajectory of my life forever.

That day began just like any other - my routine got engulfed in monotony during online school. I woke up and joined my daily dose of zoom calls on autopilot. After my final class, I laid down to get some rest. However, I would not get any rest that day, not after that call from my dad. Upon receiving the news, I was silent. I was aware that my grandpa was facing complications with his health, but I was not prepared for this. Of course the death of a beloved family member is devastating. But that day I was in so much disbelief that my body was physically incapable of responding, or even crying. That day, only the cold wind of January was crying outside the window...

I came to terms with the loss eventually because as we all know, time heals even the deepest of wounds. I can't express how grateful I am for having such a caring person in my life for 14 whole years. Despite my animosity toward endings, I learned that there's nothing more important than appreciating every second you have with your loved ones as if it was your last, because unfortunately your time with them is finite. That is a truth you must learn to embrace. And knowing that you will always have the memory of that person in your heart, you begin to accept and move on. So every time I think of my grandpa, I accept the idea of impermanence, turn on our favorite song, and calmly tell myself - well, that's it.



Student Name: Arjun Yerreddu  
 Grade: 8  
 School: Adams Junior High School  
 Title: WHODUNNIT  
 Category: Short Story  
 Key: Gold Key  
 Educator: Brittany Setzekorn

### Chapter 1: Rudy.

SOME days I ask myself, "Could this day get any more boring?" However, today was different, very different, grandpa got me and Olivia, my quiet older sister, a new board game to play. I've never seen anything like it before. According to the shiny and colorful cover which looked like graffiti in NYC this game was, "A Game Changer." I had no idea what that meant, but whatever it was it sure beats watching the Hutchinsons play basketball at the park by the police station, where Papa works. Rather than shooting the ball into the hoop, they somehow managed to land the ball in my face. Yeah I know, not fun, but today felt as though it would be vastly different. I eagerly opened the board game and read the instructions of this so-called outlandish game called "WHODUNNIT?" The rules of the game are pretty simple, The board features many rooms like a study, a dining room, a billiard room- whatever that is, and other rooms like a ballroom and a library. You are given three cards, one of a person, one of a place, and one of a weapon. From that, your opponent-using something called an alibi- must try and solve the crime by guessing the person, and weapon using clues. Real candid if you ask me. I lift the box up and place it down in the, rather musty, living room where Olivia is sitting on the faded couch. Once I somehow managed to convince Olivia to play with me, I set up the cards in the correct order.

"Ready?" I ask as I look her way, waiting for a response.

She nods, with a strong sense of apathy.

### Chapter 2: Oscar.

I slouch down in my chair, as I adjust my picture of my kids, Rudy and Olivia, and watch a very boring slideshow of how to be a better investigator when seemingly out of thin air, Sergeant Williams appears out of nowhere.

"What is it!" I say, clearly startled by his sudden presence.

"Mister Thomas has been murdered," he says coldly, as he grabs a file and tosses it my way.

I glance at the file in my hand.

"What is this?" I ask demandinglly.

"It's the case file, sir," Williams says calmly.

I feel my face become red, like when I came face to face with my crush Daisy, back in High School. I open the case file and skim through it, catching bits and pieces of information. Apparently, the victim- MrThomas Lou- was murdered with an unknown weapon, all we know is that there were two wounds, deep ones for that matter of fact, but I didn't want to picture that scene in my head now. Both wounds were 5 inches wide, and the weapons of interest were a wrench, a hammer, and a baseball bat. I take note of that in my crumpled-up notebook. Also, Three suspects are of interest, Mary White the butler, Oscar Schwartz the gardener, and Tina Lou the wife of the victim. Mary had grudges against the victim, as he apparently denied numerous requests for a raise, witnesses said. Oscar is a nice and sincere man, but he too had also asked for a raise, and -like Mary- was denied. Tina was a very honest and kind woman who held her dignity to high standards. I quickly scribbled all of that down on the crumpled paper, trying very hard to make it legible. As I finished reading the file briefly, I looked over my notes and decided it was time to head out to the scene. I walk out of the office, Williams trailing close behind me as I rush over to my car and sit inside the old police cruiser. I crank up the engine and put on my raggedy old leather jacket I got from a trip to Las Vegas with my colleagues. When the engine finally turns on, I zoom down the large concrete jungle that is the underground police parking lot. Once I reach the outside entrance, I race towards the mansion, eager to unfold the mysteries of the murder in the mansion.

### Chapter 3: Rudy.

I take three shiny, matte textured cards and hold them in front of my eyes, like Grandpa does when he reads the newspaper, and investigate each card. The first card says Mary white was the killer, the second says she killed the victim with a wrench, and the third says she killed the victim in the Billiard room.

"What's a Billia-" I blurt out, but immediately cut myself off, realizing I may have just given away the location to Olivia. Speaking of Olivia, I look up to find her on her phone, glued to it like a monkey and a banana.

"Ahem, Olivia?" I ask softly, "OLIVIA" I shout, before I finally get her attention.

"Sorry," she mutters, as she grabs a witness card and a case card, both will help her with solving the crime.

"That's strange, though she didn't pay attention to the rules", I wonder to myself.

Olivia reads the witness card aloud, "Witness A says that the dining room was locked and they say they saw mister Oscar Schwartz in the garden outside near the gate to the grand mansion driveway." She grabs another witness card and reads it, "Witness B claims that Mary White was using the bathroom, as the witness had asked who was in the bathroom, during the time of the murder and heard Mary respond." She suddenly seems more and more interested in the game as she reads card from card, gaining more and more information of this conundrum. She read one last card, "Witness F says that he/she went out with Tina Lou, Witness E and G both supported this claim and showed a movie ticket receipt. From all of this information, Olivia must decide who did it.

"So, who did it?" I ask, acting curious. Olivia looks my way, laughing. Never in a million years did I expect her to actually laugh.

"Hmmm, well Mary white said she was in the dining room, and from many witnesses' testimonies-" she tried to finish, but I cut her off.

"A testimony is like what someone says in a courtroom, like what Witness A said was a testimony as they said that in the courtroom, making it a testimony, do you get it now?" She asks considerately- for the first time in my life. Miracles of miracles, Olivia's actually being nice to me! I couldn't believe what I was hearing, I felt as though my ears had quit and sought a new job. Olivia, the same sister who would never ever bother to say hi to me, was suddenly so indulged in this game. I was simply at a loss for words, to say the least. Part of me wanted to ask why, so that's what I did.

"Why are you being nice to me?" I ask, still astonished by her sudden up-beatness. She glances at me, "You seriously think I'm never nice to you?" She says, acting as though she's a heartbroken lover. I look up at her, nodding my head vigorously. She laughs, again, "I'm just busy all the time, so when it seems as though I ignore you completely, it's all because I'm trying to graduate well." she explains to me, "You see, that's why I don't talk to you much, and as for why I'm serious or just straight mad sometimes is because I may be having a bad day." She continues, "Just like how we all do, that's just part of nature!" she exclaims, as it seems as though I've just uncovered a new part of my sister.

I'm speechless, "that's..that's.. Great." I managed to say it finally, "but you know, you could just, you know acknowledge that I exist sometimes," I blurt out, relieved but scared at the same time, feeling that I might have hurt her feelings.

"I still love you Rudy, It's just being in High School and all is a lot more stressful than elementary school, there are a lot more classes, homework, pressure, clubs-

"I think I get the idea," I say, admiring the conversation that seems long overdue.

"But what I mean is that, I don't purposefully ignore you. It's all about my passion, I want to be a lawyer, and when I realized what this game is truly like, I suddenly burst out of my shell." She says calmly, "But I promise, I'll spend more time with me, I realized after we started playing, that if it weren't for you, I wouldn't have this time to bond with not only my passion, but my own little brother" She starts tearing up, as she leans in for a big hug. I hug her back, savoring this once- in- a- lifetime opportunity. My own sister just hugged me, if you heard that, you would probably think that's normal. But now I get it, Olivia doesn't hate me, she just works hard, so she can one day spend all that lost time with me. It all adds up now, and one by one the puzzles fall into place.

"Wow, I really don't understand what to say to that, but yes, your welcome, thanks for making it all make sense to me, but I think there's a game we need to finish," I say smiling at her, she smiles back- emitting a new sense of familiarity. - It's a true feeling that can't be described with just pure words, it's love. Something I never expected from her.

I drove through the town's narrow streets and reached the mansion at the other end of the old town of Petersville, a small but loving town. It's not hard to see why the whole department was already at the scene, Mr Lou was the town's richest, and a personal favorite of mine too, since he knew my dad very well, I felt a sort of connection with Mr Lou, and now I was determined to figure out who killed him. I walked towards the entrance, taking in the sight, the old, brown, three-story mansion stood out among the houses near it. Mr Lou was a strange man indeed, but very wise at the same time. Why he chose to settle here was beyond me. I walked inside the mansion, and it was pure chaos. Forensics running around carrying evidence, officers comforting the witnesses, and then the three suspects, sitting on the stairs. I walked up to them, registering their clothes. My dad always told me it was good to get a first impression, even if it meant what clothes they wore.

"Hi, My name is Private Tim, an investigator for the PPD," I said as I showed them my badge so they would trust me. I motion them to follow me into the large -strangely empty- living room. I point towards a sofa and tell them each to sit down.

"I'm here to figure out who killed Mr Lou, and from what I've seen, one of you three is the killer, so don't play around with me, and the process will be a lot better for you, trust me.

"I say sternly, eyeing each of the suspects closely. They all nod.

"Ms White, could you please, tell me where you were, at the time of the murder?" I ask her flatly, no emotion traced in my language.

"I was in the dining room, cleaning the cupboard out, as Mr Lou had said he planned on moving," she says rapidly, as though she's recited it a million times.

Odd.

I nod, "thanks for being straightforward with me, Mary." I say, as my attention shifts to Oscar, "And you, Oscar, where were you last night at the time of the murder?" I ask, now grabbing a chair to sit in front of the suspects.

"I was in the garden, cutting the bushes, to get the house ready for sale." He says as sincerely as anyone could possibly say, I immediately feel a sense of trust, but I try not to jump to conclusions. I gaze upon Tina who seems to not care about the interrogation, arrogance.

"Ahem, Ms Lou, where were you at the time of the murder?" I ask, trying so hard to restrain myself from punching her. Arrogance is my number 1 enemy.

"I was at the movies with my friends, " she says, cutting her nails, completely tuned out.

"Right, okay, thank you all so much, I'll be back with my final decision. Give me a bit.

I walk out of the room, angry, pure anger. I take a deep breath, like my therapist advised me to do when in stressful situations, such as this. I look around the foyer and notice a lock on the dining room door. I walk up to a maid and ask her a question.

"Excuse me, since when was the dining room door locked?" I ask her.

"Oh hi! Yes, I locked the doors last night, before heading out to say my goodbyes to Ms. Lou!" she says excitedly, which is unusual when the man who is supposed to be paying you is dead. What she said had me thinking, how would Mary have possibly been in the dining room, when this maid said she locked the door, odd. She also mentioned that she

said bye to Tina, the wife, and one of the suspects. I walked upstairs and checked the CCTV and sure enough, the same maid had locked the doors, and walked outside-I switched the cameras- and waved to Tina. in the background of the Camera, Oscar was seen cutting branches. I fast forward to the camera to the time of death, and he was still cutting away until he heard a scream and ran inside. That leaves only one suspect left, Ms White. Unfortunately, the room where the murder had occurred had no cameras installed, so I couldn't end the case right there. Suddenly, I remembered what one of the witnesses had said, that Mary was in the bathroom downstairs. I walk down and inspect the bathroom, and then, I find a wrench in the trash can. I knew it. I then noticed a trail of water, someone didn't wash their hands. I followed the trail as it led me straight into the Billiard room.

I just knew it, before I gave the wrench to the forensics team, I measured the distance between the two sides of the wrench, 5 inches. The same distance from each of the two wounds.

I waited around for about an hour until the results came back, and sure enough, the fingerprints matched with Ms Mary White. I shook my head, some people are really desperate for money. I walk downstairs and almost slip over the trail of water, this is why you wash your hands. I grab Williams and Deputy Mark to assist me as I arrest Mary. Before I let her go, I said something.

"Wash your hands next time, and get better at hiding things! " I suggest playfully, as I fold my hands into a gun and pretend to shoot a bullet at her as I wink at her, she glares back at me, another case down.

## Chapter 5: Rudy.

Olivia and I played for hours, hours of fun, hours of bonding, the last thing I expected was a board game would connect me to her so much. I learned so much from her, like how mom was before I was born. Since she died shortly after I was born, I didn't get to know them well. Olivia also seemed to ace the game, it looks like her hard work really paid off, not in the way she intended probably.

Mary white really was a bad murderer, who hides a wrench in a trash can, and even worse, who doesn't wash their hands. I'm 10, and I have more hygiene than her, Olivia laughed when I said that, I guess I really am a stand-up comedian. Me and Olivia clean up the mess and stow away the game on the shelf, Olivia throws away the juices we had and the candy wrappers we feasted on. Good times. Olivia and I went outside, and I never wished for fresh air more than now. Sitting down inside a house with a half- working AC on a hot summer day is not ideal. Me and Olivia talk and talk, memories unlocked, stories unlocked, like a video game storyline.

Olivia showed a connection with the game, and for once, she showed appreciation for me, ME!! I couldn't believe it then, and I still can't even though that was 2 hours ago. We

walk and talk all around Petersville, and then land ourselves at the beach, perfectly at sunset. We buy a shaved ice cone, the coldness tickles my teeth, it feels weird, but so refreshing at the same time. I look at Olivia as she goes on and on about how bad Moms cooking was, and all I do is sit down and admire how people really do change so much, Never in the whole universe did I think a simple board game would save my relationship with my own sister, I look up at a cloud, which reminds me of grandpa, and I thank him, It seems as though the cloud winked at me. I thought my eyes were fooling me, so I blinked again to get another look. Instead all I saw was me and Olivia staring at the sunset, the true bond of two siblings who found each other again striving in the background.

THE END

Student Name: Catherine Xu

Grade: 9

School: Jordan High School

Title: you saw tragedy / in me

Category: Poetry

Key: Gold Key

Educator:

I learn to drown beneath noxious dreams  
three months before I can recall you /  
from ember shards that cut too deep  
and drain out lifelines atop cotton sheets  
I must be inclined to so inquire / those eyes  
within eyes / what must they believe / drifting  
between worlds undone and souls entwined  
and fingertips threading lives between lives /  
what so must they see beneath woe that is me  
    who can't try to fly free under barred skies of  
violet / static violence caught in winds blowing over  
homes long lost like / stupidity that seeps under  
carpet to stain what's here / hunger over me-you  
forgotten / yet we still hover as phantoms over  
slumped shoulders / so just allow me such inquiry of /  
whys tucked into words you spoke / scattered in ways  
that don't hurt how they should / and yet you still  
withhold closure / beneath that tragedy  
you saw in me.

Student Name: Damilola Dosunmu-Afolayan

Grade: 9

School: Klein Collins High School

Title: "Black"

Category: Poetry

Key: Gold Key

Educator:

Black

I don't like that word

People call me that

They don't mean to be rude

I think

But black is the night sky

The dark ocean

Black is everything

Because it's a shade

I'm not everything

I'm brown

I'm Nigerian

I'm me

My skin isn't black like charcoal

It's brown like fudge cookies

It's brown like oak trees



Student Name: Sarah Hassan  
 Grade: 12  
 School: Klein Cain High School  
 Title: "People in Palestine Don't Grow Up"  
 Category: Poetry  
 Key: Gold Key  
 Educator: Cynthia Scott

Last night, I was eight years old  
 I fell asleep in my own room  
 But I could still hear  
 The sounds of my mother's soft singing in Arabic  
 My eyelids fell heavier and with each blink,  
 A new image appeared in my mind

I saw mallow fruits, my father's favorite,  
 The familiar plots of olive trees,  
 Ones that grew as my great grandparents did  
 My eyelids joined briefly again  
 And I saw the golden-blue mosque  
 The one that makes my land holy

I wake up in the morning for my dawn prayer  
 And 75 years have passed  
 I am still eight years old  
 I didn't wake up to my mother's sweet voice  
 The sounds of bombs took her place  
 My eyes didn't slowly blink awake  
 They were wide open and could not close  
 I couldn't find my mother, my father,  
 My sister, my brother  
 I went outside but I couldn't see  
 The mallow or the olive trees  
 I was in a place unfamiliar  
 Away from the golden-blue mosque

I still remember everything  
 It was all just here  
 I remember my mother and my neighbors  
 I remember my land

I have no memory of the bombs  
Or the men in military gear  
I don't remember all of the lifeless people  
That lay on the ground, seeming to have replaced our plants  
I remember the light that came from lamps  
I don't see light anymore except for  
The bright red glow in the sky,  
Accompanied by sounds of explosives

I don't remember being a criminal  
I am eight years old  
All I can think about now is  
My mother's song  
Her sweet voice replays in my head,  
"Falasteen, ya, Falasteen"  
Palestine, Oh, Palestine

Student Name: Akshita Sadana

Grade: 9

School: Klein Collins High School

Title: Beautiful Heartbreak

Category: Poetry

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Megan Schmidt

### Beautiful Heartbreak

Wasn't the Man Supposed to be Stronger?

He was strong,  
But she's still stronger,

Now she's standing here but where is he, now?

She would bear the weight for them both,  
But it was not enough.

See he never knew,  
She could carry more than he could, too.

2 years,  
She never spoke a word of what's been killing her slowly.

While he goes on,  
That he can't take it for much longer.

Still, she listens.  
Does she not bear the weight of him, too?

But she loved him,  
Tried to solve all of his problems, too.

He never saw what she's been put through.

Hours of him crying in her arms,  
What did it do to her?

She loved him,  
But he was dying...slowly.

Still, she did all she could,  
She loved him.

The pain of his hurting,  
It hurt her more than him.

She loved him.  
She could bear more weight than him.

Soon,  
It was too much for him.

Now he's gone,  
But she's still here carrying the weight of it all.

Today,  
She's still stronger.

So You Wrote a Few Heartbreak Poems...Do You Think That Makes You a Poet?

Hello.

The secret admirers,  
The love letters,  
The holding hands on a public subway.

The first argument,  
I'll apologize first,  
I'm sorry.

It's okay,  
I forgive you.  
I love you.

Goodbye.

Don't Worry

You said you want to take a night out by yourself.  
No, it's okay, I don't mind.  
"Don't worry, I love you."

I won't worry.  
I don't mind the slowed, reverb music,  
Putting me to sleep without you...

Morning.  
I don't think I worried too much.  
Awakened to 15 texts,

"I never loved you."  
"I don't need you."  
"I've found someone better."

It's okay.  
I didn't worry too much.  
I loved you.

Her

Her face turns red every time she cries,  
But her eyes shine bright like a thousand lights...  
When she smiles.  
Oh, how I love to see her smile.

True Love

It's called, "love."  
The delusions.  
The increased rate of your heartbeat,

The sweaty palms.

But this time, "it was different."  
It soothed my soul.

Student Name: Morgan Hardin  
 Grade: 8  
 School: Schindewolf Intermediate School  
 Title: Dandelions  
 Category: Short Story  
 Key: Gold Key  
 Educator: Leanne Pope

Dazzling sun pours down on my face like liquid gold, white fluffy clouds adorn a cerulean sky that could stretch for miles, and wispy dandelions so abundant they form a white blanket sheathing the rolling hills of West Texas. Laughing, singing, smiling. Just two little girls full of joy and hope in a world seemingly hand-crafted just for them. Oh, how I wish I could go back in time to those moments, but now I'm sitting here waiting, holding back a floodgate of tears, just hopelessly waiting.

"Avery" I look up and see Ivy's mom. I shove the memory to the back of my head and return to reality. "Ivy's been asking when you were coming to visit. She is so excited to see you." I barely recognized the woman in front of me with fizzled hair, huge dark circles under her eyes, and a red splotchy face. I stood up and walked with her. "Everyone at school has been asking about her, even the teachers," I said. Ivy was one of those people who can talk to anyone. She is smart, kind, and popular. All the teachers love her, and she's friends with everyone. Then there's me. Quiet, B average, and keeping to myself. If it weren't for Ivy, no one would even know me. "Well, Ivy would be happy to know people are thinking about her." We round the corner and come to a door decorated with purple flowers. Purple is Ivy's favorite color. My hand hovers above the door handle. I hesitate. I haven't seen her since she started treatment. What if she changed? What if..."Avery?" I'm pulled from my thoughts, "You don't have to do this, I understand if it's too hard." Ivy's mom looked at the ground with tears pricking her eyes. "No, I want to see her."

I pushed the door open, and a tidal wave of sunshine washed over me. There was a huge window on the far side of the room, letting the shimmering sun pour over me. The room was packed with purple cards and balloons. Then my eyes drifted to the bed. The same rich brown curls and intense blue eyes. The same smile and carefully painted fingernails, but somehow different... sick. Her skin was so pale I could almost see through it and her eyes were tired and droopy. "Avery!" Ivy said

"Hey Ivy," I slowly made my way to her bed and hugged her. "I'm so glad you came to visit, it's so boring, I painted my nails like a hundred times." I look down at her nails, perfect almond shapes colored lavender with tiny white dandelions on each one. -

Dandelions - Ivy's obsessed with them, and it's actually how we met.

We were 7, I was walking home from school and reading a book at the same time, I wasn't paying attention and I tripped over Ivy who was crouched down. "OMG are you ok" She held her hand out to me and in the other one was a dandelion. I took her hand and shook

off the grass that had clung to me. "Yeah I'm fine," I responded. "What are you doing?" She was already back crouched down looking for something. "I'm trying to find the perfect dandelion," she responded. "Want to help?" "Sure" I kneeled on the ground, I wasn't sure what I was looking for, but I saw a dandelion that looked decent and held it out to her. "How about this one?" "It's perfect!" she squealed. "I wish for a perfect day tomorrow." Then she blew on the dandelion, so the seeds flew off in the gentle breeze. I look over at her, but she's walking away, "Hey, where are you going?" "Home," She stated. "But why did you do that?" I ran up to her "I always wish for a perfect day on my way home," she said as though it were obvious. "Oh, ok. Hey, where is your house?" "Just past the pond," she pointed past a small body of water. "What about you, where do you live?"

"I live right next to the pond."

"Do you want to walk together?"

"Sure, what's your name?"

"Ivy, you?"

"Avery,"

Then we walked together until we got to my house

"Bye, see you tomorrow Avery!"

"Bye Ivy!" every day after that we would walk to the field, find a dandelion, make a wish, and go home.

I snapped back to reality "They look amazing as usual" I say "Yeah I thought the dandelions were a nice touch." "You and your dandelions," I say while rolling my eyes "Hey stop it!" she says while fake punching my arm, Then we talked for hours, I wished I never had to leave but eventually, a nurse and her mom came in and told me it was time to go.

"Bye Avery"

"Bye Ivy"

"Will you visit me tomorrow?"

"Of course I will."

Ivy's mom walks me out of the room and down the hallway, "Thank you for coming. It meant a lot to Ivy" said Ivy's mom with tears lining her eyes.

"No problem, I've been meaning to come to visit for a while."

Then we walked in uncomfortable silence to the door, where a truck was waiting for me. I quickly said goodbye to Ivy's mom and practically jumped in the truck.

"So how was Ivy?" my mom asked.

"She was fine. Mom, I think Ivy might be okay," I said with hope rising in me like the sun in the morning.

"Well, let's hope so, but for now all we can do is be there for her."

That night when I was asleep my dreams were filled with fluffy dandelions, deep blue skies, and two little girls singing and laughing.



"AVERY!" I opened my eyes to my little brother, Colt, right in front of me wearing only a diaper. Colt looked almost just like me, with soft blonde hair, tan skin, and dark green eyes. Except he was three and I was fourteen. "Mom said to wake you up!"

"Colt inside voice," I said while rubbing my eyes.

"BUT IT'S SUNDAY!" Every Sunday my dad watches football on the TV and Colt has made it a rule that if he can yell at the TV then he can be loud too.

"Okay go tell Mom I'll be downstairs in ten minutes."

"OKAY!" he runs down the stairs.

"AVERY WILL COME DOWN STAIRS IN uh... A FEW MINUTES!"

I lug myself out of bed, get dressed, brush my teeth, and strangle my hair into a low ponytail. I make my way down the stairs where I hear the TV. "And he's gonna make it Tim I know he is! LOOK THERE HE GOES NOW, HE'S GOING, GOING, AND... TOUCH DOWN!"

"WHOO TOUCH DOWN!" my dad yells excitedly.

"YEAH TOUCH DOWN!" screams Colt.

Colt high-fives my dad, grabs a mini football, and throws it on the ground.

I laugh as I walk the rest of the way down the stairs and into the kitchen.

"Morning Avery."

"Morning Mom... After breakfast can I go over to see Ivy?"

"Sure I'll take you."

"I WANT TO COME!" yells Colt as he runs over to us.

"Not this time Colt," says my mom.

"BUT I WANT TO SEE IVY!" he stomps his foot down and pouts his lips.

"If you were to come you'd need to put some clothes on. Not just a diaper," I said, knowing he wouldn't change.

"FINE I'LL JUST WATCH FOOTBALL WITH DAD!" Then he ran away into the living room.

Colt always runs everywhere. He rarely walks. That's why we call him "Colt the bolt".

After breakfast, I went to see Ivy, and then I went to see her every day after that for about 3 weeks; until one day I was with Ivy and she went to use the restroom. I overheard the nurse talking to her mom. "Ivy's health is declining faster than usual. I don't know how much longer she has." They walked away and that's all I heard of the conversation. I felt my heart drop to my stomach and tears pricked my eyes. I thought back to all the visits I made and it was only then I started to realize how much worse Ivy was than when I first saw her. I was terrified at the thought that it was so gradual I didn't even notice, I would have never noticed if I hadn't overheard the conversation. "Are you okay?" I snapped back from my thoughts and turned around. Ivy was standing right in front of me. "You look like you've seen a ghost," she says, looking concerned.

"Yeah, I'm fine. how about we play a card game?" I say trying to cover my shock.

"Okay sure," Ivy said, not sounding too convinced

The rest of my visit, the nurses' words echoed in the back of my head and followed me into my sleep.

"Go fish!" yelled Ivy

"Dang it, I'll never win," I say while throwing my cards down on the bed.

"Ever since the third grade," Ivy says, mocking my tone. "Hey wanna go outside for a walk?"

"Ummm are you sure you can?" I ask nervously.

"Sure, I went out yesterday."

"Okay. Come on let's go" I stood up and went over to help Ivy with her IV pole. We were almost out the door when a loud beeping noise came from a machine on the IV pole.

"Ivy, Ivy!" I yelled but she seemed to not hear me as stared off blankly. She took a step forward and fell to the ground. I froze, unable to do anything. Doctors and nurses rushed into the room and started flashing lights in her eyes, giving chest compressions and checking her vitals. I sank to the ground and reached for her hand which was already cold as ice. I huddled my head in my hands and sat there for what seemed like hours. When I looked up it was dark and no one was in the room. All of Ivy's things had been cleared out, and the room looked bare. I put my head back in my hands and cried.

I slowly drift out of the dream and eventually realize that I'm in my bed. I pick myself up and think about the dream I'd just had. I look over at my alarm clock and the time is 5:37.

"Okay," I think. "I'll have just enough time to see Ivy before school, just to make sure. I jump out of bed and quickly get dressed. I'm putting my hair up when Colt comes running into my room.

"Avery, why are you awake so early?" Usually, Colt wakes up super early while my mom and I sleep in more.

"I am going to ask Mom to take me to see Ivy before school," I explain.

"CAN I COME PLEASE!!!!" Colt yells while giving me puppy-dog eyes.

"Ugh, fine you can come."

"YAY" Colt celebrates

"But you need to put on some actual clothes," I say with a smirk on my face.

"Okay fine" he pouts as he walks to his room. I sigh as I walk over to my mom's room. She's doing her makeup in front of a mirror.

"Hey, mom, can we go see Ivy before school?" I ask.

"We?" My mom says with a questioning look on her face"

"Yeah. Colt wants to come too," I say.

"Okay sure well leave in 30 minutes"

"Thanks, Mom" I rushed out of the room and finished getting ready.

We round the corner and walk towards Ivy's door, and visions of my nightmare dance in my head. I hesitate to open the door but then Colt says "Come on. Just open the door already." I take a deep breath and walk in.

"Avery! And Colt!" she says excitedly.

"IVY!" Colt yells so loud I'm surprised a nurse didn't come to check up on us.

"Hey Ivy," I say in a quiet voice. The rest of the visit went by fast. We talked and played a game of cards, but then my mom said, "Avery, Colt, it's time to go!"

"Bye Ivy!" Colt yells while hugging her.

"Bye Colt!"

he runs out of the room and into the lobby to wait with my mom.

"Bye Ivy, see you after school," I say and start to walk out of the room.

"Wait, Avery, you know you're my best friend right?" asks Ivy.

"Of course Ivy"

"Okay I just want to let you know just how much you mean to me thank you," she says

"Ivy you are my best friend, you have been since second grade, you've introduced me to so many new people, and hobbies and taught me to speak up more I would be the one thanking you" I hug her tight and leave to go join Colt and my mom.

After school, I stopped by the field to get a dandelion and bring it to Ivy. I walked into the hospital and her door sign was gone. Confused, I walked into her room and found it empty, Hope exploded in me like fireworks, did she get released? She was doing better this morning. A nurse walks by and I ask them

"Excuse me do you know where Ivy is, Ivy Barnes"

"Oh sweetheart, has no one told you?"

"Told me what?" I say with my hope slipping away.

"Ivy is... not here anymore," she said softly.

"I know, so where did she go?" I say with tears sliding down my face.

"Honey, Ivy's passed away." No, no no no no no. I say sinking to the floor and clutching the dandelion in my fist I get up and run, I run away from the hospital. I ran away from the nurse. I run away from everything. Next thing I know, I'm at home in my bed and I cry, I cry, I cry, I cry until I have no tears left. Then I lay, curled up in my bed unable to do anything else.

"Avery?" I hear a little voice, I look up and Colt is standing in front of me looking sad.

"Why are you and mom crying?" he asks worried

"Colt," I say knowing I have to be strong for him "Ivys gone"

"Where did she go? Is she lost?" he sounded confused

"Colt Ivys was gone forever," I say. He climbs into my lap and stays quiet for a while.

"I don't want Ivy to be gone," he says, I don't even have to look at him to know he's crying too.

"neither," I say quietly, we sit like that for a while Colt eventually falls asleep and I put him in his bed and fall into mine, as the day's events seep into my dreams.

I opened my eyes and I was in the field behind the school. "Come on Avery let's find a dandelion" I start to shake with uneasiness at the sound of her voice. I turn around to see Ivy, healthy, active, smiling Ivy. A single tear slides down my face, and I think to myself

"Good a happy dream" It's been a while since I've had one.

"Avery, you good"

"Yeah, never better," I say, and it's not a lie

"Ok, look there's a dandelion over there"

"I'll go get it," I say as I walk over to the spot she was pointing at

I bend down to pick the dandelion but I trip, suddenly and fall into a deep hole it's at least 1 and a half feet taller than me. I look up to see a dark eerie sky. Ivy walks in to view and

stares down at me. The hairs on the back of my neck stand up sending shivers down my spine. She picks up a shovel and says "It should have been you."

"What?" I feel tears pricking my eyes.

She plunges the shovel into a huge pile of dirt.

"It should have been you" she continues to say as she dumps the dirt on top of me. I feel tears streaming down my face. "Ivy," I say desperately

"It should have been you" Another scoop of dirt falls on top of me.

I fall to the ground, "I know, I know it should have been me." I say now sobbing.

"It should have been you" I feel the dirt land on my head. "Stop, please stop," I say begging for it to end but it doesn't her words repeat along with a scoop of dirt. The dirt starts to cover my face now and I begin to scream, "Ivy stop, please stop" but she keeps shoveling dirt and saying "It should have been you" Even after the dirt covers my face I can still hear her.

I jolt out of the nightmare with cold sweat and tears running down my face. My breaths are so hard, I feel light-headed but I jump out of my bed and run, I'm not sure where I'm going until I get there—the field. I feel my sadness immediately turn to anger as I kick the grass and dirt and scream until my limbs are tired and my voice is hoarse. "It's not fair!" I plunge to the ground and sink into a sad pose, just angry, sad, tired, and confused. A bright light shines on my face and I look up to see thousands of dandelion seeds floating in the air in front of a brilliant sunrise full of pink and orange hues. "Beautiful things can come from even the most horrible experiences," I remember Ivy used to always say that when things didn't go her way. I slowly pull myself up and look out at the view in front of me. I came to the conclusion that even though it will be hard, even though I have no idea how I will live without her; I have to try to take it one step at a time.

Student Name: Dhani Soinee

Grade: 8

School: Hofius Intermediate School

Title: Fair

Category: Poetry

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Lauren Brennan

Fair

It's time that I forget about the word fair  
because no one can look past  
the texture of my hair  
Everyone loves the skin that is fair  
and just expect me to keep  
keep going without a care  
The talent I possess is completely unmatched  
but the white girl over there  
has all the eyes caught  
They say "Be happy she did so well!"  
but all the tears  
are making my eyes swell  
Due to my beautiful dark skin  
they will never ever let me win  
So it's time that we get rid of the word fair  
because as long as I have my thick curly hair and  
my skin that isn't so pretty and fair  
the white girl will always fit in  
and this tall beautiful black girl  
will never ever win

Student Name: Jacob McCaskill

Grade: 10

School: Klein Oak High School

Title: Fear Itself

Category: Short Story

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Holly Walsh

909 Lancaster Ave. was the site of a colonial home, well-built and ready for a family to inhabit its halls. Instead, it would be purchased by a man named Harold Wright.

Harold was born in South Carolina in 1965, and he spent his adolescence in constant fear. He feared his mother, a violent drunk who could not keep a job, and pitied his father, who was a miserable pushover who suffered just as much as Harold. He worked 18 hours a day as both a salesman and a custodian at Big Tony's, the only car dealership in their area. This left Harold defenseless against the wrath of his mother for much of the day. He was neither dim nor an exceptionally bright bulb. He was, however, singled out for torment by teacher and student alike for his limp and slow, croaking voice. Both of these were caused by his mother's wicked temper. He never had a friend in all those years, and his existence there consisted of nothing more than punishment and pain.

Needless to say, Harold left town as soon as possible.

He hitchhiked up north, taking nothing but the clothes on his back and 40 dollars, stolen from his father's wallet. He was 19 then, lost and hopeless. He arrived in New York in July, and the sun was bearing down on the streets with a vengeance. He wandered for blocks, searching for work and a place to live. He found both of these when a group of young businessmen took Harold under their wing. He was brought aboard as an intern at Bishop Unlimited, a distinguished firm that did everything from marketing to stock trading.

Harold worked his way up the corporate ladder, becoming VP. 25 years later, the company went bankrupt. Harold had always been paranoid-this was exacerbated by years of wild partying-and he always feared something like this. His childhood had trained him that life would go south whether you expected it or not, so he decided to get prepared before it did. He socked away cash in a safe he kept in his linen closet. When the markets crashed, he had saved up a few million. He took the opportunity to retire early. He had suffered in his early years, worked hard in his middle age. He deserved some rest.

He looked at real estate listings in the more rural areas of New York. He didn't have to search long; there were plenty of people looking to get rid of their vacation homes. He found exactly what he was looking for. A large colonial on 2 acres, shrouded in a parcel of oak trees. There was something odd about it though; it had been on the market for 30 years. Harold ignored this and made an appointment with the realtor.

Harold arrived on a Saturday morning. Even at noon, the sun did little to warm the air. The wind was harsh, driving icy splinters through Harold's canvas jacket. His bones began to

go numb, making it a laborious trudge to the front porch of the house, as if he was being warned to keep away. Harold was greeted at the steps by a balding man in a checkered suit. He was grinning fiercely. "Hello! You must be Mr. Wright. I'm Kevin."

Harold did not like Kevin. "Hello."

"I'm glad you could make it. You're the first offer we've had on this property."

"Why is that?" Harold was concerned. He had heard stories like this before, houses selling for unbelievable prices, only for the new owners to find mold or termites or...worse.

Kevin's grin wavered for a moment. "You tell me. It's a gorgeous place, no doubt about it."

"Right." Harold was not reassured by this.

"Anyway, let's go inside, shall we? Bit chilly out here." Kevin walked up the front steps, produced a key from his hip pocket, and opened the door. It swung open with no complaint. Harold was slightly surprised. He expected the loud screeching of rusted hinges, like the haunted houses of his childhood. Kevin led the way, striding in on garish loafers. Harold shuffled in after him. The house was warmer than outside, but not by much. Every surface was covered by a thin film of dust.

"Sorry about the mess. Like I said, we haven't had any visitors in a while."

Kevin flipped the lights on. Harold wandered around aimlessly, inspecting for mysterious stains or cracked tiles. The house was dusty, sure, but it was in excellent condition. The appliances were a few years out of date, and the house would need some cleaning, but nothing serious. Just a house left dormant. But why? Why did it sit for so long? Harold returned to the foyer. Kevin had not moved, and had not stopped smiling. Harold was intensely unnerved by Kevin. His outdated style and slick mannerisms reminded him of the sleazy used-car salesmen of the 1970s. It reminded him of his father. Harold shivered. Kevin broke the silence.

"So, what do you think?" His voice was chipper, in spite of the gloom around him.

"What's the catch?"

"What do you mean?" Kevin forced the grin as high as he could, muscles tensed like elastic bands. His face was a comical grimace.

"You know perfectly well what I mean." Harold was not playing games here. He knew there was something wrong. There had to be. Two-story colonials on secluded plots did not go for prices this low, not unless there was "a little incident," as Kevin might say. Kevin sighed. His smile did not relent, but relaxed slightly.

"There has been a history of the owners experiencing some... psychological distress."

"Go on." Harold was now beginning to experience this psychological distress.

"They go crazy. End up in mental hospitals." Kevin had stopped smiling.

"Any reason why?" Harold asked.

"Never got an answer. None of them could speak when the police came to investigate."

"Who called the police?"

"Neighbors across the lake heard screaming. Cops showed up just in time. They found the oldest son trying to burn the place down."

Harold considered this. He had always considered himself level-headed, at least after he moved to New York. Was Kevin trying to play mind games? Maybe he was fielding another offer.

"Let's go to your office. I'd like to discuss this further somewhere warm."

"Fine by me."

The two exited the house. Kevin scrawled out directions on a notepad, handed it to Harold, and then got into his car; a mid-eighties GM that looked fast, but handled like a complete slug. It summed up Kevin pretty well, trying too hard and getting left behind. Harold got into his own car, a BMW M5, and worked his way back into town, admiring the autumn colors of the leaves.

Kevin's office was a squat brick building just off Main Street. The lot consisted of half a dozen spaces. Kevin's ride and a silver SUV took up two of them. Harold parked and hurried in. The building was illuminated with a mix of cool natural light and warm lightbulbs, giving the room an off-kilter appearance. Kevin was in his office, shuffling through one of his many filing cabinets.

"Come in," Kevin said, not looking at Harold.

Harold sat in the chair in front of the desk. Kevin pulled out a large file and slapped it down.

"We haven't gotten around to getting computers put in, so we're stuck with paper for now."

"Fine by me."

There was an uncomfortable silence. A space heater whirled softly somewhere behind Harold, but it didn't seem to be working properly.

"So, you wanted to discuss the house more. What is it you want to know?"

"Who are the previous owners?" This was the burning question on Harold's mind.

"They've all been families of five or more. No less."

"All of them went crazy?"

"All the adults did. The kids, 12 or under, they seemed fine. All went to state care. I don't know where they are now."

"Nobody knows why they went crazy, right?"

Kevin shook his head.

"Couldn't get a straight answer out of any of them. One of the kids mentioned a grandfather clock, but they could never find one on the property."

Harold sat, mulling this information over. Finally, he spoke.

"Do you have a coffee machine here?"

"Around the corner, door on the right."

Harold stood, left the office, and entered the break room. Mini-fridge, toaster oven, coffee pot. Same as always. He brewed a cup for himself, then wondered if he should have offered one to Kevin. He leaned against the countertop and pondered for a moment. The coffee was sour, but it was hot. He returned to the office 10 minutes later. Kevin was reading the local paper.



"So, what do you think?"

"I'll take it."

The two of them filled out the paperwork, and Kevin was stunned when Harold bought the house with cash. There was a three-day waiting period, so Harold drove back to the city in the dark, back to his apartment.

On Tuesday, Harold drove back into town to get the keys to the house. He arrived at ten, and was surprised to Kevin waiting for him outside the office.

"Good morning!" Kevin was once again bright and chipper.

"Morning," Harold said.

Kevin pulled the keys out of his pocket and handed them to Harold.

"There you go. 909 Lancaster is all yours."

"Thanks, Kevin."

Kevin turned and went inside. Harold was almost sad to see him go. Oh well, he thought. He had arranged for a moving company to deliver his furniture, and they would arrive at the house soon. He drove to the house, enjoying the winding roads through hills of flaming orange leaves. When he arrived, he surveyed the land. He would have room for a garden, a pool, anything he desired. He smiled, and began to whistle as he approached the front door. He walked in and went straight down to the furnace. He had familiarized himself over the weekend with old manuals in the library. The house immediately began to warm up. The movers arrived not long after and unloaded his belongings. He thanked them, tipped them generously, and swiftly got to work unpacking. He was finished by six, and treated himself to the pizza parlor in town. So far, retirement was treating Harold just fine.

At 2:30, Harold was awoken by a loud noise, much like a gong. He wasn't frightened by it, only confused. He searched the house and found nothing, concluded it was his imagination, maybe too much pizza, and went back to bed. The next day, he awoke feeling refreshed and opted to spend the day outside. He walked around his yard, enjoying the very idea of owning land. He went down to the lake, where the water was completely still. The ducks had flown south, the fish had gone...wherever fish go. Harold had spent some time fishing as a boy, but that well of knowledge had dried up a long time ago. He spent the rest of the day reading a hardcover novel he had bought some time ago. His work kept him too busy for reading, and he was looking forward to some well-deserved time off. He went to the supermarket that evening, cooked a nice meal, and drifted off easily once again.

That night, he was woken up again, this time at twelve. He again searched high and low, and again found nothing. He went back to bed. The next few days went about the same. Harold awoke, explored the property, read on the porch, and went back to sleep. On Thursday night he did not sleep. A loud ticking noise, like an old clock, followed him wherever he went. He tried everything, warm milk, hot bath, even sleeping pills he used

on long flights. Nothing worked. It would not stop. He sat in the living room, staring at the wall. The sun rose, and the ticking ceased. He was relieved for a moment, but then he began to panic. I'm going crazy, just like the rest. Kevin told me, he warned me, and here I am all the same going mad mad mad mad

Kevin stopped himself and took a deep breath. He was just fooling himself. Just because they went crazy doesn't mean I'm going crazy.

He drove into town to see the doctor. There, he was told he was in perfect health, with some slight sleep deprivation. He returned home, unsatisfied with this answer. He tried his hardest to relax that evening, but it was no use. He climbed into bed, and not five minutes later, the ticking started again. He started to cry. He was going crazy. He was hyperventilating, trying to get as much air in as he could. The air was cold and it stung, making him panic more. He began to scream and run through the house. He couldn't help it. He was scared. The ticking wouldn't stop. It grew louder and louder, and he began to scream louder too. He couldn't think. The fear was crushing him, a massive wave drowning him. The clock began to chime. There was a clock, he knew it, there was a clock somewhere. He had to find it and make it stop, make it stop, MAKE IT STOP. He ran blindly through the house, barging through doors. He searched the attic, and every closet, but he did not find it. He let out an enraged animal cry and began to tear at the walls, peeling the paint. He went to the garage. In the garage was his car, and leaning in the corner, a sledgehammer. Perhaps it was left behind, perhaps it was pure luck. Harold didn't care. He picked it up and stomped back into the house. He swung it into the wall. There was a great boom and the house shook, but the walls were solid and did not cave. He slammed it into another wall, but it did nothing. He would have to burn the house. He dressed and went back to the garage. He put his car into reverse and drove straight through the garage door, sending splinters of wood flying. He turned around with a screech and went screaming down the road to the gas station. He got out of his car and walked into the mini-mart. He grabbed two jerry cans and a box of matches, then walked out without paying, ignoring the attendant behind the counter. He filled both cans, put them in the passenger seat, and drove back home.

On the way back, the attendant at the gas station called the police to inform them a man had just stolen 10 gallons of gas and driven off. They sent out an officer as Harold pulled into the driveway. He carried a can in each hand and the matches in his pocket, and got to work dousing the house. He used one can for each floor of the house, and was pouring a trail to the front yard when a squad car pulled up to the house. An officer got out of the car and began approaching Harold. Harold paid him no mind. He had business to attend to. He pulled out the box of matches, took out a single match, and struck it. The cop swatted the match out of Harold's hand. Harold looked at him in dismay and went to light another. The officer took the box away from Harold.

"Sir, I've just gotten a report that someone matching your description stole some gasoline. Do you know anything about that?"

"I had something important to take care of. I can pay him back."

Harold dove for the matches again. The officer took Harold by the wrists and pulled out his handcuffs.

"Wait! I have to burn my house down! Please!"

Harold shoved the police officer back, knocking him backward into the car. Harold picked up the matches and lit the trail leading up to the house. The gasoline began to burn, flaring up to the house. There was a great woosh, and the windows all shattered at once. The fire burned brightly, the same orange color as the leaves. Harold was brought to the ground by the police officer. He was arrested and brought to the police station, where he would remain until his trial. The ticking stopped. He was charged with petty theft, arson, and assault, and sentenced to 15 years in the state penitentiary. He arrived with a smile on his face, free from the endless noise that tormented him.

He sat down in his cell, relieved at last, when he heard the ticking start again.

Student Name: Maggie Atkinson  
 Grade: 12  
 School: Klein High School  
 Title: Happy Endings  
 Category: Science Fiction & Fantasy  
 Key: Gold Key  
 Educator: Dawn Sharpeta-Black

I want to be a happy story. A story that ends with happily ever after.  
 But I am a tragedy even the Greeks envy. A story where the wolf eats my grandmother,  
 where the woodsman puts an ax in my chest.  
 Every time, I relive my life. Every time, my grandmother gets sick. Every time, my mom  
 tasks me with delivering her broth and bread and various sweets. Every time, I die.

--

Life 1

--

"Grandma?" I let my voice drift throughout the small cottage, taking my muddy boots off  
 at the door and treading toward my grandmother's bedroom. I feel awful for thinking this,  
 but I hope Grandma is too sick to get out of bed and look at my boots. The path isn't as  
 muddy as the surrounding woods, and she knows that almost as well as I do. She  
 implemented the rule after all, but how am I supposed to tread on boring old gravel when  
 there are wildflowers and trees to explore?

"Yes, my little red?"

"I brought you food! And some playing cards! Are you up for a game of Gin Rummy?" I  
 pushed my way into her room, pausing in the doorway.

"Are you okay Grandma? You look a little funny." There was something eerie about the  
 way she stared at me and licked her lips, but she was probably looking at the basket.  
 Mom filled it this morning, and even I couldn't resist a sweet treat or two on my long walk  
 over.

"I'm sick, you little nuisance. Be kind to your old granny."

"Not too old to let me sneak some sweets though, right?"

"After that comment of yours, I don't know that I would even let you sneak broccoli." I  
 gasped in mock horror, giggling through my hand when Grandma grinned back at me.  
 Were Grandma's teeth...? No. But, man they sure looked...

"My my Grandma, what big ears you have!" Grandma always kept a jar of candy next to  
 her bed for me, for when she couldn't get up and I kept her company. It happened more  
 and more frequently these days, but when I asked my mom about it she just told me to be  
 strong. So I just lifted more bags of flour for her and wondered what was happening to  
 Grandma on my own time.

"All the better to hear you with, my dear." I crept ever closer to her bed where she was wrapped up in her thickest blankets. With those weighing her down, she would never catch me in time to stop my candy thievery.

"Grandma, what big teeth you have!"

"All the better to eat you with!" And it lunged.

--

Life 2

--

In the next life, with the flashes of teeth and fur and claws plaguing my mind even as a child, they killed me in the village square while my parents and siblings cried on the sidelines. I was too strange, they said. I didn't understand what was happening.

--

Life 3

--

Getting to Grandma's is easy. I just have to not stray from the path. Maybe that's where I went wrong in the first life, so I put one boot in front of the other on gravel roads and hope.

I still don't quite know what's happening to me. But my two previous lives shove themselves to the forefront of my mind and demand to be known. So I know at least one thing: I've done this before.

At Grandma's, I dodge the wolf's first strike. Not the second.

--

Life 4

--

This time, I refuse to go to Grandma's. The next day, my mother asked me again. Same basket, same goods, same question.

And she asks every day.

I think I live for a year more in that world, a world where I wake up, deny my mother, and go about my day. But at some point, I grew tired of my mother with no free will and decided to drown myself. I'll wake up in another life anyway.

--

Life 7

--

"Help! Help! Please, can anyone help me!" I'm stumbling through the cottage, clutching my arm to try and stem the bleeding. The wolf is behind me, playing with its food. I remembered the second attack a moment too late, but at least it wasn't enough to kill me this time.

"No one is nearby, little red riding hood." The wolf taunts me in my grandma's voice. I think it wants to see me cry. By this time, my lives have run out of tears.

"Please don't call me that. You're not her."

"She is dead, little red riding hood. I ate her. Who she was is in my belly. I think that gives me all the right I need."

In all this, I forgot she was dead. That if I ever solved my repetitive problem, she would still be gone. My grandma, who had braided my hair back when it got in my way. My grandma, who made the best brownies ever and refused to share the recipe. I would never have her brownies again. I would never see my grandma again, only this copy of her that tried to kill me. It hurts, now, that I'll associate her face with death. I don't want to fight the wolf anymore, so I sit on the floor and stare it in the eyes. My grandma's eyes.

"Why do you keep doing this to me?" For a second, I see my grandma in the softening of the wolf's face. In the sympathy it shows me in this life's final moments.

"Because it is my nature."

--

Life 10

--

I make it to the door in this life. I swing open the solid wood and hit the wolf with it, sprint past the frame, and run into six feet of muscle. In this life, I meet the woodsman. He narrows his eyes at my distressed babbling, at my insistence of a wolf that has yet to show its ugly face. The woodsman knows what the wolf can do. How it can trick you. The woodsman drives his ax between my ribcage.

--

Life 16

--

In this life, instead of hitting the wolf with the door, I grab it by the scruff of its neck, ignoring the snapping of its teeth and shoving it out in front of the woodsman as my proof. But as soon as I let go, the wolf lunges. Not at me, but at the bigger threat, the strong man with an ax and a hatred for the wolf. It eats my only hope of being saved. I bare my neck for the wolf and let it get to work.

--

Life 19

--

"So, Grandma, how's the bed? Comfy?" I'm tired of fighting, so I keep a safe distance and chat with my grandmother's imposter.

"You don't have to pretend to believe me, little red. I know you've lived this story as many times as I have."

"What's happening to us?"

"Who knows what the authors feel we must learn from the repetition of the ugliest parts of our story."

"If I come near you, will you kill me?"

"Of course."

"Okay."

--

Life 23

--

I owe the wolf no sympathy, but I feel it anyway, the same way I feel the phantom pains of all the ways it has torn me apart. In this life, I find the woodsman instead of going to Grandma's. I steal his ax while he's turned the other way. When I enter the cottage that belongs to my dead grandma, the wolf has put on my Grandma's skin but does not bother to pretend to be her anymore. It shows me small mercies.

"You're late."

I approach the bed quickly, swinging the ax from above my head toward the wolf as it aims to hurt me, surprise flashing in its eyes. I almost feel bad, as its head rolls at my feet and its blood gushes from the space where its neck would be. I steal my Grandma's glasses from his face and close her eyes before sheathing the ax on my back and wiping my bloody boots off on Grandma's mat, just like I used to do with the mud that came from straying from the path. Next, I will stray from the path further to look for my next prey. To return the ax to the woodsman, to lovingly store it between his eyes that only ever narrowed in suspicion at me.

I want a happy story. But I'm going to have to make it.

Student Name: Nathan Paul

Grade: 11

School: Klein High School

Title: Hope InThe Void

Category: Science Fiction & Fantasy

Key: Gold Key

Educator:

### Hope InThe Void

Within an endless expanse of empty black, there's a single bubble of immeasurable size. As an undefinable amount of time elapses, this bubble gradually expands to fill the void of black. And within that bubble resides innumerable conceptual and physical existences defined by matter, energy, space, time, and souls.

At least that's what Sylvain's grandpa used to tell him. Reminiscing of simpler times, he lies on his bed, arms spread and one leg dangling off. The bedroom, curtains shut, was almost pitch black despite the noon sun's best attempts.

Instant noodles and energy drinks litter the floor. He hasn't left his bed all day, yet fatigue is constant. This is no different from the past six days since the funeral of his cherished girlfriend, Freia. Of course, he is no newcomer to such things. Orphaned at a young age, he never got the time to become attached to his parents, perhaps for the best. His grandpa cared for him all his life, and, to Sylvain, nothing more was needed. Until his grandpa, too, passed away, but this time, in peace at a venerable age. Sylvain was saddened yet moved on quickly. He was already working and had Freia to comfort him.

Sylvain was happy then. Now he lies there, full of thoughts, empty otherwise. A slight stubble speckles his face. An unkempt dark brown supposed-to-be combover covers his head. Sharp brown eyes gaze woefully into the ceiling. Stress and lack of nutrients have led his once fit body into near emaciation.

His clock, a memento of his grandpa, was reaching three PM, the same time that the funeral ended. When it did, a brilliant light appeared to bless the shadowy room. Shocked upright, Sylvain witnesses the source of the shining. There floated a figure. Humanoid yet genderless, it glowed golden. When it spoke, it declared, "I am God," Its voice echoing from the walls as though it spoke from every direction. "On this 7th day, I've come to you with an option."

Sylvain figured he had finally lost it, yet with nothing better to do, he indulged in what he believed was a hallucination.

A sluggish nod from Sylvain prompted God to continue, "I present you the chance to resurrect Freia, to make it as if she never perished. But I am He, and thus I know all. You are no fool. You know nothing comes effortlessly. Of course, you may decline."

Sylvain knows that he's no fool. So how is it then? That such a hallucination could push him into absolute resolution. Still, he had not a shred of hope. He didn't believe it was



possible. Even if he did, how could he possibly accomplish it? So how is it then? That, without hope nor belief nor any emotion save for resolve, Sylvain cried out "NOW!"

And God, all-knowing indeed, was previously expecting such a response. The light transitions into blue, covering the world while God responds, "Then face your trials!"

With that, the luminance blinds him. When it fades, a blue tint remains to coat the world, but God has vanished. Sylvain instantly notices that his clock stopped. The realization of what's happening kicks in while he leaves his home.

Outside, birds dot the sky like a well-timed photo. A few pedestrians are frozen mid-step. Not a single blade of grass rustles. Golden words scribe themselves onto the sky for Sylvain to see. They read "Find a treasure. One contested by the Earth and the Dead, no less beloved than your own life. Reclaim what is yours. Begin where your life ended."

Sylvain needed no more instruction. He set off for an intersection not a mile from his house. Two bouquets, one huge and full of what was once several shades of blue, red, pink, and purple, lay against a light pole, wilted by time. The other is still colorful, a testament to the consistent replacement by Freia's family. Sylvain sees many stopped cars, and he can see, with his mind's eye, his own car which has been left in a repair shop for nine days.

Walking towards the center of the intersection, his attention is seized by tire marks that lead to a larger black mark containing a few crimson stains remaining of what used to be more. This is where a new golden writing appears: "You know very well 'all that glitters is not gold', but The Dead currently embrace the brightest glitter you've been blessed to see. If you need another reminder, return to—"

Sylvain disregarded the rest and dashed to the goal. Panting, he reaches his destination, a graveyard. Standing before his dearly deceased, he knows the objective. He knows it's not right. But he also knows it's a test. Thus, he jabs his hand into the ground, and he digs. With his bare hands. Until he can lift the cover of the ornate coffin. By now, Sylvain cannot bear to see anymore, so, with closed eyes, he probes the inside until he grasps metal. After just a glance at the gold sapphire-adorned necklace, God once more appears before him.

Realizing he's finished his task, Sylvain says, "I've done it. Now revive Freia."

"Your trials have barely begun. Now that you have proven your determination, you shall ascend, step-by-step, through Existence."

Before Sylvain could complain, the blue light overcame him once more but was replaced by bright reds, oranges, and yellows. Sylvain, now larger than Earth, is on the Sun.

A new riddle etched itself onto the blackness of space: "Turn the white rocks black." He subsequently noticed that his fingers were painted in wild, different patterns. One of them was green and blue, quite like Earth. Among the others, two were blue, one reddish brown, one light brown, one beige, two red-orange, and two gray. With such obvious color schemes, their purpose became clear. What especially sticks out to Sylvain are the two not gray but white fingers which likely represented the Moon and... What?

Ignoring his question, Sylvain wiggled his fingers to gauge their effect. As he'd expected, the revolutions of each celestial body moved along with his fingers. To make the Moon black, the light would have to be removed. And there is only one light source here.

Sylvain began to move his fingers in a calculated manner. Once finished, the Earth completely blocked the moon, thus blocking all light. Next, Sylvain considered what the other white one could be. It couldn't be another moon because there are too many others in the solar system. If it is neither a moon nor technically a planet then perhaps... Pluto? Once more rearranging the revolutions, Sylvain completed his task and was flashed into the next trial.

This time, Sylvain was viewing the entire Milky Way until his vision rotated towards some other galaxy. Then, several colors create a tunnel around him as he flies toward that galaxy at incomprehensible speeds. In an instant, he enters a solar system and, finally, a planet.

When he landed on the planet, he was covered in armor. On his hip was a sword, and he was surrounded by the smell of blood. Beside Sylvain stood thousands of soldiers in his same armor. A similar number of soldiers with different armor stood opposed to Sylvain.

But what captured his attention was the soldier right next to him. A soldier with Freia's face, and before rushing forward, she shouted, "I shall kill the commander!" Sylvain, thoughtlessly yet expectedly, raced after her. He recognizes that she can't possibly be real but nonetheless must protect her.

Sylvain's grandpa always used to say how adaptable Sylvain was, and he truly is, as proven by him unsheathing his sword. Tossed into a bygone battlefield, he immediately knows what to do. So he follows "Freia".

And he's fast. His body feels stronger than it should. Must be an aid from God. Sylvain puts it to good use when an enemy lunges toward "Freia". But before the enemy reaches, Sylvain swings his sword masterfully, just like in the knight movies he'd watch with his grandpa. The enemy was lacerated through his side and fell.

Enemy after enemy tries and fails to so much as scratch "Freia". Some stabs to the gut, a couple slashes across the torso, even a spinning jump that attacks two at once, and "Freia" is almost to the commander.

However, before she can, Sylvain himself sprints past her and beheads the sluggish commander. Elegant and precise, Sylvain exceeded the necessity of the challenge, causing "Freia" to fade from vision as the following challenge began.

Sylvain's seen many pictures online of what the universe might look like, and he must admit that they're quite accurate. After all, he is currently seeing hundreds of them. All around him, there are massive swirls of colors, some he can't even name. Each swirl is adorned by an enormous white orb in the center.

Then, most disappear, leaving the remaining 7 to line themselves up in front of him. He begins to drift towards the first.

As he enters it, the scene around him changes back to his home. There, Sylvain sees... Sylvain. Another Sylvain is sitting on his couch, smiling. And why wouldn't he be? Freia is sitting right next to him. Then, realization dawns on the regular Sylvain that this must be a parallel universe with a parallel "Sylvain": A happy one. In this reality, everyone's alive, and they're both happy. This is what he wants.

The vision ends and fades into the subsequent universe, which is quite similar because "Sylvain" is undoubtedly happy. He looks older and is smiling contentedly at the baby in his arms while Freia smiles at the both of them.

Eyes tearing up, Sylvain wonders how this is a challenge when it makes him so overjoyed. But when the next universe starts, he understands. An unruly gray beard speckles the face of a man with puffy baggy eyes nearing purple. That man is, sadly, "Sylvain". In his hand is a small, orange bottle filled with white capsules. Like a shot, he throws it back. Freia must've never been revived.

In the following parallel, a red button labeled "end" appeared near Sylvain. He believes it's the way to give up and run from the rest of these visions. He also sees this universe's Freia, walking down the aisle of a chapel, but not in a wedding dress. Sylvain looks down and sees a casket with a picture of him.

Freia kneels to touch the casket, but hesitates and sinks to the floor, crying. She cries and cries, but right before this vision ends, she whispers "I wish I was dead. I wish he never saved me."

The fifth universe did have both a "Sylvain" and a Freia, but "Sylvain's" beard stayed messy, and they both had horribly baggy eyes. They were also sitting on the sidewalk and wearing dirty, torn clothes. They were poor and homeless, and Sylvain was utterly aghast. "Sylvain" managed to resurrect Freia, yet he couldn't even earn money!? The thought of such indignity and suffering for not only him but his precious Freia was as bad, if not worse than the previous tragic visions. Needless to say, he still refused to consider the button.

Then, the scene was back in his home. Although this vision isn't audible, it's clear that "Sylvain" is arguing with Freia. After a few minutes, Freia rips a ring off her finger and throws it, along with the house keys, at "Sylvain" before storming out. Another unbearable vision. As though poverty wasn't failure enough, how could any version of Sylvain screw up so severely that he would let himself be the reason he loses Freia.

Finally, the previous universe melts away into the 7th and final one. "Sylvain" is filling gas with Freia. At first, Sylvain thought it might just be a happy one again.

Unfortunately, that's far too optimistic. He then notices gas overflowing from a car whose owner was on his phone with his ears plugged. That man also happens to be smoking a cigarette, and a small part of it burns enough to fall off. Its blackened figure, still ever so slightly lit, falls into the gas causing the entire station, Freia and "Sylvain" included, to erupt in flames.

Freia died again. After being revived. Simply and truly, Sylvain could not find any words to describe how he felt. But it didn't end there. The vision changes again, despite it being presumed to be the last.

“Sylvain” and Freia are shopping until they hear screams in the store. A man with an assault rifle was shooting everyone indiscriminately. Freia doesn’t make it.

Again the vision changes. Freia is lying in a hospital bed, withered. All sorts of machines are around her giving oxygen and nutrients or monitoring her status, and one begins to emit a constant beep while displaying a flat red line.

Again. Their house burns down. Freia is still inside. Again. Freia is giving birth. She suffers a maternal death. Again. She and “Sylvain” are at the top of a building. Freia is shoved off.

At this point, Sylvain is staring emptily at the passing nightmares. One after the other, he witnesses the unthinkable happen. And the worst part? Every nightmare is real. It didn’t exactly happen to him, but it nonetheless happened to another him in a parallel universe. Hell, it could quite possibly happen to him later.

Yet he persevered and decided to consider all of that later because the next trial was starting. Now, under Sylvain’s feet is a giant sphere. Its colors are similar to that of a universe but far brighter and consist of even greater variety. Besides the sphere, everything is pure, empty black without a star, galaxy, or universe in sight.

Sylvain once more recalls his grandpa’s stories. This is not just a sphere. It’s a bubble. The Bubble. And he’s surrounded by The Void. He is literally standing on all of creation. On the other side of The Bubble was Freia, but she was standing still, dazed. The distance from Sylvain to her is about twenty feet.

Sylvain takes his first step towards her, his foot landing on an especially bright spot of The Bubble. Immediately, the place where he stepped explodes in an incomprehensible magnitude and is accompanied by a cacophony of screams. Then, in front of Sylvain, the golden writing from earlier trials appears again, stating: “Choose” and below that “Intelligent lives:” Under it was a number that Sylvain concludes is in the tens of septillions and is continuing to rise as the explosion finishes. Septillions. A million to the fourth power. A lone step caused that destruction, and Freia is quite a distance away.

Sylvain must choose between such an astronomical amount of death or failing Freia. He came here with a single goal in mind, but he has no less than an average conscience. Regardless of morals or logic, Sylvain chooses to push forward.

But not without at least some plan. He swings his arms back and forth, gathering momentum, to perform a long jump. He manages to jump nearly six feet while also touching the ground with only the tips of his toes. The lives counter increased by only a couple septillions which is drastically less than the first step. He repeats the same motion, reeling from the weight of the lives lost.

That leaves him one step away from Freia, but she still doesn’t move at all. With one last leap, he stretches his arm out to touch Freia before he touches the ground, but as soon as he does, she disappears.

Sylvain is now falling, full body, towards The Bubble. He thankfully is teleported away before an untold number of people are annihilated. Instead of the usual shift from one trial to the next, Sylvain was simply moved from The Bubble to The Void around it. From

where he is, The Bubble seems smaller than a tennis ball. Sylvain turned around and saw Freia in the distance.

He starts towards her, but someone halts him: himself. A second Sylvain stood between the real Sylvain and Freia.

Second Sylvain scowls at Real Sylvain and yells, "You think this is over!? You're useless. You will never succeed! Freia won't be saved and it'll be your fault. A worthless idiot like you should've been the one to die, FAILURE!"

Despite the harsh verbal assault, Real Sylvain responds calmly, "I don't care." He lunges at the fake, pinning him to the ground in a chokehold. Minutes pass with Real Sylvain's grip getting tighter until the fake disintegrates into nothing.

With his last obstacle gone, Sylvain rushes to Freia. Though she's still motionless, for the first time since her death, Sylvain admires her. She has luscious brown hair complimented by striking brown eyes, and Sylvain races towards them.

He wraps his arms around her. There is no teleporting or trickery. Freia gasps and falls to her knees, but Sylvain is still clutching her firmly.

"No need to explain. God granted me all memories up to now," Freia said. "Thank you, I love you, Sylvain."

Simultaneously, God appeared saying, "Congratulations on your triumph. Now, I'll explain your trials." He spawned images from each trial. "Earth tested your wisdom and initial determination. Solar System tested intuition. Galaxy tested your protective capability. Multiverse tested conviction and pragmatism. The Bubble tested your loyalty to Freia, and, obviously, no lives were lost. The Void tested confidence, but not even I expected you to murder yourself without hesitation. Lastly, trial 7 will be the rest of your lives."

Sylvain opened his house door after work. He walked inside and saw Freia sitting on their couch.

Turning towards him, she said, "Sylvain, come here real quick."

He did so, giving her a hug and a kiss while she showed him a new TV show she found. Sylvain lets a tear of joy emerge; life is back to a wonderful normal. Happier than ever now, Sylvain vows to protect their happiness.

Student Name: Denver Vyas-Grenn  
 Grade: 11  
 School: Klein Oak High School  
 Title: Middle-Eastern immigration into Germany  
 Category: Critical Essay  
 Key: Gold Key  
 Educator: Holly Walsh

Denver Vyas-Grenn

## Middle-Eastern Immigration into Germany

### Context

After World War II, imperial powerhouses, namely England and France lost an immense amount of holdings in their foreign colonies, whether forcibly or willfully. Although they had won World War II against Germany, both Britain and France were in a state of economic disparity, and in no position (economically or politically) to fight colonial revolutions (IMF 2019). Hence when colonies such as North Vietnam went into revolt against France and India rioted against Great Britain, they both chose instead of fighting a likely prolonged conflict, for minimal economic gain, they would simply leave their colonies as France did in 1954 and England in 1948. In 1945, 750 million people lived under colonial rule, today, there are only 2 million (United Nations 2022).

This rapid decolonization of countries, most of whom had not been independent since the "modern era" (1500) naturally led to economic instability in these newly independent nations (Office of the Historian). Throughout the late to mid-20th century, these economies failed to innovate, largely due to their lack of economic foundation (investors/new industry) and lack of former sovereignty. Take India for example: in 1966 India's gross domestic product (GDP) was 45 billion, in 1986, 20 years later, their GDP was 249 billion. On the surface level, this may seem good. After further review, you can see that their GDP multiplied by 5.5, while their GDP per capita only went up 3.9 times (Macrotrends, "India GDP 1960-2023"). And then when you take into factor the fact that their population increased by 300 million (Macrotrends, "India Population 1950-2020"), almost the population of the U.S. You can see that India, although increasing its GDP, was advancing at a slower rate than the rest of the world.

### The Middle East

Similar to India, most Middle Eastern countries followed the same economic route. All Middle Eastern countries gained their independence within the span of 50 years (1922-1971). Although most Middle Eastern countries struggled economically, countries like Saudi Arabia and the UAE that found massive oil reserves in their country did not follow the same track. Saudi Arabia's GDP increased by 4,400% from 1968 to 1981, during the same period their GDP Per Capita increased by 2,300% ("Saudi Arabia GDP 1968-2023").



The UAE followed a similar pattern. Although it seems redundant to say: people need money, so they naturally stay in countries that have money and leave countries that don't. Throughout the Middle East, we can see that most countries aren't economically stable. Naturally, people are going to leave countries with un-prosperous economies (despite attempted foreign stimulation) and move to countries with stable and proven ones.

### Germany

In 1933 Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party came to power in Germany. Their hyper-nationalist ideology prompted them to invade neighboring countries for Lebensraum (living space for the Aryan race) and thereby start WWII. The war started in 1939 and ended in 1945, with Germany on the losing side, and almost all prominent Nazi political leaders dead (ie Goebbels, Bormann, and Hitler). Following the war, Germany was split into 2, on the western side they were controlled by England and America (and France to a lesser extent), and the USSR in the east ("Division of Germany: Consequences | Vaia"). This split caused Germany's economy to become divided as well. East Germany fell into a state of economic despair while under the Soviet Union. Because the industry was tied directly to the government in the USSR, all enterprises that existed before the occupation in East Germany either went out of business or were observed by the government. ("American Economic Association 2020").

In contrast, West Germany's economy, under the rest of the allied powers (who were all capitalist countries) blossomed. By introducing a new currency, German markets flourished. Not just big companies, but local shops and markets were finally able to buy resources and sell them to the public for an affordable price. Furthermore, the Marshall Plan, an economic program that America created after WW2 to stimulate the economies of newly independent and wartorn countries, helped Germany, by giving them 1.4 billion dollars (gethard), around 235 billion dollars today. Because of the amount of new business generated in West Germany, millions more jobs were created. But because a vast majority of working-age and fit men were killed during WWII, these jobs were largely left unoccupied.

### Immigration into Germany

On October 30, 1961, Germany and Turkey entered into a pact to fill the jobs in Germany with Turkish able-bodied men, whom almost all of were unmarried (Amt). This agreement stipulated that Germany would pay for Turks to migrate, and have jobs ready for them when they arrived in Germany. This rooted Turkish populations in Germany, to where now, in the modern day, 3 million Turks live in Germany ("Number of Turkish Immigrants in Germany - Dua.com - EN").

Turkish immigration into Germany could be described as "pull" immigration. As people left their country because another country was better. In contrast, "push immigration" is immigration that occurs because your home country is unstable, and you need to leave. This was the case in Syria. In 2011 the Syrian civil war started, causing a horrible

humanitarian crisis. Life in Syria was horrendous, naturally, people left in search of a better life. But the extent to which people migrated was unprecedented. 5.6 million Syrians have left Syria, making it the largest refugee crisis in the world today. Most of these refugees that left Syria went to neighboring countries, but the largest non-neighboring country to take in refugees was Germany with nearly 850,000 people or about 16% of the total refugees, as it was Angela Merkel's (Chancellor of Germany at the time) policy to take in these refugees (UNHCR).

Effects of Middle-Eastern immigration on Germany

In general, the effects of immigration on Germany have been negative. Immigration has naturally stimulated GDP growth but has lowered wages to a relatively large extent, decreasing 1,382 euros (1443 USD) annually from 2019 to 2022 ("Average Annual Wages Germany 2022"). Germany's crime rate increased a staggering 40% from 2015 to 2016 because of the refugee crisis and has not steadily recovered ("Germany Crime Rate & Statistics 1990-2022").

Responses to immigration in Germany, politically, have been negative. Naturally, when wages

are lowered and crime is increased because of immigration, people become anti-immigration.

Another effect on Germany because of this mass immigration was cultural clashes.

Very rarely will you find examples of direct conflict between Middle Eastern immigrants and

Germans, but you can see heightened animosity between the two groups in other areas, namely

religion. Germany is a predominantly Christian country while a vast majority of Middle Eastern

immigrants are Muslim. The two religions clash on a regular basis. An example of this is the

building of the central mosque in Cologne. Cologne is home to the famous Dom Cathedral,

when Muslim leaders wanted to build a mosque, Christian leaders vehemently opposed the idea

saying that such a city with a cathedral as famous as the Dom Cathedral should not be home to

the biggest mosque in Germany. Despite this, the mosque was still built, much to the dismay of

the Christian population, who got the impression they were being replaced. ("Is Islam Changing

Germany? – DW – 07/07/2017").

The effects of this decrease in support for immigration can be seen in politics. Specifically in support of the AFD. The AFD is a political party in Germany, which stands for Alternative for Deutschland (Germany). It was created originally in 2013 to oppose bailouts for indebted European countries, arguing Germany which had done nothing wrong



financially should not have liability when other European countries' economies fail. This sort of nationalism bled into the modern AFD which mainly issues immigration, and specifically stopping it (Deutsche Welle ([www.dw.com](http://www.dw.com))). In the German federal election of 2021, the AFD's results were very poor, getting only about 10.3% of national votes (Voce and Clarke). Despite this recent polls show that 21% of German voters plan on voting AFD in the next election cycle ("Germany"). It is important to note that no other political party in Germany has as strict views on immigration as the AFD, in the AFD's manifesto, sections 3-9, they suggest sending German Armed Forces to the borders to secure them(The Political Programme of the Alternative for Germany. MANIFESTO for GERMANY). Many political pundits dub the AFD as far-right and ultra-nationalistic. Most German voters believe that Germany should take in fewer refugees than they did in 2020 (S.A).

### Possible Solutions

When thinking about solutions to the immigration problems of Germany you have to take into account 3 main factors; Appeasement, Plausibility, and the Human factor.

Appeasement means a solution that appeases a majority of the natural-born population and that can be passed in the Bundestag and Bundestrat. Plausibility means a policy that can be put into practice. For instance, deporting every immigrant overnight would not be plausible as it would be impossible to deport millions of people in such a short period, and the inverse, letting every immigrant stay and having crime and lowered wages put Germany in the ground. Lastly, the human factor. For a German man living in Germany all his life, then suddenly seeing his country become filled with people of different backgrounds, it might be hard. But it's hard to argue that this outweighs the fact that these refugees were practically forced to leave because of the deplorable conditions their countries were in.

On the issue of immigration, I would propose 2 possible solutions. Borders closed to refugees and a high standard for prospective migrants. Or an EU-sponsored stabilization military. Let's evaluate the border-closed solution. It appeases the people of Germany because over 90% of them believe Germany should take in the same amount or fewer refugees (S.A). It could be passed in the Bundestag because it would restrict future refugee entry which would appease the AFD but it would also allow all undocumented refugees to stay in Germany as well as allow some immigrants to still enter Germany which would appease further pro-immigration parties like SPD und CDU.

It is plausible because it doesn't propose anything drastic, there would have to be a minor mobilization of the military to enter ports for refugees to stop entry. But other than that there would only be changes to immigration law. I would propose 3 stricter guidelines for immigration laws. 1-Require immigrants to either have a bachelor's degree or higher or have been accepted into a German college institution, in which you will be required to complete your degree. This would ensure the democratic future of Germany, as every functioning republic must have an educated population. 2-Have a C1 level of proficiency in the German language, typically A1 or B1 is required, but to streamline cultural

integration for immigrants, I would recommend a C1 level. 3- Have no leniency for previous criminal convictions, currently, Germany has leniency for prior criminal convictions for immigrants, in that immigration officers can accept a criminal if they deem them rehabilitated, but to ensure a completely safe society, I would suggest Germany lets no one in with criminal convictions. With that said the last part of the criteria that this policy has to pass is the human factor, in my opinion, this is the biggest obstacle. Since this policy would stop refugees from entering Germany, it would hurt their livelihood to a large extent. But when forming policy, at some point, you have to factor your people in and recognize that your country cannot be a sanctuary any longer to refugees because it would lead to Her imminent demise. Furthermore, it is extremely forgiving to the millions of refugees that Germany took in, by granting them citizenship and thereby a new opportunity. It is also important to note that in 2015 Angela Merkel accepted refugees from the Syrian refugee crisis and was the only main European country to do so, therefore it would be very unfair to then deport those same refugees under a new administration. Because of this, I would argue that it takes into account the human factor and is overall more forgiving and lenient than it is harsh.

Secondly, I would suggest a more unique solution. Create a European Stabilization Military. The European Stabilization Military (ESM for short) would be a temporary military made up of member nations' military forces. The ESM would include an army (including tanks and artillery), an air force, and a navy. It would act as a stabilization force that would invade Middle-Eastern countries that abuse their citizens and thereby cause a refugee crisis like Syria, and overthrow their government, then establish a proxy government. By now you are probably thinking that this sounds a lot like America's policy during the 2000's and 2010's. The difference between them is that the ESM would be for the sole purpose of stabilization, whereas America was trying to eliminate specific terrorist threats. Originally the U.S. was in the Middle East to eliminate the Al-Qaeda threat but it later became about other factors. The Department of Defense does claim to have the goal of stabilization, but the U.S. is still in the Middle East because of large contracting deals and the abundance of oil.

The benefit of the ESM is that it would establish proxy governments similar to the power dynamic of America and occupied Germany post-WW2. A government under the supervision of their liberating country while still being democratic. By doing this you would cut off the various refugee crises in the Middle East from their source, thereby securing your country and ensuring the safe future of people of impoverished countries. When you evaluate this solution you will see that within Germany it would appease more pro-immigration parties because they are mainly focused on being pro-immigration from a humanitarian standpoint, and this solution would (theoretically) be a huge humanitarian success. It would also appease the anti-immigration parties, namely the AFD because it would exponentially decrease immigration into Germany. It would also appease the German people because immigration would decrease. But is this solution plausible? In my opinion, this is the biggest obstacle to this solution. It would be relatively hard for member nations of the EU to coordinate an army of this magnitude, and even harder to

go into foreign countries and fight a war or multiple wars. Despite this, I think it is plausible for 2 main reasons. Firstly French president Macron as well as former German Chancellor Angela Merkel have expressed support for a European army (although not specifically for this reason). Secondly, it would stimulate not only the economies of liberated countries but also those of liberating countries (the European countries). Because it would stimulate these economies it is likely to be able to gain support in the form of funding from EU countries' governments. Lastly, the human factor. The effects of this would be unprecedentedly good for the peoples of war-torn countries like Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, as it would free them from their instability and provide them with a democratic way of life.

#### Conclusion

In conclusion, I would suggest the first of the two options, although if both policies worked, the latter would lead to better outcomes, it's the issue of plausibility that limits it. Furthermore, its ethics are severely questionable as invading a sovereign nation is very serious, and some argue that the negative effects Germany has experienced don't warrant a unilateral invasion. Because of this, the first option should be implemented because it is the most plausible and (if it worked perfectly) it would have great effects on the German economy, the German political climate, refugees currently in Germany, and lastly, German society.

Student Name: Giselle Silva

Grade: 12

School: Klein Cain High School

Title: Ode to Teenage Girls

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Key: Gold Key

Educator:

The theory of social perception confuses me—not the theory itself, I passed my sophomore sociology course with a near-perfect score. The oddity lies in its truth, how blatant and obvious it seems once explained.

Social perception is why my mother enjoys the banter between my friends in our kitchen, mixing a discussion of disorganized drama and intellectual insight, but finds the two girls talking in front of us at Forever 21 insufferable. Social perception is why bitter influencers feel the need to dissect every piece of media girls enjoy and declare it annoying and insipid despite their misunderstanding of Fight Club. Social perception is why my sister's ironic misogyny pulls me to the floor in laughter while my ex-boyfriend's similar comedy routines triggered small sounds of irritation.

It's seen in strained smiles, a facade against the beliefs of people who hate you, who invalidate you at the smallest instance. It's seen in the disinterest of those who couldn't be bothered to let you into a debate simply because of the pitch or your voice, tendency to use filler words, or other slights of femininity that have already discredited whatever argument would've come out of your mouth.

Perception is everything. It is your mouthpiece, your facade, your personality. Perception puts your persona on a pedestal and waits eagerly to see it fall.

"If you want to be loved, you must first submit to the mortifying ordeal of being known," is a quote I frequently find in my mouth. No person can love an ineffable monolith. No person can truly know a milquetoast yes-man. And yet, finding the space to be your true zeitgeist of experiences is always a gamble. Perception is reality, but a true presentation of oneself is difficult to manage in a world that criminalizes the slightest nuisance.

Weirdly enough, I think that's the magic of being a teenage girl—the magic of being written off and declared annoying before you open your mouth. Every expectation is already shunted for the belief that you're just as pointless, inexperienced, and consequently irrelevant as your interests.

It's an equally great excuse for making terrible decisions as it is presenting the true self.

"I'm a teenage girl!" My sister says, resting her head against the pink-brown mottled pattern of my comforter. The golden orange light of the lamp sitting on my desk casts her pained smile in strange shadows, and I tilt forward, palms under my chin and elbows to the mattress. Her hands explode outward in an offshoot variation of jazz hands.

"He shouldn't be talking about that stuff in front of me; I'm fourteen!" She shouts, a disbelieving tinge entering her voice.

Nodding furiously, I agree. In the era of teenage girlhood, she's walking through the younger phases. It's her friends in the grades above her whom she'll ask for rides to the local soda shop instead of peers she sees in class every day. High school is still a new endeavor to her, a large and off-putting mess of unnavigable corridors. Her inside jokes have backstories that don't redden her face to tell. The measures of freedom, of bittersweet-tasting independence she's reached, are smaller than mine, though they are fast growing.

Still, his problems are older than hers, and he should know that.

"Do you think he—" I cut myself off, careful. "Do you want to psychoanalyze him?

Because we can, but it doesn't really matter, does it?"

She shakes her head, and I admire her a little. If there were a weekly report that averaged how often I thought and therapized over semi-attractive boys with a modicum of trauma, hers would pale in comparison to mine. Her time is too valuable to deal it out as I do, like a truly terrible gambler. No, she deals like she's playing blackjack, careful and concise. She utilizes her girlhood with forethought, reading case studies from my guinea pig test runs with thoughtful consideration. Her cross into this new phase doesn't unnerve me as my own did.

Listening to her rant in and out about her freshman woes, sticky fingers of sadness grip at me, quick and hard. I know I won't be there as she was for me, crashing onto her bed in a mess of giggles and hopefulness. As I draft college packing lists and cram for scholarship applications, there's little time to think about my waning presence in her life, and her descent into teenage girlhood makes me mourn my own.

Unfortunately, I am on the outs with my girlhood. School is nearly up, and my good-student, confirmation-biased reputation enables a bad habit of dipping from class. Houston's warehouse district invites me in, eager to decorate their hole-in-the-wall galleries with student artists mature enough to hold a conversation but young enough to take a 40% cut. Parents have checked out in light of legal adulthood, and a friend with a silver Buick drives me to the skate park for a fundamental lesson in falling off a longboard. She guides me through the backstreet trails that weaken our conviction to personal safety, and as we crash in karmic succession, I feel the most alive, the most teenage girl I have ever felt.

The peak of my sister's teenage girlhood will look different than mine: this I know. Though our house, parents, and entire lives align in location and experience, I'd be remiss to forget she is not me. The digital art room won't be her cafeteria, and perhaps she won't have estranged confidants who threatened to pipebomb the school in "a private Discord server." Maybe she won't skin her hands and knees on concrete as she crashes from a borrowed skateboard. Maybe she won't get in her friend's silver Buick, laughing and scrapbooking pictures of two scraped hands in different shades of brown to her Instagram. Maybe she won't leave her classes for the friendly room a floor down, and perhaps she'll find her talents on a stage instead of standing in front of its frame, listening to the insufferably inaccurate critic next to her who took one introductory art history

course in college and suddenly achieved artistic enlightenment. She'll experience youth just as I did and yet entirely differently.

It's that thought that brings me back to the present, watching her like the ravens, Huginn and Muninn, while I still can. Eventually, I and my lingering presence will fade from her as her world grows onwards and outwards, and she'll learn if she doesn't already know, that the status of "teen girl" allows almost any behavior except those shown in Jennifer's Body.

More than anything, I want her to be an annoyance, as an annoyance in this world signifies an honest presence. An annoyance is not someone who hides from conflict for the sake of the odd passerby's comfort level, and certainly not the comfortability of the boy we discussed that night. Hopefully, she'll learn to take pleasure in it, to laugh in the face of anyone who dares call her so. Perchance she'll even find the pride to admit to it with the sort of conviction I won't master before my girlhood is past.

Regardless of my inability to claim it, I know I am an annoyance. I am every too-loud laugh that spills from my lips. I am the jeans marked up from paint mishaps. I am the blood on the sidewalk that dripped from scraped knees and the cracking voice on my phone's camera roll. I am the skinned hands and bright smile and endless babbling about "—he made me tea, and it was kind of bad? But it was so sweet, Livi!" I am the cryptic song suggestions and self-fulfilling Instagram notes. I am the girl someone else's mother criticizes for her thin hoop earrings or vulgar tone; believe me when I say that I am just like other girls.

I am a teenage girl, and for the weeks I still hold that title, social perception has no hold on me. Somehow, the annoyance with teen girls is so ridiculous that any transgression of that nature is invalidated upon reception to my brain. But when 3:00 pm hits on December 23rd, I'm ready to hand the mantle down to my sister as I hand down everything else in life, be they clothes, car keys, and eventually, as she must do with our youngest sister, the status of teenage-girl-in-residence.

Time doesn't stop, and unfortunately, I don't hold the privilege of eternal youth. Nostalgia dares to pull me into this balance of childlike responsibility and edging independence, but the road of time's a one-way. Growing up is a one-way, and while I may hold onto the allure of my girlhood, teenage girls don't belong on college campuses. As my boots click onto my chosen institution's concrete, I know the ghost of this girl who joyfully skins her knees and flounces through her high school like she owns it will fade into my soul, a phantom imprint against the woman I'm growing into. Teenage girlhood will live on with each visit my sisters claim they'll make, with every unnecessary drama that unfolds, and with the brightness that succeeds me; but womanhood, with all its aches and pains, draws me in closer.

"Woman" is a frightening word. It does not hold the neutrality of "man," nor does it forgive the way "girl" does. "Woman" comes with heavy responsibilities and negative connotations. "Woman" is what boys jamming the hallways like blood clots call teachers who tell them to move along. "Woman" is a man yelling at his wife when she accidentally mixes the colors with the whites. "Woman" is an insult no girl wants to be called.

I hesitate at womanhood, with all its social perceptions and nagging liabilities and few rewards. The nostalgia on this one-way road dares to draw me back into the playful phase I'm signing off from, but wishing naivete to myself is both impossible and disconcerting. Women who left teenage girlhood more than a decade ago still refer to themselves as "girls," and something about that disquiets me. Is it the fear of deepening lines around our eyes? The forgiveness our world holds for adorable, annoying girls, but not women who, for lack of better phrasing, should have their shit together? Could it be the push to motherhood before we're ready, ascribing every emotion to another?

Those promises, and more waiting to make their introduction, present themselves on silver platters of dubious quality, but despite that, womanhood holds features of goodness entirely separate from girlhood. Girls cannot be powerful, nor can they be independent. They hold onto the parents and mentors of the past with a tightened grip, and I no longer see myself clutching to my mother's skirts. Girls do not have credit cards or a house in their name. Others' financial security is where they find their own, always in that anxious reliance, in dependence irritating growth.

Girlhood has its good turns, yes, but womanhood is not something to fear. It can't be, not when there's a legacy of sisters behind me who are walking the same trail. I refuse to lead them into the rut of women who fear themselves, but comfort doesn't rest with the willful ignorance of permanent girlhood. Different experiences wait for different maturations.

Colleges invite me into their aged halls, and opportunities to weave a web of independent security beckons further. Teenage girlhood, with all its freedom and contradictions, is an experience that I'm undoubtedly grieving, but for myself and for those after, it is a mindset I must leave. I will not be the guinea pig who teaches her young sister to look at her teen body and mourn it with all she is, or show her that an ascent into womanhood is an ascent to suffocate everything "girl"—the joy, the excitement, the wonder—inside of her. The woman is just the girl's final form, and those who see otherwise are simply holding the wrong social perceptions.



Student Name: Karla Guevara  
 Grade: 12  
 School: Klein Forest High School  
 Title: Pretty Girls  
 Category: Poetry  
 Key: Gold Key  
 Educator: Danae Perez

My Pinterest feed is full of pretty girls.  
 Girls dressed in lace stockings and white iridescent pearls.  
 Girls with luminant skin and flawless figures.  
 With looks so divine, bodies sculpted, made to be entwined.  
 They've been Kissed by the sun's succulent rays and blessed by the moon's mystique!  
 I mean, they've gotta be, just look at the number of all those saves!  
 Oh wouldn't it be grand if, I too, could look and feel the way these hypnotic babes did?  
 Walk around and feel my silk skin glimmer in the eyes of others.  
 looking exotic, nevermore becoming aphotic.  
 To Have the luxury of other fellow pretty girl look at me and go,  
 "Oh hey there, twin!", only then would it finally be considered my hard earned win.  
 Now wouldn't that just be grand..?

Instead of feeling aggravation creep within as I watch a pretty girl apply lip gloss in a  
 restroom mirror.

(Ooh man..)  
 I mean, why bother, why continue?  
 Why adorn such perfection when it's already there?  
 Why waste time here when you could be out and about basking in everyone's awe?  
 Lore people in, like sirens songs.  
 Instead you stand and beat your face raw, making me want to cry and gnaw at my claws  
 as I watch  
 You make us regular folk sulk as we wait for our turn in line  
 waiting patiently as the time wastes by  
 Feeling my mind reeling, dealing with these ugly thoughts.  
 My Skin peeling, I'm sneering at my own feelings  
 ugh!

But you see, Scrolling through these photos, I'm trapped in titanium trance.  
 I'm Captivated by their immaculate gleam, chiseled features, porcelain skin, dewy glow, I  
 woefully touch the wrongdoings on my face.



Hyper Focusing on each blemish and smudge, bump and scuff, I'm left with no choice but to smear sand and clay into my face, my desperate attempt at filling in the cracks and smoothing out the base.

After all, even Greek statues started off as nothing more than blocks of marble, right? Like Narcissus to his pond, I long to fond over my eternal gleam  
Oh Morpheus, won't you bring forth my dreams and help fuel my meek esteem?  
If Aphrodite rose from the sea, I have sunken and become an absentee

Then again, It wouldn't be all that hard to reconstruct the pieces.

Peel back my layers and iron out the creases.

I'd Go back online and gather up what others share

save this one here and this one there. This will be inspiration for my hair, that for skin care, this for my clothes and shoes, perhaps some tattoos, and oh yeah, that one for my nose.

Slowly but surely I'll reconstruct myself.

Wrap myself up in sequin scattered bows as I present myself to others, in hopes that my progress shows.

See, I can Frankenstein myself out of femininity

Meanwhile Makeup and clothing become my epiphany

Don't you see?

Pinterest and pretty girls have become the death of me.

Student Name: Chi Pham

Grade: 12

School: Klein Forest High School

Title: Second Banana

Category: Flash Fiction

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Danae Perez

As someone who has always feared rejection more than death, it feels like a curse how aspirations of Hollywood glamor have manifested itself front and center in my mind. I should've listened to my mother, who would've told me to do something mundane like waitressing at some déclassé restaurant a family friend owned in Chinatown, and honestly, I'm starting to give it some thought. While a monotonous life it would make, at the very least I wouldn't ever worry about coming second banana to another white actress at an audition again. Contrary to what my occupation, or more so desired occupation, may have you think, I reside in a small, worn-down apartment with loud neighbors, walls in need of several fresh coats of paint, and flooring so uneven that it nearly constitutes a hill range. I believe the term is "humble beginnings."

At the moment, I anxiously await a callback from one of the hundreds of auditions I've been to. My name is Bai, but please, call me Joanie. My mother would've hated that I go by Joanie nowadays, and if she was here, would tell me how beautiful the name Bai is. I hope she understands that it's necessary for business—who's ever heard of an actress with a Chinese first name in Hollywood? I try not to think about how disappointed my dead mother would be, but it feels like she's a cloud in my mind.

I hear a ring. Almost automatically, I shoot up from my stained sofa, reaching for the phone. The front side of my hands starts to butter. I position the phone with my ear against my shoulder and try to slow my breathing. Could it finally be happening? A voice forms on the other line.

"Hello, this is Amanda calling from Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer," the woman on the other side begins, "I'm speaking to Joanie Kwan, correct?" I nearly dropped the phone.

"Y-yes."

"Well, congratulations. The directors of Ms. Chinatown appreciated your audition as Yin Lang."

This time, I actually dropped the phone.

"However," she continues, "we are only considering you, among others. You understand what a callback is, yes?"

"Yes, of course," I responded, "when is this callback?"

"Tomorrow. Half past noon. Any other questions?"

"No."

Amanda hangs up.

I chose a solid red dress, a pair of matching heels, and a fascinator—an ensemble I'd see Ms. Chinatown herself wearing. I lift my feet up heel first as I exit my home towards the taxi to look the part of a Hollywood starlet. Just as my body reaches the car seat, I lay my head against the window and have my first moment of rest in days. All feels correct.

\*\*\*

The next day, sitting in the lobby of MGM Studios, I study my possible competition. First, a teenage girl. I shouldn't underestimate anyone, but she's clearly no Ms. Chinatown. I looked over to the other woman in the room. It felt like dying. She was unbelievably stunning, both looking and dressing the part of a glitterati. I could see myself in that restaurant uniform already. Get a grip, Joanie. Think this through. She couldn't possibly be here for the role of a Chinese girl, right?

A lady holding a clipboard steps out of a door, clearing her throat.

"Joanie Kwan and Romy Dietrich?"

I stand up, as well as the mysterious woman.

"Here," Romy responds. She lifts her heel up just as I did before in her stride towards the door—the only difference is that it must come naturally to her.

"H-here," I responded. I try to exude the same starlet energy walking towards the door, but I feel more like a waitress walking toward a table.

Romy smiles at me. I feel her looking into my soul.

"May the best actress win," Romy says.

As I step into the audition room, all nerves slowly shake off. The men from the audition before call Romy up first, directing me to sit in a plastic yellow chair. I hear her read the script in a slight accent I can only describe as faux-oriental, the way boys would mock me in elementary school.

"I love New York, but I miss—" she hesitates, "..Cha-awng-cuh-ching?" Chongqing. I couldn't help but feel grateful for her slip-up. She finishes her audition, strutting towards the seat next to mine and giving me a smile worthy of its own Academy Award.

The directors call my name. My stomach turns into cheese.

"Whenever you're ready," the one in the middle said. I take in as much oxygen as I can. Now as Ms. Chinatown, I begin to repeat my lines from memory.

"Well, I love New York," I notice the directors frowning, "but I miss Chongqing most of all."

"Sorry," the one on the left interjected, "you said the line fine, but we'd like for you to read the part of Hui Wei instead." They hand me a much thinner script and I try to hide my confusion and retain my composure. Hui Wei, the maid? I glanced through several pages before I began to open my lips, but it wasn't the lines I planned on saying.

"Was there any reason you didn't ask Dietrich to read this part as well?"

The man sitting on the left gives me a look—one I've received since elementary school when I know too much and don't hide it.

"It was because we'd think you'd be better suited for the role more than Ms. Dietrich," he began, "you should really take it as a compliment."

"Why couldn't you tell me this on the phone?"

The directors looked as if my words were lemons souring their ears.

"I'm sorry, are we having an issue?"

For a moment, I considered swallowing my pride just to finally get a role, but would my mother have wanted this?

"Congratulations, Romy."

I don't bother to hear what they have to say before I head toward the exit, with my eyes filled with the heat of summer. Well, there's always next time.

Student Name: Katelyn Arciniega  
 Grade: 8  
 School: Doerre Intermediate School  
 Title: Selling Happiness  
 Category: Flash Fiction  
 Key: Gold Key  
 Educator: Melissa Reisdorf

"I want what I deserve," the girl said, edging dangerously forward. Her grip on her dagger tightened with every word she spoke. The man to whom she was threatening stumbled backward, eyeing the dagger. How could something so small change so much? Stop the beating of a heart? Steal breath from a throat? How could something as small as the dagger she was holding, as small as a butter knife, wield so much power? "And what is that?" the man asked meekly. The girl, all shadows and edges up till now, stepped closer, revealing the glossiness shining in her eyes. And the fear. "I want my happiness back!" she screamed. The man pressed himself against the wall as if it would shield him from the young girl's fury.

"I-I can't give you that," he finally managed, "Once the trade is made it can't be und-" he was interrupted by the girl howling.

"NO REFUNDS!" he persisted over her shrieks and wails. The girls fell to her knees as her screams petered out to desperate whimpers. "Please... give it back... it's mine... you took..." her voice dissolved into sobs. She thrust forward the dagger, but there was no energy behind her stab. Her arm just hung there listlessly, drooping, as if she was offering the dagger. The man snatched it away from her. "I deserve-"

She was silenced by a quick slash to the gut. Blood droplets sprayed from the wound as the girl dropped like a rag doll, the red soaking through her shirt. The man slid the knife into his belt, stalking out of the alleyway, not even glancing back to see if the girl was dead. As he turned the corner he tapped on a mechanism inside his ear. "Disruption has been taken care of," he growled.

He was wrong.

Back in the alley the girl was lying in a puddle of dark blood, struggling with every raspy breath, but even in her delirious haze, she still murmured, "I want... Drystan back..."

...

They took my happiness. I traded it away. I wish I could claim I didn't know what I was doing. But that would be a lie. I knew exactly what I was doing as I walked into that office. As they strapped me into that chair. As they pressed the machine against my temples. Even as the blinding white overwhelmed me and I succumbed into the glare. I knew what I was doing when I threatened that man in the alley, even though my mind was clouded by painkillers. I knew what I was doing, I simply thought that giving it up

was worth the reward. Or that whatever life I was living couldn't get any worse. It was probably the latter. To anyone else it would be impossible to grasp. A girl, trading away her happiness for a wad of cash. But when taking into account all the facts of my story. All the emotions I was feeling, I would hope that my actions wouldn't be considered unthinkable. After all, many have done it before me. And many will do it after. Trading away certain attributes, mental and emotional, for the money. Or, in the case of the rich, buying certain desirable attributes. A dash of wit, a sprinkle of kindness. Customizing their personality until it was to their liking. A perfect image in their mind.

A little while ago, before my procedure, my brother, Drystan, had traded away his happiness. The most desirable trait. Because happiness isn't just an emotion. It's a state of mind. And some people would kill to possess it. Or at least, pay a lot of money. And Drystan needed that money, our family was sick, dying of a virus that had struck our area, including my mother, two of our siblings, and me. He needed that money to purchase medical supplies and we had nowhere close to what was needed. Driven to desperation, he gave away the one thing he had left to give. His mind.

I remember when he told me his plan, I called him crazy and warned against it. But the words I uttered could not fix the fear in his eyes or the sickly pallor of my skin. Now his smile is only a flitting image in our memories, his laugh a haunting bell in our dreams. I miss them. I miss him. But most of all... he doesn't deserve it. I know the world's not fair. I've always known that. It's always been painfully clear. But this play of the cards seemed like an especially cruel slap from the universe. I figured that if I traded away my happiness I would have enough money to purchase his happiness. So, I, driven to desperation, gave away the one thing I had left to give. My mind.

...

Drystan was the one who found me in the alleyway, lying in a pool of my own blood. He propped me up gently, laying my head in his lap, cradling it ever so slightly. I stared up at him, blinking rapidly.

"Drystan? I got... money... we can buy back your happiness... now... you can finally smile." I said. He stared at me for a long time. "Deidre," he started, his voice cracking, "We have to get this wound checked out." He helped me to my feet and we stumbled forward together. "We need to get your happiness back first." I persisted. He paused our slow pace for a moment to look at me, "Deidre, listen to me. In these past few weeks I've learned something. Those scientists in those labs can steal a lot of things from us. But never truly our happiness." He lightly squeezed my arm, "Because we can always create more." And when he said that I knew that I never had really lost Drystan in the first place. Then he put his arm around my shoulder and we walked out of the alleyway.

Student Name: Keeley Hudson  
 Grade: 11  
 School: Klein Cain High School  
 Title: TEETH.  
 Category: Science Fiction & Fantasy  
 Key: Gold Key  
 Educator:

Excerpt: The Daily Word

"On October 27th, 5:49pm, the victim's mother called her local police station. In the call, audibly distressed, she describes the victim's body as almost unrecognizable. Aside from the operator's attempts to assess the situation and understand the scene, most of what is said is nearly indecipherable.

Authorities are maintaining utmost privacy for the victim and her grieving family during this harrowing time. The identity of the victim, time of death, and cause of death has remained undisclosed."

8:47am

Coated in a thin layer of blood and slightly withered from my venture this morning, my hard copy of Greek Mythology: A Study, would never quite be the same. I didn't exactly mourn the pages that laid before me, as ordering another wouldn't fare particularly difficult, and class had just begun a reading on Theseus, which had never been of my interests anyways.

I stepped out of the stall and placed the book back in my bag, though pocketed away from my belongings that had been left undamaged. The absence of a mirror in the bathroom left me hoping there was no blood left on my face, as I scrubbed away at my crusted finger tips.

As the red washed away, I thought about all that had happened in the last few hours. I'd been restless the night before, sweating like a sinner in church, and nauseous as I'd laid in bed. I knew the library opened early, so I'd gotten up before my alarm and walked there. I think that's when the pain started. It was like my gums had been screaming at me to do something, but I was too exhausted to do much of anything about it. I had found a place to study, opened my book... and that was all I remembered before waking up to bloodied pages and a missing tooth. As I recounted it, it all sounded ridiculous.

I took my phone out of my bag to dial my mom, before seeing the time and remembering it was still fairly early, and she'd be waking up in a few hours anyways, so the call could wait. With my breath still shaky from sprinting to the restroom, and my mind completely hazy after a lack of sleep and an eerie situation, I decided to make my way back to my apartment.

Excerpt: Interview with Officer on the Scene: The Feud (Local News)

The Feud: Can you speak on the nature of the injuries? We understand privacy, but so little has been released.

Officer Jonas Barley: I can confirm that the girl was found in a shocking state, though I will not go into detail at this time. We are working with forensics team experts to better understand the situation at hand. It is best to approach such with sensitivity.

The Feud: There's rumored to have been some sort of supernatural or unearthly involvement within this case. Care to comment?

Barley: Our investigation has remained grounded in evidence and fact. Right now, our primary concern is the victim and her grieving loved ones.

The Feud: Of course. Any advice for those reading at home?

Barley: All we want is to bring some clarity into this case. If anyone has any information regarding the situation, please come forward. Remain patient and cooperative with us as we work through these trying times together.

12:26pm

I clutched the edges of the sink, my knuckles white, drops of blood sputtering from my mouth and staining the porcelain crimson. I struggled to find the tooth with my tongue before spitting it out, watching it roll and rattle until it hit the fastened drain. I took my attention away from the sink, allowing my eyes to adjust to the girl staring back at me. In an attempt to find a sign of myself in the reflection, I squeezed my eyes shut, the messy hair and deep-set shoulders disappearing from my vision, and opened them with caution, a sigh of relief escaping me as I recognized the control I still had over my body. That was enough.

Blood dripped from my bottom lip to my chin, some already dried and crusted over my skin, some still becoming accustomed to the air. My eyes were sunken, discolored, glazed over, like a visible absence watching me from the other side of the mirror. I was paler than I'd ever seen myself, tainted only by the dribbling red. Sweat dripped down the side of my head and nausea hung in the room around me, accompanied by the kind of dizzy that makes you feel like you've just been hit by a truck. And, somehow, I felt better than I had in hours; like I might be a person again despite it all.

I ran my tongue along every tooth until I reached the vacancy in the bottom row. Then it's sister at the top. I touched the bloody gums with my finger, my movements slow as if they couldn't keep up with my thoughts.

The bathroom was silent, safe for a clock ticking above the door. 12:35. Only 12:35. I swear it felt like this, whatever it was, had ruled my life for weeks, not less than a day.

I pulled a towel from a rack in the corner and ran it under the faucet, then scraped at every bit of red left on my face. The newly open space in my mouth still oozed here and there, but I figured it would stop soon, and I had bigger problems than a little bit of blood. Such as, the excess of blood from just moments before. One tooth? When you're young and you lose a tooth there's never nearly that much gore involved, right? Was I going crazy? It just didn't make sense. None of it did.



A twenty-year old in perfect health losing two teeth with less than a few hours in between, and seemingly without any cause, was unheard of. I pinched at the tooth next to the drain and examined it, trying not to think about the fact that it was secured safely in my skull a little over forty minutes beforehand. For the most part, it was still stained a little pink, but other than that, nothing was necessarily wrong with it. But that was the issue all the same. It wasn't broken, cracked, rotting, chipped... not even a little. Its roots were still fully intact, and though I wasn't a dentist, I would say it's condition was perfectly fine. There had to be a reasonable explanation. I feared if I couldn't figure it out it would simply drive me insane.

Excerpt: Echo Broadcasting

"Girl Found Dead in Her Apartment: Cause of Death Unexplained and Horrific, Sending Shockwave through Community:

Local law enforcement has been especially busy these past few days, regarding the mysterious death Tuesday evening. Recent discoveries by journalists at Echo Broadcasting have revealed that the girl was found in a pool of her own blood, with several bones and ligaments protruding from her body. With so few details provided by those on the case thus far, this uncovering shifts the case from understandably confusing to baffling and eerie.

A large portion of those discussing the case believe there is some sort of paranormal involvement, while others state that as more evidence comes out, everything will be explained. Whether this fares true will only be determined by investigators as they move forward with this case"

3:57pm

Back in the bathroom again. The lights were too bright, white seering into my eyes like a branding iron on cattle. I dropped to my knees on the tile floor, grabbing the toilet before pulling my hair back and vomiting. I'm not sure if it was all blood or just the discoloration of whatever I had eaten last, before my organs decided to give up on me.

I sat there for a few minutes, dizzy and trying to get back into a better state of mind, but the fog was perpetual. The lights. I had to turn off the lights. The longer they stayed on, the weaker I felt. My head pounded in their presence and tears welled up in my eyes every time I looked down at the gray tile, newly adorned red. I didn't want to see it anymore, I needed to turn the lights off. Get the pain to stop.

As I tried to stand, my limbs felt like they were bending inwards, like I'd oiled up my joints and now, they too, had had enough. I gripped the side of the sink and almost threw up as I straightened out my back.

My spine. The visceral feeling of my spine pressing against my muscles, my skin. It was going to rip out of me. Just like the teeth. My teeth. It was going to free itself from the cage of my body and replace itself. Just like the teeth. I had to turn the lights off.

I nearly threw myself forward trying to take a step. Itching. Itching to look at the mirror. To see my bones come apart from my soul and cackle in my wake. My head slowly ticked its

way towards the reflection like a broken doll. And of course, it did almost break me, seeing her standing there, watching me. Matching my movements. I almost expected her to lurch forward and grab me, sucking me in and taking the pain away at last.

But she didn't. I was almost shocked to see the reflection's arm move towards me as mine reached for the mirror. My hand was still bloody, imprinting on the glass. So pale, all color drained from me completely. My white t-shirt would never be the same again, stained by a dark red streak from the neck line to my waist. And the eyes, so soulless and desolate, so utterly alone. I knew what came next. I knew that once I looked at what hid behind my tinged lips I wouldn't be able to go on. And yet, I had to know. Before I turned the lights off, I needed to know.

My lips parted from one another. Slowly. It was as if I saw everything in the wrong order. First my gums, then my tongue, even the roof of my mouth, all before I looked at my teeth.

Most were normal, almost irregularly straight and bolted into my mouth. Others were on the brink of damnation. Wiggling and writhing. But there were no empty spaces. Instead, in the place of the five or six already lost, were some of the most vile things I had ever seen. They were jagged, disfigured, crooked, and gray with stains of something I couldn't quite place. Looking at them now, they were completely obscure looking next to the other teeth, but every time I blinked or took a second glance, for a moment they looked normal again. For a moment.

Somehow, I understood that they were teeth, just... misplaced, and somehow attached to me. Despite attempts to move them with tongue, they stayed firmly rooted in their place.

My head began to spin once more and I was harshly reminded of my original goal. At this point, the lights were just a swift motion away from being turned off, but I feared my shoulder might detach from its socket with any movement too sudden. The last thing I needed was another piece of me falling apart. Though my shoes felt weighted by the ton and my eyelids grew heavier by the second, I took two more steps towards the lightswitch before inching my hand up the wall, and flicking off the room's electricity.

Almost immediately, the atmosphere changed completely. I felt my body relax. As the tension released, I dropped to my knees, stifling sobs. Though parts of me ached, it felt more like an aftermath than anything else. Nothing made sense. I curled up against the bathroom floor, fastening my arms around my stomach. I could feel my gums starting to throb as my cheek pressed against the cold tile. It didn't matter. I felt like I was going to be okay, like there was a chance I wasn't going to die in this dinky, blood ridden apartment, like I had thought I might mere minutes before.

Excerpt: The Harrowing Podcast

"With sorrow in my heart I am discussing a recent scene here tonight, November 6th, to report on a deeply horrific situation that has not sat right with anyone upon hearing word of it.

Just a few days ago, a girl was found dead in her own apartment, wounded nearly beyond recognition. It is said that her body was bloodied and bruised, the injuries sustained only able to be described as absolutely putrid. As more details are developed, I become more sick to my stomach. If you would like to read up on the situation, I suggest 'The Daily Word,' as they're an unbiased news channel with consistent updates and respect to those grieving right now. Personally, it is difficult for me to even try to describe the scene myself, so I'll leave that here. Let's move on."

5:13pm

I sat there for what felt like hours, though from what I could see in the dimly lit room, the clock above the door stated otherwise. Eventually, I decided there were a few things to get done now that I was fully mobile again. Calling my mom was number one on the list, quickly followed by any form of a doctor's appointment.

My left arm lifted to grab hold of the sink, my sweaty palms struggling to find much grip before settling on a place to anchor myself. As I stood, my bones shifted. Everything felt rotten. Completely and utterly rotten.

The pain surged again. Everywhere. Worse than before. I screamed, agony taking form in my body and nesting wherever it pleased. My blood ran thick through my veins, my joints strained against my muscles, attempting to escape from my body, their mortal prison. My back hurt most of all, as my ribs and vertebrae pushed on my tendons, slowly, as if to test their strength before deciding to rip through them. Three teeth, drenched in blood, clattered against the ground, as if to prove just how helpless I was.

The dizziness engulfing my mind grew overwhelming, the only thing keeping me from passing out, ironically, was the pain. I wanted to succumb to the darkness behind my eyelids more than one could put into words. Yet I laid there, wide awake, thrashing on the bathroom floor, praying something would put a stop to the seething pain that scorched every fiber and cartilage that graced my being.

I don't think I understood what was happening when it began, but I felt it. Felt my spine slowly peek through my skin, starting from the top. As it did, a numbness ran through my abdomen. The shock gave me a moment to open my mind. A moment to marvel at the fact that I was somehow still alive.

My ribs made their way to the surface next. I knew there was nothing I could do, so I simply surrendered to the notion that I would be spending whatever time I had left to live defeated and checking off every bone that made its exit. I thought about my teeth, how in their place grew grimey distorted versions of what they once were. Maybe that would happen to the rest of my body. Maybe I would wake up tomorrow as a renewed vessel to my brain, like the ship of Theseus, however the tale goes.

My knees pierced the walls that held them in hell. Hell. Maybe that's what this was. Or maybe this was some messed up visceral nightmare, or undiscovered disease. I don't want to know what that mortality rate looks like.

My hips. The pain came in waves now, highlighting each part of me as if I was taking a tour of all the bits of my body that had worked up the courage to rip through their enclosures.

My eyes began to close. Finally. I didn't want to hold on anymore. A white glaze flashed across the underside of my eyelids. A muffled scream hit my eardrums. It didn't make any sense.

A sharp pain surged through my mouth, running along my gums. There was no feeling left in my body, with the exception of my teeth, disfigured and distorted, having replaced themselves nearly completely by now. I let myself sink into my skin, my mind being the last thing to go. No more suffering. No more questions. No more worry. All replaced by their own absence.

Excerpt: The Daily Word

"Today marks November 15th, roughly three weeks since the first report on this situation. Very little has been confirmed since then, save for the victim's age, just twenty years old. With the discussion on this terrible incident coming to a close, and so few questions answered, The Daily Word implores any readers to give their minds time to rest. Keep this young girl alive in your hearts, and her family, in your thoughts and prayers."

Student Name: Chi Pham

Grade: 12

School: Klein Forest High School

Title: Terminal Path (Vietnam; 1968)

Category: Poetry

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Danae Perez

after the Art Workers' Coalition's "Q. And babies? A. And babies" poster

1. I eat / only until I am full, / yet the men / who drink blood / of lamb like wine / can never feel their hunger satiated. / When blood becomes interstitial, / seeping through / the only soil / my feet have ever felt, / and mothers, brothers, / daughters, / sisters, and sons / lie lifeless / in interwoven stacks like / a flock of sheep sleeping tightly together, / and the killing floor / is a rainforest—vast, wet / and what was home is now / an abattoir / of all we will ever know, / and you could try to / run, / but no one does, / tell me, / what is there left to do / but walk the path / that God has made for me?
2. In the still of cruelty, / Sin / becomes afterthought. / Warfare / takes precedence to humanity. / As the men kill, / not out of survival / but / on command / like trained dogs, / like programmed machines, / blood-lust replaces logic. / Killing becomes instinctual, / becomes nature, / becomes as routine / as taking out the trash. / Nature / appears to have assigned us the role of prey / and to soldiers / predator. / America, / the apex predator, / almighty savior, / great liberator, / cleanse me of my wretched condition, / return home to your families, / embrace / your wives and children / with the same arms / used to kill ours, / but know / that muscle / has memory. / Muscle / does not / forget. / Violence / is the slightest presence of red in laundry. / All becomes / a little redder and / you can never wash me out. / You still try. / You will never be satisfied.
3. I walk through the dirt terminal / with no direction / or destination / but elsewhere. / Soldiers kill / with the promise of liberation / to spread freedom / but / to who? / Did it work? / Tell me, / what does freedom look like? / What color? / Is it red? / Tell me, / what is home? / Where can I find it? / Can you fly me there? / How far am I from it?

Student Name: Zaina Haider

Grade: 10

School: Klein Collins High School

Title: The First Light of Dawn

Category: Short Story

Key: Gold Key

Educator:

At the first light of dawn, the first prayer of the day begins.

حَبِيبُ اللَّيْلِ الرَّحْمَةُ اللَّهِ بَيْتِمْ

I stand with my bare feet facing Mecca, rustling the soft prayer rug underneath them. Woven onto the prayer mat is the Kaaba surrounded by the winding stars of night. My grandfather made this with his own hands, mother had told me.

قُلْ هُوَ اللَّهُ أَحَدٌ ١ ...

The air is of olive oil and warmth. I feel the winds of my family brushing past me.

اللَّهُ الصَّمَدُ ...

Aunties and uncles shuffle in and out of the kitchen, laughing and mumbling amongst each other and so the strings of blooming conversations all weave together to create the sound of home. I cannot help but open my eyes.

لَمْ يَلِدْ وَلَمْ يُولَدْ ...

From just here, I can see our entire home. In every room, delicately crafted colors, ornaments of our generations breathing against the walls. Schoolbooks left forgotten, browned receipts and crafted yellow qash baskets sleeping on a worn, green couch. Intricate worlds had been brought to life in the tatreez my aunties had lined along the walls.

وَلَمْ يَكُنْ لَهُ كُفُوًا أَحَدٌ ...

Will we not trace our fingers along their patterns so in the night we could go onto the rooftop and find them again in the sky?

الله أكبر.

There is so much to see.

My eyes want to dance around me, but I try to hold them down to my feet. As I go into sajdah, I catch my mothers green eyes on mine. I quickly look back down. We never watch each other pray.

I finish in silence, giving her the first turn to speak.

Mami, a stone woman of poetry and politics, of poise and poison, of paint and blood;  
A woman of three children born in Palestine.

“Duha, come to me”, she waves her hand as signal.

I fold my prayer mat, climbing onto our loved couch.  
I sit in Mami’s lap and she begins caressing my cloud of hair into two poofs, pinning them  
up with two white clips and accenting them with two white earrings.

“Habibt, why don’t you close your eyes when you pray?”

I look into her green eyes and around at our breathing house.

“...There is just so much to see, mama”

She stares at the eyes I got from my father and smiles.

“My love...”

She lays me down on her chest, putting her hands over my eyes.  
It is black.

“When you close your eyes... you will see Him.”

I can hear my heart beat and my breath brush against the breath of the house, and so I  
gasp.  
It is black.

But, there is so much to see...

-----

Tonight, I will sit with the adults and eat and nod and agreement when they speak.

Life is scarce, but not brutal. There is joy so long as there is love, and when we have  
bread, we dip it in hummus and smile at each other. And when we don't, we smile at each  
other regardless. This I knew very well for my age.

The features of my family are beautiful, I always realize when they are turned to me like  
this.

“There will be another attack soon”

Baba is thin with a large nose and dark pores. A new layer of fog builds up behind his gray eyes each night he returns from the hospital.

"There will always be another,"

Amal Auntie is an outspoken woman who never married, instead spending her life overseeing the orphans. There were many since the war, I knew well for my age.

"The occupation can threaten us, but they cannot take away our pride..."

Mama declares, reaching for taboo.

"We are proud ghazzawi!"

Amal Auntie affirms, being followed by patriotic agreements.

"They can take away our lives," whispered Safi Uncle.

Safi Uncle grows out his gray hair to show that he is a docile man, one easily persuaded by the batting of a child's eyes.

Suddenly, everybody turns to face me.

"Uksut!," "Hai Allah," I hear in whispers.

My brother Ahmed, a dark and hardened man from years of something I could not yet know, raises his head. He has been eating in a conspired silence, one that no one wanted to break.

"No matter where we move, they will kill us. And it is us who will be blamed."

A length of silence follows him. I look into his eyes and he looks into mine, and I know there is something he is saying, screaming.

Suddenly, I feel much older.

The table shakes around us. My father in a deep sigh, my mother arguing, my aunts and uncles each in lecture, first at my brother, and then at one another.

They all, except my brother, stand up, and everyone towers over me.

I have a feeling that I somehow play a part in it all.

Suddenly, a cry.

Everything else goes silent.

The youngest in our family, Rayan.

He is strangely quiet, and often jealous. When he cries, I rustle his hair and a hush falls over his pink lips, and then after a moment, he smiles and giggles no matter how hurt he is.



But today, he only kept crying, and I had the strange feeling that he felt older as well.  
The family huddled their aside differences to comfort him, and all else dissolved.

-----

The time had come to pray Isha.

It was decided that Rayan would go with my aunties for the night, so finally, he started to giggle again. We all prayed together and parted, Rayan leaving hand in hand with my Aunt.

I rustle my hair, hoping my family hears me stomping upstairs. But then, I see it.  
All else is forgotten.

I've never seen my mother cry before.

She rises in prayer, and I meet her closed, wet eyes.  
She cannot see me anymore.  
My eyes are open wide.

I lay in bed thinking.

She could not see me anymore.  
And maybe, maybe she really did see Allah.  
I close my eyes and I imagine the stars on the roof and the tatreez on the walls.  
Maybe I will touch them in my sleep, and maybe tomorrow, I will see Him, too.

But tonight, I had a much stranger dream.

-----

"Duha, Duha! Open your eyes!"

I wink myself awake, and through gritty eyelids I see my mother above me. I wince outside the window.

The sky is lit, but it's hours before Fajr begins.

My mother grabs me.  
As quick as her hands move to wrap a few of my belongings in cloth, we are outside and moving. In swipes of thick paint did we leave our home, and as we ran further away, I saw our rooftop being swallowed up by a strange gray.

My brother carries me over his shoulder.

“Put your hand over her eyes,” my mother tells him.

It goes black.

The air smells different. It feels different. There was always dust, but today there is something else, and in not knowing anything, I felt very young.

Mami must have not been looking, as my brother unveiled my vision.

The more we walk, the stranger this dream gets to be.

There are so many people crowding the road. The streets I know so well just seem to be wearing different clothes. All gray.

Even the stars had packed up their things and left their homes in the sky, like the rest of us, and in their place was loud noises and smog.

It is all so gray.

My father is gone.

In the rush of it all, I only just realized my father is gone.

“Where is Baba!” I shout.

“Habibti, do not worry...” Mami speaks softly.

She assures me that Baba is okay, that he is only at the hospital working, that we will go see Raya and Auntie and Uncle there too... but the moon, the moon tells me something is wrong. Mami goes quiet.

The moon whispers to me, “Look there” and I see them.

Big-bellied dancers of black and orange dancing to the beat of the bursts above us, dancing where my Auntie’s house should be.

My brother binds me tight to his beating heart and we run towards the fire.

All around us, rubble.

I hear the moon screaming now.

I see him--

--without a face.

Docile, gray hair

burnt black and bloodied  
and a body that had been eaten by rubble,  
his memory eaten by the bread we dipped together,  
dipped in a roofs rubble.

I do not open my eyes for the rest of the journey.  
I do not look.  
I listen.

In between the screaming and the bombs, there was nectar:

لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا اللَّهُ  
مُحَمَّدٌ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ  
أَشْهَدُ أَنْ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا اللَّهُ وَأَشْهَدُ أَنَّ مُحَمَّدًا رَسُولُ اللَّهِ

We recited the Shahada for Safi Uncle.  
When we reached Al-Shifa Hospital, we recited it for ourselves as well.

-----

My brother tells us to wait, and so my mother and I sit down to rest.

From just here, I can see our entire road.

The road is filled with people, some breathing.  
The air, it's smell is dust and flesh.  
Bare bodies are quickly being wrapped in white. Written on their kafans, their names.  
And on the arms of living, their names.

I stare at the half-breathing roads, the moon pulling my eyelids open wide.

Even if my eyes were shut, all I would hear is the screaming. The bombs are already so  
loud, and all of these people, these ignorant, selfish, people are screaming even louder  
than the bombs.  
Screaming loud enough to wake me up.

I stare at the people the way I stare at the stars but I know now that I am not dreaming.  
No, I know well now that my dreams were swept away with the big bellied dancers,  
promised in some poetry of the Nakbas that I was always too young to recite.  
But I am older now.  
Between the bombs and the 'Bismillah's and the screaming,  
between the breathing and the bare and the burnt,  
I bear witness,

and I know that there is no room for poetry.

And I know now why mother had told me to close my eyes.  
There is no God here to see with my eyes open.

Suddenly, a cry.

In my mind, everything goes silent.

“Mama...”

My brother, a dark and hardened man, has come crying for his mother.

And what would become of me?

-----

We rush inside the hospital, my brother holding the hand of my mother and I holding hers.

Everybody is so tall and so fast.

I feel it, a constant movement that cannot be interrupted. Not by the blood on the floor, not by the ripped apart people, not even by the screamers.

It is all so fast.

I see, in thick swipes of paint, a baby with his head ripped apart, eyes alive and crying, and I feel urged to kiss the forehead of my young brother.

Ahmed stops, and so do we.

Dressed in white, Auntie lays on an open hospital bed.

Bruised. Bleeding.

Breathing.

Baba comes from behind a curtain dressed unfamiliarly as a doctor, but he hugs me tight and I know it, the smell of home, so I forgive him.

I breathe him in.

Had we all seen the same things?

I look around to see who is holding Rayaan.

“Where is my brother?” I smile.

A silence. I look at Amal Auntie,

“Alhamdulillah... we have him here...”

--and from her bedside, dressed in white, she retrieves a bag.

-----

Mami and I have taken turns watching Amal Auntie while she recovers.  
Many of us were sent outside into tents, new bodies overflowing the hospital in our place.

I've learned many things.  
Among them, I've learned that silence is the real death.

That day I found my brothers limbs sifted into a bag, I screamed.  
I screamed louder than the bombs, louder than the men outside.  
I learned that screaming was the only action that had any meaning.  
Silence is the real death.

And so, when we are provided bread, we eat and talk.

We talk about the dead knowing we could join them in any moment. We whisper their old secrets and quiet moments of the past, I think in the fear that we will lose them again underneath the rubble of our own minds.  
And if we do, they really die, having been forgotten forever.

When we don't have bread, we save our strength.

For tomorrow will be another day of martyrs, of standing in lines to retrieve the sour water, of shootings and bombings, blood and screaming.  
Another day of living, of dying, in Gaza.

The time had come for Isha.

In prayer, we all cried together.

I try to keep my eyes closed but I feel the ground shake underneath my feet and cannot help but open my eyes so I can see that Mama is still there.  
Her eyes are closed.

We finished prayer together.  
I lay my head in Mami's lap and stare into her greener eyes.

My mother, a warrior of three children born in Palestine.

I will keep my eyes open all night, I dream, so I know she is always with me...

But tonight, I had a nightmare.

-----

"Duha! Duha! The light of my eyes, the soul of my soul..."

I try to open my eyes, but it hurts. It's all black.

I hear men all around me weeping, but I am submerged under a thick water, the weight covering my eyes.

"Baba, where are you?"

The weeping grows louder.

"Baba, where are you?"

The recitation of the Shahada rings in my ears.

Are they reciting for me? Have I already died?

"Baba..."

"...My love..."

A stillness.

I've never heard my father cry before.

"Baba... I can't open my eyes"

I feel a kiss on my forehead, and I know it from the smell of home.

"Alhamdulillah, for you cannot see your father cry..."

I feel around my face and there is cloth. It all starts to come back in rushes.

"Where is mama!" I scream against the water.

My father holds me tight.

"She is very sick right now,"

My brother cries, from somewhere...

"she was with you when the bombs hit."

I sit for a length of time, not able to cry any tears.

It is all black. I feel so young.

I do not ask about Auntie.

I can not look.

I listen...

"We have to go North, they will siege here until morning..."

"...and if I go with you, what will become of my patients...?"

I have the strange feeling that Ahmed feels younger today too.

"...I will stay here with your mother. Take Duha to Al-Aqsa Hospital, there are still surgeons there."

I wait for a response.

"...Run, my son, keep your eyes open and listen. The occupation will kill you if they see you."

A silence, one masked by the noise of the hospital.

I listen.

"I'm sorry, habibi..."

"It is okay, Baba..."

My brother is the last to cry for the first time.

But now, none of us have any tears left.

I raise my head against the weight.

"Write your name on my arm, Baba, so they will know I was your daughter."

And so, he does. And he takes from my ears those white earrings Mama had dressed me in and pins them to his coat pocket.

He brushes my hand over them so I know.

I will be with him, always.

He kisses my forehead through the cloth and I smile, my wounds healed.

Ahmed and I start North.

-----

My brother carries me over his shoulder.

"I understand why you were always so angry now, brother"

In long strips of silence, I felt the world getting quieter.

The screaming was growing distant but the bombs were still overhead.

The rumble beneath our feet, the rhythm of the big bellied dancers.

"I hoped you never would," He laughed softly.

My brother falls silent. I feel a tear run from his cheek down to my neck, but I will pretend not to.

"You have grown so old..."

I hold on tighter. It is all black.

I hear the mechanical whirring of the moon among the silence, and Ahmed starts to walk slower.

As my eyes are closed, I remember.

"Where is the sun?" I ask.

He does not respond.

Within a few steps, we stop suddenly.

I can feel his heart beat through his chest, faster now, his breath against the breath of the cold. He stays quiet.

"Where is the sun, Ahmed?"

I feel the moon whispering to me, but I cannot hear her words.

My brother, suddenly very hesitant in his movements, whispers back,

"...The stars are still out, habibti, but I see it, I see the first light of dawn".

He slowly sets me down behind him,

"Will you not pray fajr with me, Ahmed?"



He speaks very quietly,

"No, my love. I will watch you pray... I will make sure you keep your eyes closed,"

And so, at the first light of dawn, the first prayer of the day had begun.

حِيمِ الرَّحْمَةِ اللَّهُ بِسْمِ

Rubbing the rough concrete under my bare feet, I face toward Mecca. I dream of everyone I love safe in Haj together, and with my eyes closed I imagine that the Kaaba is right in front of me. My Aunties and Uncles, my mother and father, my brothers and all of the martyrs on the roads, all of us dressed in white and in prayer together.

قُلْ هُوَ اللَّهُ أَحَدٌ ١ ...

The air is still. I hear my breath against the sands. The moon whirrs closer.

اللَّهُ الصَّمَدُ...

It is black. Behind my eyes, I feel a presence. Could it be Him?

لَمْ يَلِدْ وَلَمْ يُولَدْ ...

My brothers back touches mine. I feel his breath. The stars scream.

وَلَمْ يَكُنْ لَهُ كُفُوًا أَحَدٌ...

And the moon falls silent.

الله أكبر.

I smile,

"I see you, Allah".

Student Name: Evie Wyke

Grade: 8

School: Ulrich Intermediate School

Title: The Love from Mom and Pop

Category: Novel Writing

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Rikki Carter

Pop pushed me to the floor, my head crashed against the glass dining table, splintering it. As I fell to the floor I felt my breath getting knocked out of me. The blood rushed to my head. I didn't care though, I was more scared of Pop now. Would he hurt me more? Or will Mom get a few knocks out of me too?

Pop was holding an empty beer bottle in his hand, looking ready to shatter it. He was screaming profanities at me that I couldn't even understand. My head was pounding and my ears were ringing. I needed to get up, but I couldn't. Pop threw the empty beer bottle over my head onto the wall. The glass pieces fell over me and landed on my face and body. I saw black dots, indicating I was going to pass out soon. I felt too weak to get up or move at all, everything went dark.

I closed my eyes for a split second, then opened them again to realize I was in bed. How did I get here? I lifted myself from the bed and stumbled over my feet. I took a few minutes to regain myself, then, I went out and into the living room.

"You made your Mother clean up your mess." Pop scoffed as he was sitting on the living room sofa. I was confused, what mess?

I looked around and saw the half broken glass dining table. It all came back to me at that moment "I-I'm so sorry sir it won't happen again, I promise." I said to Pop as he stared at me with a different sort of hatred in his eyes, the hatred that he only had for me.

"You better not pass out ever again." Pop said as he turned his head to look at the TV.

I nodded and went back to my room to clean up. I checked the clock, 10:00am, great, it's the weekend. I finished getting ready and I cleaned up the scabbed-over wound on my head. I walked into the kitchen and grabbed a new beer for Pop. I walked over to him and set it down on the coffee table. Pop muttered something I didn't hear, I didn't care and rushed back to my room. I sat down at my desk and started to do my homework, god forbid I ever fail a class or Mom and Pop would quite literally kill me.

About a half hour later I finished my homework and began to do my chores around the house. Although, I wouldn't really call it chores per say, I would call it work. Neither Mom or Pop would help me, or thank me. I feel like a personal maid to them. I don't care if I get paid, which I don't. All I care about is at least getting a 'thank you' from either Mom or Pop. That's all I want, just a little bit of appreciation. That's what I need, I need someone to show some sort of affection to me. I don't think I've ever been shown any at all, not even once.

\*\*\*

My mind spiraled into my own thoughts as I was cooking dinner for Mom and Pop. Where'd all the time go? How did it become afternoon? I guess time flies; I made them a can of soup each, hopefully they like it.

After I made the soup "Dinner's ready, do y'all want me to bring it out there or in the dining room?" I called out to them.

"Look at the goddamn table idiot. What do you expect?!" Mom yelled out at me. Oh, right, the table was broken, I forgot. I brought the two bowls of soup to them in the living room.

"About time." Pop said in a harsh tone "You already pissed us off today once. Remember, two strikes, you're out." Pop said as he waved his empty beer bottle in my face before tapping me hard in the head with it. I winced once the glass hit my head, but I shook it off and nodded.

"Yes sir." I walked back to the kitchen and grabbed another beer for Pop, and a water for Mom. I brought the beverages to them then went off into my room. No dinner for me, again.

I changed into my night clothes and laid down in bed. It was only 7:30pm, whatever. I stared at the ceiling, my mind blank, the only thing that I could think of was how. How to get Mom and Pop to say anything good to me. Anything at all, it would make me the happiest person on earth.

I felt my throat start to burn, my eyes start to feel sore. Before I knew it tears streamed down the sides of my face, I couldn't help it anymore. I tried to hold them back and wipe them away, but new tears replaced the old ones. I sat up in bed and tried to calm myself down. My breath started to become sharp and I struggled to calm myself even more. I was only getting worse. I hugged my knees and buried my face in my arms. I sobbed quietly for what felt like hours. I had to keep quiet, or else Mom and Pop would be mad at me for being 'loud and annoying'.

It was about an hour later when I calmed down. I was in the bathroom cleaning my face off. Mom and Pop were asleep, so I could make a little bit of sound. I was washing my face with a wash rag with just warm water. The feeling of the water on my face felt...odd. I was careful not to touch the wounds on my face. Though, I really wanted to feel the sting I would get. To give me a thrill of something. The urge was impulsive, there weren't any consequences if I hurt myself anyway. So who would know anyway? I got lost in my own mind, until I heard a bang from outside the house.

I quickly snapped out of my trance and turned towards the direction from where the sound came from. I slowly exited the bathroom and went out the backdoor. The sound I heard felt like it was out back and not in the front. I turned on the backyard light and looked around the yard for any sign of anything different. Nothing was out of place, odd. I shrugged it off and went back inside to my room quietly.

\*\*\*

As I layed down again in bed it was silent. The only thing I could hear was the neighbors sprinkler outside and the grasshoppers chirping, it was peaceful. As soon as my head hit the pillow I felt myself fall into a deep sleep. I was so drained emotionally and physically I just let my body go limp.

The next day I woke up to my loud alarm blaring in my ear. I turned it off and got up and got dressed. Today was Sunday, right? I looked at my calendar as I was brushing my teeth and I realized I had to do something at school today. Mom made me volunteer to help design the school for a spirit week. She thought it would be 'beneficial' for me to get more school hours in. Ugh, well, at least I can just walk to school. I didn't want to bother Mom or Pop anyway just to drive me two miles.

Once I got to school, I tried and tried to get the front door open, but it wouldn't budge. I eventually gave up and just sat on the cold concrete and leaned my back against the brick wall. It was a foggy day outside, and the air was moist. I zipped up my hoodie and put my hood on. I snuggled into my hoodie while I waited for someone else to arrive to open the doors.

After a while, I heard a car start to park and footsteps, two sets of footsteps. I opened my eyes and looked to see who it was, was it students? Was it teachers? Nope, it was two police officers walking towards me. There was one man, and one woman. I felt my heartbeat start to rise as they walked closer and closer to me.

"Are you Liana Cott?" The male police officer said. My eyes widened, how do they know my name? I shakily nodded my head yes.

"Great, may you please follow us? Bring your stuff too." The female police officer picked up my backpack, which was next to me and helped me up. I followed the two to the police car and they made me sit in the back of the car. I felt the wheels start to move and I watched the car move farther and farther away from the school.

About 15 minutes later, we arrived at the police station, my mind started to race with worryful thoughts. What did I do wrong? I was escorted out of the car and put in a small, plain room with only one light. My best guess is it was an interrogation room. They sat me down, then left the room, with only me in it.

After a few minutes, I heard the door behind me open. In walked a woman, dressed in a black suit. She then sat across from me and looked at me.

"Hello, you must be Liana. It's so nice to meet you, you can just call me Miss Emma." She said to me, in a scary, yet comforting way. Although the way she looked and spoke sent shivers down my spine, she was very kind.

"So, do you know why you were brought here?" Miss Emma said. "N-no I don't." I tried my best not to stutter while speaking, but my anxiety was getting the best of me.

"Well, allow me to explain. We brought you here to talk about your home life, and how you're treated." Then, after that short explanation, it hit me. I'm speaking with a CPS worker, I'm 'saved'. I had zoned out for a while until Miss Emma snapped me out of it.

"Liana, are you alright?" She looked at me with a hint of worry in her eyes. I wasn't thinking, I started to just spill out words and what happens with Mom and Pop when I'm

with them. The whole time I was speaking, Miss Emma was writing things down, but also listening to me and what I said. The first time I have ever been heard.

\*\*\*

"Wow... Liana, I am very sorry for what happened. Your mother and father shouldn't have done those things to you." Miss Emma said once I finished telling her what Mom and Pop did to me. "I promise we won't let them hurt you anymore." She said to me again. Wait, what did she mean? Not being able to see them again?

"Wait wait, you're moving me?" I said in a somewhat panicked voice "Yes, we are moving you to foster care. Clearly, your guardians now are not able to take care of you at all." I froze. They're taking me away, I mean, I know that Mom and Pop are unable to take care of me. But I love them, they're my only family. I don't want to lose that.

October 17, 2022

Hey, It's me,

It's been two months since they put me in foster care. Some weird couple adopted me and took me in. They're nice and all, but there's something off. I'm not sure what's off about it but it's like they grew tired of me. I don't know how to feel about it. They feed me, and they don't hurt me like Mom and Pop did. But they ignore me otherwise, although I do stay in my room most of the time. I don't know how to talk to them, I was never taught how to. My 'new' parents' names are: Mike and Sherry. When they first met me, they were nice and caring. They did everything for me, helped me with my homework, and they helped cook. They were so kind to me. But I guess they got tired of me because they started to slowly ignore me, and not help me with certain things. They still feed me and take care of me, but they haven't done anything else extra like they used to do. I'm starting to feel left out again. I wonder if it was better if I just ran away and started a life on my own.

-Liana

I closed my Diary and threw my body on my bed. I took my pillow and put it over my face. Tomorrow was my birthday, fun. Tomorrow would be the day I run away and start a new life. Throughout the night I tossed and turned, I couldn't sleep. I couldn't stop thinking about how to run away, what would my plan be? How can I get out of this lonely place? Would it be better if I just stayed? No, I need to do this for myself, for the better of me. The clock turned to 3:00am, my time to go. I had already made up my mind about where I was going. To the woods, next to the small town just about two hours away. I had packed up all of the things I needed in order to survive: some money, clothes, water, food, a toothbrush and some toothpaste, also a book to keep me occupied. I unlocked the window of my room and slid the screen door away. I looked down at the dark and damp grass and stepped onto it. The moist night air was cold, I liked it. As soon as my feet hit the grass, I started to sprint away. I ran out of the neighborhood, into the small forest near

it, and stayed there for a while. I caught my breath as I looked at my phone, luckily I fully charged it, and I brought two extra portable chargers. I pulled up my map on my phone to the small town, it said I can walk there, but it'll be about a 12 hour walk. Oh well, better get to it then.

\*\*\*

Seven hours in, I am exhausted. I took some naps, and drank some water along the way. But most of the time I was walking. I was out of the small forest by now and in the city next to the small town. I only had to get out of the city then I would be in my new life. As I walked down the crowded streets I heard someone yelling at me. "Hey! Hey kid! Wait up!" I turned around to see who it was, it was a teenager, no older than 16. He ran up to me and looked at me with a kind, yet worried expression on his face.

"What are you doing in this city with no adults to supervise you? This city is very dangerous when being alone, so why are you here alone?" He asked me, I simply just told him what I was doing. "I've run away from my home. I'm going into the next town to start my new life." The boy looked shocked.

"You ran away from home?" He simply asked me, it was the only thing he could muster out of his mouth. I nodded my head yes.

Just then, two others caught up to the boy "Jeez Ron! Next time slow down, I coulda had another asthma attack!" One of the kids said, the other two kids were about my age, 14, they looked like twins. One girl, one boy, the girl took a puff of her inhaler and sighed in relief.

"Gavin, Olivia, she's one of us." The older boy said, the twins looked at him confused. "A runaway?" The boy twin said, whose name was apparently 'Gavin'. The other boy nodded and the twins looked at me.

"She could stay with us! We could have a new family member!" The girl twin said, who was 'Olivia' from what I picked up. Gavin and Olivia looked at each other, then me, and smiled.

I looked at the twins confused and concerned in a way, what do they mean by 'new family member'? The older boy, Ron, looked at me and held out his hand for me to take.

"C'mon, we'll bring you someplace that'll be safe. There's no need to worry, you're safe with us, we're like you." Ron said calmly, I stared at his hand and looked up at him with a worried look. I wasn't sure if I should trust them, oh well. What did I have to lose anyway?

\*\*\*

As I walked with the three, I noticed that there were more trees, and the pavement was getting less and less under our feet. Until it was entirely gone. I was still holding Ron's hand as he led me and the twins were behind me. I looked around the wooded scenery and listened to the two twins bicker and argue about stupid things.

As we continued to walk through the, now forest-like area, I looked ahead and saw a small, old cabin made of wood ahead of us.

"Welcome home!" Ron said as he opened the door to the old cabin and inside was a nice, yet simple place.

The cabin inside was well kept and there was a small living room, two bedrooms, and a nice cute kitchen. The cabin was nice and kept up, it had a calm and nice demeanor to it.

October 23, 2022

It's me again,

It's been about four days since the trio found me. I've got to learn a lot about them and they're all so nice. I feel like I can finally be happy with where I am.

-Liana

I closed my diary and looked out the window.

I'm finally free.

Student Name: Madison Doss

Grade: 8

School: Krimmel Intermediate School

Title: The Rise and Influence of AI: The Human Without Morals

Category: Critical Essay

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Lisa Liessmann

Since the beginning of time, all species have found ways to better adapt to their surroundings for the best chance of survival and the ability to thrive. Of these adaptations, many don't have precise accuracy on their first attempt, like many things in life, but with perseverance, through trial and error, we evolve. Recently, our evolving world has been crumbling slowly due to the exponential growth of technology, especially artificial intelligence. In a fast-paced world, many things have been developed within unreasonable due dates to keep up with consumer interests, and with impossible standards come underdeveloped and faulty programs. The workforce will face challenges trying to effectively fulfill entry-level jobs, due to the influence of AI. As a result, human productivity may become very low due to our dependence on artificial intelligence. When will it be too much? What if it is already too much? Never did this ever cross my mind as something that I would have to deal with in my lifetime, maybe the generation after me, yes, but now seems too soon, and who knows, it may be.

Artificial intelligence made its ground-breaking debut in the latter half of the 1900s. John McCarthy developed AI as a way to make "intelligent machines" and "intelligent programs," his goal was to create "a system that exhibited human-level intelligence." Meaning, that his original intention was to create machines that could analyze the human thought process. John McCarthy then wrote the first effective programming language for AI in 1958. This program is known as LISP, which stands for List processing. John's contribution and knowledge of artificial intelligence soon led to more complex forms of AI. He shed a new light on a shadowed topic. The most recent Artificial intelligence forms found in our society are gaming bots, founded in 1959; "Expert systems," a way to replicate the human thought process, founded in 1965; and ChatterBots, founded in 1966. As the world advances, the newest technology is very beneficial to withstand the constant challenges, especially in the work field. However, this development has a chance to harm our economy. Many entry-level jobs are looking at complete replacement by AI soon. Eventually, the majority of occupations will have some sort of AI assistance. Artificial intelligence will affect those in the positions of data entry clerks, accountants, telemarketing, and many other jobs. With this comes risks. We run the risk of a higher percentage of people with debt. These jobs may seem minute, but some citizens experience this as their way of life. These jobs are how people can provide for their families and gain experience in an industry. A recent article stated, "A March report from Goldman Sachs found AI could substitute up to 25% of current work, with about two-



thirds of jobs exposed to "some degree" of automation." Artificial intelligence has proven to enter data more efficiently, but humans should have priority access to these jobs. Why replace a system that isn't broken? This research is nerve-racking and shows that we are becoming too dependent and are relying too much on an unhuman source meant to assist our needs, not independently operate. It would be saddening to see such a beautiful place enter a recession due to a computer that lacks feelings and compassion. The lack of jobs can affect the government and economy if more people can't sustain their way of life. Artificial intelligence is not consistent enough to trust with valuable information that can help or harm the people of our society.

One of my favorite quotes I stumbled upon while researching entailed a great way of putting modern artificial intelligence. Scientific American states, "Why would we expect a newborn baby to beat a grandmaster in chess? We wouldn't." We are expecting way too much of such an undeveloped technology. We have not yet settled on the proper parameters to which we should limit the usage and strength of AI. Programmers are stuffing artificial intelligence with too much information that could lead to a catastrophic disaster. There needs to be limits set in place to prevent accidents from occurring. It would be hard to imagine a world without speed limits. Havoc would break loose. People's lives, loved ones, property, and pride would be on the brink of danger. They were put in place with that specific development of technology, so why can't we do it again? While we are ahead of the development in artificial intelligence, why can't we come to terms? If measures are not put into place now, we will experience AI turning into superintelligent AI.

Matured superintelligent artificial intelligence is an extremely horrifying topic not because of what it entails, but the possibility that it occurs. This form of AI is a direct effect of giving AI too much human analysis and thought-processing data. AI at this point will have the ability to improve itself independently, but also it will have the ability to manipulate humans and human programmers to do what the AI wants. This is known as the "Control problem." What makes AI complicated to contain is its capability of quickly processing data, it will be able to block the actions that programmers take to turn off or weaken the program. We can already see artificial intelligence outsmart human wit through computer games. However, computer games don't directly affect the ability of the world to perform. It shows AI will have the possibility to outsmart us later in this technological development. Furthermore, we need to focus on creating adequate products that have gone through adequate tests. There is one main idea that humans have that artificial intelligence lacks. Feelings. Without any feelings, the possibilities are endless of what AI can commit. There is no limit to feelings. No guilt. No anger. No compassion, No emotion. AI will never have or know the feeling of creating something harmful. Many researchers believe that due to all of this rapid development of AI, we may go through an "AI explosion." The severity of this would be detrimental, and researchers believe there will only be one chance to restore humanity due to it. Though this is yet to occur, nothing is impossible through the development of technology.

A technology so grand can become great again. In little time, AI was overdeveloped and expected to do too much without thorough reasoning of what may occur because of it. Not putting inventions through proper testing procedures has landed humans in trouble before, so why continue to make the same mistake over again? A machine incapable of compassion or feelings does not have the right to a job but you. It is unfair and unjust. Humans have the upper hand as of now, the ability to stop and prevent catastrophes. If we continue to be naive about the facts, consequences may and will arise. The boundaries of AI need to be agreed upon. The future of our world and economy depends on us. Alone, changes may never get done, but together we can restore AI to do what its intention is, to aid and assist humans, not replace them or their worth. We need to act now before it is too late. All for one, one for all.

Student Name: Karla Guevara  
 Grade: 12  
 School: Klein Forest High School  
 Title: Youth  
 Category: Poetry  
 Key: Gold Key  
 Educator: Danae Perez

In a place where time's shadows race,  
 We find ourselves caught in a bind  
 Growing up too fast, at such a hurried pace

Youth's joy is replaced by adult's gaze,  
 Dreams shed like a winter's petal left behind  
 In a place where time's shadows race

Innocence fades, leaving us only empty space  
 Dull aches and meaningless days bring ennui  
 Growing up too fast, at such a hurried pace

Responsibilities now thrust upon our days  
 The weight of the world now falls on our shoulders  
 In a place where time's shadows race

Fading memories of carefree grace  
 Now strive to leave our youth behind  
 Growing up too fast, at such a hurried pace

Though it might feel like an endless chase  
 Our final forms will surely be full of grace, much as we were promised  
 In a place where time's shadows race

Sucking up our tears we hide our face  
 Strength grows and bone stretches, our winter has arrived and we mustn't forget it  
 Growing up too fast at such a hurried pace

And when we arrive to take our final place  
 With heavy eyes and solemn grace, we'd look behind with great ache  
 In a place where time's shadows race  
 Growing up too fast, at such a hurried pace.

Student Name: Chino Umelo

Grade: 10

School: Robert Turner College-Career High School

Title: It's a long way home from here to Houston.

Category: Poetry

Key: Gold Key

Educator:

It's a long way home from here to Houston.

Studded across the dirt roads as trees sprouted from your feet,

(In the beating heat of the Sun, you lay tired along the concrete)

rooting in nearby soil as it picks its base up,

(Twisting and pinching parts of yourself as you lay your broken pieces across the grass)

leaving lone seeds scattered across the new plain

(Dirt wallowing beneath your fingernails as you embrace the rough edges of American soil)

It's a long way home from here to Houston.

As days shot by with the Moon greeting you nightly, small tugs of wind breezing by you  
(Maybe it was God's riddle you never pieced together)

You sat with your pieces in hand, gripping them loosely as the wind takes them away

(Your feet are burned, scabbed, and picked apart by ragged rocks who won't forget your skin)

A Northern rock snatches a piece of your toe as you depart, scattering blood across  
foreign pavement

(The lying string of what once was, broken letters of his message strewn across the grass)

As you leave while dragging your feet, the Sun rises to wish you a good morning

(You watch as your blood melds with fuzzed grass, God observing as you leave a piece behind)

It's a long way home from here to Houston.

In the blizzarding weather of New York and the blaze of Virginia, your shoes stay stained of  
oil

(The plane was packed, filled with those like yourself, your bodies staining the seats as  
you all rode)

The piece you left on your seat was greasy, musk and exhaustion filled the plane as  
passengers shut their eyes

(Your lips tugged up occasionally on the trip, only when reminded of the place you left)

When the new world smeared itself against your clothes, you left your own blemishes  
across your seat

(But when wrenched between the packed seats of a plane, silently remembering a splatter of the past in those around you, your lips couldn't help but twitch)

It's a long way home from here to Houston.

Sometimes, when huddling against those like yourself, the Man glares at you  
(Your eyes move towards the old, black-box television as the Man standing tall at a podium ranted about you, lip curling downward as his sheep fell at his feet in the streets of Washington D.C)

The common man watches as your people awe and rave over the bustling country  
(Humans of this plain were odd, others looking in distaste as some commend your kind)  
You leave yourself on the new valley of land, concrete scrapping your feet as you walk

It's a long way home from here to Houston.

Maybe home would be waiting somewhere in the green swarms of unfamiliarity  
(somewhere hidden in the rich soils of Texas)

Maybe when dropping pieces of yourself across the grass  
(somewhere in the small, clustered alleyways of the city, buildings touching as the street grew)

When a rock keeps a piece of your toe in the Northern plains  
(somewhere in the Texan heat, the Sun furious as it beats down on the pavement )

When listening to the orders of the Man at his podium  
(somewhere in the clustered streets of Houston, bustling with people of every color)

It's a long way from Houston to home.

Student Name: Jerry Tong  
 Grade: 10  
 School: Glenda Dawson High School  
 Title: An Ocean of Hope  
 Category: Personal Essay & Memoir  
 Key: Gold Key  
 Educator:

I remember the way the water looked in Galveston on that day in May. It was unusually clear, and the breeze was warm. My dad and I walked past boat after boat, all massive private yachts out of reach to us. Our boat was farther down the docks, and we had reserved it specifically for taking Ava on a tour.

Still a child, she had told us that her dream was to ride on a boat out to sea and that she wanted to spot dolphins like the ones she had seen jumping and diving in the movies. I had never been dolphin watching either, and the only time I had seen one in person was at the aquarium where their trained movements in captivity were unlike the wild and carefree leaps I had imagined. Instead of hunting for squid and fish, they were fed frozen seafood from a bucket, and, instead of journeying for miles to meet with other dolphins, their travels were restricted by enclosures. Looking back, I understand that their longing for the freedom of the open sea was not unlike Ava's aspirations of returning to her life as it was before. Walking along the docks that day, I hoped that this boat ride would give her a glimpse of that freer life.

We gathered with the other volunteers to meet Ava and her parents. Her mom carried her. Now seven, Ava looked frail in her yellow summer dress with blue bows, and she didn't have any hair after her chemo treatments, which made her seem oddly infant-like. Everyone stared quietly, but eventually, we moved on to talking about school and getting out on the water.

The first time I met Ava, a brain cancer patient at MD Anderson Cancer Center in Houston, was two years before. I'm an active member in our local chapter of the Super Joey Foundation, a nonprofit whose purpose is to bring some joy and comfort to kids with cancer. We weren't allowed into the hospital during the pandemic, so Ava walked out accompanied by her mom. Ava wore her long black hair in a bow, and when she saw us, she hid behind her mom's legs. I remember how old and worn she seemed for a child. Ava didn't speak that day. Maybe it was because the younger volunteers horsed around. Maybe it was because she didn't know us. She just watched, and I could see she was losing her childhood to cancer. I knew then I wanted to make Ava happy. I remember when I was her age, I was in second grade. On weekends, I would ride around the neighborhood on my bike and play tag in the streets with my friends. Ava had an entirely different experience. She had been in the hospital in Houston for three years and had never attended school, and she had never learned to ride a bike, even in China. Ava just

stayed in her hospital room as each season passed. It would have been too risky for her to get close to people. Her days were confined to watching the world go by either on a screen or through the window beside her sick bed.

Ava's family had traveled to Texas from China two years earlier so they could get her the most advanced medical care. America was their last hope. Her parents had no insurance and were now living at the Ronald McDonald Foundation house along with several other families who relied on charitable support. Within our group we did what we could to help with Ava's treatments, raising money from donations and from selling merchandise like books and clothing. It felt good to gather up all the money and hand the family a life-sized check made of cardboard. I took pictures of Ava smiling and cheering like she and her family had won the sweepstakes. I hoped that we had helped her along her journey to recovery and that we could ease her through the stress. Everybody just wanted her to be able to live a more normal life and have some fun.

One of my favorite activities was during Christmastime when we brought gifts to Ava and the other children at the hospital. Mrs. Wen, a parent volunteer, offered her house for our activities. We prepared Christmas cards, wrapped toys, and assembled jiaozi dumplings. They are a classic Chinese food that can be boiled or fried and are Ava's favorite. Mrs. Wen cut and rolled out the sheets of dough into perfect circles. I scooped spoonfuls of ground pork and vegetables into the centers and pinched the edges together into folds. Filling spilled out the sides and the folds warped. I made many poor attempts, like odd balls of playdough. The flawless dumplings came from the parents while most volunteers' outcomes were similar to mine. I didn't think Ava would care anyway. She would still think they tasted great.

The next day at the hospital, a nurse came out with two carts and we filled one with cards and presents for the other patients and one just for Ava. We rolled Ava's frozen dumplings packed in Ziplocs into the check-in area where Ava was waiting. Her eyes darted to the freezer bags where she recognized the thin folds of cream-white dumpling skins. She scurried to the cart, like a baby turtle rushing to its home in the sea. I couldn't believe how swift she was. Then, as if she were trying to move a wall, she pressed herself against the towering cart and attempted to roll it back to her room. Her excitement made me chuckle. I thought I had wanted them to be perfect, but I really just wanted her to enjoy them. I heard later that Ava begged for the dumplings when she returned to her room and that she ate until she was stuffed. I wished I could have seen her, but I would have to wait to get another chance the following spring when we would make them again and she would eat like a pig, coming back for third and fourth helpings, just as I imagined she might. In the new year, our volunteer group went back to the hospital to donate money. I hadn't thought about Ava much over the holidays while I went skiing with my family. My brother who was visiting from college had convinced me to descend a steep trail that I thought would be my last. I really thought I was brave after that, but during that same time, Ava had had implant surgery. Somehow, I was sure that would fix everything. We were ready to congratulate her on a successful surgery; however, there was no triumph when her

mom rolled her out in a wheelchair because she was too weak to walk on her own. Where her long hair once flowed, visible stitches and scars replaced it.

The ride home with my mom was silent. It didn't make any sense to me that in just a few weeks Ava's limbs had become so thin and her face pale and swollen. I was afraid to ask anyone about her condition. I wished my mom would say something, but she never did. It wasn't until much later that I learned that the surgery was a last-ditch effort to kill the tumor deep in her brain.

A month later at the hospital, I prepared myself for the worst, but, to my surprise, Ava's body had adjusted to the surgery. Despite the toxins they had pumped into her head, her face looked healthier and her cheeks were rosy. A beanie covered her scars, yet they didn't seem to bother her. She could walk out to greet us at the entrance, but she did have to be carried for any distance longer than several feet. I was happy to see her, and I could tell that she was happy to see me and the other volunteers. We had become familiar and welcome faces.

On Easter, a holiday that Ava didn't understand at all, a group of volunteers gathered at a suburban farm to set up an egg hunt and a talent show for her. As the first person to perform, I swallowed and took a deep breath. Before beginning, I looked at her, but she didn't look back. Her eyes remained focused on a basket of brightly colored plastic eggs. We had packed them full of mysterious surprises, some contained dress-up jewelry, and some were like rattles full of jelly beans. I announced, "Good afternoon everyone. I hope you are all having a wonderful Easter. I have written a poem for Ava." The farm, even the clucking hens, fell silent except for the microphone feedback. "When the world is so dark, there's a girl who lights it all." My poem was an ode to her spirit, mind, and heart in sixteen lines. I spoke the words I had practiced a hundred times and wished that I had practiced them more, maybe then Ava would have grasped the meaning. My words came out clearly, and my tongue didn't trip, but she was distracted by the animals and the bright colors. At least she was having fun. Ultimately, all I wanted was for her to feel and act like a regular kid, and that's exactly what she was doing.

It wasn't long after that I learned that the doctors had given up. I was at the dinner table eating when my mom sat next to me and said, "The doctors believe that Ava's cancer is terminal." I stopped chewing and couldn't swallow very well. My fork felt heavy in my hand. At that moment, when the few people who could save her had lost hope, I understood that Ava would never get better. As far as I know, nobody told Ava. I imagine that nobody could bring themselves to burden her innocent mind with the reality of death.

I knew everything about her, her past, even her future, but she knew little about me. She wasn't always approachable, being shy and sick, and I was seven years older, but I should have spoken to her more. We never had any personal conversations. There were moments when I could have approached her, but I made excuses. She doesn't want to talk. She is doing something else. I don't speak Mandarin fluently enough. All that time, I supported a friend who I didn't let know me, and now that time is gone.



As we left the docks in Galveston for Ava's dolphin-watching trip, my dad snapped shots of our group on the boat with Ava's family. The captain announced it was a good day to see dolphins but that we would have to be lucky. When we got far enough out on the sea that it became like a glistening cerulean blanket, vast and deep, he sped up. I removed my cap and held onto the railing while the wind cut through my hair. Nothing could be heard over the roaring motor and rushing wind, and the odor of briny fish permeated everything. When we turned corners, mists of freezing sea water hit my skin and soaked my shirt. The captain let us play music and someone chose Disney songs which we blasted from our little vessel. Ava smiled as she sang along to the popular "I'll Make a Man out of You" from the movie *Mulan*. Even though I couldn't hear her soft voice, I could see her mouthing the lyrics in English. The salty breeze made her dress flutter behind her like she was the hero in a movie, and she looked hopeful about things. Like *Mulan*, the warrior who used her intelligence to show her might and prove everybody wrong, Ava scanned the horizon with a determined expression. At that moment, I realized she was the strongest person I had ever known.

In search of dolphins, we all scanned the water while looping around the docks, and I kept a lookout for any fins poking out, flippers waving, or a broad fluke splashing. As we gently navigated past some shrimp boats, we were met with the flat, dull surface of the water. Would we be lucky enough to see the agile creatures? The water stretched infinitely around us. Our final turn back around was our last chance for something to happen.

After an entire afternoon on the water, it felt like I had been on the ocean my whole life like I couldn't remember what came before. There was only the rumbling motor, the wind gushing through my hair, and the taste of salt on my lips. Somehow life back on the shore didn't seem important anymore. I looked at Ava and realized I didn't know if I would see her again. Did she feel the same way? It was clear she still expected dolphins. Maybe I did too.

Student Name: Jacqueline Xiong  
 Grade: 11  
 School: Glenda Dawson High School  
 Title: Causes of Alopecia  
 Category: Short Story  
 Key: Gold Key  
 Educator:

At age fifteen and three-quarters, I am experiencing hair loss. This is not uncommon—precisely point-oh-nine percent of the adolescent population goes through some kind of hair loss, or alopecia in scientific words, in their teenage years. Said symptom is caused by anxiety and stress. Lack of Kerotin. All-in-one shampoo and conditioner from Walmart. A vitamin deficiency, which apparently can't be tested at home. In September, Healthline informs me about all the vitamins I am potentially lacking, so I secretly sift through my mom's tiny pill bottle city in the locked cabinet in her bedroom, and swallow.

In October, clumps of black hair clog up my shower like inky spider webs. I scoop up the wet clumps and toss them into the trash can. Then, because I absolutely can't tell my mom, I call Hannah.

"I need to tell you something."

Hannah is parting her black hair into long, thick sections. Last year she wore her hair in a ponytail every day, but this year she curled bangs and dyed layers, becoming one of these aesthetic Instagram girls who live off Pinterest and self-care reels. Last year, we used to share these reels with each other. Now my homepage is full of WHY YOUR HAIR ISN'T GROWING and HAIR PRODUCTS YOU SHOULDN'T BUY.

"Yeah?" Hannah says. She bends her neck until all of her hair cascades over her face. She throws her hair back. She pulls out a front section and begins to curl it with a straightener. Her mom doesn't have curlers at home; she thinks teenage girls should be modest.

"I, uh," I make myself say. "Um, I think I'm."

I try to think of the right word. Balding? That's for people in their forties and fifties. Experiencing hair loss? Going through metamorphosis? Teen Health said that shedded teen hair grows right back at an even faster pace, so maybe it is metamorphosis. But Hannah has already morphed. Changed. Shifted away, so if I'm not careful enough with my words, she'll open her mouth and laugh.

A curl blossoms into existence and droops a little when Hannah's curler lifts away.

"God," Hannah says. "I hate Asian hair." She pauses and looks at me and maybe catches onto something, but we don't have that same sync we used to have. "Sorry, continue?"

"I think—okay, this isn't a big deal, but it is a big deal to me. So can you. Like, not laugh."

"Okay, I won't laugh."

"I think." I can't say it. I try again. "I think I'm," is all I can say.

Hannah stares at me for a second. She sets down her straightener and tucks her hair behind her ears neatly. She huffs out a little laugh, which means that she is going to end

this with an easy, lighthearted joke instead of a serious philosophical conversation. "Are you coming out to me?"

My heart capulatatates. Freezes. Plummets.

"No," I hear myself say. "I'm experiencing alopecia."

"Okay," Hannah says. Is that relief? "Be right back."

She comes back half a minute later with the common name of alopecia and a new approach to this over-dramatic ex-best friend. She offers hair serums from Target and salon names. She laughs it off even though she said she wouldn't. My scalp itches, either with an oncoming headache or the dandruff that my household's cheap nine-dollar shampoo can't remove.

"Well," Hannah says when she runs out of things to say. "Let me know when you want to start on hair care, because I've also got to go to take care of my hair."

"Your hair looks fine."

"Not really. I cut these bangs myself. And my mom doesn't let me use heat protectant." Something terrible and bitter twists up in my gut. I'm not envying her. It would be so stupid to be jealous of her. "Your mom has good hair. You have good genes."

"Yeah, I guess," Hannah says, in a voice that means she's still unconvinced. "I mean, it's all Asian hair. Yours and mine. I bet your mom has good hair too. Right?"

Right, I should say. I'm just kidding with you. My hair's fine. Isn't it funny to be experiencing alopecia at fifteen? Haha.

Instead I say, "My mom and I don't. Everyone else in our family does."

"Oh," Hannah says. Pauses. "I guess hair loss is the recessive gene in your family."

If we are texting, a LOL would follow that particular text. But we are video calling, face to face, and there is no white screen and blue text bubbles to absorb the silence that follows. Hannah smiles a nervous smile and begins to curl a back section. She's going to find a reason to leave soon. I don't think that's something I can hear without hurting.

So I say first, "Bye, Hannah."

"Bye, best friend," she says.

\*

To Hannah, I am perpetually nameless. Hannah says it's because she met my mom in church before she met me, and every time she looks at me, there is always too much of my mom in me. She says it gives her an identity crisis. I say that I'm not like my mom, but Hannah always laughed it off, even back then.

I try to find ways to unbecome my mom. I stop wearing my hair in an ever-thinning braid. I press contacts into my eyes even when my eyes are burning from a weekday all-nighter. I buy hair growth serums, huge scrunchies too hot in the Houston weather but adequate to create a sense of volume, twenty-dollar curlers from advertised Instagram ads. I search up how much of the mother's genes are passed down to the daughter. How recessive certain genes are.

"You're pretty," Hannah tells me as we walk to second period together. It's the only time of sophomore year we have together, this three-minute lapse in time surrounded by people rushing to their next classes before the bell rings. It should feel crowded, but I

have Hannah next to me. It should be easy to fill three minutes with conversation, but here we are anyway, silent as specters.

Hannah looks down at me when I don't respond. She is six inches over me. It'll be easy for her to see my bald spot if I have one. She recalculates strategy. Uses the little knowledge she has about my family life to form a convincing smile. "Hey, don't give me that look. Your mom is so pretty. She looks just like you."

Hannah saw my mom once before. It was the start of freshman year, and it was the annual meet-your-teacher day, and we were still best friends. Hannah ran up to me as soon as we saw each other in the sea of people and whispered, "You look just like your mom."

She meant it as a compliment. I knew she did. It was a compliment for any good daughter to be like their mom. But I saw my mom in the midst of the well-dressed parents wanting to leave their child's teacher with a good impression, and my mom stuck out like a sore thumb between them.

She was oily. She hadn't showered in three days, not even for today. Her hair was up in a tight braid even though it showed her bald spot. She wore a black Nike hoodie with all the fuzz fallen out and a pair of patched joggers from her college days that still showed the emblem in Chinese. Beside her, Hannah's mom was bright and clean and smiling, and she looked exactly like the kind of trustworthy auntie down the street you'd trust to have your back.

It must be the most terrible thing in the world, to be ashamed of your mom. But there were so many other things to not be ashamed of— a shiny best friend I was still BFFs with, a shiny auntie who could be my new mom, myself who had all of these things— that the things that were not shiny, not glittering, were fading away.

\*

At age forty-four and two months, my mom is experiencing hair loss. This is very common— precisely sixty percent of middle-aged women reported loss of hair, or alopecia in scientific terms, from ages forty to sixty. Said syndrome is caused by heredity, depression, and vitamin deficiency. None of which can be tested at home.

In December, I scoop up clumps of hair from the bottom of the bathtub with silver strands. I start bringing more pill bottles from Walgreens to my mom's bedroom. Then, because I absolutely can't tell my mom, I take the bottles back to my own bedroom and chug them down with water. My hair is still not growing. I am still unable to part out a front section without revealing my receding hairline. I am still not sending Instagram reels to Hannah.

New Year's is coming up, and aunties will be coming to my house to pick on my mom's bald spot and her fuzzy black hoodie, her silence and lack of occupation and perpetual namelessness. My mom is still not showering. Still wearing the same black hoodies and decade-old college joggers. Still not caring.

Back when I was six or seven, back when I still had thick hair to part into potential bangs and didn't look so much like my mom, my mom told me stories of love. They were never stories of love between lovers. They were stories of loving your aging mother, loving

people who shared your blood even though bloodlines were invisible things hard to grasp. Even back then she was afraid I would become too much like her. Maybe she cared back then.

Loving other people will only disappoint you. You can't have expectations. You don't need to love people. If you stop caring, you won't have to please them anymore.

I knew her sadness, I thought. Then, I didn't want to.

I could tell her that I knew. That I watched as she cried upstairs huddled in a little blanket as aunties downstairs called her a useless stay-at-home woman who relied on her husband, that I was just a room away as she wiped off her tears and splashed cold water on her face and became dull and lifeless. That I watched as she brought fewer and fewer pill bottles and cared less and less about people. That I knew her staying was not out of love, but out of necessity. A lot of things were necessary until they weren't. Forever-BFFship. Love. Hair.

I wonder when I'll start caring less about my hair. When the day comes for me to become my mother.

I don't want to know.

Student Name: Ruby Chen

Grade: 11

School: Glenda Dawson High School

Title: Cookies

Category: Poetry

Key: Gold Key

Educator:

Cookies

In the spring,  
she dipped a hopeful finger into the dough,  
to taste its sweetness,  
and to herself she smiled softly  
as she thought of how she would make this with him.

In the summer,  
she guided his small, grubby hands to the bowl,  
to form misshapen balls of dough,  
and together they watched eagerly  
as the balls melted in the oven.

In the fall,  
they cleared the dishes from the table with washed hands,  
to make room for the final course,  
and they smiled proudly  
as they watched hands reach for their tray.

In the winter,  
he guided her frail, trembling hands to the bowl,  
to form misshapen balls of dough,  
and together they sat near the hearth quietly  
as the balls melted in the oven.

Now spring,  
he dips a coarse finger into the dough,  
to compare its taste to his memory,  
and a tear drops into the bowl silently  
as he thinks of how he had made this with her.

Student Name: Isabel Chung  
 Grade: 11  
 School: Pearland High School  
 Title: recollection is a love song  
 Category: Poetry  
 Key: Gold Key  
 Educator:

exuvia

our 17th summer finds us caught on the edge of being, limbs trapped halfway in the still-chirping shell of emergence.

still two, three months left till either of our birthdays, but you press your hands to mine and the warmth feels like pulling a bow loose, unwrapping:  
 this year, we are going to see everything.  
 there is no before it's all over but you won't be the one to say it  
 and i always stutter my goodbyes.

sometimes you bring me to old parking lots to watch the sky drink itself into a sunset haze,  
 tell me to come closer, closer, until our knees knock together  
 and your shoulder bleeds salt onto mine. against our backs,  
 the stop sign our old selves scratched hearts into  
 stands above us even years later. we're both young still—  
 only a few inches taller but chasing a sort of movie ending anyway,  
 hoping to reach the end credits and see our names scrolling up steadily  
 to a frank sinatra song neither of us can name.  
 in our wake, glittering:  
 the old shells we left behind, too heavy for a life in the limelight.

sunlight fades in the corner of my eyesight, a dulled radiance shaped like your laughter molded into cicada song.  
 it's an image i can't bear to lose. briefly, i press my palms to my eyes and watch the evening's first stars dance there,  
 praying i can make a constellation out of them  
 shaped like the laughter beneath our tymbal-shake stomachs.

burnout

i'm told waiting is the hardest part, but it comes easy to me.

gives me a chance to slow down, count the moments in love me's and love me not's,  
filling in the spaces the people on our old wallpapers have left.

it's only been a few hours but yesterday already feels so far away.  
we've got too much time in our hands—pointless when all of it spills through our fingers,  
trickling down weary knuckles, pooling between us on old pavement, sherbet-sweet.

we're bad at puzzles but try to complete each other anyway,  
crushing pieces together when it doesn't work and  
crushing each other even,  
new moon flesh bruising on the jagged edges.

look at the picture on the box: regret. so many late nights together we could've used  
to become content with the distance, but  
we get sick off caffeine instead, find acetaminophen in late-night conversations to soothe  
the worst aches.

press your fingers to where the pieces didn't stick, trace the image of the final product on  
my throat. smile into my skin:  
hurry, i think i'll be all ashes soon.  
hurry, i don't know how many love me's we have left.

fast lane

got bad eyes so when we run  
everything blurs into downtown lights and my heartbeat goes  
too fast to count, too  
short to sight read.

no beat to our footfalls until i catch up to you and  
it all gives way to a rush of concrete and  
stilling shadow, polyrhythmic, finding a tempo  
in the trembling sliver between our interlocked fingers,  
a tritone backbone  
in our shaky laughter.

you've always been faster—just crossed the finish line and  
there's already fountain soda dribbling down your thumb, two straws stuck in the plastic  
cover.  
losers weepers, i'm used to losing to you, i already know  
shorter one's mine so i



seek out the bar line gap in the dark,  
nails clipping your wrist when  
you hand over the cup.

polystyrene squeaking under our fingers but  
the momentum is too much for us to slow down now so we  
trip over the cherry-flavored syllables and  
almost say  
gonna miss you  
instead.

deep breathing

in / the moment i've got too much on my mind, worried it'll burst out and embarrass me,  
but i smile anyway and link my arm in yours, praying closeness will instill a silence i've  
never known before. we're both thinking too much tonight, and there's unfamiliar emotion  
in the way you hold yourself together that has me all assumptions and needle-thin  
nerves, trembling, theorizing.

out / of my mind a year ago, i tried to memorize you in your entirety, so convinced that it  
would free me from having to forget. all for naught: tonight everything seems to slip  
away anyway, leaving me with the clementine residue, bittersweet. i can't remember the  
details so i fill them in by hand, color by number, as if either of us still remembers how it  
felt to be five and free. reaching through the spectrometer for something physical: red  
where my side presses against yours, held endpoint to endpoint. under led lights your  
weight is a warm line, neon orange, heater in december type of comfort. goldenrod eye  
contact like back when we did our homework in the park side by side, took the same  
classes, braced ourselves against the wind, electrifying.

in / high school and it's just black and white, now. there's nothing special about today but  
a warm song is playing somewhere in my throat and it's grounding. my eyelids are heavy  
but i can't fall asleep just yet, have to feel out every last moment—how long until we have  
diplomas in our hands, how long until we take diverging paths? will i find you in my  
textbooks? will the mundanity persist—knowledge of the whorls on your thumb hidden  
beside the chemical compositions of a dozen stars?

out / of practice but you're closer, suddenly  
in / my universe, and there is no music, no fireworks, but braced against you i can count  
your lashes in the low light. i'm tracing the kaleidoscope patterns spiraling  
out / in your eyes for anything i can hold onto, anything that won't break on a thousand-  
mile trip to a new world. leaning

in / but there is distance between our hands already, so i hold the memory of yours close  
to my chest, wrapped in cellophane so it won't break when i fade  
out / past the houston skyline.  
in, / steady. don't care if time's running  
out, / just say something kind to me again. tell me an untruth; promise me your next  
breath will be for us.

Student Name: Sion Joo  
 Grade: 11  
 School: Glenda Dawson High School  
 Title: Wrinkled Beautifully  
 Category: Personal Essay & Memoir  
 Key: Gold Key  
 Educator:

The mind holds memories; wrinkles tell their story.

#### Creation

The biggest furrow on my mother's face is her first furrow.

At the ripe age of thirty, my mother had her first child. In the agonizing span of forty-six hours, a decade's worth of aloe vera and cucumbers crumbled from her face. Father was absent during her toil; he was dozing in the car. Nurses believed it would take days before I began thumping on the entrance. Yet, on that dewy June night, merely an hour after everyone was dismissed, mother was contorting and curling. She told wild stories of the next two days that reset her definition of pain.

Mother scoured the internet for birthing tips, live births, and dietician advice. Her pregnancy exercises consumed nearly half of her day. If there was anyone more prepared for labor, it was my supermom. Of course, she, likewise, expected to lay pretty pretty on the hospital bed with her fresh layer of evening make-up, give a few grunts, and pop out a healthy eight-pound baby.

Instead, she lay dismantled on the sweat-drenched hospital bed with her crumbling and melting evening makeup, begging God for one less contraction. She used all her might to release the energy that she'd been brewing for 9 months but the energy simply didn't do much. On her face, this monstrous strain took on the shape of gritted teeth, bursting sweat, and a ginormous wrinkle between her eyebrows. Curses flew out. Some unprecedented collar-grabbing and chest-fisting occurred. Lipstick, foundation, and the new L'Oreal serum flew off. Needles bursting with all sorts of new colorful pains were introduced. Doctors hollered for extra support. Nurses were staggering from the tire.

The new wrinkle descended further and further down into the genetic information of the epithelial cells below until it was finally situated in the space between her brows. Mother's pride was gone; with its departure, came a curse. This curse would bite my mother's face ever so frequently starting the day I was born.

With the birth of her first child, followed the birth of her first wrinkle. We would grow up together.

#### Devotion

Mother was thirty-four. I was four. Yet, at every request of her mini princess, she dawned fairy wings and a ballerina tutu to play Princess Ju-Ju with me.

She was a full-time wage earner. I was a full-time mischief-maker. Yet, she burst out from her company seminar mid-presentation after receiving a call that a group of neighborhood mothers were demanding that her daughter spit out an apology for stealing from a walnut tree.

Mother left for work at five o'clock AM each morning to catch the Metro that carried her two hours to her workplace. She never missed a beat. Even if it was raining, snowing, and hailing, mother would depart from our door at five o'clock and stride back in punctually fourteen hours later at seven o'clock.

The clock struck seven every single day. Every single day, within at most a five-minute interval, mother would slither through the door, back hunched, jaw unhinged, body barely sustaining from melting onto the doorstep. The wrinkle between her brows was so deep that narrower tributary wrinkles began branching out from the mainstem. She thought of rose baths, milk massages, spasming out on the couch, stuffing her cheeks with Choco-Pie, and sleep. However, she knew the reality that the daily cucumber facials of her twenties were centuries away.

She would glance to her left and see my grandfather sprawled across the couch cracking away at shrimp chips. She would glance to the right and see a landfill of dirty dishes. Mother would hear the sound of Grandmother's giggling, the bath faucet spouting, and the plip-plopping sound of feet clapping with the water's surface. When she faced down, she was met with an energized little furball celebrating her return.

Mother immediately got to work. She unplugged the clothespins from the refrigerator door and pinched the skin at the edge of her eyebrows. As she scrubbed the plates, her temples turned red then purple then blue. The clothespin dug deeper, stretching the foreskin above her eyes while shifting excess skin to the forehead, creating the perfect environment for the fostering of new wrinkles. If her eyes started to droop, she would slither to the drying rack to fetch another clothespin to plug into her face.

Once she was finished with dishes, unloading the dried clothes, preparing father's midnight snack, reloading wet clothes, and packing four lunches for the next day, she had five clothespins and ten wrinkles on her face.

She was not done.

She took the selfish, sulky little girl clutching her apron to the master bedroom and unfolded the makeshift table. I recognized this signal: I ran to the cubby below the TV stand and grabbed the two cleanest sheets of paper. Mother had the colored pencils ready.

Starting from ten o'clock, Mother drew outlines of princesses for the brat beside her to color. Only after I'd drowsed off- color pencil still clenched in hand- did my mother stop manufacturing. She carried me to the mattress beside us with the last droplet of strength left inside her, tucked me in, and retreated to the bathroom to unplug the pins.

The clothespins left a purple stain with removal. The next morning it would fade back into peachy pink.

Wrinkles, however, don't follow cycles. They can't grasp forgiveness. The forehead's furrows were permanent because a curse was cast.

#### Consideration

I had a strange obsession: elbows.

I don't recall my first interaction with an elbow, but I could imagine what a transcendental experience it would've been, because, for the next five years, there wouldn't be a day that I don't grasp someone's elbows.

Dry elbows, moisturized elbows, tanned elbows, pale elbows... I enjoyed them all. Any adult who was kindly willing to lend their arm to the innocent-looking child immediately regretted it when minutes of rubbing elbows turned into hours of stretching elbows. Maybe there was magic hidden within the crevices of the elbow. Maybe I lost something precious inside someone's elbow wrinkle and was on a quest to retrieve that special something. I might've just enjoyed the sensation of loose skin under my fingertips. To this day, I still don't have the slightest idea of when or why this habit began.

One thing I was sure about, however, was my favorite elbow: my mother's. Her elbow was stretchy but not elastic, dry but not ashy, and bare but not bony. She was the nicest lender, and therefore the victim with the highest elbow-time. She didn't question my habit nor make awkward gestures to shoo the odd kid away. Mother voluntarily lifted her sleeves and laid beside me at night for our daily elbow-time.

After a long day of work, mother always collapsed midway onto the bed. As if face-planting was the trick to rejuvenating her energy, after a moment's pause of charging, she would use the rest of her might to crawl into the covers beside me. Instead of lying on her

back to immediately drift to dreamland, mother sheathed her elbows and turned sideways to face me. Her right hand was her pillow; the left hand, now twisted outward, was my elbow. She slept in this same position for all three hundred and sixty-five days in a year.

Her right hand was a double-edged sword. It was a pillow, a pillar of comfort and support. However, it was undoubtedly the cause of yet another curse strike. Sleeping, her face was unconsciously being smooshed night after night. Although it was faint nasolabial lines at first, they soon evolved into a mad furrow with characteristics of the first wrinkle's deep penetration and the second wrinkle's multitude. They stretched from the little cubby below her nose all the way down to the corner of her lips, dividing her face in three.

The curse continued, mercilessly biting mother's face.

#### Protection

Mother always cautions me, "When you marry a man, you marry the in-laws as well."

My grandparents tended to make spontaneous visits to our residence. They would simply walk a few apartment buildings down to our complex, punch in the digits, and make themselves at home. Although a problem in itself, it wouldn't have been much of an issue had they come in silently, done their business, and left the home in the state that it was originally in.

Instead, grandfather often staggered through the doorway drunk, sprawled out across our sofa half-naked, and motioned for mother to cook. Grandfather always swore on his godly spice tolerance and ushered mother to add as many chilis to his ramen as possible, but this clearly wasn't the case since he would hog our only restroom for hours on end, vomiting, and shitting. Unsurprisingly, he was also the type to wrestle a child over a TV remote controller and an uneven split of a Ssang-Ssang Bar<sup>1</sup>.

Grandmother had given up on her drunkard husband since long ago. And although grandmother wasn't nearly as frequent with her visits, each time she visited, she left mother absolutely broken.

Grandmother despised my mother. The reason for scorn differed each time she visited: it could be a loaded washing machine, or an ironing board left propped against the wall. An issue as measly as a dripping faucet was always the start of a nasty nagging session for her. Grandmother usually started by criticizing my mother's homemaking skills, regressing to her days when a speck of dust would deserve a beating from the mother-in-law. However, mother wasn't ever too bothered by these comments because she knew that imperfections were inevitable since Grandmother's visits were spontaneous. Then, grandmother would complain about mother's occupation and salary. She sometimes sighed, lamenting about her son's departure and subsequent "contamination" by a country bitch. Mother twitched. These were insults that remained in her heart.

Grandma knew how to rile up mother: at the end of each nagging session, she brought up the clueless, merry little me that was always tugging her apron.

According to her, I should've been a boy. In our family ancestry, almost all Joo family males had produced male offspring. Grandmother, the superstitious woman that she is, undoubtedly expected father to continue the family name. To her surprise, father had me. Rather, more specifically and according to Grandmother, mother caused him to have me.

Mother gently reached down under the table and cupped my ears. Then, she died inside.

That night, in the bathroom, wrinkles formed. Mother crumbled. She curled up on the floor and beat her chest until her fist unclenched itself. She threw up her pride. She cried and cried and cried. She ripped her skin apart and patched it back together. She cursed her fate. She howled at God. Her face contorted in anguish. All across her face, hundreds of minuscule wrinkles were born. These wrinkles fed on my mother's salty tears. They devoured her youth but spit out the bones. Her rosy cheeks turned brown and sunken. Her tangy skin melted. The wrinkles advanced to the scalp and uprooted her hair. By itself, one wrinkle was invisible. Together, they killed mother.

#### Love

Forty-six grueling hours later, I was born. My father described my first cries as obnoxious; my mother always told me my cry was angelic. At the peak of my mother's pain, my cries served as a reminder that physical hurt was worthwhile.

The nurses haphazardly wiped me away and placed me on my mother's heaving chest. My mother was instantly overwhelmed with joy. She recalls me as the most beautiful being she had witnessed: fair skin, button nose, and doe eyes. In reality, I most likely looked like a cone-shaped purple alien, but the power of a mother's illusion is strong: she won't deny the beauty she saw that day. However, no maternal illusion could mask the massive wrinkle between her brows. She first noticed it when she glided her hand across her forehead to wipe off sweat beads. Instead of her fingers smoothly sailing across her brows, it was abruptly stopped by a valley running down the middle. After rubbing the area a few times to confirm the wrinkle's presence, she commenced.

Mother staggered up from her bed. Knees trembling and eyes hazy, she slowly inched herself toward the bathroom door. She poured the rest of her dimming strength into her fingertips and turned the knob, unveiling the wide mirror that stood before her.

The mirror showed someone else. It wasn't a youthful, thirty-year-old newlywed staring back into her eyes; it was a haggard, gray-toned ahjumma<sup>2</sup> with a long, deep wrinkle between the brows.

...

A giggle escaped her lips. Small giggles became hysterical laughs. Mother bent over the sink with an uncontrollable burst of joy and pleasure. With the birth of her first wrinkle, she had finally become a mother! Sure, there was a deep, odd concave down the middle of her face. It was awkward and unnatural. However, to my mother, this wrinkle symbolized the birth of an angel. She knew the future would hold its trials, but she would now have a gritty little angel to accompany her through life's obstacles. To this day, Mother assuredly confirms that this laughing spell wasn't post-partum delirium nor was it a coping mechanism. She laughed because of pure joy.

That day, on the corners of each eye, two little laugh lines appeared.

...

Wrinkles aren't curses; they are testaments to all the devotion, consideration, protection, and love my mother gave me. Whenever my mother smiles, all of her wrinkles are accentuated. It's so incredibly beautiful and strong. I'm reminded of all her stories. I dive down deep into her memories. I rejoice at the birth of my life companions.

Each dewy June, my birthday comes back around. It's the day that both me and mother's first wrinkle were born. However, we never forget to remind each other that, while a birthday is a celebration of the born, it is also a celebration of my mother for birthing us both.

1. Korean Ice Cream that has two popsicle sticks within the frozen cream. It's meant to be split in half with a partner.
2. Korean for "old lady"



Student Name: Analucia Thomas  
 Grade: 11  
 School: Spring Branch Academic Institute  
 Title: Sunflowers and Scales (Excerpt)  
 Category: Novel Writing  
 Key: Gold Key  
 Educator:

## Chapter 16: Kieran

Something was off.

Well.

Something had been off for days now. First, the Sunflower Boy had disappeared from the manor—something he only knew by the sudden absence of his voice carrying through the manor's walls. He wasn't told what had preceded the disappearance (not that he often was informed of household goings-on), but he was smart enough to know that it wouldn't be productive to ask.

If only Kieran had committed to that mindset, much of the needless confusion surrounding him now would be nonexistent, he chided himself. Self-pity, though, wouldn't help him—or anybody—now. Now, what would be productive would be to investigate the noises coming from outside. Typically, midday would be loud with the bustling noises of village life, and odd gravel-crunching noises wouldn't mean much of anything. However, the raging storms of the past few nights had led to the village outside being near-silent, so the noise of scraping gravel grabbed Kieran's attention; though in truth, in his boredom that would not have taken much. Regardless of whether the noises meant anything, his father was holed up now with the guards, discussing strategy. It certainly wouldn't hurt matters to see what was happening. In fact, due to the guards' temporary absence, it might even have been the more practical choice to assess the situation.

Kieran rose from the desk where he'd been aimlessly contemplating, and slowly walked through the open entryway into the dark hall, permeated with light sprouting from torches that lined the walls. He carefully calculated each step, extremely aware that a misstep could account for a very unpleasant fall. When Kieran arrived at the end of the hall, he forced open the doors, trying not to flinch at the heat that had soaked into their dark metal and now seared his palms. What faced him on the other side of the doors, however, only exacerbated his confusion.

Staring across from him were two boys, both unmoving. One, a short, dark haired boy in a wheelchair, stared nervously up at him. The other, whose expression reflected more fear than nervousness, was the Sunflower Boy.

Or at least he was fairly sure it was. The boy standing in front of him stood with a solid posture, his hair somehow longer and fluffier than it had been mere days before. Even his

face was different: the scar Kieran himself had caused was now joined by a much larger one, marring his cheek and neck in a pink smear. And to top it all off, this boy had wings . Large, golden, undeniably ostentatious wings.

But when the boy spoke, it was undeniable that he and the Sunflower Boy were one and the same. Kieran recognized the voice, from the one he was used to hearing only through thick stone walls, from the one that had spoken to him in the same frightened tone so many years ago.

"Kieran. I didn't—you—I...." The Sunflower Boy trailed off, whatever statement he'd been trying to construct left unfinished.

Kieran decided to lead with the obvious point—or at least, the most immediately pertinent. "You're not supposed to be here."

The Sunflower Boy 's face deepened in hue, to the point where it nearly matched the tone of the angry red gash on his cheek. "I know. I just...after...after this happened," he said, lifting the gaudy wings at his sides, "I didn't know where else to go. Mother, she has to know something about this—"

Kieran cut him off. "Mother's not here."

The Sunflower Boy seemed to wilt; his eyes, previously shining with something like hope (or perhaps, more accurately, desperation) went dark. "Oh."

The boy seated in front of him—who to this point had sat unmoving, presumably listening to whatever it was that was currently going on—spoke then: "D-do you know where she is, then? Where we could find her?"

Who is he? Why is he here? Kieran wondered.

Kieran decided he did not wonder greatly enough to protract the situation further. After all, what kind of a question was that, from a complete stranger? What information could this boy have to make Kieran' s mother so important to him, that he would be willing not only to accompany his brother from who knows where but beyond? Kieran made up his mind to cast the two away, continue his studies, and pretend this ridiculous situation held no relevance to him.

I need to focus.

I can't be distracted now.

He was, of course, promptly distracted.

## Chapter 17: Ian

Kieran.

Ian hadn't seen him in years—though they were never separated by more than a few inches of wall—but as soon as he opened the door, Ian knew it had to be him. The last time they had stood together, Ian had barely come up to Kieran's shoulder. Times had changed. Ian could look him straight in the eye now, though he wasn't quite sure he wanted to confront his piercing gaze. Kieran's gaze seemed more tired than explicitly furious, concentrated in one eye; the other was hidden by a thick strip of gauze. For a

moment, the injury hidden beneath the gauze was all Ian could focus on. It must have been recent to still have been bandaged, right?

He wanted to ask:

What happened?

Are you okay?

Did he...

But he knew he wasn't in a place to ask or even to care, knew that even if he was, Kieran likely wouldn't explain. He never did.

Kieran was, however, the first to speak. "You're not supposed to be here."

Well, that was to the point. And not necessarily untrue. But Ian had gone through such an ordeal. He was determined to answer at least some of his questions (and hopefully Ryu's as well), and he knew that to do so he'd have to avoid an argument. A confrontation wasn't something he could take right now—or maybe ever, if he was honest. Ian did his best to explain; but he'd barely stammered out a few words before he was cut off.

"Mother's not here."

Ian felt himself deflate as the words registered:

Mother's...not here.

She's always been here.

Where is she?

Was this all for nothing? Ian felt dizzy, fuzzy, pained in a way he hadn't felt since his wings had sprung. His mind was cluttered, clogged in a way he now realized he might never clarify. "Oh." The questions crowding his mind obscured whatever remained of his thoughts. At once he felt full to burst and so, so empty.

Ryu barely seemed fazed. "Do you know where she is, then? Where we could find her?"

Was he already formulating a plan—some sort of rescue mission? The idea was tantalizing but impossible. Ian highly doubted Kieran would be willing to share enough details. Even more so he doubted that they'd actually be able to enact one; what could two barely functional teenagers do on their own?

For a few moments Kieran did not respond. Enough time passed to shift the mood slightly from despair to utter awkwardness. In those moments, Kieran seemed to make his decision, and he turned on his heel to return inside.

"Wait! You—you can't just leave. " It wasn't Ian who had spoken, but Ryu, who was at present leaning out of his chair to a somewhat dangerous degree, eyes locked on Kieran's as if he thought he could mesmerize him into agreement.

Kieran paused and turned his gaze, more fiery now, to Ryu, though his tone remained cool and calm. "You do not dictate what I can or cannot do. Who even—" He cut himself off, inhaling sharply, posture stiffening as if he had just been plunged into an icy ocean. His gaze, now so hot Ian wondered if it might actually burn, turned to Ian. "Sunflower Boy. What... What is this?" he said, gesturing to Ryu.

Ryu balked.

Ian might've understood the reaction, had he not been startled by being called "Sunflower Boy." He'd nearly forgotten his proper title.

Ryu's breathing quickened as he responded, eyes still locked on Kieran. "I—I'm not a 'this.' You don't have to talk to me through him. I'm perfectly capable of responding on my own."

Kieran squinted; he seemed somewhat taken aback, though Ian couldn't tell if the reaction was genuine or not.

"Alright then. What are you?" A bit of genuine curiosity seeped into his voice as he continued, gaze now coldly fixed on Ryu: "At first I thought you were a non-element. You seem to possess advanced technology and dress yourself in a typical fashion as seen in such types, and you don't have any obvious markers of elementality—for example, wings, sprouts, abnormal body heat. However, when you insisted upon staring at me so rapturously, I noticed that you distinctly lack pupils, which"—he frowned slightly—"I don't believe is normal, but I suppose you're free to correct me."

There was a brief pause in Kieran's monologue as he waited for a correction, though none came. The only sound was Ryu's heavy breathing. "Oh, and that as well should have alerted me to something unusual, I suppose. You breathe air the same as most land creatures do, but it seems like you struggle with it, and..." He slowed down for a moment, as if he might soon run out of breath himself: "I may be incorrect in my assumption, but it appears you may also struggle with walking on land. Though individually—or perhaps even combined—those factors may have no greater meaning, given that you came here with my brother, this is bound to be tied to something nonsensical."

"Well, none of that—none of it is entirely wrong, I guess. But as for what it all means... I honestly don't know." Ryu's voice was shaky but unyielding.

It seemed to Ian as if Ryu was trying to ignore Kieran's tone but wasn't quite succeeding. It was better than he could do, though; he'd been immobile for nearly the entire exchange.

Kieran's sudden scoff made him snap to attention.

"Sunflower Boy, did you do this on purpose? Contrive a plot to use your fishy friend as bait so I'd help you?"

"No, it's not.... It's not like that." Ian looked to Ryu, hoping to reassure him, but his friend's gaze was still fixed on Kieran.

"It's working, though, isn't it? I can see it in your—in your face. You want to know what's going on as much as I do." Ryu paused for a deep breath and continued, the rest of the phrase coming out in a rush: "Not just with me, either. You want to know what's happening with your mom. You want to know what's happening with Ian—in fact, I bet you want to know why I'm calling him that, too. Just—just hear us out, please. If nothing else, it can be like"—his face flushed a purplish blue—"like a research project. You can gather notes on me—on hybrids, if you want to call it that—and then leave, or whatever. Just... give us some information in return, if you can."

Kieran rubbed his temples, still standing inches from the door. "You're certainly persistent." There was a moment of tense silence as Kieran contemplated the offer—

which, to Ryu's credit, was further than Ian had ever thought they'd get—but then he turned his back to them, opening the door.

Ian could feel his shoulders sink, the hopelessness of their situation setting in. “Wait, Kieran, I—”

Kieran shook his head. “There's no use adding to your argument. As annoying as your friend was in making his point, it's not an entirely incorrect one. I'm never one to turn down an offer of information.”

So that means...

Kieran turned back to face them once more, his eye narrowed. “Follow me. I'll tell you what I know.”

## Chapter 18: Ryu

The olive-skinned boy who stood in front of him seemed straight out of a novel. Honestly, the same could be said about Ian, but the two could not have more clearly occupied distinct genres. Where Ian appeared generally soft, almost fluffy, everything about Kieran was sharp, from his gaze to his crisply folded clothing. Their strong jaw, eye color, and ridiculous height were the only constants.

Kieran's style, too, was like none Ryu'd ever seen in real life. Long, black hair was neatly tied with a long red ribbon into a ponytail that reached nearly all the way from his high-collared red and gold jacket down to his loose, high-waisted pants.

Ian had also seemed startled at Kieran's appearance, though Ryu surmised that his shock was more at the bandage obscuring half of Kieran's face. Ryu couldn't be sure why it was there, but he'd heard enough to have a guess, and the atmosphere of the home only contributed to the wariness that guess instilled in him. If the outside was ominous, with its obsidian pillars and radiation of heat, the inside was worse by an order of magnitude. As Ryu's eyes adjusted to the initial darkness, he realized the hall was dimly lit by torches and glowing carvings embedded in the walls. What exactly they were of he was unsure, but it was definitely fire related—clearly, Duke was proud of that ability. This only unsettled him further.

Ryu contemplated the halls silently. There was no sound except the echo of footsteps and the vague hum of rotating wheels until Kieran came to an abrupt stop in front of an intricately carved door.

“Sunflower Boy. Wait here.”

Ian looked as if he wanted to object; to be honest, Ryu wanted him to. But he said nothing, merely acknowledging Kieran's request with a small nod.

Kieran opened the door and beckoned Ryu inside what appeared to be a small study. Gleaming shelves brimming with books made of very thin metal sheets lined the walls. Kieran sat down at a tidy desk in front of one of the shelves and sighed, turning to face Ryu. “Don't worry. Unless you give me a reason, I don't plan on hurting you,” he said

with a soft laugh before continuing, "I'd just like to know exactly who you are before I lead you into a very...sensitive situation."

"That makes sense."

"I'm glad you understand. By my observation, I believe you're likely of water-element descent, though from your style of dress and technology...you've been raised primarily in non-elemental society, correct?"

Ryu nodded. "Y-yeah, that's right. I didn't even know what elements were until like...two days ago, maybe? I definitely didn't know I was one.... My name is Ryu, by the way. You don't have to address me like I'm not here."

Kieran, somewhat unsurprisingly, disregarded the last part of his statement.

Student Name: Nadia Weaver  
 Grade: 8  
 School: Memorial Middle School  
 Title: The Yellow Flowers  
 Category: Poetry  
 Key: Gold Key  
 Educator:

Ah, the golden light of your soul.  
 It always shone - even thru' the harshness of day.  
 And I remember, such a flapping of wings there was  
 Beating in my heart...

The day I picked the yellow flowers.  
 Your favorite.  
 Stumbling home, giddy, cheerful,  
 Waiting to find your glowing smile.

The day the sun gazed without emotion,  
 Listening to my wailing grief.  
 For then I knew that your beautiful soul  
 Would not be near me any longer.

Never have I seen a butterfly as a butterfly  
 Since you left.  
 And the flowers that were meant for you  
 Lay rotten in the place I dropped them.

Mother always told us that all would be wonderful  
 If we stayed brave and kind.  
 I never thought that that would become a lie.  
 What did you ever do?

What did you ever do?

Student Name: Lydia Watrous  
 Grade: 12  
 School: Tomball Memorial High School  
 Title: A Sun Drenched Room  
 Category: Poetry  
 Key: Gold Key  
 Educator: Dana McMillan

I want to be pretty like a sun drenched room, like water running through your fingers, like book stores and beaded bracelets, like cookies in the oven, like a new dress and nice hair, like red rocks and blue skies

I want to be wild like dancing on the top floor of a parking garage, like a sunburn running across your nose and cheeks, like holding hands, like pushing you down the hill with me so we end up tangled together at the bottom, like old trucks and fire escapes

I want to be powerful like wind in my hair and feet in the grass, like little kids running around my feet falling over everything I say, like guessing your favorite ice cream flavor on the first try, like english class and automatic doors, like laughing in a way that makes you want to be with me

I want to be elegant like ladies made of stone with plants spilling over the sides, like looking through old letters, like wearing eyeliner and a black dress that's been hidden in the back of a closet for thirty years

I want to be devastating like crying on public transport, like forgotten childhood toys, like a love letter lost in the mail, like drowning myself in music, like lonely houses, like flowers killed by frost, like ivy clinging to the wall of a highway

I want to be interesting like cool clothes, like a hidden cemetery, like fingernails painted black, like laughing and secrets and pink hair, like a two minute conversation you spend all night thinking about, like highways twisting around each other looking like spaghetti

I want to be brave like talking about how much I believe in God, like holding eye contact, like learning to skateboard and play guitar, like telling that girl I like her tattoo, like writing and writing and writing, like running towards you with my arms open

I want to be gentle like driving through fog, like waking up to a storm, like rocking a baby to sleep, like watching the sunset every single day, like practicing piano, like making lunch for my brothers



I want to be better like helping my mom with chores, like only saying things I mean, like talking to the person who isn't cool, like reading new books, like working for what I want, like not feeling so insecure and messed up, like wanting to spend time with my family, like making more friends

I am jealous like chasing anyone who gives me attention, like making things about me, like trying so hard that I make it so so much worse, like knowing I'm being selfish and not wanting to change

I am dark and terrible like stealing lines from songs and pretending they're mine, like lying to my dad about who I am, like making myself feel worthless, like asking for too much, like I don't know my sister, like wanting to grow up too fast, like making promises because I want to be better, like wishing my life was some big tragedy so I could justify all my awful thoughts, like I want to know love so much like I'm so desperate to feel it I forget so many other things like I lose things I can't find but I'm looking I'm looking and I find the good but I also find the awful the dark the terrible and sometimes it scares me more than the good makes me happy

But I want to be yours like laying upside down on your couch so I can see you from a different angle, like picking you up so we can go look for the tallest tree to climb and kissing at the top, like wanting to be with you even when I don't want to be with anyone, like screaming how much I love you because I can't say it quietly, like I don't even know who you are yet

I'm pretty like the way I look at the sky, like how I laugh at myself after I say something stupid, like how I feel so happy in a new city, like how I can listen to music and look out the window for hours, like when I take pictures with my little blue camera, like how I keep going to church even when everyone else stops, like trying to make a difference in the world, like telling my friends how to live more sustainably, like hugging my family, like loving my friends too much, like being proud of my poetry, like praying and reading and being excited about the things I learn

I am who I am because of all the things I want to be and all the things I am becoming

Student Name: Lauren Taylor  
 Grade: 11  
 School: Tomball Memorial High School  
 Title: Always Wandering  
 Category: Personal Essay & Memoir  
 Key: Gold Key  
 Educator: Kathleen Campese

It's that time of year again. I know because as I step out the back door in the early morning, I feel a chill in the air that makes the hair on my arms and legs stand up. I wait for them to come, and, like usual, they do. Right on time, I think to myself. Stories. Hundreds and hundreds of stories. Enough to spend a whole lifetime reading, The only problem? They've never been written. They only exist for me to remember and relive every year around this time when the leaves start to fall and the bees and wasps go into hiding until the next spring. This is the time when the stories fill my head again, and I get the inexplicable urge to create more. I step out into the backyard and like the cool air, they encase me.

Our backyard is nothing special. Flowerbeds line the patio, home to a few scraggly bushes that could survive just about anything, and flowers that are replanted every year in the spring after the worst of the cold has passed. Grass grows up through the cracks of the slabs of concrete, which is lighter in some spots where we had left mulch bags sitting out for a few months. The lawn is shabby, patched with a variety of grasses, weeds, and some spots where the sun always hits and where nothing ever grew at all. Most of my time in the yard is spent around the side of the house, where the spotty grass gives way to a pine needle strewn floor and weeds that grow straight up out of the ground, threatening to take over the entire yard. It was here where most of my stories took root. I traveled the world and beyond from that run-down backyard. I've been a pirate sailing the southern seas, an adventurer in rainforests filled with venomous animals whom I always managed to befriend, a world renowned horseback rider, a chef who lived in the rocky mountains, an orphan with a pet tiger, a sled dog racer in Alaska. I visited so many places in that yard, but the most amazing of them only exist in my mind alone. An avid lover of fantasy even today, I created magical worlds that no one else will ever get to visit. One of my favorites I can still remember: Trees with white trunks whose leaves were an orangish-red all year long, covered in bioluminescent plants and fungi. A sky stuck in a permanent dusk with 5 moons and no sun at all. Great gods that ruled over dragons and satyrs and elves. All living under the scorching sun of Tomball, Texas.

Even though next to none of the stories I came up with actually took place in the backyard, I drew inspiration from the creatures that lived there. The rotting wood of our old swing set provided a wonderful home for large and fuzzy carpenter bees, gentle giants who I quickly learned not to fear. Anoles sunned themselves on the side of the house, darting for cover whenever I got too close. Little brown skinks and green tree frogs

that used to be everywhere, but I would be lucky to spot now. Great big toads that lived for years under the flower pots in the garden, and small toads that we would catch and show off to our parents. Squirrels that would make nests in the great, big pine tree, and red hawks that would catch the squirrels. Even the red wasps I learned to live in harmony with, though I still get a tad nervous when they buzz past. I grew up with these creatures, and I learned to appreciate all of them. Except for the yellow jackets, who I still believe to this day to be the devil's spawn. These insects and animals became dragons and griffins in my head. Squirrels grew until they were big enough that I could climb on their backs. Mocking birds carried messages from far off kingdoms. Even the little grubs and beetles had a part to play in my grand tales.

I would spend hours upon hours outside, pacing back and forth, coming up with story after story after story. I learned recently that people are more creative when walking around, which might explain how I was able to come up with hundreds of ideas in the backyard, and they all flew out of my head the moment I sat down to write. "Fleeting ideas" my friend called them, but I knew that wasn't true. Fleeting ideas wouldn't still be on my mind eight years later. I walked that overgrown path by the side of my house so many times I wore down the grass under my bare feet and made a permanent trail. I would run my hand along the rough brick of the house, taking in the vine-covered trees and rusted bird bath, and breathing the sweet scent of crepe myrtle flowers; but in my head, I was already a thousand worlds away.

Now, as I walk outside I can feel the stories starting to come alive once again. Though my feet are much less calloused than they used to be, the feeling of the dirt and the roots of the ash tree underneath them still awakens a childlike sense of giddiness within me. I suddenly want nothing more than to walk back down that path and delve once again into the world of fantasy within. I realize now that these stories are much more than just a way for a little girl to pass the time, they are a part of who I am. They are an extension of myself, forever immortalizing my thoughts, feelings, and greatest passions. And while they always exist within me, in the backyard, they exist all around me. Different flowers, different bees, different grasses, same stories. I've been doing this for years, but it still surprises me just how far I can go if I let my mind wander.

Student Name: Alissa Feng

Grade: 10

School: Tomball High School

Title: American Doughnuts

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Key: Gold Key

Educator:

If there was one way into the heart of any white, American born, 10-year-old, it would have to be doughnuts. And if there was one thing I, an Asian, not so very American born, 10-year-old was going to get in life, it would have to be doughnuts.

"Mom, puh-leese!" I shout over the crackling rainbow medley that my mother flips in a wok—pinkish, juicy shrimp, golden eggs, and green scallions. I throw myself against the kitchen counter. "Everyone brings something for their birthday at school! I have to get doughnuts for mine!"

The fragrant, savory aroma of her Chinese soy wafts across the room, but my mind is set on the sugary, fried-to-goodness circles with their gooey, 'American Signature' glaze.

Mom's spatula clangs vigorously against the pan, a loud thunk every time it hits the bottom. Hot pools of oil in the pan hiss at the steady whirl of the overhead fan.

"I make fried rice for your friends and you bring to school instead." She says sternly in her broken English. I wince. "Kuai dian, ba mifan gei wo!" (Quickly, give me the rice!)

As if on queue, the rice cooker begins to hum its usual Happy Birthday tune, the red READY button spurring to life. I groan and stomp towards the cooker, its lid spewing out thick steam that hits my face.

"No one even wants to eat fried rice," I grumble as I grab the rice and pour it into the pan. "Just let me take doughnuts to school instead!"

"Ni zen me zhidao?" (How do you know?) Her spatula grazes the pan.

"Because I know!"

"Ni kan, ni! bu! zhi! dao!" (See, You! Don't! Know!) Mom slams the spatula against the rim of the wok with each word, plumes of smoke rising up the pan as she fumes. Small grains shoot off the spatula with each impact. While she bubbles over in irritation, I am

flooded with shame. Is it that hard to buy some measly doughnuts for a birthday? My blood begins to boil.

“No, I do know! Noone wants your gross, Chinese food! And they don’t want your stupid fried rice, they want doughnuts! American, normal people doughnuts!” I yell.

Now it is my gross, Chinese words that spew out of my mouth.

I suck in a breath. My mother stops, her hand and spatula frozen in midair. Then the oil in the wok stops sputtering, the overhead fan stops whirring, and the rice cooker’s ‘ready’ signal stops singing. Even the fried rice stills. There’s this glassy look in my mother’s eyes that stares so deep into me I feel stripped bare. Her eyebrows soften and she looks down at me, and then down at the wok full of gleaming rice, and murmurs, “I’ll buy you the doughnuts.” Her English isn’t broken this time, but I still wince.

\\

The car ride to school is ear-prickingly silent. The tires against the asphalt, the wind’s blow against the car, and the occasional clicking of the reverse gear are muted by the stuffed, heavy air inside. The box of doughnuts lay in my lap, the pastries bumping against one another after each slight movement. The clouds cruise by and blur into a giant puddle of pearly rice outside the backseat window, and I clutch the box as tight as the knot in my stomach.

“Have fun, okay?” Mom says as we drive up to the front of the school.

“Yeah.” I mumble, and climb out the car door. As I turn to close it, my gaze meets my mother’s, and she stares at me with those glassy eyes. “Sheng ri kuai le.” (Happy birthday.)

I pause. “Yeah.”

I shut the door and walk away with my box of doughnuts, leaving her and her thoughts of Chinese fried rice.

\\

11:20 AM, the bell rings, and I hear the Happy Birthday tune again. Hallways crescendo into an ocean of noise as children flood into the cafeteria doors. The doughnuts in the box shift around as my hands shake. Nervousness? Excitement? I can’t tell as I shuffle along the wave of kids that flow in and out of the lunchroom, a sea of color swimming around

my vision. Plates piled with Tuesday's mystery slop whizz past me, girls' giggles ripple through the room, and the smell of peanut butter and jelly rests in my nose.

"Hey! Over here! You brought doughnuts?" A classmate waves me over. "Hey guys, she brought doughnuts!" A line of blonde and brunette heads turn to me, their shiny blue and green eyes staring into my dull black ones.

"Yeah, I brought them for my birthday! And they're the American Signature ones that everyone gets!" I boast. I wait for the smiles, the "Cool!"s, the "Happy birthday!"s, the "Congratulations, you are now one of us!" But all I hear are loud whispers and scattered smirks.

The classmate that waved me over furrows her eyebrows. "American Signature? That's so lame. No one even gets those." A collective snicker falls upon the group and I stop opening the doughnut lid. I stop hearing their words and seeing their glares. For a moment, I stop breathing. All I see is the cold fried rice that sits on the kitchen counter.

\\

The front door's hinges creak as I open it, and immediately I am hit with soy, five spice, and a touch of garlic.

"Hue lai le?" (Back home?) Mom calls distantly, her voice covered by the rhythmic sounds of spatula against wok and the soft hum of a kitchen fan. As I trudge to the kitchen, my eyebrows raise.

"Is that fried rice?" I ask, sliding into a counter stool.

Mom nods. "I reheat from this morning." She scoops a mound of gleaming, vibrant rice into a bowl and slides it in front of me. "How was it? Did they like the doughnuts?"

I stare down at the fried rice, at the shrimp, at the eggs, at the scallions. At the chipped edges of the ceramic blue China bowl it sits in. At the spoon Mom sets next to it that should've been chopsticks. And everyone blurs into a muddy, slicken rainbow as my cheeks burn with tears, vision puddled.

"Oh, bie ku bie ku." (Don't cry, don't cry.) Mom soothes, her hand reaching to smoothen my hair.

I choke from labored breaths. "Mom, the doughnuts. I-"

"Shh.. I know," She pushes the bowl of rice closer. "Chi ba." (Eat.) With shaking hands, I hold the hot bowl, steam grazing my cheeks with its burning touch.

"Sheng ri kuai le," She murmurs, before breaking into a soft song.

"Happy birthday to you, Happy birthday to you.."

Student Name: Priyanka Sugumar  
 Grade: 12  
 School: Tomball Memorial High School  
 Title: Everything Will Be All Right  
 Category: Personal Essay & Memoir  
 Key: Gold Key  
 Educator: Dana McMillan

It's June 5th, 2006, Monday morning at 7:00am. Dawn has been born, along with a tiny, 4 pound baby. The morning birds watch me gasping for life through a window, as their sweet chirps echo through the foggy streets of Bangalore. A year later, I'm in the middle of a street in the Netherlands, watching the pigeons, calm as a mountain, my eyes following their delicate hops. I pick a loose feather. One touch, and the smooth silk melts into my skin, forever imprinted.

Until I was living in the United States and got introduced to chicken nuggets, I had never eaten meat. At age 8, I quit meat when I looked into the eyes of a chicken and a dog and saw the same soul. When I was 12, blood and cruelty pressed into paper as words on a flier about the dairy and farm industry opened my eyes to another ethical issue and I became vegan. Over time, I began to notice every lizard, every squirrel, every frog on the street from the frantic hustling of cars and buzz of modern society.

Watching animals opened my eyes to the world and I learned to have pure intentions - to let go of selfishness. I wear -5.5 prescription lenses, yet my eagle eyes activate to zoom in on the flaws of the world, beyond animal cruelty. Initially naive, I scowled when kids took more than one piece from trick or treat buckets. I refused to receive flowers as I remembered Buddha's lesson of loving flowers by watering them. Later, I promise myself to never kill a mockingbird - one that does no sin - that the life of that pesky spider on my wall is just as important. To do no harm, to practice ahimsa - nonviolence. To have empathy and compassion for the suffering of the world. I look at the world through chameleon eyes that reveal the cognitive dissonance and disparity of ethics. My eyes turn independently: one bewildered at the suffering animals go through, the other, trying to comprehend the harsh realities of life. I try to center them without going cross eyed and feeling alienated. My skin turns to scales as I try to camouflage with the practicalities of the world.

I grew up naive, an impractical idealist, intensely critical of the world's depravity, wallowing in guilt and ambitious anger. I must have a purpose in life beyond myself; I must protect what is good in the world. I created grudges at the first glance and was silent as a mouse, arrogant that I didn't need anyone. I felt betrayed by minor dissent, dodging people to avoid judgmental misunderstanding. Today, before I go to bed each

night, I long to laugh unfiltered and whisper my deepest secrets with lifelong friends. I am the guinea pig in the world of social experiment called life and uncomfortable variables are thrown at me, testing multitudes of theories, only to be found inconclusive and cause sleepless nights. But what, more than animals, can explain the phenomena of life? The one eyed chihuahua at the back of the shelter, so skinny bones were protruding, taught me to love beyond the illusion of appearance and conditionality. The corpse of the goats of ritual sacrifice warn me of tradition and dogmatic belief. The solitary wolf howl echoes the sadness of loneliness in my soul as the bright moon illuminates the love birds and their beauty of companionship.

But even snakes can shed their skin, and I gain hope in the world. I realize that I must find a symbiotic relationship, like the deer that allows birds to live on their back to get rid of pests and the birds also benefit by gathering fur for their nests, in order to balance practicality and idealism.

I take a walk around my neighborhood lake and watch the serene patience of the crane as it hunts the fish, the strength of the ant carrying a leaf ten times its weight, the love of the mother duck as her ducklings follow along in blind trust, the perseverance of the squirrel as it swings from the slippery hummingbird feeder, and I think to myself, everything will be alright.



Student Name: Addison Chaddock  
 Grade: 11  
 School: Tomball Memorial High School  
 Title: Flip Flop Sisterhood  
 Category: Personal Essay & Memoir  
 Key: Gold Key  
 Educator: Angela Bellows

### Flip Flop Sisterhood

It looked like a tornado of reindeer & snowman covered wrapping paper had just barreled through our living room leaving a swirl of snowflake ribbon and a dusting of glitter in its wake. The sweet smell of my parents cinnamon flavored coffee tickled my nose and we all snuggled on the couch to watch the twinkling of the Christmas tree lights since the navy night sky still filled the windows with darkness. After all, it was only 5am. The dark would soon give way to ombre splashes of blue, purple and sunshiny yellow across the Texas sky. Our Christmas morning sky was the anti- snow globe kind but we were never really “snow people” anyway. This was the calm after the Christmas-present-opening-storm, my favorite part of the day. All four of us snuggled together taking in Christmas morning with all five senses before we hopped in the car to visit “the grandma’s” on either end of Texas.

...Swirling cinnamon and vanilla.  
 ...Black turning to bright.  
 ...chocolate from the candy in our stockings.  
 ...the soft fur of my mom’s robe against my face.  
 ...that light dusting of glitter stuck on my fingertips.

But just as I leaned over to lay my head on my mom’s fuzzy robe ‘ed chest, I noticed it. One small box sitting alone under the tree. The cherry red paper and shiny gold bow untouched, STILL wrapped! I jumped up in excitement screaming “LOOK!” startling my mom as her coffee mug bobbed on the tips of her fingers. Without spilling a drop, she gave my dad a sneaky grin and he smiled back with every inch of his face. His poker face has never been that great. “What is that?” my sister said, as if she has downed that entire pot of cinnamon coffee, meanwhile I was already halfway under the tree slithering to that single box. 1-2-3 we each ripped a side of that cherry red paper revealing a crisp white box. It reminded me of those chocolate covered cherries that you can only find this time of the year, one bite and you have sticky cherry juice and white cream covering your fingers and lips. That crisp white box contained four tickets. No, they weren’t Willy Wonka Golden Tickets, in fact they were simply printed on thin tissue like paper and there wasn’t anything “fancy” or “magical” about them. Little did we know that that one present, these non-magical see-through paper tickets, would be an experience of a lifetime for our

family. These were our tickets to a FAMILY ADVENTURE! But what I never expected was that these tickets would also be the key to changing my perspective on life.

The date on the tickets had finally arrived and it was time to board our first family cruise vacation. One step onto that ship, and I forgot it was a ship at all! Dripping with crystal chandeliers, levels of doors, shops and rooms stacked above and below me; it reminded me more of a fancy hotel than a boat skimming atop the ocean abyss. The main room was lined with tables of endless rows of bite sized desserts as far as my chocolate loving eyes could see. For two days, the four of us explored every inch of that giant floating hotel and for four days we found fun around every corner. My sister and I learned that we are the luckiest Bingo stamp stampers according to my dad as he screamed "BINGO" for the third time! We also mastered the art of the most perfect ice cream swirl since there were unlimited ice cream machines on deck ten. A little word of advice from a self-proclaimed professional ice cream cone maker, an ice cream tower taller than your face will indeed fall when you take the first lick. While we were having the time of our lives together, I couldn't help but wonder why my parents kept saying "the adventure was yet to begin" just wait until day three.

Well day three was tomorrow so I would soon find out.

I woke up to the morning sun sending sparkles of glitter across the blanket of blue waves. My mom slowly pulled back the blackout curtains, revealing a small speck of land curved around the side of the ship like it had opened its arms for a giant hug upon our arrival. My parents announced that we needed to be ready in twenty minutes because we were going to be getting off the boat to head into the port to go on an excursion in the jungle. My sister and I were so excited that I'm pretty sure we broke some sort of world record for getting yourself ready in the morning. It certainly helped that the bathroom was so small that you could brush your hair, brush your teeth, and put your socks on without even moving an inch. Ten whole minutes later we were ready to disembark the ship and see what this jungle adventure was all about.

As we were herded like cattle off the boat and onto a bus with about 15 other passengers from the ship, the air landed on our foreheads leaving a layer of sticky residue like a slobbery kiss from the jungle. All 19 of us filed into the bus alternating one squishy seat after another. The driver crackled through the thick air announcing that the ride to the jungle was about an hour so we should sit back and relax. Excitement was still pumping through my veins like an iv of caffeine so there was no way I was going to be able to do that. As the bus bumped along the pothole ridden road and kicked up dust in its wake, I had a front row seat to landscapes unlike anything I had ever seen in Texas. As the dust parted my eyes gulped up the views, the ocean edge and bumpy road was lined with fruit stands with cardboard signs, fresh fish hung on lines next to the rickety boats that brought them in. A family of chickens made their own parade as the bus hissed a tornado of dust around them. That's when my eyes landed on a small blue and white

shack that had three rooms with a tiny sign that said “escuela.” It was the school! There was no twirly yellow tube slide or monkey bars, in fact there wasn’t even a single swing in sight. The doors and windows were all open which meant there probably wasn’t even air conditioning. I could see 2 small rows of children watching their teacher scribble some words on the chalkboard and I wondered if they were my age.

Suddenly, in a blink, the landscape shifted to a beautiful green wall of vines dotted with tropical flowers like confetti thrown onto them.

SQUEEEEEAK!

The van brakes jolted my heart, and I sat up ready for the next announcement. We finally arrived! We spent the day ziplining over the jungle canopy, tubing in caves so dark that you couldn’t see your hand in front of your face and swimming near a waterfall that glistened like shards of smooth glass glued to the black and green hillside carpet. Our guides announced we were going to be served an authentic Belizean meal that had been prepared by their own families just for us. My stomach was rumbling as I sat in the open-air jungle palapa, and the warm smells of homemade tamales and spiced rice swirled titled my nose and my tastebuds. As a plate was placed in front of me, I noticed the girl that brought it to me was probably about my own age. I wondered why she wasn’t at school and then I noticed she didn’t even have any shoes on and that she had blisters on her feet from walking on the rocky jungle dirt. Where were her shoes? I tried to ask her, but she looked at me confused. My dad repeated my question in Spanish, and she just shook her head saying, “No no zapatos.” I looked down at my sparkly purple flip flops and without hesitation I took them off and handed them to her. Sure, they were my favorite pair, but I also had about six more ‘favorite pairs’ in my suitcase, she needed these. The lady with her didn’t want her to take them but my mom and dad insisted, and I think the lady knew they weren’t backing down. Dinner was over and it was time for us to get on the bus and head back to the cruise ship. I was suddenly very aware of the crunching jungle dirt under my bare feet. I tried to bounce from toe to toe as I headed toward the van, shoeless, the bare bottoms of my feet became magnets for pointy rocks and sticker burs. But I really didn’t even notice because I was so focused on that girl. She was sitting on the sad faced humidity-soaked picnic table watching us leave. Watching us as we returned to our lives. Lives that looked so much different than hers. I waved to the girl as we drove off and she waved back. A Cheshire cat smile crept across my face as she lifted her legs to hug her knees and I noticed that her feet fit perfectly into those purple flip flops, while my own bare feet dangled from the seat not quite touching the floor of the van. And in that moment, I knew that those sparkly purple flip flops were her favorite now!

The remainder of the cruise was filled with fun and adventure just like my parents had told us it would be. But the best part was, that my eyes were opened to the rest of the world. The “experience of a lifetime” that my parents promised was more than ziplining over the Mayan Jungle or splashing in the cold clear water, it was learning to appreciate what we have so much more. It was learning that sometimes your favorite thing can be

given to someone who will love it more, because they need it more. That one Christmas gift to my sister and I was the reason we were able to see that there are so many people in need within our own community. We had lived in this bubble of similarities, a cookie cutter community, where it felt like everyone was just like us in this town, but we were so wrong. That cruise removed the rose-colored glasses that only allowed me to see the “pretty” in our lives, now I see the “REAL” I no longer see the “wants” in life, now I see the “needs”

Since that cruise trip, my parents have continued to find ways for our family to serve in food pantry’s, clothing donation centers and give back to our community. My heart yearns for it, my eyes see the hurt and my mind knows others’ need our help. At such a young age I learned that even the most fun adventure can result in a life changing experience, but it can also result in a PERSPECTIVE SHIFTING experience.

I often think about that girl and wonder if that day and those little sparkly purple flip flops took her life on a new path like they took mine. I hope they did!

Student Name: Mia Siduguen  
 Grade: 9  
 School: Tomball Memorial High School  
 Title: Gold Turns Gray  
 Category: Poetry  
 Key: Gold Key  
 Educator: Janet Stackhouse

Remember?

I miss them, I miss "us"  
 Too often I catch myself looking over old pictures  
 Remember the golden days?  
 Filled with innocence  
 Of shameless laughter and smiles caught in the sunlight  
 Before life became reality  
 Before we peaked at our diverging paths  
 Remember late karaoke nights?  
 Birthday parties and sleepovers?  
 When we would wake up early to make my mom breakfast,  
 Dressed in old gowns we found in your closet  
 What happened?  
 What happened to me and you?  
 From talking everyday to checking in on the holidays  
 Because the moment our car left the California border,  
 I've felt as if the wind blew dust on our history, just as it covered the tire tracks  
 Remember when we would play in the ocean?  
 I do, because that was the day I got my first bee sting  
 And we ended up just walking along the shore, just talking  
 I remember, the five of us  
 Before conflict and pain got in between us  
 The memory feels raw like it was yesterday  
 Yes, I remember,  
 We were closer than blood relatives  
 Then five became four  
 And four became three  
 I wonder how they are all doing  
 I wonder how often they think of our old life  
 I wonder if they remember us  
 I wonder, I wonder  
 We were everything  
 We were larger than life

What happened?

I moved away,

We grew apart.

Student Name: Camila Flores  
Grade: 11  
School: Tomball Memorial High School  
Title: Memoir  
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir  
Key: Gold Key  
Educator: Kathleen Campese

I still don't know the true meaning of home: An immigrant's family journey.

I was born and raised in a beautiful country in South America called Venezuela, where I lived in a small –but comfy– apartment with both of my parents and my little brother. A normal kid going into her teen years would talk to her friends about makeup and what's the latest trend occurring, but that wasn't me. Ever since I was a kid, I was aware of the economic issues my country faced. I wasn't really interested in watching the news, so I relied on social media and memes about the economic situation, the corrupted government, and the lack of basic necessities such as food, water, electricity, and so on. But primarily, I would research individuals who decided to move away from Venezuela in order to chase opportunities and find a better life quality overall. Although my family and I struggled a few times, like not having enough money to buy groceries, and pay bills, I never positioned my family and I leaving our beautiful country.

It was a warm Thursday, August 1st, 2019 when my life changed completely, and to this day, I am still not sure if it was for the better.

As I walked through the long, monochromatic, and cold halls of the airport, I could feel the stares of my family as they watched me leave the place I once called home. Although I placed a smile on my face, I slowly felt the warm tears fall down my cheeks as I whispered a last goodbye to the life I was leaving behind. It was the first time I had ever stepped foot into a plane, and probably the last time. I could not wrap my head around the fact that I was moving to a different country, so when the plane took off, I held my mom's hand tightly and hoped for this fever dream to be over. Soon after, we arrived in America and my family and I reunited with my dad after two long years of being away from each other. I saw my mom's face change ultimately and tears slowly formed in her eyes. We hugged each other tightly; a hug that felt like a cozy afternoon. My dad then drove us to the house where we would be staying, it was a beautiful bohemian and classy house with two floors and multiple bedrooms, but the catch is that this house wasn't ours. When my dad moved first, his long-distance friend had heard about his situation and decided to reach out and ask if he wanted to pay cheaper rent; my dad, who only had so many dollars to his name and the knowledge of a few English words, immediately

accepted the offer and the two bedrooms with a shared bathroom became our home our first three months in America.

I was thrilled to learn all about American society and culture, visiting stores like Walmart and Target felt like a dream. I was astonished as I noticed every aisle in the grocery store was stocked and filled with a variety of products to choose from. I wanted to get every single sugary cereal and carbonated drink, I thought to myself, Is this what heaven is like? Because of the poverty in Venezuela, I didn't get to enjoy sweet treats as much, maybe once every two weeks, and only if we weren't short on money. I could go hours dreaming about all the sweet treats known to humankind, but I didn't bother asking for it because I'd rather not see the disappointment on my mom's face because she knew she was not able to afford it for us.

My first week in America went by fast and now it was back to school season. Am I gonna make friends? Are people gonna think I'm weird? What if someone asks me about something and I don't know how to answer the question? My mind was filled with anxiety and I spent sleepless nights hoping for time to go by slower. By this point, all the excitement about America had disappeared, I had no interest whatsoever in starting in a new school, I just wanted to be home again and start middle school with my friends.

Night Before Starting Middle School. I cried. And I cried even more. I didn't want to leave my mom's arms, she was running her fingers through my hair as I kept talking about how I missed my old life. This went on for hours, and it wasn't until around 10 p.m. that I finally calmed down and decided to get some sleep. I never actually fell asleep, I just closed my eyes and pretended I was going to fall asleep any time soon. The next morning, I heard noises from the kitchen downstairs and that indicated that it was time to get ready for school. As I ate my breakfast as fast as possible, I said goodbye to my mom, and still filled with anxiety I got on the school bus and prayed for the day to go as fast as possible. It is safe to say that I didn't make any friends on the first day, nor the first week, and suddenly a month has passed since starting school. I still felt like an alien, and even though I now knew some people, I still found it difficult to fit in with the other students. I remember being taken out of the class to go to the library because we ESL kids needed extra help when doing exams, and even though I knew deep down that this extra help didn't measure my intelligence, I still felt dumb and helpless.

Spring of seventh grade. It was easier for me to communicate and do my homework without as much help, and by the time it was the summer of eighth grade, I made some friends who spoke English, all the effort and time dedicated was finally starting to be worth it. I still reminisced about my old friends and my old life, not as much now, but the feeling of nostalgia never really left my body.

High School. 2021. The start of high school marked the beginning of a new chapter in my life, and also marked the two years anniversary since moving to America. I often called my family and told them all about the education system here. I was overwhelmed by all the extracurriculars to choose from and all the classrooms. Freshman year went by fast



and now it was the night before sophomore year. Overall, I was happy because of all the friendships I had made, and perfecting a whole new language in the span of two years was admirable to a lot of people, but I still couldn't find my place in this world. The bed that I spent multiple nights sobbing wasn't really mine. Our house was never empty, but it did feel like it. There wasn't any significant memories created in this house that could bring any sense of comfort, so making this house feel in any way like a home was a difficult mission.

To this day, I still find myself looking for the feeling of home and belonging somewhere else. I am thankful for the opportunities and memories that America has given me, yet I still can't process it as my home. I am aware that maybe, if I ever go back to my homecountry, I might not find the true meaning of home there either because of all the years I have spent away from there, but I still have faith on one day stepping foot back to my country and it being as beautiful as I remember.

Student Name: Camden Skyles  
 Grade: 11  
 School: Tomball Memorial High School  
 Title: Memoir Essay  
 Category: Personal Essay & Memoir  
 Key: Gold Key  
 Educator: Kathleen Campese

My heart sank. The red and blue lights flashed behind me. I looked down to check my speed, and found myself going over the speed limit. A wave of insecurity and confusion rushed over me. I felt as if I hadn't been driving that fast, after all I had gone much faster before. I felt trapped, not knowing what to do in a situation like this. I looked back to previous conversations with my parents, warning me to watch my speed and be safe on the roads, and I feared my parents' reaction to me even getting pulled over. I feared their anger. I feared my punishment. I feared.

The wait seemed endless. I tried to calm myself down and remember what I was supposed to do in this situation. I got my license and registration ready like my parents had told me for when the officer came to my window to ask for them. I sat. I waited. And I waited some more. I looked down at the clock, 10 minutes had gone by. Finally, the officer got out of her car, stopped near my backdoor, coming just within an arm's reach of my window, reached her hand out as if she was being held back, and said "License", in a rude and awkward manner. I was confused. I had been practicing my well mannered responses just like my parents had instructed before she came up to my window, but she hadn't even given me a chance to put them to work. I was expecting some kind of interaction, like a, "Hey, why the speed man?", or for her to at least come up to my window to acknowledge me, but nothing of the sort ever came. The best I had after her response was a yes mam, and giving her my license. She Came back 15 minutes later, stopping short once again. She said only, "Sign here", handing me a paper to sign that acknowledged that I had to appear in court, and a citation. Wait...What? COURT?! She was making me appear in court! I was simultaneously stunned and furious, yet I still responded with my calm yes mam and signed. Wow, I was angry. In my arrogant and biased opinion I felt as if this had been a personal attack on me. She said a max of ten words total, seemingly trying to avoid me. After what was probably the most awkward and puzzling interaction I have ever had in my life I found myself stuck, boiling in a pot of circling bewilderment and fury.

Not knowing where to go, I decided that the best thing I could do was call my mom and warn her. I told her what happened, and her immediate response was, "Well, are you okay at least?" I stopped. Any sort of fear I had simply washed away in one fell swoop. It felt like a scene in a movie, where the film pauses and zooms in on the main character's thoughts. I once again thought back to previous conversations with my parents. I thought about them reminding me every time I left the house to be careful, teaching me to use

manners and be respectful with adults, and realized that everything they ever did was for my own good and protection. I had always taken those things for granted, but in that moment everything seemed to click for me. There seemed to be an infinite slideshow in my mind of my parents caring for and protecting me even when I didn't know it. I felt what was once confusion and anger shift to a sense of gratitude towards my parents and their endless love for me. I snapped back to reality to hear my mom again, "Camden, are you alright?!" To answer her question, I simply responded, "Thank you Mom."

Though I probably will make a few more ill-advised decisions like that in my lifetime, in that moment I made a promise to myself to never take my safety for granted again. My mom's response in what seemed like such a dire time made me realize how much my actions affect other people. I saw just how vital I was to my mom, and that truly reshaped my perspective on life. After I got that ticket, I quit taking unnecessary risks because I knew how distraught my parents would be if anything ever happened to me. I quit speeding (for the most part), and I started to take pride in making good decisions. Though at the time the speeding ticket seemed like a glimpse at the end of the world, I honestly believe now that the reflection and realization I got from the ticket outweighed the negative consequences that came along with it in the long run.

Student Name: Tiffany Luu

Grade: 9

School: Tomball Memorial High School

Title: My Favorite Vietnamese Store

Category: Short Story

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Takeisha Woods

I'm stuck in the middle of the aisle of my favorite Vietnamese store.

I can't understand any of the words that surround me, and then, I'm transported back home.

I'm sitting at the kitchen table with my head in my hands as my dad reprimands me for messing up my time tables for the umpteenth time. The steam from my mother's bánh xèo travels through the masses of Buddha statues and Danish cookie boxes filled with sewing supplies. The smell of her homemade nước mắm wafts into my nose, and then I'm brought back to my senses.

I have two bottles of fish sauce in my hand, I try to make out what the words on the labels mean but I can't.

And suddenly, I'm crying in the middle of the aisle of my favorite Vietnamese store.

Am I really Vietnamese if I can't remember what type of fish sauce my mother used to put into my eggs, or the type of rice she always used to buy?

Am I still Vietnamese if I can't speak a lick of my parents' native tongue, or remember how to greet my elders without my mom reminding me what to say? Am I still Vietnamese if I don't enjoy putting chili garlic sauce in my bún bò Huế, or chicken with my congee?

I look at the bright red Sriracha in my cart and think back to Lunar New Year.

I'm nine years old again.

The color red is everywhere. It's the color of the dainty paper lanterns that hang from the stair railings, it's the color of everyone's shirts, all of my aunts have their lips painted red, and all of my uncles' cigarettes ignite a red flame.

I'm sitting on my grandma's brown leather couch, watching as everyone converses with each other. I pretend I understand what they're saying and play with all the red envelopes in my hand. "It's time to go home," my mom says, pulling me up.

I stand up and get ready to leave when she nudges my shoulder.

"Say goodbye," she tells me.

I do as she says and say goodbye to all my relatives, but I can tell they find my attempt at Vietnamese amusing by the way their eyes crinkle when they hear me say their names, and the way their smiles lift up as I bow to them.

And although it's not visible on their faces, I can tell my parents are embarrassed.

Embarrassed that their only daughter is more American than Asian. Embarrassed that their child still needs to be told what to say in Vietnamese, embarrassed that their daughter has never been able to hold a conversation with her family in their native language.

But I keep my head down and don't bring it up.

That same night, my mother comes into my bedroom. My floorboards creak and light sneaks in through the small crack of the door. "So fat," she says, pinching the meat that hangs off my cheeks.

I open my eyes slowly and yawn as my mother shakes my shoulders. She has one of her hands behind her back, "I have something for you," she whispers to me.

"What is it?" I croak.

Through the darkness, I can see her pulling her hand up to my face: she has a red envelope. I smile and push my hands out, but she shakes her head. She looks at me disapprovingly and purses her lips.

I don't understand why she's not giving it to me. "What?" I ask questioningly.

She looks down at me, I can tell she's about to start one of her long tangents. "Do you know why we give li xi," she brings the envelope to my eyes, "out?" I shake my head no. "It means good luck," she tells me, "We give these to every child on Lunar New Year to wish them good luck and good health." (Lucky Money)

"I didn't know that," I say.

"I know you didn't." She smiles pointedly, "And before we give these, the kids will say Happy New Year--"

"Happy New Year," I exclaim.

She laughs at me before continuing, "In Vietnam, we say Chúc Mừng Năm Mới." I look at her confused, I don't understand why she's giving me a vocabulary lesson. (Happy New Year)

"Lunar New Year is not just about getting money from your elders. It's about continuing generations of traditions. It's not just about eating good food grandma made, it's about celebrating our culture," she says in a thick accent, her voice heavy with rasp and years of wisdom.

"I know you're embarrassed to show all your friends the áo dài ba gifted you for Christmas instead of the princess dresses the other kids got, and you're worried to let people come over in case they'll smell the stench of my bánh xèo instead of chocolate chip cookies bubbling in the kitchen." She sighs, "And I know, in your heart, you want to be like all the American girls – but this," she waves the thin red envelope in front of me, "is who we are." (Dress, dad)

"Chúc Mừng Năm Mới," she tells me, leaving the envelope on my bedside table. (Happy New Year)

I look up at her and watch as she leaves my room, "Happy New Year," I say.

And in an instant, I'm brought back to reality, sitting on the floor of a Vietnamese store.

Tears streak my face as I look at the two bottles of fish sauce in my hands. I think of my grandma, chiding me to eat slower every time I burn my throat on her hot dishes, I think of all my aunts and uncles handing me crisp ten dollar bills for the New Year. I think of my parents and every lesson they've ever taught me.

And then I wonder if I was ever Vietnamese, or if it was just what my genealogy results said. Was I ever Vietnamese if the only things that ever reminded me I was, were the empty bowls of phở that piled up in my sink, the traditional folk music that echoed throughout the hallways of my parents' home, and the soy sauce stained piano books that sat untouched on my dusty wooden shelves?

Was I ever Vietnamese?

I stand up slowly and put back one of the bottles in my hand. I wipe my cheeks as I drop the other one into my cart.

And then, I leave the aisle of my favorite Vietnamese store.

Student Name: Andrea Hebert  
Grade: 11  
School: Tomball Memorial High School  
Title: Stay or Go  
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir  
Key: Gold Key  
Educator: Kathleen Campese

### Stay or Go

People have to make decisions everyday, whether it's what mascara they wear or leaving everything behind for a new job opportunity. Small decisions are just as important as big ones. They both affect you personally on a deep level. I've made many in my life but one always lingers in the back of my mind. Almost two years ago I was just beginning high school in Louisiana. The place I lived in was sort of small, everyone knew everyone. The first week flew by and I made a promise to myself to focus on school and not become boy crazy like my sister did in high school. That was until I met him. Ethan. Ethan was my first boyfriend ever. He was about 1 ½ years older than me. So he was more experienced in the dating world than I was at the time. Little did I know that this experience would affect me in the long run.

Our relationship seemed as normal as any typical high school relationship. We made promises that we would last until after high school. That we would grow old together. Maybe even have kids. We would get into fights every now and then about the smallest things. As time went on, those arguments lasted longer and were causing more problems with my life outside of the relationship. I was getting bad grades, not communicating with my family, and more.

In October, homecoming was coming around. Of course I planned on going with Ethan, but he had other plans. He was going to go with his girl best friend because they were in the same grade. I knew he was embarrassed that I was younger than him, at first it didn't bother me, but the second he posted pictures at the dance is when my heart broke for the first time. I felt it drop from my chest to the pit of my stomach. The world felt heavy and then I felt warm tears pouring down my cheeks. I didn't tell him I had a problem with anything because I knew he would blame it on me in a second. I just forced myself to move on.

A couple months later, it was time for Mardi Gras break. In New Orleans, Mardi Gras parades are a big deal. So I decided to go with my sister, her friends, and Ethan to a parade. Everything was fine at first but then Ethan started to drink. I always remembered what my mom said to me. Drunk words are sober thoughts. I could feel the tension throughout the whole night. He kept drinking more and more. That was when he started to tell me how he didn't even like me and was just bored. My heart broke again. What I didn't know was that this was just the beginning of many more heart breaks.



March and April were the toughest moments for me in this relationship. Even at a young age, I lost myself. We were getting into arguments every day. Whether he was accusing me of cheating, or I simply told him how I felt and he made me look like the bad guy. I would cry during class, on the bus, and in my room. Two days before my birthday, he blocked me. My heart shattered. We didn't talk for a whole day until he unblocked me to tell me he was joking. I didn't find any of that funny. Once again, I forced myself to forget about it and decided to try to enjoy my birthday.

On my brother's graduation, he managed to completely break me. After the ceremony, my family was already in the car. I was still near the stadium saying goodbye to Ethan's family. He started to walk me to my parents car but all of a sudden these guys started to catcall me. Ethan got mad and blamed it on me, I didn't know what to do. It was pitch black outside, my family was at least a mile away, and Ethan was threatening to break up with me. He then took my phone and threw it on the sidewalk. He yelled at me. He told me to never text him again. And then he was gone. I didn't cry, nor did I let my parents know what happened. I waited until we got home and then ran to my room. I let it all out. I decided to call my friend Luis, he was one of our mutual friends that knew about the toxic parts of Ethan and I's relationship. He told his girlfriend, Ivon, my best friend now, to try to help me through this. She told me that he wasn't worth this type of pain at my age. I soon calmed down and went to school the next day like nothing happened.

After a week, he called me. I was shocked. Frozen. He told me he was going to drive me home the next day so we could talk it out. I agreed. I ended up forgiving him, he's all I knew. He was my best friend at the time, if I didn't have him, I would have been alone. We kept getting into small arguments as time passed. With each argument I lost more and more feelings, I became more detached from him. Around May, I knew I was done with him. But I thought I was so in love even though I was just attached to the idea of being in a relationship.

My parents soon told me about the big move to Houston Texas. This changed everything. I hated the idea of leaving Louisiana. I would be leaving my friends, my family, and Ethan. He was not on board with the idea, but it's not like he had a choice in the matter. He made it clear he didn't want to try long distance but I was consistent in at least opening his mind to it. I tried everything to keep us together. He soon agreed that he would at least give it a shot. Several arguments and threats about leaving me later, it was about time to move. He was really insecure and it started to show once I started going to my new school. He was sure that I would cheat on him while being away and that I would find better. One day, we got into an argument about my English class. Some boy found my Instagram, Ethan had my password at the time, and he exploded. He was ignoring me for the rest of the day and I got sick of it. I called him later that night while he was at work and ended it all. I went off. You're not good enough for me. You drained me. I deserve better. We're done. Those words linger in my head until this day. I was so over being put down all the time and not being able to enjoy my life. He was shocked. He didn't expect this at all, so much that he thought I was joking. He was used to the girl who would let

him walk all over her, until he woke up the next morning blocked on everything. After the breakup, I focused on myself, my grades, and just enjoying my youthful life.

It's been a full year since I broke up with Ethan, and I have never felt better. I can actually focus on work and school. I don't have to worry about upsetting anyone by simply going out with my friends. I can even take naps without waking up to someone yelling at me.

Breaking up with him is the best thing I have ever done for myself.

Student Name: Jessica Corkern

Grade: 8

School: Tomball Junior High School

Title: The Next Door Neighbor

Category: Humor

Key: Gold Key

Educator:

Miranda Blakes is the most kind-hearted person who lives in the most beautiful house in the neighborhood. I, Lily Jones, have been best friends with her since high-school. Although my house is well..not beautiful, I've never been jealous of her. On Saturday, I'm supposed to babysit her child named Morgan. You could say she's also beautiful...but also beautifully psychotic. You'd never really think a baby would be a psychopath before their brain even develops, but I'm telling you..she is. Every time Miranda takes Morgan on a walk in her stroller, I always seem to notice the devil's look in her baby's eyes whenever she peeks up at me. I just know it.

Well, Saturday came. I packed a devil-baby proof lunch and mindset, and stepped into her house. I looked around cautiously, as you never know where the baby could be. I guess Miranda isn't such a great mother, because she left Morgan in her crib for an hour before I arrived, instead of waiting for me to come watch her immediately. Anyways, I walked up to her crib to see her staring at me, not moving. At this point (and it hasn't been long at all) , I don't even want to pick her up. I left to go get her milk because I suppose that's what babies want? Not less than thirty seconds later, I walked back up to her crib with the bottle of milk, and she had disappeared. "HOW?" I exclaimed. As I paced around the room, looking to where she could have gone, I heard something in a room close to the one I was in. I ran over to the noise and saw Morgan in the bathtub of the master bathroom.

As I scrambled to pick Morgan up out of the bathtub, I found myself on the floor not seconds later. There had been baby oil poured on the floor purposefully. I know this, because as I used the countertop next to me to help pull myself off of the floor, I knocked the bottle onto my head. During all of this, mind you, the baby was laughing hysterically. I finally got off of the floor and snatched Morgan out of the tub. I looked back into the tub, and Miranda's husband's wallet was on the floor of the bathtub, with all of his money spilled everywhere. I ran back to Morgan's room and sat her back down in her crib and locked the door. As I began to hurry back over to the bathroom to retrieve the wallet and fix it, I heard water running.

I sprinted to the bathroom and found the husband's money soaked in the water of the bathtub. I turned around and saw the baby on the countertop next to me, smiling with blank eyes. Then, she disappeared into thin air right in front of me. "Not again!" I yelled. I decided to ignore it and emptied the tub to try and fix the money situation. A few

moments later after blow drying the money, I began to worry about the baby. "Oh... that's right. The baby's gone," I said.

I began to search the house for her, but she was nowhere to be found. RING RING. I heard my phone ring in my pocket as I was searching her house. "Hey, Lily. I'm gonna have to come back home earlier than expected for personal reasons. I'll be there in about 10 minutes. Is that alright with you?" she asked. My heart skipped not just one, not just two, but 9 beats. "Uh.. yea, sure. That'll be great! I'll see you there," I replied. "Okay. Is everything alright? You sound a bit out of breath," she asked. "Oh, everything is alright. Morgan is doing well," I replied hastily. "Great! Well, I'll see you there!" she exclaimed. "Oh, crap," I muttered.

I continued to search for Morgan with haste. I heard her giggling in the walls. "What the heck?" I exclaimed. I searched for about 8 minutes when I heard Miranda's car pull up in the driveway. "Oh no!" I yelled. I searched for as long and fast as I could. "Hey, Lily! I'm home! Where's Morgan?" she said. "Coming! Give me one second!" I yelled. There was no way I was going to find Morgan before Miranda began to worry. "Man! Where are you at, Morgan?" I murmured. I ran upstairs to find her balancing on the stairwell railing, about to fall off. "Oh my gosh," I said. I grabbed her quickly and ran downstairs. "Hey, Miranda. Here's Morgan," I said. I practically tossed Morgan to her. "Oh! Thanks! Did she cause you any trouble?" she asked. "Oh, of course! Ha!" I said. "What?" she asked. "-not. Of course not, sorry," I quickly replied. "Oh! Ha! Well, you must be on your way!" she said. "Alright! Goodbye!" I yelled behind me. As I peered over my shoulder before I stepped out of her house, I noticed the baby glaring at me with her daring eyes. I quickly shut the door and sprinted back to my house. "Not ever again," I said.

Student Name: Ashley Urias

Grade: 11

School: Tomball High School

Title: The Phlebotomist

Category: Short Story

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Paul Nimon

### The Phlebotomist

Living in the deadly city of Avilla, Missouri, Mason Woods, was extremely an intelligent phlebotomist. He was a tall, brunette with dark brown eyes and was diagnosed with a serious mental disorder; schizophrenia. Despite suffering from a mental illness, he was still a family man, consisting of his kind wife Amanda, and his compassionate nine-year-old daughter named Michelle. They decided to move away from the urban life in New York City and into a ghost town. He thought the history of the hauntings of the city would pose no threat to his family, but he was quickly proved wrong. Thankfully being new to the area, no issues arose for the family. However, in the winter of '08 things took a rapid turn for the worse.

What's that horrid smell? It reminds me of death. Mason thought to himself, as he walked down the basement stairs, after getting a glass of water. It was around 3 in the morning and the shining moonlight was creeping into the windows. He followed the scent, and as he was walking, he heard incoherent gibberish. His hands were sweaty and his legs were starting to feel numb.

"Why me?" the mysterious being garbled.

"Who said that?" Mason asked. He stopped in his tracks and shakily set down his glass of water. Trembling as he continued down the creaky steps, CRASH!

The door slammed shut behind him. Mason quickly ran up the steps, almost tripping, and locked the door behind him. What is wrong with me? Mason raced to his bed to find his wife, as hoped, she was fast asleep and most importantly, safe. A breath of relief brought a sense of tranquility to his terrified mind. The next morning, Amanda was getting breakfast ready for Mason and asked,

"How'd you sleep, honey?"

"You won't believe my night!" He exclaimed. She'll be alarmed when I tell her my terrifying experience.

"I- I- I, I don't remember."

"You what?"

"I don't remember." Mason was confused by his lack of memory but figured it was just his mind playing tricks on him. It was probably a hallucination; I am a bit paranoid, he thought.

"Well, maybe you'll remember after you come home from work, you're running late!"

When Mason arrived at work, he felt as if he was being constantly stared at. Do I have a giant target on my back, or a mark on my face? What's everyone's deal? He felt uneasy but didn't let it distract him from his work. Ring, ring, ring, Mason's phone was ringing as the landline flipped the quiet working environment and suddenly interrupted him.

"Mason, I don't know how to break this to you, but Mi...Michelle's missing." Amanda said worryingly on the other end.

"What do you mean she's missing?" As Mason replied his heart sunk deeper than an anchor.

"I can't find her anywhere, it's like she disappeared out of thin air!" She cried.

"Don't worry, I'll be home as soon as possible." Mason, without turning back, ran to the parking lot and jumped into his vehicle. This can't be real. My baby girl is missing. Driving over the speed limit, he somehow made it to his house, unscathed. "Amanda, what are we going to do? Have you filed a missing child's report?"

In distress, Amanda screams, "This is all your fault, Mason, I never wanted to move here!"

"My fault?! Where were you when she was last seen? You tucked her in, not me."

Amanda starts to giggle. "Do you really think you're not to blame for this?"

"I found Michelle, her face was flushed and pale. Her eyes were wide open with her veins popping out. She had needles poking through her skin, all over her arms and legs. Being a phlebotomist came in handy, right?"

"Daddy?" Michelle whispered on the other end.

"Michelle, I don't know what's gotten into your mother, she's acting crazy. I'll be home soon." Mason immediately hung up the phone and shortly arrived home. He bursts through the door and sees his wife and daughter start to twitch with their mouths wide open.

"Daddy, you did this to us. I will never forgive you for ruining our family."

"Us? What do you mean, us? I would never do anything to hurt you, Michelle, I love you."

"How would you explain the blood on your face, Mason?" Amanda asked.

Amanda and Michelle stare abruptly at Mason. The lights start to flicker, windows start to shatter, plates and paintings fall off the counters and walls. "I need to get out of here!"

Mason shouts. He sprints outside and drives into town to escape. What did I just witness? Am I imagining things? Am I going crazy? Mason, unsuspectingly jumped out of his car as fast as he could, thinking he was safe and away from all the chaos.

"Help, someone please, help me!" He pleaded.

"What seems to be the problem, dark disciple?" A handsome stranger asks.

"Dark disciple? You must have confused me for someone else."

"Your name is Mason Woods. I don't have you confused, allow me to explain your predicament. You killed your family. Cold-blooded murder. You left their bodies to rot in your home for over a week. You've been in purgatory reliving your self-inflicted trauma. I have concluded that you will be spending the rest of eternity in anguish and suffering.

"But I don't understand, who are you?"

"I am what people would call 'the embodiment of evil.'"

"Lucifer?"

"Lucifer, The Devil, Satan, it's all the same, but it doesn't matter. I'm just here to tell you the truth. The paranormal activity you faced was the ghosts of your family. Look at your face, you have their blood all over yourself. The odor you smelled was your daughter's dead body, neither you nor your family have been alive for two weeks now."

"How did I die?"

"You killed yourself, you didn't want to face your consequences on Earth. Now you'll be damned and face them in hell."

Student Name: Nhu Le

Grade: 11

School: Tomball Memorial High School

Title: The Scalding Summer

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Kathleen Campese

The brightest moments of my life were spent during the blue summers we had together. Warming rays of sun that spilled through the sandy grains of time from the three years of youth that I got to unveil him. All of the agonizing time I spent mulling it over of how I should have held him a little tighter, a little longer ... it seemed to bite back at me. I woke up and found myself dampening my own pillow with salty crystalline tears that trickled down my cheeks. The unruly snot slugged out of my nostrils. I sat up, my back ached from my games of tennis yesterday. My days were redundant. The summer of the year 2023. A summer that was undoubtedly the bleakest despite the everlasting sunny skies.

When I arrived on the tennis courts, I could only dread. Picking up my racket that felt like it held the weight of the world's burden, dragging my legs that felt like they had chains attached to them, missing bright yellow balls one after the other. I was getting lectured and scolded for playing so poorly when the most important day of my high school tennis career was inching closer and closer. A part of me wanted to snap at my friends I was practicing with at the time, shouting every internal curse word I had pent up. "You don't understand ..." But I held my tongue, because they did. They did understand. He was their friend too, their captain. It was a hard time for everyone, undoubtedly. The summer days were excruciatingly long, almost like the sun was a mockery to the life that ascended to its skies. It was the summer of 2023, days before tennis tryouts when our community had been struck by shattering news: our tennis captain, had ended his own life. I remembered feeling the fragments of our memories we had together prick my mind as I recalled them, bringing tears to my eyes. Not long after that, I began welting up with some other ominous feeling. It felt like thick black tar suffocated my chest, aching the back of my throat when I tried to croak out his name. The balls that I once failed to hit over the net properly, soared well above it, trying to touch the sky, even scrape it. To beg for them to return the person they had taken away from our lives. This feeling I felt, it was hatred. It was hatred that seared and haunted my every move as I blighted the world for taking him.

The tennis courts were where we made the fondest of memories. "Hey, you can join us, you know." When I looked up, there was a boy, clearly older than me and much more experienced than I was in living. He had heavy bags under his eyes and slouched shoulders as though they carried a burden. But when I followed him onto the courts, he was nothing short of brilliant. A smile that held the hope of the world was always tugged on his lips when he stood on our cobalt blue, juniper green and white lined courts. Our



captain was a star, the most incandescent the world would ever know. He was the tennis captain for our two teams. There was quite the age gap between the Junior Varsity and the Varsity team at the time as it was separated by freshman and sophomores on the former while juniors and seniors were on the latter. "Paint?" I remembered asking curiously, unsure of why we of all people would be painting. After all, we were tennis players. None of us did art. "Yeah! For Rock the Block. It's basically an event where we walk the block around the school on our own float and toss candy to everyone. Freshman have to walk though, so I guess that means you." He teased me. I complained about how unfair it was, but he reassured me. "If you get tired, you can come onto the float with us. I won't tell anyone." Rolling my eyes, I remarked about how noticeable it would be if I suddenly climbed onto the float, but he didn't seem to care. He always was the most lenient upperclassman and frequently doted on the freshman and sophomores, finding them amusing.

It was my sophomore year and his senior year when we grew closer. Despite being on two different teams of the same sport, he made sure that we all got along. Whether it was proposing a secret santa or white elephant exchange during Christmas time, or coming to spectate Junior Varsity's games during the fall and winter, he organized our co-team practices over the summer. Those summers were always the most vivid. Tennis was a vital part of our lives, for him especially, this was true. Complaining and laughing when we joked around playing our completely one sided match, I never would have thought someone who seemed so content with life like he did, would have such plaguing dark thoughts. To this day, I blame myself for how ignorant I was of it. A good handful of us on the team knew about it due to his disclosure. But other than small inklings of his mental health, we were left in the dark. I ended up growing fond of him, looking up to him like an older brother, our team captain. I just didn't realize what the cost of it all was. Along with his legacy, he also left behind hindering thoughts of what we could have done differently to help if we had known the bigger picture.

Near the end of my sophomore year, tennis was getting hard to stabilize with academics in tow. It was a double season sport that required me to frequently miss school, take time out of my days to practice and constantly lag behind on school work. So I made the decision to quit. I had sprung it up on a few people, he was one of them. Of the four people I had told, he was the one who encouraged me to stay the most. Despite graduating in just one short month, He promised to practice with me over the summer before heading to college, if he was even deciding to go. He promised to make sure that I'd get on Varsity so that he could come and watch my games on Fridays. I should have known that all of those things sounded too good to be true. So when we saw him along with the graduating class of 2023 off ... I didn't hear a single word from him all summer. It was at that point I should have realized something was wrong. But something inside of me insisted that he was just doing what all soon-to-be college students at the time were doing, hanging out with his friends before they all had to part ways. I could understand that much. What I couldn't understand was why none of my texts had been responded to two months into summer break in July. I began practicing just a week or two before try-

outs, not having much motivation to do anything more than that. The summer felt extra hot, the summer of 2023. I made a promise to myself that if I didn't make it to Varsity, I would quit. After my first day of try-outs, dealing with the ridiculous scorching heat, I was just about ready to drop dead despite winning my match that day. Whether it was no coincidence or chance, I heard about the suicide of a former student. However, I didn't think much of it until receiving a message once I got home. The text message that appeared that night still haunts me. The text message that broke the news that our former captain had taken his own life.

The funeral wasn't until the day after tryouts. Our old tennis coach who had quit right after the graduation ceremony of our seniors in May had come back to officiate the service. Every coach before him, every tennis player, even the seniors from my freshman year, they were all there. Tennis was his life ... and now it became mine. I didn't end up making Varsity despite winning all of my games, but at that point, I couldn't bring myself to quit. After being in that room with his sister, his parents and all of the friends he made that got him to his senior year through tennis, it felt utterly wrong to quit if he didn't despite everything that went on. Everytime I thought about leaving, the days grew hotter. Much, much hotter. The warmth enveloped my skin. I still looked up to he in the blazing star in the sky that we call the Sun. The summer of 2023 was sweltering, both physically and mentally. The sunsets seemed to grow more spellbinding and solemn and the days went by slower.

He and I parted ways during this summer ... since then, I realized that I should have told him goodbye. Even though we made plans for the summer, I should have said goodbye and sent him off with a smile. In two weeks, it'll mark the end of the most brutal and stifling summer of my life. In two weeks, it will be autumn and maybe then, the scalding of my skin will ease and I can let go of these regrets that continue to hold me back.

Student Name: Pearl Robertson  
 Grade: 10  
 School: Tomball High School  
 Title: The Stone of Perfidia  
 Category: Science Fiction & Fantasy  
 Key: Gold Key  
 Educator: Bryce Gaskey

Gravel crunched beneath his polished shoes as he traversed the path, head hung low. Bulbous gray clouds canopied the natural vibrant blue of the sky, signaling the coming of rain. Callum could not find it in himself to care about the proposition of sullied clothes or drenched hair. He was here for one purpose.

He approached the headstone with reluctance, though his feet continued to guide him forward as if his desperate need for closure overruled his fear. Everything had happened so suddenly. The life of his father slipped away silently like a bandit into the night, leaving Callum with nothing but memories that felt too distant from the present. But as much as he wanted to bid his final farewell, it cemented his father's death into the permanence of reality.

It was an admittance. An acceptance.

No matter how much Callum wished for it to be so, this wasn't a cruel dream fabricated by his mind. It was an all too real experience, one that would haunt his conscience no matter how hard he tried to twist away from the grief.

The mausoleum was a speckled brown granite with the words "HERE LIES KING ENAR" engraved into the stone. Emotion swelled in his throat as he reached out a trembling hand to trace the lettering. Tears sprung to his eyes, blurring his vision, and he suddenly felt sick to his stomach. As if a noose had been wrapped around his neck, cutting off his oxygen, it became difficult to breathe. The grief he'd been trying to conceal quickly broke down his facade, leaving him tearful and shaking like a little boy.

"... I still do not understand it, Father," he whispered as a gust of wind passed him. Out of his thick cerulean coat, he pulled out a rose. His fingers curled around the stem, clutching the flower to ground the sorrow that sat heavy in his heart.

"I thought when the time came, you'd realize you were wrong about my half-brother." Callum shook his head gravely, his teeth grinding together. "But instead you go through with it, condemning us all to a dull future with an undeserving king. I want this! More than Oliver ever has, yet you blindly followed him? How could you?"

His jealousy swelled like that of a lava pit, bubbling with fierce passion until he was ready to erupt, maddened by the actions of a dead man. Practically since birth, his father had always taken more liking towards Oliver. He was responsible and educated, a skilled fighter. Not only that, Oliver was the product of “true love” with a servant whom his father snuck out to visit; not the loveless arranged marriage that brought Callum into the world.

Despite all this, Callum never seemed to match up to Oliver. He was always slower, less experienced, and arrogant. But his loyalty towards his kingdom rivaled that of his half-brother to astronomical degrees. Oliver never held an interest in courting power. To him, being of royal lineage was more of a job than a blessing. How could their kingdom prosper under that kind of ruler? A ruler who felt no obligation to his duties?

“I will not allow your favoritism to destroy our people!” Callum exclaimed, wiping stray tears from his eyes.

He carefully placed the rose atop the granite, though his bitterness did not cease. He couldn’t come to understand what had caused a great man like his father to skew his judgment so greatly.

It began to rain. It started with miniature droplets that landed faintly like dewdrops in his hair, on his shoulders, the backs of his hands. Then the droplets grew in size and intensity, plopping on his cheeks and forehead until it was a pounding downpour that beat unrelentingly against his skin; a testament to the grief that wracked his lungs, his heart, his entire being. Callum stood and bore it.

“Take my word, Father,” Callum spoke aloud, eyes glued to the tomb as if it was the man standing there himself. “I will be crowned King. Even if I must lock away that bastard into the deepest dungeon to prove I am the worthy son.”

— — — —

Despite the passage of time, Callum still clearly recalled the memories of being curled against his mother’s side, reading from a weathered hard copy in dim candlelight. Her presence brought the soothing aroma of lavender and vanilla, her voice a calming remedy that always managed to lull him to sleep.

One of her favorite stories to tell was The Stone of Perfidia. The tale had been told to him countless times as a child, so much so that he could perfectly recount the story in his head: settled along the base of steep mountains was a small town named Logwin. In the town lived two brothers who were known to be inseparable. They were often referred to as the daredevils, considering their thirst for adventure and the townspeople's lack of

desire to partake in such things. One day, out of sheer curiosity, the brothers decided to venture up the mountains.

It was a climb no one had ever attempted to make, seeing as many rumors floated around about the probable troubles that would come your way if you managed to reach the peak. Despite this, they embarked on the journey anyway. After all, rumors were not cemented, scientific facts. They were crafted under the pretense of fear to distract the mind from all the endless possibilities.

The brothers set off on their mission at the crack of dawn and arrived at the peak just as the sun began to fall past the horizon. Satisfied with their newfound knowledge and the breathtaking sights, they decided to head back before the sun set completely. As they carefully traversed the grassy terrain, the younger brother's eyes suddenly caught sight of a glistening purple among the lush green. Intrigued, the younger brother paused and approached the glow. He crouched down and brought his hand to grasp a raw obsidian stone. The moment he made contact, a powerful blast erupted from the stone and he found himself levitating midair, blessed with wondrous power no one had ever believed possible.

His brother, knocked over by the impact, hurriedly rose to his feet. Shock joined his feelings of distress as he witnessed his sibling hover above the ground, eyes a disturbing glow of purple.

Frightened by the strange stone, the older brother suggested they leave it and venture back down. The same could not be said about the other. He simply scoffed at the other's concern, blinded by the stone's power and unable to understand his brother's good intentions.

In the end, only one lived to see another day.

In an act of betrayal, he blasted his brother's body off the side of the mountain, never to be seen again.

Following the brutal shove, not much history was recorded as to who else harbored the stone. All that is known is that the stone was passed along to many different men along the way until eventually, the kingdom they knew today was formed.

One thing was apparent, the gem caused all its holders to betray who they were and everything they loved. And for this, the people of Logwin named it The Stone of Perfida.

In present times, the gem was concealed in the secluded area of the West Wing, guarded by a specialized group of guards at all times. His father decided it was the best course of

action considering the gruesome decisions people seem to make while in possession of the stone.

Despite the evident dangers of wielding such powerful magic, Callum knew the stone would be his only chance to claim the throne. Oliver would remain king until he passed or became too unwell to do so. But if Callum were to incapacitate him, Callum would automatically be declared king.

His plan was simple: when the time came, he'd run to the West Wings and inform the guards that his half-brother was engaged in battle; Callum had been sent away for his protection and to acquire assistance. With the recent death of King Enar, they wouldn't question his word and would go off to protect Oliver. After all, Callum had never been anything but obedient and loyal.

"Soon," he assured himself as he peered out the window of his bedroom. The clouds had faded to reveal a red-blooded rouge. The sun was a glowing shade of gold, beaming down on the vast, grassy hills and the array of homes in the town beyond the castle walls.

"By the time they notice, it'll be too late."

-----

It was a room Oliver had yet to explore. When his father was alive, no one was allowed to enter except his guards. The doubtful sovereign sighed deeply, basking in the irony of it all. This room was his in principle but belonged to a different man. A man whose role he did a shoddy job of fulfilling, like an incorrect puzzle piece in a grand picture.

Oliver's recently appointed role as King left him with dread and anxiety. On paper, the anxious autocrat was well prepared to carry out his duty. He endured grueling training with their most skilled knights and spent countless hours with tutors going through lessons on culture, the history of their kingdom, and his responsibilities.

Yet, Oliver didn't feel ready.

Not when all one could think about was how inadequate one felt when compared to their father. That, and the incessant and contemptuous whispers about his impure royal lineage.

The young monarch's eyes roamed the study idly, gazing upon the multitude of shelves, each one housing a wide array of books. Oliver reached for a random title, a grin spreading across his face as he realized what book this was. When they were younger, Callum was fascinated with fairytales, so Oliver procured a book which they shared. As he thumbed through, his eye caught the reflective glimmer of a photograph and paused,

curious. It was of him and Callum, younger, and unshackled from the grief and despair of unrequited responsibility. Happy.

Guilt washed over Oliver like the dredges of a tidepool as he rubbed its worn edges. What happened to them? To the afternoons of endless play as boys, fake sword fights with brooms.

Perhaps it was his fault.

After all, Oliver was the eldest, he should've done something to prevent this malaise, but he was always caught up. Always hobbling back to his princely quarters with a new wound and assignment in tow. But he couldn't stop. Not when he couldn't stand to see the eyes of his father be anything but beaming, not when he continued to hear whispers of doubt when he turned his back. But those are all excuses, aren't they?

Callum was alone and forced to watch as their father dedicated all his time to preparing Oliver for a role too large for him, but Oliver smiled charmingly and tried to disguise the uncertainty that sat on his shoulders.

Oliver tore his eyes from the photograph, staring out the window as he thought.

Maybe... maybe he could fix it.

Just then, the doors were thrust ajar and Oliver turned to see a group of guards.

"King Oliver!" A guard stepped forward, his gaze sweeping over the study and Oliver with confusion. " Prince Callum alerted us that you were under attack."

"Callum?" Oliver inquired, his eyebrows raising at the mention of his brother's name.

"Where were you previously stationed?" He questioned as he watched the eyes of the group shift to realization and then dread. The hairs on the back of his neck stood up, a cold chill washing over his body as the leader responded: "The West Wing."

— — — — —

The weight of the jagged gem in his palm was a comforting one as Callum sprinted away from the castle grounds, grass crunching beneath his feet as he ran.

His heart palpitated loudly in his ears, a rush of adrenaline that spiked his heart. In the past, this moment would've served as one of disobedience, another reason to add to the plentiful list of how Oliver was the better son. But now? Callum felt not even an ounce of regret from his thievery or his deception. He was tired of being less than satisfactory.

From now on, he would be the better son - and in an hour - The King.

He slowed from an outright sprint to a jog, chest heaving and legs aching as he brought himself to a stop. The sky had morphed from a kaleidoscope of warm hues to a dark navy dotted with stars-like freckles, the full moon shining brightly upon him. He stood there idly as he waited for the inevitable confrontation as he ran his thumb over the natural rigid edges of the obsidian stone.

"Callum!" A familiar voice called, sending a shiver up his spine. Callum turned to face his brother standing a few feet away, steadily approaching with anger lacing his every movement.

At just the sight of him, fire ignited in Callum's chest. His fist tightened around the stone, teeth grinding together fiercely. He was so sick of Oliver. Sick of his overbearing perfection, sick of the sound of his name and the pitch of his voice. He despised everything about his half-brother, for there was no favorable trait he could mention. There was only one thing standing between him and his birthright.

Tonight, Callum would force his way into becoming an only child.

"I was beginning to get worried you wouldn't show. " Callum chuckled lowly, breaking his gaze away from the irritated irises that fixated on him to instead focus on the pulsing gem in his palm.

"Missing something?" He taunted, a smirk curving his lips, unaware of how his eyes flashed a vibrant purple.

Oliver's face hardened with outrage, fists clenched so tightly his knuckles turned white. "I should've been able to smell your jealousy from a mile away. You reek of the stench!" He scoffed in disbelief, taking a couple of steps until they stood face to face. "I understand you're upset about what happened to Father. But grief does not justify theft; especially for something which you know is incredibly dangerous." His voice shifted to a tone Callum had never heard before, something like... disgust.

"Are you so self-centered that you would put everyone in danger to prove to a dead man that you're better than me?"

Shame blossomed on Callum's cheeks and he ducked his head away, jaw clenched as his body shook from the emotions that swelled in him. There was a war raging within him and suddenly, his internal battle came to an end.

"Fight me."



The tension melted away from Oliver's face, leaving only confusion. Baffled, he faltered back a step, "What?"

"Fight me, Oliver," Callum barked, his throat so tight he felt his vocal cords could snap from the strain. He craved this. The opportunity to make it clear he was the better son. "Since I'm such an atrocious person—"

A fist cracked against the side of Callum's jaw, cutting off his words. Pain blossomed across his jaw and his head pounded from the impact. His hand migrated to his face as his eyes met his brother's. They gazed back with regret, but managed to hold the authority they always did when they looked his way.

A sudden flash of neon struck from Callum's fingertips, his hand a blur too quick for Oliver to perceive. A strangled yelp escaped Oliver's throat as he was sent flying from the blow.

The impact was a harsh one that left him disoriented, shaking to replace the air that had been knocked out of his lungs. A quiet groan escaped his lips as he flipped to his back on the grassy hill, staring up at the night sky. A levitating figure interrupted his view of the full moon, though it didn't take long to distinguish his brother's face floating above him. A gasp escaped Oliver as he realized his brother's eyes were now glowing a vibrant purple, completely void of the deep brown he'd come to know. "Callu—"

Callum directed the stone towards him with a righteous fury, unflinching as purple lightning shot from the gem and struck Oliver.

A scream erupted from his throat and tears sprung to his eyes, an unspeakable, agonizing kind of torture that left him reeling. Each second of pain provided what felt like hours of agonizing torture. Abruptly, the horrible crackling stopped. Oliver lay breathless upon the grass, every nerve ending in his body vibrating with the residual energy still coursing through his veins. His throat constricted at the sight of Callum hovering above him, not an ounce of remorse in his expression.

"Is it because I'm..." Oliver uttered from dry lips, coughs rattling his chest. Every word brought forth more blood from his lips, the thin, steady stream of red flowing down his chin and neck. His brother did not return a word, just stared at him with that same indistinguishable ire. His silence was the only answer he needed.

Oliver squeezed his eyes shut, tears welling in his eyes. All his life. There was no escape, was there?

When had his little brother transformed into a monster?

"It'll never work. No matter what you do or what you destroy, you will never obtain Father's love and respect. You will always be an afterthought." Oliver spat with quivering lips, hatred bleeding out from his tongue.

A quick zip of lightning had him lifeless on the ground.

Callum descended to earth, crouching down to observe his fallen sibling. The once vibrant gray of his eyes drained into a lifelessness no one could return from.

Callum floated to his feet, turning from the beaten corpse to the kingdom.

There was only one thing left to do.

Purple lightning crackled menacingly, a glowing hue taking over his figure as he rose into the sky and headed toward the awaiting castle.

Student Name: Logan Young  
 Grade: 12  
 School: Tomball Memorial High School  
 Title: You Don't Look Peruvian  
 Category: Personal Essay & Memoir  
 Key: Gold Key  
 Educator: Dana McMillan

"Wow, you don't look Peruvian," the older Mexican woman said to me in a supermarket check-out line. She'd noticed me chuckle at the joke she'd just shared with her son in Spanish. When she asked me how I learned Spanish, I told her my mother is Peruvian.

You don't look Peruvian.

In school, at work, in grocery stores, and pretty much anywhere you can imagine, I've heard this phrase countless times during my high school career. Of all my friends who have native Latin American parents, I have the lightest skin tone and eye color.

To the casual observer, I may not look it, but I'm the product of a bicultural home. I grew up with two languages spoken in the household, an extended family spread across two continents, and when some of my friends were having their favorite family meal of barbecue or spaghetti and meatballs, at my house we were having arroz con pollo.

In the same way the lady at the grocery store didn't (at first) recognize me as someone with whom she shared many cultural ties, something similar happens to me with non-Hispanic people: They make an assumption about my cultural heritage based on their perception of me. In other words, they think I'm one of them because I look like they do.

For better or for worse, my appearance has always been something of a disguise, masking a mixed cultural background few suspect I possess. And while my diverse heritage is core to my identity and something I deeply value, the "cultural disguise" I walk around in hasn't always felt like a blessing.

"Why can't they speak proper English?"  
 "I wish they'd go back to their own country."  
 "They're all so lazy, you know."

These are the comments I've heard again and again—sometimes blurted out loud, sometimes muttered under their breath, but always uttered by someone who had no idea a half-Peruvian Hispanic was standing next to them.

When people don't see you as "the other," they often speak without a filter, and what they sometimes reveal isn't always pleasant. As a child I'd been taught the American "melting pot" was one of our country's greatest sources of strength. As I grew into my high school years and experienced casual intolerance and bigotry over and over, I came to understand—from voices often uncomfortably nearby and loud—just how large the gap is between reality and the ideal. Not everyone values cultural diversity. In fact, a lot of people don't value it at all.

Which is a shame, and I hope that changes. And I'm determined to be part of that change. During my high school years, I've learned so much from my Asian friends, my Mexican friends, and my African friends about other cultures, customs, and ways of life. These experiences have enriched me, expanded my worldview, and even allowed me to have a greater appreciation for my own bicultural heritage. It's a cliché, but it's the truth: variety is the spice of life.

My bicultural background hasn't just shaped who I am, it is who I am. I'm American and Peruvian. I'm hot dogs and ceviche. I can call for a pass in soccer in English or Spanish. I understand the value of cultural diversity because I've lived it. My view of the world is bigger and more interesting because of my mixed background. I think Helder Camara, the reformist Catholic Archbishop, may have said it best:

"Keep your language. Love its sounds, its modulation, its rhythm. But try to march together with men of different languages, remote from your own, who wish like you for a more just and human world."

Student Name: Monika Condon  
 Grade: 8  
 School: Annunciation Orthodox School  
 Title: Places To Feel Peace  
 Category: Personal Essay & Memoir  
 Key: Gold Key  
 Educator: Marian Rosse

## Places To Feel Peace

"El Salvador is the place where I grew up; I've been there my entire life. One day, you will appreciate it as much as I do." I grew up with my mom saying these words - explaining that I may not see the hidden gems of El Salvador now, but in the future, I will be forever grateful that I was raised to go there every summer. On the other hand, I hear my dad giving me lessons about the history that permeates every inch of Galveston Island. "The past here will linger forever. There is so much history kept between every wall here. There isn't one house in this town that doesn't have a past. You will appreciate having a beach house here." My family has owned a beach house in Galveston since I was in kindergarten. I go there every weekend whenever possible but always feel as if I run out of activities to occupy my waking hours. Going to the beach is my only option when I'm there. The feeling of loneliness creeps in the quiet ocean breeze.

I have often thought about these two places, El Salvador and Galveston, as boring destinations with equally boring activities in which I have to partake every year. But lately, I actually thought about the meaning of these two places and the memories they both hold for me. El Salvador is where I am blessed to connect with relatives I don't see often, and Galveston is where I let all my feelings release. Do I completely appreciate the impact these places have on me? Over this past summer, I compared the two places. Seeing the differences between them filled me with nostalgia, and I finally began to realize that these two locations are what have kept me happy and grounded to my roots ever since I was a small child.

The first image that comes to mind when I think about El Salvador is the rough ocean that greets me - like an old friend - on every trip. As I land in the airplane, I can smell the familiar aroma of fried minnows as I stroll lazily next to the salty beach. My grandparents constantly forcing food into me as I explain - to no avail - that I cannot eat even one more bite. The volcanic sand scorched my feet, leaving them burning with pain as I raced to cool them off in the refreshing water. The waves fling me under - over and over again - as I choke, gasping to fill my lungs with much-needed air. My life flashes before my eyes as I can't seem to find the surface before the next wave sweeps my feet out from under me again. After five long and mostly miserable minutes of getting tossed and turned under the waves, I finally surrender and drag myself out of the unforgiving water. My legs are sore from trying to keep myself above the water. There's nothing better than lying on the

hot volcanic sand to work on getting the tan I will proudly wear back to Houston. The arduous walk back up to my grandparents' house is always rougher than we remembered from the previous summer. My entire family is exhausted but intent on being the first in the single shower. Being the youngest, I always end up last. Although I am sweating from the heat on the beach, a cold shower is not what I am in need of most, however. My older sister tries her best to keep the family off their phones while we are visiting there. She will encourage all of us to play A Ticket to Ride, my grandparents' favorite board game. Since El Salvador is a three hour plane flight away from my hometown, and I do not get to visit the crystal clear waters except for once a year, I go to my second beach home. Galveston. When my family bought our house in Galveston, and I stepped into it for the first time,, my kindergarten self wanted to cry. There were Mardi Gras masks everywhere - watching my every step. Even though I was little, I could see the passion in my dad's eyes. He knew immediately that he could give this house a "fixer upper" - a place where my sister and I could grow up - a place our family of four could go every weekend. My dad was successful with this; he worked tirelessly to renovate the house to make it what it is today - just how my family likes it. I would go to Galveston for the day to see my dad's progress. I would either be spending all my time at the beach or making friends with our neighbors. I met my best friend in Galveston. She lived two houses away from me and was what made Galveston start to feel more like a home. I went to Galveston every weekend, and I would be sitting on my front steps, waiting for my friend to come over to play. We would spend every minute at the beach, eating pita bread and hummus or looking for sand dollars in the sand. As time went on, however, our schedules got busier. My friend and I weren't in Galveston at the same time and never got to meet up like before. I got used to the idea of spending my time on the beach alone. I grew to enjoy it more and more because it was a time for me to think and reflect on my day. I found peace in the sound of the ocean's gentle waves. Galveston doesn't have the crystal clear waters that El Salvador boasts about in travel brochures, but it is the place in which I have grown to feel most comfortable over the years since kindergarten

These two completely different places share a common factor - they bring to mind the same warm sensation when I reflect on my time spent in their welcoming arms. Arms that wrap me with the feeling of belonging and tranquility. I have taken advantage of time spent in Galveston and El Salvador my entire life, not fully realizing the incredible beauty these places have to offer those who seek their sandy shores. I now completely understand how amazingly lucky I am to have the opportunity - weekend after weekend and summer after summer - to absorb the experiences that others can only read about and wish ... If only. Those same stars wink at me from overhead, reminding me to count my many blessings.

Student Name: Sylvie Caputo  
Grade: 8  
School: Annunciation Orthodox School  
Title: Chateau  
Category: Poetry  
Key: Gold Key  
Educator: Marian Rosse

The stones covered by years of vines  
Chopped to grow, many times.  
The walls composed of mossy bricks  
The trees composed of leaves and sticks.  
A crevice filled with flowers wilted  
Without a chance, their growth, stilted.  
A courtyard filled with hedges dead  
Where the royal guests were led.

Long ago the jasmine crawled  
And children liked to roam the halls.  
Queens would promenade in gowns  
And kings would hunt with horse and hound.  
Back when trees had rings of five  
And forbidden love was still alive.  
Servants whispered behind closed doors  
And noblemen fought in wars.

Past and present intertwined  
As the monarchies declined.  
Wildflowers sprout from cracks  
Around the kingdom's rusted plaques.  
The antique roses touched by dew  
Although abandoned, they bloom anew.  
Stained glass brightened by the sun's rays  
Alone and silent the chapel bell stays.

The stillness of this kingdom vast  
Only nature could outlast.

Student Name: Zoya Johl

Grade: 7

School: Annunciation Orthodox School

Title: I Never Forgot my Jamaica

Category: Poetry

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Joan Lange

I remember a time  
 I used to kick and splash in turquoise waters,  
 dripping wet and covered in sand,  
 coming home, scolded by my mother.  
 I used to feel the dirt between my toes as I chased my friends  
 in the forest of the Blue Mahoes.  
 Once, my legs, strong and youthful,  
 I climbed the mango tree, and  
 dug my teeth into the flesh of a fresh mango.  
 Closing my eyes at night, filling my lungs with the sweet ocean air,  
 I listened to the whistling of the warbler, chi, chi, chi, chip.

My life was perfect.  
 But,  
 I grew up.  
 I wanted more.

I left my home for New York.  
 I spent sixty years,  
 Kicking and splashing, trying to keep my head afloat,  
 working, tired, stressed, late nights, caterwauled by my boss.  
 Feeling the cement under my feet as I chased the clock  
 in a concrete jungle.  
 I spent sixty years climbing up seventy-two flights of stairs.  
 Closing my eyes at night, coughing from the polluted air,  
 I listened to the cars, honk, honk, honk.  
 But,  
 I never forgot my Jamaica.  
 I counted every day  
 until I could return.  
 I never forgot my Jamaica.



Student Name: Abby Seaberg  
 Grade: 8  
 School: Annunciation Orthodox School  
 Title: Zebras  
 Category: Humor  
 Key: Gold Key  
 Educator: Marian Rosse

(Author's Note: For the record, my dad's a surgeon. I'm allowed to tease these guys. I have the surgeon's pass.)

ze·bra /'zēbrə/ - noun

1.5. refers to a rare or unlikely diagnosis, which med students are known to favor over more regular or not-absolutely-insane ones.

"Hey, Jules?" a timid voice asked from the other side of the bathroom door.  
 "Yeah?" Jules sensed a problem, and a shiver of anxiety prickled its way through her body.  
 There were many things wrong with that bathroom - all of which were most definitely Jules's fault.  
 The algae on the showerhead was from when she tried to grow a strain of bacteria to stop blood loss. The messed-up toilet flusher was from that time she thought Taco Bell was a good pick-me-up after a malignant rotation. The corroded sink head was from the disposing of a dubious solution. There may or may not have been a cockroach infestation from when she decided to become a prepper and stock up food underneath a loose tile. Jules refused to talk about the Cladosporium-Ringworm incident, and there's many more incidents she legally can't talk about.  
 Unfortunately - well, not really for Jules - the only person who suffers from all of this is her roommate: Amelia.  
 Amelia had tried to file for a dorm change since day one. Actually, since the second she arrived, when she discovered - in a rather unfortunate manner - that Jules had snuck in her pet snake. But, Med School was already filled to the brim, so she was stuck rooming with a Burmese python and a "mad scientist."  
 This bad luck set the tone for her Med School career and all of Jules' "scientific" endeavors. Amelia had a solid reputation as a black cloud, meaning her luck was withering and festering in the gutters of mirror shards and Friday the 13ths. Anyone with an ounce of superstition was sprinting the moment Amelia walked into the room. This

made her and Jules an interesting combination, because Amelia was sprinting away the moment Jules walked into the room.

How come? Well ...

Pet snake? It ate Amelia's black cat, Rory. Algae on the showerhead? Amelia's blonde hair turned green. Messed-up toilet flusher? Amelia got terrible acne from being splashed viciously with sewage. Corroded sink head? Amelia's teeth turned brown from the water. Cockroach infestation? They found that her bed was cozier than the bathroom.

Cladosporium-Ringworm? There was only one diagnosis. Rat dissection -

"Why are flowers growing out of the toilet?"

That was unexpected.

"...What type of flowers?" Jules replied slowly.

"Roses...At least, I think," answered Amelia.

"Amelia," Jules began, full of dignity and bluff. "I have done many, many experiments in that bathroom. Planting roses in the toilet wasn't one of them."

Technically, it was true.

"Jules, they have stripes ... and mouths," Amelia whisper-screamed. "Who else would do such a thing? My cat? Your stupid snake Ralph killed him!"

"Wait...THEY HAVE MOUTHS!?" exclaimed Jules. That changed everything.

"YES; THAT'S. WHY. I'M. FREAKING. OU- AHHHHHH!"

Performing experiments in the bathroom was indisputably a bad idea. But now, with this discovery, all secondary thoughts were kicked out of Jules's brain. Including the safety of Amelia.

"IT WORKED! IT WORKED! OH MY GOODNESS! HOLY FATHER, IT WORKED!!" Jules raced across the dorm to grab her experiment kit and barreled into the bathroom. "MOVE OUT OF MY WAY!"

Jules shoved a crying Amelia - whose arm was wrapped entirely by black thorns and strange flowers - out of the bathroom to reveal the specimen inside the toilet. She gasped.

It was by far the best bad idea she'd ever had. Flowers exploded from the toilet and circled the room like a predator does to its wounded prey - or like Ralph did to Amelia's cat. It was beautiful in a violent, macabre way, with black and white zebra stripes and mouths filled with sharp fangs. It reminded Jules of her aunt: a vampire in bold animal print.

"OMIGOD! I HAVE TO TAKE THIS TO THE MED!" Jules enthusiastically chopped off a portion and shoved it into her kit. "BYE AMELIA!!" she shouted, sprinting out of the dorm and leaving a wake of striped calamities.

"JUUUUUULLLLLLEEEESSSSS!!!" Amelia screeched, tears pouring down her face, blood gushing down her arm, and an army of predatory zebra-vampire-flowers hot on her trail.

Jules burst into the Med.

"I GOT IT! I GOT IT! I-"

Wait.

Nobody else was there.

A fan chopped annoyingly on the ceiling, and the chill air smelled way too clean to be good for the esophagus. It gave Jules the shivers.

"Oh, you're kidding."

Clip, clop, responded the fan.

Jules whirled around. There was no way that the Med was empty. That'd be ridiculous! There's a college nearby! At least ten kids needed emergency surgery on the daily! AND, this is in the BIGGEST MEDICAL CENTER IN THE WORLD, SO WHY ON THIS STUPID, CURSED, FAVORITIST WORLD IS-

That's when she saw it.

The painting on the foyer wall - a pathetic copy of Georgia O'Keefe's "Ladder to the Moon" - was slightly ajar. Jules rolled her eyes. Of course they have a secret passageway. No other way could those residents get from the IMCU to the ICU every 30 minutes on 12-hour shifts without collapsing into a bundle of sweaty scrubs and ironically malnourished bones.

The painting creaked open dramatically as if she were in a mystery movie, and not a 14-year-old's writing contest submission.

Jules ducked under the hazardous corner where the wall met the passageway ceiling and treaded inside carefully. Typically, in mystery movies at least, going into the hidden passage isn't the brightest idea. But, in the defense of every dumb-yet-curious mystery protagonist, you can't not go in. You can't live your whole life knowing that behind the terrible ladder painting in the hospital that smells like hand sanitizer-scented Febreze was a hidden passageway, and you don't know where it leads.

Besides, curiosity was Jules' weakness.

So, when I said she treaded in carefully, I was lying. She barreled through that passageway like she barreled through everything - impulsively, dangerously, and in a worrisome manner.

In a blur of dull lighting, concrete walls, and the immune-system-wrecking odor of formaldehyde and humid cleanness, Jules found herself in a cavern.

It was gargantuan, dim, and domed, with light trickling down the gray walls. A slim walkway of concrete wrapped around the room before dipping into a grandiose auditorium. The walls housed bags and bags and bags of red liquid - undoubtedly blood - next to dissected bodies - cadavers - like some sort of sick museum. At least it explains the loathsome pickles-and-burnt-matches stench of formaldehyde.

On the stage in the auditorium below was an uninteresting wooden lectern, but a rather interesting man. He was bald, in an immaculate lab coat, and had perfectly manicured hands. His attire wasn't what made him interesting - it was the look in his steely, glacier eyes, eyes that belonged inside the hospital, not working in it. It was the same thing for all the audience members as well - psychopathic leers disguised by professional costumes.

Jules hid behind a shelf of disturbing doctor oddities to observe.

"Hello. As you all know, I am Dr. Hansen," announced the man behind the lectern. His authoritative voice reverberated off the walls of the auditorium. Jules knew him - he had performed surgery on her brother a few years ago. "Today, we have gathered here to view the initiation of one of our finest med students, Tristan Rutherford."

Tristan Rutherford sauntered in from behind the stage's red curtains. Nobody clapped. To be fair - Jules wouldn't have clapped either. Tristan was well-known throughout Med School to be the King of the Gunners.

Sounds cool, right?

Well, it's not.

A Gunner, in med-school terms, is like a teacher's pet on levoamphetamine. They are dead set on getting the highest grade possible and looking perfect in front of faculty - no matter what. They always raise their hand in class, they act like they are better than everyone, they tattle, they betray, they brag ... Basically, In a nutshell, they're annoying, pompous, rude snakes.

So, to say that Tristan Rutherford is the King of the Gunners means he's a teacher's pet on levoamphetamine and dextroamphetamine. Everybody hated his guts, to the degree they'd dissect them, preferably while he was alive, and party until his life was poured out along with his blood. Then they'd even throw an after party - and med school students aren't known for being energetic partygoers.

Tristan continued to slither across the stage like the annoying, pompous, rude snake he was. His dark brown hair was greased into McDonalds' fryer, and a smirk dripping in "I'm better than you" played across his thin lips.

Tristan stopped right next to the lectern where Dr. Hansen stood. Just then, a resident - John-something - walked up with a golden goblet. His angry, quadruple-shot-espresso-fueled eyes were on the brink of rolling out of their sockets. Another resident - Lee-something - walked next to him and carried a clear bag filled with red liquid. Jules hoped it was Koolaid, but the tube attached to the bag, the label that said A, and Lee-something's wide eyes and pale face said otherwise.

Wait.

An initiation.

Where they drink blood.

This wasn't some little party - this was a surgeon cult.

It made sense that they had a cult. Surgeons were psychopaths. You can't expect someone who performs surgery on dead bodies that smell like pickles and burnt matches to possibly be sane.

The residents set the suspicious items on the lectern, and Dr. Hansen proceeded to pour the blood into the goblet. Silently, he handed it to Tristan. The King of the Gunners drank it, slowly, savoring it without bothering to wipe that stupid Gunner smirk off his face or that maniacal look from his algae-colored eyeballs.

You would think that in a cult, the audience would respond enthusiastically with a synchronized dance and song sequence. But no, the audience was dead silent.

"What the heck?" Jules muttered.

Don't ask.

No, dear reader, not because 14-year-old writing defies all logic, but because an auditorium is designed to echo.

Jules' words bounced into the auditorium, going back and forth a couple of times just in case somebody missed them. In an eerily-in-sync wave of lab coats and assorted skintones, all of the doctors swiveled their heads to face Jules. They stared their arrogant, precise, psychopathic eyes down into the depths of her soul, dissecting it like an organ and not saying anything because she probably wouldn't be able to understand their eloquent medical dialect anyway.

"WHO. ARE. YOU?????" The lead cult leader spoke like the caterpillar from Alice In Wonderland but with less pretentious-smoke-letters and more I-will-donate-your-body-to-science-right-here-right-now-with-this-scalpel.

"Um, I'm Jules. The girl whose brother's appendix you removed three years ago."

Recognition flashed across Dr. Hanson's face, along with relief: murder is going to be so much easier to get away with. He smiled sharply like one of his scalpels, which may or may not have a dark record of homicide. "Why don't you come over here?" he asked coyly.

Even Jules was perceptive enough to know this was a dumb idea. But, she wasn't perceptive enough to know that her bargain plan was utterly bovine.

Yes, you actually read that right. Yes, that's a pun. Yes, I actually wrote that pun. No, I'm not cutting it out.

Oblivious to her ridiculousness, Jules lifted the cut-off rose-with-a-mouth-and-zebra-stripes into the air. "I MADE A SPECIMEN THAT CAN CURE CANCER!!!"

A hush would've fallen over the auditorium if it wasn't already in silent judgment.

Dr. Hanson's gaze flitted quizzically off to the side before he prompted, "Go on," in a typical condescending-surgeon manner.

"Well, I was studying cancer in zebras for this project, and I realized that a chemical found in cancer cells also-"

"SACRIFICE! SACRIFICE! SACRIFICE!"

Looks like Amelia was taking her turn at making a barreling entrance.

Wait. Amelia?

Yes. Amelia.

But, it wasn't her barreling in; she was being barreled. Or, more specifically, she was strapped onto an operating table, trying to scream through her gag - but, she just wound up looking constipated. It was bad enough that she already looked like a disaster - messy blonde hair still with streaks of green, bloodshot eyes rivaling her bloodshot - and oozing - red forehead pimples, and left arm still bleeding from the thorns that littered it - but that expression really took things to the next level of yikes.

Jules was stunned. She knew Amelia had broken a mirror into 7 pieces last year, but she didn't know that her black cloud-ness was this bad.

The man in the lab coat carrying her in - a newbie med student named Rob-something - paused in his tracks. He stared dubiously at the silent horde of irritated-looking eyes, up at Jules, and back to the horde.

"Um ... not a good time?" Poor guy. Newbies have it so rough, even when they are in psychopathic surgeon cults.

Dr. Hanson had the nerve to roll his eyes as he turned back to Jules. "Your specimen?" he inquired.

"How about this." Jules pulled a lighter from her pocket - it may or may not have been a Hello Kitty Collectors Edition. It lit up with a click, and she let the flames teasingly lick the petals of her vampire-zebra-flower. "Either you let Amelia and me go - free - or I burn this specimen and any hope of curing cancer."

The whole auditorium burst into laughter. Jules had decided that surgeon laughter was the most uncanny laughter she'd ever heard. It was a series of mocking chuckles and snickers, with calculated pauses and increasing intensity designed to make a person self-conscious.

"You should have asked the Bio Department," chided Dr. Hansen sardonically. "Besides, we don't make money when you're healthy."

With those final words, a scalpel punctured Jules' heart with the lunatic precision only a surgeon could muster.

\*\*\*

Beep. Beep. Beep.

"Oh, she's alive!" cried out a female voice. "My baby's alive!"

Jules groggily opened her eyes and was met with the tear-stained and blotchy faces of her parents.

"Mom? Dad?" she asked, dumbstruck even though she could obviously see them.

"Hush, you just had surgery! You can't use up all your energy!"

"Surgery???" She couldn't possibly just have had surgery. Not even a minute ago she was bargaining with a deranged surgeon cult for the life of her cranky roomie.

"Yes." This voice was new.

But, it wasn't really new. When Jules rolled her head to the side like a geriatric rag doll, she was met with the maniacal and calculatingly blue eyes and sharper-and-more-homicidal-than-his-scalpel grin of Dr. Hanson.

"It wasn't all that bad. Just a nasty scrape across an organ. But, we will require you to stay here for a bit to make sure you fully recover. Goodbye." He was curtly egotistical, per usual.

"WAIT!"

Dr. Hanson spun around, his lab coat dramatically flipping behind him like a bleached vampire's cape.

"Yes?" he challenged, eyes narrowed into dangerous slits, and his blinding teeth barred as he gritted out the single word.

"Your cult!" Jules blurted out. Something about having surgery really killed the already pitifully weak barrier between Jules' thoughts and mouth.

Dr. Hansen looked at her like she was stupid. Her parents gasped and worried that she had suffered brain damage as well.

Embarrassment crept into Jules' voice as she tried to defend herself. "I mean - but, there was a whole ceremony! My roommate was the sacrifice! You stabbed me!"

Dr. Hansen gave a dry chuckle that didn't quite reach his ever-so-cold eyes. "That was just an initiation for one of our med students. He graduated into residency."

"Yeah! An initiation where you drink blood!"

Dr. Hansen chuckled again, but this time darker. "Jules," he paused, relishing in the tension. "Those were just dreams. As we say here,

'When you hear hoofbeats, think horses, not zebras.'"

Student Name: Sophie Tatum  
 Grade: 10  
 School: Aristoi Classical Academy (upp  
 Title: My Father's Fire  
 Category: Novel Writing  
 Key: Gold Key  
 Educator:

## Prologue

### My Father's Fire

No one could charm a fire the way my father could. He knew how to call up the little red flames speaking to them as if they were really living creatures, timid beasts curled beneath the charred black logs he'd piled around them to protect them from the bitter winds of the night. I had tried to imitate his ways the best I could, snapping the thin twigs between my fingers and tossing them hopefully beneath the logs to the first tiny glowing sparks that showed, but no matter how hard I tried, the flames wouldn't listen to me. I was a stranger to them while my father was an old friend. They didn't know me yet. I didn't give up trying, of course, but after the first few failed attempts, I was content to sit back and watch my father whisper gently to the beasts. He could breathe life into them like no one could, and even on the coldest, windiest nights, he could send those glorious red flames dancing back and forth, while I sat there watching, with the fire's warm, gentle glow on my face.

Our old shack in the woods often felt like the loneliest, wildest, darkest place in the world, and I'd never liked it much, but on quiet nights like these, with the wonder of the golden threads of flame flickering like something out of a dream right before my eyes, I knew I wouldn't desire to be anywhere else in the world. The nights of my father's fires weren't all like that, though. Somehow, the creature he called out was never the same. Sometimes it crackled in a cheerful way, as if it were laughing, other times it roared and reached for the nearest tree branches that hung just above it. Sometimes it spat and hissed -and on some nights it screamed. When my father heaped too much wood on the blaze, the fire would soar up in rapid gusts, unhindered by the wind, then they would let out a high pitch crying sound, like someone in great need. I hated that sound. So these were the worst nights I spent with my father and his beasts. My father never did anything about the flames, when they got too high. He never said a word when they screamed. He didn't move at all. He would just sit there and watch them with misted eyes, as if he were under some spell or enchantment. I hated to admit how much these nights terrified me. When I look back, I wish I would have gone and done something about them myself, but I guess I was just afraid to. My father was as unpredictable as his fire, and there was really no telling how he would react. He didn't care if the frightened little creature grew into a monster, he would just sit there and watch calmly as always. He was a strange man, growing more distant from me every day. People who had known him before said he was



out of his head, but I didn't believe them. Even though I had the strangest feeling that they were right, and as the years went by, I started to see it too. He used to talk to me and tell me stories beside those fires he made. There was a time when he never let the blaze go too high. Yes, there was always a trace of sadness in his eyes, but he had never let it take over him. He used to be a warm, gracious man, with the loudest, deepest laugh I'd ever heard. If things had gone on that way, I might've been happy living isolated in the woods, but then he changed. Every day I saw more sadness in his eyes, every day his laugh got a little softer, and his giant hugs a little more limp. Finally, when I was about eight, he took to shutting himself away. Now he never wanted me around except on those nights he called up the flames. As for me, I never spoke to him unless he said something to me first. When I was younger I went on talking to him all the time, but as the weeks went by, I realized my words seemed to be hurting him. Sometimes they'd cause tears to fall from his eyes, and he'd hold up a hand and tell me to stop. Other times, his eyes would just Mist over, and he didn't seem to know who I was. A lot of people said it was grief that ruined him, but I wasn't sure. I knew I didn't have a mother, so something must have happened to her, but he had never let that hurt him before, so I didn't understand why it was hurting him now. At the time, I hadn't understood anything at all. Even though his change scared me, he never tried to hurt me or anyone else. We mostly didn't see each other, he was in his room all the time, while I was off in the forest, getting into all sorts of trouble. So it was only the flame that united us.

Fire was strong enough to break through any darkness, that's what I always told myself when I watched them burn. Fires that could bring warmth on the coldest nights. I liked to think it would be the same way with my father, that his darkness wouldn't stay. That there was still hope for him to change back to who he'd once been. Even when it seemed like he'd gone too far away, and that we were too distant to ever be a family again, I would go on praying that one day he would find his fire, that the light could shatter all the darkness and that it would lead him back to me again.

Student Name: Amanda Hopkins  
 Grade: 8  
 School: Aristoi Classical Academy (upp  
 Title: The Ulua Virus  
 Category: Science Fiction & Fantasy  
 Key: Gold Key  
 Educator:

# THE ULUA VIRUS:

Tape one: Unidentified disease

Researcher: Dr.Sarita Matute

Station: Santos's Crossing Health Unit

Date: 8th of August, 1990

Report: Several cases of an unidentified infection have been reported in Santa Bárbaran residents. Patients were reported to have been swimming in the Ulúa River prior to symptoms.

Additional notes: Blood samples have been ordered from each patient. Water samples were taken from three key areas of the river.

Sample one: Outside Lake Ulúa

Sample two: Near Santos's Crossing

Sample three: North Section of lake

Results are expected in seven to eight business days. A follow-up to this entry will be made shortly after.

-

Tape Two: Inconclusive

Researcher: Dr. Sarita Hopkins

Station: Santos's Crossing Health Unit

Date: 19th of August, 1990

Report: Low levels of aluminum and copper were discovered. Neither should have produced the symptoms found in patients. Blood work yielded negative results. Common pathogens consistent with symptoms were not present. Many of the patients' symptoms have improved. Several, however, have worsened by developing Meningitis. 28 new patients have been admitted. All with initial symptoms of itchy throat, skin rash, irritated eyes, nausea, and hallucinations. I suspect we are dealing with something viral.

Patient one: Infant

Condition: Asymptomatic

Patient 2: Adult

Condition: Deceased

Patient 3: Child

Condition: Stable

Patient 4: Adult

Condition: Stable

Additional notes: Recent miscarriage with patient 4.

Autopsy results:

Patient two: Tumor found near the spine. More tests need to be conducted on surviving patients.

-

Tape three: Unknown pathogen identified

Researcher: Dr. Sarita Matute

Station: Santos's Crossing Health Unit

Date: 5th of November, 1990

Report: I believe I have discovered a new pathogen in the waterways near Santos's Crossing. It was also found in the blood work of our patients. We are nicknaming the disease- the Ulúa virus. We have notified the Santa Bárbaran government. Blood samples, water samples, and biopsies have been sent to law enforcement.

Biopsy results: The tumor yielded a strange and frightening discovery. They were filled with aggressive worm-like organisms. As impossible as this may seem, it appears the organisms are being "birthed" from the virus. Almost like they are being "hatched"

Results: Further tests are needed.

Additional thoughts: The idea of discovering a new virus is both terrifying and exciting. I'm just hope glad we identified the pathogen before it had a chance to spread.

-

Tape 4: Cause for concern

Researcher: Dr. Sarita Matute

Station: Santos's Crossing Health Unit

Date: 7th of January, 1991

Report: My supervisor has informed me that the local police are still processing the samples sent two months ago. An official statement should be coming soon. However, we were assured that the pathogen in question was not a serious threat. I find this shocking considering what I have found in my own research. The virus initially reproduces a lytic cycle. However, in time, it undergoes a type of metamorphosis. From what I can observe, the viral stage seems to be in its immature form. Once the worm-like parasites emerge, they immediately seem to gravitate toward the brain and nervous system.

Survivors show negative results for the Ulùà virus. However, I am wondering what might be going on in their heads as the only way to detect the secondary infection may be an autopsy. I believe it may be in our best interests if I contact law enforcement myself.

Addendum: The police haven't received the samples. When I confronted my supervisor, he claimed that another Santa Bárbaran confirmed the pathogen to be Giardia. I find this outrageous. Why would they lie about sending the samples to law enforcement and...seriously? Giardia? A grade schooler wouldn't confuse Giardia with the Ulùà virus.

-

Tape 5: Tipping point

Researcher: Dr. Sarita Matute

Station: Santos's Crossing Health Unit

Date: 4th of April, 1991

Report: Despite my repeated warnings, the Santa Bárbaran government is promoting its waterway to its citizens and surrounding areas. No doubt Apparently, that's why the law wasn't alerted. The riverway is big money, and no one in the administration wants a potentially deadly disease scaring the tourists. Typical government bureaucracy. I fear this could be ground zero for an outbreak, and not to Giardia-

THIS SUMMER

RETURN TO THE ULÙÀ WATERWAYS!

A MESSAGE FROM YOUR LOCAL GOVERNMENT!!!!

-Report continued: However, the potential pandemic isn't the most concerning piece of news that I've received. Patient 4 brutally killed her husband with her bare hands. She kidnapped patient 1 after also murdering the child's parents. Patient 3 also violently attacked his parents. The three were last spotted in the waterways near Santos's Crossing. In addition, several people have been reported to have gone missing on the river. I am convinced it is all connected.

-

Tape 6: Bad to worse

Researcher: Dr. Sarita Matute

Station: Santos's Crossing Health Unit

Date: 18th of October 1991

Report: This summer went exactly as I figured: more illness. Most get better quickly which means no one cares about the possible secondary infection. I can't with have a good conscience allowing this to continue. Despite pleading with everyone in my department, no one will listen to my concerns. I'm thankful I live outside of the river's vicinity. Now, They are building a landfill near the river. The rumor in the town is they are covering something up. Some say it's a spaceship.

But I don't have time for that nonsense. I think it's time I threatened to go to the press.

Addendum: And I was terminated. Effective immediately. However, When I returned to my office, I found a tape on my desk. There was a note that simply said "Lab 8, come at night". Based on what I've seen on this note, I will return tonight.

-

Tape 7: Alien

Researcher: Dr.Sarita Matute

Station: Santos's Crossing Health Unit

Date: 18th of October, 1991

Report: So I went. I was shocked to find my supervisor and his assistant were the ones who left the tape. Apparently, They have been trying to figure out who they can trust with the current threat. They believe most of the parish government has been infected. Regardless, what they showed me in the lobby.... It was disturbing to say the least. The virus is sentient. It doesn't want to just spread, it wants control. From what we've observed, the worms spread throughout the body's nervous system, so they can override the host when needed. The tumor acts as a second brain. TEven decapitated, the worms even kept a decapitated dog's head alive. According to the data we've seen, most will simply succumb to the virus, losing control. A small portion will perish. The remaining will mutate into giant amphibious creatures. Afterwards, we went to my supervisor's... Jim's home. Jim and I spent hours telling me how the local government is planning to introduce the virus to the water and food supplies. We discussed plans of how to go public over a bottle of wine. Alien invasion by way of viral infection is frightening, but I must admit it feels good to no longer fight alone.

-

Tape 8: The end or the beginning?

Personal journal: Dr.Sarita Matute

Date: 19th of October 1991

Thoughts: I must have passed out because when I woke up, I was alone.

Jim left me a note. It said two things: "Welcome to the family" and "See you back at work in two weeks." Fired and rehired in 24 hours, this must be some kind of record. Then I guess the real battle begins. Last night, Jim seemed pretty confident that we'll be able to get both law enforcement and the military involved.

-

6th of November, 1991

Back to work and back to war. I'm feeling under the weather, but Jim and I have a big meeting today. Time to discuss the future. Odd. Jim wasn't in today, but he left the bottle of wine that we shared two weeks ago. It had instructions to analyze the wine under a microscope, So I did as asked.

Oh, God.

I am infected with the Ulùà virus.

I immediately left. As I drove away, the staff of the entire building followed me to the parking lot and watched me. They were all smiling.

How can I be so gullible?

-

5th of February, 1992

I'm working in a veterinarian's office. I've been poisoning my body with anti-parasite injections and chemotherapy meant for dogs. I'm forty pounds underweight, balding, and my mouth is covered in sores. But I've kept the disease from overtaking me. However, I'm just buying time until I figure out how to cure this thing.

-

23rd of April, 1992

I can feel them scratching at my skull. The injections aren't as effective anymore. My fingers are spasming. My eyes are twitching.  
I am dying.

-

5th of May, 1992

I've been having the strangest dreams. I've been thinking about running to Ireland or France. Or even moving to the states for med school.

-

15th of June, 1992

I miss my mom and dad. There's so much I wanted to do. I wanted to meet someone, grow old, and have kids.  
Now I'll never do anything.

-

27th of August, 1992

I can hear them now. They want me to consider them my children.  
I consider them a plague.

-

21st of September, 1992

I lost my job at the vet's office. My memory isn't what it used to be. I'm mailing these tapes to the cable station. The police too.  
Maybe they can use what I learned to save us.

8th of October, 1992

This ends tonight. If anyone watching this wants to know my last words, they're,  
"Boil anything you drink; that kills the virus."

Student Name: Cole Ahmed  
Grade: 10  
School: Awty International School  
Title: A "Dream" with Rebecca Powell  
Category: Short Story  
Key: Gold Key  
Educator: Amanda Wood

It was the night of July 7th, 2023, and I hadn't been able to sleep in my bed. I went downstairs and I was just genuinely tired, tired of myself, of my situation, tired of everything. I took around 30 mg of melatonin and went to sleep. It started at the beginning of 11th grade, only it wasn't me living every second. It was solely crucial moments in our story together, me and Rebecca Powell. It first started, and I became aware during the 1st day of 11th grade when I happened to transfer to Memorial High School; I was paired as a lab partner with a girl I had met and grown to know very well in my younger years. We had gone to school together before I failed to further my education at a private school. Around February, we became friends. I asked her on a date. She said no and told me later that if we were going to go out, no one could know. Our first date was a food, then a movie; we didn't kiss, but I put my arm around her shoulder, and it felt so different than it did with my first love, Marie. It felt "pure." By our 4th date at an arcade, I finally built up the courage to kiss her and asked her to become my girlfriend. She said yes to me as expected, but the nerves were crippling. The next moment I remembered was when my lacrosse team finally beat Episcopal and ended our losing streak. As the final whistle blew, she rushed to me on the field and jumped onto me, for everyone to see. The next moment was at the end of lacrosse season, and I had just sprained my ankle at one of my lacrosse tournaments and was on crutches. As soon as I returned home, she was there taking care of me, and that Sunday, we started making out. I looked into her solemnly green eyes and realized that this wasn't a girl I was supposed to fool around with; she was the one I ended up with. After the realization the memory ended.

The next memory was our graduation from Memorial. After our graduation, we announced the idea that Reese was on course to attend NYU, and so would I in the fall. To our surprise, our families didn't like the idea of us together in college. Alcoholism has had a long history in my family. After hearing the news from our families I needed a drink. Then, it skipped to our first break-up during our sophomore year of college. It happened during March; we were so caught up in our personal lives that we had almost forgotten about each other, and it turned out to be my first time going to an actual bar and having a one-night encounter with a stranger. It skipped to a couple of weeks later when we crossed paths and decided to "get coffee." I hadn't been able to stop drinking; she left me because of my problem. It was warranted, but it hurt worse the second time. After the breakup, I remember stumbling into a bar, and the memory ended.

It skipped to my graduation, which she attended as just a friend, and then I jumped into my next memory: her graduation, where I was in the stands watching her great accomplishment from afar. We went to support each other as friends, but after and at the party, she had a bit to drink, and she thought that I had to, and we ended up getting close. It happened at her grad party. If that isn't a sign that we are meant to be, I don't know one. I was completely sober and felt a casino chip in my pocket. I reached in and pulled it out; it was a year sobriety chip. I had done it. I kept my promise. I changed. I was no longer an immature alcoholic. I was now a man she could love, a mature-year sober college graduate. When we woke up from that night, she thought it was a drunken mistake, but for me, it was like finding my favorite toy after thinking I had lost it. Having her in my arms, even though I only remember a brief part, that feeling is still to this day unshakable. The intoxicating allure of her love still stays with me as a lingering dream. I'd die for her passion, that feeling that I crave, and beg for. She was gone in a haze of embarrassment for our actions.

The next flash I saw was her in a beautiful old-time gown that the queen would have thrown Reese out for wearing and looking that good in her presence. When my eyes first came upon her, my knees buckled so severely that it caused me to stumble and spill some of my club soda onto the red carpet. When our eyes interlocked, I engaged in a stare of many emotions: envy was the one that held the most power. I envied the person with her here; I'd do anything for her. I would have always. I broke eye contact to survey the room, and my eyes immediately shifted to the poster boy whom the party was originally for. It was her date, a young, beautiful, built, wealthy man. My eyes welled up, and my body, too intoxicated with anger and love, did the one thing I'm seemingly best at, and I ran away. Seeing her with that guy was enough to ruin my night. Even in a nice suit and a bank account full of money, I still managed to be a scared, insecure little boy.

The next memory I had was, I assume, five weeks after the gala, and I found myself in a situation with someone we both knew all too well, a mutual friend from college, whom I had begun to use to deal with all of my poorly controlled emotions. She randomly broke down crying in an awkward attempt to tell me something; she was talking about how she had always seen me and had seen who I truly was. I wasn't paying attention to her speech; I was in my world, trying to get Reese back over her unneeded noise. She left as she realized I didn't care, seemingly embodying five years of pent-up emotions in 30 seconds. I honestly didn't give her a single thought; only Reese was important to me.

As she left and slammed my door abnormally hard and huffed her way out of my life, I fell into my next memory. It was the day of my 24th birthday, and everyone I had ever cared about was there, especially her. She said something that has stuck with me even to this day: "Happy birthday to the best man I know and favorite person in my life." I just partied the night away, keeping the idea of her presence near me in my head and having it



comfort me. When I woke up I had a comfortable weight on my arm, warm drool all over my arm, and her precious blond hair, she woke up to a subtle twitch of my pec, and as soon as she woke up, she realized what had happened the night before. What was so wrong? She had cheated on her boyfriend with ME, it was me. Why can't she just see it? I'm who she ends up with. It was always me! As she left, the memory ended.

I was running in a hospital; I had to find her, hold her, and make sure she knew I would always be there for her. I spot a doctor and ask him what happened, he tells me how Rebecca had gotten into a car crash due to her cab driver being under the influence. In my dazed and confused state, I reached over and found my 36-month sobriety chip. I stayed clean just like I told her I would. I walked in and saw the woman I fell in love with. The doctors told me she had a piece of metal lodged into her head, so they had to shave off her hair to perform surgery. I see her there lying with a broken collarbone, bruised ribs, and countless scratches, and her left eye was black with her buzzed hair and a cool scar. Still, even with all of the alterations to my beautiful girl, I love her as I will until I die. I was there for her through every surgery and late lonely night. When she was cleared, it was my happiest memory; the following memory was her moving her belongings into my apartment.

My proposal was my next memory, and we decided to take a trip to Mykonos, Greece. We stayed there for a week and a half. The first week was perfect, but on the first day of the second week, it started to pour down, and I decided to wait till we left for Paris, France. It rained day and night for a week after our trip to Greece. I ended up getting down on one knee and asking her to marry me on one of the last nights we planned on spending in Paris. It was like a scene out of a movie; as soon as we got to the place I planned on proposing, it started to rain, my favorite place in the city. We ran to take cover and ended up in a park pavilion, waiting for the rain to pass. Then I realized that this was exactly like our relationship: always waiting for the right moment, but I just had to seize the moment and live the rest of my life with the woman I had already waited long enough for. I bent my knee and asked her to marry me; without doubt, she said yes to me. We embraced in the rain as she said, "Yes." One word, three letters, but such an impact it could've had on my life. After that night, I fell asleep and jumped into my next memory.

My next memory was around a year and a half later, I had just turned 27, and I was to be soon married to the literal woman of my dreams. "We are now forever," she said as the last words before I fell into the next memory. It was our wedding day, "August 14." read our wedding information. I had looked all over for her; I had to see and be with her. I had imagined her beauty in her surreal white wedding gown, perfectly complementing her emerald-green eyes. I imagined how she looked, but I could never comprehend how fulfilling, to my eyes upon that day. I felt the same knee-buckling feeling when I saw her at that charity event; even through the alterations in our lives, I still saw her as I always had. I found her beautiful even when she felt as though she was disgusting. She was perfect in

my eyes; I walked over to her while giving her an awkward gaze that she found weird. I just looked at her and said nothing when I got to her. "Do I look bad?" she asked. "No," I responded, "you look perfect," I scarcely said while my eyes watered from not blinking for so long. I kissed her and turned around to leave. She called out for me, and when I returned to her, she gave me a picture she had from our first date at the Regal Theater next to our school. I took it and put it into my pocket for good luck. I was 27 and about to marry the woman of my dreams. I looked along the rows as I waited for her to walk the aisle; the music started, and I couldn't help but tear up as she began her walk down the aisle. "Together, I know we can do anything. I can't wait to work hand in hand to build a beautiful life together," she said in the last line of her vows. I remember looking into the crowd; I saw people I know well and people I will meet soon. The one person who caught my eye in the crowd was my first love and the only real ex I had before Rebecca, Stella Gordon. She was my first real girlfriend in high school, and we dated for just four months. We had a very messy relationship, and the breakup was even worse. Now I'm looking down at her with my dream girl on my arm, and the woman I had so foolishly thought I would marry in the future is looking idiotically at me and my future. I stuck out my arm for my bride as we walked down the aisle together, and I couldn't seem to shake the smug look on my face. The fact that I was happy and she was at MY wedding alone kept in my head as I walked with the love of my life.

We got into the car we were going to drive away in, and when we finally got to our house, we didn't do anything besides "enjoy each other's comfort" for the days following our wedding. Then, after I finally kissed her goodnight and we went to sleep, I jumped into my next memory. About a week after our three-year anniversary, Rebecca had recently felt nauseous. So, I made a doctor's appointment to see if she had something besides a cold. The doctor said that she was completely normal except that she was pregnant; we both laughed at the idea of her being pregnant because we hadn't considered what would have happened if she did get pregnant. We took a cab home in absolute silence; then she finally released an ironic "surprise?" I let out a very nervous laugh and told her we didn't have to keep it if she didn't want to. She walked over to me, hugged me as tightly as possible, and told me she loved me. I gave her as much affirmation as possible, kissing her forehead and carrying her to bed. After we went to sleep, the memory ended.

My next memory was a few days before our first son was born. "Minos Ahmed" is the name we gave to our son. Rebecca was swollen up with a stomach the size of a bowling ball on her stomach, yet she still managed to be the most beautiful woman I could see. It then switched to my next memory of Rebecca in labor, and my poor, sweet wife was in so much pain I couldn't do anything about it except give her my hand to squeeze and wipe the sweat off her face. When he was born, he was a big baby, around seven pounds four ounces. Junaid had already gained a nickname from Rebecca's nurse assistant, "Juni." Rebecca could go home after about four days. Then I jumped to my next memory: Rebecca was trying to feed Juni while I was holding him, spilling it all over my shirt. She

burst into tears in a panicked haze due to a lack of sleep and exhaustion. I fed Juni and put him to bed without her, but Rebecca was in our room and cried herself to sleep. I walked into the room and saw my wife lying over the covers on our bed with crust in her eyes from the tears there. I picked her up, put her under the covers, then crawled beside and hugged her till I fell asleep.

The next thing I remember is my son's first birthday; all of my closest friends and relatives came over to celebrate my son's birthday. After all the festivities, everyone had left, and he was asleep. Rebecca and I spent the next couple of hours under a blanket, re-watching the same movie we had seen on our first date; the memory ended with her falling asleep on me as the movie ended.

I had always been insecure about how significant others felt about me, but with Rebecca, it had never been a problem. I was always entirely sure exactly how much she cared about me; my choice of affection was physical touch, and whenever I feel nervous or panicked, I always calm down with the touch of a loved one. With Rebecca, I always had a hand on her or touched a piece of her jacket, just a little thing. With other people, they always seemed slightly irritated, and I would take the hint and stop, but Rebecca was okay with it she always made a little gesture to ensure I was okay. My next memory was taking Minos to his first day of school; It felt so awkward just giving our child away to other people. I felt strained like I didn't want to let him go. I could tell Rebecca felt the same way, so I had to be strong for her. We walked back home holding hands. Rebecca had this tense look on her face, so we stopped at her favorite coffee place and got a drink. We made it home after, and I counted the minutes until I could go and pick him up. When the clock struck two, I started walking to the school and arrived right as the bell rang. After he got home, he fell asleep; Rebecca and I began cooking dinner together, and after dinner, I went to sleep and kissed my wife goodnight, as I waited for the next memory, I ended up opening my eyes to the glaring sunshine of July 8, 2023. I woke up in a sweat pool with a pounding heart. My wife and our child were gone, taken from me so suddenly. Rebecca, now reduced to just my old friend and nothing more. I threw myself back into my bed and tried and close my eyes to no avail.

Student Name: Neda Ravandi

Grade: 11

School: Awty International School

Title: A Certain Kind of Hunger

Category: Flash Fiction

Key: Gold Key

Educator:

### A Certain Kind of Hunger

Winter has fallen over Granville and Marla buries her face in a pillow, groaning as her stomach growls mournfully and a chill sweeps over her calves. This is the fifth time she's been woken up. She reluctantly unfolds herself out from under the threadbare blanket, scratchy plastic shift rubbing against her thighs as she walks over to the window. Marla shoves a palm against the wood, pressing it shut. Her hand comes away streaked red, and she winces, gingerly plucking at a splinter. She turns back to the mattress, flopping down, and the window squeaks open again in response.

A few hours later light starts to crawl in, vague imprint of sun pressing insistently against the curtain of dark, wintry clouds. Marla gets up, rubbing the heels of her hands too hard against her eyes. A small pocket of snow is collecting on the windowsill, dripping into a dirty puddle at her feet. She turns away and rubs absentminded fingers over the thin skin on her ribs as she opens the fridge. Marla sighs at a lone, curiously patchy apple slowly succumbing to a mountain of frost. She decides on a grocery trip.

The store is empty, silent, sparse; devoid of those with too much self-preservation to brave the Vermont snow. Marla's heels clack self-consciously against the shiny floor and she leans heavily over the handle of her shopping cart. She's eyeing a stale-looking box of instant mashed potatoes when her phone vibrates; a call from Dan. She lets it ring, lets it fall on top of the towering mound of missed calls, tries to remember the rent for this month, tries not to remember his curly brown hair, the smattering of freckles that shifted across his cheeks when he smiled. Marla thinks of long nights in a big, cold bed. She thinks of indents in the pillow next to her, thinks of other people's apartments. Marla remembers a warm kitchen on a cold night, remembers a clever, freckled arm around her body while she stirred potatoes in a pot, and reluctantly tosses the box into her cart.

Marla turns into the next aisle and stops in front of a wall of canned fruit sitting shoulder to shoulder, an imposing, candy-colored battalion. She runs chapped, bitten fingers across a row of sugary peaches (all-natural juices, 100% organic) and stops at a container of cherries. She closes her eyes and breathes in the sour, cigarette- aftershave smell of the bar across from her apartment. She can almost see the rosy grenadine stains on her fingers, the slanted smile of the bartender as she started with a Shirley Temple every night. Marla remembers sucking drink after drink through a soggy paper straw, lazily eyeing the strangers around her from under hooded eyes. She thinks of dizzy walks back home, the way lamplight would cast an odd yellow shine over snow on the side of the

road. Marla remembers the sour taste of vomit. She remembers glistening snow. She puts the cherries in her cart.

The next aisle over is very kitsch, an apparent appeal to Granville's miniscule tourist population. Marla revels again in the emptiness of the store, the freedom that comes with solitude. A line of prayer candles stand solemnly; Bruce Springsteen, haloed, Whitney Houston looking skyward, Bowie, with white, feathery wings. There's a rack of breath mint tins with God's face on the lid that read Command-mints. She stares warily. He stares back. She fingers the enamel of God's eyes and thinks of yawning New England churches. Marla remembers the emptiness of the church down the road, the way it felt like a midnight grocery store when she stepped inside. She thinks of numb fingers brushing the frosty metal doorknob of the confessional booth. There was the blue light streaming from stained glass windows, the endless pews, the echoes no matter how quiet she whispered. Marla thinks of prayer, of yellowed, dog-eared hymnals. She thinks of the bruises on her knees. She picks up the mints.

And when she rolls her cart around the last aisle, she comes face to face with a cash register. Marla's setting out her measly pickings when she sees a cake on the pastry rack next to her. It's enormous; three-tiered, laden with mountains of pink frosting that loop around the sides in complicated swirls. Marla feels an inexplicable urge. There is a sudden, sharp pang in her stomach. She picks up the cake, looking at the cashier. "Just this, please," she says, and he rings her up silently, delicate fingers dancing over the register.

When she gets home, cake balanced precariously between her hands, Marla sets it on the floor and sits down cross-legged in the middle of the kitchen. She carefully releases the cake from its cardboard box and sets it down in front of her. The cake is monstrous like this, intimidating so close up. It's violently pink, and ropy, lighter-colored frosting runs like vines around the sides. Marla swipes a finger through the frosting and puts it to her lips; sugary sweet. She tentatively hovers her hand near the top and takes a small piece with her fingers. Marla chews; swallows. Emboldened, she digs wrist-deep into the cake and grabs soft, spongy chunks, eating from her own cupped hands. Her mouth is smeared with pink frosting, cheeks rouged with rosy cake. The gritty feeling of sugar is pressed to the backs of her teeth. There is pink on her shirt, pink on the floor, pink under the rough crescents of her nails not yet bitten to the quick. The cake fills her mouth, spilling from between her lips. Marla eats and eats and eats until it is gone. The remnants of the box lay in torn scraps around her, cardboard casualties of war. Frosting is smeared in wide streaks across the floor. She can feel it matted in her hair, on her arm where it has mingled with blood from a careless scratch. Marla smiles, sated.

Student Name: Rory Colgin

Grade: 9

School: Awty International School

Title: A Dark and Stormy Night

Category: Science Fiction & Fantasy

Key: Gold Key

Educator:

### A Dark and Stormy Night

I was staring out the window. Thunder crashed. Lightning split the sky. Rain banged on the windows so hard I thought they might shatter. Something dashed through the bushes. A blur of bright yellow streaked across the garden-

"You didn't check the weather?" Daphne snapped at me.

"Don't be antagonistic," Mama said. "Magnolia used her hard-earned money to go on a trip with us. Don't make me take you home." She picked Daphne up and put her on the couch.

"Don't be silly, Mama, we're not going anywhere in this weather." My baby sister, Daphne Noelle, was six years old when we visited that tiny town in Northern California. She was pale as fresh snow with a mass of curly hair that swallowed her face whole and took hours of maintenance. Her snowy whiteness was fitting, as was her middle name because she was born on Christmas Eve.

Daphne was my favorite sister, but she was a pest. She had more energy than a retriever puppy and a quicker wit than any adult I'd ever met. She was a pretty little girl and received compliments and questions asking why she wasn't modeling regularly, but she was extraordinarily unladylike. Her favorite thing at the time of the trip was her crossbow. We all knew her personality came from Mama's side of the family. Everything she had she got from our uncle; her albinism, her curls, her snarkiness, her spunk, and her crossbow that although plastic and brightly colored, had been subject to Daphne's customization and loaded with wooden stakes.

At least Poppy (who stayed with Dad and didn't come along) was quiet.

But Daphne, despite her constant stream of commentary and noise, was my favorite sister.

Daphne hopped off the couch and went to the kitchen.

"Don't fill up," Mia reminded her.

Mia was my stepmother. She and Mama got married when I was nine. Her real name was Lilith, but she was too much of a parent for me to call her by her first name, and I shuddered to think of calling her Ms. Horowitz. She watched Mamma Mia whenever she couldn't sleep, we learned that quickly, so the nickname Mia was born. Shortly after that, it occurred to us that between her wide-set eyes, golden blonde hair, and perpetual suntan, she carried a strong resemblance to Sophie Sheridan.

"I'll eat if I'm hungry," she piped.

"Lizzy, tell your daughter to wait until dinner," Mia exclaimed.

"I can't tell that girl anything," Mama replied without glancing at Daphne.

"It's not like we're going anywhere," she replied. "It's flooding."

"That boy won't ever be ready anyway," Mia sighed. She sunk into the couch and let Daphne curl up in her lap with a platter of cheese and crackers.

"No! No, no, no, we're going," Heath exclaimed from his bathroom.

Heath was my step-brother and best friend. We played the same sports, had the same friends, liked the same movies, and read all the same books. Every book I read was kept carefully preserved in preparation for months of bouncing around in Heath's backpack. He was his mother's twin- blond, tan, and doe-eyed. It was the only thing I envied about him. Everyone told me I looked like my dad. I hated it. Mama was prettier than Dad, she aged better too, and half the time, we had to outright say it for people to assume she was my mom, but that never happened with Dad.

Mama's hair was dark and pin-straight, mine was blonde and tightly coiled. Mama had high cheekbones and an aquiline nose, I had full cheeks and my nose was small with a sharp upturned tip. Mama wore silver, I wore gold. Mama's eyes were deep dark brown, mine were gray-green. Mama's skin was olive, mine was tan enough but constantly flushed. Mama's freckles came and went with the seasons, but mine stayed dark year-round. Mama was petite, I was thin but lanky. All of my limbs were too long for my body and I looked like I had been stretched out on the rack. At least Dad had the muscle and fat to be proportional.

"It's almost flooded, we won't be able to leave until it goes down," Mama said.

"Flooded? No!" Heath shouted. "Not yet!" He ran across the living room to press his face against the window. He sighed and deflated. His hair was half-blow dried and he had blunt eyeliner marks on his eyes since he hadn't smudged it out yet.

"It's flooded," I muttered. I covered my face with my hands. "This reservation was so hard to get, oh my god."

"Don't worry about it, Maggie Mae, at least they didn't make you put down a deposit," he replied, peeling himself off the window.

"They did!"

Then the doorbell rang.

Heath ran from the room like there was a monster at the door, and Daphne bounced over to get it.

Mama beat her to the door though. "Hello?"

The girl standing there was shivering violently. Her hair was sopping wet and she had makeup running down her cheeks in rivers. A yellow raincoat that was much too large for her engulfed her and dragged on the ground.

"Can I wait out the storm here?" she asked shakily. The sight was pitiful.

Mama exclaimed, "Of course!" She stepped aside to let the girl in and gestured frantically for me to get her a towel.

I left and Heath followed me. I pushed Daphne's crossbow out of the way to open the cabinets. "Damn her and the places she leaves her crap," I muttered.



"You've been seeing her outside too, right?" he whispered.

"Maybe," I replied. "You're paranoid. You think that whenever you meet someone new."

"I don't and I'm offended you would even say that," he said quickly, then he continued his spiel, "Something's off about her, I know it."

"She hasn't even spoken yet."

"I just have a feeling."

I piled three towels into my arms and shouldered the towel cabinet shut. "You said the same thing about me, and Daphne, and I bet you said the same thing about Mia when you were born, okay, take a chill pill."

"Just listen to them talking outside."

"Heath--"

"Listen, Magnolia," he snapped.

I huffed.

"What's your name?" Daphne asked as if it was an accusation.

"Mae," the woman replied. Her voice was nasal. It was like nails on a chalkboard to me, I had to fight myself to continue listening. She had a faint English accent, like she didn't grow up there but her parents did and they vacationed there every summer with her grandparents who smoked pipe tobacco like the grandpa in *The Parent Trap*.

"That was almost Magnolia's middle name," Mama said. I was supposed to be named after Maggie Mae, the Beatles song because she used to listen to it on repeat with her little sister who died before I was born. Dad said no because he hated the Beatles with a fiery burning passion. Mom snuck in Michelle (my actual middle name) because that was also one of her sisters' names, but she was long since estranged.

Heath called me Maggie Mae anyway. The sentiment Mama loved it for was lost on him, Heath was never a very sentimental guy.

We listened carefully still.

"The girl who went to get towels?"

Mama didn't respond, but she must have nodded.

"Is she your daughter?" Mae asked.

Mama must have nodded again.

"She looks just like you."

"Thank you! People usually think she looks like her dad," Mama said.

"It's something in the eyes. Maybe the eyebrows." The girl's clothes squelched and dripped as she stood in the living room waiting for the towels.

"I'm going to bring the towels over," I told Heath.

He shook his head. "No, wait it out."

"You're too old to act like this."

"Fine, go, get murdered. I'm telling you, Maggie Mae, she is not good news."

"No, she's not good news. She's the unluckiest person I've ever met, she's stranded with a family of wackos in a flash flood in the middle of nowhere."

Heath started to retort, opening his mouth with indignance written across his face.

I left to give Mae the towels.



She looked up at me with a strange expression in her eyes. Sadness? Fear? Confusion? Guilt? She stared at me the way my cat did after clawing my furniture or throwing litter everywhere for the fun of it.

"Thank you," she said breathlessly when I gave her the stack.

"I'm Magnolia," I said. My arms were swinging awkwardly by my sides, I stared at her expectantly.

She dried herself vigorously, moving the towel so fast I didn't know how it was picking up anything.

Mama looked at me with wide eyes. She looked at Mae and back. She wanted me to get her fresh clothes.

I passed Heath on the way up to Mama's bedroom. He was still tucked behind the bathroom door, listening closely like a spy. He would have to move when Mae changed, I thought.

He didn't need to move. I put the clothes on the counter so she could finish drying off, she thanked me profusely and stripped down right there.

Mama was slack-jawed. She glanced at me repeatedly, expecting me to do something, but I was too shocked to pick up the hint. Mia covered Daphne's eyes with her hands.

Daphne was giggling up a storm, but Mae paid her no mind.

"I told you!" Heath whispered so loudly Egypt could hear him.

All I could do was shake my head.

Mae put on Mama's t-shirt and plaid Christmas pants (we don't even celebrate Christmas). She was dark-haired and pale-skinned with the sharpest features I had ever seen. She had arched eyebrows, a pointy chin, and cheekbones that could slice cucumber. She looked up at us again, expectantly.

"Are you hungry?" Mia asked.

She nodded shakily. Her body was shivering so intensely you might think she was being electrocuted. She had thick rings around her fingers and a huge necklace, all of it silver-colored but she had green and blue stains on her skin beneath them.

Mama perked up. She was a good cook, a great one in fact, but she was too humble to say so. She could make pasta with marinara, alfredo, or pesto, garlic and lime chicken that could win any cooking show, and steaks that no one could recreate. She could make anything and it would taste like it came from a Michelin star restaurant. Baking was another story entirely. "Well, I can make pasta-"

"No, no, no, no," she said, "No pasta. I can't have pasta."

"What can I make you?"

"What do you have?"

Mama opened the fridge. "Chicken, steaks... I could make grilled cheese and tomato soup..."

"Steak would be great," she said.

The window behind her was threatening to shatter from the pounding rain. It was forest as far as the eye could see outside, and the town was so small and nearly a mile away. The longer I thought about it the less it made sense. How could Mae have ended up

stranded out there? There was no hiking trail, she had no car, she was alone. It was difficult to see anything, but I could almost make out a person standing in the thicket of trees.

Mama was asking her how she wanted her steak cooked and Mae was showing her at the stove. A deep crease was set in her forehead.

My mother was often confused, she had bad hearing, and it was like she had a delay. Like when your TV is showing the mouths moving, but all the words are mismatched. Math wasn't her strong suit either, and she once asked why we needed more trees if they were only taking more of the oxygen. She was a genius though, in her ways. She spoke four languages. She had a photographic memory for faces and never forgot a name. She always knew the plot twists in movies. She could find every country on a map and she knew most capitals. She always won board games, Battleship, Clue, card games, you name it, she was an expert strategist.

Until I was ten years old (until I found out about his affair), I assumed that's why she and Dad divorced. He was a genius in the way we usually assume, quick math, quick reader, quick learner, and he was always looking for ways to make her feel smaller. He and Poppy, who was three years younger than me and a daddy's girl through and through, shared glances when she took too long to do simple math, giggled behind their hands when she couldn't spell 'receive' or 'conscientious.' He could never win Bridge though, and that's what really matters.

I looked up and saw Mae with a steak that was nearly raw. Blue rare was generous for the barely-cooked, basically-living steak Mae was scarfing down like a monster.

Mama was staring at her with her mouth hanging open. She glanced at me with wide eyes, as if to ask, Are you seeing this?!

Blood from the steak was dripping down her forearms and staining Mama's shirt.

"Mae?" she said tentatively.

Daphne looked up from her cheese platter. She exclaimed, "What the hell are you doing?!"

"Daphne," Mia scolded, "Watch your-"

Mae looked back up, the blood streaked down her face, mixing with her makeup. Her hair was plastered against her forehead and chin. Her skin became pale and waxy. The most noticeable of all, her eyes were glowing red.

Mama squinted at her. "Mae-"

She snarled beastially, rising to her feet and further. Her toes hovered just above the ground.

Heath bolted towards the door and zipped in the opposite direction when he remembered the rain. He snatched Daphne off the ground and ducked into the bathroom with her dangling precariously in his arms.

I was frozen in place. My head was telling my feet to move, but they wouldn't. They couldn't.

She opened her mouth wide to bare razor-sharp teeth and a long and pointed tongue. Still hissing, tongue lashing, teeth glimmering in the light, she launched at me.

I tumbled to the ground, dodging her claws by a hair before she flung at me again. Bellows and screeches rang in my ears as I stumbled towards the bathroom. Mia and Mama watched helplessly from behind the couch. Mama was shaking and clawing at the couch, reaching for me, while Mia held her down by her hips to keep her out of the beast's path.

"Heath, open the door! Open the door!" I cried hoarsely.

"Open the door!" Daphne was shouting too. "Lemme at her!"

The beast was coming closer, taking each step carefully with the blood from the steak still dripping on the floor.

"Heath! Heath!"

"Lemme at her, idiot! Lemme at her!"

"No, Daphne. She'll get in, Daphne," he said.

I scrambled away from Mae. The stairs appeared behind me like magic and before I knew it I was toppling down them. My head battered against each step.

The basement was dark. I couldn't see a foot in front of me. I scrambled around, feeling with my hands.

The creature was gone. I stood, tentatively, at the bottom of the stairs. I took off towards the laundry room and slammed the door behind me.

"Get off!" She howled, "Get off! Let gooo of meee!"

My chest heaved. My breath was coming out in short puffs.

Sharp nails, not like a bird's talons or a cat's claws, nails like overgrown human nails pierced the door. They were yellowed with dirt caked under them. I pressed my back against the shower tile. The leftover water soaked my shirt but I didn't care.

The door was in shreds. A heap of wood shavings sat in the doorway with the knob on top of it like a cherry on a sundae.

Mae's shoes had been ripped open with overgrown, yellowed, dirt-caked toenails. Her neck and face were covered in blackened burns. She came closer, hovering above the ground. My hearing was clouded, all I could hear was the thunder and lightning and the crashing rain outside.

The creature was so close I could smell her breath. It was suffocating, worse than garlic breath, worse than cigarettes. She was frothing at the mouth, her two fangs dripped in bloody drool.

She reached one hand towards me, her nails brushed over my skin.

She shrieked at me. Her mouth opened, spit flew at my face, and I could smell her rancid breath. Her nails dug into me as she lunged at me-

No, she wasn't lunging at me. She was falling. The creature crumpled to the ground, tucking her head into her body, shrieking and wailing until she finally fell still and silent. A thin wooden stake jutted out of her back.

"I told you I could get her," Daphne said, tucking her crossbow under her arm.

"Daphne!" I cried. "Oh my god."

Mama stood up and ran to me. She had blood all over her. It covered her rings and her necklace.

She hugged me, then leaned down to feel the beast's pulse. "It's dead. We should pack up."

\* \* \* \* \*

"I told you it was a bad idea," Hildegund said. "I knew she wouldn't be able to control herself."

"You should have turned the friend," Feiyan added. She sheltered herself with her coat. Leonor shook her head. "Shut up, you both."

"Somebody's mad," Hildegund teased.

"We'll move toward the coast."

She and Feiyan exchanged a knowing look. Mae was the third this month who was a failure. Stephanie, Jessica, and now Mae, all dead.

Student Name: Issabella Kamara  
 Grade: 10  
 School: Awty International School  
 Title: A Letter to My Anger  
 Category: Poetry  
 Key: Gold Key  
 Educator:

Dear Anger,  
 you are not my friend. I have no use for you.  
 Worst wishes,  
 X.

Dear Anger,  
 I am filing an order. Leave me  
 alone.  
 Please go.  
 X.

Dear Anger,  
 you make me shake.  
 Way too much.  
 Everyon can tell.  
 Leave me  
 alone.  
 X.

Dear Anger,  
 you do not disguise yourself well.  
 I can call you by your real name,  
 but you would not listen. Not as though you have as of late.  
 So long, Fear.  
 X.

Dear Fear,  
 it is fine to be afraid,  
 just please,  
 be  
 so  
 honest.

I will stay with you because  
Fear,  
nobody wants to be alone.  
Goodbye,  
or maybe a new hello.  
X.

Student Name: Martina Miquelarena

Grade: 8

School: Awty International School

Title: Body Beautiful

Category: Poetry

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Jacob Moore

### Body Beautiful

In a world quick to judge,  
We often forget how to love.  
Our bodies, unique and true,  
Deserve acceptance, through and through.

From head to toe, we are divine,  
A masterpiece, one of a kind.  
Our curves and edges, a work of art,  
A reflection of our inner heart.

So let us embrace our every flaw,  
And love yourself, with admiration and awe.  
For beauty lies in every shape and size,  
A rainbow of colors, all beautiful in God's eyes

Let us celebrate our bodies with pride,  
And never let anyone's words divide.  
For we are strong, we are enough  
A shining star, made of tough stuff.

Student Name: Saanvi Doddaballapur

Grade: 10

School: Awty International School

Title: Climbing

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Key: Gold Key

Educator: laurence paul

There is ash in the air. There is pain when I open my mouth and inhale the residue of a sacrificial pyre. My lungs burn. The weather has no mercy on me either. The heat scorches my body, my face flushed, my hair is hot to the touch, and my back is drenched with sweat. I stand next to the coconut cart, looking up the mountain. My father told me it was a hill but to my weary eyes, that is a mountain. On top of the mountain is Pazhani Murugan. Pazhani is pronounced "pa- la-ni". The "l" should roll your tongue back but shouldn't exactly touch the roof of your mouth. A decade of learning traditional music in Tamil taught me that. Pazhani Murugan is a sacred idol of Lord Murugan, the Hindu god of war, lying in a temple over a thousand years old. It is my family's god. my god. My God.

I am sick. Physically and mentally sick. I do not want to be here. I am sick of the smog, sick of the heat, sick of the endless sea of people, and sick of this country that should be mine. I want to go home, to my bed, to sleep. But home is an ocean away. There is an ache in my stomach, gnawing hunger bereft of sustenance. I spent the entirety of last night throwing up water in the hotel bathroom, bracing myself on the frigid tile of a bathroom floor. I took medication after medication. My mother told me it was food poisoning. I have not eaten in three days.

Appa forces me to drink some coconut water. "Drink. You have to climb. Thatha and Mama will go in the cable car." Thatha means grandfather. They will go in the tram because he cannot climb. I do not tell him that I cannot climb, either. I would rather be allowed to move freely, at my own pace, than to be clumped and shoved in that endless line for the rope car. The heat might kill me before the exertion. I force myself to chew and choke down the fleshy coconut. The tender inside of Indian coconut is a common snack, scooped out with a piece of the coconut shell. Nothing goes to waste, no resources are wasted. I have seen the starving people in makeshift shacks, too many for one nation to feed. I cannot let this coconut go to waste, even if my stomach protests and riots in rebellion.

My father, sister, and I walk to the entrance of the temple and leave our shoes. We follow the cow. It was an emaciated creature that looked half-starved. Nothing like the healthy cattle I see on Texas road trips. Yet this scrawny cow means so much more to the people than one of those bucks raised for death. Everywhere we passed, devotees reached out so



as to merely graze the cow's skin with their fingers, then pressed those fingers to their eyes. Cows are sacred. They are our providers, our nurturers, our salvation, a blessing. So I pressed my hand to the cow's flank, looked into its eyes, then closed mine, touched them, and prayed. I prayed that I would make it to the top.

"Seven hundred steps," Appa said, "only seven hundred steps." Actually, it was six hundred and ninety three. But I didn't know that at the time. Seven hundred steps. I had climbed more before, but never in this condition. We begin our ascent. They are stone steps, about one foot in length. There was a certain amount of steps, then flat uphill slopes, then more steps, all on one winding path up. I stop every round we make up the hill, sit on the floor where thousands of feet step every day, and breathe. The air is cleaner up here, the shade of trees protecting me from the sun's wrath. Every so often my sister cast me a concerned look. But I climb on. There are people chanting non-stop on the way up. They kneel to touch every step, place a piece of camphor on it, then light it with a match. A glowing path trails their ascents. Some have walked for days, for miles, to come here, blessed for a new year. I cannot comprehend that fidelity. I can see the small stretch of forest and lake from the height now. My stomach churns, then I am dry-heaving on the side of the hill. There is nothing there for my stomach to purge. Sip some water, then move on. There are loose pebbles, scratching, making indentations into my dusty bare feet. There is nothing soft about them. I think about the cow, the blessing I asked for. Funny how the word "blessing" sounds like "blessé," French for hurt. This region has a history of French influence. It hurts but I cannot stop now. "Prove your devotion; it's only seven hundred steps," I tell myself. But what devotion do I have? I may have been raised with this culture, this dharma, but I will always be a spoiled American brat who goes to a fancy private school, has been to more churches than temples, and has never known true want. I have not known suffering like they have. I do not know devotion like they do. So I suck up my silly complaints, and climb higher.

At some point, I forget the pain. The ache of my muscles, the pounding of my head, the underlying sense of heatstroke, the storm of nothing in my stomach; it all fades away. We reached the top. Vel Murugan. We cram into the line for fast-pass tickets (that we didn't even end up using). So much for avoiding lines. The money for the tickets is a hundred rupees each. It's throwaway money for me, an unnoticeable, insignificant amount. A little more than a dollar. But it is not for all of them. Some farmers come for blessings for their crops. Saving a few hours of time in a crowded line is not worth that money to them. Suddenly I am disgusted with myself, with my Americanness. Money, money, money. Is there nothing else of value to my solely capitalist finance-centered brain? The temple has monetized religion, devotion like I have never witnessed before. And people will pay. Pay darshana, pay the fee, bribe a priest for a little more time in front of the god, pay their effort, pay their lives. They have monetized one of the most precious jewels of our culture. My stomach heaved. I quickly found the nearest trash can and finally, for the first time

today, properly threw up. There I was, in one of the most sacred temples in India, purging water and the little bit of coconut I had eaten.

For the three hours we waited in that line, I prayed and tried not to throw up again. Once we entered the actual temple I sang. I sang for Subramanya, Karthikeya, Murugan, who has guided my hands and my mind to fight. And for the two minutes I saw the idol before I was shoved along, the picture I had prayed to every morning since childhood, I have never known such bhakthi. I felt it. I felt the force that inspires individuals to walk for days, in rain and shine; the force that unites a billion people and has for a millenia. I found bhava, and then I climbed down.

Student Name: Clea Rose Deschanel-Pathman

Grade: 9

School: Awty International School

Title: Codename: Mercy

Category: Short Story

Key: Gold Key

Educator: laurence paul

The Profonda sliced through the choppy waters of the Atlantic, dark waves lapping against the sides of the ship. The moon hung, full and round, in the center of the sky, a quiet white eye watching the sailors below. They weren't really sailors- that much was clear, from the heavy holsters at their hips and their gruff voices, the scars concealed under their black tactical gear. They moved efficiently under the shadows of drifting clouds, moving crates and relaying orders, glancing to the glass windows of the helm every so often. The captain's silhouette moved in between the blinking dashes and arrays of the controls, passing in front of the steering wheel, circling the kneeling figure in the middle of the room.

"Are you trying to get yourself a one way ticket overboard, lad?" snapped a foreman when one of the mercenaries paused for too long, eyes raised to the helm. He slapped him upside the head and he got back to work in a hurry.

"Hey, Mercy, not trynna rush you or anything but-" Chast's voice crackled over the com in Mercy's ear, almost sending her off balance as she gripped the boat railing, her feet swinging above the rushing sea below.

"Chast, dear," she hissed in between her teeth. "Kinda busy."

"Right, right." A pause. "It's just, the kid-"

"Has no spy skills whatsoever unless disobeying orders counts, and it's a miracle he even got accepted into the CIA?" answered Mercy. "I know. Tell him to stay put."

"No, it's not that-" Mercy switched off her com before Chast could continue. If this was going to go right, she couldn't afford any distractions. For God's sake, her reputation was on the line.

She pulled down her goggles and switched on the night vision mode, checked that the deck was clear, and pulled herself up, twisting over the steel railing and landing quietly on the other side. Mercy slipped from shadow to shadow, avoiding patrolling mercenaries with the help of the heat signatures the night vision revealed. The central loading area of the top deck was a maze of crates and shipping containers, crawling with mercenaries, but it was the only way Mercy could get to the helm, unless she wanted to play monkey bars with the railing and inch her way 120 feet above the Atlantic.

She had almost reached the command building when three mercenaries suddenly turned the corner in front of her. Mercy ducked into an alcove between two crates to avoid being spotted. She would have moved on, but the stamp on one of the crates made her stop.

She traced the red lettering with one of her gloved fingers. Angkor Wat, Artifact #43

- HANDLE WITH CARE. Mercy was surrounded by stolen heritage and hired guns. There was clearly only one solution. She pulled out the trigger she had stored away in a pocket. They didn't call her Mercy for nothing.

She pressed the detonation button, and, in the distance, mercenaries screamed as a bloom of fire lit up the deck, sending flames lashing out into the ocean. Orange, red hot glow lighting up the scenery behind her, Mercy took advantage of the diversion and snuck inside the command center. She crept through the silent and empty halls of the helm. The only noise was the whirring of the engines, and ongoing shouting from the fire she had started outside. Mercy winced. She hoped none of the artifacts had been damaged. She was probably going to get shouted at for that, but, hey, it's not like she was known for her great planning. Demolitions, though? That was her talent.

Mercy pressed herself to the wall and looked over the bend in the corridor into the next hallway. The door to the helm was completely unguarded. Her goggles were reading only one heat signature inside. Mercy pushed open the door, keeping low to the ground to avoid being spotted from the wide glass windows of the room.

They looked out onto the cargo deck, where the mercenaries had gotten the fire under control. The lights of the helm were off, and the room was dark but for the blinking array of the command dashes. The red and green flickers illuminated the bound and blindfolded figure in the middle of the room, cross legged and silent, but Mercy could tell from her body language that she was aware of everything going around her.

She knelt beside her and the figure's head snapped to the side, struggling out of her bonds. Mercy unsheathed the jagged knife at her waist and the captive went still. She angled the knife upwards, the glint of the steel catching on a ray of moonlight, and slashed through the zip ties tying the figure's hands together. The figure blew out a breath, and Mercy rolled her eyes.

"What did you think I was going to do?" she said accusingly.

Mercy reached forward and pulled the sack covering the figure's face, revealing an olive-skinned head topped with short brown curls, a Star of David necklace tucked beneath them, thick eyebrows, long eyelashes, a straight, firm mouth, paired with a sharply slanted nose and piercing cocoa dark eyes.

Moses tried to speak, but with the cloth around her mouth, it came out like a series of aggressive hums.

"Darling, you know I love it when you sing," Mercy said sweetly, "But use your words."

She slipped behind her, and, facing her back, untied the gag. It fell to the ground in a heap of cloth, and Moses whipped around, her ankles still bound, eyes practically burning with fury.

"What are you doing here?" she seethed.

"Saving your butt," Mercy said.

"I didn't ask for you to save my butt," Moses countered.

"Really?" Mercy gasped. "In that case, I'll tie you back up, head home to Washington and tell Mossad I tried to save their best agent but, she said, 'no, thank you, see you next time!'"

"How did you even know I was here?" Moses asked.

"Sixth sense," Mercy answered gruffly. "That, and the distress call you sent out."

Moses stilled, the smooth panes of her face going slack. "Mercy. I didn't send out a distress call."

The door slammed open, and a group of mercenaries burst in, guns raised. They surrounded the two of them in a wide circle. Mercy let her hand stray to her gun holster, the other instinctively thrown out in front of Moses. With a groan, Moses pushed her hand away.

"Don't even think about it," a mercenary said, eyes narrowed. "Reach for your gun and you're dead." The green light of a sniper's path glinted at the edge of Mercy's vision, pointed straight at the center of Moses's forehead. True to her codename's namesake, Moses didn't even balk.

The steady tapping of a cane hitting the ground filled the air. Moses and Mercy looked to the helm door, where a tall man limped through, a scar tracing the side of his face, and a smile splitting his lips.

"Well, well," he said in a sharp British accent. "The two greatest spies in the world, under my roof, on my ship, trying to steal my cargo. What a pleasure to finally meet you both. I'm sure you're wondering-" Mercy cleared her throat loudly. The British man halted.

"Yes?" he said quizzically.

"It's just, um." Mercy tsked. "If we're the two greatest, then who between us do you think is better?" Moses flaunted her side profile as if that would convince him.

The Brit looked ill. "Oh, good God, I mean-" The two agents crossed their arms. "Well, both of you have had very illustrious careers," stammered the Brit. "You are, of course, an expert in combat and demolitions. But, Moses has infiltrated thousands of syndicates and retrieved wealths of intelligence."

"I have the higher kill count, though," Mercy pointed out.

"I've been on more missions," Moses reminded her.

"Well, I suppose there's really only one way to solve this, huh?" Mercy said, turning to face her completely.

Moses nodded, sizing her up. "Of course. It's all about who's the better shot."

"Really?" The Brit said. "Not like, espionage or intelligence-"

"No, no," Mercy scoffed. "See, we'll show you." She reached for her gun and shot the mercenary nearest to her. Moses dropped to the ground as the room exploded into a shoot out. Mercy ducked behind one of the control arrays and tried to shoot at the Brit, clearly the boss of the operation, but two mercenaries escorted him out of the room before she could land a good shot. Moses shimmied her way next to her, caterpillar style, her ankles still bound.

"Great plan," Moses said, and Mercy could not tell whether that was sarcasm or not. "It reminded me of that thing we did in Alaska."

Mercy waggled her eyebrows. "Oh, really?"

Moses grabbed the gun of a fallen mercenary and joined Mercy as they shot at the men on the other side of the room. "Not that, you idiot. The illegal animal poacher?"

"Oh, right," Mercy said. She lined up a shot and took out two mercenaries with one bullet. "Didn't we escape that compound chased by bears?"

Moses smiled. "Good memories." She grabbed a second gun and began shooting with two arms. It wouldn't matter how many guns they used, they were outnumbered at least two to ten, with a limited amount of explosives and bullets.

"We can't keep this up," Mercy told her.

Moses glanced at her, and for a moment it looked like she really was worried, when suddenly Mercy heard the telltale sound of a grenade rolling into a room. She grabbed Moses and slammed them against the floor.

When the smoke cleared, and the ringing in her ears subsided, Mercy slowly raised her head, and saw a gangly, acne ridden face peering down at her.

"Oh, thank God!" he exclaimed, plopping down on the ground in a heap of relief and teenage hormones. "Ms. Mercy, I was scared out of my mind! I had to shoot a guy to get here," he whispered. "And I had to throw a grenade, just like you taught me, and I almost blew myself up too."

Mercy cradled the side of her head, blinked away the blurriness, then slapped him. "What did I tell you?" she snapped.

He cringed. "Stay in the boat?"

"Yes!" she roared. "And what did you do?"

"Leave the boat," he said sadly. "But you were in danger! Plus, Chastity said you turned off your com. Also, why is that his codename?"

Moses peeked over Mercy's shoulder at the boy. "Mercy, dear, you haven't even introduced me."

He blinked at the Mossad agent. "Oh, gosh, you must be Moses! Ms. Mercy has told me all about you. I'm J-"

"Junior." Mercy stared daggers at him. "He doesn't have a codename yet, but I did teach him the number one protocol of espionage is to never reveal your real name."

Junior shrunk. "I forgot. Sorry. No one can know my name? Really?"

"I wouldn't say no one," Moses cut in smoothly, with a glance at Mercy. Mercy side-eyed her.

Junior glanced back and forth between them. "Oh, gosh," he repeated.

Moses stood up and began flicking off switches on the arrays. To Mercy, it looked like a jumble of buttons and lights. "What are you doing?" she asked.

"Turning off the engine and all the lights," Moses replied. "Taking a page out of your book. Sew chaos, divert, and get out."

"That's Protocol 43!" exclaimed Junior.

Moses raised an eyebrow, and her eyes widened in realization. "Mercy- are you his mentor?"

Mercy sighed. "They couldn't find anyone else."

"She's stuck with me," Junior said, grinning.

Moses threw an arm around him, and the other around Mercy. "Ooh, we're going to be fast friends, Junior."

Mercy disentangled herself from them and set to work snatching grenades from the mercenaries and refilling on bullets. "We need to get off this ship," she reminded them. "Not without one thing first," Moses said. She was staring out the windows, gazing at all the crates full of stolen heritage. Then she looked back to the two CIA agents. "One more Mossad-CIA joint mission?"

Junior's smile only grew bigger. "This is the best night ever!"

A half hour later, they reached the helipad on the top floor of the command center. Junior and Moses had stolen a flash drive full of all the evidence Mossad needed to take down these heritage smugglers while Mercy sashayed around the ship, planting explosives in every nook and cranny she could find, from the delicious, fiery C-4 to the beautiful, classic TNT. The wind whipped their faces and blew against their clothes. Mercy was blinking away tears when Moses raised an arm to point to the horizon, where the silhouette of a helicopter was making its way towards the Profonda.

"That's our ride, ladies and gentlemen," Moses announced. There was a slight glow to her eyes. The evidence they had retrieved today would keep scavengers away from heritage sites around the world, especially those in Israel.

Mercy glanced at Junior. "You did good," she told him softly.

He beamed. "Really?" She nodded. "So, now can you tell me the story behind Chastity's codename?"

Moses answered for her. "His first mission was an infiltration in the field. He was a field agent before he was a mission technician. It was supposed to be a seduction," she added with a wink. "It went horribly. Chastity's codename is the only CIA codename without a trace of irony." A smile flickered on her face. "Mercy here, on the other hand, blew up a building on her first mission."

"I wonder when I'll—" Junior was cut off by a gunshot, and Mercy's knees gave way under her. A stream of blood trickled down her abdomen. Moses screamed.

The Brit stood behind her, the barrel of his gun pressed to her spine, poised for the kill shot to follow the stun wound he had just given her. "We meet again, Agent Mercy," he said sagely.

Mercy held herself still, not showing an ounce of pain in her face, and locked eyes with Moses. The wind grew stronger as the helicopter approached, blades slashing the night air, vicious as the waves slamming against the ship deck. Home and safety were so close and yet so far at the same time. Leave without me, she hoped her eyes were communicating to Moses. Take Junior and go.

"Give me the flashdrive and I'll let you all go," the Brit spat in a shrill voice. "Do you have any idea how much money these artifacts will get me?"

"I know how much grief it will cause the countries where they belong!" Moses cried.

The Brit tightened his grip on the gun, and Moses fell silent, lips pursed with fear. "I will shoot her," the Brit said. Mercy wasn't afraid to die, she realized. She was afraid of what a choice like this would do to Moses, who looked like someone had driven a dagger through her heart. Mercy had never wanted her to have to make a choice like this. A choice between her duty to Mossad and her duty to... to Mercy.



Junior looked to Moses, then to Mercy, then to the Brit and the gun he held. His hands were trembling. Moses realized, with a sinking feeling, she had never gotten to teach him how to resist fear. Junior grabbed the flash drive and held it out to the Brit.

"Take it and leave her," he said. Mercy might have imagined it, but Moses looked almost relieved that someone had made the choice for her.

The Brit snatched the flash drive and shoved Mercy forward. "Thank you for your generosity," he said to Junior, false sweetness laced in his words like venomous honey. With the bleeding injury in her stomach, Mercy lost her balance and stumbled, but Moses caught her with a warm and tight grip. The helicopter touched down on the pad, and the Mossad agent flying it shouted out to them in Hebrew. Junior dragged her into the helicopter, Moses walking backwards with her gun trained on the Brit, and they all climbed on.

The Brit was smiling maniacally, clutching the flashdrive to his chest. The helicopter lurched back into the air. Moses leaned Mercy against a seat and set to work cleaning her wound. Mercy blew out a painful breath in between her clenched teeth. She watched Junior, sitting in the opposite seat, staring at the Profonda below them.

She wanted to shout at him for making the wrong choice. The mission always went before the agent. But, then, Junior shouted over the din of the whirring blades; "Tackle shop!"

Mercy grinned and cried, "That's my boy!"

Protocol tackle shop; bait and switch. Junior pulled out another flash drive from his pocket, causing a gasp to slip from Moses's lips. It wasn't everyday someone managed to surprise the top Mossad agent.

The Profonda grew smaller and smaller, swallowed up by the night sky and the Atlantic Ocean. Mercy remembered her precious explosives planted aboard. She fumbled for the detonation trigger in her vest pocket, and Moses helped her extract it.

"Will you do the honors?" she asked her sweetly.

Moses laughed. "I thought you'd never ask." The command center swelled into a burst of flames, chaos and fire raging over the black and blue of the dark sky and shadowed ocean. The crates were safe from the explosion, but that was more than she could say of the mercenaries.

Moses and Mercy gazed into the inferno together, their bloodied hands having somehow found their way to each other. Mercy suddenly remembered Junior, sitting in front of them, and turned back to the young agent.

"Generosity!" Mercy yelled. "That's your codename."

"Codename: Generosity," Moses repeated, playing with the vowels. "I like it."

She heard Generosity, completely starstruck, whisper, "Can you two adopt me?"



Student Name: Dariia Chugueva  
Grade: 10  
School: Awty International School  
Title: Fistfood  
Category: Poetry  
Key: Gold Key  
Educator: Alison Kilfoyle

In fact, the porcupines are close. Even the porcupines with human faces. From the fist of night you pry your just cause. Into its open palm. Spit. Antennae across the belly and the back—antennae on antennae, nestled. Tickle my ear with the quiver of listening. Again! We are ripe for sound!

The porcupines know each other by needle vibrations and superfluous scent. But often, the needles shred the scent to burning paper. This is why, after the acupuncture, she was wormfood.

When the night bares its neck you will think of impalement by listening. When the night bares its neck you'll be wormfood too. Through white knuckles like the stumps of antennae, fresh scent of decapitation—in its fist you'll find your worms. By then it won't be a fist.

Student Name: Issabella Kamara  
 Grade: 10  
 School: Awty International School  
 Title: Formula for Creativity  
 Category: Poetry  
 Key: Gold Key  
 Educator:

What are you looking for in an award winning piece?  
 Surely a bit of grit and elbow grease.  
 What are you looking for in my art?  
 Maybe something rebelliously smart.  
 If that's the case, why must it be consistent across all?  
 Every piece must walk straight, yet also sprawl.  
 I have to find something that sets my art  
 so far apart  
 It's the same reason the next fifty entries won.  
 It's amazing, just like the next five ones.

What would you think,  
 letting your eyes sync,  
 looking at my piece?  
 Would you tell me to cease?  
 Would you tell me I'm doing creativity wrong?  
 That those colors are not that of a dove song?

How it is unlikely I felt that way,  
 it seems my emotions were kept at bay.  
 I changed sharing directions  
 and spun your head with those sections.  
 Your stanza wasn't broken properly,  
 How do you plan to tell me?

I am only honorable when I am mentioned  
 do you seriously expect casting that upon me to strengthen?  
 How do you plan to tell me  
 that while a poet I may be,  
 What I have been doing for years  
 composed of blood, sweat, and tears  
 Is not worth anything.

Do you hold yourself high,  
really consider yourself that guy!  
Really think you've completed your mission,  
knowing this one teen, instead of any other submission  
Will receive a pin and a ticket to summer camp because of the scheme  
Is the winner you deem?  
Hah! You thought,  
No, it was "The plot"  
Whatever the else helps you sleep for a spell  
I hope you think of yourself well.

How do you think of yourself telling  
staring them down and quelling  
the little spirit, despite their majors,  
hundreds of thousands of teenagers  
They are doing creativity wrong?

Perhaps, you don't,  
and instead just move along.

Student Name: Dariia Chugueva  
 Grade: 10  
 School: Awty International School  
 Title: Fruitful  
 Category: Short Story  
 Key: Gold Key  
 Educator: Alison Kilfoyle

I watch eight hours of wildlife documentaries. I, who will never die. (In the dream I crane my neck, and hold myself well but no better than anyone. There's warmth in us. We offer our faces, in the hope that we may spare this warmth. Our guileless and harsh faces will spare this warmth.)

...

I doze off with puff pastry crackling under my sheets, and wake up to dim winter. The fruit bat wants to fuck. The fruit bat wants. Everything.

I yawn. What can I do that the fruit bat can't? For a moment this excites me. The plight of woman, who can offer a bat nothing. Puff pastry cracks with my spine, with the whip of white light from my low-bent computer. Fellatio! Fatal! Oh!

...

I'm on my bike when my sister calls, and on the ground when I answer. My knee to my chest when she opens her mouth, right in the middle of the sidewalk.

"Grete says hi. She wants to know how classes are going."

A part of me wants to tell her about my first injury in years, but injury has never interested either of us. My sister used to take ice baths, and massage her legs, and sleep long and well, to keep her body together. She used to eat like a man, and stretch like a prey animal. She used to stay aloft by the grace of her youth and her own watchful cultivation. Hear the tap run down the stark, flickering landscape of your own routine. A girl is alive in there.

"I'm studying fruit bats."

"I didn't know they still made you take bio."

"They don't. I switched majors."

To my sister, who has only ever loved one thing.

"To animal science?"

"Sexology."

This is a lie.

I brush pebbles from my shin.

"When?"

"This morning. I had a revelation."

"She had one too."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"That's good."

She still pauses to let me probe further, because no one ever adjusts to how few questions there are between me and anyone—even when they were the one to teach me to read, to hear me say nothing.

This is because few people are truly curious, and the trick is to know when there's something to gain. I never know. Sometimes, I approach the edge of wanting. Today, blood pollinates my hands where they poked at the skin.

I buy two danishes, so that there's no need to go out tomorrow. I watch eight more hours. This is the first time sleep finds me tired.

...

I stayed downstairs for a long time, because Grete was my sister's friend, and because the fray would be good for me. My sister had just returned from ballet school, so she stood like a creature with many habits, who knew many names but said few of them. She spent the whole night against a column, practicing holding her spoon like an invalid.

Grete didn't dance. We were on the couch together a while before we spoke. I labored to keep my eyes open, which was usually no trouble. I was lazy, and so always awake.

Vigilant. Eating. My sister had come and spiked the air with the beauty of work, with warmth and life and relief. I would work for something too. But I didn't know work, only humiliation.

She regarded me. There are words for what she must have thought of me, mine as much as anyone else's. Grete was good at looking long and well, and not exhausting herself with the first glance. I was better, and a better judge of character. Not because I was accurate, but because my books had bred me for scarcity. For sparse and early people. Mortality rates, and the inevitable spike in brain trauma after the Neolithic revolution. Childbirth. The shadows of small luxuries tickling death. Passing in the reeds and looking back.

...

Meerkats mate when it rains. When I return from the bakery, I try to slip my sneakers off and they tear from their soles. They are cheap and mean nothing. I will die. I will die. I will die a good death. Good is now—good is the harsh and guileless face that neither remembers nor foresees.

I call my sister.

"Won't she get married? Won't you tell her to get married—or laid—, or something?"

Before she answers I'm asleep—easier than ever before.

I'd told Grete as much the night we met. Upstairs, in the dark, as we laid on our backs. She was too beautiful to dance. There were better things. This made it impossible to keep still, even as her breath and pulse slowed to a mechanistic hum.

It wasn't a moral conviction—I could form no moral convictions. Fumbling in the hot dark, I knew only that her body at rest was something swell and ecstatic and sacred, and also a sad fragment of what could be. The moonlight bared the valleys of her face, which were few and far between. Between the valleys there were vast stretches of white. I had no love for men, or children. In her quiet, my own esthetic backbone bent down to die. She rose from the bed, nude. And it would not die.

...

Bats may not be blind, but they can smell god by the incense and the excrement. They can smell when you marry young and have as many children as possible—because you smell like nothing, because the scent, too, recycles into blood or bone or music. Some bats will eat blood.

They'll gorge themselves on pounds of fruit, then fly, naked, in the dark.

I wake up with my sister on the line, her exhales heating my phone to near-death. The warmth travels through my fingers. It's brighter and faster than touch. Sure, paintings, but I've only ever met one expendable woman, and she was a dream. It's been great.

I want to build with my hands, but first, I have to confess something. Bats don't feel labor pain. Plenty of animals don't. In fact very little of the world is lovable. There are a few valleys, and, between them, vast stretches of light in which you will die. You'll run out of water, or bone or blood or music.

It's five am, and my sister still sleeps. Morning breaks the egg of the world. She used to rise at four, while its shell was still smooth, a shadow in the yolk-light of the bathroom. I felt capable of anything. She urged me back to sleep. She shimmied into her leotard. I stayed awake for this, for the beauty.

I was the luckiest girl alive—to have beauty in reach, when other people had to kill themselves and fish it from their own faces, or learn to love their parents, or become aesthetes, or mothers, or hungry. My sister was silent, and methodical. Our harsh and guileless faces stalked each other through the dark.

Student Name: Mariana Pulido  
Grade: 9  
School: Awty International School  
Title: Home  
Category: Poetry  
Key: Gold Key  
Educator: Ana Ebie-Mouton

Home  
Four letters  
Two vowels  
One syllable

Said in 7,139 different languages  
With a million different definitions  
All for mine be lost in the haze  
In which I find myself most days

Maybe it was lost beneath the rose-colored scar  
Placed asymmetrically on my left arm  
A rushed young nurse  
Surrounded by the cries I rehearsed  
Oblivious of the everlasting reminder she dispersed

Maybe it was lost the day my parent's phone rang  
Shouting and chaos exploding  
An entire class  
No one older than 5  
Kidnapped, disappeared  
Could have been anyone yet  
It happened to the preschool 2 miles from my very own  
We moved not even a year later  
Searching for something greater  
Away from everything and everyone we'd ever known

Maybe it was lost the day I cried  
My tears stained my mother's shirt  
No older than 9  
Coming to the realization I would never have my childhood back  
At least back when it was my cousins who picked me up from the ground  
And the endless weekends spent riding the sand dunes

That blissful laughter was deserted on the orange-colored stairs  
Replaced by generic questions and longing stares

Maybe it was lost the day we got the news  
After settling down in a comfy white home  
Huge windows, big yard  
Accepting, adapting, moving on  
And then suddenly, we get to go back  
After everything was broken  
And had to be remade  
The scars began to reopen  
After everything we paid



Student Name: Sofia Ballesteros  
 Grade: 9  
 School: Awty International School  
 Title: Home  
 Category: Poetry  
 Key: Gold Key  
 Educator:

A home away from home it may seem  
 My feet are planted in soil where my heart is unseen  
 Donde mi cultura se presenta – quiero vivir  
 How could it be?  
 Lifetimes away I am,  
 From where I stand everyday  
 My home;  
 700 miles away

Hortensias me hacen sentir cómoda  
 When I return to this place,  
 A breath later I am distant into another world  
 A world which provides the best  
 But not somewhere I long to be

Home is the feeling of warmth  
 Where family meets with the deepest hugs  
 Hugs that remind me this won't be forever.  
 Along  
 mountains,  
 borders,  
 scenic drives,  
 Is where I belong.

No matter where else I'm shown,  
 Nothing ever compares to the feeling of  
 home.

Student Name: Victoria Van Den Bergh

Grade: 8

School: Awty International School

Title: I Hope Death is Peaceful

Category: Poetry

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Ana Ebie-Mouton

I hope death is peaceful.

I hope death is carried to your bed when you fall asleep on the couch as a child.

I hope once it arrives, it will be warm and calm,

like a cup of hot chocolate brewed on the first day of winter,

or like the embrace my mother gave me before leaving me at school with kids I would soon know the rest of my life.

I pray when my grandfather passed on, it was painless.

When I cried, "Hasta luego!"

I did not know it would be my last time speaking to him.

I will never hear his voice, his laugh,

I will never hold his hand or hold him in a hug.

I believe death makes us love a little more,

after realizing what we lost in life.

All because death takes, never gives,

Because the world never stops and waits,

for me to recollect myself.

I try to understand how you were here one day,  
gone the next.

How you arose that morning, same as always,

Ate breakfast, got dressed.

None of us knew it would be your last.

Student Name: Neda Ravandi

Grade: 11

School: Awty International School

Title: In Which the Cool Girl Tries to Keep a One-Night Stand

Category: Poetry

Key: Gold Key

Educator:

### In Which the Cool Girl Tries to Keep a One-Night Stand

Take me by the open throat and  
 Run me ragged  
 Heavy-bellied press of my body  
 Into your body and we are one body  
 We are shinbone fibula metatarsal  
 I have teeth do you want to see them  
 Lightning-rod believer  
 Reflect me back into your stratosphere  
 Your fingers follow:  
 My body my your body my us body  
 Last night I stole your eyes  
 You were asleep I didn't want to wake you  
 Rusty-penny-colored iris  
 Sticky black of the pupil  
 Now they are in the pocket of my winter coat  
 The good one I got on sale last June  
 June when the junebugs bugged you and  
 You drank me moonshine-blind  
 Under stars that dripped down  
 Sweat me out so you can see again  
 Give me a knuckle sandwich I'm starving for it  
 Let me champ at the bit for a while  
 Before you smoke me out of your sheets  
 Can you wash me  
 The next time you put in a load?  
 Can I lie there, sudsing in the wet-hot dark?  
 Your eyes are still in a coat in my closet  
 I'm sorry I forgot to give them back

Student Name: Aanya Ram  
 Grade: 9  
 School: Awty International School  
 Title: My spark; My mother  
 Category: Poetry  
 Key: Gold Key  
 Educator: Ana Ebie-Mouton

20 years old  
 Crossing the seas filled with dreams  
 Memories scatter her past as she leaves her home, searching for a better life  
 The weight of daughter and mother on her shoulders  
 She dares to dream for those who couldn't before  
 Creating her story

Sooner is 30 than 20  
 Dreaming and working  
 Her child's future is always on her mind  
 Creating her story

Reaching 40 leaves 30  
 Achieving her dreams makes us proud  
 Never giving up or breaking down  
 Inspiring those who are afraid to dream  
 Still a work in progress  
 Creating her story

40 years old  
 The story of a woman, brilliant and kind  
 Come a long way from when she began  
 Sharing her dreams and inspiring others  
 Creating her story

Obstacles learn to be scared of her  
 An unstoppable wave  
 Achieved the unachievable  
 A true hero amongst us in the shadows  
 This is my mother, my hero  
 And her story deserves to be told  
 My words do not have enough power to describe what she holds.

Student Name: Manon Esler  
 Grade: 9  
 School: Awty International School  
 Title: Oedipus Poems  
 Category: Poetry  
 Key: Gold Key  
 Educator: Amanda Wood

### The Blind Pursuit of Truth

Amidst the twists and turns of life's grand play  
 Do we navigate our own chariot, or are we simply being pulled  
 The great Oedipus, who once freed Thebes from everlasting misery  
 Is called to play the riddlers' game once again  
 A plague, nesting over the town full of sorrow  
 No prayer could save them, and no cure could ever exterminate it  
 He arose and searched for answers to free his people from the mystery of the curse  
 Consultation of great prophecies, Tiresias immersed  
 Presenting his eyes that cannot see, yet a mind that roams free  
 Yet the answers he bore would not suffice  
 Creon and Tiresias, perceived foes  
 Through Oedipus' mind, clouded with fears  
 Oedipus, the mighty king, who knew not of his past  
 His ultimate duty to the city was to bring this killer to light  
 So that he could end this curse and make things right  
 He searched day and night, unraveling clues and piecing a puzzle  
 To unmask the killer that hid in the night

Sight is a curse, and blindness a blessing  
 Wandering aimlessly, we are unable to see the truth that surrounds us  
 Jocaste grows with unease as she seeks the truth  
 She sees a reflection in her past of his persistent quest  
 But Oedipus never ceases, searching for the truth with unrelenting eyes  
 A messenger came, bearing news that shocked Oedipus to the core  
 In Polybius's passing, Oedipus was relieved with joy  
 No longer fearing the prophecy, it seemed that fate had set him free  
 As he basked in his newfound hope, he began to question if his destiny was beyond his control  
 A shepherd, old and wise, shed light on the darkened mystery  
 His heart was heavy with dread as he had seen the infant abandoned  
 He knew Oedipus was not who he thought he was

For he was the cursed child of Laius and Jocasta  
The truth sunk in like a dagger to the heart  
Leaving Oedipus wounded with a never-healing scar  
He realized that his fate had been forever foretold  
And the truth hit him like a bolt of despair

We are the pawns of a more significant game orchestrated by the gods and the goddesses.  
Blindness and insight, though appearing opposed and two sides of the same coin  
Oedipus collected the pieces to unveil the mystery  
And as the pieces fell into place, Oedipus saw his own face.  
The choking truth that made him eternally blind.  
Fate and destiny have led him to fold as destiny played its final hand  
Oedipus, who was once a strong and mighty king, in exile  
Where he suffers the consequence of his exceedingly dire actions  
He is condemned to a life of suffering and pain to learn harsh lessons of life  
He could never escape the fate that he could not constrain  
Destiny and free will intertwined, forever powerful and influential  
Jocasta, at a dearth of hope and an immense point of guilt, turned her lights out  
Majestic Oedipus, banished with guilt, pleads for a last farewell  
To embrace his kids overcome with melancholy  
For his blindness will never see them again  
As well as, his feet will never step on the accursed soil of Thebes

Student Name: Konrad Tittel  
Grade: 10  
School: Awty International School  
Title: One of Those Days  
Category: Poetry  
Key: Gold Key  
Educator: Amanda Wood

One of Those Days  
It's one of those days.

Those days when  
The sky frowns down at you,  
Gray streaks of clouds  
Cutting across its fragile skin,  
When  
The birds sulk through the air,  
Whose melodies  
That once cradled the world  
Now berate it with solemn hymns,  
Melancholic shrieks,  
Like weight of the world  
Rests upon their wings.  
And so I joined their chorus of screeching;  
I scream,  
I cry,  
I shout,  
And beg for the darkness  
To fly out.

But alas,  
It is one of those days.

Then the rain comes in sheets.  
The dejected moans of the birds  
Are replaced by the  
Ferocious knocking of rain pellets  
At my window;  
The winds' roars of wrath  
Pierce the thin walls of my room,  
Drowning my screams of sorrow.

And all of a sudden,  
 I am once again imprisoned  
 In the dark confines of my brain.  
 I can't shout anymore  
 I can't run anymore  
 Icantthinkanymore  
 ICANTWRITEANYMORE.  
 The knocking at my window  
 Grows.  
 And the rain  
 Floods my thoughts.  
 I'm not good enough  
 I'm not smart enough  
 Imnotperfectenough  
 WHY CANT I JUST BE BETTER?  
 WHY?  
 WHY AM I SITTING HERE  
 LIKE A LOSER  
 WHEN I SHOULD BE CLIMBING TO THE TOP??  
 And yet my tears don't listen  
 And I feel their  
 Sad procession  
 As they navigate the crevasses,  
 Pits of sorrow in my cheek,  
 Then roll down my face,  
 And finally  
 Plummet down,  
 Helpless, powerless, useless,  
 Into a pool below me.  
  
 I flick the light switch off.  
 Darkness.  
  
 It's one of those days.



Student Name: Bryan Zhao  
 Grade: 10  
 School: Awty International School  
 Title: Record  
 Category: Poetry  
 Key: Gold Key  
 Educator: Amanda Wood

Old as time itself  
 History soars fluidly through the air  
 Its wispy wings of wax and feather cusp the sun's circumference  
 Fall into despair, to bound back to golden sky  
 History is never in equilibrium

It changes, molds, seemingly bends to humanity's fist  
 The palm and fingers rough copper  
 Groaning and twisting to bronze  
 Flashing to iron in a fit of chaos  
 Refined in a factory, it's hammered into steel  
 Only to dissolve into binary

History appears to be what we want it to be  
 Redesigned, retold, re-transcribed, all done by us  
 Time and time again  
 From alpha to omega  
 But it's change is made in patterns  
 Splashes of paint and ink that copied the drawing a generation ago

Once in a while, History sheds its old suit and thrifts for a coat  
 A pair of shoes for the year  
 A shirt from polyester to cloth for the decade  
 And a nice jacket for the century  
 Each garment slightly resembling the last  
 Until the entire outfit becomes an amalgamation of culture and time

If you were to unravel these outfits and truly delve into History's flesh  
 What you would find would be nothing  
 At least nothing you might understand

Not yet translated by humanity's pen  
 would be an incomprehensible dialect of strings.

Threads of all that can be and have happened poking out every which way  
Woven amongst and in between  
All that has happened  
All that is happening  
All that will happen.

We have yet to interpret it  
A steady flow of memory soup  
A patchwork of all humanity's accomplishments  
And failures.

But it's there  
Always has been  
Always will be  
Unraveling and weaving through time and space  
Even if History warps and skews itself to fit human's mold  
It stays true to itself  
The one and only record of existence  
Too bad

The cipher remains locked.

Student Name: Clea Rose Deschanel-Pathman

Grade: 9

School: Awty International School

Title: Snippets From Mr. Douglass

Category: Poetry

Key: Gold Key

Educator: laurence paul

Snippets From Mr. Douglass

(Found poetry from Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass)

written in the starboard  
starboard marked,  
thus starboard placed  
in the word so possible  
my pen and book write  
Home to house,  
thus written,  
thus write

slave rules  
unlawful to  
best forever,  
unmanageable to  
harm unhappy,  
explaining  
understanding  
but  
perplexing achievement;  
pathway  
that  
time  
least expected

no man is an island in a song  
while lines found  
songs, my brethren  
killing himself  
in  
the chambers of his  
singing, as  
impossible

is sung  
to  
drown in  
an  
island; evidence  
of emotion

scripture of the master  
lion born many,  
and  
luxury was fraud  
master perplexed  
upon any  
humane conversion,  
savage piety  
among preachers  
we lived in emancipation  
when our prayers took  
sympathy

freemen die free  
death found me happy,  
first reward  
ready earned  
for color none remarked.  
describe meat,  
drink,  
fire,  
for bonds  
scathing slavery,  
I was  
seldom  
strong and  
at the same  
time colored with  
devotion

Student Name: April Guo  
 Grade: 9  
 School: Awty International School  
 Title: Stone  
 Category: Poetry  
 Key: Gold Key  
 Educator: Ana Ebie-Mouton

# Stone

She wiped away what wet her cheeks,  
 giving me the most of her attention,  
 With the biggest smile present on her cheeks  
 When my six year old self  
 Staggered over to her arms  
 With the prettiest purple stone  
 My eyes behold.

Little did I know  
 what churned  
 That much older mind of hers,  
 Full and overflowing with  
 History, Love, Intuition, Knowledge  
 that I can never  
 Dream of inheriting.

Memories.

Do I remember her tears?  
 Barely.  
 Do I remember her sorrow?  
 Not quite.  
 I was awed by that sizable violet stone  
 which brought away my attention  
 From the person I share my stories with  
 When I'm hurt  
 When I'm down,  
 When I'm joyful  
 And in wonder.

Years later,

Experiences and memories teaches me  
 What's important  
 and what can be put aside.  
 Instead, I regret and fall down in despair  
 As the same objects that wet her cheeks  
 Travel down my eyes.  
 Possessing my soul.

Eight years in exchange  
 For a young girl to understand  
 what is alive and lively  
 To what is dead and deceased.

Dejection.

I stare at that purple stone I was so stunned about  
 While I hold its lifeless figure in my hands.

It felt dead.

It was only alive  
 the day of discovery.

Realization.

On the same day  
 Someone who gave her the blood flowing in her veins  
 And brought my mother to this world.  
 Someone much more important  
 Then a stone to a six-year-old  
 Had her last breath and traveled far and away  
 Minutes before the stone mesmerized my eyes.

Regret.

Wasn't able to sit on her side,  
 Couldn't understand what was happening  
 Didn't put my head on her shoulder,  
 Gently listening to her heartbeat  
 That could never be heard in a stone  
 I did not assure her with my high, squeaky voice  
 When I could leave that dead stone on the sidewalk

And choose an emotional creature that loves and cares  
Over some mineral that fades.

Student Name: Katherine Gell  
Grade: 9  
School: Awty International School  
Title: The Door  
Category: Poetry  
Key: Gold Key  
Educator: Alison Kilfoyle

### The Door

AaaAhH  
My door is so loud  
The door is hanging onto the hinges by a thread  
Not a thread, a fiber  
No, not a fiber, a molecule  
No, not a molecule, an atom.  
No matter

One day the door will fall off of its frame.  
And when a new door is put on or installed by a handyman.  
because I have no knowledge on the installation of doors,  
The hinges will still squeak and squawk when another door is put on.



Student Name: Layla Campbell  
Grade: 12  
School: Awty International School  
Title: The Wise Chocolate  
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir  
Key: Gold Key  
Educator: Joshua Hudley

The Wise Chocolate  
I love chocolate.

My after school routine led me to the corner of Bissonnet and South Rice waiting for the number three bus. As expected it was running thirty minutes late. But this time I was prepared with a mini pop-up lawn chair. I know it may seem extreme, but yesterday, between my low iron levels and the scorching Houston heat, I ended up lying on the concrete gazing up at five curious onlookers.

On this particular day a woman in her 90s stood beside me at the bus stop. A wave of guilt washed over me. I couldn't help but wonder if she needed this seat more than I did. As she coughed, my mind jumped to worst-case scenarios. She definitely needed this seat more than I did. Driven by my emotions, I blurted out,

"Miss, would you like to sit?"

Without hesitation she accepted my offer and I felt a sense of fulfillment. Eventually the bus arrived and I managed to stay on my feet even though feeling a bit lightheaded. The lady stood up and thanked me, offering me a small Dove chocolate as a token of her appreciation. With a cheeky smile I eagerly unwrapped and devoured the chocolate. I then read the message on the wrapper: "When life isn't going right, go left." Real.

A few weeks later, the morning after I had qualified for the National Speech and Debate Tournament, my debate coach calls me into his office. As I stood facing him, he voices his concerns, saying, "I don't think you should travel to Kentucky. With your Type 1 Diabetes, it's just too risky. I have to supervise the other four qualifying students." While his concerns were valid, the fact remained that I had earned my qualification and had every right to go. I interpreted his casual dismissal of my ambition as a challenge. "I have class, but let's continue this discussion tomorrow," he said triumphantly, sipping his diet Dr. Pepper.

Once again, I find myself at Bissonnet and South Rice, with that same pop-up lawn chair. As expected the same lady appears. Despite my feeling so let down by my speech coach, I

again offer her the chair, and she accepts and thankfully hands me another Dove chocolate.

This time the message reads, “Everything will be okay in the end. If it’s not okay, it’s not the end.” I thought, “OMG! Real, Real!” savoring the sweet chocolate.

Finally home, I compose an email requesting a meeting with the principal, school nurse, and my debate coach—copying my mother to add another layer of authority. I sit at the kitchen counter illuminated by a solitary dim light and embark on an extensive search of legal databases.

I refuse to accept that this is the end. Chocolate promised me otherwise.

It’s now 3:11 AM. I print out every article, diligently highlighting Texas Education Code, specifically Chapter 38 Section 38.016 and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

What he said wasn’t just heartbreaking; it was undeniably illegal.

The next day I brief my mom on the plan and prepare to present my case. Insulin shot in my left hand, mom’s hand in my right, confident and respectful, I enter the meeting room. I know the educators are just trying to protect their school, but having a nonfunctional pancreas doesn’t make me a threat. Like any other kid, I have dreams.

Sitting at the head of the oval table I present my arguments, adding, “In seven years of living with this disease, I have never had a diabetic emergency.” Heads nod in agreement. The administrators find my stack of notes on federal law adorable and also yet undeniably persuasive. I walked out of that meeting feeling like a super lawyer hero.

The day before my flight to Nationals was Friday. I boarded the bus armed with my pop-up lawn chair. I gave it to the same elderly lady, and she gave me another Dove chocolate. This time, though, I saved it in my pencil case.

On June 11th, in my congressional chamber, holding my Columbia University student padholder, I reach for a pen and find the Dove chocolate. I open it, drop it in my mouth, and read the message, “You are exactly where you are supposed to be.”

Man, I love chocolate.

Student Name: Leah Hwang  
 Grade: 10  
 School: Awty International School  
 Title: Through My Eyes  
 Category: Poetry  
 Key: Gold Key  
 Educator: Amanda Wood

I have observed a certain hierarchy among Asian immigrants.  
 The first generation worked for their success with eyes full of stars.  
 They are the American-Dreamers,  
 the Pulled-Themselves-Up-By-Their-Bootstrap-ers,  
 the Made-Its.  
 (These are my grandparents.)  
 The second generation built upon what their parents created, showed them it was worth  
 it.  
 (These are my parents.)  
 But the third generation?  
 They have lost sight of what their ancestors have sacrificed,  
 they are insolent and obsessed with being anything but themselves.  
 Anything but Asian.  
 (This is me.)

So there are times when people tell me that  
 I am not a Real Korean.  
 "You can't even speak your language."  
 "Fake Asian."  
 "Whitewashed."  
 "Banana." (white on the inside,  
 yellow on the outside.)

And for a while, it was easier to just lean into it.  
 Trying too hard to be American? What do you mean, 'trying'?  
 I am American.  
 I went to etiquette class in a white dress  
 and the rodeo in cowboy boots.  
 At 8:10 every day during elementary school announcements,  
 I pledged my allegiance to my country—  
 liberty and justice for all.  
 For a while, I was just like all the other girls with their blond hair and wide, toothy smiles.

Yet deep in my heart, something still felt off—  
 I knew that I could not count myself as a True American either.  
 Not after my thermos was stolen at lunch  
 so they could see if there was dog inside or  
 when they pulled their eyelids up  
 to see the world through squinted—  
 Asian—  
 eyes. “How do you even see like this?” they ask.  
 As if the eyes of my people are not sufficient to fully behold their  
 Great American Nation.

But my eyes see enough.  
 They see the immigrants turned away under the Chinese Exclusion Act, 1882  
 —this hatred is not new.  
 They see a man being beat to death in Detroit, 1982  
 in front of a crowd only too happy to watch  
 but reluctant to help.  
 They see a woman pushed onto subway tracks in New York City, 2020  
 while the American president’s “Kung Flu” decimates the nation.  
 They see immigrants, young and old, eyes losing their sparkle.  
 Struggling to be American,  
 struggling to be Asian.  
 They see enough.

So the next time someone tells me that  
 I do not count, that I am not Asian enough—  
 I will ask them if they could  
 please,  
 try seeing the world through my eyes.

Student Name: Lauren King

Grade: 7

School: Awty International School

Title: Title Here

Category: Short Story

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Ana Ebie-Mouton

Laying in bed, all Felix could do was think with nothing but his own thoughts and the blank face of his ceiling. Two-hundred fifty words. That was it. two-hundred fifty words and he would be done, two-hundred fifty words and he could be accepted, two-hundred fifty words and he could be denied. Unable to think of anything but those few phrases, Felix's ability to concentrate on the work at hand waned. The blank, white ceiling hovering above him wasn't helping either, mimicking and taunting his already blank canvas of a mind.

"I should get some air," Felix sighed to no one but himself and his own blank conscience. Dragging down the stairs the only person invading Felix's peripheral view was his stepdad who had been knocked out on the couch probably since early that morning. Opening the front door Felix took a deep breath, breathing in the fresh air he had been missing from his overly cluttered room and breathing out any anxiety caused by the essay. This was a uniform activity Felix would do, to escape his subconscious and any other chore weighing heavily on his mind.

The crisp air swirling around him wisped in a feeling of comfort and calm he couldn't achieve from his congested room. The only other time he felt this feeling of security was when his father was around. Already having gone eight years without him, one would think that by now the feelings evoked whenever father flashed across the canvas of Felix's mind would have faded. Even now the sentiment caused Felix to feel an aching pain in his heart. Continuing his walk Felix arrived at the part that always, without fail caused his eyes to light up and his mind start to unwind. He filled and overflowed with calmness as well as joy. Adorned with overgrown plants, the garden was a sanctuary where bees and butterflies fluttered their wings in harmony, where the obscure shadow lasted all year round, for it was covered by a tree as old as time itself. For as long as Felix could remember this garden has only ever been home to him and his dad. It was their special place obscured from the rest of the world, a place for only them, no mom, no stepdad, and definitely no thoughts of college essays. Sitting in his favorite spot, under the arching sunflowers and behind the idyllic begonias, Felix could breathe. He could sit there forever in that spot. If the world was ending, one wouldn't find Felix in a shelter or bunker, but in that garden. Screeeeech, sounded the broken garage door of Felix's home. It had been broken for as long as Felix could remember, although his mom always fantasized about getting it fixed. One could hear the nails-on-chalkboard sound it made all

throughout the neighborhood, which helped alarm Felix whenever his mom was arriving home. Ever since Felix's dad died, a switch flipped in his mom, morphing her into one of those helicopter parents. To his mom, Felix wasn't seventeen; he was still a toddler trying to explore the world for the first time. This meant she had to protect him and attempt to baby-proof the whole world. Felix arose from his spot and began his commute home; if he hadn't, his mom would've most likely put out a missing person's report.

Barely cracking open the door, Felix attempted to slip in without being noticed. His mom was in the kitchen preparing dinner and his stepdad was surprisingly awake, watching basketball on the T.V. Felix never really liked watching sports. He loved playing lacrosse, even football for a hot sec, but he was never the sit back and watch guy. The entire reason he had chosen Syracuse was its rich lacrosse history. The famous creators of the stick he owned and the athletes that led the Orange to three NCAA championships attended Syracuse. It had been Felix's ambition to attend Syracuse and wear the magical number twenty-two following in the footsteps of the greats and winning the All-American title. Additionally, Felix found a connection to his father, just like he had dreamt. His father made it to Syracuse but never wore the great jersey due to the inconvenient intersection of -isms. Felix's biggest moment in life, everything he had worked so hard for was riding on his acceptance into Syracuse. Like everyone, Felix had backup plans, but they would never fulfill his lifelong dream, their dream. Of course, sneaking in hadn't worked, it never does, somehow moms had a spidey-sense or third eye allowing them to know when you were trying to conceal yourself from their reach.

"And where have you been without telling anyone where you were going?" Felix's mom reprimanded.

"Yeah, where have you been? You know not to leave this house without telling us first," Felix's stepdad two-centsed, staring at Felix with anger and culpability. Although he hadn't been awake when Felix left, never seeming to care all that much for his well being, Felix's stepdad put on a facade to fool Felix's mother. This had always been the case. Although Felix had never said a word about it, it bothered him, yet he loved seeing how happy that Fake made his mom, especially since all Felix had left was his mom. He had been super close with his grandparents on his father's side. His mother's side grands had died a few years before he had been born. He never got to know them and it hurt his mom too much to talk about them. Unfortunately, ever since his mom remarried, Felix's grandparents wanted nothing to do with his family anymore; they had always been stuck in their ways, wishing Felix's mom wouldn't re-marry. Felix loved his grandparents very much but for them to be able to ditch him and his mom so easily made him grow sour towards them.

"I was just going on a walk around the neighborhood," Felix complained.

"Well, why didn't you tell your dad first? " Felix's mom scolded, escalating her voice.

"He's not my dad." Felix mumbled under his breath.

"What was that? speak up son! " demanded Felix's stepdad, aggravation elevating by the second.

"I said, you're not my dad, you're a two-faced drunk and could never replace him, " snapped Felix, finally, freely combusting and speaking his mind. He knew this outburst would upset his mom, but in that moment he didn't care. It was the aftermath of the pent up frustration he had for years, coupled with the anxiety caused by the essay. Maybe Felix's grandparents felt this frustration when they disapproved of Felix's mom remarrying; maybe this is the anger they felt causing them not to want any relation with him or his mother. Felix charged up the stairs, slamming the door, running away from the broken expression on his mom's face and the rage he could feel boiling in his stepfather. Downstairs and all throughout the house lingered eerie silence. The quiet unsettled Felix, who expected roaring commotion from his stepdad and weeping from his mother. This expectation turned into a need for noise, something to distract his mind from what he had just blurted out in front of his mom. He had no remorse for his words' affect on his stepdad; the only feelings he cared for were his mother's. Still no noise, no ruckus, no tears, no pounding from the heavy steps of his stepdad stumping up the stairs, absolute silence. To disrupt this persistent pressure perpetuated by the blackhole of silence, Felix found his headphones and harnessed his favorite playlist. The music playlist celebrated his best memories with his dad. Hearing his dad's voice through the static of the cell phone, Felix's shell of anger began to crumble. Although the quality was poor, the message was clear: "I don't get why you can't ever seem to answer whenever I call, but when I was coming back from the store, the strangest thing happened. I was getting back to the car when a group of obviously drunk guys came up to me. They were ranting about how they loved their wives but couldn't protect them. Then they went on to ramble about how they left their sons to do their job for them. I don't know, I just wanted to tell you about it; I found it weird. Love you, but I'd love you even more if you could answer your phone occasionally. I'll be home soon. Bye." That was the last voicemail Felix's dad left. Felix felt the tears gathering in his eyes. He tried to stop them. He hated the feeling of tear drops running down his face into his mouth, leaving a bitter salty taste. But he couldn't stop it. Not this time. The tears fell from his eyes like a dam breaking, a river exploding through its levy. In that moment he missed his dad more than ever and there was nothing he could do about it. Soon a thought broke into his mind like an intruder; he knew he had to protect his mom; she was all he had left. Before he could build up the courage to walk downstairs, he heard footsteps up the stairs. These footsteps were not the pounding, loud, angry footsteps he normally heard, forewarning trouble with his stepdad. These footsteps were soft, petite, angerless and non-intimidating. They were his mother's footsteps. Felix quickly wiped the tears from his face to avoid the embarrassment of his mother's gaze upon his drenched face. The door slowly creaked open and Felix's mom peaked through. She wasn't mad; her face expressed guilt. She entered, overwhelming the room with a sweeping, peace-building, meditative silence. Neither spoke but their expressions warmed. Felix's anger morphed to conviction, discomfort. His mom's face foregrounded guilt, pleading forgiveness. One single tear falling from his mother's face was all it took to break the standoff.

Felix leaped from his bed and ran towards his mom with open arms pleading, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," tears streaming down his face. He wrapped his arms around her so tightly she could have turned purple. "I'm sorry, I never meant to say any of those things. I didn't mean to hurt you or James" Felix pleaded, he'd expressed a partial truth.

Felix's mom, arms wrapped somehow even tighter around him sobbed, "It's okay son, I know you didn't mean to but I wanted to say sorry too...I never should have pushed you like that and I'm sorry for being too overprotective. I know you're dealing with a lot of stress from the essay as well. I also know you're mourning your dad, but there is no need to take it out on your stepfather."

"I know I shouldn't have and won't do it again. I know now that it's my job to honor and protect you," Felix declared.

"Wait. hold it. What gave you the idea that you had to protect me? It should be my job to protect you, " Felix's mom admonished.

"I got the idea from someone very special," Felix smirked. "Wait, I have it!" Felix sang, his voice booming with triumph and excitement.

"Have what?" inquired his mother.

"I know exactly what I need to write!" Felix exclaimed, already ushering his mother out of the room so he could concentrate on the work at hand.

"Alright I'll leave you to it!" his mom quipped, leaving with a slight smile. "You're still apologizing to your stepfather. Don't think you're off the hook yet" Felix's mom reminded, eeking these last words in before the door shut her out.

A little giggle escaped before Felix rushed over to his computer. He hadn't felt this urgency or spark to write ever since receiving the assignment to write the essay. Felix knew what he was going to write about; he knew that special story he needed to tell. It started with him deleting the words, 'title here'.



Student Name: Cara Obua

Grade: 9

School: Awty International School

Title: Undone

Category: Short Story

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Ana Ebie-Mouton

Kaitlin Taylor bunched her hair into a ponytail as she walked drowsily towards the mirror. Mellow orange sunlight casually suffused the dark corners of the room, reaching below her chair and bed. Outside the window was a quaint field of wheat that curved easily onto a towering hill. A pile of messily cut papers and short plastic figurines posed underneath her mirror. She would have smiled at the years of presents she received from her son when he was young, but the dryness at the corners of her mouth held it back. Despite having endured the effort of fully raising a son, her blonde hair never lost its shine, and miraculously, few wrinkles found places on her face. Her husband commented on it with unending awe nearly every time he viewed her. Each repetition of the complement sprouted a coy and profoundly grateful smile on her cheekbones.

She picked up a gray towel and ran it underneath the faucet. After wringing out the cloth, she gently massaged her face with it. The warm towel pressed into the crust on her eyes, her forehead, and lightly over her nose. She wiped her right cheek until a curious sting made her wince. It didn't feel like she had swiped over a zit; it felt like a vicious and inconsiderate pinch. It hurt far too much. As her cheek throbbed, Kaitlin hesitantly tapped the area with a single finger. She hissed and retracted her finger the moment she touched the injury. The pinch hurt more than it had before, forcing her to take a lengthy breath to calm herself.

Her fingertip had a coat of off-white dust on it.

"Like milk powder," she thought, and then closed her eyes, trying to soothe herself from the rapidly burgeoning pain.

Her jaw dropped when she opened her eyes. In her reflection, her cheek wasn't burdened by swelling or a bruise. Instead, it was caving in on itself. Her right cheek had arched, she thought, like the seconds right after a cannonball connected broadside, but just before the ship wrecked. The hole dug through until a strip of white.

Bone.

In the moment before any noise could crawl up her breaking throat, Kaitlin saw another person. She froze. Eyes fixed on her mirrored gaze, she saw the blur of two fingers roving across her injured cheek, just on the periphery of her vision. She heard her breath catch, and saw panic in her own eyes. Maybe she was in a dream. But the pain was all too real. It felt as if a boxer's punch had gone right through her face.

Kaitlin hunched over her counter, closely examining her wrecked cheek with her fingertips. She inspected the layers of skin and tissue in all shades of pink through the bone.

From outside the walls of the mirror, one finger pounced at her face swiftly, without a hint of urgency. Desperation instead erupted from her as her hands bit into the counter while the rest of her body strained to plummet into the floor.

Before a sound other than a babble could call for her husband, a loose string of emerald steam shot from their finger and linked to the stolid bone on her cheek. Vigorously, webs of her skin opened its maw over the abrasion at the spotlight of her face. Veins attached, connected like they were never apart and succumbed to whatever force was healing her. A haze pressures her eyes and warbling blurs like heatwaves tampered with her vision. What was happening to her?

Nothing. Nothing had happened, the glaze of sweat pricking her forehead perplexed her. Her hand stilled once she glared at it and they crackled when she looped her towel on its metal hook.

Kaitlin sometimes thought she saw silhouettes of unfamiliar people around her, usually in this bathroom. She knew it was an illusion. Why would anyone loom over her for a decade without a single word or action? She wasn't in any danger. She closed her eyes again and began to recite the words her mother had taught her many years before. Finally, she took several deep breaths, at the intervals she'd been taught and opened her eyes. Her cheek was red, likely from all the prodding, but it wasn't any more concave than usual.

"Not even a zit," she thought, mulling over how unusually her face stung.

After changing out of her sleepwear, she wound her way down to the kitchen. It was early, but Kaitlin's husband sat patiently at the table. She knew their son would be tending to their crops somewhere in the field. Her husband chewed on a piece of toast, waving casually to her.

"Good morning," she hooted, pouring herself a glass of water from the jug at the table's center.

Kaitlin's husband spread yellow fig jam onto his bread with his stubby fingers and hummed a response to Kaitlin's greeting. Happiness accompanied nearly every one of his movements. Even the brushes of the butter knife matched the beat of a song he constantly played on his phone.

"Morning, Kaitlin. Do you want to listen to this thing with me?" he pointed at his phone.

"They're dedicating this whole day to guitarists. It actually sounds pretty good."

"Alan, you know I don't listen to your radio stations."

He shrugged and took another bite of his bread. "Try listening to something outside of your city-stations once in a while. It's not as bad as you think."

Kaitlin huffed and took a sip of her water. She yawned, not missing a beat as her fingers, nevertheless, drummed Alan's song on the table. She'd left for the countryside decades ago, and didn't regret it. From sunup to sundown, she looked after the land, their home

and the family. However, there were times she yearned to see a skyscraper again and spend her nights with overbearing noise or light pollution from other human beings. Sometimes, she missed allowing something else to take her focus and fill it with emotion.

The front door swung open with a drawn-out, noisy whine. Dallas Taylor entered as he usually did; sweating with quiet self-satisfaction. When Kaitlin named him, she'd wholeheartedly believed she would eventually return to the city of Dallas. Her family traveled to the DFW metroplex once, a decade ago, when Dallas was just ten. Dallas had stumbled and fallen as they crossed the street on their way to lunch. He'd gamely picked himself up and tried to catch up with her. But, in a flash, he'd been struck by a reckless car's side-view mirror as he ran for the curb. The driver didn't stop, even though a child was involved, so they never found out who he was. Since then, Dallas blanched at the thought of city roads. He'd been hit on a seemingly empty avenue; one moment there were no cars in sight, the next moment he was seeing stars. Kaitlin was happy with her trade: She'd left Dallas, the city and kept her son safe.

Despite the long hours he spent outside over several years managing the field, Dallas remained, stubbornly, pale. Stranger still, she couldn't see much muscle on him, despite his hard work every day in the field. Kaitlin constantly worried about how it was that he'd been cheated of even the most basic benefits of his active life. Dallas adamantly refused to be medically evaluated for what kept him looking frail. He never minded it; he simply accepted his state and tried his best at his tasks.

"Dallas! You're back early," Kaitlin said. "I'm glad you are here. You should rest. Lately, you've been tired all the time."

"Don't worry, Mom. I'm not tired. Have you eaten yet?" Dallas asked. His eyes remained shut for seconds each time he blinked.

"I'm gonna make you some food, then you're gonna rest."

"I'm not tired, really," he said as he pulled out a chair beside his father.

Dallas had the same curly, dark hair as his father; they even looked identical when Dallas was sitting. Kaitlin smiled and shook her head, looking at them. They both had one hand on one leg, while the other doodled or drew circles on the table.

She opened her pantry door and lifted a plastic container of pancake mix off a high shelf. Carefully, she placed it on the counter. She paused Dallas with her hand before he could object, and turned on the stove. The chair squeaked as her husband rose from his seat.

"I'm going to go get to work on the harvest. You should start using a few of the machines, Dallas," he said, giving the boy a look. "See you soon."

Alan shut the door, but his whistling traveled through the opened window. Dallas set his head on his forearm and silently observed his mother as she cooked. After emptying out the remaining pancake mix into a bowl and yanking the fridge door open, she easily cracked two eggs using one hand each time. Kaitlin didn't measure the milk before pouring; she knew exactly how to make a good pancake. She memorized the exact amount of pancake mix she needed to make fluffy four-inch buttermilk pancakes for her family. dissolve and how much should be temporarily left untouched in the bowl. After

she whisked the mixture, she poured half-cup-sized dollops onto her well-heated griddle. Both Kaitlin and Dallas settled quietly as the pancakes began to set. About two minutes later, she flipped them and the pleasant aroma of fresh pancakes floated from the pan.

"What fruits do you want on this?" Kaitlin asked, anticipating his love of raspberries.

Raspberries were not in season, but she'd got some for him.

He didn't give an answer. Abruptly, a slight ache began in her right shoulder. She had been aggressive opening the fridge for the eggs. This time, she would be gentler, going in for the fruits. The resistance from the fridge door shot pain up her shoulder, as though an army of darts were lodged in it. Nothing she had felt was similar to the scorching feeling she was experiencing. She clamped her left hand over her aching shoulder.

She felt the top of her left palm bend inward, from a point that should have been rigid.

She jerked the hand away and stared at it, wincing as pain stabbed through her right shoulder again. Out of anxiety, she glanced down swiftly at her shoulder.

There was a gaping crater in it, and the inside was stained thoroughly with dried layers of copper and brown tissue. A dark scar appeared as a rim around the rotting wound. What was happening to her? No blood, no muscle, maybe even no pain. The aching was too dull to be made by a chunk of skin withering. It hurt—horribly—but it should have been worse. The hole was widening, opening over her skin like teeth underneath her shoulder—

Strangely, Kaitlin was on the floor. The fridge remained open, with the box of raspberries nonchalantly sitting on the shelf. She turned to see Dallas crumpled on the floor beside her.

He was lifting himself off the ground, pressing his palm on the countertop for support.

Dallas was unscathed, but heavy pants came from him, as though he were puffing out water instead of air.

"Or blood," Kaitlin thought morbidly. Why had that been her first thought? Had she heard something disturbing on the news? Did it have something to do with the pain? Or was it about that ebbing throb in her shoulder and the absence of blood? What happened to her shoulder?

"Dallas," she called weakly.

How had he gotten on the floor? How had she gotten on the floor?

Another gentle ache pulsed in her shoulder, and she examined it. This wound was worse seconds ago. It had been ghastly, and the pain she felt was intense, but unrealistic. How was her shoulder unharmed? She remembered that it had decayed completely.

"Dallas," she repeated, swallowing her building astonishment. He nearly fell while descending to the floor, lacking the strength to stand. "What happened to my shoulder? What's happening to you?"

The stiffness of Dallas' jaw upset her as he strenuously rubbed his eyes. Dallas must have healed her, but what was wrong with her body? Past her luminous skin, it was decrepit, barren, and dead. Each heartbeat quickened until they pounded in her ears like drums. Dallas reached out with two fingers, and he gently pressed them onto her neck. Her heart slowed after being pacified by whatever Dallas had done.

"What did you do?" Kaitlin asked quietly. His discomfort contorted into bewilderment as he gaped at her. He closed his eyes and his posture sank with juvenile fatigue.

"I healed you," he professed, mentally reeling from the confession. He would never have admitted it without the tantalizing weight of fatigue pressuring his eyes. It sprawled him into an interminable haze that left him too drowsy to abide by his logic.

But he wasn't entirely numb, the response he'd given his mother was...sufficient.

"No," his mother whispered. "No, you did something else. Why could—why was my body rotting? God, Dallas, what did you do to me?"

Instead of a response, Kaitlin received a fragile, apprehensive breath as Dallas warily glanced at the window. He moved in jerks instead of fluid actions, and his already pale skin lost more color. He had been returning from the fields perpetually fatigued at least once a week. His waves of drowsiness were the cost of Kaitlin's health.

She chose to address the most nagging question in her mind. "What were you healing me from?" she asked, questioning whether her heart was truly pounding.

"You were," Dallas started slowly, "hurt badly, and I didn't wa—"

"Am I dead?"

Silence.

"Yes," he answered. He separated the meanings of his words from his speech, demanding stolidness from himself. "When we were in the city, the car hit you. Dad fainted. I don't know what I did, but I saved you.

Kaitlin recalled the sight of Dallas splayed feebly on the road. Her clothes were pristine, devoid of crimson, while his shirt was gushing with too much of it. It was the first situation his life-giving power had left him in.

People yearn for power the way planets draw in meteors. Some people can capitalize on the end of the world. Anything can be exploited.

"You made me forget it." That was the exploit that Dallas chose. Whether she lived or not wasn't entirely under her control, but her knowledge should have been.

Dallas responded in silence. He was willing to confess all his faults, but his moral truths were something he couldn't admit. Explaining the erasure of Kaitlin's memories aloud would stitch remorse into his actions. Eventually, he wouldn't remove a single memory from his mother. Then, he would suffer for it.

Kaitlin asked for his reasoning and shot to her feet at another response of silence. The pancakes were utterly burned, stuck fast on the pan. They would have to be scraped off. She quietly pulled the utensil drawer open, rattling the forks, spoons, and knives.

She would need a knife.

She took one and began to saw at the bottoms of her pancakes. Behind her, the floorboards creaked as Dallas stood. Kaitlin snapped her head to look at Dallas.

He pressed two fingers to her forehead, and the warmth of it blurred her sight. The knife clattered onto the floor, and she leaned against the counter with slack arms. Her thoughts fell into his hands like gorgeous ribbons. In his mind, he cut the newly sewn fabric off the ribbon. Then, the conversation escaped from Kaitlin, instead taunting her at the furthest edge of her memory.

Dallas picked up the knife from the tiles, and he placed it in the sink. He grabbed another one to finish scrapping the charred remains of the pancakes. As he dropped them onto a plate, his mother blinked slowly, and placed a palm over her forehead. Suddenly, she sat up, eyes wide.

"Dallas! You're back early," she said. Her nose crinkled. "Something burned. Oh, we burned the pancakes?"

"Yeah, the first batch is the throw-away set anyway," he said. "Here, I'll start the next batch. This one we'll actually eat."

She watched him closely as he poured and flipped the pancakes.

"You look tired, Dallas. You look like you really need to get some rest."

He pulled a little box of fresh raspberries from the bottom of the refrigerator.

"Yeah, I was feeling a bit tired today," he replied with a fleeting smile. "Feel free to sit at the table; I'm almost done with these."

Kaitlin sighed happily, staring as Dallas washed the berries the exact same way she always had; washing the outsides gingerly, and making sure to get water into the center. She obliged and sat at the table as her son dried them. Golden syrup spilled onto the pancakes, and he carefully set the raspberries on top of it. After charging up the platter with more food, he placed an empty plate in front of his mother.

"Breakfast is served," he said, with an elaborate wave over the table.

He lifted the heavy platter with one hand, dishing food onto his plate, while his mind wandered. That day in the city, his mother had said something to him moments after she had first returned to life. After the tires crushed her leg and the bumper pressed into her face and after her shattered bones wrapped back around each other.

"Dallas, why would you do this? Nothing means anything anymore. How could you ruin it all? I loved you so much."

Student Name: Liesl Sercu  
 Grade: 10  
 School: Awty International School  
 Title: Worry  
 Category: Poetry  
 Key: Gold Key  
 Educator: Ana Ebie-Mouton

# Worry

I walk to the grocery store  
 \*whistle\*  
 I walk to school  
 \*whistle\*  
 I ride my bike  
 \*whistle\*

Everywhere I go  
 There's whistles  
 Coming from men  
 four times my age  
 When I was younger i wondered  
 "What were they whistling at?"  
 Now I know  
 They're whistling at me.  
 At me?  
 Why me?  
 What was so special  
 That they chose to whistle at me?  
 I wondered

Now I know why...  
 And wish i didn't  
 Wish I didn't have to worry  
 Worry about my skirt being too short  
 Worry about my clothes being too tight  
 Worry about being alone, even in broad daylight  
 Worry all day  
 I wish I didn't have to, but I do.



Student Name: Carson Villarreal  
 Grade: 7  
 School: Calvary Episcopal School  
 Title: The Green Rock  
 Category: Science Fiction & Fantasy  
 Key: Gold Key  
 Educator: Crystal Brock

Home alone, noises going through my head, the rain trickling down the window. I was sitting on my couch, reading a book from upstairs. After all, the power was out, and my mom and dad were out cold sleeping in their bed. My sister didn't want to talk to me since I had gotten on her nerves begging her to talk to me. As I finished the chapter in my book, suddenly, "knock, knock." "What the," I said. There was no way someone would deliver a package in this rain. I slowly crept off of the couch. Cautiously, I opened the door. As I peeked out of the door, there stood a small box. It had fragile tape all over it. I picked up the box and brought it inside. It wasn't heavy or odd-looking. I didn't know what to do; "Should I open it," I thought to myself. I was very bored, so as anyone would do, I opened the box. "A green rock?" I said. Inside the box sat a rock, a boring green rock. Nothing special about it besides it being green. "Odd," I said. I went upstairs to put it in my room. "What's that?" my sister said. "Leave me alone," I replied. I put the rock on my dresser. "Perfect." My parents finally awoke and were in the living room. "Hey honey, wanna play a board game," my mom said. "I'm ok," I said. I walked to the kitchen and grabbed some chips. I sat down at the table, staring outside. Minutes felt like hours and hours felt like days. Finally, dinner was ready. I had to go wake up my sister because she was taking a nap. "Dylan, wake up." "What, what!" she said. "It's time for dinner." "Ugh, fine." Thankfully, we had a gas stove so we were able to eat. The best we could do was some basic pasta. We said our prayer and ate. After I finished cleaning up, I went upstairs and chilled while playing with my Rubix cube. I got tired quickly, so I went to bed. During the middle of the night, around 2 a.m., I woke up to a light. The rock was glowing. "No way," I said. I got up from my bed and went over to the rock. I was timid to touch the rock, but there was a voice in my head saying to touch it. I went to put my fingers on it and as they touched, "Ow!" I felt a shock, and the rock suddenly stopped glowing. I walked backward toward my bed and tripped on my clothes. I fell to the floor, but as I hit it, I felt nothing. "What the," I said. I hit the wall, then stubbed my toe, nothing. I couldn't feel pain. "Cool." I was still super tired and wanted to test it out in the morning. When I woke up, I had almost forgotten about the night before. I remember because I saw the rock when I went to change. I stubbed my toe again, but this time it hurt. "What the," I said. Maybe the rock didn't last forever. I touched it again and felt the same shock from the night before. I hit my fist on the bed frame. Nothing. "I see," I told myself. The power had turned on since my digital clock was showing the time. I could finally play on my Xbox. I went downstairs to see my family, but they weren't there. There was a note in the



kitchen that read, "We went to the store to get groceries, and your sister is with her tutor, love Mom and Dad." I had nothing to do, so I wanted to see if my friend Jeremy was available. I texted him if I could come over, but he said he was busy. I went upstairs to play on my Xbox. I played on it for a while and went downstairs as my mom and dad came home. We played a card game at the table, and then my sister got home. At this point, it was 4:00 p.m. and I just wanted to lay down. My dad had already started making dinner. Once he finished, we went to eat. Today he made a beef and broccoli dish. It was one of my favorites. As I went to get my plate, I accidentally hit my hand on a knife. "Honey, are you ok!" my mom said. "Yeah, what happened?" as I said this, I looked down at my arm. It was bleeding very badly. I didn't want my family to know about the powers, so I said I was fine. I patched it up and ate. All dinner my sister was annoying me. I got excused from the table and went upstairs to play on my Xbox. None of my friends were on, so I got off. I was playing on my mini hoop and got tired. I went to bed.

When I woke up, we drove for an hour to a river. It was a long ride and felt like a year. Thankfully, I had my phone, so I watched YouTube the entire way there. We got there and stepped in the frigid cold water. I could barely stand it, and it took me a while to get in. Finally after some convincing, I plunged in the water. I could barely move from being so cold. I was shivering, but then the sun came out. I felt relief go through my body and the warm summer air. I put on a tube and splashed into the riptide. I was soaring down the river and started to catch speed, too much speed. I pinched myself to see if I still had my powers. When I pinched my arm a stinging pain went through it. "Uh oh." I was gliding on the water, screaming, coming up on a tree. I was about to hit it. "AHHHHHHHHH." Suddenly, everything went black, and I woke up in my bed; it was all a dream. It

Student Name: Adelaide Dutt

Grade: 11

School: Duchesne Academy Of Sacred Heart

Title: Flower

Category: Dramatic Script

Key: Gold Key

Educator:

“Flower”

Act I: Grandmother

A reddish- brunette haired young woman has frizzy ringlet curls that cut off at her shoulders. The young woman’s name is Shui King Wong. It means water warrior. Her mother told her she didn’t like her name. She said her posture was never straight enough, her demeanor never calm enough, her brain never sharp enough. Never enough for her.

The young woman was born in Canton, China and moved to Hong Kong with her great love. They got married, hoping to start a family and life together.

Now the young woman gives birth to her only daughter. She does not smile in their first photo together.

The daughter’s name is Chor Yin.

She has black hair, small eyes and plump lips. She carries herself like her father.

The father approaches the little girl with wide, cracked hands. He holds her small frame in the air with a whoosh and brings her back down safely into his arms. His name is Pak Cheung Fan. It means prosperous and stable.

Pak Cheung Fan: “Chor Yin, watch my show with me.”

Chor Yin steadily walks to sit next to her father. She joins him on a tattered yet plush brown couch. There is only enough room for two.

Chor Yin: “Baba, why this show? It makes me sad. Scary.”

Scenes of Muhammad Ali throwing punches at a man in a ring flash on a CRT television set.

Pak Cheung Fan: "You have to defend what you create in life. Notice how Muhammad is not giving up even though he looks like he should? Because there is a chance that he will win."

ChorYin: "Okay. I understand."

ChorYin did not understand. She looked at her father with wide, open eyes. Her father had begun to speak in English to her so that when they moved to America, she would be able to thrive. She went along with whatever her dad said, her admiration for him was untouchable.

Pak Cheung Fan never had an American name. He was always "prosperous" and "stable"

The family of three left their home in Hong Kong to Los Angeles, California during the early eighties. They passed by Disneyland and Hollywood Boulevard to make shelter in the attic of their family friends.

ChorYin: "Ma I do not like the smell, it hurts my nose. Please get rid of it! Please!"

Shui King Wong: "This is just temporary, we will be somewhere else soon."

ChorYin tries to rip down the bed sheet clipped at the top of the crumbled ceiling. Shui King Wong slaps away her little hand.

Shui King Wong: "Stop this at once! This is not forever, Lua, (daughter) it will be over soon. You need to calm down, Bauchu chanchu. (Stay focused)"

Her voice shakes at those last few words. Her mother had said those same words to her when she was younger. "Bauchu chanchu." Was she becoming somebody she wasn't?

Regardless of her painted expression of regret, she does not take back her words.

ChorYin: "Ma, I want home! Take me to school. I miss home."

Shui King Wong: "You start school in one week. This is now home."

Shui King Wong bites her lip, visibly trying to hold back tears. The voice of her mother in her head says "Bauchu chanchu." The words in her mothers voice hurt, but there familiarity brings her a strange sense of comfort.

She hugs herself lightly.

In a whisper, she says to herself

Shui King Wong: "You did the right thing."

--

## Act II: Metal Lunchbox

The family of three has moved out of the attic and into a small apartment. It is on top of a Chinese restaurant. They just opened it, and anticipate business will be fruitful, or at least successful enough to sustain them.

ChorYin plays with a small plastic doll with tangled hair and a ball of yarn. She tilts the ball of yarn to face the barbie doll, as if it has a face.

ChorYin (in a deep voice): "It is over girl! No playtime, it is school! You learn and make friends"

ChorYin (in a high- pitched voice): "Funny for you, sir. I am going to school and will play all day! So much fun. Aw yin! (I win)"

Shui King Wong: "Lua, stop! You are being childish. You cannot behave like that or you will not make friends at school. And you need to be good for the teachers."

ChorYin: "I am sorry."

Shui King Wong: "ChorYin- Lisa, you have to go to school now. Today. Are you ready?"

ChorYin: "Aw gaw man?" ("What is my name?")

Shui King Wong: "Lisa."

ChorYin: "Hi may lay gaw?" ("What is yours?")

Shui King Wong's chest rises and falls slowly in a staggering manner. What is her name?

Shui King Wong: "Eleanor."

Eleanor ushers Lisa to the front door. She exits abruptly, leaving to go to the family's new restaurant.

Lisa: "Ma!"

Lisa looks around with deep, tearful eyes, She begins walking one way, then the other.

She sees a sign that she cannot read, but the image is that of a school bus. She sits on the bench and waits for her ride. She taps the tips of her polished black shoes together. In her head the scene with the sparkly red shoes from an American movie plays in her head.

"There's no place like home," She thinks to herself.

She looks up to the sky.

Lisa: "Aw guaju layt." ("I miss you.")

Rusty bus doors open with a screech. Lisa hesitates to walk in, she lets the blue-eyed and brunette girls and boys fill in for a bit. She finally steps on with a light stumble in her feet, her head down.

Lisa: "Hello girl! My name is Lisa. I am a student."

Little girl: "Okay, uhhhhh. My name is Sarah. Are you nervous about school? I am. My mommy packed me a ham and cheese sandwich and told me I would do great. I got a gogo squeeze and I got apple slices and a lot of stuff. How old are you? I am five."

Her eyes dart back and forth, trying to remember what she can say.

Lisa: "Yes."

Little girl: "I don't think you understood me. Did you?"

All the English lessons her dad gave her went away when put to practice. She does not respond. She takes a deep breath.

Lisa: "I..."

The little girl fidgets in her hot, sticky seat. Her legs peel off as she stands up and sits with a red-haired boy sitting across from them.

Lisa begins to frown over losing a friend before she made one, but before tears flow, she notices her stop coming up.

She stumbles out of her seat, walking up to the bus driver. Her fingers grip the handle of her metal lunchbox tighter. Lisa opens her mouth as if to say "Hey, this is my stop!" but the words do not come out.

Lisa: "TING!" (STOP).

The metal lunchbox leans back in the air, Lisa swings it forward. It hits the bus driver flat across her face. She takes a second as she stumbles on her footing,

Bus Driver: "Kid! What is your problem?"

Lisa: "Sorry."

She sits back in her seat.

Misses her stop.

—

Act III: Future

Years pass by between that day with the lunchbox. Lisa is in the summer of her senior year of high school. She finished her application to Syracuse University. She dreams of being a journalist. A storyteller.

Lisa: "Mom, can you read my application essay?"

Eleanor: "Lisa, no not right now. I am getting ready to hang out with my friends."

Lisa: "Am I supposed to stay?"

Eleanor: "Yes! Of course. You will be a good daughter and sit with me. If my friends want to talk to you, you will reply back."

The next day is Lisa's birthday. Lisa is holding fistfuls of her hair as she tries to cover her tears. She is finishing her application to Syracuse. The seat under her is wooden and weak, it has been at the family restaurant for years.

How is she supposed to write in her application how her only extracurricular was working at her family's restaurant? Her test scores aren't high enough and her essay won't be good enough. She crumples up her application paper. "Throw it away," Her mind says.

Lisa: "Mom, do you think I am good enough for this college? I should have improved my test scores, done something, anything to be better. Did I disappoint you? Should I have done something else?"

Eleanor: "Of course, you could have done more! My mother always told me that if you mess up the first time, slap yourself for messing up, then move on. So you must move on. And I do not understand this question."

Lisa: "What do you mean? About what college I'm going to?"

Eleanor: "You are going to University of Maryland? What do you mean?"

Lisa: "I wanted something different, new and fun. Somewhere where the weather is cooler and the city shines brighter. How fun would New York be?"

Eleanor: "Lua! Stop this at once. I brought you here, you stay here. You have to learn to be more obedient and listen to me so you can marry a Chinese boy. This American culture has polluted your mind."

Lisa runs her fingers through her slick, black hair.

Lisa: "Sure, okay."

Late at night, Lisa lays in her bed. She contemplates while confiding in the ceiling. She pretends that the popcorn texture is a mountain of clouds. The clouds engulf her, lift her off past the birds, the sky, the sun. She sees the stars, the moon, the whole galaxy. She wonders where she fits in anywhere in the universe. If she does at all.

—

Act IV: Daughter

Twenty years have passed since Lisa sent in her application to the University of Maryland. She studied journalism, moved to New Orleans to be an oil and gas analyst. She fell in love with her American husband, James. A man blonde with gray-blue eyes.

James: "Lisa, do you like your hair like that?"

Lisa: "What? What do you mean?"

James: "Like the color, the black?"

Lisa: "I should dye it?"

Lisa plays with the ends of her hair. The strands are strong and thick, jet black.

Lisa: "Yeah, yeah sure. I'll get highlights. I need some change in my life."

James: "Sure! Great idea. Some change would be fun!"

—

The now brunette- blonde stranded Lisa and her husband James have a daughter. Her name is Madeline. She has black hair and blue eyes, a combination of both her parents. The family of three lives in the Southern heart of Georgia. She grows up in a private school.

Madeline is seventeen years old. It is summer, the sun beams bright and the air is crisp.

She approaches the laundry room. Her fingers scale over the door, she slowly opens it. Lisa is blissfully folding warm towels. The smell is clean and comforting, lavender and vanilla.

Madeline: "Good morning."

Lisa: "Morning."

Madeline: "Mom, do you have a um... a Chinese name? Do you know what I mean?"

Lisa: "Yes, I do. It's an ugly name, my mother knew what she was doing when she named me."



Madeline: "Well, what is it?"

Lisa: "ChorYin."

When she spoke, the words rolled off her tongue in disgust. She spat out the syllables as quickly as she could, thinking the quicker said, the faster it would be over with. The sound is unfamiliar when it comes out.

Madeline: "I don't think it's ugly."

Lisa scoffs.

Madeline quietly leaves the laundry room, warm towels pressed to her chest.

Later that summer, Madeline gets tutoring for standardized tests. She goes to her relative's tutoring place for a good, cheap discount. Before she leaves every session, her mom talks with the owner.

Lisa: "Jie Jie! Ho Sanyee?" ("Sister! How's business?")

Relative: "Hao Hao." ("Good".)

They continue to talk in Cantonese, Madeline listens intently, even though she cannot understand the conversation. They finally finish talking. Madeline lifts herself from a folding chair, walks out of the building. Her fingers pressed against the screen door, she walked out with a slam.

Alone, she grazes over to the car.

A man, disgruntled with gray stubble and a shaggy baseball cap begins walking in her direction.

Man: "Hey! Hey girl, look up!"

Madeline keeps her head low, but her phone starts ringing, so she subconsciously flings her head up as if to answer the call.

Man: "Jesus Christ! Ching Chong, put your head back down. Nobody wants to see that."

Madeline's face is painted white. Embarrassment. Confusion? Anger. She begins to walk faster, to the car but feels a tight grip on her arm.

The feeling is familiar.

Lisa: "Get away from my daughter."

The man throws his hands in the air defensively.

Man: "Chinese blood runs strong here."

Lisa's eyes widened. Her speed quickens as if she is ready to beat him up.

He runs away.

Madeline and Lisa, just the two of them, approach the car. This time with caution.

Madeline: "I'm sorry, I didn't do anything I swear! He just came up out of nowhere."

Lisa: "Sweetie, I am not mad at you. Why would I be?"

Madeline: "I don't know. I'm... I'm surprised he even noticed I'm Chinese."

Lisa: "Why would you say that?"

Madeline: "I just don't feel like I am. I mean I don't think I really fit the part."

Lisa: "Well you are, it's in your blood. Shouldn't that be enough?"

Madeline: "It doesn't feel like it for me. Remember when you told me you forgot most of Cantonese? You spoke it to auntie perfectly fine. Why didn't I ever learn Cantonese? And then.... oh my God! I went to Chinese Baptist Church camp over the summer. All the kids, even the mixed ones told me that they all went to Chinese Sunday school. I should've done that."

Lisa laughs at her ramble as she starts up the car.

Lisa: "Do you want me to sign you up now? It's a little late, huh?"

Madeline: "No, I know. I'm just saying I wished you signed me up when I was younger."

Lisa: "Well, some things just don't work out in your favor. I didn't get what I wanted when I was your age. Life is just hard like that sometimes."

Madeline folded her arms around her chest and slouched in her seat. She was silent for the rest of the car ride.

—

Act V: Child and Mother

Madeline is watching a Youtube video on her laptop. The warmth from beneath the device provides her artificial comfort. The view from her porch swing is clear: the sky is blue, her skin feels hot from the sun kissing it.

Lisa: "Madeline, can I join you?"

Madeline: "Sure, yeah mom."

Lisa puts a safe arm around Madeline's shoulder. She gently strings her fingers through her daughter's jet black hair. It looked so beautiful on her, but on Lisa it always felt ugly.

The mother closes her eyes, wondering if life would have been different if she never dyed her hair. If she went by ChorYin instead of Lisa. If she studied in a library instead of her family's Chinese restaurant. If she had a choice for college. If she could have done something differently.

Lisa slowly lets go of the hug. That hug was something her own mother never gave her. But with Madeline, this love was so easy to give. It felt right.

Madeline looked up at her mother, her eyes an almost- black brown.

Madeline: "Mom, what does your name mean?"

Lisa: "Lisa. I think it means 'God is my oath'."

Madeline: "Um.... I don't understand, you never grew up religious."

Lisa: "Oh, you mean Chor-Yin."

Madeline: "Yeah, that's what I meant."

Lisa: "It means 'pretty flower'."

Madeline slightly smiled at the thought of such a name.

Madeline: "I think I like that name better."

Madeline tilts her head back and forth, as if to try and find a certain glint she inherited from her mother's eyes.

She wonders if the women in her family have always looked for this same light.

Madeline: "If you... if you gave me a Chinese name instead, what would it be?"

Lisa/ ChorYin: "Give me a minute to figure that out for you."

The mother and daughter pause in silence for a moment.

Lisa/ChorYin: "MeiYing."

Madeline: "What does it mean?"

Madeline looks in her mother's eyes. She finds a glint, and hopes her mother sees the same shift in light in her expression.

Lisa/ ChorYin: "Beautiful flower."

Student Name: Adelaide Dutt

Grade: 11

School: Duchesne Academy Of Sacred Heart

Title: Un-Stuck

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Key: Gold Key

Educator:

A sticker wears over time, and when peeled off its slick surface, it leaves behind residue: a reminder of what once was. It is a reminiscence of the experience of life, the wear and tear, the virtues and pitfalls.

My brother has been one of the core stickers in my life, providing me with stability and connection. I never looked up to him, he would often pull immature pranks or not stand up for me when others put me down. Regardless, while we were never close, the consistency of him in my life made me feel at home with him. But slowly, I saw him begin to lose himself. By my freshman year and his junior year of high school, he had been in and out of rehabilitation facilities, moving states, attending unhelpful programs. When looking at him, I saw someone so vibrant and unique slowly engaging in substances and attitudes that caused the person I knew to wither away. His addiction took over; our connection lost its adhesive. The inconsistency made me feel like residue left behind on a sticker, depraved and

fraudulent. The combination of his mental deterioration and my parents trying to bring back the old him altered my personal development.

My value of life shifted. I thought, "If I can hide from the world, nothing will hurt me like whatever damaged him." What I did not expect to lose in this approach was myself. I began to avoid social settings from homecoming to football games through fear of rejection and the unknown. Moreover, I avoided myself, dismissed self care when I felt upset, beat myself up when a test or assignment was hard. Grace was never allowed, feelings were shoved away. When I stripped away my bright personality, I left behind a stranger, someone out of touch with her own feelings and afraid of the unknown.

I began to realize I could not let my fate be decided by my brother's wellbeing when he came back home from a wilderness therapy program. His presence brought clarification. An old, humorous state revived after being sent away for so long, reminding me that he was just a kid, too, one who was not finished with his own journey. In a long and tedious process, I began to open myself out into the world again. I started to journal about my day and feelings when I needed to, confiding in storytelling when words didn't know the right things to say. Writing became an outlet for my emotions. Engaging in more extra curricular

activities, trying things out of my comfort zone like debate and lacrosse which were once unconventional to me, I slowly but surely gained autonomy and direction of my own life through allowing leeway for myself to grow through new opportunities. Rather than shielding myself from the world to maintain innocence, I accepted what had happened and felt whole when discovering myself again. The occasional stumble in my brother's recovery discourages me, but I remind myself I cannot fall when he is challenged. The safety of knowing my story has not ended has led me to continue to embrace myself when the worst seems apparent. Residue left behind on a sticker that has peeled away does not represent the unwanted, but resiliency, meaning you can come back to life after feeling ripped apart.

A sticker is complicated on the surface. It has many unknown layers of printer ink and vinyl, but also damage and decay from existing. I did not understand that I am not complete without the unexpected difficulties of life, until I myself experienced hardship. The only way for me to feel complete is to accept and embrace all parts of me, from the outgoing writer and debater to competitive lacrosse player. Someone else's experiences, like my brother's cannot define how I choose to write or play out my own life. Once ripped away, residue is still part of the sticker.

Student Name: Lily Cockerham

Grade: 9

School: Duchesne Academy Of Sacred Heart

Title: Where Beauty Lives

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Key: Gold Key

Educator:

It was raining

at soccer practice that day. I remember the darkness and the gloomy feeling that settled over the team after the sun had set and the rain had begun to fall. Every soccer practice felt gloomy and dark to a 6-year-old girl who hated the sport, but that Thursday afternoon was more dismal than most. I was running to the benches for a water break that day when I slipped in a pool of rainwater and fell flat on my face. The rain didn't take long to pool in the various holes of the makeshift soccer fields we practiced on, and I was the unfortunate victim of a very deep puddle.

Beauty can be the grace I've never had. Beauty can be the ability to keep your clothes clean and your ego unbruised.

As I picked myself up, I made eye contact with a short blonde girl standing nearby. She looked me up and down and sort of rolled her eyes while I walked over to grab my water bottle on the bench next to her. I remember feeling queasy and on edge when she sat down next to me, but I ignored that gut feeling and told myself she probably wasn't trying to be mean before. She had bright blue eyes and a blonde bob, and her voice sounded as sweet as candy. But as beautiful as her voice was, her words came out ugly and sour.

Beauty can be a first impression. Beauty can be the 9 seconds your brain takes to determine if you like someone.

"Your name's Lily, right? So's mine, but I think yours is spelled the weird way. I saw it written on your water bottle, and I just think L-I-L-L-I-E is a much prettier way to spell it," she began to say. When my mind replays this memory, I wish I could tell her what I now say whenever anybody asks why my name is not Lillian or Lilliana or even Lilly. I was named for the flower, Lily with one L after the I. But at 6 years old, I choked on my words, and she said nothing to that little girl at soccer practice.

Beauty can be confidence. Beauty can be the words that catch in your throat, the ones that you know you need to say anyway.

She continued, "I mean, no offense, but Lily with only one L

after the I is so boring anyway. It must look so simple and sad when you write your name on your papers at school, huh?" This time, I did manage to say something back. "I like your name better than mine, it looks prettier," I half-lied in the hopes that she would stop bothering me. Beauty can be the truth.

"Oh my god," Lillie gasped, "What's wrong with your nose?" My hand flew to my nose, but it was perfectly normal, no bumps, bruises, blemishes, or boogers. My voice shook slightly, and I felt embarrassed as I said, "Nothing's wrong with my nose." "Yes, there is. You have these little black hairs in there," she recoiled in disgust. Tears started to fill my eyes, but I blinked them away. Lillie kept going, "They look like little snakes, and it's so gross." I touched the area around my nostrils, but I didn't feel anything like the snakes that Lillie described. I tried to explain it to her, "I think it's normal. You have them too, but yours are blonde and hard to see." "No, I don't! I'm pretty," she sneered at me and ran off to another girl on the opposite side of the long bench. Beauty can be strength. Beauty can be blinking away tears and standing your ground.

I stared down at my feet, wishing I had a mirror to examine the snakes inhabiting my nose. About ten minutes later, my coach wrapped up practice, and I ran to my mom to tell her all about it. She insisted that Lillie was just a mean girl, and I didn't need to worry about her comments, but it was too late. Her words echoed in my head, but not the ones about how gross my nose was. Her voice repeated, "No, I don't! I'm pretty!" And I knew she was. Lillie was the kind of girl everyone wanted to be friends with, she was the girl everyone wanted to be, no matter how cruel her words could be. Beauty can be the people you wish you were. Beauty can be something you didn't even know you needed.

The following summer, I visited my grandparents in Wisconsin and mentioned the story in passing. My grandfather told me that my nose hair was probably just like his, dark, thick, and always growing quickly. He told me that he trimmed his every so often but that it was obvious I would need to do it too. I remember how cold the bathroom felt and my tears sliding down my cheeks as he tried to cut the hair with scissors. My grandfather was a surgeon, and I knew that he wouldn't have cut me, but I still didn't want those scissors anywhere near me. When he was done, I looked at myself in the mirror, convinced I was as pretty as Lillie now that the snakes were banished. Beauty can also be pain. Beauty can be the illusion that tears are a price you should be willing to pay for a chance to look like



someone else.

At home, I grew paranoid that the minute the hair grew back, I would lose the beauty I had shed so many tears for. When I took the scissors out of Mom's bathroom, I didn't want to trim those hairs. I wanted it all gone, so I would never have to worry about the ugliness it brought with it. My hands were not as dexterous as my grandfather's, and they shook as I tried to cut each little piece of it. When I sliced the side of my nose, the blood started dripping down slowly, and I shoved a piece of cotton up there for the rest of the day. I told my mother it was just a nosebleed, but I'm certain she figured it out anyway.

Beauty can also be paranoia. Beauty can be the illusion that blood is a price you should be willing to pay for a chance to look like someone else.

Years later, I bought an electric trimmer, and now, I only ever take it out of my bathroom drawer when I notice the little black snakes poking way too far out of my nose. 6-year-old me was unsuccessful in her attempt to eradicate all the nose hair, and eventually, she learned that she was right when she told Lillie that it was normal. Everybody not only had them but needed them for health reasons. But if I run my hand along the inside of my right nostril, I can still feel it there. The scar where the blood poured out that day will always be with me. A reminder of what beauty really is. Beauty is both external and internal. Beauty is your heart, a manifestation of all your admirable traits. Beauty is everything you have ever loved about yourself and everything you will ever love about somebody else. Beauty is both the person you are and the person you wish you were. But beauty can be corrupted. It can become a voice in the back of your head telling you to change. It can become the cutting words of another person. Beauty can lie sometimes. But before it does, beauty starts as a whisper in the wind, a reminder of the gorgeous things that you are and the ones you strive to be.

Beauty can be something that surrounds you but also something that is always found within you, no matter how much it can lie.

Student Name: Noah Sonabend

Grade: 8

School: Emery Weiner School

Title: A Broken World

Category: Poetry

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Elaine Lupovitch

The shrilling sound of the siren haunts me,  
 But not as much as the tragedy to come.  
 People scream and yell,  
 Searching for their family, in a crowd of onlookers.  
 I look up and see a black sky,  
 Full of destruction and debris,  
 Destruction of the land I call home.  
 Just a while later, war is called,  
 I see my brother put on his uniform again, and tears come to my eyes,  
 This is not fair. Why can't the fighting stop?  
 At the time, my 13-year-old self didn't understand what was happening.  
 The fights over the years that have led to this.  
 The next few weeks are in misery,  
 Hours in a bunker with nothing to entertain me but my mind.  
 As I reflect on what has happened, I can't get the images out of my head.  
 Kids, taken from their families. Men, leaving their wives to fight a war with no fixed end.  
 When will it stop?  
 When will this be marked as history?  
 The answer is unknown.  
 Maybe tomorrow, maybe in a couple of years.  
 All I can do is hope.  
 Hope that I can live my life, without being scared for my survival.  
 Hope for a future with my family, all of us together under the same roof.  
 Hope for peace and a life filled with kindness.

Student Name: Chloe Pinsky

Grade: 8

School: Emery Weiner School

Title: A Gap In Time

Category: Flash Fiction

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Elaine Lupovitch

I flutter my eyes, as my eyelids reveal a hospital lamp. Where am I? Where's my mommy? I had questions rolling off my tongue. I look over and I see my pink pony. I love that pony. "Mommy? Daddy?" I flinch as I hear the door crack open.

"ELLE! YOU'RE AWAKE!" My mom exclaims. She grabs me and embraces my warm body. What is happening? "Aaron, get in here! She's awake!"

My dad pushes the door wide open. They both stare at me with a glimmer in their eyes. I slowly step onto the cold, hard ground.

"Guys, I'm going to be late for my playdate with my friends!" I say with confusion.

My parents don't know what to say. "Honey, you've been in a coma for seventeen years, you're twenty two," My mom says as her heart fills with worry. "We've visited you every week. Ever since that horrible ice skating accident."

I was speechless. All I vaguely remember is I was in figure skating class. My parents are kind of crazy about it, they want me to be very successful. I tightly grasp my pink pony, and wish this just could all end. I've been absent for my entire childhood and school years. I missed all of my youth.

As I walk around the room, I notice a bright, colorful calendar stuck to the wall. 2006? I was just in 1989...I stumble as I try to run, and realize it. I'm not five years old anymore; I don't do little kid things anymore. Fear, pain, and tears fill my eyes. My parents hold me tight, and sit me down. In a figure skating class, I slipped on a crack in the ice, stopping and tripping everyone in its path, and fell unconscious. When the doctors realized how horrible this accident was, they warned everyone, thinking I wouldn't make it. Waking up was almost an utter shock to everyone. Realizing I still have the mind of a five year old, it might be a good idea to take me to therapy. No more playdates, no more figure skating for littles, but worst of all, a gap in time took place. I was practically teleported. A coma is pretty much a time machine, I thought.

A few days later, my parents helped me walk to the car.

I'm going home! My foot wobbly hits the comforting floor of the car. I missed the smell. I'd remembered the most unusual things about my short childhood. Smells, tastes, people. I remembered my parents' voices, the smell of my favorite food, my love for my pink pony. My parents drive me home. As I step out of the car, my bare toes sink into the plush, cold grass. I've always noticed the most peculiar things about the world.

When I step inside the red brick, one story house, I walk up to my kindergarten room. With my pink race car bed, my collection of ponies, everything a little girl could ever dream of.

All of a sudden, I noticed a distinguishing blue envelope. I carefully rip open the tightly, perfect, straight-edged packaging, and unveil a terrifying note: I knew you would wake up on this day...June 7th, 2006. Welcome home, Elle, you won't be here for long.

I stood there, astonished. What does this mean? Who did this? This had to be a mistake. Maybe telling my parents wouldn't be such a good idea. I ended up deciding to not tell them. I feel a tense pain, and keeping things on my chest makes me anxious. I don't know who to tell, since I don't have any friends. I only had a best friend when I was young, of course.

The phone rings. I sprint to get it. "I know where you live, Elle."

I quickly threw the phone onto the floor, sprinting to my room, and pace. What do I do now? Who is this? What do they want from me? The wind blows into my dark, curly, knotted hair as I open the dusty window. I sit on the table and hug my knees. My parents came in, concerned and wondering what had happened, but then they remembered. They send me to the basement and lock me in.

"MOM! DAD!"

Hours later, My mom walks back in, and explains everything. They had put me in this coma for my own safety! I was perfectly fine, they set me up in ice skating, and they knew I would fall! Someone wanted me. Wanted me dead.

Student Name: Sabrina Sen-Roy

Grade: 8

School: Emery Weiner School

Title: At My Worst and Best

Category: Flash Fiction

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Elaine Lupovitch

### At My Worst and Best

4:00am; I wake up to the sound of my alarm clock going ring, ring, ring, blaring in my ear. I pull on my Lululemon leggings. Wincing at the fact that I spent \$118 on them. If I don't wear them daily, I won't get the value back. I walk on the treadmill and I set the incline to 1.5%. Walking turns to running as I get into the flow. 5 minutes, 10 minutes, 20 minutes, 30 minutes. I stopped the treadmill, wishing I had more time in the day to improve my life.

4:30am. Shower, dress in my work scrubs, do my makeup, and my hair. The checklist gets shorter as I progress through my day. The time is now 5:15am. I slave over the hot stove making breakfast for me, my husband, and my 6 children. Pancake after pancake, I progress. The time is 6am. My children are fed and my husband, Robbie, is just now waking up. I wish I could say the same, as I have been awake for two hours, and counting.

I look around at the house I once thought so fondly of. The house was once an oasis, a paradise. A boho chic with beachy undertones. Now, all I see is toys, food, and my kids ugly artwork that I didn't have the heart to throw away. I kept my rules in place until the 3rd child. Toys littered the floor. When I finally have time, I need to clean this stupid house, I thought to myself.

6:30am. I check my phone as I load up my car with my lunch bag and hospital shoes. As I pull my shoes on, I think. I think about the people I help. I think about how very lucky I am compared to the people I visit. The people sitting at home, not able to move. The people that are so sick and weak that they can't get out of bed. The people that are loved by oh so many, just like me.

6:15am I stop for my daily Starbucks run, still thinking about my messy house.

"Hi there! Welcome to Starbucks! What can we get for you today?"

The overworked underpaid employee says to me, as I pull up. I ordered a venti matcha lemonade with light ice, extra lemonade, and only 3 scoops of matcha powder. A mouthful to say.

"Your total will be \$5.03 at the next window."

Another charge to my already depleting bank account.

7:00am. I arrived at the first home hospice patient's house. I go in not knowing who I will be attending to. My colleague, Marissa, needed me to step in because she wasn't feeling well. I ring the doorbell and a young couple greets me. Who am I caring for then, I ask

myself. The beautiful and young duo leads me to a back bedroom. The walls and room are bare except for a bonanza of hospital wristbands in a pile. The room looks like the people who arranged it were in a scramble to it put together. How strange. I don't want to ask any questions. I look to the bed. A little girl lies there. She looks pale and weak. Her parents explain,

"She seems to be getting even worse. She seems more sick because she wasn't playing with her toys."

Understood, I thought to myself as I opened my medical bag. I do my job through watery eyes. Just a couple more minutes I think to myself to pass the time. Surprisingly, this is my first time crying on the job.

8:00am. I get back to my car. Hot tears stream down my eyes into my face and mouth. The salty tears bring my makeup down my face. I will never think of my kids' messy toys that way again. I want to stay grateful now. Grateful like the people I help daily. Grateful like the people that have been at their worst and best.

12:00pm. I eat lunch in my car, also a messy space; but this time, I don't complain. I go through my day being mindful to keep thankful.

7:00pm. I get home to my wonderful kids. We play, laugh, and enjoy our time together.

Student Name: Avery Wigder

Grade: 8

School: Emery Weiner School

Title: Cost of Peace

Category: Poetry

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Elaine Lupovitch

Why is it that everything in this world has a cost?

Why is it that everything in this world comes with a price?

Why is it that peace is not free?

The cost of peace is too high.

The world waves goodbye,

and we separate into our own different areas to fight and to argue.

I would pay all the money in the world for peace and peace forever.

Innocent people should not be losing their lives because they can't pay a price.

The world is messed up.

I want to live in a world where it is free to say that I am a 14-year-old Jewish girl.

I want to live in a world where it's free to be yourself.

I want to live in a world where it's free to embrace happiness.

I want to live in a world of peace.

It may be expensive and it may come with a cost,

but at the end of the day, it's what the world needs.

This is our canvas and we decide how we want to paint it.

Student Name: Ryan Berger

Grade: 8

School: Emery Weiner School

Title: It's What's On The Inside That Matters

Category: Critical Essay

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Elaine Lupovitch

Everyone is equal. Unfortunately, many people worldwide would strongly disagree with the statement I just made. They will look at you, see something different, and then hate you for something you can't control. MLK Jr states "An individual has not started living until he can rise above the narrow confines of his individualistic concerns to the broader concerns of all humanity.", suggesting that we can't live normally until we accept that we all are different. The action of ignoring that completely falls into the pseudo-scientific study of eugenics. Eugenics is the belief that some races, ethnicities, or religions are genetically superior. This study is incredibly inaccurate but correctly expresses the feelings these ethnically racist people have. These beliefs have made many states not collaborate on world issues and have forced some of the greatest empires to fall. The former state of Yugoslavia is an incredible example of this.

Yugoslavia was a European state that came to power in 1918. The modern-day states that used to be part of Yugoslavia are Kosovo, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Slovenia, Montenegro, and North Macedonia. Because of the many different ethnic and political standpoints in Yugoslavia, specifically the many conflicts between the Serbs and the Croats, the communist party was eventually dismantled and the socialist party came to power. This is why Yugoslavia changed its official name to the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The socialist party was very beneficial for Yugoslavia as many socialist beliefs included equality for all men and preached the idea of brotherhood and family. This was used in the hope that the Serbs and Croats would stop hating each other. Yugoslavian leader Josip Broz Tito believed in this as well and was consistently suppressing nationalist movements throughout the entire country. Lazar Koliševski succeeded Tito. Koliševski was from Serbia and had many strong Serbian beliefs.

In January 1992, just 12 years after Koliševski came to power, Yugoslavia began to collapse. Shortly before that in 1990 Slovenia internationally declared independence. This started the fight for independence against Yugoslavia throughout the area. Slowly after Slovenia declared independence many other states declared independence as well such as Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia. This was devastating for the founders of Yugoslavia to watch. Because of this Raif Dizdarević said "Our fathers died to create Yugoslavia. We will not go down the road to national conflict. We will take the path of Brotherhood and Unity." After Slovenia, Bosnia, and Croatia left only Serbia, North Macedonia, and Montenegro remained in Yugoslavia. Since the economy was crippling, the state of Yugoslavia officially dispersed in 1992.



Because Koliševski was not the most socially beneficial leader, the states of Serbia and Croatia had frequent disagreements. They were under the same leadership, in the same land, and under the same laws but still hated each other because they were visually different. Slobodan Milosevic states "Yugoslavia is a multinational community and it can survive only under the conditions of full equality for all nations that live in it. " Even with efforts like the ones from Milosevic the Serbs and Croations kept fighting and created more conflicts over the years, including a violent attempt by Serbia to take control of the Croatian city of Knin. Serbia felt that because there were more Serbians in Knin it should be theirs. This almost led to a giant war between the two states and might have added more ethnic borders around the world.

After Yugoslavia dispersed the individual states had even more chaos within themselves, similar to a civil war. The Kosovo revolution is a great example of this. Kosovo is a part of Serbia that rebelled against the Serbs and now has the majority of international national recognition. After Yugoslavia dissolved, two areas in modern day Serbia attempted to gain independence. Those two areas are Kosovo and Vojvodina. Vojvodina is near the north and Kosovo is in the south. In Kosovo there was a group established called the KLA, the Kosovo Liberation Army. This group was mostly funded by the Albanians. Why? For the same reason as Knin, Kosovo wanted independence. Kosovo was 98% Albanian but the land was in Serbia. This led to a long war between Kosovo and Serbia, as Serbia consistently used 4th-generation warfare tactics. This included common ethnic cleansings, pogroms, and massacres all around the area and the sad thing is some countries couldn't help because they also had places that wanted independence. They wanted to prevent that internal independence at all costs.

There was even more drama during this time period because the USA "accidentally" bombed a Chinese emissary and created more chaos but in the end, all of this led to the UN Security Council Resolution 1244 being passed in 1999. Resolution 1244 forced UN peacekeepers into Kosovo to help the people. Another beneficial thing not specifically in Resolution 1244 but all around the world was the fact that many people noticed that Serbia had broken the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. More specifically, they broke articles 1, 2, 5, 9, and 13. In the end, the Kosovo revolution was successful but as society expanded so did the tension between Serbia and Kosovo.

An instance of a small difference, but still a significant dispute, is shown between Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, and Croatia concerning their languages. All three of these countries speak slightly different languages, but they sound very similar and they are internationally recognized as Croation-Bosnian-Serbian. The main difference between the languages is that Serbian uses the Roman and Cyrillic alphabet while Croatian uses the Roman alphabet exclusively. None of these states liked this, as all of these states didn't want to be seen as similar to the other, but regardless of that the languages were very similar. Even now in 2023 there is still fighting between the two countries and the opposing country's citizens are being killed because of ethnic differences. Whether it's from job opportunities or even social codes, being Croatian in Serbia might get you hurt, and being Serbian in Croatia might also get you hurt even if you bring no harm. This is

proven internationally illegal by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights articles 13, and 14 which state: "Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution" and "Everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country."

People worldwide will look at each other, see a difference, then attack each other. This process has repeated itself many times throughout history, creating some of the strongest nations and with that, creating more poverty. Politicians around the world will disregard their standpoint just to emphasize how important it is to be unified. But in the end, even the strongest nations like Yugoslavia will collapse. May it be known that, just because you look different doesn't mean you should treat someone differently.

Student Name: Eliya Shani  
Grade: 8  
School: Emery Weiner School  
Title: Layers of the Subway  
Category: Flash Fiction  
Key: Gold Key  
Educator: Elaine Lupovitch

I took the subway home from the hospital the day I was born. It was my first time, obviously. I don't remember the ride but Mommy and Daddy say it happened, so I believe them. I don't really know any better. Our family doesn't have a car, so we use the subway to get to most places. We live in New York so that's pretty common. Cars are not cheap. I took the subway home from my first playdate with my friend. I'm still kind of scared of going on it alone. Usually either Mommy or Daddy comes with me, for now. They both say that I am 7 and  $\frac{3}{4}$  years old and need to be brave, which means going on the subway alone. I hope they never leave me because I think that I will always be scared. Mommy just got fired from her job and she fights with Daddy when they think I am sleeping but they don't know that I am not. I hope they stop fighting soon because I am turning 8 soon and I don't want them to be mad at my party.

I took the subway home from my first day of 6th grade. It went very well. I am no longer scared of being alone on the metro which means I have matured a lot. I actually feel very proud when I stand there in my uniform and backpack because then everybody knows I go to school and I am very smart. Mom and Dad are acting kind of weird. They still fight when I am asleep and Dad keeps on telling Mom to get a job. But they also fight about other things too like bills and money. I wish that everyone could be happy but I don't think that is going to be happening any time soon.

I took the subway home from my first day at work. I got a job working as a lifeguard at the neighborhood pool. I do my job very well because I took a bunch of swimming lessons when I was younger. I am 15 and I understand more things than I used to. Mom and Dad still argue but now they don't even try to hide it from me. I know that our family is falling apart. I'm scared of what will happen next but I have no one to talk about it with. However bad things are now I know the worst is yet to come.

I took the subway home from my first time at court. My parents are getting a divorce. It came really fast but I was expecting it. The papers, court, arguing over who gets me and when. Really, I saw it coming a mile away but it still hurts. I'm 17 now and I am counting down the days until I become a legal adult so I can run away from this tiny apartment and never look back.

I took the subway home from the DMV. I saved up all of my money for the past 3 years so I could buy a car. It's second-hand, beat up, and it looks pretty old but it's mine and I am very proud of it. The second I got home I started packing, I looked all over both my guardians apartments for anything that belongs to me because I don't plan on coming

back. I decided to tell each of them separately with a note. That way once they read it I will be long gone. Even if I gave them the news to their faces there would be nothing they could do or say to change my mind.

I took my new car all the way to Houston TX where my aunt and favorite cousins live. On the way I noticed I had a total of 75 missed calls and 236 messages from my guardians. I blocked both of their numbers, happily. Over the next few weeks I got my life back in order. I continued senior year at a different school. I erased my old life then restarted.

There is one thing, however, that still ties me to my old life. My metro card sits on the nightstand of my new room. I look at it every night before I fall asleep. I can't bring myself to drop it in the garbage. No matter how hard I try, the subway will always be meaningful to me. It won't always be in a positive way but I have made my peace with that.

Student Name: Avery Wigder

Grade: 8

School: Emery Weiner School

Title: Lost in the Light

Category: Poetry

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Elaine Lupovitch

I wasn't always this angry.

It's just the world on my body.

My experience.

We don't look further than a smile to see how you are gasping for air, but choking on salt water.

They don't see how your sense of purpose in life is slipping through your fingers like sand.

They don't see you stare at your reflection longing for the "old you" back.

Now you miss yourself.

The old person that you lost.

My body is burning with the shame of not belonging.

I don't know where to go.

I don't know where to be.

I don't know who to be.

I wish things were different.

I wish I was different.

I feel as if I'm made to understand but I'm not to be understood.

We shouldn't be this kind of tired at our age.

How many deaths have you died to be so strong?

How many times have you screamed to be so silent?

I wasn't always this angry.

It's just the world on my body.

My experience.

Student Name: Addison Penny

Grade: 8

School: Emery Weiner School

Title: My Closet

Category: Poetry

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Elaine Lupovitch

The rods in my closet hold hangers filled with oversized T-shirts,  
School uniform polos, cozy sweaters.  
On the floor, you can see my cart,  
Covered in bracelet-making supplies and my good markers,  
Representing who I am now.  
But the back of my closet holds my whole life,  
Me in different versions,  
Memories coming to life as objects  
Like the same ones that live in the back of my mind.  
Somewhere...

There is a bright, frilly dress,  
Adorned with bows and ruffles,  
From when I was three years old,  
Reminding me of how pretty I felt  
As I twirled around and around,  
The long skirt swaying for what felt like forever then  
But is ten years ago now.

There is a pair of sparkly silver Converse sneakers.  
The same ones that guarded my dance bag  
While I competed in my ballroom shoes.  
The ones who watched me smiling and shaking a little bit  
As the judges handed me a gold medal.  
The ones I considered my lucky shoes,  
Now four sizes too small but still sitting in the corner of the top shelf,  
Untouched for years.

There are my old sheets from the smaller bed I got rid of,  
Now used only for trundle beds  
when I host slumber parties,  
Covered with drawings of whimsical unicorns and fairies  
That would always watch over the sleeping baby

I once was.

There is a collection of Harry Potter T-shirts  
That I got on my eleventh birthday,  
That represented my favorite book series at the time.  
Wingardium Leviosa dragging me back  
Into Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

Year after year,  
More and more things  
Get shoved to the back  
To make space for the current me.  
But they are still there  
For me to find when I am cleaning my room,  
And for me to remember what my life was like in the past.

Student Name: Eliot Kelly-Leftwich

Grade: 10

School: Emery Weiner School

Title: Singing Cigarettes

Category: Poetry

Key: Gold Key

Educator:

the needle slips into the grooves,  
routine and obsolete,  
this time, your voice is coaxed out,  
it's crisp from the cigarette smoke,

cough, hey, how's school been?

i feel my bones crack underneath the pressure of it,  
you pull the soup from the microwave and i cry some more,  
comfort lunch,

because i can't remember when i saw you last,  
i start to document every time i see people, remembering to say i love them,

day 1 - i saw mom

day 2 - i saw you

i love you.

the collar of your shirt and the scruff of your chin,

it's colder up here,  
it feels like summer down there, doesn't it?

the record scratches,  
it is too hot down here, to answer your question,  
i don't know if that should make me sad or give me closure,  
it already ended, so what if it breaks on the way,

i flip it over,  
refit the needle and sink to the floor,  
my fingers embedding into hardwood panels,

you would like it here,



i like it here, in my floor,

i burn my tongue on the soup, and drop the steaming bowl into my lap,  
broth and tears coating my jeans,

it took so long to realize,  
smile for me please,  
remember me and tuck me into your breast pocket,

a pen or a pack,

i've burnt myself and i've broken my fingers, scraped on the edges of broken records,  
trying to find your voice in one of them,

haven't seen you in awhile,  
gee, you look bigger now,  
have you grown?

i've found the perfect one this time though,  
but the b-side starts to slow, dwindling towards the middle,  
slipping towards the pupil of your eye,  
i don't take it off, even though it's finished now, i simply sink further,

see you next time,  
don't be a stranger,

my head crashing,  
my body seeping into wood grain,  
hold me please,

if you won't,  
i'll find a way,

the needle pops up on instinct, and the lid slips shut, and it's back in the sleeve, up on the  
shelf,  
i don't remember putting it there,

it protrudes a little,

you can hear me, right?

right?

i'm still trying to hear you.

Student Name: Mia Laviage

Grade: 8

School: Emery Weiner School

Title: The Diagnosis that Affected All of Us

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Elaine Lupovitch

## The Diagnosis that Affected All of Us

As the shoe smacked the wall with a loud thump, I became startled. The pink and blue pillows were ripped off the couch and thrown onto the hard floor creating a crashing sound. I watch the panic in my mother's eyes as screams surround the room. My sister throws another one of her overwhelming tantrums, the third of the week.

"What could it be about today?" I ask myself.

The day was Monday, and I was prepared for another busy day at school. I attempted to concentrate on eating my delicious waffles and studying for my big science exam coming up in the next few days. I picked the juicy red fruits from my breakfast bowl as I tried to focus. I stared at my plate, as I watched a teardrop land on my strawberry. I wondered if this nightmare would ever end.

About one year ago, my sister, Charlotte, was diagnosed with a disorder called PANS. Even though this disorder is not rare, not many have heard of it. PANS can be originated from a tic bite. It can also be caused by repeated infection, or mold overload in the body causing neuroinflammation. Some recurring symptoms include anxiety, behavioral regression, difficulties in school performance, obsessive-compulsive disorder, as well as mood disorders. Charlotte experiences these struggles these struggles daily, from the moment she wakes up even into the night. I rarely attempt to get involved, in fear of being harmed. Sometimes, Char becomes so violent it is dangerous to be around her. She throws objects around the room and uses her hands to hurt. I can truly see the fear in my dog's eyes as well.

Charlotte has been to countless doctors, sat through vials of blood draws, and attended therapy every week, but not much seems to help. I'm still patiently waiting for her to get better; I pray this day will arrive. These doctors have given her supplements in the form of creams, pills, and liquid. She even was given new dietary restrictions. All of our dinners are gluten and dairy-free, with limited counts of sugar.

My friends come over expecting a delicious snack, but we don't have anything that anyone enjoys. My mom used to buy boxes of Cheez-Its because they were my favorite snack. Sadly, Char would sneak them for her own, and we would find crumbs in her closet and under her bed. Now the pantry is full of gluten-free crackers, nuts, and anything made with almond flower. But the hardest part of her day is the mornings.

Stepping in the car for school sometimes takes an hour. Char refuses to get dressed, brush her teeth, or sometimes even eat her breakfast. It's a nightmare. At one point, my mom trusted my sister to take her pills in the car while she was driving her to school. A few weeks later, my mom went to a carwash, where they discovered several pills hidden under Charlotte's seat. She hid them every single day.

Our car rides are the opposite of silence. She sobs and refuses to carpool. My mom is forced to walk her into her school building.

It's been truly difficult being her big sister. We hardly ever get along, because she is always yelling and screaming at me. The attention is rarely on me because Charlotte needs it most. Living with her after her PANS diagnosis has been a rollercoaster, filled with so many ups and downs. I struggle to fall asleep due to her screaming before bed or in the middle of the night. My entire family is exhausted, especially my mom. Charlotte will barely separate from her; she is always attached to her side. She declines playdates and sleepovers, and won't leave the house. My mom and I rarely get to spend any time together, alone.

Currently, Charlotte takes seventeen pills, two liquids, and two powders every day. It's always a fight to take them; she always refuses. Pillows are torn and tossed onto the ground. Shoes are thrown at the wall leaving marks and dents. My mom is pushed and screamed at, all as I watch in horror. This occurs every single day.

Over holiday breaks, my family and I have traveled around the country. I vividly remember one time Charlotte yanked my mom's shirt at the airport, yelling at the top of her lungs, demanding we cancel our trip. My mom sometimes just cannot do it anymore, and she begins to cry as well. I don't blame her.

It's been immensely difficult being the child who gets the least amount of attention, but I am grateful that Charlotte is receiving the help and attention she needs. Her condition is serious, so I'm glad that we discovered it early so we can treat it. I can't imagine how hard it is for my mom to parent a child like this. I greatly commend her for everything she does.

I wait for the day to arrive when she is fully healed. I've been waiting for a year, although it feels like an eternity. Somedays, I lose hope. I pray for no more violence, tantrums, and screams.

I pray that one day our relationship will soon become closer, and we will rely on each other. I am grateful that Charlotte is receiving the aid she needs. Words cannot express how grateful I am. My heart hurts for her, and I hope one day soon she will get better, and things will go back to how they used to be.

Student Name: Renana Machol

Grade: 8

School: Emery Weiner School

Title: The Smoke From Far Away

Category: Flash Fiction

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Elaine Lupovitch

My eyes open and take in the surroundings of my body. I'm at my house, in the comfort of my bed, but I don't seem to understand why I'm still here when there's light outside my window.

I look toward my alarm clock and see the time 12:02 P.M., Monday, 12th of

September, screaming at me in red. Why am I in bed so late on a school day? I try to recall what happened prior to my blackout and to understand what's going on.

The simple fact of oversleeping hits my mind. I knew I shouldn't have pressed that snooze button. I had forgotten my parents left early and wouldn't have been able to remind me it was time to leave.

I don't know if I should just accept the fact I'm here and skip school, or make the effort to get up and walk to Greenville High School.

I decide to start with my simple routine of getting ready for school, and I go downstairs to grab myself some coffee. I know as soon as the bitter-sweet taste of the ground-up beans touches my lips, I'll have the energy to start my day.

I push the sheets off of my legs and turn myself to get out of bed. My feet land on my fuzzy white carpet and I move around to feel its softness. I move along and set my feet on the wooden floor that has been the same ever since we moved to Greenville 5 years ago. My door gives out a tired, shrill creak as I open it. I've reminded my dad at least 10 times about it, but I guess he hasn't gotten around to oiling it. I'm not going to get picky around the subject, I know he works hard to supply enough money for us to live like we do.

I try to be quiet, and tiptoe my way down the stairs, until I realize there's no point. I don't think a dog will care if I'm loud or quiet, and it's just me and Bean right now.

As soon as I get down to the first floor, I sprint around my living room and into the kitchen. I want to get to my daily cup of coffee as soon as I can.

I start to pour the coffee beans into a measuring cup that I will need to put into the machine, as my eyes drift to look out the window upon the hot fall day.

A heat wave flashes all over my skin, causing goosebumps to form as a distant appearance of smoke enters my view. It seems so far away, but I've been reminded constantly how fast wildfires spread. Of course, the one day my allergies have enough power to block any smell from reaching me, a wildfire breaks out right near me. That's just my luck, how could I miss such a major thing?

As the reality of a wildfire interrupts my thinking, my hands get sweaty, and they are no longer strong enough to hold my cup. It just slips right out of my grip.

The glass shatters as it hits the floor, and the shards explode into the tiniest of pieces. I feel a sudden pain gutter through my leg. It feels as if a million blades pierce into my skin, opening the once calm layer of skin. My hand bolts to cover the newly opened scab, and I feel a warm substance I know is blood.

I'm scared to look down, the appearance of blood has always been a discomfort for me, but I know I'll need to push through it.

My eyes drift slowly down to where the glass entered and I can no longer see the color of my skin. It's all red now, causing last night's dinner to rise out of my stomach and into my throat.

I push down the need throw up and remind myself of the situation. I need to get out of here, I need to refuse the pain and run, I think as I try to arouse my adrenaline.

I turn to the window to see the progress of the fire and see it has captivated the houses a block down. I now know I have very limited time to escape. I scream out for Bean, hoping that this one time, she'll listen to me and come.

"BEAN, PLEASE BEAN FOR ONCE JUST COME!," I scream out. My ears pay attention attentively and thankfully make out the sound of her nails clitter clattering on the floor. I notice her come as she turns the corner into the kitchen. She knew something was off, and I'm grateful she ran down.

I grab her cobalt-speckled collar and find the strength inside me to thrust off the ground. I see the flames inhale my favorite place in my backyard, the swing set I used to play on when I was younger, and tears start to fill my face. I know this house will never be the same.

My childhood home will be destroyed, and I'll never see it again. Where will we all live? I shove away my feelings and try to jostle through my decor-filled house. I see the door just out of my reach and try to sprint, even though my pain wants me to give up. I run and run until the handle of my front door is right in my grip.

I look back one last time and see the flames clutch my kitchen and the memories that were collected throughout my life. There's no way I'm stopping now, so I shove my legs one after the other down the street. As we get further away, I look to the side of me and see Bean heavily breathing with scratches all over her leg. Her expression makes me think back, and I finally come to a conclusion. Everything I've known, it's all gone.

Student Name: Addison Penny

Grade: 8

School: Emery Weiner School

Title: Writer's Block

Category: Poetry

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Elaine Lupovitch

My pencil sits, still and stuck on the empty page.  
 My brain swirls with so many ideas and with none  
 All at once.  
 It's like an invisible force keeps the words from  
 Pouring onto the paper.  
 Each thin blue line runs across the notebook paper  
 For miles.  
 Miles upon miles of desolate space forming a  
 Big white void of lifelessness.

How do I add life?  
 How do I turn its emptiness into a wide world of colors and  
 Information and verses and clauses?  
 Something important to the world?  
 That makes an impact?  
 That the people around me need to read?

How can nothing but  
 The scratches of my pencil lead  
 form the universe  
 I know I can create?

I know the answer is words,  
 But the eyes around me, watching me, make it not matter anymore.  
 They keep the words inside me,  
 And push my hand back from picking up my pencil  
 And writing them down,  
 And hold my mouth shut from saying them out loud  
 So all that becomes of me is frustration.

The frustration seeps through my brain  
 And takes over the space where the words should be  
 Like an apocalypse, shoving all my writing further and further away,

Twisting each sentence until all I have left is a mess of dissatisfaction  
And a crumpled piece of paper with scribbled-out scratches of graphite.

This is a poem for people who prefer reading over writing.  
For people who can't create the correct words,  
And can't make sentences flow from their thoughts out onto the paper,  
And care what others think about them.

Poems, stories, essays, scripts, novels, scrolls  
Stay trapped  
Like they are in a maze.  
A maze of anger, peer pressure, and fear of being judged  
Inside my mind.



Student Name: Helina Zhang

Grade: 11

School: Fort Bend Christian Academy-Hs

Title: ode to the american flag: kanagawa

Category: Poetry

Key: Gold Key

Educator:

love is ... splintering glorious pain-breaking into a chandelier of golden p i e c e s  
 the poets said under their breath  
 you live and you learn  
 and maybe because i was never that. good. at. learn ... ing.  
 that i grew to love that split second pain  
 as i gave my blood out slowly, bones curled over my bathtub ledge  
 crimson droplets cut white-breath crescendoing against the tile. splatters. icy silence  
 awakens.  
 i will grieve it like any other (& maybe that was when the problems started)

i carved towering peaks on my thighs, something my body will forgive  
 but my heart will pray to remember  
 crimson peaks formed  
 formed from the red and gold sea  
 (can you say sea to shining sea three times fast)  
 that formed my mother's tongue  
 mountains formed through collisions. mountains steady. brilliant, bloody crimson peaks  
 formed  
 covered jagged cliffs with splattered golden foliage, 张家界  
 ponder your thoughts as i skipped from pond to pond-sea to shining sea

\*\*,  
 every time you and i collided  
 kanagawa could not compare  
 my hopes are just like a spotted tidal wave  
 i watch it rise and float away (the tide always evades me)

moon will draw you in  
 high tides rise all boats- but maybe not mine  
 i will celebrate your fullness every year- c r a c k i n g open a pocket of golden hopes and lost  
 dreams  
 i will search across the red sea on a golden boat  
 to say hello to your child across the shining sea

red sea red sea  
do you remember me?

your beauty is not lost on me  
your language is not lost on me

i keep my hopes under my pillow, like any other kid

but unlike a kid: my hope is decades old, aquamarine blue, picasso's blue  
我爱你

with us intertwined  
and the thought  
lingered on my mind  
that you might be mine, floated away  
like kanagawa

\*\*\*  
carry your tired smile, oh please bring your weary souls

drag your ever-evasive body to give up

pledge your allegiance to a deep crimson flag, splattered with cream-colored stars  
a star sans wish that you cannot have. too far fallen  
a dream that you will forget soon enough  
against a brilliant aquamarine sea- that does not know your l a n g u a g e

as your mouth forms a word that will betray your mind  
tongues lolling in a way you were not taught  
S-I-L-V-E-R is not something you would wear  
the gold star is something you would much rather adorn  
C-I-V-I-L is not something they were to you

words will form greyish mush, something indescribable  
flying from your tongue, something you cannot reach for  
swimming like a koi that will evade you to a sea that does not love you  
its golden flecks remind you of a country once forgotten

red sea red sea  
do you remember me?

i will wish upon your five twinkling gold stars  
i will pledge my allegiance to a country that may come to love me  
crimson peaks and golden language and all

we have long since been estranged.

Student Name: Elizabeth Lei

Grade: 11

School: Home School

Title: Disconnection

Category: Short Story

Key: Gold Key

Educator:

On the day Marie ate an orange, I killed her. I can still see the way she leaned into the countertop, still smell the sticky pulp and juices that stained her hands. Sometimes, I catch my fingers unconsciously peeling back the skin of a phantom orange, nails digging mindlessly into the air.



It was on the cusp of autumn that we arrived as bright-eyed newlyweds. Marie's cousin Liam and his wife had graciously invited us to stay with them for a few days, urging us to scope out the surrounding houses. They lived on a sprawling ranch overlooking fields of cows and hay bales, with only a small gravel road winding to the main road. It was an opportunity for us to unwind after the whirlwind of decisions that had consumed our lives before the wedding. Over a plate of steak and potatoes, we shook with laughter as Liam dramatically narrated their honeymoon story, leaping up now and then to re-enact a scene or impersonate a character.

After dinner, Liam led us to the patio chairs, his wife handing us each a mug of apple cider. I savored the steam that enveloped my face, a comfort from the cool night air. Out in the countryside, it seemed like nothing separated the ground from the sky – if I wanted to, I could reach out and collect the stars, one-by-one.

"So you like video games?" Liam asked me, propping his feet up.

I laughed. "I'm a video game developer. If I'm not developing a game, then I'm playing one. My doctor tells me I should probably find some other hobbies to fixate on."

He nodded approvingly, then hesitated for a second, as if he was going to remark on something. Instead, his demeanor shifted and he began to sip at his cider meditatively. His wife glanced at him searchingly, then turned to me. "You probably can't tell, but Liam's been dying to meet you. He's been working on something for the last year now, but he's quite anxious to hear your opinion. He thinks very highly of your games, you know."

Liam grinned and scratched his beard. "I'll come clean then. I am a big fan, have been ever since you released your Starship series. Didn't want to geek out and scare you away."

"You're an original follower, then," I said, delighted. Liam didn't strike me as a video game devotee – with his scraggly beard and dirt stained flannel, he fit the stereotype of the modern technology abstainer.

Beneath the shawl covering her shoulders, Marie piped up. "Tell us about your project, Liam."

Something in his demeanor shifted, and he studied the ground thoughtfully. "Some might call it a virtual reality system, but it's more than that. When you're plugged in, it-well, your physical body is completely tied into the virtual environment."

I leaned forward. "What do you mean plugged in?"

"The system is composed of tiny electrode wires. To put it simply, they send electrical signals deep within the tissue and change the way your unconscious mind perceives your surroundings. Nutrients are funneled in through the wires, so you don't even have to unplug to eat or drink." His eyes gleamed in the darkness as he set down his mug, fidgeting with the handle.

The silence was broken by my disbelief. "That's physically impossible."

"I've been in the system myself, for up to six weeks. No food, no water. Yet here I am, alive and kicking," Liam gestured to himself, an urgency in the rapid movement. "You think it's impossible now, but wait until you experience it yourself. The thrill of living in a simulation. Truly and completely living, I'm telling you, not some projections from a flimsy headset."

You are a madman, I thought. A foolish, foolish madman. If Liam was telling the truth, then he was playing with fire. Pretending to be in a fantasy world with a video game controller clutched firmly in my hands was something safe and familiar. I had the power to turn it on and off. But to completely immerse oneself in another reality – mind and body controlled by wires – made me shudder in horror.

Marie laid a comforting hand on mine. I squeezed it tight.

"Just think about it," Liam said. "I want you to be a part of this, I really do. With your brilliant mind, just imagine what we can create."

I felt scalding spice on my tongue and Marie's warm, smooth palm. "I'll think about it."



After our brief stay at the ranch house, I was strangely relieved to be back in our apartment, leaky pipes and all. Marie must have sensed how uneasy I was from the conversation with Liam, so she didn't bring up the topic. For that, I was grateful. We settled into a comfortable routine quickly, delegating tasks based on both of our schedules. With Marie working from home, I came home to the dinner table piled high with herb roasted chicken and stuffed mushrooms. Married life was treating us well. Life was perfect. That was, until the package came.

"Is that garlic I smell?" I called out, sighing in relief as I kicked off my dress shoes. Work was getting painfully monotonous, and I was in the deepest creative rut of my life. Walking toward the kitchen, I stopped abruptly when I saw Marie sitting at the table, cradling a small black box. "Honey? What is that?"

She looked up, her eyes bright and cheeks flushed. Drumming her fingers lightly against the box, she slowly lifted it up for me to see. "I know you're going to be mad, but please just listen. The mailman brought a package this afternoon addressed to us, and I—"

I had seen the wires. In two long strides, I crossed to her side and ripped it from her hands, driven by the fear that had lingered in the back of my mind since our conversation with Liam. Multiple long, needle-thin strands protruded from the box. "Are you out of your mind? Why didn't you throw this away immediately?"

"Listen, it's not what you think," she said hastily, fumbling over her words. "I just wanted to try it, just to see, and it works exactly like Liam said it would, and honestly you won't believe how colorful and vibrant and perfect it is."

I felt a horrible chill go up my spine. The world spun in my peripheral as I stared at Marie, stupefied. The uncanny glow in her eyes pierced through me, and I noticed in a daze that her behavior reminded me of something. Or someone.

I put the box down and turned away. I couldn't look at her any longer or I would throw up.

"Why can't you try and see how wonderful this is?" her shrill voice rang in my ears as I walked numbly toward the bedroom. "A few hours ago, I was the happiest I've ever been. Look, watch this."

I heard her rustling around, and a few seconds later, a low humming sound filled the room. Dread sank into me, and jerking around, I ran swiftly to where she lay, slumped against the chair. Wires protruded haphazardly from her skin, pulsing periodically.

“Marie? Marie?” I shook her body frantically. Her head lolled back, saliva dribbling from the corners of her mouth. Pulling out my phone from my back pocket, my fingers trembled violently as I pressed 9-1-1. Before I could hit the call button, Marie jolted up, wide-eyed and awake. She ripped the electrodes from her body. “You see? I can control when I want to come out.”

I wasn’t listening. Picking up the box, I headed for the door. I would destroy the cursed thing with my bare hands. I would rip every wire apart before it would ever touch her again.

“Stop!” Marie cried, desperately tugging me back. “You can’t break it. I’m linked to it now. If it’s taken apart in any way, I will die. That’s what Liam told me on the other side.”

Liam. That bastard. Now, I was utterly helpless: he had taken my wife. I was sure he was determined to drag me next into his obsession.



The couch became my refuge. Marie plugged herself in most weeks, staying in for days at a time. I pleaded with her, but she could not comprehend my terror. Every time emotion overtook her – most often anger and resentment – she retreated to the bedroom where the box sat on my pillow, wires strewn over the blanket covers. It was her escape from the pain of her failing marriage to an obstinate, unyielding man. Why couldn’t I be more understanding? Why didn’t I just try? Because of what it’s doing to you, I wanted to scream at her. But I stayed silent and took it, if it meant she stayed in this reality with me.

It was only a matter of time before I saw the markings on her skin and it all boiled over. That morning, Marie stood propped against the kitchen cabinets, slowly peeling a mandarin orange. She was stacking the peels one-by-one in a neat little pile on the countertop. When I walked in, she paused for a brief moment, then popped a piece into her mouth.

“You hate oranges,” I said.

“Do I?” she murmured. “I thought they were my favorite fruit.”

My eyes narrowed. She could never stand the pulpy texture of oranges; when we dated, she refused to even kiss me if I ate an orange that day, claiming the remnants lingered in my mouth. Now, she reached out toward me, offering a small piece. As she did so, her

sleeve slipped down, revealing an arm covered with silver patches. They were reflective like metal, light glinting off in rays.

I tried to hide my visceral reaction, but I wasn't quick enough. She saw the way I flinched, and something flickered across her face. Without another word, Marie shuffled toward the bedroom, orange juice dripping from her fingers into sticky puddles. I heard the familiar whirring sound, then a small thud as her arm fell onto the mattress.

Something rose in me, a choking sensation that blinded me with burning white light. My whole body trembled feverishly, and without thinking, I opened the kitchen drawer, pulling out a pair of shears. My feet moved stiffly, clumsily to the bedroom. I turned the knob ever so slightly and pushed the door open. There she lay, one hand draped off the bed, the other gripping the box. I went and stood by her side, looking at her pale, beautiful face. Oh, she was so beautiful.

With one hand, I touched her face tenderly. With the other, I cut the wires. As the shears snipped through, her eyes flew open, and I swore for a second, her eyes met mine in a fleeting moment of confused anguish. Then, she began convulsing and flailing for what seemed like an eternity. Through it all, I wept and held her hand gently until she stopped twitching. Rivulets of orange juice and blood had dripped from her silver wounds onto me, the nauseating smell of iron permeating the room.

Later in our bathroom, I washed my hands with scented soap, methodically scrubbing my hands underneath the flow of boiling water.



Student Name: Yuna Lee

Grade: 10

School: Home School

Title: Waning Flames

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Key: Gold Key

Educator:

To this day, going to advanced pediatric care scares me. Even though my fear did not torment me previously before an unforgettable visit, it does today. I'm not particularly scared of the doctors or the nurses; it's the way my anxiety crawls into my skin as I sit on the examination table that intimidates me. The way the atmosphere suddenly feels as cold as the chills you get from seeing the depths of the world, the way the smell of devastation fills the room, the way I feel suffocated in my fate traps me in my state of mind. On the way to the doctor's, I try to feel reassured by my mom saying, "It will be okay." In anticipation of this specific appointment, hundreds of altered versions of these words, "You'll be fine" or "Everything will be okay," followed me ubiquitously. As much as I wanted to have faith in those words, as time passed, the colors of autumn faded into the smell of bleakness, following in the steps of my unconvincing faith.

At the doctor's office, explaining to my orthopedic pediatrician that as a professional figure skater, I had not skated for three months struck me in the face. Never once in the previous years of my life have I ever approached the thought of not skating. To me, figure skating is what fuels my body and my soul. It's the warmth of the sunlight in heavy winters, the laughter that makes someone else ask if you're crying, and the hug you never want to let go of. When I clarified my situation and told my doctor that my injury was not improving, it was clear that only one solution was left.

Just four years old, I knew what I wanted to be. Even everyone around me knew that my goals and future were clear: to live out my dreams of being a figure skater. Growing up, I was raised with high expectations for school. To continue to skate, I had to get exceptional marks in class. In its unique way, skating motivated me in every possible aspect of life. My everyday routine consisted of getting up at five in the morning to skate three hours before school, going to school, getting my homework done before afternoon practices, skating or working out for another three hours, studying, and sleeping nine abundant hours at night. At a point in middle school, I reached the stage where my figure skating career was taking over. All the years of driving 20 hours every school break to train at the Olympic training center appeared to have paid off after a breakthrough season.

After months of contemplation, I took the step to transfer to an online school. I had enormous belief, confidence, and faith in myself to carry on my academic skills and push on with figure skating. During that first year of online school, I climbed up in the regional, sectional, and national rankings for the first time in the way I had accomplished that year. The following season, I was determined to go even higher than ever. Driven by my

passion, love, and commitment to this sport, I had everything I needed to keep improving. I had the physique, the endurance, the strength, a healthy body, a healthy mind, and most importantly, my mom by my side. Since online school has its perks of flexibility, I was able to grasp the chance I had to train with top coaches abroad without the stress of missing school. I went to training camps in South Korea and Japan, made new international friends, and gained real-world experience.

My season was cut short after a brief taste of success from one competition. It felt as if my entire life—everything I had worked for up to that point—was ripped out of my hands. With the endless visits to the dreadful doctor's offices, needles, x-rays, and MRIs, it felt as if my vitality was draining. Everywhere I go, people say, "There is always a light shining at the end of the tunnel," or "There is always an end to the tunnel." The end of the tunnel always used to, no matter what, just appear right at the tip of my nose. Now, I'm not sure what point of the tunnel I'm even standing at. The end of the tunnel seems so far out of reach that I feel like I'm drowning in darkness. The same feeling of suffocation from the examination table closes in on my brain. I want to believe this is not the end of a memorable path, but the little voice gnawing in my head tells me otherwise.

Not being able to skate for long durations and without figure skating consuming my mind day and night, I had too much free time. Therefore, I began to feel unbalanced. I couldn't exercise the way I desired or perform the hobbies I usually liked to do. I needed to stabilize myself in this insecure period, so I devoted my time to school and exploring interests that helped me step out of my comfort zone. A young girl who always hid under the dining table when her piano teacher came, a young girl who saw stars after attempting to play the flute, evolved into a young adult who found joy in playing the guitar. A little kid who always sat in the back of the class matured into a teenager who interacts with others at every opportunity she sees. A middle schooler whose biggest fear was failure grew into a high schooler who faced countless defeats.

Even after everything, I am still the figure skater who fights through every stage of metamorphosis. The battle against the laws of nature cannot destroy me. Even through the darkest points of the tunnel, I will endlessly fight for the young adult in the examination room, the teen who has so much left in her, the kid who dreams beyond infinity, and me, who always makes it out in any case.

Over half my life, I've dedicated every breath, every drop of sweat, tears, and blood to figure skating. This event threw me off the path that I've always thought I belonged to. Through my time withdrawing from figure skating as per doctor's orders, I've learned there is so much more to life than just figure skating. This setback has changed me as a human; I've touched the shore of who I truly am. As devastating as it is from an athlete's perspective, I am blessed to have experienced this, and I am also beyond thankful to every pair of hands that have helped to hold me up. I refuse to let another hiccup hold me back from achieving my dreams, so I'm willing to sacrifice more than I've already had to push through the worst and return from the dead. I learned that it is crucial to expect the unexpected and be grateful for every chance attainable. Because most of the time, the fire doesn't burn how you'd think it would.

Student Name: Bella McDaniel  
Grade: 11  
School: Houston Christian High School  
Title: A Life Alone; Together  
Category: Poetry  
Key: Gold Key  
Educator: Jill Read

I know my mother very well. I read  
my mother on my bedroom wall every  
morning when I wake up, through handwritten  
notes and letters held by frames. I taste my  
mother in the coffee order I have  
at breakfast. I smell my mother in the  
soft, clean scent of lotion I stole from her  
drawer when I was young, and have yet to  
stop buying since. I hear my mother through  
the radio station that plays throwback  
worship songs when I turn on my car to  
go to school. I see my mother in the  
sunrise through my car windshield on my drive  
to school. I feel my mother in the socks  
on my feet that she used to say were best  
for when winter would bite. I channel my  
mother in the mature ways I write and  
speak about things in school. I embody  
my mother in the ways I dot my i's  
and cross my t's, as I do my homework  
each night. I mimic my mother in my  
early bedtime tendencies and time spent  
in prayer to Jesus before. I live with  
my mother almost every second, each  
day it seems. A sort of sweet torture I  
have learned it to be, to live with someone  
no one else gets to know apart from me.

Student Name: Avery Tucker

Grade: 9

School: Incarnate Word Academy

Title: Herculean Hills

Category: Poetry

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Amanda Snook

We are uncontained, but our minds are caged,  
 With Herculean hills standing steep in the hearts of our heads.  
 Though we cannot simply go through them;  
 We cannot move forward without them.  
 We try to fly over them,  
 but it's all glass, no clear skies:  
 It's not safe for any bird to fly.  
 Our red-rendered wings,  
 Now bold and bloodied,  
 Are now broken by fear,  
 unable to move forward,  
 past the Herculean hills that bind us to the past.

We wait in the past for our wounds to heal  
 Because the present is undesirable  
 And the future, unattainable.  
 But as seasons pass we learn the past won't heal the blood-like fear that past mistakes  
 drew.  
 We must swallow the the pain of our battered pride like bitter medicine  
 and pursue the present and prepare for the future.

We climb the steepest side without a sigh,  
 Because we now know Morpheus will no longer formate our dreams into fruition:  
 Because we are woken and our dreams are no longer just spoken.  
 As we claw and climb sweat drips into our eyes  
 But they never look away from the prize.

We clear our calendars so we can live in the present and make way for the future,  
 But as we reach the top we stare at our half-healed wings,  
 The scars of our screw-ups scribed into history books.  
 Each wrinkle etched into our healed skin carrying lessons learned,  
 Mistakes moved on from but never bygone.

When we finally reach the peak of those Herculean hills  
The fresh taste of renewal is pungent in our mouths.  
We feel as fiery as a phoenix risen from the ash.  
As strong as a statement said from passion.  
And as fresh as a room newly cleaned.

Yet, we are as ever changing as the phases of the moon,  
Cause nothing ever stays in stone.

Uncertainty is in our foresight,  
For all we see on the front horizon are blackened mountains.  
But we are no longer scared,  
Because we've climbed harsh hills with our weed-like will many times before.  
"Why do we do this?," you say "When staying in the past keeps the Sea of Sorry at bay."  
Because running through the dark is sort of our thing,  
And securing is only yearning, and apologizing is just scrutinizing.

So the only thing we can do is ready ourselves  
For the new year that is just about,  
Already,  
Basically,  
Here.

And though Herculean hills still stand tall in our stead  
We are taller,  
And ready to take the lead.

Student Name: Sarah Spalding  
 Grade: 9  
 School: J Mark Price's Reading & Writing Workshop  
 Title: Growing Pains  
 Category: Poetry  
 Key: Gold Key  
 Educator:

Adults always say,  
 "Growing up is hard."

I can't say they're wrong -  
 Every second alive  
 Is another second older,  
 Another second in which life becomes even more difficult.

My human,  
 Emily -  
 She's 10.  
 We've been together since she could form sentences.

Although I'm invisible to most,  
 Emily says I'm her best friend.  
 Her elders just smile and laugh,  
 Calling her "cute" and entertaining the idea of me -  
 Gracie, the imaginary friend.

In her room,  
 As her cradle turned into a "big-girl" bed,  
 Our lavish tea parties,  
 With Ellie the Elephant and RhiRhi the Raccoon,  
 Got smaller and smaller,  
 Fewer and fewer.

As baby teeth turned into adult teeth,  
 She sometimes forgot to tell me about her day,  
 But remembered to sit and watch movies with her mom.

As playing in the sand turned to surfing in the waves,  
 I sometimes forgot how to swim,  
 Swallowing water as Emily paddled out to her dad.

As friends became crushes,  
And hands interlaced with hands,  
No one told me who we should 'Oh' and 'Ah' at,  
Or why Emily blushed and hid her face.

I still smiled and laughed,  
Especially when Emily did remember I was with her,  
But even when she didn't.

Because,  
I knew she was happy,  
I knew she was on the path to greatness.

But then,  
My heart beat began to slow,  
And once steady limbs grew tired.  
Solid figures faded through tables,  
And loud voices dimmed and fuzzed.

As Emily grew older,  
And Emily forgot,  
I faded,  
Back to a fleeting imagination.

Student Name: Emily Yen

Grade: 9

School: J Mark Price's Reading & Writing Workshop

Title: Lightning and Thunder

Category: Flash Fiction

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Star Han

His face darkened, his eyes smoldering. He clenched his fists before marching out without another word. As his footsteps echoed down the hallway before fading to nothing, she stood up. She walked to the window, facing the secondary school a few blocks away. Her eyes trailed down the building to the street, where a flickering shadow drifted underneath the wavering moonlight. She imagined his hand shielding his head from the pelting rain.

She flung open the window, nearly bowled over by the gust of wind. The folded paper airplane she kept on her sill fluttered to her feet, speckled with rain. She leaned over and picked it up. The scrawled letters bled through the paper– ‘lightning and thunder, i’ll chase you across the sky’. She aimed into the air. The rain curved, like a bow with its string taut with anticipation. She threw the airplane.

It hid itself in the rain before she had even blinked. She squinted, tracing its imaginary path, weaving between droplets that might shoot it down. Her gaze fell and she saw a figure on the roof of the school.

It was him. She was sure of it.

She met him there once, on a day where rain didn’t pound down from the sky. She skipped the stairs two at a time and shouldered open the door to see him standing at the edge, staring out into the horizon of skyscrapers. A moment passed while she caught her breath. Digging around in her pocket, she pulled out a crumpled note– ‘lightning and thunder, i’ll chase you across the sky’. She folded it against her stomach, straightening the creases into wings. She stood and sent it flying into his shoulder. As he turned towards her, his surprise morphed into an affectionate smile.

“You’re here!”

She leaned out of the window, ready to call and shout. Her face dripped with water. In his hands he held a scrap of white something. It was bleeding. Black blood pooled over his hands.



She froze, thunderstruck, raindrops suspended in the sky. He looked up then back over to the streets then back at the building, almost like he knew that she was watching him.

He walked forward. As he approached the edge of the building, she could piece together the regret on his face. She leaned out farther. Every moment that passed brought them closer and closer until—

he slipped and silently fell into the streets, his blackened hands reaching up and grasping the air as if she was there to catch him.

"-----!"

She shouted, but her voice didn't fly through the air. The rain cut it up into pieces and they sank into the ground two stories beneath her. She scrambled out of the window. Her feet clung onto the slick brick of the building, her hands grasping onto any windowsill she could. The wind pried at her fingers and she finally fell to the ground.

She ran. She ran down the streets, towards the school. The boy fell behind the skyscrapers. She could only see darkness, ink pouring from the sky.

Student Name: Lina Volpi

Grade: 8

School: J Mark Price's Reading & Writing Workshop

Title: Puppeteer

Category: Flash Fiction

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Star Han

### Part 1: SHE

She's falling, falling down into a pit of nothingness, drowning in the unknown. Her demeanor remains calm, despite the chasm gaping below, bearing jagged teeth, ready to swallow her. She looks up at the towering arcs above her, bending and twisting against the will of gravity. The silence screams into the nothingness. The soundless girl continues to  
fall  
fall  
fall...

Light seeps into the darkness, casting a dim glow onto thousands of stone white pillars below, arranged in a rosette. She falls on one of them, bone colliding against the marble. Everything is quiet. Looking down, she recognizes that there is only one way left to go. Forward. A sound stabs the silence and forces it to retreat. A stranger comes forward, stoic, the only sound made from the pitter patter of her bare feet.

The woman takes her hand and leads her along the lilies, speaking only a few words. "We must go forward. We must go forward."

She follows her, tugged along by her comforting grasp. They walk and walk to the horizon. Time passes uncertainly, the girl growing weary. She needs to keep going, keep going, keep going. Finally, the woman comes to a halt. Jagged cliffs fall into darkness, going on forever. She turns to face the woman but is greeted by hands, pushing, shoving, toward the darkness. She makes no noise, even when she struggles against the woman, even when she gives in, even when she tumbles into nothingness.

### Part 2: YOU

You're falling, falling down into an abyss of darkness. You are calm, you are still, you make no noises. As you fall, you look around, taking in the scene, the overbearing arcs and pillars making you feel small, helpless, weakened. You crash into the pillars, still staying silent. Motionless you stay until she comes. She wears no shoes. You take her hand....you take her hand...

Take her hand!

TAKE HER HAND

You take her hand. She grasps your hand tightly in hers, leading you the only way left to go. Forward. She leads you forward. She leads you forward. Let her lead you forward. One step at a time. One foot in front of the other. Show no resistance. SHOW NO RESISTANCE. You get to the cliffs hanging down into the pool of darkness, and she pushes you....

down

down

down.....

Part 3: I

I'm falling, falling. I can't move, I can't speak, I scream out but no noise escapes. I try to move but my bones won't work. My head jerks around, and my eyes take in the landscape. My limbs flail out of my control. I see the ground before everything goes dark. I think I prefer it this way, nothing to struggle against.

My eyes snap open and my spine stiffens. My body is willed up from the ground, where traces of blood and flesh are left on the jagged pillars. Everything is so silent. My head turns toward a woman with angelic features approaching. Her eyes are an icy blue and pierce into my soul. Her skin is milky, and her hair is of gold. She's come to save me, I think, hope flooding my eyes with salty tears.

My broken body rises up, and I inhale sharply from the agonizing pain. A raspy voice rattles my bones. Don't think. don't think. It doesn't hurt. Get up. Don't be weak. The angel reaches her perfectly sculpted hand out and my blood runs cold. I've been here before. My hand twitches to grasp hers, but the way her eyes stare through me reminds me of- what does it remind me of?

Don't think. Take her hand.

Why?

Take her hand.

Why?

TAKE HER HAND.

No.

My hand gives in, and I take her hand. My mind feels foggy as she guides me forward. My eyes cloud and my body feels weightless, like I'm hovering over the cold stone. I feel my worries chip away the further we go, her firm grasp morphing from frightening and unknown, to warm and reassuring. My mind feels hollow as a coconut. My breath gets shallower, and my muscles aches, but I focus on her hand. she stops. She lets go of my hand. I feel cold inside. Where are we? Why am I here? I shouldn't be here, I should be-

where should I be? I feel numb, I drop to the floor as my knees give out, tumbling forward.

She drags me up like I'm weightless. I try to pry from her grip, but it's useless. I struggle against her for a while, until a dreamlike fog hits my brain again. My eyes flutter open. We are at the end of a cliff. It's a beautiful cliff, I think to myself, a voice rattling my bones again, is it me who's thinking it? I can't tell anymore. I should feel scared, but I feel nothing, nothing.

The woman turns around, not facing me anymore. My ear itches. I need to scratch it badly. I want to put my hands to my face, but they remain motionless. I push and push, until finally it gives, I sag with relief as I scratch my ear, and look around for the first time on my own. The stars and clouds only shine a dull spark, and the cliffs seem intimidating. I have a bad feeling about this place. I hear the pitter patter of feet and I swivel around to see the lady waltzing towards me with a dangerous gleam in her eye. I try to run, but my body has seized, leaving me, once again, immobile.

She pushes, shoves me forward, until I'm a mere inch from the edge. She leans in, so close I'm scared to make any noise. She grabs my jaw and pulls me close, close enough to hear her whisper in the same raspy voice I've heard so many times before. "Pretty girl, what a sad fate she met." Then everything goes dark. Again.

Student Name: Sanjna Pandit

Grade: 12

School: Kinkaid School

Title: A Journey of Reflection: Returning to my Homeland

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Angelique Jamail

Home. Home is a place where we can be ourselves. It is an opportunity for both exuberance and quiet contemplation, a sight for both struggle and success. Most importantly, home is one of the few things in the world that encompasses our past, present, and future. These sentiments were much-needed reminders in the wake of 2023, and I am grateful to share my period of reflection that led me to them.

My family and I returned from a ten-day trip to Kerala, a state on India's tropical Malabar Coast where my mom was born and spent her childhood summers. Kerala is just as much her home as Texas is, and the moment I stepped off the plane and into the streets of the coastal state, I felt the same way.

#### Reflection in Subtlety

We were blessed to have my maternal grandparents taking this milestone trip with us. We arrived mid-morning at their flat in Kochi (a historic trading town in Kerala), a few hours before Christmas Eve festivities. Having arrived a week beforehand to get the place ready, my grandmother and grandfather warmly greeted us at the door. At first, my excitement to be in Kerala could not overtake my lingering sadness at not having a traditional Christmas. There would be no tree, cold weather for wearing fuzzy socks and blankets, and no presents to open the following morning. These things have always been of great importance in making my winter season special, so I couldn't quite "let it go," so to speak. However, as I stood on the balcony and stared at the beauty in front of me, I felt a breeze that seemed to be telling me: "You may not have a tree, cold weather, and presents, but what you do have is a view of the sunset, a flat nestled in the heart of the city, and a family to share it with."

In that moment of reflection, I realized that I must not take my mother's homeland for granted. We were all here together for a reason, and I was not going to let that be wasted. So for the rest of the trip, instead of experiencing the winter holidays that I was accustomed to, I was singing the song of palm trees, backwaters, and anything else that Kerala gifted us.

#### The Power of Fulfilled Promises: Long-Term Reflection

Before my great-grandmother passed away, she asked my mother to take her to one of the most sacred places of worship for Kerala Hindus: Guruvayur Temple. Though they had planned a trip to see the temple in the early 2000s, it was not meant to be. Fate had its own plan in mind, and it would end up being my mother taking her own family to the temple to honor her late grandmother's memory. When we all stood in front of temple doors, taking in this ancient symbol of history and culture for the people of Kerala, I could feel my great-grandmother's presence. This was a feeling I knew I wanted to carry with me into the new year: what it means to come full circle, to stay true to one's mission no matter the road to accomplishing it.

Our trek to the Guruvayur Temple was not the only fulfilled promise during the trip. My family and I were extremely fortunate to have a meeting with the senior-most female in the Travancore royal family: Her Highness Gouri Parvathi Bayi. (The Travancore Royal family ruled the princely Indian state of Travancore until the country's independence.) When we arrived at her estate, she was there to greet us at the door, a figure of power and grace. Her gray-blue eyes, neatly lined with kohl, lit with wisdom as she spoke with us about an array of topics: their home in Kerala, the relationship between her and my grandparents, visiting America, and even Starbucks coffee! On the one hand, my journalist side was eagerly jotting down notes and trying to document every word spoken by Her Highness. Something particularly memorable was her delightful response to my grandmother's musings on growing older: "Remember, age is only a number. Look at me. I am eighty years old and still dancing. What more could you want?"

On the other hand, I just sat back and absorbed the environment we were in: the cozy sitting room, the large paintings displayed on the walls, the open window bringing in the breeze from the monsoons. My grandfather had told me that he would try his hardest to get an appointment with Her Highness, and he fulfilled that promise. Because of that, I left the royal home with a better understanding of my lineage and the people, places, and experiences that my mother's side of the family is made of. In the words of Her Highness, "We are just one cog in the entire wheel. There is no present without the past, and there is no future without the present."

Going With the Flow: Immediate Reflection

Waking up early in the morning is not my forte, and neither is standing in long lines. These were the two things that would await us during the midpoint of our trip. The reason for an 8:00 a.m. departure and the lengthy wait in the heat of the afternoon was that my family and I had a tour guide to meet in Kanyakumari, a coastal town on the tip of India. From there, we would take a boat to reach the place where Swami Vivekananda, a 19th-century Indian monk, is said to have meditated for three days — a large rock that has now become a popular tourist attraction. This rock also represents the junction of the Arabian Sea, the Indian Ocean, and the Bay of Bengal. For all these reasons, plus the fact that I share a birthday with Swami Vivekananda, I was really looking forward to visiting the rock. My family and I followed our tour guide, who weaved us in and out of the crowds,

and we were met with a line of gargantuan proportions, stretching nearly double the length of what we were expecting. I looked at the time: 4:30 p.m. My family and I stood at the back of the line, our uneasiness steadily climbing as the line showed no signs of moving up to the dock. Then, our tour guide returned from the counter and told us the news. They would stop accepting tickets at 5 pm, and we would not make it up there in time.

My family and I were naturally disappointed that we could not go onto the rock. But it was a learning curve for all of us. Given that everything on our agenda had gone smoothly up until that point, we were reminded of how fortunate we were to have been able to visit the places we did. Not being able to physically step onto the rock would not be the end all be all, because we could still see it from afar, and it was still just as beautiful. Our tour guide told us, "Do you know when Swami Vivekananda meditated on that rock? December 24-27, 1892." My eyes opened wide with realization, and I turned to face my family. We were at the southernmost tip of India on the day when, exactly 300 years ago, Swami Vivekananda was swimming back home.

After a decade of scattered memories, I returned to the land of my ancestors. This trip was so important to me on many levels, and doing it with my family as the last thing before the new year made it all the more special. I not only checked off my list of "Must-See Vacation Sights in Kerala," but I reconnected with my roots. I got a better understanding of who I am and the rhythm and beat of my homeland. That is home, that is family, that is legacy.

Student Name: Cynthia Cai  
 Grade: 10  
 School: Kinkaid School  
 Title: A Soy Wax Candle  
 Category: Poetry  
 Key: Gold Key  
 Educator: Angelique Jamail

Life is like a soy wax candle, burning and carving away until it flickers out.

I recall I was five, when my parents had their first huge argument in front of me. It was Christmas Eve, but the Christmas spirit had been replaced by violent, piercing shouts. My brother and I sat cross legged on the floor, gutted like dead fish, he was sobbing like a banshee. It was then, when my parents' love for each other first presented myself with plaguing doubts.

I was six when I first wanted to stop being a little girl, but being seven seemed so far away. It was when turning seven was my biggest goal in life, when I could finally receive my very own iPad. So, I counted and counted those winding days down until my seventh birthday. Thus, I was one year closer, but mere weeks after my birthday I think I spiritually lost my dad.

I was seven and three weeks when I first heard the word divorce. Divorce, a word I should not have known the meaning of, at the ripe age of seven. Screaming became a constant occurrence and my parents' voices were often hoarse, so there was only one place I thought was silent for all hours of the day: my personal heaven.

I was nine when I wanted to be ten, to be that proud, tall fifth grader to those puny kids. When being more respected than a nine year old would be my proudest, least prudent moment. That year, for my birthday, I got a vacuum sealed plushie in a makeshift box made of plastic lids. That night, I cursed my mother, even when I should have cried happy tears at her bestowment.



I was ten, willing myself to quit crying because she told me, "Your dad is likely having an affair."

When instead of wishing for them to stay together, I pleaded for her to leave him.

As we fished in the dark blue waters lining Galveston beach, and a fish caught onto her snare,

I was distracted, ecstatic at the prospect of their divorce. I waited for her to admit it, with the fishing lights dim.

I was eleven, wishing I was twelve, to not burden my mother with sticking around during nights.

My dad was gone more than 70% of the year, so instead, she lived like a single parent.

Without her calls ever getting through to her husband, that clown reached new heights.

Materialistic desires long deserted me, I only wished her loathing became equally apparent.

I was twelve, hating my father for puking up his A5 wagyu steak and red wine, and passing out on the floor.

As an agnostic, still I prayed every night to a different god, to any god who listened.

The god who answered would become my god, but no one's ever listened before.

So, I bent to my knees, and cleaned up gray, chunky vomit with towels until the tile glistened.

I was thirteen, wishing to stop growing up, to stop feeling the burdens of my world.

I was an eighth grader, crying for the world to sweep me up and away from life.

I willed and willed for someone to take me far away from the situations life hurled.

Still, with nothing left, I wished for any distaste directed at the husband from the wife.

I was fourteen, sometimes wishing I was sixteen, and sometimes wishing I was dead.

In the mornings, I wished for sixteen so my mother didn't have to drive me everywhere.

At night, I wished for death to take me away from capitalist society and to a fluffy bed.

I wished for a semblance of meaning in my life, maybe for a life that wasn't such a nightmare.

I am fifteen, sometimes wishing I was twenty-two so my brother could be eighteen.

She keeps telling me daily, that when my brother graduates high school, she will fulfill my wish of divorce, that I had always foreseen.

So, I wish I was twenty two, but with much affection, I wish my mother initially, wasn't such a fool.

Life is like a soy wax candle, and my carving wick's flame has almost flickered out.

Student Name: Cynthia Cai

Grade: 10

School: Kinkaid School

Title: Colours were ours; Colours are yours.

Category: Poetry

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Angelique Jamail

Grand pomegranates are the drops of blood  
pitter pattering onto the white marble floor.  
Sounds like the April rain showers, soft and comforting,  
pooling at the bottom of your feet like fruits of Hades' pomegranate tree.

Saccharine marmalade is the juice of an orange  
sweet and tangy, wild and free.  
Tastes like the love of fall, the love of sharing,  
sticky with the hearth and warmth of marmalade jam.

Dewy daffodils are your wide, wide smile  
laughing at me, after my tumble down our stairs.  
Looks like the field of stars, I could get lost in,  
just for me to laugh at you buried between stalks of daffodil flowers.

Flourishing pistachios were your baby green plants  
that decorated your sweeping ivory balcony.  
Smelled like the ichor of thriving life, clumping and tumbling,  
planted by your green thumb and your little pistachio bundles.

Frosty skies were your eyes embalmed  
forever resting in their gleaming, glimmering glory.  
Felt like the blue haze, gray with the sky,  
or royal with the sea, my gaze follows your blue skies.

Pointed amethyst is the crystal replacing your unbeaten heart  
sitting between your rose quartz lungs and white quartz bones.  
Sounds like the black holes, shards pierce your skin from beneath,  
so only I see them, tiny crystal spikes poking through your skin– amethyst clusters.

Charred chestnuts were your favorite little snacks  
burning, forgotten over the crackling, shattering fire.  
Tasted like the bitter acid, rising along my throat,

silently following the bile once I take a bite of your blackening chestnuts.

Burnt coal was all that was left  
beneath your lingering smirks and otherworldly guffaws.  
Looked like the inside of your mind, burnt and dead,  
though I tried, impossible to rekindle those scorched coal pieces.

Colors were ours. We were colors.  
You colored my world, my atmosphere, my life.  
Tonight,  
I sob away at the stars,  
lying in a field of daffodils,  
with an empty seat for you.  
Between me and you is a dying coal fire and your favorite snacks—  
pistachios from your garden,  
chestnuts from the fire,  
pomegranates from Persephone's tree,  
and marmalade from your mother's shivering hands.

Tonight,  
I look to the amethyst heavens  
for you,  
for you,  
for you.

Student Name: Helen Zhang

Grade: 11

School: Kinkaid School

Title: Donuts for Two

Category: Poetry

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Angelique Jamail

Dear Mother,  
I still remember  
all the stories  
you used to tell  
me. Do you  
remember Nashville,  
Tennessee? That's  
where we first met,  
my unborn spirit and  
your American dream.  
You bought a box of still-  
warm donuts and we ate  
in the park of your  
blushing college, your  
slender fingers  
grasping at the  
scintillating mist  
that separates  
us, past and  
present, Chinese and  
American. Still, you reach  
across that chasm  
and hand me a donut, a roll  
of soft yeasted dough soaked  
in the warmth of sticky  
caramelized sugar and  
unspoken dreams. I  
remember thinking  
that you, with your doe-  
eyed stare and rounded face,  
looked so out of place  
in the bleeding gaps of  
wounded trees, crimson

leaves pouring out of the crevices  
in their bark like rivers of molten  
blood. You finish the last donut,  
licking your fingers to get  
every last drop of artificial joy,  
and stand up and smile. Your  
lips are sticky with the remnants  
of our feast, and as I stand across  
from you I long to take  
my sleeve and wipe  
that youthful cheer from your  
face, because you are too  
young and naive to possibly  
comprehend the difficulties  
you will face, your tongue  
cannot possibly anticipate the  
fast paced dances it must be  
accustomed to in order to  
be seen as remotely normal.  
How could you possibly realize  
that you will raise a child  
in a land that is foreign to you  
but home to her, that the two  
of you will forever clash  
over the language of your  
mother and her mother  
and her mother, because  
your child's tongue hangs  
thick and heavy in her mouth,  
a wingless goose lost among swans, and  
if you were to peel back  
her obsidian hair, widen her stygian eyes,  
you would find an empty blue  
gaze and locks of golden wheat.  
You turn, a small smile tugging  
at the corners of your dimpled  
face, and all I can do is stand  
here, a stranger in this past land,  
watching you walk away.

Student Name: Riana Pliskin

Grade: 9

School: Kinkaid School

Title: Kasha

Category: Poetry

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Angelique Jamail

My mom is from the former Soviet Union  
And she likes to make me Kasha  
A meal made of cooked buckwheat  
My soul food.  
After long and tiring days I come home to her warm hugs  
And sit at the counter to tell her about my day  
And she listens  
Standing by the stove,  
She strokes the buckwheat kernels in a boiling bath  
She is concentrated on me but her eyes elsewhere  
Cutting a chunk of butter that melts in the pot  
She adds salt and chops tomatoes  
Occasionally wincing at the acid that made its way into her cut  
Nonetheless, she spoons it into a bowl for me  
Just like her mom did for her  
And I sit there,  
Like an impatient child waiting for my favorite meal  
Except I am not a child, I am a moody teenager  
Tired from a long day of high school.  
She sits down next to me and hands me a cold little spoon  
And we take a bite and sigh  
It tastes like memory, and it tastes like childhood  
From one generation to the next

Student Name: Caroline Pielop

Grade: 11

School: Kinkaid School

Title: martyr of maidenhood

Category: Poetry

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Angelique Jamail

unless you will repair my story  
thumb through crumbling pages  
lines written by circumstance and oppression  
all the way to that first word  
she

what else can I do for you?

I can give you the half finished narrative  
of a girl forced up too fast,  
yanked by the collarbone so she stands  
and breast defines chest  
a body sculpted to stretch fabric, not minds  
since she will start to swell  
to garner attention from beady eyes unless

she covers

beware.  
my shoulders may provoke you.

I can show you something written by mother  
daughter defined in advance  
told "school comes first" then rules change  
girl comes before comfort  
since the 36 year old with the baby belly  
would not have wanted this  
knowing she yearns for something forbidden

You told me to write love letters didn't you?  
I ran with that

and started writing poetry.

I can write a new book if you give me time  
to unravel this woman  
space is necessary with room to work and  
knot together a person  
as discovery is difficult with a backseat driver  
The weaver must be me  
unconfined to a shape or an expectation  
they is a murderer  
of an old woman's history

but is it murder if she was sentenced to death anyway?



Student Name: Tiffany Zhang  
 Grade: 11  
 School: Kinkaid School  
 Title: Muscle Memory  
 Category: Personal Essay & Memoir  
 Key: Gold Key  
 Educator: Angelique Jamail

Dear Cath,

I remember that Saturday night. I remember asking if you wanted to study for our history midterm together at my house. I remember that you were tired from rehearsal and wanted to work alone, but I could FaceTime you if I really wanted to study together.

So I did.

When I punched in the 10 digits that would connect us to each other, your tired voice floated into my ears. I saw you, dark circles contouring your eyes and the stacks of papers and textbooks burying your tiny frame.

I didn't think much of it—as midterms approached, all of us overworked ourselves until our backs permanently arched into "c"s and our veins permanently dripped coffee. But once we started studying, I noticed your memory slips. How you forgot which year Christopher Columbus sailed the ocean blue and which paintings Picasso drew. I chalked it up to your lack of sleep and your anxiety about the upcoming musical.

I remember you seemed normal. Almost. You chatted about the boys you thought were cute and how Jake seemed infatuated with you when he offered to be your lab partner. When we had run out of questions to quiz each other on, you fell silent.

"What are you thinking about?" I asked.

You hesitated. "What would you do... if I came out as transgender?"

We'd always ask each other questions like this—what would you do if I were a cockroach, what would you do if I were bald—but this time, it was different. Your breath had shallowed, your voice wobbling when you said the word "transgender," its unspoken weight clouding your thoughts.

I'd accept you. I assured you of it—we'd still be best friends. I wanted to ask you more, but I didn't want to probe.

Then, you nodded and our conversation was over. "See you on Monday," you said. You smiled weakly, waving to the camera. My screen went black. And then you were gone.

"Yeah, see you Monday," I echoed.

I wish I knew that I wouldn't.

\*\*\*

Dear Cath,

When, on Monday, you weren't at school, I assumed that you were at a doctor's appointment. During Physics class, our school announced that we had an assembly today after lunch. The principal's voice blared over the speakers: "Teachers, please arrive at 1:45. Students, please arrive at 2:00."

That surprised everyone. Even Ms. Smith was confused, but we all shrugged it off and continued discussing Newton's Second Law like nothing happened. For a while, everything was fine: I ate pepperoni pizza with Claire and Melissa for lunch, but the air between us felt stiff without you. After I finished eating, I retreated to the library to finish some homework.

I wish I'd known what was coming.

When I walked into the assembly, the air felt thick and unwelcoming. Once everyone had taken a seat, our principal hobbled onto the stage, his thumping footprints echoing against the wooden floor throughout the auditorium. As anticipation heightened the bubbling in my stomach, I wondered what the unplanned assembly could be about. The principal cleared his throat into the mic.

"Students, as you may know, this assembly was not planned, but that's what happens when there are events that you can't foresee..." He shifted his weight from one leg to another. "What I'm trying to say is that your classmate, Catherine Hernandez, died by suicide last night."

In an instant, I could feel water filling my lungs; soon, I felt water submerging my head as well. I tried to gasp for air, but the air around me was too thick, too heavy to breathe for life. I clung onto my wooden chair, my boat, but the waves were too cruel and the icy wind was unrelenting. All around me, I heard hushed, dead silence. Nothing. And then everything at once. A dissonant symphony of sobs and wails reverberated through the air. Our school cried together.

Our principal stood there, awkwardly deciding what to say next. “All midterms, assignments, and projects are canceled. Hopefully, we can take this time to heal and move forward.” Then, he walked off stage.

I wanted to chase after our principal and drag him into my torrent, have him drown with me. But all I could do was clutch onto my chair and cry. Slowly, one by one, the song of cries and sobs faded as my classmates—our classmates—picked themselves up and filed out of the auditorium.

But I buried myself deeper into my chair. I buried myself in the soundproofed walls of the auditorium, saturated from the roaring waves in my head. I didn't know how long had passed when I found I was the only one sitting in the auditorium. Soon, my school counselor came into the room and shook me. “Come with me, sweetie. You must be going through so much pain right now.” I refused to get up. She shook me again. “Come with me to my office. Everything will be okay.” I wanted to look at her through my glass eyes and whisper that no, I wouldn't be okay. That no, I would never get through this.

But the only thing I could do in that moment was to cling onto her and let her take me away.

\*\*\*

Dear Cath,

I looked through our old pictures today. I found one of us showing off our friendship bracelets to the camera, yours gray and blue, mine white and blue.

To be honest, I hated the freshmen retreat. I can't believe that the teachers made us stand outside in the heat and climb ropes while praising our “teamwork.”

There was one activity that I liked during the freshmen retreat, though: making those friendship bracelets. I remember sitting criss-cross on the floor, piles of beads and string strewn among us. You were the first person that approached me—the new girl. You invited me to sit at your lunch table with your friends. Do you remember that? I do. I remember your wide eyes, your beaming smile, and your contagious energy.

I grabbed a piece of tape and a few different colored strands, knotting and weaving the strings together: pull the left string, bring it under the middle string, and loop it over the right string. You watched me, inquisitive.

“How'd you do that?” you asked.

“Muscle memory,” I responded. “I can teach you if you want.”

You nodded and scooted closer to me. I taught you how to tie the different knots and how to weave and intertwine the strings together. You nodded along, and then you started to make your own bracelet, choosing blue and gray as your colors.

“Why would you choose gray?” I asked. “It’s such a gloomy color.” You laughed and then replied, “We can pretend it’s silver. Silver symbolizes strength, anyways.”

You finished tying the final knot, and then you wrapped the bracelet around your wrist. It was starting to unwind, but you told me not to worry. You seemed to love it.

“Put on your bracelet, too. These can be our friendship bracelets. We even have the same patterns.”

I did, carefully holding mine so it wouldn’t break.

You took out your phone, snapped a picture, and then smiled at me. “Perfect.”

\*\*\*

Dear Cath,

I can’t stop looking at our photos. There’s one of us after the fall play, hugging each other. It was my first time seeing you on stage. Our school put on Cinderella, and you were the evil stepmother.

After the fall play, there was a party at Mia’s house. We were in the backyard, sitting around a table with you at the head. All the attention was on you: everyone just wanted to congratulate you. One of our friends, Jacob, passed you a Coke bottle, pretending it was a Tony Award.

“Please, give us your acceptance speech,” he joked. The chatter around the table grew quiet.

You smiled and then cleared your throat. “Thank you so much for this Coke bottle— I mean Tony Award.” We laughed. “I just want to thank everyone for being here and supporting my journey as an actor, as well as the Academy for giving me this award. Thank you.”

We all clapped and cheered. One of our other friends, Nicolas, shouted a question. "Tell us, Queen, what show or character do you want to play the most?"

You smiled again. "Actually, I have been thinking about this for quite a long time." You stopped, stared, and then took a deep breath, "I have always wanted to be Shakespeare's Hamlet."

There was a beat of silence, but we quickly started clapping and cheering again. Nicolas frowned.

I remember how your face flickered when you caught Nicolas's, how you exaggerated your laugh. "I was just joking. Don't worry about it, okay?"

Looking back, that was something you said often.

After a few hours, the table is empty. It's just us. I sigh. "We should go to New York together. You're gonna be on Broadway one day."

"I hope. Promise me you'll come to my first show, okay?"

"I promise. I'll be in the front row and cheering you on as loudly as I can. And we'll eat famous New York Pizza and experience the city as much as we can. We've gotta get out of Texas."

You paused, seeming to contemplate. "I don't like pizza. Too much cheese and tomato sauce."

"But it's the New York pizza." I exaggerated. "We have to. Or else, what's the point?"

You laughed, and then put your hand on top of mine. "Okay, I promise."

\*\*\*

Dear Cath,

My family and I are on a short vacation today. Mom said that I needed a break from the house, so she rented a beach house for the weekend and forced me to come with her. I haven't swam in the water yet. Instead, I've just been sitting on the front porch and watch the sun rise and fall, a constant rhythm. The beach view is stunning, Cath, you should see it.

Tonight, I couldn't fall asleep, so I walked to the ocean, the cool night air blowing through my hair as footprints trailed after me in the sand. I made my way to the shoreline, the waves kissing the sand and tickling my feet. I watched the ocean as it glittered, the moon's light reflecting in the water like fragmented pearls.

After the assembly, I found out that you had Persistent Depressive Disorder starting from middle school due to gender dysphoria, but no one—including me—knew. You were an actor, even off-stage. There were still so many lingering questions that I wanted to ask you. How did you manage to keep this secret so well-hidden? How did you manage to make others so happy, while you yourself were not?

I trudged deeper into the ocean, wishing I could see the world beyond the end of the ocean, the world I don't know, the world where you swim now.

Are you okay? Are you happy? I hope your world has big stages, bright lights. I hope that in your world, you can be Hamlet without any judgment.

I waded deeper into the ocean, until the waves reached my waist. Under the yellow glow of the moonlight, I couldn't tell where the skyline ended and the surface of the sea started.

You were always happy, but sometimes the happiest people are the most depressed. I've heard of Vincent Van Gogh and his ear, Sylvia Plath in her kitchen, but they all seemed far away. Now, it was all so close. Too close.

Salty tears stung my eyes, and bitterness surged in my stomach. Maybe you kept quiet because you never trusted me. I wondered what would happen if I stopped fighting the current and allowed the ocean to take control of me, filling my body with water instead of the memories of you.

I ran back to our beach house, afraid of what would happen.

\*\*\*

Dear Cath,

I have been thinking a lot.

I have decided to study psychology in college and then become a psychologist. I hope to help people with depression and other mental health disorders to love this world again.

Cath, are you listening?

\*\*\*

Dear Cath,

Today was your funeral, and my final goodbye to you. Don't worry, no one will replace you. I won't eat New York pizza with anyone else.

I don't remember much of the funeral. I remember a lot of people from our school went, and I remember people telling your stories and singing your favorite songs, so that made me feel better. After the procession, everyone lined up in front of your casket and looked at you for one final moment. I was the last person in line, so when it was my turn, I stood there for what seemed like hours. Your skin was waxy, like a candle, and your eyes were glued shut. You seemed peaceful, no signs of struggle or sadness visible; instead, your lips were etched into a faint smile, so I hope that meant that you were happy in your final moments. I will never forget it—your laughter, your smile, your love.

In the corner of my eye, I unexpectedly see something on your wrist, and my breath hitches as I realize what it is—the friendship bracelet that we made together during the freshman retreat trip, blue and gray holding onto each other by a thread. Before I could stop myself, a teardrop fell from my eye and sunk into the beige carpet, creating a small spot of water darker than what surrounds it.

Student Name: Emma Baird

Grade: 12

School: Kinkaid School

Title: My Baby; Once Mine

Category: Short Story

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Angelique Jamail

Georgia Jacobi had been dreading the funeral all day. Still, she picked up the black dress she laid out the night before, the one with the long sleeves lined with lace at the collar. After changing, she wandered to her bathroom counter and lay her carefully brushed hair over her shoulder. Her reflection almost looked fake, a poor mockery of grief. Looking at it made her let out a breath that traveled far enough it fogged the mirror.

"Okay," she muttered. "Okay."

The reflection didn't respond, didn't offer a single word of affirmation or comfort. The fan whirled above her head, and loneliness curled around Georgia's chest. Secretly, she was glad; she knew she deserved it.

She couldn't make herself turn on the radio in the car as she drove, instead opting to soak in the click of the turn signal and the roar of an obnoxiously fancy car to the right of her. She jumped as the driver behind her impatiently honked their horn. Charlotte always hated the sound of car horns when I'd drive her places, she mused. Not that she knew that I noticed.

Luckily, the light turned green and flushed the rest of the thought away.

The guilt, the crushing weight of relationships lost and maintained, returned when she parked and made her way towards the cemetery gates. Her flats snapped a twig in half as she approached a darkly dressed crowd, adjacent to a storm cloud brewing on the horizon. A few heads turned to look at her, but they didn't linger very long. Instead they avoided looking at the graves dotted across the neatly trimmed grass, the lawn well maintained as if the dead cared for landscaping.

An unseen priest mumbled some generic bible verses as she snuck her way around strangers to get a good look at the figure in front. Standing next to the grim priest was a man in his late thirties, the same age as Georgia, his face stony and full of emotion at the same time—Aaron.

Aaron poorly hid a sniffle and turned away from the crowd to face the gravestone. She caught the movement and followed suit, gaze landing on the words engraved into the artificially smooth surface:

Charlotte Beckett, October 4, 2005 - July 20, 2018

It instantly struck her as real. Georgia had to squeeze her thumb to stop herself from throwing up. As a distraction, she watched Aaron's shoulders shake, watched as he held all the parental grief for his daughter on his shoulders like Atlas holding up the sky.

Georgia wanted to take it on, but her shoulders cracked at the mere thought of it.



As the priest's mumbling stretched on, a single tear fell to the disturbed dirt at Aaron's feet. Georgia watched it soak in and pretended it was rain. The sun shone brightly as the service wrapped up.

\*\*\*

Georgia stayed back as people she'd never seen before walked up and gave Aaron their condolences, acting like they'd known him for years. Awkward bimonthly lunches suddenly felt worthless in comparison.

There was a second of emptiness, a moment of Aaron staring up at the sky alone. Sunlight landed on him like a spotlight, like a gentle painting of a saint. However, the dismay swimming in his dark brown irises removed any sense of calm. With a deep breath, Georgia straightened out the bottom of her dress and approached him.

He glanced over at the sound of footsteps, and managed a weak smile.

"You're here," he commented lethargically, the bags under his eyes emphasizing his tone. Georgia's stomach twisted with guilt and she nodded, small and ashamed.

"I got here a few minutes late."

Aaron appeared mildly surprised at that, but also not at all. It's the same face Georgia had seen after missed softball games and school pickups. He barely attempted to cover his surprise when he explained, "I didn't see you. Must not have been looking hard enough." Georgia cringed, but Aaron hardly seemed to notice. She could read the barbed words hidden underneath the statement. She knew, with a sinking feeling, that he didn't even expect her to show.

In the silence, she looked down at the grave and swallowed the lump in her throat. "I'm sorry. Maybe I could've loved her if I tried, if I knew how to be a mother."

"No, don't say that. Please don't start this again." He sounded so weary, so frustrated by the world and all the complexities of it.

Georgia's hands clenched at her sides as memories flooded her—arguments over lost patience, feelings of helplessness as her five year old daughter cried in front of her, solemnly filling out divorce papers, and finally a custody battle that was never a battle to begin with. She pushed it all down, ignored it and focused on the present. Never again would she repeat the mistake of becoming a mother. "Okay."

Aaron barely heard her. Georgia cleared her throat and put an uncertain hand on his shoulder. "I'm just, um, glad she had you. When I couldn't handle it."

"It didn't change anything," he replied hoarsely. "She died anyways"

"Aaron, I..." she searched for the correct words, some advice that would fix everything, and found nothing. "I know. I'm sorry."

His eyes shut tightly, so much so that he appeared to be physically pained. "Stop saying sorry. I've heard enough of that already."

"Right."

"My baby is dead," Aaron continued thickly. Georgia could practically see the cracks in his face as raw sadness broke through the skin. He turned to meet her gaze directly, eyes wide and distressed. "She was my daughter, Georgia. She was mine."

She was mine too, played at the tip of her tongue, but she bit it back. She didn't trust herself to mean it, not when she moved away for a reason.

Silence hung between them, swinging dangerously but not close enough to cut. Georgia curtly nodded and avoided looking at Aaron. "I should go."

He didn't respond.

Georgia turned to leave, staring at the ground and trying not to cry. The space next to her was cold, absent. It had been for two and a half years, ever since she left the family, but it sent a chill down her spine that she never noticed before. For the first time, it felt wrong. Not paying attention, she bumped into another funeral goer and lifted her head to apologize. There was a woman her age, mascara slightly running and face downcast in sorrow. The woman smiled, but it didn't reach her eyes. "Oh, it's alright," she reassured Georgia.

Georgia went to move away, but the woman kept talking.

"Sweet Charlotte..." she sighed wistfully. "She always loved coming over to hang out with Henry. And the stories he'd tell about sitting with her in class, what a funny girl. I wish that drunk driver knew how wonderful she was. I hope he knows what he took away."

"Yeah..." Georgia's eyes darted to the cemetery gate restlessly.

The woman wiped a tear, smearing the already smudged mascara on her cheek. She tilted her head curiously. "Are you a neighbor?"

"No...I'm her mother."

The words weighed the air down heavily. Neither of them spoke. The woman blinked, blinked again, and shook her head; she gaped like she was waking up for the first time during the entire service. Her comment came out incredulously, "I didn't know she had a mother."

"You didn't—" Georgia stopped, tears threatening to choke her. "I need to go."

She pivoted and walked towards the gate as fast as she could without looking too rude. For the first time all night, sobs made their way to the surface and tears streamed down her face relentlessly. Once arriving at her car, Georgia sank into the driver's seat, gently closed the door, then screamed. She screamed so loud she didn't care if anyone heard.

\*\*\*

The next day she spent fine-tuning an article to be published in the coming days, though technically she got days off work for a "family emergency." She had flinched slightly at the term, considering her distance from Charlotte, but took the time off with relief. That relief was short lived, unfortunately, and she resented the time to think and feel bad about herself in her own home instead of being distracted in a busy office.

Her mind kept floating back to Charlotte, trying to track down the last conversation they had but failing to pin it down. On a phone call with Aaron, maybe, but the greeting would've been brief, fleeting—not to mention, inherently awkward.

The guilt from the funeral, mixed with aching grief of a missing presence that hadn't been there to begin with, spurred her on with newfound energy and determination. Before it got too late in the afternoon, she pulled on a sweater, grabbed her keys, and went to her car.

\*\*\*

The cemetery was one hour away from closing, and Georgia seemed to be the only visitor. The trimmed grass didn't generate much shadow in the setting sun, the blades too short and evenly cut for the sun to strike them.

Already by instinct, though it was only a day old, her feet led her to Charlotte's grave. She sat down with her legs crossed in front of it, inspecting the fresh flowers left on the dirt from a distance. She looked down at her hands and frowned—she had nothing to give. Rather, she had words, so she swallowed her anxiety and made steady eye contact with the name engraved in the stone. Squaring her shoulders, she pretended her late daughter sat amongst the flowers with an anticipating yet cautious pout. Georgia smiled and sheepishly began.

"Hi, Charlotte. I know I've said it before, but that was years ago, so it won't hurt to say it again. I'm sorry. I'm sorry that I hurt you, that I didn't know what I was doing. You deserved better. You deserve to be alive and happy and with your dad, away from me and—" she stuttered and her eyes began to water, "—and safe."

She tried to imagine Charlotte's face, but she had grown so much in the time spent apart that she couldn't remember if her mole was by her left or right eye. All she was certain of was that she inherited Aaron's beautiful brown eye color.

"I tried to be your mom, and I just couldn't. I thought I accepted that, but now you're dead, and...well, I don't know." Admitting that made her chest feel lighter; after a second, she even managed to laugh. "I'm talking to the air. I don't know what the hell I'm doing." Georgia burst out laughing. She laughed and laughed until her lungs were empty and her face dripped with tears. The laughs weakened her and she fell backwards into the grass, her hair mixing with the green in a collage of nature and humanity and suffering. It took her a second to stop laughing, and when she was done, she let out one more breathless whisper: "I don't know what I'm doing, and... that's fine."

Her arms stretched out and touched the pure living earth. Her left hand brushed against a thicker stem, and she twisted around to see a small purple flower that had sprouted on its own accord. She got a good grip on the stem, then plucked it and placed it in her lap for safekeeping.

"I definitely won't forget you," she added softly as she pushed herself back into a sitting position. Her voice grew stronger as she said the one thing she was certain about. "I'll spend every second of my life wishing I was better to you, though I know I didn't have it

in me. Still, you won't be forgotten. And maybe that's the best I can do, even if your friend's mom doesn't know who I am."

"I know you're my daughter, but not really, and I was your mom, but not really. Maybe we were just two people stuck together by the universe, and now that you're gone, we've been unstuck." Georgia bit her lip self-admonishingly. "Well, we've been unstuck for a while, but this time it's permanent. And that sucks, but it's life. I just wish I could've spent it better, gotten to know you. Just...not as your mother."

"I loved you as much as I could, Charlotte," she muttered as she gently laid the picked flower on the grave's dirt, still fresh and disturbed from the funeral. Next time, she'd bring a stone instead. She looked up at the sky and sighed, a burdened sound directly from her soul.

"I love you."

Student Name: Caroline Pielop

Grade: 11

School: Kinkaid School

Title: my friend is freshly dead; at least almost there

Category: Poetry

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Angelique Jamail

she, roadkill and i are the same like that  
pests of the living, barely dead  
weave in  
weave out  
stitch yourself into existence before splitting  
needle through their extraordinary brains  
they will draw long thistles out  
but unsheath yourself  
before they turn you onto familiar skin.

drive barefoot,  
sister of the possum.  
the supple ground beckons my toes  
a crisp pedal follows suit.  
attraction blooms to a repulsive need,  
paint me in brains on the boulevard.

lie with me joeys  
words retire their paralyzing  
cursed to dance on asphalt  
who will scrape the tar off their soles?  
perpendicular of headlights they sob

portal of glare, transplant this  
limp bundle of discount souls  
trace the tire tracks on your body  
into home of just-bathed daughters

breathe, my kin.

Student Name: Kate White  
Grade: 8  
School: Kinkaid School  
Title: My Hands Knew You  
Category: Poetry  
Key: Gold Key  
Educator: Angelique Jamail

### My Hands Knew You

My hands,  
soft and warm,  
pressed against my mouth  
as I tried my hardest to bury a laugh.

My hands,  
dry and frigid,  
struggled to stop  
the neverending stream  
that cascaded down my crimson cheeks.

My hands,  
latching onto yours with a white-knuckled grip,  
as we leapt into the serene waters  
that inky October eve.

My hands clutched onto memories of you.  
Memories of laughing, crying, and loving  
together.

My hands knew you.  
I knew you.

I knew how you smiled,  
the way your shimmering eyes crinkled at their corners when you laughed.

I knew you,  
until I didn't.

I lost the sound of your laughter.  
My hands lost the warm press of your palm against mine,

our fingers no longer interlocked.

My hands forgot you,  
but I never did.

Student Name: Helen Zhang  
 Grade: 11  
 School: Kinkaid School  
 Title: Newton's Laws of Feminism  
 Category: Poetry  
 Key: Gold Key  
 Educator: Angelique Jamail

Newton's First Law: An object at rest stays at rest, and an object in motion stays in motion unless acted upon by an unbalanced force.

The first law is the one that tells you not to  
 move. Feel your sinews rot away, ochre  
 ripens to brown which sweetens to black ash.  
 Because god, men love a girl who smears  
 her remains on the dinner table at midnight,  
 crude cinders and ruined voices.

The first law is the one that tells girls like me  
 move when a man tells you to, stop when he stops.  
 Being a girl is never difficult, just follow the laws put before you—  
 even as a skeletal puppet am I still feminine and attractive?  
 My life divided into equivalent portions of meat,  
 Man sizzles my flesh on a grill and eats bone for dinner.

Newton's Second Law: Force equals mass times acceleration.

It's never good when a girl has mass.  
 Mass like value like worth, mass like weight—  
 men like a girl whose mass is dictated by the inflection of a man's words,  
 the cadence of his tone and the wandering of his eyes.  
 My mass is dependent  
 on how human, how feminine, he perceives me.

If my mass is zero then why does it feel  
 like I am hurtling towards the core of this earth, hardened muscle and calloused  
 aluminum,  
 I am a comet, my fire trail blazes glacial white through an infinite cosmos,  
 for some reason, I can't stop burning.

Newton's Third Law: Every action has an equal and opposite reaction.

It's simple: you push first, I push back  
 except men hate a girl who talks back, so really it's



men push first, then men push harder.

Feel my body give way, I am a salted corpse waiting to be devoured,  
mummified organs and dead-fish eyes,

don't men love a girl with big eyes and an organ-strangling waist?

I am a facade of strength,

my reaction is one of mist and vapor tears escaping from bloated flesh,  
I have an opposite reaction but it's never equal.

At night, I lie awake and watch the stars.

I wonder if God is male, if Newton's laws are really preordained destiny,  
I wonder if feminine really equals human.

God looks down upon my spindly frame, expression inscrutable.

Run soft hands over your fading body,

pinch abalone flesh between bony fingers and suppress a scream.

I follow these laws,

aren't I feminine enough?

Student Name: Ryder Tang  
 Grade: 11  
 School: Kinkaid School  
 Title: Objet petit a  
 Category: Short Story  
 Key: Gold Key  
 Educator: Angelique Jamail

What had started the affair was a crippling bout of insomnia. It started right after one in the morning. My girlfriend and I had finished dinner at five thirty, each took showers, crawled into bed at nine, and fell asleep. Somehow, for some reason, we awoke at the exact same time.

It didn't take long for us to figure out that we wouldn't be falling back asleep. Ten minutes was enough for us to both slog off the couch and into the kitchen.

What everybody understands about insomnia is that you're still tired during the course of it. But what people don't know is the pain. What came with our insomnia were headaches, massive and overpowering.

We sat in silence on opposite sides of the dining room table. I tapped my thigh absentmindedly. She picked at a piece of lint on her shirt. Time oozed like syrup in a bottle.

"I've never been more awake and tired at the same time in my entire life," she said. "I wonder if it has something to do with moving into a new place."

"Maybe," I said.

We were silent again.

"Could it be our mattress?" she asked.

"Mattress..." I repeated. Something about a mattress seemed oddly familiar to me.

Which is when it suddenly occurred to me that I had once before experienced something very similar to what was happening right now. When was it? It was...oh—

"The furniture store robbery," I said, out of the blue.

"Furniture store robbery? What are you on about?"

And so it began.

—

In the psychoanalytic theory of Lacan, the objet petit a, or object of desire, stands for the unattainable force which compels us to continually desire as a projection of the ego. What I've come to realize is that Lacan's objet is really an elementary ingredient in our recipe for love. To put that neatly into a simple phrase: "endearing foibles"

The comic-philosopher Žižek tells a funny story about this concept.

"Some decades ago, in Europe, the two biggest names in the modeling industry were Cindy Crawford and Claudia Schiffer. A big magazine in France makes this opinion poll

asking, of the two, whom would you prefer to live with. Cindy Crawford won. You know why? Because she had a birthmark, a small, nearly unnoticeable mole to the right of her lip. Claudia Schiffer was too perfect."

So it is the idea that you cannot ever fall in love with the perfect person. That there must be some tiny, disturbing element, and it is only through discovering that element that you say, "In spite of this imperfection, I love this person."

—

"When I was in college, I tried to rob a furniture store. It wasn't a special store or anything. It was just...there. The type that, when you pass it on the street, makes you think, 'Oh, this has to be a cover.' But no. Some old lady ran the place, all on her own. Arrived in the morning and opened the doors, locked the doors and left at night."

"Wait, but if you were going to rob a place, why a furniture store?"

"Well, that's the thing. We were looking for a place to sleep."

"We...who were you with?"

"My roommate. He was my best friend then. We were so broke, we couldn't afford shampoo. And definitely not AC. The summers back then were horrible. You couldn't sleep. You'd break out in sweats in minutes even if you didn't have clothes on."

"I don't get it," she said. I tried to avoid her gaze. "Why couldn't you have gotten a job or something? Some work after classes. That way you could've bought shampoo. And AC."

"That was the whole point. We didn't want to work. That was the one thing we were sure of." I paused. "Look, you're probably right—it is our mattress. Why don't we just take the car and spend the night at a hotel or something?"

"No, I wanna hear the rest of the story."

"It's not a very interesting story. Nothing really happened." My head was starting to hurt even more.

"Did it work, then? Did you wind up sleeping there?"

"Well, sort of. We got to sleep there. But it wasn't really a robbery. The lady just let us."

"Why's that?"

"That's the strange part. The lady was a huge Tarantino fan. You know, Pulp Fiction and all that. When we went in, there she was, just starting Kill Bill. We didn't have guns at the time, just these shabby knives we found in the science department, to dissect frogs and whatnot. Anyway, we figured they looked sharp enough." I sighed, examining the wood grain of our dining room table.

"And? What then?"

"She made us a deal. Finish the movie with her, and we could sleep on one of her mattresses."

"So? You did?"

"Yeah. And that's the problem. It wasn't much a robbery at all, more of an equal exchange. We watched her movie, and we got our sleep. And I hate to say it, but it was the best sleep I had gotten in a long time."

"Problem? How was it a problem?"

"It's hard to describe. It's more a feeling. Nothing you can really place a finger on. Like, it was a turning point. I left my roommate and started going to classes. I got my degree. I took a job, and I met you and bought an apartment."

"Hmm..." she peered into my eyes. "What happened after that?"

"Nothing. That's all of it. When we woke up, she was still watching Tarantino. You know, the more I think about it, the more I think we should've just used our knives and refused to watch that movie. It's like by making us watch Tarantino she put a jinx on us. Like a voodoo shaman or something." It was a weak joke, (not really an actual joke, even) but nonetheless, I expected her to smile. But she just kept her serious expression.

"What happened to the store?" my girlfriend asked.

"I don't know. I never went back after that." Once again, it was silent. I could tell she wanted to know more.

"I think you're right," she said, after a while.

"Huh? About what?"

"The jinx. Like, it's the reason you and your roommate split, right? And that's why we both can't sleep right now. I mean, I've never felt this feeling of being tired but unable to sleep, ever, until I met you. And think about it. I'm your roommate now, aren't I? I'm being affected by your jinx too."

My headache was only getting worse.

"Okay, let's say that you're right. "Let's say that you're right and it is a jinx. What do we do about it?"

"Rob a furniture store. Now. Before the insomnia goes away. Except this time we do it right."

"What? Now?"

"Yep. It's the only way."

"But it's midnight. Where would there be an open furniture store?"

"Belgrade's a big city. We'll find one. Just do as I say."

—

I was twenty when I visited a friend in Latin America. It was my first time in the continent, in either Venezuela or Guatemala—why can't I remember the exact country I visited?—and I was talking with my friend, a very attractive lady, even to this day. She wasn't tall, but she had long black hair, beautifully-shaped ears, and a lovely fragrance. (That could be a false memory, who knows. Maybe she had no fragrance at all.)

In any case, the one thing that I can firmly remember from the trip was our discussion of a strange thing that had happened to her. She told me that when her last lover saw her naked before making love, he had told her that if she were just to lose three or four pounds, her body would have been perfect.

"Then you should never lose three or four pounds," I said.

She blinked at me, like a tourist gazing at an Incan statue.

Because if she were to effectively lose three or four pounds, she would no longer be perfect. She would just be plain. The illusion of perfection is generated precisely by this subtle excess.

—

We were out in my old Silverado and cruising through Belgrade by 1:30 p.m., searching for a furniture store. She at the steering wheel, me in the passenger seat, both of us wearing black ski masks, and a dark leather satchel sitting loosely in the cupholder between us. I didn't know its complete contents, but I knew there was a Glock semi-automatic inside. Every time we passed over a bump, the satchel would rustle just a little, and my forehead would grow damper. Why my girlfriend owned a pistol and ski masks, I didn't know. I never bothered to ask, either. It just wasn't the type of thing I could really word the right way.

Despite our preparedness, we still ran into a problem. We drove through the quiet streets of Zemun to Dorcol, Dedinje to Vracar, and yet not a single open furniture store was to be found. There simply weren't any furniture stores in Belgrade, it seemed.

"Let's just call it off," I said. "We're driving in circles, and no furniture store would be open now anyway. This isn't the type of thing —"

"We're here," she said, slamming on the brakes.

We were on the outskirts of a tucked-away corner of residential suburbia. The houses lined up along each side of the road, forming dark walls of shadow. The sky was past dark, a frozen dome of matte black. Behind the houses, you could just make out tall, looming buildings, which looked like either jails converted to houses or houses converted to jails.

"Where's the furniture store?"

Silently, she grabbed the satchel and stepped out of the car. I got out from my side and stared at her.

"We're going to rob this house," she said, nonchalantly, as though ordering a dish at a restaurant, pointing at the small, gray tudor behind her.

"A house is not a furniture store," I correctly pointed out.

"It's similar," she said. "Life isn't perfect. You don't always get exactly what you want. Sometimes you just have to settle." She pulled out the Glock from her satchel and handed it to me.

"I don't know how to shoot a gun. I've never even held one until now."

"You're not gonna shoot it. Just point it at them. Keep it in your back pocket, and as soon as we see them, point it at their face."

"But—"

"Just keep your finger off the trigger. Let's try not to kill anyone."

"Sure, but—"

"How do you think we get in?"

I gave up. "Let's just try the front door first," I said, sighing. In my hands, the gun felt as heavy as a lead weight in a fish's gut.

"Are we actually doing this?" I asked her.

"Yes. What other choice have we got?"

—

As we should've expected, the front door was locked. Serbians were good about that. With no other option, we quietly circled around the house and into the backyard. The entire backyard was covered by a dim light coming through two sliding glass doors leading into some sort of kitchen area. Carefully, my girlfriend slid one of the doors open just an inch and leaned her ear into the opening.

"Somebody's talking," she murmured.

"Are you sure?" I whispered. The strange feeling was coming on stronger now.

"Yeah. I think it's a woman. You wanna take a listen?"

Nodding, I stuck my own ear in the crack. Sure enough, I could just make out the faint voice of a woman, loud enough to hear, but too quiet to understand. She was speaking fast in a slightly odd, high-pitched voice, like she was on the verge of tears.

"No," I said aloud.

"No?"

I turned to face my girlfriend. "I just don't think this is a great idea. I mean, if she's talking to someone, that means there's more of them, and they're awake..."

"Not this again. This house is the house. I know it." With that, she slid the door fully open and stepped in.

Once more, the conversation had ended before I had a chance to talk. I followed my girlfriend into the house.

The kitchen led into a living room area. The woman's voice was becoming louder, coming from a door in the corner leading to what I assumed would be a bedroom. Walking closer and closer, my girlfriend and I approached the door. At this distance, I could also begin to make out the quieter voice of a man. When we were just outside of the bedroom, my girlfriend pressed her ear to the door, and I did the same.

"Tell me who it is," the woman said in her strange tone.

"I really didn't..." the man responded, his voice hoarse.

"I'm being really patient with you right now," the woman said again, her voice rising, which instead of sounding menacing, made her even more high-pitched, almost in falsetto.

"Look, I didn't—"

"If it were anybody else, they'd have your lying ass out in an fucking instant. But I'm giving you a chance right now. So do you wanna tell me or not?"

At that moment, my girlfriend turned to face me, her eyes alert as an eagle's, and gave me a slight nod.

Nodding back, I quickly opened the door. Raising my gun, I entered with my girlfriend behind me, scanning the room. The woman was right in front of us, her back facing me,

still shouting. A few feet in front, the man saw me and froze. The desperation from the argument before remained etched onto his face, as though sculpted.

"Hey are you listening—" the woman began, before noticing the man's expression and turning to face us. Suddenly seeing the masked duo behind her, one of which held a gun pointed directly at her, the woman gaped. She opened her mouth to speak, trying to form a phrase, but her mouth stiffened, and not a word came out.

Neither of them moved or made a sound. From this distance, I could now see the two of them clearly. The woman still had streaks of tears running down her now wide-open eyes. Slowly, the woman slowly lifted her hands into the air. Copying her movements, the man did the same.

"Is it money you want?" the woman said, still in her high-pitch, like some faulty clarinet.

"Walk over to that corner," said my girlfriend, nodding towards the corner farthest from us and near the bed. "Both of you. Slowly."

Without a word, the couple did as told.

"Now strip the sheets off the bed and fold them. The blanket too. Neatly."

Dumbstruck, the couple both stared at her for a second, like deer in headlights. Only a second, though. A quick glance at the gun in my hand told them exactly what would happen were they not to obey orders.

The two worked efficiently, as if they thought I would shoot them if they were too slow. When they were done and all the bedding was in a neat, stacked pile, my girlfriend ordered them to bring it outside to our truck. Once that was done, she told them to take the mattress and take it to our truck as well. The whole time, I followed them with my gun, keeping it pointed at the two of them. Every time we were outside, I thought that one of them would scream for help, make a move, or break into a sprint, but none of that happened. They simply obeyed, resigning themselves to their fate.

Finally, when the mattress was snugly fit into the bed of our pickup, and we guided them back into the house, one of them spoke.

"Why are you doing this?" the man asked us. "If you really wanted a mattress, why didn't you rob a furniture store?"

My girlfriend shook her head.

"We're really sorry, actually. It's just that we couldn't find a furniture store. If we did, we would've robbed that."

That didn't really seem to satisfy him, but then again, he wasn't in any position to feel satisfied.

Working quickly, my girlfriend set out on the last order of business; producing a length of nylon from her satchel, she tied the couple's arms and legs and sat them in a closet.

Checking once to make sure that neither of them were thirsty or uncomfortable, my girlfriend closed the closet doors, and off we went. As I made my way out the front door, I could hear their faint voices from inside the closet. No doubt they had started arguing again. Relationships were strange, I thought.

We only managed to drive for five minutes before we gave up, found an empty, abandoned-looking playground, and parked nearby. There, we barely managed to lug the

mattress off the bed of the pickup and throw it onto the mulch before we collapsed like a couple of dead fish, not even bothering with the bedding. The spell of insomnia—the one that felt as though we could never sleep again—had left as quickly as it had come. I couldn't even remember what it felt like.

"Did we really have to do that?" I asked.

"Of course," she murmured, curling herself into a ball.

I could feel my eyelids drooping. For a second, I strained just a little to stay awake, waiting for her to fall asleep. She rested her head on my chest, light and soft as a baby.

I had found my objet petit a.

Finally, I gave in. At last, I shut my eyes, and sleep closed upon me like a heavy metal door.

I wouldn't wake for a long, long time.



Student Name: Lucas Fang  
 Grade: 11  
 School: Kinkaid School  
 Title: Qiancai  
 Category: Poetry  
 Key: Gold Key  
 Educator: Angelique Jamail

# Qiancai

Qiancai [前菜]: circular side dishes, meant to prepare you for the main course.

My Taiwanese name, Hong-sheng, draws me to A-ma's calming aroma  
 Amidst the steam of small curdling broth.  
 The Taiwanese that flies around my grandparents' dinner table,  
 Is of the melodies that brush the petals of my ear,  
 Of the mysteries I nudge my father to translate.

"Dad, dad! What did An-kong say?"  
 "Oh," they snap from the other world,  
 "Just something about their garden. Not important,"

I feel Hong-sheng slip off my shoulders.

\*\*\*\*\*

Every cut contains compassion,  
 Every strand contains a purpose.  
 Gù báh mī, [牛肉麵]  
 Thinly-laced love swimming in the incessant round pool  
 The blanketing braised beef noodle soup  
 Cleansing warmth gushing down our steamy throats.

\*\*\*\*\*

I can understand Taiwanese through a non-complex system of my own invention.  
 A stranger engages in conversation with me. "You \_\_\_\_ eat \_\_\_\_ more \_\_\_\_ appetizer  
 \_\_\_\_ good."

It's not about the words I can fill in. It's about the blanks which I can't.

“M biàn, to sīa.” (I don't want that, thank you).  
 I'm guessing.  
 I swivel my head to my father:  
 “I thía bô, phai sè,” (he can't understand you, I'm sorry about that).  
 The stranger was asking me if I thought the food was good.

When they speak,  
 It sounds like love and I think I can touch it, but it can't hear me.  
 Hearing is the easy part. It's the understanding that's difficult.  
 Taiwanese, at its core, is a set of static voicemails —  
 Messages I can sparsely make out but never respond to.

\*\*\*\*\*

I'm mesmerized by the flashing lights  
 Illuminating the crisp night mist.  
 The shrimp swim carefully around the shallow pool  
 Laughter dancing around the massive billboards  
 Swirling tapioca trickles gracefully down the tongue  
 Hong-sheng, [泓善]:  
 Everywhere I venture  
 Leads me back to this one market,

I've always seen Taipei as a circle.

\*\*\*\*\*

The characters fly across the page of my menu.  
 “What are you thinking of ordering?”  
 Indecipherable.

The calligraphy adorns the walls of my bedroom.  
 “Great grandpa wrote these. Aren't they incredible?”  
 Incomprehensible.

It's funny when someone says,  
 “your language” —  
 all you can do is force a smile and nod.

They shove it at you, they want you to love something that was never even your own —  
 but it's so beautiful.  
 I'm in love with something I can hear but never taste.

\*\*\*\*\*

My grandmother's free-flowing fingertips; ballerinas blessing the endless sea of black and white.

My grandfather humming perfectly on-key in between his gracious chops of golden-red tomatoes.

My brother scribbling sounds off-key as he tackles the music with his fierce violin.

These are the sounds I can remember.

The Taiwanese for which I need no translation.

\*\*\*\*\*

The heart, unlike the bowl of the Qiancai, is not perfectly circular.

Try as it may, it will never roll, float, or spin away from you.

A-ma runs her fingers gently through the soft hair she gave me.

Hong-sheng is always a part of you, even if not in your tongue,  
and only in your blood.

Student Name: Helen Zhang

Grade: 11

School: Kinkaid School

Title: Stargazing in Peru

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Angelique Jamail

Last summer, my mother took me hiking in Peru.

We didn't hike the Andes, because that would be terribly cliché. Instead, we hiked the narrow mile from our hotel to the nearest Starbucks and bought a flat white and caramel frappuccino.

I ran the sweet current of burnt sugar and bitter coffee over my tongue, letting it coat the inside of my mouth in a thick haze of cold.

The view was remarkable, burnt sierra plateaus and stunted cacti chased each other over the terrain. The Starbucks we'd just emerged from had a regional decoration: an ivory skull with two narrow, cruel horns.

If you're thinking this doesn't sound like Peru, you'd be right.

Last summer, my mother took me to Arizona.

I stood at the precipice of the Grand Canyon, one foot over the void of oblivion, the wind teased me closer to the edge.

My mother was snapping photos of the scenery, her lips curved upwards in a smile. Light flickered through her wild black hair, it turned into plumes of stygian fire.

Then I returned home to Texas, to my unmade bed and soft black drapes, and fell asleep to dream once more.

Last summer, my mother took me to the icy tundras of Alaska.

Moose plodded serenely in violet pastures, and the sun seemed to emanate glacial heat, mist tumbled from the clouds to shroud the whole place in a sheer haze of silver.

Then I woke up, pushed back covers patterned in endless, hypnotic violet circles, and left my bed into the realm of unreal.

Last summer, I dreamed a million dreams and yet none all at once.

In a world shaken by pandemic, where travel seems more and more like an impossible experience, I create memories for myself where there are none to create.

I drank coffee last morning; I drove across the continental U.S for a fresh brewed coffee in Seattle.

I wrote a poem; I returned to summer camp, surrounded myself in a myriad of familiar comforts, and indulged the creativity of my burgeoning mind.

I took a walk outside; I was with my family at the beach, we were laughing because the punishing heat was making our feet glow like coals, the ocean beckoned me closer with frothy arms.

I step forward.

Last summer, I learned how to live.

And here I am, alone in my backyard. I lie on the grass, it's dew seeping into my flesh as I try to recall the warmth of a fading summer. I recline, tilt my head up towards the heavens. It's eerily quiet tonight, silence punctuated by the gasps of drowning stars. The sky is an ocean polluted by a thin sheen of oil that scintillates the jaundiced light of street lamps and sends it hurtling back towards Earth. There are no stars here, they cower before the feeble manufactured mockery of their gaze, they pull the moon out of the sky in fear of it being shot and killed for daring to glow when it is not allowed to.

So I close my eyes, allow the thin pinpricks of diamonds illuminate the space, and pretend the world is as it should be.

I am stargazing in Peru.

Student Name: Lucas Fang  
 Grade: 11  
 School: Kinkaid School  
 Title: The Room We Had Forgotten  
 Category: Poetry  
 Key: Gold Key  
 Educator: Angelique Jamail

### The Rooms We Had Forgotten

A bruise with many rooms; it had an upstairs,  
 An elevator, a balcony, and was  
 Always tumbling into a different country.

Depression tastes like ashes. Like burning your roast  
 Until it's charred and bitter, and all you can do  
 Is spit it back into the dirt.

She could feel the bruise pulsing under her skin,  
 Throbbing with a pain that lingered and refused to fade away. It was a reminder of the  
 night before,  
 When her God had frowned upon her, tumbling headfirst and landing with a sickening  
 thud.

As she sat in her cubicle, staring at her malevolent scarlet,  
 Her mind kept drifting back to the bruise. Images flashed before her eyes -  
 The staircase, the banister, the walls, and the landing.  
 But most of all, she could see the rooms.

The walls are dark and uneven, painted with the sleaziest of colors. They aren't flat.  
 They aren't smooth. They aren't even, but they are there and you can see them.  
 They are coated with a film so thick it makes them glisten and shimmer in the light.

Rooms that were not there before, but had suddenly appeared inside her bruise.  
 Each one was distinct, with its own walls, floor, and ceiling.  
 Some were spacious and filled with light, while others were cramped and dark.  
 There were rooms with furniture, paintings, and carpets, and rooms that were empty  
 except for a single chair or a table.

Mother's room - The fusion of autumn and spring, supreme, straight, generous, and  
 gracious, exclusively female, a warm room that is filled with the scent of baking powder,  
 lima beans, and cinnamon, the warmth of encased fragrant smoke, the armpits of a

mother's love, the melting tenderness of the body that belongs to a little girl, the larynx of a woman's joy.

Brother's room -The room is uneven and rough. The floor feels hard and uneven to the touch. The smell of bread fills your nose, and you can feel the warmth of the wood of the door panel. You can feel a wooden floor beneath you. The floor is cold. The air is warm.

Father's room -The smell of old books and a faded cologne tickle your nostrils and make you feel claustrophobic. You are kneeling next to a chair, on the floor. The room is filled with a musty odor, like the inside of an old attic. It's almost dry, like bones that haven't seen the sun in too long.

She tried to shake off the strange vision, but the buildings towered above her, and the streets were filled with people speaking in strange tongues.

She had been taken captive; awaken to a skyline  
Greeted not by the golden dawn,  
But by the ominous trails of rockets  
And the distant echo of explosions.  
The streets we walk are lined not  
With the playful games of old,  
But with the remnants  
Of mud, blood, and tar.  
Walls pockmarked with shrapnel of past incursions,  
Our windows no longer hold the glass  
That shielded us from the horrors of the world.

But was she trapped in a prison just now?

Or had she always been?

Our prison – It had a political ideology, an economic structure,  
A legal system, and a language; it had its own history and its own places.  
It was Everywhere. Its arms were concrete, and its legs were steel.  
It was tall and it was low; it was far yet always near.  
Its eyes were cold, and its hair was rough and mean. It was dressed in rags made of a  
penal uniform.  
The concrete skin was gray, and riddled with the nicks and cuts of past failures.

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, trying to shake off the haunting memories that clung to us like a second skin.

Like generations clutching her wrist, telling her this was all her fault.

Mother,  
Brother,

Father.

You told me I was beautiful,  
You told me I was strong.  
You told me I meant your world.

All I know are these concrete rooms,  
These wistful rooms,

And now your rooms are missing.  
You all are missing.  
I am missing, you.



Student Name: David Liu  
 Grade: 11  
 School: Kinkaid School  
 Title: The Twilight Lounge  
 Category: Short Story  
 Key: Gold Key  
 Educator: Angelique Jamail

### The Twilight Lounge

The dripping water from the pipe woke him. With a cough, Newman rose from his bed. Sunlight still hidden beneath the cityscape and rain flecking the lights, Newman, now standing, gently wriggled a record from his overflowing record case. Like a surface of silk against a needle, the record brought life to the dusty room. It was a German sonata, its voice soft and languid. Newman closed his eyes and tried to play along, his fingers dancing in a ghostly rhythm, reliving the magic of a memory. Newman felt himself on the wide stage in the concert hall, with a thousand pairs of eyes on him and crescendo of applause washing over him. The track ended, and for a moment, Newman found himself staring at a clipping running across the Holonews: Twilight Lounge, Music and Dance. The club was in the rich district, probably not accepting of his type anyway, Newman reckoned, judging from the entry fee and the address. Newman started coughing again. He turned on the TV to Channel 9 and started cooking his breakfast, always a mundane and tasteless thing that Newman swallowed without much thinking. Old Winston was on the TV again today, reporting on a fire in California, the rising rents across the city, and a cute story about a teenage girl's success in a national dance competition. The girl stood on the stage, the glints of the cameras reflecting off her eyes, while she wore a picturesque smile and hefted a trophy that was more than half of her size.

"Julie, how do you feel at this moment? Youngest ever to win the NCAA and with a unanimous decision."

"I'm so grateful for this opportunity to live out my dreams. And I just want to thank my parents who always showed me their support —"

Newman snorted.

"My parents never had a lot of money to spare," the girl continued. "But they always supported my practicing and stayed with me through the late nights and the injuries" — tears began to well up in the girl's eyes.

"Alright, Julie," the reporter smiled. "What do you have to say to all the young dancers out there?"

"It sounds cliché, but follow your —"

Newman smashed the off button.

As Newman stared at the blank TV, the black screen gradually became the dark drop curtain of the concert hall backstage. His heart rose as the winners' names were called. He could see the smiles, imagining himself embracing the trophy. Then, the first place went

to someone else. He knew it was because of that one chord, or that one ghost note— he knew it was because he just didn't practice hard enough — he knew it was all his fault that this happened.

Shaking himself from the memory, Newman sat quietly in his seat before coughing once more. I'm an exterminator, and I work at BioLife. That's all I am now.

Newman wiped the sweat from his brow and rubbed the heat from his eyes. What he needed was water. Standing up to go to the faucet, he collapsed.

Newman found himself calling the bus to stop at the wealthy district and standing in front of the rain-soaked façade of the Twilight Lounge. It was closed, in all likelihood. He pulled on the door, not expecting it to open, yet was greeted by a thick fog as the door swung open with gusto. Newman coughed from the scent, a drop of blood staining the floor.

10-15 days, the hospital droid had said. Some brain trauma.

Doctors had handed him some pills and sent him off with a walking cane, which was the rest of what his insurance coverage afforded. 10-15 days of recovery or of life?

The hallway opened to a grand hall as Newman walked further. A dimly lit chandelier cast rays of light that reflected across the clear-glass tables, their arrangement leaving a path towards the stage and to the piano that stood center, hidden under the silhouette of the low roof.

It was a cold evening, and his fingers were shaking. There was no bench in front of the piano, so he stood. Gingerly, he pressed a single note. Breathing in the frigid air, he continued to a chord, to an arpeggio, and to a phrase. There it came to him, like a hand guiding him to the notes, to the perfect gesture that sung the tenor — unwavering, pure — its voice holding like a sail gliding across ice. The music swallowed him, his body became its instrument and he swayed, pressed, and ached with every breath that it let out.

"Who are you?"

Newman turned to a young man cleanly shaved and smartly dressed in a suit.

"S-sorry." The dryness of his lips made him stutter. "The door was unlocked."

Newman stepped down from the stage, acutely aware of the man's gaze.

"I just wanted to play a little. I used to play piano, and I don't have one at home. I mean, I do, but it's too heavy to bring up and —" Newman laughed weakly — "It works out because I saw your advertisement yesterday, that you need a pianist, and I was going to have to come here and ask you anyway."

The young man stared at Newman for a moment, then smiling. "Oh! I didn't know you were a pianist. I'll make sure you will be able to play."

"Really?"

"Yes. But there will be a waitlist." He opened one of the doors, gesturing to Newman. The door led outside. "I'll let you know when there's an opening. Now if you will excuse me."

"But you don't know my name."

A flicker of annoyance crossed the man's face. "Sir, I have to clean the mess you have left all over this carpet. Now if you will excuse me." He grabbed Newman's arm.

"No." Newman's voice shook.

The young man sneered.

"Did you really think you will ever be able to play here? With that smell" — Newman began to stumble backwards as the young man advanced. Newman fell to the ground as he tripped down the steps of the front door, beginning to cough. The rain, still pouring, crashed upon him. The young man slammed the door close behind him.

Arriving at work the next morning, Newman was greeted by his boss Howard, a plump man with a grin, calling him to his office.

"I have some good news for you Newman. You're being promoted!" Howard waited for a reaction from Newman. Howard pushed forward with the contract. Howard continued.

"That does not mean an immediate pay increase though. But in a few more years, you might be looking at some hefty equity in the company."

Newman remained silent.

"Well, how does that feel? Newman! 23 years of service paid off, huh?"

The words fell on deaf ears.

Newman still remembered his first job at Biolife, the red brick building and the first colony of rats he had to kill. They were huge, he had thought, but nowadays, he would consider those early rodents starved. He had run away that day, sickened, only returning after a week because he needed the money. The job still nauseated him.

From dawn to dusk, Newman never took off the twenty-pound chemical tank, the mask that tore at his face, nor the suffocating suit. More than once, Newman's vision flared out; he stumbled and fell against the sidewalk. But it didn't matter to him. Working made the days faster.

He looked down at the contract — at the death sentence that stared back at him — and signed.

Barely able to sleep, Newman left home for work earlier the next day. He trudged to his train terminal. The businessman, office workers, and laborers slipped around him as if he was a weathered rock in a stream.

As Newman stepped towards his gate, a note softly rang. Turning, Newman noticed a small boy, with his finger extended in a chopstick gesture, playing on one of the train terminal pianos.

Newman approached the boy and placed his bag against the piano. The boy stopped playing and inched away from Newman, who understood that his sickly appearance and clothing probably weren't the most appealing.

"Like this," Newman said. He gingerly placed the boy's hands on the keys, making sure the boy's wrists high and arms relaxed.

With eyes widened curiously, the boy mirrored Newman.

"Yes. And now like this." He played F-sharp, then C-sharp, D-sharp, D-sharp, C-sharp, with the boy following along closely.

"Mary Had a Little Lamb!" The boy's mouth curved into a smile.

Newman returned the smile, and as C-major key turned to B-flat, the music evolved from charm to poignancy, the melody meandering and swelling with each soft trill, the base theme humming softly, intertwining, and curling around the treble's high voice, singing angelic and pure.

The music seeped and flowed into his fractured mind, carrying him out of the train terminal and towards his own Twilight Lounge where he would perform in the decades to come. Opening his eyes, Newman smiled softly to the boy, and he heard applause.

Student Name: Shaivi Moparthi

Grade: 9

School: Kinkaid School

Title: Threads of Joy - Grandfather's Legacy Woven Through Games; Laughter; and Wisdom

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Angelique Jamail

The colorful threads of delight are woven with the resonant laughter that once rang through the hallways of our home during exciting matches of carrom and badminton in the rich tapestry of our most beloved memories. Those days were frozen in time, capturing an energy that filled the air and left an indelible imprint on the canvas of my heart. My adored grandfather, whose presence was a core part of my childhood, stood at the center of these wonderful hobbies.

Carrom, a strategy and skill game, had the magical capacity to turn our living room into a bustling arena of friendly competition. It was a highly awaited event, with the unmistakable sound of the striker colliding with the carrom ringing with a repetitive rhythm. The strategic flicks, playful banter, and the occasional clattering of pieces produced an aura of camaraderie that extended beyond the board's physical boundaries. Each game became a live testament not just to our talent and competition, but also to the profound kinship we shared—a friendship forged by the shared delight of success and graceful acceptance of failure.

Our badminton bouts were equally revered, with the rhythmic thud of shuttlecocks against rackets. The courtyard, drenched in sunlight, was transformed into our stadium. The shuttlecocks drew arcs of pure enjoyment across the air like joyous sprites. The raucous rallies mirrored the ebb and flow of our laughing, creating an intangible realm in which the simple act of playing became a timeless bridge uniting generation.

In quieter moments, chess was an opportunity to use strategy and intellect. The unmistakable click of chess pieces, each movement a careful step in a dance of wits, echoed the furrowed brows and deep silences that presented a picture of the close connection we had. Chess became a canvas for the exchange of wisdom, more than just a game of calculating movements on a checkered board—a silent discussion that conveyed volumes beyond the words left unsaid.

Among these amusing hobbies, another sphere of shared interest emerged: the world of numbers and logic. Solving math problems became a group effort, a voyage into the world of equations and theorems. His careful coaching transformed math into a

playground of discovery, where each issue answered was a triumph shared in the warmth of mutual understanding rather than an academic accomplishment.

As I reflect on these moments, it is evident that our bond extended far beyond the realm of games. Carrom, badminton, math, and chess were not mere activities; they were conduits through which we communicated, connected, and forged a relationship that defied the passage of time. The lessons learned on the carrom board, the badminton court, and in the world of numbers and strategy continue to shape my character and approach to life.

In the wake of his passing during the pandemic, the tangible echoes of our shared joy persist. The carrom board, once alive with the click of the striker and the shuffle of carrom men now lies silent. The badminton court, once animated by the thud of shuttlecocks and the patter of footsteps, stands empty. Yet, the memories dance in the corners of my mind, a poignant reminder of the joy that once reverberated through our home. The lessons learned during those playful afternoons have become a compass, guiding me through the complexities of life. Each flick of the carrom striker, every rally on the badminton court, and each math problem solved stands as a testament to a bond that transcends the temporal boundaries of our shared moments.

As I navigate the ever-shifting currents of life, I carry within me the spirit of those joyful games, the laughter that once echoed through our home, and the wisdom imparted during quiet sessions of problem-solving. My grandfather, a beacon of joy and wisdom, lives on in the threads of these cherished memories, forever embedded in the fabric of my heart.

Student Name: Cynthia Cai  
Grade: 10  
School: Kinkaid School  
Title: Tonight  
Category: Poetry  
Key: Gold Key  
Educator: Angelique Jamail

"Tonight" I will die.

I have a blog documenting my life.  
It will also document my death.  
It is an open forum blog.  
I know no one sees it, but I post to relieve myself.  
Fits of rage and tears and joy captured in tiny moments.  
In posts of 100 words or less, sometimes a video or a picture.

First, it was for my piano pieces.  
In the great halls, the reverb echoes around me as I play in silence.  
My eyes closed, my fingers dance across the white and black keys with ease.

Then, it was my ice-skating progress.  
In the rink at George's Mall, I spin and spin away.  
My worries spin and spin away too.

Then, it was my artwork.  
The gray, cold statues of clay reflect my thoughts more than the words on this page can.  
I use my fingers to indent, like how the artwork makes indents in my life.

Soon, it became an outlet.  
Gone were the videos of young me skating her heart away.  
Replacing them were long essays:  
Essays of my life in excerpts and anecdotes.

"I hate my life."  
I titled this first essay and posted it.  
Less viewers read this post.

"I hate my dad."  
I titled this second essay and posted it.  
Even less read this one.

"I hate myself."

I titled this third essay and posted it.

Zero people read this one.

"I want to die."

I titled this fourth essay and posted it.

No one opened it.

So, this poem is my final entry.

Perhaps in years and years when someone comes across this page,

They will read my essays.

And appreciate my last form of art, my last attempts at screaming

Screaming across the Pacific Ocean in Point Nemo, for help.

This poem is my last goodbye.

This poem is my confession of love to this blog.

I title it, "Tonight."



Student Name: Chloe Weng

Grade: 10

School: Margo Writing

Title: Century Egg

Category: Short Story

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Margaret Tung

I am twenty-four, living off of two part-time jobs and eating spicy chicken sandwiches and studying late into the night for my graduate degree. My boyfriend Eli keeps protesting that I work too hard, but he doesn't understand. He cannot understand what it means to be an outsider, that others are wondering whether you belong, that you need to work twice as hard to prove that your last achievement wasn't a fluke. He cannot understand the burning desire to survive, passed down from my parents and grandparents and great-grandparents; how I study to the point of exhaustion not because I want to, but because I owe it to my ancestors who haunt me in the veil of filial piety.

I am on my way to lunch when my phone rings with a call from my mother. I pick up the phone. "Wei, Ma? Is there anything you need?"

There are a few moments of static. "Your grandmother," my mother gasps. "She had a stroke. She passed away in her sleep last night."

At first, I can't parse what she's saying, partly because it's in Cantonese, which she hasn't spoken in years except to her family in China, and partly because her voice is crumpled and weary like she's been crying.

Then, it sinks in. "Oh," I say stupidly, because that's all I can manage.

I stand frozen for a while, not in grief but in some semblance of it. After a blur of twists and turns and a numbing cold flooding my brain, I find myself not in my studio apartment, but my boyfriend's one-bedroom walk-up. When I knock, he immediately opens the door, a confused smile pasted onto his face when he catches sight of me. However, his confusion morphs into concern once he notices my expression, and he hastily lets me in.

"What's wrong, Vivian?"

"My, it's—my grandmother," I stammer. "She's dead. My mom called me just now."

"Oh, I'm so sorry." Eli wraps his arms around me tightly, as if his embrace will chase away the grief.

An irrational fury washes over me at his mindless American sympathy. In Guangzhou, if you apologize for someone else's death, mourners will look at you strangely, as needlessly saying "sorry" trivializes the death. Then, my anger melts into confusion, because what am I going to do?

It was impossible not to vacillate between anger and sadness when thinking about my grandmother; the fearless five-foot-one woman who was always too proud to walk with a cane, who dyed her hair mocha brown bi-weekly to have her locks match her youthful

inner spirit, who taught me Cantonese traditions to make sure I wouldn't forget, but resented my mother for allowing me to forget them anyway.

Eli gently closes his fingers around mine. "What do you need me to do, Vivian?"

What would I say to my grandmother if I could have seen her right before she died? I lost my ability to easily speak Cantonese long ago, but somehow I know.

"Let me show you how to make congee."

\*\*\*

My hands automatically shuffle through my pantry for ingredients I know I won't find: white rice, century eggs, green onions, ginger, spice jars full of familiar flavors. Of course I don't have those in my kitchen—I hadn't so much as thought about Chinese food through the quick stops by Quincy Market and cheap New England clam chowder from Copley Place.

I look up to see Eli staring at me quizzically, and I feel blood rushing to my face. What am I thinking, stopping by my apartment for pieces of my culture I had left behind a long time ago? "We're walking to Chinatown," I say, ignoring the shame curling in my stomach next to my phantom grief. "Time to go shopping."

\*\*\*

Step one: Gather all of the ingredients.

After the twenty-minute walk, the strokes on the signs decorating the streets start to rearrange themselves into the characters of my mother tongue, and the passersby start to resemble the crowds in the Guangzhou marketplace where my grandmother once pulled me to every morning. The stores and shops here, however, didn't speak of the stalls in Guangzhou, but rather the Asian-American fusion that had sprouted in this bubble. Still, I let the tangy aroma and bustling streets take me back to Guangzhou.

While my parents were busy making plans to immigrate to the U.S, my grandmother had kept a watchful eye over me. She had fought tooth and nail with my mother, insisting that our family stay in China. "I was soft on your mother," she used to sigh, her lips pursing, "so she has grown to be a headstrong woman with faraway eyes. But your eyes will be steady, and your feet will be planted firmly in Chinese soil. I will make sure of it."

Her words echo through my mind as memories flash in my head, and I can almost feel my grandmother's wrinkled but firm hand pulling me through the marketplace, guiding me to the right ingredients in the grocery store, where most of the workers speak Mandarin.

Pungent century eggs with their characteristic gray-green yolks sit in the refrigerated section of the grocery store, next to half gallons of soy milk and a tofu section that even Goldilocks would approve of—extra firm, firm, medium, soft. Heavy stacks of short-grain white rice are piled in the front of the store, their heft symbolic of the real estate they took up in nightly Chinese dinner bowls. Green onions, cilantro, and ginger emit the fragrant pungent base that is characteristic of all Chinese saute dishes. An entire row is dedicated to soy sauce—dark soy sauce, organic soy sauce, light soy sauce, seasoned soy sauce—because without this Mother sauce, no Chinese dish would be complete.

Eli's face is fixed in an expression I can't decipher as I pay for the ingredients, conversing with the cashier. "I've never seen this side of you before," he says as we head back to the

apartment, glancing at my hands, which have stopped trembling. I lug the paper bag in my palms steadily, as if I'm holding onto my grandmother's strong grip. Of course you haven't, I want to tell him, but swallow back the words. Only she has, and she's gone.

\*\*\*

Step two: Rinse the rice in running water until it's clear. Then, bring the water and rice to a boil.

Back in the kitchen of my apartment, I wash the rice with mechanical swirling movements. It was through watching my grandmother's sure hands that I learned how to make rice. I filter out the starchy rice water and pour fresh water into the pot as Eli rinses the herbs. Looking over the counter amidst the steady stream of water pulsing from the sink faucet, he wrinkles his nose at the dark green-gray century egg. "What's this even called?" "Pidan," I say automatically in the Mandarin I learned in high school in America, but somehow my mouth draws out the pi into a "pay" and the dan tilts into a question, more like the Cantonese pronunciation. Even as my tongue remembers the taste of Cantonese cuisine, my mouth clumsily fumbles over its linguistic markers.

I start the fire on the gas stove to boil the water. "It's called century egg because people like to say it's been preserved for a century." I try to ignore Eli's disgusted expression.

"Don't look so scared—it's harmless, not to mention delicious in congee."

Instinctively, I look away from how easily Eli's face twists at the smell of a century egg.

Because of course he would, a petty voice jeers in my head, and I brush it aside.

"Cilantro is xiangcai, literally fragrant vegetable," I add, with the "c" coming out as a hard "ch" sound, distinctly like my grandmother.

The fragrant aroma that lends the herb its name effuses from the chopping board and wraps around us. The same smells that once emitted from my grandmother's cramped kitchen. "Make sure you cut the xiangcai carefully, like this," she would say, angling the knife in my small hands over the bundle of green leaves. Then, she would squeeze my stubby fingers, her grip painfully tight.

I review more ingredients with Eli as the water with the scallops added begins to bubble up, finding myself tilting my "l"s and hardening my final "ng" sounds like my grandmother once did, almost copying her accent now that mine is already gone.

However, my voice feels like a poor imitation of my grandmother's rich tones, a hollow echo of characters from a lifetime ago.

\*\*\*

Step three: Mince and wash the pork, then marinate. Prepare the herb garnishes.

As Eli minces the pork, I prepare the pork marinade, relying on instinct.

"Use your eyes, your hands, your nose," my grandmother would always scoff in our kitchen in Guangzhou, over and over again until it was stuck in my head like an irritating earworm.

The advantage of her lectures is that despite the lack of measuring tools in my small kitchen, I can tell how much minced ginger is enough, how to perfect the balance of

cornstarch, baking soda, and water. After adding white pepper and sesame oil, I scoop up the pork and toss it into the marinade, mixing vigorously.

"What's your name in Chinese?" asks Eli as I methodically cut green onions on the bias.

"Oh, my name," I pause in the middle of chopping green onions. "'Vivian' doesn't really have a proper translation, but I have an actual Chinese name."

"Why don't you use your real name then?"

I roll my eyes. "'Vivian' is my real name, one that I chose for myself." In truth, my grandmother asked the same question in my head with empty-eyed disappointment—why don't you use your real name?

Eli raises his hands as a show of surrender. "Alright, I was just curious."

My resentment simmers into hot anger. Why was he curious now, and not before? Not once through our nightly spicy chicken sandwiches did he ask for any piece of what made me Chinese.

"Of course you're curious now," I couldn't help but scoff.

"I am," Eli insists, frowning at me as he slices the cilantro. "I don't know this part of you, Vivian, but I want to."

I ignore him and focus on the cutting board. My mind flashes to what my grandmother would say if she could see me now—twenty-four, trying to revive my ability to cook Chinese cuisine with a clueless American boyfriend. I can almost imagine how she would cluck her tongue disapprovingly if she spectated our weekend trips to Quincy Market, how she would wrinkle her nose at the cream pie we stuffed our faces with. My insides shrivel slightly, almost as if they are adjusting to the timid figure of seven-year-old me being scolded by her.

"You're doing it all wrong!" I snap at Eli, glancing at the uneven pieces of cilantro scattered over his cutting board.

Eli sets his knife down and turns around to face me. "Look, I don't know what your problem is right now, but I understand that you're grieving. I want to help you through it, but I can only do that if you let me. I'm sorry about the cilantro, and I'm really sorry about your grandmother."

Again, with the useless apologies that did nothing but fill up the empty space with clutter.

"You think you can just help me through it?" I sneer, fully aware that I'm the one in the wrong now.

"God, Vivian, I'm trying," Eli says, and I know he is, but that doesn't change anything.

"God, Eli, you're such a gweilo," I mock, letting my Cantonese slip out. Such a ghost, such a devil—in other words, such a Westerner that it's almost painful.

Eli squints at me in confusion briefly, before hardening his gaze. "I don't know what that means, but I think you need some time to yourself." When I don't respond, he asks, "Tell me, do I need to leave your apartment?"

I just point to the exit, and he leaves with a quiet click of the door closing.

\*\*\*

Step four: Prepare the century egg, then add the protein and garnishes to the rice.

I don't realize I'm shaking until I try to scoop up all the vegetables and my hands almost drop the cutting board. Eli has never seen me lose my temper before, or at least he's never seen his American grad student girlfriend with the perfect GPA lose her cool before. In reality, Eli's chopping is haphazard but passable, yet I still scowl at the cilantro before gathering the garnishes into one large bowl. Then, I turn the heat down and slowly drop the marinated pork into the pot of rice.

I push my hands against the marble countertop and lift myself up backwards until I'm sitting on the counter, legs dangling above the ground and the smooth surface cooling my soy sauce-stained hands. I keep my eyes on the steaming pork, waiting for the raw pink to darken into a tender brown.

"I don't know what you would say to me if you could see me now, Popo," I say aloud, not realizing I'm speaking in Cantonese until the last word. "But I'm not seven anymore. I'm a twenty-four-year-old woman living in America, that headstrong girl with faraway eyes that you were afraid of me becoming," I whisper in English, because somehow the scraps of my memories of my grandmother are sharp and jagged. No other person had smothered so much attention onto me, yet also taken so much confidence away from me at the same time. She had held onto me so tightly because she knew that I would be leaving soon—thousands of miles away from the food, the culture, the life that she had imagined for me. And so, my grandmother had convinced me that I was her favorite grandchild for now, but that I would be reduced to a gweilo in her eyes if I immigrated with my parents to the States.

When the pork is just the right shade of sienna, I get down from the counter to stir the congee and add the forgotten century eggs, pungent fumes now folding into the steam. Their green-black is a stark contrast against the soft white of the rice, slowly infusing it with flavor as they boiled.

Irritation sparks in me again as I'm reminded of Eli's disgusted expression from before. The last time I had made that face at century eggs was when I was four, and my grandmother had glared back like she wanted to slap the disdain out of my cheeks. But Eli might as well be a newborn when it comes to this, I muse, guilt stabbing through my stomach as the stench in my apartment grew. I turn off the stove when I see the egg is ready. Eli really didn't deserve my outburst.

I get out my phone and pull up Eli's contact. hey, can you come back to my apartment? we need to talk, and i can't finish all this congee by myself, I text Eli.

He reacts with a thumbs up, and I prop myself back onto the cool countertop, waiting.

\*\*\*

Step five: Eat.

When Eli knocks on the door to my apartment, I have just finished adding the vegetable garnishes and serving the congee. I let him inside, but for once he's waiting for me to speak first.

"I'm sorry," I apologize automatically, ashamedly, a bit stupidly like a child who should know better. "I shouldn't have snapped at you like that. Nothing is your fault, I'm just—not myself."

"It's alright," Eli reassures with a soft smile. "I'm sorry too. I care about your culture, and I want to share it with you, or learn about it at least."

"It's alright," I echo, and either apologies aren't so useless after all, or I've turned into an ignorant American. Probably both. A warm feeling grows inside of me, unraveling the tension in my stomach, like it had loosened my grandmother's taut grip on my hand.

"I'm dying to try that congee," Eli quips.

Relief washes over me, and I laugh and gesture over to the dinner table, where the congee sits, steam drifting from the two bowls. We both sit there, and I watch Eli as he brings the spoon to his mouth and swallows.

His eyes widen. "It's good. Like, really comforting." He eats another spoonful of congee, then another.

"Don't choke," I warn, sounding like my grandmother, before swallowing a spoonful of congee myself. The rice itself is mildly sweet, but the garnishes add a citrusy tang that permeates the umami of the pork. Above the layers of flavoring is the century egg, its strong richness binding the dish together in a way that screams the Guangzhou that I have always savored, mixed with the amalgamation of Chinese-American ingredients from the Boston that I have grown to love. I mindlessly stir the bowl of congee with my right hand as Eli reaches for my left hand.

He's still cluelessly American, but I had always been careful to hide my Chinese side, so focused on assimilating that I started to believe that no person could love that part of me. The stinky century egg version of me lay hidden, dormant; a being so unworthy of another individual's affection that I covered her up and plastered on a new identity. In fact, I was the one who dragged Eli to fast food restaurants at midnight, the streetlamps barely illuminating our path into the city and the rush of cars hiding the sound of our footsteps. He was the one who noticed the dark circles shadowing my eyes and insisted that I stop pulling all-nighters. He might not have had a place in my past life among the streets of Guangzhou, but he holds my hand as we tread through the streets of Boston in the life I lead now.

Student Name: Chloe Weng

Grade: 10

School: Margo Writing

Title: reveries on fear

Category: Poetry

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Margaret Tung

a love letter to fear  
Remember that morning  
I had allowed you to follow me home?  
We had known each other for years already,  
a rush of ecstasy stared down from  
Above, and against the ledge I pictured  
what it would feel like to fly  
but you reminded me in your cloying voice  
what it meant to fall.  
The green hue of the river  
was only visible  
When you were beside me,  
your gentle grip  
holding me back, a loving vise  
watching the waters churn and protest.  
You and your smile, your soft laugh  
were the reason  
I never jumped.  
And I painted landscapes  
with the blue-green  
of your eyes, their depths  
Infinite  
and spiraling.  
You taught me how to fracture  
and call it  
art,  
so I would never open my mouth  
and let curdling words  
spill out again,  
because you always cared to keep  
a watchful eye on me.  
And you embraced me  
only yesterday

when I stared at the number  
marked in glaring red on my paper,  
and your words filled that emptiness  
with something more powerful:  
nightmares  
of being stuck in classrooms,  
as a failure in a failure of a room  
Full of huddled children  
that bang when you're not looking.  
I thanked you—  
In response, you smiled,  
lip curling.

a breakup letter to fear  
From when I was six, you followed me  
into school, closing my eyes in the dark  
failure of a room  
Full of huddled children.  
and played clips of gunshots  
in my ears so I would stifle my giggles.  
Bang. Lockdown drill over.  
From when I was ten, you embraced me  
as my fingers hovered over a keyboard  
in black-and-white,  
and my hand squeezed a pencil  
waiting for the timer to start,  
and I shivered at your  
Bone-cold touch,  
the clammy feel of skin  
long since dead.  
But the tremble is welcomed,  
because you are—what is that word again?  
my Boyfriend,  
my Lover,  
From when I was twelve, you kissed me  
my breaths would rot and die out,  
I stuttered  
tongue festering  
mouth trembling  
throughout the speech, the presentation.  
You lifted one pale finger  
to my parched lips



so that the poison would not  
Spill from my mouth,  
drip down to my chin.  
Until I was fourteen, you looked  
over my shoulder whenever I glanced  
Away from you,  
and tremors rocked my body–  
As a child I thought you would  
abandon me once I grew older,  
but you are still here today,  
smirking at me with effortless charm  
only now we are the same age  
And what is that word again?  
Groomer,  
Stalker,  
whatever can capture the rush of dread  
that I mistook for ecstasy.  
And I will keep asking myself:  
Why won't you leave?  
because you cling to me, thick poison  
dripping from your pores into mine  
and this is why  
From when I am sixteen,  
I have made the decision–  
Fear, we had a good run  
But I'm ready to move on.

Student Name: Chloe Weng  
 Grade: 10  
 School: Margo Writing  
 Title: sirens  
 Category: Personal Essay & Memoir  
 Key: Gold Key  
 Educator: Margaret Tung

stage 1: funeral  
 in the distance  
 i catch the melody of sirens  
 wailing in scarlet red,  
 a requiem for those who  
 cannot be mourned,  
 notes woven in flashing lights  
 that glint ruby and sapphire  
 in the sun's morning glow.

they spin tales of her  
 i cannot recognize,  
 how she always had a smile  
 alight on her radiant face.  
 she was a brilliant girl,  
 they keep repeating in their  
 eulogies—she was only seventeen  
 and she would have never  
 ever done such a thing.

and they never say the word: suicide.

stage 2: reminiscence  
 i leave the sea of black in the funeral  
 and walk over to the abandoned home,  
 dusty hallways whispering to me  
 with every remnant of her:  
 whose fault was it? was it mine?  
 the damp air heavy with one word,  
 as if the wind itself was weeping:  
 why? why? why?

i grind coffee beans in the machine,

listen for the satisfying crunch  
 as she tells me she always preferred tea,  
 perched atop the cold marble counter,  
 ebony black hair framing a thin face,  
 the crescents under her eyes fading  
 in the glaring sunlight.  
 as a ghost she says i don't want your pity,  
 i just want you to listen.

and so i do.

stage 3: tour  
 a bedroom,  
 this is where i cried myself to sleep.  
 a basement,  
 this is where i hid when they fought.  
 a kitchen,  
 this is where i pressed my wrist against  
 the blade until fear took control again.  
 a family portrait—this is my home.

a sister whose eyes won't ever light up  
 as brightly as they had before,  
 a father who falls forever silent  
 and dissolves into a second ghost.  
 a mother who can't stop apologizing  
 to no one, and i see all of them,  
 smiling mechanically in the portrait,  
 blissfully unaware of what had been  
 festering in her.

and i shield my eyes from grief.

stage 4: musing  
 i try to imagine what it would  
 have felt like, staring down from  
 the ledge with emptiness swallowing  
 her from the inside out. or would  
 it have been a dark despair, gnawing  
 at her insides, cold and biting and  
 morphing into a type of pain  
 she could not come back from?

because you think you understand,  
 you think she should have been  
 grateful for the life she had,  
 you think you could have talked  
 her down, you think you are  
 capable of shifting the balance  
 of death, warding off his shadow  
 with a flick of your hand,  
 and you could be right, maybe  
 you are right.

but then how could you have not known?

stage 5: regret  
 warmth blooms against my fingers,  
 but the bitter taste lingers in the  
 ceramic familiarity of the cup,  
 refusing to touch my gossamer tongue.  
 will you show me where? i ask her,  
 and she brings me to sit on the  
 bridge sitting high up above the  
 waters below, high enough to jump,  
 disappear under the currents, and never  
 come back up. we pry concrete pieces  
 from the ledge and toss them into  
 the currents, watching them sink.

i catch the hypnotic siren's song  
 rippling from the river of sea green  
 under the crumbling cement bridge.  
 angular eyes sharpen on me from below,  
 with the same crescents underneath,  
 the same ebony hair in her reflection,  
 dimmed by the scarlet red hue of sunset.  
 will you tell me why? i ask her.  
 she does not respond.

she cannot.

Student Name: Claire Glickert

Grade: 8

School: Presbyterian School

Title: A Composer's Composure at Camp

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Elizabeth Eades

### A Composer's Composure at Camp

As I lugged my violin and backpack up the steep stairs, excitement mixed with fear swirled around inside of me. I was an ant surrounded by a crowd of giants, laughing, talking, and rushing by me. I was walking into music composition boot camp, the first year of a brand new program. I had dreamed of one day composing music, but didn't have any experience with it. Feeling lost and confused like a hiker in the middle of a forest without a map, I followed the crowd and found myself in a room filled with instruments. I wandered in and saw I was one of the youngest and one of the only girls. I felt as if I stuck out like I was wearing a Halloween costume when it wasn't Halloween. We started a project and it became obvious to me everyone else had a lot more experience. I couldn't wrap my head around all of the time signatures and notes. I was starting to wonder if I should have signed up for this. I bit my lip wondering if I was good enough to be here.

The rest of the day went by in a blur with new faces, names, techniques, instruments, rooms, and classes, too much to take in. I was like a sponge trying to absorb too much water. Next thing I knew I was at home crying.

"I don't know if I want to do this anymore." Mom comforted me.

"It's normal for new things to feel scary at first. I'm so proud of you for being brave and trying today. I think if you keep going you'll be proud of yourself too." Tears ran down my cheeks like rain drops on a window.

I stuck with it and kept trying. As the days passed by, I realized camp wasn't as bad as I had made it seem. The following days I was braver and stronger, opening myself up and allowing myself to have a better time than before.

The weeks flew by and finally came the day when expert musicians would perform my song. That morning, I walked into camp feeling ready and excited. I was a climber who had reached the top of a mountain after a hard and frightening journey ready to enjoy the view. The final day was a vibrant rainbow that arose from weeks of rain. Confidence flowed through me. The bassoon, violin, and flute began to play. Like dots dancing on lines, notes floated off the page to make wonderful sounds, each creating a different feel. My notes strung together, creating lovely harmonies and melodies that filled the air along with the other composers'. And those notes weren't just notes. They were my thoughts and feelings. My song, Stepping up, was a reflection of stepping to the challenge of camp, not giving up, and growing braver in the process.

Even though camp held many challenges, I now realize going was practice for the next time something was scary or hard. The road will always have bumps and twists, you just have to push through and keep going. I also found that composition is a good way of expressing myself and it makes me a more creative person.

Fast forward to a few months later, I walked into a new middle school, with that familiar feeling of fear mixed with excitement swirling around inside of me. This time, though, I was ready to face my fears. I've got this. I told myself. And I did.

Student Name: Nicholas Laskaris  
Grade: 8  
School: River Oaks Baptist School  
Title: A Sister Beyond Compare  
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir  
Key: Gold Key  
Educator: Chelsea Reynolds

A  
Sister Beyond Compare

"Niko,  
look, I've learned this the hard way. Don't compare yourself to others. It's the worst thing anyone can possibly do. Comparing yourself will do no good. It will only bog you down." That was said to me by the most important role model in my life. She made me realize that my yardstick should be myself and that I should focus on self-improvement without being distracted by whether others do better or worse than me. She inspired me to be determined in my goals, resilient in my setbacks, and to appreciate the steps of my journey. She helped me believe in myself and develop introspection. That person who had a profound impact on me, my mentor, is none other than my one-year-older sister, Evie.

From  
the outside, Evie is a typical fourteen-year-old girl. She has long, dark, curly hair, a sweet smile, and dark eyes full of kindness and comfort. However, from the inside, she is so much more than just a teenager, so much more than just a sibling. Evie has just entered high school and is facing new realities that are more strenuous and demanding than those in middle school. However, just like she had always done, she goes through her trials and tribulations with a smile on her face. Her mind remains determined, her dedication stands unwavering, and she is not intimidated by whatever challenge lies ahead. There is no mountain too tall for her to climb. Even though she excels in almost everything she does, she never gloats. I believe that she owes her success to the fact that she never compares herself to others, but rather only to how she was a week, a month, or a year ago. For example, if she wants to improve in cross-country, she will use her past performances as the benchmark as opposed to comparing her times to that of someone else. I don't think my sister is perfect; despite her flaws, her attitude and way of thinking towards aspects of life in my age worked well for her and intrigued me to explore her approach in dealing with my realities.

When

I was in seventh grade, I came home in a bad mood that had stuck with me ever since my English class that day. I had gotten a 96 on an English quiz. That may seem like a good grade, and it was! It even increased my average grade by more than two percentage points. So why was I disappointed, angry, and distraught? The usual reason: other people. After talking with several of my friends about the quiz, I realized that they all had a grade above 96, and a few even got 100. My 96 did not seem that impressive anymore. That entire day, I kept trying to find someone who got a grade lower than 96 on the quiz. When I told my sister about why I was upset, she laughed. What she said after that I will never forget, and I used it since then to lift myself up whenever I felt that life punched me in the stomach. "Niko, look, you got a 96. That is a good grade. It does not matter if your friends got a higher grade. You did good and you should be proud of your own work. Don't compare yourself to others, it will only bog you down." Knowing how she was doing in school, with her best grades, awards, and lasting focus, I decided to try her advice and free my mind from judging myself to others in my life. After all, that 96 was an improvement for me; I had completely lost that perspective when I compared myself to others. Instead of satisfaction that my hard work bore fruits, I was deflated and self-doubting. From that day, I gradually started focusing on self-improvement and on blocking out of consideration of how others were doing, whether better or worse.

Even

though this event happened less than one year ago, I have taken my sister's advice several times since then. I began to see improvements in myself not only academically, but also emotionally and spiritually.

Comparison is one of the most consuming and malevolent aspects in one's life. It is tempting, but one should try to avoid it as much as possible because it doesn't do any good, and like my sister said, it will only bring you down. This new way of thinking has particularly helped me in my high school application process. Every day, my classmates talk about that endeavor, and they are obsessed. They compare test scores, how they study, how they think their interviews went, what plans they have next, and the likes. Due to my new life motto to focus on myself, I manage to mostly stay unaffected from all that noise around me, from every real or imaginary thing my classmates bring up that only increases anxiety. I manage to navigate purposefully and peacefully the process for the next big step in my life knowing that no matter what, the road ahead is long and I will be okay if I stay on it and just focus on getting better one step at a time.

I

am fortunate to have my sister in my life. Her being one year ahead of me on the road I travel, and the amazing person that she is, has offered me



invaluable service and has given me assurance, perspective, and motivation while I pursue my evolving dreams. I still struggle sometimes to overcome the emotions that come from how I compare relative to my peers; the satisfaction and boost of confidence when I perform better than most, or the disappointment and self-doubt when I don't. However, that is just another confirmation of my new life motto. I am fine to not be perfect. In fact, there is actually some fun in that, and I don't even think "perfect" exists for a person. My goal is to keep ameliorating my imperfections while building on my strengths. I know when that happens, I can feel it. The effort is mine, the realization is mine, but the initial credit goes to my beloved sister for steering my mind to start thinking that way. I will always be thankful to her for that.

Student Name: Campbell Pacey  
Grade: 8  
School: River Oaks Baptist School  
Title: Blossoms of Kindness  
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir  
Key: Gold Key  
Educator: Chelsea Reynolds

### Blossoms of Kindness

The car was surrounded by noise, meaningless sound. I was so tired of not understanding, not being able to speak my mind. My opinions, concerns, and questions were all drowned out. Drowned in silence like someone would drown in an ocean, the waves muffling screams. The radio, playing what I could only guess was news, filled the car with more worthless noise. The unfamiliar words, rapidly spilling into my head, but not being received. The phrases bounced around, filling my conscience like hornets in a box. Communication used to be easy. I slipped away to the family dinners, to the meals I spent with loved ones. I refused to let the gathering tears run, pushing the twisted fear and loneliness down. How I yearned for the feeling of being heard. Instead, I felt like a lion at a zoo, with every move watched, but never understood. Daydreaming of home passed the time, but it didn't help. I had never been so far from my family, from my friends, from my home.

The small car sped into the city, blanketed with a gentle layer of fog. Small drops of rain sprinkled on the windshield, but the sharp sounds of the unfamiliar community cut through the soft pitter-patter. Familiar smells of rain were replaced by the air freshener in the car. Outside, there was a sea of umbrellas. The people under them quickly went about their day, ignoring the car and the girl inside it. They had no idea of the sorrow of the passenger. Why would they? Most of them probably had never been 6,682 miles from their home before, but I was. I might as well have been on a different planet. A shiver drew me back to the overlooked car. My hands were cold, but I would rather freeze than ask to turn the heat up. Instead, I shoved my hands further into my pockets.

The deafening silence was broken by the woman driving. Her voice was faint and soft, like a quilt, sewed together with love, each stitch with meaning. The slow, uncertain words came through. "You want music?"

Jumping at the opportunity for distraction, I gratefully replied, "Yes, I would love music," remembering to speak slowly and in complete sentences.

The girl sitting beside her, Yuki, turned the knob on the radio until a song played. The song was familiar. The girl that would be my host sister for the next week offered a small smile. I returned it. I had never been so thankful for Olivia Rodrigo. My focus slipped away to the lyrics.

Before I knew it, the car eased to a stop in a parking garage. I walked around the blue car to the trunk to grab my bag. Standing up made me lightheaded. The exhaustion made the echoing noises of the garage pound against my head like a hammer pounding on a nail. Mind you; being an exchange student in Japan so far had been amazing. The food, people, and places I had encountered were truly lifechanging. It was just the lingering loneliness.

As we walked towards the apartment building, Yuki explained that they lived in a small apartment and that we would share a room with two small beds. "Are you okay with sharing?" she asked.

I quickly responded, doing my best to sound more confident than I felt. "I would be fine with anything. That sounds great."

I studied her. Yuki was tall, with a round face. Her expression rested in a cheery smile that looked natural. She walked briskly and out of instinct. She clearly knew where she was going. Her shoulder length hair bounced with her steps, swaying in the gentle breeze. We arrived at a door that looked like every other we had passed: simple, with a uniform black mat under it. The small woman, who had introduced herself as Ms. Kobayashi, unlocked the door.

Yuki opened it and walked in. My feet slowly took unsure steps onto the clean, white tile. I took off my shoes and exchanged them with the extra slippers that were reserved for guests. Carefully placed below the step, I could only hope that the beat-up tennis shoes were positioned in the correct way.

Pictures of the Kobayashi family lined the wall of the small apartment. I looked closer at their family, with grandparents and uncles. The resemblance was obvious. The photos reminded me that I didn't belong. They reminded me that I was an outsider.

Ms. Kobayashi gestured to the first door on the left, making out the words, "Your room,." Yuki helped her by adding, "We will let you settle," though her accent made the slow phrase difficult to understand.

I retreated into the room, mumbling, "Thanks."

The small room had two twin beds that were neatly made with white sheets and a beige blanket tightly pulled across. I set my suitcase down beside the bed and collapsed onto the cushiony mattress. My tense muscles relaxed. I thought about my family, how right now they would probably be getting up for breakfast. My dad would be cooking bacon, and my mom would be flipping pancakes. My brothers would be playing basketball outside. I would have been playing with them or curled up with a book or helping with breakfast, but I wasn't. Slow, warm tears started rolling down my cheeks, wetting my face. They started in just a few, then multiplied. The bottled-up emotion erupted in a silent burst. There was so much isolation. It felt good to let it out. I laid there, shaking, for a few more minutes then prepared myself to face an awkward dinner. I wiped my eyes, brushed my hair, and splashed some water on my face. Then I took my first step up my steep mountain to climb.

I found Ms. Kobayashi sitting at a table, reading something in a notebook. She looked up and me, smiled and announced, "We will have hamburger steak and soup for dinner tonight. Is that okay with you?"

Her confident words surprised me. I stuttered, "Y-yes, that sounds great," and looked at her notebook again.

Recognizing my curiosity, she turned it to face me. The page was covered with Japanese phrases and their English translation. The loopy handwriting was beautifully clumsy, with things crossed out and erased. I flipped a page, and another, and another. They were all full, full of sentences that were written with worth and love in every word, the entire notebook.

I didn't know what to say. The warm tears returned, but they felt different. A weight was lifted off my shoulders. Tears rolled down my face, yet I felt myself smiling.

Ms. Kobayashi gave me a confused look. She didn't understand how much it meant to me. My heart overflowed with the feeling of acceptance. I felt like I belonged. Her selfless act gave me the strength to face my fears of living with a host family. I felt like I could climb my mountain but also lead others up.

In Japanese culture, cherry blossoms represent love and new hope. Ms. Kobayashi showed me both. The blossoms of her kindness are both beautiful and meaningful, blooming for all to see. Ms. Kobayashi taught me the importance of compassion, from small gestures to unbelievable love, putting others before yourself can cause ripples that one never could have dreamed of, like giving a girl the inspiration and confidence to make the world around her a better place, one blossom at a time.

Student Name: Edward Kang  
 Grade: 8  
 School: River Oaks Baptist School  
 Title: Nature's Plight  
 Category: Poetry  
 Key: Gold Key  
 Educator:

### Nature's Plight

Amid the Earth's warming face,  
 There is a problem, could that problem be us?  
 From the mighty jungles, to the arctic's icy grasp,  
 Among melting ice, a chilling sight,  
 To plastic seas, a dangerous plight.

I am a polar bear,  
 Once ice's king,  
 But that ice is melting,  
 No places to roam, no place to call home.  
 Hunger is a grueling force.

I am a sea turtle,  
 Seamlessly gliding across the ocean blue,  
 Coral reefs, once vibrant and bright,  
 Now lack color with no chance to thrive.  
 Plastic islands infect my path,  
 Pollution, omnipresent with each tide.

I am a deer,  
 As the once emerald canopies vanish,  
 No longer do I feel the Earth's warm embrace,  
 My habitat transformed into one for humans,  
 My world disrupted, the forest purged,  
 I cannot rest at ease, as I am scourged.

I am a falcon,  
 Soaring the boundless skies to my delight,  
 My mountain home, once secure,  
 Now threatened by heat's powerful allure.  
 As the world's temperature continues to grow,

My nourishment, my home and my future takes a blow.

I am a monarch butterfly,  
No nectar left,  
No strength to soar,  
No place to call home.  
The meadows and fields, once so lush and green,  
Now withered due to the escalating heat.  
As human progress paves its path  
My path seems to dissipate.

From the north to the south,  
From pole to pole,  
Our warming world drives nature from its throne.  
For our deeds have scarred and caused it pain,  
Together, we can make a change.

In harmony we all must strive,  
In order for every future to thrive.

Student Name: Jessica Fan  
 Grade: 8  
 School: SpiderSmart at Sugar Land  
 Title: A Refuge in the Woods  
 Category: Poetry  
 Key: Gold Key  
 Educator: Sharon Li

The first time I enter the library,  
 It's like walking into a forest clearing  
 A precious sanctuary,  
 Away from the terrifying, tumultuous throngs in the halls.

The books and on  
 beckon, singing the shelves,  
 dancing

Open me!  
 Read me!

Mama bear librarian  
 Who knows me well now  
 Protects her cubs from the wolves.  
 She knows their mischief  
 Their devious, naughty schemes.

She's wearing her signature glasses  
 With a long silver chain dangling behind her neck.  
 Two blue pencils stuck inside her bun  
 and around her wrist, a charm bracelet dangling  
 with tiny copies of her favorite books.

Mama book bear does not judge you  
 if you are the ugly duckling in the pond.  
 Librarians believe you will become a beautiful swan  
 with time and patience, knowledge and kindness –  
 their essential ingredients.

Always longing for the comfort of the library--  
 In the final seconds of class,  
 I carefully pack my backpack,

Slide in my  
pencil bag,

binder,

water bottle.

Stare at my friend's watch,  
...counting  
down  
to  
zero.

I push back my chair  
Burst from my desk,  
Grab my friend's hand,  
And we swim upstream through the stampede.

We get to where the currents meet,  
From four directions.  
See kids get flung into lockers  
And someone slipping on a puddle of water.  
We try not to think about the sound our sneakers make  
as we walk through something sticky  
to avoid the onslaught of wild animals squawking and preening.

We hear the assistant principal's voice,  
calling for order in the courtyard,  
Directing traffic and sweating profusely  
in the steaming, stinking crush of adolescent humanity.

Up ahead,  
A beacon of light!  
The rotunda, a wide open space,  
sunlight streaming through floor-to-ceiling windows.  
The herd thins in these parts of the savannah,  
away from the watering hole.

Releasing each other's white knuckles  
we flex our stiff fingers to get the circulation back  
and go our separate ways.

I walk through the double doors of the library



and breathe a deep sigh of relief.  
The tall green grass of the bookshelves rustle in the wind,  
like a secret magic meadow.

Student Name: Ariel Yu

Grade: 7

School: SpiderSmart at Sugar Land

Title: Arms of Green

Category: Poetry

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Sharon Li

### Arms of Green

A grapefruit tree used to sit  
Behind my house, four times taller than me.  
It bore juicy sweetness for me to pick  
From this great, big grapefruit tree.

Its trunk was only slightly wider than me.  
The journey up felt like a quest in the wild.  
The prizes were grapefruits, easy to see  
And as fresh as the first breath of a newborn child.

I climbed it every day I could  
To escape my house during quarantine.  
Like a benevolent guardian it stood  
Watching as I hung from its arms of green.

My family cared only about the fruit it bore,  
But I could care less.  
The thing that I desired far more  
Was the chance to sit in this tree and de-stress.

But then the horrors of 2021 befell  
My wonderful, beloved grapefruit tree.  
It became a hollow, empty, dry shell  
Of the magnificent plant it used to be.

It was the freeze of February that took all its leaves.  
It was something Texas had never seen!  
Those hated fragments of ice were just petty thieves  
Stealing the color they could never be: green.

We waited a day, a week, maybe more,

Hoping beyond hope that our tree had survived.  
 Alas, my father believed that our tree was done for.  
 And soon, the tree-killers arrived.

That day, I came back from dance to see  
 Strangers lugging around pieces of wood.  
 I realized that it was my grapefruit tree  
 And ran inside, hoping my tree was not gone for good.

It was true; my tree was now a hole.  
 A hole in the ground and a hole in my heart.  
 My precious tree had left a gash in my soul.  
 Its fruit and branches all torn apart.

There were no more branches and no more grapefruits.  
 No place to sit in leafy green of peace.  
 All that was left was dying roots,  
 Those poor dying plants denied release.

Why did the tree go away?  
 Where will I go to escape quarantine?  
 I can only stay inside and pray  
 That I may one day lie in other arms of green.

A grapefruit sapling has been planted  
 In the place its predecessor was before.  
 But I'll never know: had we granted  
 The tree more time,  
 Could it have come back from its death door?

Student Name: Yunhan Sui

Grade: 11

School: SpiderSmart at Sugar Land

Title: When Time Passes on Her

Category: Short Story

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Sharon Li

With groups of cockroaches and mice roaming across the room's corners, mom and I only knew peaceful family nights from the movies. It was a small apartment that cost more than half her salary, but we made due. Every time a bug rushed across the floor, I threw the broom to my mom and closed my eyes. She is my protector; she always stands between me and anything dangerous.

Mom Loved to read. Sometimes we lay in bed together, bathed in the orange-smelling flame from a scented candle she bought on clearance. She would murmur as she read, but nothing I could comprehend. As the candle flame started to gutter, she would gently close her book and set it down next to me. Sometimes I would wake up later with drool staining the over, but she would never scold me. I have never seen her angry. I think she is too tired to be upset by anything. Her gaze is always calm and gentle, though, behind it all, there is an undeniable sadness. Even when we talk to each other at the breakfast table, I feel her looking at me from far away.

Every kid has drawn their family portrait in preschool. The teacher would tell us to draw a square with a triangle on top with three or four stick figures inside. I would draw a house for me and my mother. I have only seen my father once; I don't even remember when. It is a vague fleeting memory that may be an amalgamation of stories my mother has told me over the years. How can you know what you remember? I was not the kid who asked "Where is daddy?" I had my mom. For as long as I can remember, my family only consisted of my mother. I never thought that I lacked attention from father because my mom gave me everything that I needed.

Mom always comes home late, wearing her black work suit. After making me dinner, she goes back to her computer until after I fall asleep. She always looks tired. Before bedtime, I would often carefully ask her, "Mom, are you happy today?"

"I am happy today, " she always said, smiling, and then: "Because I am with you."

Then I would sleep soundly. But deep down, I knew somehow that she was covering. I didn't notice back then, or perhaps I chose to not notice.

\*

Mom and I always travel during school breaks. We usually go to the sea; she likes to wear a quit blue fairy dress. I used to mistake the edge of her dress for waves of the ocean. I thought that my mom was the Blue Fairy, just like the beautiful and wise woman Pinnochio met. She likes to walk along the sand spit, where the waves keep the sand wet and firm. As a child, I needed to run to keep up with her after exploring some tide pool or jellyfish wracked upon the shore .Chasing after her, I felt worried. When I reached her, out of breath, she would hold my hand and I would calm down.

Eventually, her sadness was overwhelmed by her responsibilities. Being a single mother with a full-time career was difficult, especially when she needed a second job to support us. After school, the daycare minivan would pick me up, and I would eat dinner and finish my homework at a preschool. They always served cold fish sticks or tasteless broccoli; I hated the food, but I never told mom about it - she had too much to worry about already. After I finish my homework, I would lean over on the window top and watch the streets for hours, waiting for mom's car to pull in. There were six other kids in my class, we would wait for our parents together, but I was always the last one to be picked up.

\*

Mom's hard work paid off after a while. Three years later, she was promoted to project manager. Mom now has a bigger offie and a better salary, but the reward for working hard at her job is more work. I have to wait even longer for her to pick me up each day.

"I'm now earning ten thousand dollars more each year!" Mom told me with high spirits, "Now we can buy a piano, a computer - anything we want!"

"Can we move to another place with fewer roaches?" I asked, dead serious.

Mom said she has been saving to buy a house with a backyard, It would also have three bedrooms and individual bathrooms. She said I could have the extra room as a place to study or play.

I was happy that I finally got my room, but I was a little sad the same time because mom now spends even less time with me.

I waited for even longer at the daycare. And when mom finally showed up, she always looked more tired than before.

Mom, are you happy today?

\*

Two things happened when I entered middle school: First, mom and I moved into a two-story house with a backyard. To my surprise, it also had a swimming pool/ I had my room, which mom filled with books and toys. She also bought a lot of yard decorations and flower seeds hoping to transform our dull yard into an ideal family paradise on magazine covers.

"Yangyang, we can plant these flowers and make a beautiful garden together," my mom told me with a big smile, squatting on the arid grassland, "We can also plant an orange tree - it will grow fruits by the time you go to high school."

We never saw the flowers bloom or planted the orange tree. Mom was too busy with work and rarely stepped into the backyard after that day. I tried to take care of the flowers the first year we moved, but none of them survived that winter, and I gave up.

Mom was still alone, and she disliked that.

That haunted me for the rest of my childhood. Whenever she dressed up, not in the business clothes like when she went to work, but in a going-out way, I knew she would leave the house when I fell asleep and come back before I woke up in the morning. Soon after that, a man would appear in my house, and he would try to ingratiate me so that I would like him enough to let him be my new dad. But I didn't like any of them, and I had ways to expel them out of my territory. I would fake a sickness, throw the guy's thoughtful gift into the pool, or sit between them on the sofa for as long as the guy stayed. I also invented a strategy - sometimes, I would furtively approach mom in a voice just loud enough for the guy to hear: "Is Dad coming over tonight?"

Eventually, she got the hint and stopped trying. Once I heard her on the phone say: "I'll think about getting married again when Yangyang is older."

However, I never understood why she wanted to get married at all. Was I not enough for her? If she didn't have time to take care of the garden or hang out with me, how did she find time to go on dates?

The seeming peace continues until high school.

\*

"What do you think, Yangyang?" Mom turns around in front of the dress mirror, wearing the quilt blue fairy dress. The design is not out of date despite being years old. The smooth tailoring and eye-catching patterns made her look young and pretty, and I knew I wasn't the only one who thought that.

"It doesn't suit you anymore," I gave her a glimpse and quickly glanced down at my phone. "You aren't twenty years old anymore. You should wear something that suits you."

The lights in her eyes dimmed and I saw something smoldering in her face. She took off the dress and dutifully hung it back up in the closet. She put on her usual home uniform: a red T-shirt with gray sweatpants and made dinner.

My mom's wish to dress up never faded, though. She took me to the mall more often and asked for my opinion on different outfits. I never gave a positive evaluation. To erase her hope, I even called her "old" and said it was "unsightly for her to pretend still she is a young woman."

I told her that her business outfits suited her best. Not because for aesthetic purposes, but because of the meaning behind that costume - independent, strong, successful, self-sufficient, no need for help from anyone. In my mind, she should go to work every day, come home, and take care of me. She didn't need another man. That would only take away from my time. I should be enough, after all.

On my sixteenth birthday, my aunt Shuyuan came to visit me from China. I've always loved her. She was three years older than my mom, but she had the energy that made me feel I could be friends with her. My mom didn't celebrate with me due to work, as usual, but Aunt Shuyuan took me to dine at a nice steakhouse, shop for dresses at a garnished mall, and play at my favorite theme park for the rest of the day. On the Ferris wheel, I told her that was the happiest day of my life, and at that moment, I truly felt that way.

"Well," Aunt Shuyuan smiled, "you can be this happy every day if you have a dad. You know your mom is busy, and it would be good to have someone to take care of you."

It felt like she poured a basin of ice water from the top of my head that completely eradicated my passion for the rest of the night. Aunt Shuyuan didn't hang out with me for me; she was my mom's lobbyist. I don't remember about the rest of the night, but I felt I was fighting the rest of the world alone, defending my peaceful yet precarious life against the omnipresent intruders.

I suppose Mom thought I was old enough because Aunt Shuyuan wasn't her last attempt. Mom's supporters came after me for weeks straight. Every day I come home, a relative or acquaintance is waiting for me. They would get me presents or butter me up but eventually circle back to the same topic - my mom needs to get married. I tried to be polite at first but eventually got annoyed. I knew that they wouldn't leave me alone unless I could firmly state my attitude.

"My mom doesn't need a husband," I told them, "If my mom gets remarried, I will have her regret it."

\*

I was never the smartest one in any of my classes, but I was the best because I spent hours every day studying or practicing. My mom never pressured me, but I was always in the mode of competition - I wanted to be better than everyone else. I wanted my mom to compliment me.

My mom gave me more attention. She said I am our family's priority until I get into college. She spent a lot more time with me - teaching me to drive, making me food, and driving me to different places - to perform violin or take math exams- making me feel like the proudest daughter in the world.

I stuffed my life with all forms of competition, rehearsals, and practices. My mom's life was filled with me - she made me dinner every day and drove me everywhere. She encourages me before my competitions and consolidates me if I fail. I got more attention in these four years than in the first fourteen years of my life combined. I soon made it to college. She was very happy.

At the time, I thought this was the best for my mother and me.

\*

I got admitted into a prestigious university on the East Coast, separated from my mom, my friends, and everything I was familiar with. It was a pain at the beginning - classes were hard, and I was surrounded by people that are much smarter than me, but my mom was proud.



Mom got more congratulations than I did, everyone repeated the same phrase “You finally got over the hard time!”

Were Mom and I living a dire life in the past?

Mom called me every day, asking about everything she should and shouldn’t ask. I usually listen to her phone calls while working on my things, dazedly repeating “Yes, yes.” She visited me very often, almost once a month. My friends thought it was odd, none of their parents showed that much attachment to them.

College life was more exciting than high school. I was on the math and debate team and joined the dance club. I started to pay attention to trends - shopping for nice outfits, finding the right hairstyle, and wearing make-up. I stopped neglecting my appearance - studying wasn’t my only focus anymore.

When I came back home during the summer, I came to the fact that Mom started seeing a man whom I called Uncle Zhang. He’s an English teacher at a local high school, and he’s seven years older than her. I didn’t say anything. In fact, I felt a sense of relief. I remembered that a few years back, it was only the young men who were chasing after her. I felt sorry for her whenever I thought of that.

Mom and uncle Zhang didn’t have a wedding; they didn’t even go to the City Hall. She packed a simple luggage and moved in with him. They traveled around the country; she sent me a lot of pictures of her smiling, and wearing colorful sports suits. She seemed happy and energetic, but she was no longer the young woman in the blue Fairy dress, ten years ago.

After college, I stayed on the East Coast and worked for a tech company. I developed my style of living - work, going to company socials, clubs, and occasionally, dates.

I rarely went home and called my mom. I would spend hours Facetime with friends or colleagues, and chat with strangers online, but I had nothing to say to her.

Mom and Uncle Zhang only had five years of good times, then he had a cerebral hemorrhage that nearly paralyzed him. A lot of people told Mom she should leave, but she stayed and took care of him. After a year, Uncle Zhang died, and I went to his funeral. Mom was calm, as if she just finished some task.

Mom moved back to her house; she’s now retired.

Mom raised many flowers in the backyard but planting the orange tree was too much work for her. Our backyard finally looked like how we envisioned fifteen years ago, but now, it is only my mom that's taking care of everything. She would often sit in the lawn chair and gaze at the flowers for the entire afternoon. She still enjoyed reading, but she often fell asleep holding her book like how I used to when she read for me.

\*

I visited Mom during Christmas. Opening the door, it seems like dust has been pushed away, and all the memories come rushing to my face.

There was a bowl of half-eaten ramen noodles and some packages of frozen food on the living room table. The television was playing a reality show, and my mom passed out cold, leaning back on the sofa. She slept peacefully as if she had been there forever. I didn't know if she always lived like this.

Is she always this lonely?

She didn't hear me walking in.

My thoughts drifted back to one night, twenty years ago. My mom cuddled me on the sofa, and the television was playing a scene of a family of five dining together.

There was a yearning in her voice that could not be concealed: "Yangyang, it would be so nice if we had a family like that."

I also thought about the time she took me to the mall. I had no hesitation in attacking her taste and confidence. I didn't notice her disappointment, yet the look on her face at the time now turned into a knife that stabbed into my heart.

What I thought was the perfect family wasn't what she wanted at all. Mom wanted to explore another side of her; she yearned for romance, and I ignored and shut down all of her wishes.

I came to this realization twenty years too late.

If I could travel back in time, I would tell her: "Mom, you look beautiful in that blue Fairy dress! You really do!"

Student Name: Angel Huang  
 Grade: 8  
 School: SpiderSmart Learning Center of Bellaire  
 Title: An Early Goodbye  
 Category: Short Story  
 Key: Gold Key  
 Educator: Yan Hou

The dodgeballs came at me in all directions. I was running around frantically trying to find myself a haven in a corner of the gym.

Smack!

A dodgeball slammed me so hard in the back that I saw little white stars dancing in front of my eyes. I stumbled forward a bit and heard people whisper, "She's faking it!" A surge of dizziness cast upon me. My legs suddenly gave in, and I collapsed like a withering primrose. The real dread was when I slowly pushed myself up. Hummingbirds buzzed in my ears, I felt the dizziness multiplied ten times, and fog clogged my vision. I crumbled onto the gym floor once again. I then knew what fainting felt like. It was dreadful.

A brain tumor, apparently. I had been feeling weird ever since the morning when the first snow fell. It was the dizziness that bothered me. Or the fact that my mother told me I was just "under the weather." That wasn't true. Surprisingly, never in my one decade and five years had I gotten sick during winter. Everything was fine that day until I fainted. Mom drove to my school the minute the office staff called her, and because Dad was picking Austin up from his piano class, he wasn't there with Mom. It had been relieving to wake up in that hospital bed, to smell the antiseptic wipes and escape the darkness I'd been trapped in while in the state of unconsciousness. Oh... how soft those snow-white sheets were. They must've paid a fortune for those things. Creamy soft blankets were my only comfort when I was informed of the tragedy by a nurse.

I didn't even know what a brain tumor was. I was the smartest in my class, so how did I even get brain cancer? Did I use my brain too much? Did I stay in the sun too much?

Why me?

I repeated that question as the nurses rolled in and out all sorts of machines. I didn't know. I really didn't know. My mother explained brain cancer to me, but she was sobbing and weeping for me to understand what she was saying. She had to leave because the doctors had to run all sorts of other tests on me with big scary-looking machines.

As I lay on the hospital bed half awake, my thoughts wandered to the weekly science articles from school. "Most brain tumors are treated by surgery," it said. Was I going to have surgery? My hands were trembling as I contemplated the thought of my head being cut open. But a sudden cr-creak stopped my thoughts. Despite being tired, my head shot toward the direction of the doorway. A middle-aged lady walked in with her mouth stretched into a wide smile and a transparent cap over her brunette locks.

"Good afternoon, darling, I'm Dr. Maya," the lady chirped as her southern accent diverted my attention away from the rows of meticulously placed surgical knives that were just pushed past my room by a nurse. "You must be the one and only Faith Laurence," She smiled at me.

"Yes," I muttered meekly, trying to rub off the pencil mark that was on my thumb.

"Don't worry, darling, those aren't for you," Dr. Maya chuckled as her eyes found their way to where I was staring.

"Am I not having surgery?" I sat up with a sudden dose of dizziness filling my head and slowly crawled back under the blanket.

"No, sweetie, unfortunately, your tumor is inoperable." She sighed with a kind of sad smile like her puppy died, "The tumor doesn't have a clear border so it's hard to perform surgery without harming your healthy brain tissues." She mustered a smile again. "But that's alright because we have other options for you and your parents to consider." As if on cue, I saw a glimpse of my mom's blue jacket as she and Dad appeared at the doorway. For a moment, everything was going to be alright. I felt a wave of relief. Perhaps the doctors got it wrong, and I actually didn't have a brain tumor. That's right! Everyone makes mistakes, even professionals like doctors, right? Because now that Dad was here, he would fix all of it.

"Mom! Dad!" I cried, feeling like my world was coming together.

"Oh! Sweetheart!" My mother cried tears of joy and squeezed the air out of me.

When she finally let go, my dad embraced me in a stronger squeeze: "My little girl—oh" He stopped hugging me when I started to bawl like a baby. "Don't worry sweetheart we'll get through this together."

I saw Dad's eyes were a bit red. Was he crying? Why was he crying? Dad never cried in his life. He was going to fix all of this, wasn't he?

"Dad, I'm going to be okay, right?"

"Yes, sweetpea, you're going to be okay." Tears were streaming down his face now as he managed a little smile at me and sat down by my bed.

"I'm not going to die, right?" I asked with fearful apprehension.

"No, you're not," Dad whispered in my ears as I smelled his minty breath.

"But—how are they going to take away my tumor?"

"I don't know sweetie. I don't know," Dad choked out. He was silently crying right now.

"But—all I know—" He took a deep breath and looked at me, "All I know is that you are brave. You are strong, and after whatever treatment, you're coming home, Faith. You are coming home."

Dad continued on about how brave I was and how God would save his little child while Mom and Dr. Maya were talking about my potential treatments. So, my tumor was real. It really was real. Unfortunately, I knew it before I even heard Mom and Dr. Maya. I knew it when I lied to myself, and when I asked Dad about my tumor. They were talking about some chemotreatment? I really was going to die, and at that moment I started laughing. Hysterically. Dad looked at me with a worried and confused expression. I giggled even harder. Dr. Maya and Mom rushed over to me.

"Are you okay sweetie?" I heard Mom's anxiously muffled voice.

"She's just under stress." Dr. Maya's southern accent responded. "I'll give her something to calm her down." And after that was a blur. I heard some "blahs" and mumblings that I can't make out. My eyelids were dropping, and I was getting extremely somnolent. So, before I knew it, sleep fell upon me.

When I woke up, it was morning. The hospital curtains were open and I saw Mom lying on another bed beside mine. Her back was turned to me so I didn't know whether she was awake or not.

"Mom," I whispered carefully scooching to the other side of the bed where I was close to her.

"Oh—sweetie," Mom turned around and sat up, "You're awake!"

"Where is Dad?"

"He's at work. How are you feeling, Faith?"

"My head hurts. Did you stay here all night? Wait—did I sleep through the night? What did Dr. Maya give me? What happened to me?" I stopped, looked at Mom, and took a deep breath. My headache was starting to hurt really bad.

Mom then explained to me that after I fell asleep, she decided to temporarily take a break from her job and stay here at the hospital with me, and so Dad could go to work.

"Austin will come and see you after school today. He was worried about you all afternoon yesterday." Mom continued, "And—" She was interrupted when we heard the door creak.

"Oh, sorry!" Dr. Maya apologized. "I was just looking to see if you guys woke up. Are you free right now?" I nodded, my headache too bad to respond.

"Well, yesterday, I talked with your parents about your treatment, and—well, today I'll tell you..."

Chemotherapy. That was the word. What was that? I didn't know. Listening to Dr. Maya and Mom explain it was just like listening to a science lecture all over again. All I could understand was that my chemotherapy treatment would last for about five months. It might not work for my tumor, but according to Dr. Maya, "Trying is always better than not trying." Every week, I was to have a chemotherapy session which would vary in time from each session. Then the experts would see if my tumor was gone or if chemotherapy didn't work at all. Perhaps, the only positive thing about this chemotherapy was that I got to stay home for the time being.

Austin came to see me that afternoon. My ten-year-old brother was not much of a crier, but he cried today. And full-on bawling too. I realized things that I'd never known before until I got my tumor. So, Dad cries, and Austin too. What else does the universe have in mind?

My parents were on a roller coaster for the next few days, running up and down the hospital elevators, getting me food, clothes, or anything to attempt to make me feel more comfortable. The chemotherapy sessions were not painful at all. It's simply a little tube injecting liquids into my arm. There was something in that liquid that made me so sleepy after each of my sessions that I spent most of my days in deep slumber. I've never felt this tired in all my life. It was sleep for me all day and every day.

I knew cancer could cause hair loss, but Dr. Maya and Mom never told me that chemotherapy treatment was the thing that caused it. I started losing hair after two weeks of chemotherapy. I cried. Tears fell when I saw the big lumps of my ink-black hair on the pillow when I woke up one morning. I knew how stupid and utterly ridiculous I was to be

crying about my hair while my own life was on the line. But I was sad because my hair was just one more reminder of how possible it was for me to die.

After months, chemotherapy didn't work. The tumor was growing.

Eventually, I didn't go to the hospital anymore. Perhaps, it was because of the fact that I couldn't feel anything. Physically and emotionally too. It was like someone turned off the big switch to all my senses. The tumor stretched down my spine. I was spending most of my time sleeping; however, sleeping felt like I had no control over myself. Weeks passed. Months passed. Friends came to bring me flowers. Pastors came to pray for me. It was always that one verse from the Bible: "He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for His name's sake." Everyone used that line in their prayers. I was sleeping, but I could hear them. The distant mumblings. The crying and bawling of my mother and father. I could hear that too. Austin played the piano. It was a beautiful melody. But all of that didn't mean that much to me, after all, I was at home waiting for my final breath.

Sleeping was peaceful. It was quiet compared to all the tormenting treatments I've had in the past nine months. Sometimes I could hear a thump thump in my ear like the sound vibrating from my mother's footsteps. Oh—but I realized that was just my heartbeat. From time to time I heard a sound that resembled a pot sizzling. I smelled lilies from the time we went to Hawaii. Other times, I felt gentle breezes slightly sweeping up my bed sheets. One time, while hearing the thump thump beat of my heart, the sizzle sizzle of the pot, smelling lilies from the fields, and feeling the gentle zephyr lifting my white sheets, my slumber went on forever.

When I died, I thought back to when I was first admitted to the hospital. I was a scared girl afraid of her own death. However, now that I've experienced it, maybe I wasn't really afraid of death itself. Maybe it was the idea of death that terrified me. But I know why now. It was like this, oh, after I died. No words could explain why. I just know why. Every single question that I've had in this lifetime was answered, including my own death.

But that summer was a tragedy for my family. My mother sobbed until there were no tears left to cry. My father's heart ached whenever he looked at my pictures on the refrigerator. Austin— he— well, Austin grieved, laughed, played piano, and mostly cried. It was sorrowful for my family. It has been like this for the past two years.

Part of my mother's shattered heart can never be mended again.

My father's now-tired countenance will never have that lively appearance again.

Austin could never play the same tune he played with me all those years ago when we still lived in our big house with the swings.

I watched them from paradise, and I saw that, besides the fact that I was gone, nothing really changed. Emotionally yes—maybe. But the everyday tasks, that was the same. My family still continued about their days. Even though my mother was lamenting, she still made her delectable noodle broth for the family. My dad still worked to pay for Austin's expensive school. Austin studied, played at recess, and did homework. In some ways, my family got over my death. They got over my death for me. They were living life for me.

So now, as I sprint across the rolling hills and jump in the lily fields of heaven, I rejoice to see their lives unfold. I believe humanity has the power to get over anything if they try—even the death of a child or sibling.

That's what life is about.



Student Name: Sophia Li

Grade: 9

School: SpiderSmart Learning Center of Bellaire

Title: Ice Cream and Britney Spears

Category: Short Story

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Yan Hou

On June 1st, I confirmed my belief that doctor's appointments are the worst when you are a fat kid.

The shame and embarrassment I felt when Dr. Jane made me step onto the dreaded fearful terrible scale as my weight has gone up instead of down. She momentarily looked down at my arms, with the little white lines woven on them, but it wasn't her job to speak out about it unless I had put it on the teen health form.

"I understand that your sister's death could be affecting you. I'm deeply sorry about your loss. Let's also try to maintain a good and healthy diet!"

"I understand."

She led us out of the doctor's room as an old woman was being strolled in. Everyone in the clinic knew who she was. She was a poor yet sweet grandma who had dementia. Before I could pity her even further, Dr. Jane pulled out a goodie bag for me. When she thought I wasn't looking, she took the red cherry Dum-Dum lollipop out and dropped it in her pocket.

"Duō me shāng xīn...(How saddening)" Mama pointed her head up in pity while we both stared at the old woman. "Come on Tiana, I'll drive you to the park and you can go on a walk. Jīn wǎn shàng wǒ men bāo jiǎozi. (Tonight I'll make dumplings.)"

Mama handed me my Airtag and a fob which I could click three times to call the police. I reminded her that I'm old enough, I'm sharing my location, I'll walk safely, and that our neighborhood is safe and I won't get kidnapped. I plugged in my earbuds that hadn't been deep cleaned in two years and shuffled my Spotify playlist.

"Baby, can't you see, I'm calling-"

I paused from my walk and looked down at my phone.

Toxic by Britney Spears was playing. It was my sister Claire's favorite song.

I didn't want to listen to things that reminded me of her.

The loud hyperventilation from my mother as my father grabbed her and pulled her in a tight embrace, while they both thought I was asleep.

My father's eye bags turned more purple over time, my eating disorder and the lines across my left arm, and my mother was spending most of her time in my sister's former bubbly blue bright room.

I didn't want to think about Clarie's death.

"Hey!" A girl with a smurf-like height pulled my hoodie before a gray blurry figure appeared a foot in front of me. "You almost hit that pole! Be careful. Are you okay?" The girl wore a beige shirt with no design on it.

"I'm fine. Thank you-?"

The girl, around my age, smiled and signaled for me to pull out my earbuds. "I'm Madeline, you can call me Maddie because I just saved your life!" I couldn't help but notice that her eyelashes were perfectly curled with mascara that wasn't too clumpy and stacked on top of her lashes along with a signature shiny highlighter in the corners of her eyes.

This Madeline here looked just like the type of girl that would bully me.

"I would've been fine." I covered my hand as I couldn't help the rude statement flowing out of my mouth. Oops.

Madeline giggled, as a blush overflowed her face. "Let's walk around." She turned around and continued walking. Some nerves in my foot and my leg created a step. One step. Two steps. I followed after her.

On June 6th, Madeline kept talking to me.

I learned a few facts about her.

Number one, she was the national champion for high school debate for original spoken word poetry. She liked to call her debate event the "Trauma Olympics" because usually OSWP is filled with experiences with racism, sexism, and trauma.

Two, she's sixteen, just like me.

Three, she's from Turkey and is a refugee.

Four, she liked to hold my hand and sing random Elvis songs.

Also, five, she had the most bounciest beautiful brown curly hair I had ever seen.

On June 9th, Madeline bought me ice cream for the first time.

She happily danced her way over to me as she gave me some money and pulled my arm. She huffed, puffed, and blew the house down when I didn't at first follow her. Thankfully, she calmed down. She asked me if I wanted anything while pointing to the Barbie pink ice cream truck, and I told her no. She ordered one scoop of rocky road in a cup and she asked me what I wanted. I told her to just not order for me and yet she ordered one scoop of cookies and cream in a cone for me.

The ice cream would be too sweet if I ate it. Too sweet. A sweetness that fruit wouldn't be able to give.

"Well, well, looky what we have here. What are you thinking, Tiana Diana?" Madeline started to laugh. "Hey, Tiana Diana is a cute nickname."

"..Well, well? Madeline, you seem like the type of person to gulp whenever you are in trouble."

Maddie laughed even harder.

"Are you not going to eat your ice cream?" She slowly craned her neck and it's the first time I saw her brown eyes directly with the sunlight shining in them, and it made her eyes into a softer hazel color.

"Sorry, I just don't have the appetite." I certainly had the appetite but that ice cream was going to be around three hundred calories including the cone. "If you say so... you can give it to me so we don't waste food."

I handed over the ice cream cone.

Madeline slowly ate it with one arm around her stomach.

On June 15th, Madeline talked about why she approached me in the first place.

"Why did you want to be friends with me in the first place?"

"Why not?"

"We were literal strangers, Maddie." Emphasis on the strangers part.

"Woah, I'm shivering in my boots!" She cackled and rolled over in the hot humid haggard grass. It was almost as if she was resistant to the scorching sun. She sometimes reminded me of Charizard from pokemon. She was just as short as that fire lizard after all.

"That is quite the great, 'no more mister nice guy' face."

"Whatever."

She bursted out laughing at me and I swore her spit almost hit my eye.

On June 21st, Maddie told me about her former debate coach.

She led me to a patchy area with perfectly soft grass and we both sat down.

"I once had a sixty year old pedophile as a debate coach. He would touch people's shoulders like this..." Maddie clenched and softly violated my shoulder with her hand.

"EW!"

Maddie started to form the most grinch-like smile while she giggled.

"He would call the girls hot and everything!"

I pretended to gag. "That's traumatic."

"He would sometimes grope people's butts."

"Oh gosh...And how old were you when this happened?"

"We were in middle school."

My jaw dropped even further.

On June 24th, Maddie came over for a sleepover.

She brought an entire lavender suitcase, filled with soft blankets, pillows, and games. My mother led her into our house, and hugged her and treated her like a messiah that descended from the gods.

"Maddie, can I be honest with you?" She nodded back.

At 8:49 pm, I whisper to Maddie about my dead sister.

She leaned forward and gently touched my hand, "Do you want to make something in memory of her?"

During the night, we searched for tutorials on Youtube on how to make paper lanterns. We put a small led light bulb that was attached to a Hua Dao battery to light up.

At 9:34 pm, Maddie finished two lanterns, "For Claire. She's now in a better place." I placed my DIY paper lantern along with hers.

"If god was real then why did he make Claire die? Don't get me wrong, I respect people who believe in god, but if I ever see him, I want to ask him that question."

Maddie clenched her grip on my hand.

"What are some hobbies you like to do?" She changed the subject.

"I like to walk with you, Maddie."

"..."

"I know. I don't have a lot of hobbies. But I want to keep going on our daily walks."

"Then let's continue doing that. Healthy hobbies like walking help grief." Maddie held my hand even tighter and squeezed it. I squeezed it back, as she squeezed my hand again. Maddie's face turned into a grimace and at the time I thought it was because of the tense atmosphere between us.

So I obviously tried to loosen the atmosphere.

"I also enjoy talking to you Maddie. You are the type of person who would pat your own shoulder with a smirk when someone tells you 'good job'. Oh, and you would say, 'easy peasy lemon squeezy, it was easy as cake.'"

Maddie choked on air and folded over.

She grabbed my hand soon afterwards and started to sing Moody Blue in the worst pitched voice I have ever heard, "Oh, Moody Blue. Tell me who I'm talking to."

"Shut up."

"You're like the night and day-" My ears started to bleed physical blood.

She pulled out this huge bag of red Takis. "Your mom doesn't mind if I eat in your room right?"

"Don't worry, you can eat here."

"Alright." She pulled out a single Taki, and made sure that she didn't cause a mess. "You want some."

"No thanks, I'm good." One taki is twelve calories. I shifted my head down, and straightened out my jacket because it did too good of a job of creating air holes that looked just like my stomach.

"If you're sure..."

Maddie only ate one taki before putting it away.

On July 7th, Maddie was sick. She looked like she's gone through a horrific Final Destination vision.

"Hey Mad Mad, you look like you're going to throw up. Did anything happen?"

"...Period." She looked away from me. "It's the time of the month."

"Oh."

She crouched over, and I helped her up.

The daily ice cream truck came by. We both didn't move to go to order.

"Are you not going to order ice cream?"

"It's bad for my girl problem right now. Do you not like ice cream or something? I have never seen you eat ice cream with me before."

"Something like that." I actually loved ice cream but I couldn't risk the extra calories.

"What do you mean?"

I didn't respond.

On July 12th, Maddie brought some earbuds. She gave me the right earbud and she plugged the left earbud into her ear.

I gave her a thumbs up. Her short nails clicked onto her phone and we listened to Toxic by Britney Spears together that day.

During the walk that day, she crunched over a lot. I thought that it was just her girl emergency getting to her.

On July 19th, I still believed that doctor appointments are the worst.

I stepped on the dreaded, degraded, frightening scale once again.

"Wait mom, didn't my weight go down?" One hundred seventy eight pounds. I remembered it being one hundred eighty last check up.

"Bù, nǐ de tǐzhòng shíjì shàng zēngjiǎle sān bàng. (No, your weight went up by three pounds)" Turns out my memory was wrong. I slowly heaved my way off of the scale with mortifying humiliating awkward embarrassment waving off of me.

Dr. Jane butted in, "You are currently five foot six inches which means your BMI is in the ninety-fifth percentile and it is twenty-eight point seven."

"Oh." In simpler terms, I was still overweight. How surprising.

On July 23rd, Maddie sat on a bench and tried to tell me something.

"This is important, I just don't know how to tell you."

"Maddie, you can take your time. It's up to you to decide when to tell me."

Maddie looked up with the most guilty expression and the sun no longer shines in her eyes.

Maddie groaned and clutched her stomach area. "Sorry, my period started today."

"I thought your period was two weeks ago."

"Nope, I lied. I was just sick."

I slapped her lightly on her shoulder.

"You should've told me that you were sick."

Maddie didn't respond back.

On July 27th, Maddie told me that she has stage four gallbladder cancer.

She looked down, telling me that she's past "repair" and now her cancer cells can't get removed since it has spread too far. She began to apologize to me for not telling me sooner.

I started to cry on the spot, as I felt pathetic that she was the one comforting me, not the other way around. That the cancer patient suffering was instead doing the comforting, not me.

That night I stayed up until 2:36 am, searching for a "gallbladder cancer stage four cure". Not a single website fulfilled my hopes. I ended up eating two packs of ramen that was four hundred fifty calories as well. I ended up crying even more.

On August 3rd, Maddie called me.

She told me that she's in the hospital and her survival rate is close to two percent. Mama rushed me over to the hospital as quickly as possible.

We made paper hearts together and talked about our day. I asked her what her winning champion original spoken word poetry was about. She told me that she did her poem about a grandma with dementia.

On August 10th, Maddie gave me a small gift.

It was a necklace with a silver "C" on it. C for Claire.

"Your sister will," Maddie coughs, "Will always be here with you."

I started to wear it every day.

On August 14th, Maddie asked me if I had anything to say to her.

Maddie tightly clenched the white bedsheets near her, as she signaled for me to come closer to her. I told her about how my sister died.

"Claire died just because she was Chinese. There was a man and he repeatedly smashed her head into the ground on the concrete brick red floor." I left out the part where the man also called her racial slurs.

Maddie went silent before a singular tear left her eye, trailing down on her clear glass skin. She batted her eyes letting out a small "Oh."

"Tiana, I'm sorry. I'll be here for you."

"..."

"Maybe soon, I won't," She laughed a little before looking at my expression and stopped.

"But in your heart, I will be, okay?"

I didn't respond.

On August 17th, I told her the real reason why I didn't eat the ice cream that she offered me.

"Ice cream and processed food have too many calories."

She looked at me blankly. Her two-toned lips parted and closed again.

"I have a binge eating disorder. If I eat something, it won't matter if I feel full or not. I'll just keep eating it as long as there is food left and it is delicious."

Maddie propped herself upwards to sit up and she slowly reached towards me.

"So, I have to stop myself. And if I eat that ice cream, it not only adds to my calorie count but also my cravings will grow stronger and I'll just end up going on a binge again."

"Tiana. That's so incredibly..." She stopped herself. "Listen, it's okay to eat some processed food once in a while. Of course, people shouldn't eat junk food every day, but it won't hurt you if you just try it once in a while. I'm no professional, but I can tell you at least this."

On August 20th, Maddie died in the sickly white hospital.

Before her death happened, she gave me a small and neatly folded note.

"Read it when the time is right."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

Maddie smiled and looked down at the pale white sheets that covered her body. "Read it when I'm dead."

Maddie died at 1:38 pm.

Endless streams of tears appeared on my face and I had used up a whole tissue box. I knew that I should console Maddie's parents but I couldn't lift my stupid head to even look at them.

At 11:35 pm on August 20th, I shuffled through my pockets to find a note.

I couldn't breathe. I didn't want to open the note. But I did.

"Dear Tiana Diana,

The sarcastic remarks that you threw at me were the best type of humor I have ever seen in my entire life. You were right, I do gulp whenever I'm in trouble, I pat myself on my shoulder with a smirk when I'm proud of myself, and I do like to say easy peasy lemon squeezy. I don't remember why I decided to become friends with you on the spot back when you almost crashed into that pole. I think it was because of your monolids.

Moreover, I believe that you can get through this. I know you are an amazing person. If god exists, then I'll ask him your question for you. Thank you for this summer.

XOXOXO

Maddie Waddie the Baddie

Love you."

On September 22nd, days after Maddie's death were endless.

I didn't feel like walking in the park anymore but I still walked. On and on, over and over.

"Young lady, would you like some ice cream?"

I paused my music and looked up at the bright ice cream truck. I pulled out some cold cash from a rusted zipper in my pocket.

"Yes, may I have one scoop of cookies and cream?"

"Cup or cone?"

"Can that be in a cone?"

I finished the ice cream and quickly threw it away. I popped in my earbuds, searched up Toxic and clicked play.

"Baby, can't you see, I'm calling-" I lip synced along and imagined Maddie and Claire were singing with me.



Student Name: Jeffery Gao

Grade: 11

School: SpiderSmart Learning Center of Bellaire

Title: Misinformation in the Opioid Crisis

Category: Critical Essay

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Yan Hou

Beginning in the early 1990s and continuing into the present, a wave of terror spread throughout the United States involving the use of opioids and other addictive substances. This has come to be known as the “opioid crisis.” According to Sarah DeWeerd, “[T]he groundwork for the crisis was laid in the 1980s, when pain became recognized as a problem that required adequate treatment.” The medical community began to target pain in general as a serious problem, labeling it “the fifth vital sign” and attempted to promote prescription drugs that could help in dulling discomfort. People’s belief in the dangers of pain became so severe that at one point, “US states began to pass intractable pain treatment acts, which removed the threat of prosecution for physicians who treated their patients’ pain aggressively with controlled substances” (DeWeerd). Synthetic opioids began to be seen as the ideal substance for this problem as they were believed to be effective painkillers that could be created for the public. At first, many believed that opioids weren’t addictive at all, creating the roots for misinformation and misuse of the drugs. This abuse was made possible due to misleading information from clinical studies, in which “A letter to the editor in the New England Journal of Medicine in 1980 reported that of 11,882 hospitalized people who were prescribed opioids, only four became addicted, but the short letter provided no evidence to back up these claims” (DeWeerd). Even though their introduction in the US was much earlier than the actual crisis itself, “it wasn’t until the mid-1990s, when pharmaceutical companies introduced new opioid-based products -- and, in particular, OxyContin, a sustained-release formulation of a decades-old medication called oxycodone, manufactured by Purdue Pharma in Stamford, Connecticut -- that such prescriptions surged and the use of opioids to treat chronic pain became widespread” (DeWeerd). Despite its apparent health risks, pharmaceutical companies promoted opioids to the public eye in hopes of gaining large profits from their usage. As misinformed doctors armed with the ability to prescribe enormous amounts of drugs with reduced legal responsibility, opioids were pushed into the market, becoming vastly popular and leaving monumental effects on those who became dependent upon them. In the present day, many still stay misinformed about both the usage of opioids themselves and the pharmaceutical companies that sell similar products. Many gain a biased view against pharmacies and doctors because of the opioid crisis’s influence on their lives, leaving “unsystematic, partial, reactive policies and programs developed based on divergent points of view” (Morin). The line between the proper usage of drugs

and abusing them was blurred after the opioid epidemic influenced public stigma against those involved with the distribution and prescription of drugs.

Through the opioid crisis, the concept of drugs and their uses have become incoherent in the eyes of the average person. Being affected by the opioid crisis either directly or indirectly leads one to have a more negative view of drugs in general, serving as a foothold for the pharmaceutical industry to be attacked. Studies involving patients who had been in indirect contact with opioids, through their family or friends using them, “expressed opioid-restricting attitudes and behaviors that may reflect internalized stigma and fear of addiction” (Larson). In addition to negative feelings about medicine, in general, stemming from the opioid epidemic, the internet also allowed for the situation to get out of hand. In recent history, the internet has exploded as a means of communication. Distrust of the medical profession, including doctors and so-called “Big Pharma,” has spread throughout the internet via social media posts and fake news articles. Through the negative perception of drugs on the internet, all that was involved with medicines also gained severe backlash from the general populace, leading to more and more people becoming fearful of pharmaceutical companies in general. In doing so, a certain stigma around drugs has been formed throughout the past decades, in which many have been convinced that drugs serve only negative purposes. Scientists have found that “in response to contradictory evidence on the effectiveness of risky health behavior prevention strategies aimed at young people, PST(primary socialization theory) posits that both positive and risky health behaviors are learned through social interaction. These social behaviors and the norms for them are developed in the context of interactions with family, school, and peer clusters” (Lariscy). Social misinformation has only been amplified through the internet’s usage, creating a stigma surrounding the subject of drugs through ads and misleading internet feeds.

The opioid crisis has chipped away at the trust placed in medical professionals. It has been found that “[M]ost people do not get their opioid painkillers from doctors. It was found through a study that 60 percent get them off of friends and family members for free” (Hart). This demonstrates how throughout a community, between personal relationships, both the idea and usage of drugs, especially opioids, can be witnessed to have grown. Additionally, the usage of racial or ethnic origins also played a role in the blaming of drugs. Studies found that “racial attitudes and socio-economic trends also helped the opioid epidemic to gain a foothold in the United States. Purdue Pharma focused the initial marketing of OxyContin on suburban and rural white communities. That strategy took advantage of the prevailing image of a drug addict as an African-American or Hispanic person who lived in the inner city to head off potential concerns about addiction, says Helena Hansen, an anthropologist, and psychiatrist at NYU Langone Health in New York City. The companies targeted doctors who were “serving patients that were not thought to be at risk for addiction,” Hansen says. “There was a definite racial subtext to that” (DeWeerd). The opioid crisis introduces signs of social hysteria mainly through the culture of a community, in which the main factor that caused such craze was

the members of society themselves. Either through peers or being influenced to believe a false claim about others, the problems shown can be summed up to the falsities of one's community.

From the craze involving opioids and the pharmaceutical industry, lasting consequences can be noted which stemmed from it. Despite the efforts of those who discredited the drug industry, the opioid crisis itself continues to grow as a side effect. This is because as more begin to steer away from professional pharmaceuticals in general from fearing them, they are typically more likely to be misinformed about how to properly and safely take medication. A report from "The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimated that 108,000 people died from opioid medication overdoses from January to December 2021 (an increase of 28.5% from 78,056 deaths in 2020), the highest recorded in U.S. history" (Kuebler). This can be seen as a direct effect of many having illicit and over-prescribed painkiller interaction, a sure tell outcome of the mass panic caused by opioids. Another ramification of the opioid crisis was its emotional effect on those directly affected by it. In a cross-sectional multicare study, one can take note of how "patient viewpoints on efficacy were correlated with the pharmacological benefits of Opioid Medication Therapy (OMT) and with the associated psychosocial measures. The implications of OMT in relationships, such as the feeling of being judged, concerned a majority." (Landreat). Such can be explained as an after-effect of society villainizing opioids and their usage, portraying anything related to the subject itself to be inherently evil. In doing so, people felt shamed for having been prescribed opioids, even if they had the correct reasons to be taking them. It can be understood that, through the fast-spread pace of information in developing societies, "public opinion of opioid use has shifted from the discussion of drug users as criminals, and the fear of narcotics", portraying "addiction as a character flaw" (Morin). From the opioid crisis, not only was the general populace affected, but also larger industries that were related to opioids. As a result of the opioid crisis, pharmaceutical companies have been put at the forefront of backlash for their promotion of medicines and for their responsibility to help those who have been impacted by drug usage. Because of the opioid crisis, many companies have begun to instruct physicians and doctors on the correct safety guidelines for drug distribution, and have begun to research methods of more efficient and commendable rehabilitation for those affected by drugs. Many pharmaceutical companies have begun to promote "collaborative and interdisciplinary approaches to addressing the root causes of opioid misuse and opioid overdose are still desperately needed. These include attention to the critical roles of social determinants of health, stigma elimination, legislative advocacy for patients with OUD, and focused education for providers, pharmacists, and the community." (Kosobuski)

The opioid crisis and its effects initially paint a bleak future not only for the individual but for society itself as a whole. However, one can recognize more optimistic ideals from the example of social hysteria. For the individual, one takeaway that can be understood is the prevalent nature of drugs to be both harmful and beneficial, and to be vigilant in keeping

up to speed about them. In the current day and age, many have access to beneficial sources to help them effectively and safely take medicines in which one can “fully understand the specific class of prescribed medication and its associated risk factors,” one example in which being how “The CDC 2022 guidelines provide the standard of care for effectively managing non-cancer acute and chronic pain” (Kuebler). When involving the entirety of society, the opioid crisis also serves as a reminder of the importance of staying informed. As a result of the opioid epidemic, the community as a whole should recognize the importance of correctly informing new generations of the dangers of unrestricted drug usage and measures to counter such in the future.

Student Name: Daniel Guo

Grade: 11

School: SpiderSmart Learning Center of Katy

Title: Dead Zones: The Underwater Cost of Economic Modernization

Category: Critical Essay

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Yanli Liu

The straight, uniform aisles of the grocery store are packed to the brim with ruby-red Driscoll strawberries, plump sacks of Nishiki white rice, and fishnet bags of Dole avocados. Kroger, Walmart, Costco, and other major retailers pasted full shelves of prosperity across America, booming profits and the populace. While busy grocery counters and empty racks of produce reflect rosy consumer markets, this is a not-so rose tinted example of environmental concerns trampled in the rearview in favor of economic modernization. The advent of commercial nitrogen and phosphorus based fertilizers occurred in the 1950s following the development of chemical-based explosives during the technological arms race of World War Two. In other words, the synthetic fertilizers that sustain billions of dollars in supermarket produce are formed and mass produced in the same Haber-Bosch process that killed millions in the trenches and concentration camps of World War Two (Hergert et al).

Although in a different manner altogether, Modern America continues to be affected by nitrogen and phosphorus based fertilizers utilized in pursuit of economic growth. Before chemical fertilizers, farmers spread and plowed their fields with manure, the most primitive and natural, albeit much less concentrated, form of nitrogen and phosphorus. Pre-dating the trend towards supercharged synthetics, humanity had used the less glamorous, but more natural form of fertilizer for the last 8,000 years (Hergert et al). But in the 1950s, the war to end all wars came to an end, and our troops returned home. In a post war baby boom, 76 million babies were born, causing the US population to more than double in the latter half of the 20th century (Wattenberg). Consequently, to keep up with skyrocketing demand, American agriculture was forced to rapidly expand production. Chemical fertilizers, used sparingly in the 1940s, surged at the turn of the century, dousing America's farmland with over 20 million tons per year.

Unfortunately, as America learned how to support an exponentially larger population, the American economy learned how to jump through (or simply ignore) numerous regulatory hurdles associated with the environmental costs of industrial modernization. While America learned how to feed millions more people, it forgot how to preserve the natural world. Industrialization was, and still is, allowed to continue, not with a planetary coworker, but a planetary casualty.

With 71% of the Earth being water-covered, it is no surprise that humanity's advance comes at the ocean's expense. Today, 81.4% of America is located in coastal areas, and of the last 16 years, nearly 80% of population growth has occurred in just 57% of the nation's land area (Castelletto). While population development continues to boom, the natural world has once again taken a backseat. Dead zones, swaths where dissolved oxygen quantities become too low to sustain aquatic life (hypoxia), have increased more than tenfold during the last 50 years. Major harbors across the Pacific Northwest, the Gulf of Mexico, and the upper East Coast, while economically strong, suffer from cyclical swaths of polluted, ecologically dead aquatic zones.

A body of water reaches the threshold of "dead" when dissolved oxygen is rapidly absorbed faster than it can be replenished (Costa et al). Usually, dead zones form because excess nitrogen and phosphorus nutrients catalyze rapid marine algal blooms. At first glance, algae contain chloroplasts necessary for photosynthesis, and photosynthesis produces oxygen, right? While true at first, the concentrated fertilizers enrich the water with extremely high levels of phosphorus and nitrous nutrients, inducing an extreme, unsustainable level of algae growth. The mass of algae will produce some oxygen, but as it decays, it absorbs most of the water's dissolved oxygen. Additionally, decaying algae mixes with chemicals, clouding the water's surface and blocking sunlight from reaching other marine plants, inducing an ecological extinction where the entire ecosystem loses circulation.

There are three major dead zones across the US coast. The Mississippi River runoff zone in the Gulf of Mexico, the Chesapeake Bay area runoff zone, and the Oregon Coast current zone. The three dead zones share some form of common cause: runoff, pollution, and climate change. The main culprit for dead zones is often runoff (EPA). While agricultural runoff from farms is a large culprit in oceanic algal blooms, the fossil fuel companies operating in key shipping channels (i.e the Mississippi River or the Chesapeake's many tributaries) contribute a large mixed bag of pollutants into the water (Surrick). There is, of course, the usual suspects of algae inducing nutrients, but fossil fuel companies also produce toxic per and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) that leak into waterways and add to ecological harm. Paired with ocean currents that are beating heat estimates by 40% (Colella), conditions form a greenhouse primed with the nutrients and climate perfect for massive algal blooms. As a result, dead zones that used to be contingent on optimal tidal conditions and perfect temperatures now last seasons on end.

With the spike in dead zone frequency and severity, harms to the coastal economy, human health, and marine biodiversity will reach ecological tipping points where irreversible harms accrue to the natural world.

Dead zones have profound effects on every aspect of an ecosystem and its food webs. For example, dead zones reduce dissolved oxygen essential for every species from small

shiners, shad, and other baitfish to pelagic tuna, marlin, and snapper. At risk of hypoxia and suffocation, fish are displaced from familiar structures and habitats, forced to find new sources of food, habitat zones, and breeding grounds. As coastal dead zones in the Gulf of Mexico and the Chesapeake cover from ten to forty percent of their respective regions, the yearly migration and distribution of fish upstream to estuaries and deltas has become increasingly unstable and unsustainable. Fish kills, where assorted dead sea life washes ashore following prolonged hypoxia, have become more common, and beaches from Atlantic to Pacific often become modern day graveyards where hundreds of thousands of tons of sea life rot among sand castles (Biello).

Additionally, dead zones suffocate demersal zoned bottom dwelling lobsters, clams, oysters, and a variety of marine shellfish. In doing so, dead zones destroy marine ecosystems from the bottom up. Shellfish are filter feeders, cleaning the water as they search for food. Without nature's vacuums, water quality drops, pollution becomes prevalent, and fish experience shorter lifespans.

Even if aquatic life is not choked out by debilitating oxygen levels, a lack of oxygen can have long lasting effects. The National Library of Medicine estimates that when the dissolved oxygen of a body of water drops below 1-2 milligrams per liter for just a few hours, there can be permanent damage to marine life (Adel-Tawwab). Fish grow slower with less oxygen, and even slight hypoxia stresses fish physiological and immune response, making species more vulnerable to disease and parasites.

The dangers of dead zones are not limited to aquatic respirating fish and shellfish. Algal blooms caused by fertilizers and other chemicals produce harmful cyanobacteria that can cause permanent damage in humans as well. The US Environmental Protection Agency notes that algal blooms can contaminate key sources of drinking water in reservoirs, lakes, and rivers, putting humans and pets at risk of deadly skin-based and gastrointestinal illnesses. Additionally, scientists at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration estimate dead zones cost the United States seafood and tourism industries around 82 million dollars annually, an external economic harm closer to home than the direct effects of a dead zone. Logically, one would expect that dead zones larger than the state of Massachusetts with an 82 million dollar price tag would receive the attention that Massachusetts does, right? Unfortunately, this is not the case. The Associated Press found that despite acclaimed goal setting by local and state governments, dead zones continue to increase, signaling a desperate need for increased attention and funding. More could be done in wastewater regulation, maritime cleanup operations, and oceanic forecasting to predict and mitigate the scale of future dead zones. Corporations that allow rampant pollution must be held accountable, and the dousing of highly concentrated chemical fertilizers must be reigned in.

In *The Old Man and the Sea*, Ernest Hemingway writes: "Most people were heartless about turtles because a turtle's heart will beat for hours after it has been cut up and butchered" (37).

Humanity has naively put nature after material economic growth. Driscoll and Dole, Walmart, Costco, and Kroger have all kept grocery shelves stocked with sparklingly fresh green produce, ignoring the dirty, decaying soup of algae, fish heads, and cyanobacteria that lies behind the fix all facade of economic modernization. There must be more heart at all levels in preservation of our oceans, especially when considering the possible adverse effects of industrialization and modernization. The ocean, and the natural world as a whole, must be held in equal regard as the well stocked supermarkets of the 21st century. Staying the course on our current retrospective, ignorant approach to the natural world leaves the lifeblood of humanity dead in the water as a trivial expense in the pursuit of fervent economic development.



Student Name: Frida Buck  
 Grade: 10  
 School: St Agnes Academy  
 Title: 52 Days  
 Category: Dramatic Script  
 Key: Gold Key  
 Educator: Herman Sutter

# CAST OF CHARACTERS

AHMAD - Middle aged, caring, wealthy, Iranian man.  
 FAKHRI - Ahmad's wife, she is very strong and fierce.  
 FARRAH - Ahmad's oldest daughter.  
 FARIDA - Also Ahmad's daughter, she is deathly ill.  
 MAN 1 and MAN 2 - members of the Mojahed political party.  
 AKHOUND - to clarify, an Akhound is a religious person/title. This Akhound is a judge.  
 AKHOUND #2 - An Akhound from Ahmad's hometown.  
 GUARD - Prison guard.

# 52 DAYS

## INT. HOUSE PARTY - NIGHT

It's 1980 in Iran. People are mingling in a warm room, the atmosphere is exciting and fun. There is music playing and good conversation. AHMAD (middle aged man, Iranian, put together) is speaking to some friends. His smile is inviting and he has a friendly presence. Suddenly, the fun stops and the atmosphere is shattered by pounding on the door. The HOST of the party carefully makes his way to the door and once he opens it three moral police burst into the room. They shove people and push as the party seeps into panic. They stop at Ahmad and immediately arrest him with no explanation. They take him out of the house and the door slams behind them. Outside of the house, they blindfold him and take him out of view. Inside the house, the room is silent.

## INT. JAIL CELL

Ahmad sits against the wall of his jail cell. It's small and empty but most of all it's dark. He stares, zoned out with a blank expression for several beats. There are some young men scattered in the cells next to him. They lean over the bars to get a good look at him before one of them speaks up.

## MAN 1

Psst, hey.

Ahmad looks over.

MAN 1

I know you.

The young man leans closer, he's as close to Ahmad as possible.

MAN 1

You own Tampela building. Don't you?

Ahmad doesn't flinch at the man's poisonous voice. He is apprehensive, but he replies.

AHMAD

Yes.

The young man laughs in a sinister way. Another one speaks up, he yells.

MAN 2

Why are you here?

His tone is mocking, as if he already knows the answer to his question. Ahmad looks up.

AHMAD

I don't know.

He is immediately cut off by the first young man.

MAN 1

I know!

He yells with a boiling anger as if his voice is dripping with disdain.

MAN 1

You're rich. A money hoarder! Parading that building around.

Ahmad doesn't react to the man's speech because he knows it is not true. The young man begins to laugh darkly, he leans even closer.

MAN 1

You know, if the Mojahed were in charge.

He gestures to the young men around him, implying that they are the Mojahed group.

MAN 1

We'd kill you.

The other man shouts. Ahmad finally changes his expression. He looks at the men with pity in his eyes.

MAN 2

You're lucky you're alive!

The prison erupts in laughter, Ahmad sits there composed. Behind his calmness, there is a spark of fear in his eyes.

EXT. PRISON

Four girls and their mother are standing outside the bleak prison entrance. A tall man stands guard outside. FARRAH the oldest sister holds FARIDA's hand as their mother FAKHRI speaks to the man.

FAKHRI

We are here to see my husband.

Her voice is firm but the man waves her off.

GUARD

No visitors.

The rage in Fakhri's face is painfully evident, she opens her mouth to speak, but Farrah interrupts and answers the man instead.

FARRAH

Please sir, this is our father.

She thinks for a moment and then brings Farida forward. Farida is obviously ill.

FARRAH

Please, she's sick. Don't rid her of her dad, not in this state.

The man shows no emotion towards them. He shakes his head and the five are left defeated. They walk a few feet away from the entrance.

FARIDA

Why would they do this? Imprison him? For no reason?

Farrah looks grim and Fakhri looks like her rage has boiled over.

FAKHRI

This is the “new” Iran, Farida.

INT. JAIL CELL

It is a new day. Ahmad has stood up and he slowly paces in his cell, he is interrupted when the door swings open. Everyone looks towards the new man who has walked in. He starts to unlock the cell of Man 1. Man 1 looks at him with a twinge of hope, but then, as if he has some sort of revelation, he begins to yell.

MAN 1

NO! NO, PLEASE!

Man 1 is dragged out of his cell. The door slams shut. Ahmad sits down, slightly shaken, and puts his head in his hands.

EXT. PRISON

The days pass and every single day Farrah, Farida, and Fakhri wait outside the prison. Each day, they have no luck. Ahmad is not released. They wait and they wait and they wait restlessly, yet they are never shown remorse. They keep on waiting for him.

INT. JAIL CELL

The cell next to Ahmad is empty now. He sits and thinks deeply, trying to decipher the precarious situation he is in. The door opens and the man walks in. He takes another young man out of his cell.

MAN 2

Please, please.

He drags him out and the door shuts.

Time passes like this, as each day goes by, another young man in the prison is executed and Farrah and Farida wait for their father outside. They do not miss a single day. They are desperate.

EXT. PRISON

Farrah, Farida, and Fakhri approach the prison once more. This time, it is apparent that Farida has grown more ill, that her sickness is consuming her.

FAKHRI

My love, you should be on bed rest. You know that.

There is worry in Fakhri's eyes, but there is also desperation. Farida is ten times more sick than she was before.

FARIDA

I will come here every single day. I can't give up. Not until I see baba again.

Farrah hugs her sister gently. They stand, looking at the prison walls.

INT. JAIL CELL

Ahmad looks tired, he's been in jail for more than several weeks. Yet he still clings on to a strand of hope. The door opens, this time the man opens Ahmad's cell. There is fear in his eyes but he does not scream or beg. He stands and walks out with the man. They begin to walk down a dark hallway when the man speaks.

GUARD

Come.

Ahmad looks him in the eye but follows his orders. They stop walking and the man opens a door.

INT. SMALL COURTROOM

Ahmad walks in with him and sees a small gaggle of people, some of which he recognizes. It appears to be some kind of courtroom. Ahmad sits at the front of the room. AKHOUND wearing a turban sits at the Judge's Chair.

AKHOUND

You are guilty of the murder of 6 moral police.

Ahmad freezes, there is pure confusion painted over his face but he knows better than to speak up.

AKHOUND

Ahmad, you owned the Tampela building. Your building was being used as a base for the Moral Police. A group of men belonging to the Mojahed political party killed 6 moral police there. You face execution for this crime.

Ahmad clenches his jaw. He looks around the room. His eyes land on AKHOUND #2 who is glaring at him. He turns to the AKHOUND.

AHMAD

I own the building but I have no relation with the Mojahed party. You have no evidence to prove that I was involved in those deaths.  
The AKHOUND pauses.

AKHOUND  
You face execution.

Ahmad's face goes pale.

AHMAD  
May I see my family?

The AKHOUND looks at the guard and then back at Ahmad, he considers and then speaks.

AKHOUND  
One member.

Ahmad stands.

AHMAD  
My daughter, Farrah.

The AKHOUND nods and Ahmad follows the guard out of the courtroom.

EXT. PRISON  
This time, the entire family is there waiting for Ahmad. Four sisters and two brothers including Farida and Farrah. Fakhri is there too. A guard comes outside.

GUARD  
Farrah?

Farrah quickly steps out from her family. The guard gestures to her to follow him and she goes inside the prison.

INT. HALLWAY  
Ahmad sees Farrah and they very quickly embrace. He holds her arms and looks her directly in the eye, speaking strongly.

AHMAD  
Listen to me. There is only one person in that room who can save me right now. He is an AKHOUND (#2) from my hometown, please Farrah, talk to him. He is the only man they'll listen to.

The guard places his hand on Ahmad's arm, before he leaves, Ahmad kisses Farrah on the head. He is taken back inside.

EXT. PRISON

It's a bit after Ahmad's trial, people are leaving the prison and his whole family is waiting outside. When the AKHOUND #2 comes out they stop him.

FAKHRI

Wait, please.

The AKHOUND (#2) stops and looks at her.

FAKHRI

Ahmad told us that you could help him. Please, whatever you want tell me and we will give it to you. Anything to save his life.

The AKHOUND #2 thinks for a moment. There is no remorse in his expression.

AKHOUND #2

Give us 500,000 toman.

Fakhri hesitates but starts to nod, he interrupts her.

AKHOUND #2

And your home, and Tampela.

He thinks for a moment.

AKHOUND #2

And your car.

Fakhri nods.

FAKHRI

Yes, of course, yes.

EXT. PRISON

It's the next day. The sun is rising and Ahmad's entire family is awaiting eagerly outside the prison. He walks out and they all embrace him.

AHMAD (V.O.)

I worked so hard

## EXT. CEMETERY

Now he is standing with his family in the same position, this time they are all wearing black. They are looking at a gravestone. Farida is not there. Ahmad buries his head in his hands and sobs.

## AHMAD (V.O.)

For everything I have

## INT. OFFICE

Now he is standing alone in his office. He sits at his desk which is covered in books on law.

## AHMAD (V.O.)

And I'm not going to let anyone take it from me.

He opens a book.

THE END.



Student Name: Frida Buck  
 Grade: 10  
 School: St Agnes Academy  
 Title: Cruel World  
 Category: Dramatic Script  
 Key: Gold Key  
 Educator: Herman Sutter

There was once a lively planet named "Gaia," home to nature and many creatures. There was a man, who was nicknamed the "Godseeker," who sought to gain the powers of a god. On his conquest to become a god, he had done many cruel things. He made the goliaths, the strongest species to exist on Gaia, go extinct, cheated death against cosmic beings more powerful than him, enslaved the whole population to work for him, and executed those who spoke out against him. Many revolts happened across the world, and many of them were put down in a matter of seconds. The longest-lasting rebellion lasted for 7 months. This rebellion would lead to the Godseeker killing an entire race. He showed the whole world that he wouldn't dare to step down, and would do anything to achieve his ambitions. However, it wasn't enough for a race known as the Brimstones, and another rebellion was stirring up, and it was to be the largest rebellion that this universe had ever seen.

In the caves of which a family of the Brimstone people sought refuge, a baby girl was born. This girl was named Asher and was gifted in Brimstone magic, the strongest magic of the land. Despite this, the Godseeker's advanced equipment was enough to make the Brimstones refuge in caves. Asher, as a young girl, quickly mastered the magic and went so far as to experiment with the limits of what Brimstone magic can do. As an adult, she went out of the caves for the first time in her life. She had heard stories of the Godseeker, and how oppressive he was. Asher's family was lucky enough to not be found and sent into the prison camps. Unlike other races, the Brimstones caused a lot of trouble for the Godseeker, as they were experts in magic, so he made the decision to put them in prison camps where their magic could be detained. Asher went to one of the prison camps that her parents told stories about. What she saw there filled her with rage, and within minutes, freed all of her people from the camps. When the Godseeker was heard with the news, he was furious. The Godseeker went to the prison camps that Asher destroyed, and that was when Asher and the Godseeker met face-to-face. The Brimstone witch then attacked the Godseeker. The Godseeker was amused by the witch's power and was thrilled to fight someone who could rival him. After a long battle that scarred the land, the witch falls to the Godseeker. Impressed with the witch's power, the Godseeker offered the witch to be his right hand. The witch, seeing no better option, took the position as the Godseeker's right hand. The Godseeker with the witch's help, desolated the world into ruins, turning a once lush and lively world into a burning ball of fire. The Godseeker, seeing that the

planet is unable to sustain life, left the planet with the Brimstone witch to find more worlds to conquer.

However, unbeknownst to the Godseeker, the surviving humans were living amongst the caves surviving on what they had. Fortunately, the Dwarf race was able to care for the refugees going underground. Despite the ashes reigning above the surface, civilization was thriving underground. Millions of years after the planet's extinction, it turned back to its lush, green state. Due to conflict between the humans and the dwarves, the dwarves kicked the human refugees out of their homes, and many humans died due to starvation or disease. One generation of humans however was able to overcome the odds by studying closely what the dwarves were doing before they kicked them out. Every generation goes up to the surface and surveys the living conditions of the land and determines whether it is a hospitable place or not. After not much deliberation, the humans set foot on the surface for the first time. There they were able to build a house and cultivate crops. Generations later, a whole town came to life with shops, restaurants, schools, and housing. Everyone in the town was happy until a celestial being came down from the sky. This celestial being was half man and half squid. The creature was obsessed with gaining power, so he started to destroy the planet. Many of the townsfolk died, and everyone, including the underground dwarves, is in a state of fear. Luckily for the people, druids were able to take care of the celestial being, but at the cost of every druid but one dead. The celestial being was too weak to destroy the planet, so he escaped to the moon where he healed. The one druid who was alive decided to leave the town to explore the lands. A boy named Lucas however was fascinated by the druid's magic, and he too wanted to learn magic so he could do what that druid did, protect the people from otherworldly dangers.

Lucas grew up to be a mage, learning spells from ancient tomes that were found in the ruins of the Godseeker's doing. Everyone in the town appreciated him as a protector of the town. One night while he was sleeping in his tower, he was awoken from the screams of people. He looked outside of the window and saw a remnant of the celestial being's body part being reanimated to attack the town. The young man collected his things and rushed out of his tower to face the reanimated beast. The beast was a giant eyeball the size of a 3-story tall building. Lucas felt intimidated by its presence, but he fought the eye. He was in a losing battle, and his running away meant that he would abandon his town. Luckily for him, the druid from when he was a child came back. The druid saw the wounded man, and he stepped in to face the eye. Lucas was able to cast a spell that was able to make him recover his injuries much faster than a normal human would, but he slowly started losing consciousness. Using more magic would make him pass out, but he wanted to keep going for the sake of his town. With everything he had, he cast the most powerful spell he had known. The eye exploded into many pieces, painting everything around it a bloody red color. After that, Lucas passed out.

When he regained consciousness, he woke up in an unfamiliar place. That place was the druid's home. The druid recovered his body after the eye exploded, taking care of him until he regained consciousness. The druid greeted Lucas at his home and commended

him for being there when the town needed him the most. Lucas and the druid talked for a bit and he learned that the druid's name was Terran. Terran complimented Lucas with his magic, but he criticized his lack of willpower since he was able to easily lose consciousness when conjuring magic. With that in mind, Lucas asked Terran to strengthen his willpower. Terran agreed, saying that Lucas has so much potential to be a mage. Terran took Lucas in as his student and taught him everything he needed to know.

Years later, the town has grown into a large city, and Lucas is a master conjurer. Terran unfortunately had died due to old age, but he made sure that he taught everything he knew before his end. Lucas has fought countless beasts that tried to prey on the city and anything that gets in his way. He encountered a group of cultists that tried summoning a celestial creature. The creature they were summoning looked familiar to the one back when he was a child. He went into a state of fear and tried to stop the cultists from going any further. But unbeknownst to him, the summoning ritual had already been initiated, and there was nothing he could do to prevent it. Lifeforms from space started to swarm Gaia, and lasers seemed to be piercing through the atmosphere, forming portals that the creatures could go through to invade Gaia. In the midst of this, the lead cultist faced Lucas and struck first. Lucas dodged the attack and counterattacked back. The fight lasted nearly an hour before the lead cultist was killed by Lucas's spells. He rushed back to the city to prevent any more damage that would happen to the city. He was relieved that the city was able to hold the celestial invaders into a stalemate. One of the city guardians told Lucas that the creatures were coming through portals and that they needed to be destroyed. Lucas rushed to one of the portals after being informed. When he got to a portal, he was hesitant in his ability to destroy it, considering how fortified it was. Nonetheless, he went in to protect the planet from imminent doom. The creatures guarding the portals slowed Lucas down, but they weren't a match for him. After punching through the guards, and narrowly avoiding the autonomous defense systems, he reached the command terminal. There he deactivated the portal and turned off all security protocols. A portion of the invaders were killed. Realizing that the portals had a lifelink between the creatures, he searched for more portals and deactivated them one by one. Before he searched for the last portal, he collected the remains of the alien creatures and returned them to the city for research. After thorough research, he talked to the weaponsmith to make him a new weapon with the remains. Since the celestial creatures have a special property that makes them and their weapons strong. The weaponsmith forged a staff that was able to concentrate his power into one singular energy core. With his newly forged weapon, Lucas set out to deactivate the last portal. Nothing stood a chance against his new weapon, not even the autonomous defense system that was built in place to protect the portal. After he deactivated the last portal, it was all over... or so he thought. As he was walking back to the city, he could notice the sky getting darker at an exponential rate. When he looked at the sky, he saw the celestial creature that was depicted from the summoning circle the cultists were performing. He was scared, and felt afraid, as this was the same creature from his youth. Nonetheless, he provoked the creature, knowing that the planet was at stake. The creature created devastating beams

that scarred Gaia's surface. He knew that his spells were only gonna scratch his skin at best, so he tried to think of clever ways to attack him. As he was running from the attacks, he thought of what each of his spells could do. One spell in particular could be able to redirect high-concentrated magic spells: giga beams, mana blasts, and piercing bolts are examples of such spells. He also noted that the heart of the creature was exposed and could potentially redirect his beams at his heart. One thing however was that he wasn't sure if the redirection spell could redirect a high-concentrated energy attack. With much deliberation, he decided he was going to risk his life for the planet's survival. As soon as he saw the beam charging up, he began to perform the spell. As soon as the beam went straight towards him, he activated his spell and pointed it towards the creature's heart. When the beam made contact with the sigil, the beam was redirected, and the creature exploded within mere seconds. The explosion knocked Lucas unconscious. He woke up hours after the creature's demise, and he returned to the city to get rest.

The Godseeker noticed that Lunarus, the creature that Lucas had killed, was killed. What intrigued him the most however was that Gaia was able to support life that was powerful enough to kill a celestial being. Since he was too busy conquering other universes, he sent his servants down to track and kill the culprit behind Lunarus's death. A week goes by and Lucas encounters one of the Godseeker's servants, Bracken. Bracken was the king of his planet before the Godseeker conquered it. He introduced himself to Lucas as a servant of the Godseeker. Lucas never heard of the Godseeker, so began to question who he was. Bracken explained who the Godseeker was and why Bracken was sent here. Hearing all of this, Lucas began to attack Bracken. Bracken was able to endure most of Lucas's spells and counterattacked with his weapons. Lucas knew that he was at a disadvantage. He tried using the redirection spell on one of Bracken's attacks but it failed. With barely any hope, he began to use his high-concentration spells. Remembering what Terran had taught him about willpower, he began casting high-concentration spells one after another. This caught Bracken by surprise, and he began to struggle. The battlefield was even between the both of them, but Lucas had the determination to kill Bracken. Bracken was killed after a long-fought battle. After this encounter, he realized that more dangers were gonna be up ahead of him, so he began studying every spell he could get his hands on and researched unique things that came his way.

The Godseeker was getting angry when one of his most loyal servants was killed. He began sending his more powerful servants to kill the man, but none ever came back. He grew restless and angry, so he sent Asher to kill him for good. Asher arrived back on Gaia for the first time since the planet was destroyed. She saw how beautiful the planet was, but she was focused on killing the man that the Godseeker was stressing over. Sometime after her arrival, he met Lucas, and she began to attack. Lucas had never seen such magic in his life, and neither did Asher. Lucas's attacks were more devastating than when he killed Bracken, so much so that he was scaring the land. Both the witch and the mage fought for days without ever knowing when the battle would end. As they fought, visible black spots on Gaia could be seen in outer space. Lucas grew tired of Asher's fighting, so he enhanced his attacks and his senses. The sudden faster attacks threw Asher out of

balance, and she began to falter. She could not fail again as she did when she was trying to protect her people. She then realized how similar Lucas was to herself when she was fighting the Godseeker: fighting to protect his people. This realization made her surrender to Lucas. She explained why she surrendered herself to him; explaining to him what the Godseeker had done to her people. Asher then warned Lucas that the Godseeker would soon come after him, and told him he should prepare to fight him. Lucas took Asher into his home after some consideration. Both of them helped get gear ready to fight the Godseeker that Lucas had been hearing from every outside invader who came to see him. The Godseeker was enraged to find out that Asher had not come back after two weeks since he sent her. Without any more servants to go after the man, he went back to Gaia to face him himself. Asher felt his presence as they were eating lunch together. Both Lucas and Asher rushed back to Lucas's home to grab all things that they had made to fight the Godseeker. The Godseeker met the man who had been driving him mad for the last time, but he was shocked to see that Asher was beside him. Furious, the Godseeker attacked them. Both of the spellcasters retaliated, and the battle had begun. The Godseeker began to overpower them both, saying that no one could match him. Both of them started to feel hopeless since none of them were doing any significant damage to him. Their drive started to dwindle. They both knew that this planet and the universe depended on them. Knowing that the two began to regain their determination. They changed their strategy; instead of fighting together, they split up and attacked him from all sides. Asher's determination fueled her magic to be stronger than she had ever seen before, and Lucas heightened his magic and his senses, just like what he did to Asher. The Godseeker was starting to get overwhelmed by the two. The Godseeker had enough of both of them and began to push his limits. This unaffected the spellcasters as their drive was fueling them to push their limits. The Godseeker began to falter; he was unable to attack anymore. The Godseeker surrendered to them, but neither of the two wanted to spare his life. The Godseeker, after millions of years since his birth, was dead. With the Godseeker gone, the universe was in harmony, celebrating the two heroes who defeated the Godseeker. Back on Gaia, Asher and Lucas became friends and helped maintain balance across the universe. Terran was looking down on Lucas, and he was very proud of what he had become.

Student Name: Scarlet Jacobson

Grade: 11

School: St Agnes Academy

Title: i took the end of the world by storm.

Category: Poetry

Key: Gold Key

Educator:

it was cold and dark in that house,  
love's lack emanating from the floorboards,  
chilling me in the mornings.

i went for a walk on the highway,  
watched the cars go by and thought about jumping,  
but i knew there wasn't a point.

no matter where i go i wish i was somewhere else,  
i want to be at home in myself,  
instead my skin fits badly over my hunched bones.

i open my eyes to close them again,  
block out the ceaseless noise of the day and age,  
the violence and apathy and outrage and excess.

the billboards flew by when i left, they told me things,  
they said that i needed to change,  
one said i couldn't but had to be saved.

when i woke up this morning they said it's finally happening,  
all the doomsdayers and naysayers are eating their words,  
and my mother is visiting my house.

she wants to be with me in the end, or so she says,  
but i ran out the back door and didn't stop,  
just like in the old days.

it happened,  
i felt it,  
the warmth on my back and the knowledge i couldn't turn around.

the pavement dissolved but i kept going,  
the sky disappeared and i never stopped,

all there is in life is running from yourself.

i, some half-baked orpheus, kept my back on the apocalypse,  
the heat of the explosion behind me just reaching my heels,  
when the wave of memories swept me up.

i lived all my life again,  
watched it over, and sat in a ring with all my selves,  
overlapping at the edges as we realized it had reached us.

with a voice all our own, all my own, we screamed and i felt it,  
the dissolution of my bonds, and watched myself fade,  
until i was left alone in the searing blaze without breath.

Student Name: Kyra Ezikeuzor

Grade: 11

School: St Agnes Academy

Title: My Dad Ate Lizard During the War; 1967 / I Heard it Rain in Biafra; 1969

Category: Poetry

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Herman Sutter

My Dad Ate Lizard During the War, 1967

To eat a lizard, first flay him like the black viper

Shed at noon. Snip his tail for

Tales of Chukwu cut

Short by screaming in the distance.

Watch the sun mist, God's blessing after He swept the lands,

Broom of harmattan and red

Gunpowder.

Cut at his eyes till it sees smoke-blind like you do at

Dusk. Snip off his head because Owerri is

Gone. Now fry his body with palm oil and salmon dreams that possess

You. Savor him with the gall of a federal,

Curry and pepper.

I Heard it Rain in Biafra, 1969

I hear it rain in Biafra!

And wet winds of smoke and sand harpoon.

Dew coats the banana leaves, flecks of sand powder boughs of tall and wise!

I know it rains in Biafra!

The air smells of wet earth; sand coats feet as hands drum to the tune of Come. Bia.

Take. Fra. Hands held of sand hurricanes.

Oh, how it rains in Biafra!

And that woman balances her frayed basket of groundnut and banana, worn steady arms; children mud-dance, competition of makeshift rag .

Footballs. Bellies bouncing from Sunday's sweet egusi and pounded fufu.

Crickets chirp infinite tunes.

Tonight, it rains in Biafra!

And the sun wasps burrow in their haven, slumber dreams to spew static // flit about // drink hibiscus nectar about the rosemary tangled gates.



God knows it rains in Biafra!

Ube and Udara, yawn and pulse with plump, ripe yams.

Plantain bulge in tall thin Banana trees, sand-soaked.

I know it once rained in Biafra!

Student Name: Kyra Ezikeuzor

Grade: 11

School: St Agnes Academy

Title: No More Small Gods

Category: Poetry

Key: Gold Key

Educator:

My Great-Great Grandmother  
 Held small gods in her pockets  
 Clutched them, babe to His thumb  
 Dipped her forefinger in palm oil  
 Kissed it to her body. Pad of finger, Oil, Lips.  
 Anointed derelict prayer that oil and clay  
 To gods numerous as sand flecks  
 Billowing through linen curtains,  
 Swaying palm trees.

My mother and I caw at the cross.  
 Caged indigo birds.  
 Singing songs of blue smoke and savannah dreams

Hidden in the cherry trees of the orchard,  
 The sun belches his pig belly

In the bliss of the romantic spring,  
 We anoint the prayer of rosemary and corkwood.

Murraya and plume incense  
 Licks our black-blue sweat.

My Great-Great Grandmother  
 Swore at the horizon, thick-lipped.  
 Trekking on spiked gravel roads.  
 Carved a dent of stone into her heart.  
 Wept at the earth pyre.  
 And found her small gods empty.  
 My mother and I gorge on the honey.  
 From the western cove.

Lick our lips to pray taste  
One fleck, one drop of New Religion.

Chant virgin blessings to the sky goddess.

We paint our faces clam white,  
Rebind our moon-bound feet to iron cherry coffins.

Through bloodied feet, we find our God calling.

Student Name: Kendall Doerr

Grade: 12

School: St Agnes Academy

Title: Ophelia's Lament

Category: Poetry

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Herman Sutter

Soft! His form arrives in my mind's eye  
 "Tarry not," he seems to say, "Hither! Come my way."  
 My steps list to his voice.  
 Marry, my heart is thine, I cry!  
 But fie! His visage melts into enmity,  
 his lips taste of gall, ere nothing at all.  
 I beseech thee, return to me!  
 Empty, I am, ever shall I be.

Wither wilt thee fly to, O roses so red?  
 Do thee possess a place to rest thine head?  
 And thee, O lilies so pure? In faith,  
 I held thee. Wherefore did thee go?  
 Go to, melancholic willow!  
 Weep no longer. Thine tears fill the brook,  
 Crease the earth, drown mine sunflowers.  
 Yet worry not, I too am wont to grievous burdens.

Perchance I will sleep now,  
 t'were lead me to thy domain of dreams.  
 Good night, good night, my wayward maids,  
 I bid you good night! There you must visit me,  
 amongst the rosemary and the chrysanthemums.  
 But soft! Mine bubbling, bubbling brook calls,  
 Must I answer? Answer, I must.  
 Good night, good night, good night!

Sweet, sweet water, thine blankets entice me.  
 Hum, hum, I will sing thine song.  
 O willow, I bid you good night!

Ere mine eyes shut,  
 list to mine words.

I was thine, thine was mine, sometime.  
Thou warr'nt mine bouquet of narcissuses,  
Peonies, freesias. Perchance thou lost it,  
perchance, perchance. Worry not, I  
worry no more. Goodnight, goodnight,  
mine love awaits thee.

Student Name: Sophie Da Silva

Grade: 10

School: St Agnes Academy

Title: prized girlhood

Category: Poetry

Key: Gold Key

Educator:

cover me in gold  
but don't call me a trophy

call me a brilliant student  
because i win trophies  
and get good grades

call me stylish and chic  
because i like to look nice  
in my clothes, heels, and highlights

still i'm called a good girl  
keeps her head down  
smiles amidst pains  
quiet at mass  
she doesn't talk to strangers

why can't i be known as the  
powerful girl  
who eats fear for breakfast and  
roams the streets free?

why does curling my lashes and  
doing my hair mean getting  
weird stares?

feeling beautiful should be free  
free of judgment  
free of side-eyes and comments  
free of pretty equaling dumb

let me live in a world where  
i can be accepted for being

unapologetically me  
and celebrate women being  
strong and fierce and  
smart and sophisticated  
all in one

how can we change?

we're covered in gold  
but don't call us a trophy  
call us hope.

Student Name: Sophie Da Silva

Grade: 10

School: St Agnes Academy

Title: Semi-Soothing

Category: Poetry

Key: Gold Key

Educator:

A lemon lozenge is quick to ease the perforating marks left behind by  
viscous songs filled with bitterness  
and serenades of my undying love to certain people  
in my portable box of knives and hugs.  
Can't sift through the stew.  
Their cacophony is too jumbled up for me to find a clear voice.

But the lozenge is a note of nectar, an escape.

And I suck on that lemon drop some more, staring at the white plaster walls  
who always have answers for each of my whispers.  
The bathroom is crowded and cramped, compliments of a squished apartment but I  
always find answers when my fingers trace the grout between the hexagonal tiles  
who make innocent little flowers that meander in and out like a tabby cat.

The citric acids seep into a canker and the ambrosia poison burns and burns.

Somehow the sting grows.  
I think I know why, but I don't want to spit it out.  
The soothing lull of the lozenge is too delicious and I'm halfway done with it.  
Is this how the standing man in the blue suit feels when  
the rest are sitting next to the stone with flowers?  
My nails scratch the corner of the ceramic sink and their shrieking screech vibrates into  
my very existence.  
I realize that I'm in denial.  
I'm the man in the blue suit.  
I'm the one who refuses to look past pre-packaged sweets.  
An onlooker that sees the two distant planets  
each isolated in their own orbit  
but blurs them as one.  
One where reality and non-actuality are  
disguised by my disregard to learn further  
to question my source



and look past my laziness.

My tongue pushes against the lemon lozenge and my lips pucker.

The opaque droplet falls out of my mouth but

it is barely the size of a tear.

Maybe the tear of the one

who keeps things in for too long,

the tear of the fibber,

the tear of the honest,

I need to stop sitting on the flower tiled floor,

slumping over the obscure, glowing void of unfiltered information and

untie the knots I've unknowingly fastened

because not everything is as sweet

as it seems.

Student Name: Kyra Ezikeuzor

Grade: 11

School: St Agnes Academy

Title: Tan Honey

Category: Poetry

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Herman Sutter

Last spring, the bees feasted  
On the honeydew vines and  
Fed us tanned honey. They tried to clean the thing,  
But pungent doesn't settle  
In soft stomachs.

You don't fear it though.  
You accept the paint God brushed on You,  
Though, I know whose

Hand stretches to taste  
The Orange Sun, strung up against  
The big and bright blue.

Whose fingertips grazed the  
Salt spray. Forked through thick eelgrass, white  
Dress billowing, Windswept.  
To kiss Her mirror.

Who yearned to envelop  
Herself in the sweet Nectar  
Of the Light.

The bees know it too.

So you keep stretching your hand, but know  
there's too much color between your  
Palm and forearm,

So you'll bear the brunt  
Of tuft hair,

Tuft-mouthed as

Your hand sweats to kiss  
My Mother's skin. Her golden womb  
Bore you wrong.

They'll tell me my Orange Sun  
Is burning me too wrong

Not as wrong as you.

So, don't hate it when  
They say that thing to me  
Don't hate that thing,

Keep your hands from dreaming,  
Or they'll burn you further from Her  
Than I was before.

You can't clean tan honey.

Student Name: Isabella Bradbury  
 Grade: 10  
 School: St Agnes Academy  
 Title: The Art of Moving On  
 Category: Personal Essay & Memoir  
 Key: Gold Key  
 Educator:

October 16, 2016

Maybe this will be the year. I ran out to the mailbox, practically skipping, a wide smile plastered on my face. Yes, I thought to myself. This will be the year.

I pried open the creaky old thing with anticipation, expecting to find a little wrapped present or a card. I stuck my hand in and felt around.

Empty.

This was not the year.

I looked back at my mom standing in the front doorway with a sorrowful look on her face.

"There- there has to be some explanation," I justified. "Maybe it got lost in the mail. Or maybe the mailman just hasn't come yet, and I should just come and check again later, or maybe-" My mother sighed softly.

"Isabella," she said, giving me a look that told me that there was no explanation. The same sad, sorry look she had given me last year. And the year before that. "I'm sorry," she said, "Do you want a hug?" Teary-eyed and red-faced, I nodded, running into her outstretched arms.

October 16, 2017

"Happy Birthday to you! Happy Birthday to you-" they sang out as I looked over at the scene: all of my friends singing around me; the perfect, shiny, pink cake I had always wanted; the flames of the ten little candles flickering with light. "Happy Birthday dear Isa, Happy Birthday to You!" As happy as I was- and I was the happiest I had been in a long time- I couldn't help but feel that something was missing. I distracted myself with thoughts of the delicious cake I was about to eat and all the presents I was about to open, and before I knew it, I was cheerful again as I talked with my friends and played and ate cake in delight.

Once the party started to settle down, and people began to leave, my mother called, "Isabella! Come say goodbye to the guests!" I walked down the hallway to the foyer, and somewhere in between the thank yous and goodbyes I found myself listening in on my friend's conversation.

"-of course," said her father, "anything for my little princess," and he enveloped her in a hug.

I couldn't stop the tears from falling. I ran to the bathroom and shut the door, staring at myself in the mirror. I looked at my pale, shaking form, eyes hot and teeth clenched. I

wondered what it was about her. What did she have that I didn't? What did I do to make my father decide not to stick around?

It was then that I decided that I hated birthdays.

June 17, 2018

"Welcome, class!" our Sunday school teacher said cheerfully. I knew that I was probably too old for Sunday school, but I knew that Mom dropped me off here so that I wouldn't get bored while she was at work. Plus, I didn't mind; it kept me busy, and the teacher was my favorite.

"Good morning, Miss Bennett," the class responded in unison.

"So, today I was thinking that we should make Father's Day cards!" she said. "I just feel like kids always make their moms Mother's Day cards at school since Mother's Day is during the school year, and the dads don't really get as many cards, so this is a perfect opportunity to make a card and show your dad how much you love and appreciate him, don't you think?"

"Yes, Miss Bennett," the class replied.

I hesitated.

We all grabbed paper and supplies from the front of the room and got to work. My brows drew together as I tapped the pencil against my desk. I looked over at the other children's letters: paragraphs upon paragraphs with cute little drawings and fancy lettering and all.

"Isabella, focus please," snapped Miss Bennett. "No zoning out in my class."

"Sorry, I just- I don't know what to write about," I explained.

"You don't know? What do you mean you don't know?"

"I just... nevermind," I said.

I doodled on the cardstock for the rest of the class.

December 25, 2019

"Are you calling him?" my mom asked me. I nodded. I knew that at this point it was silly, that after so many years I should probably give up, but for some reason I still had this small fraction, the smallest inkling of hope that maybe he would pick up this time. It reminded me of when I was little, when every birthday, every Christmas, I thought that maybe this would be the year he would send me a present. Thinking about it made me tear up just a little bit, lips slightly trembling. There never was a year.

But for some reason, I still had this tiny, miniscule amount of hope. And for some reason, I called him again. And I don't know why I was surprised when all I got was a dialing tone that would never connect.

I wanted to make excuses for him. I really did. I wanted to tell myself that maybe he just changed phone numbers, and he forgot to tell me, but I don't do that anymore. Because I knew that no matter how hard I tried, I wouldn't be able to fool myself. So I hung up before I could convince myself to try and leave a message.

July 12, 2020

I leisurely scrolled through FaceBook, which I didn't normally use, but it was the middle of summer, and I was bored, so why not? I paused on a post with a picture of some people I had not seen in a long time. The caption read:

Happy 17th birthday, Thomas! Happy birthday to the best step-son a man could ask for. I am very proud of you. I know you will do great things in life.

And to be honest, I was sort of surprised by my reaction. I swallowed hard and considered blocking him, so I wouldn't get my feelings hurt but decided against it. I was surprised at how I was so passive, indifferent. The old me would have broken down in tears. I thought back to something a friend had said a few years ago that had stuck with me: "No point in shedding tears over someone who never did anything to deserve them," she had said. I expected myself to be somewhat jealous, but instead, I found myself thinking, Good for him. At least someone gets to have the love I never got.

October 16, 2022

"HAPPY BIRTHDAY!" my family shouted. Everyone popped out from where they were hidden behind furniture as I opened the door. They all ran to come hug me, surrounding me with their warmth and joy and love. All of my family came to visit from Mexico for my surprise party and to be with me to celebrate my quinceañera.

"Thank you so much!" I smiled and looked around at the decorations: banners and streamers and balloons and all of the food that everyone had made. I was touched that they had done all of this for me. "Seriously, though, you have no idea how much this means to me."

"Of course, mija," said one of my aunts. "We wouldn't miss this for the world." We hugged and there was dancing and eating and singing and laughter and happiness and excitement all at once.

This is what it's all about, I realized. Spending time with the people you love who love and care about you as well.

I didn't check the mailbox, or call him this year. It's strange how many years it took me to finally realize that he is not the source of my happiness, and my happiness cannot depend on him. I realized that there are so many other people out there who care about me, including myself, and that was what I needed to focus on: the people who were there for me, not the people who weren't. And although letting go was quite the journey, one that took place over the course of many years, I had people beside me every step of the way. It was definitely a journey worth taking. And lastly, I don't hate birthdays anymore.

Student Name: Natalia Silva

Grade: 12

School: St Agnes Academy

Title: The Frontdoor

Category: Poetry

Key: Gold Key

Educator:

In the quiet entry room,  
only the slow rustle  
of the houseplants being blown by the a/c can be heard.

The door in front not  
only leads to the front street,  
but is a portal looking  
out at the world.

The door is a strong, dark wood, broken up by thick glass squares.  
The door handle that clicks like a cicada when it opens is  
at my elbow.

It glistens gold as  
the light from the front yard pours in through the glass.  
I can see out the door when it's closed, and my neighbors  
can see in.

It's a vulnerable piece of art.  
It gifts the house with shining squares of sunlight,  
feeding the houseplants.

But it denies the privacy of an average door.  
It's a vessel for light,  
for the sunny squares  
that warm the hardwood floor that the dog likes to lay on.  
Bathing in the sunlight the room is split.

A dark background next to an illuminating grid that moves  
with the sun.

I stand and bask  
in the glow of my see-through door.

Student Name: Charlotte Loweth

Grade: 11

School: St Agnes Academy

Title: Through the Eyes of a Hero

Category: Short Story

Key: Gold Key

Educator:

### Through the Eyes of a Hero

September 11th, 2001. The early morning in New York City is bright and clear. The sun is shining down on the iconic city of dreams and the place people aspire to work in - the financial district. I love traveling here, but it is nothing like "the farm" I love hunting on with my dad. I have just finished my work here for my company, Thoratec Corporation, a medical device company, and I have been a great businessman there. I check out of my hotel and am ready to get on my early morning flight to go back home to San Ramon, California. I am excited because I will be taking the earlier flight today to pick up my twin daughters, Anna Claire, and Madison, from their first day of kindergarten. I had a busy work schedule in New York, and I am looking forward to seeing my wife, Deena, and my favorite girls. I grab my bags and head to the airport, the city is already bustling through the morning traffic, with workers ready to start their busy days. I arrive and begin to walk into Terminal A to check in for my flight and get through security to pick up the morning paper. I love to learn about influential figures like Winston Churchill, who has been my recent favorite. Whenever I am in doubt, I say to myself, "the lives they led and the decisions they made were uncommon," reminding myself of the importance of doing what is right in the face of adversity. My flight is scheduled to take off at eight o'clock in the morning, and I now head to Gate 18.

As I arrive at my gate, I take a seat while I read the paper. My flight has been delayed by 42 minutes. Finally, I grab my things and head to my plane. The gatekeeper scans my ticket, and I walk through the gate. It was finally time to board Flight 93 to San Francisco. I walk through the doors of the plane and stow my baggage. I get to my first-class seat, 4B, and wait for the other passengers to board. The flight attendant asks me what I would like to drink, and she serves my favorite, orange juice. The other passengers boarded the full flight. After, we wait for a few minutes as the last passengers scramble to their seats. The door shuts, and we prepare for a smooth takeoff.

The plane takes off from the runway and we head into the



bright blue sky. My mind calms, and I look forward to my arrival in San Francisco. There are a group of Arab men with thick accents and large bags sitting around me, sweating, and tapping their feet anxiously. They continue casting nervous glances at each other, which I find odd. I call Deena, my wife to tell her that I am safely on the plane and heading to San Francisco. When I get up into the air, the flight attendant hands me my breakfast and I start to eat. One of the Arab men stood up to go the bathroom and pulls out a heavy bag that dropped into his arms from the overhead compartments. He locks the door and stays in the bathroom. That was a bit strange to me. I focus on my paper and reassure myself there is nothing that can logically happen just because a man is in the restroom with his bag. I return to my paper and read about how Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld held a press conference to disclose that over \$2,000,000,000,000 in Pentagon funds could not be accounted for.

The Arab man finally comes out of the bathroom. My worries disappear for a moment, but immediately return. A bulky belt is hiding under his shirt, and he starts taking deep breaths. What is he doing wearing something like that? But then again, what could he do with a belt that was checked by security? He goes back to his seat while he stares and nods his head at his group of friends. Suddenly, all the Arab men look eye to eye with each other and stand up in alliance. They reach for the overhead compartments and take out fiery red ribbons. I jump in my seat. Sweat runs down my face and my mind starts to race. They look each other straight in the eye. They tie the ribbons around their heads as passengers look up in concern. The men sit back in their seats, and one of the Arab men in front of me presses the help button. The flight attendant comes to his seat and sweetly asks what his request is. He pulls her tightly by the hair to his chest. She gasps for air. A scream was let out and all the passengers stand up to see what is happening. Passengers burst into tears as they realize the threat these men pose. The man takes out a knife and forces it to her neck. My stomach drops as I feel the terror and confusion. I have no control of the situation. I am nothing compared to what these men can do to me. These people are not here to fly to San Francisco. They are here to fight a war.

The other men stand up. They are walking row to row ushering people down to the back of the plane. Nobody knew what was going to happen to us as we pray the situation will not escalate. The other Arab men stand up from their seats and open their bags pulling out weapons. They look at each other and shout, "We have a bomb on board! If you do not give us what we want, we will blow the plane up!" One of the men lift their shirt to display a belt full of bombs. I turn around to see the flight attendant crying in agony. I pull my headphones out of my bag and rapidly plug them into my phone. I try calling Deena but hang up because it just was not the

right time.

I run towards the economy isles for safety and press my body against the aircraft walls. All that is going through my mind are the painful, threatening words the men are shouting at us. The other passengers stay back. I am terrified that if we leave the area, they will kill us. The flight attendant is pinned against the wall saying, "I can't do that, I just can't!" It feels like I am in a nightmare. He keeps indenting the knife in her face until she does what he demands. I peer down the aisle and see her weeping at the door helplessly. Suddenly, the flight attendant knocks an odd pattern on the door of the cockpit. The door opens, and the pilot's eyes grew stricken. My heart sinks into my stomach. Everything looks as if it was in slow motion. A passenger takes a calm approach to address one of the Arab men. They kindly ask what the men want from us and if they could settle down. The Arab man whips him on the floor and stabs a knife in his chest. This act ignites a flame in our spirits to fight back. We all need to come together and take control of this flight from these men. The other Arab men storm the cockpit, and I hear attacking and piercing shrieks from the pilots. Suddenly the plane drops. The pilots are thrown out of the cockpit with their eyes barely opened. A piece of paper flew on my foot. I carefully pick up the receipt-looking paper. It read; Beware of Cockpit Intrusion-Two aircraft hit the World Trade Center. It looks like a note from the control towers to the pilots that was printed in the cockpit. As I look back, the pilots lay on the ground with no sign of life. This was an attack, and these were not Arab men spending a week in San Francisco, they were terrorists and hijackers.

One of the four hijackers came out from the cockpit and rush us to the very back of the plane. I run for my life, brushing up against people as I run. The passengers in the back are unaware why the plane dropped, and why we are running to the back. I figure they do not understand, until their cries and screams of realization pierce my ears as the terrorists' charge through the aisle. The other flight attendants sitting in the back of the plane assume the pilots must have hit some turbulence, but they could not have been more wrong. I quickly grab an open seat in the back of the plane. The hijacker who ushered us to the back ran to the cockpit, seizing the front of the plane. We are on our own. We are cramped together, unaware of what could happen next. Scared for our lives, we wonder if we will ever make it back to our families tonight.

I call my wife to get help. She used to be a flight attendant and might be able to give us advice. I tell her panicking, "Yes, yes, just listen. Our airplane has been hijacked. It is United Flight 93 from Newark to San Francisco. We are in the air. The hijackers have already knifed a guy, one of them has a gun, they are telling us there is a bomb on board, please call the authorities."

She speaks with a calm but worried tone,  
 “Tom, they are hijacking cross country planes full of fuel all up and down the east coast. They are taking them and hitting designated targets. They have already hit both towers of the World Trade Center. All planes have been ordered to be grounded.” I already knew this information from the paper that was on my foot, but now that it is confirmed, this is a living nightmare. I hear an alert roaring through the airplane speaker, “We have a bomb! Stay back!” I ask Deena if an airplane could survive a bomb. If we could get the bombs in our control, it might save our lives. She said, “An airplane could survive a bomb if it is stored in the right place.” I hang up.  
 I pick up the phone and call my wife again.  
 She exclaimed, “Tom, you’re ok!” “I’m not,” I answer. I gather myself and ask what more we can do to save the passengers, and possibly another monument. She now tells me the pentagon had just been hit and she thought it was my plane. My mind starts running too fast to process anything. I was just reading about the Pentagon less than twenty minutes ago, and now it is completely destroyed. All the passengers are saying their prayers and hoping for the best while calling family members. I ask her if she called the authorities. She said they arrived and were questioning her. I get off the phone. I had a voice inside telling me that we were going to be the next plane that would be used to attack America. I will not let them win this war.  
 The passengers and I think of what to do in this situation, especially because none of us are prepared for something so unpredicted to happen. Why is this happening to us? We are citizens traveling home to our families, jobs, and universities. A passenger calls United Airlines in search of help. They get on the phone and United keeps transferring him until he reaches a woman who had a calming sense in her voice. Her name is Lisa. She has us to stay calm and think positively. She also tells us to keep her on the phone and not to hang up. We feel she is there for us, and she is a light in this dark tragedy. We all knew our lives will end shortly if we do not take action. I know I need to be strong and lead others to fight against the terrorists.  
 I grasp my phone to call Deena as I hear a voice from the front that says they are crashing the plane, “Oh my God, it’s a suicide mission.” I yell. I am appalled they could conduct such a selfish, and horrific act against us and our beloved country. How could these people take our lives this way and why do our children have to be the ones who will not have a mom or dad to come home to? Why would God do this to me and my family?  
 The passengers and I come together to think about the possible outcomes and efforts we can put into escaping this nightmare. The reality is, we cannot

fly the plane or protect ourselves with modern day weapons the terrorists have. We need to act courageously. All the passengers come together and decide we need to take over this plane and crash it somewhere with nothing in the way. I feel a wave of power washing over me. I feel that I could be the person that saves many. I could be a leader like Churchill, and I could take the uncommon path. We understand that we will die, so we should do anything prevent death to others and the potential loss of a monument. Why would anyone do this and kill so many people including themselves? I call my wife again. "Deena, they are on a suicide mission, and they are crashing the plane." "What are you saying?" she asks. "Well, they are crashing this plane, but don't worry we are going to do something." She asks who was doing this, and tells me to stay unnoticed, and I answer, "A group of us." I was not about to let this plane crash into a landmark and kill all of us as well as other innocent people.

I start to think of anything in the plane that we can use to defend ourselves and attack the hijackers. My eyes peer out of the window, trying to locate where we are. We attentively wait to get to a rural area before we go through with our scheme. I stand up confidently knowing that I can make a difference and lead my fellow passengers. We cannot defeat them with just self-defense when the hijackers have all the weapons. I start pilfering through the drawers of the plane salvaging anything the passengers and I can use to fight back. I grab seat buckles, steaming water pitchers, luggage, and our greatest weapon, the beverage cart.

There are no exact plans, but our determination will guide us to defeat the hijackers. Determination is the key strength we have over them, and this is greater than any weapon. I get all the passengers to come together. Some are hesitant to take charge but their bravery inside shines through. They realize what our power and control can do to save our country. Passengers get reassurance on the phone with Lisa as we enter a zone of calmness together. We say the Lord's Prayer with strength and power, as the pride of being Americans beams through our souls. Passengers make their last calls saying, "I'm ok, but I'm in this plane that has been hijacked, and we are about to take over. I just wanted you to know that I love you always. Tell my family I love them. G-g-goodbye." I call Deena begging her to pray. The Lord's strength is my most powerful force, propelling me to lead the passengers.

I am ready to lead and attack. The words of God

"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me," give me courage. This is my mission, my purpose in life. I hear a message from the hijacker. My heart races. Would we be able to still complete our plan, or would end it all now?

"Ladies and gentlemen: Listen to the captain: please

sit down keep remaining sitting. We have a bomb on board. So, sit." We are not

going to be heroes sitting here. We need to give our best efforts to attack back and be leaders. We are ready to go. "Let's Roll." A man said as we began to charge.

I storm the aisle yelling, "Mayday! Mayday."

We have everything we need to kill these horrible, sinister people and take over. We have the power and strength of determination, and nothing can stop our will. Passengers run towards the cockpit. Plates and pitchers fly across the plane. We turn into an army. The beverage cart bangs against the cockpit door. The hijacker in control of the plane starts rocking the aircraft. The wings are dramatically tipping side to side, trying to knock us down. We are stronger than this and nothing is an obstacle for us. I throw all the objects I could salvage and use. Screams fill the air, cries and yells of strength echoing inside the cabin. A hijacker knocks me over. I am lying in the aisle. "I'm injured!" I yell, "You all go without me!" Passengers carry through with their last efforts, bombarding the cockpit to find the terrorists in disbelief. The plane starts to tip forward. Our altitude is dropping rapidly. A breach of light peaks through. The force pushes me around the plane and then a feeling of calmness overtakes me.

Student Name: Elizabeth Avila

Grade: 12

School: St Agnes Academy

Title: wheel of six spokes

Category: Poetry

Key: Gold Key

Educator:

\*gira is an Italian word that translates to turn, spin, or revolve

Gira, gira

Turnstiles of time infinite and irreversible

The flashes of the pieces of you that belonged to me, alone but never unseen

A voyeuristic sense of uneasy peace in the unbalance of my life in - in - in -

Me and my Mother

Me and the Lover

Me and the Lord, God

Gira, gira

Back then I was a little monstrous; back then, when I was little -

Glass little castles built on sand,

Cave in on myself again and again,

Gira, gira

Your skin the canvas for my want,

My fingers, the artist's touch

The violence that lived in us would die with us, we said

Gira, gira

I can't say I don't love you,

but I want you wouldn't last a second outside the incubator

And You don't have the time to wait

At the End,

When the seventh say begins again,

Does the sun still shine in your memories of me?

Student Name: Sophia Burnette

Grade: 10

School: St John's School

Title: the blueprint

Category: Poetry

Key: Gold Key

Educator:

black- one word one syllable  
 its lit but it's difficult  
 fighting for rights all our lives  
 yet we still get the bare minimal  
 when it comes to our music you love it  
 when it comes to us youre ciritcal  
 ig models wanna cop but hate us  
 hey google define hypocritical

cause everybody been knew it  
 but act new and stupid  
 pop culture loves us  
 cause we are the blueprint  
 its not tiktok slang  
 and its not gen z lingo  
 the way we talk is four letters  
 A A V E, bingo

feeling confused? listen  
 i got a story for you  
 throwback to when the slaves was abused  
 throwback to when we'd be punished or noosed  
 penalties, for writing the truth  
 forced to make our own english to use  
 not from gen-z, from our african roots  
 put respect on how it was produced  
 they risked their lives yet y'all still missuse?  
 huh, it aint nothing new.

black- one word one syllable  
 its lit but it's difficult  
 fighting for rights all our lives  
 yet we still get the bare minimal

when it comes to our music you love it  
when it comes to us youre ciritcal  
ig models wanna cop but hate us  
hey google define hypocritical

our vernacular was created  
by those who was slaving  
y'all vultured our culture  
its broken and fading  
some people don't realize  
that its appropriating  
copying us then claiming  
they invented it, reclaiming  
our own words and styles  
is wrong, im done debating.



Student Name: katrina pauls  
 Grade: 12  
 School: St Pius X High School  
 Title: My Pinky Promise  
 Category: Poetry  
 Key: Gold Key  
 Educator:

To a child a pinky promise is sacred.  
 When they are broken,  
 it almost shatters your trust.  
 We may not be children,  
 but I pinky promise you this.  
 I pinky promise that when you fall into your darkness,  
 I will be a light trying to guide you.  
 But sometimes my light isn't enough,  
 So I will hold your hand,  
 so you know the monsters under the bed can't hurt you.  
 I will comfort you in any way I can.  
 For you I will be the peace in a storm,  
 The warmth of a blanket straight from the dryer.  
 I will be as strong as you need me to be,  
 And as steady as tune of a nursery rhyme.  
 I pinky promise.  
 I pinky promise that the days you scrape your knee,  
 I will be the band-aid that heals it all.  
 But I need you to know  
 I'm going to be here no matter what.  
 And this may be almost childish,  
 but I pinky promise,  
 I will never harm you.

Student Name: Leah Feng  
Grade: 11  
School: St Thomas' Episcopal School  
Title: written in sand  
Category: Poetry  
Key: Gold Key  
Educator:

i thought i loved the beach  
white foam waves crashing onto the shore  
clouds drifting lazily overhead

seagulls swarm overhead and  
you toss them torn pieces of bread crusts  
off your peanut butter and peanut butter sandwich

you smile as they come  
diving down, hair flying  
you are a goddess of some kind

a goddess of my kind  
my goddess  
one of a kind.

you trace my hand  
with your fingers  
light as a feather

i trace your constellations  
with my tongue, my lips  
we drift, two of a kind

the sky stretches on and i wonder  
if the stars mind  
a girl loving another

in an infinitely expanding cosmos  
we were the last rays of a setting sun  
a supernova burning out

we were letters written in sand

an outgoing tide never meant to last.  
i thought i loved the beach

but maybe all that i loved was you.

Student Name: Eleanor Simmons

Grade: 8

School: St. John's School

Title: A Sky Without A Sun

Category: Short Story

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Judy Adams

Joan kicks at the stuck door in her tiny apartment, trying to let herself out of her bedroom and into the miniscule living area. Bursting through the jammed door, she sees several hover cars with flashing lights fly by her balcony, distorted by the fractured webbing of the glass door. Stepping out onto the balcony, she wonders why hover cars would be in her borough; Joan seriously doubts that anyone living here could afford one. Her apartment, if you could call it that, is located in the Unworthy borough, a place for those of tainted blood, unpaid debts, and shifty pasts.

The Worthies, the lucky souls who fall into none of those categories, occupy the rest of the city, and however impoverished they may be, they are not an Unworthy. Joan, sharp and intelligent, falls into the first category, a girl whose mother made the mistake of falling in love with a rebel.

Oily and slick, the unused streets are illuminated by the neon signs resting on buildings as Joan steps out onto her balcony. She thinks about her own hunger, her paltry paychecks from her cleaning job, and her stunted savings account, depleted by her sister's death. Atalanta was killed in a surprise bombing by Sequoit rebels while the twin sisters were traveling to Lux Auris. Joan barely escaped with her life, and Atalanta was buried in the catastrophic amounts of debris, her body never recovered despite the numerous searches conducted for survivors.

Haunted by those harrowing days, Joan rarely ventures from her modest apartment, too afraid that she will see the images that she escaped: hollowed out buildings, broken bodies, and countless other atrocities. Padding back into her living room, Joan scoops up her computer, and coils on her sofa, apprehensive of the grueling hours her boss will inevitably assign her.

She lives a life of solitude, isolated and muted, her work sapping every bit of strength she has. Everything Joan does requires as little interaction as possible. She wonders if it is like this for everyone else: receiving work messages online, showing up to empty mansions to clean, groceries delivered by drone. It has been eleven days since she has spoken to someone, her last words were to a border patrol agent as she returned from visiting Atalanta's gravestone in Lux Solaris.

Joan cherished a close bond with Atalanta. Inseparable, the two had gone everywhere together; even traveling across the continent for a job interview that Atalanta had been offered. Joan often felt like the sky; she wasn't particularly noticeable until made beautiful by the sun, but she was always there. Atalanta, the perfect sun to her calm sky,

was a positive, opinionated person who brightened her days. The sky belonged with the sun, and the sun rotated with the sky, altering the latter even when it was hidden. When Joan returned home alone from her sister's funeral, she felt as frozen as though the sun would never rise again. She had never known true solitude—not after her father had disappeared somewhere in Sequoit, nor after her mother had uprooted her young daughters and died rather shortly afterwards, but she felt its cold bite after Atalanta passed. The loving sisterhood they treasured had lasted through disagreements, miscommunications, and lack of maturity, but it couldn't transcend death. She sighs and resumes working on the couch. The sound of her typing, sluggish and apathetic, fills the purple bruise of the night sky. Less than ten minutes later, a heavy knock sounds at the door. Joan pauses, she knows no one who would bang on her door. Rationalizing that it must be one of her odd neighbors, she starts for the door just as it is blasted off of its hinges. Several dark shapes emerge from the poorly lit hallway, bulky and ominous. Striding towards her, the closest figure brings down some sort of weapon just as electricity arcs down her spine and the world turns black.

Head pounding, she regains consciousness in a small room lit by a hot spotlight. Joan tries to raise her hand to her crying eyes, but her hands are met with cool metal. Entrapped by bands of steel, her wrists rest in shackles fused to the chair she sits in. She focuses her gaze on the chair and digs a fingernail into its hazel inlay, which upon closer inspection reveals itself to be wood. She thinks it quite strange that she is restricted to such valuable material. Forests are a thing of the past in Miseriae; the only existing lumber on the continent remains within the last unconquered vestiges of Sequoit. Glancing around the room, the pain in her head only increasing, Joan becomes increasingly nervous. She is shackled in a cramped space occupied by a shiny metal table, blue door, and a second chair, Joan realizes that she bears resemblance to a common criminal. She looks down at her wrists, chafing against the bonds, and wonders why she's restrained like a dangerous terrorist in... A prison cell? What has she been arrested for? Would she be given a trial? A question carries her back from the unknown; who were the men who broke down her door and attacked her?

The door clicks twice, and a tall man with a serious face thumps into the seat opposite Joan, boorish and callous. Silently and without a word, the man examines Joan from across the table, and then grabs her face with one hand. Joan attempts to throw off the iron grip of her jailer, but the man only tuts and turns Joan's head sideways.

"So it was you." Releasing Joan, the man leans back in his seat. "We didn't want to make the same mistake as last time. Your poor sister was such an unnecessary casualty."

Surprised by his words, Joan makes a small noise in her throat. Casualty?

He coughs once. "Now that we've gotten that settled, you should know that you're in for a treat. You have made several powerful enemies here at the Center. I doubt that they'll be happy with all your sneaking and spying."

He leans over the table and speaks very seriously to Joan. "Atalanta. You have made our lives difficult for several months now. Did you think we wouldn't notice that all the

Sequoit attacks were based on secret information? That we wouldn't try and find the little mouse sneaking around with rats? You tried to play a game too advanced for you, smuggling Sequoit civilians, rebels, into our glorious nation. You thought you wouldn't get caught."

Joan, completely lost in this conversation, just frowns, unsure of how to respond to being called her sister's name and referred to as a mouse. She knows that Atalanta is dead, killed in a bombing, so why doesn't this man? Does he know something she doesn't? What could her dead sister have possibly done? He raises an eyebrow at her confused expression and crosses his arms.

"Why-What do you mean? Me? But I-she- dead? How do you know?"

The man brandishes a black box in her face. "I bet you wish you'd've looked a little harder for these don't you? This recording tape has so many frames of you doing what you do best-smuggling and sneaking those Sequoit rebels into our country. You have no idea the damage you've caused, with your hacking, spying, and stealing, destroying our offensive attacks on Sequoit!"

Once more, the man pounds the table, finally confident that he has made his point and struck fear into his audience. Joan tries to puzzle out the information that she has been given in her head. How would they have a video tape of her committing some heinous act when she hasn't ever stepped a toe out of line? That was more like Atalanta; she had the most opinionated mind, and she had openly despised the conquest of Sequoit and the law barring Sequoit refugees from emigrating into Miseraie. In fact, an idea was buzzing at the base of her skull, momentarily concealed by the question at hand.

"Can I see the video?" Joan asks, wanting to see if her theory is correct.

Snorting at her request, the man wheels out a machine with a bulbous screen and inserts the tape into it. Joan watches the grainy video play. It featured a young woman with short brown hair in a ridiculous bun, slouching at an alleyway entrance and ushering people inside the entrance. Scraps of clothes hang off of the rail-thin bodies of the refugees. Some clutch infants to their chests, while others limp along with heavy burlap sacks. Joan sits motionless as the people climb through a broken window and out of view of the camera. As the woman stands guard, the figures clamber back out of the window, each dressed in something different and clutching a set of envelopes. The woman beckons to each of them in turn and leads them out onto the street, where they disappear.

Blowing a strand of her short brown hair out of her face, Joan can only gape at the footage. Atalanta preferred to wear that style of bun, and Atalanta's posture was atrocious, both facts mirrored in this film. Joan closes her eyes and considers the facts. Atalanta was presumed dead, her body never recovered, and here was a recording of a girl who looked and behaved just like her. The pieces begin to fall into place for Joan. The 'bombing' that killed Atalanta would have been a perfect way for the Center to eliminate one of their biggest rebels, a spy who had inside information. That job interview that Atalanta had received was probably just a ruse planted by the Center.

These people looked more like starving victims than smugglers and spies. These refugees Atalanta had helped rescue had never committed a crime except for living in a war torn

country and an intolerant world. The children Atalanta had helped rescue were so small that they couldn't even drive a hover car. Joan feels an immense swell of emotion rise in her heart, and she feels so proud, happy, and jubilant that her sister is alive and doing something so selfless.

The man produces a piece of paper from his pocket and reads it to her. "So. Atalanta. Do you plead guilty to these charges; espionage, bribery, forgery, treason, capital treason, smuggling, battery, arson, burglary, fraud, identity theft, disturbing the peace, breaking curfew, vandalism, et cetera et cetera?"

Joan knows that giving up her true identity will most likely result in death for her sister, because the government now knows where she is hiding, how she helps the refugees, and how she smuggles them to safety. If only to protect her sister, she will have to destroy that tape and plead guilty to all the aforementioned crimes to erase any suspicion that it wasn't actually her. It's the only piece of evidence against Atalanta, and it would eliminate all that her sister had worked for in saving the defenseless Sequoit.

Joan calms herself and feigns indifference. "May I please have a glass of water? I'm quite tired." At this point, it isn't even a lie; her throat aches, her headache mounts, it's as though her body is catching onto the decision that her mind has already made. The light above blinds her reminding her of the sun late in the year, providing light but no warmth as the cold seasons leech it's energy.

The burly man ejects the tape and wheels the machine out of the room, leaving Joan alone with her reflection. She tilts her head to the side, looking at a face that's no longer hers. She will have to sell this perfectly, so that the man will believe that she's only helping herself, Atalanta, and not covering up something larger. But what will happen to her after that? She already knows. She had seen enough of death when she believed that Atalanta died. She averts her eyes from the soulless mirror, not wanting to see her sister die.

Knowing that the cold end comes for everybody, and that she's sacrificing her life for a good purpose, Joan decides to face these next few moments with courage rather than tears. Steeling herself for her last minutes on this planet, she blinks twice and lets a single tear carve down her cheek. Carrying into the room, snippets of a conversation float in as the man enters the room with her water.

"Why bother? It'll be over-

"Just go, no matter what, she's done fo-

He places the thick glass a few inches away from her. Joan simply clears her throat, knowing that her voice will betray her if she gives it the opportunity to speak. Fishing out a tiny blue remote control, the man releases her hands with the press of a button. She examines her raw wrists, which have strained and struggled against powerful bonds much stronger than themselves, with tender care. The blood that flows through these veins is the same that flows in her sister's. Her sister, who was dead and then alive again, the sister whom death will ignore as Joan dons her sister's name like a coffin. It is her final resting place, the ever-shining sun in the motionless sky, the glorious light against a blue backdrop.

She allows herself to experience her emotions one last time: love for her sister, grief at her own near end, pride in her sister's actions, and remorse at her own ignorance to the plight of others in the world. She holds back tears and opens her defiant eyes. These are no longer hers, they are the eyes of a bull trapped in a bullfight, an animal doomed to die so that a matador can claim victory.

As a buzzing roar builds in her ears, unrelenting and oppressive, she sweeps the tape into her hand and drops it into the unassuming glass. A quick burst of sparks escapes the glass and warms her cold, dead hands which have locked around the cup. The roar escapes her ears and takes the place of the man's shouts and bellowed curses. Time seems to stop as heavysset men fill the room, clutching black handguns.

She feels rather than sees the glass drop from her hands, the shards and droplets ricocheting across the now-sparkling floor. Staring at the light, she leans back into the chair and pulls her shaking hands to her chest. Her gaze is lost, somewhere over Lux Solaris. She does not attempt to flee or fight, as they most certainly anticipate. Her gaze flits down once, just once to the original burly man. What she sees is confirmation enough that she will not be leaving this room.

Staring down dozens of barrels, she can only wonder which one will extinguish her spark. The hum of voices grows, but the noise in her head dampens, as if there is something else to experience, to notice.

The crashing waves of sound break in a final crescendo just before the world, chaotic and despairing, goes black.



Student Name: Derek Jiu

Grade: 9

School: St. John's School

Title: Apoptosis

Category: Flash Fiction

Key: Gold Key

Educator:

-Inspired by the 1982 Tylenol Poisonings

Five years ago, my mother told me I was her biggest mistake, one that wasn't meant to live past the first trimester. She cursed my existence and dissipated into the frosted morning hue, nothing left behind but a scar synapsing atonement across my right cheek. I huddle on the cold floor, wondering if Mom still remembers me now, if she's thought about me at all since running away with her fourth boyfriend to chase butterflies and wrestle ghosts. My stigma ignites to flame, and I think of that one Vietnamese pharmacist down the block flashing puppy eyes while handing over the brown paper bag of painkillers.

Make sure to only take three a day, alright sweetie? she had cooed unctuously, clamping our hands close like a fortune teller, clairvoyant guidance dribbling off the tongue. Her jaundiced fingernails soured until they drew blood, unable to find a palmar crease.

The sound of Pops echoes from down the hallway: a loud thump, a soft groan, swollen feet clacking in cadence to the heater's muted croons. I pay him no mind and stay curled up against the wall, motionless. The only child in this nursing home, I've learned to navigate life the way I pickpocket candy from the reception desk – mouth wired shut, keeping everything hidden in the shadows. That's the way of the rich people outside, they say.

The door creaks ajar. I peer up to him lurking by the entrance, blinking asynchronously, massaging the freshly swollen bleb on his forehead. After nodding hello, he meanders over by the wooden chairs, glossy eyes averted on the pixelated TV droning jabber, wrinkled face puckered in austerity. Ever since Meemaw's funeral last March, his deteriorating brain only plunged further into the abyss, once lively outbursts and roars of laughter swept away in high tide, diminished to the occasional grunt in my direction. The lobotomist said when Alzheimer's swallows him whole, I'm better off letting his identity shatter and quickly cleaning up the pieces; tampering with broken glass is never a good idea. As if to look for a fragment was to forsake our past.

Several days ago, looking out the window, I noticed Pops stumble outside to burn the last of Meemaw's photo albums in the bonfire, watch crystal smoke flash through the night

sky, a single tear bifurcating along his nose ridge. It sizzled into nothingness and I felt his tremors fall to entropy. Under those disjointed stars, we became body and afterimage – groveling before the altar, dove prayer lying ass-first, the last of our forgotten remorse singed to ash. Bound in half-light, hollow cheekbones entwined with the supple dirt, jaw unhinged to swallow unanswered delusion like rotting salmon roe. How piteous. I waited long after he left, billowed afar like a forgotten breath, to scurry over and wade through the smoldering embers. Seethe and flicker. They lashed out once more at my feet before dying in a melodramatic sludge, sunburnt light diffusing to shadow. Cue the rugged sigh, heavy itching of the cheek.

The TV rambles dissonance, tracing a gilded halo above our heads. On the screen, a wild protest storms the Capitol, spools of red peeking out from the trampled mass. The reporter scrunches his ruddy face in condemnation and jabs both hands in the air like clockwork. Half an hour later, he bisects and crumples onto the linoleum floor, the camera roughly shuddering before changing to muffled static, then black. I laugh at its futility. Both Pops and I have grown fond of this omnipresent silence, let it slowly embrace our bodies. Once the dinner bell metabolizes, we lunge, hunched spines bolstering a thick gut, mouths gobbling corruption, our aching hearts varicose with fervor. We eat and eat until it screams for mercy, then tear its throat apart in chunks.

The dinner bell screams. I abandon fetal position, walk to the door, invoke Pops to follow. No response, only runs his skeletal fingers through invisible hair, slicking back the surviving few strands to salvation. My body whines in hunger; I stomach it down and collapse onto the seat beside him, indulging for a second, then speaking up.

“You know, it isn’t right to stay stuck. Sooner or later you need to let go.”

For the first time in weeks, he mirrors my gaze, gossamer lips pursed in repentance. Bloodshot eyes muse over the choreography of my face, his rigid visage easing into a catharsis. I crunch the number of teeth in his smile with one hand.

“Have you?”

The melted starburst swells into crenated darkness, echoing past & present at once. The dinner bell tenses violently, high on adrenaline. He laughs.

I wait before answering.

“...How?”

He gestures across the room, toward the neatly made bed. I pause again, longer this time, a grin languishing along the edges of my mouth. Bruised neck flowering in airheaded ink, I get up to unfurl the contraband shoved under my bedframe, tucked behind mounds of dirty loungewear. The old man's dream: a cache filled with sedatives, from aspirin to ibuprofen to a few syringes oozing morphine, all stolen from the nearby pharmacy on 5th Avenue. His pupils dilate, rummaging through the trove, and he takes out a small, bloodied Tylenol bottle. We exchange a quick glance, hurriedly tear off the safety seal, shaking two pale capsules into my right hand. One each, extra strength.

I exhale a confession and stare at the cracking walls of this room. Inside and outside, the gaping fissure yawns banality, then crumbles like oracle bones to dust. Every choke a lucid dream, every breath forsaken. Pops mars his cheeks until he reaches bone, fingers delving through cartilage and muscle.

"Here goes nothing."

I gulp the pill dry and abort our evolution, the shrill news broadcast left blaring past the empty room.

Student Name: Derek Jiu  
Grade: 9  
School: St. John's School  
Title: Apotheosis  
Category: Poetry  
Key: Gold Key  
Educator:

< Blocked

No Caller ID  
unknown  
October 30, 2023 at 10:49 PM

---

0:00 -0:32

#### Transcription

"Hey \_\_\_\_\_ we haven't talked in a while..."<sup>1</sup>

Was this transcription useful or not  
useful?

<sup>1</sup>And when we last met, blood sweeping arcs across tinted glass and my hands burrowed into your throat, I could only see the beauty of our embrace. Mercy begging for a hush. The trembling of my heart against yours, voiceless prayer shot by the crystal rain. Oh, how the scar howled like children or wolves under that bruised sky, its incandescent glare caught between my yellowing teeth. How the last of your smile flaked a moon in the wind, echoing a confession, echoing the staccato of my blade against skin: jaded. Oh, I dreamt of you

with roses on your face: forgotten. So I pressed my lips to your right cheek and seared atonement. A life of salvation, you whispered. A life worth living. Blood is thicker than water, but mud is thicker than blood. I'd marinate your body with this shit-stained mud. Stroke the grooves of your corrugated spine. Because I was born into the family business, of harvesting dawn like midsummer durian, of coaxing dusk from dry corn husks, of harboring the truth in tongue. My face flushed with greed. Tears cleaving a road to skyline. I swallowed the night sky and my tongue still splutters for woman, for want. And I haven't turned rotten, not yet. And I will never turn into the predator or the streetlight, the violet or the lust, the angel or the patriot, but I know you still, still love me.

Student Name: Vivian Kwoh

Grade: 11

School: St. John's School

Title: Colorless

Category: Poetry

Key: Gold Key

Educator:

I am a colorless woman  
My hair is bleached  
My eyes dull  
My hands have rarely touched the sun

I am colorless  
And I should be grateful  
Because without color  
I can spin the wheel of capitalism  
The wheel of bigotry to my liking  
I can lift up those with color  
Because it is my duty  
As someone without it

A colorless woman  
Shouldn't crave color  
Why should she?  
When color comes with  
Culture, community, colorism, crosses to bear

I didn't choose to be colorless  
My grandfather came from China  
With knowledge to his name  
And color on his skin  
Color that has been stripped from me

And I should be grateful  
To be American  
Instead of Chinese

I should be grateful  
To look to my side or up on stage  
And see struggles so much greater than mine

I should be grateful to feel inadequate  
 Because how could I, how dare I  
 Wish for more struggles  
 So I can belong

How dare I let my knees buckle  
 under my infinitesimal cross  
 When other stand with backs straight  
 under weights much larger

I should be grateful to be colorless  
 To be a woman with a family who loves her  
 Who can seek help when she needs it  
 Who can go home and know  
 My life will not change

How dare I feel stripped  
 Of something that brings hardship  
 How could I find anything but comfort  
 In being colorless

So how dare I  
 With my struggles less heavy than others  
 My mind less damaged than others  
 My heart less broken than others  
 My body less crippled than others  
 My self less hated than others  
 My identity less known than others  
 My native tongue less spoken than others  
 My skin less colored than others  
 Feel anything  
 But happy?

Student Name: Grace Kozak

Grade: 8

School: St. John's School

Title: Crow

Category: Poetry

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Michael Seckman

Crow

None of the birds wanted to hear  
when the crow sang its song.

With the muddiest quill,  
and a call so shrill,  
which bird would bother to listen?

So when the ruby-bellied robin  
and the golden-feathered warbler,  
and the nuthatch colored like diamonds  
fluttered through their rows of trees,  
sitting in the perfect leaves,  
the crow did not bother  
to join them.

It burst through the blue and green treetops,  
swaying with the purple winds and skies.  
Its vibrant symphony filled the air  
with all of the pretty things  
other birds were lacking.



Student Name: Nia Shetty  
 Grade: 9  
 School: St. John's School  
 Title: falling in between the cracks  
 Category: Poetry  
 Key: Gold Key  
 Educator:

falling in between the cracks  
 sweet voices fill the air,  
 perfumed with scents of za'atar, hommus, and shakshouka  
 in the minutes before disaster

school children won't stop talking,  
 no matter how hard their teacher tries to get them to quiet down  
 in the minutes before disaster

but silence follows the path of the missiles  
 that shake the entire city to its core

the thick olive oil made by a loving grandma spills on the floor,  
 the shattering of the glass bottle the only sound heard in the shock

antique plates fall to the ground,  
 it's broken pieces tainted with anger and lost hope

looking out of the cracked window,  
 black smoke as far as the eye can see  
 along with the chorus of screams

the ocean used to be calm, but the tide is growing,  
 the waves rippling with immense force,  
 now a sea of red

how do we know what to fix if we can't even see what's broken?

a building fell down on two toddlers  
 as millions of viewers witness the atrocity,  
 but that won't make their tiny hearts beat again

hospitals, schools, and homes reduced to ash and ruins,

the color of gray strikes the canvas  
removing peace and joy with each brushstroke

sitting overseas, tears in my eyes,  
why do I feel so weighed down when I'm not even witnessing the horror outside

"i'm fighting for what i stand for" they say,  
since when do we play a game of whose right or wrong  
when a human life is on the line

the numbers rise every day,  
a new accomplishment, a beginning to the end  
caution: graphic image loading

seconds pass by before I'm transported to a world  
where there are no bright clouds in sight  
as I tremble and try to scream, I feel empty and bare

I can feel my mouth moving, my soul aching  
but nothing comes out  
I'm stuck in a box trying to break free to no avail,  
slowly sinking into the claws of greed,  
a pit of blackness with no end

I embody their worst fears until  
I wake up from this "nightmare"  
which is millions of others' reality

why do I have the luxury of seeing the sun rise every day,  
a rainbow if we're lucky, and the hummingbirds chirping?

history is supposed to teach us about our mistakes  
not create a never-ending cycle of war, hatred, and bloodshed

we have no second chances, can't rewind time,  
happiness is lost in translation on this earth

we're all tiny pawns in a game of chess,  
but who's the winner?

the olive oil keeps pouring,  
hope is a question with a hidden answer

one more step before we slip and fall in between the cracks

Student Name: Morgan Raizner

Grade: 10

School: St. John's School

Title: Glass

Category: Poetry

Key: Gold Key

Educator:

I'm covered in glass. Head to toe.  
 Its fragility is unmatched by most other substances.  
 My glass is covered in lines, scratches, and cracks, each casting a shadow of crooked dashes and dots onto the skinless body that lies behind.  
 It's embarrassing, really.  
 Everyone can look in. They say that it's easy too.

My glass is thin, easily broken.  
 Sometimes my glass breaks from the inside out. That's the worst. It leaves clear, triangular shards, pierced into me, sticking out of my muscles and organs like a graveyard.  
 I go to the glassmiths to get fixed. They hammer nails into my glass, cracking it one puncture at a time, until they can reach the fragments,  
 but by then they have only created more.  
 Now I have holes in my glass.  
 Holes exposing my bare self.  
 Holes relaying shadows of crooked dashes and dots.

I got a glass tint.  
 Like the one lining the windows of my dad's car. He says it's so that no one can look at what's on the inside.  
 I guess that's where I got my inspiration.  
 I covered my glass in my new tint. I wrapped it around my legs and arms, hands and feet, each individual finger and toe.  
 It was good for a while.  
 No one could see through me.  
 My holes, scratches, and cracks were hidden underneath thick layers of dark plastic.  
 There were no shadows cast because no light was let in.  
 And I was happy with that.  
 But my tint wasn't permanent.  
 It started peeling, getting stuck in every door that I closed behind me.  
 It got hard to keep up with. Hard to pick up every layer that fell off. Hard to stick them back on.  
 So I let it chip, layer by layer, door by door.

Then I was bare again.  
Cracked.  
Scratched.  
Exposed.

I asked my mom,  
"What do I do?"  
She handed me a bucket.  
A bucket filled with stains. Glass stains of different colors. Some of the most beautiful I've ever seen.  
"Paint."

I looked at my glass. My canvas.  
My scratches became paint strokes.  
My cracks became splashes.  
I painted.  
I followed the paint strokes.  
I colored the splashes.  
I painted rainbows over my muscle and fireworks over my organs.  
I covered my self in color.  
I made art.

I looked different in the light.  
It would no longer pass right through me.  
It would no longer be kept out.  
I reflected it.  
I reflected it into the colors of the rainbow, painting sunsets on every wall I walked past.  
Each part of me glowing differently than the other.  
It made my scratches and cracks glisten and sparkle.  
It made me feel new.  
No. I was anything but new.  
I was stained.  
And I loved that.

Student Name: Jennifer Lin

Grade: 10

School: St. John's School

Title: Grocery Shopping

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Key: Gold Key

Educator:

The heat of Taiwan burns like a wildfire on my un-sunblocked skin as I rush forward to catch up with my speed-walking brother. Though we had only just stepped out of the Air-BnB, I was already collecting sweat in every crevice imaginable. My stomach growls at me, angrily begging for breakfast.

I followed three paces behind my brother, stepping in every crevice and on every crack that he did. I do this because when I was younger I had thought he was probably taking the best path, but by now it is just a habit. Most of the time though, I miss his steps because my legs are simply not long enough to match.

The green and blue lights shine on my brother's face as he walks into the small convenience store titled Family Mart, swinging the glass door open. I pick up my pace so I can just barely catch the fast closing door.

The refreshing AC hits me like a shot of pure dopamine, but I have no time to enjoy it because, now, it's game time.

Buying snacks and food in front of my brother was always a bit of a gamble as to whether or not my choice would garner his approval. It was also a gamble that I, for some reason, was immensely afraid to lose; perhaps it comes as a part of being the younger sibling or perhaps I am just silly.

We separate, sifting and raiding the convenience store as we try to find a suitable breakfast. I nab an instant ramen and a korean barbeque flavored can of pringles. I go as fast as possible because he likes efficiency.

I meet up with him in the line for the cashier. The area around the cashier also displays Chinese sausages, sweet potatoes and hard boiled tea eggs. My brother quickly grabs an egg and places it atop his collection of Taiwanese delights. I also want an egg but I don't want to look like I'm copying him, so I opt for a sweet potato.

We sit down to eat at one of the crisp white tables. There's not much to say when you're eating, so I slurp my noodles in stone-faced silence. After I finish my ramen and sweet

potato, it's about time to go. The glass door swings open and the heat once again bombards my senses.

I crack my can of chips open, trying to find some sort of solace in the smoldering heat. After five minutes we finally arrived back at the Air-BnB. By then though, I am a sweat-drenched monster, just barely trudging on. Before we go in, he turns to me and asks for a chip. Now, I smile, tasting the sweet flavors of a fruitful gamble.

--

On the nineteenth of August my brother left for Yale. It wasn't as if he would never return to see us, but I knew that things would never really return to the way they were. My mother and I traveled with him all the way to New Haven because he definitely needed multiple hands to carry his luggage and I wanted nothing more than to be useful.

On the night we arrived, all of us were ravenously hungry, but my mother had arranged a dinner with some family friends so we could only wait with our miserably whining stomachs. Then, after what feels like an eternity of starvation, my mother finally calls my brother and I to walk over to the restaurant.

We end up eating at the only Chinese restaurant in New Haven. My brother and I scarfed it down like the ravenous monsters we were. Light conversations start up and die down, and before long we are all ready to leave. The parents decide to take a walk around the famously gorgeous Yale campus so they can continue their conversations.

I presented no objections because I expected that my brother would come along as well, which would've been the perfect opportunity to get some quality time. But, he instead smiles at his phone and waves us goodbye to meet up with some of his future classmates. It's probably the smarter decision for him, since he would be spending the next four years with them, not me.

He walks away and a couple minutes later the rest of us leave as well.

My mom and the other parents walked slowly as they happily chatted about the recent events in their lives (nothing that concerned me). Neither of the other two children are my age so they opt to play by themselves, leaving me to walk at the forefront.

The streets were dark and a series of old worn street lamps served as our only source of light. For me, the walk is completely silent. My brother is not here to make silly comments so there is nothing to relieve the awkward loneliness I am surrounded in.

There are also no footsteps to match and no brother for me to follow three paces behind, and so, my foot catches on one of the crevices and I fall. I feel the heat of embarrassment crawl up into my cheeks as I scramble to get back on my feet, brushing the dirt off myself. With each brush, my hands burn at the loss of skin but my heart burns with the loss of something else.

The next day we go school-supply-shopping at Target and my brother sends me off to fetch some mechanical pencils for him. I grab three different packs off the shelf because I am not sure if any of them are good enough. My red, skin-peeled hands ache as they carry the goods to my brother. It hurts but I don't say anything, and he doesn't notice because he is busy grabbing bottles of toothpaste off the shelves.

Part of me wants him to see my hands and worry. I want him to notice how hurt I feel. That part wants him to come over and ruffle my hair as he tells me, "You're so silly." But, the rest of me decides to be more realistic and hide the embarrassing moment from him.

--

The air is frigid around me as the sweat from my dance class slowly slides down my forehead and freezes in the chilly breeze. Sore and tired, I clamber and collapse into the cozy warmth of my dad's car.

A minute passes and my dad does not start the car, I raise my head in confusion.

"Dad, are we gonna go?" I ask, with a slight tone of impatience; dancing after a long day of school and volunteering had left me in a bad mood.

My dad smiles at me, saying, "Let's go to HEB."

His words extinguish the burning exhaustion in my muscles and sort of primitive glee fills my stomach. Grocery shopping had always been exciting; nothing could beat picking a curiously colorful item off the shelf to bring home. The drive over is filled with anticipation and before long I am walking a metal cart through aisles that hold thousands of goods.

I push our cart over to the milk, hovering above the refrigerator before giddily plucking a vanilla almond milk off the shelf. After a few more strolls through miscellaneous areas, my heart is as full as our overflowing shopping cart and we head over to the cashier. As my dad gets ready to load the groceries onto the small conveyor belt, I do a sudden double take. The familiar colors of red, purple and blue on the waxy cardboard box take me back to when I was still an elementary schooler and I rush over to add the box of Bagel bites to our cart. Grabbing the box with two hands, I proudly show the glistening box of frozen treats to my father.



“Look Dad! It’s the pizza Bagel Bites.” I say, grinning with uncontrollable excitement, “Oli and I used to love these.”

When we arrive home my dad and I promptly begin unpacking our freshly bought groceries so we could stock them in the refrigerator. Our hands are quick and before long all that’s is the small box of bagel bites. I tell my dad that I can finish the rest and he leaves.

I don’t really know if it was because of my subconsciousness or just coincidence that the Bagel Bites were left for last. Either way, in that moment, I could not bring myself to put the box away, so, for some reason I can’t explain, I bring the Bagel bites all the way to my brother’s room upstairs, far from the refrigerator.

I open the door and the darkness of the unused room embraces me. My brother has been gone for almost two months but his blankets are still strewn untidily across his bed in the same way as the morning of August 19th. I feel as if time has stopped in this room.

Plopping down on the gray bean bag, I pull out the Bagel Bites from the plastic HEB bag. The cardboard box sits on the ground, forming a small pool around itself as the icy outer layer thaws. I watch the condensation slowly drip down the box, feeling something also drip down my face. And, as I cave into the soft embrace of the cushion beneath me, a multitude of thoughts and feelings run through my head. They run rampant, wreaking havoc on my mind while I sob in violent heaves before leaving me as a desolate mess. The only thing left ringing through the walls of my skull is the familiar feeling that has echoed throughout my life: the burning desire to be something.

To some degree I’ve always felt that if I didn’t become someone or something then all I would ever be is just his sister. If I didn’t get into a college like Yale, would he be disappointed? Perhaps it is not a burning desire I felt, but rather a bone chilling fear that I would never be enough or achieve enough to make him love me.

This feeling had never hit me before, but as I sat in the pool of my melting bagel bites, I wished that my brother would come home so I could hug him in the way I was always too scared to. I wish I could bury my face into his arms and tell him I am scared of growing old and that I do not want to be an adult like him.

- -

That was the first time I sat alone in his room, and it won’t be the last.

When I am sitting alone in the dark, the clock stops. Only in that moment, when I am staring at his unmade-bed, can I understand that everything has changed.

I do not want to wonder and yet I can not stop myself from wondering.

I do not want to wonder whether he already knows how I feel. I do not want to wonder if he will still recognize me when we are older. I do not want to wonder if I will ever make him proud.

All I want and all I wish for is another chance to choose the right grocery, another chance to make him proud, because he is my big brother and I am just his silly little sister.

Student Name: Katharine Yao

Grade: 11

School: St. John's School

Title: It's Just Carnegie Hall!

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Clay Guinn

The lights were the first thing I noticed when I peeked out from behind the stage door. They glared down at me in golden yellow, demanding a performance worthy of the storied stage. The 268-seat Joan and Sanford Weill Recital Hall may be one of the smallest in Carnegie Hall, but still, it's Carnegie Hall. Sea-green curtains covered the paneled walls, and an elaborate chandelier hung from the ceiling, positioned right above the audience. The master of ceremonies waved his hand, gesturing for me to step on stage. My hands are frozen solid, like two blocks of ice. I try and fail to flex my fingers. The piano glares menacingly at me, daring me to approach with my hands frozen, limp at my sides. You are not worthy, it seems to accuse.

The audience sat before me, perched on blue velvet-lined cushioned chairs shrouded in semi-darkness. Watching and waiting, like a pack of hunters, they expect the best, no less — that is what I have to present. I take my bow, placing my hands on the keys. Not only are my hands now reminiscent of a human popsicle, but they are also shaking like autumn leaves right before they fall off a tree branch and land on the ground to get crumpled by stomping boots. I close my eyes. In. Out. The competition is already over, I tell myself in an attempt at reassurance. (It doesn't really work.) But the audience is still staring at me, expecting the famously flowing notes of the cut-time 4-to-3 cross-rhythm, a signature of Chopin's *Fantasia-Impromptu*. But I know my playing is nowhere near as polished compared to the competition video I submitted a few months ago. I hadn't practiced much in all the weeks leading up to the competition: I spent all my time studying for midterms or practicing sports or procrastinating on various other things. A disaster should be expected.

With that less-than-comforting thought in mind, I press down on the keys, the first few notes tumbling out in an asynchronous mess. I mentally cringe — keep your face as calm as a blank slate, no matter what your hands are doing (the Golden Rule for a piano performance). Although I didn't show it in my expression, I probably messed up approximately thirty-nine times in the seven minutes of the piece, my hands stumbling over the scales and arpeggios and that dreaded sixteenth note-to-triplet section.

After a while, the lights lose their blinding glow, dimming as the audience almost seems to fade away, leaving an illusion of just me in a near-silent concert hall stumbling through

the tortuous seven minutes of my piece. But I know the audience is still there — glaring up at me from those velvet-lined chairs, judging me, criticizing me. My parents sit in the fourth row, their eyes downcast, my mother's phone tilting sadly in her lap. Even its video camera seems disappointed by my lackluster performance. You're not good enough, they all seem to say. We expected better.

<><><>

The waiting room was always the worst place to be. It didn't matter what kind of waiting room — whether for the doctor's office, a job interview, or a backstage lounge — the straight-backed chairs and graciously placed snacks and bottled water meant to soothe us only served to increase our trembling. The only difference here is that the stuff provided is much fancier: the chairs cushioned with red-lined velvet, the waters labeled with a fancy Fiji logo, the snacks more like hors d'oeuvres consisting of a cute cheese platter with slices of salami and a box of Ferrero Rochers. Everything in the room, from the gilded crystal chandelier to the tea party-esque floral wallpaper to the white-gloved bellhop in charge of instruments and the gold coat rack, oozes with class. My sweaty palms skidded across my navy and white jacquard skirt, which was too short to cover more than an inch or two past my knees; it did nothing to hide their bouncing.

The only things I had to distract myself from the looming dread of walking up on stage were the glossy program booklet and the television mounted on the wall in front of us. The program seemed like another silent mocker to my inadequacy, a fancy little thing featuring color-printed high-resolution pictures of each performer and a paragraph touting their other accomplishments. Everyone else had international music competition awards, some even hailing from far-off places like Spain or Singapore. Most were also much older than me: I was twelve then. Watching the others perform was no better: Sabine, the Californian violinist, flew through her violin sonata, and Olivia, a bass clarinet player, cruised through her jazz solo. Each of them was a brilliant musician who loved their craft — all I was really here for was the "I played to Carnegie Hall" claim. I never fell in love with playing piano as my fellow musicians did: I started from a young age and, later on, only persisted because I was "good" and it would "be a shame to quit." I've thought about quitting so many times but never followed through. Playing piano is what I'm good at; I had nothing else.

<><><>

Several hours before, I was sitting in a dirty plastic red booth in a cramped New York pizza place, a neon-pink sign above the door signaling that this was "the place for authentic NY pizza!" The only authentic thing I sensed was the sheer terror at my upcoming performance and the rapidly developing blister on my left big toe (my right foot is a teeny bit bigger than my left, so I always end up with too-small shoes on my poor left foot).

After a weeklong school trip back-to-back with a fencing competition, I hadn't touched the keyboard for two weeks in the month leading up to the recital. What kind of accomplished musician pulls that kind of thing? I didn't practice enough — I know that. My mom only yelled at me about it twenty-three times in the last few hours. It's too late to change anything now. My only solace is the greasy deliciousness of the gooey mozzarella comfort food heaven from this ramshackle place. That sign wasn't kidding: New York pizza is good (unlike my preparation for this concert)! But really, how would I, who was born and raised down South, really know what it's like?

<><><>

I stumble off the stage in my heels, nearly tripping over the nonexistent hem of my knee-length skirt. Although I've only been off stage for a grand total of about eight seconds, I can already feel my face growing wet, salty tears slipping down my cheeks and plopping onto the glossy pine-paneled floors. The master of ceremonies, Julie, takes one look at my face and hands me a nearby box of tissues.

"You're okay," she whispers. "Don't worry." She places a gentle hand on my shoulder and guides me out from the wings to an ornate bathroom. "You've finished performing already, so if you want, I can let you up to the box to enjoy the rest of the show." Julie hands me a wet paper towel to wipe off my face.

Sniffing and wiping my eyes, I nodded, shuffling into an elevator more akin to a jewelry box. The balcony was filled with a few rows of plushy sea-green seats; I immediately sank into one and pulled off my shoes, my blistered feet breathing a sigh of relief. Another girl I recognize as Emily, who performed before me, also perches on a chair in the first row.

"Hey!" she greets. "You were really good out there. It's so nerve-wracking being in Carnegie Hall, right?" I didn't really believe her; after all, how could my thirty-something mistakes be called "doing well?"

"Thanks," I murmured. "You played well, too." Emily smiles at me and hands me a Ferrero Rocher. "I'm from Staten Island, and I literally had a nervous breakdown after my first time here. It's not so bad after, though, watching everyone else trip and stumble on stage. We all have a good laugh about it afterward, too."

After calming down a bit, the shock of the moment leaving after a few performances, I find she's right. After my own performance, there really was no one left to disappoint, the audience moving on to critique the next poor musician and my parents dozing off in the comfy chairs. I bite into my Ferrero Rocher, the hazelnut cream a much-needed explosion of sweetness in my mouth. The pianist on stage stumbles over a chord in Chopin's Nocturne Op. 9, No. 2, which I have played before.

"You're right," I agree. "It's not so bad."

Student Name: Johnathon Li

Grade: 11

School: St. John's School

Title: Language of Survival: Exploring Personal Traumas in *The Harvest* by Amy Hempel and *Bullet in the Brain* by Tobias Wolff

Category: Critical Essay

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Allyson LaBorde

Individual human experiences shape the way each person perceives the community and world around them; within these experiences lie an amalgamation of lessons, successes, and failures. However, traumas are also an inevitable fragment of these human identities. The two short stories, “The Harvest” by Amy Hempel and “Bullet in the Brain” by Tobias Wolff portray two characters coping through their own traumas. One, a near-death car crash, two, a robbery at gun-point, both narrators of these short stories find solace in detaching themselves from the situation. Thus, Hempel and Wolff utilize diction and tone to illustrate how, in the face of trauma, human nature tends to turn to detachment as a coping mechanism.

The authors’ tones in describing their main characters demonstrate this sense of detachment from reality, in order to cope with a traumatic experience. In the opening sentence of “The Harvest”, the narrator introduces herself by stating that “the year I began to say vahz instead of vase, a man I barely knew nearly accidentally killed me” (Hempel 103). Established from the start, Hempel’s nonchalant tone downplays the significance of this traumatic experience; the narrator’s comparison suggests that this casual change in language is on the same gravity to a life-threatening accident. This bluntness in the author’s tone, as a result reveals the narrator’s emotional disconnect from reality that perseveres through the entire story. However, it could be this very same bluntness that protects the narrator from the accident’s mental toll. Like “The Harvest”, “Bullet in the Brain” introduces Anders with a similar tone. The main character waits in a line at the bank that just closed. As a woman looked towards Anders to validate a mutual frustration, Anders responded with “ ‘Tragic, really. If they’re not chopping off the wrong leg, or bombing your ancestral village, they’re closing their positions’ ” (Wolff 221).

Although not yet held at gunpoint, this cynical tone sets up the attitude that Anders has shelled himself to use in threatening situations—in this case threatening to his confidence. Wolff’s use of the pessimistic tone creates tension in the scene, and to an extent, demonstrates Anders’ lack of awareness of this tension. This detachment of social outcomes acts as a safety mechanism because the pressures of being judged and perceived are removed if Anders simply focuses on others’ language. As both stories progress, a more refined perspective on both of the protagonists provide further insight into the desire of detachment to outside influences. The narrator in “The Harvest” concedes that a good portion of her story were exaggerations; she offers a true story, but

accepts the readers' speculations to believe her as "who would have? I was there and didn't believe it" (108). Hempel's matter-of-the-fact tone provides a sense of competence in an otherwise incompetent narrator. She, the narrator, realizes the loss of trust to the readers, but does not attempt to regain the same trust. In recovery from a traumatic accident, the author's monotonous tone in describing the narrator's revelation further supports this idea of detachment. Although trust is lost between the reader and the storyteller, the narrator remains indifferent—indifferent to what others think about her condition and her experience. As "Bullet in the Brain" introspects to Anders' childhood memories, a unique saying, they is, causes Anders to become "strangely roused, elated, by those final two words, their pure unexpectedness and their music" (226). The only positive moment in the entire short story, this scene once again focuses on language. However, instead of critiquing how someone speaks, young Anders is instead fascinated by his cousin's grammar. This positive tone humanizes Anders in a story where he is painted as a complete pessimist. Both stories, then, use tone to demonstrate that the character's detachment towards their surroundings are an act of self-defense. While Kempel's character relies on detachment to escape the pains of the car crash, Wolff's character relies on detachment to escape issues of insecurity. Ultimately, the author's use of tone in "The Harvest" and "Bullet in the Brain" support how human nature tends to detach when faced with a difficult experience.

Both Hempel and Wolff also use diction to illustrate this human desire to detach in the presence of a traumatic experience. As Anders was under gunpoint, a threat from the assailant caused Anders to laugh and say "Capiche—oh, God, capiche" (Wolff 224). With the result ending in getting shot, this quote demonstrates Anders' inability to realize the danger in front of him. Wolff's choice of "Capiche," a cliché saying, emphasizes Anders' inability to realize the danger in front of him. Then, this cliché word choice demonstrates Anders' detachment to his own protection—when threatened, Anders subconsciously detaches himself from the situation, acting as superior. And so focused on criticizing the robber's language, this hyperfixation directly resulted in his death. By removing the narrator's own credibility, Hempel creates a narrator that makes readers question whether or not the information told by the narrator can be trusted anymore. For example, the narrator begins to explain that "I'm going to start now to tell you what I left out of "The Harvest" and maybe begin to wonder why I had to leave it out" (106). The "had" in this quote demonstrates an assertiveness that suggests the genuine inability for the narrator to tell the truth. Almost like an obligation, this assertiveness demonstrates why leaving details out was necessary. This detachment from others inadvertently protects the narrator from burdening herself with the trauma and pain of this car crash; a trauma response, these lies, then, act as a way for the narrator to cope through the accident. As the stories evolve, this sense of detachment continues. In the final moments of Anders' introspection, his fate is described as "the bullet is already in the brain" (226). An acknowledgment, this phrase suggests Anders' acceptance of his death. The "already" also carries a matter-of-fact connotation where this death should have been obvious. This is the ultimate form of detachment, detached from one's own body. Anders has finally

separated his thoughts from his dying body, the final attempt to protect himself from the pain that is about to come. Through this use of specific language in describing both protagonists' responses to their personal traumas, Hempel and Wolff demonstrate the human desire to detach from these demons.

Accomplished through the lens of unreliable narrators, Hempel and Wolff demonstrate the ways in which humans cope as a response to trauma. In attempts of self-preservation, detachments from one's experience acts as a border from the experience's emotional baggage. These authors' use of diction and tone argue how the character's polarizing personalities derive from a subconscious need for survival, not from snarkiness. "The Harvest" and "Bullet in the Brain", then act as a reminder of empathy: "To treat others how you want to be treated" as each person's storyboard is different. And while each one of us live through different story plots as our own protagonists, we are all, at the end of the day, just humans.



Student Name: Michelle Liu

Grade: 10

School: St. John's School

Title: Monstrous Maternity: Frankenstein and Destructive Motherhood

Category: Critical Essay

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Clay Guinn

## Monstrous Maternity: Frankenstein and Destructive Motherhood

To what extent do our mothers influence us? Mary Shelley explores this question in *Frankenstein*, a book written following traumatic events in her life tied to her struggles as a mother. A dark version of motherhood subtly permeates her book, particularly embodied by the scientist Victor Frankenstein and his destructive creation. In patriarchal power structures, the maternal role is often simplified and fetishized to an expected display of feminine sacrifice that simultaneously disempowers the woman. Shelley subverts this narrative by exploring the complexities of toxic motherhood through a male character, allowing readers to analyze the intricacies of a destructive mother-child relationship without the biases reserved for women. Frankenstein specifically represents a mother due to his act of creating the monster, instilling life into a previously inanimate body through labor and the surrender of his health. Similarly, the Creature possesses child-like qualities, including his naivety and attachment to the scientist. However, Frankenstein's "mothering" of the Creature leads to detrimental consequences, illustrating the influence that parents hold over their children. Victor Frankenstein projects a destructive version of motherhood upon the creature through his narcissistic self-perception, misguided attempts to alleviate his own trauma surrounding death, and inability to face the repercussions of his own behavior as a parent.

Victor Frankenstein's narcissism leads to his belief that Creature only serves as an extension of his own power and genius, which creates a significant power imbalance in the mother-child relationship. While Frankenstein conceived reanimation, he claimed that "A new species would bless me as its creator and source, [and] many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me," (35) failing to predict the fatality of his invention. The scientist elevates himself to the status of a god-like creator, disregarding the bodies which he desecrated and exploited to assemble his creation. Frankenstein's belief that "his species" would blindly treat him with indebted gratitude furthermore neglects the autonomy of the Creature. Just as most narcissists exhibit a superiority complex, Frankenstein views himself as a higher being when compared to his creation. The assertion that the Creature would "owe their being to me" (36) shows that Victor expects gratitude purely for instilling life within his child, despite undertaking this project due to his own selfish motives. Frankenstein argues that "No father should claim the gratitude of

his child so completely as I should deserve their's," (35) viewing himself as the epitome of parental sacrifice. Victor's expectations are not completely ungrounded, as he undergoes the toils of motherhood over the course of assembly. Much like a new mother, Frankenstein surrenders various aspects of his life for this invention, becoming increasingly isolated and physically unwell. However, Frankenstein's narcissism prevents him from taking responsibility for the Creature which he chose to tediously assemble. Similar to Frankenstein, narcissistic mothers feel that their children are indebted to show affection and respect purely on the basis of receiving fundamental necessities, despite the fact that every child deserves these basic aspects of life. Ultimately, Frankenstein serves as the antithesis of healthy motherhood, which should be non-transactional and extend far past birth. After Frankenstein completes the Creature, he reflects upon how "I had desired it with an ardor that far exceeded moderation; but now that I had finished, the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart," (38) abandoning his creation when the idea of a child became a reality. Frankenstein views his Creature as a "beautiful dream" that twisted into something unrecognizable, instead of an entity with autonomy and emotional intelligence. Rather than adjusting to the reality of his Creature, Frankenstein feels "horror and disgust," and rejects the creation which reflects his ugliest traits. The creature disrupts Frankenstein's inflated self perception, in which he exists as a daring inventor on the cusp of breakthrough. Instead, the scientist sees the consequences of his own problematic behavior, in which his corruption of nature, unhealthy obsession with reanimation, and his irresponsible grave robbing led to the creation of an equally flawed being. In these ways, Victor projects a narcissistic version of motherhood upon a creature who fails to exceed his delusions of grandeur and genius.

Victor Frankenstein places a strong emotional significance upon his "child" to alleviate unresolved traumas surrounding the death of his own mother, and rejects the Creature when it instead embodies the most uncomfortable aspects of his fear and grief. Understanding Frankenstein's psyche requires an examination of his relationships with the female figures in his life: the mother and Elizabeth. From childhood, Frankenstein "looked upon Elizabeth as mine, mine to protect, love, and cherish," and received her praises as "a possession of my own," (22) viewing Elizabeth as a perfect commodity. The people that Frankenstein possess have little agency, and each serve a distinct purpose rather than existing for selfish reasons. When faced with grief, Frankenstein fails to truly reflect upon his deceased mother as a fully-fledged person, and instead seeks to replace one possession with another. The psychological motive behind the mother-child relationship of Frankenstein and the Creature serves as a crucial reason for its ultimate demise. Frankenstein, the grieving parent, rejects the Creature entirely due to its inability to fully replace the mother's role and its selfish need for love and nurturing. After Frankenstein flees the scene of his experiment, he dreams vividly of Elizabeth, his fiancée, becoming "livid with the hue of death," in which "her features appeared to change, and I thought that I held the corpse of my dead mother in my arms; a shroud enveloped her

form, and I saw grave worms crawling in the folds of the flannel," (38). Victor's repressed grief and fear only emerges in his subconscious state, in which the two people which he idealizes the most are indefinitely transformed by death into something unrecognizable. Frankenstein benefits from the idyllic and caring nature of his Mother, characteristics which he also identifies in his fiancée, Elizabeth. Frankenstein seeks to preserve these traits within another entity in order to alleviate the irreparable damage of his mother's passing, and simultaneously prepare for the inevitable death of Elizabeth. While emotionally mature individuals recognize that the impact of loss has no true solution, Frankenstein rejects this alternative of healthy grieving. Consequently, Frankenstein's child personifies the aspects of the Mother's death which he despises, as a "demoniacal corpse" and a "thing such as even Dante could not have conceived." (39). Frankenstein alludes to images of demons and hell when describing the Creature, strongly correlating his child to the unconquerable and evil workings of death, which claimed his mother not long before. The contrast between the Creature and the mother, who represented beauty and goodness, also incites Frankenstein's hatred of his child. The disappointing Creature serves as a physical manifestation of Frankenstein's unprocessed grief, brutally reminding him that death remains permanent, despite his futile efforts.

Frankenstein inflicts the trauma of maternal abandonment upon his Creature, and refuses to take responsibility for the consequences of his destructive motherhood. Victor meets again with his child after two years, who expresses, "But on you only had I any claim for pity and redress, and from you I determined to seek that justice which I vainly attempted to gain from any other being that wore the human form," (102) indicating his desire for Victor's attention and regret. Frankenstein's child seeks companionship in other people, as an attempt to compensate for his mother's absence. He forms unhealthy attachments to individuals who project an innocent and familial form of love, which he was deprived of in childhood, and faces continual rejection painfully reminiscent of his abandonment. These failed relationships circle back to his mother, Frankenstein, who still shuns the Creature despite its obvious desire for reconciliation. Frankenstein views his child as inherently bloodthirsty, believing that "[he] had turned loose into the world a depraved wretch, whose delight was in carnage and misery," (53) in turn denying any culpability in the Creature's actions. Victor's constant characterization of his child as a cruel and inhumane entity indicates that he is reluctant to recognize the very human flaws within the Creature, traits developed from his destructive motherhood. The creature does not find pleasure in its murders, but kills to seek revenge on its creator, who represents the epitome of human unkindness. Frankenstein believes that his child is inherently evil, a belief repeatedly reinforced to the Creature through his mother's abandonment and his experiences of rejection in the real world. The creature reveals, after Victor's death, that "[his] heart was fashioned to be susceptible of love and sympathy, and when wrenched by misery to vice and hatred, it did not endure the violence of the change without torture such as [one] cannot even imagine," (165) describing his kind disposition before mistreatment at the hands of his own mother. The "vice and hatred" which the Creature

endured first transpired from the actions of his creator, and any subsequent interaction only further internalized Frankenstein's initial cruelty. The Creature describes the "violent change" which he endured as "a torture you cannot imagine", displaying how Frankenstein's destructive and abandoning form of motherhood deeply impacted the very core of his child's motivations. Even in death, Frankenstein does not recognize the extent of the damage which he inflicted upon his child, the root cause of the Creature's self-loathing and desire for revenge. Victor dies only regretting that the Creature lives, or in a deeper sense, a physical consequence of his flawed motherhood still exists in the world. Meanwhile, the Creature mourns for a narcissistic mother who abandoned him from birth and failed to recognize the psychological anguish which he inflicted upon his only child. Ultimately, the tragedy of Frankenstein's mother child relationship lies in Frankenstein's inability to empathize with Creature and atone for his creation.

Frankenstein and his Creature embody a toxic mother-child relationship through Frankenstein's narcissistic projections upon his child, attempts to use the Creature as a way to cope with unresolved grief, and refusal to take responsibility for his destructive parenting. Much like a narcissistic mother, Frankenstein views his creation as a loyal extension of himself, and expects the Creature to reflect his self-perceived power and genius. When the Creature ultimately subverts his desires and exists as an individual entity in need of care and nourishment, Victor rejects his child altogether. Furthermore, Frankenstein treats the Creature as a means of alleviating his grief towards his mother's passing and fears surrounding the inescapable death of Elizabeth. However, the ugliest and unresolved aspects of his grief are embodied by Creature, due to Frankenstein's lack of understanding that possessing a child cannot fix the damage of loss. Lastly, Frankenstein fails to take responsibility for the impact of his destructive motherhood as a catalyst for the Creature's destruction. Victor misunderstands the Creature as an inherently evil being, rather than a child seeking justice for his mistreatment through violent means. In these ways, Frankenstein negatively impacts the Creature, just as our mothers are capable of influencing us. Shelley's feminist construction of a mother-child relationship still remains applicable in the current world, subverting the patriarchal norm of gentle and selfless care. In order to urge readers to truly analyze their own maternal relationships, Shelley places destructive and complex motherhood as the very core of Frankenstein. Whether or not readers take her cautionary advice, Frankenstein still serves as a trailblazer for good maternal representation in literature, inciting discussions about Frankenstein and the creature's mother to child relationship even in the present.

Student Name: Maddie Stelmak  
 Grade: 8  
 School: St. John's School  
 Title: Nature's Solemn Song  
 Category: Science Fiction & Fantasy  
 Key: Gold Key  
 Educator: Michael Seckman

The lift up to floor twenty-three rose silently, save for the few, rhythmic beeps that shattered the stillness. A fifteen year-old boy had perched himself against the metal wall several minutes ago, and now the teenager was tapping his foot along to the repeating, metallic noises echoing through the small chamber, his fingers flicking between the messages clogging up the mail on his watch projection. He glanced up when a woosh of air announced his arrival at his desired floor, stopped his music, closed the projection with a simple thought, and began gliding down the corridor. His graceful stride paused at Room 2387, and after whispering "Tollanberg, Wren" into the pad, the door slid open without a sound.

"Mom, I'm back!" he called out into the apartment, toeing his boots off at the door, the soles falling onto the hard tile with a gentle thunk.

"Hey, little bird," she replied, voice slightly raspy, and a slow smile spread across his face at the mention of the familiar nickname. "How was school? Did you have fun in your father's apartment these last few weeks?"

Wren lowered himself onto a stool just meters away from his mother, and chirped back, "School was fine, I guess. The lunch was okay today, and Wires sat next to me in class."

"Oh! Wires! Aren't they that kid you like?" she teased, giggling lightly, eyes sparkling with mischief. Wren's face heated, his cheeks matching the color of his unnaturally vibrant, red hair.

"Mom... stop..." he muttered, his response only fueling her laughter. In a desperate attempt to change the subject away from his not-crush, he remembered the question he needed to ask. "Mom, we're talking about instruments at school, and I need to buy one. Professor R-A52 said so."

She blinked, clearly puzzled. Her stare drifted to a small box in the corner, worn and beat up from countless hours of use. "Wren, you have a clarinet," she whispered, her gaze sliding back to his. "I gave it to you two years ago. You play it every time I see you."

Wren's eyes glared holes into the floor, the boy suddenly embarrassed. "I need an e-clarinet. You know, the program you can download on your watch?"

"Why can't you just use your real one? Not the computer projection?" The confusion was audible in her weak voice.

Exasperated, Wren looked back up at her. "Nobody uses real instruments anymore! We're probably the only people in the whole city who even own some! E-instruments are better! All you have to do is insert a song, and it'll play for you!" I can't bring my real clarinet to

school, he thought worriedly. Everyone would think I'm an old geezer or something. The only music nowadays was the clanging of metal.

Mrs. Tollanberg's gaze steeled. "So you click on a song the computer gives you, and it just plays it? That's it?" Her hands tightened around the flute in her lap.

"Yes!" Wren almost shouted. "It's so easy!"

"Exactly. You don't do anything yourself," she muttered, fingers twitching. Suddenly, her head snapped up. "Follow me."

Shrugging off the remaining blankets, she rose from the couch, snatching her leather boots, her gaze never meeting Wren's shocked expression.

"But, Mom!" Wren yelled after her as she walked through the door. "You're sick! You shouldn't be moving around!" He frantically skidded after her, boots gliding across the floor so quickly that they hardly touched the ground.

Mrs. Tollanberg pressed a button on the elevator and fluttered in, not even glancing back to see her son dashing in between the closing doors.

-----  
Mind racing, Wren stepped into the lobby, a steel-plated entryway with an android upright behind the desk. Mrs. Tollanberg soared through the glass doors, her gait never slowed by the illness gripping her tightly.

"Where are we going?" Wren asked, having finally accepted that his protests were in vain.

"This way," his mother simply replied, turning to the right and starting down the cracking sidewalk.

His mouth dropped open, deep, blue eyes blown wide. "Mom... why are we going this way? The hoverbus station is in that direction... we're not walking, are we?" he hissed, his tone curling in disgust.

The path crumbled under their feet with every step, the concrete decades old. Monstrous, steel skyscrapers erupted from the ground and sliced through the brownish sky, stretching as far as Wren could see. His eyes flicked upward nervously, and when he spotted a familiar vehicle gliding silently between the buildings, he prayed that nobody he knew chose to use any nearby hoverbus routes on this particular Tuesday afternoon. His mother sailed around corners left and right, her faded eyes never falling from the shattered horizon. As the two of them continued to walk through the twisting, endless maze of humanity's creations, Wren noticed the structures around them descending into a similar state as the sidewalk-- worn from weather and unuse. They passed by fading graffiti adherent to the walls, and he squinted as he tried to read the big, bold letters "Gen Alpha" in a stylized script on the gleaming metal.

Mrs. Tollanberg's quick pace began to slow, and eventually pattered to a stop entirely as they reached a building, partially eroded and smaller than the rest they'd seen. Wren's eyebrows furrowed in confusion. It looked as if it couldn't be more than four stories tall, and under chipping white paint, he thought he saw glimpses of brick. A sign was displayed at the top of the structure, yet many of the letters had fallen off, the remaining ones spelling out "THE BIN."



"What is this place?" the boy whispered in shock and possibly curiosity.

"The Briarwood Pediatric Center," his mother replied, her voice low and husky. "Or the remnants of it. It used to be full of doctors caring for children back in the second era, but like all the other hospitals and care centers, the government let it fall to pieces."

The Tollanbergs stepped through two metal frames of shattered glass doors, gleaming fragments crunching beneath their boots. Once entering the lobby, Wren's heart skipped several beats and his eyes blew as wide as hoverbus thrusters. A slight gasp popped out from his parted lips, the only sound in the otherwise silent room.

Plants, large and green and fruitful, exploded from the tile floor in vibrant, colorful bursts. Their long stems pierced through the decaying ceiling and up, up, up, to the very top floor, where sunlight was streaming through a small hole in the roof. A hazy glow cast over everything— the flowers with their twirling petals, the leaves of every shape, size, color, the broken chairs stacked in the corner, the splintered desk behind waves of green. Even though there was no sound at all, Wren could almost hear the plants singing along to a distant melody, the gentle tinging of the stars, the exciting rush of the water, the roar of the wind in a great crescendo, a bird call.

Wren was not surprised to feel warm droplets of water forming at the corners of his eyes, sloping down his cheeks, slipping into his open mouth, wetting his dry tongue. In fact, he welcomed them. The boy could not recall a time in his life that he had ever felt so free, so calm, so alive. He was soaring to the moon. He was dancing on opportunities. He had grasped the stars.

However, the only thing that captured true beauty even more than the spectacle before him was the woman standing to his left. Her face was tilted up to the sunlight, a vivacious expression painted there. Her skin glowed radiantly, and her hair was brushed by a distant breeze until it cascaded back down onto her shoulders.

Mrs. Tollanberg's gaze shifted to look at her son. "Can you hear it, little bird? This is nature's song, a song that has been lost among our new world. Only a human can attempt to harness it— not an android, not a computer. Hear the song and listen."

"Mom," Wren whispered, voice clogged with tears. "I've never seen a plant before now." "I hadn't either, until I discovered this place." Their conversation drifted along quietly to not disturb the glory of the moment.

Wren's gaze glided to a sign on the cracking wall, to the desk before them. "Why are hospitals like this? Why aren't they used anymore?"

His mother turned to him, her stare rueful. "What is the need for hospitals and doctors if the government has a cure for every disease? They can heal anyone, and they can make anyone sick."

---

Wren curled tighter in on himself, his body configured into a messy bundle of drying tears. His mind a still void, he sat alone in the dark, empty classroom, hollow gaze staring blankly at the music notes embedded in the sheets of paper before him.

The day had started out fine as ever. The hoverbus had dropped him off at school with his clarinet case snug in his tight grip. He had dissolved into a blushing mess at lunchtime

when Wires had placed their tray next to his and had stuck up a conversation. He had inserted a math question into his calculator before anyone else did. However, the joy had been shredded apart by the sharp claws of his classmates' reactions that afternoon. They all had gone, all the same, all the same, all the same, just clicking a few buttons. He remembered the shock as he walked to the front of the classroom, then their expressions after his song that he wrote and played himself, as his mom had insisted. He had heard Silver's washed out voice mocking him and seen Bolt's disgust apparent on his face. He had witnessed Wires's pure confusion, their hand raised high in the air, fingernails alternating yellow, white, purple, black, their lips forming the simple question, "Why?"

Now, here he was, haunted by his actions, his mind an empty slate. A soulless body waited for a command, a belief, just something. No thoughts of the beauty of nature or a melodious song dancing out from his fingertips filled his head.

Suddenly, a hacking cough burst from his throat, so painful and forceful that he doubled over. Another wave of coughs seized him, and through his watery eyes, he glimpsed the bright lights of the cleaning androids outside the door. I'm sick, he realized. They're coming for me.

Fear gripped him then, pure and sharp and deadly. As his swimming vision slid to the music sheets on the table, he swore he could hear a tiny voice in his head, whispering softly, Destroy everything. Purge the disease. Destroy everything. Purge the disease. The voice slithered through his skull and wrapped itself around his mind, tightening like a noose. His brain was wiped clean, his heart squeezed like a sponge, all poison and traitorous thoughts trickling out and down to the ground. His eyes cleared, his face set in hard determination. Like a demon was possessing him, he robotically stood, feeling nothing but a sudden, complete frustration, and he ripped and tore the paper to shreds. He could hear the echoing voice, whispering, Destroy everything. Follow my rules. Destroy everything. Follow my rules...

His hands snatched up the pieces of songs and his ebony-colored instrument, and the man prowled over to the large window. Wren yanked the glass open, ignoring the shrill warnings whining about the high altitude. With all his might, the young man threw everything out the window. His clarinet fell so far, so fast, until he couldn't see it anymore. He wished he could listen to the sweet sound of it cracking to pieces. The music sheets and broken bits of his soul sprinkled down like kind rain after a storm, gently petting the destruction below. His coughing pattered to a stop, and the man's ears caught the sound of the androids passing by his door.

The metallic clicking piercing through the elevator made him want to scream, and his thoughts pulsed thunderously through his head. Too loud. Too rhythmic. Too musical. As soon as the doors inched open, he tore down the hallway, boots clawing into the steel floor, until screeching to a halt at Room 2387. His breaths labored, eyes alight with alien fury, he snarled, "Tollanberg," into the box.



However, all thoughts of destruction disappeared as he cried out and fell down to the floor. The empty silence of the apartment stabbed into his head, loneliness crashing over him like a tidal wave. The harsh, antiseptic smell of the cleaners' work drifted over to him, not a trace of her left behind, not even the flute.

With an animistic howl, the man staggered into his bedroom and collapsed onto his blankets. His sobs were so loud and echoing that his ears bled, and blood dripped down onto his fingers, littered with paper cuts. He never heard music again.

Student Name: Ailey Takashima

Grade: 8

School: St. John's School

Title: Necklaces

Category: Short Story

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Michael Seckman

The beginning pixels of morning light began to filter out the darkness. A sunny day began, but Hana only perceived clouds and mist. Closing her eyes, she remembered the long summer trips to Japan, Taiwan, New York. She could still see the lights of Tokyo dancing in front of her, all different colors and shapes. She smelled the pig hearts, the roasted squids on the side of night market streets in Taiwan, and heard the honking of horns and bustle of city life in the too crowded streets of New York. She reveled in the familiarity of Fourth of July fireworks, going off like flash bangs in the middle of the open dark sky, endless possibilities. These experiences and places represented a part of her. She relished the lights, dancing on a bright city street in the heart of Tokyo. She embodied the late nights and laughter of night markets.

That trip reminded her of all she was, yet she felt like it was just that, a trip. She didn't belong to those things, too American, off on her accents, set on not trying duck liver. Opening her eyes, she was stuck in the car on the way to school. Hana sighed, her hands worrying the smooth textures of her necklaces, warming the material from the cold she bore.

Her necklaces beat with her heart, a part of her ever since she lay crying as an infant in the hospital room. Her proud parents tied the knots, securing them tightly. There they stayed, a part of her. She wanted to do whatever she could to make both her parents happy and proud, to show them she knew what the blessing of her culture meant. But her cultures were polar opposites, magnets that never ceased to push against each other. They were unable to come together and make her whole, eating at her soul. So she needed to choose one. But how could she? She never got time to stop and think about it, and she definitely would never choose favorites.

Hana had worn abundant amounts of yukatas and chi paos, been thrown into endless lessons, attended year after year of Japanese and Chinese new years, and participated in countless American traditions. She could have been Beyoncé with all of her different personas. Not too Taiwanese or Japanese at one event, but just enough to please both her parents and fit in with everyone else. She could not appear too American or too little. It changed at every event, every day, all the time. Why couldn't she just fly free of these burdens pushed upon her, just stop and relish the happiness that came with knowing these cultures were her background, her story, what made her up. She did not want to have to express them all the time. Which cultures would she conceal or show? She endured the feelings of envy towards those with just one culture, normal and simple.

They only had to identify with one group, and they fit in. She hated her obligation to prove she belonged. There lay a truth, one she knew deep inside and resisted, afraid of the honesty it held. She would never fit in with any of her cultures, never have a place. She contemplated these thoughts until she got out of the car, quickly ripping off her mokume-gane necklace and her jade, stuffing them into her pockets. Hearing enough stories, experiencing enough hate, Hana took them off, even when she usually wouldn't have.

She stood in the science room, timid and scared. The teacher dressed in white robes seemed to stare into her soul, piercing and hostile. Even worse, he decided to start off the school year with a bang. Hana watched wearily as he placed the can with water on the hot plate, causing it to boil, snarling loudly and teetering with opposition. The can and water, nasty and red-hot, clashed with the ice cold water, finally resigning with a booming inhale. Packing up, she noticed a girl slithering towards her. She wore a long braid and smiled with a painted face.

"Wow, I noticed that you're Japanese. That's cool, I don't know any Japanese people." Her comment stung from the beginning, slightly insensitive. Hana brushed it off. The comment would lose meaning, be forgotten overtime...

"Yeah uhm...thanks" she replied, "nice talking to you." Best to end the conversation there, leave before this girl could classify and gape over her any longer. Instead, as she picked up her stuff to leave, the girl yelled and startled her.

"Wait! Before you go, will you say a sentence in Japanese?" Hana really didn't want to, and didn't have the knowledge of how to say a full sentence. Ignoring her lack of motivation, Hana would only start lessons next week.

"Sorry, I can't." The braid girl's face became painted with confusion that soon turned into disbelief and laughter, her smile turning smug.

"What do you mean? Isn't that a big part of culture? You should at least know something!" Hana left the girl to her laughter then. Eyes filling with tears and hands balling up, walking away, she knew that she grew up too American, tried too hard to fit in. Hana struggled under pressure from everyone around her, not fitting in anywhere. She wondered when she would finally explode, trying to keep herself up. She asked her father to start teaching her some things that day.

Walking into that bright ruby red house she wandered lost. Hana had just come from school after quickly changing into her chi pao and pulling her necklaces over her head, so the dragon dance already started. The grooves on her jade necklace were cool and familiar, she traced them anxiously. A Taiwanese-American gathering. Perhaps she would encounter her group of people and finally fit in. These people would understand, they were like her, stuck between two cultures. Displaying her Taiwanese culture proudly, Hana pretended the jade necklace would give her strength. Hong bao were thrust into her hands, laden with American money inside. Chatter resounded off all the walls in the house, sharp tongues speaking in different tones and possessing different sounds. One of her mother's friends rounded a corner, one she recognized from another smaller gathering. Hana racked her brain for her name, possibly Amy.

"Ni hao, Hana, you have gotten so big! How are your Chinese lessons?" Amy smiled, looking at the other children around the room speaking perfect Chinese. The woman's pride and smile caused Hana to become encouraged to fit in and do the same.

"Hun hao, xie xie." She blurted confidently. Listening to herself the prominent emotions of disappointment emerged, her accents were off. She hoped Amy would overlook it, understand that Hana did not go to a Chinese-speaking school like her children did. Amy grimaced, her face struggling to hide surprise.

"Oh well," she answered, "looks like that American school is doing you well." Hana laughed to rid the subject. Subconsciously she held her other necklace between her two fingers, rubbing it back and forth. With the emergence of awkwardness the necklace had become apparent.

"What is that?" Amy asked with suspicion, "that certainly does not look like a jade necklace." She leaned forward, trying to get a closer glimpse.

"No, it's not. It's a mokume-gane necklace, for my Japanese culture. It's made using a traditional Japanese technique." She desired to say more when Amy's crumpled face turned to one of outrage.

"Was your jade necklace not enough? Do you understand its importance to our culture?" Amy stormed away, and Hana stayed quiet. If she hadn't shown any connection to her Japanese culture, or hadn't tried to speak a different language without practice, it could have been avoided. She could have fit in, drawn no hostile attention after the conversation. Everyone looked at her as if she possessed an unlucky number four on her head. Why couldn't she just be Taiwanese, just fit in for one night.

Despite her wreck of a day one more task loomed ahead, the Japanese new year celebration. The whole of her father's family would make an appearance, dressed up in traditional clothing, speaking like native speakers. Hana would not mess up again, humiliate her parents even further. Hands trembling, she tore off her jade necklace, replacing it with her Japanese one. No one would see it and remember her differences. She made sure to practice her speaking, a combination of simple miscellaneous words. Hana would only use them if she was forced to. She consciously put in an effort to fit into her own family, burdening her enough. The yukata she wore flowed with beauty, a split down the middle of blue and white patterns. Once dinner lay ready everyone said thanks and helped themselves to the luxurious and detailed and exuberant spread. Halfway through her aunt came around.

"Have you eaten your black pea yet? Yes? Good! It's a special tradition that is done every year. It should not be forgotten!" Hana had indeed forgotten to eat her black pea, and she rushed to grab one before her aunt got to her seat. However, in her rush Hana slipped, hands grasping at air and feet scrambling to find solid ground. She met the floor, dropping her tray and crashing into the spread of food. Salmon, tamago, mochi, black peas, it all went flying through the air in slow motion, clashing into the dirty, brown, rough ground. When the dust had settled all of her family's hard work, the foods that were supposed to connect us to our culture for the day lay ruined on the floor, bright colors becoming dull. But the most horrifying of all, was the shattered red teapot. The charm on

its handle laid in the middle of the glassy mess, the liquids tainting it forever, a dark mess. She knew what the teapot represented in the family, culture and sacred tradition. Silence covered the room like a thick blanket. Eyes pierced through her skin from every direction. Hana suddenly felt silly in her yukata, she didn't deserve it.

"What have you done?!" her aunt's shrill voice cut through ears.

"I'm so sorry...it was an accident..." She could barely find her voice, let alone hear it herself. She cleaned up the mess while the rest of her family glared in disappointment, continuing with the other traditions as best as they could. When Hana had erased the wound to the best of her ability, she left.

That night Hana lay restless, watching her chi pao, yukata, and discarded American school clothes hang on her dresser. She suffered like the shattered teapot. Turning her head to look at her chi pao, illuminated in the shine of the moonlight, the secrets of the red fabric lay exposed. It seemed as if it glowed with superpower. The swirls of gold popped out of the red background, like they could run free, flourishing. She turned her head to the right. There her yukata lay, the bow seeming even bigger in the small, dark, cozy room. The loose sleeves hung down, stuck in a position of a deity swooping down to save her people. And there, in the front were her school clothes: the most simple of them all, a white polo, red sweater vest, and blue skirt. They were the same for all the children. She had taken so many tests, walked so many halls, hid so much of her culture in these clothes, but she also held gratitude for her ability to adorn them every day.

Sometimes she wished she could go to school with her yukata on, gliding through the halls, donning the elaborate colors carving paths with her grace and vibrance. She yearned to go to school wearing her chi pao, the glowing fabric catching the sunlight from an uncovered window, refracting throughout the room. These outfits deserved to put their beauty on display everyday. But before she knew she would get too many whispers, gossip, questions. So even on days she could, she never did. She had ruined everything today, longed to rid herself of each one of her cultures at some point. She had exposed too much of her hidden self. The feeling rose from heart-wrenching panic and shame. But she also felt a restlessness knocking on the side of her, wanting to be released. She didn't want to hide anymore. Maybe if she had always been her true self, she could have been happy, known who she was and not made as many mistakes with her culture. Now, in her room staring at all these outfits, separated into three parts, she felt like a pie, eaten by all the different aspects of culture in the room. They transferred her to the good times, walking to breakfast and through the night markets of Taiwan, the bright night life of Japan, the alcoves of delicious foods, and the favorite restaurants of her neighborhood. These memories were what brought her joy, not hiding her culture and pretending. In the dark she saw the full beauty of the outfits, her culture, and experienced the significance of her necklaces burning through the skin on which they lay. Most of all though, she saw the importance of all her cultures. They were all crucial to what made her her: her melting pot, her happiness in hard times. Who cares what others think? Her different cultures made her unique and stick out in the crowds of different groups. She was thankful for her culture, thankful for her parents, showing her their traditions and leading her on a path to

who she really was. The rubber bands snapped into place, creating a different person with pride in her culture. Her mix of cultures, a hidden gift, a medal, what they truly were all along.

She constantly asked herself how she should act, more American, more Taiwanese, more Japanese? She wandered around her thoughts, lost and unsure of the one thing she should have known best, who she was. She had been stuck on the question her whole life, but an answer emerged. Her cultures combined to form a combination within herself, perfect and beautiful. She could be herself away from insignificant judging eyes.

Her necklaces did not deserve the darkness, they were precious. Infused with culture, made with strong hands, given with love and luck. A reminder of her newly found self, there all along. She would not regulate her culture for others! She didn't need to display or conceal her cultures just for her parents or people around her. She had pride in these cultures now and saw them as something special given to her. Her cultures made her unique, and she swelled with feelings of gratitude, fortune, and luck. Hana smiled at both of her parents in the front seat of the car as she opened the door to the building. Her necklaces open to the shining lights, intertwined.

Student Name: Beckett Batchelor

Grade: 9

School: St. John's School

Title: Oh Fairwell Viola!

Category: Poetry

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Kemberly Kemp

Oh Fairwell Viola!

While I ponder here washed up on the shore of an antic island, I can't help but wonder if my life will ever be the same. Is the situation that I find myself in penance for some wrongdoing?

Never have I felt, in all of my years, a feeling such as this. At heart, I am eager to grief, but my mind knows the harsh reality which is that I cannot afford to. Oh poor Sebastian, bathing in his watery grave, while I am here, a land I have no familiarity with, acting as somebody who I also have no familiarity with. If he were here, I wonder, what would he do?

Amongst all of this angst, however, I still have a feeling in opposition to this, of gratefulness, for the captain has done everything in his power for the sake of me. The debt which I now owe to him is one that can never truly be re-paid.

Above all, I feel a grave melancholy for the death of my womanhood, which I hope to resurrect before I forget myself as a whole. Even if I am able to reveal myself, how would I even begin to explain myself?

Besides this, I am anxious at the thought of having to confront the duke of this land, Orcino. What will he be like/What will he think of me? Will my real identity be revealed? All of these feelings, twisting and turning in my stomach like a witches' brew, have left me sick to my stomach with no end in sight.

I know I mustn't be deterred by this, for Sebastian cannot have died in vain. I will march to the court of this 'Orcino' as a new person, like a crusader into Jerusalem, and act as Sebastian would if he were here, which will surely earn the duke's respect. If it must be, make it my dying wish that my lineage will carry on.

Student Name: Derek Jiu

Grade: 9

School: St. John's School

Title: Parallels

Category: Poetry

Key: Gold Key

Educator:

-after Tarfia Faizullah

I will crack through the sunburnt light  
polluting nails, rippling the last  
of our saltwater tears, tearing

open dawn past the silenced drum of  
a sparrow, how our lungs  
praise death the way we chew

& swallow Mother's word – gasping for  
mercy, apoptosis bound to a  
hunch – my tongue slivers moon &

its yolk, kisses diaphanous clouds, rain  
clenching skin, the bone, the  
flesh of my pruning spine,

a lone shard grieving forgotten sins – isn't  
it strange, to see your own shadow  
twitch on supple ground,

praying for a euphemism unborn, or, another  
bruised sky, humming, tribute  
shattered along pavement like

dusk to slit a child softening in the womb –  
voiceless, eyes cradling a ruptured  
heaven, bare head dragging

itself along the hoar-singed cliffside, I leap  
off and I take flight and I echo our  
retribution, mother nature clawing



my open throat.

Student Name: Nathan Kim

Grade: 10

School: St. John's School

Title: Perfectionism; My Beautiful Monster

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Cameron Dowlen

"Nathan is an excellent student and a pleasure to teach. He is an active participant in class and truly seems like he loves and enjoys school...However, he tends to be very harsh on himself over small mistakes, especially on quizzes and tests," my report card read. "Small mistakes? There is no such thing as a small mistake, only errors that tear you away from your goals," my perfectionism murmured in my ear. "Ignore them, and listen to me. I can give you control." Perfectionism is my monster, not unlike Odysseus's encounter with the sorceress Circe. In Emily Wilson's translation of *The Odyssey*, Odysseus is imbued with a false sense of confidence and control, manipulated and distracted by a fabricated notion of authority that was created by Circe. In *The Odyssey* and in my own experience, the need to feel in control can block rational thinking, and lead one down a destructive path that results in a loss of self and the inability to recognize the monster before them.

The first time I confronted "perfection," I was sitting in Kumon, a learning center for math and reading. By the time I was five years old, I worked diligently on packets of multiplication and long division. As my eyes scanned over the problems and my hand moved almost instinctively to solve them, a smile spread across my face while my eyes sparkled. It felt amazing, the challenge of the work, and the pride I felt when I got the answers right. The best sensation came when I saw check marks line the whole page, accompanying every question like a reassuring guard against any red x's. "This is perfection," I thought to myself because to me, perfection was a beautiful thing, the epitome of hard work and skill. To me, perfection was my friend, the same way other kids had their imaginary ones. It filled me with a confidence that I loved. It stood behind me, pushing me upward and onward to be my best. I didn't have to look back to know it was there, beautiful and strong, warm and kind, glorious. After all, its voice was so sweet, revealing my "future" with greatness ahead if I just continued to listen and obey its charming whispers. It illustrated and narrated a polished path of success. I felt empowered, like everything I wanted could be found on this straightforward trail, with step-by-step instructions ultimately leading to a desirable end result. After every new challenge and success I fed my perfectionism, and each time it felt like the path it had shown me became clearer and clearer, that my perfectionism became stronger and stronger. Eventually, I thought I was unstoppable, running and soaring, like nothing was out of reach.

Walking into class on quiz and test days, I set my pencil against the paper, hardly reaching for the eraser I brought. I quickly filled in blank spaces, circled answers, and drew lines to connect it all, standing above the rest of my classmates to turn my work in first. When teachers would return those assessments a week later, the fractions on the corners of my paper were whole, triple digits scores circled with some type of congratulatory note accompanying them. My teachers exclaimed, "Great Job, Nathan," "Wonderful," "Excellent Work!" I delighted for a while in reading those comments, but after some time, they began to lose their luster and the numbers became more important than any sticker or message. Perfection's voice harshly rebuked me for placing value in and getting distracted by such trivial things, and to remain focused on what mattered most. Every year, I earned awards from Kumon—trophies, certificates, medals—I stacked them on my shelf like they were treasures of gold, when they were cheap plastic and stone. Inscribed with "Honor Roll Nathan Kim," these accolades established and affirmed my worth to myself and others, a manifestation of what me and my perfectionism could accomplish. Hearing others' congratulations also made all my hard work seem worthwhile. My friend seemed to take further delight in each and every accomplishment, murmuring encouragement into my ear, swelling my heart and mind with pride, but there was no end, and it was never enough. There was always someone else to impress, someone else to hear praise from, another score to get, something else to achieve. No matter how hard I worked to appease my friend, it asked for more.

My friend became my relentless companion, hovering over me day and night, at school and at home, while I sought any way I could satisfy it. "If perfection was my friend, then mistakes were my enemy," I thought one day, deciding from that point on to despise my errors. My perfectionism seemed thrilled that I had come to this revelation. Soon, it began to whisper terrible things about my flaws, "They keep you from reaching your dreams and goals. They taint what people think about you. Don't listen to what everyone else says. Why would you make a mistake when you should just get it right the first time and everytime?" I listened and listened and listened, until this negative, hateful voice was the only thing I could hear, and the only thing that mattered to me. So I studied until there were no marks, no red pen tainting my papers. My answers were left untouched, and I scored full points, time and time again. I came to expect nothing less from myself...to me and my perfection, this was the only acceptable result. So no matter how many flawless grades I received, I wasn't fulfilled. I felt nothing. I felt empty.

But as time went on, my friend seemed to slip away. It seemingly became more elusive the older I got. My tests and quizzes, once decorated with check marks, were returned to me, desecrated with corrections. The errors slowly began to crush me, as I indiscriminately beat myself up over one or five mistakes. It didn't matter to my perfectionism, the result was the same. The result was imperfect. Tears would roll down my face, terror would grip my heart, and the acid would churn and twist in my stomach. As adults tried to console my hiccupped sobbing, they would show me my work saying, "It's still a really good grade," but that was not what I saw, and that is not what I wanted to hear. All I saw was failure.

After a particularly hard test when I knew I made a mistake (or several), my cheeks flushed and my gut felt like a hole had been punched through it. The pain became physical. The pride that my perfectionism had once filled my heart and mind with was leaking out. I desperately sought salvation from my friend once again, however, instead of the sweet voice that goaded me into following it, I heard shrieks of deprecation, taunts, and bellowing insults. I couldn't push it away or block it out. The noise was too loud, too cruel, and merciless. Perfectionism had dug its claws into my back and was refusing to let go. And now, when I turned to look behind me at "perfection," I saw my friend for what it truly was. It was grotesque and fragile, cold and sadistic. What I thought was "perfection" was an insatiable monster, a delusion created by my mind, fed by my greed and hubris, a creature that had grown stronger than I could control. Perfection was my enemy. It lurked behind me every day. It destroyed my confidence and self-worth, dragging me into a morass of self-contempt and hatred.

The realization finally dawned on me, that my mistakes were never my enemy, nor the source of my pain, and that perfectionism was an unattainable myth. Instead of viewing my mistakes as opportunities to learn, as potentially valuable lessons, I ignored them. I shunned them. I hated them, and as a result, I hated myself. The idea of not knowing, the idea of failing, all of it terrified me. It made me believe that I was, somehow, not worthy. When the self-loathing and anxiety consumed and debilitated me, I knew something had to change because I knew I couldn't go on like this. This was not sustainable, and it was not me. It was then I hit rock bottom, and I realized I had to build myself up again by celebrating the incremental victories and no longer looking for those big wins. I abandoned the imaginary ideal of perfection, and began to accept myself for who I am, flaws and all, knowing that so much of life is beyond my control.

When one is overcome by the feeling of control, they are set on a self-destructive path, unaware of what they are doing. For example, Hermes renders Circe's magic and tricks ineffective while guiding and advising Odysseus through an almost prophetic future. With this aid, Odysseus enters the home of Circe and drinks the same concoction that turned his men into pigs, however instead of transforming into an animal, Odysseus "drew [his] sharp sword from by [his] thigh and leapt at her as if [he] meant to kill her. [Circe] screamed and ducked beneath the sword, and grasped [his] knees, and wail[ed]" (Wilson, 269, 321-324). In Circe's submission to Odysseus she literally and figuratively places him in a position of control, "grasp[ing] [his] knees, and wailing" as she begs for mercy, an act of supplication common to Ancient Greek literature and culture, which showed respect and reverence to another (Pache, 390-391). Odysseus is often portrayed as a dominant figure throughout *The Odyssey*, and this moment shows no less than that as he reverses the roles and takes control of the situation. However, Circe is unlike the monsters who have simply eaten, snatched, and killed his men, for she nearly ended Odysseus's return home without having to hurt him. Immediately following her defeat, Circe invites Odysseus to bed with her, but he first forces Circe to promise to release his men from their animal forms. "At once she made the oath as I asked. She vowed and formed the oath, and then at last I went up to the dazzling bed of Circe" (270, 346-349). At first,

Odysseus appears to be the one in “control” of the situation, especially in the initial language where Circe “at once made the oath [he] asked,” showing the dominance Odysseus has established. Looking beyond Circe’s obedience, Odysseus “at once...went up to the dazzling bed of Circe,” the “at once” demonstrates a desperation, and hints at the fact that Odysseus might not be in control at all. Odysseus also describes the bed as “dazzling” to illustrate the allure of Circe, but this reinforces that he is not in control; that even in the house where his friends had been turned into farm animals only hours before, he can only think about his own pleasure. With the help of the gods and his cunning, Odysseus seemingly avoids the enchantments of Circe, but unbeknownst to him, he is already under her spell and has fallen into a more dangerous trap than any curse. Through a false sense of control, one loses sight of their original purpose as well as their values. After saving his men from their animal form imprisonments, Circe compliments her now lover, the cunning Odysseus before inviting him and his men to stay at her home, “‘Odysseus, you always find solutions. Go now to your swift ship beside the sea...Then come back with your loyal men.’ My heart agreed; I went down to my swift ship on the shore. I found my loyal men beside the ship” (272, 402-409). These commands indicate that Circe has established some type of control over Odysseus. She flatters him in a way that makes him complacent, giving him the semblance of control. When Circe gives Odysseus the two commands, he is fully willing to follow them, his actions mirroring her words verbatim, “go now to your swift ship...I went down to my swift ship” and “come back with your loyal men...I found my loyal men.” This moment can be perceived as Circe’s grace, allowing the soldiers to rest at her home, but it also demonstrates her ability to manipulate those around her, taking advantage of any weaknesses such as Odysseus’s ego while making him believe he still has authority. Odysseus returns to his men who are weeping by the shore over their lost compatriots, and he tells them to follow him into the home of Circe. Eurylochus gets angry and reproaches the men willing to follow Odysseus and Odysseus himself, “‘Fools! Why would you go up there? Why would you choose to take on so much danger, to enter Circe’s house, where she will turn us to pigs or wolves or lions...Our friends went to [the Cyclop’s] home with this rash lord of ours. Because of his bad choices, they all died.’” Odysseus is enraged, and “at that, [he] thought of drawing [his] long sword...to cut [Eurylochus’s] head off and let it fall down to the ground—although he was close family.” (273 432-442). While Eurylochus’s complaints come from a significant amount of truth, Odysseus cannot see past his pride and his newfound love. Odysseus acts irrationally, ready to defend the woman that had just turned his men into pigs and had attempted to do the same to him, willing to behead and kill Eurylochus, who is “close family,” a fact Odysseus himself points out. Odysseus feels empowered by his conquering of Circe, proud of his accomplishments to the point that he is unable to realize that Circe has completely reversed their roles, the cunning Odysseus being controlled and puppeteered. Odysseus and his men would stay over a year on Circe’s island, forgetting their homes, families, journeys and giving into gluttony and lust, making Circe the most dangerous of all the monsters they encountered, a monster that they could never tell was one.

Maybe if I continued to pursue perfection I would have emerged more ambitious and more driven, a monster myself. But that didn't happen, and I am glad that it didn't. I had to consciously let go of that part of me, because I realized that the perfection that consumed me for so long was destroying me from the inside out. Instead of continuing on that wretched path of self-hate and delusion, I learned something more valuable than any perfect grade, to accept my mistakes and not let them break me apart. To use each opportunity to build myself up, to grow and learn, to become better. Like Odysseus's encounter with Circe, I fell prey to a feeling of control, a made-up lie created by my perfectionism, imprisoning myself on my own island, unable to move on. I unknowingly set expectations on myself that simply couldn't be maintained or achieved, and while I would be lying to say that my desire for perfectionism has completely left me, each conscious step I've taken away from it has been critical to my survival.

This year, I read *The Odyssey*, a story I was more than excited to dive into, but I quickly noticed something while analyzing chapter after chapter. I hated Odysseus, how he fell for the same tricks time and time again, and allowed his hubris to overtake his better judgment and lead to his downfall on several occasions. Through this paper I questioned my contempt for his character, and it helped me realize that it was because I saw too much of myself in him. I looked into the text and saw my own overconfidence and foolishness, mirroring monsters that existed in my own life. But maybe also like Odysseus, I can continue my journey, leave my errors in the past, and learn from them. So to my friend who once motivated me, encouraged me to go above and beyond, then tore me down after filling me with hope, this paper is written for you, not to forget you, but to move on. To my perfectionism, I bid you adieu.

Student Name: Johnathon Li

Grade: 11

School: St. John's School

Title: Stitched Identities: Unveiling the Uniform's Tale

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Key: Gold Key

Educator:

Stubborn khakis and scratchy, baby-blue button ups.

Like all properly private institutions, uniform is part of expectation. Sure, the option between an American flag-clad belt versus a fishing boat-clad one offered variation (both sourced from Vineyard Vines, of course), but the choice ended there. The goal, clearly, was to promote a sense of collectiveness. Required chinos and dress shirts sourced from a designated company, all adorned in the institution's color palette, everyone must blend in because they're just the same...right? In an attempt of assimilation, all must match this cookie-cutter until the end of time. However, the similarities ended at the collar, as, a few inches above, a different story was told.

When I first entered fifth-grade, I faced a polarizing transition from public to private school, from funded to well-endowed. Frankly, I struggled. Everywhere I looked, it was hard to find people who shared this surface level identity: ethnicity. While we may relate with the same fútbol idol or a shared dislike in the cafeteria's suspiciously-perfect salad bar, our similarities ended there. To be the single full-Asian student in my grade of 200 students, a precedent was set.

As a result to this stark distinction, and as a coping mechanism, I thought it would be best to assimilate and capture my identity as the byproduct of the people around me. It was my desire to simply "fit in," and to feel like I was just like the others, and over time, I lost that ability to have appreciation for what made me, me, and the culture and rich history that came with my identity. Xiǎolóngbāo became kolaches. Dàndànmiàn became spaghetti. What's stopping it?

At the time, I hadn't realized the disservice I'd done to myself, in my ability to be. To be a proud, first-generation Asian American. The root of this issue was a result of listening to everyone but myself; this assimilation manufactured unhealthy desires: desire for the exact brand of t-shirts with whale logos turned to shame of my own closet; desire for annual Seaside trips turned to shame that I wasn't living the All-American lifestyle. In my longing to absorb, I lost myself.

Then, I walked into the storied cloisters. Freshmen orientation, at a new school with 180 new classmates, in an unknown environment. At reception, students dined on Domino's pizza and mingled in the Plaza. Knowing absolutely no one, I chose to sit with a completely random group of students who seemed kind enough to invite me in. Turns out, this group included students from four different affinity groups, and, coincidentally, were discussing the importance of diversity in these learning spaces.

Before, I never thought my impulsive decision to sit with these strangers would be so powerful. In retrospect, I realized that this decision exposed me to a new perspective, and quenched a desire that I never knew existed at that time—the desire to be myself. It seemed spiritual, almost, to feel seen again. Not as a system of uniform fifth-graders, but as an individual. With a new found sense of pride, I realized to not be a part of what's desired, but to be a part of who I am, and will always be.

At this new school, students carry themselves with a sense of uniqueness. Students might take the same classes and share the same schedule, but again, the similarity stops there. Although we wear a uniform, ourselves say otherwise.



Student Name: Lily Feather

Grade: 11

School: St. John's School

Title: Striking A Deal: Writers Guild Reaches 3-Year Agreement

Category: Journalism

Key: Gold Key

Educator: DAVID Nathan

Sarah Burkett ('10) is not a movie star — she is a film and TV actress with nine credits to her name. Her main goal is “to have consistent opportunities for jobs,” which is why she has been on the picket line outside Paramount Studios for the past four months.

Burkett has put off joining SAG-AFTRA because she cannot afford to pay the union fees — an initial \$3,000, plus \$231.96 annually and a work fee totaling 1.5% of yearly earnings. She does not receive money for her work being rerun, known as residuals, because her projects have been relatively low-budget. Due to the strike, she has been unable to promote her upcoming film, “A Gettysburg Christmas.”

The Writers Guild of America began striking on May 2, and the Screen Actors Guild joined them in mid July. Writers and actors demanded higher pay, more people in writing rooms, improved health care and better protections against artificial intelligence replacing them. While the strike was ongoing, they have discussed paltry residual checks on social media.

The WGA proposal would have cost major media companies like Disney less than one percent of their annual revenue (an estimated \$83.7 billion), yet the Alliance of Motion Pictures and Television Producers held out for 146 days before reaching a deal, which was ratified on Oct. 9, for an estimated \$233 million, up from the \$86 million that they offered initially. SAG-AFTRA has not yet reached a deal.

The agreement also includes protections against AI and health care for each writer employed in the writers’ room.

Burkett hoped that the solidarity of the writers and actors would be enough to sway the studios.

“It’s disappointing to see how much the studios are relying on a playbook that is decades old, and they’re relying on a lack of solidarity. That’s not happening on the line,” Burkett said. “Despite it being a terrifying and utterly enraging experience that we’re going through, every time I hit the line, it is more re-energizing and reaffirms what we’re doing.”

On a typical day, after a morning spent picketing in front of Paramount, Burkett works side gigs in the afternoons instead of preparing for auditions. She works as a home organizer and a tutor for private school admissions exams and general academics.

“We’re a scrappy bunch.”

She is still picketing. The studios have been more reluctant to reach a deal with the actors, who are demanding 2% of total revenue generated by streaming shows.

“If this doesn’t go the right way, this industry will not be the same,” she said. “This is make-or-break.”

When the WGA strike ended, Movie Club co-President Ally Rodriguez was relieved.

“There’s always the idea that these people are not being paid what they should be paid,” Rodriguez said. “But when you see the writers or actors that are showing their residual checks — how does anyone see this and think this is sustainable?”

Rodriguez, who is working on a play, understands the importance of writers.

“Writers are integral to creating a story, and making a movie that you want to come back to and a movie that you remember,” she said.

Rodriguez was disappointed when several of her favorite shows, including “Severance,” “The Last of Us” and “Saturday Night Live,” were delayed.

“I’m worried about how some of my favorite programs are going to move forward,” she said.

“We are fighting for the middle class right now,” said Houston native David Hornsby, 47, a writer and executive producer on “It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia,” who also expressed concern about the future of Hollywood.

Hornsby, who has a recurring role as homeless priest Rickety Cricket, is a member of all three major guilds, including the Directors Guild of America. “Hollywood is a town of unions,” he said.

During the strikes, Hornsby picketed regularly. Also an executive producer, actor and writer for “Mythic Quest” on AppleTV, he had been interviewing writers for the show until the strike.

According to Hornsby, part of the problem is that Hollywood, dazzled by streaming services, became more concerned about profit consolidation.

“It’s disruptive, which was exciting, because it brought in a lot of new buyers to television and expanded the television universe,” Hornsby said. “Perhaps too much.”

Hornsby says that the ones who suffer in the streaming era are the writers — TV show budgets stay big, but studios save money by consolidating writers salaries. “TV used to be cheap and fast,” he said. “Now, TV is lavish and expensive.”

Hornsby has received residuals from his many TV projects, but in the age of streaming, he receives significantly less.

According to Hornsby, there will be fewer shows produced and fewer opportunities for writers to get a stable job in the current landscape.

“At this point, we’ve realized that we can’t have the tech sector rejigger our industry,” he said. “They’ve turned it into a gig economy.”

Houston native David Brown, 48, is a three-time Emmy-winning showrunner for unscripted shows, including “The Amazing Race,” which typically do not require a full writing staff.

According to Brown, when the WGA has gone on strike, the networks scrambled to fill screen time by turning to reality TV because their shows were typically more affordable — but not this time. Because the studios tried to consolidate their budgets before the strike, they turned away pitches from unscripted showrunners once the strike began.

“It was like two tsunamis hitting Los Angeles at the exact same time,” Brown said.

Brown wonders if the larger world of broadcast television and streaming platforms will have to change: “What is the next model for getting content to people and getting eyeballs in front of TV?”

But Brown is optimistic from what he has seen of the WGA deal: “It seems as if the deal meets the immediate concerns of the writers, but does little to address the larger, existential issues surrounding the future of content delivery and consumption.”

Rushmore Academy parent and director Vicky Wight was delighted by the end of the WGA strike. Wight adapted the novel “Happiness for Beginners,” written by Katherine Center (‘90), another Rushmore parent, into a screenplay. Wight also directed the Netflix film, released July 27.

Because Netflix anticipated a strike, its publicity team filmed promotional material, then released it later to avoid having actors cross the picket line.

“Nobody wanted to do anything to undermine the strike because everybody involved with the movie just wanted to support the writers,” Center said.

Even though the DGA was not on strike, Wight stopped taking meetings as a director over the summer.

“It felt like crossing a picket line to some degree,” she said.

Though the actors are still on strike, Wight is getting back to work and taking meetings with writers.

“Holding out for 146 days was the right thing to do.”

Student Name: Elisa Feygin

Grade: 8

School: St. John's School

Title: The Eyes Are the Windows to the Soul

Category: Short Story

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Michael Seckman

### The Eyes are the Windows to the Soul

Had there been sun that morning, it would have gone unnoticed, hidden behind the dense layers of smog spanning the sky. The only distinction between the gray-tinged day and the night was the blasting of a horn, loud and obnoxious, meant to startle those who had not yet succumbed to permanent slumber out of their much less comfortable alternative. At the sound of that horn, the cold steel of sleeping pods was replaced with the itch and scratch of burlap clothing, the weight of heavy labor packs burdening already-hunched backs, the soreness and tightness of bodies that had not been properly rested in ages. It had stopped mattering to most. For them, pain and discomfort had been second nature for a long time.

From a bird's-eye view, the streets could have resembled the inside of an anthill. Identical creatures marched with their heads down, a mass of gray and white. There was no variation here. The atmospheric conditions had long ago leached the color from anyone's skin, from their clothes. Anyone who tried to look different was dealt with. Anyone who acted out of line was dealt with. Promptly. But there were never really any problems with that. Most people had long since lost any sense of originality, their minds becoming nothing more than the empty shells of what once were living, loving, feeling things. The thick ribbon of travelers moved like molasses, snaking through the gray, boxlike structures that served as living quarters. The winding path progressed down into the heart of the mountain marking the end of the city, down and down and down to where the air was metallic and a misstep could result in death. A mercy, for many.

It was impossible to remember a time where anyone's days were not spent down in the depths of the mountain, the only sounds being the steady rhythm of pickaxes hitting stone and the labored breathing of the people who wielded them. Beginning at the crack of dawn and ending at the fall of dusk, identical people marched down into the mountain, wearing identical clothes, walking identical paths. Every single day.

At the end of each monotonous day, each of the workers was handed a small flask on their way out. Each was monitored as they unscrewed the top and tossed back the contents. Each was watched as their dead-eyed, emotionless faces crumpled in agony for what was never longer than a split second. Each was sent on their way, having successfully ingested the serum that would keep them alive and in working condition for as long as they were required.

A girl marched down into the mountain. She looked like everyone else. Her skin was white, the palest of pale moons. Her colorless hair hung limply, framing her angular face. Her shapeless gray burlap clothing hung off of her just like everyone else's, her steps matching that same familiar one-two rhythm that no one dared to break. Her face was smoothed into that same impassive mask that no one dared to remove. She was the picture of utter plainness; her entire person seemed to emanate that she was nothing to look at. But anybody who looked, anybody who bothered (and nobody bothered) would notice her eyes. They would seem to be the same drab gray as anyone else's, but they were alive. They darted about this way and that, taking in everything, savoring it all. They did not stare ahead blankly. They saw. They almost sparkled, alight with a silver flame deep within that seemed to have gone dark in everyone else.

They say that the eyes are the windows to one's soul. Here, in this gray city, there was nothing truer. For every dead, lifeless soul, you would find a pair of dead, lifeless eyes. The guards who stood at the entrance to the mountain knew this. They watched every pair of dead eyes as they handed out those insidious flasks. So they knew of this girl, they knew of her eyes. They knew that deep-rooted fear stirred in their chests when they saw that girl with those eyes, wide and moving like she knew something they did not. They hated it. They told themselves that she was just another freak to be dealt with. They laughed amongst themselves about how strange that girl was, how she had it coming if she kept letting her eyes run rampant instead of taming them like the rest of her face. But though they made fun, though they laughed, they could not ignore the fear and hatred that they felt when they saw her, when they realized that she had what they had not, that she had the gift of sight, of thought, of originality. And each time they saw her, their hatred grew until all they wanted was to take those gifts from her.

The girl awoke the next day at the blast of the horn, sliding from her sleeping pod and into her gray burlap clothes. She noted the bite of the sleeping pod's cold metal against her bare back, the itch of the burlap against her soft skin. She might have even fidgeted in discomfort, there alone in her quarters. She might have let out the smallest noise of complaint, rolling those remarkable eyes of hers. But only there, in her quarters, could she ever make even the smallest indication of there being thoughts, let alone disdainful ones, in her head. She shouldered her labor pack, buckling slightly under its enormous weight. She wiped any expression from her face and attempted to unfocus her eyes, to stop them moving. She never could. They acted of their own accord, watching and wandering and wondering. She set off to join the masses on their collective journey to the mountain, to their unending toil and sorrow.

The girl often wondered why nobody ever remarked on the blatant cruelty and injustice of the way they labored without proper rest or payment. But then again, she did know. She could barely remember the last time someone showed the slightest sign of dislike for the way things were. She had been here so long; she often wondered if one day her sense of time would completely abandon her. But she clung to the remnants of this memory, of the faint undertones of horror and stomach-sickening fear that she had only ever felt then. A girl had refused the flask of clear liquid that they were forced to drink every night. She

had taken it, looked the guard in the face, and poured it straight onto the ground. They said she was strange, that she was not like the others. The girl wondered if she was different, like the mysterious girl who had refused her serum. She wondered if she would disappear one day like the other girl did, if they would hear stories of her ravaged body hidden deep in the mines. She wondered if they would use her as an example, if they would tell people to behave so they would not end up like her, beaten and killed all because her eyes moved too much. A silver tear slid from her silver eye, slipping down her porcelain white cheek and marking her clothing. She did not dare move her arm enough to wipe it away.

The thick band of people drifted painstakingly towards the mines' entrance, the girl hidden in the crowd. If you looked close enough, you might be able to see the glint of her silver eyes, darting this way and that, drinking in their surroundings like a parched desert traveler discovering an oasis. They saw everything. They saw the thick swaths of gray fog that had hung over the city for longer than anyone could seem to remember. They saw the immense mountain before them, imagining the horror of descending down into it, far from the sky and the open air, no matter how polluted they may be. They saw their gray, sightless twins staring straight ahead, having lost the ability to see and wonder and think. They settled, which they rarely did, on the hateful and barely disguised stares of the guards. A deep dread stirred in the girl's stomach, as if she knew, no matter how many times those stares had been turned upon her, that this time there would be something behind them.

Her face remained impassive as she passed the guards, their eyes boring into the back of her head as she returned on yet another day to the heart of that horrible mountain. Her eyes stilled, for once, as she worked. Maybe they knew what was about to happen. Maybe they figured that if they behaved just this once they could prevent it. Maybe they thought they could save her from herself, from them. For the first time, the girl looked like everyone else as she worked. Her pickaxe clanged against the unyielding walls of the mining tunnels, its rough handle chafing and blistering her hands. She did not flinch as her skin ripped, did not even blink as blood seeped from her fingers and palms. She only allowed herself to slip as she was ascending the path to the entrance of the mountain once her work was done. The worker behind her must have wondered at the shudder of agony and despair that passed through her in that moment, rocking her slender frame as it traveled from her bony shoulders right down to the soles of her thick black work boots. The guards marked the girl as she marched up from the depths of the mines, one of them palming the flask that they handed her upon her exit from the mountain. She hesitated before taking it, just a split second long enough for one of the guards to give her a menacing glare. She took the flask, well aware that it may have been a mistake. She did not care. She had made her peace with her circumstance when she watched the bright red drip from her hands down in the mines, when she had been lashed with a braided whip for stopping her work long enough to wrap her blisters in tape. Unscrewing the cap, she raised her striking eyes to the guard's, an offense punishable by twenty lashes with that braided whip. She tossed back the contents of the flask, maintaining eye contact with

the guard the entire time. She did not see that, rather than the usual clear liquid, it was a deep violet liquid that she tipped through her open lips.

For what could have been the thousandth or ten-thousandth or even millionth time, the girl was gripped by that familiar agony that accompanied the consumption of the liquid in those flasks. It began in her throat, following the liquid as it seared her esophagus and settled in her stomach. Usually the pain ended there, but not this time. The burn seemed to grow and grow in her abdomen, spreading throughout her until it felt as if it had seized every part of her in an iron fist and just squeezed, leaving her breathless and writhing on the floor. She did not know when she had fallen, only that this pain was making its way slowly up, taking its time, traveling up her spine and contorting her face into a grotesque image of mortal agony that made even the guards flinch a little.

She screamed as the pain reached her head, ripping and exploding through her in fireworks of misery. The sound echoed through the mountain, ricocheting off the walls of the mines and haunting everyone who heard it. Finally, the spearhead of wretchedness reached its target, settling in just behind her eyes.

My eyes - no - you can't - please - not my eyes, please...the girl was not sure if those thoughts ever made it past her lips, for only roaring sounded in her ears as bright ruby liquid poured from them. She felt the evil that was inside her tug at something deep within, attempting to pull it free, to get rid of it forever. She would not let it be taken from her. Even as the pain lessened behind her eyes, even as those bright silver beauties glazed and went not gray but white, pure, milky white, more blind and dead than anyone else's, the girl fought. She poured her whole essence into keeping this monster from taking the one gift she had retained, the one thing she loved. A single thought resonated through her head as she battled to keep the flame that was her soul from being extinguished. I would sooner die. I would sooner die than have this taken from me. I would sooner die than lose the one thing that keeps me from ending my own life.

Maybe it was some mystical presence that heard her last thoughts, or maybe whatever had allowed her to keep her gifts of sight and thought and life had realized that her last wish was worth being honored. Whatever the cause, her eyes darkened back from white to gray to that burning silver, and at last her body relaxed, relinquished from the pain that had plagued it moments before. The guards breathed a sigh of relief, for it had made even them uncomfortable to witness such raw agony. Their lesson was taught, and the girl would learn to control those eyes, they thought to themselves. But as one of them grabbed her, making to haul her to her feet, his hand only met cold, unresponsive flesh. He dropped her arm and stepped back, face twisted in disgust and fear. For the girl's eyes still moved, darting from one guard's face to the other, as if those eyes knew what the guards had done. As if they would never let the guards forget. One of the braver guards inched forward, nudging the girl's body with his foot. She did not move, but her eyes did. Those eyes slid to the guard's gray ones, pinning him with an accusatory gaze. They lingered there until he stepped away, removing his foot from the girl's leg.

The girl's eyes continued to wander to anyone who tried to move her body, to touch her, to disturb the lesson that was being taught to every onlooker of this grotesque scene.



Their silver stare was so unnerving that they were covered, bound with a cloth. But the guards moving the girl's body could not help but feel that those eyes were staring right through the cloth, watching them, damning them to the deepest tunnels of the mines. All that the guards could think about as they attempted to transport the body was the girl's eyes, those silver irises practically screaming at them every terrible thing they had done, how they had absolutely destroyed that other girl's body all those years ago, all because she had refused to drink something. It quite literally drove them mad.

They hauled the girl's dead body and her very much alive eyes down to the deepest part of the mountains, frantically tearing off the cloth obscuring her eyes. They stared into those eyes, drowning in their silver depths, drowning in all of their sins and crimes and misdeeds. At last, they hurled the body down into the deepest of the mines, watching all the while as those eyes glinted back at them through the darkness, taking ahold of their minds and wrapping around them and tearing them apart until the guards, too, hurled themselves into the mines, if only to spare themselves from the unspeakable horrors they themselves had created.

Student Name: Elizabeth Hu

Grade: 11

School: St. John's School

Title: The Monachopsis Inside Dumplings

Category: Flash Fiction

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Warren Rawson

The plate of shaomai in front of her sickens her. The white wrapping looks closer to brown as it peels away from the glutinous rice and mushrooms and chunks of meat inside, as if the slimy brown rice is contaminating its surroundings. The rice and mushrooms stick to each other and to the skin, bits of goo connecting the membrane to the contents. It's too brown, too heavy, too rich, especially when arranged on a white plate bordered with soft blue petals and pale green vines. The contrast is too much to bear.

Just try it, her mother insists. You used to love this when you were younger. That can't be true. It's been many years since she's had shaomai, and the only vague memory she has of it is hunched over a metal bowl, a nauseating aroma working its way back up her throat. Even now, the oil-laden stench pierces her nose. She pushes the plate away.

I don't get you, her mother says as she picks up a pair of chopsticks and puts a shaomai in her mouth. I could eat these all day and still not feel satisfied. The girl watches the entire shaomai disappear into her mother's mouth, the movement of her throat as she swallows the dumpling, and the precise, elegant motion of the chopsticks as her mother goes for another one.

The girl says that the shaomai made her sick that one time and that's why she doesn't like them. That the shao in its name stood for fashao, meaning "fever," and the mai meant "bury," and so these innocuous rice dumplings were actually out to kill her. Never mind that the mai in shaomai was a completely different character than the mai of "bury"—the fact that the shao in shaomai and fashao were the same character was enough proof of the dumplings' culpability. Her mother shakes her head and makes another remark about how kids in her town loved to make them from scratch—never mind that her mother had just bought a pack of 12 frozen from the Jusgo supermarket for \$10.99, never mind that these were typically eaten at dim sum and so they were supposed to be washed down with green tea, never mind that, at the moment, she didn't have the green tea that remained always by her mother's side, only a cup of organic 2% milk, and that the flavor of the milk and the flavor of the shaomai just compounded on each other and made everything worse.

She picks at the shaomai with a single chopstick. From the untouched dumpling, she feels the verdicts of allegations she has made against herself, charges claiming that she's not Chinese enough and that she's denying her heritage by refusing to eat it. The verdicts don't have to be real for her to know what they say.

The girl noticed, once, that she was a child of contradictions. That, for one, she has never set foot in the country she had spent her entire life learning about. That although she got a 5 on the AP Chinese Exam, she couldn't remember how to say "driver's license" when trying to give instructions to an old Chinese lady. That her cousin jokingly calls her a disgrace whenever she needs three glasses of water and a box of tissues for a bowl of lamian because both of her parents come from Hunan and no one else has even touched their complementary glasses of iced water and the dish only has two peppers next to it on the menu. How can you be Chinese, her cousin had asked, when you can't even handle spice? Because even as she tries to make up for her flaw by always ordering spicy dishes, insisting her love for the heat overrides her intolerance of it, she knows it's not the same.

She can never forget that one mind-splitting incident, where even as she lay on the floor, trying desperately to vomit whatever it was making her sick, all that came up, all she could sense at the back of her sandpapered tongue was that clogging, domineering taste of the shaomai that she had eaten that morning. And when she finally threw up into the bowl after four hours of nausea, acid yellow bile dripping from her lips and covering the bottom of the basin, the only aftertaste was one of guilt. Her mother says that the illness was caught from something else, that her current repulsion to shaomai is something fake, something psychological. But the two are forever synonymous in her mind.

The girl picks up a shaomai with her chopsticks, the metal rods crossed together between her fingers instead of only intersecting at the tip. She never learned how to hold chopsticks correctly. She was just expected to know. It doesn't matter. I can still use them. I can pick up the same things as everyone else. But the chopsticks just further prove that her cousin was right and that a lizard acting like a dragon will still only be a lizard. But I am a dragon! I am!

She places the shaomai in her mouth, willing herself to grant its entry between her lips, demanding to feel its weight on her tongue. She chews slowly, forcefully, crushing every grain of sticky rice, identifying the mushroom from the meat, sawing through the greasy wrapping with her teeth. She feels it slide down her throat in one lumpy, gooey mess. Sensations of gagging and retching invade her mind as she smiles at her mother, telling her it was good the same way the rat in Chinese mythology told the cat she would wake him up in time for the big race to Heaven before leaving him behind. But the food churns in her stomach and she can't bring herself to eat another one—and she knows that it

doesn't matter whether she was born a dragon. For what good is a dragon if it can only act like a lizard?

Student Name: Cooper Kostelnik

Grade: 8

School: St. John's School

Title: The Peak

Category: Poetry

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Michael Seckman

### The Peak

Packs weigh down slow progress  
dictated by endless crunching of boots.  
Sweat comes easy when you scrape the sun,  
touch the moon. Rhythm, a steady drum, easy to lose  
track of time, mindless climbing. Stopping cold  
on cold rocks, feeling the cold breeze.  
Restarting the ascent, observing the old,  
pushing away the new, to familiar  
is the new. We crest mile one, twelve remain,  
still yet to see the final monstrous figure.  
Pines, oaks, turn to white, ashy aspens,  
thick shrubs turn to young strawberries.  
Slowly, the figure appears, the figure happens,  
a pointy cake, the summit capped by thin whipped cream,  
the cake crumbling on the sides, Pikes Peak.  
At mile three, daunting this task does seem.  
Hours pass slowly, but success we do seek.  
Mile five, the peak is lost for the night,  
though the morning has not yet turned to 'noon,  
A mossy meadow envelops us, filters light,  
mountain sun. Images of the white dune,  
the goal, the peak. As the sun begins its descent,  
as the clock resets, we stumble in to the  
humble set of alpine cabins. A small crescent  
waterfall, water for the remainder of the journey  
that begins again  
tomorrow.

Student Name: Aila Jiang

Grade: 10

School: St. John's School

Title: The Pitfalls of Hard Work and Passion: How Unchecked Ambition Can Lead to Unethical Means in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*

Category: Critical Essay

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Matthew Wells

The father of modern-day utilitarianism, Jeremy Bentham, argued how the pursuit of pleasure and avoidance of pain is intrinsic to human beings. Though the ideas of pain and pleasure are highly subjective, his philosophy can be interpreted as simple as the human instinct to take a hand off a hot stove, or as complex as national revolution; no matter the case, both actions aim to reduce suffering. The moral lens in which utilitarianism evaluates is through consequences, and whether they maximize happiness for the greater good. Applying Bentham's idea of hedonism to history, many notorious, historical leaders rose to power in pursuit of their own definition of happiness—including dictators like Chairman Mao, Stalin, and Hitler. However, the consequences of their actions far outweighed their "intentions": they inflicted mass and generational suffering, death, and ultimate destruction onto millions of people worldwide. This destruction, as defined by Oxford Languages, is the "action or process of causing so much damage to something that no longer exists or cannot be repaired." The intrinsic property of maximizing pleasure can often cloud one's judgments and cause unchecked ambition: the extreme means to achieve one hyper fixated end goal. In Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, unchecked ambition is prevalent throughout Victor Frankenstein's life. He is driven to create new life with hopes of glory and the advancement of human knowledge, but without a "checks and balances" system in place, he fails to evaluate the dire consequences of his ambition. The stern pursuit of scientific knowledge not only causes him to sacrifice his time, family, and health, but also leads him to bestow unrealistic expectations of being a "creator." The results of Frankenstein's ambition include the constant murders of his loved ones, the false imprisonment of others, and the tragedy of the monster—these all attest to the definition of immorality under the Utilitarian framework. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* illustrates how unchecked ambition leads to the sacrifice of health and the expectations of upholding creationism, which ultimately causes destruction and suffering.

The pursuit of knowledge in *Frankenstein* leads to "tunnel vision," causing Frankenstein to use the concept of justifying means with ends—he uses dark methods that sacrifice his own physical and mental health, all to achieve the one goal of creating life. He even goes to charnel houses and robs the graves to study the dead bodies, disrespecting both the dead and himself. Victor narrates that "[his] attention was fixed upon every object the most insupportable to the delicacy of the human feelings" (Shelley 34). His own acknowledgement on the fragility of the human brain shows how overpowering his drive

and passion is: he understands the emotional tolls of his actions, yet ignores the natural boundaries and capacities of his brain and humanity. His tunnel vision and ambition desensitizes his mind and clouds his moral compass, causing the failure to evaluate consequences. Frankenstein's unchecked ambition also leads to other emotional tolls such as isolation, as he "shunned the face of man" since "joy or complacency was torture to [him]" and that solitude was [his] only consolation—deep, dark, death-like solitude" (63). Frankenstein admits how he has dissociated himself from humanity; joy is no longer intrinsic to him, but his pleasure stems from isolation, a typical villain for humans. Shelley uses alliteration with "deep, dark, death-like" and irony between "solitude" and "consolation" to highlight the detrimental implications of Frankenstein's ambitions on his mental health. Through subjecting himself to physical labor and fatigue, his physical health deteriorates and he disregards self-care, diminishing the purpose of his life to achieving one goal. He encourages Walton in his letter to learn from him about "how dangerous [the] acquirement of knowledge" is, and "how much happier that man is who believes his native town to be the world, than he who aspires to become greater than his nature will allow." Frankenstein compares two extremes—those who live in ignorant bliss and those who succumb to the never-ending aspiration of knowledge. Frankenstein speaks from personal experience about the dangers of the overconsumption of knowledge. There are limits on human nature, and attempting to cross those invisible lines leads to depression and a shift away from humanity.

Victor Frankenstein's unchecked ambition and grueling work leads to high standards, expectations, and responsibilities—because he invests over two years' worth of time and even uses dark methods to bestow life upon an inanimate object, he inherently takes on the role as a parent; a creator. His passion and standards lead to high expectations, as he first believes his success would "pour a torrent of light into [their] dark world," and "many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to [him]" (35). Frankenstein uses the metaphor of pouring light into a dark world, alluding to *Paradise Lost* and the Book of Genesis. God created the heaven and the earth and breathed life into Adam; Frankenstein strives to replicate this role and glory, but this passion translates into impossible standards. Thus, when an ugly monster with watery eyes, a shriveled complexion, and white sockets comes to life, Frankenstein automatically feels anguished and disappointed. He first "desired [the creation] with an ardor that far exceeded moderation," but now, the "beauty of the dream [had] vanishe[d]," turning into a "breathless horror and disgust [that] filled [his] heart" (38). Shelley illustrates that the cause of Frankenstein's new negative perspective of the monster is attributed to unchecked ambition by using the words "dream" and "desire" to describe Frankenstein's original goals. Shelley's paradox of disgust filling the heart shows how Frankenstein's supposed love for the monster is instead replaced by hatred, and because Victor reveals how he recognizes his own lack of moderation and ardor, the main cause of his neglect would be the high expectations derived from his uncontrollable passion. Later, there is a shift in dynamic of the creator-creation relationship between Frankenstein and his monster. Both the absence and presence of the monster consumes Frankenstein's

thoughts and life—the threats and the monster’s “wretchedness,” make him live in fear, demonstrating the monster’s true power over Frankenstein. When staying up in his laboratory one day, Victor encounters the dreaded monster, who questions him about his true intentions with him. The encounter escalates into a verbal fight, where the monster refers to Victor as “Slave,” and how he can make Victor “so wretched that the light of day will be hateful” to him—the monster follows by telling Victor, “You are my creator but I am your master; —obey” (126). The power dynamic has greatly shifted; the monster diminishes the significance of a creator through his strong tone and commands. He addresses Victor, his God, as a “slave” needing to obey, emphasizing how power does not exclusively lie in the hands of the creator. The different power dynamic can be attributed to Victor’s tunnel vision: the hyperfixation of one goal in Frankenstein’s scientific pursuits creates a product that has a powerful strain and impact on him, giving the monster the upper hand and the role of a “master.”

The ultimate impact of unchecked ambition is neglect and later destruction. Frankenstein disregards the ramifications of creating new life, and his constant irresponsibility as a creator causes the murders and convictions of innocent people. Shelley uses the motifs of storms and darkness—first, on the “birthday” of the monster, it was “a dreary night of November,” with the “rain patter[ing] dismally against the panes” (38). The motif of stormy weather illustrates the dark setting, foreshadowing a creation that would haunt Frankenstein for the rest of his life. Through repeating the motif of storms before the murders, Shelley represents the impact of Frankenstein’s dark methods used achieving his goals; the “darkness” is all tied together with an invisible string. After committing the murder of Clerval, the monster reveals how his “heart was poisoned with remorse,” but because Frankenstein “sought his own enjoyment in feelings and passions from the indulgence...[he] was for ever barred.” Therefore, the monster felt an “impotent envy and bitter indignation” (165). The monster is misunderstood, and reveals his true emotions of guilt and remorse. However, he also reveals the culprit of his actions—Frankenstein’s neglect. Frankenstein dehumanizes the monster by never giving him a chance, and the monster was never nurtured properly to cope with his emotions of vengeance, causing him to murder his creator’s loved ones. This shows how Frankenstein judges his creation based on if it was worth his tireless work and ambitious efforts. Because of the isolation and neglect the monster felt, he “murder[s] the lovely and the helpless, strangle[s] the innocent... and grasp[s] to death his throat who never injured [him]” (167). The monster recognizes how immoral his actions were, and his simple acknowledgement proves the fact that Frankenstein should be guilty of these actions. The murders of William Frankenstein, Justine Moritz, Henry Clerval, and Elizabeth Avenza, and the eventual death of the monster is the destruction caused by unchecked ambition. The link chain starts with Victor’s tunnel vision, which later develops into obsessive working and later fear of not living up to impossible expectations, ultimately causing the neglect and death—the whole cycle derived from unchecked ambition ends up being counterproductive, causing more suffering than before.



In *Frankenstein*, Shelley illustrates the multifaceted nature of ambition by telling the story of the once “ordinary” Frankenstein who spirals into a never-ending cycle of pursuing success. The lack of moderation makes him isolate himself and impose impossible standards onto himself, which causes a link-chain of events and the ultimate deaths of Victor’s loved ones. The publishing of the novel occurred during the Industrial Revolution, a transformative period with new machines and large-scale industry that promoted productivity and efficiency, changing the course of society worldwide. Today, we continue to realize technological advancements at a much faster rate—the creation of the smartphone, generative Artificial Intelligence, and other inventions that once would only exist in science-fiction novels. Although Mary Shelley published *Frankenstein* 205 years ago, the outcomes of unchecked ambition remain parallel in 2023, and Shelley warns her future audiences about the dangers of pursuing anything without moderation. It is important to help improve society without attempting to transcend past human capabilities, because as seen in the novel, it leads to neglect and power struggles. In the present, the chase for political glory causes corrupt leaders and governments to make empty promises and disband their original philosophies for power, without others’ best interests. Unchecked ambition in businesses fosters unethical processes, such as forced labor, neglect of environmental resources, tax evasion, and underpayment of workers. Unchecked ambition in fame can cause individuals to find loopholes around the law. Lastly, unchecked ambition in an “ordinary” person’s life could be as simple as consistently staying up late for a passion project, or being too competitive. No matter what, something or someone always ends up being neglected or left behind. Let us preserve our humanity by slowing down our “progress” and evaluating our choices and its consequences, and questioning: does this really help reduce suffering in the long run?

Student Name: Kavan Pandya

Grade: 8

School: St. John's School

Title: The Tent City

Category: Short Story

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Michael Seckman

It was a beaming summer day in the smoky hot dunes of the Namib, filled with red sand as far as the eye could see. There was nothing out for miles and miles. The only thing in the barren desert was a group of several small, rickety, Oryx leather tents. Shoulders slumped, a young man stared out into the abyss. He was thinking about the ever-looming problem that had been creeping up on him. Almost all of the animals, running away to a more fertile place, had migrated because of intense drought. Rain had always been scarce, but it had never been this bad. Ever since Oryx had been leaving by the hundreds, food was hard to come by. Every morning, when he, his father, and his father's brother and his father's cousin went to hunt with their spears and arrows, they would return with less and less food. Of course, since they were nomadic, they could move somewhere else where there was more food, but everywhere they moved, it seemed like it was just as barren as the last place they were. Depressed and disappointed, the tribe moved, as a last-ditch effort, to where they are now, near the banks of a long-forgotten dry river. It had been dry for years, only barely flowing when enough rain had fallen in some land far away. Nevertheless, because of groundwater, a few plants still sprouted out of the sand, and a few animals were grazing on the short stubs.

"IKággeṇ," his father said. "Those !naras look ripe." IKággeṇ harvested the melons carefully because many spikes were protecting them. He gave the fruit to an ill tribesperson because the !nara has many medicinal properties.

Elbows resting, IKággeṇ still pondered on the same question. Slowly, his tribe was starving, and if the drought persisted, they would have to move out of the area their ancestors had roamed to the vast savannah in the east. The savannah was experiencing the same problem, he was told by other San Bushmen, but there was still plenty of game. The saddening truth was that leaving the desert meant losing the ancestral knowledge of the area, and moving out of it would mean starting from scratch. New plants, new landscapes, even new animals. That night, when every tribesperson was sleeping, IKággeṇ rose from his tent, climbed the nearby dune and stared out. There! Miles away was a car, driving through the desert on a gravel road, surely looking for some fancy desert lodge.

IKággeṇ's tribe of San Bushmen always knew that there were other people out there, and other modern people living in a series of massive tents called cities. When IKággeṇ was very young, missionaries discovered his tribe to teach them some English. Slowly, his memory of the language attenuated, and now all he and his family could remember was

the numbers. Furthermore, more and more desert lodges were being built in their homeland, but !Kággen's father said to let it be. As !Kággen stared at the car, thinking about all of these things, a disturbing and somewhat preposterous thought came to his head. To keep his family alive, and his family's tradition alive, he would have to move to one of these cities. There were many problems with this idea. Where would he go? How would he get there? How would he communicate with people if he didn't know much English? How would he send money or food back to his family? The largest, looming problem was that he would have to give up on his way of life. There would be no more going out into the bush with only a bow and arrow, there would be no more picking fruit off the dry riverbeds, and there would be nobody that shared the experience he had in a city. He had heard stories of the old government taking away people from their homelands, making them give up their way of life. The old government sold hunting passes to go hunting for his people. He did not want to end up like his people forced to be ranchers, having to give up their culture. Now, the only nomads left were them and a few other tribes across the entire country of Namibia. Almost all tribes were kicked to the Kalahari, a shockingly different land from their home in the Namib.

In the morning, he knew he had to break the news to his father !Xu. His father, had taught !Kággen everything. How to hunt, how to know if the melons are ripe, how to properly shoot a bow, everything. " Father, to support our tribe, I must leave for the city," he said. His father, dumbstruck and saddened, exclaimed, " Why, !Kággen, please do not. All of the hunters are getting too old to hunt, except you. If you leave, there will be nobody to hunt once we are too old." Luckily, !Kággen had already thought of this. He told his father how his little brother, who was twelve, could begin to learn in !Kággen's footsteps.

!Kággen knew that leaving was for the better, as him sending money and food would allow his tribe to keep their natural ways.

!Xu asked, " How will you send money? We are always moving." !Kággen told him that he knew the land at the back of his head, he knew where the river beds were, he knew where the last animals roamed, he could find them even if they were miles in the desert.

!Kággen said that he would travel down the dry Kuiseb River until he would arrive in Whale Fish Bay. There lived the missionaries who taught him English. !Xu saw all of the points that !Kággen presented. He remembered the stories that his grandfather told him, of people dragged away from the Namib, taken to a far-away land called the Kalahari, and knew what !Kággen was planning to do was the right choice. Depressed and proud,!Xu agreed to allow his son to leave.

The next week, the whole tribe banded together with rituals wishing !Kággen good luck in his journey, and best of luck finding a job. !Kággen slowly walked away from his tribe, inspecting the Oryx leather tents one last time, staring at the vast barren landscape of that once which was his home. Then he set off walking, with an Oryx leather knapsack filled with !nara melons and !nara melon juice. He then walked out of the horizon, remembering the ways he once had, the culture he once possessed, but now, he was nobody. Nobody important walking to find a job in a city unwelcoming to nonmodern

people. But he kept walking. Alas, but he is one amongst thousands sacrificing his life and culture to help preserve his people.

Student Name: Daniela Laing  
 Grade: 11  
 School: St. John's School  
 Title: The Theater Kid  
 Category: Personal Essay & Memoir  
 Key: Gold Key  
 Educator: Clay Guinn

### Rehearsal

Sweat beading on my brow, I hurried down a familiar path. It was the same route I had taken every day to volleyball practice earlier that year. I very well could have traveled back in time. Nothing was different: following a steady train of athletes under the awning by the gym, lugging the same backpack, and still (as always) running extremely late. But this time, one thing was different. As I reached the steps of the gym, I peeled off on a more unfamiliar route, heading past the gym doors for the theater.

I followed the sound of familiar voices into a room that despite its red and black wall panels, was inexplicably dubbed the Green Room. I found my castmates lounging in their customary spots on the old leather couches, backpacks and scripts strewn across the plastic tile floor. I was greeted happily by an echo of “Dani! There you are,” by castmates who were relieved we could start on time and spare the wrath of our director. Saying my apologies, I grabbed pop tarts out of the snack closet and took my customary spot next to my favorite cast member. She already had her script out to look over lines none of us had memorized on time. I peeked over at her book, marked up with lines too strange to say at school and stage blocking we would always forget. Turning to my script, I found myself reviewing the lines of a scene I had auditioned with months ago. A quick wave of déjà vu came over me. It isn’t very often that I take a step back to breathe, but in that moment I did, watching all of us together, like a little bubble in time. I feel so calm here, nothing like before. I don’t know why I was scared.

Looking around, I realized how normal the theater had become to me. The Green Room had become as familiar as the locker room before practice and the stage was as comfortable to me as the court at a big game. I realized how grateful I was to have another place to be at school. An anchor. I wasn’t sitting on the couches gingerly anymore and second guessing which spot to take, I had a place there, room for me. Thinking back to freshman year and how I had felt so out of place at the school, a newer sense of appreciation for the theater settled over me. Things worked out the way they were supposed to. I took a risk and I got all of this.

I looked at the people around me, realizing that I didn’t have to deal with them or work past big egos the way I did with club teammates. I realized that I had come to truly know

them, that they were no longer strangers. They were friends. I had the comforting understanding that when I walked through the Green Room door they would say my name, excited to see me, not to wonder why I'm there. Or that when they joked about "strange theater kid culture," I was included in that. One of them. We had bonded over updates on each other's lives, complaining about tricky lines, watching oblivious castmates with crushes on each other, and eating dozens of frozen yogurts after rehearsal. It snuck up on me, the moment when I realized that I didn't have to hold my breath or watch my words in fear of being weird. I wasn't sure when it had become so safe, but all I knew was that it had. And it meant the world.

---

### Callbacks

This side of the school was one I had been to a few times before, but it never got less intimidating, the vast theater with its gaping cream colored walls with rows and rows of seats on balconies. I had a game later that day, hair tied up in my gameday ponytail and my red jersey feeling like a beacon that set me apart. It felt strange wearing it inside the theater. None of my varsity teammates knew that I was there. JV played their game before us and my teammates were busy refereeing their game so I hoped to slip in unnoticed and to make up some excuse about where I was. I wasn't sure why I didn't want to tell them. Certainly they wouldn't care, they would probably even be proud. But something in me wanted to keep it to myself, to have it be something that was just mine for that moment and in case it didn't go well.

Nerves knotted tightly in my stomach as I searched for the room in which we were meant to audition. I pulled out my phone, looking through my email to check again and again that I was in the right place. What if you're in the wrong place and look stupid? What if you got the day wrong? What if you actually had to prepare a monologue and you missed it in the email? It was unlikely. But I checked the callback email again just to be sure.

Relief flooded through me when I noticed people walking through the side door into the big theater. I followed closely behind, still hesitating a bit as I saw where people had gathered into the first few rows by the stage. A few kids I had a class with freshman year beckoned to me and I gratefully took a seat beside them. We made polite conversation but I could feel some quizzical eyes on me, getting a couple confused side eyes from freshmen. Most of the other sophomores had been in the play last year. I was the new kid. Again. I fidgeted with the hem of my jersey and wished that someone would turn the air down, an impossible wish for Houston in the summer. But I had read somewhere that cold air made people more nervous and I didn't need my anxiety to be worse at that moment.

Suddenly, an authoritative voice called for our attention at the front of the stage. Three adults stood there, clipboards in hand with our cold read scripts ready. Though I know now that they are probably the least intimidating adults in the world, at that moment they

could very well have been the scary religion teachers at my old school who threw markers at noisy students. They announced that we would all have about ten minutes to prepare our scene and that they would bring us in one by one to read. My stomach dropped. They're putting us on the big stage? I thought we were going to be in the small theater. Maybe this was a bad idea.

People began to disperse, grabbing their assignments from the stage. I shakily followed the line and was handed a monologue from the woman who would eventually become my director. She noticed my unsure steps and smiled at me. "Are you nervous?" Usually when I'm asked that question I lie. In my usual fashion, my "no" was already prepared, but the look she gave me told me she already knew I was preparing to lie. I guess you can't fool actors.

"Yeah," I admitted, surprised at how steady my voice sounded, "I haven't done this since before Covid." I was surprised at myself, never in a million years would I have admitted to a weakness like that in volleyball. But she just handed me my script and herded off to go work with a random senior girl who I had no idea would become one of my best friends, saying, "You have nothing to worry about. Just be yourself." I ignored it in the moment, but in the months that followed, that freedom was the thing I was most grateful for.

---

### Closing Night

For the last time, nerves knotted in my stomach and I crept into the theater to take a few breaths, listening to people chattering unintelligibly in the audience. I drank in purple stage lights and a curtain full of stars. Our set was a wooden house. I thought it fitting because over the long months of rehearsal it had become my home. It was so strange to think that in only thirty minutes all the chairs currently flooded with people would be empty and I would have said my lines and done my scenes that I had worked on for months for the last time. It felt like a lifetime had passed since auditions, showing up in my volleyball jersey and feeling like I stuck out like a sore thumb and not being sure if my acting was any good and not knowing anyone. Such a stark difference from the girl standing in her costume and wig. The girl who knew her performance was good because she had worked hard because she wanted to.

I walked to the other side of the wings, preparing to check my props. I brushed aside the curtain into the backstage lit by a blue light and I found that I wasn't alone. My favorite senior was staring out at the sea of people in the audience through a gap in the curtain. Wanting to give her privacy, I turned to slip back out the side door, but she turned to me, expression unreadable. I understood she was saying goodbye to the theater in a farewell I didn't want to think about making yet.

"How are you feeling?" I asked in a backstage half whisper, unable to think of anything that would be able to measure up to what she was thinking.

Her voice was scratchy when she responded, “I may never get a chance to do theater again. Some days I think that I’ll be too busy to notice its absence, that college will distract me from the fact that I’m not here and never will be again. But I think we both know that’s not true. I’m going to miss it all. But it won’t miss me. I’m gonna be gone and things will change and it’ll be like I wasn’t here at all.”

Memories of singing off key to Hamilton in the dressing room, playing truth or dare on the cold concrete over Chipotle dinners, sprinting through a quick change, and trying to hold in laughs backstage flashed through my mind. At that moment I knew exactly what to say, “You know damn well you made an impact here. One bigger than helping us chase the poor stage managers around with mascara.”

She laughed and we got a sharp side eye from a stage manager who had come backstage to set a prop, messy mascara smudged on the edges of his eyelids. I continued when he was out of earshot, “You mean a lot to the cast, I know the freshmen definitely look up to you, and so do I.” I paused, thinking of how to articulate how much this show meant. How refreshing it was for me to be able to joke about being in the “crappy winter play” and to be okay with mistakes, all the pressure that usually permeates everything else that I do, gone. “Like if I stumble through a monologue or forget my blocking in rehearsal, it doesn’t change how y’all treat me. I’ve never had that before. And that’s not something I’m going to ever be able to forget. I don’t know what the theater program will look like in the next few years but I know I’m going to miss you.”

She smiled and wrapped me into a hug and we waited as the rest of our cast trickled into the wings with us. It didn’t matter if I was in the big theater beneath the best lights with the best actors or the small, boxy theater with squeaky doors. Because the strange cast had become something dear to me. All of us fit together like a patchwork quilt, pieces that shouldn’t work, but do. What we had become was a far cry from raising eyebrows at the cast list and being unsure about how well we would work together. Those unfamiliar faces at callbacks had become the people I looked for in the hallways. And it meant more to me than I ever thought it could. Because for the first time I did something not to be perfect, but just to enjoy it and do the best I can. I didn’t even have to be anything special for them to like me, I just had to be.

I wasn’t sure how I should feel after that night. That constant I had found would be gone. So instead of trying to figure it out, I decided to just be in the moment. I squeezed her arm as we watched the lights in the house dim and prepared to step onto the stage for the final time.



I watched the haloes around the street lights and listened to the cicadas that had begun to get their voices back. I know the feeling. I left the cast party early to get some sleep before practice. My parents were already texting me about college coaches I needed to email before my upcoming tournament.

But I was still replaying our drawn out goodbyes, everyone lingering like none of us wanted it to end yet. The drive home didn't feel real, my mind still remaining unconvinced that everything was over.

I tried to catalog the events of closing night in my mind, trying to hold onto every detail as I drove away. I tried to remember the happy moments of bowing onstage in the dimming lights and running to hug my friends waiting outside the theater. I tried to forget how it was our last time crowded into our customary circle, sitting in a senior's backyard. The muggy air was already hinting at the spring pushing winter away. The cold air we would brace ourselves against as we ate tech week dinners outside was disappearing.

There's something immensely unique about twelve theater kids in full stage makeup and hair devouring tacos at eleven thirty at night. We were ravenous (and slightly disgruntled) after two hours of striking the set that had been our home for months. We lugged out prop trees and fake hospital beds to the woodshop. My favorite senior played Childish Gambino over the speakers in an attempt to drown out the sound of nail guns removing the nails that anchored our lives in the theater. And maybe to keep the sleep deprived theater kids on precarious ladders awake as we removed lighting rigging.

Finally I pulled into my driveway, unlocking the door. I set my bag containing a strange array of makeup, my script, and cough drops down on the cold kitchen countertop. I was the last person awake in my house, so quiet compared to the loudness of the theater. Carefully arranged flowers resting in multicolored vases littered the kitchen table. A bouquet of red and yellow roses from my friends, big pink tulips with baby's breath from my parents, and a singular plastic rose from the backstage of my old school from a childhood friend. I decided to take that one upstairs with me as I turned off all the lights and climbed the stairs to my room quietly to let my parents sleep.

The thing is, before I had started acting again, I would rattle off a list of things that I thought made me worthwhile, produced in list-like monotony to impress relatives and my parents' friends when they came over for dinner. But now when people ask me what I'm most proud of, I don't have to quantify it in a count of medals or how many college volleyball coaches are recruiting me at that time. Instead, I can talk about that one time I took a chance and got an important part of my life from it.

Wiping off my stage makeup and carefully extracting dozens of bobby pins tangled in my hair, I laid out my practice clothes for the next morning, trading in character shoes and

costumes for Nike Hypersets and ankle braces. Placing the rose beside my warmup sweats on my desk, I stepped back to admire my work. The new combined with the familiar. Now they both feel like home. And I wouldn't have it any other way.

Student Name: Eshna Das

Grade: 10

School: St. John's School

Title: We were too young to understand any antisemitism : Holocaust survivor Ruth Steinfeld shares her story

Category: Journalism

Key: Gold Key

Educator: DAVID Nathan

"The Holocaust is something that is very real," said Ruth Steinfeld, survivor of the Holocaust. "And the reason we speak is that we don't want anyone to forget." In October, the Jewish Affinity Group invited Steinfeld to share her story with the Upper School. Since then, antisemitism has run rampant and unchecked. Influential figures, including musician Kanye West and NBA All-Star Kyrie Irving, have publicly made numerous antisemitic remarks, highlighting the continued need for Holocaust education. "We live in a time where it's very easy to get away with hate and violence and not have personal accountability, and because of that, there are a lot of really nasty ideas circulating," said JAG faculty sponsor Emily Reppart in reference to West's Instagram and Twitter posts.

According to JAG president Hailey Jane Frank, survivors of the Holocaust had spoken at the School before, but not recently, and the affinity group felt it was important to resume the practice while there are still Holocaust survivors.

During her talk at the assembly on Jan. 12, Steinfeld chronicled her experience before, during and after the Holocaust.

Born in 1933 in Ladenburg, Germany, Steinfeld lived with her parents and her older sister, Lea. Classmates would call the two girls "dirty Jews" and pelt them with rocks on their way to school. Steinfeld recalls how the community in Ladenburg hated her family—despite them doing no harm.

"We were a wonderful family with a wonderful home, and all of a sudden, everything changed," Steinfeld said.

In 1940, Steinfeld's family was sent to one of the 34 internment camps in France, the Gurs near the French Pyrenees. Steinfeld was forced into a cattle car and taken to the camp, where the Nazis separated the men and the women.

"That was the last time I ever saw my father."

In the internment camp, Steinfeld slept on a small straw bed inside a dirt-filled room and was given only a filthy bowl from which to eat.

One night when she and her sister were sleeping, their mother woke them up, got them dressed and sent them away on a bus with the help of the Children's Aid Society, a Jewish-French organization.

At the time, Steinfeld did not understand why she was leaving. She begged her mother to let her stay, promising she would be a good daughter, yet her mother insisted that she

go. Steinfeld later realized that her mother was saving their lives while risking her own—and knowing that she would likely never see them again.

“My sister and I always wondered how my mother did it,” Steinfeld said. “I have lived knowing that my mother must have been the most unbelievable and unselfish because a lot of children didn’t make it like my sister and I did.”

Steinfeld’s mother made the agency promise that they would never separate the two sisters.

Steinfeld and her sister were taken to live in a castle owned by the Rothschilds, an influential family that sheltered Jewish children during the Holocaust.

She hid in the dungeon for weeks while the Children’s Aid Society taught her children’s songs in French. When the Nazis drew near, Steinfeld changed her German-sounding last name Krell to the more French Acrelles to hide her Jewish identity. Just before the Nazis arrived at the castle, she moved to another French town where she and her sister were welcomed by Monsieur and Madame Chapot and their young daughter Paulette.

“I was saved by wonderful people who were brave enough to go beyond the box.”

Steinfeld and her sister attended a Catholic school and learned Christian traditions to disguise themselves from the Nazis. Although the local priest realized they had little knowledge of Catholicism and suspected the sisters of being Jewish, he said nothing. Soon, though, their town heard the news that Oradour-sur-Glane, a nearby town, had just been burned to the ground for sheltering only one Jewish person.

Then came the day that the local priest announced to the community that the sisters were, in fact, Jewish. Steinfeld suspected that this was an effort to protect the town from the same fate as Oradour-sur-Glane.

“He was afraid that his town would be put in the church and the church would be set on fire.”

The sisters were chased and insulted once more—a bitter reminder of their life in Germany. They moved yet again, still confused as to why people hated them for their religion.

“We were too young to understand any antisemitism. We just knew we weren’t wanted anywhere.”

After years of running from the Nazis, Steinfeld received a letter from her grandfather in 1945 that gave her the opportunity to move to America.

After a grueling two-week boat ride, Steinfeld and her sister met her grandfather and aunt in New York. By 1948, their aunt, believing Steinfeld and her sister’s English was too poor and their memory too weak, told the immigration agency that she did not want them anymore.

The agency showed the sisters a large map of the U.S., pointing to cities including Seattle and Minneapolis. But when Steinfeld’s sister saw “House-tin, Texas,” near the bottom of the map, they decided to move there, thinking they would see cowboys.

After moving to Houston, they got an apartment and worked at Sysco Foods for several years. Steinfeld’s friends were jealous because she and her sister had their own apartment, yet all of them had the only thing she really wanted.

"I was jealous of them because they had a mom and a dad. That's all I ever wanted in my whole life—a mother and a father."

Thanks to the language skills she acquired in France, Steinfeld became a part of Houston's small French community. She worked as a hairdresser, married a German local car salesman named Larry Steinfeld and raised three daughters. Yet, because of the pain, she never spoke of her childhood, often dodging questions, even reminders, of her past.

"In my beauty shop, whenever I would hear somebody with a German accent, I would run away," she said. "I didn't want to deal with it."

Steinfeld refused to tell even her own children about her past. The grief of losing her parents felt impossible to explain.

"If they would ask me where their grandparents were, I would just walk away and say, 'I don't know. They're somewhere in Europe.'"

In 1981, Steinfeld received an invitation to a Holocaust survivor reunion in Israel. She tore it up. But then her sister asked, "Aren't you going to go? What's the matter with you?"

So Steinfeld booked the flight. She says it was one of the best decisions she's ever made. In Israel, Steinfeld visited the Yad Vashem Museum, which features a grand room housing graves illuminated by eternal lights. Each grave represents people from the same country who had died in the Holocaust. What stood out most to Steinfeld was one grave dedicated to the 1.5 million children who were killed because they were not yet 14—too young to work. At that moment, she realized it was her duty to speak for all the children who could not.

Earlier, when Steinfeld's family proposed a trip back to Germany, Steinfeld refused.

But after her visit to Israel, she realized that she needed to go. She spent the flight in tears, realizing she was doing the one thing she thought she could never do.

When she arrived, Steinfeld and her sister visited their childhood home in Ladenburg.

When they knocked on the door, an elderly German lady invited them in.

All of Steinfeld's memories from the Holocaust came flooding back to her, and all she could do was cry.

Then the German lady started crying, too.

Steinfeld didn't understand why the German lady was crying, but she held her in her arms.

In that moment, she realized she had to forgive the German people. Her religion asked her to accept the past and forgive, so she tried to find the strength to overcome her hatred.

"The pain and the hurt that I had felt for so many years left me," she said. "I forgave myself. I forgave myself for hating. I forgave myself for holding that country responsible."

After her visit to Germany, Steinfeld had the opportunity to visit Lyon, France, where she began her search for Paulette. After meeting a French man who gave her directions, she hopped into a truck and was driven to her house. She wanted to ask Paulette the one question she had been wondering since she was a little girl: "How was it that your family was so brave as to take in two little Jewish girls while knowing the consequences?"

When she found Paulette and asked her her question, the reply was simple: “Wouldn’t you?”

When Steinfeld returned to Houston, she worked to overcome her hatred by sharing stories of her life during the Holocaust. At first, she told just her children; then she told larger groups, the first being one of her daughter’s classes at the University of Texas.

“As I spoke, I never stopped crying because I had never told my story to anybody,” she said. “I felt all the pain, all the harm of losing my parents.”

In 2020, she independently published a book “Forgive, But Never Forget” to share her story with a wider audience. In recognition of her efforts to educate future generations, she received the prestigious France’s Legion of Honor award in 2021.

To her, Steinfeld’s eleven grandchildren and eight great-grandchildren are a powerful reminder that Hitler did not achieve his goal, that he failed to eliminate the Jewish people.

By the end of her emotional presentation, the audience was speechless. After a brief silence, Steinfeld received a standing ovation.

After assemblies, students usually chatter, laugh or text as they exit the building. But that day, they left in silence.

“It is so rare that you get to hear a speaker who makes an experience that you learn about in history class feel so real,” senior Grace Rustay said.

Many students were tearing up on their way to their next classes, and many teachers tried to create an open environment for students to share their thoughts, listen to each other and reflect.

“Her speech was a strong reminder that tragedies like the Holocaust don’t just exist in a textbook,” freshman Lynn Pham said. “They’re real things that happened to real people.”

Student Name: Sophia Kim

Grade: 8

School: St. John's School

Title: Yesterday; When I; And Yesterday; When No People

Category: Poetry

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Judy Adams

Yesterday, I went back to a time  
When there was just day and night,  
No orbits or star patterns.

Guns didn't jeer at children,  
So they could walk to the garden,  
And stop to inhale the flowers.

No labels or checkboxes or margins,  
No protocols meant to control  
People subject to judgment.

Yesterday, when I went back to yesterday,  
I saw the world without its colors,  
People laughing with each other,  
And tears the shade of sunflowers.

Student Name: Sarah Nguyen

Grade: 8

School: St. John's School

Title: Zinnias

Category: Flash Fiction

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Michael Seckman

The shed door slammed behind me, rattling the entire structure and sending dust spiraling into the stale air. A row of gardening tools stood like soldiers at attention, leaning against the dilapidated back wall. I quickly grabbed the herb seeds I needed and retreated back through the door, grabbing some old gloves on the way. Then I walked to the garden, a sad little brown plot in the front of our house.

The grass, damp and squishy, rapidly soaked the knees of my jeans, squelching as I shifted my weight. All this because I texted my friends during breakfast, I thought, mentally scolding my past self for believing I could get away with such an offense. Sighing, I began digging wells in the dirt, making sure to clear the land of rocks and pebbles. Just as I was about to drop the herbs into the soil, my mom opened the front door.

"Hey! Just came out to check on you," she said, stepping onto the lawn. Was she here to rescue me from my punishment? I tried my best to act like I was working hard. "I wanted to make sure you remembered to leave three inches between seed wells, just like your dad told you." I scanned the neat rows of indentations, wondering if I could pass them off as three inches apart. She quickly dashed my hopes, inspecting the dirt before giving me a look that told me it would not. "Please, Carolina, you know how your father gets when his garden doesn't look just right." I suppressed the urge to respond with "What garden?" and instead began erasing all traces of my previous work as my mom reentered the house.

I sat back, having replaced all the soil, and immediately got dirt from my shoes onto my jeans. I threw my hands up in frustration, slapping them down again as a piece of dirt flung up and hit me on the cheek. Embarrassed, I looked around to see if anyone was watching, but there was only one old lady, half asleep on the porch across the street. What was the point? Nothing ever grew there anyway. I didn't understand people who enjoyed gardening; I only saw a bunch of work for some weeds that may or may not taste good in salad. I threw up my hands again, then watched as one of my gloves soared away, flopping onto the cement of the driveway. I didn't even bother to retrieve it, instead opting to stare blankly at the ground, eyeing the single sprout that had popped up earlier that week.

Suddenly, I noticed the old lady from across the street walking towards me. "Hello," she said, waving a wrinkled hand. "I saw you dropped this." She handed me my glove, then painstakingly lowered herself beside me. I noted she wore a relatively nice sundress but



didn't seem to mind the brown smudges appearing on it. Following my gaze, she laughed softly. "Everyone is always so worried about staying clean," she said, shaking her head. Then she surveyed the garden, if it could even be called that, and frowned slightly. "It's not much," I said, now embarrassed by its lack of growth, "but I'm planning on planting some herbs today." She looked up at me, then at the bag of seeds I had.

"Well, there's a time for herbs, but what this garden needs is some color!" She then rose, bustled away, and crossed the street to her home. After a few minutes, she popped out of the house and knelt next to me once more.

"Here," she said, thrusting a bag into my hands. "This should do the trick." I looked at it, unimpressed, and considered how to reply. On one hand, I was not in the mood for more work. On the other, it was probably rude to refuse the seeds.

"Thank you!" I told her, "I will definitely find a place for these." Then I set them aside and went back to the menial work of digging wells for the herbs.

"No, no, no!" the old lady admonished me. "We will plant them here together, right now." She began to sprinkle the seeds onto the plot of dirt, scooping soil over them as she went. My heart sank as I realized I would now have to do more gardening, but, reluctantly, I joined her. "You know, I've been living in this old house for something around thirty years," she boasted. "I used to have a garden," she continued wistfully. "So many flowers and colors...But that was a long time ago, and I'm too old now to be caring for those plants. I don't even know if these seeds will grow; they're probably as old as you are." She laughed, then shook her head and placed the last few seeds in the ground. She rose to leave, and I felt a sudden sting of disappointment as I realized that I had begun to enjoy my time with her. "I don't think we've properly introduced ourselves," I said. "I'm Carolina."

She smiled, then replied, "Hello, Carolina. I'm Mary." And with that, just as abruptly as she had come, she scurried back towards her house and disappeared through the door. I stood, rooted to the spot, looking at the bed of freshly planted seeds. Beneath the feeling of resentment I had toward my punishment, there was a glimmer of excitement, a curiosity to discover how the flowers would grow. I began to understand that I had never given gardening much of a chance, and instead I had only seen it as punishment, when it could actually be enjoyable and fulfilling.

I didn't see Mary again, aside from brief glimpses through the window, but I did see the flowers bloom. They were zinnias, and each was beautiful, vibrant, fresh. Their many petals spread open, soaking up sunlight, and although I never again gardened with the old lady from across the street, I cared for her flowers every day.

Student Name: Rachel Sipes  
Grade: 12  
School: St. Pius X High School  
Title: Audacity  
Category: Poetry  
Key: Gold Key  
Educator: Christina Guajardo

the bird on two wings  
the horse on four legs  
the man by the seat of his pants

animals survive  
plants thrive  
man gets by

when a women has it together  
a man must be apart of that  
but a man is never together

where a women has a uterus  
and can bless the world with a child  
a man only stores audacity

the lies he breathes  
their inability to move beyond their first love  
is a horrible gift they push onto women

a women will doubt if shes enough  
or loose herself to keep them  
and a man will take advantage of that

why do we allow this  
who raised them to be this  
no women I know

Student Name: Ethan Zhao

Grade: 10

School: Strake Jesuit College Prep School

Title: Free From Facades

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Key: Gold Key

Educator:

顾名思义 [Gù Míng SīYì] is a Chinese idiom that translates to As the name suggests, a simplified assumption that implies universal agreement. As in, “as the name suggests, all Asians are smart.”

At school, in debate, at parties, or anywhere out and about in the world, people treat me like I’m a Made-In-China Robot: Highly efficient, quality performance with little tolerance for error. Or as they say in Texas, we Git R Dun.

In my experience, America has come to expect Asians to achieve more with less. As this century’s generation of aspirational Asian immigrants, many of our parents came to America pursuing advanced degrees and to put down roots to make a better life for their families. Asian immigrants don’t come from centuries of wealth; we are trying to build it. We are trying to carve out new lives in a new world. We work hard for the American Dream we still believe in. But instead, our identities are grouped into a corrupted model of the quiet, obedient, self-deprecating automaton.

Here’s another apropos Chinese idiom: 源远流长 [Yuán Yuǎn Liú Cháng]. Of long standing.

My entire life, my race has set me apart. I am a skinny, nerdy Asian boy right out of central casting. Due to that appearance, people automatically assume that I must be smart. That stereotype has permeated every aspect of my life, especially in my education. Many teachers have a demonstrably higher bar for their Asian students and expect more from us in our essays and assignments. Peers assume we simply know the answers like our brains are a Wikipedia catalog. These lofty assumptions have forced us into a position of unrelenting pressure. Behind every achievement, 100, or first place trophy is countless hours of study and toil. Asian students work extremely hard just to meet regular baseline requirements, yet we are still expected to exceed and go above. However, when we do meet those unfair expectations, the instant reaction is: “Of course you did that, you’re Asian.” And when I eventually fail: “How could you not? I thought you were Asian!” This lays out this dichotomy of the stereotype. Each time I fulfill an unfair expectation, it’s not tied to determination, but instead to race, completely disregarding the work I have done.

I don't get full credit for the effort I put in because baseline expectations for me are that of course I will put in an insane amount of extra credit: I'm Asian. So when I do get high grades, people assume it is because of my ethnicity. But honestly, it's not that hard to get a 100. You just need to put in a tiny extra bit of effort. But if I was some normal white kid who studies like I study, people would be like: "Wow, do you see how hard Johnny works? He's as smart as all the Asians in his grade..."

It strikes me as unhealthy and even dangerous to expect more of one ethnicity over another. If we were to flip it and expect less of certain people because they were from a certain ethnicity, we would obviously call it bigotry. So why is it okay for Asian Americans to suffer the soft bigotry of higher expectations? Why do I need to go above "above and beyond" to meet the baseline? It feels like I'm fighting for my dignity with one hand behind my back.

Another one of my favorite idioms is 惩前毖后 [Chéng Qián Bì Hòu]. To punish the past is to withhold the future. An immeasurable truth in just four characters.

Our generation has already seen the devastating consequences of this model minority. Study after study proves how this detrimentally pervasive stereotype has infiltrated and taken over the lives of Asian Americans. When I inevitably trip and fail to meet unfair expectations, suddenly I'm dishonoring my culture and bringing shame to the Asian community. I'm insulted for "betraying my heritage" and "failing my parents" for simply getting an A-. Instead of an internal motivation for success, we are placed under unrelenting external pressure to achieve greater goals or face the consequences. Our work is transformed from a passionate exploration to a Sisyphean struggle to avoid condemnation. A system that forces us to constantly struggle just to meet higher bars and avoid crushing blows to our identity. Driven by fear rather than spirit.

Since it is a competition to be perfect, each generation inadvertently makes it harder for the next. Like any piece of technology, everyone wants the fastest and shiniest – the best. Who would want an artsy mid-academic Asian when you can get the latest automaton of efficiency? Instead of cultivating a flourishing, diverse Asian culture, we cram the whole thing into a sausage grinder and expect a fully-functioning robot on the other end. Our brains are wired by pressure to succeed, programming us to seek higher intelligence at the cost of well being. We want to express our art, our traditions, our imaginations, but we are manufactured against it because it's not accepted. When Asian students stand out with individuality, we are labeled as rejects. Those who defy the norm are seen as malfunctioning products of the perfect Asian factory, destined to be outcast from the "proper" community like robots with faulty wiring. Broken children that do not pass America's quality control. Thus, to avoid that downfall, we can never stop working. We cannot make mistakes. We cannot shatter this supernatural expectation. When we show our humanity and display our imperfection, we are condemned. Disappointment. Failure.

Disgrace. Malfunctioning automatons. The looming punishment for failure casts a long dark shadow over so many innocent futures.

Finally, 凡夫俗子 [Fán Fū Sú Zǐ]. Ordinary People.

We have seen the model minority issue grow year by year, yet it continues to negatively influence millions. Decades of ignorance have allowed this fallacy to bloom and solidify itself. Protests, awareness, and movements for social justice fail to take down the racist institution. Why? Because the stereotype is a cyclical monstrosity that has become a leech on American society. There is no easy way to combat the prejudice it brings. But while we may not be able to take down the system at once, we can fracture it. We must break down this surface level analysis of the Asian identity not by extravagant means that would risk fueling the cycle, but by simply recognizing us as human instead of robot. Instead of seeing our failures as signs of rejection, we need to learn how to view them as indications of our humanness. Instead of assuming that we are all smart, just see us as flawed individuals. While many of us are hard working, as is everyone, we are just ordinary children striving for a better tomorrow. We aren't automatons, we are aspirational. We are just humans.

In Chinese, the United State's name is “美国” [Měi Guó]. Beautiful or Golden Country. This Golden Country has attracted immigrants for centuries. From the first peoples who traveled here on foot from Asia to the now exploding Asian population that has put down roots in every state, we have all come to the New World to foster better lives. And like all immigrants, we are working for the American Dream. For too long we have tied Asian culture to one of a miraculous “higher intelligence.” This cyclical stereotype has damaged generation after generation. But we aren't robots manufactured in a foreign country programmed to be naturally smart and successful, we are simply humans working for our futures. Our culture has been forced to abide by this devastating assumption, fearing detrimental consequences if we make the smallest mistake. But it's time to change the mindset from damaged automatons to human nature. The model minority expects perfection, but that is impossible. Stop the pressures that force Asian students to run on fear rather than passion. We are not Made-In-China Electric Androids – we are humans. Hence:

顾名思义,源远流长,惩前毖后,凡夫俗子.

Long standing assumptions about ordinary people punish the young if we cannot see their humanity.

Student Name: Grace Marie Newsom

Grade: 7

School: Veritas Christian Academy

Title: The Bullet

Category: Flash Fiction

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Laura Arrazolo

### The Bullet

Heidi and Ida, two German orphan sisters, strolled through the shabby cabin doors of the home that they had grown up in, carrying in a basket filled with loaves of bread and vegetables, and began unpacking. Recently, the two sisters and their little brother had taken in many people fighting in the Napoleonic War.

Little eight-year-old Christoph watched Juliette fastening her cap. She was going undercover to get much-needed information. Usually, she would tend to wounded soldiers or carry messages to different camps. Yet, this time, she needed information that was easier to get if you were close to the person, from her brothers, who were army generals for the French. She had found a print of a newsboy she planned to disguise herself as on this mission.

„Du wirst bald zurück sein, oder?“ (You will be back soon, right?) asked Christoph.

„Ich werde es versuchen“ (I will try my best), said Juliette, trying to sound hopeful for little Christoph, but this was a hazardous mission, and even she had doubts.

Late that night, after they said farewells, Juliette headed down the cold streets of Leipzig. The road was lit with torches, and she could hear different noises blowing up, cries of pain, and everything she wanted to end so desperately. While she walked on the cold cobblestone streets, she thought about how less than a year ago, she had fled to fight with the Germans against France, her own home.

She remembered her brothers leaving for the war on October 14, 1813, her 16th birthday. It was a cold, rainy night filled with the sadness of saying goodbye. Juliette had fled from her home that crisp night while her family slept.

Before she left, she made a wish by the fountain in the courtyard. It had always been the place to come to clear her mind. It gave her a sense of calm. "I just hope that I can help change the outcome of this terrible war," Juliette looked at the quiet house, waved

goodbye, and ran down the main street. Then she left for Germany to help in the war. The Germans had been fighting alongside Great Britain, Austria, Spain, and other countries in this war against France and more against Napoleon himself.

She came up to the cottage housing her brothers. She fixed her hat on her head. But just as she was about to knock on the door, something stopped her.

A gut-wrenching feeling crept over her. How could she fight her own brothers whom she loved so dearly? What would happen? What would her parents think? Whom could she turn to? All these questions flooded her mind. She straightened up and banged on the door.

A dwarflike, grandfatherly butler answered the door.

„Hallo, mein Herr, mein Name ist Arthur. Ich kann ihnen das Papier von dir nehmen“ (Hello, my name is Arthur; I can take the paper from you), the butler said as he reached for the newspapers. Juliette quickly yanked them back.

„Vielen Dank, Herr, aber ich muss die Papiere selbst ausliefern. Dies sind meine offiziellen Anweisungen“ (Thank you, sir, but I have to deliver the papers myself. These are my official instructions), she replied, trying to sound as masculine as possible.

„Na gut, dann sind die Lordschaften bald unten,“ (Well, all right then, their lordships will be down soon), the kind butler agreed. He led her into the parlor.

When Arthur left, Juliette heard muffled voices from outside. She quickly dusted off her shirt and vest and tightened her cap. She glanced around the room at the empty bookshelves. The room was bare and only one small lamp lit the room.

„Ah, Sie sind der Zeitungsjunge, nicht wahr?“ (You’re the newsboy, aren’t you?) her brother Oliver asked as both brothers strolled into the simple wooden parlor.

She noticed her brother Henri holding something behind his back. She set the newspaper on the table and stood up.

„Ja, Sir, mein Name ist –“ (Yes sir, my name is--)

„Wir wissen, wer du bist, dreckiger Mörder!“ (We know who you are, filthy murderer!) Henri interrupted accusingly. Suddenly, Juliette comprehended that poster of the newsboy she had impersonated. She recalled the angry chants in the streets. He wasn't the hero she'd thought him to be. That poster boy was someone who had committed murder in his own country.

„Nein, warte!“ (No, wait!) she yelled, but even then, she knew the end was near. She could not reveal her true identity, even if it meant death.

"„Sag kein Wort“ (Don't say a word), Oliver said coldly as he pointed his gun at her. Juliette was stunned beyond belief. This was the end.

„Nun, wirst du dich verteidigen, Feigling?!“ (Well, are you going to fight back, coward?) Oliver shouted. He still only saw her disguise.

Before Juliette could grasp what was happening, Oliver fired his gun.

The bullet pierced her heart as she collapsed to the floor. Everything blurred, but she could still hear the yells as her hat fell and her true identity was revealed. Her brothers and the house staff crowded around her, and all went blank.

Still, a year after Juliette's death, many told her story, which everyone loved.

Even though she could not change the war, she changed many hearts. Her brothers, especially Oliver, would never forgive himself for firing the first shot at his beloved 16-year-old sister, who had left her world to fight.

As a tribute to her bravery, the people of France raised money to build a palace which Juliette could rest in. It was named the Palace of Fontainebleau, after her beloved fountain. There she lay in peace even hundreds of years later. Her bravery was unlike that which anyone else had seen. No one will forget the bullet.



Student Name: Jada Lee

Grade: 7

School: Veritas Christian Academy

Title: The Page

Category: Poetry

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Laura Arrazolo

### The Page

I stare at the blank page  
Ready to fill it with all the stories  
That keep me awake stories that  
Cascade through my brain and grow  
Longer and longer by the day

But here these stories stay  
Still engulfed in my brain  
Here they stay waiting to be jabbed and poked  
Written and rewritten on a page with  
Tears and stains they wait to be the newest thing  
But when the pen touches the page all the stories melt away

Leaving me with an empty page  
Leaving me with an empty brain  
Leaving me with an empty heart  
Leaving me with words that never seem to touch the page.

Student Name: Duy Nguyen

Grade: 12

School: Village High School

Title: A Quick Tutorial for Connecting Everything in the Universe

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Denise Keenaghan

Imagine life as a game of "connect the dots." The world is full of so many ideas, and each on its own seems solitary, a point on a grid without inherent value, simultaneously worlds apart from the next and indistinguishable from the rest in their meaninglessness. But the human mind is nothing if not a pattern-finder. We look at data points and draw lines between them, connecting them until they form a picture, just as one word of this essay conveys little, but meaning compounds the more words I add. That process of drawing lines works fine for simple ideas, but how on Earth does one connect larger concepts: questions or constructs that are bigger than ourselves and our surroundings? Let me try to show you.

I really like aliens. Or more accurately, I like the idea of aliens. Human life and society is an intensely intricate thing - think of the convoluted path that led society to this moment. Think of all the combinations of cruelty, empathy, ingenuity, foolishness, strength, and weakness; isn't it incredible? So what is it like for aliens? Will they be anything like us? Dot one is set.

The year is 2021. I'm 15 and a firm existentialist. Existentialism is many things, but at the time my understanding was that it was the belief that in the end, nothing really matters. How far back does your knowledge go about your ancestors? You might know where they're from, but do you know their names or what they were like? If they were good people? Sure, their information is preserved in your DNA, but you don't really know them. As individuals, they don't mean much to you. It seems that nothing you have ever done or will ever do will ever make a dent in the vast timeline of the universe. There's dot 2. How do these possibly connect? As with most good things, you'll have to give it a moment.

I didn't know it, but I was actually incorrect about existentialism. Existentialism isn't the belief that life is meaningless - it's actually the belief that the individual is the giver of their own meaning. There is no inherent meaning in existence other than the ones we assign to ourselves - if you decide your meaning is to have and raise children, then that is your meaning. If you decide your meaning is to be close with friends, then it is. Existentialism is actually quite optimistic; I think the negative brand comes from how strangely alluring total despair is. Existential despair is easy, because it only requires a single conclusion, a single dot: that nothing matters. But it's not really a productive or correct mindset; if nothing matters, then the fact that nothing matters doesn't matter. Simon Amstell, talking about social anxiety, put it that "everything is a choice between

fear and love, we may as well choose love." I think we can apply the same logic here: We may as well choose purpose.

Perhaps it's unrealistic, but I like to imagine that aliens, with their fur, scales, or tentacles, are staring up at the sky's starry canvas and asking the same questions we are: whether they're alone, if they really matter at all, and what they're supposed to make of the universe they've been handed. We don't know everything, but I don't think they do either - not knowing is probably one of the few universal aspects of intelligence. However, I find that asking questions yields more meaning than the answers themselves. We are defined by what we don't know, sure, but it's in that blind wandering through fog that we find each other and find meaning. That fog is the line between these two dots, and in a way, between all dots. Because regardless of the puzzle itself, all dots have the grid in common.

That's a pretty nice picture, don't you think?

Student Name: Holly Schofield  
 Grade: 11  
 School: Village High School  
 Title: An Awakening in the Snow  
 Category: Short Story  
 Key: Gold Key  
 Educator: Denise Keenaghan

"I am not human. I never was. So why are you expecting me to act like one?" is what circled his mind as he stared down at the grave. They had asked him, "Do you not feel any remorse?" And the truth was that he didn't feel any remorse, he couldn't even contemplate the thought of shedding a tear for the death. Yet here he was, standing in front of the grave as the wind lashed at his thick wool coat. The air was alight with the approach of winter as frost coated the limbs of the trees.

"It's snowing!" a young boy yelled from his stoop, "Come out and play, we can make proper forts!" His house was small, the shutters threatening to fall from the nails that they hung from. The paint was chipped and falling off of the walls. Through the worn windows you could see a small tree adorned with string and mismatched baubles. The small boy was running out of the door, slipping on his oversized boots as he ran to a porch across the street where another boy watched with a calculating gaze.

It had happened a year ago, the snow had been falling in sheets coating everything in layers of frigid white. He found that he had never liked the snow, yet he had still gone out to build those forts and race with his sled. He hated how the air seeped through the layers of his coat to eat away at his skin and spread a chill down his limbs. He hated how his nose and the tips of his ears would turn pink and how his breath would fog up as he exhaled into the air.

"Look at the trees!" the boy said, gazing intently at the bark of this big old oak tree. "Notice how the frost has made its way into the crevices, isn't it beautiful?" He turned to look at him as he asked his question. His unruly auburn hair spilled out from the green hat that he was wearing. His eyes were bright and full of wonder as they took in the sights of winter.

He never understood why the winter was always such a wonder to the boy. It had been the same for years before and it would be the same for years after. The snow always came after the freeze long after the birds and squirrels had abandoned their previous dwellings. There was nothing interesting about the season.

"Why do you like the pond as much as you do?" he asked the boy. They had been walking back to the street of houses from the woods when the boy had stopped to gaze into the

water. "I like how the water reflects more before it freezes," he said, turning to him, "It always shows more than when it does during the summer." As he said this he turned back to the water to watch as his reflection danced before his eyes.

He could see that pond from the grave, and wondered if it still reflected the world as it had before. He made to turn his head to ask the boy, but empty space was all that remained.

"What do you hear in the silence?" the boy asked as he raked up the fallen leaves into a pile. "Nothing," he said, "it is silent." The boy let out a laugh, his cheeks shining pink. "I hear the paper boy as his bike squeaks in the cold, the thump of the snow as it trickles at the rise of the sun," he paused, falling into a moment of thought. "I hear the world waking up and going to bed. Something about the quietness of winter amplifies the truly mundane." He went back to raking his leaves once more occupied with the task at hand.

He had never played in the leaves. He recalled that when he was younger his mother had chastised him for the thought, she said that the leaves were dirty and that they were not to play with. That winter he had stayed in his room watching the snowfall as the children made angels and men out of the pillowy white.

"Do you want to live forever?" asked the boy. That had been the last question he had asked him. It had happened after he and the boy parted ways on their not so linear street. He had gone into his house made of bricks finding that he awaited the next day with an unfamiliar feeling. He had gone to bed, the fireplace sparking with warmth heating the dark room. He had waited on his stoop, waiting for the boy to burst through the door greeting the day in his cheery manner. He waited well into the day, yet the boy never appeared.

He wrung his hands around that familiar green hat as he stared into the blank etchings of the grave. His fingers had turned blue long before as he had forgone the comfort of gloves. He had grown in that year, he was no longer the child he had once been. He stood at that spot now at twenty years of age, getting to see the future that the boy had fantasized about.

"I'm sorry."

It came as a tidal wave, a huge impact of feeling all at once. To be human was to feel things, to find joy and pain in things. The boy had been that joy, living as he had he still found the energy to love the world. He missed the boy. He missed his hair, his eyes, his worn out shoes and gloves. He missed how the boy always smelled of vanilla and how his smile was just a bit crooked.

"You can't love him," is what his mother said. They had argued that day, a different argument than the usual one. He had spent the morning with the boy as they watched the bees in the flowers. "That is a dirty love," she spat at him as her face contorted with rage. He had read about love before, how the poets would explain the feeling in their words. That would be the second time that his mother shot down his feelings. Like the winter, love became something unfamiliar and joyless.

He had never cried as a child, always having been told that such an emotion was a sign of weakness. Yet as he stared down at that lone grave he felt the red hotness spill from his eyes, drops falling onto his polished shoes. He loved the boy, he had known when they were young and he knew now that the feeling had not changed.

"I am not human. I never was. So why are you expecting me to act like one?" he cried out into the quiet air, the words escaping from the confines of his head. His tears ran fast, what once radiated heat cooling as they slid down his face in torrents. He heaved as a weight was lifted from his chest, his eyes finally clearing. He cried as he watched the pattern of a snowflake as it danced down to the top of the grave.

He loved the snow. He loved how the boy's head of auburn hair would dance through the white. He loved how the first snowflakes made the boy smile wide and how his eyes would twinkle with joy as he finished his snowman. He loved how the fire would crackle and pop on the nights where he could be with the boy, watching and listening quietly to the stories that he would recite with sporadic gestures.

He used his hand to brush away the snow collecting at the base of the grave, placing a handful of flowers on the cleared patch. He rose from a crouched position attempting to blink away his lingering tears.

He loved the boy. He loved the boy. He loved the boy.

Student Name: Addie Price  
 Grade: 10  
 School: Village High School  
 Title: Cigarettes on the Balcony  
 Category: Short Story  
 Key: Gold Key  
 Educator: Denise Keenaghan

Cigarettes on the Balcony,

First, there would usually be a bit of creaking in the weathered wood planks outside in the hall. Then the faint yellow light seeped underneath my door. It was around eleven or twelve when my sister would smoke when she couldn't sleep. She'd disappear to the dimly lit balcony for an hour or so, then come back and brush her teeth, though I'd still smell it on her baggy morning shirt. Even ten years later, when she's twenty seven and it's dark and deep, I hear her slowly creep past my old childhood room. I want to walk out and tell her to go back and sleep, to really, really quit. She would always tell me that she did, that she threw them out, but she never really quit. I can't stop her now when she'll be married tomorrow and she's stressed. The venue is a street away and mom insisted on us and her fiance staying the night before, so she doesn't end up paying more for the wedding. The wedding keeps her up at night so I give in to soothe her. I'm tucked into the twin sized bed, folding my legs closer to my stomach. I listen as the glass door slides open and closed with a groan, breaking the silence. It's supposed to be a big, happy day. That's why the whole family is gathered around in hotels, sprinkled around the city. It's why Rebecca came from the other side of the country to finally pay a visit; by the orders of mom, who demanded she do it in the city. I sit up for a moment and kick the thick, and slightly pilled, sheets to the edge of the bed. With a hesitant pace, I set my feet down and walk out of the room. Beyond the hallway of cold waxy wood floors textured with strips that look like lines of ants I see Becca leaning lazily on the railing with her weight on one elbow looking past the buildings and illuminated street lights. I see the smoke next, rising and billowing through the soft winds humming through her hair. At the end of the hallway I pause for a moment. I watch her almost like it's an exhibit. After a couple of seconds I cautiously glide the door to the right almost as if I make too much noise she'll run away.

"Pretty cold tonight." I pry and I'm almost scared I was too quiet. She didn't hear me. Surprisingly, I earn a hm from her as she flips around with her back to the rail. Her eyes are glazed over and her t-shirt is lazily slinked off of one of her shoulders. It almost seems like she's seventeen and there's school tomorrow and we still talk to each other everyday.

"What's up?" I offer, hoping for an actual word this time.

"Can't sleep." She tilts her head to the side looking at the chair next to me. I know. It's quiet for a second and I forgot to nod so I gave a slight bob.

"Are you ready for tomorrow?" I say. She shrugs and nods a bit so I change the subject to something small.

"How's Marco?" I say inching closer to the ledge propping up my forearms and receding into my shoulders to a slouch. The smell of a dry pine musk ringed itself around me that came and left with the orchestration of the soft gusts of wind.

"He's okay, started up that gallery he wanted to since last year." Becca states, I nod.

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah" she chuckles for a second and I go still. "He's been asking about you guys for a while, saying you should come down and bring Luke." She hints, shifting her shoulders directly to me, looking away to the tan stucco wall, once again pulling the cigarette to her lips as she inhales quietly almost as if she's embarrassed.

"I would if it wasn't on the other side of the coast. Luke has school, ya know?" I counter trying to keep my voice even. She finally extracts the cigarette from her mouth looking around almost squinting then turns to me with a remote look.

"Emma you know I didn't-" Becca begins.

"No, I get it, there's bigger and better things in California you couldn't help moving and leaving us." She blows out the smoke in my direction now, not embarrassed anymore or annoyed at my comment, I couldn't tell. Maybe both. She stares at me with her forehead threatening to break as it twists and furrows.

"You know I'm sick of you blaming me for leaving, you know that was the only job I could get at the time." Her voice begins to raise, subtle but to the point. I look away to the skyscrapers for a moment.

"Yeah but you act like you hadn't left us when we needed you, when I needed you, I had no idea what the hell I was doing without Matt and you wouldn't even pick up my damn calls." I say with a crack of my voice that made me cringe a bit. Becca straightens up a bit.

"God I'm so sorry I was so busy trying to pay my bills and put food on the table that I couldn't call you back. You know I'm sick of you acting like I'm so frigid, I went to the funeral, didn't I?"

"Yeah and left twenty minutes after. You didn't even bother to say something after me and Mom. You know she needs you right? She already lost one child, she didn't need to lose another." I retorted, crossing my arms, annoyed.

"God Emma, do you ever get tired of being so narcissistic?" Becca blurted, her eyes were glossed and there's smoke dancing around her. "He was my brother too." She says gripping the rail so hard her knuckles fade into ivory white. Her eyes are as big as saucers now. My head beckons back with regret and frustration washing over me.

"I-I know." Becca raises the cigarette again, looking me straight in my eyes. "Sorry" I finished after a moment. Becca shrugs lazily, turning to the sky scrapers.

"Nothing we can do now, doesn't matter how much we blame each other, he's not coming back." She says it plainly like stating the weather. It's quiet and the wind picks up. The lights around us are dull and the sky is a muted black with two or three stars and a plane's blinking light that I almost mistake for one. After a few long minutes of Becca smoking unbothered next to me she offers,



"Do you remember when I accidentally dropped one of mom's favorite mugs out here?" She reminisced, shrugging her head towards the floor. It's a couple of seconds before I let out a quick husk of breath that could almost be a chuckle.

"She never got over that. You know she scoured on Ebay looking for a copy for weeks." I reply using her same light tone. She lets her head fall into her hand making her long brown waves tumble to her right shoulder.

"I still think about that every week or so. Don't think I've ever seen mom so mad." She claimed quickly. It's been awhile since we've actually spoken like this, I wish it was like this more often.

"Becca." I called out.

"Yeah?" She questions wringing her head towards my direction. I see mom in her irises and hear the gentle low rasp of Matt's voice. I want to tell her that I wish she stayed in the city and that Luke, her nephew, is starting to like school now. That I still cry about Matt every week or that I hate that he called her instead of me and that she didn't pick it up. I want to tell her that it's her fault he did it but I know it's not. I wish he had called me. I wish I paid more attention, cared more. I can't play his favorite songs that we would shout out on the balcony without feeling anxious and I wish I could go back ten years so we could all talk here again like nothing ever happened and go to sleep without crying.

"It's not your fault." I say slowly letting the syllables roll off my tongue. Becca's mouth upturned faintly and she looked away again taking another inhale of the cigarette. The end lit weakly illuminating ashes of coral. Edging her chin up slightly before replying,

"It was just a mug, Emm-"

"No, I mean it's not your fault." I echo, Becca turns her head away from me and I see a murky nebula of smoke puff around her. The smell of burnt wood and tobacco returns like a distant relative at a reunion no one invited. Slowly turning her head towards me her eyes are red rimmed and pale and defenseless looking. It's like it's my first time seeing her and I suddenly have the urge to cry savagely.

"What?" Becca stands there looking at me unmoving almost like she's a painting, blanched and stale with a haggard look in her eyes that only you think you can see.

"It's not your fault." I recite.

"I," she pauses, letting her lips roll in and biting on them slowly before finishing, "I know. Uh, thank you." She fills in, looking down. "I regret it." she starts, "Everyday I do. Sometimes I wake up and the first thing I think is why the hell didn't I pick up. It eats at you, you know? Like I could've changed everything If I just stopped and talked to him. Could've just said a couple sentences on the line and he would still be here." She heaved an exasperated sigh with a fatigued look on her face as she gave me a small look to the side to read my reaction. I nodded slowly, not entirely sure what to say. I try to find a time where I'm absolutely sure I won't choke up and start crying but I do anyway.

"I think Matt would want you to stop blaming yourself. You'll never completely forget, you'll just go longer without remembering. That's all you can really ask for." She takes a sharp inhale in her nose and sniffles a couple of times before becoming still and muttering an agreement.

"Are you mad at me?" She whispered.

"Life is too short to be mad at your sister." I assure her. She offers me a small smile, I take it and reach for her hand. I want to hold on close to my big sister, keep her here and let her lead me. Suck in the marrow of her familiarity and never let her go. I miss her. I don't say anything and let my head decline onto her shoulder, burying it, allowing her brown waves wax and wane through my vision until she extracts her locks and sets them on her other shoulder. I don't want this night to end. I can't accept that we haven't shared a room in over a decade, haven't lived in the same house for years and by the morning won't even share the same last name. Now awake, I want to stay under dull cloudy night skies and bustling streets below as the moon faintly rises steadily over the skyline.

Because if I'm with her the night is twice as beautiful.

"Mind if I smoke?" She guessed.

"No, go ahead." I say.

Student Name: Eshani Gale  
 Grade: 9  
 School: Village High School  
 Title: festival of lights  
 Category: Poetry  
 Key: Gold Key  
 Educator: Denise Keenaghan

festival of lights

this festival of lights i partake in  
 every few years when my Amama  
 visits and questions if i've worn  
 the sari she got for me  
 when she visited the cousins  
 i had never met,  
 is quite the sight for sore eyes

i don't know how it works but  
 i know the bubbles of amber and gold  
 that dot my vision on those sparse nights  
 and i know the taste of the carbs and curries  
 that i really shouldn't find so picante  
 and i know the smell of smoke and incense  
 that smoke which is the only smell i call home

it's not part of my life but it's part of the culture  
 of the family i had seen twice in five years  
 much like the rituals i would partake in  
 when i stumbled upon her Praarthan  
 i would sit on my knees and pretend i remember  
 the words in the language id never conjecture but mostly  
 i just sat and breathed in the sandalwood and sage

i still don't know the language but people  
 will speak to me and tell me i smell  
 of sandalwood and then they'll ask me  
 if i want to go to a Holi festival  
 or participate in a Garba and i'll say yes  
 and i'll wear the dress my Amama left and i'll  
 itch say i'm not uncomfortable because i should feel at home

left with half my blood's worth  
of food and language and dresses and culture i  
never ate or learned or wore except for when i  
felt insecure but the gifts they left for me  
weren't a part of me  
i took the incense, and everything else  
I left to burn

Student Name: Aglaia Hong

Grade: 9

School: Village High School

Title: Last

Category: Poetry

Key: Gold Key

Educator:

Only one man's memory retained  
 He sits on the weed ridden grass  
 Feet hanging off the cliff  
 The silver lining of every cotton candy cloud  
 The ripple of the ocean beneath his feet  
 As the wind whistles in his ears  
 Screaming incomprehensible phrases of agony  
 He sees with his eyes  
 But does not hear with his ears  
 His voice does not know of companionship  
 Time begins to spill  
 Because who will keep track of Time?  
 Who will count the seconds  
 When there is no children to teach  
 And no elders to wait?  
 For him  
 Time does not exist  
 The last ant in the colony  
 Is nothing but a stray  
 Another fish in the sea  
 Another star in the sky

He lets loneliness envelop his body  
 The sunlight bathe his every hair follicle  
 He feels the prancing shadows casted by his eyelashes  
 As he closes his eyes  
 And falls  
 Down down down  
 Stale air swallowing him whole  
 Time no longer runs  
 When you are

The last

Man

On

E  
a

r  
t

h.

Student Name: Aglaia Hong

Grade: 9

School: Village High School

Title: Samuel

Category: Flash Fiction

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Dylan Harrison

I want to be an art teacher.

I want to fill a white canvas that is fervent for my touch, to have a child by my side, and to have many children see me as their muse, their inspiration. I want to love, love, love with all my heart oh so so much. I want to love my art and love my students and my job the way you look at the stars on a cloudy night, the way you caress a flower's petal between your fingers on a warm day.

I'm holding a child between my arms. His hair is frayed and straw-like, and his green eyes barely visible beneath his eyelids. I can't tell if he's asleep, but I hold him the way I would hold a paint palette; my fingers wrap around his diminutive body delicately.

"Mama."

I stroke the child's cheek, smiling. "I'm not your Mama."

"Mama."

"I'm not your Mama." I'm kneeling, rocking the bony child back and forth. "Do you want me to be your Mama?"

His eyelashes begin to flutter, as he falls deeper into the other world. I can feel him slipping away from reality, down, down, down, into a dream, into a world better than ours. A tear rolls down my cheek, another one, and another one, and all of a sudden, I'm crying.

"Mama's going to sing a song for you, oh- Mama's always here for you."

Twinkle, twinkle, little star  
How I wonder what you are.  
Up above the world so high,  
Like a diamond in the sky.  
Twinkle, twinkle, little star

How you twinkle in the sky- "

"Mama..." He murmured. "You sang... wrong."

In the distance, I can hear shouting.

"I'm sorry baby, Mama isn't a singer." I fumble with the beads of my bracelet, muttering words of prayer a child should never need to hear. One, two, three, four. I inhale, letting the cold air swoosh into my chest. Five, six, seven. The breath escapes from me, but I catch it before all of it leaves, like I'm choking. Softly, my puffs of breath begin to stir the dust like mounds of glitter being blown by a pale spring breeze under the moonlight. Like a spell, the floating particles settled into the thick air, stringing every part of the room together, a spider web in a storm.

"What can you do?" The little boy clutches at the shawls wrapped around my neck, and it almost tightens like a noose. "Mama, what can you do?"

"Mama draws." One, two, three, four. "I draw pictures."

"Draw me something."

I am without a pen. I don't possess the ability to produce paint from the tips of my fingers, so I draw. I draw with my lips, I let the words slip from my tongue rolling off like helium-filled marbles, I let it paint a picture.

"A young girl wearing a blue blouse- "

"No! Make it red." The boy interjects, shutting his eyes as if he is attempting to shut out all light.

"Alright. A young girl wearing a red blouse- she's...she's smiling. She's got chestnut skin, she's got eyes the color of rocks, and she's got black shiny braids that look like a doll's. Her name's Julia. She's in a classroom, the doors are the color of yellow ochre, the walls are cobalt blue. The tile floor is the shade of crimson lake."

"Like blood?"

BOOM.

Something outside explodes.

"No, like roses. Julia loves roses."



"Oh." The child opens his eyes, and suddenly I know him. He is my boy, not by blood, but he and I will be together forever. "Mama?"

"Yes?"

I think the sun is rising. The dirt in the room begins to cloud again, and the voices begin to rise with the star. I wipe the ash mark off the boy's face, letting the topaz orange spill onto his head, where clumps of jet-black hair are missing. His bottom two teeth are missing, perhaps in the room, listening to our conversation, or gone forever. The inevitable sound of deep breaths fills our silence.

"You're a good artist."

And suddenly, the voices are not in the distance. The noise is so loud that it's almost inaudible. The bomb was dropped.

I didn't get to catch the boy's name.

Student Name: Motunrayo Famori

Grade: 10

School: Village High School

Title: The Man Who Speaks

Category: Short Story

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Denise Keenaghan

Under normal circumstances, he would have spoken his mind, but, with a gun to his head, the idea seemed a little less favorable.

The day had started like any other—waking up to the annoying songs of the birds before taking a cold shower and wearing whatever suit was closest to the door. After getting ready for the day, he always made sure to stop at the corner cafe for a quick coffee and chat with the employees. He found it quite entertaining to listen to the stories of their lives and jobs since they were much less eventful than his own and the mundaneness of everyday life sometimes escaped him.

After finishing his chat, he turned the block and made his way down the disgustingly familiar road towards his work. His job, which he had done and been doing for many years, was talking, and only talking. In the morning, when he showed up and signed in, he talked. In the afternoon, when there was a meeting, he talked. Even in the evening, when he was wrapping up for the day and leaving, he talked. His job involved a lot of talking. So when he arrived at work and they asked him to stop—more specifically threatened him with a gun—he was quite perplexed for he had never been in such a situation before. He had never been told not to talk before and the feeling of standing and not speaking felt weird—it felt very wrong and he did not like the feeling. He was almost unable to make sense of the whole situation. Almost.

The first thing he, the one who was now not permitted to speak, did was stop and think a little about what was happening. His place of work, which was the normal office building, contained the usual annoying receptionist, desks, lots of them, and the few secrets better left unheard. And when thinking of such secrets, he couldn't help but sigh since they were best voiced, and he, a speaker and avid gossip, couldn't talk about them, leaving the secrets safe, which he felt cheated and slightly vexed about.

Perhaps that was the reason he was there, he thought, in that weird situation. Maybe it was about him speaking, not necessarily the speaking part, but what he was speaking about. Such things would be a problem from someone else's standpoint, however, after spending so much time speaking about his own life secrets, there was nothing else to talk about. So logically, he would talk about his work—one thing would lead to another and he would slowly divulge the fact that he witnessed one murder another. Obviously, the murderer later ended up in prison, but that's a story of another time, preferably when he could speak.

After a few minutes, some men came into the room they had placed him in, and escorted him out. He followed silently and looked around the familiar building. There was nothing of note except for the lack of people, but he quickly brushed the thought off. There were more pressing matters and he didn't feel very comfortable letting his mind wander around the familiar building in such an unfamiliar situation. A few moments later, after taking an inconspicuous back staircase, a couple of corridors, and side entrances, a building of that size shouldn't have, they reached their destination—a single door at the end of a boring hallway. What awaited him when they opened the door was a small room with only a table and two chairs—the classic interrogation room. Rather than being alarmed, since the reason for his “visit” was already assumed, he instead was quite fascinated with the lack of just about anything. The room looked like a solid light gray box, it smelt like a solid light gray box and sounded like a light gray box would—like nothing. The time passed quickly while he spaced out alone in the room after the escort detail left and before long, another joined him in the light gray box. He was a tall man with neatly cut black hair and dark brown eyes. Most notable about him however was not his distasteful look or glare that pierced his soul, but his clothes—more specifically his hoodie and sweatpants. He couldn't help but stare at the other man since he had never seen someone at work without a suit, and the feeling was once again foreign and he did not like it.

The man pulled out the chair across from him and sat, placing a stack of papers and folders in front of him. The silence of the room was only disturbed by the soft sound of shuffling papers. After a bit, when the man was done, he looked up from the papers and at him.

“Good morning,” he said politely, “My name is Kade Laurence. I am here today to ask you a few questions.” He put his hand out over the table.

“Good morning to you too,” he assumed he was allowed to speak since it would be impolite to not reply, “My name is Oliver Winchester, it's nice to meet you.” He too reached his hand out and shook Kade's eagerly before returning his hand back to his side “I know.”

“You know, what?” he asked with a look of confusion.

“Your name. I already know your name. You do not need to tell me such useless information. Also, I will be the one asking questions, so only speak when spoken to.”

Oliver promptly nodded his head, before sitting up straight and sustaining eye contact. Somehow, despite his appearance, the man had a vibe that demanded the respect of others. Knowing that he was not in the most favorable situation, Oliver couldn't help but comply with him.

“Do you know why you are here?” he asked while glancing at some papers.

“No. No, I don't,” Oliver said firmly.

“Ok, then tell me about your daily life and the people you usually meet.” Kade took out a pen and notepad and started jotting something down before looking at Oliver again and gesturing for him to start.

"Well, I wake up, shower, and dress up for work. Afterward, I head to the cafe around the corner and get my daily cup of coffee. I usually have a nice chat with the employees and we talk about our daily lives and rarely about work," he smiled as he continued, "When I do, I only talk about how I often have to give presentations and lots of work for my boss." "Ok," he said as he wrote more on the pad, "Do you know anyone by the name of Natalie Browning?"

"I don't know anyone by that name." Their eyes met, and Kade's rested for a moment.

"Well, the reason we are here today is because we have reports of an information leak."

"I have nothing to do with that," he said almost instantly. Kade's eyebrow raised slightly before returning to his cold resting face.

"I never said you did. I just wanted to inform you in case you had some information that might help our investigation.

"The information was about your boss. More specifically what happened on a certain trip to Lentría." He lingered on the words for a moment before continuing, "The leak found its way to the police and started a police investigation on Tonny Miller. There was no time to save him so he is currently serving a lighter sentence in prison."

"Ok...So what exactly do you want from me?"

"Be quiet and let me finish." Although he did not like the thought of losing his freedom of speech for the second time that day, Oliver promptly shut his mouth and continued to listen to him.

"Natalie Browning, the person I mentioned earlier, was the one that filed a police report and caused the investigation."

"And still, I ask, what does this have to do with me?" He questioned as a force of habit. He quickly put his hand over his mouth to soothe Kade's glare and reassure him of his silence. Kade continued to glare for a moment then sighed.

"The interesting part is that you go to the same cafe as Natalie Browning and have even been spotted speaking with her on numerous occasions.

"Coincidentally, you had a falling out with Tonny Miller because he never gave you enough credit to get a promotion, and according to some people we spoke with, even told you that you would never rise higher about two weeks before the police investigations started." He paused.

"What are your thoughts on that?"

"I have nothing to do with it. I don't know how she got that information." He was obviously lying but he wanted to test the waters to see if he could find a way out.

"Do not lie." It did not work.

"I'm not lying."

"Lying will not get you anywhere. It will cause you bigger problems in the future." Cold sweat began to form on his palms and feet.

"I'm not lying though," he said firmly.

"It is better to tell the truth now because if we have to find the extent of the information leak on our own, we will make sure you do not make it out alive." Silence filled the room as Oliver glanced around, contemplating his choices before he sighed.

"...Ok. Fine. I did leak some, of what I assume, is non-confidential information. I told Natalie Browning Tonny's name, showed her a picture, that I disliked him, and talked about the places we went on that trip, but only that. She figured out the rest on her own. Maybe because of the picture..." He said solemnly. He looked defeated and didn't really feel like waiting for death after they finished their own investigation.

"That does not change the fact that you leak confidential information. You know the punishment for that, right?" Kade pulled out a paper from the stack and reorganized it before putting his hands on the table again.

"Yes, I do." He couldn't help but shiver at the thought of that one employee who broke the rules not too long ago.

"Good. Since you know this will be easier," he said bluntly as he skimmed the papers once again, "You are lucky since it seems like the "company" is offering you a way out." Oliver stared blankly at Kade for a few moments.

"...Huh?" He was confused—very confused why the company, which he knew was anything but forgiving, decided to lend him, of all people, a helping hand.

"Could you at least explain why?"

"The higher-ups believe that you somehow have an innate ability to persuade, to convince others of things that are an extension of the truth, but not like the average person. They find value in your skill set." Kade slid the paper he was holding across the table before Oliver picked it up. The cover looked like the average project overview document however upon further inspection he noticed the nine-tailed fox, the kitsune insignia for the Hoffman family at the top of the cover page.

"As listed in the document, you will have access to high-class information and it will be your job to keep the officials around the world "in the loop" as much as we want them to be, convincing them that your words are the truth, and the only truth they need to follow."

"I don't understand." Even while briefing him in the most monotone voice with clear instructions, Oliver couldn't seem to understand—to comprehend what was going on. He knew that leaking such information would lead to problems down the line, ones he wished would happen, however, he never expected to face the death sentence nor receive a new job opportunity. If he was being honest, he really wanted to quit without having to go through all the unnecessary formalities that came with quitting his speaking job, and find a new job that paid better.

Although he was a man who usually followed his heart and gut, when presented with such a confusing deal where they gave him, a hopeless gossip, higher access to classified information that he could speak about to others as part of his job, he couldn't help but think of accepting.

"What is there not to understand, you will be joining the inner circle and becoming a higher-ranked agent." With those words of confirmation, a grand smile drew on his face as he thought of all the new secrets he could learn and speak about.

"Cool...When do I start?"

"When we find someone to closely monitor your activity, what you speak about, and to whom you speak it to." After hearing his answer, his birthday boy smile quickly dissipated into a dejected frown. He knew it was too good to be true, but alas, a man can dream.

"Oh...I see." Kade glanced at his face and smiled slightly while putting his hand out over the table once again.

"So are you going to accept the conditions?"

"Are there any other options?" He sighed and grabbed his hand firmly.

"No. There are none, so welcome to the family," Kade chuckled as they shook hands.

Student Name: Michael Nie

Grade: 9

School: Village High School

Title: The Wanderer

Category: Science Fiction & Fantasy

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Denise Keenaghan

The rain felt like crystal rock upon his cybernetic skin. The slightest breeze came over the cool night air. The rain dispersed. All he could do was stand and witness the entourage of mindless robots circle him. Everywhere he looked, those unblinking eyes stared back at him; he saw himself trapped inside those gleaming red pupils. From amidst the swarm of chrome, something flesh-colored shifted. A bullet penetrated through him. He looked down at his body; there was nothing. Then a voice, as though emanating from his body, rang out: "IT IS CURRENTLY 6 A.M, TIME TO WAKE UP."

Sitting up gasping, the number of wires attached to each bone of his spine, being plucked off like apples from a tree. His back slowly oozed out crimson blood, his brain buzzing, Dame slid off his bed and, after taking two steps, immediately fell back down again. It was just another hyper-realistic dream. He had been having many of them since he installed that last extension.

"All this chrome must be getting to me," he thought.

It wasn't unheard of for people to go insane from getting too many implants. The rich, upper class were now proud of their artificial abilities, to the point where you could hardly see the meat from the metal. Dame stood up again.

"Why not take a break from the monotony of this place?"

As he stumbled through the dimly lit alleyways of Houston, the neon lights flickered overhead, casting an eerie glow on the slick pavement. A world of towering skyscrapers and hovering vehicles, where the divide between the rich and poor was as vast as the space between galaxies.

Dame had grown up amidst the poverty-stricken slums of Texas, where machine technology intertwined with every aspect of life. The World Web, a neural interface that connected minds to the virtual realm, was both a blessing and a curse. The wealthy indulged in cyber enhancements, while the poor sought solace in the illusionary landscapes of their minds.

Then there was Houston. The image of perfection, leading the world in technological advancements.

Having lived a life of nothing but pain and suffering, Dame needed a way to get out of this society. He distinctly remembered his first encounter with the program. It had everything there was to know about how to get around this dystopian world. The first heist brought him excitement he had never felt before, and since then, he had been honing his skills.

Finally, he arrived at the location. It was his own place that nobody in the world knew of, a piece of Houston where he could be reminded of how far he had come. It was where he could be alone; away from the depressing air that the world pumps out, not able to be masked even by the city's allure. It was where he housed all the cyberware that he stole from his heists.

With his innate audacity, Dame had the finesse to hijack vehicles transporting cyberware, implanting them into himself to metamorphose into a potent cyborg. His motive was not to be one of the rich, but rather a rebellion against their oppressive ideals. His objective extended beyond mere integration; he aspired to infiltrate the echelons of the wealthy and systematically dismantle the oppressive structures rooted within this idealistic Houston.

His hideaway was a dimly lit chamber, surrounded by the hum of stolen cyberware. Cables intertwined like vines, and metallic limbs dangled from the ceiling. Dame, seated in the center, plugged into his neural interface, began the intricate process of integrating stolen cybernetic enhancements into his body.

The room buzzed with energy as the cyberware synced with his nervous system. It was a dance between man and machine, a fusion of flesh and metal. Dame's vision shifted as augmented reality overlays flooded his perception. His fingers glided across the holographic interfaces, shaping his new identity.

Continuing to take away from his organic body, Dame couldn't ignore the whispers in the darker corners of his mind. The consciousness of those who had once been lost to the allure of chrome, their fragmented thoughts and fading memories now echoing in the recesses of his consciousness. It was a haunting reminder of the thin line between liberation and madness.

"It's all for the betterment of society," he murmured to himself.

After what felt like days, the process was finally over. His conscience gushed back at him, and with it, came a new force. Something that seemed different from all the other attachments he had installed.

An alarm sounded. The constant hum of the cyberware stopped. The room itself was now deathly silent, as though time itself had stopped. And, as though on impulse, Dame opened the door to his room. Outside was a bullet, suspended in the air, about to penetrate through the thin layer of protection that shielded the room from the outside world...

Following the bullet's path, he observed a hooded figure. "He must die." The thought came from outside, taking over everything else in his mind. Dame fell, his vision blurred and his entire being was glitching. Then, with a sudden clap, it was gone. The man, the bullet, and the intrusion in his mind.

Then, a burning sensation came, as though acid was corroding his neck. A screen flickered into life in front of him, it was a picture of his face followed by words saying: "DAMION JACKSON - WANTED BY GOVERNMENT - DO NOT APPROACH."

The city which had once accepted Dame and his means of living, now turned on him, branding him a fugitive, no longer needed in this society. Dame's every step echoed with



the pounding of pursuing footsteps. The city, once his canvas, became a labyrinth of uncertainty. Neon lights flashed warnings, and surveillance cameras tracked his every move.

His cybernetic enhancements, initially tools of rebellion, now marked him as a target. As he navigated the shadows, the whispers in his mind intensified. The consciousness of those who had fallen into the abyss of too much chrome lingered, an ever-present chorus of warnings.

The lights of the city faded, and Dame could sense that something was about to happen. His awareness was now enhanced, the world had never seemed so simple before him, like it was constructed out of nothing but different colored squares, cut and rounded by no longer human hands. The world faded into gray, thunder sounded overhead and a light rain started to fall.

He looked up, eyes empty like he was but a metal toy mixed with random pieces of flesh. The rain stopped an inch from his face, sliding down an invisible barrier. A woman walking by stopped to look at this image and thought to herself, "What a serene picture." Her eyes rolled up and she stumbled, a moment later, she corrected herself, a different entity. Its lens sought the man that was before her just a moment ago, but Dame was gone.

"Looking for someone?" A voice said.

The head spun back with a crack and its eyes finally locked on to the man before it. But before anything could be registered, the body crumbled. He could not afford to be found after giving up so much.

Dame, now Damion Jackson the hunted, found solace in the darker corners of Houston. His hideaway, once a sanctuary, had become a prison of paranoia. The city itself seemed to conspire against him, the towering skyscrapers casting ominous shadows on his every step.

Though his mind was not clear, that one goal still stood firm: "Bring down this corruption."

The rain fell, giving new color to the dust covered roads of the city, as if the dirt of the people were being removed. However, these thoughts did not last long, soon the light rain became a downpour. The thunder grew louder, resonating ever closer, a fitting crescendo to Damion's symphony. The rain, once serene, now hammered down relentlessly, washing away the remnants of a life sacrificed for a cause. He no longer felt at ease.

He walked. The sound of each step felt ever louder, each step, searching for memories that were no longer there.

As the rain persisted, the world around Damion faded into a monochrome canvas, the echoes of his rebellion dissipating into the city's cybernetic embrace. In the quiet of the rain-soaked streets, Damion's consciousness, like a raindrop merging with the ocean, dissolved into the fabric of futuristic Houston, leaving behind only the echo of a dream—a dream of liberation in a world where the boundaries between man and machine, reality and illusion, were as elusive as the raindrops on cybernetic skin...

Out of the chromatic air itself, stepped the same man of flesh and bone. He observed Dame. A small hole had formed over Dame's heart. He watched as it grew, consuming Dame, his body becoming a black void. And just as the last speck of his existence was taken, the screen shut off.

The goggles fell with the clatter of light metal hitting the floor. Wiping the sweat from his brow he stood up. Not the simulated Dame, but the real Dame. He looked around the room, a room of a boy from the 20th century, full of science posters and unique inventions. The broken headset let out a hum of energy upon the wooden floor, and for the first time, Dame was aware of the man. The man who had given him that reality, and the man who had taken it away.

"Is that what the future will hold?" Dame asked.

"That is for you to decide," replied the man, returning the headset to him, a key to a new era.

Student Name: Eryna Fareeha Khairil Faiz

Grade: 8

School: Village Middle School

Title: "Drama"

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Elizabeth Foye

"Jangan drama sini," exclaimed my mom for the millionth time as we were waiting for the pediatrician to enter the room. In my hand was a mental health survey the doctor gave me, on the top of it written: "How have you been feeling for the past two weeks? Tick the suitable box". The sides of the survey now crumpled up as I clutch it tightly, barely comprehending my mother's words. Don't be "drama" here. I was used to hearing that word by now — totally opposite — of its original meaning: an act or play as a form of entertainment. I leaned back in the leather hospital chair feeling dejected; the memories on how I first regarded drama crawled back up to the surface of my wandering mind. As a child, I enjoyed the thrill of the stage, rising fame, and blinding spotlight of theater life. The lines that I recite flow right out my mouth as I put on a show, not just for the audience, but also myself. I acted day and night, every minute of the clock; it wasn't hard, it came naturally to me as if I became one with the stage, as if I was born to entertain, to be a star. At the young age of seven, I started attending drama classes with the sole purpose of improving my English proficiency. Just like the actors of renowned musicals of Hamilton and Heathers, or classics like Romeo and Juliet and Hamlet: I was drawn to drama. One swift movement after the other, almost like a reflex, the background music and the applause ringing in my ears, the smell of sweat and freshly ironed costumes fill my lungs as I entered the stage. Did I love acting? Yes. Was it something I thought I would regret? Little me would have never admit nor even think of regretting this life that I had chosen for myself.

But they had to use it against me. The talent I had was turned into an excuse for those who wanted to undermine my feelings, who wanted to feel superior, who wanted to treat me like anything but a young girl who was merely trying to navigate her growing emotions and pains. The words of "don't be dramatic" haunted me during my darkest days and nights, leaving me sleepless as I am left alone feeling: why do I have to bottle up my emotions?

I must admit that I am a sensitive person. I feel so much yet try not to; it's just what I feel. I cry at sad movies; I'm explicitly happy at weddings; I'm frustrated at minor inconveniences; I feel almost every emotion at once. It makes things worse when the emotions that creep up to me, in arguments at home especially, always turn into anger and sadness. I try to justify my feelings by desperately defending my side, and when it doesn't work out, I get easily overwhelmed and cry instead. These actions or emotions of frustration are directed maybe towards me or the situation itself, but never to my parents.

I never want them to feel threatened by my emotions, or worse, to think it was an act. But they do. My emotions are very much real and are never intended to subvert their authority or to manipulate the situation in any sense. However, they take it personally and collectively decide: I can't show emotions anymore because it was too drama of me. This feeling followed me throughout life outside home as well. "Ew gediknya dia!" exclaimed a group of young girls to me at elementary school. I never understood. Because of my habit of speaking English as it was my first language, I barely spoke my mother tongue to my peers; one word in Malay and I start stuttering all my sentences out. I also was (and still quite) an intelligent girl with a bubbly personality; I was constantly out and about, being as friendly as I could be and was a constant hyper ball of energy. Hence, I was always ranting or simply sharing insights of my life to my friends: the "passionate kid" as they would call me. I refused to confine myself to the limitations of personal expression that my parents had established for me at home, causing me to use school and friends as an escape for my problems — no matter big or small. With mainly the high standards of family and society I was in, accompanied by the additional pressure of myself to not be a failure and in maintaining my name, even the smallest mistakes made me upset. It was evident that I have not given up, but only because I could talk about this genuinely to my friends or people outside of home. It was like a breath of fresh air; I simply had little to no fear of judgment from my peers — except, there was.

Combine all of these together, including the fact I went to an all-girls, majority Malay speaking school, it made me the target of prejudice among my peers. They labeled me as pretentious, an attention seeker, a try-hard, and mainly: an overdramatic girl who uses her "drama" skills to gain some form of sympathy. It made things worse when they would speak behind my back in Malay as soon as I took one step outside their perimeter. They would then be crawling back to me and say: "Help do our homework?" along with their fake smiles and pitiful faces.

Drama was now an act to exaggerate an emotion, situation, or problem to either persuade, emphasize, or manipulate it. This exact word, with its now new definition, was commonly used by everyone I associate with. It was heartbreaking knowing that a word I had deep interest and love for as a kid was now tarnished in my mind. I couldn't revive my young days, nor could I erase my new perception of the word. I was forced to accept and face the reality: drama is a bad word.

Now that I have matured, the balance between regulating my emotions and letting myself be 'me' have now come to my senses. The love I have for theater and acting are now a strength of mine that I continue to pursue, not something that made me ashamed or put down for. Sensitivity is not something I hide anymore; it genuinely has helped me to become a more empathetic person, and to understand everyone that I converse with. The people in my life have not changed in the slightest, which is why I ask myself: do I still have to hear the word "drama" from them? Of course, you could say: change your thinking, but it's not that easy when you can't change people's belief— you can't even attempt to. The negative connotations surrounding the word haunt me and forever will. Nevertheless, my emotions are unwavering and clear: I hate the word drama.

Student Name: Rose Scamaroni

Grade: 8

School: Village Middle School

Title: Across The Street

Category: Critical Essay

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Diane Fanning

Just last year, I was confronted with uncomfortable information. I had just gotten home from what I thought was a very long and hard seventh-grade school day, rushing up the stairs with a singular purpose in mind... BED. But just as I was about to flop onto my floral bed sheets, my older sister barged in with a proud smile on her face, yelling, "I just found the perfect POI (Program Oral Interpretation for competitive Speech and Debate) topic! Child Marriage in the United States!" I was shocked. In a span of seconds, my thoughts went from sleep and what Grey's Anatomy episode should I watch today, to an uncomfortable mess of doubt and disbelief. I mean, how was this possible? This is America, the land of the free? Luckily, however, after a very long and thorough talk with my more than passionate sister, my doubts on the validity of her announcement were gone, yet more questions lingered. I mean, I used to think of myself as a relatively well-informed person, or at least for a twelve-year-old. Wasn't this something I should have been aware of? Something we, Americans, should be aware of?

Child marriage is currently legal in 41 US states (Equality Now, 2023). According to a 2021 study, "nearly 300,000 minors — the vast majority of them girls — were legally married in the United States between 2000 and 2018" (Padilla & Padilla, 2023). It's happening in big cities, in the suburbs, in small towns. It's happening in the house across the street, hiding in plain sight. How is child marriage legal in America? Part of the reason is, the United States has no national law banning child marriage and no national minimum age to marry. Only 10 states have a minimum marrying age of 17; 23 states have a minimum age of 16; two states have a minimum age of 15; and five states (California, Mississippi, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Washington) don't have a minimum age, meaning that an individual of any age could legally marry. This legal gap highlights the need for standardized measures to protect children from early marriage. Several states have recently revived debates about child marriage; earlier this year, Michigan banned the practice, but many more states need to take action. Child marriage is legal in 82% of the United States, parental consent or a judicial waiver is sadly the only criteria required for a minor to marry. "Most Americans agree that forced marriage and child marriage are terrible and heartbreaking. They imagine this happening on the other side of the world, and I wish there was something we could do to show them it's happening here, too" – Fraidy Reiss, a survivor of forced marriage (Padilla & Padilla, 2023) We have become a nation of hypocrites, decrying child marriage across the world yet permitting it within our own borders, keeping our promise of liberty inaccessible to our girls. In fact,

the U.S. State Department and the United Nations have even recognized child marriage and forced marriage as human rights violations. It's chilling to know that we allow affirmed human rights abuses to continue in our states. Furthermore, resolving the plague of Child marriage necessitates awareness. So, we must discuss the causes, effects, and solutions of Child marriage in the United States.

"Girls married young are far less likely to stay in school, with lifelong economic impacts. Child brides are also at greater risk of experiencing dangerous complications in pregnancy and childbirth, contracting HIV/AIDS, and suffering domestic violence." (Child Marriage: A Violation of Child Rights, n.d.-b) According to The Atlantic, In America, these human rights abuses are partly due to our "slow progress at state level, which is caused by the political forces that have defended the practice". Forces like the right, with conservatives who oppose child marriage bans out of said support for the institution of marriage. Yet, such "support" is rooted in conservative or religious beliefs around premarital sexuality and pregnancy. Marriage under 18 is most common in conservative states, because "girls who are sexually active or become pregnant are seen as shameful to their families," as stated by Elizabeth Clement, a US women's historian. Though most of these child marriage cases in conservative states happen to young girls who have been statutorily raped because sex is seen as more problematic than rape itself. Just a few months ago, a Missouri lawmaker, Mike Moon, defended the right of 12-year-olds to marry. This "right" however obscures the fact that without a marriage license, these men would be guilty of statutory rape. This "right" shields their actions from prosecution while subjecting children to domestic violence, rape, physical and mental health issues.

In addition, those in favor of allowing under-18 marriage argue that restrictions on marriage would interfere with parental rights, and religious liberty, or force pregnant teens to give birth out of wedlock. Some Republicans even claim that the marriage age in America should align with the age at which girls are capable of bearing children. It's important, however, to acknowledge the fact that some girls are capable of bearing children at the young age of 10. With other conservatives like Tennessee republicans who sought out the elimination of any limits on marriage entirely in 2022, declaring that parents have a "right" to choose whom their children should marry". With excuses from legislators saying, "closing the loopholes would be really unfair to the sixteen-year-old girls who feel genuine affection for 50-year-old men" (TEDx Talks) and, "if she's old enough to have sex, she's old enough to get married". Once you know there is a problem as big as child marriage, you can't unsee it. It is revolting to know that people, especially those with power, choose to ignore it. Regrettably, due to our federal system, the Department of Justice is unable to issue statutory guidance for banning underage marriage because it would not be constitutionally binding on the states, which the Supreme Court reestablished during the 2013 *United States v. Windsor* decision stating that, "the regulation of domestic relations" is "an area that has long been regarded as a virtually exclusive province of the States."

For those who oppose child marriage, however, there is still a chance that the federal government will have a role to play. In 2020 a law journal article (Hudson, 2023) pointed

out a treaty dating back to 1992 called the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which states that “no marriage shall be entered into without the free and full consent of the intending spouses.” “Full consent” however, implies that the person has the capacity to agree to the marriage, and as noted by the Supreme Court, minors lack full capacity. Thus, child marriage by definition is forced marriage. Implying that the federal government has the right to establish a nationwide minimum age to marry, though legislative action might be needed. Although this right currently remains at the state level, there is still hope, and as The Atlantic voiced; “legislators should first focus on establishing a legal age for marriage in the five states that currently have no minimum age.”

After learning that child marriage happens in the US, I remember going to school the next day and excitedly telling my friends about it. I loved being the one to inform them of this crisis, hearing their disbelief and shocked responses similar to mine. It felt good to educate people, but I was also surprised by the sheer number of people like me who had no idea forced, and child marriage happens in the US. Even adults were surprised at hearing me mention it in the halls. At dinner, I remember telling my mom about how weird it was that something like child marriage could so easily camouflage into our society. My mom responded by explaining how she first uncovered this hidden world through a friend in college, who had opened up about her experience as a victim of under-18 marriage in America. Curious, I silently listened, as she told me her friend’s heartbreaking story. She was a teenager who partied a little too much and the daughter of a single mother against whom she rebelled. One day, her mother had enough and decided that marriage was the perfect way to “contain” her. Forced into marriage at the age of 16 with an older man she had never met before, her life was flipped upside down, subjecting her to a new one filled with abuse and isolation like none other. This time, shocked would be an understatement for how I was feeling. It was uncomfortable knowing how quickly this girl’s freedom was taken from her.

According to data from Unchained At Last, a non-profit organization, in the United States, girls are far more likely to be wed as children than boys: 86 percent of minors wed between 2000 and 2018 were girls. In addition, child marriage in the US undermines our statutory rape laws, “Some 60,000 marriages since 2000 occurred at an age or spousal age difference that should have been considered a sex crime.” (Unchained At Last, 2023) Marriage affects every aspect of a girl’s life, jeopardizing her health, agency, education, ability to earn money, personal safety, and legal rights, not to mention the lifelong trauma they are left with. As reported by ParentsTogether.org, “girls who marry before they turn 18 are about 50 percent more likely to drop out of high school and four times less likely to finish college.” Early teen marriage and dropping out of high school are associated with higher poverty rates later in life. In fact, we have created such a terrible legal situation that some girls forced into marriage, resort to suicide, thinking death is the only way out. What’s more, most domestic shelters don’t accept minors, and children can’t apply for divorce until they are 18. Child marriage is a nightmarish legal trap, leaving children vulnerable to abusive situations when our government should be protecting them.



In order to cease child marriage in America, several steps must be taken. Enacting a nationwide minimum age requirement being the first step. This would guarantee harmony among all states, warranting a person can never legally marry before they can legally consent to sex, and protect children from situations of abuse and exploitation. Sex education in schools also plays an important role in educating children on consent, how to identify unhealthy relationships and the severe consequences of under-18 marriage. Gaining this knowledge will also help the new generation to make educated decisions and protect themselves from potential harm. Raising public awareness is another key factor in combatting child marriage. Through educational campaigns and organizations, Americans can be alerted by the pervasiveness and detrimental effect child marriage has. Organizations like Unchained At Last, dedicated to educating and ending child marriage in the US, joined by government institutions in order to advocate for new laws and increase public knowledge. Raising awareness and closing these loopholes is the next step towards an America with true liberty.

Child marriage in the US is a sickening legal bind that is hiding in plain sight. It is time we open our eyes and uncover this hidden world of manipulation and abuse to all. This starts with you. Call your legislator.



Student Name: Susannah Sharma

Grade: 7

School: Village Middle School

Title: Choreographer; the Vigilante

Category: Short Story

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Elizabeth Foye

"Superhero Radiance has captured supervillain Quantum, also known as Isabel Kariel, in a huge fight that just ended a few minutes ago. This is what Radiance has to say about it -"

I turn off my phone and put it in my back pocket with a sigh. Superheroes are cool and all, but I don't need to hear about them all the time. Like this is the 3rd time Radiance has been on TV in the last two days. The media also pries into their personal lives way too much. I don't need to know that Radiance's real name is Geneveive Lee, she's 22, and she lives in Houston, Texas.

It's only because of our society's obsession with everything superhero that I'm sitting here waiting to take this test in the first place. Every kid is raised waiting for the moment they can take the SAT. No, not that written test that used to be important to get into college. The Superpower Aptitude Test. Every kid takes it when they turn 16 because apparently that's when we're "mature enough" to handle a superpower. Nevermind that only 1 in 10 people actually manifest a superpower. Even then, I don't know what's worse: Not having a superpower and being painfully average, or having a superpower and getting whisked away to some government training facility where they mass produce picture perfect heroes. Actually, I guess having a superpower sounds worse. Imagine getting your whole life planned out for one career path and being on display for every creepazoid to see. Oh god. Now, I'm nervous. What if I get a superpower? What if I get shipped off to some facility without any say, separated from my friends and family and - "Amber Storm," a man calls out, pulling me out of my wildly spiraling thoughts.

Okay, take a deep breath. It's going to be okay.

The man leads me through an unmarked doorway while talking. "As you know about 1 in 10 people have some sort of superpower, and the SAT will determine whether or not you have a superpower. It's important that you trigger it here instead of in a public place where you can potentially hurt somebody."

"Okay, but how do you trigger a superpower?" I ask. Don't be nervous. Don't be nervous. "Every person with a superpower has a special nerve on the back of their neck. If you place the right amount of pressure on it, the person's superpower will trigger automatically."

He suddenly stops at a room with a chair in the middle of the room and a TV mounted in the top corner.

"This will be your testing room. It will be a few minutes until the person testing you gets here," he says, then turns around and walks out, closing the door behind him.

I sit down in the chair, pick up a TV remote sitting on the floor, and press the on button.

Maybe the TV can distract me from how absolutely terrified I am.

"Superhero duo Blackout and Category 5 have - "

Nope. Superheroes. Switch the channel.

"Supervillain Quantum has escaped police custody!"

Switch.

"Big battle happening in downtown Austin between superhe- "

Switch.

"Vigilante Ghost has continued to evade capture."

I turn off the TV.

"Are you Amber Storm," a lady says at the door. When did she get here?

"Yes," I say.

The lady walks quickly behind me and starts to push my head down. She brushes my hair off my neck and presses down on the back of it. Her hand immediately rips away from my neck and she starts . . . dancing?

"What - What is happening!" the lady yells as she starts swinging her left arm in a circular motion and walking to the left. She stops after about four steps, puts both of her hands on her hips, and starts bumping her right hip. I just stare in shock as she starts skipping in a circle, her left arm interlocked with seemingly nobody. That's when it hits me. She's doing the choreography of the "Timber" song from Just Dance. Wow, I haven't thought of that game in a while, but I remember really loving this specific dance. I think I memorized the whole thing.

"I think I know what this is," the woman says suddenly. "It's your superpower."

"Well, how do I turn it off!" I yell.

"I have a walkie talkie in my pocket. Grab it and say that the examinee in room 6 has manifested a power."

The woman then starts skipping in a circle again, and I scramble to try and grab the woman's pocket. I finally manage to yank the walkie talkie out of her pocket.

"Hello. The examinee in room 6 has manifested a superpower."

. . .

I'm lying in my bedroom at home, looking through stacks of papers and pamphlets.

Apparently, after you manifest a superpower, every single government agency wants to recruit you to become a superhero in their name. Someone with my superpower is especially in demand. At least that's what the testing people told me (after they had helped me turn off my power). One of the testers has a superpower that detects what other people's powers are. Apparently, my power lets me make anybody do a Just Dance dance, as long as it is a dance that I have already memorized. They keep on saying how perfect my power is for being a superhero.

"Superheroes, superheroes, superheroes," I mumble.

I don't want to become a superhero. I don't want my life always on display like that. Of course, I like to help people, who doesn't? But I want to help people while still having privacy. It seems like as soon as I get a superpower I have to become a superhero. Let's just hope school isn't that bad.

. . .

Spoiler alert: It was that bad. All day it was things like,

"Wow you will be such an amazing superhero."

"Your power is awesome. It's so perfect to be a superhero."

"Please remember us when you become a superhero."

It's like they don't understand that I might have other ambitions. If anything, I would become a villain just to spite them, but villains also have their whole life on display.

Ughhhhhhhh. There's nothing I can do. Am I destined to be a public figure?

The next few weeks go on like this with every single person practically demanding that I be a hero. Well, not everybody. One day when I was cleaning out my locker, I found a note that said, It sounds like you don't want to be a hero, with a location and time written on it. This was a commonly known villain recruiting technique. So now the villains want to recruit me? I just want to be left alone!

It all comes to a head at school about six weeks after the SAT .

"Why won't you show us your power?" a girl asks snarkily.

"I just don't want to," I say, visibly looking around to find an exit.

"Well, you're going to have to show us one day. How will you become a hero if you're too scared to use your power?" She walks right up into my personal space and points her finger at me.

This. Is. It. After weeks of harassment by my peers, countless notes in my locker (the villains had contacted me no less than 45 times since that first note), and even teachers expecting me to become a hero, I have reached my limit.

"Well, I don't want to become a hero, so stop acting like ME not wanting to use MY POWER is somehow wrong! And get your narcissistic self out of my personal space!" I yell and storm off.

. . .

After storming out I just wander around the city feeling sorry for myself. How dare she think that I need to use my power on whomever asks for it? How dare everyone think that I need to become a superhero or supervillain just because I've got a superpower? How dare anybody think that . . . I turn a corner into an alley and see - Oh my gosh! Is that supervillain Quantum holding a knife at a person's throat. There are at least 10 superheroes also crowded in the alley, but they're not doing anything due to Quantum holding a knife to an innocent victim's throat. Seriously, you would have thought that 10 heroes would be able to handle it, and yet none of them have thought of a plan. My nonexistent respect for heroes has completely disappeared. I quickly hide behind a trash can and look around. There's about five other people tied up behind Quantum. I assume that she's also holding them hostage. I don't want them to see me, so I take off my jacket, cut a few holes into it, and make myself a makeshift mask. Now what dance should I

make them do? By now, I've fully accepted that I'm going to save these people. I mean who stumbles upon a hostage situation and doesn't help? What are the most ridiculous dances I have memorized? Oh, I got it.

"Hey losers," I yell, jumping over the trash can and running toward the tied up people. Quantum and all the heroes start doing the "Beep, Beep, I'm a Sheep " dance while I start running between the hostages, untying the ropes that are preventing them from moving.

"Turn that corner and there's a police station a few blocks ahead," I whisper to them.

The hostages start running in the direction I tell them to. Thank God, I learned how to control who's under my power at any time. Otherwise, the hostages would be dancing to the police station rather than running.

"Who is this? A new vigilante?" one of the heroes yells.

"Who cares. They're doing something illegal. You're not allowed to use your superpower without government permission!" another hero yells.

"That's why I called her a vigilante!" the first hero yells back.

This all would have been really scary and intimidating, but all the people currently under the influence of my power are now doing the sprinkler and dabbing.

I hear police sirens in the distance. Well, it seems like my time here is up. I don't want to be arrested for illegal power use, now do I? I start running down the street and rip the makeshift face mask off. That was so much fun! It felt amazing to help somebody like that, and I can't get it out of my head what the heroes kept calling me, a vigilante. I've always admired vigilantes. They help people but their identities are not out there for the whole world to see. Wait, I'm such an idiot! This is what I've been looking for this whole time: a way to save people without everyone being in my business! This is an amazing idea. I need to start right away.

Unfortunately, my plans to become a vigilante had to wait. After the whole breakdown I had at school, my parents pulled me out and put me in online school because obviously, the social pressure wasn't good for me. I also decided to tell them about all the fear I was feeling about being forced to be a superhero. Technically, when someone first gets their power, they are required to register their ability into a government database within the first year of getting the ability. I'm pretty sure this requirement is in place so that they can take superpowered people under their control more easily. My parents decided that despite it being a requirement, I would not register my ability. Because of this, we had to move away from our home, and I'm going by a fake name. It's a lot of work, but this is the only thing we can do right now to make sure I'm not taken by some creepy government official. I promised myself I would find a way to use my powers on my terms once the time was right.

3 months later:

It's time. It's finally time! I creep out the window in my new costume. It is fully black with purple accents, knee high boots, and two bamboo sticks for me to whack people with. I start wandering around the city looking for anything out of sorts. Everything feels just right. Now I'm on my first patrol as a vigilante, and I feel right in my element. Whenever

someone asks for my name, I can just say my code name, and they won't be able to figure out any of my personal information. Speaking of code names, let me tell you mine. My name is Choreographer, the vigilante.

Student Name: Rhea Chidambaram

Grade: 8

School: Village Middle School

Title: My 10th Life

Category: Short Story

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Elizabeth Foye

### My 10th Life

The castle. A brooding monstrosity that loomed over the desolate landscape like a festering wound in the heart of the earth. The towering spires, curling around the castle, resembling skeletal fingers reaching for the heavens. The sparse beams of pure moonlight reveal grotesque gargoyles, their contorted figures aligning with the picture etched into my mind. The wind whistled as it passed through the lifeless empty cavities, which couldn't even be considered windows. A suffocating fog clung to the castle's malevolent form, the air frozen into an eternal, frigid embrace. This is what I wanted after all. Breathe, Grace, breathe.

\* \* \*

Tick tock. Tick tock. Minutes slipping into hours, hours turning into days. Tick tock. Tick tock. I know where I am. I know the bell must ring. I can feel the people gathering around me, snapping their fingers in my face, shaking my rigid convulsing body. I try to wake myself out of the nightmare, but the image of the castle is burning against my eyelid. The castle flashes, burning against my eyelid, the fleeting image almost imperceptible. I only recognize it because it seems vaguely familiar.

This is a recurring dream I have had since I was 12. I am fencing with a hooded masked figure in the castle. Except this is no bout, we are fighting to death. In my dreams, the castle and the hooded figure are always the same, but I am different. My clothes, my hair color, my eye color - all are subject to change. One element remains eerily unwavering. My opponent mercilessly plunges his sword into my heart every single time.

Ring, ring, ring. I'm in the nurse's office, vaguely aware of how I got there. Not again. Here come the compulsory questions, "What did you eat today?", "Are you under stress?", "How's your home life?" Of course, Nurse Michelle has to ask me this. She goes down the list, allotting about five seconds for each response, which she knows she won't receive. Sitting in the nurse's office once again, I feel like a broken record player. It's as though I am a passenger on a never-ending train, one that moves in circles, always ending up in the same place. I've tried. Believe me when I say I've tried to not let it slip back in. To not let it control me. But one little mistake, and it all comes rushing back. The attacks, the nightmares, the castle.

When I try to visualize the flashes and make sense of them, they elude me, slipping through my fingers like grains of sand. Sometimes, I can remember a vivid flash of the rope, tears splattering on a love letter, or the glass of the windshield shattering. Or the

castle, which somehow diverges from my typical visions. People tell me I'm hallucinating, I'm crazy, that I'm a sociopath. Maybe I am, but some part of this has stopped feeling like some twisted dream that I've been thrown into. Now it feels more concrete; these flashes are a part of me.

\* \* \*

The dream comes, as it often does, shattering the fragile peace I had managed to find in sleep. This glimpse seems somewhat familiar. At the gravestone, with a letter. Tears spilling from my eyes, grief washing over my body, and a crippling sadness filling my heart. Jolting awake, I reach for my dream journal. My mind has normalized this suffering, my main interest is to fit this piece of the puzzle into one of the macabre narratives that consume my thoughts. Fingering through my journal, I find the fragment that seems to fit with my most recent dream. Plot line two. This must go after he was shot. Swiftly sketching the frames I remember, I construct the next moment in the story. It's hard to explain, but each of these stories, lives, seem to be set in a different timeline. The pages of my journal are a tapestry of fragmented memories, like shards of a shattered mirror that I desperately long to piece back together.

\* \* \*

Mr. Abrams' class seems especially mundane today. As my mind drifts away from his lecture, I feel the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. It's coming once again. I need to refocus on Mr. Abram's droning voice, to force myself back into reality, but the vivid images that invade my mind are fragments of the lives I can never escape. In the nightmare's surreal landscape, I see a gleaming knife that hangs suspended in the air. Its blade polished to a mirror-like sheen, reflecting my terrified expression. Its presence is suffocating, as though the item has malicious intent. The more I stare, the sinister allure slowly captivates me. I cannot pull my eyes away from its gleaming edge. Shaking myself out of the trance, I glance at my reflection again. The smile plastered on my face is one of true content, one that I haven't witnessed in many a day. Am I the monster, the villain in this fight?

\* \* \*

Why is she screaming? I'm coming downstairs. "Hi, sweetie! I wanted to talk to you." "Ok." Before the episodes, my mom and I were a team. I was her mini-me who was going to be the head cheerleader and the prom queen just like her. Funny, look at me now. I don't think she has forgiven me for giving up on her dream. Initially, she did try to help. She thought my dreams were brought on by a fear of swords so she enrolled me in fencing. I was surprisingly good at it. I was so good that everyone at the institute wanted me to compete. But then the nightmares came more often, and practicing became hard. My mom then tried quite a few therapists and even a psychiatrist. But here I am; uncured and a total embarrassment.

"So, your teachers have noticed that you are having trouble adjusting to this curriculum," Each word is carefully placed, the sugary sweet but artificial placidity washing over me as it always does. My mom has that effect on people.

"Ok."



"I think that it's time for a change. This is a fragile situation after all." She doesn't mean that. She doesn't think the situation is fragile, it's me who she thinks is fragile. Not fragile like a flower, fragile like a bomb.

"We are going to try residential school." Not waiting for me to object, she forces a pamphlet into my hands.

\* \* \*

"Hi! Welcome to Ravencrest Academy. Let me show you around. My name is Ava," a peppy voice greeted me as the cab's tires crunch on the gravel entryway. I slowly turn my head, observing the bright-eyed ambassador. The grounds are beautiful and full of wildflowers. A feeling of foreboding washes over me. I shiver involuntarily. It's not just the oppressive architecture or the ominous spires of the castle that send shivers down my spine—it's an almost tangible awareness that unseen eyes are fixated on my every move. I faint into a blessed void. The world around me unravels like a tattered tapestry, threads of reality slipping through my grasp. Each thread tells a story—a different life, a different iteration. In one thread, I am a damsel in distress, chased through the labyrinthine corridors by unseen horrors. Another depicts me as a ruler, draped in regal attire, yet destined to meet a tragic end. The scenes shift like a fever dream, each life ending with the same haunting tableau—my lifeless body sprawled on the unforgiving stone floor. Tick tock. Tick tock.

As Ava hurries me to our room, I notice two boys pass me by. They're handsome - identical twins as anyone could tell. Both of them look at me with distaste, their piercing cobalt blue eyes boring into my cornflower blue. One of them spits at my shoe, muttering 'Diaboli'. Why would he do that? What does 'diaboli' even mean? I look confusedly at Ava, who mutters "Ignore them. Jack and Joseph have always been lunatics."

\* \* \*

Lying in my bed, I think about the day that has passed. My eyelids close and I felt myself fall into a deep sleep. I imagine myself slithering through deep crevices, flying through open skies. A sweet voice whispers, "I am so glad you are home."

Jolting awake, I look around frantically. It's still slightly dark outside. Unable to fall asleep, I walk towards the open window and look outside. In the moonlight, I spot two figures fencing. The boys from before, in synchronized symmetry, their fluid movements like poetry. As they parry, I am hit with a sudden realization. I have seen these movements a thousand times in my dreams. One of them is the hooded figure in my dreams.

\* \* \*

Aimlessly walking, I find myself outside the library. I enter the large space and find it instantly calming. I walk along the shelves caressing the spine of dusty books that look like they were placed there when the castle was built. I see the boys hiding something behind a row of books. I wait in the shadows until they leave and then uncover what they are hiding. There I see it, a book entitled Diaboli. I carefully carry the book to the table, brushing off the dust that lined the cover.

The book narrates the tales of a beautiful princess and a malevolent creature, Diaboli. Diaboli was obsessed with the princess and wanted her for itself, so it split a part of its



soul and embedded it within the princess. Diaboli then built a castle that was a manifestation of its twisted soul's malevolence and imprisoned the princess there. The darkness embedded in her soul drove the princess mad. When the prince was told of the beautiful maiden who was kept a prisoner, he took an oath in the spirit of his ancestors to free her and kill Diaboli. The illustrations in the book are life-like. The face of the princess with darkness in her eyes stares at me - a face that I see in the mirror every day. The prince's face is also familiar - the twins.

A chilling realization grips me as I am thrust into a vision. As if placed by an unseen force, I am at the center of a circle of people. They are kneeling on their knees, their heads bent, their hands joined as if in prayer. It feels like I am in the middle of an ominous ceremony. I felt the weight of their anticipation, their collective submission to the darkness that now gripped the castle. The air itself seemed to shudder with an unholy resonance as if Ravenscrest itself acknowledged me as its malevolent sovereign. I could feel the darkness rise in me - the soul of Diaboli desperately seeking to become whole.

As soon as I get into my room, I rush to my bedside table and grab my journal. I flip through my past lives scattered within my journal's bindings, each page etched with the echoes of long-forgotten experiences. The journal is illuminated by the ghostly light, the words dance before my eyes, and the realization struck me with a profound sense of despair. Ten lifetimes, and in each one, I met my end within the walls of Ravenscrest. The castle, it seemed, was not only a manifestation of malevolence but a harbinger of my own demise. Is this recurring cycle of tragedy inescapable? Will I die here once again?

\* \* \*

In the muted gloom of Ravenscrest, I seek out the twins, the only figures who seem to know my past lives. Before they can speak, taunt me with their insults, I force out the words. "In every life," I begin, saying it out loud, making it seem more concrete, "I am killed within the walls of Ravenscrest." Their expressions shift to solemnity and recognition.

"In every life, we are bound by the same threads of destiny," one of the twins murmurs, his voice carrying a weight that echoes through the cold corridors. "It is our fate to end your existence, to sever the ties that bind you to this cursed cycle."

The revelation hangs in the air like a chilling mist, enveloping us in an unspoken understanding of a destiny that defies explanation. I never had the chance to be soft. I was always bloody knuckles and shards of glass. I wanted them to be afraid to hurt me. But now, as though the kaleidoscope's colors had been scrambled, my perspective has changed. As we linger in the alcove, a pact unspoken yet implicit, the twins and I stand on the precipice of a decision that will define not only this life but the countless ones that have come before. I find myself standing at the crossroads of despair and hope, my reflection in Ravenscrest's ancient windows mirroring the conflict within. The castle, once a bastion of malevolence, now stands witness to a soul yearning for something beyond the relentless cycle—a chance to be soft, to embrace the tenderness that eluded me through ten lifetimes of darkness.

\* \* \*

Breathe, Grace, breathe.

"Are you ready?" I don't think I was ever ready. But I was brave. The universe listens to brave. In the quietude of the night, the cold blade gleams, catching the moonlight in a sinister dance.

Our plan was deceptively simple: Jack will fight me. We hypothesized that Diaboli's soul in me would take over and fight for its host's survival. In turn, when the piece of Diaboli's soul was in real danger, the other part of the soul would come to protect its own. When the rest of Diaboli's soul appears Joseph will kill it at the same time as Jack kills the piece in me. I will most likely die, but hopefully, we will end the cycle and destroy Diaboli in this life. Do I really want to do this? I've always heard the advice, "Don't swim oceans for someone who wouldn't jump a puddle for you" or "Don't light yourself on fire to keep others warm." Who am I fighting for? There is nobody else. I guess if I never step to the edge I'll never see the view.

As Jack advances, I brace myself, feeling the darkness within me stir, aching for release. Our swords meet with a clang that resonates through the night. I move with precision I didn't know I possessed, dancing with death itself. I parry Jack's thrust, feeling the darkness tempting me, promising power. I watch as the tendrils of darkness spread around me, the full manifestation of Diaboli's soul emerging. Joseph, hidden in the shadows, watches intently, ready for the moment to strike.

In a swift, calculated move, I feign vulnerability, luring Jack into a decisive strike. It's then that I catch sight of the full manifestation of Diaboli's soul, a dark specter looming over the castle. With Jack's blade inches away, I realize the time has come.

Summoning every ounce of courage, I turn the blade towards myself. The world slows down as I plunge the sword into my own heart. The shock on Jack's face mirrors my own as the blade pierces me, a searing pain followed by an unexpected release. As the sword enters my being, a blinding light erupts. The very foundations of Ravencrest tremble as if echoing my sacrifice. The oppressive presence of Diaboli dissipates like mist under the morning sun. As the first light spills over the castle's spires, I feel my soul liberated. I collapse, the world fading, but with a sense of peace, I've never known. In this final act of defiance, I have shattered the chains of darkness binding me.

\* \* \*

When I wake up again, I look to see how Jack and Joseph had fared against Diaboli and realize that I am back home in my own bedroom. I walk down confusedly and see my mom making breakfast. I ask her how I got back home from Ravencrest, and she looks at me really puzzled. She has no idea what I'm talking about. Did we really kill Diaboli? Was I back because he was gone? What happened to Jack and Joseph? These questions swirl in my mind as I get ready for school. As I walk into the school, people say hello. I guess I'm not the weirdo anymore. As I walk to my art class, someone loops their arms along mine. "Are you not going to say hello to your best friend?" I smile and look into a pair of Cobalt blue eyes.

\*\*\*

The sunrise in my painting of the castle unfurls its vibrant tapestry, each color an emotional prism. Fragments of both agonizing and exultant moments from my past quickly cycle through my mind. The golden rays that cascade over the sunrise bear witness to the enduring warmth of laughter that danced through my past lives, now silenced but not forgotten. The warm oranges evoke the flames of passion that once engulfed my heart in a fervor of love, while the soft pinks that blush are reminiscent of the tears that stained love letters. Deep reds tell the heart-wrenching tale of a love that bled into the fabric of my soul, leaving stains of sorrow on every page of my existence but also signifying the strength that emerged from heartbreak. Regal purples weave a narrative of dreams hanging like forgotten echoes of what could have been, yet they also symbolize the regal tenacity that continues to pulse within me. I am tethered not only to a demon's soul but also to the luminous grace of an angel. The sunrise, with its myriad colors, reflects not just the scars of my haunted history but the chance to embrace the present and live a life woven with the delicate threads of both good and darkness, creating a tapestry uniquely mine.

Student Name: Aditya Chakraborty

Grade: 8

School: Village Middle School

Title: Novel

Category: Novel Writing

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Elizabeth Foye

This book showcases the story of 3 friends who venture to capture a serial killer.

Aditya Chakraborty

Ms. Fanning

Ms. Foye

11/30/23

City of the Shadows: Apeman

"It's so good to be back with you guys"

It was a quiet evening. Three friends were hanging around at one of their friend's places. It was an apartment, glimpsing over the beautiful Charleston night sky. It was any casual friends-hanging-out night. These friends know each other since middle school when they were all in the same classes. During their conversations, Mark suggests finding something to eat.

The group landed at one restaurant. They stayed till 10 until that one sound dropped goosebumps on their skin.

Suddenly, screaming came from down the road. Hundreds of people ran away, but the friend group didn't know why.

"What was that?" Mark was shocked and questioned everyone.

"I don't know. I think we should just go." Dexter replied.

"No, no, no... Hold on" Tim got an idea.

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking what you're thinking, because I am not paying for the food" Mark replied to Tim.

"No, not that. We. Should check out what is happening." Tim suggested.

"ARE YOU CRAZY!" Dexter replied, "WE DO NOT KNOW WHAT CAN HAPPENED OUT THERE."

"If we want to run back, we will run back. Let's just check it out first" Tim replied.

"I said I'm not going" Dexter replied.

The thought of a haunted house with a legitimate murderer made their hands feel cold. The three friends drive through the pitch-dark roads, driving in the opposing direction of the running crowds on the sidewalks.

All the friends guessed at random. They went to the 7th floor. Mark, Tim, and Dexter became as pale as a ghost. They could feel their hearts in their throats. Blood was on the doors and stained the carpet. These friends were already regretting their choice of becoming involved. Rain started pouring outside heavily, and the atmosphere felt dark, like their minds. Suddenly, the hall went pitch-dark, and they saw a glimpse of a person jumping through a window.

They all tried to get to their car through the pitch-dark halls of the building. The three friends tried to stay hidden while trying not to make a noise through the crusty, black streets. The criminal, who the friends found out to be, was a tall Caucasian male in all-black, perfectly blending in with the rich night sky.

"Are you sure we should be following this man?" Mark whispered to Dexter and Tim

"I'm kind of regretting this too, not going to lie." Tim whispered back.

"Come on guys, we have come this far, we are an inch away from catching this man in his tracks." Dexter replied.

They follow this man to a small house-like area. These friends inquisitively follow him, until they reach the concrete gate, with barbed wire. The sharp needles on the barbed wire resembled the thorns on the stem of a rose. Just those, make the three friends tremble internally. The killer entered the building and the three friends tried to see over the concrete wall, by standing on rocks. Out of nowhere, the killer starts shooting in all directions in the building. The abrupt shooting scared Tim, and he fell over with an abrupt noise.

The killer heard it, and he ran outside.

"We do not have time for arguing!" Dexter exclaimed while whispering.

Dexter grabbed Tim's arm and ran to hide behind a building while keeping his eyes on the criminal.

He did a last shooting of everyone, to confirm everyone was dead. His gun lost 4 rounds. He ran outside. All the friends made a run for it to their car. Hiding there, the man inspected the whole area with a semi-loaded mini gun, making sure no one was there.

The killer finds 6 eyes, and they were theirs. The killer was a cunning man he realized Tim, Mark and Dexter were on a heist to catch him.

The three friends felt their hands and legs go cold and their palms sweat. Tim makes eye contact, and being in the driver's seat, he starts driving, trying to escape him. The killer puts on his mask, and escapes with his motorcycle. Little did he know, the friends were secretly stalking his routes, through the rear-view mirror. Tim then drifted in the opposing direction and drove after the killer, burning his wheels.

"What has got to be done got to be done" Tim said calmly, and he pushes the accelerator to 65mph. "Trust me on this."

It then became a chase race. The three friends hide-and-seeked with their car with the killer. They were chasing in the outback of the downtown, where the houses were dead silent. The chase went from street to street, block to block.

The friends fogged up the entire block, hazing the killer's view, and finally running him into a corner. He flew and hit the edge, with his final breath.

And there he was. Dead as a doorknob.

Tim, Mark, and Dexter stood out of their car. They were speechless.

"Is...Is he dead" Mark questioned.

"Looks like it" Tim answered, still unsure.

Dexter's hand shook as he picked up the phone. He dialed 911.

"We caught him. We caught Ape man." Dexter said into the phone. His voice was choking.

Tim put his hand on Dexter's shoulder.

"Well, it is what it is. We did what we had to do, and it was to protect our community. We stopped this man from hurting anyone else." Tim said reassuringly.

The body still stayed there, stinking the corner of the block.

Five minutes later, the police arrived. The amplitude of the sirens grew louder and louder, minute by minute. Chief Inspector Bowman walked out of his vehicle to the body, surrounded with yellow tape.

"You are lucky to be alive boys." Mr. Bowman says, pointing to each of the three boys. He picked up the dead body. "Without you, we would not have found this criminal."

3 months pass. Tim and Mark were happily living their lives; They were going to parties and going to their university classes. One man stayed with the event that happened 3 months ago, Dexter. Dexter tried to recall the events. He could feel it in his guts that something was wrong. He searched up all records, aliases and events of Apeman.

Dexter looked through the blocks of the internet, scraping his number, his last location detected. He detected his location through his number, using a program he made.

His eyes shrieked to find out everything. All the past newspapers made him infer one identity. His hand started shaking. He couldn't sleep.

Meanwhile Inspector Bowman:

"Honey! I'm home! Nah just kidding I live alone." Inspector Bowman chuckled as he unlocked the door to his house.

He took his mask off and gently kept it on the kitchen countertop. He turned on the TV.

"Apeman has been caught. And it was by 3 young men" the reporter said.

"Hahaha. Idiots." Inspector Bowman started laughing. "I hate that name."

He stared down at the hallway and at his mask, and chuckled while eating a bowl of cereal.

Back at Dexter

Dexter wakes up the next morning, a Sunday, to call Tim and Mark. He grabbed his phone and called.

"Hey, I need to come over right now. I need to show you something," Dexter said.

"For what?," Tim replied.

"I can't say over text right now. I will tell when you guys come," Dexter replied.

"You have to tell us. I have a meeting with someone today," Mark suggested.

"Ok. It is about that incident that happened 3 months ago." Dexter replied.

"Hey! You made a promise not to talk about it ever again." Tim stubbornly replied.

"This is urgent. I have found out something" Dexter said.

"Ok. I'm on my way." Mark and Tim said.

Tim and Mark reached Dexter's house in a few minutes. Dexter showed Tim and Mark all the evidence, and they burst out laughing.

"Get a good sleep now bud." Tim said, trying not to laugh in the middle.

Tim and Mark shut the door.

It was up to Dexter now to catch Inspector Bowman in his tracks for good. He tried scraping information, at some point illegally. After spending all his pennies on a people search, he found all the details. A house, a picture of a key, an address and a number.

He drove 20 mins into the outskirts to find an abandoned-looking house. No one was in it. He checked outside and checked through the windows. No one was there.

Before Dexter searched for Bowman's house, he 3D printed a picture of his key allowing him to unlock the door to his house. His hand trembled for the keyhole, trying not to make a noise and hoping it will work. He heard the sound of an unlocking door and the door started to creak, uncovering a blinking lightbulb, a kitchen. He pressed the record button on his phone. Suddenly, an alert appeared on his phone. It was someone getting murdered nearby.

"10 miles away!" Dexter read the notification.

He quickly talked to himself.

"If I am correct, Apeman will go down through a meadow after every kill, through the nearest tunnel." Dexter points to a tunnel through the inside of his house.

"He should arrive in around 17 minutes." Dexter ran to the basement as fast as his chicken legs can get him. He ran down the stairs to find everything. Everything was uncovered and the puzzle was put together.

All his masks were there. All his robbed items were there. Everything. He pulled out his phone and recorded everything to see a bright light come through the doorway. Bowman walked down the basement stairs and went into hiding.

"Come out. Come out wherever you are" Bowman said in a sing-song voice.

Dexter hid behind a cupboard, but Bowman found him.

"Hah! Gotcha!" Bowman said confidently, knocking Dexter out with a chair. Dexter then laid unconscious on the floor.

Dexter woke up at 2am. The basement was pitch-black. He searched his pockets for his phone, and found it, all muddy as if it was dipped into soil. He tried to recall everything, but everything was hazy. He suddenly felt a cylindrical box fall on him. He quickly realized it was a flare and immediately pulled out a matchstick. His dark, tired eyes were finally



beaming with hope like a toddler who got their favorite toy. He stroked the phosphorus red tip of the matchstick and a glow appeared. The red fire was about to send Bowman to where he deserves because of Dexter's courage and desire for justice.

"Don't fail on me now buddy!" Dexter lit up the flare and shot it out of the chimney.

The red flare lit up like fireworks, and gazed all attention. There was a red, hazy gas hovering over the tip of the chimney. Dexter's cold, bare hands grabbed his phone.

He dialed his friend's numbers. He is trying to dial as fast as possible with his numb fingers before his phone dies out. They pick up.

"What do u want" Tim answers the phone like he is annoyed.

"Take the car. Down the highway. You will end up in the outskirts. Find a house with a red glare over its chimney. Just 10 mins" Dexter replies with a fear in his voice.

"I do not have the time to find just tell me the address" Tim questioned Dexter impatiently.

"Ok the address is 578—" Dexter replies back and the phone dies.

Tim was shocked. He immediately got out of his bed and alerted Mark. He started his car and drove for ten minutes down the highway. He reached the outback, and now he started repeating to himself the description given by Dexter. He finally found it and walked outside. He put his jacket and his beanie on. He heard a repeated banging on a wall which paused after three consecutive hits. His curious mind wandered him around the area. Tim then found out that the banging was from the inside.

"Hello? Anybody there?" Tim was confused.

"Hello! Is this Tim, Mark, who is it I need help" Dexter exclaimed back.

"Dexter! What the heck are you doing here!" Tim replied.

"I'll explain, just get me out of this thing before he finds me." Dexter said.

"Find who?" Tim was confused.

"I said I'll explain later!" Dexter replied.

Tim found a metal leaf rake, in hope that the wood of the door can break. It broke and Dexter was free. Tim dialed 911 on his phone, with the address on his phone.

"Hello. My friend was kidnapped, and I believe his kidnapper is a murderer" Tim spoke on the phone while his voice was shaking.

5 minutes in, Bowman woke up to sirens. He knew what he had to do and made a run for it. Clark Bowman ran through the back door of his kitchen. He did not realize the traps

Dexter has set up behind his house. Bowman trips upon a dent and steel bars in the grass, making him fall to the end of his criminal years. There was a sudden thump, and a yell of pain and yielding.

"Yo who was that." Tim was scared.

"I set up a trap before I entered the house. I had this covered." Dexter said confidently.

Officers came and handcuffed Bowman. Clark limped while the officers were hold his hands around his back. Mark came to check up on Dexter, bringing a blanket around for comfort.

And that was it. That was the end of Ape-man's criminal years. They were still in deep trauma after this encounter, especially Dexter. The city celebrated Dexter's bravery and resilience by creating a day in remembrance of Dexter's bravery for a decade-wanted criminal mastermind.

Student Name: Kabir Rai

Grade: 7

School: Village Middle School

Title: One Last Time

Category: Short Story

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Elizabeth Foye

As I begin to huddle by a tree and clench my flask with frozen fingers, I feel the snowstorm break to a sound that one knows all too well. The sharp, distinct whistle that blew to shreds all that we could call home. I try to grasp the ice, desperately trying to skid from the awaiting inferno hurling down. I hear Ember from the other tree. "Marc! Get out of there!" the whistling was pulling me back, each push a pull. Wick yells behind me, "Impact!" Then, the world went black. Pain seared through my leg, my head pounding. "Soldier, report to the Command Center immediately." Boggs was ordering the rest from the new people from Iceberg. Little did he know that I was on a secret mission sanctioned by the military leaders, but unbeknown to most of the others. Our district was called Iceberg because of the frigid climate upstanding what used to be a land called Alaska. I shot up straight as pain slivered up my spine, winced, and slowly made my way. What do you mean, "soldier"? Where am I? Who am I now? I had a billion questions between the destruction of my home. Home.

I thought of the rich interlacing branches throughout the woods. In any other instance, this would have been peaceful. Not that I remember what "peaceful" means anymore. I wondered what I was doing in this forest, running from gunfire and missiles, exasperating of the war beyond liberty of deliberation. The surroundings went black. No, I hadn't died, but the simulation was over. I was prepping for the real attack on the Commune Nation forces. The Commune Nation. The country that destroyed our home, took our people, killed our animals, razed the freedom that they claimed to give us. They say that our land was built upon another nation, actually multiple nations, Canada and America. I would have loved to live in America. They say that their world used to be free. Not perfect, but free. Then, there was this nation called China. Once war broke out, our weapons and nuclear facilities released waste into the air, in a process called "Nuclear Winter." This was when the ashes rose into the air and blocked all sunlight, making the world a frigid wasteland. Luckily, that was a while ago, but the chances of it happening again have never been higher.

Since then, with the excuse that we were avoiding that pain, we induced oppression, with a government that would love to take power away from us whenever. I sometimes wonder: Is our security so important that it outweighs what the security protects? Does it take away our right of determination? I feel that security was worth nothing when freedom was limited. For, where there is no freedom, there is no security. Likewise; where there is no security, there is no freedom.

So when the Nation chose to take away that very balance when dissapaiting freedom and thus provisional security, nothing could stand. That is why, on November 3rd, I lost everything. I saw my home burnt, my family destroyed, and Iceberg obliterated from the skies above.

We needed to hit the Commune Nation to finally show what we've been up to. Therefore, it was decided. On the morning of December 28th at 5:00pm, the goals would include the destruction of government launchpads in the forest.

"Commander Boggs, you have five days to prepare your men for the attack." President Jade tugged at her blonde hair while ordering Boggs around. After the briefing, we were all cleared of our schedules in order to make time and space for preparation.

That night, I could not sleep. The upcoming attack was to surpass any of the training available at hand. Slowly, the hinges of drowsiness from the constant training caved in. And yet, this was somehow training. To be able to sleep sound after this many die. After all of the Iceberg dies. After our peace dies. And slowly, as it sets in, I will too.

0800 hours. The day of the strike. We depart now. Strapped into the seat, we were planning to hit the centric structures of the Commune Nation forces. We would focus on hovercraft launching bays, then carry out the destruction of response forces. Though this may seem impossible regarding the endless drop of Defenders, the second part will be the toughest. Due to our lack of surprise, technological defect, and simply having our backs to the enemy, this stage will be prolonged and harsh, in which casualty chances will go high.

Casualties will be high. President Jade made that statement with a plain face, and everyone accepted it with the same reaction, though pain and sorrow ran through the room. I could see it in the air, in the pattern of breathing, I felt it myself. Right now, in this helicopter, the feeling was no different, flying over cities of ash and towns of rubble.

Towers of skulls, no longer resembling their ever vivid personas.

"Well, this is it," Ember sighed. She was from Farmhouse. When the rebellion broke out, the fire bombings caused her to join the Revolution Forces as an explosives specialist. And then, there's Watt. He works with tech. He works in engineering. Anything science, really. He revolted in Silicon Valley, one of the old tech hubs, and had to flee. He used to make weapons and machines for the Commune Nation, making him a viable asset when we need to operate with different technologies over a period of time. Despite his mind, he needs a lesson in his formalities.

"Who's the idiot who actually knows what's going on?" He said with a grin. Under the profound grin was a scowl towards me.

"That's pointed," I recoiled. "Whose account was logged into President Coin's computer to read the full dossier?" His face flushed with anger. I smiled. He didn't.

"Take this laugh, but nobody will be laughing when your @!%\$ #)\*& \$%^\$#@ will land us all in a big pile of.." The Pilot yelled over his shoulder for us to get out, or he would have the last laugh on us... or something like that. Add in unpleasantries, and take out grammar.

Boggs' codename was Principal. Maybe, because he was the leader, they chose such a secretive name for him. Very secretive. Everyone was referred to by their name, except Boggs.

"Principal, this is Watt. Do you copy?" Watt was testing and fidgeting with the ear piece attached to her helmet. The whole codename thing didn't have a very positive effect on him, as he insisted he be given secret identity, not publicity. Ember and I were the last ones off the helicopter as it whirled off.

"Watt, this is Principal. Copy." The helicopter slowly faded as Boggs checked everyone's equipment. I quickly polished the grime off my gun's barrel, as inefficiency and negligence had no place on this mission.

"Come on guys, you can stare off into the distance when you die," said Ember. The ever energetic Ember. Now, that's the only thing she says with tone. Nevertheless, it works. She tries to affect me in some sort of delusional, drugged, and depressed way, and fails. That is, due to Boggs. He keeps more eyes on us than the Nation.

We walked further, and I was chatting away with Watt, as he was only remotely friendly to me. I took this as an opportunity to help him with social skills. Boggs held his hand up. The hand told us that if we stepped forth, even took one morsel of a shift, we would endanger our lives and the team. Nobody was safe from this danger.

Days had passed, giving way to the snow and ice, as the enemy became a rarity, not an irritation. That view was soon to be altered.

The piercing whine of shots as they clanged against concrete and metal was formidable in the frigid breeze. The interlacing white between uniforms and snow was a blur in the fresh payload of both Defenders and frost. Explosions from our grenades simply threw smoke in the air, blasting the ice into small shards.

"Make a beeline! Move!" Boggs roared over the symphony of clanging, groans and curses with unwavering resolve. Then, something seemed to clear the battlefield. The whine of shells signaled the retreat of the Defenders.

BOOM! The impenetrable defenses had been activated. I was blasted straight into the air. Another shell cracked behind me, exploding Watt into a display of gore. Watt's dead.

Maybe, we were all going to die. Die. The word seems simple, short, finite, and satisfactory. Though, the reality is far from all of those. There was no time to dwell on it though, as one bomb threw me into a tree, separating our team, and kicking in my flight instinct.

Run. I surged through the forest, gun in hand. The snow had become incessant, freezing the countless moments of loss. Freezing the emaciated corpses of the former Iceberg. Freezing those who fought in both the names of peace and freedoms, everyone who died in battles or games of our oppressive government. We're all part of some game, aren't we? Just pawns for the players who ascend over our petty conflicts. Over the bullets and bombs that explode on this small-minded world. Boggs turned by a tree, trying to shoot at the swirl of snow, simply hitting the gun that shoots you. Shooting everyone, at this point. It's just us left.

I tried to open fire with my shoulder's state, as I had now realized it was bleeding from the explosive. Blood was gushing and spewing from everyone, stains on the Defenders' reflective armor, slits in our kevlar. Death in all places visible. Nearby, the buildings from behind the trees gleamed in sunlight. Although odds were against us, and this was no time to pester me with words, because Ember tackled straight into me..

"What the heck are you doing?" I blurted straight at him.

"Ending our suffering." She grabs his rifle and runs straight at a Defender who's trying to subdue Watt and proceeds to stab him to death. I shove him back.

"What's gotten into you?" I ask, trying to make sense of his savage disposition.

"You should know what a dying animal looks like, Marc'". She turns around, and blood is splattered all over her torso. Immediately, she falls to the ground, but not without clipping her grenade pins.

The explosion rattled everyone, even after the shelling, and now, it split us apart. The building came into focus again. Something was familiar, though I had never seen it. The banners. I saw Nation. And then, I realized the area we were attacking. The whole idea of strategic attacking was something to pacify Jade. The real thing was the Presidential Mansion. The publicity of a vengeful group, why they whisked me and the other people from destroyed lands, and why the pilot shooed us off that quickly. Why Watt hacked them even after clearance to the "real" dossier.

Run. The surge inside me was too pushy. I sprinted around the trees and explosions, and the exploding trees. The mix of smoke and blood gave more drive to the sudden movement that was pushed inside my head. I was still unaware of the reason for this intuition, but as long as it kept me away from the battle, I was all for it.

Keep running. The intuition had now become a command bringing me closer to the gate that the Defenders had left open. I ran inside, breaking straight through a window, expecting all of the Nation to come by. Yet, I simply saw Imperator, dabbing his lips with a handkerchief and putting a rose in his breast pocket. I knew what to do. Did I?

Home. Family. Would small minded killing avenge them, or justify the means by which they were ruthlessly murdered. I wondered as I slowly approached him.

He killed us. He took everything. In return, we will too? We'll just kill him and the entire world until we are all away from where we are now? Small minds, big consequences. I could now hear his ragged breathing as he washed his face again.

Grab your pistol. Do what you came here to do. Finish him for all he has done. Solve death by death, pile bodies, plague the world by hatred? No. Shoot him.

I slowly grab my pistol from the small of my back. I picked it up and put it to his head. He simply turned around, and stared at me with snake eyes. No. I relieved myself from gripping the gun, and dropped it to the floor. No more killing. Tears dripped down my eyes as I turned around. A man in all white was holding the one item I chose to drop. The barrel was clean and its grip was cursory. He simply pulled the trigger.

BAM! The first shot stuck into my stomach, making me wince, while he waited to deliver the second shot. He isn't making this easy. I cried out in pain as the second shot hit me in the leg, and blood splashed on my neck. I fell to the floor. He grabbed me by the collar

and threw me against a door. I winced yet again, but this time, it sounded like a whimper. I tried to stand up. Tried. He drove his knee right into my chest. I coughed, and reeled back. He delivered another punch, sticking me right in the cheek. I fell right into the shelves nearby, splintering the wooden frame. He clicked the gun, and pulled the trigger one last time.

Student Name: Daniel Kaldestad

Grade: 7

School: Village Middle School

Title: Story of the gods

Category: Short Story

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Elizabeth Foye

In early Greek times, there was a group of Greek warriors fighting to their deaths. A group of gods (Thor, Eir, and Seir) were watching the humans fighting from the heavens as entertainment. All of a sudden, they started to hear the ground rumbling and shaking. It gets louder and louder; they see a creature coming straight towards them, and they are trying to analyze what it is. "What is that?" Eir says. "It's really cloudy, so it's hard to see," Thor says.

Thor (the god of thunder) recognizes it but just can't seem to remember what or who it is. Thor finally sees that it's Odin (Thor's father). "Innocent and good men losing their lives as entertainment was not how I had raised you, son, and now I came to show you discipline for the unnecessary and cruel entertainment that you guys are watching," Odin says. "It's ok, I can heal them later," Seir says. "No, that would be unnecessary," Odin says.

Odin was furious and disappointed at the same time. This was not the way of the gods, so he wanted to teach Thor a lesson. Odin goes to the poor men fighting and heals their wounds. Through the fog came Odin's servers, carrying delicious food and drinks for them to enjoy a good meal and feel appreciated. Odin called for Thor and his other friends to apologize for their actions. Odin says to Thor that the purpose of being a god is to serve and protect the people of the earth.

They need to feel safe and understood, and they need to live their lives in safe surroundings with their family and friends. He also showed him how torture and cruelty are not entertainment, and he said, "Why don't you use your powers for something useful instead of wasting them?" Odin says Thor finally understood his actions and what the purpose of being a god is.

"Thank you, dad, for teaching me a lesson," Thor says. "It's what I'm here for; that's both the way of the gods and a big part of being a dad." Odin starts to fly away, says goodbye, and says, "THOR YOU BETTER BEHAVE YOURSELF!" Thor yells, "I WILL!" Thor goes on about his day, and he is watching earth from the heavens when he sees a kid half dead in



a war. He comes down and heals him, provides food for him, and uses his mighty powers to stop the war and create peace.

Odin comes all of a sudden and says, "I'm proud of you, son." Odin says to Thor, and he forgives him. Before Odin flies off, Thor says, I'm sorry one last time, and Odin forgives him. Suddenly he finds out how cruel the world is and understands you need to be nice to be successful in life. Knowing this Thor looked at the world really different which made him realize that because he has all this power he needs to show that he has responsibilities. Thor is still a little bit young so it makes sense that he would learn this at his age because that's apart of growing up learning about the world and its humanity.

Thor now seeks wars and looks out for wars and helps them by helping them in fight with his amazing ability with his super powers which is having control of thunder. He starts going to counties and helping them but one thing he doesn't want to do and what he's trying to avoid is killing his enemies "even though they are mean they still deserve to live" Thor says. Thor helped especially in World War II and he was against the Germans and he told The Germans "Even though they believe in something different they still deserve to live and especially not in the cruel ways you guys are doing it on like putting them in a gas chamber." Then after hearing all this they realized what they had done but Hitler shot him self because he was surrounded by soviet and Thor which lead him to give his wife poison pills, shoot his dog, and later he shot himself because he did not want to die by getting killed by Thor and the soviets.

Thor was most likley a very inspiring hero for many kids for his great actions and just helping humanity in general. 15 years later Thor gets a wife and then he proceeds to get a kid named Utred, when Utred grew up he learned them at an early age that he needed to learn that "the world can be really messed up and the humanity in general" His son quickly learned this and knew how to use his powers because he got his powers because of his dad (Thor). Odin Utred's grandfather (Odin) got sick and Thor and Utred visited Odin, Odin was happy to see them and he needed water he asked Thor "Can you go get me some water for my throat?" But Odin realized Ultred's kindness and was wondering where it came from but then ultred said "My dad learned me the truth behind the earth and humanity in general". Odin said "Thor was not always like this you know, he used to do some naughty stuff but I reached him a lesson so I'm glad he reached you especially at you young age. You're a brigh kid with a bright future ultred especially with those powers" "Thank you!" Said ultred. A few days after this Odin unfortunately passed away due to a heart illness caused by a heart attack. All the gods were sad because of this loss but at least Odin left a lot in this little world he was such a charming person and knew what was right and not, that's one of the reasons he reached Thor these meaning full lessons. A few years have passed by and Thor and ultred have moved on from Odin passing. Thor tells Ultred that he has to never forget what it means to be a god like him and the power and responsibility.

The end

This story is inspired by Norwegian mythology.

Thor, Odin, Eir, and Seir are the characters in the story.

Student Name: Inaya Rahim  
Grade: 8  
School: Village Middle School  
Title: Time and Time Again  
Category: Science Fiction & Fantasy  
Key: Gold Key  
Educator: Elizabeth Foye

July 9, 2108

"Ema! Baba! Look what I made!" Abeba shouted to her mother and father. 10-year-old Abeba sat on the kitchen floor of her mother's home in the small city of Bahri Dar, Ethiopia.

"It's beautiful," her father told her, as he cocked his head to one side trying to figure out what it was. It looked to him as if she had disassembled their robot vacuum cleaner and reconstructed it into something new. Her mother on the other hand did not look so amused. She was a short woman with rich, coffee-brown skin, and long, intricate twists snaking through her hair and scalp. She crossed her arms and looked at her young daughter getting ready to scold her. Abeba's inventions didn't always work.

"Ema, I made it for you! It can vacuum, mop, dust, and clean almost anything." Abeba looked up at her mother with twinkling eyes. All she ever wanted to do was make her Ema proud. Her mother granted Abeba a small smile and then went back to continue her work.

Abeba loved her parents more than anything else in the world, and she knew that would never change.

May 22, 2123

Abeba, now 25 years old, sat in her parents' bedroom curled up into a ball, tears streaming down her cheeks. She touched Ema and Baba's bed, memories flooding into her mind. Abeba at the age of 6, running into her parents' room scared of the monsters under her bed. Abeba at the age of 11, watching her favorite TV show with Baba on a Saturday night. Abeba at 19, the first time her inventions failed and were rejected, crying on Ema's shoulder. And now, crying alone. They were gone, and they weren't coming back. That couldn't be right. Abeba needed them, and she wasn't ready for them to leave her. Abeba's tears continued to fall until there were none left, and then she lay there in the comfort of the memories of her parents. The only thing Abeba was sure of was that she had to fix this.

May 25, 2123

Abeba had spent the last 2 days never leaving her desk. She has been reading, writing, drawing, and planning. She needed to find a way to change time. She knew it sounded ridiculous, but she believed it could happen, and Ema had always told her, "Believe you

can, and you will." Abeba had always kept that close to her heart, and it had become something to live by. Time travel had only been thought of from a theoretical physics perspective, and no one had ever put enough thought into it before. Her friends had told her that she was crazy; they told her that everyone else who tried failed and that Abeba would fail too. Abeba simply told them that everyone else wasn't Abeba.

Abeba immediately began working on it and stopped only once to scatter her Ema and Baba's ashes and say a prayer for them. Her ideas soon grew and she began to work on blueprints for her project. One day, she would travel in time. One day, she would be back here with her Ema and Baba.

December 23, 2128

She had done it. Abeba had changed history. Her mind raced with possibilities of what could happen if her invention fell into the wrong hands, yet all she could think about was herself and her parents. She knew that it could be dangerous, that it could create paradoxes, but she wouldn't do it again.

With her Ema and Baba back, she soon became famous for her spectacular invention. She began to make more and more time machines which soon got the nickname the Zoomers because they would zoom backward in time. Zoomers gained fame, and with it, more paradoxes began. People everywhere were traveling back in time and reviving people who weren't supposed to be alive, and Abeba could do nothing but sit and watch.

December 14, 2136

"Dinner's ready!" Dora shouted from the kitchen. Jrue sat in the living room, stretched out on the couch with his feet on the coffee table - shoes still on. If his wife Dora were to see him now, he would be sleeping on the couch for the next week at the very least. Jrue turned on the TV and flipped through the channels until he got to his favorite news channel.

"Good evening Nuremberg! It's Ada speaking with breaking news! Recently, scientists have announced that changing history is extremely dangerous. Ever since the invention of time-traveling devices now known as Zoomers was invented in 2128 by the Ethiopian scientist Abeba Selassie, people all over the world have been changing the past, creating paradoxes in time. This could lead to a global catastrophe, and we must stop this. Listeners, if you are watching this right now, please do not interfere with the past. Do not -" Jrue switched off the TV. He hauled himself off the couch and into the kitchen and collapsed into a chair at the dining table. Dora set a plate for him on the table and a plate for herself next to him. She took a seat in her small, comfy armchair, and asked her husband how work was.

"Boring. Everyone's talking about paradoxes and the dangers of time travel." He rolled his eyes. "Without time traveling you wouldn't be here, my love." He gave his wife a small smile and Dora grinned back.

"Yes, I suppose that's true," Dora said in her thick German accent. Dora was a beautiful, pale-faced ginger who was born and raised in Germany. She had met Jrue on a trip to

Scotland and had immediately fallen in love. Jrue was a short and plump man with thick bushy eyebrows, gray hair, and constantly pink cheeks. Jrue had grown up in Scotland, although he was born in Germany. When Jrue and Dora got married, they moved to Germany together. One day, a few years after their marriage, Dora was in a car accident, and she passed away. Four years later, when Zoomers were invented, Jrue brought Dora back to life. Without Abeba, Dora wouldn't be alive.

As Jrue and Dora sat together eating dinner, the ground began to shake. Jrue switched the news back on and saw that this wasn't just here in Germany, it was happening everywhere! The ground began to shake harder and more violently. Jrue and Dora rushed to the shelter room, shivering with fear. All of a sudden, everything went dark. The whole world was black. Something big was happening. The paradoxes had created a catastrophe.

December 14, 2017

"No, that looks much too loose, and I don't think green is your color, Eylice," Shaïla told her girlfriend.

"I love green!" Shaïla pouted whilst she unstrapped the new green dress she had just tried on. She pulled on a bright orange jumpsuit and stepped out of the dressing room to show Eylice.

"You look like a tangerine," she giggled. Shaïla stuck out her lip, pretending to be very upset. She turned around again to change back into her normal clothes and she bit back a smile. Eylice was brutally honest and made Shaïla laugh her heart out. Shaïla loved her with all her heart and couldn't imagine life without her. If anything ever happened, they would stick together no matter what.

It was as if God had heard Shaïla's thoughts. The ground began to shake furiously and Eylice tripped and knocked over a large cart of clothes. Shaïla and Eylice grabbed each other's hands and held each other close. All of a sudden, everything went dark and the earth went black.

December 14, 1940

"Christmas won't be Christmas without presents mamà," grumbled Caitriona, lying on the rug. "It's so dreadful to be poor," she said, looking down at her dirty dress. "I don't think it's fair that we don't get anything and many others get so many pretty gifts," Caitriona complained.

"Well, we have mamà and papà," Her 5-year-old brother Andreyall told her.

"Aw, darlings. Come here Caity, Andrey." Mamà said. They came in for a hug and their frown turned into a smile. The firelight shone on their faces which brightened at the cheerful words.

The small family of four was huddled in their cottage in Athens, Greece. As the family began to tell Christmas stories, the ground began to tremble.

"What's going on Papà?" Caitriona asked worriedly. The family held each other close as the world went dark.

December 14, 2036

Color began to fade back into the world and people began to awaken. People everywhere rubbed their eyes and struggled to understand what had happened to them. One minute they were in one place, and the next minute they were in another. Abeba opened the door to her house and walked outside, craning her neck to see over the forest of tall trees that had appeared around her home.

Directly next to her house, Jrue and Dora rushed out of their house in shock and confusion, turning this way and that in an attempt to understand how their house had magically 'teleported' next to the house of the most famous scientist of all time who, not to mention, was supposed to be in Ethiopia, 5,000 miles away from Germany.

Across the forest from where Abeba, Jrue, and Dora stood, Shaïla and Eylice awoke with a pounding headache and an overwhelming sense of confusion. They were shopping for new dresses at the mall one minute, and the next minute they were sitting on a log next to a flowing river. Shaïla and Eylice spotted people from across the forest, a little under a mile away, and they began trekking uphill to reach them.

Not far from Shaïla and Eylice were Caitriona and Andreyall's family.

All four families met at the top of the hill.

"What's going on?" Andreyall asked his mother.

"I'm not exactly sure yet sweetie, but everything is going to be alright soon."

"Are we still in Greece papà?" Caitriona asked.

"Greece!" Jrue asked. "Honey, this is Germany!" He chuckled. Children were so oblivious to the real world, he thought.

"Germany? This is Ireland." Eylice said.

"It's a paradox - multiple paradoxes. It's a catastrophe." Abeba mumbled to herself quietly.

"A what?" Shaïla exclaimed. "What are you all talking about?" All of them began to talk over one another, their voices overlapping and volume increasing as they went on.

"QUIET!" Abeba finally shouted, commanding silence. "What year do each of you come from?" She asked them as calmly as she could, but she was trying to hide the urgency in her voice. If this was such a big catastrophe, that could mean that there were people here from as early as the start of the 2000s, or possibly even earlier if it was bad enough.

"We're from Germany in 2136 of course," Jrue and Dora explained to her.

"2136! That's over a 100 years in the future! We're from Ireland in 2017!" Eylice and Shaïla told her.

"We live in Greece in 1940," Andreyall told them proudly. Everyone's eyebrows raised. The 1940s were long ago for everyone else there, especially for Jrue, Dora, and Abeba, for whom it had been nearly 200 years. Everyone was silent for a few minutes while they processed the new information. Finally, Abeba came to a conclusion that no one wanted to believe.

"It seems that all of time and history is happening at the same time, from the 1900s to the 2100s, possibly more, and it's all my fault." Abeba sat down on the floor and curled her knees up to her chin, burying her head between her knees.

Caitriona walked over to Abeba and laid a hand on her shoulder. "How could this possibly be your fault? It can't be anyone's fault." She smiled at Abeba, trying to comfort her. Abeba looked up at Caitriona and softly smiled back, but her eyes were full of sadness.

"I created a time machine that caused all of these paradoxes, so it is my fault," Abeba explained.

"Well then we've got to fix it, haven't we?" Andreyall told her. Abeba sniffed and wiped away a stray tear.

"I guess we do." Abeba smiled at her new friends and the beauty of the children. "But how can we fix it? We would have to undo every one of the paradoxes." Abeba asked. Jrue immediately looked at Dora, while Abeba looked at her Ema and Baba.

"How?" Dora asked quietly. She wasn't afraid to die, but she was afraid of what would happen to Jrue when she was gone. Dora had always known that death was inevitable, but Jrue wasn't always so accepting.

"We destroy every time machine in existence, and everything will go back to normal." There was a long silence again.

"But can't we just stay like this?" Jrue asked Abeba. "There's nothing wrong with it, right?"

"Time isn't just happening all at once, it's frozen, and it's collapsing. It's ending, and we can't just let that happen." Abeba looked from Jrue to Dora, and at the way they were looking at each other. "Which one of you?" She asked them.

"Dora passed away, years ago, from a car accident. I used Zoomers to get her back." Jrue looked away from them as another tear fell.

Dora put a hand on Jrue's shoulder. "We'll do what has to be done."

December 15, 2036

After a short rest, the small group sat together in Eylice and Shaïla's house to discuss their plans. Eylice and Shaïla sat next to each other on a small couch in their sitting room and invited the rest of the group to join them on the armchairs and sofas around the room. The only one missing was Abeba, who was in her own house trying to find a way to destroy a Zoomer. In the distance, they could hear a loud, banging hammer and the small whizzing sound of the Zoomers. Minutes passed as the group sat in silence, waiting for Abeba to share her results with them. Eylice, whose ADHD made her a very impatient person, rose from the couch, planted a light kiss on Shaïla's face, and started making her way to Abeba's house to ask about the progress.

Eylice knocked on Abeba's door, found that it was open, and stepped inside. There, she found Abeba's parents whom she had brought back to life almost 8 years ago, sipping tea in the kitchen while Abeba blowtorched a Zoomer. When Abeba saw Eylice, she sighed, and put down the blowtorch.

“Nothing is working. I don’t think they can be destroyed. We’ll have to find another solution.” They made their way back to Eylice and Shaïla’s house and shared the news with the rest of the group. They again sat in silence, thinking about another way to fix time. Then, Shaïla had an idea.

“A major paradox started this mess, so couldn’t it reverse this too? Historically, time machines were invented by Abeba. If she, somehow, decided to not make time machines, none of this would have happened, creating another major paradox that would reverse everything in the first place! All we have to do is make sure that Abeba never makes a time machine.”

“Easier said than done,” Eylice replied.

“Are the Zoomers still working?” Caitriona asked. If they were, Abeba could attempt to change her past self’s mind.

“Yes!” Abeba grabbed a Zoomer and immediately disappeared, leaving the rest of them behind.

Later that day

Abeba had been gone for no more than 10 minutes when she reappeared before them with a soft smile on her face. It worked! Caitriona thought. But then something happened.

Abeba’s form flickered, almost like a glitch and she collapsed to the floor, struggling to breathe. She flickered again, and with a smile, she told them all, “I hope that you remember me and what I’ve done when everything goes back to normal,” Her body shook, and she disappeared again. This time, Caitriona knew she wasn’t coming back.

“Abeba!” Dora yelled, rushing to where she had disappeared. Shaïla was frozen in place with shock while Eylice attempted to comfort her. Jrue was pacing back and forth, thinking how she might have disappeared yet again, as Abeba’s Zoomer lay on the couch beside them.

“What has she done?” Eylice mumbled. Abeba was supposed to change her mind in the past so she never made Zoomers, but instead, it looked as if Abeba was gone. Was it possible that Abeba had done something worse to her past self?

“What if Abeba killed her young self so that she never had the opportunity to make Zoomers, just in case changing her mind didn’t work? Then adult Abeba would never have existed, meaning Zoomers would never have existed.” Caitriona thought out loud.

Everyone fell silent. She had sacrificed herself to save the world, and no one would even remember because she never existed. None of this ever happened. Dora’s form began to flicker too. Then Abeba’s parents. The three of them were only alive here because of the Zoomers. They disappeared, and another paradox began, reversing the first. Everything went dark, and the world was safe and sound.

Jrue was back in his apartment, reclined on the couch, watching TV – shoes on - but without Dora.



Eylice and Shaïla were back at the mall shopping for dresses – but without any memory of the new friends they had made.

Caitriona and Andreyall were back together for Christmas – but without any memory of the most exciting and eventful Christmas they had ever had.

Abeba's Ema and Baba had been gone for years – and they never saw how amazing and talented their daughter had become.

Without Abeba, the world was changed, with much of the population dead or never even born without the Zoomers, and Abeba's last wish was never fulfilled.

Student Name: Farida Anbar

Grade: 8

School: Village School

Title: Who Am I?

Category: Short Story

Key: Gold Key

Educator: Elizabeth Foye

### Who Am I?

Two chairs and a table: that's all there is. The silent room is permeated with the buzz of the fluorescent white lights, contrasting the sky—a symphony of colors, as the sun sets below the stretched horizon. The window beside her depicts the sky as it transitions from sunset to twilight and, eventually, to dusk—a dull realm.

The outside world, just out of reach, remains a dream hidden behind unyielding metal bars. The pastel blue walls give the room a sense of tranquility—a stark contrast to the events that unfold within. A fragile shell protecting the chaos between these walls. Two imposing shadows loom over Sophie, a woman in her mid-20s, and the patient in the chair.

"They're watching. Always," Sophie mutters as she picks at the skin next to her fingernail. Rocking back and forth, her eyes warily waiting for watchers to reveal themselves at any point. Across from her sits Dr. Mallow, a therapist with a genuinely kind demeanor, seemingly sinking into the embrace of the plush leather chair. His soothing presence is a testament to his extensive experience with patients like Sophie: he is her beacon of hope. He is her guiding star, the light that could guide her out of the labyrinth in her mind.

"Who is watching, Sophie?" Dr. Mallow inquires. His voice is soft and reassuring. Sophie blankly stares at him; her eyes bounce from corner to corner and lock onto his eyes with some intensity. She is lost in her maze, and Dr. Mallow knows that.

"Sophie?" Dr. Mallow's voice resonates with unwavering comfort. She remains unresponsive. She doesn't flinch, nor do her eyelids betray the slightest hint of a blink. Dr. Mallow pauses. Dr. Mallow looks at her, his gaze anchoring onto her eyes. His hair, predominantly a shade of brown with a few white hairs, is slicked back with a notable amount of gel. Simultaneously, his beard, trimmed to a freshly shaved stubble, complements his well-groomed and refined appearance. The silence hangs in the air, broken by the slight shift in Dr. Mallow's visage as comprehension dawns on him. She is gradually changing her actions.

With caution, he asks, "Who are you?" Sophie shifts to a confused expression before uttering, in a hushed tone, "Zelda."

\*\*\*

Her closest friend, her greatest enemy. Sophie is in a constant battle in her mind. A silent struggle where one side always emerges triumphant. The voices are her friends—offering their presence in joy and despair, a helping hand. As Sophie stays curled up in her bed,

her closest companions give her a sense of comfort and anger with their whispers. They know her the best; they know the intricate maze in her head and how to escape, or so she thinks.

It's been 3 hours. The voices won't stop; they overlap, creating a storm of echoes and a battle for control in her mind. Her friends now threaten to engulf her. Sophie begins desperately wanting a moment of peace, if even for a split second—A break from chaos. She clings to any hope she can, anything that can help her get out. Sophie finds herself stumbling out of bed to the kitchen counter. With each step, the voices grew louder, whipping up a larger storm. With hesitation, she reaches for the bottle of pills. They're calling to her, promising relief and quiet. Her mind becomes a battleground. The bottle now represents two different possibilities: one of silence and peace, and the other one is a continuation of the chaos that overpowers her mind. The room begins to close in on Sophie, urging her to think faster. The voices begin to tighten their grip on Sophie's throat, making it harder for her to breathe.

She tries to control herself, but the temptation proves too powerful to overcome. She closes her hand on the bottle. Shakingly, Sophie opens it and pours out a handful of the pills. She brings the pills to her mouth. She takes a deep breath in, allowing herself to have one more chance to rethink the decision. With her body shaking, she swallows the pills. That is all it takes. The pills give her an escape from the chaos that enslaves her; the battle is now "over."

\*\*\*

Zelda, in her internal struggle, sinking deeper into her trance of thoughts, is pulled out by Dr. Mallow's voice. "How are you, Zelda?"

The query serves as a momentary break from her thoughts; it lingers in the air while Zelda thinks about the answer to the evidently simple question. She tries to open her mouth to speak, only for it to seem like an invisible force seals it. Desperation wells up in her, trying to say something—anything. She longs to scream for help, but something is restraining her; Zelda's plea for help remains hidden. Her eyes widen in an attempt to make her anguish visible to Dr. Mallow; she hopes for her light to decipher the struggle behind her eyes. Her shoulders slump, and her eyes now reflect disappointment as she gazes at Dr. Mallow. He seemingly ignores her calls and continues taking notes. The room's silence continues. He looks back up, analyzing Zelda's face—her eyes, her nose, her mouth, her facial shape.

He looks up and begins speaking once again. "I want to speak to Sophie; am I allowed to?" There's a pause. Suddenly, Zelda's eyes, once filled with hope, are now filled with anger, terror, and betrayal. Her mouth, once sewn shut, finally opens.

"How do you know, Sophie?" Zelda demands. Dr. Mallow answers with caution, careful not to remove the veil covering his fear. "She's another one of my patients. She's just like you," he says; his forced smile does not quite reach his uncertain eyes. Zelda stays silent. Her intuition sees right through his act. She hates it when Dr. Mallow lies to her, but she doesn't let that provoke her. She's too tired, too droopy to bother. Zelda finds herself being pushed forward, walking to him. Dr. Mallow's face rises to see Zelda, slowly making

her way towards him. He looks at her, his eyes slightly squinted. Their eyes lock onto each other. Her eyes are with a composed demeanor. She motions for his notebook and pen. Dr. Mallow knows he should not, he knows that he is not allied. He slowly moves his head, side to side. Undeterred, Zelda slowly grabs his notebook and pen. She gracefully walks back to her chair. He watches her take her seat. The room has transformed. What was once filled with a calm atmosphere is now overcome by a wave of emotions. Confusion is one of them as he stares at Zelda, who begins scribbling in swift motions with passionate intensity. He tilts his head as he tries to think of what she is doing until he comes to a profound realization. He lets out a grin. She's drawing.

\*\*\*

"Mommy, mommy! Look what I drew!" Young Zelda runs up to her mother, clutching her drawing in her hands. Her face is beaming with pride. Her mom, a brunette with expressive eyes and a wide smile, kneels to her level.

"Show me," she says, looking at her with an immense amount of love. Zelda obediently turns the paper around. Time seems to slow down and everything becomes a blur. Her mom's face drops as she begins analyzing the drawing in terror; her eyes widen as she looks closer and closer. The once curious eyes are now clouded with shock as she slowly starts looking up at the shining little girl. Zelda continues to smile carrying her picture, unaware of the trepidation that she is causing. The drawing: a picture of a dark shadow looking down on Zelda. The shadow has a dark demeanor, a sinister presence. It has no face; it's empty - something far beyond Zelda's years. It is like an alter ego, taking control of Zelda.

"Who is that?" Her mom questions, her eyes threatening. Zelda's face drops. "Do you not like her? She's my friend. My imaginary friend."

\*\*\*

Dr. Mallow is drawn to Sophie's familiar love for drawing. He is intrigued, what is she drawing? Her drawings are her only way of communication. Her silent way of pleading for help, her way of giving him a key to her mind, which is inaccessible. Zelda's hand moves swiftly, creating dark and shadowy figures that resemble her previous drawings. Dr. Mallow is determined to find the exit to the maze in her mind, to discover all the dead ends and obstacles throughout the way. He wants to give her the life she never had. He wants to help her. Zelda's hand begins to slow down until it reaches a stop. She places the pen down on the oak wood table in front of them. She stares down at the drawing before hesitantly picking it up and flipping it over like she's done many times before; however, instead of the shining smile that once inhabited her face, it is a frantic facial expression. There is a sense of panic behind her eyes. The paper reads: RUN. RUN FAR, FAR AWAY. HE'S COMING. Dr. Mallow knows exactly who he is. Instead of escaping, Dr. Mallow sticks to his beliefs. Helping her.

"We can face this together, Zelda," Dr. Mallow says with the same gentle, soothing tone. He leans in closer to Zelda. Her lips, trembling, and her eyes, darting from corner to corner. Dr. Mallow begins to notice that Zelda is exhibiting that same feeling of

uncertainty as at the start of the session. He is not to be spoken about. He is a deep part of her memories. He is what is always there. What she can't escape. He is Zelda's father.

\*\*\*

The sound of bottles breaking, the sound of brutal attacks. The smell of alcohol and cigars. These were a daily occurrence in Zelda's childhood.

Every moment away from her house is a temporary escape from the storm that awaits her. She knows he is there. If he isn't, he is probably out drinking himself unconscious. Waking up at 2 AM because of somebody barging through the doors, drenched in the thick, medicinal, and slightly sweet smell of alcohol. The smell of cigars constantly engulfs Zelda's house. She is tired of the constant physical and emotional abuse. Her dad, a drinker, has a peculiar habit when he is drunk. Abuse. It started when Zelda was a little girl. Sometimes it is simple strikes for not coming fast enough to open the door, but other times—when he has the cigar in his hands—he grabs Zelda's hands and brings the cigar so close to her skin she feels it burning. She screeches and cries out for help, but nobody comes to her rescue. No one notices, not even her mother. Everybody becomes an enabler of the abuse, silently watching from the sidelines.

After years of dealing with the constant abuse, her body is covered with scars and cigarette burns. She begins to grow distant, and she becomes mute; she stops the cries for help. There is one simple explanation: she simply can't remember. She wakes up the next morning, with new cuts and bruises, yet no recollections. Zelda can't recall what exactly happened. However, she doesn't care. She loves not knowing what happened, she loves not having to worry about not opening the door fast enough, or the pain that follows it. She revels in it.

The thing that once gave her the peace she finally wanted, became what she hopes to stop: her anguish. Zelda began with simple mood swings, but it became what she yearns to escape from. She begins distancing herself from her friends and family, becoming selectively mute. She finds solace in being alone. She begins hearing voices that dictate her life, her choices. They tell her what to do and when to do it; they comfort her and give her guidance when she needs it. They are hidden from everybody else, but they become the only people she talks to. Yet, they become more and more demanding as time goes on. They not only comfort her in times of need, but tear her down. They taunt her, strip away her self-esteem, and any last confidence she has. They torture her, constantly filling her mind with thoughts she hates. And with that, it begins. Her Dissociative Identity Disorder begins to surface.

Zelda unconsciously creates Sophie as a defense mechanism against her father. Sophie is Zelda's shield and protector. She blocks Zelda from the harsh truths of reality. As a protector, an unspoken rule is that you quietly endure the pain, never dare to complain. Sophie follows that as she silently experiences the abuse and the emotional pain. She receives the trauma. Sophie begins experiencing severe hallucinations: imagining herself in places that she isn't in, people who aren't there. She becomes frantic all the time. But—in her mind—she can protect Zelda, so does it matter if she is hurt?

\*\*\*

"Count down from one hundred for me," Dr. Mallow pleads, desperately trying to ease her distress, but his efforts are in vain. Dr. Mallow backs away as his face is filled with realization. His desperation falls flat. She isn't Zelda anymore. She's Sophie; she's switched. A familiar, frantic feeling overtakes her, just like the beginning of the session. She begins picking at her skin, her gaze darting around. Sophie is now rocking back and forth more aggressively, hyperventilating; head down, her hands, attempting to block out the voices. Dr. Mallow is going to have to take a different approach. It is too late.

Rising from his chair, Dr. Mallow walks behind it to the singular counter filled with medication. He reaches for a bottle behind a sticky note marked "SOPHIE."

Antipsychotics.

He opens it. Despite knowing he shouldn't have—antipsychotics are the only thing that could stop her "friends." He takes 2 pills and walks back. He slowly sits in his chair, cautiously reaching out for Sophie's shaking hands. Her head remains drooped. He places the pills in her hand. She slowly looks up at the palm of her hands; the pills cradled in them. She is supposed to stop taking them. She looks up at Dr. Mallow, almost searching for a sign for him to stop her, but he doesn't. He simply closes his eyes and nods. She looks back down and brings the pills back up to her mouth. It's a familiar hobby. This is the only way she can talk, explain. That is the only way she can continue her role as a shield. She quickly swallows the pills, immediately reminded of the silence that follows them. She is reminded of the immediate end to the voice, why she took them in the first place. Quiet. Dr. Mallow attempts to speak again, but his words are trapped. They sit in silence until Sophie shatters it.

"You aren't here," she mutters, staring right at his eyes. Sophie pauses. Her tears begin to congregate at her waterline. "You aren't here, you aren't here, YOU AREN'T HERE." Sophie's voice becomes increasingly louder, reaching a crescendo. She begins to break down. The walls, a fragile shell, crack. They begin to crumble down. The window, presenting the sky, begins to tumble. Dr. Mallow slowly begins to fade away. She looks back up to see the room, the only thing that made her feel secure, is now gone. Sophie is back in her modest apartment. The cramped space, her supposed "sanctuary," is what she yearns to escape from. She begins to realize that's where she has been the whole time. She was trapped in her own "maze."

\*\*\*

Who is she? Who is Sophie? Other than Zelda's protector and shield: why is she there? As Sophie stays curled up on her bed, she yearns for Dr. Mallow to cross the boundaries of being a simple figment of her and Zelda's imagination. Did Sophie really deserve that trauma, those beatings? The hollow emptiness plagues her bones. There is nothing in life for her, the very essence of her soul has faded. She has no reason, no will to be the protector anymore. She wakes up to the hallucinations, the voices. She sleeps with them. She wishes there is a way to stop them—permanently.

There is: Sophie gets up from her bed, and begins walking to the kitchen counter. Instead of reaching for the bottle of pills, she opens the drawer. Sophie, shakingly, exhales. She stares at the item in the drawer for a minute. In the drawer lies a gun. She trembles as

she reaches for it. She attempts to stop the flow of tears, but one manages to escape. It falls from the corner of her eye to the corner of her mouth. She collects herself, letting out a smile. Why wouldn't she be smiling? The turmoil is now ending. This is what she has been hoping for—the longing, the groveling within her. She grasps the gun and takes it out. Permanent. Gone. Permanent. She places the gun next to her head. Goodbye, Zelda. I'm sorry I couldn't protect you. I can't. Please understand me. Sophie's finger finds the trigger. She hesitates. She slowly walks back to her bedroom. There, a mirror is hung up on the wall. Her gaze is drawn to it, and she begins to stare at herself. Her long, brunette hair reaches her lower back. Her eyes which were once gleaming are now drab and clouded. Sophie doesn't know who she is anymore. The once shining girl is now burnt out. There's a pause, a smirk curves on her lips, and she presses it. She presses the trigger. A sense of finality washes over her. The voices fade away. The hallucinations disappear. Gone. Permanent. Goodbye, Zelda. I love you.